Hegel’s Answer to the ‘Academy’ Question: Is it Permissible to Deceive a People?

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Introduction

Is it permissible to deceive a people? Ob es erlaubt ist, ein Volk zu täuschen? This is Hegel’s version of a question posed by the Prussian Academy of the Sciences in Berlin for an essay contest (Preisaufgabe) in the year 1780. Although the essay contest took place before Hegel would have been old enough to enter a submission – he was after all only 10 at that time – he took two later opportunities to provide what would have been his answer. He alludes to this essay contest in the Phenomenology of Spirit (1807) in a chapter on the Enlightenment’s struggle against superstition, and then again as part of his evaluation of public opinion in the Philosophy of Right (1820). In both texts, Hegel claims that the only plausible answer, what one would have to say in reply, is that it is impossible to deceive a people. And if something is impossible, then its permissibility is a moot point since the action in question can never be realized.

This is admittedly a counterintuitive claim. What about propaganda, ideology, and in our day “fake news” and “alternative facts”? Is Hegel denying the possibility of these phenomena? This would make his own position either implausible, easily defeated by counter evidence, or unappealing, incapable of accounting for many patent aspects of social and political life. But Hegel qualifies his answer. What he claims is that it is not possible to deceive a people about its essence or Wesen. In this way Hegel is drawing a distinction among matters about which one could raise this question, or conceivable objects of deceptions. According to Hegel’s position, although a people can be deceived about many things, it cannot be deceived about its essence. In the following I will consider what he means by essence in his answer and why he thinks it impossible to deceive a people about it.
Given Hegel’s flippant tone, it is easy to get the impression that he is mentioning the ‘academy’ question only in order to dismiss it. This makes it unsurprising that his answer has not garnered much scholarly attention.¹ My aim in this paper is to show that his answer deserves close attention because it bears on core tenets defended in these two texts, the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*. On the one hand, both passages issue the verdict that it is impossible to deceive a people about its essence. In this respect, Hegel is putting forward a single answer to the ‘academy’ question. On the other hand, Hegel’s two versions of an answer differ in striking ways. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel is addressing the role of religion in propagating deception, contrasting two conceivable objects of deception, and making the case that a people’s essence is not the sort of object about which one can be deceived. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel shifts focus from religion to politics, contrasting two possible ways of being deceived, and making the case that a people can be self-deceived about the way in which it knows its own essence. I will focus on the reasons Hegel is offering in favor of his overarching conclusion, foregrounding how these reasons emerge internally to the arguments he is making in each text.

There is also a broader reason to take an interest in Hegel’s answer, for it allows us to track his sharpening position on religious faith, public opinion, and common sense. On a general level, his answer speaks to the question of whether representational thinking (Vorstellung) is itself a kind of deception and whether it is one from which a people could or should be disabused. Hegel is here grappling with two species of representational thinking in particular: the imagery associated with religious practices and the judgments formed in public settings. Although he draws an unfavorable comparison between representational thinking and conceptual comprehension (of which only philosophy is truly capable), it is less clear whether he is seeking to substitute one for the other. Hegel’s answer thus raises questions about the extent to which he takes himself to be ‘enlightening’ his own readership and whether he sees philosophy as a suitable means for doing so. In short, does Hegel consider himself to be an agent of the Enlightenment, someone whose task is to bring ‘light’ into a condition of widespread ‘darkness’?

While Hegel is clearly alluding to the question that was put forward as part of the 1780 essay contest, at one point even crediting its well-known author, Frederick II., it is worth mentioning that Hegel’s question is in fact not identical to the one officially posed by the Prussian Academy. Here is

¹ There are some who have noted that the two passages together constitute Hegel’s answer to the ‘academy’ question, even though they do not provide detailed readings of them: Richard Bourke (*Hegel’s World Revolutions*) and Zdravo Kobe (“From Public Opinion to Public Knowledge: Hegel’s State as an Epistemic Institution).
the official version: “Is it useful for a people to be deceived, be it by leading it into new errors or by confirming it in those which it upholds?” Two discrepancies are worth noting. The Academy was asking whether it is (1) _useful_ (not whether it is _permissible_) and (2) _for_ a people to be deceived (and not to _deceive_ a people). This suggests that Hegel is offering his own interpretation of this question for reasons that are also worth considering. If we look at the essay contest of 1780 itself, we find that the official formulation developed out of a contentious genealogy and that it generated confusion and controversy at the time it was put forward by the Prussian Academy. I will thus begin with the history of this question before turning to Hegel’s answer in the _Phenomenology_ and subsequently in the _Philosophy of Right_.

**Official Question**

Frederick II, whom Hegel describes as a “great spirit” in the _Philosophy of Right_ (and elsewhere as a “philosopher-king” of the kind Plato had anticipated), shaped the Academy of the Prussian Sciences with a heavy hand. Frederick showed interest in taking over the Academy, which was initially founded in 1700, before he even assumed the throne in 1740, and he demanded a report on its current state only five days into his reign. Under Frederick’s direction, the Academy merged several scholarly societies, was renamed the _Royal_ Academy, and introduced an essay contest, which issued 37 questions between 1745 and 1787. The introduction of this essay contest was especially significant for Frederick’s aim to involve more people in the Academy’s otherwise esoteric activities. It was part of his agenda to serve as an ‘enlightened’ monarch, thereby merging absolute monarchy and Enlightenment ideals.

Frederick’s role in the Academy was in the end marked by a tension inherent in this agenda, a tension that kept rearing its head. For example, it was Frederick who compelled the Academy to pose the question of 1780 against the strong preferences by many of its members, and to do so outside of the usual essay contest schedule (which is how this contest incurred its label “extraordinaire”). It was also Frederick who then strengthened state censorship and curtailed

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2 “Ist es dem Volk nützlich, betrogen zu werden, sei es, dass man es in neue Irrtümer führt oder in denen die es unterhält, bestätigt?”
3 PR §317
5 Adler, XX. Letter to Voltaire.
6 He forced them to withdraw a metaphysical question about original powers, which the Prussian Academy had authored independently of him. D'Alembert convinced Frederick that this question was too theoretical and thus incompatible with the public mission of true philosophy.
freedom of the press for the Academy’s publication, allegedly in order to avoid bad international relations.\(^7\) Since the contest’s winners were to have their contributions published, he worried that someone could win the prize while casting a neighboring state in a negative light. So, it turned out to be quite difficult to enjoy the power that came with absolute monarchy and function as an agent of the Enlightenment at the same time.

In order to understand why Frederick decided to push the 1780 question onto the Prussian Academy, we need to take note of the fact that this question was formulated against the backdrop of an ongoing conflict between church and state power. Frederick permitted a relatively high degree of religious freedom in Prussia, for instance reluctantly welcoming Jesuits that had been banned elsewhere in Europe, specifically in France, where they were expelled in 1764.\(^8\) He was also a vocal critic of the Roman Catholic church and claimed at one point that the authority of the pope was grounded in the “general stupidity of nations” \([\text{allgemeine Dummheit der Nationen}]\).\(^9\) This turn of phrase indicates that Frederick was concerned primarily with religious forms of deception, lies disseminated by religious leaders, before he came to pose the 1780 question, though the question he ended up posing also opened the door for inquiring into the expediency of political lies.

This preoccupation with religious forms of deception becomes even more evident in his correspondence with D’Alembert that led up to the essay contest of 1780.\(^10\) The correspondence was initiated by D’Alembert, a French philosophe interested in defending a robustly public form of philosophy. It was in fact D’Alembert who in a letter to Frederick first proposed the question, \textit{is it useful to deceive the people?}, a fact not publicly known at the time, since their correspondence was kept private and its role in shaping the essay contest only later uncovered.\(^11\) This blunt version of the question was rejected by the Academy as too polemical, which is why it came to assume a less direct form, \textit{whether it is useful for a people to be deceived etc.} In their letters, however, D’Alembert and Frederick disputed an altogether different version of this question: \textit{can a people that has been brought up in a religious system get by without myths and fables?} Frederick answered this question in the negative, whereas D’Alembert took a positive view. According to D’Alembert, philosophy in the true sense of the word ought to be put to the service of ‘truth-telling’. Because this view of was not one that

\(^7\) He suspended freedom from censorship, which he himself had put into place in 1749 (Adler, XLV – XLVI).

\(^8\) Shiru Lim, “Frederick the Great and Jean Le Rond D’Alembert on Philosophy, Truth, and Politics”, 303

\(^9\) Adler, XXX.

\(^10\) Adler, XXXI.

\(^11\) Lim
Frederick shared, D’Alembert was able to pressure Frederick into pushing this question onto the Academy in order to prove his own philosophical credentials.

What exactly was Frederick’s own stance? Although he regarded himself as an agent of the Enlightenment, Frederick had a rather pessimistic assessment of the people and their receptivity to the Enlightenment project. ‘A world without error, prejudice, superstition, or fanaticism’ was a beautiful fantasy, but no more than that. According to Frederick, the human being is an ‘incorrigible animal’ who cannot be made to conform to the demands of reason. This assessment led Frederick to conclude that a people cannot get by without myths and fables that are already widely disseminated and deeply entrenched. He adds that all attempts to spread the naked (uncovered, undisguised) truth aren’t worth the trouble. Note that he is implicitly identifying deception with disguising or covering the truth, presenting it in a form that is non-transparent, rather than with the spreading of false information. In the end it was Frederick’s own judgment that deception in this sense is legitimate because unavoidable. Considering his disagreement with D’Alembert, we can see why he took an interest in this question and why it came to seem pressing, even if it was D’Alembert who pressured him to impose this question onto the Academy.

Once the official version of the question was put forward to the public, it was immediately flagged as controversial. Moreover, it was often misinterpreted as asking, “is it useful to deceive a people” (the people appearing in the accusative), rather than “is it useful for a people to be deceived” (the people appearing in the dative). This is a mistake that Hegel himself makes. The former version of the question would have implied active deception of one group by another, whereas the latter includes passive forms of deception, i.e. allowing people to be deceived by holding onto those errors they already happen to believe. Also, the former version of the question implies that it is useful for the ones that are doing the deceiving to deceive (an easier sell), whereas the latter version implies that it is useful for the deceived that they be deceived (far less obvious). As this misreading of the question suggests, many read the question as expressing an overtly critical attitude toward the Enlightenment project of proliferating public reason, since it was open to contributions that argued in favor of doing the contrary, i.e. that favored active forms of deception.

But the question itself (even in its official formulation) can be interpreted not as inviting outright violations or subversions of this Enlightenment project through active forms of deception, but rather as challenging its scope and reach. Whether deception is understood in an active or passive sense, the question was pointing toward a division in the “Age of Enlightenment” between those who are enlightened and those who are unenlightened, asking whether this division could or
should be overcome. According to Hans Adler, the question could thus be reformulated as: *is the Enlightenment divisible?*¹² In other words, is such an internal division between the enlightened and the unenlightened compatible with Enlightenment ideals? Several historians have in hindsight credited the 1780 question with bringing about a change in the Enlightenment’s course, ushering in the stage of ‘late’ Enlightenment, thereby presenting an obstacle to any static account of its project.¹³ All in all, it seems hard to overstate the role that the 1780 question played in both the Enlightenment’s self-understanding as well as its retrospective meaning.

Given this historical context, it is especially striking that the formulation of the official question seems to point back to Plato. In the *Republic*, Socrates makes the following claim: “This: it looks as though our rulers will have to employ a great many lies and deceptions for the benefit of those they rule. And you remember, I suppose, we said all such things were useful as a kind of drug” (459c, d).¹⁴ Here Socrates is arguing in favor of what is known as the ‘noble lie’ deliberately propagated by a political elite to justify a stratified social order. The lies in question would consist of (or at least involve) myths, whose purpose is to motivate people to maintain this social order. The prime example in the *Republic* is the myth of the three metals intended to make palatable a division of society along three lines (into classes of producers, auxiliaries, and guardians). What is meant by deception is not misinformation or a misrepresentation of the facts, but a myth about the justification of a social order.

According to Plato’s argument, it is beneficial not only to the rulers themselves that they spread lies (which, as I already pointed out, is an easier sell), but also beneficial to those who are ruled that they be so deceived, since they, too, are better off when they inhabit a stratified social order.¹⁵ In this way Plato is appealing to the criterion of utility, arguing in favor of deception on the basis on its usefulness to those who can hope to benefit, which is everyone. It cannot be a mere coincidence that this specific passage comes so close to the formulation of the 1780 question many centuries later. Perhaps it indicates an effort to establish the question’s long pedigree, demonstrating that it has roots that reach as far back as the Ancients. But these same words would have had a very different ring when Plato penned them. In fact, Plato’s problem was not identical to the one that

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¹² “*Ist die Aufklärung teilbar?”
¹³ Adler etc.
¹⁴ Reeve translation.
¹⁵ As Adler notes, this suggests a very different reason for deception from that provided by Machiavelli, who considered only the utility for the rulers (not the ruled) (pp. XXVI – XXVII). In *Anti-Machiavel*, Frederick claims that rulers should keep their word in order to avoid accruing a bad reputation with other rules.
preoccupied Frederick and his contemporaries.\textsuperscript{16} Whereas Plato was interested in producing new lies in the form of mythic explanations, Frederick and his contemporaries were confronting a web of ‘old lies’ put into place by religious institutions.

**Hegel’s Question**

Let us now turn to Hegel’s interpretation of the 1780 question. The first thing to note is a point of continuity between the official question and Hegel’s version, for Hegel is taking over a reference to a or the people in both texts. In fact, Hegel’s version is in terms of ‘a people’ (ein Volk) which calls to mind a plurality of nations, whereas the official question was put in terms of ‘the people’ (das Volk) which calls to mind the undifferentiated ‘masses’. Given the textual contexts of Hegel’s two passages, it becomes clear that Hegel is not talking about something as narrow as a nation, or a people’s relation to their specifically national character; but he is also not talking something as indeterminate as the masses, a term laden with class connotations.\textsuperscript{17} Although Hegel is repeating this element of the official question, it assumes an idiosyncratic significance in the context of his philosophical project.\textsuperscript{18} This reference to the people is a reference to that which Hegel calls ‘spirit’, which is another term of a ‘spiritual’ community. According to Hegel’s argument in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, ‘spirit’ is to be understood as a collective subject of sorts, a group agent that actively produces a world and a group knower that qua spirit knows the world. This means that his question about the permissibility of deception concerns the ways in which such spiritual communities relate to those concrete practices that are essential to making them what they are.

When taking a second look at the ‘academy’ question, we can wonder why the official question was posed about the people and whether the very question implies that the people is uniquely vulnerable to deception. Were Frederick II. and D’Alembert assuming that groups of people are especially gullible, or especially ‘stupid’, when compared with individuals taken on their own? In Hegel’s case, we can relatedly wonder whether his question assumes that the people is uniquely invulnerable to deception when so compared. Indeed, it does seem to be an implication of

\textsuperscript{16} According to Adler, Plato’s problem was the ‘aporia of power’, because power is the basis of what counts as right but cannot itself be grounded in right (XXVI).

\textsuperscript{17} For a discussion of Hegel’s conception of Volk, see Lydia Moland’s *Hegel on Political Identity: Patriotism, Nationality, Cosmopolitanism*.

\textsuperscript{18} In the context of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel mentions his answer in his Spirit chapter, specifically in connection with religious (note: rather than national) communities. In the context of the *Philosophy of Right*, he mentions his answer in his discussion of public opinion, in which context he characterizes the people as the ‘hoi polio’, the many, and hence an aggregate of individuals (PR §301R).
his answer that there is something about the structure of spiritual communities that excludes deception. Even if it were an open question whether I can deceive you about your own essence, for Hegel it does not seem to be an equally open question whether I can deceive a spiritual community taken as a whole about its own essence. But such a distinction between groups and individuals should not be exaggerated, for it is well known that Hegel defines spirit as “the I that is a We and the We that is an I”. Hegel is quite explicit that spirit, albeit irreducible to its individual members, only exists because individuals participate in its constitution and perpetuation. So, even though the ‘academy’ question concerns the people as a distinctly collective subject, it would be fair to assume Hegel is talking about both individuals (insofar as they are members of communities) and communities (insofar as they are comprised of individuals) and denying that either of them could become deceived about their essence.

This reference to the people does raise a further issue concerning the distinction between inside and outside and the boundaries by which these spiritual communities are circumscribed. Who belongs to the people and are there people who do not so belong, people who are outside of any spiritual community? The academy question itself appears to hinge on such a distinction between inside and outside, since it conjures a picture of someone who is standing apart from the people and subjecting it to an external form of deception, or of someone who is in a position to judge that this deception is taking place on a mass scale. It presupposes that someone knows better than the people and can thus manipulate them into accepting or maintaining lies or can enlighten them by means of ‘truth-telling’. One of Hegel’s points in both texts is to deny the stability of such a distinction between inside and outside. Whether he is speaking about the agents of the Enlightenment or about deceptive priests or politicians, it becomes clear that Hegel wants to emphasize that they are all integrated into a larger whole, the shape of a shared spirit, despite the internal polarizations to which such shapes give rise.

This feature of Hegel’s position provides him with one preliminary reason to question the 1780 question. If those who tell lies are themselves members of the community that is being subjected to a lie, because they take part in a shared shape of spirit, in what sense is their deception of others genuinely external to the people in question? Would it not rather suggest that in such cases, a community is lying to itself by means of one of its constituent parts? Some have pursued such a direction. For example, Robert Pippin claims that Hegel is developing an account of collective self-deception, according to which collective self-deception depends on the cooperation between the
deceivers and the deceived and in this way presupposes a difference between them. 19 If I am receptive to deception, then the fact that I am deceived by another cannot be something that happens to me without my involvement. Pippin writes that “Gullibility is also a form of self-deceit (‘hearing what one wants to hear’) and is as culpable.” 20 Here he is following Bernard Williams, who has suggested that spreading of political lies through media can be understood as a ‘conspiracy’ between the deceiver and the deceived. 21

This is not a direction that I will here pursue. For one, Hegel does write explicitly about collective self-deception in the Philosophy of Right, but what he has to say about it is quite different from the view that Pippin ascribes to him. 22 Hegel is not arguing that people ‘hear what they want to hear’ when they allow themselves to be fooled by political leaders, but that people tend to deceive themselves about what they already know when they form public opinions. This is a significant difference. For another, it seems to me that this resolution of the problem of deception would be too easy, which is why Hegel does not rest his conclusion on it in either text. In other words, Hegel is not claiming that deception is impossible simply because it is never genuinely external, so that every case of seemingly external deception can be redescribed as a case of communal self-deception. I think that he is not making this claim because he recognizes that it would be highly dissatisfying to those who are gripped by the question and worried about deception. Why should they be assuaged to be told that no one is ever truly outside of a shape of spirit? This indicates that Hegel will have to harness other resources to make his answer convincing.

I mentioned at the outset that Hegel’s version of the question does differ from the version that was put forward in 1780. What explains his rather substantial departure from the official formulation? We have already seen that the active form (to deceive the people) rather than the passive form (for the people to be deceived) was a common misinterpretation at that time. But Hegel also replaced ‘useful’ with ‘permissible’. 23 This substitution could have been based on his account of the Enlightenment as a historical form of spirit. As he makes clear in the Phenomenology of Spirit, a world characterized by the Enlightenment prizes the norm of utility most highly, treating it as a master

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19 Also Dean Moyar’s response essay, “Self-deception in Pippin’s Modernity” (unpublished manuscript).
20 Pippin, “Hegel on Collective Self-Deceit”, p. 181
21 Williams, “Truth, Politics, and Self-Deception,” p. 615
22 Pippin’s paper does not mention the passage in PR §317 in which Hegel discusses collective self-deception.
23 This question continued to be seen as controversial in the intervening years, and in 1788 Jean Paul (a writer whom Hegel read and admired) attacked it in the following form: whether it is permissible to enlighten the rabble [ob man den Pöbel aufklären dürfte]. Even if Hegel wouldn’t have been familiar with this specific of Jean Paul’s texts, it suggests that similar rewordings could have been floating in the air. See Adler, L – LI.
standard by which to determine objectivity. For Hegel this standard of objectivity has direct implications for laws and institutions, since their status as genuine objects, and hence as enduring and abiding, depends on whether they are regarded as useful. In the eyes of the French revolutionaries the laws and institutions they inherited fell short of this norm, which meant that they regarded themselves as entitled to abolish them. Although Hegel is arguably highlighting this normative dimension of the 1870 question by substituting ‘permissibility’ for ‘utility’, he is also immediately laying the normative question to rest. Recall that if something is impossible, then its permissibility becomes a moot point since the action in question can never be realized.

Phenomenology of Spirit

With this background in place, I turn to the passage from the Phenomenology of Spirit, in which Hegel provides the first version of his answer:

If the general question has been put forward, whether it is permissible to deceive a people, the answer would in fact have to be that the question is no good, because it is impossible to deceive a people on this matter. Brass instead of gold, counterfeit instead of genuine money, may well be passed off in isolated cases; a battle lost as a battle won pushed onto many; and other lies about sensible things and discrete events can be made believable for a time. But in the knowledge of that essence [Wesen], wherein consciousness has immediate certainty of itself, the idea of deception falls away (PR ¶550).

Although Hegel does not mention that this was the ‘academy’ question of 1780, it is a reference that his readers would not have missed. Note that Hegel is calling the question ‘no good’ [taugt nichts], which at first suggests a dismissive attitude. But we soon see that the question is providing Hegel with an opportunity to distinguish between two kinds of matters about which one could raise this question: one the one hand, sensible things and discrete events, and on the other hand, the essence wherein consciousness has immediate certainty of itself. He is not claiming that it is impossible to deceive a people about any matter whatsoever, only that it is impossible to deceive a people on this matter. So, what is this matter and why is it impossible to deceive a people about it? To be more specific, what does Hegel mean by essence and why does he claim that in this essence consciousness has ‘immediate certainty of itself’?

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24 I altered the Miller translation. Here the German: „Wenn die allgemeine Frage aufgestellt worden ist, ob es erlaubt sei, ein Volk zu täuschen, so müsste in der Tat die Antwort sein, dass die Frage nichts tauge, weil es unmöglich ist, hierin ein Volk zu tauschen. – Messing statt Goldes, nachgemachte Wechsel statt echter mögen wohl einzeln verkauft, eine verlorene Schacht als eine gewonnene mehreren aufgeheftet und sonstige Lügen über sinnliche Dinge und einzelne Begebenheiten auf eine Zeitlang glaubhaft gemacht werden; aber in dem Wissen von dem Wesen, worin das Bewusstsein die unmittelbare Gewissheit seiner selbst hat, fällt der Gedanke der Täuschung ganz hinweg.“ (p. 408)
We find that this passage appears in the context of Hegel’s chapter on the Enlightenment’s struggle against superstition, specifically the conflict between pure insight and religious faith. According to Hegel, agents of the Enlightenment adopt a negative attitude toward their opponent, whom they are trying to ‘enlighten’ by means of pure insight. This opponent is correspondingly cast in an unfavorable light. Hegel is playing with a set of visual metaphors, namely, to peer through darkness, to bring luminosity and lucidity, to illuminate or disillusion. He memorably likens this process of enlightenment to the diffusion of a scent in an unresisting atmosphere, and less flatteringly, the spreading of an infectious disease (¶545). But his thesis throughout this chapter is that agents of the Enlightenment need this opponent, without whom they would be without object and content. In short, pure insight is in fact parasitic on the very thing it rejects.

We find that pure insight can maintain its mission to disabuse others of errors and deceptions only as long as there are people that fit that description, namely, others in need of disabusing. So, if we were to ask Hegel the question, “is the Enlightenment divisible?”, his answer would have to be: “necessarily so.”

This requirement internal to the ‘logic’ of the Enlightenment project points in the direction of a culprit responsible for errors and deception – the priests. Here is how Hegel describes the view adopted by pure insight:

Just as it sees faith in general to be a tissue of superstitions, prejudices, and errors, so it further sees the consciousness of this content organized into a realm of error in which false insight, common to the mass of people, is immediate, naïve and unreflective; but it also has within it the moment of reflection-into-self, or of self-consciousness, separated from its naïveté, in the shape of an insight which remains independently in the background, and an evil intention by which the general mass of the people is befooled. The masses are the victims of the deception of a priesthood… (¶542)

According to this passage, the Enlightenment regards its opponent as double-sided. One side is the mass of people who are conscious of this realm of error in an immediate, naïve, and unreflective manner. Another side is the priesthood, which represents a self-conscious, and hence deliberate, nefarious, and egotistical relationship to this realm. In other words, according to the view adopted by pure insight, the mass of people is simply the victim of a deception perpetrated by those who are spreading error for personal gain. It suits the representatives of the Enlightenment to regard the mass of people as vulnerable to ‘false insight’, because it suggests that this very same mass could be

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25 PS ¶541: pure insight is “devoid of content” and “all content falls to faith”.
26 One criticism is that pure insight has a comparable faith in reason, so that it is not free from a faith of its own. This seems to be similar to Adorno and Horkheimer’s position in their *Dialectic of the Enlightenment*.
27 If it is in principle possible that errors and deceptions are being spread by a mechanism (think: algorithm), is a conscious agent responsible for errors and deceptions necessary for Hegel’s argument?
28 Hegel adds that they are conspiring with despotism, so they are making use of political power.
made receptive to pure insight instead. Because this view is a product of pure insight’s self-interested perspective, Hegel is cautioning us to take it with a grain of salt.

In fact, one of Hegel’s general criticisms of pure insight is that it consistently misconstrues the nature of religious faith. Although Hegel makes clear that he is not speaking about religion in its full complexity, he is talking about one aspect of religion, namely, the attitude of faith toward its object of worship, an object that is taken to be essential to it, that in relation to which a religious consciousness has ‘immediate certainty’ of itself. According to Hegel, faith is wedded to a firm distinction between a subjective belief on the one hand, and an objective reality on the other. It is for this reason that Hegel describes faith as an instance of representational thinking, sometimes also translated as picture-thinking (Vorstellung).29 Unlike pure insight, faith does have an object of its own, but an object represented as imbued with divine qualities. From pure insight’s perspective, this makes faith an easy target. For example, pure insight charges believers with falsely ascribing divine qualities to items used in religious ceremonies, pointing out that these items are just mundane sensible things – a block of stone, a hunk of wood, a piece of dough. It thereby misguidedly imagines that it is informing believers of something they do not already know.30 But the ultimate religious ‘lie’ presumably concerns not some sensible thing or other, but that which the religious community takes to be “absolute Being”, i.e. God. It is this absolute Being that is supposed to be the essence of faith, for it is this absolute Being which is supposed to be the source of all divine qualities, even of mundane sensible things. From an ‘enlightened’ point of view, priests are propagating the lie that there is such a thing as an absolute Being, and they are doing so in order to justify their own institutional power. Just like the wine they drink does not literally become the blood of Christ, this absolute Being is supposedly a mere fiction, a projected fantasy.

At this point Hegel comes to religious faith’s defense, claiming that the absolute Being worshipped by believers could not possibly be a lie. There is indeed such a Being as long as there are believers who worship it; it is just that this Being exists in a guise that pure insight is unequipped to appreciate. Here is what Hegel says:

the absolute Being of faith is essentially not the abstract essence that would exist beyond the consciousness of the believer; on the contrary, it is the Spirit of the [religious] community, the unity of the abstract essence and self-consciousness. That it be the Spirit of the community, this requires as a necessary moment the action of the community. It is this Spirit, only by being produced by

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29 Miller translation
30 See ¶553. Hegel also claims that believers are engaged in a complicated act of double-perception: “The believing consciousness weighs and measures by two standards; it has two sorts of eyes, two sorts of ears, speaks with two voices, has duplicated all ideas without comparing the twofold meaning” (PS ¶572, p. 348).
consciousness; or rather, it does not exist as the Spirit of the community without having been produced by consciousness. For essential as is the producing of it, this is equally essentially not the sole ground of absolute Being, but only a moment. Absolute Being is at the same time in and for itself. (¶549)

What we are told is that the absolute Being of faith is the very community of which believers are a part – in short, it does exist, but as the *spirit of the community*. The reason that pure insight cannot see this is that it does not produce a community with comparably robust ties. So, an additional criticism that Hegel raises against the Enlightenment is that it is set on dissolving that which binds religious people to one another without supplying anything that could take its place. Its historical victory over faith is thus haunted by a “yearning of the troubled Spirit which mourns over the loss of its spiritual world” (¶573).

In the above passage, Hegel is bringing out two dimensions of this object that is being worshipped by believers, the essence of faith. (1) The first dimension is the object’s dependence on consciousness. In Hegel’s own words, “It is this Spirit, only by being produced by consciousness.” What this means is that it is an object that is generated by an act, in this case the act of worship. It is because people worship it. This dimension is crucial to Hegel’s broader aims in the *Phenomenology*, for it is another illustration of his ‘experiential’ procedure, during which that which was taken to be independent of consciousness is revealed to be produced by it, only an object insofar as it is for-consciousness (PS ¶86). It is also another illustration of Hegel’s specific conception of spirit as a self-objectifying community, one that generates its own world. Spirit actively produces its manifestations, expressing itself in objects ranging from laws, institutions, and practices to mundane sensible things such as crosses, chalices, loaves of bread. Hegel’s passage suggests that this world, when taken as a whole, is the expression of the ‘spirit of the community’. It is therefore also that which manifests absolute Being, providing evidence of its reality.

That said, Hegel notes that consciousness-dependence is only one ‘moment’ of this object, for “this is equally essentially not the sole ground of absolute Being.” (2) The second dimension of this object is its independence from consciousness. This is what I take Hegel to mean when he claims that this Absolute Being is ‘at the same time in and for itself.’ Without this additional moment, Hegel could be read as defending a thesis not unlike his successor Feuerbach, arguing that religious people take themselves to be acting in the service of God, but what they in fact worship is a figment of their imagination. It would be an interpretation of religious practices that does not take them at face value but accuses their practitioners of false consciousness, a species of deception or delusion. This does not seem to be Hegel’s point. Rather, Hegel is stating that there is something
genuinely *objective*, which in this context I take to mean consciousness-independent, at stake in these practices.\(^{31}\) The spirit of the community is an object with a life of its own, irreducible to whatever consciousness seeks to make of it. This spirit of the community even resists consciousness because it cannot be twisted in any which way. But it is also at the very same time activated by consciousness, set into motion by it. Without consciousness, there would be no spirit of the community, because there would be no community in the first place. To put the claim in paradoxical terms, the object of faith is both made and found.\(^{32}\) Although this could sound like a debunking of a religious conception of God, Hegel seems to be implicitly alluding to the ‘Holy Spirit’ as God’s culminating manifestation in the religious community itself, which would be the religious mode of representing absolute Being.\(^{33}\)

 Absolute Being also exhibits a third dimension that needs to be added to the account. (3) The object of faith is an object in which consciousness puts its trust, an object in which it believes.

This additional moment emerges in the following passage:

> [Pure insight] talks about [priestly deception and deceiving the people] as if by some hocus-pocus of conjuring priests consciousness had been palmed off with something absolutely alien and other to it in place of its own essence; and at the same time it says that this is an essence of consciousness, that consciousness believes in it, puts its trust in it, i.e. consciousness beholds in it its pure essence just as much as its own single and universal individuality, and through this action produces this unity of itself with its essence. Thus what it asserts to be alien to consciousness, it directly declares to be the inmost nature of consciousness itself. How then can it possibly talk of deception and delusion? (PS \(\S\)550)

Consciousness does not just make this object and find it; it moreover stands in a relation of trust to it – it trusts it as that in which it beholds “its pure essence.” This third dimension is crucial, for it is this relation of trust that makes this object essential to consciousness, the essence of consciousness. Given Hegel’s overall argument in the *Phenomenology*, it can be said of everything that shows up as an object in this process that it is both found and made, found in the sense of discovered through experience, but also made in the sense of constituted as an object by consciousness itself. Hence, the first two dimensions would not suffice to distinguish essence from sensible things and discrete

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\(^{31}\) This is admittedly a contentious reading of the passage, for some would deny that the object can be consciousness independent. My reading rests on my broader interpretation of the experiential process in Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, which I cannot defend in this paper.

\(^{32}\) Hegel talks in terms of simultaneously producing and finding: “How are delusion and deception to take place where consciousness in its truth has directly the certainty of itself, where in its object it possesses its own self, since it just as much finds as produces itself in it? The distinction no longer exists even in words” (PS \(\S\)550).

\(^{33}\) Hegel also alludes to the Holy Spirit at the end of the Morality chapter: it is God manifested “in the midst of those who know themselves in the form of pure knowing” (\(\S\)671), so it is clearly doing important work in ‘visualizing’ spirit in its objective form.
events, since they too are both found and made. In order for this object to count as consciousness’ own essence, it must be so intimately bound up with consciousness that consciousness depends on it for its own sense of self, for its immediate certainty of its own essential nature. The spirit of the community meets this criterion, for consciousness relies on it in its everyday dealings with the world and for its identity as a believer.

It is striking that this last passage is pitched as an internal criticism of pure insight, for in this passage, Hegel is accusing pure insight of being foolish (hence not as insightful as it takes itself to be) and of not knowing what it is saying (hence of contradicting itself). The contradiction can be cashed out in the following way. On the one hand, pure insight admits that this absolute Being is the inmost nature of consciousness, since it claims that believers orient their lives around this representation of God. This follows from the fact that believers place their deepest trust on that which they take to be such a Being, a trust that pure insight takes to be misplaced. On the other hand, pure insight also insists that this absolute Being is an alien and other being, hence a fiction produced by manipulative priests. How can it be both? That which is the “inmost nature of consciousness itself” cannot also be an alien and other being, but only an alien and other being can be an object of deception and delusion. According to Hegel, these are mutually incompatible characterizations of an object. Although this is supposed to show that pure insight fails to be consistent in its charge, Hegel is in effect saying that one can only be deceived about that which is alien and other. Since whatever has the status of consciousness’ essence is for that very reason not something alien and other, Hegel is claiming that it does not qualify as the sort of matter about which one can be deceived.

This entire discussion serves as a prelude to Hegel’s claim that it is impossible to deceive a people on this matter, a claim that is no longer uttered on faith’s behalf, but stated in Hegel’s own voice. Given this context in which Hegel’s answer to the ‘academy’ question appears, it becomes clear that Hegel is using his charitable interpretation of religious practices to derive a general lesson that transcends the constraints of faith. We are now able to see that “on this matter” refers to whatever has the status of consciousness’ essence, “that essential being wherein consciousness has immediate certainty of itself.” Within traditional forms of religion, this essence is pictured as God, but it could also be rendered in some other way. In Hegel’s interpretation of religious practices, consciousness’ own essence turns out to be in truth spirit, or the spiritual community and its concrete practices that provide consciousness with an identity, and hence with a sense of self. I cannot be deceived into falsely believing that I am a member of such a spiritual community.
Hegel's denial of the real possibility of deception at this comprehensive level is supposed to be compatible with his simultaneous affirmation that a people can be deceived about many things, even those things that are produced by spirit. This makes his answer to the ‘academy’ question significantly qualified. Here a secular example might help. As Hegel himself admits, I can be deceived into believing that this coin is gold instead of copper, or that this bill is genuine instead of counterfeit. But could I be deceived into thinking that coins or bills are valuable? Money as a specific currency is valuable because it is made valuable by a set of conventional practices, because it is deemed to be valuable by those who treat it as such, which includes myself. In fact, money fits the criteria for essence that we have here outlined, for it is an object constituted by and at the same time independent of consciousness, plus one in which many place their trust.34 So Hegel’s point is that local forms of deceptions about concrete objects within such essential practices are possible, even if global deceptions about essential practices are not. But even here Hegel voices doubts. He adds that when it comes to gold coins and won wars, these can be made believable “for a time” [auf einen Zeitlang], suggesting that their days will be numbered.

This distinction between local and global instances of deception goes a long way toward making Hegel’s answer sound less implausible, but I think that his answer needs to be qualified even one step further. Given the line of thought we have been tracing so far, it could sound as if Hegel were defending the view that it is impossible to be mistaken about one’s own essence, namely, that those who know themselves in relation to an essence possess infallible knowledge. To return to our example, it would mean our belief in the value of money would be immune to error. Ascribing such a view to Hegel would be one way of parsing Hegel’s talk of “immediate certainty” that consciousness has of itself through this object, since one could be led to think that immediate certainty implies infallibility with respect to an object. What I want to argue is that we need to hold apart two claims: (1) that I cannot be deceived about my essence, and (2) that I cannot be mistaken about my essence. According to my reading of Hegel’s argument, he is claiming only that a people cannot be deceived, not that it cannot be mistaken.

34 If someone were to say, ‘the paper on which money is printed is worthless’, we would think that this person is confused about what a currency is, which is established by convention. Thanks to Pia Schneider for helping me think through this example. As Pia has put it to me, we can say that it is ‘faith’ in money that makes a currency valuable.
By deception, Hegel has in mind someone else, a third party, obstructing my relationship to this object, my essence.\(^{35}\) It is for this reason that he claims that an object would have to be alien or other for it to be the sort of thing about which I could become ‘befooled’. If someone attempted to fool me about that which is already within my grasp, because it is that in which I have my sense of who I am, I would directly see through the ruse. Given that this is also an object that I am actively constituting, it becomes even clearer why it could not become an object of deception by another, since in and through it I have evidence of myself. But I think that Hegel does not want to say that I cannot be mistaken about this very same essence; I could get my own essence wrong, even if it is not possible for anyone else to deceive me about it. For example, I could be making a mistake in valuing money, or in treating money as valuable, because it is possible that such a practice proves to be obstructive to the realization of a genuinely spiritual community. Or it could turn out to be the case that the religious practice of worshipping an absolute Being is misguided, because the object around which this communal practice is oriented is not in fact as it is pictured to be. Or maybe it is simply a bad idea to constitute communities around religious representations, even if this does not seem to be Hegel’s own view on the matter.\(^{36}\) What these kinds of scenarios suggest is that mistakes cannot be ruled out, even with respect that which has the status of essence in Hegel’s sense.

It seems to me that Hegel must leave such room for error because his philosophical method in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* denies the intelligible of infallible knowledge. If I am operating under a conception of knowledge, according to which it is inconceivable how I could get an object wrong, then it is also inappropriate to speak about my getting the object right, which means that we are no longer in a context in which a relation of knowing obtains.\(^{37}\) But Hegel’s method also suggests that when it comes to errors about something as fundamental as one’s own essence, we gain the distance that is needed in order to identify them as errors through hindsight, which means at a point in time when the essence has been transformed. In other words, I am only able to identify the fundamental way in which I have been misguided, my ‘blind spots’ so-to-speak, when a given shape of spirit is no longer pervasive and a new spirit of the community has taken its place.\(^{38}\)

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\(^{35}\) Does this include an evil deceiver in Descartes’ sense? Since Hegel is asking about the real possibility of deception, he has in mind powerful priests or monarch, not someone who enjoys many of the privileges of a divined mind (like Descartes’ evil deceiver).

\(^{36}\) See Hegel on religion in the *Philosophy of Right*.

\(^{37}\) I take this to be of the lessons of Sense-Certainty, since Sense-Certainty cannot account for error and so cannot maintain the difference between what an object is in-itself and what it is for-consciousness.

\(^{38}\) This line of thought also provides an additional reason for denying that I can be deceived by another: if it is indeed the case that I am too close to my own errors to be able to identify them as errors, this is going to hold also for my contemporaries.
Philosophy of Right

I now turn to the passage from the *Philosophy of Right*, in which Hegel provides the second version of his answer:

A great spirit has put forward the question for a public competition, *whether it is permissible to deceive a people*. One had to answer that a people does not allow itself to be deceived about its substantial foundation [substantielle Grundlage], the essence [Wesen] and specific character of its spirit, but that it is deceived by itself about the manner in which it knows it, and about how it according to this manner judges its actions, events, etc. (PR §317). 39

In this passage, Hegel alludes explicitly to the ‘academy’ question and this great spirit, Frederick II., repeating the formulation, *whether it is permissible to deceive a people*. 40 Indeed the two passages have a lot in common. Hegel also qualifies his denial that it is possible to deceive a people by stating that this pertains only to a specific object, and here, too, this object is being identified as the essence, also equated with the substantial foundation of a people and the specific character of a people’s spirit. In this way Hegel leaves room for other conceivable objects of deception, even though he does not specify them in this context. So far, this passage repeats the answer Hegel gave in the *Phenomenology*. But there are two amendments that set this passage apart from its predecessor.

For one, Hegel claims that a people “does not allow itself” to be deceived [sich nicht täuschen lassen], which is not identical to saying that it is impossible to deceive a people [es unmöglich ist zu täuschen]. It is not identical because it suggests a reason for this impossibility, namely, a people’s active resistance to efforts at deception. For another, Hegel is introducing an option he did not previously consider, that of self-deception. He is overtly contrasting not two conceivable objects of deception, but two ways of being deceived, either by another or by oneself. At first sight, Hegel’s preference for characterizing deception in reflexive terms is unsurprising. 41 In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel is exploring a variety of self-conceptions, i.e. identities such as that of rights bearer, moral

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39 I altered the Nisbet translation. Here the German: „Ein großer Geist hat die Frage zur öffentlichen Beantwortung aufgestellt, ob es erlaubt sei, ein Volk zu täuschen. Man musste antworten, das ein Volk über seine substantielle Grundlage, das Wesen und bestimmten Character seines Geistes sich nicht täuschen lasse, aber über die Weise, wie es diesen weiß, und nach dieser Weise seine Handlungen, Ereignisse, u. s. f. beurteilt – von sich selbst getäuscht wird.“

40 This passage is sometimes cited in support for other arguments. I have argued that it indicates that Hegel has no room for ideology in his account of ethical life (*Hegel on Second Nature in Ethical Life*). Ng ("Public Opinion and Ideology in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*") argues that the passage shows public opinion to be ideological, but not in a way that can be modeled on external deception. This is how Popper renders Hegel’s point: “In brief, it is always success that counts. If the lie was successful, then it was no lie, since the People was not deceived concerning its substantial basis” (*Open Society and its Enemies* Volume II, p. 65).

41 Zdravko Kobe describes this reference to self-deception as “in a typically Hegelian manner” (p. 176)
subject, family member, economic agent among others. Given that these identities are self-ascribed, it seems plausible to think that we could not be deceived about them by another. How would someone go about fooling me into believing that I have a different self-conception than I do? This denial would be consistent with making room for the possibility that I am mistaken about my identity in the sense of being mistaken about who I really am. But Hegel’s notion of self-deception is not as straightforward as it may initially seem.

First, is Hegel identifying being mistaken about an identity with being self-deceived with respect to it? Can the relevant errors within the Philosophy of Right be redescribed as cases of self-deception? Given what we said about such mistakes in the Phenomenology, it seems to be important that we be able to distinguish between two kinds of failure, a failure to know something that is objectively the case and a failure to be honest with oneself about something that one does (or at least could) in principle know. The category of error includes those which I could not have avoided making, because the relevant information was not then available to me – the time was not yet ripe for the needed discovery of the ways in which I have been fundamentally misguided. But self-deception implies that I am responsible for my own mistake, not simply because I jumped to a conclusion before I had all the facts, but because I withheld them from myself. I did not just make an error, I deceived myself into it. This suggests a strong degree of involvement on my part.

Second, how are we to understand the subject that is self-deceived? Is a self-deception a matter of lying to oneself, misinforming oneself, or concealing information from oneself? Such a conception of self-deception generates seemingly irresolvable dilemmas. The phenomenon of lying is predicated on a difference between the person who knows some truth and the person who does not know this truth and is therefore susceptible to the lie. If I am lying to myself, it must be the case that I both know and not know a truth. But if I do know it, how can I successfully hide it from myself? Wouldn’t I immediately see through my own ruse? And if I do not know it, in what sense am I deceiving myself? Wouldn’t this just be a case of plain ignorance? If this notion of a self-inflicted lie forces us into a dilemma, it suggests that it might be better to abandon the analogy between deceiving oneself and lying to another.

As I mentioned, some Hegel scholars have argued that Hegel develops a conception of collective self-deception that is different in form from individual self-deception and so cannot be

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42 In the Phenomenology Hegel claims that the mistakes consciousness makes are a product of consciousness itself, so that it is suffering them at its own hands.

43 See Sartre’s discussion of self-deception and ‘bad faith.’
modeled on the latter. Instead, collective self-deception consists in a cooperation between two distinct parties, those who actively spread lies on the one hand, and those who gullibly accept them on the other. This means that collective self-deception can accommodate a division of labor between deceiver and deceived. While such a conception succeeds in avoiding the dilemma, it also diverges from what Hegel argues in the *Philosophy of Right*. If we take a closer look at our passage, we find that Hegel is making a highly restricted claim. Hegel is not saying that a people is self-deceived with respect to the very object about which he denied a people could be deceived by another. If he were making such a claim, we could resolve the apparent dilemma by allowing for the possibility that in cases of collective self-deception some people are deceiving others, hence dividing the roles of deceiver and deceived between distinct parties. Instead, Hegel states that a people is self-deceived about the manner in which it knows its essence. He is thus unequivocal about the fact that a people does indeed know its own essence. Rather, the target of its self-deception is this knowledge itself, specifically the manner in which it is possessed. This allows Hegel to hold that self-deception involves simultaneous knowing and not knowing by placing them at two distinct levels in one and the same subject: even if I know my essence, I can deceive myself about the way in which I know it.

What seems to be crucial here is that our failure to know the manner of our own knowledge is not comparable to a failure to know some object. If it is the case that I do know my own essence, the way I know it would presumably be available to me, so I must be the source of my own failure to know how I know.

In the case of the *Philosophy of Right*, it is also instructive to consider the context in which Hegel’s answer to the ‘academy’ question appears, for the passage is embedded in a chapter on the internal constitution of a rational state, in particular the role of public opinion in its successful functioning. By public opinion Hegel means the sum total of judgments on matters of universal concern formed in the public setting of estate assemblies. These estate assemblies are estate specific, so they are organized by the representatives of each estate (*Stände*). Hegel thinks of public opinion formation as a process that grants individuals a say in political life, but also as a process in which one “ingenious idea” devours another. There is a difference between public opinion and private opinion, since the latter does not have to withstand the test of publicity and expose itself to challenge. But Hegel does not assume that this mutual devouring of one opinion by another will

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44 Pippin, Moyar.
45 This is not a democratic decision-making process (PR §308), which he strongly opposes.
46 According to Hegel, it is evident that “a man’s imaginings at home in the company of his wife or friends are very different from events in a great assembly” (PR §315A).
proceed rationally, which makes public opinion a collection of haphazardly formed judgments. This is hardly a rosy vision of public reason that the agents of the Enlightenment wanted to proliferate.

Hegel is not wholly dismissive of public opinion formation. He even issues a half-hearted defense of public opinion in political life. On the positive side, Hegel argues that estate assemblies are valuable because they provide individuals with the opportunity to air views about the ways in which political figures are doing their jobs, hence insofar as they establish the conditions for the exercise of formal subjective freedom. He also argues that estate assemblies have the educational value of training those virtues and skills required of official bodies and civil servants, and of getting others to care about them and to expect them from their representatives. These are benefits of public opinion formation from a political point of view. We can also think about the value of public opinion in relation to his answer to the ‘academy’ question in the Philosophy of Right. I pointed out that Hegel puts it in terms of a people not allowing itself to be deceived, implying that a people actively resists efforts at deception. It is not a stretch to think that a people resists these efforts precisely by forming public opinions. Because public opinion formation plays this vital role, Hegel grants it a central place in the life of a rational state.

On the negative side, Hegel expresses reservations. For Hegel, public opinion will always remain the “particular opinions of the many” in contrast to an articulation of what a people as a people truly knows. This makes public opinion, in Hegel’s words, a “manifest self-contradiction, an appearance of cognition; in it, the essential is just as immediately present as the inessential” (PR §316). Hegel’s reservations stem from public opinion’s relation to the essence on the basis of which it is formed. He thinks that public opinion is derived from the essence and answerable to it, but that it also distorts and betrays it. Here is how he describes this process:

Public opinion therefore embodies not only the eternal and substantial principles of justice – the true content and product of the entire constitution and legislation and of the universal condition in general – in the form of common sense [der gesunde Menschenverstand] (the ethical foundation which is present in everyone in the shape of prejudices), but also the true needs and legitimate tendencies of actuality. – As soon as this inner content attains consciousness and is represented [zur Vorstellung kommt] in general propositions… all the contingencies of opinion, with its ignorance and perverseness, its false information and its errors of judgment, come on the scene (PR §317).

According to this passage, public opinion possesses a ‘true content’ to the extent to which it articulates the essence otherwise available to common sense. Common sense is here being

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47 PR §316
48 PR §315
49 PR §316
understood as the common ground that remains for the most part in the background and is present in everyone as ‘prejudices’ (or pre-judgments), to be contrasted with the judgments of which public opinion is comprised. But in the transition from common sense to public opinion, something goes awry. As soon as this ‘inner content’ becomes consciously represented, “all the contingencies of opinion, with its ignorance and perverseness, its false information, and its errors of judgment come on the scene”. What this passage suggests is that public opinion is objectionable because it is a species of conscious representation, and for this reason an inadequate expression of common sense, and hence an inadequate expression of the essence that common sense is genuinely tracking. This is in keeping with Hegel’s recurring criticism of representational thinking, which he consistently contrasts with a conceptual comprehension that would be capable of doing justice to this essential content.

Hegel concludes his critical discussion of public opinion with a worry inspired by the etymology of opinion [Meinung], what is mine, what I mean. He notes that public opinions tend to be fervently asserted, which gives the impression that those asserting them are serious about the truth. But an opinion’s degree of intensity tells us nothing about how well this opinion expresses this ethical foundation from which it is derived and to which it is answerable. Fervor is no criterion of truth. On the contrary, it often indicates that I am more concerned to express my own unique view on a matter, rather than to stay true to that which is already widely known as common sense. Hegel remarks that “the last thing which opinion can be made to realize is that its seriousness is not serious at all” (§317). This remark specifies what people do not want to admit to themselves, what it is that they are motivated to conceal from themselves – the fact that their opinions do not reflect a serious commitment to the truth. Here we have a relatively straightforward statement of the sources of self-deception. What Hegel suggests is that I deceive myself into believing that I am capturing this essence when I am expressing my opinion and I am thereby concealing from myself the fact that this essence is known to me differently, namely, in the shape of common sense.

In one of the Additions, Hegel provides an example that can illustrate the two modes of relating to a rational state as one’s own essence. One mode is that of a political disposition, which Hegel describes as a background trust of the state. This corresponds roughly to common sense. The other mode is that of representational thought, which ‘fastens on to details’ and ‘delights in the vanity of claiming superior insight.’ This corresponds roughly to opinion. Hegel writes:

They trust that the state will continue to exist and that particular interests can be fulfilled within it alone; but habit blinds us to the basis of our entire existence. It does not occur to someone who walks the streets in safety at night that this might be otherwise, for this habit of [living in] safety has become second nature, and we scarcely stop to think that it is solely the effect of particular
institutions. Representational thought often imagines that the state is held together by force; but what holds it together is simply the basic sense of order which everyone possess. (PR ¶268A)

A person who walks the streets in safety at night trusts the state and assumes that the state merits this trust, though he does not stop to think that his ability to walk safely is enabled by the institutions of the state. Note that Hegel is once again appealing to trust (as he did in the Phenomenology) as the attitude we display toward that which has the status of our essence, in this context the state as a set of intuitions. This person is not thinking about this essence, though we could say that his behavior shows that he knows the state to be his own essence. But if this person were to represent this essence to himself, he becomes liable to ‘imagine that the state is held together by force’. Such an opinion stands in contrast to what this person knows, namely, that the state is held together by a basic and pervasive ‘sense of order which everyone possesses’.

Because Hegel’s discussion of public opinion functions as a prelude to his answer to the ‘academy’ question, it provides a context for disambiguating its allusion to self-deception and clarifying what it is that a people can become self-deceived about. The following position comes into view: Hegel thinks that I do know the essence before I come to form an opinion about an essential matter in a public setting. But when I make this essence into an object of conscious representation, I am led to distort or betray it. He offers two reasons for thinking this. First, no conscious representation could ever fully capture it, since representations are inadequate means for doing so. Second, I become motivated to conceal my lack of seriousness about expressing this essence and my preference for that which sets me apart, my opinion. So, there is something about the very structure of public opinion formation that promotes self-deception, deception about the formal inadequacy of my opinion and about my lack of seriousness concerning the truth to which I take myself to be beholden. What I am self-deceived about is not the essence itself, but the fact that I already know the essence in the form of common sense.

In the context of the Phenomenology of Spirit, I argued that we need to distinguish between deceptions and mistakes. It seems to me that in the context of the Philosophy of Right, a similar qualification is in order. Despite the fact that Hegel is privileging common sense over public opinion, Hegel is not implying that common sense is beyond reproach, so he is not ruling out that I could be wrong to place my trust in the state I inhabit. Although he argues that it is the state’s rationality that is on full display in examples like the above, it seems to me that he leaves open the very real possibility of error in a way that is at least comparable to the shapes of spirit in the Phenomenology. When he warns in the Preface that philosophy is its own time grasped in thoughts, he
is admitting that it is inevitably constrained by a historical frame. This suggests that this knowledge of one’s substantial foundation is maybe better thought of, not as the achievement of a firm state, but as an ongoing process that includes contestation and revision. To see how this might play out, just consider the ‘blind spots’ operative in Hegel’s highly telling example. We are in a position to ask: do all members of a spiritual community feel equally comfortable during their nightly strolls? Who exactly is doing this safe walking, and who is by implication excluded from Hegel’s account?

Conclusion

My aim in this paper has been to explore the two passages in which Hegel provides his answer to the ‘academy’ question with an eye to what he means by essence, that object with respect to which the idea of deception supposedly falls away. In the *Phenomenology of Spirit* Hegel confronts the historical setting in which this question was initially raised. He attempts to show that deception at the level of essence is impossible by examining the case of religious faith. As we have seen, agents of the Enlightenment charged religious leaders with deceiving the people in some wholesale way, namely, through their worship of an absolute Being. In this context, Hegel wants to show that this charge is off the mark, for a people cannot be deceived about such an absolute Being around which a spiritual community is oriented. Although Hegel would agree with Frederick that faith is making use of religious representations that do not present its essence in a fully transparent form, he argues that this faith is a form of knowledge of a community’s spirit, expressing an intimate and hence invulnerable grasp of that in which a religious community places its trust.

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel shifts focus to the political context and considers the question of whether a people could be deceived, now presumably by political leaders. Although he also denies that this is possible with respect to a people’s essence, he entertains the problem of self-deception, arguing that public opinion is formed in a self-deceiving manner. Although he continues to assert that a people does indeed know its own essence, which makes it immune to deception by an external figure, he thinks that a people knows it in the shape of common sense, not in the form of public opinion, which is a species of conscious representation. This suggests that conscious representations (whether religious or political) are not wholly innocuous. Even if they do not and cannot compromise this knowledge of essence that Hegel thinks remains off limits to deception, they can generate a form of self-deception, specifically a self-inflicted failure to know how we know.

This mature version of Hegel’s answer has broader implications for his own project in the *Philosophy of Right* and beyond, for it indicates that Hegel does not see himself in the role of someone
who has to ‘enlighten’ his readers. In Hegel’s words, is there anything that a people knows more intimately than its own essence? And if it is not a possible object of deception, how could it become an object for Enlightenment? Rather, Hegel’s target is instead the self-deception to which the production of conscious representations gives rise. And as we have seen, representations are woven into the life of many spiritual communities, formed in settings as varied as religious ceremonies and estate assemblies. This allows us to appreciate Hegel’s philosophical challenge, not as one of disseminating the truth about essence, but as one of combating the threat of self-deception in relation to it. In the end, Hegel concedes that it is excruciatingly difficult to grasp the truth as philosophy seeks to, in its uncovered and undisguised (i.e. conceptual) form. Perhaps it is in order to accommodate our limitations that he leaves behind a series of images not completely unlike the ‘myths’ and ‘fables’ that so exorcised his predecessors: the absolute as the night in which all cows are black (PhG ¶16), the truth as the revel in which no member is not drunk (PhG ¶47), and philosophy as the owl of Minerva that spreads its wings at dusk (PR, 21).  

50 I am greatly indebted to Rolf Horstmann, Karen Ng, and Francey Russell for feedback on earlier drafts; to Richard Bourke, Dina Emundts, Andrea Kern, Thomas Meyer, Fred Neuhauser, and Sally Sedgwick for questions and suggestions; to the students in my course on Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit at UC Berkeley in Spring 2022, especially to my GSI Pia Schneider, for the inspiration; and to the participants in the conferences “Hegel’s Future” at the Humboldt University (August 2022), “Hegel’s Philosophy of Right” at Oxford University (September 2022), and “Political Thought in Hegel and the Hegelian Tradition” at Cambridge University (July 2023) for engaging discussions.