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“...This naturally depends on the numbers concerned.” –Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*,
§ 270.

I. Introduction

This paper asks a simple question with no obvious answer: how many people, on Hegel’s view, is it possible to fit into a genuinely unified state? The question is both empirical and conceptual. Answering it adequately requires a sort of reflective equilibrium between a philosophically rigorous category of ‘state’ and a sensitivity to the empirical facts of anthropology, sociology, and history.

My main goal in this paper is Socratically to ask the question about size and scale of the Hegelian State, and to argue that this simple question has no simple answers. Beyond attempting to block one or two apparently obvious easy answers, I am unsure what Hegel’s view is. Primarily, I wish to debar certain candidate answers from consideration: A single, genuinely unified Hegelian State cannot be too small – it cannot consist of merely a nuclear or extended family (100s of people); but a Hegelian State also cannot be indefinitely large – it cannot consist of multiple millions of citizens, as does the modern-day U.S., Germany, and even commonwealths like Kentucky (with 4.4 million).

I offer one positive hypothesis by way of a tentative proposal. My hypothesis is this: the number of people in the genuinely unified *Sittlichkeit* of a Hegelian State must consist of somewhere between five thousand and one million people.

I construct this hypothesis from an examination of the population statistics of Germany and other regions in the early 1800s, arguing that Hegel must have had such sizes background assumptions. I then test this hypothesis against two quite different sources: the first is the recent neo-Aristotelian virtue theory of Alasdair MacIntyre, who argues that the family and the gigantic modern nations are wrongly sized social entities for the inculcation of virtue. The second is the anthropological and ethological “social brain hypothesis” from Robin Dunbar, who argues that human social networks are limited by brain size. The implications of my hypothesis for contemporary politics are briefly explored, and a few objections are stated.

Hegel’s concept of *Sittlichkeit* or “ethical life” is interesting and challenging. *Sittlichkeit* consists of smaller communities fulfilled and perfected in the context of a Modern State. Call this the Hegelian State.

The Hegelian State is not just a loose legal association, but a genuinely unified community, perhaps history's first such unified community. The "Germanic peoples" of Germany, France, England, Italy, Spain, etc. are "heaven has come down to earth in this world", Germany or England were much smaller in the 1800s than they are today. It becomes reasonable to wonder about the size and scale of Sittlichkeit in the Hegelian State and which communities of what description today, if any, might fall under Hegel's concept of Sittlichkeit.

II. Fichte and Hegel

The question of Right animates both Fichte and Hegel. For Fichte, Right is *freedom*. The formula of Right is expressed as follows: "Limit your freedom so that the other alongside you can also be free."¹ Fichte's state is very formal, and hence allows for global universality. Fichte paints mere "minimums" or sufficient conditions for political community; two members of a Fichtean state need not share other things in common, such as morals, values, mythology, sense of humor, etc. For Hegel, however, the State cannot be quite so abstract.

For Hegel, 'Right' is also Freedom. But Freedom is another name for Geist, spirit, practical reason, or will.² The stage of "abstract right" (corresponding to Fichte's conception of right) is, for Hegel, merely one stage or "moment" – and an early one at that. After abstract Right comes morality, and after these two comes Sittlichkeit, or ethical life.

Sittlichkeit transcends but includes the prior moments. It is the moment of individuality, where subjective and objective are conjoined without nullification. Sittlichkeit, accordingly, has three spheres: family life, civil society, and the state. Hegel says "the state is the actuality of the ethical Idea."³ The State is the actualization of Reason, the embodiment of Right. While Hegel's does bear within it the traditions of what comes before it, it sublimates them with self-consciousness. The State "knows itself and implements what it knows."⁴

How do Fichte's and Hegel's concepts of Right compare? The Fichtean State is more formal and hence more universal; the Hegelian State is more material and hence more individual. The differences come to light most clearly, I think, in the discussion of international relations. Fichte's idealized State contractually unites with all other Fichtean States in a confederation, while Hegel's idealized State remains particular, unique, and separate from other nations.

Consider, first, Fichte's discussion of how a global confederation would lead to perpetual peace. A consequence of the need for contractual and legal unifications is that "all human beings living on the earth's surface would gradually become united in a single state."⁵ The contractual union leaves the two states independent and "perfect equals"⁶ but resolves the perpetual danger of

1. J. G. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, Ed. Frederick Neuhouser, Trans. Michael Bauer (Cambridge University Press, 2000), 82.

2. G. W. F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. Allen W Wood (Cambridge University Press, 1991), 35.

3. Ibid., sec. 257.

4. Ibid., § 257

5. Fichte, *Foundations of Natural Right*, Ed. Frederick Neuhouser, Trans. Michael Bauer, 320.

6. Ibid., 325.

war. This is a “confederation.”⁷

Pretty clearly, Hegel’s State is united by more than the “minimum” requirement of rightful coercion and freedom. Members of a Hegelian State are happy even to sacrifice their lives by warring for the State. Hegel’s vision of the idealized State is not international. It cannot be. For there are real, material, contentful, relations of social, intellectual, religious, or mythological unity between the various members. The merely formal relations that obtain between members of the Fichtean State could just as easily apply between foreign States, or between members of a World Republic or World Federation, each of which is materially different and even incompatible with the others. The Hegelian State cannot fit the whole world into it.

III. The Scale of Ethical Life

The more material, the more particular. The Hegelian State is smaller than Fichte’s, but how big? Hegel says that “dispassionateness, integrity, and polite behavior” will become “customary” if administrators are trained and educated well. “But”, he continues: “The *size* of the state is also an important consideration, for it both reduces the burden of family ties and other private commitments and lessens the power and thereby takes the edge off such passions as revenge, hatred, etc. These subjective aspects disappear of their own accord in those who are occupied with the larger interests of a major state, for they become accustomed to dealing with universal interests, views, and functions.”⁸ Second, modernity is a necessary condition. States of antiquity could not attain to the level of self-consciousness available to citizens in the Modern State.⁹ Old tribes and clans failed, and necessarily failed, to embody Geist. So a State must be large.

Can a State become too large? Or is the State, once it comes into being, scalable? Can it, like a fractal or a tree grow indefinitely while retaining the same pattern or organizational structure? I shall argue that it cannot. To see why, consider a few examples from inorganic nature, organic nature, and animals.

No material thing is infinitely scalable. Rather, truly scalable collections must be abstract or formal, such as mathematical equations. For example, fractal shape can be expanded or contracted indefinitely.

Furthermore, all of the examples of organic entities have a definite size. And Hegel has recourse to the body analogy several times in the *Philosophy of Right*.¹⁰ A tree may be a single trunk or have a few or many branches, and each branch may have many twigs, but ultimately it must stop growing inwardly and plant seeds for new individual trees. Likewise, an individual insect, rodent, or mammal has a genetically determined total possible size at maturity (or range of sizes). Beyond this, it is sick. Once mature, organisms do not continue to grow “vertically” – however, they might grow “laterally” – that is, by reproduction. They might “split” and multiply themselves. Reproduction is the genesis of a new organism of the same form, which itself has an opportunity to grow to reach *its* full size.

7. Ibid., 329.

8. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, 335.

9. Ibid., 286.

10. Ibid., 302.

Transitioning from animals to social animals like ourselves, we can see that human society is not indefinitely scalable. Families can only be so large before they split laterally (by forming new families) or grow vertically by becoming “civil society”.

A third reason the Hegelian State cannot be indefinitely scalable is that it has a monarch and a place. The State has a monarch which is its personality, or rather, it is the “truth” of which all other “personalities” of families, etc. are abstractions.

A fourth, and related reason, the Hegelian State is not indefinitely scalable is that patriotism cannot extend indefinitely. For Hegel, the state is the locus of freedom, and true patriotism is the free identification of oneself with one’s state. It is not merely that the state can preserve the freedom of individuals; it is that *individuals as such cannot be free*.¹¹ Rupert Gordon says: “Hegel believes that within the context of the limited, modern state, one should live as part of a free ethical community, and that the modern citizen should feel ‘au Hause’ (‘at home’) in the state. This is a patriotic life.”¹²

The fifth and final reason that the state is not indefinitely scalable is that there must exist multiple states for citizens within each state to be truly patriotic. Patriotism is manifested in the willingness to “perform extraordinary sacrifices and actions”¹³

I conclude, then, that the Hegelian State cannot extend across the globe because it is a material entity, like an organism, with a particular national personality (including a head of state), in which citizens feel a real, concrete solidarity and companionship with each other and with the State. It is most probable that the State has a natural size, like an organism. It grows to the maximal size determined by its inner form and telos; then, it either splits to reproduce another sovereign state, or decays naturally. If it grows beyond its maximal natural size (through imperialization or even Fichte’s legal confederation), this would not be a larger Leviathan but a cancerous one. A so-called State without a genuine unity, size, and national character under the monarch would be dangerous to the ethical life of the inhabitants.

What, then, might the scale of ethical life be? Hegel does not say, so we cannot answer with any confidence. Hegel did not specify the scale of the state, so we may hypothesize that he did not *need* to specify. Perhaps the scale of a “state” would have been perfectly obvious to Hegel and his hearers. We can speculate that the background assumptions governing Hegel’s thought would be the size of the states in which he grew up, lived, wrote, and lectured.

First, Hegel lived in Jena in 1801. In the early 1800s, Jena had a population of about 5,000; roughly the equivalent of Wilmore, Kentucky.¹⁴ (By comparison, in the 1800s the population of Lexington, Kentucky, was 25,000.¹⁵ Secondly, since Jena is in Thuringen, we should expand our scope to notice that at the same time, the population of Thuringen was 1.1 million.¹⁶ Thirdly,

11. Rupert H Gordon, “Modernity, Freedom, and the State: Hegel’s Concept of Patriotism,” *Review of Politics* 62, no. 2 (2000): 305.

12. *Ibid.*, 308.

13. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, sec. 268.

14. Today, Jena has 110,000 inhabitants. Statistics accessed online. Berlin State Statistical Office. <https://www.statistik-berlin-brandenburg.de/>. Retrieved 27 Apr 2016.

15. Today, Lexington has 314,000. “Census of Population and Housing”. Census.gov. Retrieved 27 Apr 2016.

16. Today, 2 million.

Hegel wrote *Philosophy of Right* in Berlin, which had a population of about 170,000. So empires notwithstanding, then, we may hypothesize that Hegel was assuming that the “normal” population size of a major city, or a kingdom, or a modern state was between five thousand and about one million.

Naturally, if this scale is close to correct, then the 19th century European population of millions would inhabit many Hegelian states. And that’s just how it was. In 1806 and before, the Central European Germanic polities numbered more than 300. The largest were states like Bavaria, weighing in at almost four million inhabitants. But most were small, consisting of only a few thousand, or few hundred thousand, a scale at which genuine political and cultural unity is possible. All of these independent states could trade with each other, recognize each other, and of course could potentially war with each other.

After the Napoleonic wars in the early 1800s, some of the German nations were for unification, though they disagreed about the size of the intended empire – should it include Austria or not? By the time the decision was made in 1866, Hegel was dead. Nevertheless, the imperialization of multiple independent and sovereign states would seem to be opposed to *Sittlichkeit*.

IV. Two Confirmations

My hypothesis is admittedly tentative. For help in supplementing these arguments, I turn to Alasdair MacIntyre, especially his recent monograph, *Dependent Rational Animals*. There, MacIntyre’s project is to argue the significance for ethics and politics of our nature as rational animals, with a lifespan of childhood, maturity, and old age, and often filled with sickness, disability, and injury.

What concerns us here is his third thesis: that *certain social arrangements* are conducive to the transmission and sustenance of these virtues, and others are not. To achieve the communal goal of producing independent reasoners requires a systemic web of virtues across the entire communal association. Not only individual human beings, but entire communities, institutions, and nations need virtues to keep their integrity and to produce the next generation of independent, virtuous, rational animals. And MacIntyre argues that “neither the modern state nor the modern family can supply that kind of political and social association that is needed.”¹⁷

The MacIntyrean idealized community must be particular, therefore it must be a certain scale. MacIntyre aims for a community scale between the family and what he calls the “modern nation-state.” According to my hypothesis, the Hegelian State satisfies this condition, for it would be no larger than one million. So, although MacIntyre’s term contradicts Hegel’s, I suggest that the concepts match surprisingly well.

MacIntyre’s problem with the gigantic modern nation-state, in brief, is first that having a voice is too dependent on having money; and, secondly, that arriving at a “common mind” by “widespread, shared deliberation governed by norms of rational enquiry” is precluded by the “size of modern states.”¹⁸ When the State is larger than I have hypothesized a Hegelian State can be,

17. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Cambridge University Press, 1999), 9.

18. *Ibid.*, 131.

its pretending to constitute a “Volk” bound by “kinship and loyalty” is likely to be “an ideological disguise for sinister realities” and “dangerous fictions.”¹⁹

What other political frameworks are there, besides the state and one’s nuclear family? MacIntyre mentions: “Workplaces, schools, parishes, sports clubs, trade union branches, adult education classes, and the like.”²⁰ But does such a community exist? MacIntyre points to a few possible examples that would be good for comparative study: “fishing communities in New England over the past hundred and fifty years”, as well as the “Welsh mining communities”, “farming cooperatives in Donegal, Mayan towns in Guatemala and Mexico, some city-states from a more distant past.”²¹

The Hegelian State, appropriately limited by its internal form, could conceivably satisfy MacIntyre’s criteria. Hegel would certainly point to his own Germanic State as an approximation of the truth of Right. And I have already argued that the assumed size of a Germanic community would be between the sizes of Jena and Thuringen, between 5,000 and 1,000,000. How well do MacIntyre’s examples fit this hypothesis? Quite well: the New England fishing villages have present-day populations of 1,000-25,000.²² Glynneath and Blaenavon in Wales have populations of about 4,000-6,000 respectively; Donegal in Ireland has about 2,600 inhabitants.

None of these examples should be mistaken for a perfect exemplar, but MacIntyre suggests that the variety of these forms underscores his essential point. And while each may presently lack other necessary features, in terms of scale they, by Hegel’s lights, are viable candidates for the eventual embodiment of Geist. They are, indeed, more viable in some ways than present-day Germany (with its 80 million inhabitants) or the present-day United States (with its 330 million), which he would perceive as unified empires if there are unified entities at all.

One final bit of evidence for my hypothesis is more empirical. It is the “Dunbar number”. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar discovered that a natural and surprisingly recurrent size of human social sets is 100-200 people.²³ A particular primate brain is needed to maintain social networks 55 primates large. But the human brain size predicts for a maximum social set of quality human networks of about 150. This became popularized as the Dunbar Number.²⁴

The Dunbar number has been validated in a surprisingly robust diversity of contexts: military companies; the American parishes²⁵ self-regulated organic communities like the Amish; busi-

19. Ibid., 132–3.

20. Ibid., 134.

21. Ibid., 143.

22. New Shoreham in New England has a present-day population of 1,010; Rockport, Massachusetts about 7,000; Newport, Rhode Island, about 24,000.

23. Robin IM Dunbar, “Neocortex Size as a Constraint on Group Size in Primates,” *Journal of Human Evolution* 22, no. 6 (1992): 469–93.

24. For a thorough analysis, including responses to criticisms, see Robin Ian MacDonald Dunbar, *Primate Social Systems* (Springer Science & Business Media, 2013).

25. Mark Chaves, “National Congregations Study”, accessed online 2 May 2016. http://www.soc.duke.edu/natcong/Docs/NCSII_report_final.pdf.

nesses like W. L. Gore and Associates;²⁶ even on Twitter²⁷ and Facebook²⁸; the Dunbar Number of plus or minus 150 is resilient.

In light of the neurobiological and sociological limits of human social sets with a robust group identity and high degree of interactivity, it makes sense that Hegelian States could not be scalable. The Dunbar Number is rather small, Dunbar explores ways it can be multiplied. For instance, the Dunbar Number times itself (one hundred fifty by one hundred fifty) results in 22,500. So we could predict that a State of 22,000 inhabitants would be composed of roughly 150 individual Dunbar unit sized social sets. A State of one million would be composed of more than 6,000 such Dunbar units, and so on.

V. Concluding remarks

My hypothesis is that the scale of Hegelian *Sittlichkeit* or ethical life lies somewhere between 5,000 and 1,000,000 persons. The consequences of such a hypothesis, if it were true, would seem to be momentous. For example, this hypothesis suggests that the “international rights” of humans or of sovereign states cannot be guaranteed by international law. It also suggests that the right to secession is an essential element of the right of modern, liberal States. Not only should Scotland and England exit Great Britain, but somewhat shockingly, Scotland itself, (which consists of about five million inhabitants) would need to be subdivided into five or more independent sovereign States.

However, there is nothing in my hypothesis to suggest that subdivision would continue indefinitely nor that it would end in an anarchy of individualism – as if all ends in a dystopian Apple “iState” with a population of one. Such chimerical bugbears are eliminated by Hegel’s insistence that Geist cannot be embodied by tiny groups such as families, nor even large civil societies. For Hegel, the State must exist, and must be large. But it cannot grow indefinitely, like a cancer. It must grow to a definite size and there remain or reproduce, like a mighty Leviathan.

What of modern day federal bodies like the United States and the European Union? Today, the United States has 50 independent “states” (in a different sense of that word), with mean average of 6 million per state. Journalist Colin Woodard argues that these 50 states represent 11 distinct “nations” dating back to the founding of the colonies.²⁹ But my hypothesis calls for more than 11 nations. Indeed, for the English-speaking Americans to equate to the size of Thuringen in 1834 at the size of 1 million per state, the U.S. would need to subdivide into about 300 independent states, of about the same size and scale as the 1800 century European countries of Germany. Each independent State, once formed, would need its own president, congress, and supreme court. These “children” of the parent empires, planted like seeds from the mother tree, would retain the family

26. Malcolm Gladwell, *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Can Make a Big Difference* (Little, Brown, 2006).

27. Bruno Gonçalves, Nicola Perra, and Alessandro Vespignani, “Modeling Users’ Activity on Twitter Networks: Validation of Dunbar’s Number,” *PloS One* 6, no. 8 (2011): e22656.

28. RIM Dunbar, “Do Online Social Media Cut Through the Constraints That Limit the Size of Offline Social Networks?” *Royal Society Open Science* 3, no. 1 (2016): 150292.

29. Colin Woodard, *American Nations: A History of the Eleven Rival Regional Cultures of North America* (Penguin, 2011).

resemblance that all children bear to their parents, but would be free to form their own identities, policies, and national character.

For some readers, these inferences constitute a *reductio* of my hypothesis: if the hypothesis leads to such absurd conclusions, then it must be wrong. I am not so sure; I imagine that one's conception of "absurdity" depends in large part on how closely one agrees with Hegel.

Of course, some other readers might object to my interpretation of Hegel. Perhaps the Hegelian State is indeed scalable, and I have missed something there. Still others might accept my interpretation of Hegel but simply say that Hegel got this wrong; perhaps modern day Great Britain, Germany, or the United States cannot become true Hegelian States but so much the worse for the Hegelian State. I shall not attempt here to rebut these two objections, since my primary purpose is simply to ask the question about the scalability of Hegel's state, and offer a tentative hypothesis.

A third sort of critic, however, might accept my interpretation of Hegel but offer a neo-Hegelian modification whereby the State can be genuinely unified even without a monarch, without contiguous geographical limits, and a particular moral and material culture. In response to this final objection, I would only pose this challenge: If a single, genuinely unified ethical community is more than two or three people, is it indefinite, or does it have some definite size? If a State can include more than one million people, then how many?