

Hegel's renowned statement, "What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational," found in the Preface to his *Philosophy of Right*, has frequently been a source of considerable misunderstanding. It's often been misinterpreted as a simple justification for the existing state of affairs. However, within the context of Hegel's philosophy, particularly in relation to his logic, the statement carries a far deeper significance. Béatrice Longuenesse, in her insightful work, *Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics*, masterfully illuminates the true philosophical depth of this assertion.

To properly apprehend this statement, one must first set aside the common, everyday understanding of the terms "rational" and "actual." When Hegel employs these concepts, especially within the framework of his *Science of Logic*, he is operating with a philosophical lexicon deeply rooted in the history of metaphysics, tracing back through Aristotle to Kant.

### Hegel's Distinct Terminology

Hegel's notion of "actuality" (*Wirklichkeit*) is considerably more nuanced than mere existence or reality (*Realität*). Drawing implicitly from the Aristotelian concept of *energeia*, or activity, Hegel's actuality represents the unity of essence and existence. It is not merely something that exists; rather, it is something that is fully realised, something that is "at work". Longuenesse highlights that, for Hegel, actuality is the manifold brought into unity by the movement of reflection. It is appearance no longer set in opposition to essence, but thoroughly determined by the forms that reflection produces. This is reality as constituted, in all its determinations, by thought.

"Rational" (*vernünftig*), for Hegel, is intimately connected with the concept (*Begriff*) and its inherent teleological drive towards self-realisation. It embodies the logical, the necessary, the unified totality that is not merely abstract but concrete and fully developed. As Longuenesse elucidates, Hegel's "rational" or "the Idea" signifies the being in which the concept's self-identity has been conceived and accomplished, even as its most significant differentiation from itself (judgment) has transpired and continues to do so.

### Longuenesse's Interpretation

Longuenesse, in her detailed analysis of Hegel's *Science of Logic*, particularly the section addressing "Actuality," helps us to see that Hegel's statement does not constitute an endorsement of every empirically existing state of affairs. Instead, it presents a philosophical claim about the inherent structure of reality as comprehended through the lens of his dialectical logic.

According to Longuenesse's interpretation, the progression towards "actuality proper" involves reflection appropriating what is actual as having been produced by itself, as being nothing other than itself. This process of reflection is not external; it is the very activity of the concept achieving its own realisation. Longuenesse links Hegel's notion of actuality to the post-Kantian understanding of the unity between the "I think" and the object as determined by the "I think". For Hegel, something attains true "actuality" only when it fully embodies rationality, when it is the outcome of this self-realising conceptual movement. As Longuenesse points out, Hegel would contend that anything not rational must, by that very criterion, fail to be considered actual. She illustrates this by citing Hegel's examples of refusing to recognise a poet or statesman who lacks merit or rationality as an "actual" poet or statesman.

## Addressing the Common Misunderstanding

The prevalent misinterpretation of "What is rational is actual, and what is actual is rational" stems from equating "actual" with "existent" or "real" in a superficial sense. This leads to the erroneous inference that Hegel endorsed everything that exists simply because it exists. However, as discussed, Hegel explicitly differentiates "actuality" (Wirklichkeit) from mere "being" (Sein) or "existence" (Dasein). Mere existence or appearance, in Hegel's view, remains immediate, external, and not yet fully constituted by the process of reflection.

Longuenesse underscores that Hegel's statement posits a rational character that is actively constituted as the result of a movement driven by the teleological pursuit of the concept's unity. Therefore, something is genuinely "actual" for Hegel only when it fully embodies rationality, when it is the product of this self-realising conceptual process. As Longuenesse notes, Hegel would argue that anything that is not rational must, on precisely that basis, fail to be regarded as actual. The statement thus serves not as an endorsement of the status quo, but as a criterion by which to evaluate reality. It suggests that much of what exists in the world may fall short of true actuality precisely because it is not yet fully rational.

In essence, Hegel's dictum, as elucidated by Longuenesse's scholarly work, functions as a call to transform the existent into the actual by instilling rationality within it – a process of bringing reality into alignment with the inherent logic and telos of the Concept. It represents a dynamic principle, not a passive acceptance of the given.

I trust this explication clarifies some of the richness and transformative potential embedded within this seemingly straightforward, yet philosophically profound, Hegelian phrase. It reminds us that, particularly with a thinker of Hegel's stature, seemingly familiar terms often conceal considerable conceptual depth.

For those wishing to explore this further, I commend Béatrice Longuenesse's excellent book:

- [Hegel's Critique of Metaphysics by Béatrice Longuenesse](#)

Please feel free to pose any further questions you may have on this compelling topic.