HEGEL'S ETHICAL RATIONALISM

I

Hegel claimed to have developed and defended a unique category of ethical assessment — "Sittlichkeit," or "ethical life" (Sittlichkeit might also be translated simply as "customariness"). Although he shares with many other modern philosophers the view that to live righteously is to live freely, and with some classical thinkers the idea that the worthiest life involves an active engagement with others, Hegel adds to both positions the claim that to live freely is to participate in certain modern institutions, to be a social and political being of a certain sort.

1 In the Introduction to the Philosophy of Right, the "system of right" is said to comprise the "realm of actualized freedom, the word of spirit produced from within itself as a second nature" (no. 4: PR, 28; PRE, 35). And in no. 29, "Right is therefore in general freedom, as Idea" (PR, p. 45; PRE, 58). In this chapter, references to the Philosophy of Right (PRE) will be to the English translation of H. B. Nisbet, Elements of the Philosophy of Right, ed. by Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), which I have relied on, but occasionally altered. Also in this chapter, for the original of Gans' Zusätze, or the additions translated by Nisbet, I have consulted Band 7 of the fuldischeausgabe in zwanzig Bände (hereafter GPR) ed. by H. Glockner (Stuttgart: Frommme Verlag, 1954), and the relevant volume of Ilting's edition of the lectures, as quoted in note 5.

2 The reference to modernity in this claim is not an idle modifier. In his Phenomenology, to cite one of many such references, Hegel makes very clear that an ethical community as such (one constitutive of freedom) is a distinctly modern, Western European accomplishment. It is not
Hegel's reasons for making this claim are complex, and many involve difficult issues in what he considered the logic of individuality and universality. But, like Rousseau and Kant, he also linked the possibility of free agency with a kind of practical rationality and based much of the things he wanted to say about the "priority of ethical life" on considerations arising from an analysis of the possibility of such rationality. Or so I want to claim in what follows.

However, appreciating Hegel's position on ethical life has been impeded, I believe, by two familiar characterizations of his case. First, the nature of Hegel's ethical rationalism has been obscured by his own spirited critique of moral rigorism, dualism of all kinds, the general Zerrissenheit of modern life, and so forth. Inspired by such passages, and what they might mean for Hegel's own account of moral motivation, some commentators classify him as a "romantic," along the lines of Schiller, and so try to equate a practically rational life with some sort of sensuous harmony with "the whole," or with the rational, "what there truly is." This has the effect of rendering Hegel, to use his own classification, a premodern rationalist in ethics, and so conflicts with his own enthusiastic modernism. (My reasons for acting, "my subjectivity," seem lost in any such account of being in harmony with, reconciled with, actuality.) Second, since Hegel's account of ethical life is a historical one, it is often assumed that his argument for the motivating (or non-alienating) power of modern ethical ideals, his claim that the rational (or any rational norm) is "actual," must rely on a sweeping, highly implausible historical theodicy, that the rationality of our participation in ethical practices stems from something like the divine rationality of history itself, and its resolution or culmination in modern institutions. I want to propose an alternative, although preliminary, reading of Hegel's general case for the rationality and priority of ethical life.

II

First, some qualifications are in order. Since this sort of claim for the priority of our social existence and for what might appear to be a kind of anti-

merely the "universal substance of all individuals (die allgemeine Substanz aller Einzeln)"; rather, "ethical" or "true" spirit is a substance "known by these individuals as their own essence (Wesen and their own work." It is not like some "essential light" that swallows up such individuals (in the manner of readings of Hegel's own account of the "divinity" of the state) but is the "free Will" in which "custom" (Sitten) "makes up the substance of all, whose actuality and existence each and everyone knows as his own will and deed." P&G, p. 376; P&K, pp. 434–5.

5 To be sure, Hegel also argues, contrary to the contractarian or natural right tradition, that our being capable of mutually recognizing each other as equally rights-bearing, morally responsible individuals is itself a historical achievement, that such claims are relevant to modern agents. He recognizes too what this will sound like, and hastens to try to show that he is not thereby "excusing" past injustices, as the important addition to PR, no. 3 makes clear.

4 The general purpose of Hegel's practical philosophy is to describe the conditions for the possibility of being a free subject, or of "agency," and the results of that account are (i) be a "person" and respect others as persons (don't violate another's rights respect legitimate claims of non-interference, above all with respect to property); (ii) be a "subject"; or be morally responsible for what you do and regard others, all other human beings, as morally responsible beings; and (iii) be an ethical being; affirms and sustain certain ethical institutions. Or in the conventional language: act legally, act morally, act ethically, respect rights; do what is morally obligatory and what is ethically good.

5 This is from Holtho's Zusatz to no. 141. GPP, p. 155: PR, p. 186. Right and morality are said to have das Sittliche zum Träger zur Grundlage. For the original notes, see G. W. F. Hegel, Vorlesungen über Rechtphilosophie 1818–1831 (hereafter VRP), III, ed. by Karl-Heinz Itting (Stuttgart: Frommman-Holzboog, 1774), p. 478.

6 I don't mean by this that Hegel has in mind by such collectivity a common attempt to bring about substantive benefits or goods. Ethical life in general is not what Oakeshott has called an "enterprise" association, but a "civil" association. Cf. Michael Oakeshott, "On the Character of a Modern European State," Os. Human Conduct (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 257–63. The ends we pursue consist of the arrangements of our relations to each other such
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for the priority of ethical life (as a distinctive but the most important "realm" of right, or actualized freedom) would not be wrong, but it would clearly be incomplete. Hegel also maintains that "the ethical" is the "support and foundation" of rights-based and moral sanctions, and that claim also needs to be justified. Hegel is indeed claiming that the human good consists in being actively related to others within certain institutions. But he is also claiming, even more controversially, that it is only in being so linked that the nature, implications, and bindingness of other sorts of normative claims can be fully made out. He is especially claiming that it is only in being so linked that I can actually be an individual, rights-bearing, morally responsible, and therewith free individual.7

Ethical life, then, these "laws and institutions which have being in and for themselves," comprises what is called the "objective sphere of ethics," which is said to "take the place of the abstract good" and so to constitute "the living good" for human beings.8 Hence too the familiar question: Why does Hegel believe that such social interaction is so essential to the human good (freedom) and that it is the "basis and support" of all other aspects of a worthy life?

III

Despite the recent, brief popularity of a "communitarian" spirit in ethical theory, skepticism about such a position is so widespread it is difficult to classify its various forms. Many doubt that there is any such thing as "modern ethical life"; on the contrary, the most manifest fact about the institutions, norm-governed practices, and religions of late twentieth-century life is the impossibility (and the danger, the potential injustice) of any attempt to define some comprehensively inclusive category for all of them. Heterogeneity, pluralism, the fractured subject, incommensurable paradigms and practices, mere fragments of old traditions, and so forth, are all we've got.9

But the most familiar suspicion is that, when all is said in done, the category of Stittlichkeit, as one of ethical assessment, terminates in some version of a "my station, its duties" ethics, finally conventionalist and far too reconciliationist, or insufficiently attentive to the importance of some ethical detachment, the worth of individuality as such, and critical reflection in modern moral life.10

The standard response to this latter doubt is equally familiar and is pertinent to the first concern as well. Hegel's famous interest in the actuality of our social lives as the original expression of "the living good" is just as famously a claim for the "rationality" of such actualities. Not any "station" or social function counts as genuine ethical life, and the decisive criterion is clearly expressed in the PR's preface. We cannot be content, Hegel writes, to stop at what is merely given as public law and public morality, whether the latter is supported by the external positive authority of the state or of mutual agreement among human beings, or by the authority of inner feeling and the heart and by the testimony of the spirit which immediately concurs with this.11

The task is rather to grasp what is "rational" in such institutions, so that it "may also gain a rational form and thereby appear justified to free thinking." A modern social norm "demands to know itself as united in its innermost being with the truth."12

9 The claim is that there is not in fact such fragmentation, that modern institutions possess the authority they do (if and when they do) because all aspects of the realization of a common norm, "freedom," are obviously something that can only be shown, if it can, in terms of some general theory of modernity and modernization, and by appeal to a detailed assessment of such institutions. A defense of a Hegelian reading of the former issue is sketched in my Modernism as a Philosophical Problem.

10 The phrase is, of course, F. H. Bradley's, from his 1876 essay, "My Station and Its Duties," Ethical Studies, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1897), pp. 160 ff. Even in Bradley's case, however, it would be a mistake to neglect his own insistence on the "inner side" of morality, the importance of the proper relation between an individual and an institutional role in order for that role to count as stittlich; see pp. 177 and 179. Cf. also the similar sentiments in T. H. Green: "To ask why I am to submit to the power of the state, is to ask why I am to allow my life to be regulated by that complex of institutions without which I literally should not have a life to call my own, should not be able to ask for a justification of what I am called on to do," Lectures on the Principles of Political Obligation (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1851), p. 122.

11 PR, pp. 5–6; PBO, p. 11.

12 Ibid.
It is more widely conceded now than it used to be that such a claim is not based on an a priori justification of whatever happens in history, at least if the justification is supposed to mean that everything is deducible or derivable with necessity from the unfoldings of some World Spirit. (This consensus has been strengthened recently by the edition and publication of Hegel's 1819-20 lecture notes, where the rationality of the actual is stated much more cautiously, without such theological implications.)  

This is a simple point but it needs to be vigorously stressed. In the PR, Hegel never argues for the rationality of modern institutions simply by describing them and then insisting that, whatever they are, they must be rational because we know a priori that history is rational. However one interprets and defends the claim that "history" has produced these rational institutions, one is independently committed to some interpretation and defense of the claim that they are rational. Indeed, unless we are able to describe independently in what sense such institutions are practically rational, any case that some process of historical change produced them or even had to produce them won't have accomplished very much. More generally, it is very hard to see how any theoretical claim about the rationality of history could count for me as a reason to act, as my reason to participate in the institution. Since Hegel believes there are reasons to act, we shall have to look elsewhere.  

But what else it could mean to suggest that modern institutions are rational, can be "justified to free thinking"? A natural assumption would be that Hegel means to affirm only those "laws and institutions" that are in some sense "what all participants would rationally will." Only thereby could such institutions actually comprise the "objective sphere of ethics." Modern institutions simply happen to meet such a criterion.

This response raises a problem. Hegel clearly does maintain that modern ethical life is rational and that one distinctive feature of modern ethical life is that this rationality is the basis of both the normative claims for allegiance implied by such institutions and the actual participation and continued allegiance of participants. In the modern "ethical world" it is "reason" (not tradition or sentiment or religion) that has actual, motivating "power and mastery"; the science of right will "conceive and present the state as something in itself rational." And, "In right, man must meet with his own reason."  

Such passages, together with Hegel's spirited attacks on sentiment, or rational feeling, and the like, in accounting for ethical and political allegiances, do appear to support the view that by calling modern ethical institutions rational, he is simply appealing to the widely shared modern notion that they are the institutions that any individual would will, were she to will rationally. This of course opens a familiar can of worms: What conditions specify what would be a truly rational willing? Given that we are only imperfectly rational, why is it unqualifiedly better to do what pure practical reason demands of us? But it also does not help much in our attempt to understand the "priority" of ethical life. In such readings, it is hypothetically rational individuals who seem prior, and ethical life a consequence. And this simply cannot be right.  

So, to prevent resting everything on some contractarian view of the rational will, or on the List der Vernunft thesis, we need to begin with Hegel's general theory of practical rationality, of what, for him, makes some consideration, desire, social convention, and so forth, a justified reason to act, and...
then with a case showing that a commitment to and participation in modern social existence, the family based on personal love, modern market societies, and republican regimes are defensible, are rational, in that sense.

Clearly many who worry about Hegel's possible conventionalism or historicism or collectivism (or who think that is what we are left with when Hegel's implausible theodicy is jettisoned) worry directly about this problem. They worry about why "how we have come to go on about this or that" could count as a reason, not to mention an overriding, or ethical reason, for me to act or refrain from acting. And Hegel clearly owes such skeptics an answer.

IV

Hegel’s responses to such questions involve much contested claims about individuality and personhood, and about reason in general. In any full account of his position, one would have to include and assess his claim that the characteristics that define any possible individuality, or the various ways persons could understand themselves to be "bounded off" from and distinct from others, are historically distinct possibilities, and are necessarily results of what he called a "struggle for mutual recognition." As both a phenomenological and a logical issue, Hegel's claim is that self-definition is necessarily self-definition in relation to and even in unavoidable struggle with an other, and that no account of such a possible relation and result can ignore the inevitable problem of power inherent in such a relation. We cannot figure out what it is rational for anyone to do by pretending that life begins with relatively self-transparent, self-owning, determinate, adult, self-sufficient individuals. The ultimate Hegelian claim is that the problem of self-definition or identity is a problem of social power, not metaphysical truth, and that this process has a certain "logic" to it, and it is a book-length topic in itself.

Also part of any full picture would have to be Hegel's denial that "being rational" (which he agrees is the foundation of any possible agency or freedom) involves only the proper use of a faculty or competence. To be rational in this ultimate sense is to "fit into" the rational structure of the whole, to live "in truth," in the light of how "things in the broadest sense of that term hang together in the broadest sense of that term." 17

But there are also a number of levels and strategies in Hegel's large Encyclopedic presentation, and it is possible to understand his defense of the claim for the priority of ethical life and the rationality of modern social institutions in more limited ways, ways that derive from his general account of practical rationality. As I've tried to suggest, if the question is Hegel's case for the "rationality and priority of ethical life," that case breaks down into two parts. What conditions must some consideration fulfill in order to count as a norm in human conduct (on the assumption that only norm-governed conduct is free)? Second, why does Hegel's version of ethical or social norms best fulfill such conditions? As we shall see, a great deal of the work necessary for answering the second question derives from fully answering the first.

Consider first the more limited question of what it is for human conduct to be governed by a norm. Now Hegel's theoretical approach to the question of freedom is different than Kant's, 18 but both agree that it is practically necessary that, when I act, I act "under the idea of freedom," as Kant put it. 19 (All this need mean for the moment is, I cannot act as if my acts were determined unless I determine that I shall, unless such a principle becomes my norm.) And for both, this requirement cannot be satisfied if I act arbitrarily or wantonly. If the act comes about because of my determining that it should, then I am acting for some reason or other, some reason that it should occur. I am acting under a self-imposed norm. For both, to be a free agent is not to be subject to various motivational forces, but to be the subject of one's deeds, and for both the crucial issue in the possibility of such subjectivity is the possibility of acting on considerations that could be justified to all, or acting on reasons. For Hegel, the question of the possibility of such a norm is the same as the conditions under which a principle or goal or claim could play some role in an agent's justification of, reasons for, an action (and so in any third-person explanation of the action). 20 As in many philo-


20 Cf. Bernard Williams, "Internal and External Reasons," in Moral Luck, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981): "If there are reasons for action, it must be that people sometimes act for those reasons, and if they do, their reasons must figure in some correct explanation of their action," p. 102.
sophical accounts, if the question is an explanation of why some agent did what she did, or "what motivated agent A to φ," a necessary component of the answer has to be "what reasons justified the act for A." We need to know what A thought she was doing, and why she thought φ should be done, or we will not know what action is being performed.

Now this situation immediately gets complicated because there is obviously a difference between someone's own "personal reasons" (sometimes glossed as simply "motives") for doing something, and genuinely justifying "reasons." (People still have "their own reasons" for acting even when they act against their own interests, or irrationally, or imprudently; when there is no good reason in any sense to do what they do.) But if we assume, as I think we should, that anyone's individual reasons for acting must fit into some overall structure of justification, or that no one could have reasons for acting that weren't regarded by him as sufficiently justifying, then we are entitled to look for the explicit or implicit justificatory claim implied in anyone's acting as he does. This is what it means to say that the actions presuppose a commitment to some norm. (For the moment we can remain neutral on whether such a norm could ultimately be wholly "subjective" or personal.)

Of course there are philosophers who hold that this account of norms or reasons is already quite misleading since it suggests that moral prescriptions, or prudential reasons, or even beliefs of any kind could function as the principal origin or motivation for actions. By contrast, "desires," say, could be better said to motivate "on their own," and just by virtue of their having "motivating power," or by causally producing actions. Or, one might argue that normative principles like those discussed might be formulated, but they could not play any role on their own in bringing about an action, not unless coupled with, or made relevant to an action, by a desire, ultimately an unmotivated desire. 23

This is one of many contentious issues that will arise, but for now we need only note that Hegel is not a partisan of such claims. He clearly considers it a condition on some event's being an action that it is norm-governed, that it is motivated by some consideration taken to justify the action. And he clearly believes that such norms need not and cannot be restricted to merely instrumental, prudential or "hypothetical imperatives." 24 Indeed the extent to which an agent can give and be motivated to act on reasons that do justify his action is the extent to which the action is free; or the extent to which someone could be said to have freely gone to a philosophy talk is not a matter of his having gone voluntarily, as a result of his own desires, without compulsion, but the extent to which he understood why he was there (including why he desired to go, what motivated his desire), or what norm governed his going, why he thought it better to go than not, and so on. 25

23 Or one might count reasons as factors in psychological explanation, but as causes, mental states (beliefs) that, together with desires, explain action. Cf. Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons, and Causes," Essays on Action and Events (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980), pp. 3–20. This would, though, be, in effect, not to count such states as reasons, considerations whose motivational force depends in a complex of justificatory issues, or that cannot motivate by occurring, but only by fitting, in the right way, into the "space of reasons."

The question, in other words, of how to explain the differing situations (i) an agent has reasons to φ, and φ is (ii) an agent has reason to φ, and does not φ, does not turn on (A) understanding how reasons were, contingently, causes in (i) and not in (ii), nor (B) on externalist accounts, because normative and motivational questions are strictly distinct, but (C) on some account that establishes (iii) that an agent for whom it is rational to φ could not but be motivated to φ and (iv) his not φ-ing must be the result of some "blocking" or "distorting" phenomena, or in Hegel's case, because of the particularity and incompleteness of the social conditions that would make possible the motivational effectiveness of such reasons. Accepting this requirement is what is involved in claiming that, in modernity, the rational, or vernunft, is wicked, what might be best translated as "effective," motivating, given the root in "wirken." Cf. Robert Derrida's translation, "Ce qui est rationnel est effectif," Précis de la philosophie du droit (Paris: Vrin, 1982), p. 55. Hyppolite's translation is the same.

24 For a discussion of how Hegel argues for the claim that any "natural will" (or any policy that seeks only to satisfy natural inclinations) itself commits a subject to a "fully free" or rational will (ultimately understood as embodied in collectively self-forming institutions), see Chapter 4, this volume. For a discussion of Hegel's objections to prudential notions of rationality, see my "You Can't Get There from Here: Transition Problems in Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit," in Cambridge Companion to Hegel, ed. by Fred Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 52–85.

25 To anticipate the entire conclusion of this discussion: The conditions under which this could occur, and so under which you could truly be a self-determining rights-bearer or morally responsible subject, are the social conditions that make possible this self-
The question of freedom in Hegel is not a question about what factor actually caused the action (a desire, or respect for the moral law, and so forth), but it is a question about the character and quality of the reasons that justify the action for you.\(^26\) (There are thus wide “degrees” of freedom in Hegel’s roughly compatibilist theory.)

To return to the general point, Hegel is quite explicit about a number of conditions necessary for a norm to be a norm in this sense. For example, for something to function as a norm, it must be self-imposed, even if, ultimately, in some way collectively self-imposed. In one sense, his theory of “objective spirit” is just an account of the possibility of those human activities and interactions that are what they are because constrained by such self-imposed norms in certain ways, constituted by such self-conscious norm following. An action is the fulfillment of a contract, the punishment of a criminal, a promising, an inheriting, and so forth, only because the participants in the relevant institutions “take themselves” to be participating in institutions governed by certain rules, and view these rules as in some sense justifiable. Said more speculatively, human beings are “in themselves” what they are “for themselves,” or are collectively self-forming creatures. (This has nothing to do with what they individually believe, or the contents of their mental history. Such self-construals can be implicit, dispositional, revealed more in deeds than statements, and so forth. But that is another story.) The main point is, Were individuals to perform the same body movements without taking themselves to be following such norms, or if they took themselves to be conforming to other norms, the actions would not be those actions.

Stated perhaps more directly: There are and can be no straightforwardly “natural” or “divine” norms, no facts about the natural world, or revelations about God’s will, or intuition of non-natural properties, that, just by being such facts or revelations, thereby constrain or direct my conduct. They could be norms only if they could count as reasons for me to act, and nothing about what nature is like or what God said, and so on, can show that.\(^27\)

\(V\)

So, for Hegel, to act freely is to act under norms; this means to act on considerations taken to have justifying force; these norms must be self-imposed, or must count as reasons to or for me, must actually motivate my action.\(^28\) Before we move on to the issue of participation in ethical life as a condition of such a possibility, we should note that Hegel of course expresses what I have just said in his own language. Early in his philosophical career at Jena, in one of his first sustained treatments of “ethical life,” an untitled work later called *System der Sittlichkeit* by editors (1802 or 1809), he returns to this sort of point over and over again, although the notions of fact and self-conscious self-imposition are often somewhat artificially forced into the language of intuition and concept, feeling and rational principle, nature and spirit. Here is a typical example.

In explaining what genuinely ethical relations comprise, Hegel tries to diminish the status or significance of relations perceived to be merely natural, or putatively a direct result of natural inclinations and desires. Ethical relations involve a “freedom” from such sorts of attachments, even their “cancellation.” This is so because “absolute nature” as such does not “occur in a spiritual shape.”

Ethical life must be the absolute identity of intelligence, with complete annihilation of the particularity and relative identity which is all that the natural relation is capable of; or the absolute identity of nature must be taken up into the unity of the absolute concept and be present in the form of this unity. (My emphasis)\(^29\)

The same point is made somewhat more straightforwardly in the philosophical psychology sketched in the Introduction to the *PR*. Instead of talking about what is “taken up into the unity of the absolute concept,” Hegel discusses such a “taking up” in more directly psychological and motivational language, as he denies the possibility that, in self-conscious beings,

\(^{26}\) I mean “motivate” just in the sense of “must be capable of being the reason I act on,” not in the sense of “causally produce.”

\(^{27}\) *Die Rechtsgesetze sind Gesetze, herkommend von Menschen* ("Laws of right are posited, made, something stemming from human being"), *VRP*, p. 93.

\(^{28}\) *System der Sittlichkeit*, ed. by G. Lawon (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1933), p. 460; *System of Ethical Life and First Philosophy of Spirit*, ed. and trans. by H. S. Harris and T. M. Knox (Albany: SUNY Press, 1979), p. 142. This passage goes on to talk about this ethical life, understood “conceptually” or self-consciously, as the “subersion of the natural determinacy and formation” of the natural individual, and so a “complete indiffERENCE of self-enjoyment.” But this refers to the self-effacement of the natural or sensuous individual and should not be confused with a general anti-naturalism. Of an earlier passage, for example: “Absolute ethical life cancels the individual’s subjectivity by nullifying it only as an ideal determinacy, as an antithesis, but it lets his subjective essence persist quite unaffected. And he is allowed to persist, and is made real, as subject, precisely because his essence is left undisturbed as it is. In ethical life intelligence remains a subjectivity of this kind” (pp. 448; 131). It is this last sort of phrase that I am glossing as, Ethical norms count as reasons for an individual; they are motivating, and not just insofar as he has a rational will.
it could ever be true that an action was produced or caused by any desire or impulse, or any sort of mental state for that matter.

The animal, too, has drives, desires and inclinations, but it has no will and must obey its drives if nothing external prevents it. But the human being as wholly indeterminate, stands above his drives and can determine and posit them as its own. The drive is part of nature, but to posit it in this "I" depends upon my will, which therefore cannot appeal to the fact that the drive is grounded in nature.³⁰

(It is important to note here that when Hegel discusses why animals are not "free," he does not mention the issues of determinism and voluntarism. An animal is not free because "it does not represent to itself what it desires."³¹ The character of the self-conscious relation of the doer to the deed is what is crucial, not the causal relation.)

He does not deny that an important component of someone’s reasons for acting might indeed be some strong desire, but he does deny that the desire could play such a role just by occurring and having some causal force. The language he uses to make this point is striking. A desire must be "purified" if it is to play a motivational role "for me." That is, such desires must be freed from the form of their immediate natural determinacy, and from the subjectivity and contingency of their content, and restored to their substantial essence. The truth behind this indeterminate demand is that the drives should become the rational system of the will’s determination; to grasp them thus in terms of the concept is the content of the science of right.³²

Now, since the "content of the science of right" is argued to culminate necessarily in the structures of ethical life or a social existence, this all basically means that the claim just quoted must play a crucial role in justifying the "priority of ethical life" claim. Hegel, as I have presented him, is clearly making a number of Kantian assumptions. He too assumes that human beings can only act if they act "under the idea of freedom," that it is practically impossible to act as if we were determined. This means for him too that our actions presuppose the adoption or self-imposition of general principles (norms, maxims), even if for the most part in daily life, we just execute the norms we take for granted. And this also gets him to the question of what considerations could be relevant to the adoption of such norms, consistent with the practical requirement of regarding ourselves as free agents. So, the issue of "what could coherently count as a justifying reason for an action" is playing a large role in answering the question, Why does Hegel view the authoritative force of norms as dependent on social practices and institutions? The idea seems to be that the crucial condition for any consideration functioning as the coherent, effective norm for any free agent is a social condition, the existence of and involvement in certain social institutions. Or Kant thought such a condition for a fully justifying principle (and so a fully free act) could be satisfied only by one kind of formal principle. Kant’s great worry was to show that considerations based on the satisfaction of desires could not be the only or fundamental norms that a free agent must adopt. Hegel is not, I think, disagreeing with such a claim, as much as he is disagreeing with the implications Kant draws from it, and with what Kant contrasts with such a possibility. He argues that Kant’s moral principle (adopt lawfulness itself as your norm) does not satisfy Kant’s own condition and tries to show why his (Hegel’s) social arrangements do.³⁵

VI

The reference to Kant also brings to mind what Hegel appears to regard as a more ambitious claim. So far all we know is that actions are those events that are explicable by reference to a subject’s reasons for acting, that such rea-

³⁰ PR, p. 65; PKE, p. 45.
³¹ PR, p. 52; PKE, p. 56.
³² PR, p. 59; PKE, p. 51. The same sorts of claims are made both in this work and in the much better known 1807 *Phenomenology of Spirit* about the very "first" manifestations of spirit. There a situation of some matter-of-fact superior power and possible coercion is distinguished from the normative status of master and slave relations. In this case, Hegel tries to distinguish between the ways in which a certain consideration, here the anticipation of my possible death in a struggle with another over prestige, might function as a causally effective impulse, "naturally" (with the outcome of the struggle fundamentally a matter of strength and psychological characteristics), and where such anticipations function for the subjects as norms, or motivating reasons, and the outcome is thus itself normative, a relation of masters and slaves, not simply stronger and weaker, victors and losers.

³³ Clearly, larger issues also loom between Kant and Hegel. If it is finally true that one is only truly free in "being recognized by another," or within certain sorts of social institutions, Kant would want to know how we should describe the poor fellow who must live unrecognized. Is he not still free, indeed still autonomous, however difficult and miserable his existence might be? That is, in one sense, Kant claims that autonomy is simply constitutive of human (rational) nature, eternally, for everyone, at any time, full stop. However, if that were the whole, rigorous Kantian story, the philosophies of religion, history, politics, education would have to be extraordinarily marginalized. Or: it would clearly be a mistake to regard Kant’s moral enterprise as exhausted by a theory of obligation. There is some theory of the good, even of the "whole" within which this good could make sense as a good, in Kant’s philosophy. Hegel and many post-Kantians are clearly more interested in the latter elements.
sons always presuppose certain norms for action, and that such norms can be norms only as self-imposed, and so cannot be understood in what has come to be called some strictly "externalist" sense.\footnote{34 In Williams's formulation: "The whole point of external reasons statements is that they can be true independently of the agent's motivations." "Internal and External Reasons," p. 107. His example there is from a James story: Owen Wingrave's father insists that Owen has a reason to join the military even if Owen has no motivation to do so, his desires all lead in other directions, and he hates everything about military life and what it means. Very few philosophies have tried to affirm that there are external reasons in this sense. (In fact, as Williams himself seems to acknowledge, this is a strange example since it is very unlikely that Wingrave really has any good reason to give his son, one that could stand up to any scrutiny. The reason this isn't an external reason is, very likely, not because there are no such reasons, but because this is a bad one.) The rationalist response is usually to try to show that various considerations can meet the internalist constraint without being "relativized" to some existing, contingent "motivational set." In the recent literature, this response is common to Nagel and Korsgaard despite their differences. It is also common to Kant and Hegel, I am claiming, and the point then is to see how they differ on what could not be unmotivating, a matter of indifference.} What we have said so far, though, is still compatible with someone's acting because he wanted to do strongly, and because his general norm, which he feels to be justifiable, is to do whatever he most feels like doing.

Now, as indicated, Kant famously argued that this sort of norm could not be fully self-imposed or ultimately justifying because such a subscription must itself be motivated by considerations not fully self-imposed, dispositions and desires true as a matter of fact of the individual, and that Kant called constitutive only of heteronomy, not autonomy. Only one sort of norm could be self-imposed and universally justifiable and so could constitute what it is for an act to be rationally motivated, and so freely performed: his famous categorical imperative.

Hegel's objections to this possibility reveal this other dimension of his account of practical rationality. He objects, that is, to the claim that an action is fully justifiable to all others, and so morally worthy, only if it is governed by a certain kind of norm, the categorical imperative. On the Kantian account, this means that an action is morally worthy only if performed "from duty alone," or only if I act in recognition of and am motivated by the bindingness of this norm. If I act because I fear for my reputation, or I want to secure my individual well-being, or I desire to satisfy an emotional need to act benevolently, I might end up doing what a purely rational agent would do because of the constraints of universal justifiability, but I get no moral credit. In such a case, my reasons for action, what Kant calls my maxim, express a principle that I have no reason to expect that others could share, or also find justifying, or could only expect them to share under contingent circumstances. (They just happen to want what I want, or fear what I fear, and so on.) I thus could not expect my reasons to act to count as reasons for him.

Hegel claims first that the categorical imperative, or the general principle to do only what all other rational agents could will to do, cannot be action guiding because so formal. It fails, as a norm, to rule in or rule out, with sufficient determinacy, kinds of actions or policies. It is empty.

I am not concerned with that objection here. But Hegel also claims that the criterion of moral worth is rigoristic, that no one could act as Kant demands. And that claim brings out what seem to be Hegel's implicit assumptions about the conditions under which a principle could serve as a norm, and so should point the way to the most important issues in his theory of the rationality of ethical life. That is, since we have been searching for the considerations that led Hegel to the view that the social norms of ethical life fulfill paradigmatically the conditions of rational agency, these objections to Kantian rigorism should reveal a great deal.

There are two loci classici for such claims, one in chapter 6 of the \textit{Phenomenology of Spirit}, the other in the account of the moral point of view in the \textit{PR}. In the former, Hegel argues that Kant's own moral system reveals that he himself acknowledges that

the moral consciousness cannot forego happiness and leave this element out of its absolute purpose. The purpose, which is expressed as pure duty, essentially implies this individual self-consciousness; individual conviction and the knowledge of it constitute an absolute element in morality.\footnote{35 \textit{PRG}, p. 336; \textit{PES}, p. 906.}

But, Hegel argues, Kant's response to this recognition of the inevitably interested and individual character of our relation to any principle of action is, on the one hand, to condemn us as radically evil, incapable of ever fully realizing, but only at best striving for, what reason demands, and, on the other hand, to concede that human beings could not sustain the moral enterprise, could not fully make sense of its demands, unless it were also possible to believe in an all powerful moral judge, an immortal soul, and eternal reward and punishment.

This condemnation of our unworthiness and this concession about "postulates" reveal, according to Hegel, that in such a point of view, we are not "serious" about what morality requires, we "dissemble," or shift inconsistently from what we say we are requiring of ourselves, to what we concede we
are able to do, and so we promote a kind of hypocrisy, a feature of Christian moralism that Hegel considers essential to it, not incidental. eyebrows Duty for duty's sake,” Hegel charges,

is an unreality; it becomes a reality in the deed of an individuality, and the action is thereby charged with the aspect of particularity. No man is a hero to his valet; not, however, because the man is not a hero, but because the valet is — a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes, in general, with his individual wants and fancies. Thus, for the judging consciousness, there is no action in which it could not oppose to the universal aspect of the action, the personal aspect of the individuality, and play the part of the moral valet towards the agent. 

Clearly Hegel’s proposition is that playing the role of this moralistic valet is pointless, that there is no point in formulating a view of the right that could not count for any real individual as a reason to act, and the same sort of point is made frequently in the discussion of morality in the PR. As in the claim,

since the subjective satisfaction of the individual himself . . . is also to be found in the implementation of ends which are valid in and of themselves, it is an empty assertion of the abstract understanding to require that only an end of this kind shall appear willed and attained, and likewise to take the view that, in volition, objective and subjective ends are mutually exclusive.

Hegel even thinks the moralist needs reminding that

there is nothing degrading about being alive, and we do not have the alternative of existing in a higher spirituality. It is only by raising what is present and given to a self-creating process that the higher sphere of the good is attained.

And finally:

The right of the subject’s particularity to find satisfaction or — to put it differently — the right of subjective freedom, is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between antiquity and the modern age. This right, in its infinity,

is expressed in Christianity and it has become the universal and actual principle of a new form of the world.

I am not here concerned with the obvious problem of whether all of this amounts to a fair criticism of Kant. One might dispute whether Kant’s position relies on the postulates in the way Hegel claims, and one might insist that nothing Hegel says undermines Kant’s considered or full argument to establish how pure practical reason can motivate action (perhaps, chapter 3 of part 1 of the Critique of Practical Reason). I want to focus attention only on what these remarks reveal about Hegel’s own position and the general structure of his reasoning in support of it.

This is especially important because there are two different ways of drawing implications from these sorts of considerations, and Hegel’s formulations often suggest what I think is the most misleading and ultimately un-Hegelian. On one interpretation, what Hegel is saying is that human actions can be shown to presuppose a certain motivational structure and that once we understand these constraints, we will be able to see that no recognition of what practical reason requires of us could fit such constraints, no consideration of what an impartial agent, motivated by no motives particular to him, would do, could ever be on its own a motivating factor in action. Presumably, we can show that human beings could only be motivated by desire for their own happiness and well-being, and so could be motivated to subscribe to norms only on this condition. On this reading, if the standard for a justifiable reason is a principle that makes no reference to any particular desires or ends; and the question is, Why should I care about such a principle? How could I come to see such a view of a purely rational agent as a reason for me to act? the answer is, I could not. Kant’s own fuller position, so goes such a reading, shows this, since he concedes we could not, and either reminds us that we just are radically evil, or looks around for motivational support for that which could not on its own motivate (the "postulates").

This sort of an objection is a familiar one in attacks on rationalist conceptions of ethics and is most familiar in Hume’s attacks on the possibility of any practical rationality. If we see Hegel’s attacks on Kant in this light, and keep in mind our question about sociality, then Hegel begins to emerge, somewhat surprisingly, as sympathetic to these Humean concerns, but as substituting a kind of historical sociology for Hume’s naturalistic psychology, in accounting for the true wellsprings of human motivation. It is our

37 PR, p. 358; PRS, p. 494.
38 PR, p. 112; PRS, p. 151.
39 GPhS, pp. 181–2; PRS, p. 151.
40 PR, p. 112; PRS, p. 151. More poetically put: "The laurels of pure willing are dry leaves which have never been green." PRS, 184; PRS, 153.
affective and emotional dispositions, or our basic interest in our own well-being, that motivate what we do, but we are far more malleable than Hume realized. We can come to understand our own much-desired happiness in certain ways by seeing our well-being as essentially linked to others, and so by subscribing to norms that others could fully share, but all this only in certain sorts of societies, with certain sorts of socially formative, desire-shaping institutions.

As we have been seeing throughout, however, this cannot be the right conclusion to draw from Hegel’s attack on Kant’s rigorism. He is manifestly a rationalist in ethics and stresses this himself even when criticizing the moral point of view.

The assertion that human beings cannot know the truth, but have to do only with appearances, or that thought is harmful to the good will and other similar notions, deprive the spirit both of all intellectual and of all ethical worth and dignity. – The right to recognize nothing that I do not perceive as rational is the highest right of the subject, but by virtue of its subjective determination, it is at the same time, formal; on the other hand, the right of the rational – as the objective – over the subject, remains firmly established.41

This must mean, contrary to the obvious readings, that Hegel is not denying that rational considerations can be motivating on their own (can count for an agent as reasons), or that any position that maintains this is positivistic or rigoristic. He must be objecting to the kinds of rational considerations that Kant thinks are compelling. (In other words, the claim is that it is Kant’s version of an unconditionally overriding or categorical imperative, or his own formulation of an exclusive and singular principle of free action, that creates the rigoristic dualism between my core or autonomous self and the entirety of my contingent attachments. The appearance Hegel creates, that he is celebrating what Kant is deriding, self-love, hedonism, egoistic motivation, is what is misleading. Ultimately, Hegel is objecting to this characterization of non-moral motivation.)

Yet the results thus far are still puzzling. As we have seen, whatever Hegel believes about the content of norms, they are not binding simply because of who we are and what we happen to desire, or who we have become historically, and so because of what we cannot, as a matter of fact, help but esteem, but, still, they are binding because of what it is rational to esteem. Yet when Kant demands that we subscribe to norms that can be rationally self-imposed, norms that are even abstractly “social” (in all acts we must take the other into account, as in the idealized Kingdom of Ends), Hegel complains that Kant is hard-hearted, ascetic, and that his account could not explain how we could be motivated to act on such principles, could count the categorical imperative as a reason to act.42

VII

Hegel is clearly no anti-rationalist, “whatever-my-community-says is-OK” conventionalist. To understand his case for this better, we need to put the passages we have been quoting into some sort of perspective. That is, we need to recall some classificatory issues. As the passages we have been quoting indicate, Hegel clearly believes that the possibility of motivation is a crucial condition for a norm’s possible status as a norm. He does not, that is, believe that some consideration could count as a norm, and so a compelling reason for me to act, even if it could be shown that I could never act on such a reason. Indeed, this is the very sort of language he uses to introduce his notion of ethical life. He claims that it is “in ethical existence” (an dem sittlichen Sein) that self-consciousness has its “basis in and for itself” and its motivating purpose (bewegenden Zweck).43

Moreover, if he did not believe in this tight connection between a norm and its motivating force, there would be no point to his criticisms of Kant’s rigorism. Kant could simply respond, Look, this is what we are supposed to do, full stop. The fact that we are so weak and so inclined to prefer our own case, that we cannot ever do what we are supposed to do, that we need so much motivational and religious help has nothing to do with what we are supposed to do. (I should note that Kant does sometimes sound like this. He is, after all, famous for claiming that nothing straight could ever grow from so crooked a timber as man. And, as just noted, Hegel’s rejoinders can, in that spirit, sound as if he is simply approving rather than regretting the need for such motivational help. But this is not Kant’s position and not central to

41 PR, p. 117; PKE, p. 159.

42 This means that the dispute between them does not concern a difference between Hegel’s doctrine of “internal reasons” and Kant’s commitment to a theory of psychological causation, as Wood claims, Hegel’s Ethical Thought. I agree that Hegel believes in the possibility of motivational overdetermination for an action, and does not think moral worth could require the isolation of some “pure motive.” But I don’t think the reasons he believes this and why he objects to Kant’s theory of moral worth have to do with views about reasons and causes in Kant. I agree here with Henry Allison’s statement of Kant’s own commitment to internal reasons, Kant’s Theory of Freedom (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 189.

43 PR, p. 142; PKE, p. 189.
Hegel's objections. Kant does not believe that rational considerations cannot at all be motivating, or that that issue is irrelevant to such considerations' being reasons to act. In fact it is crucial to his case for the "possibility of pure practical reason" that they can be motivating. But the fact that such a principle "cannot but be motivating" does not mean it is decisive or overriding, and in the weighing of considerations, we are always inclined to allow other considerations more weight than would be justified.\(^{44}\)

Now it is not clear that anyone in the history of philosophy ever held a completely externalist view of norms,\(^{45}\) but someone who believed that we ought to do God's revealed will because it was God's will, and also believed that, because of our fallen natures, a consideration of God's will alone could never motivate us to act (but that we still ought to; that the norm was binding), would count. (In fact, one of the first indications of the importance to Hegel of the motivational aspects of any norm is his own investigation of the "positivity" of the Christian religion. Positivity in this sense, or some disconnection with what could be motivating for a subject, is already thereby an objection to the norm.) Sometimes J. S. Mill and G. E. Moore are also named as philosophers who believe in some theory of the right and good, independently of having to show why we would ever want or be motivated to do the right or to promote the good.\(^{46}\)

But, again, regardless of the complexities of this post-Humean controversy, the point to take our bearings from is simply that Hegel is manifestly on the other side. He accepts as a general constraint on the possibility of a norm the principle P:

For some fact, or state, or consideration to be able to count as a reason for S to do A, S's acceptance of, or having of, such a consideration must be able to motivate him to do A.\(^{47}\)

Hegel's broad acceptance of such a principle is important to note for a number of reasons, not the least of which are those that concern his influ-


\(^{47}\) This acceptance is the import, I take it, of the passages from *PR* quoted previously, as well as no. 132.

\(^{48}\) Cf. the concluding remarks of Frankena, "Obligation and Motivation," p. 81.

\(^{49}\) Indeed, it is possible to be an objectivist of some sort and still accept it. One could hold that believing the world in a certain way is thereby already motivating, that discerning the morally salient features of a situation or possible goal thereby gives one an unavoidable
explore theses options in any detail. But it should at least be noted that, in the case of Hegel, one result of viewing the matter from this perspective is that it now helps clarify his famous denial that normative theory is about what merely ought to be, and so his celebration of the rationality of the actual. We can now see, I hope, that what is important in such formulations is what he is denying: that rational, normative principles could be considered norms apart from any demonstration of how and why they could be actual reasons for persons to act, or that some inspection of a quality or a good could function as a norm apart from such a demonstration of my “taking it up” and justifying “imposing” it on myself as a norm. To say that the rational is actual is just to say that some reasons could not but be motivating; that no person could be presumed to be “actually” indifferent to what they require. And to make such a claim is to attack any view of moral theory (e.g., many religious views) that ignores such a consideration.

So, finally, the decisive question is why Hegel believes this, a question that is one of the two decisive ones in our inquiry. The other is why he thinks only his version of “ethical norms” could satisfy this condition.\textsuperscript{50}

motion to act. One would accept the constraint suggested by P, but argue that it is a mistake to separate such moral discernment from, as a separate question, “what does the motivating” when I proceed to act on such perception. There is no way I could see it that way and experience any motivational gap. If I did, that would be good evidence that I hadn’t seen what was there to see. (Irrationality is in the perceiving, or what clouds the perceiving, not in the willing or strength of will.)\textsuperscript{51}

As we have already noted in the case of Hegel, the preferentiality of one course of action over another, or all “value,” is something conferred, not discovered. A principle or goal can function as a norm, governing my evaluation of possible actions, only if self-imposed, a claim that forces the issue back to the conditions for a genuine self-imposition, or a truly justifiable valuation. (On this conception, that is, finding something valuable is not justified by being able to point to an inherently valuable quality of the thing, in the world, but by having reasons for the estimating or esteeming that do not rely on some consideration that is beyond justification or merely “given.”) Just as in Kant, this in turn raises for Hegel the question of the relation between what, prima facie, might seem to be merely my own reasons for acting, reasons relevant just to me and my situation, or subjective reasons, and the general considerations I must appeal to in justifying those reasons to myself, or, ultimately, objective reasons.

That Hegel has this view of the problem in mind is signaled everywhere by the terms we have already quoted, and in many other places. He objects to what he regards as a Kantian opposition between subjective, or heteronomously determined, ends and objective, or autonomously determined, ends, implying that such objectivity is ultimately a condition of the justifying power of any consideration. He speaks metaphorically of our having to “take up” what is subjectively and contingently compelling, and “purify” it, “raising it up” to a level of “self-creating” “infinity” wherein our “subjective right of satisfaction” is completed in “rationality” itself, and so on.

These views, all of them shifting the question of the rationality of norms to questions of justifiability, and the relation between subjective and objective reasons raise their own problems. For one thing, such approaches tend to “oversolve” the problem and tend to treat all subjective reasons as reasons only if finally objective, thus grossly underestimating the personal, or agent-centered, point of view. But at issue now is a final clarification of how Hegel’s position on \textit{Sittlichkeit} looks in the light of these considerations.


The subject is in its home; in that which is objective, it is in its element.” \textit{WN}, 122.
ensures that we have found "ourselves," that freedom as bei sich selbst sein, "being-with-self," can be assured. Like many others, his account comes down to what reasons could be given by a rationalist, or for that matter, by any "internalist," in satisfying such a motivational constraint.

This issue is complicated in Kant's case by the fact that the question of practical rationality is a question of imperatives, not "reasons" to act in the general sense. So what reason recognizes in Kant is that we stand unavoidably under a universal moral law, a requirement that we must act in a certain way. We experience the "fact of reason," that by acting intentionally at all we are bound by such a norm. (He then goes on to show what happens to us sensibly in recognizing this obligation, how we come to feel the pain of denying the priority of self-love and the esteem he calls "respect.") But it is in showing that there is this obligation that Kant, to his mind, shows that we could not be indifferent to what reason commands, could not possibly ask, Why should I care, want to do, what pure reason requires? If he can show what he claims, we have already been given the answer to such a question. Hegel will not agree that practical reasons are primarily imperatives, and he obviously thinks that Kant has formulated the inescapably compelling character of reason in an inadequate way, but the structure of this argument is what is important here.

That structure involves considerations in Kant and Hegel that are unavoidably metaphysical, at least in the general Kantian sense of a "metaphysics of the person."53 It is at this level, I want to suggest, that Kant and Hegel are mostly disagreeing, and that the distinctiveness of Hegel's position begins to emerge. The common question is, What must be involved in acting "under the idea of freedom"? And this is understood to mean, What principle must govern the self-imposition of norms by such a freely acting agent? This appears to be asking about some putatively timeless event, "when" someone would, on purely rational grounds, impose such a principle ("self-love," or "lawfulness itself"). But the question asks rather, What principles are we already and unavoidably committed to just by virtue of acting under the idea of freedom? (This would mean, such that, imagining what it would be to repudiate such a consideration and still "act under the idea of freedom" would be incoherent.) To know what such a consideration is (or must be), we have to know what it must be to be such an agent. All the weight of the case for any principle (or for the social norms of ethical life) comes down to that sort of a consideration. (It is quite important to stress that the same would be true for a skeptic, like Hume or Williams, who wants to say, Given who we are, only considerations relativized to what we already want, or are motivated to pursue, could count as reasons to act. And the same would be true of a strict contractarian, whose views on what could be justified to, or accepted by, another must be driven by some consideration of what could not but be compelling for anyone, given "who we are.")

We argue, in other words, that conceding that someone could be indifferent to some sorts of considerations, whether commands of reason or the goal of self-realization, would be tantamount to postulating a being wholly unrecognizable as us, someone who could not act on reasons at all. Because of this, such considerations could not be unmotivating (at least where all this means is prima facie motivating; I could not be indifferent to them, and still be me).

The same sort of account is visible in many other rational accounts, although with wide variations. Plato too argues that what pure reason determines to be the best social and political arrangement could not be such a norm, unless it could also be shown that "justice suffers," that individuals could be motivated to subscribe to such a norm. Given "what it is to be a human being," and what the fulfillment and happiness of such a creature amount to, no one could help but be motivated to subscribe to the Republic, if (and here the decisive, massive "if") he could come to understand his own "good" or psychic health. He cannot, of course, and so we end up with the peculiar position (peculiar to moderns) that masses of people are as happy as they could be, if they live in the Republic, even if, subjectively, they might disagree, and prefer, imprudently, to live in a democratic regime.

And so on in Kant. Here the considerations rest on the metaphysics of agency itself, the "fact" that no one could deny that she is a free, responsible agent, and so could not possibly be indifferent to what is a priori required of any such agent. To deny that would be to try to deny that one is free, something that one must be free to be able to do. (It is, in all such arguments, supposed to be impossible to concede, I see what there is good reason for me to do, and still ask, Why should I do what there is good reason for me to do?)

The parallel claims in Hegel are terminologically idiosyncratic but the general strategy is still recognizable, as in the general account of Sittlichkeit found in Die Vorlesungen von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift.

In so far as individuals are in such an ethical unity, they attain their true norm (ihr wahrhaftes Recht). The individuals attain their norm in that in such a manner they acquire their essence. They would achieve thereby, as one says,
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their destiny (ihre Bestimmung). . . . In that the ethical is actual in individuals, it is their soul in general, the universal mode of their actuality.\textsuperscript{54}

And, “The common ethical life of a people is their liberation (Befreiung); in it they come to an intuition of themselves.”\textsuperscript{55}

IX

I have argued that we can locate Hegel roughly in this rationalist camp, and as broadly sympathetic to many aspects of the Kantian approach. By a “Kantian” approach (rather than, strictly, Kant’s), I mean, the considerations Hegel is interested in defending, as the factors we could not but be motivated to realize, are not considerations based on perceptions of objective goods, or benefits, or values, but evaluations and estemings (conferrings of value) whose justifications have a certain character.\textsuperscript{56} Certain sorts of relations in which persons stand to their own activities are what is decisive in the possibility of “actions” being freely valued.” In Hegel’s account such justifications are rational in that they cannot merely appeal to or “deliberate from” contingent elements of “my motivational set.”\textsuperscript{57} This is because the evaluative issue at stake for a subject is precisely the bindingness or justifiability, as reasons to act, of any such element. It is only by means of the possibility of such an evaluative “elevation” and “purification” of my own motives that any such element could be said truly to belong to me, to be mine.\textsuperscript{58} The basic Hegelian point is, This desideratum is not a condition I can achieve individually, by trying to “put out of play” all my attachments.

\textsuperscript{54} \textit{VP}, p. 124. (I am indebted to Terry Pinkard for drawing my attention to these formulations.)
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid., p. 125.
\textsuperscript{57} This is Williams’s language in “Internal and External Reasons.” See also the notion of a “ground project” in “Persons, Character, and Morality,” in \textit{Moral Luck}, pp. 1–19.
\textsuperscript{58} The general issue of Hegel’s disagreements with moral realism, and his own position on how values are conferred, and on the conditions for any such conferring, are obviously quite complex. But it might help to note that one of the models Hegel is probably thinking of here is Kant’s for the justifiability of aesthetic judgments. There too the value, beauty, is conferred by subjects, not found; but there too not conferred contingently, as a result of dispositions and desires we happen to share. The expectation that others \textit{ought} to find this beautiful rests on a general assessment of who they are, and so what they could not be unaffected by, if, as in most cases, it were not for something distorting or blocking such a reaction and conferring.

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Accordingly, a summary of the points made thus far would look like this.

My argument has been that the core of Hegel’s account of \textit{Sittlichkeit} consists in a theory of practical rationality, or an account of what sorts of considerations count for Hegel as reasons to act. (Only within certain sorts of social arrangements could various considerations count for me as such reasons.) This is the crucial question because Hegel clearly believes that only a practically rational agent is a free agent, and he identifies an ethically worthy life with a free life.

Traditionally the question of the rationality of action has been limited such to views as that a course of action is rational if it is the most efficient means to some end; or, it is rational if conducive to an end unavoidable in any worthy or free life (some “human good”); or a course of action is rational if required by a principle no one could be presumed exempt from. Hegel’s general theory of action is teleological: All action is purposive, or for the sake of some end. But Hegel does not believe that such a premise commits him to any human account of motivation (where ends are set by “the passions”), or an Aristotelian theory of the human good (of essential ends). In Hegel’s account, to pursue an end is to subject oneself to a norm; I pursue an end for a reason, a reason I take to have justifying force. This then raises the central question: the conditions under which my attachment to any such ends, any conferring of value, could be expressive of rational agency, “reasons we could share,” to borrow a recent phrase.\textsuperscript{59} These conditions are argued to be unavoidably social and historical, although a formal and general account of the adequacy of modern institutions in meeting such criteria can also be given. So the claim is that only within certain social conditions could individual attachments to a plurality of possible ends be established “non-idiiosyncratically,” in consideration of others and their attachments. Therefore I am a rational agent and so in that sense free only within those (rational) institutions.

If this much is accepted, the basic problem then comes down to how to determine the relevant conditions or constraints on any such attaching or conferring. As the passages quoted amply indicate, actions for Hegel are norm-governed, and, by being norm-governed, presume a commitment to the justifiability of such norms, and so to some rationality condition. We may not fulfill such a condition, and we may act irrationally or unethically, but we do not have to show why we would care about such possible justifications. Given who we are (our “essence” or “destiny” [\textit{Bestimmung} or our “soul”]), we could not but be motivated by such a consideration. The content of any

\textsuperscript{59} See the reference to Korsgaard in note 56.
such norm comes down to our not being able to act as if we weren't who we are, and the adoption of any particular norm is not then uncomfortably constrained by such a general principle as much as that principle must be realized in any such norm. So the problem of what such an unavoidable rationality requirement amounts to comes down to who we unavoidably are. And this is where, given all the considerations so far advanced, Hegel's case for the priority and rationality of ethical life is made.

Although Hegel's reasons for claiming that we are collectively self-forming, socially dependent beings are too controversial to raise here, it is at least clear that he is objecting to a procedure for getting to such a basis that he describes as typical of "the understanding." We could abstract from everything that is particular and contingent, to arrive at a conception of ourselves "thin" and uncontroversial enough to justify those sorts of considerations to which no one could be presumed indifferent. We assume that the rationality condition requires that we ask ourselves what an impartial agent having no attachments, commitments, or, relying on, as it is said, no agent-relative reasons, could justify. This though would be the opposite mistake of thinking that such deliberation and justification must be based on some particular, contingent set of interests and desires or ground projects, on who we contingently are. That view is wrong, but it is equally wrong to conclude that we must adopt a criterion of justification based on so neutral and impartial a notion of a subject as to be quite problematically related to a real life of attachments, commitments, desires, and projects. In Kant's view the obligations that derive from so considering ourselves are supposed to be unconditional, to trump all other practical considerations, what might otherwise seem for us practical necessities. In Hegel's view, this could be shown (and so the motivational condition met) only by showing that all aspects of our lives not connected with such a core self, or set of obligations, could simply be "indeterminately negated," were mere appearances, "not who we are." The prospects for this in general are dim, and even if they were brighter we would be committed to some possible phenomenology of moral experience wherein this supreme attachment to a rational ideal could be shown to have some institutional and social dimension, some way in which it could be promoted and sustained. And the prospects for such an account are equally dim. Kant has some things to say about this, but given the moral ideal in question the prospects can look strange and counterintuitive.\footnote{They include artificially manipulating our emotional dispositions; deciding to visit the sick to try to increase our sympathetic feelings, so that we can have some affective assistance when we discharge our duty of benevolence; or viewing marriage as a contract for the mutual use of each other's bodies; and so forth.}

Admittedly, thus far such considerations merely get us to a "neither the one nor the other" position, an affirmation that there is some reflective, deliberative condition necessary for our attachments and projects to be genuinely "ours" (for us to be "subjects," to act "under the idea of freedom"), but a denial that this can be satisfied by a merely prudential deliberation, or by the strict demands of moral rationality. It would be necessary, to complete the picture, to show how some worked out view of the fundamental or unavoidable character of our social attachments determines the character of this reflective or rationality condition.

It is, at least, not difficult to imagine how such an account looks for Hegel. In the simplest terms, everyone has parents, can reproduce the conditions of her existence only cooperatively, and is invariably subject to, or the subject of, decisions about the common good or the exercise of some sort of political power. We are not simply one agent among many, or all alike in being agents who can act on reasons. We are, but even in being able to recognize and act on such considerations, we require others, such that the socially formative and educational institutions that make possible such recognition and its realization are effective.\footnote{One of the ways Hegel tries to show this concerns the problems of moral judgment, in cases when moral or rights-based claims are understood to be the claims they are by being formulated in terms of an abstractly conceived moral subject. Understanding the problem of moral justifiability in terms of avoiding treating myself as an exception, or avoiding a maxim that would deny others the standing of free agents, agents who can be motivated by reasons, and so on, will certainly end up prohibiting broad classes of action. But all moral life requires fairly fine-grained moral judgment, and although there are not application rules for such judgment, if the general orientation is provided only by such a "thin" conception of persons, the results, he claims, will be worrisome. Such a reliance will ensure, he argues, that I will have no criteria of judgment to rely on in deciding what counts as treating another as means or end except my own "conscience," or the depth of my personal conviction. And this, he tries to show, will ultimately allow everyone to claim some form of moral purity, agreement in moral principle, but widespread self-indulgence in moral practice. Preventing such a result will require some more complex view of our unavoidable, historically "thick," bonds with others, and thereby the kinds of reasons to act, or norms, which could not but be motivating, given such conditions.}

Kant, of course, denies this and has a doctrine of virtue. I have tried to argue elsewhere that that doctrine does not meet this objection. Cf. Chapter 4, this volume.

\footnote{This sort of limitation of morality is discussed in a Hegelian spirit by Williams in Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1985), ch. 10.}
HEGELIANISM

X

Hegel made a number of claims about modern ethical life. Modern institutions are said to embody the “differentiated” normative requirements of modern social life, and so to provide a rich “content”-laden answer to the question of what we ought to do. And he also claims that in modern ethical roles, there is no gap between the “objective” demands of “right” and what he terms the “subjective,” what I have called the “motivating,” aspect of such demands. (That is, I have argued that the Hegelian claim for a “unity of objective and subjective moments” amounts to his version of the satisfaction of a strong internalism requirement: that rational considerations be shown to be motivating. It is in this sense that the rational is, or has come to be, actual.)

In other words, Hegel accepts the condition that reasons for action must be able to motivate a subject to act, and tries to consider such possible reasons in the light of the general features of personhood and possible agency. What he adds is a simple but decisive insistence that whatever we are, we are not autonomously self-forming creatures. Everything, he argues, about both the content and the motivating force of reasons to act changes dramatically when we take account of this fact at some significant level. Such a realization shifts the focus of ethical issues away from two traditional areas and toward a third. It denies the priority or even the presumed ultimacy of “dispositions,” “passions,” or “ground projects” in our esteemings and evaluating, raising large questions about what could be said to make up an “individual’s own” inclinations, such that they could be decisive. But Hegel’s ethical point of view does not do so under the assumption that the only condition that will realize such self-determination is some kind of radical detachment, a reflection “from nowhere,” or a “pure,” individual moral self-legislation.

These claims would open up a number of questions if we continued to explore how Hegel justified his view that certain pre-volitional attachments and dependencies (in the modern, Western European form he describes) are necessary conditions for a free, because practically rational, norm-governed life. My interest here has been to introduce the general form of his argument.

This form already suggests a number of implications, especially when considered in the light of Hegel’s legacy. I mean especially the way in which contemporary ethical positions that insist on the priority of some sort of pre-volitional attachments or commitments, or ground projects in ethical life (prior in the sense of, necessary for any ethical deliberation to get started, but not themselves possible products of ethical deliberation), are sometimes casually referred to as neo-Hegelian. Such communitarian, or neo-Humean, or neo-Aristotelian, or pragmatist, or Burkean positions might be independently interesting, but not by way of what they lead to in Hegel. For Hegel, modern ethical life is not just ours; it is rational. It consists in practices and social attachments that make possible their own, rationally motivated and free affirmation. As in his theoretical philosophy, Hegel’s vigorous attack on Kant can obscure the extent to which he is developing a position on practical rationality and freedom very much in the spirit of his predecessors in Rousseau and Kant.

It is also very much in the spirit of his successors, those “critical theorists” who claimed that no account of human norms would be possible without a general theory of society; that this theory could be “critical” without being moralistic or externalist; that it could discover the “real” emancipatory interests inherent in social forms and point the way to their realization. One way of making this point, and of seeing its origins in Hegel’s attack on Kant’s rigorism and on any externalist theory of purely rational “oughts,” is to note that the underlying position for both is a kind of rationalist internalism, a way of showing why the norms constitutive of free agency could not but be ultimately rationally motivating for any real or “actual” agent. If we try to show this, goes Hegel’s original account, we will be led back to social and historical dimensions of agency indispensable in being able to make such a case, and so to the question of what sorts of attachments and dependencies can be argued to be constitutive of a free life for a modern agent.

Moreover, other considerations also become immediately relevant and unavoidable. Not only are we not self-forming in our own lives, but we are collectively self-forming over time, or historical beings. For certain purposes, in certain contexts, it can be important to ask what we must acknowledge about each other apart from such considerations and realities. But Hegel objects to the priority given such abstraction in modern moral theory. No full account of what could be a reason to act, a reason that could motivate me, can be finally isolated from an account of what forms of cooperation, dependence, and recognition are required in my becoming and sustaining myself as the subject of my deeds. You can’t be a rationalist in ethics without some commitment to this issue, but you certainly can be a cautious rationalist, concentrating on those considerations of personhood and agency that can be isolated from our social dependence and historical natures, and thereby searching for what could not but be motivating for
anyone so conceived. But that agent is not really or "actually" us, and will only provide very general notions of what is impermissible (and so what is obligatory in that sense; refraining from the impermissible). To conceive of our whole moral life in these terms is to impoverish that notion, and to leave undiscussed the most important consideration of ethical discussion, What ought we to do?