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# Action and Ethics

## in

# Aristotle and Hegel

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(Philosophy)

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis is an exploration of several themes in the work of Aristotle and Hegel concerning the nature of action and ethics, and discusses the issues raised in relation to modern moral philosophy. The thesis takes as its starting point both Aristotle's and Hegel's conception of rational, purposive human action as being central to ethics and morality. This is carried out in contrast to influential trends in modern moral philosophy regarding the nature of reason and desire. Part one considers Hegel's view of the task of philosophy, i.e. the assimilation and reflection of the particular subject matter of which it speaks, rather than abstract theoretical thinking. The discussion will highlight that many of the problems raised in the rationalist/empiricist debates of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Centuries are due to the abstract nature of those discussions, and to attempts to assimilate the subject matter to primary assumptions about reason, experience and the individual. In particular, the metaphysics of mind and the epistemology that the debate involved, it will be claimed, draws a hard and fast distinction between reason and desire. This has led to abstract theories of reasoning and motivation.

One particular consequence of abstract, theoretical thinking is that the conceptual language of debate becomes divorced from the subject matter under discussion. In particular, the cluster of concepts that form the basis of the philosophy of mind, action, ethics – reason, desire, motive, intention, purpose, etc. – become refined and specialised to a degree that they come to bear only a vague resemblance to the reasons, etc. that are features of actual (as opposed to theoretical) human conduct. In Part Two of the thesis, I will offer a contrasting perspective, discussing Aristotle's and Hegel's treatment of these concepts without the theoretical framework inherited from 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysics and epistemology.

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## MAIN WORKS CITED AND KEY TO ABBREVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION      FULL TITLE

**(A) Works by Aristotle:**

*Complete Works of Aristotle* Tr.  
J. Barnes (Revised Oxford, 1984)

NE                    *Ethics* Tr. J.A.K. Thomson (Penguin, 1976)  
*Nicomachean Ethics* Tr. H. Rackham (Loeb Classics  
Library, 1934)

**(B) Works by Hegel:**

*Die Philosophie Des Rechts* Ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting (Klett-  
Cotta, 1983)

EPS                    *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* in 3  
volumes Tr. W. Wallace (Oxford, 1892; 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.)

ILHP                    *Introduction to the Lectures on the History of Philosophy*  
Tr. T.M. Knox & A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1989)

LHP                    *Lectures on the History of Philosophy* in 3 volumes Tr.  
E.S. Haldane & Frances H. Simson (Routledge & Kegan  
Paul, 1968)

PS                     *Phenomenology of Spirit* Tr. A.V. Miller (Oxford, 1977)

PR                     *Philosophy of Right* Tr. T.M. Knox (Oxford, 1967)

SL                     *Science of Logic* Tr. A.V. Miller (Allen & Unwin, 1969)

IPW                    *Introduction to the Lectures on the Philosophy of World  
History* Tr. H.B. Nesbit (Cambridge, 1975)

(References to Hegel's original Additions shown throughout in square brackets)

## INTRODUCTION

The aim of this thesis is to explore the place of *Action* in ethics, and to trace what has been a particularly influential trend in modern moral philosophy back to its roots in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics and epistemology.<sup>1</sup> I shall argue that this trend rests on an abstract distinction between reason and desire, a distinction fundamental to the thought of (amongst others) Descartes, Hume and Kant. Furthermore, it will be argued that this distinction serves only to divorce morality from its basis in human conduct, rendering morality as a sphere of abstract conceptions of formal reasoning and yielding only equally abstract and formal rules and principles which, under close scrutiny, can be seen to bear little resemblance to what actually goes on in human conduct. *Action*, on the other hand, stripped of its intrinsically rational content, a

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<sup>1</sup> It is necessary to explain the use of the capital in '*Action*'. In *Principia Ethica* Moore sets out by "...considering what is good in general; hoping, that if we can arrive at any certainty about this, it will be much easier to settle the question of good conduct; for we all know pretty well what 'conduct' is" (Cambridge, 1922, p. 3). That (human) conduct is a clear-cut matter in philosophical discussions seems to me to be mistaken, and there is plenty of evidence in recent and current debates to substantiate this. This is not the place to argue the point here, but this much can be said: both Aristotle and Hegel were quite specific in what they understood by rational human *Action*, and specific in the way they were intended to be understood by their respective readers. As we shall come to see, one of the main factors in their view of *Action* is that it does not rest on a fundamental distinction between reason and desire.

content given over to abstract formal reasoning, finds explanation in psychologistic conceptions of desire motivation. As an antidote and corrective to this, within the ethical considerations of Aristotle and Hegel, morality remains a sphere of practical activity as opposed to a sphere of abstract and theoretical deliberation, precisely because of the lack of such a fundamental distinction between reason and desire in those considerations.

The thesis is divided into two main sections. Part One will concentrate on Hegel's discussion of his philosophic predecessors and contemporaries, concentrating on what he considered to be their formal, abstract and one-sided reasonings. This one-sidedness will be seen in treatments of reason, will, law, freedom and mind that take them out of their context of practical activity – their sphere of concrete expression – and thus render them formal and abstract.

In Part Two I shall consider modern treatments of *Action* in relation to particular areas of moral debate, showing how abstract conceptions of reason and desire often create the very problems that are being addressed. That is to say, it is often particular ways of thinking that create the difficulties and problems within many areas of ethical debate. In doing so I employ Aristotle's conception of *Action* which emphasises reason, desire, character, choice and ethical notions of the good and the worthwhile – the conceptual content of *Action* – as features of practical activity, rather than as abstract and formal features that can be captured extraneously in attempts to explain human conduct. One upshot of this is that attempts to explain *Action*

by methods of abstract reasoning begin to look peculiar, in that when we consider this conceptual content as phenomenological features of human conduct, questions such as 'What moves us to *Action*?' become redundant. The theories of motivation that such questions provoke will then form some concluding considerations.

Firstly though, in this introductory essay I shall give an outline of what has been an influential trend in modern moral philosophy. I do this here because the main body of the thesis does not aim to establish or yield a particular moral outlook or theory. Rather its aim is to question certain conceptual assumptions that lie behind the very project of establishing or yielding particular normative moral outlooks or theories. However, this does not mean to say that I am wholly sceptical about normative ethics *per se*, for, as we shall see, the later part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen developments in ethical debate which very much take their point of departure from the considerations with which this thesis is concerned.

### **Moral Theory, Reasoning and Morality**

In the preface to his *Moral Luck*, Bernard Williams gives us a brief and clear statement on the scepticism about morality that is characteristic of much of his work. I shall quote him at some length as he brings out several points with which this thesis will be concerned. He says:

I am more than ever convinced that what it [moral philosophy] does not need is a theory of its own. There



cannot be any very interesting, tidy or self-contained theory of what morality is, nor, despite the vigorous activities of some present practitioners, can there be an ethical theory in the sense of a philosophical structure which, together with some degree of empirical fact, will yield a decision procedure for moral reasoning. This latter undertaking has never succeeded, and could not succeed, in answering the question, *by what right* does it legislate to the moral sentiments? The abstract and schematic conceptions of 'rationality' which are usually deployed in this connection do not even look as though they were relevant to the question – so soon, at least, as morality is seen as something whose real existence must consist in personal experience and social institutions, not in sets of propositions.<sup>2</sup>

The main problem raised here is that Williams casts severe doubts on the enterprise of constructing moral theories, a scepticism with which I am much in agreement, throwing up as it does a series of subsidiary difficulties and questions. There is a difficulty of definition. Throughout history philosophers have attempted to produce tidy or self-contained theories, constructed around one or more principles, rules or canons. But either by criticism of particular criteria or by way of whole competing theories, individual examples and arguments have been

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<sup>2</sup> *Moral Luck* (Cambridge, 1981) pp. ix-x. Williams goes on to express a similar scepticism towards morality "...in its supposed existence as a dimension of practical thought or social evaluation..." (Ibid.), a point I shall take up shortly.

produced which those criteria or arguments do not cover, and the main structures of those theories have had to be adjusted to accommodate the problems that arise out of this.

Utilitarianism is a case in point here, through its different forms in Bentham, Mill, Sidgwick and Moore, and distinctions such as 'hedonistic', 'act', 'rule' and 'negative' utilitarianism, manoeuvres that could be seen to give Kant's reference to its 'serpent meanderings' a prophetic quality. This sort of adjustment and tinkering raises the philosophical, i.e. logical and conceptual, problem as to whether morality is the *sort of thing that can be* tidily captured in a self-contained way. Given this, and the variety of competing theories, there exists a similar doubt to that raised in connection with the very idea of political philosophy: is it not the case that we are being served up a series of writers' particular preferences in the form of principles to which they give their personal allegiance? <sup>3</sup> And further, if there is a theory of obligation involved, then by what authority or (as Williams asks) by what right does that theory oblige me or any other individual? If it is by rigour of argument, then that argument would have to be of such strength that I, or any other individual giving it serious consideration, *could not but* see ourselves obliged in the way indicated – providing, of course, that we attend to it with our full 'rationality'. This

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<sup>3</sup> Ronald Dworkin, 'Liberty and Pornography' in *New York Review of Books*, 1991, a question (according to Dworkin, no longer relevant) that provoked responses by Isaiah Berlin – see his 'Does Political Theory Still Exist?' and 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in *The Proper Study of Mankind: An Anthology of Essays* (Chatto & Windus, 1997).

is the sort of pellucid, self-evident reason that Kant claimed to be involved in the moral law, but this has hardly escaped serious criticism. It is this second dimension, the practical dimension, that this thesis will primarily focus on, rather than the first, theoretical dimension. This is because the concepts that constitute the discussion points of the latter have their genesis in the former, and it will be argued that the proper significance of those concepts originates in the activities and practices that constitute morality as personal experience and social institutions. To ignore this vital connection between human activity and ethical evaluation leads to abstract and theoretical considerations which, together with abstract and schematic conceptions of rationality, creates the gulf between the theoretical and practical dimensions to the extent that the relevance of the generalised and abstract concepts, and the conclusions of the debates employing them, is called into question. That is to say, the relevance, aims and the overall propriety of moral theory and theories of moral reasoning are called into question.

### *Action and Ethics in Aristotle and Hegel*

Aristotle does not give us a clear definition of a tidy or self-contained moral theory, although there is the clear line of thought that the best life for man is that which is led in accord with the virtues. Over the last few decades this has been taken up as an antidote to deontology and

utilitarianism, an area of debate that is still developing.<sup>4</sup> Aristotle approaches the subject from a different perspective than that of definition, giving us a descriptive account of the nature of human activity out of which evaluation arises. Ethics for Aristotle being a preface to politics, and man being by nature a social and political creature, human activity is constitutive of moral and ethical life. Thus, Aristotle does not give us a definition of morality in terms of either theory or 'as a dimension of practical thought or social evaluation', but it is clear that he takes morality as personal experience and social institutions as *given* as the natural environment of human beings. It is from within this environment that evaluation arises, and such evaluation has its basis in human activity.

Much the same can be said of Hegel. In *PR* he gives us a description of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) for precisely the same reason that it is from within this that evaluation takes place. Ethical life is constituted by human activity, and thus the details of his description of ethical life are considerations of human activity – the latter being the spring, so to speak, out of which evaluation arises. Ethical life is not something over and above, distinct from, the human activity which constitutes it, the concept 'ethical life' having its instantiation, and the particular details of its explication, in human activity. Conversely, human activity cannot be defined in isolation to ethical life, for a description of aspects of human

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<sup>4</sup> I shall discuss virtue ethics in brief later in this introduction. For considerations of virtue ethics as a moral theory, cf. Gary Watson, 'On the Primacy of Character' in *Virtue Ethics: A Critical Reader*, ed. Daniel Statman (Edinburgh University Press, 1997).

activity would form part of an explication of ethical life – in more formal terms, human activity is the object of the concept of ethical life.

Thus for Aristotle and Hegel, the existence of a dimension of personal experience and social institutions is given, but not as a theoretical dimension over and above human activity. Human activity, rather, is constitutive of that dimension, human activity that is carried out in terms of ethical concepts. Thus, for example, virtue is not a theoretical concept that can be defined analytically in isolation from particular instances, but a character trait of a person, exemplified in particular circumstances. Similarly, good is not a theoretical concept that can be defined analytically in isolation from particular instances, but something that is brought about by an activity that is an instantiation of it. Whether an activity is virtuous or good rests, not on its being assimilated to, or fulfilling the requirement of, an abstract conception of 'virtue' or 'good', but rather on account of the particular details, conditions and circumstances of *what is done*.

Without such particularity 'virtue' and 'good' remain abstract notions; attempting to define them without such particularity would be akin to attempting to explain 'fruit' in isolation from cherries, plums, grapes, etc. There is a further point, however. The medical profession generally holds that fruit is good for our health, but it is only good for us if we eat it, and then only in particular circumstances, to certain degrees, at the appropriate time, etc. In a similar way we may produce a list of particular characteristics in order to explain virtue - courage, honesty, benevolence, etc. But these are not virtuous in themselves.

As such they are mere spoken or written words; they are only virtuous when someone acts courageously, etc., and only then in relation to the particular circumstances of the *Action*. Here there is a discernible logic: 'courage', for example, is a *particular* in relation to the *universal* 'virtue', but courage is not virtuous until it has been *individually* instanced. In other words, it is the logic of the *Action*, and its particular and individual details and circumstances that accommodates its description as virtuous, good, moral, ethical, etc., and not the logic or theory of abstract notions of virtue, good, morality, ethics, etc. that define virtuous, etc. *Actions*.

One of the benefits of adopting G.E.M. Anscombe's call<sup>5</sup> to abandon the use of 'moral obligation', 'moral duty' and 'morally ought', and to replace 'morally wrong' with 'untruthful', 'unchaste', 'unjust', etc., is precisely because judgements employing such terms aim to get directly to the particularity of the *Action* under consideration. Moreover, it indicates that attempts to construct elaborate theories on the specifically *moral* 'ought' and 'obligation', to come up with definitions of the good and the right, and models of moral reasoning, are misguided. A judgement that something was unjust directs us towards the particular characteristics of the specific *Action* under consideration, whereas to seek general theories of obligation, definitions of the good and right, and models of moral reasoning are moves that direct us in the opposite direction precisely because of their generalisations. This is why, I take it, Anscombe suggests that time would be better spent

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<sup>5</sup> 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Blackwell, 1981).

looking at *Action*, intention, wanting, etc., the primary considerations of Aristotle and Hegel in their discussions of ethics.

### **Reason, Language, and the Morality of Principles**

One of the main arguments of the thesis is that there is one particular strand of modern philosophy that – consciously or unconsciously – takes as its starting point an unquestioned assumption that goes back to Descartes, Hume and Kant. This is the idea that reason and desire are distinct phenomena, that they operate on separate planes. For Descartes, reason is that on which, by its correct employment, “the supreme felicity of man depends”.<sup>6</sup> The passions, on the other hand, being irrational effects on the soul being acted upon by the body and the main obstacle to the rational and good life, “...often represent to us the goods to whose pursuit they impel us as being much greater than they really are”.<sup>7</sup> Hume says that the separate offices of reason and passion are clearly ascertained.<sup>8</sup> For Kant, “...man actually finds in himself a power which distinguishes him from all other things – and even from himself so far as he is affected by objects. This power is *reason*”.<sup>9</sup> In modern moral debates reason is, for many philosophers, the arbiter of the good and the right, an external and impersonal power

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<sup>6</sup> *Descartes: Philosophical Letters*, tr. A. Kenny (Blackwell, 1980) 166.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 173.

<sup>8</sup> *Enquiries* (Oxford, 1975, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed), p. 294.

<sup>9</sup> *The Moral Law*, tr. H. J. Paton (Hutchinson, 1976 reprint), p. 112.

transcending the particular wants and desires of individuals. As such, this reason supposedly represents the common basis of humanity that expresses itself in moral principles, or the working out of the formulae of moral principles.

However, in discussions that focus on moral principles, the distinction between morality as a 'dimension of practical thought or social evaluation' (as Williams puts it) and as 'personal experience and social institutions' becomes ever wider. Not only is the personal taken out of morality, but the thinking and language in which it is expressed appear, under analysis, to bear little resemblance to how individuals can reasonably be said to conduct themselves. On one level, human activity comes to have no place in moral debate. On another level, hypothetical scenarios are envisaged, even the hypothetical credibility of which become extremely stretched by the use of language in the arguments that are supposed to show the value of such hypotheses.

On the surface, it is quite puzzling how it is that *Action* has been allowed to drop out of the picture by so many philosophers engaging in ethical debate, leaving that subject as either an altogether different area of debate, or as a subsidiary dimension of discourse. It is true that, to a degree, Anscombe's call has been taken up, and following on from the work of Foot, the last few decades have seen the rise of virtue ethics as an approach to morality, emphasising Aristotle's claim that virtue consists of the 'complete harmony' of reason and desire (*NE* 1102b28). But this has taken some time to develop. I say *on the surface* it is puzzling how *Action* has been allowed to drop out of the



picture, for it is clear, with a little scrutiny of the conception and use of language and reason by certain writers, how it is that *Action* can fall out. And, indeed, how it is in some cases a requirement in order to maintain certain theoretical positions.

### *The Language of Morality*

In *The Language of Morals* R. M. Hare says: "Ethics, as I conceive it, is the logical study of the language of morals".<sup>10</sup> One general observation on this concentration on the meaning of words is that it leads to some puzzling reading. For example, in Chapter Six he asks us to consider teaching English to a foreign philosopher, in the highly unlikely circumstances that he deliberately or inadvertently makes all the mistakes that he logically can, and that he knows no English and we know nothing of his language. In teaching him to become conversant with the meaning of the word 'red', we proceed to give ostensive examples of such things as pillar-boxes, tomatoes and trains - some red some not.

This is highly unlikely in that it is difficult to see why (deliberately) or how (inadvertently) someone would make all the mistakes he logically could and, even given that we know nothing of each other's language,

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<sup>10</sup> *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, 1952), p.iii. See also Hare's 'Ethical Theory and Utilitarianism' in *Utilitarianism and Beyond* ed. Amartya Sen & Bernard Williams (Cambridge, 1977): "It is the object of this paper to show how a theory about the meaning of the moral words can be the foundation of normative moral reasoning". (p. 24.).

why we would not first look for a way to translate colour words. In this case, we would merely point to the translation word, and if we were to then show him, say, a pillar-box, surely that would be an exercise in showing him where to post his letters. As in the example of his reading of Aristotle on deductive inference, Hare does not take into account that communication is an activity. That is to say, apart from its formal elements or particular forms – talking, speaking, writing, gesturing, colour-coding, etc. – it serves a function, purpose, etc., and what is meant in the use of words, signs, symbols, particular gestures etc. cannot be accounted for without reference to the function, purpose, etc. of the particular act of communication. Even if we do accept the unlikely, abstract scenario for the sake of argument, the view of language that follows is highly suspect. Indeed, it very much appears to be that this view of language underpins the scenario.

The abstract nature of this view comes over more fully in Hare's concentration on the 'logical behaviour' of sentences and, more specifically, the 'logical behaviour' of the term 'ought'. Ultimately it is this 'logical behaviour' that ethics rests on, for in deciding on the principle 'One ought to do X' I am logically committed to the imperative that is entailed, 'Let me do X'. Two points arise out of this.

Firstly, *Action* plays no role in this account; indeed, it is dismissed in the preface, for such issues as the will and *akrasia* are "problems of the language of the psychology of morals, rather than the language of

morals itself".<sup>11</sup> It comes out in the later *Freedom and Reason* that if I sincerely hold a particular principle then, logically, I cannot fail to act on it – such a failure would only throw into question my sincerity.<sup>12</sup>

The second point relates to Anscombe's concern. In 'deciding' to adopt a particular principle, I am then logically compelled to the imperative that is entailed by that.<sup>13</sup> Thus (to use Anscombe's example), it is open to me to decide to adopt the principle not to punish the innocent. However, it is still open to me to make a new 'decision of principle' that, "in such-and-such circumstances one ought to procure the judicial condemnation of the innocent",<sup>14</sup> and I will thus be compelled, logically, to do so. Despite the logical compulsion that is supposed to be involved in this, it is difficult to see why this does not make morality arbitrary, despite his protestations to the contrary: I can decide to act how I like, so long as I make a decision of principle before doing so.<sup>15</sup>

The emphasis that Hare puts on decisions rests on his observation that, ultimately, "...we cannot get out of being men".<sup>16</sup> In *Freedom and*

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<sup>11</sup> *The Language of Morals*, p. iv.

<sup>12</sup> For a full discussion, see C.C.W. Taylor's 'Critical notice of R.M. Hare's *Freedom and Reason*' in *Mind*, 1965.

<sup>13</sup> I shall discuss the importing of logical compulsion into accounts of *Action* in Chapter Six.

<sup>14</sup> Anscombe, *op. cit.* p. 42.

<sup>15</sup> The words of Hegel, discussing certain doctrines of his day, are apposite here: "...thereby ethics is reduced to the special theory of life held by the individual and to his private conviction". *PR*, #140. In a similar vein, Alasdair MacIntyre has pointed out that, as an attempt to get away from the emotivism entailed by the naturalistic fallacy Hare's position doesn't get us very far. See *After Virtue* (Duckworth, 1982), p. 20.

<sup>16</sup> *The Language of Morals*, p. 162.

*Reason*, responding to a criticism of MacIntyre's,<sup>17</sup> Hare likens his position to Sartre's in *Existentialism and Humanism*.<sup>18</sup> Here, Sartre says that as individuals we are responsible for our own *Actions* and, in a sense, for the world we live in due to the fact that our *Actions* help to create the human world. Sartre's point is summed up in his statement, in the earlier *Being and Nothingness*, that "...we are condemned to be free".<sup>19</sup> That is to say, ultimately we must choose to act or not to act, and it is this responsibility that is the constant feature of our existence. Hare says: "Sartre is...as much of a universalist as I am".<sup>20</sup>

But Hare is confusing the point that Sartre is making here. For the latter, the 'must', in saying that we must act or not act, is descriptive and is intended to point out a fact of our existence. And this for Sartre indicates the very problem of morality: 'must' does not have imperative force, i.e. it does not have the necessity of the descriptive 'must'; when faced with a decision between possible *Actions*, I must do *something* (even if it is 'to do' nothing), but it is not the case that I must do *this* or do *that*. To think this would be a case of bad faith, a case of denying my freedom, and if I decide (as in Sartre's example) to take care of my sick mother rather than fight for my country, I am not committing myself to the principle 'Family comes before country', for if a similar situation arises again in the future, I still have to make a new choice. To say,

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<sup>17</sup> 'What Morality is Not', *Philosophy* 1957.

<sup>18</sup> Tr. Philip Mairet (Methuen 1973).

<sup>19</sup> Tr. Hazel E. Barnes (Methuen, 1969) p. 439.

<sup>20</sup> *Freedom and Reason* (Oxford, 1963), p. 38. For a discussion on the argument between MacIntyre and Hare with regard to Sartre, see W. H. Hudson, *Modern Moral Philosophy* (Macmillan 1983, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), pp. 217-23.

“Well, I have already committed myself to ‘family before country’ so I must act thus” would again to be in bad faith with the imperative use of the ‘must’. If on this occasion I act differently, even if there are different sorts of considerations it would be peculiar – and a case of bad faith – to call this a new decision of principle. Given this, it is difficult to understand Hare’s use of the word ‘principle’, other than perhaps concluding that he thinks that it is doing a job of work (due to its ‘moral weight’) that it appears not to be doing.

In such an account of morality the problems that are faced in acting in particular situations of conflict are pushed aside by the reliance on general principles. In the case of weakness of will, it is a question of the sincerity with which the principle is held.<sup>21</sup> In the case of the difficulties faced in situations that question our principles, they are overcome by new decisions of principles. These two points come together in Hare’s *Moral Thinking*,<sup>22</sup> in which he discusses weakness of will in terms of ‘overriding principles’, developed from his earlier *Freedom and Reason*. The problems that arise in particular situations are thus explained away by recourse to general considerations of principle. But if a person faced with such difficulties, finding the situation conflicting with a principle already held, turned to considerations of ‘overriding principles’ and the general nature of principles, then surely *that* would throw up the question of his sincerity.

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<sup>21</sup> This has similarities with the Socratic account of *Akrasia*, only there it is not so much that I don’t hold the principle sincerely enough, but that I don’t truly know the right thing to do. I shall discuss this in Chapter Five.

<sup>22</sup> *Moral Thinking* (Oxford, 1981). See especially, pp. 56-60.

Now clearly this is a position that Hare, logically and morally, does not want to arrive at, something immediately clear from the very project of attempting to establish the universal and imperative nature of moral judgements, upon which his prescriptivism is based. However, my point is this: if we start from abstract and theoretical conceptions – in Hare’s case a conception of language that disregards its function, purpose, etc. – then it is often the case that the conclusions drawn are of an abstract nature.

Here I have concentrated on Hare’s conception and use of language. He also has some important things to say on moral education and social background, which I have not discussed. Briefly, Hare says that much of the time we are affirming a moral principle that is already there, “...if our fathers and grandfathers for unnumbered generations have all agreed to in subscribing to it, and no one can break it without a feeling of compunction bred in him by years of education”.<sup>23</sup> This is the descriptive force, which moral judgements acquire, and this we might say is Hare’s referring to morality as ‘personal experience and social institutions’. The move to prescriptivism comes in that in subscribing to it I am making a moral judgement, and this is the prescriptive force based upon what Hare sees as its universalizability: in saying “I ought to X’ I am logically committed to ‘Anyone in the same position ought to X’. Thus the principles that are the basis of our moral judgements, even in the first person, do not involve individual reference.

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<sup>23</sup> *The Language of Morals*, p. 195.

As is well known, Hare standardly insists on the 'impartiality' of moral principles,<sup>24</sup> something expressed when I imagine myself in another's position and thus identifying with them. But Hare confuses a point in his discussion. This identification, Hare claims, is what Aristotle found to be the essence of love, referring to the latter's discussion of friendship at *NE* 1166a32 and 1169b7. Aristotle, however, is *describing* what he takes to be the basis of love and friendship, and not a *prescriptive* act of identifying with someone other than oneself. As an *act of identifying* there would surely be something insincere about such 'love' or 'friendship'. It in fact looks more like what Aristotle has to say about *goodwill*, which is not the same as the affection of friendship "...because it is without intensity and desire...and [the] kindly feeling is superficial" (*NE* 1167a1-3). In claiming that Aristotle is being descriptive here I am also claiming that what he says is a reflection of an aspect of morality as 'personal experience and social institutions', and not the result of practical thought or social evaluation that satisfies certain criteria of moral reasoning. Of course, Aristotle clearly does see love and friendship as a good thing, but it is not something we can just go about doing *because* it is a good thing. Here moral debate is anchored in morality as personal experience and social institutions, and not as a dimension of practical thought and social evaluation based on an abstract and schematic conception of rationality.

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<sup>24</sup> For example, in *Moral Thinking* he tells us that it is a "... formal logical rule that individual references cannot occur in the principles which are the basis of our moral judgements" (p. 154) and that "...morality admits no relevant difference between 'I' and 'he'..." (p. 223).

This element of impartiality has, in the last few decades, taken on a stronger form than Hare's considerations. Whereas Hare recognises the importance of moral education and social background, the trend to see morality in terms of contractual relations and hypothetical scenarios widens the gulf between moral debate and morality as personal existence and social institutions. The widening of the gulf is mainly effected by abstract conceptions of rationality and deliberation based upon the impartial and the impersonal, and the width of the gulf throws into question the worth and, what is more, the very point of such exercises.

### *Reason, Deliberation and Moral Principles*

In *The Claim of Reason* Stanley Cavell raises the following question in relation to Descartes' discussion of other minds:

Ought not there ... to be an objection to the argument from analogy concerning its narcissism. Call the argument autological: it yields at best a mind too like mine. It leaves out the otherness of the other.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> *The Claim of Reason* (Oxford, 1979), p. 395, quoted in Raimond Gaita in 'The Personal in Ethics', *Attention to Particulars* ed. D. Z. Phillips & P. Winch (Macmillan, 1989), p. 145. Gaita makes a slightly different point than I do, but the article as a whole represents a forceful antidote to the attempt to characterise reason as impersonal. In particular, Gaita attacks Thomas Nagel, *The Tanner Lectures on Human Value 1980* (Cambridge University Press, 1980) and Alan Donagan, *The Theory of Morality* (University of Chicago Press, 1977).



But the argument yields something a little more complicated than this. Not only does it yield a mind too like mine, it also renders Descartes' mind too like mine *and all other minds*. That is to say, it annihilates all otherness *per se*. This is a consequence of the method of doubt, whereby all individual influences, attitudes, experiences, opinions and characteristics are excluded, leaving only pure, unadulterated reason.<sup>26</sup>

This impersonal view of reason sets the tone for philosophy following Descartes. Although Hume clearly views reason differently from Descartes, the impersonal finds expression in the former's moral philosophy: "The moral agent must depart from his private and particular situation"<sup>27</sup>. Rationality is concerned only with factual or logical questions.<sup>28</sup> It gets its most forceful expression in Kant's categorical imperative "Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law".<sup>29</sup> Our conduct should be based on the fact that we are rational beings rather than our being individuals. Hare's universalizability says that a statement such as 'I ought not to do X' implies 'One ought not to do X'. That is to say, statements containing 'ought' are not personal statements but express general principles.

Hare's view that there is a basis for independent and neutral moral reasoning has been taken up, in various ways, by philosophers who

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<sup>26</sup> In Chapter One I shall discuss Descartes' method of doubt more fully.

<sup>27</sup> *Enquiries*, 222.

<sup>28</sup> *A Treatise of Human Nature*, II, 3, iii; III, 1, i.

<sup>29</sup> *The Moral Law*, p. 84.

argue that removing personal desires and projects from moral considerations provides an objective foundation for reason to adjudicate on moral value.<sup>30</sup>

Most famously amongst these is John Rawls who, in *A Theory of Justice*, puts a theoretical 'veil of ignorance' over his hypothetical citizens that hides their particular interests and circumstances. Thus veiled, the citizens would, Rawls contends, adopt rules and principles that would form the foundation for a just society. In such a situation,

The principles of their actions do not depend upon social or natural contingencies, nor do they reflect the bias of their plan of life or the aspirations that motivate them. By acting from these principles persons express their nature as free and equal rational beings subject to the general conditions of human life.<sup>31</sup>

The contractualism that marks out this particular approach has been taken up by T. M. Scanlon,<sup>32</sup> making Alasdair MacIntyre's comment of 1981 still relevant today:

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<sup>30</sup> Donagan says: "The word 'reason', as it is used here, has a reference that is fixed for all possible worlds....it describes a power correctly to perform acts having contents belonging to the domain of logic, for in any possible world, one and the same power is referred to by all such descriptions". Op. cit. p. 235.

<sup>31</sup> *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, 1972), p. 252-3.

<sup>32</sup> T. M. Scanlon, *What We Owe to Each Other* (Harvard University Press, 1999). See also his earlier 'Contractualism and Utilitarianism' in *Utilitarianism and Beyond* ed. Amartya Sen & Bernard Williams (Cambridge, 1977), in which he gives an outline of his version of contractualism.

Such analytical philosophers revived the Kantian project of demonstrating that the authority and objectivity of moral rules is precisely that authority and objectivity which belongs to the exercise of reason. Hence their central project was, indeed is, that of showing that any rational agent is logically committed to the rules of morality in virtue of his or her rationality.<sup>33</sup>

MacIntyre, and in particular Bernard Williams, have long argued the misconception involved in such de-personalising of ethics, a point I shall take up in discussing the importance of character in Chapters Four and Five. Here, though, in accordance with one of the main features of the present thesis, I shall have a brief look at the language and reasoning that is employed by Scanlon in relation to the position he adopts.

In *What We Owe to Each Other*, and in his 'Intention and Permissibility',<sup>34</sup> Scanlon discusses moral principles and, in doing so, employs what at first seems a peculiar use of language. On closer inspection, however, Scanlon's use of language throws up the need for a theory of deliberation and judgement. But it turns out that these two – the peculiar use of language and the theory of deliberation and judgement – are themselves required to support the general moral

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<sup>33</sup> *After Virtue* (Duckworth, 1981), pp. 63-4.

<sup>34</sup> T. M. Scanlon, 'Intention and Permissibility' in *Aristotelian Society Supplementary Volume 2000*.

position of contractualism which Scanlon bases on his over-arching formula that:

An act is wrong if its performance under the circumstances would be disallowed by any set of principles for the general regulation of behaviour that no one could reject as a basis for informed, unforced general agreement.<sup>35</sup>

This hypothetical rejection is the basis upon which his hypothetical contractors search for the general principles that are to govern society.

What is worrying about the language and theory of deliberation is that it gives a peculiar view of human conduct and thought, and in doing so questions the overall value of such a theoretical and hypothetical exercise.

Scanlon not only speaks of governance in the general sense of the principles that are to govern society; he also says that 'we govern ourselves'.<sup>36</sup> There is something very odd about talking like this. It suggests that we are in need of being ruled, directed, controlled or managed, but that we ourselves do the ruling, directing, etc. Philosophical charity might suggest that it is merely clumsy wording. In certain contexts it might be taken to be nothing other than a statement of autonomy – i.e. 'We are governed by no one but ourselves' – but such a context is difficult to see in the way that Scanlon expresses

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<sup>35</sup> *What We Owe To Each Other*, p. 153.

<sup>36</sup> 'Intention and Permissibility', p. 307.

himself. Rather, it is a way of talking that is connected with his view of what moral principles are – i.e. “they specify the ways in which agents are to go about deciding what to do”.<sup>37</sup> Moral principles are directives that we consult, as an authority, in a process by which we manage and regulate ourselves. It needs to be put in this way – expressed as a process – in that principles do not merely tell us what we are to do and what not to do, but rather initiate a process by which we are to *decide* what to do.

There are certainly occasions when it does make sense to say that we govern ourselves, occasions when it is perhaps the case that individuals control themselves. Aristotle’s examples, at the end of Book 1 of *Nicomachean Ethics*, of continent acts, in which an agent acts according to what he conceives to be the right or good way but against the desire to act otherwise, would perhaps be cases of this. Kant might also be seen to be saying something similar in his example in the *Groundwork* of the person who, contrary to inclination, nevertheless acts out of duty.<sup>38</sup> A more extreme example might be the person jailed by an oppressive regime for distributing anti-government literature. When questioned by guards it is not just a question of whether to tell the truth or not, for even if he lies he needs to consider whether the ‘wrong’ lie will result in ‘punishment’ for either himself or others. Such a

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> *The Moral Law*, p. 64.

situation calls for what is, for all but a few, an unimaginable amount of self-governance and control.<sup>39</sup>

It is nevertheless the case that in difficult situations where it is not clear what we ought to do, we often need to give consideration to the particular circumstances of the situation. This, for Scanlon, requires a theory of deliberation and judgement. This requirement arises against a background of general principles such as put forward by Scanlon, i.e. it is very much a symptom of considering principles to be the basis of behaviour. Faced with a difficult case, a person who 'governs himself' by moral principles needs to consider what is to count and what is not to count as an exception to his principle, those considerations brought about by the particular circumstances of the case. This is a balancing operation, but not the balancing between conflicting principles. Rather, Scanlon tells us,

...what we are doing in such cases is asking what form the relevant principles would have to take if they are to be principles that no one could reasonably reject as authoritative guides to conduct. We begin from an (incompletely specified) idea of a general requirement or proposition that we believe meets this test. We then use our understanding of the reasoning behind this principle to specify it further, determining whether the consideration in question would or would not need to be recognised as

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<sup>39</sup> I refer here to the case of the civil rights worker recently (October 2000) released by the Burmese authorities.

marking out an exception to this general prohibition or requirement in order to be one that no one can reasonably reject.<sup>40</sup>

Scanlon says that this is his own view of what we are doing in such cases. I take it by this that he is saying that this is his way of putting it, i.e. even if we are unaware of such a process, or even if we would not put it that way ourselves, this is what we are *really* doing. But it is difficult to see how such a thesis could be proved other than by what can only be imagined to be an elaborate metaphysical argument of some sort that exposes the 'real' nature of deliberation and judgement.

For the person who doesn't hold this, someone who doesn't 'govern' himself by way of moral principles, the problem is not 'balancing' the particular circumstances of a difficult case in order to work out – by a process of deliberation such as Scanlon suggests – whether they constitute an exception to the general principle, thereby establishing a more specifically determined principle that will govern his *Action*. As to whether, say, he should keep to his promise, his problem is, rather, 'Given these circumstances, should I do what I said I would do?' It is often the circumstances that raise considerations, if any, of general principles. Ordinarily, the question of whether or not doing what one said one would do need not arise for such a person, and that 'keep one's promises' never occurs either in his prior thoughts or his own retrospective characterisation of his thought and deed. His reason for doing what he said he would do may well simply be that he *said he*

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<sup>40</sup> 'Intention and Permissibility', p. 308.

would, but that is an *explanation* of his *Action* of, e.g. repaying some money, and not an appeal or reference to a principle 'Do what you said you would do' or 'Keep promises'. We might engage him in a Socratic dialogue<sup>41</sup> in order to convince him that what he is *really* saying, or what he is logically committed to saying, is that one always ought to keep one's promises. But he would be perfectly entitled to respond by asking why we have brought the 'ought' into the debate – 'You are creating a moral situation on the basis of occasions on which there were no moral considerations of what I 'ought' to do, i.e. occasions when I did something because I said I would. On those occasions considering *not doing* what I did never arose (and the 'because' here is explanatory and not justificatory)'.

Here, people doing what they said they would do is being recast as a moral principle as a result of reflecting on the logical possibility of people not doing what they said they would do, but based on examples when there were never any considerations of not doing so for the persons concerned. Consequently, we end up in the peculiar situation whereby it is not the moral principle that determines what is wrong; rather it is what is wrong that determines the moral principle. More generally, the immoral determines the moral, and not vice versa – it is what the bad do that makes the good good. That is to say, it is difficult not to see this as nothing more than philosophy creating work for itself on the basis of the fact that there are bad people, and that this work creates the existence of an arena of moral debate which bears little

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<sup>41</sup> I would say 'pseudo-Socratic' dialogue for reasons that will become clear shortly.



relation to morality as 'personal experience and social institutions'. This, of course, is not to deny that there are circumstances and situations in which good people are faced with moral problems, but this is precisely my point: they are *moral* problems, not *logical* problems to be overcome by theories of deliberation, judgement and reason peculiar to abstract thinking. If we were to imagine ourselves in the hypothetical scenarios suggested by the likes of Rawls and Scanlon, where we 'govern ourselves' by moral principles, then the general moral, i.e. rule by which we should 'govern ourselves', would seem to be something like 'Watch your back'. Or, as one reviewer of *What We Owe to Each Other* puts it, it all sounds "...a bit like 'Try not to act so that you have a complaint against you'".<sup>42</sup>

The examples of Aristotle's continent acts, Kant's unhappy philanthropist and the person under duress that I referred, to are exceptions when it would make sense to speak of persons as governing themselves. Scanlon also talks of exceptions in difficult cases. But he does not restrict his theory of deliberation and judgement to these cases, but applies it to clear cases also. He says:

Although it is sometimes unclear whether a certain consideration does or does not count as justifying an exception to some principle, there are also many cases in which it is quite clear to anyone who understands a principle whether a *consideration* justifies an exception or not. But it is generally very difficult – I would say often

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<sup>42</sup> Simon Blackburn in *The New York Times Book Review*, February 21<sup>st</sup> 1999.

impossible – to spell out a principle in a way that would enable one to decide, without appeal to judgement, even these intuitively clear cases. [my emphasis].<sup>43</sup>

But if it were as clear as Scanlon suggests then such a ‘consideration’ would not even arise *as a consideration* upon which to pass judgement. What is worrying in all of this is that quite elaborate theories of deliberation and judgement are developed in order to establish a central place for moral principles in moral life. What happens, in fact, is that the contextual backdrop is no longer moral *life*, but moral *debate*. Particular examples are developed precisely for what they have to offer in support of generalisations, but then those generalisations are said to govern the particular cases. In doing this the specific features of the debate – moral principles, theories of deliberation and judgement – bear less and less resemblance to the *real* cases of moral life, what is going on in our thought and conduct. We might say that, as a rule, people do what they say they will do. This is not an unreasonable observation to make. But it is quite another thing to say that, as a rule, people govern themselves by the moral principle ‘keep your promises’.

### **Moral Theory and Thinking about Moral Problems**

One of the claims that is often made on behalf of moral theory, particularly deontological and utilitarian versions, is that one of its most

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<sup>43</sup> ‘Intention and Permissibility’, p. 308.

fundamental points is to provide *Action* guidance. Thus, for instance, an objection common to both camps of virtue ethics is that it doesn't provide rules and thus it cannot provide guidance for *Action*. Again, writers who reject general principles, claiming that judgement can only be made by a person in the particular situation in which he finds himself, are accused of relativism – and, in some cases, it is claimed that this is itself a moral position (as opposed to the result of an analysis of the nature of moral problems).<sup>44</sup>

The classical problem for rule theorists is to accommodate their positions to cases of the conflict of duties, or situations where established principles or rules do not yield clear-cut guidance. It is in part due to such considerations that writers such as Hare and Scanlon talk about the adapting of principles in the face of particular cases. Hand in hand with the relatively recent interest in applied ethics, theorists have more and more come to use both imaginary and real life moral problems and dilemmas in relation to their theoretical positions. Whether deontologists, utilitarians or contractualists, the general idea is that conceptions of reason and deliberation can show us the 'right way' to approach, and in some cases solve, the moral problems that are presented by such cases.

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<sup>44</sup> See for instance, Thomas Nagel, *The Last Word* (Oxford University Press, 1997) p. vii.

*Logical Thinking and Moral thinking*

I have argued that such conceptions of reason, deliberation and moral systems may contribute to moral debate, but that, due to their abstract nature, they do little to contribute to an understanding of the nature of the moral problems that confront people in everyday life. Such a charge is thus a serious challenge to the claim that discussions along these lines can yield *Action* guidance: if they fail to contribute to an understanding of the nature of moral problems, they similarly fail as a guide to *Action* in the face of moral problems. Such conceptions are abstract in that they rest on the assumption that reason is somehow distinct from feelings, desires, emotions, etc, and that if we apply reason and deliberation in such-and-such a way then we can overcome or, at least, come to terms with moral difficulties. This emphasis on reason and deliberation, however, has led to confusing moral problems with logical problems, the view that so long as we reason rightly, then the less will we be afflicted by moral problems. MacIntyre succinctly expresses my general view on this:

...the view that I am criticising makes consistency between appraisals and principles of conduct a logical requirement. That principles should be so consistent is built into the meaning of moral words such as 'ought'. But the demand for consistency is in fact a moral not a logical

requirement. We blame a man for moral inconsistency perhaps, but we do not find what he says meaningless.<sup>45</sup>

We shall see in Chapter Four that Aristotle puts emphasis on right reason (*orthos logos*), and it is right reasoning that Socrates is concerned to encourage in his fellow debaters in the dialogues. But the views I have been discussing view reasoning in logically formal terms, whereas for the ancients – and particularly for Aristotle – what is sought in ethics is not formal reasoning but reasoning proper to the sphere of activity, i.e. moral wisdom or *phronesis*. The formal view of reasoning attempts to identify the general characteristics of thinking, or the logical properties of moral words and terms, whilst in ethics the problems that arise do so precisely because of particular circumstances. Thus it is unsurprising that generalist approaches to ethics find their greatest problems of justification in cases that involve too many particular circumstances for their generalisations to cover. But those problems – the problems faced by generalist approaches to ethics - are not *moral* problems, but *logical* ones that arise through mistaking logical reasoning for moral reasoning.

In distinguishing between logical reasoning and moral reasoning, I am not claiming that the latter is a special type of reasoning, i.e. that moral reasoning has its own formal characteristics and that logical reasoning has its own. The difference I allude to is that moral reasoning – the sort of reasoning that we would hope to see in relation to difficult moral problems – involves understanding, and by that I do not mean an

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<sup>45</sup> 'What Morality is Not', p 35.

understanding of the logical properties or general features of reasoning. In Plato's dialogues, many of Socrates' fellow debaters are clever in this formal way: they can identify premises, and they can use those premises to come to conclusions. Often they are conclusions that Socrates then provides further arguments against, on other occasions conclusions with which he concurs. But what comes over most forcefully in the dialogues is not the element of formal reasoning, picking out premises and drawing out of conclusions, but the wisdom and understanding that Socrates encourages. As Raimond Gaita says, discussing *Gorgias*, "The capacity to answer seriously under Socratic examination requires that the ethical subject – he who understands and is responsive to the requirements of morality – be more than a rational agent".<sup>46</sup>

This, I argue, is why Aristotle is rightly concerned with character and character traits, rather than rules and principles by which to guide *Action*. Recent developments in virtue ethics might suggest that we can look at the virtues as alternative rules to those of deontology and utilitarianism, but we need to take care of the way in which 'rule' is to be understood.<sup>47</sup> For (to return to difficult and unclear cases), what we are looking for from the *phronimos* is not someone who has knowledge (in the Socratic sense) of the virtues-as-right-rules and can then apply

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<sup>46</sup> Raimond Gaita, 'The Personal in Ethics' p. 141.

<sup>47</sup> Also involving care in what we understand by the *application* of a rule: See Rosalind Hursthouse, *On Virtue Ethics* (Oxford, 1999) *passim*. As Hursthouse points out (p. 211-12), it is one thing to identify a particular character trait as a virtue, and we may consider that virtue to be a rule, but its application can only be determined case by case. I shall return to this point shortly.

them, but someone whose *Action*, in such circumstances, invents, so to speak, a rule. This 'invention' isn't a conceptual product, but is characteristic of his *Action* – and it is this characteristic that will allow us to describe the *Action* as falling under such-and-such a virtue.<sup>48</sup>

### *Rules, Principles and Particular cases*

When difficult cases do arise, what it is about them that makes them 'difficult' varies. For instance, difficult situations are often *new* situations, the result of unforeseen and unintended consequences, or by what are commonly called 'freaks of nature'. These are, *ex hypothesi*, unpredictable, and for a theory to predict how people will act (if they accept the theory), or ought to act, then that theory must contain within itself an element that predicts the unpredictable. It might be countered that, yes, there are elements in certain cases that are 'new', and in that sense unpredictable. But these elements are particular aspects of overarching general problems (e.g. euthanasia, killing one in order to save many, etc.); that they are particular aspects does not in itself necessarily entail that they cannot be brought under general rules or principles. However, this resort to and reliance on general rules and principles, and the failure to give due consideration to what are often unique particular aspects of moral problems, is itself to fail to understand the nature of difficult moral problems.

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<sup>48</sup> Even here, the situation may not necessarily be so clear-cut that we can identify a particular virtue, something I shall return to in conjunction with applying the virtues

Jonathan Dancy, in the name of 'particularism', puts the point against this sort of generalism thus:

Particularism claims that generalisation is the cause of many bad moral decisions, made in the ill-judged and unnecessary attempt to fit what we are to say here to what we have said on another occasion....it is this sort of *looking away* that particularists see as the danger in generalism. Reasons function in new ways on new occasions, and if we don't recognise this fact and adapt our practice to it, we will make bad decisions. Generalism encourages a tendency not to look hard enough at the details of the case before one, quite apart from any oversimplistic tendency to rely on a few rules of dubious provenance.<sup>49</sup>

In this thesis, what is of most interest in the particularist's criticism of generalisation is its foundation in the questioning of unexamined assumptions about moral motivation and reasons for *Action*.<sup>50</sup> What is

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and my tentative use of 'invention'.

<sup>49</sup> Jonathan Dancy, *Moral Reasons* (Oxford, 1993), p. 64.

<sup>50</sup> Simon Blackburn claims that Dancy's radical particularism ultimately would make practical reasoning arbitrary and unintelligible, *Ruling Passions*, Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 308. I would add that, if (a theme taken up in Part Two of the thesis) practical reasoning is based on the logic of *Action* itself rather than a specialised conception of reasoning which must satisfy criteria imported in from formal logic, then human *Action* itself would be arbitrary and unintelligible. Or, what amounts to the same, it would be difficult to identify terms to fulfil a description under which something might be called an *Action*. What concerns me about much of Dancy's work is his speaking of 'properties of *Actions*' and the metaphysical connotations associated with this phrase, a point that I shall only briefly raise here. In a illuminating



primary in this questioning are the *philosophical problems* underlying generalist approaches, for those problems have implications for the very exercise of taking general moral stances based on rules and principles.

One of those problems is the very idea of morality, and what moral theory can achieve, that some generalists have. Consider the following from a critic of particularism:

One of the things a shared commitment to morality needs to do is provide people with some assurance that others won't attack them, rob from them, break promises to them, or lie to them. Providing people with such assurance is of course one of law's most important functions. Ideally, perhaps, peoples' moral commitments would be adequate to provide this assurance, without the

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passage in 'Why There is Really No Such Thing as The Theory of Motivation' Dancy says: "There is another reason for denying that reasons are causes, this is that there is no possible metaphysical distinction between the action and the reasons for it, for if we subtract the reasons from the action, there is not enough left to be an action at all" (*PAS* 1995, p. 18.). Surely 'properties' invites a similar process of subtraction, with the implication that we can identify a substratum that will count as an *Action* apart from its properties. But an *Action* is nothing other than the description under which it can be called an *Action*, and it is the characteristics to which the terms of the description apply which identify it as an *Action* to be (morally or otherwise) judged. Consider the statement 'He did that'. This is a particular statement, but as an utterance it is raised in a context, and that context provides the description under which 'that' can be called an *Action*. The characteristics of 'that' to which the terms of the description relate are the purpose, reason, motive etc. – the basis – of the utterance itself. The meaning and value of such a statement are derived, not from its logical form, but the conditions and circumstances which brought about its utterance. I shall return to this point in relation to motivation in the concluding chapter.

enforcement of legal sanctions. But realistically we recognise the need for legal sanctions to protect persons and property from others, and to enforce contracts. Yet there are things which both (a) we want peoples' moral commitments to ensure that they do, and (b) we do not want law to get involved in. An example may be that it is desirable for *morality* to pressure people to keep their *spoken* promises to their spouses, but we don't want the *law* to poke its big nose in such matters. And even where the law should and does stick in its nose, widespread internalization of moral restrictions is clearly needed. For knowing that others have certain firm moral dispositions can give us added assurance about how they will behave.<sup>51</sup>

Here morality is seen as some sort of force that pressures and ensures that people follow rules and principles, in doing so providing assurance and protection. This is a peculiar view of morality. It very much seems that what is being asked for are rules and principles that act as a (non-legal) moral police force, which people commit themselves to in order to act morally. But such *Actions* could not be meaningfully called 'moral' precisely because they issue from *pressure*, *ensured* by rules and principles that they have *committed* themselves to. Honest, faithful people who do not attack and rob people are not pressured, and their

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<sup>51</sup> Brad Hooker, 'Particularism: Wrong and Bad' in *Moral Particularism* ed. Brad Hooker and Margaret Little (Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 16.

honesty, etc., are not ensured by rules and principles. To lie, to break promises, to rob and attack people, is not something that is ordinarily going to arise as a possible option for such people: they do not need to *commit* themselves to honesty and faithfulness, for they *are* honest and faithful.

What is at fault here are the contractualist assumptions about the nature of morality.<sup>52</sup> The major problem with contractualism is that it fails to distinguish between the *moral* and the *legal and political*, carrying the enforcement (in terms of rights, duties, obligations, claims, etc) of the latter over to the former. But to talk of morality in terms of enforcement renders the term 'morality' more or less meaningless: an enforced morality is no morality at all, and if it is thought that rules and principles are required to pressure people to act in certain ways then it would be just as well to give up speaking of morality at all.

A further assumption of much thinking along these lines is that one of the purposes of moral theory is come up with a sort of blue-print of rules and principles for society to adopt,<sup>53</sup> and that "...widespread internalization of moral restrictions is clearly needed". What would be involved in a society's adopting of a particular theoretical moral position, and whether societies *adopt* sets of rules and principles at all (whether there is, e.g. some sort of process whereby societies as a whole adopt *this* rather than *that* set of moral principles) rests on a

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<sup>52</sup> Hooker sees himself as being a consequentialist, but the similarity of what he says here to contractualism is quite stark. For example, his counter-example to particularism is based on *securing a deal*, *ibid.* pp. 17ff.

<sup>53</sup> *ibid.*, p. 1.

number of assumptions to be addressed by social and political science and law.

On the other hand, whether morality consists of the internalization of moral restrictions rests on assumptions about reasons for *Action*, motivation, moral habituation and character, practical reasoning and wisdom. To ignore problems raised in connection with these features of moral life and to construct a system of morality regardless of such considerations, is to presuppose the philosophical propriety and meaning of talking about societies adopting moral theories and the internalization of moral restrictions.<sup>54</sup>

### *Between Rules and Invention: Moral Wisdom*

The evolution of virtue ethics from Anscombe's 'Modern Moral Philosophy' has led to consideration of the virtues as rules, but the

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<sup>54</sup> In recent decades such thinking, and the very idea that moral theory can perform such a function as providing a blue-print for society to adopt, has been seriously undermined by communitarianism. In political theory, the main thrust of the criticism has been a response to Rawls' extreme individualism. The main philosophical thrust has been to question the individualistic assumptions by pointing out the social nature of reason, morality and *Action*. This label covers a general perspective that defies a systematic exposition of a particular ethical theory in the work of, in particular MacIntyre and Charles Taylor, a point that is of notable significance: the most important contribution of such authors has been to point out misconceptions of reason in *systematic* ethical theories such as Kantianism, utilitarianism and contractualism. Interestingly Roger Crisp and Michael Slote suggest that communitarianism may well turn out to be the equivalent in political philosophy to virtue ethics (see their introduction to *Virtue Ethics*, Oxford University Press, 1997).

understanding of 'rules' needs to be distinguished from its pervasive use in deontological and utilitarian ethics.

The most important distinction lies in the notion of applying a rule. In clear-cut cases there is no problem for the person who is honest, courageous, etc. as to the appropriate virtue; here the person doesn't so much *apply* a virtue, he just acts honestly, courageously, etc., honesty, courage, etc. being character traits. However, a situation might be sketched out in which there is a conflict based on whether it would be best, e.g. to do what is honest or to do what is kind (or vice-versa): 'What would you do here?' I may well give an answer to this particular scenario, but this would do nothing to establish a rule 'honesty over kindness', for any such judgement would depend on the particular circumstances of any future case involving such a conflict. All that I say in relation to the present case is that, given *this* scenario, such-and-such is called for. Indeed, a future case may serve to remind us that just because 'honesty', 'kindness', 'courage', etc. are different words, conduct that exhibits them does not necessarily identify different 'rules'. That is to say, their meanings are established in *Actions* rather than the words themselves: it is often the case that honesty *is* kind and courageous.

It is difficult and unclear cases that moral theory has the most problems accommodating. I claimed earlier that, as these often involve new and unique circumstances, what we are looking for in the *phronimos* is someone who, so to speak, 'invents' a rule, and that this

invention is characteristic of his *Action*, allowing us to describe it as falling under such-and-such a virtue. This needs two qualifications.

Firstly, it might be the case that his *Action* doesn't fall neatly under one virtue term and can be variously described under several virtue terms, or we may struggle to find a term that expresses in any precise sense what the *Action* exhibits.<sup>55</sup> To ignore this possibility may again be due to wrongly assuming definite meanings attaching to specific words. The problem here is not the failure to identify a specific virtue, but failing to note that the meanings of descriptive virtue terms are not fixed by those terms but by the conduct that they describe. It is in this sense that virtue, in difficult circumstances, *implies* a rule, rather than the *application* of a rule. Further, the misguided desire for philosophical precision here should not cloud the admiration due to the moral wisdom, imagination and passion involved in such *Actions*.

The second qualification concerns my use of 'invention' here, and its relation to *Actions* implying a rule. In using it I am not taking a side on the 'invention-discovery' dichotomy, for any invention does not, so to speak, come out of nothing, but has some contextual background out of which it arises. Any situation which calls for *Action*, even those that involve unique factors, comes about by a series of events, including both foreseen and unforeseen consequences. Only by focusing on the particular circumstances of such situations can an appropriate

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<sup>55</sup> Aristotle, at *NE* Book 4 v, illustrates this lack of precision in his use of *prāotēs*, meaning gentleness, goodnaturedness, patience.

response be based, and it is only appropriate to the degree of that focusing.

Throughout his works Hegel employs Aristotle's analysis of *dunamis*, potentiality, and *energeia*, actuality, in his discussions of concrete phenomena. In any activity we bring about (make actual) something that was potentially in the circumstances within which we act. Ordinarily, what we do requires little thought and involves nothing particularly remarkable, and what we do is quite straightforward. In difficult and problematic circumstances, however, wisdom, imagination and passion are required in attending to the situation at hand. Remarkable, admirable *Actions* are precisely those which exhibit those characteristics in developing the potentiality of those circumstances. It is in this sense that such *Actions* imply a rule, i.e. that it *follows* from the circumstances at hand. Although talking of great historical events, something Hegel says in *IPW* (p. 21) is apposite here:

...a general principle is of no help, and it is not enough to look back on similar situations [in the past]; for pale reflections are powerless before the stress of the moment, and impotent before the life and freedom of the present. (...No two instances are exactly alike; they are never sufficiently identical for us to say that what was best on one occasion will also be best on another...).

The element of passion should not be underplayed here, for it is precisely this that the 'stress of the moment' requires. Laws, rules and

principles are “purely universal and abstract” (Ibid., p. 69), and what is required is *Action* and passion.

If I put something into practice and give it a real existence, I must have some personal interest in doing so; I must be personally involved in it, and hope to obtain satisfaction through its accomplishment ...To have an interest in something means to be implicated and involved in it, and an end which I am actively to pursue must in some way or other be my own end. It is my own end which must be satisfied, even if the end for which I am working has many sides to it which have nothing to do with me. (Ibid., p. 70).

Here we must not be diverted by the simplistic analytical distinction between self-interestedness and other-interestedness, the result, according to Hegel, of ‘psychological pedantry’ (Ibid., p. 87). There are certainly occasions when individuals, under the guise of pursuing some general good or the good of others, are pursuing personal advantage and furthering their own cause alone, “...even at the expense of detracting from the general cause, jeopardising it, or sacrificing it altogether. But anyone who actively supports a cause is not just an interested party – he is interested in the cause itself” (Ibid.).

The reduction of self-interest to selfishness and egoism has had much coinage in philosophy, and it has contributed to blinding many writers to the element of passion that morality requires. It is one thing to charge someone with pursuing an end with passionate selfishness, but



quite another to talk of the passionate self-interest with which someone pursues an objective.<sup>56</sup> The briefest reflection on the notion of 'caring' will surely be adequate to show the limitations of a distinction between self-interest and interest in a particular objective, for it would be absurd to claim that caring is or ought to be absent in matters of morality. Equally, there is surely much truth in Hegel's claim that "Passion is the prerequisite of all human excellence, and there is accordingly nothing immoral about it" (Ibid., p. 86.). Such passion, wisdom and imagination consists of no more than Aristotle's 'complete harmony' of reason and desire.

### *Structure of the Thesis*

Early on in this introduction I stated that this thesis is concerned with the practical dimensions of morality, i.e. morality as personal experience and social institutions. I contrasted this with the sort of moral theory which aims to establish rules and principles, claiming that this sort of approach can be seen, in the work of certain authors, to rest on the underlying assumption that reason and desire are distinct phenomena.

One consequence of this is that conceptions of reason, deliberation and judgement are put forward as the arbiters of the good and the right. When such conceptions are subjected to scrutiny, however, they

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<sup>56</sup> In Chapter Two I will illustrate how this simplistic distinction finds its expression in discussions of the individual and the state in Hegel, and in Chapter Seven in

are seen to bear little resemblance to what actually goes on in thought and conduct in moral life. This comes over clearly in the language employed by those authors, creating a gulf between moral life (personal experience and social institutions) and this sort of moral theorising. This is the basis of my claim that such theorising is abstract, and in the chapters that follow I shall look at specific abstract conceptions of reason, deliberation and judgement that have been invoked in discussions of particular aspects of *Action* and ethics.

This view that reason can and ought to be the basis of moral systems, rules and principles in the authors that I have discussed is a direct descendent of the moral philosophy of Kant, a point amply highlighted in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century by, amongst others, MacIntyre, Williams and McDowell. In Part One of the thesis I will illustrate that, despite his attempt to synthesise rationalism and empiricism, Kant retains the misleading dichotomy between reason and desire that permeates the work of Descartes, Locke and Hume, a dichotomy that is pivotal in their metaphysics and epistemology.

This feature of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy has left its mark on much 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy in the areas of *Action* and ethics. Not only is reason seen as an authoritative and objective arbiter of moral rules, but also specific abstract methods of reasoning, such as causal analysis and logical inference, are invoked in accounts of judgement, deliberation and practical reason. Here I do not deny the importance of such methods in philosophical debate - for instance, in the philosophy

of science and formal and philosophical logic – but that they produce unduly abstract accounts of *Action*.

The abstract nature of Kant's view of reason, and its basis in the work of Descartes, Locke and Hume, forms the starting point of Hegel's philosophical outlook. Hegel was the first to systematically subject Kant's work to critical analysis, his central claim being that reason, far from being a faculty or power of the mind or understanding, is historically and socially constituted. This will form the basis of Part One of the thesis.

The claim that reason is historically and socially constituted is implicit in the claim of both Aristotle and Hegel that man is by nature a social and political creature, and the aim of Part Two of the thesis will be to explore this. Here I shall show how much more specific abstract aspects of reason are invoked in analyses of needs, desires and accounts of practical reason. The emphasis here will be to contrast the social nature of reason and morality with the individualistic and psychologistic conceptions that such analyses and accounts involve. Again here, implicitly if not explicitly, the latter have failed to shake off the Cartesian and Humean heritage that figures in a great deal of modern philosophy. This comes out in individualistic and psychologistic conceptions of desire and motivation, a claim that will form the basis of the conclusion to this thesis.

## **PART ONE: HEGEL ON PHILOSOPHY, ETHICS AND WILL**

Hegel's view of the task of philosophy is to grasp in thought how things are rather than, say, speculate how things might or ought to be, and to comprehend the philosophical problems of the era. Given this, it is only natural that he should take as his starting point in his work on logic, mind, Action, ethics, etc., what he saw as a new period in philosophy initiated by (amongst others) Descartes. This he refers to as the period of the 'thinking understanding'.

What Hegel means by 'thinking understanding' is that during this period from Descartes to Kant the pre-occupation was with knowledge and understanding, the basis of our knowledge and understanding. One of the fundamental problems of Cartesian dualism was the epistemological relationship between man and the world in which he lived. This is expressed through the consequent debates between rationalists and empiricists, focusing on the nature of 'the mind' that knows and understands, to Kant's discussions of the 'categories of the understanding'. Thus, Hegel saw his task as comprehending the source of this problem expressed in the attempts to resolve it in the philosophical works of the period.

The epistemological problem arises from the ontological assumption that man is fundamentally distinguished from the world in which he lives by the possession of a mind that is of a different nature, or faculties and senses by which the external world is experienced, considerations culminating in Kant's distinction between 'phenomena' and 'noumena'. For Hegel, however, what is at issue is not an *ontological* problem, i.e. that man *is* fundamentally distinguished from the world. Rather, it is a *logical* problem, i.e. it is a problem that arises out of the ways of thinking employed by the philosophers of the period. More often than not, according to Hegel, philosophical problems are not so much about the subject matters of philosophical discourse, but the way in which the subject matter is thought about. Thus, it is often the case that problems are not about mind, reason, ethics, Action, etc., but logical problems.

In this section of the thesis I will explore some of the major issues and topics raised in this period in philosophy, illustrating Hegel's claim that many of the problems met with are due to the abstract nature of the thinking by which these issues and topics are discussed. Chapter One will address the philosophy of mind that developed from Descartes, in the ensuing rationalist-empiricist debate, against the historical, social and ethical context of Descartes' concerns. In addressing this the discussion will suggest some ethical implications of the philosophy of mind that followed.

One of those implications is that the argument of the *Cogito* renders human beings as being first and foremost individual consciousnesses.

This suggestion will be explored in Chapter Two by way of contrast of Hegel's view that human beings are essentially social creatures, and that it is precisely this social nature that accounts for morality and ethics. This position has historically raised the problem of the relationship between the individual and society/state. This problem can be seen, however, to be the result of the abstract reasoning that is often the target of Hegel's criticisms, in particular the treatment given to the concept of freedom.

This abstract reasoning that Hegel's predecessors and contemporaries afforded the concept of freedom is also much in evidence in discussions of will and Action, the subject of Chapter Three. This chapter will show that will and human conduct are derived from social context rather than some sort of abstract, *a priori*, conception of humans as essentially individual.

## 1. MODERN PHILOSOPHY AND ETHICS

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I shall explore the framework of Descartes' way of thinking and some of the implications of his starting position, a preliminary discussion to serve as a basis for an exploration of the moral and ethical implications. Here I shall concern myself primarily with the philosophical method and philosophy of mind that influenced the period culminating in Kant, the details of the moral and ethical implications to be the subject of later chapters. However, the full force of the new philosophy cannot be truly grasped without considering the theological, philosophic and moral background out of which it was to emerge.

In *LHP* Hegel gives a systematic account of the development of philosophical thought, and an introductory discussion of his views on the philosophical treatment of thought as it emerges in history, of which I shall give a brief overview of the period leading up to Descartes. I do this on two counts. Firstly, and most obviously, to provide a historical background. Secondly, and more importantly for what is to follow in the current project: Hegel's approach to the topic, and his approach to philosophy as a whole, will lay the ground for the claim (the subject of later chapters) that Aristotle can be seen to carry out the philosophical

analysis of ethics from a quite different perspective than many modern treatments of the subject. This is something that I will sketch out in the last section of the current chapter.

### **Philosophy in Context: history, ethical life and philosophical assimilation**

The central feature of Hegel's treatment of the history of philosophy is that, philosophy being concerned with what is (rather than, say, what might or ought to be), it represents a reflection of its own time. The actual (rather than the abstract, theoretical, consideration of) ethical life of a particular era - its social, political, legal, religious organisation - produces certain tensions and contradictions, and these tensions and contradictions are often the source of moral and ethical problems. Philosophy, being a reflection on, and assimilation of, how things are, often expresses those problems that are the product of the overall ethical constitution of an era. In this light, philosophy is something that attempts to bring to the surface why such problems arise. The history of philosophy is peopled by those (in Hegel's words, 'heroes') who have brought these aspects of ethical life to the surface.<sup>1</sup> Given this contextual background of Hegel's view of philosophy, a critical review (as carried out by a historian of philosophy, for instance) of particular philosophers can only do them justice by considering their work from within the ethical life - and, more pertinently here, the ethical *concerns*

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<sup>1</sup> Something perhaps supported by the fact that many of the major figures in the history of philosophy have been considered in their own time to be heretical in some way or another. To highlight a problem is often to question the state of affairs out of which it arose, without necessarily having to suggest an alternative state of affairs.



- of the prevailing period. As we shall see, the moral implications of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century philosophy attracted the displeasure of theologians who represented the dying spirit of the religious grip on the philosophy of the Middle Ages. The domination of Christianity in public life was reflected in the focal point of philosophic thought: the Divinity and the will of God. To the vast majority of the population of Europe this was a 'beyond', not only in the sense that He was beyond in a metaphysical sense, but also in a practical and moral sense. Access to the scriptures was exclusive to those who had attended the church-dominated universities and had learnt the Latin in which the scriptures were written, i.e. the clergy. Morality was derived from interpreting the will of God, and thus guidance in this area of life was the sole office of the representatives of the church.

*History, Philosophy and Religion: the Cartesian context*

For Hegel, philosophy is tied up with the practicalities of the age, and it reflects the thoughts that inform and guide the activities that constitute those practicalities. This is what Hegel refers to as 'spirit', and not some sort of ghostly, mystical, intangible omnipresence that is beyond the grasp of mortals. Philosophy, at any given time, will express the concerns of its time, and the task of the historian of philosophy is to assimilate the development of the thought that is expressed in historical progress. This is reflected in the philosophy of the age in which Descartes was writing, Hegel referring to it as the 'period of the thinking understanding'.

The main interest hence is, not so much the thinking of the objects in their truth, as the thinking and understanding of the objects...(*Ibid.*, vol. 1 pp.158).

The subject of philosophy was no longer an external world created by God from beyond, but rather our understanding of the world that we inhabit, a world which we assimilate and shape. Or rather, this was the spirit of the new philosophy emerging from the strictures of an age in which philosophy was hardly distinct from theology. Hume puts the point thus:

In later times, philosophy of all kinds, especially ethics, have been more closely united with theology than ever they were observed to be among the heathens; and as this latter science admits of no terms of composition, but bends every branch of knowledge to its own purpose, without much regard to the phenomena of nature, or to the unbiased sentiments of the mind, hence reasoning, and even language, have been warped from their natural course...<sup>2</sup>

Out of this new spirit develops the two opposite strands of thought of empiricism and rationalism, both of which carry with them moral implications which are contradictory to the prevailing orthodoxy. On the one hand,

... The spiritual was observed as in its realisation it constitutes the spiritual world of states, in order thus to investigate from experience the rights of individuals as

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<sup>2</sup> *Enquiries*, Oxford 1975 3rd. ed., pp. 322.

regards one another, and as regards rulers, and the rights of states against states (*LHP op. Cit.*, pp.163).

The mandate of the clergy, handed down by God, on such matters was under question in the very spirit of empiricism, whilst for rationalism

The individual is clearly not determined in any other way than from himself, he is the absolute beginning of determination; in the 'I', in the self, a power of decision is clearly to be found. This freedom is in opposition to the theory that God alone is really absolutely determining (*Ibid.*, pp.164-5).

In the new philosophies the world and man were no longer mere appendages of God, worthy of interest only in that they are His creations. Now, man and his environment were the focal point of attention, and the task of philosophy was to determine the nature of our knowledge of the world, and the roles that reason, judgement, desires, inclinations etc. occupied in knowledge and *Action*. In Descartes we find the ultimate expression of the challenge to the doctrines and authority of the clergy, and a direct challenge to the authority of God. Man's freedom consists in the soul thinking the will to be unrestrained, and

As free, man might do what is not ordained of God beforehand - this would conflict with the omnipotence and omniscience of God; and if everything is ordained of God,

human freedom would thereby be done away with (*Ibid.*, pp. 249).<sup>3</sup>

### *Affirmation and Refutation and Principles of Philosophy*

Central to Hegel's view of philosophical history is that the task is to explicate the main principles of the particular philosopher under consideration. Those main principles will relate to, and involve a continuation of, a philosophical conflict or debate. Thus Descartes' motivating concern was the debate of the followers of Plato and Aristotle (though "...they have often corrupted the sense of his writings..."<sup>4</sup>), "The principal point of debate among their disciples was as to whether all things should be doubted or whether there were some which were certain", and the role of the senses and the understanding in the matter.<sup>5</sup> This conflict between doubt and certainty, and the senses and reason, sets forth the debate between empiricism and rationalism that was to follow the publication of Descartes' work.

For Hegel, a correct grasp of philosophy has two elements - affirmation and refutation. In a given era different philosophical outlooks will

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<sup>3</sup> The point here is not that we see in this period the rise of the individual, in the sense that before the Reformation human beings were not individuals. Rather, Hegel's point is that we see here the formal recognition of individuals in religion, states and doctrines. This is something that is assimilated in Descartes' philosophical reflections, which Hegel regards as Descartes' most positive contribution in the history of philosophical thinking.

<sup>4</sup> R. Descartes, *Discourse on Method and the Meditations* (Penguin Classics 1979), *Letter from Author* (to serve as introduction to translation of *Principles of Philosophy*), pp.178.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

concern themselves with a particular aspect of philosophy and claim to refute one another. The one will claim that this particular aspect is essentially of *this* nature, the other that it is essentially of *that* nature. In coming to a correct grasp "...we must distinguish between the special principle of a philosophy in itself and the execution of this principle or its application to the world" (*ILHP*, pp.94). The focal point of the debate that followed Descartes was knowledge. The special principles of this debate were rationalism and empiricism, i.e. knowledge is based on reason, or on experience.

Different philosophies have not only contradicted but have refuted one another. Therefore you may well ask: what sense this mutual refutation has? ...What is refutable is only this, that some concrete mode or *form* of the Idea counts as the highest now and for every time (*Ibid.*).

A correct philosophical grasp will show that the error is to hold that *this* or *that* is the essential nature of this area of philosophy, and show that reason and experience are themselves just two aspects of knowledge. In doing so we will have executed a philosophical exposition of a philosophical concept, rather than hang our hats, so to speak, on particular philosophical pegs. Indeed, it is only in relation to one another that the notions of rationalism and empiricism (with regard to knowledge) have meaning. Hegel uses a different example from history:

Stoicism makes thinking as such its principle; precisely the opposite is what Epicurianism defines as true, namely, feeling, pleasure. Thus the first is universal, the

other is particular, single; the first takes man as thinking, the second as feeling. It is only both together which constitute the entirety of the Concept; man consists of both, universal and particular, thought and feeling. Truth lies in both together...(Ibid. pp. 98).

To claim the primacy of one aspect of a concept (knowledge, man) over another aspect is to include that other *within* the concept under discussion, even though it is considered less important; to do so is tantamount to saying that the true account of that concept will contain both those aspects in its explication. The task of philosophy, for Hegel, is to explicate concepts as a whole, and to emphasise one aspect of a concept is merely to give a one-sided view of that concept. The negative element of a philosophical analysis, its critical aspect, is not to refute the validity of that view, but rather to expose it as one-sided:

...what is refuted is not the principle of a philosophy [rationalism, empiricism], but only the claim of one principle to be final and absolute and, as such, to have absolute validity. The refutation is the reduction of one principle to be a specific factor in the whole. Thus the principle as such has not disappeared, but only its form, its form of being final and absolute. This is the meaning of refutation in philosophy (Ibid. pp. 95-6).

Thus for Hegel philosophy is not about following one particular doctrine, theory, outlook etc. as opposed to another. "Therefore there is no excuse for saying, 'I would like to pursue philosophy, but I don't know which.' Cherries and plums are fruit; every philosophy is at least

philosophy" (ibid., pp. 92). To pursue philosophy is to comprehend thought, and not to align oneself to one particular strand of thought.<sup>6</sup>

Thus it is with Descartes' solitary ruminations that the new outlook first gets a firm foothold and philosophy is liberated from the strictures of theology. The two strands of empiricism and rationalism that were to consolidate in the responses to Descartes were to establish the new spirit, 'the age of the understanding', involving a concentration on epistemology and the nature of mind.

Now if a problem arises in that account then one of the tasks of philosophy is to look at that account to see how the problem has arisen. The mind-body problem is a problem for Descartes in virtue of his starting point and the way that affects his thinking about the nature of mind and body, in his distinguishing them as being of different natures. That is to say, the problem is not with minds and bodies, but with Descartes' *thinking* about minds and bodies. This is something that Descartes more or less admits: asked how interaction between things of such different natures is possible, he replies:

This is very difficult to explain; but here our experience is sufficient, since it is so clear on this point that it cannot be gainsaid.<sup>7</sup>

There is no problem with minds and bodies, but with Descartes' *explaining* their interaction from within the framework of his way of

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<sup>6</sup> "The philosopher is not a citizen of any community of ideas. That is what makes him a philosopher". L. Wittgenstein, *Zettel*, tr. G.E.M. Anscombe (Blackwell, 1981 2<sup>nd</sup> edition), #455.

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, *Conversation with Burman* (Clarendon, 1976) tr. J. Cottingham, p.28.

thinking.<sup>8</sup> It is to the implications of the response to Descartes and the framework of his way of thinking that I shall now turn.

### **The Cogito and The Philosophy of Mind**

Now, therefore, that my mind is free from all cares, and that I have obtained for myself assured leisure in peaceful solitude, I shall apply myself seriously and freely to the general destruction of all my former opinions.<sup>9</sup>

With this statement Descartes sets the scene for modern philosophy, laying down the basis, I shall claim, for a conception of philosophy that even until recent years has been considered 'mainstream'. Here I do not ignore the obvious differences between rationalist and empiricist views on science and ideas that were to develop, but close scrutiny will show that both persuasions, consciously or unconsciously, accepted the basis that Descartes had laid, even if they were to develop from this in differing ways.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Here use might be made of Wittgenstein's analogy of the fly in the bottle: the problem is that the fly cannot escape because he does not stop and look back to see how he got there.

<sup>9</sup> *Meditations* op.cit. pp. 95.

<sup>10</sup> Perhaps it will be said that this ignores a much more specific fact: not all were taken in by the method of doubt, and thus the claim that these individuals accepted Descartes' starting point is clearly philosophically absurd and, historically, plainly false. Hume is an example who springs immediately to mind: he thought the idea of universal doubt to be risible, and even if it could be effected (which it plainly could not be) it would be entirely incurable (*Enquiries*, op. cit., sec. xii, part 1.). Hume did give some credence to a moderate form which "...is a necessary preparative to the study of philosophy, by preserving a proper impartiality in our judgements..." (*Ibid.*), but such a prescription could hardly be considered a 'system'.



*Philosophical Method and the Path of Reason*

Descartes' adoption of the method of doubt reflects his general pre-occupation with method in philosophy, as witnessed in the title of his first work *Rules For The Direction of The Mind* and in the *Discourse on Method*. This pre-occupation with method in employing one's own mind in philosophy provides the first hint of his view that the mind is essentially distinct from the world of which it has ideas, a view he elaborates on in the *Meditations*. This starting point determines both his conception, and the specific content, of his philosophy. It is also a starting point in a metaphysics and epistemology, in a way of thinking, that still pervades much modern philosophy. In particular, it bears very much on how human reason and desire, knowledge and sentiments are accounted for, and the view of human conduct that such accounts entail.

In a sense, the laying down of the method of doubt is something of a philosophical red herring, for it is the autobiographical content of Descartes' statement that ought to command our attention. The foundation of Descartes' philosophical ruminations is not the method of doubt (although clearly he *thought* it was), but rather his solitariness. Indeed, his solitariness - as Descartes himself indicates - is a prerequisite for the method of doubt to be applied, but more importantly it is the philosophical implications of such solitariness, implications that pervade his work, which have met with widespread acceptance.

What I mean by the philosophical implications of Descartes' solitariness is this: not only does he isolate himself *physically*, but *metaphysically* also. Rather than following the supposedly Aristotelian project of the schoolmen to enquire into the nature of the things that

constitute the world we live in, Descartes pursues the question 'How can I know that *my* ideas of the world are true ideas?' The change of focus is profound: 'the world' is what is present in the ideas and impressions that we have of it; the task of philosophy is to distinguish between *true* ideas, and those that might be chimeras, or deceptions of the senses, or those of our dreams. The epistemological foundation is laid: the metaphysics of the mind replaces the metaphysics of nature at the centre of philosophic enquiry. The unique feature of this shift, however, also represents the greatest difficulty. The human 'mind' is fundamentally distinguished from the world of which it has ideas, and Descartes' problem is how to reconcile the two. Man - due to his unique capacity to have ideas - is a solitary species in a material (and mechanistic) world.

However, the solitariness goes further. 'The mind' is just a general term, represented *in concreto* (so to speak) by individual minds - the receptacle of ideas and impressions. The ideas and impressions that I have are different from the ideas and impressions that you have, although it may turn out that we are having ideas and impressions of the same things. Whether we are having ideas and impressions of 'things' at all is something that needs to be *established* (i.e. by some sort of independent criteria, logical argumentation, etc.), for the only idea that we have that is self-evident is the *Cogito* - the *I* think. What the *Cogito* supposedly guarantees is the individual mind that thinks it, and thus Descartes must not only establish the existence of the external world: the existence of other minds needs to be established also. Not only is 'Man' the species isolated from the remainder of the world, individuals are also isolated from one another, requiring the discussion on the existence of other minds.

What is not being questioned here is Descartes' motive in adopting the method of doubt, i.e. that he believed that by this route, far from isolating himself and consequently bringing his meditations to sceptical conclusions, he could establish the existence of the world and others with certainty. It is clear that the expectation of such certainty was what motivated Descartes. However, the claim here is that given a particular starting point, a piece of deductive reasoning will follow, be determined by, the logic of that starting point and the assumptions that it involves, often regardless of the intentions and motives of the author. Thus, given Descartes' starting point of the distinction of mind and body and the establishing of the *Cogito*, he runs into problems reconciling his desire to establish interaction of mind and body and the existence of others, on the one hand, with the direction that the logic of his starting point takes him, on the other. It is the latter that yields individuals as being essentially distinct from one another, and serves up the problem of how mind and body interact.

This picture of the human mind as *essentially* individual is a prejudice that is not captured by Hume's 'necessary preparative' for both empiricist and rationalist alike, but is re-affirmed in the concentration on ideas and impressions by Locke, Hume, and Leibniz. Of course, the first and the last of these had radically differing accounts of the origin and nature of them, but still the focus is on the individual minds 'having' ideas and impressions. Perhaps it is only Spinoza's work that seriously differs, for rather than the 'having' of ideas his 'parallelism' involves our 'participating' in the ideas corresponding to material entities. But this doesn't quite do the job: we still *individually* participate in ideas, an individuality that is overcome only by recognising the true cause of ideas (i.e. not us individually) captured in *scientia intuitiva*.

Such a picture represents common ground; the difference lies in the approaches to reconciling ourselves with - the extent to which, and in what sense, our ideas and impressions involve knowledge of - the external world.

*The Reaction to Descartes: Locke*

Such differences are indeed important. Descartes' concern was the scepticism towards, and the dogmatic nature of, the schoolmen, and thus the self-certainty of the *Cogito* represents a stark contrast. Judgements of truth and certainty can be had, and they can be had by way of individual minds. This was largely undisputed among those who followed Descartes: it was the nature of judgements, truth and certainty, and the ideas and impressions related to them, which were to be the focus of debate. In taking issue with Descartes' innate ideas Locke initiates a perhaps more sober approach to the debate, but still he is concerned with those ideas that exist 'in men's minds' (an expression Locke employs liberally throughout the *Essay*).

However, despite the force of the attack on innate ideas, Locke continues to follow Descartes' agenda in enquiring into the source of the ideas that we have, for "I presume it will be easily granted me that there are such *ideas* in men's minds...".<sup>11</sup> The source of these is two-fold:

Whence has it all the materials of reason and knowledge? To this I answer, in one word, from

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<sup>11</sup> J. Locke, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding* ed. John W. Yolton (Dent 1976, abridged) Introduction, 8.

*experience*; in that all our knowledge is founded, and from that it ultimately derives itself. Our observation, employed either about *external sensible objects, or about the internal operations of our minds perceived and reflected on by ourselves, is that which supplies our understandings with all the materials of thinking*. These two are the fountains of knowledge, from whence all the *ideas* we have, or can naturally have, do spring.<sup>12</sup>

The historical significance of the two fountains of *sensation* and *reflection* cannot be over-emphasised. The first of these is taken up by Hume far more radically, which was to have a profound effect still prevalent today. The second, however, returns Locke directly to Descartes' isolatory ruminations, i.e. consideration of the notion of personal identity.

The *Cogito* 'guaranteed' the existence of a thinking substance, something Locke's empiricist approach could not accommodate. Indeed, Locke's aim was to get away from the existence (but not necessarily the *idea*) of substances. But despite his assertion that "*...our specific ideas of substances are nothing else but a collection of a certain number of simple ideas, considered as united in one thing*"<sup>13</sup> his views on the matter are pretty close to those of Descartes.

When we see, hear, smell, taste, feel, meditate, or will anything, we know that we do so. Thus it is always as to our present sensations and perceptions, and by this everyone is to himself that which he calls *self*. it not being

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. II i.2.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. II xxiii.14.

considered in this case whether the same *self* be continued in the same or divers substances. For since consciousness always accompanies thinking, and it is that that makes everyone to be what he calls *self*, and thereby distinguishes himself from all other thinking things: in this alone consists *personal identity*, i.e. the sameness of a rational being.<sup>14</sup>

The mention of substance here is a throwaway comment in that Locke does not consider *substance* to be a concept it is necessary to invoke. Personal identity can be had by way of the sensations of present and past experiences *and* the consciousness that constantly attends them. 'Consciousness' is all-important here, for the very notion of *reflection* is dependent on it. But what, apart from sensations and specific ideas, is 'consciousness'? Clearly it is this that gives us some notion of immaterial souls, but the *existence* (as opposed to *idea*) of such souls is not something that we are privy to "...by the contemplation of our own ideas...".<sup>15</sup>

Thus both Descartes and Locke, by way of focusing on ideas, come to considerations as to wherein those ideas occur. The one claimed that such considerations proved the existence of thinking substance, whilst the other denied the validity of such a speculation; but both put forward the central notion of individual rational creatures as being essentially distinct. Hume, who was even more sceptical than Locke regarding substances, continued this: for Hume, there were no grounds for *supposing* such, never mind a guarantee for their existence.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. II xxvii.9.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. IV iii.6.

*Locke and Hume: personal identity*

Hume's criticism of Locke has two related components. On the one hand he reproached Locke for being 'betrayed' into discussing innate ideas by the schoolmen, consequently employing the term 'idea' loosely and failing to distinguish between *impressions* and *ideas*.<sup>16</sup> The second element of his dissatisfaction, from the *Treatise*, is the failure to distinguish between discussing ideas of personal identity, "...as it regards our thought or imagination, and as it regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves".<sup>17</sup>

In distinguishing between impressions and ideas Hume establishes empiricism proper. 'Impressions' are had by our experiencing the world in which we live, but an 'experiencing' that is far more radical than Locke's. Rather than the objects that populate the world merely impressing on our senses, we are *affected* by the experiences in the sense that they engage our *affections*. These impressions are "...distinguished from ideas, which are the less lively perceptions, of which we are conscious...".<sup>18</sup>

A man in a fit of anger, is actuated in a very different manner from one who only thinks of that emotion. If you tell me, that any person is in love, I easily understand your meaning, and form a just conception of his situation; but never can mistake that conception for the real

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<sup>16</sup> *Enquiries* op. cit., II 17.

<sup>17</sup> *Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford 1968, 2nd edition), pp. 253.

<sup>18</sup> *Enquiries* II. 12.

disorders and agitations of the passion. When we reflect on our past sentiments and affections, our thought is a faithful mirror, and copies its objects truly; but the colours which it employs are faint and dull, in comparison of those in which our original perceptions were clothed.<sup>19</sup>

Locke was correct to speak of reflection and memory (for Hume 'operations of the mind') in connection with personal identity, but still there is not to be had an idea of the self. Perceptions (whether ideas or impressions) are 'distinct existences', and

...they form a whole only by being connected together. But no connexions among distinct existences are ever discoverable by human understanding. We only *feel* a connexion or a determination of thought, to pass from one object to another. It follows, therefore, that the thought alone finds personal identity, when reflecting on the train of past perceptions, that compose a mind, the ideas of them are felt to be connected together, and naturally introduce each other.<sup>20</sup>

But there is no distinct idea of a self to be had from such a feeling, and any "...identity, which we ascribe to the mind of men, is only a fictitious one...".<sup>21</sup> Such a fiction is due to a loose use of the term 'idea', failing to distinguish between distinct impressions and ideas.

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* II. 11.

<sup>20</sup> *Treatise*, pp. 635.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 259.



This takes us to Hume's second dissatisfaction with Locke's treatment of personal identity. This can be seen as a call for critical reflection, and a warning not to get oneself caught up in the metaphysical reasonings of the schoolmen. Hume asks us to look at the way in which we think about such issues as the existence of substances and personal identity, rather than considerations of whether supposed conclusions are true or false. That is to say, errors in reasoning result in fictitious ideas of substances, and what is required is to examine our reasonings in order to show how such conclusions are arrived at. The idea we have of personal identity "as it regards our passions or the concerns that we take in ourselves" is quite distinct from the idea "as it regards our thought and imagination". It is the latter that occurs in our reasoning about personal identity, and such reasoning is the subject of philosophical examination (the former is ultimately the province of psychology). In other words, despite Locke's empiricist intentions he gets enmeshed in the metaphysical reasonings of the schoolmen - even though he arrives at different conclusions.

We might here ask why personal identity had "become so great a question in philosophy" as Hume had declared.<sup>22</sup> I have suggested that if we examine the logical path from Descartes' starting point, the fundamental proposition is that human beings are distinct entities individuated by individual minds, and that questions of personal identity logically follow from this. In this I think Hume would be in agreement: it is a *way of thinking* that brings these philosophers to such a juncture. But there is also another reason why personal identity became an area of concern, an area of discourse that Hume rejects in putting aside

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

how personal identity "regards our passions or the concern we take in ourselves". That is to say, it was not only the logical, metaphysical and epistemological implications of the *Cogito* that registered concern, but also the *moral* implications.

The most adverse reaction to Descartes' work was of a theological nature and was reflected in personal moral condemnation by the established church, even though the very purpose of his doubting the existence of God was to establish indubitable proof of His existence. Locke's discussion of personal identity brought those fears to a closer focus. Whilst most attention has been directed at the epistemology of the *Essay*, Locke's driving motive for the study of Knowledge was "...morality and divinity, those parts of knowledge that men are most concerned to be clear in".<sup>23</sup> More specifically, in personal identity "...is founded all the right and justice of reward and punishment...".<sup>24</sup> But Locke's refusal to go further into the nature of the thinking thing, and his ultimate scepticism about such an enterprise, cast immediate doubt on the immortality of the soul. Whilst the critical assessments of his discussion of personal identity by, for example, Leibniz and Berkeley brought out epistemological and logical difficulties, those authors were also deeply concerned with its theological and moral implications.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> *Essay*, op. cit., Epistle to the reader, pp. xliv.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* II. xxvii 18.

<sup>25</sup> For a detailed discussion along these lines see Henry E. Allinson's 'Locke's Theory of Personal Identity' in I.C. Tipton (ed.) *Locke on Human Understanding* (O.U.P. 1977).

## **Mind and The Metaphysics of Morals**

The Cartesian emphasis on the *Cogito* and the epistemological implications that were consolidated in the ensuing 'rationalist-empiricist' debate represent a radical re-focusing. This re-focusing throws up serious and difficult questions regarding personal identity, which in turn presents difficulties in our understanding of morality and ethics. Many of these difficulties still prevail in the ethical debates of today; however, the source of much of the confusion can be seen to be derived from the acceptance of the Cartesian premises and the view of the individual human being that these involve. The debate from Descartes to Hume took on many differing forms, but Hume's insistence in making clear and fast distinctions between the 'faculties' of reason, perception and affections consolidates the Cartesian picture that still meets with widespread acceptance today.

### *The Boundaries of Reason and Taste*

Consider the following statement from the *Enquiries*:

...the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained. The former conveys the knowledge of truth and falsehood: the latter gives the sentiment of beauty and deformity, vice and virtue. The one discovers objects as they really stand in nature, without addition or diminution: the other has a productive

faculty, and gilding or staining all natural objects with the colours borrowed from internal sentiment...<sup>26</sup>

Not only do humans have 'minds', but also those 'minds' are partitioned into separate faculties with "distinct boundaries and offices". For all his endeavours to steer well away from metaphysics, Hume gets involved in nothing other than a metaphysics of mind, predicated on the *Cogito*. The task of philosophy is to delineate something 'within' us; that something cannot be experienced other than as the ideas and impressions that pass through it when we reflect upon it, but nevertheless it is the subject of philosophic investigation. Similarly with respect to morals, which are predicated upon something 'within us' that the 'office' of reason translates into *Action*: the passions and sentiments.

This metaphysics of mind reaches its peak in Kant. In attempting to bridge the gap between rationalism and empiricism, Kant turns his attention to the nature of 'the understanding', and the concepts therein that allow us to make sense of experience:

...experience is itself a species of knowledge which involves understanding; and understanding has rules which I must pre-suppose as being in me prior to objects being given to me, and therefore as being *a priori*. They find expression in *a priori* concepts to which all objects of experience necessarily conform, and with which they must agree.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Enquiries*, op. cit., pp. 294.

<sup>27</sup> I. Kant *Critique of Pure Reason*, Tr. N. Kemp Smith (Macmillan 1982), B xvii-xviii.

Again, with respect to morals, it is something 'within us', this time the faculty of reason as opposed to sentiment, that morality is predicated upon. Reason and sentiment are separate faculties; the latter may get in the way of the former, but the demand of the moral law is that personal sentiments be overcome by the rationality upon which the moral law is founded. Thus in Hume and Kant morality is not primarily concerned with the social, historical, political context of *Action*, the ethical realm within which we conduct ourselves, but the causes and principles of what we do. A metaphysics of the mind, and its constituent faculties of reason and sentiment replace the theological metaphysics of the schoolmen.

Perhaps with regard to Hume the previous remark may be regarded as unjust, but there can be no doubt that Hume regarded one task of philosophical enquiry to be a 'mental geography' of the mind. For it is

...no inconsiderable part of science barely to know the different operations of the mind, to separate them from each other, to class them under their proper heads, and to correct all that seeming disorder, in which they lie involved, when made the object of reflection and inquiry.... Nor can there remain any suspicion, that this science is uncertain and chimerical; unless we should entertain such a scepticism as is entirely subversive of all speculation, and even action. It cannot be doubted, that the mind is endowed with several powers and faculties, that these powers are distinct from each other.... There are many obvious distinctions of this kind, such as those between the will and understanding, the imagination and passions, which fall within the comprehension of every

human creature; and the finer and more philosophical distinctions are no less real and certain, though more difficult to be comprehended.<sup>28</sup>

Certainly Hume could not have foreseen the consequences of his awaking Kant from his dogmatic slumbers, but it is precisely in the latter's 'categories of the understanding' that the particulars of Hume's philosophical analysis reappear, i.e. the necessary conditions of experience.

#### *Hume to Kant: reason and morality*

This metaphysics of mind, which distinguishes between reason and passion, carries over to Kant's work on morality, i.e. a metaphysics of morality. That is to say, true morality is *transcendent* of man's *actual existence*, dependent on a divinity, precisely because of this hard and fast distinction between reason and the passions and the conflict that arises between the two. Morality is grounded on reason, the expression of freedom, whilst desire is anchored in our empirical nature.

As a moral being man has the moral law in himself, the principle of which is freedom and autonomy of will; for the will is absolute spontaneity. Determinations which are taken from the inclinations are heterogeneous principles as regards the will; or the will is heteronomy if it takes such determinations as its end and aim; for in that case it takes its determinations from something else than itself.

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<sup>28</sup> *Enquiries* pp. 13-14.

But the essence of the will is to determine itself from itself; for practical reason gives itself laws. But the empirical will is heteronomous, for it is determined by desires; and they belong to our nature, not to the realm of freedom (*LHP* 3, pp. 458-9.).

The consequence of this, according to Hegel, is that true morality is not attainable by man, for there must be a constant struggle between reason and desire for the very possibility of morality. Reason is that which we all have in common in virtue of being human, and as such the moral law which reason wills (in accordance with the maxim 'Act only in such a way that your action can be a universal law') is the universal will which all ought to strive to identify with; but desire and inclination pertain to our individual will, which must be overcome in order for us to identify with the universal will, i.e. for us to be moral.

The unity, that man should be moral, is postulated; but beyond the "should" and this talk of morality, no advance is made. It is not said what is moral; and no thought is given to a system of self-realizing spirit. For really, as theoretic reason stands opposed to the objective of the senses, so practical reason stands opposed to the practical sensuousness, to impulses and inclinations. Perfected morality must remain a Beyond; for morality presupposes the difference of the particular and universal will. It is a struggle, the determination of the sensuous by the universal; the struggle can only take place when the

sensuous will is not yet in conformity with the universal  
(*Ibid.*, pp. 461).<sup>29</sup>

This way of thinking, that distinguishes between reason and desire, which are seen as some sort of faculties or forces within us, and then predicates morality on such a distinction, thereby abstracts morality from the social, historical, political context from within which needs and desires are pursued, the context within which individuals conduct themselves ("...no thought is given to a system of self-realizing spirit"). A philosophy of mind that rests on the assumption of *Cogito*, that then makes a fundamental distinction between faculties in terms of desire and reason, results in a view of human beings as individual *hexes* of desire and/or reason. The essential, fundamental aspect, the primary cause or source of morality, is then said to rest in one or other of these faculties.

### **Moral Ideals and Moral Practices**

More recently, in an interesting discussion paper drawing on similarities between Aristotle and Kant, Stephen D. Hudson raises issues similar in nature to those raised by Hegel. The major similarity between Aristotle and Kant, says Hudson, is that they both anchor their moral thought on "The nature and structure of moral personality".<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> I shall elaborate on this comment from Hegel in relation to what I shall claim is Kant's 'external' teleology.

<sup>30</sup> "What is Morality All About?" in *Philosophia* 1990, pp. 3.



For Kant moral excellence or virtue - a good will - represents an ideal toward which man progresses by a continuous discipline of one's inclinations by reason: it represents a remaking of one's self, a reform of one's sensibilities and inclinations through *Selbstüberwindung*. It is a state of character to be acquired by continuous effort and striving.<sup>31</sup>

Much the same can be said of Aristotle. Taking courage to be a paradigm of moral excellence, Hudson continues:

The very notion of a courageous act is secondary to and dependent upon the notion of a courageous person. The former acquires its sense from the latter. How so? An act gets rightly called courageous when and only when it is such that the courageous person would perform it in those circumstances. The courageous man is thought of as an ideal type, who is the exemplar of courage; it is by reference to that type that we select which acts are typical of courage. Once we have, so to speak, got our hands on such an exemplar, we can, by reference to what he would do, decide whether what we and others do is in fact courageous.<sup>32</sup>

However, Hudson's rendering of the similarity between Kant and Aristotle here belies the fundamental *difference* between the two, illustrated by the transcendent nature of Kant's moral outlook, the reason for Hegel's referring to his version of it as a 'Beyond'.

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<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 7-8.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.* p. 8.

*Morality: the ideal and the practical*

The crucial point here is the very notion of an 'ideal' or 'ideal type', something which sits very awkwardly with the specifically *practical* nature of Aristotle's ethical thought. For Aristotle it is *practical* wisdom (*phronesis*)<sup>33</sup> and good judgement by which we act courageously and recognise courageous acts in others, i.e. looking to the particular circumstances of the situation at hand and not to *ideas* of courage and by way of reference to some external criteria, i.e. *ideals* of the courageous person. When called to act, the conclusion of practical reasoning is not an idea but an *Action*. The very notion of an external criterion, an 'ideal', is alien to Aristotle's account of practical reason, and it is because of this that the extremely puzzling, and misguided, question 'How do we acquire this criterion of an ideal?' does not arise.

What concerns me about Hudson's interpretation of the claim that an act gets rightly called courageous when and only when it is such that the courageous person would perform it in those circumstances, is his reading of *NE* 2.vi as a whole implied by his use of 1105b5-8. Specifically, my concern is his generalisation of the courageous man into an ideal type or exemplar. But there is no suggestion from Aristotle that he has such an ideal type or exemplar in mind in this passage, for here he is concerned to distinguish acts that are incidentally virtuous from those that are done from a virtuous disposition. That is to say, in 1105b5-8 Aristotle speaks of courage in order to establish in 2.vi virtue as a character trait, or acting virtuously "...from a fixed and permanent

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<sup>33</sup> Various aspects of practical wisdom and the practical syllogism will be raised throughout Part Two of the thesis.

disposition" (1105a34). This of course involves how the virtues are acquired, but this is a practical matter of repeatedly performing just and temperate acts, as opposed to those who have recourse to their rule, principle or theory (*logos*) "...and imagine that they are being philosophical and that in this way they will become serious-minded..." (1105b10). The crucial point is the repeated *doing* of courageous acts, the sign of courage as being a character trait, but whether this or that act is a courageous act will depend on the particular circumstances of this or that situation in which one acts, and not a general ideal type or exemplar of a courageous person. The latter looks a little too much like a recourse to a rule, principle or theory.

It is here that the importance of *phronesis* comes in. As I have argued in the introduction, the wisdom, passion and imagination involved in *phronesis* are such only in relation to the particular circumstances of difficult situations, and the difficulty is that the circumstances are often such that there is only recourse to the foresightedness of the moral 'inventor' (see Introduction, pp. 39ff). But this will only be attained, and we will only be able to say that it has been attained, by reference to the particular circumstances of that difficult situation. In this sense the *phronimos* is not someone we are going to be able to refer or have recourse to.

Again, Aristotle's teleology is internal not only in that, on a general level, he finds value *within* the ways in which human beings actually behave, but also in that in difficult situations ideally there will be an identity between what is required to be done and what is actually done. But whether such an identity will be attained will depend on the nature of the particular circumstances and not by reference to an ideal. It may well be the case that those circumstances will not allow such an

identity, which may be due either to the bad choices of individuals who helped bring those circumstances about, or to those circumstances being unintended and/or unforeseen such that no blame is warranted. Ideally, in such situations there will be the harmony of reason and desire involved in virtue; in blameworthy situations disharmony will be brought about by bad choices. In employing the duty/inclination dichotomy, based on the hard and fast distinction between reason and desire, morality is an external 'beyond' and we are imperfect as a species. For Aristotle on the other hand, we are imperfect through bad choices. What we can do we can do well, what we cannot do, through which there may be disharmony between reason and desire, we cannot be blamed for. That does not make us imperfect: we may not be perfect in that we are not divine, but that does not make us imperfect as a species, for the practical life is internal to our being the species that we are.

It is this notion of an *external criterion*, I suggest, that marks off the significant difference between Kant's and Aristotle's ethical thought.<sup>34</sup> In a footnote Hudson gives hint of this in mentioning the different teleologies that Aristotle and Kant employ, but he doesn't quite draw out the full significance of the difference. Aristotle's teleology of *Action* is *internal*. That is to say, the virtuous *Action* is one whereby there is an identity between what is *required to be done* and what is *actually done*, and such an identity will be achieved through a practical grasp of the circumstances at hand. There is no need for reference to an external criterion, just as there is no need for such a reference to recognise a

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<sup>34</sup> That Kant attempts to provide an external criterion for good (or right) *Action* has long been a complaint of Bernard Williams. See, for example, *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (Fontana, 1985).

virtuous *Action*, or when something is *done well*: the end, an *Action* well-done, will in its detail, its description, be internally related to the particular circumstances of the situation that called for *Action*. To generalise, for Aristotle morality is not an ideal (and surely here is the point of his attack on Plato's form of 'the Good'), but concerns the assessment of the problems and dilemmas that we face in life. Ethics can only guide us for the most part and there is no perfection to be attained.<sup>35</sup>

For Kant the situation is very different. Morality is only secondarily a matter of human affairs, although it is dependent on the vagaries of these affairs; the moral realm is a perfection to which we cannot attain, but the very *notion*, i.e. *ideal*, of morality is only possible because of our imperfection. Let us see how this fits in with the claim that Kant operates on an 'external' teleology.

#### *Teleology: the end of morality*

By 'external' here is meant that the end of something is validated by something other than that something. Thus, in the case of morality, the end of *Action*, validation comes from something external to any particular instance of *Action*. Although the *Action* is validated by the universal maxim by which it is carried out, the maxim itself pertains to a sphere that stands beyond the *Action* itself.

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<sup>35</sup> There is the issue, with regard to Aristotle, of whether virtue proper is a matter of the practical, human affairs, or the concern of the 'godlike' *theoria* in us, something that I shall discuss in Chapter Seven.

We are indeed legislative members of a moral realm which is possible through freedom and which is presented to us as an object of respect by practical reason; yet we are at the same time subjects in it, not sovereigns, and to mistake our inferior position as creatures and to deny, from self-conceit, respect to the holy law is, in spirit, a defection from it even if its letter be fulfilled.<sup>36</sup>

The moral law is validated by reason, and we are "legislative members" of the "moral realm" in virtue of our being possessors of reason from which issues the maxim of our particular *Actions*; but we are subjects to the moral law and morality in that it rules over us. As such this is something that we must strive to respect - without such a striving there would be no sense to the idea of its ruling over us - and to *constantly* strive entails that what we strive towards is 'beyond' us.

The possibility of such a command as, "Love God above all and thy neighbour as thyself" agrees very well with this.... The command which makes this a rule cannot require that we have this disposition but only that we endeavour after it.... That law of all laws, like every moral prescription of the gospel, thus presents the moral disposition in its complete perfection, and though as an ideal of holiness it is unattainable by any creature, it is yet

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<sup>36</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, tr. L. White Beck (Bobbs-Merrill, 1956), pp. 85.

an archetype which we should strive to approach and to imitate in an uninterrupted infinite progress.<sup>37</sup>

At the root of this fundamental distinction between individual human beings as creatures and the moral realm is the fundamental distinction between reason and desires and inclinations, the legacy of the rationalist-empiricist debate. That we are affected by desires and inclinations accounts for our imperfection in relation to morality and the moral law, but also the very possibility of morality.

If a rational creature could ever reach the stage of thoroughly liking to do all moral laws, it would mean that there was no possibility of there being in him a desire which could tempt him to deviate from them, for overcoming such a desire always costs the subject some sacrifice and requires self-compulsion, i.e., an inner constraint to do that which one does not quite like to do. To such a level of moral disposition no creature can ever attain. For since he is a creature, and consequently is always dependent with respect to what he needs for complete satisfaction with his condition, he can never be wholly free from his desires and inclinations which, because they rest on physical causes, do not of themselves agree with the moral law, which has an entirely different source.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 85-6. The sense of 'reverence for the law' that Kant prescribes is discussed by Williams, *op.cit.* (note 34 above), pp. 169 ff., and Chapter Ten.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

Not only is the moral law transcendent to those who are to enact it, but its source is also transcendent to both practical and pure reason.

Objects which in reference to the use of pure practical reason that is in conformity with duty must be thought of *a priori* (whether as consequences or grounds), but which are transcendent for its theoretical use, are mere *things of faith*. Of this kind is the *highest good* in the world, to be brought about by freedom.... the highest final purpose to be worked out by us, by which alone we can become worthy of being ourselves the final purpose of creation, is an idea which has, in a practical reference, objective reality for us and is also a thing. But because we cannot furnish such reality to this concept in a theoretical point of view, it is a mere thing of faith of the pure reason, along with God and immortality, as the condition under which alone we, in accordance with the constitution of our (human) reason, can conceive the possibility of that effect of the use of our freedom in conformity with law.<sup>39</sup>

The moral law, an object brought into reality by practical reason, and which is thought of by pure reason, has as its source neither of these. Rather, it is *revealed* to pure reason as a thing of faith - just as God and immortality are. Duty demands that we act, in spirit and in letter to, this revelation but, as I previously put it in the words of Hegel, "The unity, that man should be moral, is postulated; but beyond the 'should' and this talk of morality, no advance is made." Specifically what we are to do is not at all clear - "...chill duty is the final undigested lump within

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<sup>39</sup> I. Kant, *Critique of Judgement*, Tr. J.H. Bernard (Hafner, 1951), sec. 91.



the stomach, the revelation given to Reason" (*LHP* 3, pp. 461.). A metaphysics of morals, grounded on a metaphysics of mind that distinguishes 'practical' reason from the practicalities of our needs and desires, and moreover the historical, social, political context within which those needs and desires can be rationally pursued, renders only a morality that is beyond practical use.<sup>40</sup> Kant's concern was to ascertain the grounds of ethics, but his insistence on the distinction between reason and desire leads him to a way of thinking that renders only abstract principles, that divorces ethics from its practical context.<sup>41</sup>

### **History and Philosophical Perspective: ideas, opinions and philosophers**

It might be thought that in offering Hegel's discussion of Kant I am offering Hegel's *challenge* to Kant's thought. Certainly Hegel is ultimately critical of Kant's views on ethics, and in a sense criticism does represent a challenge. But in another sense it would be a misunderstanding of Hegel's conception of philosophy to see his treatment of Kant - or any philosopher - as a challenge.

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<sup>40</sup> As John McDowell notes, "There is no purely formal notion of practical reason such as Kant envisaged". "Two Sorts of Naturalism" in *Virtues and Reasons* (Clarendon, 1995) ed. R. Hursthouse et. al. pp.177. There is a similar theme running through both McDowell and Williams, op. cit., viz. that Kant's attempt to capture practical reason ends up as no more than a *theoretical* account. This is the basis of Hegel's critique of Kant's ethics generally, i.e. that it never manages to leave the abstract plane, something that Williams endorses (see e.g. op. cit. pp. 184.).

<sup>41</sup> In the next chapter I will bring this point up again in relation of the principle 'Duty for duty's sake'.

### *Criticism and Development*

For example, consider the history of philosophy. One idea of that history is that it is peopled by individual philosophers who produce their own ideas and thoughts as to what is true and false and that these ideas and thoughts supplant the ideas and thoughts of a previous philosopher, and thus truth in philosophy is represented by the ideas and thoughts of the dominant philosophy.

The simple idea which people form of the history of philosophy arises from their awareness that there have been philosophies of many kinds, everyone of them asserting its possession and discovery of the truth and glorifying in the fact (*ILHP*, pp. 57).

Thus the history of philosophy consists in the conflict between individual philosophers and philosophies. But

This picture of numerous contradictory philosophies is the most superficial idea possible of the history of philosophy; and this difference is perversely used to the dishonour of philosophy. If someone goes no further than the idea of numerous philosophies, he yet assumes that only one of them could provide truth, and then goes on to argue that the truth of philosophy can only be opinions [*meinungen*]. 'Opinion' means an accidental thought, and we can derive it from *mein* [my]. It is a concept which is mine and therefore not universal (*Ibid.*, pp. 58).

Philosophy is dishonoured because it becomes no more than a series of opinions, and as such offers no criteria by which we might

distinguish what is true in all these opinions. But philosophy has nothing to do with individual opinions, for:

The history of philosophy deals with the Ideas in the form of *thinking*. It presents conscious thinking, puts before us the heroes of thinking, of pure thinking, for our consideration in their achievements. The achievement is the more excellent the less the particular character of its author has imposed its seal on it. It is in philosophy that the particular (i.e. the particular or private activity of the philosopher) disappears, and all that remains is the field of pure thought (*Ibid.*, pp. 62-3).

We do indeed speak of the 'views' of philosophers - Plato's/Aristotle's/ Kant's... view on this or that - but what we, as philosophers, are interested in is not so much that it is Plato's view, but whether or not what he says is true. Now if we declare that what Plato says *is* true, then we are saying that it is true irrespective of the fact that Plato expressed it. It would be just as true if Aristotle or Kant had expressed it. Further, in declaring it to be true we are saying it is true irrespective of whether *you or I* declare it to be true. As philosophers, that is unimportant to us. Just as Locke could not accept what Descartes said about ideas, so Aristotle could not accept Plato's idea of the Good. But Locke accepted the validity of much of what Descartes said, just as Aristotle did of Plato.

What is important, then, about the views of Plato and Aristotle, Descartes and Locke, is not that *they* thought this or that, but the thoughts that they expressed. As a philosopher my aim is not to communicate that I have this idea, or that I have this opinion, or this

view; what / think is in a sense irrelevant. It is the thought that such-and-such is the case that I am interested in communicating, and that is of philosophical relevance.

### *Beliefs, Ideas and Philosophy*

To illustrate the point further consider a contribution to recent debates on practical ethics, Jonathan Glover's *Causing Death and Saving Lives*.<sup>42</sup> Glover describes his approach as rational - that is, in the area of killing and saving lives "...the right thing to do has been identified with what creates (in a broad interpretation of this phrase) the best total outcome".<sup>43</sup> One of the general criticisms he defends such an approach against is scepticism about arguing for a set of moral beliefs. Glover's choice of an example of such criticism is a comment of Hegel's in the preface to *P.R.* Hegel's scepticism concerns particular philosophers' attempts to say how the world ought to be:

Whatever happens, every individual is a child of his time; so philosophy too is its own time apprehended in thoughts. It is just as absurd to fancy that a philosophy can transcend its contemporary world as it is to fancy that an individual can overleap his own age, jump over Rhodes. If this theory really goes beyond the world as it is and builds an ideal one as it ought to be, that world exists indeed, but only in his own opinions, an

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<sup>42</sup> Penguin, 1977.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 286.

insubstantial element where anything you please may, in fancy, be built.<sup>44</sup>

Glover replies:

But this scepticism of Hegel's seems to rest on the dubious assumption that new ideas about how the world ought to be cannot influence what in fact happens...This doctrine of the impotence of ideas rests on one of two beliefs. One is that, in matters of morality, people can never be influenced by each other's beliefs. The other is that our moral beliefs and attitudes never determine what we do.<sup>45</sup>

Glover is seriously amiss in his understanding of the point being made by Hegel. This, however, is not to say that Glover merely misses Hegel's point, for if we consider what Glover says about Hegel and 'new ideas' we will see that this is yet another example of the broad sweeping criticisms of Hegel which fail to take into account the details of what he is actually saying. Serious readers of Hegel will be hard put to find him dismissing the efficacy of new ideas, but he does question the assumption that such ideas are the sole products of the philosopher's mind. In particular he scorns those who

...fancy that ideas and ideals are something far too excellent to have actuality, or something too important to procure it for themselves. This divorce between idea and reality is especially dear to the analytical understanding

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<sup>44</sup> Quoted by Glover, pp. 32.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 32-3

which looks upon its own abstractions, dreams though they are, as something true and real, and prides itself on the imperative "ought" which it takes especial pleasure in prescribing even on the field of politics. As if the world had waited on it to learn how it ought to be, and was not!<sup>46</sup>

The task of philosophy is to grasp in thought *what is the case*, and not *what ought to be the case*. There can be no doubt that I might influence other people by my ideas, beliefs and opinions, and that there is something in the claim that those ideas, beliefs and opinions have a say in what I do. But this is true whether or not my ideas, beliefs and opinions are right or wrong, true or false. If my ideas, beliefs and opinions are right and true, then they are in an important sense *not my* ideas, even though it is I who express them. That is to say, they are true and right of that *which they reflect*, the subject or state of affairs of which they are expressive, irrespective of the fact that I express them. And in this sense they are not 'new', although they may well be newly expressed, or the way in which I express them a new way doing so. All that has happened is that I have captured in thought and language what already *is the case* ('X is right or true'). What is of interest *philosophically* is that they are right and true, and not that they are my ideas, beliefs or opinions, and in this latter sense philosophy is not at all concerned with ideas, beliefs and opinions.<sup>47</sup> That what I think is right and true is incidental and arbitrary to the truth of what I think:

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<sup>46</sup> *Science of Logic* Tr. A.V. Miller (Allen & Unwin, 1969), #6. Henceforth SL.

<sup>47</sup> This is one reason why Hegel employs the capital in 'Idea', i.e. to distinguish between an idea that the Cartesian legacy tells us we 'have in our heads' (something I

An opinion is a subjective idea; an optional thought, an imagination, which I have as so and so, while someone else can have it differently. An opinion is *mine*, it is not an inherently absolute thought. But philosophy contains no opinions; there are no philosophical opinions. If a man, even if he be an author of a history of philosophy, talks of philosophical opinions, we detect in him at once a lack of elementary education. Philosophy is an objective science of truth, a science of its necessity, of conceptual knowing; it is no opining and no web-spinning of opinions (*SL*, pp. 17).

Hegel's targets in the remarks that Glover uses are those who would have it that, for instance, Plato's *Republic* was an attempt at constructing an ideal state, rather than an "...interpretation of the nature of Greek ethical life" (*PR*, pp.10) or those who themselves would construct a theoretical utopia and call it an exercise in philosophy. Thus Hegel's attack is not so much directed against moral beliefs and new ideas, but rather those writers who fancy that philosophy can provide a blueprint for a totally new ethical life.

### *The Actual and the Ideal*

Consider Hegel's understanding of Plato's *Republic* as an "interpretation of the nature of Greek ethical life". The *Republic* attempts to capture the objective moral principles of the good state,

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shall take up further in the concluding chapter of Part One) and an Idea which is the expression of a true thought.

those upon which the Greek city state were based and which were expressed in its laws. However, within that state there was also a 'new' principle coming through, a principle that Plato perceived as corruptive. The objective moral principles of Greek ethical life were under threat from the moral relativism (Hegel calls this 'subjectivism') expressed in the teachings of the Sophists. For Hegel, Plato was correct to dismiss this as the pivot for ethical understanding, but he was in error to dismiss it altogether as having no place in the state.

In his consideration of Plato, Hegel affirms his general approach that treats the state and its laws as being of a rational nature, and as such the state and law are represented as mind in its actuality. However, what is rejected by Hegel is that Plato does not allow a place for the individual in that he retains slavery, rejects private property,<sup>48</sup> and gives the guardians the power of assigning social position and employment. For Hegel, this involves a rejection of individuality, the concept of freedom, a concept that is realised in the actual laws and institutions of the state. However, the concept does find expression, albeit abstractly, in the teachings of Socrates based on the Delphic oracle's 'Know thyself':

As one of the commoner features of history (e.g. in Socrates, the Stoics, and others), the tendency to look deeper into oneself and to know and determine from within oneself what is right and good appears in ages when what is recognised as right and good in

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<sup>48</sup> Hegel appears to have *The Republic* in mind here, although Plato only restricted property ownership to the guardians. However, in *The Laws* 739b ff. the stranger eulogises the prospect of shared, rather than private, property.



contemporary manners cannot satisfy the will of better men. (*P.R.* # 138)

In *The Republic* the concept of freedom is abstract in that it gets little recognition in the formulation of the laws of the state.

What we see here, according to Hegel, are the obligatory laws of Greek ethical life being challenged by the idea that laws be adhered to *conscientiously* rather than merely because they happen to be the laws of the state.<sup>49</sup> But this demand that the laws be adhered to conscientiously did not issue from the minds of philosophers, but is something that is central to the concept of freedom. Again, the concept of freedom is not the product of a particular philosopher, but is central to the concept of man. Hegel is not here advocating, prescribing, that we adopt the concept of freedom as some sort of moral principle, but making a descriptive observation about the nature of human beings. For Hegel freedom is something that is a corollary to the concept of a rational human being. When freedom fails to get recognition in the laws and constitution of a state ('mind in its actuality'), then that state is not what it ought to be and individuals (or group, class, etc.) are not being treated in the way they ought to be. A similar point about 'new ideas' is made by Socrates when he describes himself as a midwife bringing to birth the ideas already embryonic in men's minds.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> We see this conflict implicit in the thoughts of Socrates in his last days: although he argued that he had done no wrong, Socrates took the hemlock as a good citizen. The following point concerning freedom will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

<sup>50</sup> This relates to Plato's theory on the reminiscence of ideas from a previous life. See especially Socrates' questioning of the slave about geometrical propositions in the *Meno* 82, *Plato's Dialogues* tr. B. Jowett (Oxford 1891, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed.). See also *Theaetetus* 210. Hegel remarks: "It is the assisting into the world of thought that which is already

Thus for Hegel the task of a philosophical consideration of ethics is not to produce ideas and theories, derived from abstract principles, about how we ought to go about our lives, but to explicate ethical concepts in their relation to what is meant by being a rational human being. If human beings are rational, then they are not in need of philosophy - by way of abstract ideas, principles, theories - to provide them with rationality. Similarly, any truth that ethical concepts have will not be on the grounds that they are deducible from either faculties of the mind or abstract principles, but on the grounds of the *Actions* and activities which constitute the actual expression of those concepts. Thus the 'new idea' of Ancient Greece was not the sole product of a philosophical mind, although it is true to say that various thinkers attempted to capture in thought the relationship between rational *Action* and activities and the ethical community - laws, customs, associations, relationships. Not until we come to Aristotle do we see a comprehensive attempt at showing such a relationship.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have explored Hegel's view of philosophy against the background of 17<sup>th</sup> Century epistemology and metaphysics. The latter produces a metaphysics of mind that renders human beings as essentially distinct from one another, individual *hexes* of reason and desire. Such a way of thinking then leads to an attempt to grasp the nature of morality in one or other of these faculties of the mind, in doing so abstracting morality from the social, historical, political context

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contained in the consciousness of the individual – the showing from the concrete, unreflected consciousness, the universality of the concrete." *LHP* vol.1, pp. 402.

of human conduct. For Hegel, the rationality of human beings is not located in individual minds, nor their morality located in abstract principles and theories. Individuality is indeed an aspect of human life, but not in the sense of an abstract individuality derived from individual minds; rather, it is a feature of the social, historical, political community - i.e. the ethical life - in which human beings conduct themselves. It is within the ethical community that individuality is expressed.

It is this starting point - the proposition that man is essentially a social creature - which distinguishes the thought of Aristotle and Hegel from the history of thought that follows Descartes' starting point. From the latter perspective, much criticism has been levelled at Hegel for subsuming the individual under the authority of the state, and with respect to Aristotle it is claimed that there are problems assimilating the individual with a general conception of *eudaimonia*. In the next chapter I shall show that this involves a misunderstanding of Hegel (a later chapter showing a similar misunderstanding with respect to Aristotle).

## 2. ETHICS AND THE INDIVIDUAL: LAW, REASON AND FREEDOM IN MORAL LIFE

### *Introduction*

The argument of the *Cogito* produces a picture of human beings as being in possession of individual 'minds' with the capacity to reason, this being what ultimately distinguishes man from other animals and the world in general. Although the inference involved in the *Cogito* attracted many critics, the view that we possess some such thing (whether in the form of analogies such as a *tabula rasa*, a block of marble, or as an 'understanding' furnished with categories, to name just a few attempts to grasp what it was) attracted general consent. Despite some important attempts in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century (influenced mainly by the work of Wittgenstein and Ryle which, otherwise, has largely been ignored) to rid philosophy of such thinking, the general idea that there is something 'in us' within which reason and desire are located still holds sway.

In contrast, the starting point for Aristotle and Hegel is the proposition that man is essentially a social creature, and "The rational end of man is life in the state..." (*PR* #75[A]). This proposition is not something that is *grounded by* philosophy, in the sense that the argument of the *Cogito* is the ground upon which the view that human beings' are essentially individual consciousnesses is based. Rather, philosophy -

in its treatment of the concepts of mind, *Action*, ethics, politics, etc. - *reflects* and *assimilates* it. In doing so philosophy is reflecting and assimilating the rationality of mind, etc. as expressed in the world, rather than providing a rationality for mind etc. by way of abstract reasoning. It is in this reflecting and assimilation that Hegel says philosophy is concerned with what *is* (and it is in this sense that we can say that, for Hegel, propositions of philosophy are of the form 'This is how things are'). In a philosophical account, the philosopher is reflecting and assimilating that of which he speaks in thoughts and words.

Neither does the proposition that man is essentially a social creature represent merely a particular view on ethics and politics. Hegel certainly does not have an *a priori* conception of man as possessing some such thing as a 'mind'. This would involve the sort of abstract and metaphysical thinking that he was so critical of in his predecessors and contemporaries. In his discussion of the philosophy of mind in *EPS* Hegel takes as his starting point man in relation to, and assimilation of, his environment. The *Phenomenology* is a logical survey of the attitudes and relationships of human beings to one another. In a sense, we don't have 'minds' until we start acting and thinking in the world in which we are situated.<sup>1</sup> That is to say, mind is

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<sup>1</sup> In *On Certainty* (tr. G.E.M. Anscombe and D. Paul, Blackwell 1969) Wittgenstein quotes from Goethe's *Faust*: "...und schreib getrost 'Im Anfang war die Tat' [and write with confidence 'In the beginning was the deed']". This relates to the general point made throughout this thesis of how philosophical language often becomes abstract and loses sight of its subject-matter. In his discussion paper "Cause and Effect: intuitive

indicative of purposeful *Action* or, more precisely, purposeful *Action* is *mindfulness*. Thus, in *PR* what we get is a discussion of mind in relation to the historical, social, ethical and political institutions that have developed through purposeful *Action*. This is the basis of Hegel's discussion of reason, law and freedom, carried out in contrast to the abstract nature of the discussions of his predecessors and contemporaries – the subject of the present chapter.

My considerations will show that a deep misunderstanding lies at the root of a particularly entrenched view of Hegel, i.e. that the ultimate justification of law and ethics is provided by the state and society to which they belong. More importantly, however, they will show that our reasonings – our reasons and motives for acting – are socially constituted.

### **State, Society and the Individual**

One consequence of taking the proposition that man is essentially a social creature as merely a particular position on ethics and politics, rather than as a logical basis for a discussion on the nature of ethics and politics, is that it is thought to entail holding the social – the community, society, state, etc. – as having ethical and political primacy over the individual. This is something that Hegel in particular has been accused of sanctioning. Here I shall argue that such accusations are based on misunderstandings and confusions of what he actually says.

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awareness" (in *Philosophia* vol. 6, 1976, pp. 420) Wittgenstein writes: "Language – I want to say – is a refinement, 'Im Anfang war die Tat'". I shall return to this point in the introduction to Part Two of the thesis.

*The Social Contract and Arbitrary Morality*

In the field of moral, social and political philosophy, one of the major consequences of viewing human beings as primarily individual was to raise questions about the nature, origin and justification of the state and its laws. Given that we are primarily individuals, what is the origin of that which holds us together in commonwealth, the state and its laws, and wherein lies its authority?

It has recently become very fashionable to regard the state as a contract of all with all. Everyone makes a contract with the monarch, so the argument runs, and he again with his subjects (*PR* #75 [A]).

When the philosophers of the era of the 'thinking understanding' turned their thoughts to moral and political philosophy, almost invariably they turned to the idea of some sort of social contract. This is witnessed in the works of Hobbes, Locke, Rousseau, Kant and Fichte, to name some. For Hegel, however, "This point of view arises from thinking superficially of a mere unity of different wills" (*Ibid.*), another example of thought based on abstract reasoning and logical inferences (*PR* #258). Crudely speaking, such reasoning starts with the proposition that humans are essentially individual and, faced with rules and laws that hold them together in a common purpose, draws the inference that the state must be based on some form of contract.

Hegel's dissatisfaction with contract theory is two-fold. Firstly, the reasoning behind it makes morality, law and the state contingent and arbitrary. That is to say, in contract, two parties come to an agreement, and the contract is contingent upon the willingness of the two parties to

come to an agreement. Thus, there may, or may not, be a contract. To carry this over to morality, law and the state is to suggest that there may or may not be morality, law and state, contingent upon the willingness of the individuals involved to come to some sort of agreement about particular morals, laws and state. Secondly, it is clearly empirically false: it cannot lie in the arbitrariness of the individual's will "...because we are already citizens of the state by birth" (PR #75 [A]).

Hegel's view of the task and scope of philosophy has led to many confusions amongst his commentators, especially in the areas of ethics and politics. Here I shall concentrate on one particular confusion, which concerns supposed implications of his view of philosophy. This will not only answer some of the charges that have been made of Hegel under such confusions. It will also (and more importantly) give a clearer idea of: 1) the relationship between the individual and social life, the central thread of Hegel's treatment of ethics and politics (a project that will be undertaken in relation to Aristotle in Chapter Seven); and 2) one of the main strands of the current thesis, viz. that often the *ways of thinking*, the lines of reasoning, that philosophers get caught up in, determines thought about mind, *Action*, ethics, politics, etc., rather than mind etc. determining thought. That is to say, that of which philosophy purportedly speaks is often merely a reflection of ways of thinking, rather than thought reflecting that of which it speaks.



*Hegel and His Critics: the state, duty, and the individual*

The general confusion to which I refer has two closely related aspects. Firstly, it is said that Hegel's view of philosophy implies political conservatism: if philosophy does only describe things as they are and not advocate how they ought to be, Hegel's description of ethical life is of such a nature that there is no justification for change. Moral and ethical values are determined by the society and state in which we live, and there is nothing over and above to appeal to in order to justify changing what we might see as an unjust aspect of that society. The second aspect of the confusion is that this implies an extreme moral relativism. Thus, for instance, if a society practices slavery, or discriminates against a particular racial group, then such practices are right for that particular society for right is right precisely because the particular society says it is.

Such charges are based on two short-comings in commentators' reading of what Hegel says. First of all, those who accuse fail to take seriously what Hegel sees as the task of philosophy, what it can and cannot do. This failing is often due to not reading what he says closely enough. Secondly, they fail to grasp the relationship between the individual and the state/ society in general, remaining on the level of viewing these categories in terms of a dichotomy - something that has been a feature of philosophy, in different forms, throughout its history.<sup>2</sup>

In his *Fear and Trembling* Kierkegaard expresses concern at the prevailing Hegelian orthodoxy of his day which, he believed, found no

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<sup>2</sup> Hegel sees this dichotomy as one particular form of the logical categories of the general and the particular (SL), other forms being the one and the many, universal and particular, substance and attribute (LHP).

place for the individual in its assessment of ethics. For Hegel, according to Kierkegaard, "The ethical as such is the universal"<sup>3</sup> and this universal is the social morality of the day; to be ethical is to submerge and, in an important way, lose oneself in that morality.

The single individual...is the individual who has his *telos* in the universal, and it is his ethical task continually to express himself in this, to annul his singularity in order to become the universal.<sup>4</sup>

This view of Hegel might be illustrated by passages such as the following:

Whether the individual exists or not is all one to the objective ethical order. It alone is permanent and is the power regulating the life of individuals. Thus the ethical order has been represented by mankind as eternal justice, as gods absolutely existent, in contrast with which the empty business of individuals is only a game of see-saw. (*PR* #145 [A])

The right of individuals to be subjectively destined to freedom is fulfilled when they belong to an actual ethical order, because their conviction of their freedom finds its truth in such an objective order, and it is in an ethical order that they are actually in possession of their own essence or their own inner universality. (*PR* # 153)

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<sup>3</sup> *Fear and Trembling and Repetition* ed. & tr. Howard V. Hong and Edna H. Hong (Princeton, 1983), pp. 54.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

The idea that morality requires that the individual submerge and lose himself in the prevailing social morality seems to come over clearly in Bradley's considerations in 'My Station and its Duties':

In short, man is a social being; he is real only because he is social, and can realize himself only because it is as social that he realizes himself. The mere individual is a delusion of theory; and the attempt to realize it in practice is the starvation and mutilation of human nature, with total sterility or the production of monstrosities.<sup>5</sup>

Taken out of the context of Bradley's stated purpose in *Ethical Studies*, this comment suggests the following. To be moral is to lose one's self in the duties that my station and position prescribe for me, and thus lose my self in the social morality of the society and state in which I live. The worrying nature of such an idea comes out starkly in that it would suggest, for instance, that the judges at the Nuremberg war crimes trials were wrong to find the accused guilty, for what is right is right *precisely in that* state and society demand it, and thus the accused were merely fulfilling the duties as demanded by the state. Hegel seems to be saying much the same when he states:

In an *ethical* community, it is easy to say what a man must do, what are the duties he has to fulfil in order to be virtuous: he has simply to follow the well-known and explicit rules of his own situation. Rectitude is the general character which may be demanded of him by law or custom (*PR* #150).

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<sup>5</sup> In *Ethical Studies* (Oxford, 1927, 2nd edition), p. 174.

However, to represent Bradley and Hegel in such a way involves a gross distortion and misreading. In the introduction to *Ethical Studies* Bradley states his purpose as to examining ethical concepts by following them to their logical conclusion, and not to put forward his own ethical views.

The object of this volume is not the construction of a system of moral philosophy....The writer's object in this work has been mainly critical. He sees that ethical theories rest in the end on preconceptions metaphysical and psychological.<sup>6</sup>

In 'My Station and its Duties' Bradley takes up where he left off in the previous Essay, a discussion of Kant's abstract and one-sided 'Duty for Duty's Sake', and looks at the notion of duty in its social context. As such, the theory exhibited in 'My Station' is the result of following an ethical concept to its logical conclusion, and although this represents an improvement it is nevertheless still one-sided, as he states in the next Essay, 'Ideal Morality'.<sup>7</sup> If we follow the logic, the way of reasoning, that an analysis of the principle of duty suggests, then it can be the case that there is no place for the individual in the scheme of things. That is to say, to concentrate on abstract principles and follow the way of thinking that those principles dictate often involves ending up in a position one does not necessarily want to be in. Contrary to the

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<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Preface to the First Edition.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 214. It has been suggested that 'Duty for Duty's Sake' and 'My Station', and by implication 'Ideal morality', are separate Essays. Now this has some truth in it, but to view them as totally separate is misleading in that they represent developments. This is signalled for us by Bradley in the preface saying the Essays "...are so far connected that, for the most part, they must be read in the order in which they stand". *Ibid.*, p. viii.

view suggested by a reading of 'My Station and its Duties' taken out of this context, Bradley remarks in the aforementioned note:

A man can not take his morality simply from the moral world he is in, for many reasons. That moral world, being in a state of historical development, is not and can not be self-consistent; and the man must thus stand before and above inconsistencies, and reflect on them. This must lead to the knowledge that the world is not altogether as it should be, and to a process of trying to make it better.<sup>8</sup>

To fail to mention this aspect of *Ethical Studies* is to misrepresent Bradley's purpose.

Similarly we might randomly dip into the *Philosophy of Right* at any point and extract statements which would support the charges of conservatism. However, this would be to do an injustice to Hegel, and to distort his intentions, for in doing so we would be pulling such statements out of the context of the development of his argument, for the *Philosophy of Right* is essentially the development of the concept of right (*PR* #2). Consequently, to use a particular statement as some sort of last word is quite unjustified. Kierkegaard's account of the fate of the individual in a society where the state and its laws holds absolute sway is indeed a worrying prospect. But to suggest that this is what Hegel is saying is a serious mis-reading of Hegel.

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<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.* p. 204.

*Law, Justification, and The Task of Philosophy*

Such a mis-reading involves concentrating on the abstract distinction between the individual and the state, the private person and the laws, rather than looking to the historical and social context from which they have been abstracted. Hegel certainly recognises the possibility of unjust laws. At *PR #3* (a paragraph that those who accuse Hegel of conservatism and quietism would do well to read closely) he says:

If inclination, caprice, and the sentiments of the heart are set up in opposition to positive right and the laws, philosophy at least cannot recognize authorities of that sort. - That force and tyranny may be an element in law is accidental to law and has nothing to do with its nature....

It may well be the case that a ruler enacts a law purely to suit his own ends, whether in line with his own particular inclinations and likes and dislikes, or to increase his power to the detriment of the population at large. These are motives which philosophy does not recognise (i.e. as authorities) in that philosophy is concerned with the universal nature, i.e. the concept, of law as such, and not particular ways in which it has been employed. Particular laws reflect the particular circumstances of a society, the particular provisions that already prevail, often to quite outrageous and absurd results. Thus, Hegel tells us, in Roman law "...there could be no definition of 'man', since 'slave' could not be brought under it - the very status of slave indeed is an outrage on the conception of man..."(*PR #2*). Again, the Romans introduced 'empty verbal distinctions' and 'downright foolish subterfuges' in order to satisfy the laws of the day.

A particular law may be shown to be wholly grounded in and consistent with the circumstances and with existing legally established institutions, and yet it may be wrong and irrational in its essential character, like a number of provisions in Roman private law which followed quite logically from such institutions as Roman matrimony and Roman *patria potestas* (*ibid.*).

Hegel's grievance with *patria potestas* was that it allowed a father to sell his children, the further ramifications of which were (as with slaves, which they therefore effectively became) that male offspring who were thus sold never became persons in law, and the only property that they could own was that gained through war.

Later, with the growing feeling for rationality, the unethical provisions of laws such as these and others were evaded in the course of their administration, for example with the help of the expression *bonorum possessio* instead of *hereditas*, and through the fiction of nicknaming a *filia* a *filius*. This was referred to above (see remark to paragraph 3) as the sad necessity to which the judge was reduced in the face of bad laws - the necessity of smuggling reason into them on the sly, or at least into some of their consequences. Connected with this were the terrible instability of the chief political institutions and a riot of legislation to stem the outbreak of resulting evils (*PR* #180).

Hegel's point here is that considering the corrupt and unethical basis upon which later Roman jurists had to work on, certain rather peculiar looking moves, e.g. the creation of certain fictions, can seem to be

justified under the circumstances. But given this, it would be ludicrous to suggest that such moves could be justified as a general principle in legislation. But outrageous and absurd as these might be, they are not the concern of philosophy.

For sure, a philosophical attitude can recognise injustice, but to do something about it involves *Action*, whether political, legislative, demonstrative, etc. - not something that is the result of philosophy<sup>9</sup>. The latter is concerned with the concept of right [*Recht*, law], and not particular ways in which it has been employed in specific laws. It is through a philosophical account of law by which the *relationship*, rather than the apparent opposition, between the individual and the state can be grasped.

### **Laws and Law Makers: ethical conflict, reason, and the end of the state**

The distinction between the concept of right and the particular ways that it has been employed in specific laws is central to an understanding of what Hegel is attempting to do in the *Philosophy of Right* as a whole. The specific laws that have been enacted are the concern, not of philosophy, but of the historian of law (as undertaken

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<sup>9</sup> This is the point of Marx's 11th Thesis on Feuerbach: "The philosophers have only *interpreted* the world in various ways; the point is to *change* it." *Early Writings*, tr. R. Livingstone & G. Benton (Penguin, 1974). This does not say that philosophy should change the world, only that it merely describes it. Marx may well have come to think that philosophy was of no use *in that* it does not change the world, but only in that *it is not the sort of thing* that is going to change the world. If so Hegel might be accused of being conservative for doing philosophy rather than manning the barricades, say, but that would be a charge to Hegel *the person*, and not his philosophy. The latter, after all, only interprets the world.



by Montesquieu in *L'esprit des Lois*), or the student of positive law, whose interests lie in the legal provisions of a particular state or society. If justification is sought with regard to specific laws as they have been enacted in history, then we need to take heed of what Montesquieu teaches us. Although his work was historical, he nevertheless expressed 'the genuinely philosophical position',

...namely that legislation both in general and in its particular provisions [positive law] is to be treated not as something isolated and abstract but rather as a subordinate moment in a whole, interconnected with all the other features which make up the character of a nation and an epoch. It is in being so connected that the various laws acquire their true meaning and therewith their justification (*PR #3*).

That is to say, whether a specific law in a particular society at any given time is meaningful (i.e. adequate to the intentions of the legislator) or just, requires looking at the historical and contemporary circumstances which led to its enactment, what it was designed to achieve and the motives that lay behind its enactment.

These laws are positive in so far as they have their meaning and appropriateness in contemporary conditions, and therefore their sole value is historical and they are of a transitory nature. The wisdom of what legislators and administrators did in their day or settled to meet the needs of the hour is a separate matter and one properly to be assessed by history. History's recognition of it will be all the deeper the more its assessment is supported by a philosophical outlook (*Ibid.*).

Thus, although *L'esprit des Lois* is an account of the historical appearances of law, and thus is not a philosophy of law, it is assisted by Montesquieu's philosophical observation that specific laws have their meaning and value in the historical and contemporary conditions in which they appear. But "Natural law, or law from the philosophical point of view, is distinct from positive law..." (*Ibid.*), in that philosophy is concerned with the *concept* of law rather than the particular provisions made in its name. What, then, other than the particular provisions that have been enacted, is the concept of law, and what is Hegel getting at in suggesting that the philosophical point of view is synonymous with 'natural law'? Let us consider this from the relationship between the two - the concept of law and positive law, i.e. law as *posited* in a specific provision.

### *Law, Authority and Conflict*

One of the ways in which Hegel illustrates the difference between natural and positive law is the conflicts that appear in the Greek tragedies. The exemplar of this for Hegel is Sophocles' *Antigone*. In acting against Creon's proclamation that the corpse of Antigone's brother Polynices is not to receive rites and burial, Antigone conforms steadfastly to the laws of the gods and tradition. "...you had the gall to break this law?" asks Creon of her. She replies:

Of course I did. It wasn't Zeus, not in the least,

who made this proclamation - not to me.

Nor did that justice, dwelling with the gods

beneath the earth, ordain such laws for men.

Nor did I think your edict had such force

that you, a mere mortal, could override the gods,  
 the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions.  
 They are alive, not just today or yesterday:  
 they live forever, from the first of time,  
 and no one knows when they first saw the light.<sup>10</sup>

Here natural law, the unwritten, the given, is in conflict with the posited law of a ruler, and "This [natural]law is there displayed as a law opposed to public law, to the law of the land" (*PR* #166). But this public law, enacted and posited by Creon, was itself an infringement of what was hitherto a public law of the land, namely the law that decreed that the bodies of enemies should be buried. "This is the supreme opposition in ethics..." (*ibid.*). The specific reference of this natural law is the family, as it is Antigone's and Ismene's duty as the last females of the family to apply the rites and bury the corpse. This duty is laid down by the gods, and over-rides any man made law: to fail in this duty would be treacherous - Ismene refuses, but "No one will ever convict me for a traitor" says Antigone.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to take note here that Hegel does not see a philosophical solution to the conflict between Antigone and Creon, i.e. that philosophy can adjudicate one to be right and the other wrong. It is

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<sup>10</sup> *The Three Theban Plays*, Tr. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics, 1984) p. 82. We should not be put off here by the fact that Antigone expresses laws, for Hegel natural, through religion, for Hegel sees religion as a way of capturing natural laws mediated by divinity, whereas philosophy attempts to grasp them directly: "In their religions peoples have deposited their thoughts about the being of the world, the Absolute, what exists in and for and by itself, their convictions about the cause, the being, the substance of nature and spirit, and then their views on how human spirit or nature is related to these matters, to God and the truth". *IHLP*, pp. 123-4.

<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 61

the conflict itself that is of interest to Hegel, as it expresses the relation between two natural forms of association. On the one hand, Antigone rightly expresses duty towards family, but this does not validate the implied universal of 'Duty to the family before state'. On the other hand, Creon is correct in saying that in the state lies the security of individuals and family, but that does not entitle him, or the state in general, to show such disregard for the institution of family. The family is 'natural' in that it is a way in which we individuals pursue our interests and satisfy our needs, and as such the state needs to recognise and respect this:

What is of the utmost importance is that the law of reason be shot through and through by the law of particular freedom, and that my particular end should become identified with the universal end, or otherwise the state is left in the air. The state is only actual when its members have a feeling of their own self-hood and it is stable only when public and private ends are identical. It has often been said that the end of the state is the happiness of its citizens. That is perfectly true. If all is not well with them, if their subjective aims are not satisfied, if they do not find that the state as such is the means to their satisfaction, then the footing of the state itself is insecure (*PR #265 [A]*).

The importance of the conflict between Antigone and Creon for Hegel is that it illustrates various aspects of the nature of law. One of those aspects is that when the state disregards the aims of individual citizens in its proclamations it gives itself the appearance of an 'objective ethical order' that *stands over* the subjective aims of the citizens in a

relationship of authority. But this is only how it *appears* to be, for what it is in fact doing is undermining the security of the state in its proper, i.e. actual, form where the laws, particular expressions of the law of reason, “be shot through and through by the law of particular freedom, and that my particular end should become identified with the universal end”.

In considering what Hegel is saying here we should resist thinking in terms of the problem as a failure in the ruler or law maker to bridge the gulf between the state and the individual, as if the state and individual are distinct phenomena, with the (good) law as that which joins them in union. What in fact has happened is that Creon, by his proclamation, has *created* the gulf between state and individual, and has thus created a situation in which the state is not actual, but is ‘left in the air’. In this sense, the distinction between individual and state, the starting point of social contract theories and abstract theories of morality, is in fact something that is brought about by the enactment of a bad law.

Another important aspect of the nature of law that *Antigone* illustrates for Hegel is that often law is taken for granted. In everyday life we don’t constantly ask about the justification or rationality of the laws. In a sense, we take them as *given*. Only when Creon acts against given and established laws and customs does Antigone raise the question of the justification of that which Creon desecrates, and all that she can say on that score is refer to them as “the great unwritten, unshakeable traditions. They are alive, not just today or yesterday: they live forever, from the first of time, and no one knows when they first saw the light”. The question of justification is raised, but she does not reason about that, but accepts them on the basis that they are the edicts of the gods. In this she follows them ‘unselfconsciously’ (PR #144 [A]).

On the other hand, Creon's proclamation shows the self-conscious aspect of the law, in that it was a conscious enactment. However, his enactment was not true to the concept of law, it was not "shot through and through by the law of particular freedom" which is the basis of the actual (i.e. good) state. The proclamation was motivated by his particular desire to disgrace the memory of Polynices, in doing so bringing about his own demise and undermining the secure footing of the state.

Hegel's point here is that the conflict arises because neither of the two protagonists refer to the 'law of reason' for justification, but appeal to different 'authorities' as intermediaries. Antigone appeals to tradition and the gods, but to attempt to justify something because it has always been so, or because the gods have ruled that it should be so, is to resort to authorities rather than to consider whether it is reasonable. Similarly Creon justifies his *Action* because he is the ruler, the law maker, but that does not necessarily entail that the proclamation is a reasonable one. Reason is in no need of intermediate authorities or external criteria, for what is reasonable is reasonable on its own account.

### *Established Law and the Spirit of Reflection*

That Hegel sees no *philosophical* solution to the conflict is due to the fact that a resolution requires an *Action*, an *Action* that relates to, has reference to, and is motivated by, the circumstances of the situation at hand – details which will be the reference point of the assessment of reason. However, what the example does bring out is that it raises the question of the justification of particular laws, and brings into question

the extent of the authority of rulers. In acting as he did, Creon himself, acting out of his individual interests, raises the question of the extent of his own authority in relation to the authority of common, unselfconscious custom and tradition, appealed to by Antigone (“*No one will ever convict me for a traitor*”. My emphasis). Whatever *Actions* are taken to resolve conflicts such as this, they will always be open to the assessment of reason. With the laws of the land, whether in the form of accepted custom and tradition, or in the form of the edicts of rulers,

...they arouse the spirit of reflection, and their diversity at once draws attention to the fact that they are not absolute. Positive laws are something posited, something originated by men. Between what is so originated and man’s inner voice [i.e. reason] there may be an inevitable clash or there may be agreement. Man does not stop short at the existent, but claims to have in himself the measure of what is right (*PR* p.4 [A]).

Whatever ‘authority’ is appealed to in justification of a particular law or state, reason is on hand to question it. When a ruler, or rulers, act in their own private interests and contrary to the interests of the end of the state - i.e. ‘the happiness of its citizens’, man being social by nature - merely on the grounds that they are the rulers, then they bring into question the justification of their own government. The fact of being in authority as government is no good reason for any laws that may be enacted, and similarly just because something has been traditionally so and customary is no good reason for it to be so now and in the future.

Supposed justifications such as these deny the 'spirit of reflection', reason, and thus run counter to the proposition that man is a rational creature. The very notion of an external criterion to which reason appeals is to afford that criterion an absolute authority over reason. For then reason is justified in its considerations if, and only if, those considerations refer to that criterion as their authority. Thinking and acting that rests on a criterion external to the particular and specific circumstances, the basis of an assessment of *practical* reason, is the true source of relativism.<sup>12</sup>

In starting their analyses with the abstract categories of the individual and the state, social contract theorists attempted – in the notion of contract – to find a principle to mediate between ruler and ruled. This is in itself unsurprising in the historical context of the era of Locke, Rousseau, Kant etc. Hegel's complaint was that they did not go far enough in their analysis. The historical circumstances of the period were such that traditional authority, and the extent of the authority of those who ruled over individual members of society, came into question. But this distinction between authority and the individual in the historical events of the time, was not due to the lack of a theory that would bridge the gap. Rather, it was due to the fact that the rulers had ruled badly, and had thus themselves brought up the question which was to be answered in, e.g. the events of the French revolution.

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<sup>12</sup> Such relativism is reflected in many areas. Politics has its ideologies, religion has its gods, morality has its principles: *this* ideology, *this* god, *this* principle is the justification of what it is good and right to do, and what is good and right is only so in *relation* to this criterion. But the history of humankind has shown, in the form of opposition and dissent, that in the light of the 'spirit of reflection' such justifications are inadequate to the role that they pretend to.



The distinction between individual and authority is a feature of situations where things are not as they ought to be; taking them as a fundamental feature of the human condition is to abstract them from this context. A further move in such abstract reasoning is to think of rules and laws as primarily *imposed* on individuals, rather than as an inherent and central feature of purposive *Action*. Certainly history is awash with examples where rules and laws have indeed been imposed, but the concept of a rule and law is not the invention or sole possession of those relatively few who have been in the position to make such impositions. Acting according to rules and laws is, rather, the distinguishing factor of purposive *Action*, the thread (as it were) of the practical business of life.

*Rules, Laws and Ethics: the rational and the actual*

In his consideration of law Hegel points to a similarity between the laws of nature and the laws of the land: just as we consider the laws of nature as given, it is also the case that, as members of social communities, there *are* laws of the land that are given, whether we agree with their specific content or not. However, this not a fact in the sense of a *brute* fact, something that is given independently of human life, but is a fact in virtue of the rationality of human life. Consider games. Chess, football, etc. involve particular rules that are intrinsic to the playing of those games (e.g. someone who doesn't move the rook, bishop etc. in the established ways is not playing chess). These particular rules are the expression of, and thus presuppose, the concept of a rule. But whereas it would make sense to ask who

invented chess, football, etc., and when they were invented, asking who invented the concept of a rule, and when it was invented, is baffling. For Hegel, the fact that there are laws is something that is given in that the concept of law is a given. This is itself a particular feature of the fact that man is rational: the existence of laws is the expression of reason.

Over the years the rules of many games and sports have undergone change, for many different reasons. Often, though, this is because they gave an unfair advantage to one contestant (team etc.), or because, for instance, a particular rule gives room for unfair advantage, or a contestant has found a way to use a particular rule for their own advantage. That is to say, change has come about because there is a better, fairer, way to play, i.e. something isn't *right*. In this way, the rules have aroused the 'spirit of reflection', not only in that something isn't quite right, but also in cases where contestants have found a way around the rules. This is also the case with law. Changes are made because they don't do what they are supposed to, or certain parties have been able to manipulate them, i.e. particular laws may not reflect the spirit of the law - something is not right. The actual content of a specific law may well be unethical, tyrannical, unjust, etc., and this will 'arouse the spirit of reflection' as to its validity. But

In nature, the highest truth is that there is a *law*; in the law of the land, the thing is not valid simply because it exists [in terms of its specific content]; on the contrary, everyone demands that it shall comply with his private criterion. (*PR* preface, p. 4 [A]).

In questioning a specific law, it is not that we are questioning the *existence* of a law, only its specific character. In questioning a law

thus, in suggesting that it is a bad, unjust, law, we are saying that it is contrary to the very idea of a law, contrary to reason. Here there is a clash

...between what ought to be and what is, between the absolutely right which stands unaltered and the arbitrary determinations of what is to be recognized as right....But it is precisely in these clashes between what is absolutely right and what arbitrariness makes pass as right that there lies the need for studying the fundamentals of right. In right, man must meet with his own reason; consequently, he must consider the rationality of right, and this is the task of our science in contrast with the positive study of law which often has only to do with contradictions (*Ibid.*).

The positive study of laws is concerned with the specific content of the laws, whereas philosophy is concerned with the rationality of the fact that man lives by laws (i.e. the concept of right, ethics). This is what Hegel means by the *concept* of law, philosophy being concerned with that aspect of how we live that is captured in thought.<sup>13</sup> That is to say, the concept of law is not merely thought, it is *lived*. This is essential to

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<sup>13</sup> Here we can see that the usual meaning of the term 'idealism' as applied to Hegel is a misnomer: ideas are not something that float around in our heads, or in some ghostly fashion above man and the world, but are *lived*. Further, I would suggest that Hegel's reply to Marx and his 11th Thesis on Feuerbach would be something to the effect that whereas philosophy is concerned with that aspect of life that is captured in thought, "You [i.e. Marx] are concerned with that aspect of life that is captured in *doing*". It would seem that Marx either did not see, or at least did not accept, this point, for he spends much of his time attempting to develop a theory of *praxis*, a sort of fusion of thought and *Action*. But for Hegel human *Action is praxis* - why join something that is not separate?

grasping what Hegel is getting at throughout his work: philosophical thinking is not just coming up with certain ideas or conceptions, but the grasping of something quite real and actual:

It seems to be opening wide the door to casual opinion to hold that thought is to be pre-eminent over the right, yet true thought [i.e. philosophical thinking] is not an opinion about the thing but the concept of the thing itself (*Ibid.*).

It is in this sense that Hegel considers philosophy is concerned with natural law (natural in the sense that it is a specific form of reason), with the given, how things are rather than how they ought to be. And it is in this way that philosophy is not primarily concerned with justification in the same way in which we address how things ought to be. To look for the justification of law, or right itself, would be to question whether we are right to organise ourselves in ethical relationships, involving institutions, practices, laws, etc. as opposed to asking whether *this* institution, *this* practice, *this* law, is right. This in turn would involve asking for the justification of ethics itself, and to do this would be to question whether we have free will. The answer to this question would be of the form 'This is how things are', rather than how they ought to be. This is far as we can go - to talk about the justification of how the will is would be to ask whether we ought to be free, which implies that *this* is something we have a choice about.

To speak about ethics is to pre-suppose the will (and by this is meant *free* will, for "Will without freedom is an empty word..." *PR #4 [A]*) - not an abstract entity that we as individuals 'possess' (a point I shall raise more fully in Chapter Three), but the fact that we do organise our lives in particular ways, that we do conduct ourselves in ethical ways, that we do condemn and commend *Actions*, that we have ethical

institutions and laws, etc. Here we are talking about how things are, about something that is *given*, philosophy being a reflective activity (reflecting on how we are, what we do). In that we are talking about something that is given, our discussion is then in a sense about natural law.

The relationships and institutions - morality and ethics, property, the family, work, law and legal provisions and organisations, the particular offices of the state - are all 'natural' in that they are all the particular expression of reason. Not reason in the abstract, i.e. as somehow distinct from these particular expressions, as reason for Hegel is practical reason: these relations and institutions are rational means by which we pursue and satisfy our needs and desires, and it is this sense that "What is rational is actual and what is actual is rational" (*PR* preface, p. 10).

### **Purposive *Action*, Rationality and Freedom**

In the previous chapter I claimed that for Hegel freedom is a corollary to the concept of a rational human being.<sup>14</sup> That is to say, if we are to accept that human *Action* exhibits rationality, the details of which are the subject of the second part of this thesis, then we are, *pari passu*, saying that such *Action* is free *Action*.

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<sup>14</sup> Chapter One above, p.92.

*Abstract Reason and Concrete Freedom*

Hegel's discussion of freedom, like many of the topics he treats in the *Philosophy of Right*, is in places quite difficult to grasp. One of the main reasons for this is that it is very much a response to the treatment afforded to the topic by Kant and those who claimed to have developed his thought (in particular, Jacobi and Fries). The conclusions that they had come to Hegel regarded as abstract, whereas for Hegel "Truth in philosophy means that the concept and external reality correspond" (*PR* #21[A]). In showing the abstract nature of that conception of freedom, and showing its inadequacies, it is "...the truth in the form of a result that we are looking for...[and] the development we are studying is that whereby the abstract forms reveal themselves not as self-subsistent but as false" (*Ibid.* #32 [A]).

The truth about freedom, for Hegel, is not something that is deduced or arrived at by way of abstract reasoning, but from an account of that in which freedom is claimed to be exhibited. It is in this way that Hegel differs quite radically from his predecessors, which can be illustrated in the following way: if someone were to claim 'Man is free', the correct response would not be, 'Well, show me your *thinking* on this' but 'Show me where that freedom (the predicate of your proposition) is exhibited'. The former will result in abstract reasoning, whilst the latter will refer to human conduct.

Hegel will not be in disagreement with the conclusion of such abstract reasoning - so long as it is that 'Man is free', of course. What he would disagree with, however, is the claim that this sort of reasoning is a full account of freedom. We have already seen this in relation to Descartes *Cogito*: by abstracting himself from the external world and all that that has influenced him, Descartes produces the *Cogito* which

represents the potential, possibility, of thought; not *actual* thinking - only the abstract possibility of thought. The world in which thinking and willing (in the sense of rational *Action*) *actually* takes place thus stands distinguished from ("stands over against me" *PR #4[A]*) the *Cogito*, thinking as mere possibility of thought.<sup>15</sup>

When I say 'I', I *eo ipso* abandon all my particular characteristics, my disposition, natural endowment, knowledge, and age. The ego is quite empty, a mere point, simple, yet active in this simplicity (*Ibid.*).

That this is an abstraction, and that this abstraction is not the full and true account, is to be seen in the fact that I *abandon* etc., I am "yet active in this simplicity". That such an abstraction is a possibility of thought - as opposed to *the* possibility of thought, which suggests the contradictory idea that a possibility can exist as a possibility alone - is, on the other hand, a positive philosophical development: "With Descartes, thinking begins to plumb its own depths" (*ILHP*, p. 183).

One particular aspect of Cartesian philosophy Hegel is highly critical of is the distinction between thought and will, especially when will is accounted for by the same sort of reasoning as that afforded to thought by Descartes. That is to say, when will is considered as an

...unrestricted possibility of abstraction from every determinate state of mind that I may find in myself or which I may have set up in myself, my flight from every content as from a restriction. When the will's self-determination consists in this alone, or when

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<sup>15</sup> In Chapter Three, I will discuss the Cartesian conception of will in more depth in the context of Hegel's account of will.

representative thinking regards this side by itself as freedom and clings fast to it, then we have negative freedom, or freedom as the Understanding conceives it (*PR #4*).

In a similar way as the *Cogito*, this conception of will is the result of abstract reasoning, i.e. the result of *thinking*. It is abstract in that it is reduced to being only a possibility, that from whence all particular, actual, willing comes; it is that which determines particular acts of will, distinct from those particular acts themselves - in the philosophy of Fichte, the ego (*PR #6*). However, in that it is the result of abstract reasoning, i.e. thinking, it is itself also an act of will. Rather than being the possibility of willing, that from whence all particular willing comes, it is itself a particular instance of willing - "...the content of something thought...something established by our activity" (*PR #4[A]*).

#### *Will and Freedom and Character*

What we see here is Hegel's criticism of the *way of reasoning* that leads to the conclusions reached about the nature of thought and willing. His main concern in *Philosophy of Right*, however, was how this conception of will involves a one-sided conception of freedom, and how this translated into ethics. By 'one-sided' is meant that this conception of freedom is not wholly false - after all, the conception of will on which it is based is arrived at by way of thinking, which itself, being an activity, is itself indicative of freedom. But it is indicative of only one aspect of freedom, i.e. "...negative freedom, or freedom as the Understanding conceives it".

This negative freedom, or freedom as the Understanding conceives it, is one-sided; but a one-sided view always



contains one essential factor and therefore is not to be discarded. But the Understanding is defective in exalting a single one-sided factor to be the sole and the supreme one (*PR #5[A]*).

Hegel's point in referring to this conception of freedom is that it follows from a logical error in the thinking about will, a logical error that leads to claiming this view of freedom to be the whole truth of the matter. The logical error is this: in that it is the result of thinking, it is in that sense a *determination*, it is arrived at by a *determination of thought*, but the conclusion to this thinking is exalted as that which is the very possibility of thought, i.e. the fully *undetermined* will which *determines* itself (thus Hegel's frequent references to 'self-activity') in *particular ways*. To think is to determine oneself, to restrict oneself to thinking *this*. The undetermined possibility negates its 'undeterminedness' into thinking *this*, but such philosophical reasoning fails to recognise that this supposed indeterminateness is itself arrived at by a particular way of thinking, i.e. a negation. The logical error consists in the supposed starting point - the possibility of thought, of willing - itself being a result.

When it comes to looking at the freedom of will, it turns out that freedom consists in the possibility of an individual determining himself, acting, in particular ways. My freedom consists precisely in the indeterminateness of my will. Certainly, I am an individual born in a society that has a particular history, social and political structures organised according to particular values, etc. But all this is incidental and accidental: as a rational, thinking, being the essential thing is that I am free to adopt or reject the ethical realm in which I am situated, and this would be true in whatever particular society I was born in.

There is certainly some truth in this. As an individual I can do very much as I please. For instance, I could arm myself with all sorts of implements and go on a killing spree. For sure, there are laws and moral codes that forbid my doing this, but I can ignore them - they do not physically restrict me (at least until I get caught), and it is up to me whether I shall be deterred by these laws and codes. Laws and moral codes are valid to me only if I recognise them as valid; so long as I realise that I may be punished should I get captured ('Don't do the crime if you can't do the time'), or socially ostracised, then they have no deterrent effect - that is down to me. I am free to do what I like.

Many people find such thinking morally frightening as well as morally abhorrent, and understandably so. It is a reminder that there are many aspects of life - constant and frequent and regular features of everyday life that because of their constancy etc. we take for granted and feel secure about - that on reflection have no secure and safe bases. This sort of concern is something that is not restricted to people on the street, but is found expressed in philosophy and literature. For instance, Simone Weill reports of an occasion crossing a bridge, and the thought coming to her "Why doesn't that man coming towards me rip my face off?"<sup>16</sup> In Albert Camus' *L'Etranger* Meursault stands pointing a gun at an Arab, saying to himself "you could either shoot, or not shoot". At that moment, whether he shoots or not does not matter to him.<sup>17</sup> Many aspects, practices, activities, that we feel secure in in our everyday lives are based on deep-seated beliefs that we hold, and

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<sup>16</sup> An experience related by Peter Winch in a talk to the University of Southampton philosophy society, 1986.

<sup>17</sup> Albert Camus *The Outsider* (Penguin, 1983), p.5

the "The difficulty is to realize the groundlessness of our believing".<sup>18</sup> Those aspects, practices, activities, involve innumerable individuals any of whom may at anytime commit some horrific deed. But why is it that, on the whole at least, people don't? For moral theorists the question is : what is it that, on the whole at least, makes people moral and lawful?

This, however, is a question that arises out of a confusion, a confusion based on the idea that freedom consists solely of the individual's potentiality. If freedom of will, to be free, means anything then it surely requires the exercise of will, thinking or doing something. As we have seen, on a personal level thinking of myself as mere potential, 'I can do what I like', is thinking *something*, and thus is not mere potential. If it consists in my potential to think like this, then there is no will involved - "My willing is not pure willing but the willing of something" (PR #6[A]) - it doesn't make sense to speak of free will. Indeed the very idea turns out to be contradictory and nonsensical.

### **Freedom of Will in Social Context**

There is some sense in 'I can do what I like', however, and Hegel's point that it is itself a negation and an act of will is illuminating. It is a negation in that it is a rejection, and it is an act of will of sorts in that it is an attitude that I adopt. That it is to say, it is a rejection of *something*, an attitude towards *something*, and it is a rejection and attitude that is *dependent* on that something. 'I can do what I like' only makes sense in the context of certain activities and practices that I

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<sup>18</sup> L. Wittgenstein, *On Certainty*, Tr. G.E.M. Anscombe & D. Paul, ed. G.E.M. Anscombe & G.H. Von Wright (Blackwell, 1969) #166.

might do, and it is something about those activities and practices that motivates the rejection and attitude. Thus, in an important sense, an acquaintance with those activities and practices is a prior requirement. The sense of, and my ability to say, 'I can do what I like' arises out of the fact that I am a member of a moral community rather than an abstract individual as the mere potential for acting.

### *Ethical Life and Habituation*

Weill's answer to her own question is illuminating here. But why *would* the person walking towards me rip my face off? The question is not so much 'Why doesn't he?' but 'Why would he?'. There might be reasons and purposes to serve as to why he might (she might, for some reason, provoke great anger and hatred in him), but it would be odd to ask for reasons and purposes why, walking past her, he doesn't. Acting involves reasons and purposes, and they pertain to my surroundings and environment, 'external' to me as an individual as potential. These reasons and purposes are more often than not located in the activities and practices that constitute the moral community in which I live. It is this community which provides the context within which reasons and purposes can be *my* reasons and purposes.

This relationship between individuals and the activities and practices of the community in which they live involves important implications for how we account for freedom. Not until I have learnt, habituated, come to some sort of acquaintance with these activities and practices can I engage in such activities and practices for *my* reasons and purposes. Some sort of knowledge or acquaintance is required of these activities

and practices in order for me to make informed decisions about which of them are going to satisfy what I want. In this sense, the freedom that is indicated in 'I can do what I like' is born of the learning of, habituation in, the activities and practices that it may or may not engage in. However, when engagement does take place, it will be due to the reasons and purposes involved in the activities and practices engaged in, those reasons and purposes therefore becoming mine.

It is not until I have learnt, come to some sort of acquaintance, with these activities and practices, and am thus in a position to make informed decisions and choices in relation to them, that I am considered free in a moral sense. The grounds for moral commendation and condemnation are the reasons for my doing something and the purposes I choose to pursue. My decisions and choices, the reasons for my *Actions*, the purposes I pursue - these constitute my character (moral or otherwise), my 'selfhood'. In judging me you are judging them. Take them away and the criterion for judgement goes with them. My 'self', then, is not something that inheres in me as a human being, but is a development born of my engagement with the world, the moral community in which I live - my personality and character. The self, ego, etc. as mere potential is something arrived by way philosophical abstraction.

We can see the reasoning that renders human beings as essentially individual in the consequent theory of the social contract. Clearly, such reasoning goes, we are all individuals (a claim of extreme empirical naiveté), so how is it that we live according to morals, rules, laws, in community with one another? Social contract is the answer that historically many philosophers have come up and, as we have seen in the Introduction, an idea that still has much influence. Locke moves

from envisaging a time when men got together and agreed on laws to the notion of tacit agreement, and with Kant we get an hypothetical agreement: if we were all to consider the rationality of the moral law, then we would (in virtue of having reason in common) agree with it. Perhaps the most logically and ethically absurd conclusion of this way of thinking comes out in Rousseau, according to whom

...what is fundamental, substantive, and primary is supposed to be the will of the single person in his own private self-will...Once this principle is adopted, of course the rational can come on the scene only as a restriction on the type of freedom which this principle involves...(PR #29).

Freedom consists in the expression of the private will of the individual, but what if the interests of the general will conflict with that of an individual? In such a case, the individual does not see his 'true' interests, and we must force him to be free.<sup>19</sup> The logic of the freedom of the private will fails to hold its place, overturned by the general will, and the gap between the individual and the general is bridged by the dubiously absurd notion of forcing someone to be free.

### *Agreement and Social Life*

Taking Hegel's principle that although a particular piece of reasoning may result in untenable views and absurd consequences it doesn't necessarily follow that it is totally false, we can see that there is

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<sup>19</sup>J-J Rousseau *The Social Contract* tr. Maurice Cranston (Penguin classics, 1968), Book 1, Chapter 7.

something important in social contract theory. Rather than contract, which has quite formal connotations, there is clearly something important in *agreement* in human relations. Most obviously, there is agreement in language. This is something that goes across the board: I do not refer to particular languages (English, French, etc) but to language *per se*: in principle, particular languages and the meanings involved can be translated between one another. But here we are not talking about agreement in the sense of contract, for the question 'When did we first agree to use language?' seems a particularly odd one. The idea of an hypothetical agreement seems no more than a superficial attempt to explain away a difficulty, and all it seems to do is brush aside something that is philosophically important. It would be more pertinent to say that 'There is agreement in language', rather than 'We agree in the use of language'. This rids us of the idea of 'coming to an agreement' without fudging the issue. Furthermore, if we rid ourselves of the idea that human beings are essentially individual, then there is no need to have recourse to ideas of 'coming to an agreement' in an attempt to explain what it is that 'joins' us together.

Language, though, is much more than a series of words - it is not something that we have *in addition to* being human. Language is an activity rather than something that merely describes activity - language that describes an activity (e.g. a football match) is a particular use of language. As such it can give us some insight into the morality of our activities and practices. When I make a promise I do not do something and *add* the words 'I promise to...'. If asked why I had kept my promise, the reply would be 'Because I *said* I would!'. Here there is a danger in trying to say more than this, which can lead us into abstraction. 'But didn't you feel a moral obligation to keep your promise?' In the normal run of things I do not *feel* a moral obligation to

keep my promises; any moral feelings that I have come on the scene when I fail to keep a promise, or when I consider not keeping it. But that I have these feelings is indicative of my general agreement with the practice of promise-keeping, although that is not something that I have at some point agreed to do. The abstraction comes out in the notion that, in the same way that language is often thought of, moral obligations attach to our activities and practices.

Why do we keep our promises? Why do we tell the truth? These are odd questions to ask, as they can be taken to point to reasons for doing so, perhaps reasons that indicate functions. If someone were to reply that they keep promises and tell the truth in order to get on with their fellow human beings, unless he were making a general philosophical statement about what it is to be human, we would be pushing him to abstraction by asking such an odd question. This being pushed to abstraction might be shown in the difficulty he has in finding an answer; he has taken the question to point to reasons that act as an anchor, so to speak, to promise-keeping and telling the truth. Many moral theorists look in the same direction: just as social contract theorists look for reasons as to how a mass of individuals are joined together, so moral theorists look for moral ideas that act as anchors to moral conventions. The person who answers 'In order to get on with my fellow human beings' has, in a sense, turned back on himself: promise-keeping and telling the truth are particular ways of getting on with our fellow human beings; the latter does not add anything further - the two come hand in hand. Similarly with the moral theorist who searches for moral ideas that underpin moral conventions: if the former relate in any way to the latter, then they will be particular features of the moral conventions being considered.



*Moral Questions: activities, practices, and conventions*

That such questions as to why we keep promises can lead us to look in the wrong place comes out when we consider that we are generally interested in asking why certain individuals *don't* keep their promises, *don't* tell the truth, etc. (and this partly explains the oddity of questions as to why we do). It is only against the background that promise-keeping and truth telling is very much the rule that we ask such questions. In our *Actions* we do not act in a void, but act in relation to a *given* situation - activities, practices, conventions. This is also the case for the moral philosopher, for if moral ideas and principles are to have any validity then they must have reference to something given. Abstract principles, which refer to nothing specific, also produce nothing. Commenting on Kant's universalizability principle and the demand that it be absent of contradiction, Hegel says:

The absence of property contains in itself just as little contradiction as the non-existence of this or that nation, family, & c., or the death of the whole human race. But if it is already established on other grounds and presupposed that property and human life are to exist and be respected, then indeed it is a contradiction to commit theft or murder; a contradiction must be a contradiction of something, i.e. of some content presupposed from the start as a fixed principle (*PR* #135).<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> The point that Hegel makes here is very much in the same vein as Anscombe's, when she writes of Kant: "His rule about universalizable maxims is useless without stipulations as to what shall count as a relevant description of an action with a view to constructing a maxim about it". 'Modern Moral Philosophy', in *Ethics, Religion and*

To say that a person has acted wrongly is to say that he has acted contrary to a given activity, practice, convention, and in an important sense such a deed is parasitic on the given.

There are many activities, practices, conventions that are agreed ways of going on wherein to do wrong has a different signification than those that make up the specifically moral background of a community. Consider mathematics. When we go wrong in a calculation we 'go wrong' in the sense of making an error or mistake. 'What's the good in doing that?' is out of place in this context. There would be no purpose in doing wrong, and it is difficult to see why anyone would want to. On the other hand, if I borrow money from a friend 'promising' to pay it back, but without any intentions of doing so, then I am using the practice of promise keeping in order to get money for nothing. That is, my *Action* is parasitic on a given practice.

'Why do you keep your promises?' In a sense, if a useful answer could be given of this question, then it wouldn't involve moral reasons. That is to say, being asked to morally justify the *practice* of promise keeping - i.e. and not just the *keeping* of promises - would be perplexing. I might give moral reasons why I refrain from not keeping my promises. It is in the light of not keeping promises that we raise 'the moral' in relation to promise keeping. If it could be imagined that there was a situation whereby no one had ever broken a promise, then the practice could perhaps not be regarded as a specifically moral practice. But this

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*Politics* (Blackwell, 1981), p. 27. Hegel's general criticism of the abstract nature of Kant's approach to ethics, is brought out by Williams in relation to modern moral philosophy, which, "...in its more Kantian forms...is governed by a dream of a community of reason that is far too removed, as Hegel first said it was, from social and historical reality and from any concrete sense of a particular ethical life...". B. Williams, op. cit. (note 34, Chapter One) Postscript, p. 197.

is an unrealistic scenario - hence the cautionary 'could perhaps' - for we know enough about human beings to know that 'I will' can always turn out to be 'I won't' - that the promise won't be kept. The important point about this is that it is not arbitrary, i.e. someone just *happened* to not keep a promise, and others followed having 'discovered' a way of getting something for nothing. Given the ability of human beings to reflect on and invest certain practices with various reasons and purposes (i.e. freedom), then the possibility of not keeping a promise is a necessary feature of the practice of promise keeping.<sup>21</sup>

This necessary feature is not, of course, just a feature of promise keeping, but is a condition of freedom itself. Indeed, it is in effect a *condition* in the sense of a restriction. One aspect of Hegel's dissatisfaction with the view of the will as mere potential is that such a view makes morality arbitrary. This runs against Hegel's general claim that morality and ethical life are a necessary feature of rational *Action* (and thus human life), but more importantly it turns out to be false when subjected to analysis. Thus it is not just a *moral* concern of Hegel's (in the sense that 'It is the wrong sort of attitude to adopt towards morality'); it is also a thesis that logically does not hold up.

My freedom, the thesis goes, consists in my potential, 'I can do what I like'. Granted, in my surroundings there are numerous customs, activities, and practices - an historical, social and political community in which I am born. This is given - it is not something that has come

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<sup>21</sup> Here we have a specific example illustrating that realising (as opposed to the mere potential of) one's freedom is something that is learnt: a child may utter the words 'I promise...', but not until he has learnt the activity of promise keeping will the words mean anything to him; and only then will he be in a position to abuse the practice.

about by my will or freedom. However, as a free individual I might choose to engage in this community, or I might not.

But this is clearly false. What is also given to me is that I am a creature of needs and impulses, and the fulfilling of these *requires* that I act. I am not self sufficient in my potentiality - it has to be realised somehow, I *have to* engage in the world in which I live. Of course, I may 'drop out', but this already presupposes that I have engaged and have been involved with fellow human beings in learning the skills by which I am to be self-sufficient, and to make such a decision as, and learning of the possibility of, 'dropping out'.

More importantly, freedom as mere potential involves the possibility of being *amoral*, the view that engaging in morality is a matter of choice. But, given that we do not live in a moral vacuum, that we have engaged and been involved with fellow human beings, to take no further part in moral relations would suggest adopting some peculiar state of inertia. What this would involve is puzzling, but it would seem to suggest, on one level, to put myself at the mercy of my needs and impulses - i.e. I would die. On another level, to do nothing would involve a decision, and it is difficult to imagine *reasons why* I might make this decision that did not refer to the world in which I live - in which case, my decision would be determined by that world. Freedom as mere potential renders morality as arbitrary, as a matter of choice - an idea that is ultimately as logically incoherent as the idea of freedom upon which it is based.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> It is the 'contract' in social contract theory that is the most puzzling in this context: contract is generally understood as an arrangement agreed between two parties, an arrangement that will exist only on the basis that the two parties choose that it shall exist. What is puzzling is the suggestion implicit in contract theory that the existence of

In the abstract consideration of freedom there are then three factors identified. Firstly, there is the freedom of potentiality, captured in the attitude 'I can do what I like'. But, when we consider it more closely, there are two sorts of restrictions on this potentiality: the needs and impulses that require fulfilling in order to live (and surely if freedom is to mean anything it must minimally involve the freedom to live); and a given historical, social and political community consisting of customs, traditions, activities and practices, which is not of our choosing.

However, if we are to be free in the sense of not being at the mercy of our needs and desires, and at the mercy of the elements that may or may not provide for them, then we also need the means by which they are to be satisfied. That is to say, "...the impulses should become the rational system of the will's volitions" (*PR* #19). This 'rational system', though, is already in place in the customs, traditions, activities, practices of the community in which we live. It is such customs, activities and practices - in "right, property, morality, family, state, and so forth" (*Ibid.*) - that the system of needs is organised, the rational means by which our needs and impulses are fulfilled. As these means improve and develop, and the basic needs are comfortably provided for, it is taste, utility, pleasures and enjoyments which are then the object of these means (*PR* #190 [A]).<sup>23</sup>

This complex arrangement and organisation of activities and practices - i.e. the state - is the rational expression of our needs, wants, desires,

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morals, ethics, the state, etc. exist only on the basis that human beings have chosen that they shall. Presumably, we might have chosen not to have them.

<sup>23</sup> The passage quoted here will be looked at more closely in Chapter Seven.

enjoyments, etc. and the truth of the freedom of will,<sup>24</sup> what Hegel often refers to as 'mind objectified', and

...it is only as one of its members that the individual himself has objectivity, genuine individuality, and an ethical life....[His] particular satisfaction, activity, and mode of conduct have this substantive and universally valid life as their starting point and their result (*PR* #258).

That is to say, the satisfaction of my needs and wants, the intentions, purposes, reasons, etc. that pertain to them, are located in the arrangement and organisation of the social community. However:

The state is no ideal work of art; it stands on earth and so in the sphere of caprice, chance, and error, and bad behaviour may disfigure it in many respects. But the ugliest of men, or a criminal, or an invalid, or a cripple, is still always a living man. The affirmative, life, subsists despite his defects, and it is this affirmative factor which is our theme here (*PR* #258 [A]).

Thus, Hegel repeats the advice of the Pythagorean to a father who asked how best to educate his son in ethical conduct: "Make him a citizen of a state with good laws" (*PR* #153).

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<sup>24</sup> We might challenge the person who claims his freedom by 'I can do what I like': 'Well prove it - do something (which will presumably show that you can do what you like) - make it *true*'; freedom as mere potential "...is the will's abstract certainty of itself, but it is not yet the truth of freedom, because it has not yet got *itself* as its content and aim..." (*PR* #15). To repeat an earlier quote, "Truth in philosophy means that concept and external reality correspond" (*PR* #21).

### *Conclusion*

Hegel's central proposition concerning ethics is that the rational end of man is life in the state. In this chapter I have illustrated that Hegel does not so much *provide* an argument for this, but rather shows that this proposition is something reflected in ethical relations and the organisation of the state itself. For Hegel, the task of philosophy is precisely this: to reflect and assimilate the reason present in human affairs, rather than to provide abstract arguments that attempt to justify particular theories of those affairs.

The failure to grasp Hegel's view of the task of philosophy has led many of his commentators to accuse him of extreme relativism and of political conservatism. Such accusations are based on the sort of abstract reasoning that is the very target of his critique of philosophical thought from Descartes' *Cogito* to Kant and his followers. In the fields of ethics and politics, such abstract reasoning hinges on a false dichotomy between the individual and morality, ethics and the state. Certainly history has shown that tensions arise between the state and its individual members, often leading to great social upheaval. But this is due to the *Actions* of those in power, and not to the want of a theory of morality or social contract theory. Such theories are themselves the logical result of the abstract reasoning which sees human beings as primarily and essentially individuals.

In the philosophical reflection and assimilation of the law and reason in human affairs, we can see that ethical conflict (epitomised, for Hegel, in Sophocles' *Antigone*) often arises out of particular habits, customs and laws that are established in specific social and historical contexts. Consequently, *Actions*, and not general theories, are required for their solution. In this is contained Hegel's response to those who would

charge him of conservatism: just because a particular practice, custom, law etc. is established, is not in itself a justification for its continued existence. The practices, customs, laws of human beings must constantly satisfy reason and the spirit of reflection. To rest on a particular doctrine, ideology, or theory would be precisely to annul reason and reflection, and what is right, ethical, good, would be relative to that doctrine, ideology or theory.

The freedom that such reason and reflection involve is based on a practical grasp of circumstances, and consequently there must be something to reason about and reflect on. This something is provided by the social context of human affairs. More often than not freedom is argued for by abstract reasoning, which takes individuals out of the very context within which such freedom can be exercised. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is also the case with many discussions of the will.



### 3. WILL, ETHICS AND ACTION

#### *Introduction*

The most striking and obvious similarity between Aristotle and Hegel is their view of the relationship between ethics and politics, which is brought out in their proposition that humans are essentially social and political creatures by nature. A less apparent, but nonetheless important, observation is that neither Aristotle nor Hegel give direct accounts of 'the will'. Aristotle's discussion of the voluntary/involuntary<sup>1</sup> distinction and of choice takes place within the context of the conditions of *Action*, 'the will' not given the status of a subject in its own right. This contrasts starkly with much philosophy that followed on from Descartes' work. What follows from Descartes' work represents Hegel's point of departure: following a critique of the abstract thinking of his predecessors and contemporaries that affords 'the will' a subject in its own right, Hegel goes on to discuss willing, purpose, intention, etc. in the social context of *Action*.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Interestingly Rackham (Loeb Classics Library, 1934) comments on the opening passage of book III: "'hekousion' and 'akousion' are most conveniently rendered 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' but the word 'akousion' suggests 'unwilling' or 'against the will'...".

<sup>2</sup> *PR* consists of three parts. In the first two parts Hegel gives a general consideration of the concepts of ethics, will, and freedom, and how these affect considerations of purposive *Action* and moral conduct. The present project is concerned specifically with

The specific details of this general observation concerning Hegel's critique of abstract thinking come out in a consideration of practical reason and Hegel's teleological account of purposive human *Action*. However, in his concern for both the state of philosophy and the historical circumstances in his own day,<sup>3</sup> Hegel's preliminary critique of conceptions of will can be seen as clearing the ground for a proper consideration of will in its concrete expression in *Action*. The form of that critique is much the same as his criticism of views of freedom, discussed in the previous chapter: abstract reasoning renders a conception of will that is likewise abstract. This charge of abstraction involves considerations that are familiar to criticisms in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century of the philosophy of mind that dates back to Descartes.

### **Hegel and the Philosophy of Mind**

Firstly, however, I shall give a brief overview of the aim and purpose of Hegel's discussion, and a brief sketch of his own account of mind. This sketch can only be brief, for if it is being claimed that such concepts

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these considerations, and their place in their social context. In part three of *PR* Hegel goes into the details of how the concept of will works out in the particular details of ethical life - the family, civil society, and state - which will not be discussed here. This thesis is concerned with the first two parts in their relation to Aristotle's view that ethics is an introduction to politics, i.e. a consideration of the conditions of *Action*. To go into the particular details of how will works out in the family, civil society, and state would thus go far beyond the parameters of this thesis.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout *PR* Hegel makes quite scathing remarks about his contemporaries, the general gist of which are that they took Kant's considerations to absurd conclusions. This poverty in philosophy, as Hegel saw it, was particularly prevalent in Germany. See, for instance, 'Inaugural Lecture at Heidelberg', in *IHLP*.

can only be truly captured in their practical and social context, then the truth of this proposition will only be seen in the detailed exposition of those concepts. In doing this, however, it will then be possible to consider the details of the arguments.

*Thinking and Willing: theoretical and practical mind*

One of the central ideas that Hegel criticises in the philosophy of mind prevalent in his day was the distinction between thought and will:

The following points should be noted about the connexion between the will and thought. Mind is in principle thinking, and man is distinguished from beast in virtue of thinking. But it must not be imagined that man is half thought and half will, and that he keeps thought in one pocket and will in another, for this would be a foolish idea. The distinction between thought and will is only that between the theoretical attitude and the practical. These, however, are surely not two faculties...(*PR* # 4 [A]).

Whilst it is perfectly reasonable to consider thought in the sense of thinking without physically acting in the world, to then make the move to say that thought and will are two distinct faculties is a move in abstraction. This comes out when we consider that "A man...can [not] be theoretical or think without a will, because in thinking he is of necessity being active" (*ibid.*). Hegel is here as much concerned about the way in which such conclusions as the distinction between thought and will are arrived at as the conclusions themselves. As we shall see later on in the present chapter, this has quite significant implications on

reasoning and logic, and that which it speaks of – implications that are familiar to philosophy in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.

For the time being, however, this point of Hegel's offers an insight to his dissatisfaction with the abstract nature of the prevailing philosophy of mind. That is to say, such thinking is indicative of the treatment given to a cluster of related concepts, such as mind, will, freedom, and how these work in accounts of *Action*. In discussing these concepts Hegel is clearing some ground in order to show that these "...abstract forms reveal themselves not as self-subsistent but as false" (*PR* #32 [A]). In bringing these concepts down from the abstract level we will then be able to see them in their true, i.e. concrete, practical and social context.

A preliminary idea of the practical and social context of Hegel's view of mind can be had from his view that mind is reason in the world. This relates to his initially curious comment that the "...impulses should become the rational system of the will's volitions" (*PR* #19). What he is saying here is that, in the abstract, the needs and desires that human beings have (impulses) are fulfilled by engaging in the world. This is how we might express the fulfilment of our natural or animal instincts. It is abstract in that it is an expression that abstracts from the fact that we are rational creatures, and that rationality has a bearing on how we fulfil our instincts, desires, needs, etc. This comes out when we consider that the ways in which we fulfil these involve activities, practices, arrangements, institutions, etc. – i.e. rational systems.

Our engagement in these activities etc. – in such forms as education, work, leisure, etc. – involves engaging in the rationality of them. In this sense, will is practical mind, "...the truth of intelligence" (*PR* #4), and engaging in such activities involves assimilating, and reflecting in our

engagement, the rationality of those systems. Thus, in order to act freely requires knowledge of the rational system that is our society, and such knowledge is a prerequisite for engaging in the business of everyday life.

As we have seen in Chapter Two above, the truth of freedom is not established by logical inference and deduction, but by acting in the world (the truth of freedom is thus *practical* in the same way that the truth of intelligence is practical mind). If freedom means anything, it must minimally involve the fulfilling of needs, desires, etc., and that is something we do by engaging in the activities etc. that constitute the rational system that is our society. Freedom, then, is participation in the business of everyday life, which gives us a preliminary account of *Action* as the fulfilling of needs, desires, etc. by means of activities of the rational system.

Preliminary though this is, it carries with it a practical account of mind: it is only when I come to know, when I assimilate, and reflect in my conduct, the rationality of such activities, that I can be said to be acting *mindfully*. Furthermore, it shows that the concepts of mind, knowledge, will, freedom and *Action* hang together, precluding questions of individual definitions ('*What is mind...knowledge...will...freedom?*') that often lead to abstract reasoning. But looking at how we are often led astray can itself be illuminating.

### *Act and Action: philosophy and moral conduct*

In looking at philosophical considerations of ethics the concern here is for specific types of conduct, and this is reflected in the empirical, i.e. non-philosophic, concern for conduct. For instance, ethics is

concerned for the most part with statements within which the verb is of the active form, just as a court of law is interested in (as a philosopher might put it) whether the verb in 'He killed Smith' can also operate in terms of 'murdered'. I say 'for the most part' in that this does not exclude certain cases wherein the verb operates in the passive sense: the significance of 'fell' in 'The soldier arrived at his post for duty and fell asleep' and 'The soldier finished his duty and went home and fell asleep' is clearly quite different, and the contexts clearly mark out the ethical significance of both the statement and conduct. Take another example. In *Mental Acts* Geach clearly wants to say something quite specific about 'acts of judgement' and that is determined by particular philosophic interests, but in ethics we are concerned with 'acts of judgement' in so far as they have some empirical implication<sup>4</sup> (Jones is judged to have murdered Smith, and consequently ends up in jail).

The above considerations might be looked at as an analysis carried out on two different levels: what is actually, physically, done, and what is *said* of what is done. Philosophy is concerned with what is said, in that what is said often involves judgement, which in turn involves thought and reasoning. Hegel's concern with this is that often the way in which we think and reason can lead us to lose sight of that of which we speak, resulting in a discourse that radically differs from the discourse from within which it begins. 'Thought', 'reasoning',

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<sup>4</sup> 'Mental acts' of judgement - what someone thinks and (equally important) feels about something or other - might have empirical significance of a sort in the sense that certain of them are indicative of an individual's character. The importance of this will feature prominently in Chapters Four and Five.

'judgement' and '*Action*' take on significations other than those involved in their original context.<sup>5</sup>

In Chapter One we saw how Descartes' line of reasoning led to a discrepancy between what he says and that of which he speaks. Faced with a question by Burman on the problem of the interaction between minds and bodies, he admitted that there was no problem in experience. The problem arises out of his method of reasoning. But such discrepancies can arise in more subtle ways. 'Ordinary language' philosophy of the present century is also vulnerable. Consider the following. In a review of J.L. Austin's *How To Do Things With Words* Walter Cerf points out that there is something peculiar in substituting 'performing an *Action*' with 'performing an act', a peculiarity which is carried over from the expressions 'saying something' and 'performing a speech act'.

Within everyday discourse 'performing an act' means...any sort of behaviour that is the taking over of a role or the putting on of a show. Acts performed in this sense - the act, say, of the trapeze artist - have a strong action character, and, sounding very much alike, the ordinary 'act' thus sneaks in place of 'action' without raising suspicion. Once in place, it is in fact employed by Austin in an entirely different way, completely unacceptable in ordinary discourse. Yet this new way remains undetected because it is a way *philosophers* are in fact quite familiar with - familiar, though, not in everyday discourse, but in learned discourses of

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<sup>5</sup> "The language game in which they are to be applied is missing" – Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, #96

metaphysics, epistemology and philosophical psychology  
 ...To 'perform an action', in the familiar everyday sense,  
 has become 'to perform an act' of traditional  
 metaphysics, epistemology and psychology...<sup>6</sup>

Cerf is particularly concerned with speech acts. Here the concern is ethics, and thus we are interested in the *doing* of something in a way that we are not interested in 'performing an act'. That is to say, ethics - both philosophical and empirical - is not so much interested in metaphysical, epistemological and psychological definitions of *Action* but the classification of instances of *Action* (in terms of being good, evil, right, wrong) as issuing from judgements that have empirical implications.

The implications of this on how '*Action*' is to be understood here are quite significant. The main topic of the present chapter is will, and for Hegel will is a feature of *Action*. In saying this I am not saying *Action* involves something called 'will'. Rather, instances of *Action* are such *in virtue* of their being '*willful*', and not in virtue of their being reconcilable with, or satisfying, a particular definition or theory of *Action*. This is particularly pertinent in ethical discourse. When a particular deed is judged, definitions and theories of *Action* are not at issue; what is at issue is *what* is done in *this* deed. In substituting for the particular details of what is done a general conception of *Action* in an analysis of an ethical judgement, the essential aspect of that judgement is lost, and the discourse takes on a different form. What is then at issue is not what is done, but the general conception of *Action*.

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<sup>6</sup> In K.T. Fann (ed.), *Symposium on J.L. Austin*, op. Cit. p. 364.



Of course, most human behaviour would fall into the category of 'willful', and this is not a concern for ethics alone. The point, however, is that in judging certain behaviour to be good or evil, right or wrong, 'willfulness' is a primary consideration, and our judgements on this will determine whether or not any given behaviour can be considered an instance of *Action*. When we say '*This Action* is wrong' the scope or parameters of the *Action* in a person's behaviour will be determined by the degree of 'willfulness' present in the behaviour under consideration. Many things may be done by me during a given period of time, not all of which will necessarily be wrong, although it may well be the case that during that period as a whole I was involved in wrong *Actions*. Further, however, not everything that resulted from my behaviour that, under different circumstances, would be deemed to be wrong will be necessarily captured within the scope of my *Action* in that under *these* circumstances they may not have been 'willful'. The '*Action*' itself will be defined by what we have to say about it, in our judgement of the 'willfulness' present.

Consider the matter in the following way. Will is something that is predicated of *Action*, and not a subject term (e.g. 'Will is...'). This would seem to beg the question 'What *is Action* such that it can be described?' Well, *Action* is that which is judged, in ethical judgement, to be predicable by 'willful', 'voluntary', 'intentional', 'chosen'; 'good' and 'evil', 'right' and 'wrong' etc. - i.e. '*Action*' is indicative of a *doing* the scope of which is reflected in the degree to which these predicates are judged to be pertinent. But notice that this is not reducible to the proposition that ethical and moral judgement is all about what we are *saying* of the *Action*, our *putting* various characteristics on it - but

rather it is what we are saying *of the Action itself*, i.e. we are talking about characteristics of someone's behaviour.<sup>7</sup>

Many of the problems that arise in philosophy do so precisely because we allow a gulf to form between what we say and how we think, and that of which we speak and think. To be wary of this is something we might take as a general warning from Hegel's philosophy as a whole. This is the basis of his criticism of the abstraction in his predecessors and contemporaries.

### *Will in Abstraction: thought and language*

The main thrust of Hegel's criticisms is that past and contemporary work in the area of will tends to discuss 'the will' as something or other that human beings have or possess, even though this is rarely intended to mean that we have or possess a will in the sense of having or possessing arms and legs, or material goods. Will, for Hegel, is a feature of acting, the latter taking place in an ethical community. To treat will in isolation of this context is to *abstract*, and thus discussions fall into the difficulties of trying to identify 'the will' without the attendant reificatory implications.

This is something that can be illustrated by everyday use of language. When we use the definite article, the term that accompanies it usually has the function of a noun, i.e. denotes an entity of some sort or

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<sup>7</sup> This point relates to what Hegel calls the 'speculative proposition', in which he is critical of traditional subject-predicate logic where, for instance, the predicate is some sort of abstract quality which is attached to the subject. This is something I shall come to shortly.

another.<sup>8</sup> Given this it would appear that speaking of 'the will' invites a series of embarrassing questions: what sort of entity is 'the will'?...Where is it located?...What does it look like?, etc.

Here attention can only be drawn to the fact that if you say 'The will is universal, the will determines itself' the words you use to describe the will presuppose it to be a subject or substratum from the start. But the will is not something complete and universal prior to its determining itself and prior to its superseding and idealising this determination. The will is not a will until it is this self-mediating activity, this return into itself (*PR #7*).

On the one hand, Hegel here guides us away from a conception of will which would result in the need to provide answers to embarrassing questions, that is he declares the will not to be a subject or substratum to which predicates can be attributed in the way that they are to entities denoted by the terms accompanying the definite article. This point can be demonstrated in terms of what Hegel calls the 'speculative proposition'. Traditional logic treated the subject of a proposition as something to which certain qualities or attributes were attached, and in consequence the subject was given the status of some sort of substratum or entity that existed independently in one way or another. But for Hegel the subject is nothing other than what is or can be truly said of it. Hegel uses statements about God as an example:

In a proposition of this kind one begins with the word God. This by itself is a senseless sound, a mere name;

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, Hegel's point about abstraction is not dissimilar to the point that Ryle makes about reification in *The Concept of Mind* (Penguin, 1972).

only the predicate says what he is and fills the name with content and meaning...<sup>9</sup>

Again, with a proposition such as 'The rose is red' the rose does not exist independently of 'redness', as if the latter is some sort of abstract idea or quality that human beings attach to it. The proposition 'The rose is red' is a statement about the *rose*, which does not confer upon it the status of a substance or a member of a class of substances; and *redness* is something that inheres in the subject, and not something conferred upon it by way of our ideas.

Language like this looks upon the subject as self-subsistent outside, and the predicate as found somewhere in our head. Such a conception of the relation between subject and predicate however is at once contradicted by the copula 'is'. By saying 'This rose is red', or 'This picture is beautiful', we declare, that it is not we who from outside attach beauty to the picture or redness to the rose, but that these are characteristics proper to these objects. (*EPS* #166.).

To talk of will as if it were such a subject or substratum is for Hegel to abstract, in that to isolate will from the contexts to which the term pertains, and to refer to will as a capacity in isolation to the various and specific ways that this capacity is fulfilled, is itself a piece of philosophical abstraction.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> From the *Phenomenology*, translated by W. Kaufman in *Hegel: Reinterpretations, Texts and Commentaries* (Weidenfeld, 1966), pp. 392 and 394.

<sup>10</sup> I would not want to argue here that this sort of reasoning can be attributed to Aristotle, but notice that he would want to satisfy himself that the attributes 'voluntary',

In the same way in which such abstract talk renders freedom as a mere potentiality, will is rendered as some sort of faculty for the possibility of *Action*. This helps to bring out Hegel's (what can at first seem obscure) claim that will is something which determines itself, supersedes and idealises this determination, and yet is nothing prior to its doing this. A person must will *something*, determine himself in a *particular way* before it makes sense to talk of will in the first place:

My willing is not pure willing but the willing of something.  
A will which... wills only the abstract universal, wills nothing and is therefore no will at all. The particular volition is a restriction, since the will, in order to be a will, must restrict itself in some way or other (*PR #6[A]*).

There are two points to be brought out of this.

In every day discourse we talk of will in terms of voluntariness, choice, intention, etc. (e.g. 'Did he do that voluntarily/by choice/intentionally?') This is to say, in talking of will we often do so in the context of asking whether a particular deed was a particular act of will. Moreover, the terms 'voluntary', 'choice', 'intention' etc. - and similarly 'will' - can only operate in the context of a specific *Action*, a particular *Action* which is brought under consideration. These terms do not work in the context of generalised types of *Action*: it makes no sense to ask whether 'killing' is the sort of *Action* that is voluntary, chosen, intentional, etc. precisely because these terms play a role in establishing whether *this* particular instance of killing is a *murder*, i.e. whether it was an act of will, and the sorts of things considered in answering such a question are the sort of

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'chosen', etc. were applicable before considering conduct to be an instance of *Action* proper.

things that are left behind, so to speak, by generalised types of *Action* such as that referred to by 'killing'.

The second point concerns Hegel's consideration of his contemporaries' discussion of this issue, i.e. those who fail to take into account the above considerations, and would consequently identify the will with the individual ego (in particular, Hegel had Fichte in mind). This type of identification is what Hegel refers to as the abstract universal: 'abstract' in that it is considered purely as a capacity, 'universal' in that *qua* capacity it is willing nothing *in particular*.<sup>11</sup> Hegel is not denying that there is an aspect of will in this, but rather that this is to consider the matter in abstraction. Indeed, it is only in that I, as an individual, can will *something* that it is possible for me to consider 'myself' in this abstract way. Hegel explains this with reference to the first-person pronoun:

When I say "I", I *eo ipso* abandon all my particular characteristics, my disposition, natural endowment, knowledge, and age. The ego is quite empty, a mere point, simple, yet active in this simplicity (*PR* #4[A]).

Active in that it is something *I do*, i.e. I *abandon* all my particular characteristics, etc. and thus this is not a 'pure' will, but a will that wills *something*. It requires an act of will in order for any individual to consider himself in this manner.

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<sup>11</sup> The emphasis I put on 'in particular' relates to the point below, i.e. that nonetheless it is an act of will.

*Will in Practice and Will in Thought*

Not only were the sorts of views that Hegel considered features of academic life, but they were also views that gained expression in practice - in terms of both polemical writings about the relations between the individual and the modern state, and in *Action* motivated by such considerations. Thus consideration of the individual ego and the individual person was a feature of both academic and ethical life.<sup>12</sup> After all, Hegel would have it that if an academic account of ethical life is to have any validity at all then the terms in which that account is rendered need to have reference to particular instances within the ethical life it purports to give an account of.

One example Hegel uses to illustrate the tendency to identify will with the ego is the Hindu practice of contemplation;

Among the Hindus...the highest life is held to be persistence in the bare knowledge of one's simple identity with oneself, fixation in this empty space of one's inner life, as light remains colourless in pure vision, and the sacrifice of every activity in life, every aim, and every project (*PR* #5[A]).

More importantly for Hegel, identification of will with the individual in the sphere of political *Action* can be the source of great upheaval.

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<sup>12</sup> Throughout *PR* Hegel refers liberally to contemporary political and ethical *Actions* and events that are motivated by, or justified in terms of, certain philosophical positions. Indeed, as Hegel considers ethics to be concerned with particular *Actions* and not theoretical or generalised categories or types of *Action*, such *Actions* and events play an important role in illuminating Hegel's philosophical approach.

...the phenomena which it has produced both in men's heads and in the world are of a frightfulness parallel only to the superficiality of the thoughts on which they are based (*PR* # 29).

The phenomena 'in the world' that Hegel refers to are the *Actions* of the reign of terror following the French revolution, where the 'abstract conclusions' of the type of thinking put forward, by Rousseau and Fichte in particular, came into power, affording

...for the first time in human history the prodigious spectacle of the overthrow of the constitution of a great actual state and its complete reconstruction *ab initio* on the basis of pure thought alone, after the destruction of all existing and given material. The will of its re-founders was to give it what they alleged was a purely rational basis, but it was only abstractions that were being used; the Idea was lacking; and the experiment ended in the maximum of frightfulness and terror (*PR* #258).

Hegel also claims in *PR* #258, that the identification of will with the ego can also be seen to be the source of the notion of political freedom which issues out of nihilism, which calls for the destruction of any thing that has order, as order involves particularity which contrasts with and is felt to threaten the universality of the ego: it is threatening in that order demands conformation to particular, specified types of activity, which is thus a restriction on the individual as an independent ego



which has freedom defined in terms of its universality - i.e. lack of restriction.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, in criticising the widely held views of his time Hegel did not hold that these views were wholly mistaken, totally devoid of truth. His contention was that such ideas only represent a particular way in which individuals could employ themselves; the freedom implied in equating the will with the ego does represent certain possibilities, certain ways in which it is possible for human beings to think and act. The point is, however, that all these represent particular acts of will. These are only negative possibilities, shown in the examples of Hindu contemplation, political terror, and nihilism; more importantly the element of truth in such ideas is forcefully brought out in the most negative of human possibilities, for

In this element of the will is rooted my ability to free myself from everything, abandon every aim, abstract from everything. Man alone can sacrifice everything, his life included; he can commit suicide (*PR* #5[A]).

Hegel's concern with past and contemporary accounts of will was not restricted to ethics and practical considerations of life, however. Hegel was also concerned with epistemological and metaphysical accounts of will. Whether will is accounted for in terms of empirical evidence, or in terms of 'the will's' intrinsic nature, there are considerations which limit the validity of such accounts. The evidence or proofs which support these accounts do not stand up to scrutiny.

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<sup>13</sup> A particular example of how this line of thought can result in such arguments would be *The Ego and its Own* by Max Stirner, a contemporary and sometime intellectual combatant of Marx.

If we consider will to be some sort of individual ego, much of what is meant by this term is some sort of self-awareness or self-consciousness. But examples of activities where there would appear to be little trace of self-awareness or self-consciousness, as something experienced, are much more common, i.e. activities where we are unaware of our *willing* but which nevertheless we would consider to be acts of will. In our thoughts and activities our attention is focused on what it is that we are thinking or doing. Whether I am trying to remember something, calculating a mathematical problem, or fixing a leaking tap, my attention is focused on the past event or mathematical problem or leaking tap. In such exercises I am not conscious of my willing, or of my will or ego. It may be I, a particular person, who is thinking these thoughts or fixing this tap, but

When I run after a street-car, when I look at the time, when I am absorbed in contemplating a portrait, there is no I. There is consciousness of the street-car to be overtaken etc. <sup>14</sup>

In our day-to-day activities - which occupy a great portion of our lives - there is little evidence of a self-conscious willing, a willing that can be captured in terms exclusive to those that describe what it is that is thought or done.

Although often quite scathing of his contemporaries, Hegel was not unsympathetic to the aims of past philosophers. Human activity has been traditionally distinguished from the activity of animals: human activity involves reason and rationality; there is an element - some sort

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<sup>14</sup> J-P. Sartre, *Transcendence of the Ego* tr. F. Williams & R. Kirkpatrick (New York, 1951), p. 40. The points raised here are related to the discussion in Chapter Five.

of rational element - present in experiences of humans of which there is scant evidence in the activity of brutes. From this have come many attempts to isolate this element, throwing up such concepts as the soul, the ego, the self, i.e. that which does the willing.

Kant captures this tradition particularly well. In his discussion of the 'unity of apperception' he clearly distinguishes between the 'I think' and that which is thought or experienced. Kant claims the 'unity of apperception' to be one of the essential ingredients of the very possibility of experience; to be more precise, the possibility of individual experiences: It must be possible for

...the "I think" to accompany all my representations; for otherwise something would be represented in me which could not be thought at all, and that is equivalent to saying that the representation would be impossible, or at least would be nothing to me.<sup>15</sup>

A representation thus has two essential ingredients: that which is represented in the unity of the manifold, that which is seen or thought, and the consciousness, the 'I' that sees or thinks, that which marks off the representation as that of a particular individual, as *my* perception or thought.

For the manifold representations, which are given in an intuition, would not be one and all *my* representations, if they did not all belong to one self-consciousness.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Critique of Pure Reason* tr. N. Kemp Smith (Macmillan, 1982), B131-2.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.* B132.

Of course, it would be difficult to make sense of the claim that there are perceptions, thoughts, sensations, etc. which are not the perceptions, etc. of a particular subject, and thus there would appear to be something necessary about what Kant is getting at. However, the problem with this account is the way in which Kant goes about explaining it. There can be little doubt that there is something about such experiences which constitute them as being experiences of some particular individual, but instead of focusing on what it is about those experiences which necessitates that they be the experiences of a particular individual Kant, in aiming to fulfil his intentions stated in the introduction to *Critique of Pure Reason*, attempts to show how such experiences are possible at all. This formulation of the question requires a quite specific sort of answer, relating to the kind of beings who have such experiences, and the answer that Kant gives is that the self-conscious ego - the 'I think' that marks off self-consciousness - must attach to that of which it is conscious, i.e. that which is perceived, thought, etc.

### **Willing, Acting and Experiencing**

Hegel's charge of abstraction relates precisely to this sort of move to metaphysics. That is, attempting to explain something in isolation to that which is a defining characteristic, attempting to explain will or consciousness in terms which exclude the consideration that willing is nothing other than the willing of *something*. To think of will in terms of its being a noun is clearly misleading, but at the same time it is worth emphasising the term's root in the verb form - *to will, to do*, i.e. we are concerned with what experiences, acts, and *Action* involve.

*Descartes, Spinoza and Kant*

Hegel's position on these issues might be illuminated in the context of a philosophical debate which had its immediate antecedents in Descartes and Spinoza. In rejecting Descartes' distinction between "...the perception of the understanding and the *Action* of the will"<sup>17</sup> Spinoza claims that the very idea of their separate status is incomprehensible, for

The intellect and the will are related to this idea or volition as rockiness is related to this or that rock, or as man is related to Peter or Paul.<sup>18</sup>

Ideas or perceptions already involve the will in the having of them, they are affirmations which do not require a consequent act of will to pronounce them true. Our ideas and perceptions may be false, but this is due to our having inadequate knowledge of things about which we are having ideas, or that we are perceiving, and not an erroneous use of the faculty of will. Thus in an important sense knowledge (adequate or inadequate) is a prior requirement to our having ideas or perceptions which are in any way coherent at all. I cannot think of something about which I have no knowledge. I may recall seeing something of which I have no knowledge, but it is difficult to understand what I am *to think about it*, other than to think about how I am to make sense of it, *understand* it. For Spinoza, talk of the will or faculty of willing is an

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<sup>17</sup> *Principles of Philosophy* tr. V.R. and A.P. Miller (Kluwer Academic Publishing, 1983), 1, 32.

<sup>18</sup> *Ethics* tr. R.H.M. Elwes (Dover 1955), 2, Prop. 49 Coroll.

abstraction, 'will' being a general term that says something about the ideas or perceptions that we have.

Kant's view on the matter is somewhat different from this. The proof that a representation is a representation of a particular individual lies in the transcendental deduction of the necessary conditions of experience, the 'understanding' of the subject giving form to the objects of perception. But the point which Kant overlooks is that the representation - the *experience* - itself indicates the presence of the subject, without the aid of a deduction. In other words, in order for the representation to have the semblance of a coherent form it is a necessary pre-requisite that I have some knowledge of the objects (or some of the objects) which constitute the representation. I accompany all my representations accordingly as those representations involve my knowledge of what it is they are representing (which is part of the meaning of Spinoza's 'Knowing involves knowing that you know'). Faced with something or a situation of which I have no knowledge, I may be curious, bewildered, apprehensive, fearful - descriptions of myself being in such a situation - due to my lack of knowledge. The connection between perceiving something and knowledge Hegel puts metaphorically, but the point is made:

The variegated canvas of the world is before me; I stand over against it.... I am at home in the world when I know it, still more so when I have understood it (*PR #4[A]*).

Curiosity, bewilderment, apprehension, fear, pertain to experiences where I am at odds with the objects I perceive, where there is a clear distinction between myself and 'the world', the situation I am in, a distinction that is *felt* and not only thought. But such situations are *unusual* - for the most part, I am at home in the world in that

experiences involve knowledge and understanding of what it is I am experiencing.

When we talk about the having of ideas and perceptions - especially with regard to 17<sup>th</sup> Century philosophers - there is a tendency to overlook the point that for the most part those ideas and perceptions involve our *active* participation, and the notion of experience which follows from overlooking this point is devoid of the involvement of he who experiences. But in my desires, hopes, aspirations, etc. I am present, not as a transcendental adjunct, but in what is desired, hoped for, aspired to. That is to say, in wanting something it is not that I want something to happen to me, as an 'I' divorced from all feelings, sensations, etc. On the contrary, it is because of the feelings, sensations, etc. derived from such experiences and the activities they involve that such activities are desired, and furthermore that such experiences and activities are participated in at all. This is something that is captured in the motives, purposes, intentions which experiencing this or that involve.

### *Practical Knowledge and Action*

From this we can throw a little light on Hegel's claim that the will is a "self-mediating activity", a "return into itself" (*PR* #7).<sup>19</sup> In doing so it is illuminating to look at Aristotle's practical syllogism.

As in a demonstrative syllogism the practical version involves a major and minor premise, and a conclusion. In the practical syllogism

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<sup>19</sup> What follows owes much to a reading of Anthony Manser's 'Hegel's Teleology' in *Hegel's Philosophie Der Natur*, ed. R-P. Horstmann & M.J. Petry (Klett-Cotta, 1986).

however, the conclusion consists of an *Action* (NE 1147a28), and this *Action* issues from certain characteristics of the premises. That is to say, the major premise says something about the end of the agent ('All sweet things ought to be tasted') and the minor premise involves a relation between the end and a particular object ('This X is sweet'), i.e. the object is a means for fulfilling the end expressed in the major premise. A person who holds 'All sweet things ought to be tasted', confronted by an object that is sweet will thereby act - "...the agent, if he has the power and is not prevented, must immediately act" (NE 1147a30).

However, this necessity of *Action* (problems regarding which I shall discuss in Chapter Six), is complicated by man having a rational as well as appetitive part to the soul. This rational element in *Action* compounds the complication, but it carries a point with interesting consequences. In the acting the means is often a particular object, an object with specific characteristics relating to the end of the agent. But one thing that reason enables us to do is to use objects in a way that does not necessarily correspond to what might be considered their natural characteristics or the purpose for which they are designed. I can use a spade for many tasks other than that of digging. In effect, the object is, in a sense, transformed in that it is vulnerable to the use I put it to - it is vulnerable to my purpose. "...when I use it I 'negate' its particular characteristics in the sense that I change them to suit my purpose" (PR note to # 59[A]).

This is one aspect of what Hegel calls putting "my will into something" (PR #58), and is an important element in his explanation of property ownership. However, the important point for present purposes is that in 'putting my will' into something, in using an object, everything that



appears in the practical syllogism relates *directly* to the agent. That is to say, the relation between means and end has been transformed:<sup>20</sup> in an important sense the means is no longer external to the end, precisely in that it is my will - end - that *determines* its use, and thus the relation of means and end is internal to my ends and their fulfilment. This point is not too dissimilar to that made by G.E.M. Anscombe when she says:

We must always remember that an object is not what is aimed at *is*; the description *under which* it is aimed at is that which it is *called* the object.<sup>21</sup>

It is in this sense that Hegel speaks of the will as a 'return to itself', a 'self-mediating activity'. The end of my willing is that which is willed by me, which is to say that in such willing I am myself the end. My activity is self-mediating. But this is something that is arrived at via the object, and that object, 'the description *under which* it is aimed at', is determined by what it is I want from it. At an abstract level, I may be said to have potential; but it is only by way of Acting in the world that I achieve *actual* willing – in Hegel's terms, the *truth* of willing.

The essential point in this is that Hegel's analysis of purposive *Action* is derived from the logic of what is done, and what is involved, in Acting

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<sup>20</sup> Manser makes the same point, but in doing so he brings out a further point: "The means is no longer something external, it is 'informed with purpose' and in a sense becomes part of the agent's body". Op. cit. p. 268. This latter point will come into play in Chapter Five.

<sup>21</sup> *Intention* (Oxford, 1963 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.) p. 66.

itself, as opposed to the logic of a particular *theory of Action*.<sup>22</sup> Similarly with the practical syllogism: it is the logic of *Action* that is the criterion of its validity, not the demands of some sort of formal logic. Thus the discussion and analysis is determined by that of which it speaks, rather than determined by the demands of an abstract conception of reason or logic. In this way Hegel distances himself from the 17<sup>th</sup> Century tendency to consider will as an attribute of individual human beings, something they possess, and from 18<sup>th</sup> Century and contemporary thinkers' attempts to account for the will as either a metaphysical ego or epistemological subject.

Here is a development of a point raised in Chapter Two with regard to Hegel's view of will. The opposition (rather than analytic distinction) between the individual will and the state which philosophers have often emphasised comes out as a contractual relation, in an attempt at reconciliation, involving individuals who have - actually, theoretically or hypothetically (e.g. Rousseau) - come together and formed - actively or tacitly (e.g. Locke) - in a common union. The next logical step from this is to isolate the individual will from the relations which form the ethical community and we are left with the nexus of individual agency. But for Hegel this is an example of "abstract reasoning" (*PR* #258), which ignores the observation that an act of will is only such in the context of ethical relations, that we are born into, and brought up to act within the context of, an ethical community, and that acting at will is something

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<sup>22</sup> When dealing with a particular philosopher in, say, the history of philosophy, it may well be useful shorthand to refer to 'Plato's/Aristotle's/Descartes'/Kant's theory of ...' etc. But to carry that over into saying that their *aim* was to produce a 'theory' is to claim something that involves a series of considerations which are not going to be satisfied by a piece of shorthand. When it comes to analysing Plato's etc. account of this or that, then the shorthand of the label 'theory' has outlived its usefulness.

that individuals come to do through a practical understanding of the relations that constitute the community.

### **Agency, Self-awareness, and The Ethical community**

In deriving his discussion of will from the context of ethical life Hegel opens up an avenue for a discussion of *Action*, something that can be seen in the light of modern discussions on purpose, motives, intention, etc. Such discussions aim at establishing some element of agency in *Action*, which was clearly the aim of Hegel's contemporaries of whom he is so critical. But the harshness of that criticism should not overshadow the point that Hegel was, to an extent, sympathetic with this aim. Hegel's criticism is that this was pursued by way of abstract reasoning, that philosophers often resort to logical inference where straightforward observation of what is involved in purposive *Action* provides a clearer insight.

#### *Abstract Action and Concrete Action*

An act of will is something that is *done*, and it is considered to be an act of will in that it is done in an ethical community, a community of which the agent has a practical understanding. In other words, we are concerned with agency in that it is a feature of *Action*, which takes place within an ethical community, and thus to attempt to account for will in isolation of this context and then attempt to introduce this abstract notion of will, in the form of agency, back into an ethical context amounts to being misled by abstract reasoning, failing to see the wood for the trees.

It is important to emphasise here that Hegel is talking about both a cognitive and a practical understanding that informs *Action*. Kant brings out the former, but does so only formally in terms of the possibility of experience. Hegel's account comes in the light of experience in that abstract cognitive reasoning is itself only a possible experience, experience involving a practical cognition.<sup>23</sup> When we consider that a practical understanding of the ways in which we act involves desires, motives, intentions, etc. in the execution of such *Actions*, then it can be seen that in coming to an understanding of the ethical relations of a community - such as to participate in it - involves my becoming aware of my agency as expressed in those desires, motives, intentions, etc. That is to say, agency, and the awareness of one's own agency that acts of will involve, is not something that needs to be introduced into an account of experience - it is already present *in that experience involves* an active, cognitive agent, such as is present in *Action*.

In the *Politics*<sup>24</sup> Aristotle says that man is a political animal in that individuals have in common the ability to perceive good and evil, justice and injustice, etc., and "It is the sharing of a common view in

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<sup>23</sup> For Hegel logical reasoning, for instance, is a practical activity, i.e. it has a purpose, aim, an end to attain, but this is not to say that logical reasoning is an *Action*. This will depend on the circumstances in which it takes place: although we wouldn't speak of logical reasoning, exercising one's mind on the relations between abstract objects (or however logical reasoning might be described), in terms of right and wrong, a minimum of consideration will show that doing such a thing in *certain* situations might well be the subject of ethical judgement. Take another example: even within Buddhism it would be considered wrong to meditate in certain situations.

<sup>24</sup> All references, unless otherwise indicated, will be to the Penguin (1981) edition, tr. T. Sinclair.

*these matters that makes a household or state*".<sup>25</sup> Hegel makes a similar point: "It is the nature of humanity to press onwards to agreement with others; human nature only really exists in an achieved community of minds" (*PS* p. 43). Hegel's general point about the relationship between individual and state can be drawn from this: to seek philosophical, ethical or political enlightenment by emphasising one aspect of the distinction between the individual and society or state over the other is the source of many a confusion and error.<sup>26</sup> More importantly here, however, is that these comments from Aristotle and Hegel give us a lead in showing how an account of reason, mind, will, and *Action* can be drawn from their true, i.e. concrete, practical and social context.

The first point to make is that here the question is not how *might* we account for the mind, will, etc., which abstract reasoning then attempts to answer by constructing a theory of mind, will, etc. Such a move is implicit in Kant's attempt to account for the *possibility* of experience, for example. The account, rather, will be drawn from how mind, will, etc. give an account of themselves, and the latter will be the criteria for the truth of how we think, speak, of them. From this perspective mind, will, etc. are not things that we have in the sense of potentialities for engaging in the world, but are aspects of the *actual* engagement in the world, the *Actions* in which they are instanced.

By 'the world' is meant the world in which human beings live, a world that consists of a network of customs, practices, activities, institutions, that reflect the needs, wants, desires, purposes, ambitions, that we

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<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 1253a.

<sup>26</sup> In Chapter Seven I will show the importance to an understanding of *eudaimonia* of focusing on the relationship between these in more detail.

pursue. This is not the mundane world of abstract reasoning, over against which humankind stands as a creature possessed of individual minds and reason. The world into which we are born, and in which we conduct ourselves, is a rational system organised around needs, wants, desires, etc. Whether we are speaking of the ways in which we extract fuel and power, and deliver it to our homes; forms of transportation and communication; institutions of education and training; systems of justice: these all add up to a rational system that reflects our needs and wants, and are the means by which we pursue them. The social context within which we conduct ourselves is, so to speak, 'the rational system of the will's volitions'. That is to say, will is an aspect of that system in the engagement that is required for the existence, and continued existence, of that system.

In this sense, the world in which we live, engage in, is thus the world of mind. In saying this, however, mind is not some sort of ethereal intelligence or spirit that pervades our lives, distinct from the particular ways – practices, activities, customs, etc. – in which it is instanced. This would be a further abstract distinction, and is the source of the confusing and unhelpful label of 'Idealism' that is often attributed to Hegel. Participating, engaging in, and reflecting those practices, etc. in our participation and engagement, is the mindful pursuit of needs and wants, i.e. purposive *Action*. Such practices, activities, customs, etc. are expressive of the agreement achieved within a community, an 'achieved community of minds'.

It is only against such a background, within such a context, that we can 'perceive good and evil, justice and injustice'. That is, 'the sharing of a common view in these matters' is the basis from which we can pick out particular instances of *Action* for moral and ethical praise and

condemnation. However, such a common view has its basis in the nature of purposive *Action*, something that can be overlooked in the search for the basis of a common morality.

*Common Consent, Moral Propositions, and Judgements*

Consider the following from the preface to *PR*. In deciding the nature of his conduct and what his position in life is to be, the 'unsophisticated heart' bases his decision on what is publicly accepted as good and true. The problem here, according to Hegel, is that those who seek the good and true in this manner "...are in the position of not being able to see the wood for the trees". He continues:

...the only perplexity and difficulty they are in is one of their own making. Indeed, this perplexity and difficulty of theirs is proof rather that they want as the substance of the right and the ethical not what is universally recognised and valid, but something else. If they had been serious with what is universally accepted instead of busying themselves with the vanity and particularity of opinions and things, they would have clung to what is substantially right, namely to the commands of the ethical order and the state, and would have regulated their lives in accordance with these. (*PR* pp.3-4)

The line of reasoning of the 'unsophisticated heart' is quite straightforward: morality pertains to the relationships that exist between individuals, how they think about and act towards one another, and thus an account of what is moral is to be based on a *consensus hominum*, on what is generally accepted as good and true, and only on

such a basis can we derive the principles on which we ought to lead our lives.

It might be suggested here that Aristotle might be worthy of the appellation 'unsophisticated heart' - after all, throughout *NE* does he not often seek guidance from commonly held views? However, such a suggestion is misconceived in failing to recognise that Aristotle's ultimate concern is with what is voluntary or involuntary, whether what is done is done through choice, i.e. an act of will. There may be various opinions about the good or evil of a particular deed, but what is ultimately in question is - and this is something that often features in attempts to justify opinions on such matters - whether or not what was done was done voluntarily or not, was an act of choice, an act of will. Again, there may well be differing opinions on what constitutes voluntary or involuntary conduct, or what an act of choice or will involves, but voluntariness, choice and will are common criteria in making judgements about the ethical worth of *Actions*.

Of course it may well be suggested that this does little towards establishing what exactly it is that makes something good and right, or what Hegel means by 'Right'. But Hegel raises the question of "...how it is possible, in an infinite variety of opinions, to distinguish and discover what is universally recognised and valid?" (*PR* p.3). On the other hand it can serve to illuminate one of the main problems of an account of morality based on a *consensus hominum*. It is not a *moral* problem, or a problem about morality, that such thinkers are faced with, but a misconception in their approach to the subject matter. A sociology could perhaps produce a general exposition of the norms of behaviour and deviations from such norms in a particular society, but this would be inadequate to the purpose of the philosopher. What is of



concern to the latter is what it is about such behaviour that marks it off as right or wrong, good or bad, and this is not the sort of thing that is captured in observations of behaviour patterns. It may be true to say that the majority of the population conduct themselves in the right manner, but this does not inform us as to *why* this is the right manner in which people ought to conduct themselves.

The pitfalls and mistakes of this sort of approach become clearer the more we investigate. On the basis of such an approach would come mere descriptions of *Actions* as 'right' or 'wrong', rather than judgements, for the subject of such predication would not be *particular acts* but *general types of acts*. Thus propositions such as 'Killing is wrong', 'taking another's possessions is wrong', etc. would result. The problem here of course is that, according to general opinion, there are certain situations in which killing is right (or at least not wrong, e.g. when involuntary), taking another's possession is right, etc., and what is required in order to arrive at valid judgements is reference to particular and specific circumstances. But it is not that our vocabulary is deficient in its capacity for such reference, for the terms 'murder' and 'theft' refer to specific circumstances in particular acts of killing and taking of another's possessions that mark them off as wrong. More precisely judgements such as 'murder' and 'theft' make reference to the voluntariness, the choosing, i.e. the will of such *Actions* and the persons who execute them.

Thus the focus is not so much on ethical *propositions*, which state the validity of certain descriptions of general types of acts, the sort of propositions that moral theory tends to seek and produce. Rather the focus is turned on *judgements* that state '*This* (particular act) is wrong'. Again, this is what Aristotle appears to be getting at with his claim that

ethics cannot go beyond the general in its recommendations, the situations and circumstances of human affairs being so various (*NE* 1094b11ff.).<sup>27</sup> However, this does not preclude us from looking at the conditions of *Action* and the conditions of judgements about specific instances of *Action*.

Indeed, there are matters in the conditions of *Action* and judgement that need to be clarified before consideration of substantive moral propositions can be entered into, and in this what is being put forward by Hegel is not so far removed from debates from our own not too distant past. In her paper 'Modern Moral Philosophy' Anscombe writes

In present-day philosophy an explanation is required how an unjust man is a bad man, or an unjust action a bad one; to give such an explanation belongs to ethics; but it cannot even be begun until we are equipped with a sound philosophy of psychology. For the proof that an unjust man is a bad man would require a positive account of justice as a 'virtue'. This part of the subject-matter of ethics is, however, completely closed to us until we have an account of what *type of characteristic* a virtue is - a problem, not of ethics, but of conceptual analysis - and how it relates to the actions in which it is instanced: a matter which I think Aristotle did not succeed in really making clear. For this we certainly need an account at least of what a human action is at all, and how its description as "doing-such-and-such" is affected by its

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<sup>27</sup> A theme that will feature throughout the present work.

motive and by the intention or intentions in it; and for this an account of such concepts is required.<sup>28</sup>

The important point here is that an analysis of the concepts of motive, intention and *Action* is required, and on this Hegel is equally adamant. However, it is hoped that it will become clear that an analysis of these *would constitute an ethical analysis*, and that an ethical analysis without this would be inadequate, focusing on *Actions* as some sort of events devoid of motives and intentions. 'Killing' describes such an event, but it is devoid of any reference that gives ethical force to the term 'murder'. Such considerations will allow us to approach the question of what it is to be virtuous - or what 'type of characteristic a virtue is'. But an important difference between what Anscombe is saying and the view of Hegel centres on the former's claim that this is not a problem of ethics,<sup>29</sup> but of conceptual analysis: for Hegel the concept of a virtue could only have meaning in relation to the 'actions in which it is instanced', and it would be difficult to see what a conceptual analysis would consist of without such a context. Thus it is a problem of ethics in that it directly relates to human *Action*, and hence the logical starting point for Hegel is will.

### *Conclusion*

Hegel's philosophical treatment of mind arises out of his criticisms of the abstract nature of the discussions of his predecessors and contemporaries, and we have seen how philosophical discourse can

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<sup>28</sup> In *Ethics, Religion and Politics* (Blackwell, 1981), p. 29.

<sup>29</sup> Of course, in suggesting that this is a 'problem of ethics' I am not suggesting that it is an ethical or moral problem - something we might get into a moral dilemma about.

lead to a gulf between how we speak of certain phenomena and that of which we speak. Human beings are indeed rational, but this is not necessarily to say that they are possessed of some kind of thing that is distinguished from their engagement in the world in which they live. Human reason is, for Hegel, primarily practical reason, something that is evident in the ways and means by which human beings pursue their needs, desires, ambitions, etc. that constitute the society in which they live.

In treating mind in this manner, Hegel shows that will is similarly not some abstract entity that we are in possession of, but is rather a aspect of purposive *Action* engaging in the customs, practices, activities of social life. Consequently, morality – reflecting on such engagement and conduct – is itself an aspect of mind, and as such it requires a closer look at the particular details of *Action*. That is to say, a discussion of *Action* and ethics necessarily brings up considerations such as reason, desire, purpose, intention, etc. and what they show us in conduct and ethical judgement. To these I shall turn next.

## **PART TWO: ARISTOTLE, HEGEL AND THE CONDITIONS OF ACTION**

In Part One of this thesis I have concentrated mainly on Hegel's view of the task of philosophy, reflected in his critique of the abstract reasoning that he claims permeates the period of philosophical discourse from Descartes to Hegel's contemporaries. For Hegel, the task of a philosophical discourse is to reflect and assimilate that of which it speaks, rather than to *provide arguments for* that discourse's subject matter. In this way, Hegel claims, philosophy reflects the reason that is the subject matter's own, and not the reason that determines particular ways of thinking about it. The latter approach to philosophy, although it may produce valid points, often only results in one-sided and therefore abstract conclusions.

Thus, in the particular chapters of Part One we have seen how philosophical accounts of mind, morality, ethics, will, freedom and *Action* often lead to conclusions that abstract these from the social and historical context within which they are situated. Under the influence of 17<sup>th</sup> Century epistemology and metaphysics, human beings have been rendered as essentially individual minds, partitioned into separate

faculties of reason and desire, and abstract principles (e.g. duty, utility, contract) have been sought to provide the basis for a common, social, union. This comes over particularly forcibly in discussion of ethics and politics, where the individual stands opposed to the state, society, social life into which they are born. Will, freedom and reason have in this way been divorced from their practical context, the context within which they are exercised.

The difference in approach of Aristotle and Hegel lies in their central proposition that man is essentially a social and political creature. This proposition is not something that is *grounded* by an abstract argument, but is *expressed* in human conduct itself. Of course, this is not to say that what is said in a philosophical discourse is not to be grounded by some sort of argumentation or justification. The point is indicated in a comment by Wittgenstein:

Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of *seeing* on our part; it is our *acting*, which lies at the bottom of the language-game.<sup>1</sup>

That is to say, the ultimate grounds of what is said in philosophical discourses about human conduct are to be located in particular

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<sup>1</sup> *On Certainty* #204.

examples of human conduct.<sup>2</sup> This itself indicates another important difference: the reasoning that holds together a particular philosophical discourse does not have a particular conception of reason or logic to satisfy; what it must satisfy is the reason expressed in its subject matter, in this case the reason expressed in human conduct.

As a corollary to Hegel's critique of abstract reasoning I have argued that, as a result of such abstract reasoning, much philosophical discourse develops a language that loses sight of its subject matter. This is something, I shall continue to claim in Part Two, which still pervades much of 20<sup>th</sup> Century philosophical accounts of *Action* and ethics. This is not an entirely new claim, although it is something that has not been pursued at any length. It was certainly a concern that occupied Wittgenstein in his post-*Tractatus* writings. Indeed, it is perhaps a reaction to the *Tractatus*, and, in particular, to Frege's attempt to develop the mathematical theory of functions to investigate the logical structure of the concepts expressed in natural language. Baker and Hacker nicely sum up the consequences of Frege's work on this for us: "If we then look to [the resulting] quantification theory to discover the 'real logical forms' of our thought, we mistake a deliberately distorted reflection for the object reflected".<sup>3</sup> My point is the same: if we demand that philosophical discourses satisfy particular ways of thinking, particular theoretical and abstract conceptions of

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<sup>2</sup> "Im Anfang war die Tat' [In the beginning was the deed]", see note 1, Chapter Two above.

<sup>3</sup> G.P. Baker and P.M.S. Hacker, *Frege: Logical Excavations* (Oxford 1984) p. 391.

reason, what is then reflected (e.g. mind, will, *Action*, ethics) is distorted by those particular conceptions.

In Part Two of the thesis I shall pursue the exploration of this theme in looking at particular features of human conduct. Often, modern accounts of certain features of human conduct, and their implications on morality and ethics, demand satisfaction in terms of quite strict and formal (and, therefore, abstract) conceptions of particular details of those features of conduct.

In looking at Hegel's considerations on the will, freedom, reason and *Action*, in the preceding chapters the main feature has been that they have been accounted for in their practical, social, context. It has been the logic of will, freedom, reason, and *Action* that has been reflected in those accounts, rather than the demands of a formal, abstract conception of logic. Structuring philosophical discourse by what human conduct itself expresses, I shall claim in the forthcoming chapters, is one of the most illuminating features of Aristotle's work. This forms a contrast with the work in moral philosophy which emphasises formal methods of reasoning, as discussed in the Introduction.



#### 4. REASON AND DESIRE IN CHARACTER AND ACTION

##### *Introduction*

In this chapter I shall consider various aspects of the logic of human conduct in order to illustrate the role that reason, desire, knowledge, belief, and related phenomena play in moral and ethical life. This will be an investigation into the logic of human conduct, rather than a discussion of the logic of the concepts of reason, desire, etc. which might then be employed to furnish theories of *Action* and ethics. The aim here is to show how the quest to produce formal theories and principles can result in refining and defining this cluster of concepts to such an extent that discussions lose sight of their original subject matter. Instead of discussions of reason, desire, etc., what is sought is a rational and logical rigidity that is difficult to reconcile with the reason, desire, etc., as exhibited in human conduct.

For present purposes, I shall limit myself in this chapter to making some general observations on the tendency towards rationalisation and abstraction, illustrated by considering various areas of philosophical debate. The emphasis shall be on illustration, for I shall steer clear of definition as this is itself often the cause of problems in

analysis. However, two specific points will come out of this. a) Discussions that aim to establish particular moral theories and principles overlook the importance of moral character to the nature of morality, thereby highlighting the abstract nature of such an aim; b) Good and evil are characteristics of purposive *Actions*, rather than determinations of theoretical thinking, and the possibility of doing good and evil *Actions* is to be seen in the nature of what is involved in conscience. These two points can be seen in some general and preliminary considerations of *akrasia* and acting with a bad conscience, subjects which will be given more detailed consideration in Chapter Five.

### **The Characterisation of Action and Moral Character: desire, reason and knowledge in human conduct**

In Chapter Three I claimed, in line with Hegel's overall view that the task of philosophy is to assimilate and reflect how things are, that the practical syllogism rests on the logic of *Action*, rather than on a formal and abstract conception of logic or reason (see above, p. 165). The practical syllogism is a central part of Aristotle's discussion of human conduct. Often, however, misunderstandings about what he is saying arise precisely because many commentators demand that an account of human conduct should satisfy a quite formal and abstract conception of reason in an analysis of the practical syllogism. Such a

conception of reason itself often rests on an abstract distinction between desire and reason.

If, as Anscombe says, a fundamental concern for ethics is to get clear about what type of characteristic a virtue is (see note 28, Chapter Three), then we need to take account of the *character* of the *Action* in which virtue is present, and the moral character of the agent. That is to say, desires, feelings, etc. are integral to a person's moral character, and reason and desire are not as easily distinguishable in nature as formal analysis might suggest. The hard and fast distinction between reason and desire is something that prevails in modern philosophy, but it is also made by commentators on Aristotle. As we have seen in the Introduction, for many influential moral philosophers reason is the true arbiter of morality (e.g. Hare, Nagel, Rawls, Scanlon). Desire and willing, however, are matters of psychology or the language of psychology (Hume and Hare respectively), or developed into neo-Humean theories of motivation,<sup>1</sup> and thus are taken out of the context of personal experience and social institutions that constitute moral life.

### *Desire in Moral Character*

Moral character is a constant feature throughout *NE*. Given this, it is somewhat surprising that many commentators fail to take seriously the

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<sup>1</sup> C.f. Michael Smith's *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994). I shall raise a few points in relation to this in the conclusion.

importance of the role Aristotle sees in the discussion of character. More often than not, this is due to commentators wanting to derive from *NE* a formal account of conduct as an external event in the world, rather than as account of human conduct as an indication of a person's moral character. Consider, for example, a remark by Anthony Kenny:

The opening passage of book iii [of *NE*] has only a punning reference to 'passion and action' to link the topic of voluntariness with that of virtue.<sup>2</sup>

In particular, the problem relates to Aristotle's stipulating that how a person feels after an *Action* is relevant to questions of voluntariness. Rosalind Hursthouse sketches out the problem as it is seen by those who are unhappy with such a stipulation:

"Feelings are relevant to questions of voluntariness", it might be said "only in so far as passion prior to or during action might excuse the action or make it involuntary. So to bring in how the agent feels subsequent to the action, as in 1110b18-19 and 1111a20 is simply a mistake".<sup>3</sup>

As Hursthouse points out, failure to take Aristotle seriously here is a failure to take seriously that we are dealing with character, and not merely acting in terms of an external account of what is actually done.

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<sup>2</sup> A. Kenny in *Aristotle's Theory of Will* (Duckworth, 1979), p. 3.

<sup>3</sup> R. Hursthouse in 'Acting and Feeling in Character: Nichomachean Ethics 3.i.' in *Phronesis* Vol. XXIX, No.3, 1984, pp. 254-5.

In the passage at *NE* 1110b18-19 Aristotle says that how a person feels subsequent to an *Action* has a bearing on whether it is to be regarded as voluntary or involuntary. Now, if we were concerned with *Action* only in terms of what is done, on its effects or consequences, its formal character (an external description of what is done) – say, for instance, for purposes of establishing a theory of responsibility<sup>4</sup> – then it would seem that feelings after the event are irrelevant. But the very fact that Aristotle *does* consider them relevant indicates he is more concerned with moral character – the motives, desires, feelings, reasons, that are characteristic of a person's conduct. Here, as throughout *NE*, Aristotle is not so much concerned with a definition of *Action* by which we might determine what counts as good or bad, as with the sorts of characteristics from which *Actions* issue.

### *Abstract Reason and Moral Theory*

This concern with the types of characteristics from which *Actions* issue marks off a significant difference between Aristotle's concerns and the emphasis on reason in modern moral philosophy. Aristotle is examining the logic of human conduct, the logic it expresses in virtue of moral character, rather than looking to establish a theory of *Action*

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<sup>4</sup> For those commentators who consider that book III of *NE* principally sketches out a theory of moral responsibility, see e.g. Kenny, *op. cit.*, T. Irwin 'Reason and Responsibility in Aristotle' in A. O. Rorty (Ed.) *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* (California 1980), Randall R. Curren 'The Contribution of *Nicomachean Ethics* iii 5 to Aristotle's Theory of Responsibility' in *History of Philosophy Quarterly* vol. 6, No. 3 July 1989. In contrast see Hursthouse, *op. cit.*

that will yield formal principles which can then be employed to determine what it is good to do and what it is bad to do. The difference can be made more explicit from a point made by Peter Winch. Discussing the difference between a parent who engages with his child spontaneously, and one who engages with his child because he thinks he ought to, or out of duty, Winch says:

I am not trying to *replace* Kant's contention that acting for the sake of duty is the only kind of behaviour which is good without qualification with the counter-contention that acting spontaneously is the only kind of behaviour which is good without qualification. On the contrary, my contention is that there is *no* general kind of behaviour of which we have to say that it is good without qualification. Kant's mistake, that is, lies in trying to fill out the view that only the good will can be called good without qualification with a positive account of the kind of behaviour in which a good will *must* manifest itself. All we can do, I am arguing, is to look at particular examples and see what we *do* want to say about them; there are no general rules which can determine in advance what we *must* say about them.<sup>5</sup>

Of particular interest here is the negative emphasis that Winch places on 'must'. Theories of *Action* and theories of morality are at their most

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<sup>5</sup> P. Winch, 'Moral Integrity' in Winch, *Ethics and Action* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972), pp. 181-2.

abstract when it is thought that they *must* satisfy either some sort of logical or metaphysical justification: in the case of *Action*, for instance, a theory must satisfy the inference of formal syllogism that is brought into considerations of practical reason;<sup>6</sup> in morality, Kant attempts to derive morals from reason alone. Such justifications are not going to be derived from the study of human conduct, for formal logic and metaphysical reasoning are not features of conduct. This is why Aristotle rightly emphasises, throughout *NE*, that the study of ethics can only give guidance for the most part.

The demands of satisfying a formal conception of logic and metaphysical justification in theories of *Action* and morality are indicative of the hard and fast distinction between reason and desire. Whether desires, feelings, appetite, etc. are going to feature in a particular theory or not, ultimately that theory must satisfy the demands of abstract reason. I say 'abstract' reason, for it is not the reason that is found in human conduct, but a conception that has been purified, refined, for the purpose of satisfying formal logical conditions and argumentation. The reason present in conduct is purged of the desire element and elevated as the arbiter of what is to count as good or as bad.

Often the reasons for my conduct *are* my desires, without such conduct necessarily being unreasonable or irrational. Distinguishing the rational- or 'reason'- content from the 'desire'-content in the desires

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<sup>6</sup> I shall discuss this point in greater depth in Chapter Six.

that are my reasons for acting, is often impossible, precisely because such a project is misconceived in assuming that human conduct can be accounted for in terms of the analytical distinctions of 'reason' and 'desire'. On the basis of such a distinction *Action* becomes a specialised term in a language that loses sight of its original subject matter.

In the area of moral philosophy, such a language renders the predicates 'good' and 'evil' as abstract terms that are attached to *Actions*, very much in the manner of basic subject-predicate logic. It is against such a background that I claim that in Aristotle and Hegel we get discussions that are determined by the logic of *Action*, and in which we can see that 'good' and 'evil' function in the *Actions* in which they are instanced. When it comes to questions of 'good' and 'evil', the description 'That was good/evil' says that 'good/evil' is *characteristic of the Action*, rather than something that, after abstract consideration, or measured against an abstract rule or principle, we merely want to say of the *Action*. Again, if it is merely a matter of what we want to say, morality itself becomes arbitrary (see Chapter Two, pp. 98ff. Also, see p. 134): 'Do we want to say anything, and if so which particular moral principle or theory should we invoke?' However, this ignores the fact that in purposive *Action* what is done is done with the agent *knowing* the *Action* as good and evil, a knowing that is not the result of, or determined by, or an appeal to, abstract reasoning or principles.



*Knowledge and self-awareness in Human Conduct*

For both Aristotle and Hegel knowledge is central to *Action*, knowing what is, and what is not, in our power to do. This self-awareness itself accounts for the ethical nature of human conduct – acting well or badly, the good or evil character of *Action*. Hegel says, "...when we speak of good, we mean the knowledge of it" (*PR* #139[A]). Here Hegel is not saying that in having knowledge of good we have knowledge of an abstract concept or category. Good, for Hegel, is not a predicate that attaches, in the sense of formal subject-predicate logic, to an *Action*. Good, rather, is the character of the *Action*, the deed, what is done, as opposed to an abstract category under which we place some *Actions*, and not others. Thus, when 'we mean the knowledge of it', it is not 'good' as such that we have knowledge of, but *Actions* which are of that character. The self-awareness of *Action* is knowledge of what is, and what is not, in my power to do as good and as evil, and not necessarily a philosophical insight into what good and bad consist of.<sup>7</sup>

This has important consequences for the analysis of *Action*, and the nature of the knowledge involved in our knowing what is and is not in our power to do. A closer look at what is involved will uncover a source of much confusion in philosophical accounts of morality.

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<sup>7</sup> If such a thing is to be had. Philosophers certainly ask more questions about good and evil, but it is yet to be proved that they therefore have a greater insight.

One understanding of 'knowledge', the knowledge of what is, and what is not, in our power to do, is based on what is *physically* possible for someone to do. On such a basis, the assessment of a person's ability to do something will take into account certain physical characteristics (e.g. strength, manipulative skills) and cognitive abilities (e.g. to manipulate tools, machinery, other people, with certain ends in view). On these grounds, I know that it is in my power to do all sorts of things. I could, for instance, go out into the street with my grandfather's old rifle and fire it at anybody who crosses my path. I know the rifle works, I know what it is capable of doing, I have the physical strength to wield it and pull the trigger – I know that such an *Action* is within my power.

This assessment of what is in my power to do is something that can be carried out by a stranger, someone who has just met me. This, however, says something important. The assessment would be made on the basis of my being a human being with certain physical and cognitive capacities, and not on consideration of the person G.P. What has not been accounted for is that I am a person with moral character, and that my perspective on what is and what is not in my power to do is a *moral* perspective. As G.P., I *know* that it is *not* in my power to do such a thing. It may well be the case that I know I can do some things that others find morally repugnant, that others know are not within their power to do. But that also takes into account that I am a person with moral character. Making an assessment of what is and what is not in my power to do without consideration of this, is to make an assessment of an *abstract* human being, with certain physical and

cognitive abilities. It would not be an assessment of G.P. – the ‘self’ in self-knowledge, that which refers to G.P., drops out of account, leaving only an abstract human being. Without considerations of character, we are *abstract* individual human beings – but no such things exist.

That this is an abstract human being follows directly from the notion of ‘knowledge’ that is being employed. On the surface, it would very much seem that the analysis of our knowledge of what is, and is not, in our power to do is an example of practical reasoning. That is, it focuses on particular capacities that are the means by which it is possible to attain certain ends. But this is not the case. Precisely because the analysis is carried out on purely physical grounds stripped of the moral character of a particular person, the reasoning is itself of an abstract, rather than a practical, nature. I can certainly sit at my desk and reason about my strength and manipulative skills, concluding my reasoning on these that I could physically go out and commit murder. In this sense, it might be said that I ‘know’ that it is within my power. But I also *know* that I could not do that, in virtue of knowing myself as the particular person G.P. The ‘knowledge’ and the so-called practical reasoning that is involved in analysing an abstract human being is far removed from the knowledge that *real* persons have of themselves, and the practical reasoning involved in actual instances of human conduct.

This process whereby aspects of human conduct and experience are rendered abstract is particularly widespread in much modern moral philosophy, the result of focusing on constructing moral theories and

the establishing of moral rules and principles. As a result human beings are viewed as abstract entities, and what counts as moral *Action* is derived from a rational assessment and application of those theories and principles. Moral character does not come into the equation. This leads to a very peculiar outlook: human beings are not, *per se*, moral beings; they have to *make* themselves so by way of rational calculation. We do not, *per se*, view the world we that live in morally; rational calculation will tell us the right way to view it like that. Human conduct is not, *per se*, moral in character; that is something given to it as a result of rational calculation.

However, for both Aristotle and Hegel, good and evil have their origin in human conduct, and not in abstract human thought. Furthermore, human beings conduct themselves in particular social situations, consisting of quite definite customs, habits, practices, laws, etc., from which the particular contents of human conduct are taken. The choices a person makes are the mark of his character (*NE* 1111b6), and to choose involves choosing from something. These customs, etc. constitute the range and context from which choices are made. It is only within such a context, against such a background, that questions about good and evil, right and wrong, virtue and vice arise. To recognise such moral distinctions and judgements involves conscience.

### **Conscience, Action and Character in Moral Life**

Purposive engagement in an ethical community involves being of a certain moral character, which in turn involves knowing *Actions*, activities, practices, etc. as good and evil in themselves, rather than having abstract conceptions of good and evil, under which headings human conduct is categorised. Good and evil are *characteristic* of *Actions*, rather than abstract concepts or categories that are predicated of certain deeds by way of some sort of faculty, or formal logical operation of reason. Good and evil, this amounts to saying, originate in human conduct, and not abstract reasoning *about* human conduct. This practical knowledge of good and evil involves conscience and, for Hegel, it is in having such a conscience that "...both morality and evil have their common root" (PR #139).

The aim of Hegel's discussion of conscience is to bring out the practical (or, as he would say, 'concrete') nature of good and evil. I say 'bring out' quite specifically, for good and evil are already *in*, so to speak, *Action*, the philosophical task being to *expose* or *show* this. Doing so involves saying something more on the way in which reason and desire are employed in discussing human conduct, in particular the conception of reasoning involved in moral philosophy. This, in turn, has some interesting implications for the nature of judgement.

*Conscience: the origin of good and evil*

Paragraph 139 of *PR* demands close attention. Here Hegel expands on his claim that to have conscience is, *eo ipso*, to be capable of good and evil<sup>8</sup>. The passage is lengthy, so rather than quote it in full I shall note its most pertinent points. The possibility of evil, Hegel says, comes about in the form of

...the opposition of the natural level and the inwardness of the will. In this opposition, the latter is only a relative and abstract subjectivity which can draw its content only from the determinant content of the natural will, from desire, impulse, inclination, & c.

By 'inwardness of will' and 'subjectivity' Hegel means the individual human being who has needs, desires and impulses to pursue and fulfil. 'Inwardness of will' is 'relative and abstract' because what Hegel is doing is analysing down the concept of *Action* into the two aspects under which it can be grasped in thought, i.e. in terms of needs, desires, impulses, etc., and in terms of reason, which involves self-consciousness, i.e. the recognition of these needs, etc. Hegel goes on to say that desires, impulses, etc. *may* be recognised as either 'good' or 'evil', but in attributing good and evil we are saying something quite specific about the sort of *Action* we are attributing them to. That is to say, in attributing good or evil to instances of conduct, we are saying

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<sup>8</sup> Here I shall restrict myself to conscience in the sense of self-conscious awareness and knowing. Problematic conscience will come into play in Chapter Five.

that such instances reflect some further aspect which takes them out of the category of acting through impulse and desire (as, for instance, infants and animals do, although because of this impulsiveness we do not consider their conduct in terms of good and evil). We might say: under the description 'fulfilling a desire' an *Action* is neither good nor evil, but it may well be either of these under the description of an assessment of the rationality of the *Action*. This rationality involves being aware of desires, impulses, etc., and also being aware that they may be either good or evil, as

...good...comes on the scene as the opposite extreme to immediate objectivity, the natural pure and simple [i.e. impulsively 'fulfilling a desire'], and as soon as the will is reflected into itself and consciousness is a knowing consciousness.

Being able to apply the terms 'good' and 'evil' in relation to my desires involves being *aware, conscious* of the desires, impulses, etc. (as opposed to unconsciously acting upon them) that I may attribute 'good' and 'evil' to; and also being aware that this is something I can do, which involves, so to speak, my reflecting on my own capacities (this being part of what Hegel means by will returning into itself – e.g. *PR* #7). 'When man wills the natural, it is no longer merely natural'. We reject the appeal to impulse and desire in excusing behaviour precisely because the recognition of those desires and impulses itself involves the possibility of *not* acting in that way.

The two aspects of purposive *Action* which come out in analysis, desire and reason, are something that, in self-consciousness, we are aware of:

Man is therefore evil by a conjunction between his natural or undeveloped character and his reflection into himself; and therefore evil belongs neither to nature as such by itself - unless nature were supposed to be the natural character of the will which rests in its particular content - nor to introverted reflection by itself, i.e. cognition in general...(Ibid.)

Here Hegel is not so much concerned to sketch what the 'doing of evil' involves, but rather to set out the nature of human conduct, showing the grounds for our acting well or badly, employing the terms 'good' and 'evil' of *Action* (the foregoing quotation being an explanation of in what 'both morality and evil have their common root'). In doing so he comes from the claim that individuals act both in terms of desire, impulse, etc. - often considered to be 'natural', shared with animals - and in terms of reason, leading to the overall claim of the paragraph that it is only in that desires, impulses, etc. are the object of rational consideration, a feature of rational *Action*, that evil appears on the scene.

Keeping in mind, then, that Hegel is concerned with the origin of the concepts of good and evil, and not their application to any particular types of *Action*, the argument goes something like this. *Action* can be



characterised both in terms of reason and in terms of acting out of desires, impulses, etc. Suppose we tried to characterise a human's conduct just in terms of the latter. Then it would not merely be the case that there are no reasons for my behaving impulsively, but that, considering the sort of creature that I am, it would not make sense to ask for my reasons for behaving in the way I did: in this sense, it might be said that it would be 'natural' for me to behave in this way. If asked to give reasons why I behaved in this way, either the questioner is ignorant of the sort of creature I am, or he is asking me to justify or to explain why I behaved as I did. But in this characterisation I acted impulsively, without having reflective, conscious reasons for my conduct, and thus the question makes no sense, in the same way that it makes no sense to ask for an infant's or animal's reasons for what they do. To ask such a question implies that in some sense or another I *chose* to act in that way, but the point is that the sort of behaviour that we have in mind here is not that which involves reason in the choosing to do it, but is behaviour of an impulsive kind. An account of my behaviour here is given in terms of the needs, desires, etc. that I have in virtue of being the sort of creature I am.

### *Reason and Desire in Action*

Now it would be an impossible task to try to illustrate this point with an example of *Action*, precisely because the account has been sketched specifically leaving out another essential aspect of *Action*: rationality.

Not only do we act by impulse, but by reason also. That is to say, we not only conduct ourselves in order to fulfil certain desires, but we also employ different means by which those desires can be fulfilled. This would be an *Action* carried out by way of practical reason. But this is not to say that reason is something that we have over and above the 'natural' element of desire, for

In everything human it is thinking, thought, which is the effective thing. An animal lives too, it shares needs, feelings, etc. with man. But if man is to be distinguished from animal, his feelings must be human, not animal, i.e. thought must be implicit in it. An animal has sensuous feelings, desires, etc., but no religion, science, art, or imagination. In all these thinking is at work....

We have will, vision, etc. and oppose them to thinking, but thinking determines not only thinking but the will, etc. too, and when we look at it more closely we come to the knowledge that thinking is not something particular, a special force, but the essential and universal thing from which everything else is produced (*IHLP* pp. 54-5).

Thus Hegel is *not* saying here that this sort of reason separates us off from our natural tendencies, that it somehow frees us from nature, for here we are talking about something that is quite natural to us, self-

consciousness - something which Anscombe describes usefully as 'knowledge of the object that one is, of the human animal that one is'.<sup>9</sup>

Considering a passage from Aristotle's discussion of voluntary and involuntary conduct can further illuminate this point:

It is probably wrong to say that acts due to temper and appetite are involuntary; for on this view in the first place the capacity for voluntary action will not extend to any animal other than man, or even to children; and secondly, when we act from appetite or temper are none of our *Actions* voluntary? (NE 1111a24 - 28).<sup>10</sup>

*Voluntary Actions* are those in which "the originating cause lies in the agent himself" (1111a23), and thus there is nothing peculiar in saying that someone acted through desire or temper *and* acted voluntarily, precisely because that someone is the sort of creature who has desires. Whether the conduct is a spontaneous outburst of temper or a calculated means of fulfilling a desire, it does not affect the question of voluntariness; for

...what difference is there in point of voluntariness between wrong *Actions* that are calculated and wrong *Actions* that are due to temper? Both are to be avoided;

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<sup>9</sup> 'The First Person' in Guttenplan (ed.), *Mind and Language* (Oxford, 1972), p. 62.

<sup>10</sup> In both the Loeb and Penguin editions 'appetite' is rendered as 'desire'. Aristotle himself uses *epithumia*, which usually indicates desire in general, i.e. appetite, rather than *orexis* which is generally used to indicate a specific desire.

and the irrational feelings are considered to be no less part of human nature than our considered judgements. It follows that *Actions* due to temper or appetite are also proper to the human agent. Therefore it is absurd to class these actions as involuntary (1111a34 – b3).<sup>11</sup>

Here we must not construe Aristotle's mention of 'irrational feelings' in Humean or 'quasi-hydraulic' conceptions of desire-satisfaction. Desires are not bottom line forces that set reason off on its mission of fulfilment. The desires I have depend on what there is to be desired. I desire sweet things because there are sweet things. The discovery of sugar cane did not come about out of the desire of the people of the western world for sweet things, but it is a historical cause of the existence of the various sweet things there are to be desired. Here we have a process of rational appetite, the basis upon which the abstract distinction between reason and desire rests. Aristotle's point about voluntary *Actions* is that both desire and reason feature in an account of human conduct, and not in hidden forces. As to where morality and evil come into the picture, this requires a further point,

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<sup>11</sup> Discussing force and involuntariness in *NE* Kenny (op. cit., pp. 35-6) puts Aristotle's point in the context of an opponent to his argument "...who is a determinist in respect of bad actions, and a libertarian in respect of good". I would suggest that in putting the point in terms of a philosophical argument we miss an important observation that Aristotle is making with respect to character and *Action*, viz. that how a person himself characterises his acts is itself an indication of his character as a person. This is a point that Hegel attempts to get over throughout his discussion of good and conscience (*PR* #129-40).

one that arises directly out of consideration of these two aspects of *Action*.

### *The Logic of Reason and Desire in Action*

In analysing *Action* in terms of desire and reason, Hegel often employs the logical categories of particularity and universality. But although they are logical, i.e. technical, categories, in line with Hegel's view that the practical syllogism reflects purposive *Action*, they reflect the logic of *Action*. For instance, in *Action* involving the pursuit of a specific desire, 'particularity' can be seen in that the agent is concerned solely with the *here and now*, fulfilling *this* desire. Looking solely from this perspective, we see the agent's concern as focused solely on the particular aspect of the *Action*, that is, a fulfilment of his desire, the sort of attitude of which 'I just want this...' is descriptive. The central thing about the *Action* is that it fulfils something that he wants. Here focusing on the desirability<sup>12</sup> of the *Action* is to focus on its particular aspects - both in that it concerns a particular feature of the *Action*, that it fulfils a desire, and in that our interest in the *Action* is that it issued from a person with a particular desire.

In considering purposive *Action*, however, there is more involved than merely the pursuit of desire in terms of the here and now. For

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<sup>12</sup> Not in the sense of *hairetos* (choiceworthy), as employed by Aristotle. This will come into play shortly.

instance, a person is hungry, and so he eats. But there are various questions that could be raised, falling under the general heading of 'right' – general in the sense of its not necessarily being the 'right' of morality. That is, questions as to whether *this* is the right time, place, food, etc. to eat. These are the types of questions that adults ask children to consider, in the hope that, eventually, they will ask such questions of themselves without prompting. Even better, we would hope that they so train and habituate themselves that the questions (ideally) never, or (at least) rarely, arise: *feeling* hungry will not automatically lead to wanting to eat when it is not the right time, place, food, etc. In other words, through training and habituation - much of it self-training and habituation - desire becomes 'right desire', rational desire, and *Actions* exhibit rational principle.

It is this rational element to purposive *Action* that Hegel refers to as the 'universal' aspect of *Action*. Thus, although Hegel discusses human conduct in terms of desire and reason, which in analysis can be distinguished, in purposive *Action* they are not clearly distinct, are not two distinct 'faculties', do not issue from distinct 'faculties'. In analysis we form categories, concepts, etc. out of them, and as such they are abstract categories: the danger lies in losing sight of what we are doing in the process of analysis, and assuming that the distinct categories, concepts, etc. that we form are distinct, or show the same degree of distinctness, in the subject matter that we are analysing.

*Knowledge, Reasoning and Principle*

In forming categories, concepts, etc. in philosophical analysis the aim is to be as clear as possible about what we are saying about our subject matter. Those categories, concepts, etc. function, so to speak, as signposts that map out the path that our reasoning and arguments take in our discussions. However, in concentrating on producing a precise and clear map, the latter can become a refined version of the terrain that it covers. In doing so, anomalies often appear between our discussions and that which they address, and what is then sought is a sharper definition of the categories that are employed. This is particularly evident in considerations of *Action* and ethics: epistemological exactitude is demanded of the knowledge and reasoning involved in human conduct in attempting to come to terms with certain problems, a demand which often only throws up further problems<sup>13</sup>.

Consider this in relation to the practical syllogism and something Aristotle says about *akrasia*. Aristotle identifies a universal proposition in the major premise, and in his discussion of *akrasia* he says that the incontinent person has a principle, a rational part to his soul (*NE* 1102b15), by which he recognises the right thing to do. But he acts contrary to this, even though he knows what he does is wrong (1145b12-13). Similarly, in cases of bad conscience, Hegel recognises

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<sup>13</sup> One way in which the search for such exactitude creates problems is in discussions of *akrasia*, a point I shall return to Chapter Five.

"knowledge of the true universal, whether knowledge in the form of merely a feeling for right or duty, or of a deeper cognition and apprehension of them" (*PR* #140[A]). Hegel takes care here in ensuring that we understand his use of 'knowledge' in a broad sense, and we need to take similar care in Aristotle also. In neither Aristotle or Hegel is there a specific or definite conception of knowledge involved. As we shall come to see, the significance of this comes out when we consider the way in which Aristotle distinguishes between himself and Socrates in employing 'knowledge', a difference also reflected in their views as to how 'principle' figures in human conduct.

A great many of the arguments in *NE* involve Aristotle's invoking 'right principle'.<sup>14</sup> It turns up as the principle of virtuous *Action*, the basis of law and justice, a sign of good character, and yet we do not get a specific definition of what it is. However, I would suggest that to look for such a rigid definition would indicate that we have misconceived Aristotle's point. It is not something that can be formalised, but rather comes into play in particular circumstances: "...the temperate man

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the Penguin edition Thomson uses 'rational principle' and 'right principle' where most other translators use 'reason' and 'right reason'. For example, at 1119b17, where Peters, Chase and the revised Oxford translation use the latter terms. For present purposes I shall substitute 'reason' and 'right reason' where Tredennick uses 'rational' and 'right principle'. As we shall see, this would very much seem to be substantiated by the context.



desires the right things in the right way and at the right time, and this...is prescribed by reason" (NE 1119b19).<sup>15</sup>

*Action* is the result of *prohairesis*, which involves deliberation (*bouleusis*), a particular employment of reason (*logos*), the latter also being present in *akrasia*. More importantly though, right reason (*orthos logos*) is in there too:

...incontinent action is in a sense influenced by reason and opinion, contrary not in itself but only incidentally (because it is the desire, not the opinion, that is contrary) to the right reason. So this is [a]...reason why the brutes are not incontinent, viz. because they have no universal belief but only an impression and memory of particulars (1147b1-5).

The incontinent act involves some sort of understanding and acknowledgement of rightness, which would come, say, in an account of the incontinent's universal beliefs. The dilemma for the incontinent is that his beliefs about how he ought to go on are challenged by his

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<sup>15</sup> The point that the right principle is not something that can be formalised or written down, and the variety of uses that Aristotle puts it to might be understood in the context of the broad extension of *logos*: not only does it translate into a formal account of, say, a mathematical proposition (*logon echein*), and thus a technical principle that we might consciously employ when making calculations, but also into an account that can be given of something without it being a guiding principle of that something, c.f. NE 1102b32 - 3. Further still we would want to say that *Action* may be guided by principle, although in saying so we would not want to say that it is guided by

desire to do otherwise. Notice here that it is not necessarily the case that this involves knowledge of a *particular principle*, but only a belief or opinion (*doxa*), the latter involving right reasoning. That is to say, a belief or opinion about how we ought to go on involves some sort of grasp of the term 'right', without necessarily operating with a particular principle that determines what is right and what is wrong. But this does not preclude someone's knowing *this* to be an unworthy, dishonourable, dishonest, etc. thing to do. Now when we are talking of a situation where the agent is acting contrary to a specific duty, it is certainly the case that 'I ought not to do this', i.e. the 'ought' has a *particular* reference, but even here right reasoning involves the *universal* in that 'ought' implies rightness or correctness, and rightness and correctness imply a rule. Here the 'ought' has universal reference, the very context that provides for the possibility of 'ought' having particular reference. That is to say, 'ought' functions giving a universal sense to a statement where particular reference is made.

When a person considers how he ought or ought not to behave, this is indicative of his character, which involves beliefs and opinions about the rights and wrongs of certain *Actions*, practices and activities. This is precisely because *Actions*, practices and activities *imply* a rule, right reasoning, rightness: in acting I am *prima facie* saying that it is fine,

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a particular, formalisable, principle. It is here that we can begin to see the tensions between modern Aristotelians and Kantians.

alright, ok, etc., to do this.<sup>16</sup> It is this universal aspect of *Action* which is expressed by 'ought', something that is also indicated in the judgements we make about the conduct of those whom we consider to be incapable of right reasoning: to excuse them thus arises precisely because what they did is something that ought not, as a rule, to be done; it is on the basis of this that the practice of excusing operates. On the other hand, with those whom we consider capable of right reasoning, it is precisely the possibility of there being a conflict between an individual's particular desires, *as an individual*, and the universal aspect implied by right reasoning that the 'ought' arises.

At *NE* 1134a35-b2 Aristotle broadens his use of right reason in discussing political justice. It is not the man we allow to rule, he says, but right reason, "because a man does so for his own interests"; whereas "justice is the good of others". At 1180a21 law is said to be the "pronouncement [*logos*] of a kind of practical wisdom or intelligence".<sup>17</sup> Clearly right reason is related to *eudaimonia* in its being the principle of virtue, i.e. the universal principle implied by virtuous *Action*. It is also, however, reflective of the ethical community, in that right reason involves "...perception [*aisthesis*] of good and evil, just and unjust, etc.", it being "... the sharing of a common view in *these*

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<sup>16</sup> I say *prima facie* in that, of course, with the *akratic* it is expressly not the case that he thinks this is alright to do. The significance of this will come up shortly.

<sup>17</sup> Again, here, Aristotle is quite loose on what right reason involves, i.e. it is a *kind of* practical wisdom or intelligence. Right reason is not something definable *in itself*, for,

matters that makes a household or state".<sup>18</sup> Thus, right reason is the principle of justice and the rational basis for formal law. Yet the point cannot be reducible to a merely 'external' account of *Action*, to the claim that conduct is virtuous or vicious in that it occurs in the public domain. For such conduct will be considered an *Action* only in that we can attribute certain cognitive abilities to the agent, i.e. in virtue of his being someone who agrees in the principle implied by right reasoning, the principle of ethical community.

### **Knowledge, Judgement and Character in Moral Life**

In Aristotle's discussion of virtue and right reasoning, there is an important difference between what he means and the sort of knowledge that Plato or Socrates had in mind. For them, the virtues are principles which are the object of knowledge, whereas for Aristotle they are not so much principles as character traits which *imply* principle. In the *Eudemian Ethics* Aristotle gives us some nice contrasts between himself and Socrates. Military courage is

...due to experience and knowledge, not (as Socrates said) of what is fearful, but of the resources they have to meet what is fearful.

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in relation to virtue, it is expressed in the sphere of activity and feeling (*NE* Book Two, chapter vii).

<sup>18</sup> *Politics*, 1253a17.

.... the Socratic saying that nothing is stronger than wisdom is right. But when Socrates said this of knowledge he was wrong. For wisdom is an excellence and not a species of knowledge, but another kind of cognition...<sup>19</sup>

For Socrates virtue involves a quite formal knowing, i.e. knowing 'objects', e.g. *what* is fearful, whereas for Aristotle knowledge in the sphere of virtue is not of this kind, but rather wisdom (*phronesis*). That is to say, knowledge in the sphere of virtue and its activity is not the knowledge of specific objects, and definite species of knowledge, as exemplified in the 'knower-known' dyad of epistemological theory; wisdom is a *practical* cognition, involving a grasp of circumstances indicating the right way to go on.

### *The 'Ought' of Judgement and Action*

In Hegel's characterisation it is also recognised that the person acting with a bad conscience need not know, in the strict sense, the right principle – he may have 'knowledge in the form of merely feeling for right or duty'. *Action* is rational for Hegel in that it issues from "purpose, as issuing from a thinker" (*PR* #119), and thinking involves thinking about "the universal side of action, i.e. the intention [i.e. what was intended by doing such-and-such]" (*ibid.*). The purpose and intention in *Action* reflect the practical knowledge in the agent in that it

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<sup>19</sup> Oxford Revised edition, 1229a14 and 1246b33 respectively.

involves the knowledge that doing such-and-such will bring about more than the *here and now* of doing such-and-such:

The discrete character of the external world shows what the nature of that world is, namely a chain of external relations. Actuality is touched in the first instance only at a single point (arson, for instance, *directly* concerns only a tiny section of the firewood, i.e. is describable in a proposition, not a judgement), but the universal nature of this point entails its expansion...hence in murder, it is not a piece of flesh, as something isolated, which is injured, but life itself which is injured in that piece of flesh (*Ibid.*).

In intending to commit arson or murder I know that much more than this bit of wood or flesh is damaged. In this, thinking is involved, i.e. the *Action* issues as from a thinker and, further, a judgement is involved: a description of the *Action* would not be a mere proposition – ‘I set *this* bit of wood alight’, ‘I put the knife in *this* bit of flesh’; this would not be a full description of my *Action*. The descriptions ‘I set fire to the house’ and ‘I murdered Jones’ say that in putting the match to this piece of wood I burnt the house down, and in putting the knife in this piece of flesh I murdered Jones. The judgement involved in my *Action* is reflected in my practical knowledge: in order to burn down the house, in order to murder Jones (both of which are the originative causes, the purpose for doing *this* e.g. *NE* 1140b16), I ought to, should, do *this*.

Thus, the 'ought' or 'should' indicates the universal element in *Action* of the judgement involved in practical reasoning. In this sense, all purposive *Action* involves the judgement 'I ought or should do this', in that the 'ought' or 'should' conjoins doing *this* with my purpose, what I want to bring about, which is always (in *purposive Action, ex hypothesi*) more than doing *this*. It is also in this sense that, as Aristotle says at the beginning of Book One of *NE*, all rational activity aims at some good, and that this is the object of life, life being activity (*NE* 1168a7). Similarly for Hegel: every *Action* has some positive end in that it involves changing a given state of affairs confronting the agent, and it is precisely this "...raising of the given to something self-created which yields the higher orbit of the good" (*PR* #123[A]). That is, changing a given state of affairs implies that the change that I create *ought* to be the case.

It might be objected here that the 'ought' of a purely practical form of reasoning has been surreptitiously changed to that of the moral 'ought', coming out fully in the claim that all *Action* aims at some good. But this is precisely what I am *not* doing. The 'good' that I am referring to here is that expressed in the question 'What is the *good* in that?', and not the 'good' of abstract moral theory, or the 'good' of a moral principle arrived at by way of abstract reasoning. Of course, the question that still seems to remain is whether the 'good' that my *Action* aims at *is* good, and to some extent this is a valid question. But the tendency of moral philosophers to think of good as being something

over and above *Action*, activities, practices etc., reveals something peculiar in raising the question.

### *The Practical Good and The Moral Good*

The demand for a specifically *moral* good in analyses of *Action* reveals a rather abstract conception of human conduct. In a statement such as 'All *Action* aims at some good' the reference of 'all *Action*', that which it refers to, is, in the main, human activity in general. That is, examples of 'All *Action*' would take into account the practices, activities, customs, habits, of everyday human life, the activities that constitute the lives we lead. A great many of these are shared activities that we participate in, as a matter of course, as ways in which we go about satisfying our general needs, desires, etc. In doing so, we participate in such activities for some good, even if we don't actually think this every time we eat or drink, go to work, have a game of chess, get on a bus. As a matter of course, the question as to what is *morally* good about all of this does not arise.

Nevertheless, the participation in such activities implies the judgement 'This ought to be done', which comes out when the moral question is raised: 'Ought you to have done that?' This is relatively rare, referring to particular *Actions* or activities ('ought you to do that sort of thing?'), against the background of a great many other *Actions* and activities where the moral question is not considered to be relevant or appropriate. Certainly, there are practices that have been hitherto



accepted and practised as a matter of course, and questioned as to whether they ought to be participated in. Tradition, custom and habit are no absolute justification for human conduct, the point that Hegel is making in his use of the phrase 'the spirit of reflection' (see Chapter Two above). But the peculiarity arises in attempting to come up with a specifically moral 'good' outside of such contexts, precisely because it involves looking away from contexts out of which the moral question is raised, contexts that (so to speak) give birth to the question.

The result of this demand for a conception of the good as something over and above the details of particular *Actions* and contexts is, more often than not, a definition that, not surprisingly, bears little relation to the everyday lives of people who are, presumably, to live up to and instantiate such an exemplar. The further question is then often asked, 'What *sort of Action* is it that would best accommodate the deliverance of this good?', leading to a definition of *Action* which acts as a measure of good *Action*. The abstract nature of such reasoning is witnessed by its total impracticality: even if it were possible (which is extremely doubtful) to invoke such definitions into human conduct, moral life – the business of everyday life – would come to a standstill. Perhaps it will be said that this is not the point of moral theory, but that still leaves the question as to exactly *what is* the point of theorising that bears little resemblance to the moral life that people *do* lead.

To what extent, then, is the question of whether the good of someone's activity *is* good, still a valid question? The answer to that is not by way of comparison with some abstract notion of the good or

*Action*, but to look to the actual, purported, good that an activity aims at. This is something that can only be evaluated within the context of the particular activity, for activities do not aim at an abstract notion of the good, but the good *of that activity*. It is specific *Actions*, activities, practices, etc. that generate the moral question, against the background of a vast network of *Actions*, etc., which constitute moral life. In a sense, the activity that generates the question stands out:

When I will what is rational, then I am acting not as a particular individual but in accordance with the concepts of ethics in general. In an ethical action, what I vindicate is not myself, but the thing [done]. But in doing a perverse action, it is my singularity that I bring on to the centre of the stage. The rational is the high road where everyone travels, where no one is conspicuous (*PR #15[A]*).

The 'good' of our *Actions* and the 'ought' of the judgement implied in them are thus primarily of a practical, rather than moral, nature. It is particular *Actions* that stand out against that background which bring about the moral tone to the 'good' and 'ought'. That is, morality is itself raised from the practical level of everyday life in cases of *Action* which do not sit comfortably in everyday life; or when the justification of a particular activity or practise, hitherto unquestioned, is raised. Certainly, difficult situations arise where we are prompted to ask the moral question 'How ought I act?', but this is asked by someone with moral character who, on the whole, knows how he ought and ought not to act. This is indicated in that he gets on with the everyday business

of life, the 'good' and 'ought' of his *Actions*, activities, practices etc. not being such as to raise the moral question.

*'Ought' and 'Good': moral ignorance*

On the other hand, the moral question 'How ought I to act?' is not appropriate to the person of bad character, for

As a matter of fact, every bad man is ignorant of what he ought to do and refrain from doing, and it is just this sort of fault that makes people unjust and generally bad (*NE* 1110b28).

The ignorance involved here is not ignorance of certain things, i.e. the "circumstances and objects of the action" (*NE* 1111a18), but ignorance of the universal principle (1110b31). The licentious man, for example, even though he is led by his appetite (1119a1), is still calculative and thus, can ask how he ought to fulfil a particular desire. The difference between the licentious and the temperate man, for instance, is that the latter pursues desires and pleasure as right principle directs (1119a20). The difference here is that with the temperate man the question whether he ought to pursue a particular desire is open to him, whilst with the licentious person it is not so much a question of whether he shall pursue it, but *how* he ought to pursue it to get the maximum pleasure. With the temperate person the 'ought' has universal reference, 'Ought this to be done (here, now, if at all)?', whereas the 'ought' of the licentious refers only to his particular desires and to the

pleasures to be had. The defining character of the licentious person is self-indulgence (e.g., 1121b8, 1119a1), the 'ought' in his reasoning operating solely in the pursuit of his own satisfaction, he being ignorant of the moral character of the 'ought'.

The licentious man is carried away at his own choice, thinking that he ought always to pursue the pleasure of the moment; the incontinent man pursues it too, but has no such belief (1146b23).

The question 'Is the good that my act aims at really good' is not the sort of question that the person of bad character is going to ask of himself. In many ways, it is a fruitless question to ask of him: the 'good' that we operate with is not the same 'good' with which he operates, for he is ignorant of its meaning and significance in terms other than when referring to his particular desires and pleasures.

In discussing licentiousness Aristotle, in *NE*, focuses mainly on the person who constantly pursues the pleasure of the moment, the pleasurable self-indulgent. But self-indulgence can be seen operating at a more general level. For example, a person might think he ought to seek revenge for what he considers to be a wrong done to a member of his family. But the motive would be to satisfy *his* desire for revenge, for a wrong done to *his* family, the nature and severity of that revenge determined by *his* feelings about the supposed wrong done. In this sense, he is the law, he is the one who determines the scope of the

'ought'. For the weak-willed, however, the 'ought' does not have this personal determination.

This is what distinguishes between the licentious and the weak-willed: the latter do use the term 'good' in the moral sense, in a sense that does not have a directly personal motive, whereas the former do not. This thinking about how one ought to act, and the further step of acting upon it, is precisely what is involved in having conscience.

### *Believing, Acting and Moral Conscience*

At *NE* 1098b33-1099a2 Aristotle says:

...presumably it makes no little difference whether we think of the supreme good as consisting in the *possession* or in the *exercise* of virtue: in a state of mind or in an activity. For it is possible for the *state* to be present in a person without effecting any good result (e.g. If he is asleep or quiescent in some other way), but not for the *activity*: he will necessarily act, and act well.

In *PR* #141 Hegel discusses what the transition from morality to ethical life involves, a distinction that for the individual involves the difference between thinking and acting. In conscience is expressed the moral, beliefs about what ought to be the case. The good involved here, what I believe to be good, is abstract in that it is only *thought* – it is only what I think *ought* to be the case. But in thinking something ought to

be the case, it is implied that it is *not* the case, and my proposition or belief is that the good that it involves should be *actual*. Until I act, I remain at the level of the 'ought-to-be', and it is not until I act that what I think becomes ethical. In other words, it is one thing to have beliefs about what ought to be the case, and another to act on them.

In this difference between thinking and acting, Hegel is saying much the same as Aristotle in the point he makes about the *possession* of virtue and the *exercise* of virtue. In acting on a belief a person is fulfilling the conviction involved in believing 'X ought to be the case', and it is this showing the conviction of one's belief that is much more a sign of character than the mere holding of a belief. The importance of this point is something that many commentators on Aristotle overlook or underestimate, mainly due to the modern tendency to try to work out which are the 'right' beliefs to hold. But ethics is much more than the holding of a set of beliefs, for as a practical study it is concerned with *Action* (*NE* 1095a5). In concentrating on beliefs and moral codes, what is often overlooked is the important point that acting involves *commitment*, committing oneself, and that, without acting, the holding of beliefs means very little in reality.<sup>20</sup>

It is from such a context that problems of weakness of will and bad conscience arise. Such problems would not exist if it were the case that the holding of beliefs *causes* us to act in a way appropriate to

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<sup>20</sup> Here I speak of committing oneself to what is done, and not the commitment to abstract principles discussed in the Introduction.

them, but the importing of logical and causal inferences into our accounts of *Action*<sup>21</sup> misses the point that acting involves committing oneself. In our everyday activities, in our eating, travelling, work, leisure, we commit ourselves in what we do. But because most of what we do is common practice, habitual, and part of the ethical community in which we live, we do not *feel* that we are making commitments. It is only when such activities are questioned that the commitment that we are making comes out. Should we: endorse and continue to support the current treatment of animals in our eating habits? Contribute to the detrimental effects on the environment in our preferred methods of travelling? Assist our bosses in the exploitation of the third world by the work we do? Cheer on two people whose main aim is to punch each other to the ground? Much of our daily lives we take for granted, but that does not mean that what we do does not involve committing ourselves in some way.

To have beliefs, however, is very different from acting on them. It is one thing to be persuaded by an argument that the farming of animals for human consumption is unjustified, but it is quite another thing to become a vegetarian. In ignoring the transition from having a belief and acting on it, we miss out a crucial factor in human conduct which cannot be explained away by a rigorous conception of reasoning which does not make a show in the logic of human conduct. The decisions that we make in acting are much more than the logical or causal

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<sup>21</sup> Logical and causal inference will be discussed in detail in Chapter Six.

entailment of the holding of certain beliefs. More often than not our beliefs are not chosen as such, but are something that we are persuaded of. But to act on them is a choice, a decision that we have to make. This is precisely what is indicated by weakness of will: we believe something to be good, and believe that to act contrary to it is wrong, but acting according to what we believe to be good is often a choice or decision that is difficult to make.

When both good and evil are placed before me, I have a choice between the two; I can decide between them and endow my subjective character with either. Thus the nature of evil is that man may will it but need not (*PR* #139[A]).

To attempt to account for *Action* as a logical or causal entailment from beliefs is, in effect, to do away with the element of choosing and deciding involved in acting. But it is in this choosing and deciding that good and evil have their origin and genesis, and doing away with this element, by importing the logical or causal entailment of abstract reasoning, is not so much to solve the problem of morality, how we might lead the right path through life, but to do away with morality altogether. However, that someone *can* do good is, *eo ipso*, to say that he *can* do bad, and vice-versa; a set of logically coherent principles, a particular moral theory, may banish evil from our *beliefs*, but that will not banish the possibility of *doing* evil in the choosing and deciding that *Action* involves.



### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have illustrated the role that reason, desire, knowledge, belief and related phenomena have in various aspects of moral and ethical life, in contrast with the tendency towards rationalisation and abstraction that these concepts attract in much philosophical debate. In doing this, my reading of Aristotle has emphasised his concern with moral character, rather than reading him as attempting to establish a theory of *Action* which will yield formal principles to determine what it is good to do and bad to do. By the latter aim, reason and desire become contrasting, abstract concepts, with the reason of human conduct being purged of the desire element. Consequently, this logically rigorous, purified conception of reason is raised as the arbiter of the good and the evil.

In emphasising moral character as primary, however, we can see that desires, feelings, appetite, etc. are central to moral conduct, and not so easily distinguished in nature as a purified conception of reason often suggests. Indeed, it is very much the case that the reasoning about how, when, where, etc. we are to fulfil our desires that establishes those desires as either good or bad. Theoretically, it may well be the case that acting according to desire, and acting according to reason, are easily distinguishable in analysis, but this gives a misleading picture of the desire and reason involved in human conduct. We might say that, as a fact of nature, we are creatures with

needs, desires, impulses, etc., and these are the stimuli for what we do. Those needs, etc., are, in the sense of being facts of nature, given. But our awareness of them, that they may be fulfilled in various ways and by different means, itself gives rise to our knowledge of what is good and bad: to have them as the *object* of our *Actions*, rather than impulsive stimuli that cause us to act, is that which gives us good and bad *reasons* for acting this way or that way. That is to say, the analytical distinction between reason and desire, affected by a logically purified conception of reason, is not so easily reconcilable with the logic of human conduct.

This, however, will not be acceptable to many modern moral philosophers, for analytical reason demands that the moral is something over and above the practical. We have seen in Chapter One that this is the case for Kant, in that morality is something that is unattainable to human beings, due precisely to the distinction between reason and desire and its expression in the duty/inclination dichotomy. Those who, in one form or another, have continued the Kantian project, demand that reason – the arbiter of morals – is something over and above the personal nature of individual agents' reasons, motives, relationships, etc. that constitute practical life. But that is due to treating individuals as abstract beings, rather than as individuals whose outlook on life is of a moral nature. Taking individuals as abstract beings, the question is raised as to what makes some good, and some not. But such a distinction between good and bad can only be made *given that there are* moral beings, within which context it

makes sense to say that someone is bad. Good and bad are, that is to say, features of, arise out of, human conduct, rather than abstract concepts by which we determine what is to be good and what bad.

The distinguishing between good and bad reasons for doing this or that involved in human conduct, I suggest in agreement with Hegel, is precisely the concrete phenomenon that we refer to by the concept of conscience. The conflict of conscience arising out of knowing one thing to be the right thing to do, but wanting to do otherwise, does not arise for Aristotle's person of excellent character. This is not because he acts solely by reason *alone*: he acts by right desire. Such a conflict is a problem for those who do not have such a developed character: for them, believing what is right, but desiring something else, gives rise to weakness of will. These are issues that I shall explore further in the following chapter.

## 5. JUDGEMENT, CONSCIENCE AND WEAKNESS OF WILL IN ACTION

### *Introduction*

In Chapter Four, I claimed that often the danger in philosophical analysis is that, if we lose sight of what we are doing in analysing a subject, we allow the results, the concepts distinguished and defined by the analysis, to take primacy and dominate our perspective on the subject. In this way, the subject does not determine our perspective; rather, the concepts, and the way in which they have been defined, determine our perspective. However, in ethics especially, the concepts become specialised to such a degree that they no longer operate in the practical context out of which they have been analysed. Thus, we are left with a cluster of concepts – such as good, evil, desire, reason, knowledge, judgement – that are so highly defined in relation to, and in differentiation from, one another that they become irreconcilable with certain ways in which people think and act. Consequently, what results is a highly specialised language that, at most, bears only a vague relationship to that which it purports to be discussing.

In this chapter I shall look at the connection Hegel observes between logic and *Action*, which has implications on judgement and the notion

of practical truth in human conduct. Following on from this, it will be argued that talk of good without reference to situations in which it is instanced results in an abstraction that ultimately has little bearing on how people do think and conduct themselves. This reflects on the notion of right desire, the wanting to do right, which involves an attitude and disposition which defies the analytical distinction between reason and desire. As we shall see in the final section of the chapter, some of the problems related to the phenomenon of *akrasia* can be seen as arising out of a demand for epistemological exactitude in our conceptions of knowledge and reason.

### **Logic, Judgement and Practical Truth in Action**

Here I will develop a point that was made in the previous chapter. There I claimed that purposive *Action* implies a judgement, in that the reasoning of the agent implies that *this* (the thing done) ought to be done. This will perhaps be met with much suspicion by many modern philosophers, for there is a strong tendency to think that judgement is effected in thought, and that consequently the proper discipline for the analysis of judgement is that of formal logic. In this section I will suggest that logic is in fact a refined and abstract formalisation of purposive human conduct, the way in which we engage with the world. A development of this will show that the notion of practical truth is not as peculiar as it might at first appear.

*The Judgement of Logic and the Logic of Judgement*

The seeming peculiarity of the claim that *Action* involves judgement rests on an assumption prevalent in philosophy about the nature of reason and, in particular, logic. The assumption is that the province of thought is fundamentally distinct from the material world, the world of physical objects and physical events, *Action* being one particular type of physical event. Thus, judgement being an act of reason, a form of thought, and the proper discipline for the analysis of the 'forms of thought' being logic, it is a fundamental conceptual error to claim that an *Action* is a judgement.

This is an assumption that Hegel recognised, and anticipated, in his own day. Much the same assumption is often made in modern philosophy on the relation between language, and consequently logic, and the content of what is said in statements, propositions, judgements, etc. In the Logic that forms part of *EPS*, Hegel says: "The judgement is usually taken in a subjective sense as an operation and a form, which is found merely in self-conscious thought". But, he continues:

All things are a judgement: that is to say, they are individuals, which are a universality or inner nature in themselves. They are a universal which is individualised.  
(*EPS* #167).

This claim of Hegel's is a direct attack on the prevailing psychologism in philosophy, and in particular formal logic. The point he is making

here is that, in language, we form distinct terms such as 'subject', 'predicate', 'copula', 'proposition', 'judgement'; 'individual', 'particular', 'universal', etc. However, these terms are not founded on some special operation of the human mind, but rather have their basis in the world in which we live. When I say '*This* (i.e. individual) is a rose (universal)', the subject and predicate are in, e.g., my garden. The truth expressed by the copula is not made so by my expression, but by the flower that I refer to itself. This flower is a universal, a type of flower, which is individualised in being *this* flower:

...the germ of a plant contains its details or particular, such as root, branches, leaves, & c.: but these details are at first present only potentially, and are not realised till the germ uncloses. This unclosing is, as it were, the judgement of the plant. The illustration may also serve to show how neither the concept nor the judgement are merely found in our head, or merely framed by us. The concept is what dwells in the very heart of things, and makes them what they are. To form a concept of an object means therefore to become aware of its concept: and when we proceed to a criticism or review of the object, we are not performing a subjective act, and merely ascribing this or that predicate to an object. We are, on

the contrary, observing the object in the character imposed by its concept (*EPS* #166).<sup>1</sup>

Of course, there are many good reasons why we should formalise the various features of language, setting these out in terms of subjects, predicates, different types of judgements, etc. One such reason, for example, is the use of logic textbooks for teaching various techniques in formal argumentation. Syllogism is a prime example, particularly useful in showing how the inference in an argument can be valid without its premises necessarily being true. The interest in such analysis is not what a particular argument says, what it says about its *content*, but the *form* of the argument. Indeed, in many of the propositions that make up standard syllogisms knowledge of the content is presupposed:

All men are mortal, therefore Caius is mortal: All metals conduct electricity, therefore e.g. copper does so. In order to predicate these major premisses, which when they say 'all' express the immediate individuals and are properly intended to be empirical propositions, it is requisite that the propositions about the individual Caius, or the individual copper, should previously have been known to be correct on grounds of their own. Everybody feels not merely the pedantry, but the unmeaning formality of such

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<sup>1</sup> Wallace translates *begriff* as 'notion' but, for the sake of continuity with translations of other works of Hegel, and to avoid confusion, I have substituted 'concept'.



sylogisms as: All men are mortal, Caius is man, therefore Caius is mortal (*EPS* #190).

Hegel is not dismissive of the value of syllogism altogether. For example, it has value in the empirical sciences through induction. Induction is certainly not perfect: in universal premisses the 'all' only indicates, e.g. all the metals that have been subject to experimentation and observation. But the significance of this is that it leads to what Hegel calls the 'syllogism of Analogy':

In the syllogism of Analogy we conclude from the fact that some things of a certain kind possess a certain quality, that the same quality is possessed by other things of the same kind. It would be a syllogism of Analogy, for example, if we said: In all planets hitherto discovered this law of motion has been found, consequently a newly discovered planet will probably move according to the same law. In the experiential sciences Analogy deservedly occupies a high place, and has led to results of the highest importance. Analogy is the instinct of reason, creating an anticipation that this or that characteristic, which experience has discovered, has its root in the inner nature or kind of object, and arguing on the faith of that anticipation (*Ibid.*).

The reason that Hegel refers to here is not the 'faculty' that is supposed to be in the sole possession of mankind, the sort of subjectivism that he is attacking. Rather, it is the reason that comes

about in our engagement with the objects in the world, through experimentation and observation. The general point that Hegel is making is that syllogism does not consist of the 'categories of the understanding' or 'laws of thought' that are exclusively human and as such distinguishes humanity from the world, but the formal rendering of the way in which we engage in and with the world.

This formality comes out in that, once we come to terms with elementary logic, working out how we can draw correct conclusions in the different figures becomes a mechanical process,

...which its purely mechanical nature and its want of inner meaning have very properly consigned to oblivion. And Aristotle is the last person to give any countenance to those who wish to attach importance to such enquiries or to the syllogism of understanding in general. It is true that he described these, as well as numerous other forms of mind and nature, and that he has examined and expounded their specialities. But in his metaphysical concepts, as well as in his concepts of nature and mind, he was very far from seeking a basis, or a criterion, in the syllogistic forms of the understanding. ...that syllogistic of the understanding to which he first gave such a definite expression is never allowed to intrude in the higher domain of philosophy (*EPS #187*).

Hegel's reference here to the syllogism of 'the understanding' is precisely that understanding of reason in its abstract formality, the

abstract formality that takes syllogism as a criterion of validity or proof for reasoning. What this thinking falls short of is that the formal syllogism is derived from the way in which we engage in the world, i.e. it is derived from purposive *Action*. As such, it is not a criterion for how we *must* think, but the formal, abstract rendering of the way in which we *do* engage purposefully, thoughtfully, in the world in which we live.

Hegel's complaint is that logic had become so abstract and specialised that it had been divorced from the very contexts that supplied its meaning. Consequently, logic itself had become meaningless:

At present...the different forms of the syllogism are met nowhere save in the compendia of Logic; and to make an acquaintance with them would be termed an act of stupid pedantry, of no further use in practical life or in science. It would indeed be both useless and pedantic to parade the whole details of the formal syllogism on every occasion. And yet the several forms of syllogism still make themselves constantly felt in our cognition. If any one, when awaking on a winter morning, hears the creaking of the carriages on the street, and is thus led to conclude that it has been a strong frost during the night, he has gone through a syllogistic process: - a process which is everyday repeated under the greatest variety of conditions. The interest, therefore, ought at least not to be less in becoming expressly conscious of this daily action of our thinking selves, than is admitted to accompany the

study of the functions of organic life, such as the processes of digestion, assimilation, respiration, or even the processes and structures of the world around us. We do not, however, for a moment deny that a knowledge of Logic is no more necessary to teach us how to draw correct conclusions, than a previous study of anatomy and physiology is required in order to digest or breathe (EPS #183).

To generalise Hegel's point, abstract thinking can often involve an inversion: syllogism, propositions, judgements, etc., are seen as issuing from logic, which becomes the criterion for rationalising the world and our *Actions*, rather than logic – syllogism, propositions, judgements, etc. – issuing from the reason in the world and our *Actions*.

### *Action, Judgement and Thought*

Aristotle's concentration on character, his distinction between the voluntary and the chosen, choice involving deliberation, and his discussion of the practical syllogism (especially in chapter iii of Book VII, *NE*), clearly suggests that judgement plays some sort of role in purposive *Action*. Character is determined by our choosing what is good or evil (e.g., 1112a3), choice implying rational principle, the name 'choice' (*prohairesis*) itself indicating "something that is chosen *before* other things" (1112a17, *pro* = 'before'). Indeed, the practical syllogism

involves three propositions involving the joining of subjects and predicates, the concluding one being an *Action* (1147a30). Thus the conclusion, an *Action*, this would suggest, is a judgement of the form 'This is good', every *Action* aiming at some good (1094a1; leaving aside for the moment whether it is an apparent or actual good, or whether it is successful).

What I am suggesting here is that this is very similar to Hegel's claim that *Actions* are judgements. For Hegel, a judgement involves bringing a particular under a universal. Thus, an *Action* is a judgement in that it says that '*This* (particular *Action*) is good (universal)'. In purposive *Action* there is both a positive content and a negative content: positive in that in doing something I *produce, posit*, a state of affairs; negative in that I change, *negate*, the state of affairs before me. Consequently, there is no such thing as natural innocence in purposive *Action*, for what I do I choose to do, and that involves judgement. Natural innocence is a feature of the voluntary, but not chosen, conduct of children. Judgement is something that is developed:

...we unhesitatingly ascribe only a very inadequate power of judgement to someone who habitually frames such judgements as "The wall is green", "This oven is hot", and so on. In contrast, we say that someone genuinely understands how to judge when his judgements deal with whether a certain work of art is beautiful, whether an action is good, and so on. In the case of judgements of the first kind, the content is only an abstract quality, the

presence of which can be adequately decided by immediate perception; whereas to say of a work of art that it is beautiful, or of an action that it is good, the objects in question must be compared with what they ought to be, i.e. with their concept.<sup>2</sup>

Such development is something that is indicated in the education of children, in the acquisition of language, the cognition (as opposed to mere perception) and understanding of their environment.<sup>3</sup> In philosophical analysis it is perfectly reasonable to distinguish between thought and *Action*, just as it is perfectly reasonable to say that to think *can* be a different thing than to act. But to say that they *can* be distinct is quite different from saying that (as in the Cartesian tradition) they *are* – that is, ontologically – distinct. For what we are discussing here is purposive *Action*, which involves choice, and what is chosen involves thought. It has been a particular feature of modern philosophical debate – especially, in the area of ethics, in arguments between Kantians and utilitarians – to draw distinctions between what goes on before an *Action* and the deed itself, but

It is subjective reflection, ignorant of the logical nature of the single and the universal, which indulges *ad libitum* in the subdivision of single parts and consequences; and yet

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<sup>2</sup> *The Encyclopaedic Logic* tr. Gereats, Suchting and Harris (Cambridge, 1991), #171[A].

<sup>3</sup> On Hegel's discussion of cognition and understanding in *PS*, see D. Lamb, *Language and Perception in Hegel and Wittgenstein* (Avebury, 1977).

it is the nature of the finite deed itself to contain such separable contingencies (*PR* #119).

The concept that ethics is concerned with is *Action*. In analysis we can make the distinction between the single elements of 'intention' and the 'consequences' of intention. Some say that it is the intention that matters (e.g. a will that is good), others that it is the consequences that matter. But it is absurd to say that there *are* intentions *and* there *are* consequences, as if these are separate phenomena: there are no intentions without consequences, for what is intended *are the consequences*; there are no consequences without intentions, for consequences *are what was intended*. These are not distinct phenomena that can exist on their own account, but are particular logical distinctions derived from *Action*. They are distinctions that can only be drawn *given* that something has been done.

That such logical distinctions are founded on *Action*, that they are *grounded* on purposive *Action* rather than themselves being the grounds of *Action* (an inversion effected by abstract thinking, see p. 230 above), is something we would do well to keep in mind when reading *NE*. When Aristotle says that choice implies something that comes before, there is nothing to suggest that he is saying that choice can exist without something being done, as if it were some distinct mental phenomenon or event that need not necessarily lead to an *Action*. It is in this sense that I have been claiming that Aristotle is not concerned in *NE* with a *theory* of *Action*, metaphysical *pre-conditions* for the possibility of *Action*. In this lies the importance, say, that he

places on how a person feels *after* he has acted in his analysis of character (see Chapter Four, pp. 183ff): in ethical judgement we are concerned with someone who *has* character, and not with a theoretical and abstract account of pre-conditions of *Action* and character. This is also supported by the many references throughout *NE* to the judgements that *are* made in common practice (see, in particular, Book VI, chapter xi).

In claiming that *Actions* themselves are judgements I am no doubt taking my reading of Aristotle a step further than what he explicitly says in *NE*, and certainly further than many modern commentators would accept. However, there is material in *NE* which strongly suggests that Aristotle had some sort of conception of practical truth.

*Practical Truth: creating good and bad*

At *NE* 1179a19 Aristotle says:

...in the matter of conduct truth is assessed in the light of the facts and of actual life; because it is in these that the decisive factor lies.

And at 1107a30-b1 he says:

When we are discussing actions, although general statements have a wider application, particular statements are closer to the truth. This is because actions are concerned with particular facts...



These two statements make Aristotle's general point that in ethics, the more we take into account the particular circumstances of *Actions*, the closer to the truth we shall get in what we say about them. However, at 1139a21 he says something that provides a wider context for the idea of practical truth:

Pursuit and avoidance in the sphere of appetite correspond exactly to affirmation and negation in the sphere of intellect; so that, since moral virtue is a state involving choice, and choice is deliberative appetite, it follows that if the choice is to be a good one, both the reasoning must be true and the desire right; and the desire must pursue the same things that the reasoning asserts. We are here speaking of intellect and truth in a practical sense: in the case of contemplative (as distinct from practical and productive) intellect, right and wrong are truth and falsehood. To arrive at the truth is indeed the function of intellect in any aspect, but the function of practical intellect is to arrive at the truth that corresponds to right appetite.

Aristotle's point about the particular facts and of actual life in assessing the truth of conduct can be taken as a warning, explicitly made at various places in *NE*, not to expect too much from the study of ethics. To ask for a definition of 'right', i.e. to establish it in writing or in formal terms by way of, say, ethical principles, is indicative of a misfocused approach. The most that ethics can do for us is to give us a 'broad

outline of the truth', i.e. we must be content to draw conclusions that are for the most part true (*NE* 1094b20-1). The peculiarity, for many modern readers of Aristotle, is the idea of truth in the matter of conduct: it is one thing to speak of right and wrong in the matter of conduct, but truth and falsehood in relation to *Actions* is quite another thing.

In her 'Thought and Action in Aristotle' Anscombe picks up on the idea of practical truth, and cites a possible objection:

The concept of *truth and falsehood in action* would quite generally be countered by the objection that "true" and "false" are senseless predicates as applied to what is done.

But, referring to Aristotle's concept of Action, she concludes that:

...these predicates apply to actions (*praxeis*) strictly and properly, and not merely by an extension and in such a way that ought to be explained away.<sup>4</sup>

Clearly there are ways in which 'the concept of truth and falsehood' in relation to Action is relatively unproblematic; 'He did X' may well be a fact and thus a true statement. For modern philosophy the problem arises when we use the concept of truth not so much in describing who did what, where and when, in describing *that* he did X, but in relation to saying that *what* he did was true or false. The question is: can we talk

about truth and falsehood in ethical judgements in relation to *what is done?*

Anscombe goes some way in supporting such an idea:

...practical truth [is] when the judgements involved in the formation of the "choice" leading to the action are all true; but the practical truth is not the truth of those *judgements*. For it is clearly that "truth in agreement with right desire" (1139a30), which is spoken of as the good working, or the work, of practical intelligence. That is brought about - i.e. made true - by action (since the description of what he does is made true by his doing it), provided that a man forms and executes a good "choice". The man who forms and executes an evil "choice" will also make true *some* description of what he does. He will secure, say, if he is competent, that such and such a man has his eyes put out or his hands cut off, that being his judgement of what it is just to do. But his description "justice performed" of what he has done will be a lie. He, then, will have produced a practical falsehood.<sup>5</sup>

So we might say that a description of a man who forms and executes a good choice will involve an ethical truth, not merely in that the

<sup>4</sup>In *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, ed. R. Bamborough (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1965) pp.157-8.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, p. 157.

description 'He did X' will be true but also in that the description 'His doing X was right or good' expresses a truth. Thus if we were to accept such an idea, we need to accept that a right or good *Action* is a true *Action* and a wrong or bad *Action* is a false *Action*.

Perhaps the most common way that moral philosophers would approach the issue of whether a particular ethical judgement – e.g. 'X was justice performed' – is true would be to come up with a definition or theory of justice, and then measure the *Action* under consideration against that. But this moves us away from justice as a feature of *Action*, the truth or falsehood of the first-person description of the *Action* as 'Justice performed'. For in terms of *Action*, although what is just (*dikaios*) is what is aimed at, what this will be (and whether it *is* just) will turn on the sense of justice (*dikaisosune*) with which the *Action* is performed. It may well be the case that someone who claims justice has been done by his *Action* defends himself by way of a theory of justice, or by reference to some other supposed authority (popular opinion, religion, etc.). But again, this misses the point: the supposed authorities that he cites will stand or fall according to whether or not particular features of his deed can be seen to be motivated by a sense of justice; and that what he calls a sense of justice can be seen *to be* a sense of justice - rather than, say, revenge, misplaced loyalty, envy, etc., or an outright lie. Even in a court of law, it is not enough that it is an official judge who applies the law and passes sentence; what is wanted is that the law is applied, and sentence is passed, with a sense of justice.

A further temptation here for moral philosophers would be to ask exactly what this 'sense of justice' is – as if it were, say, some special faculty that exists in us distinct from individual instances in which justice or injustice is perceived or sensed. But this is an abstract philosophical move, a move peculiar to philosophers (or, at least, certain sorts of philosophers): moral agents, i.e. individuals acting in the world, are concerned with what is just and good in particular situations; whereas moral theoreticians seem bent on asking what justice or the good is *other than* in the *Actions* in which they are instanced. For the former, there is a great deal of agreement on what is just and good: agreement not in what justice or the good is, but agreement in *this particular deed* being just and good, in *that* being just and good. Certainly there is disagreement also, but again this is usually about individual instances, disagreements about, say, rewards and punishments. The abstract philosophical move demands a meaning to justice and goodness distinct from individual instances of them, but it is precisely individual instances of *Actions* that give meaning to the terms 'justice' and 'goodness'.<sup>6</sup> If we do not take this into account in our philosophical thinking, then it might seem that good and justice in some way lie in wait for particular *Actions* to fulfil their demands, rather than good (and evil) and justice (and injustice) being *created* by particular *Actions*.

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<sup>6</sup> Here again we can see how the abstract question takes on the mantle of the old subject-predicate logic: 'just' and 'good' are abstract predicates which we attach to the subject (*Action*), rather than a central aspect of the subject.

It is in the sense that good and evil, justice and injustice, are created by *Actions* that I speak here of practical truth. When someone refers to a particular *Action* and says 'That is good' or 'That is unjust' the primary purpose is to say something about the *Action*, and not to give a clue as to their general conception of good and justice. The concern is the *Action* itself, the *Action* as a fact in the world. This is reflected in what we intend in our *Actions*: faced with a situation that is causing distress, pain, injustice, etc. we manipulate the various factual circumstances of the situation in order to *make good*; conversely, given the opportunity by way of the various factual circumstances of our situation, we manipulate them to create an injustice (e.g. theft). Such *Actions* are the basis of moral and ethical life, the truth of what is good and just, evil and unjust, rather than a super-sensible world that results from abstract philosophical thinking.

### **Good and Conscience in Thought and Action**

In claiming that *Actions*, and the states of affairs created by them, are the basis of moral and ethical life, I am claiming that the meanings of 'good' and 'evil', 'just' and 'unjust', are tied up in the particular details of the *Actions* and states of affairs to which they are attributed. Another way of stating this - in terms of Hegel's criticism of traditional subject-predicate logic - is that 'good' and 'just' are not abstract predicates (referring to abstract notions, conceptions, ideas, etc.) that have meaning in isolation to the subjects (*Actions*, states of affairs) to which they are attributed. That is to say, the meanings of 'good' and 'just' are

implied in the specific details of those *Actions* and states of affairs that are, in character, good and just. Those specific details are the referents that provide the sense and meaning to the application of the terms 'good' and 'just'. It is in this sense that descriptions employing 'good', 'just', etc. express practical truths (and falsehoods).

There is a tendency in much moral thinking to suppose that, on the contrary, it is our notions, conceptions, ideas, etc. of good and justice that characterise those *Actions* and states of affairs as 'good' and 'just'. Such a tendency is one particular aspect of Hegel's criticism of what he considered to be the abstract philosophical thinking of his day. As we have seen throughout the first part of this thesis, Kant's idea of the will that is good in itself, Hegel claims, is the result of such thinking. Hegel reserves his severest condemnation for those (e.g. F. Von Schlegel, Fichte, Solger – writers, associated with the Romantics, who claimed to follow and improve upon Kant) who developed this into the "...view that the goodness of the will consists in its willing the good", a view in which "...this *willing* of the abstract good is supposed to suffice, in fact to be the sole requisite, to make its action good" (*PR* # 140). Thus, according to this view, what is good is what the individual moral agent conceives to be good. Hegel spends much time berating what he sees as the shallowness of such thinking, but I want to concentrate on the positive side to his point.

The positive point is that, if it were to be the case that good is determined by the individual agent, a central aspect of the moral life of the agent is rendered false and illusory. Thus, when I want to do the

good or the right thing, but it is not absolutely clear to me that what I am thinking of doing *is* the good or the right thing, I am mistaken because I am failing to realise that it is good precisely because I want to do the good or right thing. What *that* might be is not important, for as long as I am doing it with a good will, then it is the good or right thing. Such a view is refuted by the logic of reasoning in thought and *Action* in the moral life of individuals, highlighted by the phenomenon of conscience.

*Conscience: the desire to do right*

At *PR* #140 Hegel says:

The subjective right of self-consciousness to know whether an action is truly good or evil in character must not be thought as so colliding with the absolute right of the objectivity of this character that the two rights are represented as separable, indifferent to one another, and related only accidentally.

As members of an established ethical community, the greater part of our lives involves engaging in the habits, customs, practices and activities that constitute the ways in which our needs, desires, wants, etc. are pursued and fulfilled. It is a practical knowledge and understanding of this community that serves us in getting on in life. On the whole, this is quite straightforward, even though it may take up much effort in areas such as education, training, work, leisure, family life, etc. Often, however, situations arise whereby the straightforward business of everyday life is interrupted. No more immersed in that



community, we ask questions of ourselves and of certain situations with which we are confronted. We are not sure about the rightness of a particular practice, or we are not clear about the right way to go on, or we are not sure that what we think is the right thing to do is in fact the right thing to do. In such situations, we become aware of our individuality by the demand on ourselves to get things right, and the demand that this be recognised by the community. Not only do we want to do what we think is the right thing, but we also want it to be recognised that it *is* the right thing.

Wanting to do what one thinks is right and wanting that to be, objectively, the right thing, are not two separate, accidental and indifferent attitudes. It is, rather, the very heart of the ethical community: Hegel stresses throughout *PR* that mere conformity to customs and laws is not adequate, both to ourselves and the ethical community as a whole. A state that demands mere conformity and obedience from its citizens is one that is prone to corruption and internal disruption, for a community that flourishes is one which is organised to meet the needs, desires, wants, and concerns of its individual members. Conscientiousness is thus a central aspect of moral and ethical life.

Conflicts of conscience, that is to say, are themselves a necessary aspect of ethical life. Not content to accept things merely because they are customary, traditional, established in law, etc., we question practices and activities that we might previously have engaged in without question. But in questioning thus, it is not necessarily the case that we are clear about what is right and wrong. If we do think that we

know what is right, we are often concerned as to how to establish that what we *think* to be right is indeed the right thing. The personal dilemma of conflicts of conscience is captured for us in the logical difficulties in determining what, exactly, is to be the criterion of truth as to what is right. But what philosophers have tended to ignore in attempting to solve this problem, is precisely that *desire* to do the right thing, not only for our own personal satisfaction but also that *it is* (i.e. objectively) the right thing to do.

Consider what Aquinas has to say about the erring conscience:

Et ideo diendum est quod omnis conscientia, sive recta, sive erronea, sive in per se malis, sive in indifferentibus, est obligatoria; ita quod qui contra conscientiam facit, peccet.<sup>7</sup>

In *Summa Theologiae*, 1a 2ae, Question 19 article 6 Aquinas explains that since conscience, whether right or wrong in what it believes to be in accord with God's law, is binding, this can leave a person in somewhat of a fix.<sup>8</sup> In other words, suppose my conscience tells me that I ought to do so and so - and it is wrong/in error (according to God's law). Then I'm doomed, because if I follow my conscience I do wrong (*ex hypothesi*), but if I act contrary to it I do wrong because it is

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<sup>7</sup> *Quaestiones Quodlibetalis* 3, Articulus xxvii. F.C. Copleston, in *Aquinas* (Pelican, 1955) p. 28, translates this passage as: "Every conscience, whether it is right or wrong, whether it concerns things evil in themselves or things morally indifferent, obliges us to act in such a way that he who acts against his conscience sins".

<sup>8</sup> Blackfriars edition.

wrong of me to do what I believe to be wrong.<sup>9</sup> Here we have a practical dilemma as issuing from conscience.

The conflict arises in that a person wants to do only that which he thinks is right, but wants that which he thinks is right to be actually, objectively right - for Aquinas, in accordance with God's law. Conscience is a natural principle derived from God, according to Aquinas, and aims at His laws (even if it is sometimes amiss). The religious framework, however, is not a necessary requirement, as John Stuart Mill illustrates:

The internal sanction of duty, whatever our standard of duty may be, is one and the same - a feeling in our own mind; a pain, more or less intense, attendant on violation of duty, which in properly cultivated moral natures rises, in the more serious cases into shrinking from it as an impossibility. This feeling...is the essence of conscience...<sup>10</sup>

However we wish to characterise it, whether it be given to us by a deity or a cultivated feeling for duty, conscience would seem to be something within us that aims at what is right and good.

But there is something not quite right with this, something that Mill provides a clue to. Conscience is an internal sanction, which has an external counterpart - viz. "...the hope and favour and the fear of displeasure, from our fellow human beings or from the ruler of the

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<sup>9</sup> I owe this rendering to Rosalind Hursthouse in discussion.

<sup>10</sup>J.S. Mill, *Utilitarianism*, (Everyman, 1964), p. 26.

universe".<sup>11</sup> What is paramount here is the wanting to be right, *in both* the internal, subjective, and external, objective aspects. That is to say, the distinction between right and wanting it, the external, objective, and the internal, subjective aspects is something that arises from a problematic situation, whereas ordinarily there is no distinction. The reactions of fellow human beings and the ruler of the universe may deter someone from committing evil deeds or failing in a duty; and the prospect of guilt, if 'internal sanction' is meant in the sense of coercion as Mill would appear to suggest (as opposed to authority or approval for a course of *Action*), may also act as a deterrent. But deterrent, whether internal or external, is not something that is going to come into play for someone who *wants* to do right.

### *Right Desire and Acting Truly*

One of the major features of philosophy throughout its history has been the characterisation of the needs, desires and wants of human beings as 'internal' strivings, stirrings, or propensities to act, as distinct from reason, which works out how these needs and wants are to be fulfilled within the 'external' environment in which they live. This has certainly been the case since Hume, reflecting his infamous 'Reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions'. Wanting and desiring are the ultimate springs of *Action*, reason being at a loss to explain the

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.* p. 25.

ultimate ends of human beings. Ask a man why he exercises, and he will only reply that he desires health and hates pain.

Perhaps to your second question, *why he desires health*, he may also reply, that *it is necessary for the exercise of his calling*. If you ask, *why he is anxious on that head*, he will answer, *because he desires to get money*. If you demand *why? It is the instrument of pleasure*, he says.

And beyond this it is an absurdity to ask for a reason.<sup>12</sup>

In moral philosophy, this distinction between reason and desire (or, in Hume's terms, between reason and sentiment or taste) leads to disputes as to whether morals are justifiable by way of reason, objectively, or whether moral judgements and statements are merely the utterances of personal, subjective, preferences.

The notion of 'wanting to do right', if there is any sense to it, would appear to bridge this distinction. On the one hand, it is clearly (if it is to be a spring of *Action*) something that an individual *wants or desires*, i.e. it has a personal or subjective element. On the other hand, that it should be *right*, suggests an objective element, i.e. that what is done is valuable or worthy independently of my wanting or desiring it. However, the 'subjectivist' might reply that this is a piece of sophistry: whether valuable or worthy independently of your wanting it, it still comes down to *your wanting* it thus.

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<sup>12</sup> *Enquiries* loc. Cit. App. 1 sec. 244.

There is a confusion here, and I think Hume, or at least the interpretation Hume has received, bears some of the responsibility for this. The passage reducing a person's activity to his desires is used by Hume to draw the conclusion that "Thus the distinct boundaries and offices of *reason* and of *taste* are easily ascertained".<sup>13</sup> But this does not unequivocally bear the mark of a conclusion, as the passage also bears the mark of an example that is drawn *specifically* to yield such a conclusion, in which case what is said to be the conclusion is in fact the *presupposition* of the example. That is to say, if one wanted to forward the view that reason and taste are distinct offices, then that is the character that one *would* give the example.

It would be perfectly reasonable to fill in the reasons for a person's wanting good health with other reasons, and give further reasons that do not ultimately rest on his wanting or desiring in Hume's sense. He wants his family to fare well. He enjoys his work. He is also good at his work, and he gets pleasure from seeing the benefits it has for others. 'Wanting', 'enjoying', 'pleasure' – but, it will be argued, these are terms that refer specifically to the agent, and anything that is said to be a reason for acting can be seen itself to rest, depend on some desire, taste or sentiment in the agent. However, just as *what* someone wants or desires is dependent on the *wanting and desiring*, that wanting and desiring is equally dependent on *what* is wanted and desired.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. 246.

It is the failure to see this that leads to confusion. People do not just 'want' and 'desire' – they want and desire *something*. Talk of 'wants' and 'desires' is the language of philosophical abstraction, which is one thing. But it amounts to becoming blinkered by such talk to then attribute such bare 'wants' and 'desires' to people. Indeed, it is *what* we want that very much goes to defining and characterising our 'wants' and 'desires', and we would be hard put to give an account of 'wants' and 'desires' without a *what* element, without resorting to talk of 'strivings' and 'stirrings'.

The distinction between the reason for acting and the desire that acting involves is not as clear-cut as is often made out. Indeed, wanting and desiring are very much rational attitudes: just as there must be a desire for some reason for acting, so there must be a reason for having some desire. Certainly the distinction between reason and desire *can* be validly drawn. For instance, calculation can involve the employment of reason, dispassionately aiming at the correct result. Similarly, a good philosophical argument will arrive at a conclusion without the intervention of the particular preferences of the philosopher. The mathematician and the philosopher in such cases do not calculate and argue in order to arrive at a result and conclusion which they particularly want or desire.

However, they *do want, desire*, to come to a correct result and a valid conclusion. They want this for the right reason, i.e. that that is where the calculation or argument leads. But with this the distinction begins to blur, or rather we begin to look at the situation in such a way that the

original reason for making the hard and fast distinction no longer does the job we originally set out to do. That is to say, the distinction between reason and desire is drawn for specific purposes, purposes that are tied up with the tasks we set out to accomplish. We can certainly make a hard and fast distinction *conceptually*, but it is quite another thing to see this as grounds for claiming that they are distinct phenomena *in realiter*. Such a move involves another example of the way in which we think, logically and conceptually, determining our subject matter, rather than the subject matter determining our thinking.

However, in saying this I am not claiming that the distinction between reason and desire is drawn exclusively in logical and conceptual analysis. It is also a distinction that is drawn in our attitudes and concerns about our beliefs and the way in which we conduct ourselves. This is something we do for particular reasons, reasons that need not be particularly good ones. The making of such a distinction, and the fact that it is done for some reason, results in conduct that philosophers find difficult to assimilate, which in turn leads to confusions about what is and what is not to count as reasons for acting.

### **Weakness of Will, Bad conscience and Self-Deception**

One aspect of human conduct that has puzzled many philosophers in the current century is the phenomenon of weakness of will or *akrasia*. The problem for the Ancient philosophers is that *akrasia* would seem to involve erring voluntarily, which is somewhat paradoxical when we



consider that to err is not something that we do *voluntarily*. This is particularly puzzling when we consider *moral* weakness: knowing the right thing to do in a particular situation, a person then acts in a contrary way. The question that consequently forces itself on philosophers is thus 'How is *akrasia* possible?' The phenomena of *akrasia* and self-deception throw up questions that are extremely difficult to provide coherent philosophical answers to.

### *Aristotle on Akrasia*

In discussing *akrasia* I do not here propose to offer a solution to the problems that it presents, for in a sense the idea of attempting to provide a philosophical solution to this sort of phenomenon is misconceived. This misconception, I shall argue, is itself based on certain misconceptions about those features of conduct that constitute the phenomenon of *akrasia*. It is these features that I shall concentrate on here.

Let us first look briefly at what Aristotle says about *akrasia*. He begins Book VII with:

The question may be raised: What sort of right conception can a man have, and yet be incontinent? Some say it is impossible for a man who knows, because it is a shocking idea, as Socrates thought, that when a man actually has knowledge in him something else should overmaster it and "Drag it about like a slave". (NE 1145b21-24)

Amelie Oksenberg Rorty sets out clearly the Socratic problem for us.

The Socratic position has three separable theses:

- (1) no person voluntarily does (what he takes to be) bad;
- (2) acting virtuously requires – indeed, is identical with – (acting from) knowledge; so acting badly is acting from or in ignorance;
- (3) there is fundamentally one object of moral knowledge, the Good. It follows that all forms of wrongdoing are essentially the same and that they all involve involuntary ignorance of the Good. <sup>14</sup>

Socrates rejects the concept of *akrasia*, but Aristotle himself retains it. The argument which he produces for its retention is centred around the question of what sort of knowledge we are talking about here, i.e. in what sense is the *akratic* acting against knowledge that he possesses?

First of all, let us consider the question regarding the sort of knowledge the *akratic* has. Aristotle raises the point about the having of knowledge without the person putting it to use, some of which cases we can put down to acting in (rather than through) ignorance. This has already been dealt with at length in Book III and, although it helps to clear some of the ground, it doesn't really do the job of providing a consistent account of *akrasia*. This is because we need to deal with

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<sup>14</sup> 'Akrasia and Pleasure: Nicomachean Ethics Book 7' in *Essays on Aristotle's Ethics* ed. A. O. Rorty (University of California Press, 1980), p. 267.

cases where knowledge is present when the emotion upon which someone acts occurs (NE 1147b11).

This latter point of Aristotle's, however, contains an important consideration. With the *akratic* we are dealing with someone who is knowledgeable of the universal aspects of *Action*, i.e. is capable of forming judgements or universal premises under which he considers *Actions* to be good or bad. Indeed, it is the knowledge that he has of the universal nature of his conduct - the major premise in the practical syllogism - that throws up the peculiarity of the case: it was Socrates' concern that it was precisely this that was 'dragged about like a slave' should the concept of *akrasia* be accepted. Similarly, we are dealing with someone who knows the particularity of the case - that the desire can be fulfilled in *this* way. Clearly, then, ignorance in whatever form will not explain away *akrasia*, for it is precisely the lack of ignorance that throws up the problem.

The important point however is this: the universal premise – implying 'the right principle' - is *not* contradicted by the *Action*, although the person does not act in accordance with it. This is because the person still upholds the universal premise, it still forms part of his beliefs about what is good; his reasons for acting were not due to, say, any long-term benefit to be gained out of acting badly, but merely to fulfil a particular desire. That is to say, it is not "Knowledge in the strict sense" - i.e. knowledge of the right principle - which is "'dragged about' by the emotion, but only sensory knowledge"(NE 1147b18), knowledge pertaining to desires.

Consider this from another perspective. A person in this sort of position, it is often said, has been overpowered by his desires, he is acting in accordance with the particular circumstances of the situation. In doing so he is disregarding the universal aspect of *Action*, the aspect under which it can be considered good or bad. But that does not mean that the *Akratic* does not hold beliefs in the form of what is good and what is bad, although occasionally he fails to conduct himself in accordance with them. For the licentious person, for example, the conflict between what he does on particular occasions in fulfilling his desires and his general beliefs does not arise, for he "is carried away at his own choice, thinking that he ought always to pursue the pleasure of the moment" (1146b23). The point is that the licentious person is acting consistently with his general beliefs, that his *Actions* are conducive to fulfilling the sort of life he has chosen to pursue, whereas the *akratic* is not acting in accordance with consideration about the universal aspects of his conduct, general beliefs which, if he followed, would constitute his chosen way of life. He is acting only in the sphere of the particular - i.e. desires of the moment.

The peculiarity of the concept of *akrasia* is that the reasons that would count for my not acting in the way I did are *my* reasons, they are reasons for not acting in the way that I did that I hold, the point which encourages Socrates to reject the concept. The attempt to explain away *akrasia* goes something like: 'He knew there were reasons for not acting in the way that he did; that is, he believed that this sort of

thing is wrong, but he didn't really hold these views himself because, e.g., he didn't have a true understanding of the right principles involved' (as those, say, who "have just started learning a subject reel off a string of propositions which they do not understand", *NE* 1147a22). This returns us to the Socratic position that ignorance (i.e. not *really* holding those views himself, not really *seeing* the truth) causes us to go astray in such situations. But, as we shall see, this does not succeed in explaining it away.

In 'Thought and Action in Aristotle' Anscombe suggests that one of the reasons for the lack of a clear-cut conclusion in Aristotle's discussion is due to his still being under the influence of this Socratic view that evil is based on ignorance.<sup>15</sup> This is something that I would not outrightly dispute, although there are passages in *NE* which suggest that Aristotle was uncomfortable with Socrates' position, especially in the difference in their accounts of knowledge (Aristotle's account of exactly what is 'dragged about like a slave' being one particular example of this difference). The problem comes, however, in the stark cases of clear-cut situations wherein a person, fully capable of making choices, forming judgements with a view to what is good and what is bad, consciously conducts himself in a way that would be condemned according to the sorts of judgements he himself has formed. Of course, I may be mistaken in the sorts of things that I hold to be good, but this does not have any bearing on the case, "for

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<sup>15</sup> In *New Essays on Plato and Aristotle*, loc. cit.

there are some people who have no less confidence in their opinions than others have in what they know" (NE 1146b29). That is, whether true or not, I hold them to be true and I act contrary to what I hold to be true. We are dealing with someone who has moral character, but who on occasions acts against the sort of attitudes that make up that character.

### *Reason and Desire in Conflict*

The standard analysis of *akrasia* very much rests on the distinction between reason and desire, and there is plenty of material in *NE* to suggest that this is the case with Aristotle. Practical reason tells me the best way of going on, that *this* is the best thing to do in these circumstances, but on occasions I have desires which compete with what reason tells me. Reason is over-powered by the desire of the moment. That reason and desire are distinct for Aristotle would appear to be confirmed at *NE* 1102a25 – b28, where he tells us that, as well as a rational element, "...there seems to be another element [*phusis*] which, while irrational, is in a sense receptive of reason" (b13). This he illustrates with the difference and similarity between the *enkratic* and the *akratic*, i.e. the rational and the irrational urge them on in different directions. However, towards the end of this passage Aristotle tells us that the distinction is unimportant – "...in what sense it is a separate element does not matter" (b25).

My claim here is stronger than Aristotle's: not only does it not matter, but if we take it to mean that there are within human beings two sharply distinguished faculties<sup>16</sup> then we can easily lead ourselves into conceptual confusion. Certainly on occasions it can sensibly be said that a distinction does arise in our attitudes and conduct. But it is significant that it is in cases of *enkrateia*, overcoming the desire to do what one thinks one ought not to do, and *akrasia*, succumbing to that desire. That is to say, ordinarily there is no distinction, for in the case of the *akratic* we are talking about someone who *on occasions* is troubled by a desire to do other than what he thinks he ought to do. We may, following Aristotle, talk about them being in harmony, but it would be a confusion to read into this and into Aristotle that we actively harmonise these two elements or faculties within us.

If this were the case, then I suggest that life would be considerably more difficult than it is. Thankfully for a great number of people, it is only occasionally that we can speak of being 'over-powered by desire',<sup>17</sup> and the use of such a phrase is perfectly reasonable. However, if we take this phrase too seriously in our philosophical considerations we are apt to lead ourselves into confusion. For instance, it conjures up images of human beings as vessels of some sort within which the stirrings and strivings of the rational part and the

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<sup>16</sup> It is interesting to note here that Aristotle uses *phusis*, tendency or state, rather than *dunamis*, faculty or some sort of thing we are equipped with.

<sup>17</sup> Of course, in many parts of the world there are a great number of people who are constantly plagued by the desire for, e.g. food, but this is *need* caused by poverty and disaster.

emotional part compete with one another. But we are not just overpowered by desire – we are overpowered by the desire to do, or for, *something*. That is, we are overpowered by the *object of desire*, what the object has to offer us, and this is why we speak (as Aristotle does) of the desire of the *moment*. Talk of being overpowered by desire *per se* is abstract talk, with associated images of desires within us lying in wait for objects to attach to. But the objects of our desires have a primary and fundamental role in the particular desires that we have – it is these that characterise the specific desires that we have.

In philosophical analysis it is one thing to talk about human conduct in terms of clear distinctions, but attributing these distinctions to the constitution of human beings is quite another thing. Again I would refer to Wittgenstein's observation that language is a sort of refinement (see Chapter Two, note 1 above), but to take this refinement as referring to how things actually are is a failure to adhere to a fundamental rule of philosophy, viz. to be vigilantly conscious of what one is doing and saying. The result of such a failure is to get so engrossed in our own way of thinking that what we think becomes more and more only a vague reflection of how things actually are.



*Akrasia: the philosopher's problem*

In "How is Weakness of Will Possible?"<sup>18</sup> Donald Davidson, rightly I think, generalises the concept of incontinence to consider it in relation to the attitude or belief of the agent, in doing so not restricting incontinence to knowledge.<sup>19</sup> Davidson makes some interesting points in his paper, but I also think he makes some confusing remarks. I shall restrict myself to the latter, for I think that it is these that shed light on the philosophical problems of *akrasia*.

The first signs of confusion come with reference to three other authors.<sup>20</sup> The first is to Anscombe and a comment she makes in *Intention*. "The primitive sign of wanting is trying to get", says Anscombe.<sup>21</sup> But, he continues, "Hampshire comes closer to exactly what I need when he writes, in *Freedom of the Individual*, that 'A wants to do X' is equivalent to 'other things being equal, he would do X, if he could'".<sup>22</sup> Now it not clear why Davidson makes this comparison, but presumably he must see some similarity in the points being made by Anscombe and Hampshire. However, Anscombe's point is about *wanting* and its role in *acting* – i.e. the doing or *trying* to do something, and not in establishing a principle which, e.g., plays a role in a

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<sup>18</sup> In Joel Feinberg (ed.) *Moral Concepts* (Oxford, 1969).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.* p. 93.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.* p. 94.

<sup>21</sup> *Intention* (Oxford, 1957), p. 67.

<sup>22</sup> Davidson, *op. cit.* pp. 94 – 5; S. Hampshire, *Freedom of the Individual* (New York, 1965), p. 36.

conceptual or theoretical framework for *Action*. For "The wanting that interests us here...is neither wishing nor hoping nor feeling the desire, and cannot be said to exist in a man who does nothing towards getting what he wants...the wanting that concerns us here is a person's doing something about it".<sup>23</sup> That is to say, Anscombe is making a point about the phenomenon of *Action* and not establishing a building block for a theoretical account of *Action*.<sup>24</sup>

The confusion here is that it very much seems that Davidson fails to see that Anscombe is making a *different sort of* philosophical point, based on observation and exploration, rather than one that goes towards a rationalistic definition of *Action*. The 'wanting' that is expressed in a person's trying to get is of a different nature to the 'wanting' that does not find expression in acting, such as the *akratic's* wanting to do the right thing but doing something else. Davidson does not appear to recognise this, and in going on to use Hampshire he adheres to a theoretic view of 'wanting'.

That Davidson fails to see the *sort of* philosophical point being made is reflected in his reference to E. J. Lemmon's 'Moral Dilemmas'. Lemmon says: "Perhaps *akrasia* is one of the examples of a pseudo-problem in philosophical literature: in view of its existence, if you find it

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<sup>23</sup> Anscombe *op. cit.* pp. 67-8.

<sup>24</sup> Anscombe is certainly concerned about the concept of *Action*, but my understanding is that it is an exploration rather than an attempt at a formal definition of *Action*.

a problem you have already made a philosophical mistake".<sup>25</sup> Davidson replies to this: "If your assumptions lead to a contradiction, no doubt you have made a mistake, but since you can know you have made a mistake without knowing what the mistake is, your problem may be real".<sup>26</sup>

The point I take Lemmon to be making here is that, in view of the existence of *akrasia* as a phenomenon, any problems that arise for philosophy are going to arise by way of the philosophical method employed in discussing it. There is a problem with giving a clear, rational explanation of *akrasia*, but the problem for the *akratic* is not philosophical. The possibility of *akrasia* is not grounded by a clear philosophical account, just as acting is not grounded on philosophical accounts of such concepts as 'wanting'.

Davidson believes that the confusions we get into are based on a mistake about the nature of practical reasoning,<sup>27</sup> and there follows a discussion on this. But what we get is a discussion based on the concept of an ideally rational person, i.e. a rational person who satisfies an abstract and formal account of practical reason. The paper concludes with:

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<sup>25</sup> E. J. Lemmon, 'Moral Dilemmas' in *Philosophical Review*, LXXI (1962), pp. 144-5. I do not wholeheartedly go along with it being a pseudo-problem, for philosophical problems are often illuminating as to what can and cannot be done in philosophy, and thus can be a spur for us to reflect on what we are doing and *how* we are doing it.

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.* p. 95.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.* p. 96.

...if the question is read, what is the agent's reason for doing *a* when he believes it would be better, all things considered, to do another thing, then the answer must be: for this, the agent has no reason. We perceive a creature as rational in so far as we are able to view his movements as part of a rational pattern comprising also thoughts, desires, emotions, and volitions.<sup>28</sup>

When such a creature is the result of a rigid philosophical account of thoughts, etc. then it will necessarily be the case that in the case of incontinence the attempt to read reason into behaviour will be "...subject to a degree of frustration"<sup>29</sup>, especially when the reason that we try to read into it is based on an abstract and formal sort of reason, which only exists by virtue of a certain sort of philosophical approach.

The error with many discussions of practical reasoning lies in the quest for a systematic and closed 'theory', and attributing this as the sort of thinking that is going on in particular cases of *Action*. In "Deliberation and Practical Reason"<sup>30</sup> David Wiggins sums up this point in general terms:

No theory, if it is to recapitulate or reconstruct practical reasoning even as well as mathematical logic recapitulates or reconstructs the actual experience of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p. 112.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> In David Wiggins, *Needs, Values, Truth* (Blackwell, 1987).

conducting or exploring deductive argument, can treat the concerns an agent brings to any situation as forming a closed, complete, consistent system. For it is the essence of these concerns to make competing, inconsistent claims. (This is a mark not of our irrationality but of *rationality* in the face of the plurality of human goods).<sup>31</sup>

When a person does *a* when he believes it would be better to do another thing, then it may well be the case that he has no reason in the sense of 'reason' that issues from a closed, consistent, complete system of 'practical' reasoning, but that is no justification for drawing the conclusion that *the agent* has no reason. Only against the background of such theoretical thinking can assumed wisdom adjudicate so clearly as to what is to count as rational and what as irrational; what is to count, and what is not to count as a reason for acting.

#### *Akrasia: the akratic's problem*

In Chapter Four I claimed that Hegel's discussion of conscience is an attempt to show, bring out and expose, the practical nature of good

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p. 232. Wiggins' footnote to this is also pertinent: "Jonathan Glover speaks of 'the aesthetic preference most of us have for economy of principles, the preference for ethical systems in the style of the Bauhaus rather than Baroque' (The Aristotelian Society, supp. Vol. 49, 1975, p. 183). Against this I say that only a confusion between the practical and the theoretical could even purport to provide reasoned grounds for such a preference". Ibid. pp. 232-3.

and evil, for it is in conscience that "...both morality and evil have their common root" (see p. 192 above). This is in line with his general approach to philosophy, viz. that its task is to set out and expose the logic of *Action*, and not necessarily to provide solutions to the problems that individuals experience in their lives. Given that as rational creatures human beings do not merely conform to, and accept without questioning, the laws, customs and habits of their social situation (a point related to 'the spirit of reflection' discussed in Chapter Two above), that "...on the contrary, everyone demands that [they] shall comply with his private criterion" (*PR* p.4 [A]), then problems relating to how things are and how they ought to be will be a necessary feature of life.

Of course, not all philosophers who have covered such ground have entertained the confused belief that they could provide solutions to the problems that individuals experience in their lives (though only a brief survey of the literature will show that there are many who *do* appear to entertain such a belief in moral philosophy in general). Most writers concern themselves with attempting to provide solutions to the philosophical problems that the phenomenon of *akrasia* throws up. But even here the overall problem is of how a person *can* voluntarily err.

Consider what Hegel says about conscience and its positive side, good and morality. This refers to the desire that individuals have to do the right thing. By 'the right thing' here I do not mean that in any given situation there is a particular right thing to do, that faced with a troublesome situation there is one course of *Action* awaiting

enactment, so to speak. It is simply the desire to get it right, to *right* the situation. This does not have a philosophical justification to it; we must not think that we must, do or ought to appeal to some universalizable maxim that will justify by way of reason what would be the right thing to do. Reason in this formal sense has not been distinguished in this context. At bottom, wanting to get it right – the concept of right<sup>32</sup> – has as its basis human activity and conduct, and that involves rational desire, *practical* reason. Similarly, there is no distinction between the subjective and the objective – it is not that *I, in particular*, want to get it right, and right according to what *I* think is right. What is wanted is that *the situation* is righted. What is wanted is, in Aristotle's terms, practical truth in agreement with right desire (e.g. *NE* 1139a30).

With the negative side of conscience, however, something further is going on. In doing wrong there is an intrinsic falsity in the deed. Thus, for example, in fraud I present something as true and right to my victim, but that which I present to him is not what it appears to be: I sell him something that has the *semblance* of gold, but which in fact is not gold. Wrong, in this sense, is a mere *show* [*Shein*], it is something masquerading as true and right (*PR* #82). But it is dependent on truth and rightness, that the item is genuine and that this is the true and the right basis on which to strike a deal, and this is explicitly recognised by me in that they are the basis of my deception.

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<sup>32</sup> It is worth pointing out here that Hegel uses the term *Recht* with its full etymological significance, i.e. meaning correct, lawful, just (*gerecht*), ethically good.

This fraudulence is then a practical falsehood based on a person's knowledge of what is true and right, carried out with the conscience (*Gewissen* = self-certainty) of the perpetrator knowing what he does to be wrong. This is what is involved in acting with a bad conscience, and it is this knowledge of what is true and right that is the basis upon which I can act truly or falsely – i.e. conscience is the common root of both good and evil.

Now consider the matter from the following perspective. Ordinarily, I am the sort of person who acts truly and rightly, doing and wanting to do what is the right thing. I am not ignorant of certain possibilities: I know that *I can* take advantage of certain situations, act in ways that might be considered to be to my own advantage, but it never enters my mind *to do so*. What might be considered to be to my own *advantage*, i.e. *more* than what I consider is truly and rightly due to me, is not something I ordinarily want. However, on a particular occasion, I am tempted by an opportunity to defraud someone, and I succumb to this. Here I act with a bad conscience, not only in that I act falsely and wrongly, but with the added factor that *I feel* bad about it. Such conduct is uncharacteristic of me, character not only being the sum of what I do, the way I act ordinarily, but also how I feel about what I do and about myself.

The question that concerns me here about *akrasia* is not so much how it is possible – given the nature of conscience, that is relatively clear – but rather how I can put myself into a position in which I know I will suffer from my own condemnation. This takes *akrasia* a step further



than Aristotle, who concentrates on the knowledge involved, which Socrates emphasises. In this way, as Anscombe says (p. 256 above), Aristotle may well have still been under the Socratic 'ignorance view' of evil.

However, if we are to take Aristotle's claim that man is a creature of rational appetite, and his remarks on character and feeling seriously (discussed in Chapter Four above), then this further point is implicit in the phenomenon of *akrasia*. That is to say, desire and feeling are a fundamental feature of the *actual, empirical* phenomenon of *akrasia*, and the distinction between reason and desire is something that arises out of this sort of situation and experience. On the other hand, if you begin by analysing the phenomenon of *akrasia* with an abstract conception of knowledge and reason - 'abstract' in relation to the context of the phenomenon which you are analysing - then the likelihood is that there are going to be anomalies and problems, precisely because that conception of knowledge or reason bears little or no resemblance to that which is expressed in the phenomenon. This is the philosophical mistake that I take Lemmon to be speaking of (see p. 261-262 above).

There is, however, something that can be said about the empirical problem of *akrasia*, without resorting to speculative psychology. The feeling bad about it (which is more than likely, since the *akratic* is someone who would not ordinarily act in this sort of way) is due to the fact that what I think I ought to do is not expressed in what I actually do, and the latter is a judgement that is contrary to the beliefs held by

the agent. As such, it is a *false* judgement according to the beliefs held by him. Ordinarily, being a person of good character, the agent wants to act truly.

This recalls a point I raised in Chapter Four concerning Aristotle's distinction between the possession of virtue, as in a state of mind, and the exercise of virtue in an activity, and Hegel's distinction between the moral attitude and the ethical (see pp. 216 -217 above). The *akratic* has the right moral attitude, he is in possession of right principle, but on *this* occasion he finds he cannot act in accordance with it. For Hegel the moral attitude is when a person is still in the 'ought to be' of thinking, but the moral does not find expression in the ethical, i.e. *Action* and the actual. Here we have a situation where there is no conjunction between right desire (for in a sense the *akratic* has it - it just does not win over) and practical truth. But when they do need to be *conjoined* then we are on the verge of *akrasia*, i.e. ordinarily the two are not distinct – the person just acts. It is in this sort of situation, this sort of experience, that the distinction between reason and desire arises.

When philosophy assumes this distinction between reason and desire then it is apt to run ahead of itself. In the beginning is the deed. Closing the preface to *PR*, Hegel comments on those who would give instruction to how the world ought to be, but it is also pertinent here. Philosophy comes late on the scene, and "The owl of Minerva spreads its wings only with the falling of dusk" (pp. 12 –13). That is to say,

philosophy does not ground morality, ethics and human life; it assimilates and reflects what is.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have developed two points that were raised in Chapter Four. The first of those was that purposive *Action*, conduct that issues from established characteristics of a person, can be seen as a judgement, which through further consideration lends plausibility to the notion of practical truth. This in turn furnishes an argument that suggests the analytical distinction between reason and desire is not as clear-cut in *Action* as it is often supposed. This is supported by a discussion of right desire, wanting to do the right thing as a central aspect of conscience.

In saying this I am arguing that distinctions between reason and desire arise in certain empirical situations, reflected in examples such as *akrasia* and bad conscience. The discussion of these develops the second point carried over from Chapter Four, viz. the important distinctions that Aristotle and Hegel draw between virtue as a state of mind and virtue as activity, and between the moral and the ethical. It is often this that accounts for the actual, empirical problems of *akrasia*. On the other hand, philosophical problems arise from the demand of epistemological and logical exactitude in accounts of knowledge and reason. Aristotle's claim that virtue implies a principle, rather than the Socratic view that knowledge involves knowledge of a principle, opens

up the discussion of *akrasia* to allow us to see that character and feeling are fundamental features in reasoning, something that is left out of accounts of formal, abstract practical reasoning.

In the following chapter I will continue the main theme of the thesis that attributing the abstract concepts and categories of philosophical analysis to the subject matter of our considerations can often give a jaundiced perspective. In particular, I will consider the use of causal analysis and formal accounts of practical reason in discussions of *Action*.

## 6. AGENCY, CHOICE AND SELF-SUFFICIENCY

### *Introduction*

In Chapters Four and Five I discussed various aspects of human conduct that reflect the nature of both Aristotle's and Hegel's conceptions of purposive *Action*. I say here *reflect* rather than *define*, for the aim was not to set down psychologically or logically necessary pre-conditions by which *Action* might be explained. To attempt to establish psychological pre-conditions would be to formulate a theory of mind that would hopefully go towards explaining how 'the mental' then finds expression in the physical world in which *Action* takes place. Such an exercise rests on the Cartesian and empiricist assumptions that mind and the physical world are essentially distinct, as discussed in Chapters One to Three. On the other hand, to attempt to set down logical pre-conditions for *Action* would be to make an assumption, the subject of criticism in Chapter Five, about the nature of formal logic.

In the present chapter I shall discuss these further. In particular, causal analysis and the use of logical inference will be considered as ways of accounting for *Action*. It will be argued that such approaches are confused in a common way, i.e. that they both *unnecessarily* seek some sort of mechanism that operates between the internal, 'mental' and the external, physical expression of the latter. This is unnecessary, I suggest, precisely because those aspects of purposive *Action* discussed in Chapters Four

and Five – reason, desire, character, conscience, knowledge, self-awareness – show that no such mechanism is needed, and that the distinction between ‘the mental’ and the physical in relation to human conduct is misleading. Those aspects of *Action* that I refer to will be looked at in the context of voluntary conduct, choice, character and practical reasoning. I will suggest towards the end of the chapter that such considerations, alongside considerations of habituation and education, are reflective of *self-conscious Action*, and that in this light such questions as what *moves us* to *Action* are in fact peculiar and misconceived questions.

### **Voluntariness, Choice and Agency**

Aristotle’s account of *Action* has deservedly attracted much attention in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In his voluntary/involuntary distinction, and his discussion of choice and practical reasoning there has been a slow but significant move away from discussing abstract moral theories to looking to the specific details of *Action* and the implications on ethics. However, in accounts of *Action* there remains a tendency to find explanations by reference to abstract ideas – quite legitimate in their own place – that Aristotle’s account shows to be unnecessary, and which ultimately only lead to confusion. This is the case with causal analysis, and the use of logical inference in discussions of practical reasoning.

### *Aristotle on The Voluntary and The Chosen*

At NE 1111b5 Aristotle says that choice is a "better test of character than *Actions* are", and that a chosen *Action* is a voluntary *Action*, although it involves something further than this, "for both children and animals have a

share in voluntary *Action*, but not in choice". This something further is that "choice implies a rational principle, and thought" (*NE* 1112a16).

Aristotle's point seems to be something like this. The sorts of ways a person chooses to conduct himself will tell us something about the sort of person he is. An *Action* only tells us that the agent did *this*, and although we may want to call it, e.g. evil, it does not tell us the reasons for his doing what he did. A person's reasons for conducting himself in the way that he does are part of our understanding of that person's character. If we enquire why he chose to act as he did, we gain information about his character, and this will be, to some degree, illustrative of how he thinks he ought to go on in life. This might be extended slightly to saying that the sorts of things a person chooses to do will constitute what he thinks well-being consists in, for choices are about means and not ends (*NE* 1112b34ff.), i.e. we do not deliberate about and choose ultimate ends, e.g. well-being,<sup>1</sup> i.e. all rational *Action* aims at some good (as discussed in Chapter Four above). How we choose to go about attaining well-being is illustrative of the sorts of persons we are, it says something about our characters.

Aristotle's discussion of *prohairesis* involves a particular account of agency, different from that captured by the term 'voluntary', in that choice implies character. This in turn involves deliberation, constituting *Action* in a broad sense - i.e. not just the pursuit of a particular desire, but the pursuit of desire in terms of a practical understanding of the social context of *Action*, the activities, practices, customs, habits of the community in which the individual lives. Character thus involves an understanding of *Action* in

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<sup>1</sup> I use 'well-being' as the translation of *eudaimonia* rather than 'happiness'. There is little in Aristotle's work that suggests he was talking about what the latter term is used to indicate today. This will come into play in Chapter Seven.

relation to getting on in life, and it is this which is the mark of the chosen *Action* rather than a merely voluntary one.

We need to keep in mind that in discussing choice we are usually referring to extraordinary situations, in that much of our daily lives involve activities where no apparent conscious choices are made, although we may want to say that those activities were chosen. "Thus the field of deliberation [which is an aspect of choosing] is that which happens for the most part, where the result is obscure and the right course not clearly defined" (*NE* 1112b10). For the most part, our daily lives involve activities where the result is not obscure, and the right course of conduct is a question that rarely raises itself, e.g. "writing, for we do not hesitate over the way in which a word should be written" (*NE* 1112b1). In such activities questions of choice, in the normal course of events, do not arise.

However, when it comes to more complicated *Action*, that which involves thought and deliberation, Aristotle appears to have burdened modern philosophy with something of a problem. Practical reasoning, involving thought and reasoning, expressed - when laid out - in premises, results, not merely in a proposition about how I should go on, but in *Action* itself. Hegel says much the same:

...practical reason not only posits the universal determination, i.e. *the good, within itself*, on the contrary, it is only 'practical' in the more proper sense, when it requires that the good should be there in the world, that it should have external



objectivity; in other words, that thought should not be merely *subjective*, but altogether objective.<sup>2</sup>

What goes on then between my thoughts and reasoning (involving desires, beliefs, the practical assessment of particular situations) and my *Action*?

G.H. Von Wright puts the question in the following way:

What sort of connexion would this signify between want and thought on the one hand, and *Action* on the other? Can I say that wanting and opining *make* me act? If so, would this be a form of causal efficacy? Or would it be more like a logical compulsion?<sup>3</sup>

Von Wright gives us two possible explanations of what is going on between thought and *Action*, causal analysis and some sort of logical compulsion involved in the inference of practical reasoning. However, as we shall see, such attempts to explain *Action* represent *ways of thinking* and do more to explain that way of thinking than they explain *Action* itself. That is, *Action* is made to fit the particular mode of explanation - causal or logical analysis - rather than the other way around, such attempts failing to take heed of Aristotle's demand (made at various places throughout *NE*) that theories and the truths they purport to put forward must fit the facts and actuality, rather than the latter accommodating the former.

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<sup>2</sup> *The Encyclopaedic Logic*, op. cit., #54. Later on in the present chapter I will make a few points regarding Hegel's mention of 'the good' in practical reason, and I shall discuss it at greater length in the following chapter.

<sup>3</sup> 'On So-called Practical Inference' in J. Raz (ed.) *Practical Reason* (Oxford, 1978), p. 47.

### *Agency and Causal Analysis*

Causal analysis exemplifies such explanations of *Action* in terms of a way of thinking, trying to think of *ways in which* thought and reasoning can result in *Action*, rather than with the logic of *Action* itself. In his 'Actions, Reasons, and Causes' Donald Davidson confirms this in the opening paragraphs of the paper, saying:

What is the relation between a reason and an action when the reason explains the action by giving the agent's reason for doing what he did? We may call such explanations *rationalizations*, and say that the reason *rationalizes* the action.

In this paper I want to defend the ancient - and common-sense - position that rationalization is a species of causal explanation.<sup>4</sup>

That is to say, Davidson's subject is not *Actions*, i.e. things done, but the philosophical explanation of *Action*, and further, a particular way of thinking about *Action*, namely causal explanation. This can be seen by noting that *Action* is rational *per se*, and therefore does not need *rationalising*. Or rather, *Action* needs rationalising only to those who find a particular instance puzzling, in need of justification, etc., or those who want to put forward a particular way of thinking about *Action*. The *general* nature of Davidson's approach is illustrated by his broad categorisation of human conduct. In a footnote he says:

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<sup>4</sup> *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, 1980), p. 3.

Actions, performances, and events not involving intentions are alike in that they are often referred to or defined partly in terms of some terminal stage, outcome or consequence.<sup>5</sup>

Here Davidson throws in *Action* together with unintentional behaviour. But, as Aristotle points out for us, the *prohairesis* involved in *Action* proper distinguishes it from unintentional behaviour. Davidson, continuing the footnote, then goes on to distinguish *Action* as what an agent does intentionally, but then goes on to lump it together again with voluntary but unintentional and involuntary and unintentional behaviour:

...suppose 'A' is a description of an action, 'B' is a description of something done voluntarily, though not intentionally, and 'C' is a description of something done involuntarily and unintentionally; finally *suppose A=B=C* (my emphasis).

But we need to ask *why* suppose  $A=B=C$  when the descriptions provided for A and B and C suggest the conclusion  $A \neq B \neq C$ ? Or rather,  $A=B=C$  when we consider them in terms of formal categories which provide a framework wherein A and B and C are representative of the *category* 'event', 'happening', etc. rather than actual phenomena. What we are left with is a discussion of philosophical categories rather than of the actual features *Action* itself.

Anscombe gives a hint as to what is going wrong with Davidson's approach. Given the options of either causal efficacy or logical compulsion, he goes for the former

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid., footnote 2, p. 4.

...on the ground that there is a difference between my having a reason and its actually being my reason. I act because...We need an account of this 'because'. The psychological 'because', he supposes, is an ordinary *because* where the *because* clause gives a psychological state. The solution lacks acumen. True, not only must I have a reason, it must also 'operate as my reason': that is, what I do must be done *in pursuit* of the end and *on grounds* of the belief. But not just *any* act of mine which is caused by my having a certain desire is done *in pursuit* of the object of desire; not just *any* act caused by my having a belief is done on grounds of the belief.<sup>6</sup>

Whereas the description of something done in the form 'He did X because... (of such-and-such a desire) and... (such-and-such belief)' is perfectly sensible, there is nothing in the description to say that the agent did X *in pursuit* of the desired end or *on the grounds* of the beliefs that he held at the time. Such a description fits impulsive behaviour pretty well. Indeed, such behaviour represents the mainstay of Davidson's position, behaviour which is instanced by the onslaught of a state or disposition:

A desire to hurt your feelings may spring up at the moment you anger me; I may start wanting to eat a melon just when I see one; and beliefs may begin at the moment we notice, perceive, learn, or remember something.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> 'Von Wright on Practical Inference' in P. Schlipp (ed.) *The Philosophical of Georg\_Heinrik Von Wright* (Open Court Pub. Co., 1982)

<sup>7</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.12.

The problem with such an approach is that, although Davidson gives us the grounds for distinguishing between certain types of behaviour, he does not recognise these grounds as reason enough for making such a distinction - and thus all forms of behaviour are lumped together with *Action* proper. The cause of the problem is that *Action* proper, to borrow from Anscombe again, is

...not just any old thing which we do, such as making an involuntary gesture. Such a gesture might be caused, for example, by realising something (the 'onset of a belief') when we are in a state of desire. Something I do is not made into an intentional action by being caused by a belief or desire, even if the descriptions fit.<sup>8</sup>

The confusion arises from the failure to allow the different forms of behaviour to be self-defining in terms captured by Aristotle's observations on the difference between the voluntary and the chosen. Instead, *Action* is not only placed in the same category as unintentional, voluntary but not intentional, and involuntary behaviour, but also in the broader category of 'events' and 'happenings' where clearly causal analysis is provided with an opening. In other words, we allow the way in which we think to determine how we define *Action*, rather than allowing *Action's* distinguishing characteristics to do the job.

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 378.

*The Voluntary and The Chosen: unreflective and reflective conduct*

In his paper 'Hegel and The Philosophy of Action' Charles Taylor points out the historical origins of the type of approach that Davidson adopts.

...the basic conception goes back, I believe, at least to the 17<sup>th</sup> Century. A conception of this kind was, in a sense, even more at home in the basically dualist outlook common to the Cartesian and empiricist philosophies.

*Qua* bodily movement actions resembled all other events. What distinguished them was their inner, "mental" background. Within the bounds of this outlook, there was a clear ontological separation between outer event and inner background.<sup>9</sup>

Taylor contrasts this with a 'qualitative view' -

...actions are what we might call intrinsically directed. Actions are in a sense inhabited by the purposes which direct them, so that action and purpose are ontologically inseparable.<sup>10</sup>

Here Taylor reflects the importance of the distinction between the voluntary and the chosen as put forward by Aristotle, albeit he approaches it from a slightly different angle. This becomes clear later in the paper, in a passage that deserves to be quoted at length.

On the qualitative view, action may be totally unreflective; it may be something we carry out without awareness. We may

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<sup>9</sup>In *Hegel's Philosophy of Action* (Humanities Press, 1983), ed. Lawrence S. Stepelevich and David Lamb, p.2.

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*

then become aware of what we are doing, formulate our ends. So following a conscious desire or intention is not an inescapable feature of action. On the contrary, this degree of awareness in our action is something we come to achieve.

In achieving this, we also transform our activity. The quality of consciously directed activity is different from that of our unreflected, semi-conscious performance. This flows naturally from the second view on action: if action is qualitatively different from nonaction, and this difference consists in the fact that action is directed; the action is also different when this direction takes on a crucially different character. And this it does when we move from unreflecting response, where we act in the same manner as animals do, to conscious formulations of our purposes. Our action becomes directed in a different and stronger sense. To become conscious is to be able to act in a new way.<sup>11</sup>

Conduct that is voluntary but not chosen is 'unreflective' *in that* it is not chosen, whereas *Action* that is the result of choice involves deliberation and is thus 'reflective' (although, as we shall see in relation to habit, this is a very basic drawing of the distinction). The latter consists of more than reacting to impulses and desires, the mode of behaviour of animals and often that of children. Reflective behaviour is something that we develop through experiencing and learning about the world we live in, and it is by way of such experience and learning, and the *Action* that is characteristic of it, that we develop the capacity to get on in the world.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 7.

To become conscious, in Taylor's words, is precisely the development involved in gaining a practical understanding of the world (activities, practices, customs, habits, et al.) in which we live, making judgements in relation to that world (discussed in Chapter Five, pp. 232ff. above), providing the background to the deliberation and choosing of *Actions* proper. That is not to say that these processes of understanding, judgement, deliberation and choice are going on on each and every occasion of a conscious act. Much of the time our *Actions* are straightforward, that 'straightforwardness' reflective of character based on the understanding, judgement and deliberation that we have developed over time. Given such developed character, there is no distinction between thought and *Action* – we just act. That is to say, there is no need for some sort of causal mechanism to be imported into our accounts of purposive *Action*, a move that is reminiscent of the Cartesian attempts to explain the relation between mind and body.

### *Agency and Practical Reasoning*

However, looking at *Action* from within the context of philosophical presuppositions rather than the contexts within which *Action* takes place is not restricted to causal analysis. It is also illustrated by the approach which starts from the idea that practical reasoning, being a type of *inference*, involves some form of logical necessity. Indeed, a comment by A.J. Kenny can be taken to suggest that practical inference itself presupposes logic, in that



It is beyond doubt that in addition to theoretical reasoning there is practical reasoning. We work out, with the aid of logic, not only what is the case but also what we are to do.<sup>12</sup>

That is, *Action* is *dependent* on the 'aid of logic' in order for us to work out what is the case and what we are to do. Clearly there might be a sense in which the *philosopher* employs certain logical tools in order to, e.g. formulate practical reasoning, but it is equally clear that this is not what goes on in *Action* itself. I say Kenny's comment *can* be taken to suggest such dependence on logic, that not being the only possible interpretation of what he says. But what is worrying about this is the suggestion that the 'aid of logic' is sought, suggestive of the absurdity that "...a previous study of anatomy and physiology is required in order to digest or breathe" (see Chapter Five, p. 231 above).

Nevertheless, there is undoubtedly a prevalent tendency to view practical reasoning, and thus *Action*, through formal logical categories, the use of 'inference' in the formulation being an obvious example of the 'aid of logic'.

Consider a point made by Mary Mothersill:

Now if we suppose that Aristotle meant the practical syllogism to remind us that in *prohairesis* a person must have an end in view (expressed in the universal premise) and must also have some beliefs about the particular facts of his own situation (expressed in the minor premise) then the syllogism is not *any* kind of argument but rather a schema of logically

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<sup>12</sup> 'Practical Inference', *Analysis* 26.3 (Jan 1966), p. 65.

necessary conditions for deliberate (intentional) action...(my emphasis).<sup>13</sup>

Again the aid of logic is brought in the form of logical necessity in order to capture the nature of *Action*. This is expressed even in Von Wright's suggestion, mentioned earlier, that the relation between thought and *Action* might be one of logical compulsion. Von Wright's problem, Anscombe suggests,<sup>14</sup> is the way in which he phrases the inference, viz. 'Unless I do A, then I shall not achieve E'. Thus for 'E' to be achieved I am logically compelled - if I really want 'E' - to do 'A'. But surely the idea of being *logically compelled to Action* is an absurdity?

The difficulty felt is to grasp why this should be called 'inference'. Inference is a logical matter; if there is inference, there must be validity; if there is inference, the conclusion must in some way *follow* from the premises. How can an action logically follow from premises?<sup>15</sup>

Practical reasoning concludes in an *Action*, rather than merely a proposition concerning what must be done if a certain end is to be realised. However, using 'unless' in a schematical rendering gives a false impression in that 'A' is a *necessary Action* in 'Unless A, I shall not achieve E'. Whereas in reality 'A' may not be the *only* means by which 'E' can be realised. For sure,

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<sup>13</sup> 'Anscombe's Account of the Practical Syllogism' in *Philosophical Review* 71, Oct. 1962, p. 461. A point, incidentally, that Mothersill attributes to Donald Davidson.

<sup>14</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., pp. 384-5.

Practical grounds may 'require' an action, when they shew that *only* by its means can the end be obtained, but they are just as much grounds when they merely shew that the end *will* be obtained by certain means.<sup>16</sup>

In schematicizing practical reasoning into syllogistic form, something 'borrowed' from logic, the logical necessity of the inference between premises and conclusion is taken along as part of the package. But such necessity does not always have a place in *Action* - i.e. situations where there may be various means by which to achieve the desired end.

### *Desiring, Wanting and Action*

'Wanting' is indeed a necessary condition for *Action* - *but wanting does not appear in the practical syllogism*. In discussing practical reasoning, Aristotle, I would suggest, is taking it for granted that it is wanting and desiring *for some end* that is under consideration, and wanting for some end is involved in an *Action*. Thus he is not talking about desiring and wanting as some sort of 'psychological states' which are pre-conditions to *Action* - which in the Humean tradition are usually parcelled-off as 'stirrings in the soul'. Desiring and wanting are the desiring- and the wanting- of- the- object, something that cannot be captured in exclusively psychological terms (see Chapter Five, pp. 247ff. above). Furthermore, he is not talking about wishing - "...e.g. we wish to be healthy, but choose things that will make us healthy..." (*NE* 1111b29). The wants and desires that are related to *Action* and its end or object involve a rational cognition of it as in our power, of the possibilities that a state of affairs has to offer, rather than

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 384.

brutish desires that cause us to act. The necessity comes in here: if we are talking about *Action* - rational and deliberate *Action* - rather than a theoretical framework or blueprint of the pre-conditions of human conduct, then wanting and desiring are themselves necessary elements in what has been achieved. 'If that which he did was rational and successful (what was done was not only deliberated about but also *deliberate*) *he must have wanted it!*'. His reasons will appear in the formulation of a practical syllogism - wanting doesn't, it is redundant and would be pleonastic. However, this necessity of the wanting does not necessitate that *certain* reasons are to be put into the premises, only that there are *some* reasons to put in. The necessity is thus not that of logical necessity that prevails between certain premises and a particular conclusion, but the necessity of the features of rational, deliberate *Action*, features necessary to achieve a desired end.<sup>17</sup>

What, then, *does* move us to *Action*? But this is a curious question. From the start the presence of 'move' begs the question of some *force* - causal or logical - which is suggestive of involuntariness. The 'wanting' that Aristotle is interested in *is* the 'move' to *Action*, but a 'wanting' that is tied up with the world we have learned to get on in, i.e. a *practical* 'wanting' and not a 'wanting' of an exclusively psychological nature. Taylor provides us with a clue as to the curious nature of the question:

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<sup>17</sup> In 'Von Wright on Practical Inference' Anscombe provides a detailed discussion on how we can get fooled by the idea of 'logical necessity', even in theoretical reasoning. 'As well as the truth connection of p, p implies q, and q we also want to say that there is logical necessity: "But the logical necessity is *the justification* of assertive inference from p to q and its apprehension *compels* belief". That is a confusion. The justification is simply the truth of p and p implies q: Where there is such a justification, we *call* the connection one of "logical necessity" '. p. 391.

One theory explains *Action* in terms of the supposedly more basic datum of the mental; the other accounts for the mental as a development out of our primitive capacity for *Action*.<sup>18</sup>

In an important sense, man is his activity - activity is a 'natural principle' (*NE* 1168a8 - a point I shall discuss at greater length in Chapter Seven), and, further, desires and wants - 'the mental' - are the desires and wants they are in virtue of the context of the sphere of activity, in which exist the objects of those desires and wants, i.e. the world in which we live (= are active). To repeat something I said in Chapter Five (see p. 249 above), just as *what* someone wants or desires is dependent for its being wanted on the wanting and desiring of the agent, so the wanting or desiring of *the agent* is dependent on the object. With such a background it just does not make sense to ask what it is that 'moves' us to *Action*.

This is true of the general question. But of course in particular instances of *Action* we often ask 'Why did you do that?' But this is a different sort of question altogether in that it questions the rationale or justification of a particular deed. Here the question is often of the form 'What's the good of that?' The 'good' comes in here because we assume that *Action* is for *some* good, and we are right to do so: *Action* and activity are concerned with *getting on*, with some 'good' in view. Whether it is the actual good or apparent good (*NE* Book III 4) - i.e. whether it is good absolutely or good for an individual (*NE* Book VII 12), or whether it is good as a means or as an end (*NE* Book I 4) - is irrelevant here (again, this is something I shall look more closely at in Chapter Seven). To ask the question in a situation where the 'good' or the point of the *Action* is clear will (rightly) bring

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<sup>18</sup> Op. cit., p.13.

astonishment from he who is questioned, and the general question 'What moves us to *Action*?' only makes sense in the context of a *particular philosophical conception of Action*. But I have argued that it is a philosophical conception of *Action* - i.e. a theory or definition of *Action* organised around philosophical categories and concepts - that produces questions that are quite peculiar when asked of *Action* and activity proper.

### **Action and Activities: choice, habit, rules and self-awareness**

The confusions that arise in this area are often due to conceiving activities as in some way mechanistic, carried out 'habitually', rather than looking at them in their wider context of *Action*. *Action* involves deliberation and choice, which themselves involve a practical consideration of the way in which those activities are carried out and what might be attained by way of them. The first thing to note here is that many of the activities which we get up to require *habituation* in the ways those activities are carried out and in the *objects* we employ in doing so. In looking at human activities we need to note that habituation involves learning how to get on in the world that is populated by innumerable objects, artefacts, tools, etc. the very existence of which is dependent on the potential purposes they fulfil *for us*. In learning to use, manipulate, employ such things for our purposes we learn those activities that 'getting on in the world' involves. This itself involves a reflective awareness of our own agency and a degree of self-sufficiency, two factors which are reflected in the process and practical organisation of education.

*Activity, Choice and Habituation*

Clearly there are situations where agency figures but in which choice is not immediately apparent. And yet in considering these activities we are not dealing merely with the sort of voluntariness that, according to both Aristotle and Hegel, animals and children display; we are considering activities which fall within that sub-set of voluntary conduct, i.e. rational, purposive, *Actions*, the cause of which, says Aristotle, is *prohairesis*. But here in discussing activities it would seem that the closer we focus on the activity concerned the more the role of choice in its execution appears to diminish. However, a closer look at what these activities involve shows the relevance of Aristotle's point that the field of deliberation, the considerations involved in the making of choices, is that which happens for the most part, where the result is obscure and the right course is not clearly defined.

Now, the foregoing considerations are not intended to establish that choice has *no* role to play in such activities, or that a person engaged in a particular activity cannot make choices, but that when we consider the nature of such activities and the sorts of situations which arise in the execution of them, situations in which choice comes into play, then we are talking about situations which have an effect on the ordinary, straightforward execution of those activities. This in turn throws up the question of where choice is to figure in our account of *Action*.

Consider the latter point from the following perspective. When a situation arises where choice is involved, it is a situation where the sort of question 'What shall I do (here, next, for the best...etc.)?' arises. An important point to emphasise here, a point that tends to be overlooked, is that the question is 'What shall I do?' That is to say, the situations in which this sort of

question arises involve the person being directly conscious of their agency. But there are many day-to-day activities in which we participate where situations throwing up such questions, such a direct awareness of one's agency, are a hindrance to the execution of those activities. Furthermore, such situations arise, for the most part, when the activity is not following its ordinary, straightforward course of events. More often than not the situation throws up such questions as 'What shall I do?' and involves an awareness of one's agency precisely because the 'right course of *Action* is not clearly defined', and this is so because the situation in question represents an element within the activity which hinders its ordinary, straightforward execution.

The point being made here regarding choice can be illustrated by considering a modern, everyday activity: take, for example, driving a car. The learner-driver faces many questions such as 'What shall I do (here, next, for the best...etc.)?' because the results of certain operations are obscure to him, and the right course is not clear. I may know, as a learner-driver, that, for example, the accelerator makes the car go forward and that the brakes bring the car to a halt. But until *I feel* the result of depressing the accelerator or brakes - i.e. the pressure required to cause certain speeds of movement and degrees of slowing down - the result may well be obscure and the right pressure to, e.g., move off slowly and smoothly, unclear.

Further, the anxieties of the learner-driver arise due to the fact that the question raised is 'What shall I do?', a question that directly confronts the driver with his own agency. Indeed, the learning process is itself geared to minimise the occurrence of such questions, i.e. to accustom the driver to the various operations of the vehicle, the sorts of bodily movements and



the force required for certain manoeuvres, and the rules of the road, which is to say, minimise the occasions where the result of certain operations are obscure and the right way to go unclear.

Clearly in such activities situations requiring someone to make a choice are a hindrance to their successful execution, and it is when such questions of choice do not arise, or come up rarely, that I would, e.g., graduate from being a learner-driver to a qualified driver. I am aware of the bodily movements required for different operations, what those operations effect; I have a practical knowledge of the rules of the road (i.e. I can drive in accord with them), etc. Given that other road-users drive in accordance with the rules of the road, situations should not arise wherein the question 'What should I do?' confronts me. It is only in *unusual, extraordinary*, situations that this question will arise for the qualified driver.

If we consider this further, we shall see that even when we are talking about the skilful execution of an activity the role of choice is not immediately clear; indeed, it is in situations where our skill comes into question, or is put to the test, that it comes out more clearly. What is interesting in a situation in which the question 'What shall I do?' is raised is that it is not a situation of our choosing (even though it may have been due to a *voluntary* manoeuvre), i.e. it arises when something has gone wrong, when something has gone amiss, where there is something hindering the successful execution of the activity, etc. - i.e. when there are *external* factors at play, factors which are not caused by my choosing but which may (truly) cause me to be in difficulty.

When driving, for instance, I may make a mistake, or even intentionally break the rules of the road, and thus I may well be in a situation which is accountable in terms of my agency. But agency does not necessarily

involve choosing: in the case of a mistake, it is clear that the resulting situation is not of my choosing, although I acted voluntarily; however, even in the second case it may be said that I chose to break the rules of the road, but it would be absurd to say that I chose the situation wherein the question 'What should I do?' arises, even though I knew it was possible that I might find myself in such a situation. In breaking the rule that I did (e.g. driving too fast) I wanted to get away with it, i.e. not end up in a dangerous situation, and my bodily movements and my handling of the car are directed by this purpose. That the situation got out of control was not of my choosing, although I am blameable.

### *Activity, Rules and Reason*

That choice is not *apparent* in the skilful execution of certain activities can be seen if we look at the point from the perspective of the nature of such activities. Many such activities are what we would call 'rule-governed' in that they involve the mechanical use of our bodies and tools, etc., i.e. if this is done then that will happen, and that will be a contributory factor in the successful execution of the activity as a whole. Some activities are not only rule-governed, but *law-governed* also, and these laws reflect the basis for the successful execution of the activity concerned. Driving comes immediately to mind here, i.e. its successful execution involves following certain rules or laws.

Problems arise in using 'rule-governed' and technical activities in explaining human behaviour. This is precisely where causal analysis, for instance, misses the mark, choice consequently falling out of account, for, as Anscombe tells us of *NE*:

Book VI teaches us, as I think we might not have realised from Book III, that there is no such thing as a 'choice' which is *only* technical....There is always, on Aristotle's view, another 'choice' behind a technical or purely executive one (1139b1-3). That is why he denies the name of 'prohairesis', 'choice', to the technical or executive decision, even though this is the fruit of deliberation, if that particular thing for the sake of which the decision being made is not *itself* decided upon by deliberation.<sup>19</sup>

That is to say, by focusing exclusively on the technical aspect of executing an activity, the element of choice and deliberation 'behind' the activity - the background or context of *Action* - falls out of account, thus allowing causal analysis a place in the picture.

The role that choice *does* play in the execution of an activity can be seen in the fact that activities are the sorts of things that are chosen, i.e. a particular activity itself represents a choice. As a factor in purposive *Action*, activity represents a means to some end. I want to go somewhere, and I choose a particular means which will get me there - e.g. I drive, cycle, walk, etc. Considering the rationality of activities i.e. that they involve some form of practical reasoning - there would seem to be some sort of pre-condition which forms the basis of the possibility of executing such an activity with purpose; something which is captured in the idea of following a rule.

In speaking of rules here it needs to be acknowledged that rules vary in their rigidity and application, i.e. it might be just a matter of common sense whether they should be followed, or it may be a matter for the law, but this

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<sup>19</sup> Anscombe in Bamborough op. cit. ,p.68.

will depend on a whole range of considerations centred on the details of particular activities. For present purposes however it is enough to note that such considerations of how rigidly a rule ought to be applied, and whether it should be enforced, only come on the scene when it is already established that acting against a rule is foolhardy, wrong, evil, etc. And the idea of acting against a rule needs to be emphasised here, for notice that in charging someone with being 'foolhardy' or 'criminal' we are talking about persons who have not merely failed to follow the rule, but who have consciously flouted the rule. With regard to the further question as to what it is that establishes any particular rule - i.e. what sort of considerations or principles give it its validity - we would do well to reflect that considering the sort of creatures that we are - according to Aristotle, creatures who function on the principle of rational desire - a rule can be seen as reflective of a quite rational way of going about things. That is, purposive *Action* implies a rule that signals, so to speak, the way to a desired end.

Clearly, rule-following can be seen to be teleological in that a rule is followed for the sake of some end, but care is also needed in considering what sort of 'end' we are talking about here. For instance, I may follow the rules of the road in order to get from A to B, but this is not to say that the rules are designed specifically for my own personal ends. The 'ends' of the rules of the road are of a different nature, for their aim or purpose, the reason for their being designed in the way that they are, is to enable me to attain my personal ends smoothly, safely, efficiently, etc., and the best way to achieve this is to drive in accordance with those rules.

Here the rules are not only conducive to my personal ends, but also to those of other road users. In this sense the rules of the road are reflective of a rational way of attaining the ends of such an activity as driving, i.e.

rational not only in that they enable me to drive well, but more importantly they enable me to drive well in virtue of the fact that they enable all road users to do well in their pursuits. Consider a point by Hegel:

By educated men, we may prima facie understand those who without the obtrusion of personal idiosyncrasy can do what others can do. It is precisely this idiosyncrasy, however, which uneducated men display, since this behaviour is not governed by the universal characteristics of the situation (*PR* #187[A]).

Thus 'driving' has universal characteristics (captured in the rules of the road) in that its very possibility by *all* users is dependent on each doing what others do. Hence the universal and social character of such activities, which is central to both Aristotle's and Hegel's account of *Action*, i.e. reflecting the claim that man is by nature a social creature.

### *Self-awareness and Acting Well*

However, it needs to be kept in mind that the sorts of rules which are under discussion require for their execution the capacity to make choices and an awareness of one's own agency, for these rules pertain to the sort of activity that is chosen, i.e. a rational activity by which I can attain my personal ends (e.g. getting from A to B). This awareness of one's own agency is something that Aristotle is clearly getting at when he says:

What we deliberate about is practical measures that lie in our power.....The effects about which we deliberate are those which are produced by our own agency but not always in the same way, [i.e. by different means]....(*NE* 1112a31-b3).

Deliberation and choosing involve self-awareness of some sort, something that comes out in considering rule-following when it is noted that the capacity to follow a rule involves the concomitant capacity not to follow a rule, that the capacity to act well involves the capacity to act badly, and thus how I conduct myself, which rules I follow and which I break, depends upon what it is that I want to achieve. It may well be the case that a person spends very little time in life making such choices, but this will depend on that person's character. This is to say, acting through rational choice may not involve self-awareness at any given time, or the sort of self-reflection involved when considering e.g. whether I should break this law or not, but clearly deliberation and choice cannot be accounted for without some reference to an awareness of one's own agency.

The importance of self-awareness in an account of *Action* can be seen if we look closely at the distinction that Aristotle and Hegel make, at several places, between the conduct of children and that of rational adults. Children, for Aristotle, do not act through choice, for their ends are set by desires, and not conceived in such universal terms as are captured in the sense of 'acting well'. Children act out of impulse and desire, something that comes out when we consider that, more often than not, the child's statement 'Candyfloss is good' can be understood in terms of 'I like candyfloss' and not as a statement about the benefits of the properties of candyfloss, i.e. 'good' here is being used in a particularly narrow way. This point is brought out by Hegel when he says "...children have no moral will but leave their parents to decide things for them" (PR #170[A]).

Using the term 'good' to refer to *Actions*, and not just to say something about my personal tastes, requires an ability to understand the rationality of an *Action*, i.e. its 'universal' aspect, the extent to which it might be an

instance of acting well, *eupraxia*. It is on the basis of this character of *Action* that rational adults are able to make decisions, for it is the rationality of the *Action* which is the subject of deliberation - i.e. is this a good - efficient, justifiable, legal, honest, sufficiently far-sighted, etc. - way of attaining this good that I want to attain. It is the child's inability to deliberate about such aspects of conduct in terms of 'acting well' that excludes him from acting through choice.

However, to suggest a hard and fast distinction between children and adults, apart from setting the misleading task of determining exactly when children receive reason and become adults, misses the point that this ability to grasp the rationality of *Action*, based on a practical understanding of the social context, is something that, like judgement, is developed. Both Aristotle and Hegel acknowledge this as the primary function of education, and in doing so give important pointers to the social context of purposive *Action*.

This is something that calls for close scrutiny. In turning to it I want to develop (with the help of Hegel) Aristotle's concept of *autarkeia* in order to further the historical argument of the present chapter, that Aristotle represents a turning point in philosophy which looks ahead to modern philosophical considerations, considerations which are traditionally thought to be distinguishing features of modern thinking in relation to antiquity.

### **Self-sufficiency, Education and Action**

Throughout Hegel's works he makes numerous comments about the difference between the modern world and the world of the ancients. Hegel sees the defining aspect of the modern in the rise of Christianity, giving

recognition to individual conscience through the crucifixion of Christ. However, Hegel's discussion of the Jansenist – Jesuit debates of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century concerning conscience and the philosophical development of the notion of 'the good will' is highly critical, and it is to the ancients that he turns to illustrate what he regards as the 'superficiality' of such a development. In particular, he returns to Aristotle's account of *Action* as involving knowing and willing as bringing out the nature of individual intentions, motives and purposes.

### *Hegel and The Ancients*

*PR #124* says:

The right of the subject's particularity, his right to be satisfied, or in other words the right of subjective freedom, is the pivot and centre of the difference between antiquity and modern times. This right in its infinity is given expression in Christianity and it has become the universal effective principle of a new form of civilization.

Commenting on this, Knox tells us that Hegel

...held that subjective freedom never came within the Greek purview at all, since the principle of conscience, of self-certainty, on which 'subjective freedom' in all its forms depends, came into the world with the Christian revelation (translator's note 18 to #124).



But here Knox is conflating two very different points when he claims that, for Hegel, subjective freedom did not come within the Greek purview at all. Hegel's point at #124 is that subjective freedom was not explicitly recognised, expressed, in the *ancient penal codes*. This is something he says explicitly at #117 [A]:

Oedipus, who killed his father without knowing it, cannot be accused of parricide. The ancient penal codes, however, attached little weight to the subjective side of *Action*, to imputability, than we do nowadays ( *PR* #117[A]).

The point that Hegel makes here is a social and political one, about the actual social and political arrangements of the day. It is quite another point, however, to claim that he is talking about the 'Greek purview' as a whole. This would be to ignore the importance that Hegel sees in the fact that Greek drama also did include reference to the 'subjective' aspects of *Action* – i.e. the knowledge, motives, intentions etc. of the individual agent (for Hegel's analysis of *Antigone*, see Chapter Two above). For example, Oedipus, in accordance with established law, custom and practice, considered that he had committed the crimes of parricide and incest, hence his self-inflicted punishment. Nonetheless, Sophocles also refers in his plays to the subjective motives, intentions and purposes with which Oedipus acts, references which Hegel considers significant in themselves.<sup>20</sup> Knox's comment also fails to take into account various

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<sup>20</sup> Sophocles, *The Three Theban Plays* tr. Robert Fagles (Penguin Classics, 1984).

comments of Hegel's on ancient philosophy and philosophers. For instance, he tells us that

The philosophy of modern times proceeds from the principle which ancient philosophy had reached, the standpoint of actual self-consciousness.... (*LHP* vol. III, pp. 159).

Self-consciousness, for Hegel, represents the possibility of 'subjective freedom', i.e. someone's being aware of their ability to make decisions, choices, to conduct themselves rationally (as opposed to, say, merely following the orders of others). Certainly, Hegel sees philosophy as developmental, in any given period moving from the abstract to the concrete, something he comments on with regard to Plato and Aristotle:

Plato with his ideas or universals laid the foundations of the independent world of intellect, and established absolute existence as an existence which is manifestly present in the mode of thought; Aristotle developed, completed and *peopled* the realm of thought... (*Ibid.*, pp. 29. My emphasis).

Thus, in claiming that subjective freedom did not, for Hegel, come within the Greek purview at all, Knox is conflating what Hegel says about the actual customs, laws and codes, with his consideration of the Greek dramatists and philosophers.

*Motives, Intentions and Deeds*

As we have seen in Chapter Two above, ethical life for Hegel must necessarily shape itself in a way that accounts for the needs, wants, ambitions etc. – the features of ‘subjective freedom’ - of its individual constituents, otherwise it loses its authority and is prone to internal strife and corruption. This is what he refers to as the necessity of ‘subjective freedom’ to find expression in the institutions of a society. Aristotle ‘peopled’ Plato’s world of the intellect by taking into account, in *NE*, the particular aspects and features of individual agency, especially in his discussions of knowledge and ignorance, the voluntary/involuntary distinction, and choice. Indeed, Hegel considers this to be a fundamental philosophical concern that Aristotle raises, even in relation to more recent philosophical considerations. Further to his description of bad conscience (see Chapter Five, pp. 266-267 above), Hegel adds (*PR* #140):

At one time great importance was attached to the question whether an action was evil only in so far as it was done with a bad conscience....The inference from an affirmative answer is admirably drawn by Pascal: *Ils seront tous damnés ces demi-pécheurs, qui ont quelque amour pour la vertu. Mais pour ces franc-pécheurs, pécheurs endurcis, pécheurs sans mélange, pleins et achevés, l'enfer ne les tient pas; ils ont trompé le diable à force de s'y abandonner.* [Let us have none of these half-sinners, with some love of virtue; they will all be damned. But as for these avowed sinners, hardened sinners,

unadulterated, complete and absolute sinners, hell cannot hold them; they have cheated the devil by surrendering to him].<sup>21</sup>

In a footnote to this, Hegel takes Pascal to task for not following his point through:

In the same context, Pascal also quotes Christ's intercession on the Cross for his enemies: 'Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do' – a superfluous prayer if the fact that they did not know what they did made their action innocent and so took away the need for forgiveness. Pascal quotes there too Aristotle's distinction (*Nic. Eth.* 1110 b24) between the man who acts *οὐκ εἰδώς* and the one who acts *ἀγνοῶν*; in the former type of ignorance, his action is not freely willed (here the ignorance depends on external circumstances...) and his action is not imputable to him. But of the latter Aristotle says: 'Every wicked man is ignorant of what he ought to do and what he ought to refrain from doing; and it is this kind of failure (*ἀμαρτία*) which makes men unjust and in general bad....An ignorant choice' between good and evil 'is the cause not of the action's being involuntary' (of being non-imputable) 'but only of its being wicked'. Aristotle evidently had a deeper insight into the connexion between knowing and willing than has become common in a superficial philosophy

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<sup>21</sup> Pascal, *The Provincial Letters* tr. A.J. Krailsheimer (Penguin, 1967), letter iv.

which teaches that the opposite of knowledge, the heart and enthusiasm, are the true principles of ethical action.<sup>22</sup>

Ethical *Action*, for Hegel, involves the conscious knowing of the agent, practical knowledge in relation to the circumstances in which a person acts, and not merely willing the good. In difficult and problematic circumstances, resorting to a reliance on the good will alone is, for Hegel, an easy philosophical way out of the problem, just as in a particular *Action* a person can find "...good reasons, a justification in his own eyes for the evil he does, because he can use these reasons to pervert its apparent character from evil into good" (*PR* #140). That is, knowing my deed to be wrong, I can plead that nevertheless my intentions were good. This, after all, is one of the possibilities of conscience.

With Aristotle's detailed analysis of the details of purposive *Action*, what we in fact see, I suggest, is very much what Hegel is saying about self-conscious *Action*. It is easy enough, in analysis, to draw a distinction between the motives, intentions, etc. – the 'subjective' elements – of a deed, and the deed itself, but it is precisely the lack of this distinction that is the mark of an ethical *Action*: in the person who acts with true and full virtue (*arete*), not only are desires and rational principle in complete harmony, but also the motives and intentions are in complete harmony with what motivates and what is intended, i.e. the deed. With the merely continent (*enkraitic*), a distinction arises in that he desires other than what he considers ought to motivate him, the *Action* that he ought to bring about, but in the fully virtuous such distinctions do not arise: because of the

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<sup>22</sup> Hegel sees this reference to 'the heart and enthusiasm' as only a slightly different form of the view that willing the good is adequate for an *Action* to be good. See Chapter Five p. 243 above.

character that he is, he just acts. In a sense, his character is a second nature, developed by habit, something captured for us admirably by Bradley:

The character shows itself in every trifling detail of life; we can not go in and amuse ourselves while we leave it outside the door with our dog; it is ourself, and our moral self, being not mere temper or inborn disposition, but the outcome of a series of acts of will. Natural it is indeed well to be; but that is because by this time morality should be our nature, and good behaviour its unreflecting issue; and to be natural in any sense which excludes moral habituation is never, so far as I know the world, thought desirable.<sup>23</sup>

To the 'perversion' that 'What is natural does not reflect, and without reflection there is no morality....where we are natural *because* we do not reflect, there we can not be moral', Bradley replies:

But here it is forgotten that we *have* reflected; that acts which issue from moral reflection have qualified our will; that our character thus, not only in its content, but also in the form of its acquisition, is within the moral sphere; and that a character, good or bad, is a second nature.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* pp. 217 – 18. Julia Annas, in *The Morality of Happiness* (Oxford, 1993) p. 126, uses this passage to a similar purpose. Rightly protesting the neglect of Bradley's work on ethics in Anglo-American philosophy, Annas comments: "Bradley's own brilliant account of ethics owes much to the leading ideas of ancient ethics..." (footnote 5, p. 4.).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 218.

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did not have a name corresponding to what we refer to by these terms, but I am arguing that his discussion of the details of purposive *Action* very much constitutes what self-conscious activity amounts to. But this much needs to be kept in mind here: in discussing self-consciousness, I am not aiming to *define* the concept, but rather I am looking to the logic of the particular details of human conduct which constitute the concept. Self-consciousness, that is to say, is not something that is distinct from the way in which it is manifested, and thus self-conscious, purposive *Action* cannot be defined without reference to the particular details which acting involves. In this sense, self-conscious activity, knowing what one is *doing*, is something that we develop as individuals through developing a practical understanding of the social environment in which we act.

For Aristotle education aims at freeing individuals from being governed solely by their feelings and desires, and to be receptive to argument,

...because the man who lives in accordance with his feelings would not listen to an argument to dissuade him, or understand it if he did. And when a man is in that state how is it possible to persuade him out of it? In general, feelings seem to yield not to argument but only to force (*NE* 1179b26-29).

Similarly for Hegel education is a liberation of sorts, and

...this liberation is the hard struggle against pure subjectivity of demeanour, against the immediacy of desire, against the subjectivity of feeling and the caprice of desire (*PR* #187).

Education is the art of making men ethical. It begins with pupils whose life is at the instinctive level and shows them



the way to a second, intellectual nature, and makes this intellectual level habitual to them (*PR* #151[A]).

The distinction that Aristotle makes between argument and force is central to rational agency. The person who understands an argument is one who understands what is being said in terms other than merely debarring him from fulfilling certain desires at any given moment in time. The argument will show him that, e.g. to do *this* at this point in time, would not be good, wise, prudent, etc. and, depending on the strengths of the argument, an educated person will agree with that argument, and act accordingly (excluding the phenomena of *akrasia*).

There are two important points here. Firstly, the argument refers to the universal character of the *Action*, i.e. to those factors (relating to goodness, wisdom, prudence, etc., i.e. acting well) which do not refer to the fulfilling of *this* desire, here and now (i.e. it may not be bad, unwise imprudent, etc. to fulfil the desire at another time). That is, when someone says that it would not be wise, prudent etc. to do *this*, he is referring to the wider scope of the deed, his point being to show me the practical aspects involved in the light of the circumstances of the proposed deed. Secondly, in acting in accordance with the argument, the person has himself decided to do so (or to refrain from doing something), in virtue of he himself agreeing with the argument (i.e. seeing its validity in terms of acting well). The person who does not understand the argument, and who lives in accordance with his feelings, may be forced not to do such and such, i.e. in this sort of situation he does not make a decision - the decision that he should not act is made for him. This is reflected in the way in which we bring up children.

The importance of the example of the person who is receptive of the argument is that it takes us on to a much neglected notion of Aristotle's,

which is reflected in the aims of education and training: *autarkeia*, self-sufficiency or independence. In discussing flourishing or well-being (*eudaimonia*) Aristotle says this of self-sufficiency:

It is a generally accepted view that the perfect good is self-sufficient. By self-sufficient we mean not what is sufficient for oneself alone living a solitary life, but something that includes parents, wife and children, friends and fellow-citizens in general; for man is by nature a social being....A self-sufficient thing, then, we take to be one which by itself makes life desirable [*hairesos*, choosable] and in no way deficient; and we believe that happiness [*eudaimonia*] is such a thing (*NE* 1097b8-16).

When it comes to questions of well-being or welfare, the child, governed by feelings and desires, does not yet have the ability to recognise that which is desirable on its own account (rather than being desirable on account of, say, the liking of sweet things), i.e. that which is conducive to well-being, and such decisions are often made for him by his parents. In this sense the child is not yet *eudaimon* due to his conduct not having the character of *autarkeia*.

Aristotle's main concern in this passage is to tell us what *eudaimonia* involves, and his interest in *autarkeia* is to show that *eudaimonia* has such a character as this. In this sense, the passage is about *eudaimonia*, *autarkes* being secondary. Aristotle doesn't directly draw out a relationship between the two with regard to the individual person. It is in the philosophy of the Stoics and Cynics - which involve both positive and negative

reactions to the outlook of Plato and Aristotle<sup>26</sup> that self-sufficiency is attributed to individuals directly. However, there are direct references scattered throughout Aristotle's ethical writings.<sup>27</sup> By looking closely at what Aristotle says about *prohairesis* in relation to education, the roles that self-sufficiency and independence play in self-conscious, purposive *Action* can be elucidated.

### *Choice, Well-being and Acting Well*

Choice involves deciding, through deliberation, to do something on a particular occasion, which is one way of saying that choice involves determining oneself in one way or another. Further, all of this is descriptive of an *independent Action* of, on this occasion, a self-sufficient individual. We may take advice, listen to the suggestions of others, but ultimately the decision rests with us whether to accept or reject that advice or those suggestions. We are self-sufficient and independent in that we *take* advice and suggestions, and do not regard them as demands that we act accordingly. Self-sufficiency is not only a characteristic of *eudaimonia*, it is also characteristic of the person who deliberates and chooses which, for Aristotle and Hegel, are features of purposive, self-conscious *Action*, i.e. activity upon which *eudaimonia* or well-being is dependent.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup>On Stoicism see J.M. Rist, *Stoic Philosophy* (Cambridge, 1969) and A.A. Long *Hellenistic Philosophy* (Duckworth, 1974).

<sup>27</sup>See e.g. *Magna Moralia* 1212b24-1213b2 and *Eudemian Ethics* 1244b1-20.

<sup>28</sup>That *eudaimonia* or well-being is dependent on deliberative and chosen *Action* comes out of Hegel's observation, discussed in the previous chapter, that good "has in the subjective will its only means of stepping into actuality" PR #131. Here Hegel makes a connection which Aristotle does not explicitly follow through with regard to *eupraxia* and *eudaimonia* in

Even though Aristotle doesn't explicitly connect *prohairesis*, *eudaimonia* and *autarkeia* in such a way, it is clear that he had something like the above in mind. This comes over more clearly in his consideration of what individuality consists in. At *NE* 1168b34 he says:

...a person is called continent or incontinent according as his reason is or is not in control, which implies this *is* the individual. Also it is our reasoned acts that are held to be in the fullest sense voluntary and our own doing. Thus there is no doubt that this part is, or most nearly is, the individual man.

New-born infants have what we might call basic needs and desires, basic in that the child is hungry, thirsty, etc. but has not developed the capacity to distinguish *what* food, *what* drink, etc. As they develop and begin to understand the varieties of foods and drinks available in the world (i.e. the world of family and friends) that they inhabit, so they develop the capacity to distinguish *what* they want to eat, drink, etc. Later on in life, children consider food and drink in terms wider than, e.g. the pleasure of sweet things. Consideration of what is good for them also comes into play, and we hope that as they develop this becomes more and more the case. One particular aspect of parents' hopes for their offspring is that they will be able to make their own choices, that their health will be something that they will take care of themselves. This sort of self-sufficiency and independence is established by the development of reason, learning about and understanding the world in which they live, and how to get on well in that world. This, at least, is the aim of social training, education, etc. – it might

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*NE* although as we shall see in the next chapter there are some interesting considerations in *Politics*.

not succeed, but on the whole, parents aim to bring their children up to do well in their independent lives. Ideally, the more the voluntary conduct of children can become reasoned, chosen conduct in later years, so much the better.

There are numerous areas of life in which we make reasoned choices in and about our own lives, and many of these will be our identifying characteristics as individuals. In this way we self-determine ourselves, i.e. the reasons upon which we act and the choices we make constitute the 'self' we come to be. It is the reasoning, thinking, deliberation about the world in which we live and the choices that we make that contributes to our social and moral identity. For Aristotle, although, as mortal, we are not going to attain the self-sufficiency and independence of the divine, activity in accord with practical reason is that which establish us as *this* person, and it is this sort of activity that establishes us as (as far as is possible) self-determining, self-sufficient individuals.

The importance that Aristotle places on education can be seen against this background, for the process of education has the *eudaimonia* of the adult the child will become as its ultimate aim, and *eudaimonia* involves acting well. The latter involves reason and choice, which are characteristic of self-sufficiency and independence. Education, then, aims to develop in the child the ability to make decisions concerning his own welfare, to consider the rationality of his *Actions* and not merely to act according to his desires. For the self-sufficient or the independent person, things which are conducive to well-being are desirable in and for themselves, and it is his ability to recognise this character of *Action* which is the basis of his own decision-making. Similarly, just as the aim of education is to bring about

independence in the child, so for instance the driving instructor is looking to the pupil being capable of driving self-sufficiently and independently.

*Self-sufficiency, Practical Reason and Social Life*

But that such independence is not equatable with solitariness is something that both Aristotle and Hegel are insistent upon. In acknowledging the validity of an argument that to do such-and-such would not be a good thing, I am acknowledging at the same time that my own well-being is not something that I have exclusive insight into, and this is captured in the reasons why doing such-and-such would not be a good thing.<sup>29</sup> Such an ability to grasp the wider aspects of *Action* involves establishing what Hegel calls a 'second intellectual nature', something that becomes 'habitual' through the process of education. A similar point is made by Aristotle, for contemplation is the high point in self-sufficient activity, although contemplation does not hold exclusive rights over it. That is to say, although "...happiness (*eudaimonia*) is a form of contemplation"

...its possessor, being only human [as opposed to being a god, who is completely self-sufficient], will also need external felicity, because human nature is not self-sufficient for the purpose of contemplation; the body too must be healthy, and food and other amenities must be available (*NE* 1178b30-5).

Self-sufficiency pertains not only to thought, but also to purposive *Action* and practical reason, i.e. the assessment and organisation of how we are

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<sup>29</sup>This is why both Aristotle and Hegel recommend that education should be taken on by the state, c.f. *NE* 1179b30ff. and *PR* #153[A], where Hegel dismisses the solitary education recommended by Rousseau in *Emile*.

to fulfil the desires and needs that we have in virtue of our being human. Putting such practical reason to use involves activities by which such needs and desires can be fulfilled, activities which are organised with such an end in mind. But it is only through my ability to use practical reason, to participate in such activities, that I become an independent, self-sufficient person; and I am able to participate in such activities only in that I understand the rationality, the universal character of such activities. That is to say, it is only in virtue of my knowing that such activities are not designed specifically for the fulfilment of *my* desires and needs, my knowing that such activities are designed for others also, that I can participate in them. It is only through acting alongside or in conjunction with other people that I become independent and self-sufficient, and thus only with an awareness of the agency of others, and by doing things as others do them, do I become aware of the scope of my own agency. Independence or self-sufficiency does not involve being solitary but social. The individuality that I have as *this* person, with such-and-such characteristics, indicated by and in the reasoning and choices that I have made and do make, arises out of my development and engagement in the social context in which I am born and in which I live (see Chapter Two *passim*).

In Part One of this thesis I illustrated how, for Hegel, such concepts as will and freedom defy definition without reference to the way in which they are expressed and manifested, in the same way as wants and desires do (as discussed in Chapters Four and Five). The same is true of the concept of self-consciousness: attempting to define it without reference to the

particular ways in which it is expressed is an abstract exercise that can only result in an abstract conclusion.

In *PR* we are dealing with self-consciousness in the sphere of *Action* and ethics, the self-consciousness expressed and manifested in social, moral and ethical life. Self-conscious *Action*, that is to say, is the *actuality* of ethical life – “...self-consciousness has in the ethical realm its absolute foundation and the end which actuates its efforts” (*PR* #142), an allusion (also made at #152 and #258) to Aristotle’s concept of the unmoved mover, moving in a similar fashion as objects of desire:

There is a mover which moves without being moved, being eternal, substance and actuality. And the object of desire and the object of thought move in this way; they move without being moved.<sup>30</sup>

Self-consciousness takes on different forms, i.e. it ‘moves’ in various particular ways according to its object: seeing and hearing involve the awareness of seeing and hearing, perceiving and thinking an awareness of perceiving and thinking (*NE* 1170a29 – 30). The ultimate form of self-consciousness is this ‘thinking of thinking’ that, for Aristotle, is the divine element in us (*NE* 1177b29 – 30), and which for Hegel is philosophy, “...or Spirit that knows itself as Spirit, [which] has for its path the recollection of the Spirits as they are in themselves and as they accomplish the organization of their realm” (*PG* #808), i.e. the thinking that is involved in the various ways in which self-consciousness expresses and manifests

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<sup>30</sup> *Metaphysics* 1072a25.



itself. In the study of ethics, philosophy is concerned with self-consciousness in the needs, desires and reasoning that express themselves in the social, historical, cultural and political environment in which we live.

### *Conclusion*

In this chapter I have developed several themes in Aristotle and Hegel to argue that Aristotle's analysis of *Action* – in terms of the voluntary/involuntary distinction, choice, character and habituation through the education and training that forms part of social life – can be accounted for in terms of self-conscious *Action*. The aim has not been to establish a definition of *Action* and self-consciousness in order to show the relations between thought and particular instances of *Action*. This would suggest that thought and *Action* are distinct phenomena, raising questions about the nature of the relations that hold between them. Consequently, philosophers have sought to find relations which might account for the move from thought to *Action*, in the form of causality, compulsion based on logical inference and, in moral considerations, principles or theories that come between thinking and doing. However, considering the nature of self-conscious, purposive *Action*, the question as to what moves us is in fact a peculiar one.

Certainly, self-conscious *Action* can and does show, express, manifest a distinction between thought and *Action*, i.e. as self-consciousness, but this is in situations where problems arise and the question 'What shall I do?' arises. This sort of self-consciousness also arises in cases where we don't know what the right thing to do is, in cases of *akrasia*, and in cases of continence. But self-consciousness is for the most part expressed and

manifested in the 'moral self' that Bradley speaks of, i.e. habituated character that is developed out of education, training, observation, reflection and deliberation – the process and development of a practical understanding of the social circumstances in which we live and act. In right desire and ethical *Action* there is no relation between thought and *Action*, what I *want* and what I want to *do*, for there is no distinction that requires explanation in terms of relations.

The distinctions that we make in analysis, that is to say, often complicate matters when we allow ourselves to attribute those distinctions too readily to the actual subject matter under analysis. In Chapter Two above I discussed the distinction that is drawn between individual and society as a whole in terms of Hegel's account of ethical life. A similar distinction has marked many commentaries on Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia*. This, I shall argue in the next chapter, is based on the confusion resulting from the way in which we can be misled by our own thinking.

## 7. EUDAIMONIA AND ACTION

### *Introduction*

In this chapter I shall take a closer look at the concept of *eudaimonia* and some of the treatments it is afforded by modern commentators. This, along with *akrasia*, is perhaps one of the areas where Aristotle's thought finds most problems in being accepted into modern thinking. However, as we shall see, it is not at all clear that the problems are Aristotle's, but rather due to perspectives with metaphysical and epistemological baggage inherited - consciously or not - from Descartes, Hume and Kant. This comes over not only in claims made about the nature of Aristotle's arguments and the philosophy of mind that we get in *NE*, but also in modern considerations of the *raison d'être* of the state and its relation to individual agents. If care is not taken in respect of these last two points we can find ourselves not only misled, but also failing to benefit from insights of Aristotle's which are highly pertinent to modern ethical life. These insights can be illuminated by considering the relationship between *eudaimonia* and *eupraxia* which I shall explore in the later part of the present chapter.

The problem with modern interpretations of Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* is something like this: *Actions* are the acts of individual

agents, and if *eudaimonia* is the end of *Action* then it must be related to the will - motives, desires, intentions - of those individual agents. Thus *eudaimonia* is a feature of the individual will. The problem for Aristotle, according to this reasoning, is moving from an individualistic conception of *eudaimonia* to a wider-ranging, objective, universal, meaning for the term, and yet the argument for *eudaimonia* insists that we retain the direct relationship between *eudaimonia* and the will of the individual.<sup>1</sup>

This is only a bare outline of the problem: what Aristotle says here has implications for a whole range of other ethical concepts. Aristotle spends much time showing us what is required for virtuous *Action*, but all those requirements ultimately rest on the character of individual agents. Again, *autarkeia* - a concept central to *eudaimonia* - lends itself easily to individualistic interpretation: how can such a concept relate to anything but to the individual who is *autarkeia*? Many of the most important (and interesting) of Aristotle's arguments and points rely on his invoking the 'right' or 'rational' principle - e.g. his discussions of

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<sup>1</sup> In his 'Two Conceptions of Happiness', *The Philosophical Review* 88 (1988) R. Kraut says of Aristotle that "Roughly, he insists on an objective and stringent standard, whereas our test is more subjective and flexible". p.167. However, I shall argue here, as I have in Chapter Two in relation to Hegel, that this apparent dichotomy is misconceived, a misconception based on an unquestioned, pre-supposed hard and fast distinction between individual wants and desires, and the public, objective, ethical realm in which those wants and desires are expressed in *Action*. Further, if 'stringent standard' is understood to be the adherence to stringent rules, then this runs counter to Aristotle's thought: ethics and *Action*, for Aristotle, is not about following rules and laws, in that this does not capture the nature of human conduct, and further that ethical studies cannot produce, or 'discover', stringent rules and laws.

*akrasia*, the voluntary/involuntary distinction, *prohairesis*, right desire, etc. - but he fails, it is said, to give us a clear picture of what he means by this. Certainly Aristotle wants us to take on a broad meaning for *eudaimonia* but, for modern critics, it is difficult to see how we can get away from the narrow, individualistic level.

### **Activity and Social Life**

Although it is a well-established principle amongst commentators on ancient thinkers that a shift of focus is required to grasp what is going on in Aristotle and others, that the theoretical frameworks of modern thinking and those of the ancients differ greatly, in the course of discussing *eudaimonia* I want to illustrate how this principle is not taken as seriously as it ought to be taken, and that it ultimately fails to find a place in much of the debate. Further, this will throw into question the assumption that this need to adjust our thinking somehow bears witness to the falsity of the ancients' vantage point. Rather I shall suggest that identifying this difference between those outlooks is itself an important contribution to current debate.

#### *Activity: a natural principle*

In particular, there are two specific claims that Aristotle makes which illustrate this. The first concerns his claim that there is an intrinsic relation between human existence and human activity, a relation he refers to as a 'natural principle'. By this he means that it is an aspect of

the nature of humankind, and this leads to the second claim that tends to be ignored in many analyses: that man is by nature a social and political creature.

With regard to Aristotle's starting point, the first thing we need to note is the relation between activity and human life in general. He says

...existence is to everyone an object of choice and love, and we exist through activity (because we exist by living and acting); and the maker of the work [that results from activity] exists, in a sense, through his activity. Therefore the maker loves his work, because he loves existence.

This is a natural principle; for the work reveals in actuality what *is* only potentially (NE 1168a5-10).

Taken on its own, 'existence' is an abstract category, a category which, applied on its own, carries little meaning. In this sense 'existence' is an abstract noun form of 'to exist', but even here particular, actual instances of 'to exist' are needed if 'to exist' is to convey any meaning. By 'particular, actual instances of "to exist" ' is meant *the way in which* the subject exists, .e.g. the activities that make up its existence if it is a living thing. For animals to exist is to *do* just that - they exist in actually eating, drinking, etc. For human beings existence becomes a potential, i.e. it is a question of eating and drinking what, where and when. Even with the senses, there is choice in what, e.g., we see and hear (art and music). Thus existence is an object for us in that it is a matter of choosing how to fulfil that existence, i.e. the activities which we participate in in our living. For human beings existence does not mean

merely breathing, eating, drinking, sleeping, etc. (although there are philosophers and scientists who think this to be the case), but also the possible activities through which we might exist. Activity, to paraphrase Aristotle, reveals in actuality what is only potentially.

Consider desires. We might say humans and other non-human animals share certain needs and desires in common - eating, drinking, sleeping, procreating, etc. And this is certainly the case. But as we look closer at the particular ways in which those needs and desires are fulfilled, and at what is required to fulfil them, differences appear between species. Thus, on an abstract level, all animals have basic needs and desires in common, but as we get down to a more concrete and practical level, differences appear which are significant to the activity, survival and well-being of the particular species. This is the case even within species: as a human being I have the 'same' needs and desires as other human beings, but differences appear when accounting for my constitution, health, environment, etc. The more we move from the abstract to the concrete, the less value the truism of the proposition that animals (including humans) share basic needs and desires holds.

One way of stating the difference, as has been done in various previous chapters, would be to refer to the will, choice, intention, present in the fulfilling of a human being's desires. But this does not directly capture Aristotle's point about potentiality and activity. However, another way of stating the difference is that, in general, there is a more direct relationship between an animal's activity and the

fulfilling of its desires, whereas human desires more often than not involve often quite complex means by which they are fulfilled. Indeed, this is often a necessity for man, as in the example Hegel gives of "...the necessity [for man] of cooking his food to make it fit to eat" (*PR* #190[A]). The reasoning involved in thinking and acting in terms of means and ends represent potential and actual ways in which desires can be and are fulfilled. Thus, although species share common needs and desires, the activities involved in fulfilling them indicate important differences when we apply ourselves – whether in our analyses or in our treatment of them<sup>2</sup> – to particular species.

The point that I make here is a logical one, relating to needs and desires, the ends or objects by which they are directed, and the means employed in their fulfilment. We might again, as in Chapter Five above (pp. 247ff.), be tempted here to invoke Hume's 'Reason is ...the slave of the passions', but note that these passions/desires are often had only because they are attainable by way of reasoned activity, and that these means - rational activities - are often desired for their own sake, e.g. cooking, and not merely for a further end, e.g. eating. Thus the activity itself becomes the cause of the desire, rather than the desire

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<sup>2</sup> And in the *purpose* of our analyses in relation to our treatment of them, e.g. it might be argued, in a Cartesian fashion, that humans and animals are fundamentally distinct in that the latter have no soul, and thus cannot feel pain, so the way in which we treat them is morally insignificant. This is not the place to go into such a debate, apart from to point out that to use differences for the purpose of such views is both logically and ethically suspect. This is a point that Mary Midgely makes in her discussion of the notion of 'speciesism' in *Animals and Why They Matter* (Penguin, 1983). See esp. Chapter 9.



being some sort of non-rational phenomena that causes us to act, although I will be the cause of my fulfilling that desire.<sup>3</sup>

The modern tendency to regard desires as arising exclusively from some sort of internal stirrings of individual human beings fails to note this last point, and consequently Aristotle's concept of *eudaimonia* as the end of Action becomes difficult to assimilate. A not too dissimilar point is made by Sarah Broadie in her *Ethics with Aristotle*:

We should notice that the argument [for *eudaimonia*] itself does not operate with the notion of a human self whose interests might conflict with the interests of another, or of the citizens at large. The *dramatis personae* of this argument are not you, I, we or they, but roles or functions. The *aiming* which is the central notion of the argument is not intending, seeking, or purposing in a psychological sense. Only human individuals 'aim' in that sense, and the aim may vary depending on the motive. But Aristotle's argument attaches aims and ends to those abstract entities crafts, activities, practices, projects. *They* cannot have motives, and the 'aim of' each is defined by the end whose achievement is the mark of *success* for that kind of craft, activity, etc.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of the over-simplification involved in causal analyses of *Action*, see Chapter Six above.

<sup>4</sup> S. Broadie, *Ethics with Aristotle* (Oxford, 1991) p. 16.

The point that Broadie makes here is that the argument for *eudaimonia* does not operate on the assumption that human beings are first and foremost isolated (by conflicting and competing interests) individuals, but rather on the basis of the active and social nature of their existence. The view that humans are fundamentally individual, as I have argued throughout Part One of this thesis, is a modern prejudice based on the epistemological and metaphysical framework of the rationalist/ empiricist debate. It is specifically the notion of a human self based on *this* prejudice that Aristotle does not operate on for (as we shall see shortly) it is not the case that he does not have *any* notion of the human self.

### *Modern Preconceptions*

There is a clear tendency in modern interpreters to retain 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> Century metaphysical and epistemological precepts in their reading of Aristotle.<sup>5</sup> This comes over particularly forcefully in discussions on the relationships between desires, perception and rationality. These tend to involve, in one way or another, viewing reason as something we have over and above, 'added on to', our animal desires and faculties, rather than something that pervades all aspects of our lives. Consider a question raised by Nagel in his 'Aristotle on Eudaimonia':

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<sup>5</sup> For a similar theme, see Hursthouse's review of Engberg-Pedersen's *Aristotle's Theory of Moral Insight* in 'Moral Habituation', *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* vol. vi (1988) pp. 201-19.

If digesting, for instance, is something a clam does, why is it not something a human does as well - and something to do which is part of being human, even though it does not require effort?<sup>6</sup>

The answer to Nagel is that we cannot accept this picture, because it is a picture of *human-being-as-clam*. That is to say, we do not merely *digest*, for there are a host of factors present before we consider putting something into our mouths - digestible or not - which are not present in the nutritional processes of a clam. Certainly a physician may be able to point out a digestion process that might be conceptually compared with that of a clam. But the physician is interested in the digestion system of his patients in terms of *what* is digested, *how much* is digested and *how* it is digested - i.e. those factors that pre-figure consumption. Failure to take this point from Aristotle leads to comments such as:

Food, for example, is an external good, and the only thing that could count as the proper use of food is eating it.<sup>7</sup>

For us, the proper use of food is not merely the eating of it, but eating it *appropriately*, eating *well* (appropriate and well according to our own health, constitution, social and economic circumstances, etc.).

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<sup>6</sup> In *Phronesis*, vol. xvii (1972), p. 254.

<sup>7</sup> R. Heinaman, 'Eudaimonia and Self-sufficiency in the Nicomachean Ethics', *Phronesis* vol. xxx iii/i (1988), p. 49.

When we consider desires (e.g. to eat) and their object (food) in Aristotelian terms, we see that they cannot be considered in isolation from one another, precisely because for us our desires and their objects are not isolated from one another. The tendency to consider such distinctions as ontologically separable can lead to quite surprising results, as we shall come to see shortly. In 'Two Conceptions of Happiness' Kraut says, with specious plausibility,

... a major human good is the second-order good which consists in the perception that our first-order desires are being satisfied.<sup>8</sup>

which leads him to the apparently quite straightforward conclusion that:

A theory of eudaimonia, in other words, ought to harmonize, at least partly, with the way people feel about their lives; that is the upshot of our argument linking eudaimonia with the perception that one's major desires are being fulfilled.<sup>9</sup>

Again, as we shall see, such simplistic treatments of the nature of human needs, desires and perceptions are the result of philosophical abstraction rather than being based on the way things actually are; missing the complexities of those needs, desires, perceptions, in comparison with those of non-human animals; regarding needs, etc. in the abstract. The observation that 'Human and non-human creatures

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<sup>8</sup> Op. cit., p. 173.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., p. 175.

have needs etc. in common' is clearly true, but this is uninformative about the nature of those needs so long as we fail to state whether we are talking about the needs of clams or sheep or human beings, etc. In failing to refer to the latter, needs etc. become philosophical abstractions, unrelated to the way things actually are for clams, sheep, human beings. (Leaving aside the merits/demerits of adopting such a perspective, any claim that Aristotle's views are being discussed is invalidated immediately, for Aristotle's concern for needs, etc. is in relation to the *proper functioning* of that whose needs are under consideration.) In such analyses, reason is set aside as some sort of extra appendage, distinct from needs and desires, rather than pervading those needs and desires. That human needs are pervaded by reason is a point which Hegel makes well:

An animal is restricted to particularity. It has its instincts and means of satisfying them, means which are limited and which it cannot overstep. Some insects are parasitic on a certain kind of plant; some animals have a wider range and can live in different climates, but there is always a restriction preventing them from having the range open to man. [Man has] The need of shelter and clothing, the necessities of cooking his food to make it fit to eat and overcome its natural rawness... Intelligence, with its grasp of distinctions, multiplies these human needs, and since taste and utility become criteria of judgement, even the needs themselves are affected

thereby. Finally, it is no longer need but opinion which has to be satisfied...The very multiplication of needs involves a check on desire, because when many things are in use, the urge to obtain any one thing which might be needed is less strong, and this is a sign that want altogether is not so imperious (*PR #190[A]*).<sup>10</sup>

Human needs are not some sort of non-rational phenomena, reason coming along in order to secure fulfilment. Rather, we have *rational* needs and desires, rational in that we develop different ways of sheltering and clothing ourselves, different foods and various ways in which to procure and prepare them, according to the purposes determined by tastes, usefulness, opinions, etc. These purposes, and the means of procurement, involve further needs and means, such that there is a whole complex of needs. However, within all of this, the concept of need being employed has been transformed, in that the needs that we are talking about no longer have the sense of necessity (as that which attaches to, e.g. the need to eat), but rather derives its sense from the ways in which we have chosen, e.g. to eat when, what, and how much.

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<sup>10</sup> In the Cambridge edition Wood ends this passage with "...this is a sign that necessity [Die Not] in general is less powerful". 'Necessity' expresses the development of Hegel's argument (though of course 'want' is more specific). According to Ilting's edition, Hegel entitles the pertinent section 'Sphere der Notwendigkeit und Ungleichheit', Sphere of Necessity and Difference, and then goes on to discuss the 'System Des Bedürfnisses', System of Needs. Karl-Heinz Ilting (ed.) *Die Philosophie Des Rechts* Klett-Cotta (1983), #89-93. #93 compares the needs of man and animals (Tier und Mensch).

*Needs, Desires, Reasoning and Perception*

The same point that Hegel makes about the transformation of needs is made by Aristotle in his consideration of 'external' goods throughout *NE*, goods that are not needs in the sense of necessary (e.g. to stay alive), although some amount is necessary for *eudaimonia*. The subject of ethics is concerned with *living well*, and not merely staying alive, and it is precisely in relation to living well that needs and desires are relevant. The needs and desires pertaining to *eudaimonia* are not related to mere survival, but to the sorts of ways in which we go about being *eudaimon*. Indeed it is surprising how many commentators on Aristotle miss this point: the desire that Aristotle is concerned with is *right* desire; the desire to, e.g. eat, is neither right nor wrong, good nor bad.<sup>11</sup> Both Aristotle and Hegel say that reason distinguishes man from animal, but again this is stated at too abstract a level and needs more concrete expression. Thus, we might say: one of the ways in which humans and animals differ, is in the reasoning involved in the fulfilment of the desires that we have in common, as well as those desires that are different.

Again, Kraut's idea that a 'major human good' involves perceiving that we are satisfying or fulfilling our desires ('first order' or any other 'order') is an oddity, its oddness resulting from the misleading use of 'perception' and desire-satisfaction. The satisfying of a desire is itself a

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<sup>11</sup> 'Right desire' is discussed in Chapters Four and Five above.

rational process, involving a particular way, amongst other ways, of doing so; there is not, in general a single phenomenon 'satisfying a desire'. In that our fulfilling of our desires is pervaded by particular intentions, choices, preferences, calculations (e.g. how beneficial something is), in the execution, we do not need to 'perceive' ourselves (whatever this may mean) doing so. What we perceive are the particular details that *this way* of doing so involves, not some abstract and removed perception of our *doing so*. Perception itself is pervaded by reason in the experience of perceiving, i.e. the whys and wherefores of the perceptual experience. The crucial passage here comes at *NE* Book IX. 9:

A man who sees is aware that he is seeing, a man who hears that he is hearing, and a man who walks that he is walking; and similarly in all our other activities there is something that is aware of them, so that if we perceive, we perceive that we are perceiving, and if we think, that we are thinking.

To be conscious that we are perceiving or thinking is to be conscious of our existence(*NE* 1170a29-32)

Aristotle's contextual point here is that this consciousness contributes to the good (and, presumably, bad) of our experiences, which is to say that our experiences are good (or bad) in virtue of the nature of our experiences, and such consciousness is a feature of the rationality of those experiences. Clearly any grey area is located in how we are to understand Aristotle's *aisthanesthai*, generally translated as 'to



perceive' but above universally translated in terms of consciousness or awareness. But the idea that Aristotle uses *aisthanesthai* here in terms of the simplistic sense of perceiving ourselves as we perceive objects at a distance is implausible. For Aristotle, perception is not a non-rational process whereby objects impress upon the retina, reason coming along to assimilate what is seen. Perceiving is itself a rational experience, rather than an experience which is rationalised. Aristotle makes this clear in *De Anima* at 424a17 - "...concerning all perception it must be understood that the perception is the reception of form without matter".<sup>12</sup>

The important point in all of this is that Aristotle is talking about the goodness of *life itself* in virtue of the nature of our experiences, rather than the perception of certain experiences (fulfilling desires) being a good amongst others. Reason is not something that is ontologically separate from desires, but rather runs through our experiences in the fulfilling of our desires and needs. This is captured nicely for us by Broadie in her discussion of *theoria* (a particular way of employing reason) in relation to *eudaimonia*:

...far from recommending a retreat from life on the ordinary, practical level, Aristotle asks that it be lived with

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<sup>12</sup> *De Anima* Tr. H. Lawson-Tancred (Penguin, 1986). This point – i.e. 'the reception of form without matter' – taken together with his claim that man's better part, the intellectual, is the divine in us, suggests grounds for thinking that Aristotle has more dualist sympathies than current mainstream interpretation allows, in that *nous* is not reducible to the material and to individual desire satisfaction. The latter point will be raised later in the current chapter.

a different emphasis. So continuities between *theoria* and everyday existence tell in favour of his enterprise; as, for example, the fact that *theoria* is already a natural human activity, and we engage in it almost all the time without decision and probably without being able to help it. As he says at the beginning of the *Metaphysics*,

All men by nature reach out for knowledge [or: understanding]. An indication of this is the delight we take in our senses; for even apart from their usefulness they are loved for themselves; and above all others the sense of sight. For not only with a view to action, but even when we are not going to do anything, we prefer sight to almost everything else. The reason is that this, most of all the senses, makes us know and brings to light many differences between things (980a21-7)

This more-than-practical interest in our surroundings and in each other is already *theoria*.<sup>13</sup>

Not only is it the case that desire and reason are inseparable, but the point runs through to Aristotle's conception of practical life and reason. To miss out on this, is to miss out on the basis upon which Aristotle's discussion of *eudaimonia* takes place.

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<sup>13</sup>Op. cit., p. 424.

### *The Character of Selfhood*

The idea that good and evil refer specifically and foremostly to individual agents and their desires - i.e. that good and evil are 'in' us rather than in what we *do* as rational agents - runs alongside the tendency in much modern philosophical debate (particularly in rationalistic conceptions of ethics and neo-Humean theories of motivation) to view individual agents, and their reasonings and desires, as - somehow or other - entities or phenomena distinct from the world in which they engage. Questioning such an assumption is not to deny that the sphere of feelings and thought and the sphere of *Action* can be distinct (as opposed to *are* distinct, a point I make with regard to reason and desire in Chapter Five above) from one another - having feelings and thoughts is different from acting - but feelings and thought, rational desires, involve reference to the world in which we live in the fulfilling of desires, i.e. acting, and the possibilities that the world holds are more often than not motivating factors in the feelings, thoughts and desires that we have.

That is to say, a *rational* desire is one that is possible to fulfil in *Action*, and this involves engaging in the world. Feelings and thought are, generally, about the way we live our lives, the things that surround us and how they affect us, and what it is that the people we live amongst get up to. Herein lie the objects of many of our desires: those objects of desires have a place within the sphere of *Action*, and it is precisely because of this that we have the feelings and desires and thoughts that we do. Rational desires are about the possibilities that the

customs, habits, ethos of the social environment in which we engage in our *Actions* offer.<sup>14</sup>

Here we need to look more closely at the claim of Broadie's that Aristotle's argument for *eudaimonia* does not operate with the notion of a human self. The argument certainly doesn't operate with a notion of the self with the emphasis placed on the agent as an isolated individual, a prejudice of modern philosophy which clearly has its roots in the Cartesian *Cogito* and in Humean psychologism. Such a conception is fraught with difficulties, particularly in establishing whether, and in what way, such a thing exists.<sup>15</sup>

Aristotle's conception of selfhood differs very much from this. Throughout Part Two I have argued that many of the conceptions that much modern philosophy attributes to its subject matter are, in fact, the results of abstract reasoning, rather than being attributes of the actual, particular phenomena of the subject matter. In this sense, the language of reasoning has taken leave of the subject matter which it purports to refer to. Thus, conceptions of reason, needs and desires

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<sup>14</sup> Notice that the objects of desires of children and those with learning and mental health difficulties are sometimes not possible to attain, and this is why we do not consider such desires to be rational. Now this is not to say that those desires are therefore *irrational*; we might say that it is that the environment does not cater for the fulfilling of such desires.

<sup>15</sup> Much has been written on this topic. Some of the more interesting discussions are: J-P Sartre *Being and Nothingness* Tr. H. Barnes (Methuen 1969), G.E.M. Anscombe 'The First Person' in S. Guttenplan ed., *Mind and Language* (Oxford, 1972), and A.R. Manser 'Problems With the Self', Presidential address, *Proc. Arist. Soc.* 1983-4. For an interesting and more positive discussion see G. Evans 'Self-Identification' in *Varieties of Reference* (Oxford 1982).

are developed by way of abstract thinking, i.e. outside of the social contexts in which they are, *in actuality, empirically* developed. Consequently, the language of such thinking becomes specialised to the extent that it no longer describes how things are.

By way of contrast, I have argued that in Aristotle's and Hegel's conceptions, reason, desire, choice, agency and character are derived from the social, moral and ethical contexts in which, as empirical phenomena, they develop. In this analysis, character has played a fundamental role throughout, and in Chapter Six we have seen how the cluster of concepts that constitute purposive *Action* is characteristic of self-conscious *Action*. It is the development of self-conscious activity, in terms of a practical understanding of our social and ethical environment, habituation in activities, practices and customs, and reflection that at the same time constitutes the selfhood of character – the habituated 'moral self' that Bradley speaks of (see pp. 305ff. above). That is to say, Aristotle and Hegel do not have a conception of the self that begins with an abstract definition, but rather *arrive at* a conception through considering the development of the empirical phenomena which gives rise to (actual) character and selfhood.

### **Eudaimonia, Activity and Eupraxia**

Given the historical roots of modern philosophy in Descartes, Hume, and the synthesis in Kant, it is not surprising that an individualistic interpretation is thought to be needed if *eudaimonia* is to have a place

in current debate. But this runs counter to a claim that pre-dates the Cartesian 'revolution' and which still enjoys much support, i.e. the idea that man is by nature social and political.<sup>16</sup> This claim of Aristotle's is indeed almost universally acknowledged, but again it fails to gain expression in the execution of ethical analysis, which tends to obscure the teleological nature of Aristotle's point. Consequently, the majority of discussions attempt to reconcile *eudaimonia* with a personal, subjective account of the good and best life, or repudiate Aristotle as an egoist or hedonist.

#### *Eudaimonia and the Individual*

A point that W.F.R. Hardie makes in his paper 'The Final Good in Aristotle's Ethics' illustrates this well. Hardie considers a passage from *NE*, which describes *eudaimonia* in terms of human good in a general sense, i.e. in relation to domestic and political science, and a statement in *Eudemian Ethics* which relates to the individual's own well-being. "But", he says,

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<sup>16</sup> In my discussions of this I have concentrated on the social rather than the political aspect of this claim of Aristotle's and Hegel's. This relates to my point in footnote 2 to Chapter Three, i.e. that to go into a detailed discussion of Hegel's view of the structure of the state would be to go beyond the parameters of the thesis. This strategy does, however, have the unfortunate consequence of the missed opportunity of discussing the similarities – similarities that perhaps even Hegel does not acknowledge – between Aristotle's and Hegel's distinction between civil society and the state. This must be left for another occasion.

...something should be said at this point about the relation between the end of the individual and the greater and more complete end of the state. "While it is worth while to attain the end merely for one man, it is finer and more godlike to attain it for a nation or for city-states" (*NE* 1094b6-7). This does not mean more than it says: if it is good that Smith should be happy, it is even better that Brown and Robinson be happy too.<sup>17</sup>

What is worrying about Hardie's rendering of this point is that he seems to be emphasising individual end-seeking and desire-satisfaction. Immediately after the passage just quoted he states that "Individual end-seeking is primary",<sup>18</sup> something that seems to be re-affirmed in his later *Aristotle's Ethical Theory*, stating that political institutions exist to "promote the ends and enjoyments of individuals".<sup>19</sup> Now clearly Aristotle is saying that the state has the task of promoting the *eudaimonia* of individuals, but to read this in terms of individual end-seeking and enjoyments can be quite misleading. The 'ends' with which the state is concerned are those of the activities and practices which are promotional of *certain* (and not *all*) ends of individual members, i.e. those ends which are conducive to myself and others being *eudaimon*. I may have 'ends' which are not conducive to *eudaimonia*, as well as ends which the state is neither positively or

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<sup>17</sup> *Philosophy* vol. xl (1965), p. 281.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Oxford (1980; 2nd ed.), p. 19.

negatively concerned with at all. This emphasis on individual end-seeking thus affects what Hardie wants to make of Aristotle's statement at 1094b6-7.

Hardie wants to restrict the meaning to 'It would be better that Brown and Robinson should be happy as well as Smith'. But why should it be 'better'? The most obvious answer to this would seem to be that the greater the number of happy people the better the situation altogether, a view that Broadie seems also to hold, saying "the difference is one of quantity".<sup>20</sup> There is no doubt that there is some truth to the greatest number principle, but it altogether misses the subtlety of how Aristotle sees *eudaimonia*. The point might be put in terms of it being not a question of quantity, but of quality. That it is 'finer and more god-like' is indicative of a quality that cannot be reduced to the empirical quantification of individual desire-satisfaction, precisely because what is of concern to the ends of the state are *right* desires, and right desires relate to living *well* and not to how many desires can be fulfilled. If Smith, living in (i.e. acting in) community with Brown and Robinson, is *eudaimon*, then it is more than likely - as a matter of fact, all being social creatures - that Brown and Robinson should be *eudaimon*. Smith may live, through his activity, by stealing the goods of Brown and Robinson, but Smith would not be *eudaimon* in Aristotle's sense because he is unjust and, as we are told in *Politics* 1253a7, it is a common view in our perception of what is just and unjust which makes for community. Such perception is qualitative, whereas the



stealing by Smith, and any pleasure he may get out of it, is a quantitative result from desire-satisfaction (e.g. one may be rich in a quantitative sense, but not necessarily in a qualitative sense).<sup>21</sup>

As I have already suggested, the 'more is better' characterisation results from failing to take seriously the teleological nature of Aristotle's claim about the nature of man and his activity, resulting in the idea that the state's purpose is to secure (in true utilitarian fashion) the maximisation of desire-satisfaction of individual members of the community. One of the upshots of Aristotle's teleology is that the state is a necessary feature of human life, rather than being merely one way (amongst other ways) of ordering needs and wants. For instance, if it were desire-satisfaction that we were after, we might well do better if we were all assigned 'pleasure machines' which could be programmed to fulfil the desires we have at any given time.<sup>22</sup> Whatever such a fanciful idea might entail, we would not be talking about *human life*, for it involves ignoring central features of the latter. Aristotle's point that man is by nature social is illustrated for us in his analogy of the severed or sculptured hand:

<sup>20</sup> Op. cit. p. 16.

<sup>21</sup> A point that leads Aristotle to castigate those who warn us that 'man should think the thoughts of man', or 'mortal thoughts fit for mortal minds', *NE* 1177b31-33. Here there is a similarity with Hegel (see footnote 16 of the current chapter) on the nature and end of the state, i.e. "The march of God [the divine or the rational in us] in the world, that is what the state is" (*PR* #258[A]).

<sup>22</sup> R. Nozick discusses such ideas in *Anarchy, State and Utopia* (Basic Books, 1975), chapter 24.

Separate hand or foot from the whole body, and they will no longer be hand or foot except in name, as one might speak of 'hand' or 'foot' sculptured in stone.<sup>23</sup>

A human being who is not, in some way, living a social life is a human being in name only, precisely because it is only within a social community that a person can act, activity being for us what it is to live (which is another way of expressing Aristotle's 'natural principle' at *NE* 1168a2-5). The 'needs' which we have in virtue of our 'need' for social community are not related so much to *desires* as to what is desirable (*hairetos* - choiceworthy, rightly desirable), i.e. related to those activities which involve *acting and living well*. Focusing on 'bare desires' (so to speak), we can easily overlook Aristotle's *right* desire, thus emphasising individual end-seeking and desire-satisfaction rather than the end-seeking of the community as a whole. There is nothing intrinsically wrong about the former, but

...the state has a natural priority over the household and over any individual among us. For the whole must be prior to the parts.<sup>24</sup>

There is no conflict here with Aristotle's claim that the state exists for the promotion of the *eudaimonia* of individual members, precisely because *eudaimonia* relates to individuals as *social beings* rather than the arbitrary desires of this or that individual.

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<sup>23</sup> *Politics* 1253a18.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

*Eudaimonia and Activity*

Hegel makes some remarks which illuminate Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* and activity. Consider the following two passages:

Individuals in their capacity as burghers in this state are private persons whose end is their own interest. This end is mediated through the universal [i.e. forms of association] which thus *appears* as a means to its realisation. Consequently individuals can attain their ends only in so far as they themselves determine their knowing, willing and acting in a universal way and make themselves links in this chain of social connexions (*PR* #187).

The fact that must direct my conduct by reference to others introduces here a form of universality. It is from others that I acquire the means of satisfaction and I must accordingly accept their views. At the same time, however, I am compelled to produce means for the satisfaction of others. We play into each others hands and so hang together. To this extent everything private becomes something social (*PR* #192[A]).

Individual members of a state or community are private persons in that they pursue their own interests and ends. In doing so, they participate in activities which, as possible ways of attaining certain ends, do not

relate exclusively to a person's own interests, i.e. they are activities which represent possible ways of attaining certain ends for all private persons in principle.<sup>25</sup> In Hegel's terms the particular end I pursue is mediated through the universal in that I pursue that end through an activity which does not exclusively serve my own ends.

It may perhaps seem a little odd to talk of such 'activities', as 'activity' usually refers to the *doing* of something. But here I am talking about what Broadie calls 'those abstract entities crafts, activities, practices, projects'. The distinction between the aims of individual persons - in the psychological sense - and the aims of activities might be drawn thus: in describing what someone is doing we could refer to the activity, e.g. driving a car, but the driver's description would more than likely be something like 'I am going to the shops/to work/to meet a friend'. Generally speaking, driving involves the possibility of getting from A's to B's; *actual* driving involves the motives and particular ends of individuals specifying the A's to B's. For sure, it may *appear* (to repeat Hegel's emphasis) that the activity is the individual's own means (i.e. he owns the vehicle, has chosen where to go, the route to take, etc.) to serve his own particular end, but it is only through driving in such a way that does not relate exclusively to his own ends that he can drive in first

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<sup>25</sup> 'In principle' notwithstanding i) individuals who have disabilities such that they cannot participate in such activities, and ii) certain restrictions that are representative of the customs and habits of particular states and communities, restrictions emanating from social mores, morality, or restrictions which have been set by way of legislation. Clearly these might be seen as concerns for well-being in a very broad sense, but to argue this would be to go beyond the scope of the current project.

instance.<sup>26</sup> Or, as Hegel says, 'Individuals can attain their ends only in so far as they themselves determine their knowing, willing and acting in a universal way'.

An individual's determining his 'knowing, willing and acting in a universal way' does not necessarily mean acting with the personal motive 'Act with the well-being of others in mind' (although this obviously is a possible personal motive). What it means is that personal success in many activities involves knowing and understanding that this is attained in such a way that is conducive to the well-being and success of others who also participate in that particular activity - whether this is a personal motive or not. When we consider how a great many activities carried out by individuals relate to more general features of life such as commerce, industry, finance, education, politics, et al., we can see even more clearly that acting from purely personal motives is not necessarily at odds with acting in a way which is conducive to the well-being and success of others.

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<sup>26</sup>See Chapter Six above on learning to drive in relation to this point. Also see J. L. Austin's attempt to replace the translation of *eudaimonia* as 'happiness' with 'success', 'Agathon and *Eudaimonia* in the *Ethics* of Aristotle' in J. M. E. Moravcsik (ed.) *Aristotle: A Collection of Critical Essays* (New York, 1967). Although success is not equatable with *eudaimonia*, it is certainly applicable to it. This comes out of comparing Aristotle's views with those of the Stoics. In the Stoical version, *eudaimonia* involves the element of tranquillity (e.g., Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations* V 16, 34,81, and Seneca, *Epistles* 85 2, 24) gained in carrying out a task in the manner of a master craftsman, 'doing the right actions', but success is not a necessary element. For instance, in archery what is important is that the bow is handled correctly in terms of tension, taking aim, etc., but whether the target is hit is of secondary importance (Cicero discusses archery in *De Finibus* 111 22). For Aristotle, success is required for Acting well. See T. H. Irwin 'Stoic

The tendency in modern debates to consider the individual in isolation from the social and ethical environment, often results in the analysis of *Action* in terms of act and consequent, 'internal' motivation and 'external' consequences, falling into arguments about whether the important factor is the 'subjective' or the 'objective' aspect of *Action* - as Hegel would have it, a somewhat abstract exercise. However, moving away from the pre-conception that ethics is about individual desire-satisfaction, the focus of the debate changes. That is to say, rather than getting involved in a metaphysics of *Action*, we begin to concern ourselves with *Action* as a factor in the social community. Yes, ethics is concerned with individual *Actions* (which is quite different from individual desire-satisfaction), but individual *Actions* in terms of acting and living well in the social arena in which they take place. Consequently what needs to be looked at now is the relationship between *eudaimonia* and *eupraxia*.

### *Eudaimonia and Eupraxia*

In *NE* Aristotle doesn't directly give us a connection between individual *Actions* and *eudaimonia* as a whole (whether in terms of a whole individual life or the whole of the public realm), a connection which Hegel makes in saying that individual *Action* and the public realm are dependent on one another for good. *Eupraxia* would seem to translate

literally as 'acting well', although it is often rendered as good *Action* or doing well.<sup>27</sup> Good *Action* and acting well would certainly seem to be connected, but it is precisely the relation between 'good' and the 'well' of *eupraxia* that we need to be clear about. As we shall see, clarifying this has bearings on how *eudaimonia* is to be understood.

Although *NE* offers little help, Aristotle is much clearer on the topic in *Politics*. Book 7 investigates the question whether the best life is a life of contemplation or the 'active' life of practical wisdom, the task being to determine the best constitution as it is the constitution which will facilitate the best life. This facilitating is pertinent to the community as a whole as well as the best life for the individual, for are we

...to say that happiness is the same for the individual and for the state, or not. The answer is again obvious: all would agree that it is the same (1324a5).

The practical life involves 'externally acquired goods', the acquisition of which is often due to fortune. But Aristotle is keen not to identify good fortune (*eutuchia*) and *eudaimonia*, for fortune is something that *happens to us*, rather than something that is accomplished by our own

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<sup>27</sup> For example, 1140b6-7 in the Penguin edition reads "...in the case of action, ....the end is merely doing *well*", while F.H. Peters (Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1906) renders the passage "...since good action or doing well is itself the end". Ross (Oxford, 1925) translates "...good action itself is the end". as does M. Ostwald (Bobbs-Merrill, 1962). The Loeb reads "...doing well is itself the end". The essential feature here is that the translation carries a fully *active* sense to it, something that will become clear presently. Thus 'doing well' doesn't quite fit the bill, for we can be doing well and be relatively inactive - 'The patient is doing well'.

agency, and *eudaimonia* is an *activity*. Again, this goes for both individual and state:

...no man is just or restrained as a result of, or because of, fortune. A connected point, depending on the same argument, applies with equal force to the state: the best and well-doing state is the happy state. But it is impossible for those who do not do good actions to do well, and there is no such thing as a man's or a state's good action without virtue and practical wisdom. The courage of a state or its justice, or its practical wisdom, or its restraint have exactly the same effect and are manifested in the same form as the qualities which the individual has to share in if he is to be called courageous, just, wise, or restrained (1323b29).

Here the connection between acting well and *eudaimonia* is such that it is impossible to be *eudaimon* without acting well. Thus *eudaimonia* is dependent on *eupraxia*. The latter is not dependent on the former, but rather on material circumstances such that *eudaimonia* is possible at all, for

Let this be our fundamental basis: the life which is best for men, both separately, and in the mass, is the life which has virtue sufficiently supported by material resources to facilitate participation in the actions that virtue calls for (1323b36).



Thus both acting well and *eudaimonia* are dependent not only on material resources, but also the arrangements that derive from the constitution, for

Obviously the best constitution must be one which is so ordered that any person whatsoever may prosper best and live blessedly....(1324a23).

That is to say, *eupraxia* (and its related terms) and *eudaimonia* are dependent on an objective state of affairs in order for them to be realised, which is another way of re-stating Aristotle's principle that man is by nature social, and that his natural environment is the political state. Against this background the idea that *eudaimonia* is about individual end-seeking, or that it is in any way primary, is not so much simply wrong as ill-conceived. Clearly Aristotle was concerned for individual well-being as well as *eudaimonia* in general, but if those individual end-seekings are going to be instances of *eupraxia* then there needs to be material resources and arrangements that are not the result of the individual's own agency. The better the arrangements the more self-sufficient the individual, i.e. the more able to participate in self-sufficient activities. Contemplation for Aristotle is an ideal, but an ideal that *can* be realised in a well-ordered state, and an ideal in that it is the most self-sufficient and, in an important sense, *active* of activities:

If all this is true and if happiness is to be equated with doing well, then the active life will be the best both for any state as a whole community and for the individual. But

the active life need not, as some suppose, be always concerned with our relations with other people, nor is intelligence 'active' only when it is directed towards results that flow from action. On the contrary, thinking and speculation that are their own end and are done for their own sake are more 'active', because the aim in such thinking is to do well, and therefore, also, in a sense, action (1325b14).

Thinking and speculation are more 'active' in that they are neither dependent on things external to their exercise, nor hindered by them - activities that are in no way *passive*. However, as Hegel reminds us,

The necessities of life must have been supplied (c.f. Aristotle Met. 982<sup>b</sup>22(k)), the agony of desire must have vanished; the purely finite interests of men must have been worked off....(ILHP pp. 110).

Broadie gives us an excellent discussion on the question as to whether the best life is contemplative or practical, concluding that

Since human *theoria* needs material conditions but cannot lift a finger towards obtaining them, human *theoria* in itself is the least self-sufficient activity. But granted the material substructure, lovers of *theoria* are more independent than would-be politicians as they need not look for special occasions and resources. The practical virtues need others as partners and recipients of their

exercise ([NE] 1177a30-32), whereas the person of theoretic wisdom 'even when by himself can engage in *theoria*, and the better the wiser he is; he can perhaps do so better if he has fellow-workers, but still he is the most self-sufficient' (1177a32-b1).<sup>28</sup>

### *Conclusion*

What I have argued here is that by taking the individual agent as the starting point for an understanding of *eudaimonia* we miss much of what is going on in Aristotle's argument. This is particularly clear in the relation he wants to establish between *eudaimonia* and *Action*, something I have attempted to expand upon here. Whether we are talking about *Action* in the broader sense, i.e. in terms of activity being a 'natural principle', or individual instances of *Action*, i.e. as issuing from individual agents, *eudaimonia* comes out not as a rigid and stringent moral concept which might guide us to the good life, but as a feature of, and strived for in, *Action*. Man is by nature social, and thus *Action* is by nature social, activity being a 'natural principle': it is only natural that man is concerned with doing well, as well as with well-being. As we have seen, this does not necessarily mean that individuals are themselves motivated by the well-being of others as well as their own, but that the activities, projects, and practices that we participate in involve their success - and the success of individual

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<sup>28</sup> Op. cit., pp. 424-5.

participants - as their guiding force. This is what doing well involves, and *Actions* which threaten such success come under moral and ethical scrutiny out of that very concern for doing well.

It is failing to take seriously enough the teleological nature of Aristotle's account of *Action* that leads to the interpretation of his views as egoistic or hedonistic. This in turn involves modern readers of Aristotle relying on Kantian and utilitarian ideas of duty and moral obligation<sup>29</sup> as representing the foundation and efficacy of morality, and to consequentialist interpretations of purpose and function. For sure, purpose involves means and ends, the sort of purpose sought in the question 'To what end did you do that?'; however, the sort of end in question is not something that is consequent to the *Action*, but is a feature of *Action* itself. And so with *eudaimonia*.

A major problem for the committed acceptance of Aristotle's conception of *eudaimonia* in modern debate is the quite stringent demands made of it by his commentators and critics alike. The bulk of material written on the topic concerns itself with a stringent and logically coherent theory, or whether Aristotle puts over a consistently 'comprehensive'<sup>30</sup> or compatible<sup>31</sup> view. These can only represent

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<sup>29</sup> Again we might refer to Hardie, 'The Final Good in Aristotle', as an example of a commentator who resorts to such notions. In the final paragraph of his article Hardie makes attempts to reconcile Aristotle with Professor D.J. Allan's remark that Aristotle "...takes little account of the motive of moral obligation", making some preliminary remarks on how self-respect (again emphasising the self-regarding aspect of *eudaimonia*) might be understood as a 'principle of duty'.

<sup>30</sup> E.g. R. Heinaman, *op. cit.*

attempts to reconcile Aristotle with pre-conceptions which are our own and not his. In an important discussion of Aristotle's supposed two conceptions of *eudaimonia*, Gavin Lawrence points out how some commentators try to sort out the inconsistencies from this 'two conception' account by invoking a criterion of 'value' which is not Aristotle's, and that

...Aristotle's concern is explicitly with the question of what activities, or weave of activities, *constitute* the ideal human life, and *not* with the question of what activities a human should *value*, or be "devoted to".<sup>32</sup>

The value that an activity has is not something that we bring along to embellish it with; any value an activity may have will be determined by the situation in which some sort of activity is called for. The circumstances and situations of human affairs are so varied that activities cannot be assimilated to rigorous and stringent criteria of value and schematized in some sort of ethical hierarchy. That Aristotle's concern is primarily for *Action* and activities, and not what we ought to value, is something that might be said of *NE* as a whole.

*Eudaimonia* cannot accommodate such demands for rigour and stringency. I say this, however, not to allude to shortcomings in Aristotle's thought, but for two very different reasons. Firstly, to make such a demand is to ignore something that Aristotle constantly reminds

<sup>31</sup> E.g. A.D.M. Walker, 'Virtue and Character' in *Philosophy* 64, 1989..

<sup>32</sup> 'Aristotle and the Ideal Life' in *The Philosophical Review* vol. 102, no. 1 (Jan 1993).

us of throughout *NE*, viz. that the study of ethics can only deliver what is *for the most part* true, and secondly (which I suggest is the basis for Aristotle's making the first point) precisely because *eudaimonia* is not strictly speaking a *philosophical* problem (although it would be absurd to suggest that presenting a coherent philosophical account of it is problem free), but rather an ethical, i.e. *practical* problem. That is to say, *eudaimonia* is a problem in that it is something that needs to be *secured*, and the ways and means of doing so are to be sought in attention to the practical details of life rather than in philosophical analyses. To demand a philosophically rigorous and stringent account is thus misconceived, and fails to distinguish what philosophy can and cannot do.

## CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have argued that a major feature of much 20<sup>th</sup> century Anglo-American moral philosophy is that it rests on an unexamined assumption that reason and desire are distinct phenomena. One consequence of resting on this distinction is that reason is seen as some distinct calculative faculty from whence the authority and objectivity of moral rules and principles are, and ought to be, derived. As I illustrate in the introduction, on this grounding elaborate theories of reasoning, deliberation and judgement are developed to such an abstract level that a gulf has developed between moral debate and moral life, such that any relationship between what is said and what is done is difficult to discern. In contrast to this, I have argued that Aristotle's and Hegel's discussions of ethics and ethical life based on considerations of purposive *Action* offer an antidote both to this assumption, and to the gulf between moral debate and moral life that it entails. This focusing on human activity – as opposed to general rules and principles – as ethical considerations helps to provide the lack of philosophical psychology that Anscombe complained was missing from moral debate in her 'Modern Moral Philosophy'.

In Part One of the thesis I suggested that the hard and fast distinction between reason and desire is an inheritance – often an unconscious one - from 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century metaphysics and epistemology. In Chapter One I traced this theme through the work of Descartes, Locke, Hume and Kant, arguing that Descartes' argument for, and the responses to, the *Cogito* rendered human beings as essentially individual minds. This is illustrated in the treatment afforded to the concepts of reason, will and freedom, viewed by the metaphysics and epistemology of the period as faculties, powers or forces possessed by individuals.

In contrast, I have put forward an analysis of Hegel's claim that talk of reason, will and freedom without reference to the subjects of reasoning, willing and freedom is abstract and one-sided. The error consists precisely in the abstracting of these concepts from the historical, ethical, social and political context within which those subjects are located, the moral and ethical life within which reason, will and freedom are expressed. In matters of morality, this abstract one-sidedness is seen in notions of social contract and Kant's will that is good in itself, notions that have enjoyed a strong foothold in modern moral philosophy.

The contrast that I allude to is Hegel's observation, echoing Aristotle, that man is by nature a social and political creature. This involves the claim that reasoning and desiring are not faculties, powers or forces distinct from our acting in the world. In failing to acknowledge this, I have argued in Part Two, the importance of moral habituation and



character is overlooked by accounts of *Action* based on abstract forms of reasoning such as causal analysis and logical inference. Such accounts again create a gulf between what is said and what is done, i.e. it is difficult to reconcile those accounts of *Action* with what is involved in acting in the world. The overall effect is that abstract conceptions of reason determine the subject matter, rather than the subject matter determining the accounts given. By importing abstract and theoretical forms of reasoning into accounts of *Action*, Aristotle's discussion of practical reasoning is often transformed into yet another species of abstract, theoretical reasoning, divorced from its proper sphere of activity. But, as Aristotle says, "...in the matter of conduct truth is assessed in the light of the facts and of actual life; because it is in these that the decisive factor lies". That is to say, if our account does not accord with the facts and "...conflicts with them we must regard it as no more than a theory" (NE 1179a19 - 21).

Concluding the introduction, I said that the claim that reason is historically and socially constituted is implicit in the claim that man is by nature a social and political creature. This statement was refined in discussions in consequent chapters. Acting involves reasons and purposes pertaining to the ethical community in which we live (p. 127), which is to say that in our *Actions* we do not act in a void, but in relation to a given situation arising out of the practices, activities, conventions, etc. of ethical life (p. 132). The particular contents of our *Actions* are taken from social situations within the context of customs, habits and

laws (p. 191), and it is precisely this context out of which the question 'Ought...?' arises (pp. 212ff).

If this is the case then, conjoined with the claim that although the distinction between reason and desire can be drawn *conceptually*, it is quite another thing to claim that they are distinct *realiter* (p. 251), this amounts to saying that desire and motivation are themselves historically and socially constituted. This again is implicit in the statement, reflecting the implications of the analysis in Part Two, that when we look closely at the social context of reason and *Action*, the question 'What moves us to *Action*?' is a peculiar one (p. 287).

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century the abstract distinction between reason and desire has raised answers to this question in the claim that *Action* results from an appropriate conjunction of beliefs and desires. It is one thing to have a view or perspective of the world, but something further – some sort of force - is required in order to explain the move to act in the world. Such a view of motivation has come under attack in the last few decades. In his 'Non-cognitivism and Rule-Following' McDowell illustrates the peculiarity of this question:

I suspect that one reason they find ...[this claim] obvious lies in their explicit adherence to a quasi-hydraulic conception of how reason explanations account for

action. The will is pictured as the source of forces that issue in the behaviour such explanations explain.<sup>1</sup>

In his *The Moral Problem* Michael Smith claims that such a simplistic conception has never been treated seriously by those putting forward either strong or weak Humean theories of motivation,<sup>2</sup> but this still leaves Jonathan Dancy puzzled as to what precisely a theory of motivation based on the conjunction of beliefs and desires amounts to. Dancy's problem is that:

The most striking feature of this account is that no justifying reason can be a motivating reason and no motivating reason a justifying one.<sup>3</sup>

Dancy's own view of motivation is:

What motivates agents to action, I propose, and what justifies their actions in favourable cases, is *what they believe*, not their believing it. The belief may perhaps give their reason, or reveal what their reason was, but it will not actually *be* that reason.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> In Steven Holtzman and Christopher Leich (eds.), *Wittgenstein: To Follow a Rule* (Routledge, 1981), p. 155. McDowell's work in this area, along with that of others, has produced much debate during the last decade which is still very much alive (see, e.g. Jonathan Dancy's *Practical Reality*, O.U.P 2000). Here I shall confine myself with a few brief remarks on how this debate reflects my discussion in Part Two.

<sup>2</sup> Michael Smith, *The Moral Problem* (Blackwell, 1994), pp. 101 – 2.

<sup>3</sup> 'Why There is Really No Such Thing as The Theory of Motivation' in PAS, 1995, p. 1.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

In arguing that motivation is primarily linked to the particular situation in the world in which we act, Dancy is reflecting my claim in Chapter Two (p. 127) that acting involves reasons and purposes constitutive of my surroundings and environment, and the claim in Chapter Seven that desires and their objects are not isolated from one another (p. 327). My claim is, however, broader than Dancy's, in that the surroundings and environment in which I act are themselves part of an historically situated ethical community, and it is such a context within which reasons and purposes can be *my* reasons and purposes.

However, this raises a question as to how far we can take particularism without rendering *Action* arbitrary and unintelligible (see Introduction, footnote 50). 'He did that' is a particular statement, but as an *utterance* it is raised in a context, and that context provides the grounds for the description under which 'that' can be called an *Action*. The characteristics of 'that' to which the terms of the description relate are the purpose, reason, motive etc. - the basis - of the utterance itself. Any meaning and value that such a statement may have are derived, not from its logical form, but from the conditions and circumstances that brought about its utterance (as I have argued in Chapter Four, on the logic of the *Action* itself rather than an abstract conception of logic). But in cases other than when a mundane statement of fact is being uttered (which itself would have some context in understanding its utterance), there are general descriptive terms that are appropriate to the *Action*. Thus, there are circumstances such that someone's acting well and acting badly will raise the utterance 'He did that', and there are a host

of more specific, but nevertheless general, terms corresponding to 'well' and 'badly' that are appropriate according to the purposes, reasons and motives of the *Action*.

In saying this I am claiming, in agreement with Dancy, that only a full description of a particular *Action* makes it both intelligible as an *Action* and provides any grounds for moral judgement. Dancy considers an example suggested by Smith in which someone returns a wallet found in the street to its owner. Even if we don't have the slightest idea why she did it, we already think it is an intelligible thing to do, and we think this because it is right. One thing wrong with this, Dancy goes on to argue,

...is the idea that if an action is right, it is at least intelligible, whatever the agent's reasons for doing it. This idea of a sort of intelligibility which prescind from the agent's reasons leaves us with too little to work on.<sup>5</sup>

There are many possible details which would fulfil the description of the *Action*, taking into account the agent's purposes, reasons and motives which would cast doubt on whether, given these, giving back the wallet was right. Or, as I have argued in Chapter Three, a statement such as 'Giving back a wallet to its owner' is a general and abstract description or type which leaves unspecified whether *this particular Action* is right or wrong, and general and abstract descriptions do not make *any* particular *Actions* intelligible. As Dancy goes on to say,

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

What we do get from the thought that the action was right is that it is at least intelligible that *someone* should have done the action, provided that *they did it for the reasons* that in fact make it right, and *understanding them as such*. (my emphasis).<sup>6</sup>

Here I have only briefly considered the topic of motivation in the light of the implications of my discussion in Part Two of this thesis. These implications are that when our considerations of *Action* take as their starting point the logic of *Action* itself, and that involves taking into account reasons, desires, character, conscience, knowledge, self-awareness, etc. of particular *Actions*, then the further question of what moves us to *Action* becomes redundant. This amounts to saying that general and abstract theories of motivation are not needed, in the same way that general and abstract theories of reason and reasoning do little to clarify what is involved in moral behaviour.

In saying this I have argued that both Aristotle's and Hegel's discussions of ethics and ethical life, based as they are on considerations of *Action* and mind, are rich sources that can serve as an antidote to the temptation to view morality in simplistic terms of rules and principles. On the one hand, by looking at morality in terms of the family of concepts that constitute philosophical considerations of *Action* and mind, the characteristics of *Actions* that we are wont to judge can be exposed. The generalisation involved in the recourse to rules, principles and generalist moral theories subtract these concepts from

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

consideration, and thereby remove the very details upon which moral judgements of particular *Actions* are based. On the other hand, by taking into account character and habituation we reveal the social context in which particular *Actions* issue, thereby showing that reason and motivation are socially based rather than faculties or powers that render human beings as primarily individual by nature, the latter view tempting moral philosophers to develop abstract conceptions of reason and deliberation in order to overcome that individuality. Again, if we take seriously Aristotle's and Hegel's claim that man is by nature a social and political creature, then such a temptation is both misconceived and unnecessary. And by taking it seriously, I do not mean subjecting the claim to analysis according to some sort of criterion based on an abstract conception of reason, but by looking to what such a claim involves in relation to *Action* and ethics.

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