

## Summary of *Hegel's Conscience*

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*Abstract:* In this summary I introduce the interpretive framework for *Hegel's Conscience* and then provide an overview of the book's six chapters.

I set up my argument in *Hegel's Conscience* by asking why there is no distinctly Hegelian strand in contemporary ethical theory. From the beginning the argument is addressed simultaneously to scholars in the history of philosophy and to ethical philosophers working with a problem-based approach. The goal is mutual illumination, though I place more emphasis on contemporary ethics learning from Hegel than on Hegel scholarship learning from the formulation and solution of problems in ethical theory. In the Introduction I canvass six possible reasons for the lack of a Hegelian ethical theory, showing that none of the reasons actually prevents such a program from coming to fruition. I will mention two of these reasons here, and then discuss a few further points from the book's opening before giving a summary of the chapters.

One of the worries with Hegel's practical philosophy is that it is just an amalgam of the standard models of ethical theory that adds nothing fundamentally new to the historical resources available to contemporary ethical theorizing. Given that Hegel does have strong Aristotelian and Kantian elements in his account (to mention only the two most prominent influences), the worry has some merit unless we can figure out exactly what binds the different elements together into a distinctively Hegelian whole. I argue that the unity of these elements is provided through the conceptual tool of the structure of self-consciousness, the basic form of thinking that Hegel variously refers to as *infinity*, *self-referring negativity*, and the *Concept*. I argue that conscience is central to Hegel's account largely because of how it operates as such a power of negativity. In his distinctive way of conceiving of the unity

of the universal and particular, Hegel provides an original conceptual tool that resolves a number of debates in ethical theory.

The final and decisive reason that I give for a lack of a contemporary Hegelian program is that no one has given a comprehensive account of Hegel's conception of practical reason that is accessible to a broader philosophical audience. Hegel does not make it easy to understand his conception of practical reason, yet he does have all the elements of a robust conception of how the individual agent reasons about norms and navigates the ethical landscape. Hegel rejects the idea of a formal decision procedure that could guarantee approval or disapproval for a given input, but such a procedure is not the only model of practical reason. Hegel does make important arguments about deliberation, as well as about moral motivation and the nature of the values that support practical reasoning. Attending to Hegel's various claims about conscience is crucial to unearthing the full conception of practical reason. It is the ambiguous status of some of those claims that has provided one of the major obstacles to seeing Hegel's ethics clearly. Once conscience and mutual recognition are placed on par as the twin tools for understanding the activity of the ethical subject, Hegel's claims about Ethical Life and social substance can be seen as an outgrowth of his theory of practical reason rather than simply as an alternative to ethical theories centered on the free individual.

We can formulate the main problem of modern freedom as the problem of how to understand the relation of conscience's authority to the authority of good reasons or objective ethical content. Does conscience in its full authoritative sense *reflect* (objective) rational content, or does it (subjectively) *determine* the content? If it just reflects content that is valid on its own, then conscience seems to be a formal requirement merely tacked on to an already given normative landscape. But if an individual determines content through the appeal to conscience, the very idea of stable rational content available to all agents begins to break down. This unpalatable either/or is met by Hegel with his dynamic account that I call performative freedom, in which content is taken up and altered in the very act of expressing it. Conscience is thus largely a site of combination and synthesis, with the judgments of conscience being concrete instances of ethical action.

There is a *prima facie* tension between an account based on the first-person point of view of conscience and an account based on the second-person point of view of mutual recognition. My reading does not seek to downplay the importance of recognition, but rather to show that it finds an equally

necessary correlate in conscience. The main idea of recognition is that the agent can only be concretely free if she is recognized as a free being by other free agents. The basic lesson is that only in the social realm of Ethical Life can action be cashed out as rational because only there is my *claim* to rationality and freedom *affirmed* through recognition by others. But the argument goes further than this relatively modest and intuitive point, for it typically involves the claim that recognition *secures* content.

One concern with foregrounding recognition is that doing so can cut off inquiry into the details of Hegel's ethical theory, and especially into the details of his account of practical reason. The role of recognition in practical reason is normally conceived as operating at the level of the *overall* judgment or action, when one receives the response of other agents. But that is already too late for many central ethical issues in moral motivation and deliberation. We need to know what makes an action *recognizable* as the action of a free individual. This will involve social preconditions, but it will also mean understanding just what the individual *does* in judging and acting. The pivotal scene of ethical theory is deliberation under ethical uncertainty, and conscience rather than recognition is the main figure necessary to theorize this scene.

Though I draw mainly on the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and the *Philosophy of Right*, one of the most important passages for my reading comes in the *Encyclopedia*. I repeat it here in two parts to give a sense of the centrality of conscience to Hegel's view of ethics, history and philosophy. In a passage added for the 1830 edition, he writes,

Only in the principle of the Spirit knowing its essence, *in itself* absolutely free and having its actuality in the activity of its liberation, does the absolute possibility and necessity exist that State power, religion and the principle of philosophy fall together into one, completing the reconciliation of actuality in general with Spirit, of the State with the religious conscience as well as with philosophical knowing. (*Encyclopedia* §552)<sup>1</sup>

In describing the principle of conscience, Hegel's emphasis falls sharply on the *activity* of liberation. The principle Hegel refers to here is the principle of self-knowledge, and the activity of liberation is the process of self-conscious action through which individuals and communities come to further knowledge of their freedom. There is a continuous process of transforming existing norms. The reconciliation that Hegel refers to here does not imply a quiescent harmony and a passive obedience to existing norms, but rather the realization that free human activity is the source of all normative legitimacy.

One could doubt from the text given thus far that the principle of “State power” corresponds to conscience, but Hegel removes this doubt in his subsequent references to the harm done by Christianity in its one-sided Catholic guise and to the ability of self-consciousness to overcome repressive religion. He writes:

But the principle contains the infinite elasticity of the absolute form, to overcome the corruption of its form-determinations and of the content through itself and to effect the reconciliation of Spirit in itself. Thus the principle of the religious and the ethical conscience become one and the same in the Protestant conscience—the free Spirit knowing itself in its rationality and truth. (*Encyclopedia* §552)

Hegel’s strategy of immanent negation always functions within a claim to content rather than itself creating content *ex nihilo*. Conscience cannot be an original source of norms, but it can be a source for transforming, through processes of negation, the existing norms. It is an activity of liberation rather than the basis for a construction from the ground up of a society’s ethical norms.

Chapter one makes the initial case for thinking of conscience as central to Hegel’s ethics and lays out the conceptual basis for Hegel’s theory of practical reason. I give a preliminary account of the role of self-consciousness by reading a central passage from the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in relation to Richard Moran’s recent work on the authority of self-consciousness. I show that Hegel’s distinctive take on issues of self-consciousness and self-determination stems from his conception of “self-referring negativity.” This device allows Hegel to think of practical reason and ethical content as uniting the universality and particularity of the will, and it thus serves as the basis of what I call Hegel’s *performative view* of practical reason.

Chapter two takes up the problem of motivating and justifying reasons. The central problem here is how to think of the relation of the reasons that agents do in fact act upon to the reasons that ultimately justify their actions. I show that Hegel’s claims about motivated action bring him quite close to the theory of internal reasons advocated by Bernard Williams, and that the tension between internal reasons and objective standards of justification comes to a head in Hegel’s discussions of conscience. I show that Hegel endorses a requirement of concrete identity between motivating reasons and justifying reasons, such that individuals can act on reasons of particular concern to them while affirming their commitment to the universality of their actions. I argue that reasons for Hegel are generated by *purposes*, and that he relies on

a relation of individual purposes to universal purposes that is best described as a “nesting” relationship. Agents act on their particular purposes but are committed to the answerability of those purposes to the broader purposes in which they are nested.

In chapter three I discuss Hegel's views on the holism of action and duty. The goal is to explain why Hegel's criticisms of the ethics of conviction are not criticisms of conscience itself, but are rather directed at views that violate the requirements of holism. I set out the issues through an analysis of holism and the problem of “detachment” by Jonathan Dancy. As Dancy shows, the primary problem is how to think of the belief that an action is a duty in a way that does not make the belief itself the source of the duty. The argument against detachment that Hegel makes in many places is an argument against detaching aspects of the overall action from the whole. After interpreting Hegel's arguments against subjectivism as arguments against detachment, I show that we can think of the requirements of autonomy in Hegel as requirements of non-detachment.

Chapter four, “Deliberation and Justification,” gives an account of what agents do when they engage in ethical deliberation and an account of Hegel's model of justification in ethics. I present the work of Barbara Herman on judgment and deliberation as a frame for understanding Hegel's concerns about moral reflection. I argue that Hegel turns to the concepts of Spirit and Ethical Life as contexts of *value* that allow for objective resolutions of moral conflict. The operative model of justification is a Default and Challenge model, where individual beliefs are given default entitlement status but are subject to challenges from others. I show that Hegel's claims about the authority of conscience, and the dependence of conscience on the objective contexts of Ethical Life, show that he takes conscience to be the claim of default entitlement, and that, properly understood, it is subject to definite challenges but not to global skepticism.

In chapter five I discuss the theme of mutual recognition in Hegel's ethics. While the prevailing tendency in the literature is to think that the social conception of recognition *replaces* the authority of individual conscience, I show that recognition and conscience are complementary concepts in Hegel's account of the rationality of action. One of my main claims is that recognition for Hegel is typically *indirect* recognition of the value of an action rather than *direct* recognition of another's free agency. I contrast the indirect model with Christine Korsgaard's argument for direct recognition of humanity as the

source of value. I argue that while Hegel does in the *Phenomenology* give an account of such direct recognition, in the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel's account of Ethical Life relies on value residing in objective institutional purposes and on individuals being indirectly recognized through their actions within those contexts.

In chapter six, I bring the preceding analysis of practical reason to bear on the three main institutions in Hegel's account of Ethical Life, namely the Family, Civil Society, and the State. One of the main goals is to understand how individual subjectivity is respected and expressed within those institutions. I show that all three institutions exhibit structural features determined by the account of practical reason. In the case of Civil Society and the State I show that there is a need for the authority of individual conscience even within the institutional contexts, and that the institutions are organized so that individuals can recognize institutional action as a function of their own agency. The institutions are not merely authorities *over* the actions of individuals, but they are contexts *for* the actions of individuals within which the right of self-consciousness can be satisfied.

#### NOTES

1. *Encyclopedia (E)* refers to G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse 1830*. I have emended the translation from *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind* (part three of Hegel's *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences* [1830]), trans. William Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971).