



HEGEL'S

CONSCIENCE

DEAN MOYAR



Hegel's Conscience

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I have incurred many debts in the course of the long development of this project. From a dissertation that dealt extensively with Hegel's development and very little with contemporary ethical theory, the text grew into a ponderous treatment of the conscience problem that included Kant and Fichte as well as lengthy discussions of Hegel's systematic aims and methodology. I owe the current more determinate and tighter form largely to suggestions and comments from OUP's anonymous referees, whom I thank for saving my unwieldy work from the dustbin of history. I would also like to thank OUP's Peter Ohlin for staying with the project to its conclusion.

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NOTE ON CITATIONS AND ABBREVIATIONS

I have found it necessary to alter many of the translations of the primary texts that I am examining in this study. I do not, however, note these alterations except in those cases in which I think the original translation is especially misleading.

Citations of Hegel's works are given parenthetically according to the abbreviations below. For the *Phenomenology of Spirit* I simply give the page number from GW 9 and the paragraph number from the Miller translation. Any parenthetical citation with a "§" in it refers to the *Phenomenology*. With the *Philosophy of Right* I give Hegel's section number. All parenthetical citations with a "§" and no letters refer to the section number of the *Philosophy of Right*. When a section number is followed by a "Z" it refers to the Zusatz, or Addition, to the original section. When "HW" appears after a section number it refers to Hegel's handwritten notes to the section.

KANT

Kant.Ak. – Akademie Ausgabe of Kant's works.

PP – *Practical Philosophy*. Translated and Edited by Mary J. Gregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996.

FICHTE

SW – *Sämtliche Werke*. Edited by Immanuel Hermann Fichte. Berlin: de Gruyter, 1971.

SE – *The System of Ethics*. Translated and edited by Daniel Breazeale and Günter Zöller. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.

HEGEL

GW – *Gesammelte Werke*. Ed. Hartmut Buchner and Otto Pöggeler. Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1968–.

W – *Werke in 20 Bänden*. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986.

JSE I – *Jena Systementwürfe I: Das System der spekulativen Philosophie*. Edited by Klaus Düsing and Heinz Kimmerle. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1986.

JSE III – *Jena Systementwürfe III*. Edited by Rolf-Peter Horstmann. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1987.

- HHS* – *The Philosophy of Spirit (1805–6) in Hegel and the Human Spirit*. Translated by Leo Rauch. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1983.
- PhS* – *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977.
- LNR* – *Lectures on Natural Right and Political Science*. Translated by J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995.
- EPS* – *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind. Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. Translated by William Wallace and A.V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971.
- PH* – *The Philosophy of History*. Translated by J. Sibree. New York: Dover, 1956.
- PR* – *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Translated by H.B. Nisbet, Edited by Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991.
- VPN19/20* – *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*. Edited by Dieter Henrich. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983.
- L II* – *Wissenschaft der Logik: Die Lehre vom Begriff (1816)*. Edited by Hans-Jürgen Gawoll. Hamburg: Meiner Verlag, 1994.
- SL* – *Science of Logic*. Translated by A.V. Miller. Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press, 1969.

"Do not mistake me, however. I am not saying that she did not err in her advice. It was, perhaps, one of those cases in which advice is good or bad only as the event decides; and for myself, I certainly never should, in any circumstance of tolerable similarity, give such advice. But I mean, that I was right in submitting to her, and that if I had done otherwise, I should have suffered more in continuing the engagement than I did even in giving it up, because I should have suffered in my conscience."

Anne Elliot to Captain Wentworth in Jane Austen's *Persuasion*

The minister, on the other hand, had never gone through an experience calculated to lead him beyond the scope of generally received laws; although, in a single instance, he had so fearfully transgressed one of the most sacred of them. But this had been a sin of passion, not of principle, nor even of purpose. Since that wretched epoch, he had watched, with morbid zeal and minuteness, not his acts,—for those it was easy to arrange,—but each breath of emotion, and his every thought. At the head of the social system, as the clergymen of that day stood, he was only the more trammelled by its regulations, its principles, and even its prejudices. As a priest, the framework of his order inevitably hemmed him in. As a man who had once sinned, but who kept his conscience all alive and painfully sensitive by the fretting of an unhealed wound, he might have been supposed safer within the line of virtue, than if he had never sinned at all.

Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter*

"I was speaking of the oil in the hold, sir."

"And I was not speaking or thinking of that at all. Begone! Let it leak! I'm all aleak myself. Aye! Leaks in leaks! Not only full of leaky casks, but those leaky casks are in a leaky ship; and that's a far worse plight than the Pequod's, man. Yet I don't stop to plug my leak; for who can find it in the deep-loaded hull? or how hope to plug it, even if found, in this life's howling gale? Starbuck! I'll not have the Burtons hoisted."

"What will the owners say, sir?"

"Let the owners stand on Nantucket beach and outyell the Typhoons. What cares Ahab? Owners, owners? Thou art always prating me, Starbuck, about those miserly owners, as if the owners were my conscience. But look ye, the only real owner of anything is its commander; and hark ye, my conscience is in this ship's keel.—On deck!"

Herman Melville, *Moby Dick*

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INTRODUCTION

1. HEGELIAN ETHICS?

There is no subfield of contemporary ethical theory known as “Hegelian ethics.” By contrast to the other acknowledged titans of practical philosophy, Aristotle, Hume, Kant, and Mill, no distinctively Hegelian program has taken root. This fact is all the more surprising given the revival of interest in Hegel over the last thirty years and the expansive body of secondary literature that this revival has produced. There has indeed been a great deal of progress in understanding Hegel’s writings and situating them in relation to his predecessors. Some of the best recent work has actually focused on Hegel’s conception of freedom and the alternative understanding of practical philosophy that his conception makes possible.¹ Yet his influence on contemporary ethical theory remains largely negative. His thought is most often invoked to critique Kantian moral philosophy in order to move autonomy-based ethics in a more historical and social direction. One could also cite Hegel’s influence on the movement toward “anti-theory” by philosophers such as Bernard Williams, since Hegel is a leading critic of the abstract “ethical point of view” as the exclusive mode of moral assessment. Given the scope and ambitions of Hegel’s own project, however, this mainly critical character of his influence is surprising.

¹ Works focusing explicitly on freedom include Dudley (2002), Franco (1999), Lewis (2005), Neuhauser (2000), and Patten (1999). Several articles by Robert Pippin, following upon his groundbreaking *Hegel’s Idealism* (Pippin [1989]), have also been very influential in shaping the discussions about Hegel’s theory of freedom. *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (2008) brings together Pippin’s work on Hegel’s practical philosophy, and is sure to be central to ongoing debates. Any list of books in the English-language literature required for coming to terms with Hegel’s practical philosophy would also have to include Brooks (2007), Hardimon (1994), Peperzak (2001), Pinkard (1994), Quante (2004), Speight (2001), Williams (1997), and Wood (1990). The works of Avineri (1972) and Taylor (1975), which were pivotal in drawing increased attention to Hegel’s practical philosophy, are still good starting points, but their insights have been incorporated and eclipsed by more recent work.

In this preliminary section I evaluate the possible reasons behind the absence of a clear Hegelian program in ethics. There are two main categories of such reasons: those arising within Hegel's thought and those having to do with issues in the reception of his thought by philosophers working in ethics. I will first sketch and evaluate the three main reasons arising from within Hegel's thought. These reasons, given in order of increasing strength, are: (1) Hegel was more interested in methodological and meta-physical issues than in detailing an ethical theory with philosophical appeal outside of his system. (2) Hegel has no ethical theory as normally conceived, but rather only a social and political theory. (3) Hegel's most sustained treatments of issues in ethical theory occur in dialectically unstable locations that make clearer the positions to which he is opposed than the positions he actually supports.

1. It is certainly true that Hegel argued vehemently that systematic form is what grounds philosophy's claim to be a privileged kind of knowledge. The works published in his lifetime insistently foreground the methodological issues central to his systematic aspirations. One often gets the sense that his primary concern, even in the practical writings, is to render familiar issues into the unfamiliar terms of his speculative logic. Hegel's philosophical terminology and method seem quite foreign to the standard perspective of ethical theory, which assumes that the terms explaining moral deliberation and motivation must be accessible to moral agents themselves. Even if most ethical philosophers do employ technical terms, they usually draw on a host of examples to make their terms intuitive for the ordinary agent.

Two basic points should give us reason to resist thinking that Hegel's very conception of philosophy precludes an accessible account of ethical theory. First, Hegel places the "Idea of the Good" and moral action at the penultimate stage of his *Science of Logic*. Far from undervaluing the perspective of ethics, moral agency, and value, Hegel actually invokes ethical terms at the highest level of his speculative logic. One of Hegel's central goals in his conception of a system is to unify theoretical and practical reason by vindicating the possibility of *truth* in ethics. His discussion of the logical basis of such truth shows that he holds there to be a convergence of perspectives, such that the theoretical and practical, the religious and philosophical, all share the same conceptual basis. Of course identifying that goal does not allay the worry here, since few have reached the end of the *Science of Logic* and emerged to draw intuitively clear ethical conclusions. Even if ethics is explained via the concepts developed in the *Logic*,² these cannot be said to represent the self-understanding of an everyday ethical perspective.

Another well-known dimension of Hegel's view does address the need to explain ethics to the ethical agent herself. The stated aim of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* is to provide a "ladder to Science." This ladder shows the way to the standpoint of philosophy (of "Absolute Knowing") from the standpoint of ordinary consciousness. The *Phenomenology* also sets out the side of the "appearance" of Science itself, including the way that the world shows up, normatively speaking, for the ordinary knowing and

² References to Hegel's *Logic* are references to the doctrine as presented in the *Encyclopedia* and in the *Science of Logic*. When I am referring to a specific text I name that text explicitly.

acting subject.³ A major section of this ladder is an account of autonomous action, and hence the *Phenomenology* is a key resource for understanding Hegelian ethical theory. Although serious interpretive work is needed to translate the relevant passages of the *Phenomenology* into ordinary language, Hegel does offer there an account of a wide variety of ethical issues from the perspective of the agent.

2. It has often been claimed that Hegel has no ethical theory, and that he argues that ethical theory is impossible. The standard narrative of practical philosophy in this period is that Kant and Fichte made individual autonomy the focus of their ethics, and that Hegel, rejecting these conceptions as overly subjective and individualistic, invents a social conception of practical philosophy that displaces, if not eliminates, the possibility of a theory of an individual's duties. His social conception seems to locate the responsibility for achieving ethical value (the Good, freedom) solely at the level of the social whole, such that individuals need only occupy a well-defined place within that whole in order to be ethical. This picture of Hegel as merely subsuming individual rationality within the social organism has frequently been called into question by Hegel scholars over the past decades. Yet outside of the circle of Hegel specialists this image of Hegel persists, in large part because in contrast to theories that give clear procedures for moral deliberation (such as Kant's Categorical Imperative test), just what the Hegelian individual must do to count as ethical (besides simply participating in social institutions) is very hard to discern from his texts. There are many passages in which Hegel valorizes individual subjective freedom, yet he seems to provide little in the way of guidance for the ethical deliberation of individuals, and providing such guidance seems to be a minimal requirement of an ethical theory.

While Hegel does not offer a catalogue of duties or virtues, or a single metric for judging the consequences of actions, he does hold positive views that fall within standard conceptions of ethical theory. These include claims about moral motivation, about the nature of intentional action, and a definition of the Good, to name just a few. Allen Wood's remarkable *Hegel's Ethical Thought* has demonstrated that one can cull from Hegel's texts views on an extremely wide range of problems in ethics.⁴ One certainly cannot say that Hegel is rejecting the very idea of ethical theory in favor of a quietistic appeal to existing practice. His arguments are of course bound up with his social and political philosophy, but that hardly disqualifies them from counting as ethical theory.

³ The ultimate status of the *Phenomenology* within Hegel's system remains a matter of some dispute. For the claim I am making here, I take my bearings from the statement at the end of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel writes, "Just as Spirit in its definite existence [*daseiende Geist*] is not richer than Science, so too it is not poorer either in content. To know the pure concepts of science in this form of shapes of consciousness constitutes the side of their reality" (432, §805).

⁴ Wood's "Introduction" remains a good starting point for thinking of the prospect of Hegelian ethical theory. Though I disagree with him on the status of the *Logic* and on the basic characterization of Hegel's theory as "self-actualization," there is also much that I agree with in Wood's work. Building on his engagement with contemporary ethics, my aim has been to focus on practical reason rather than to give an exhaustive view of Hegel's practical philosophy.

3. Hegel's dialectical style of philosophy makes it much easier to say what positions he criticizes than to say what positions he endorses. The whole idea of a dialectical transition from one concept to another depends on the ability to illustrate the determinate breakdown or failure of a concept, and such an illustration will often seem to be a decisive refutation of that very position. In reading the texts that form the core of Hegel's ethical theory as defended in this study, the task of ascribing the positions presented in the texts to Hegel himself is especially challenging. My two main textual sources are the section of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled "Conscience. The Beautiful Soul. Evil and its Forgiveness" and the section of the *Philosophy of Right* entitled "The Good and Conscience." In both cases, Hegel gives a rousing critique of moral subjectivism that has seemed for many readers to render problematic all the positive claims in the relevant sections. Especially in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, it is quite contentious to claim (as I do) that much of what Hegel discusses under the title of conscience represents his own view.

There is no way, outside of examining the specific texts, to argue that Hegel does or does not endorse a view that appears within the dialectical development. It is true that his method and his holism mean that every part of the overall view must be assessed in light of the other parts. Repeated reminders about the multiple meanings of the Hegelian *Aufhebung* (cancel, preserve, elevate) will not eliminate all concerns about the status of practical reason or conscience within Hegel's overall view. Yet we can do more than just guess whether or not a position remains standing—has a definite standing—after its dialectical overcoming. For the concept of conscience we have two main texts that we can compare, several auxiliary texts (*Encyclopedia*, *Philosophy of History*, *Logic*), and several sets of lecture notes. By taking all this evidence together we can understand which views he positively holds and what roles the critiques of various views play in his overall account. In much of this study I draw on the relevant passages in a way that downplays the dialectical complexities of the surrounding material. Attending to the full methodological import of the passages would be too distracting from the systematic argument, and would in fact have led to a much longer, unwieldy book. The best answer to this challenge is to do close reading of the relevant texts, and to identify in particular the claims that can be ascribed to Hegel. We can then at least have clear arguments about what counts as Hegel's own view, rather than arguing in the abstract about how to characterize his theory.

I turn now to the reasons involving the reception of Hegel's philosophy that might account for the absence of a distinctive kind of Hegelian ethics. I present them once more in the order of increasing strength: (4) Hegel's ideas are too bound up with his discredited dialectical logic for them to be made workable based on contemporary philosophical assumptions. (5) Hegel's theory is just an amalgam of the standard models of ethical theory, and thus it adds nothing fundamentally new to the historical resources available to contemporary ethical theorizing. (6) No one has given a comprehensive account of Hegel's conception of practical reason that is accessible to a broader philosophical audience.

4. There is no doubt that Hegel's technical terminology, and the general obscurity of his *Logic*, is a major obstacle to understanding his practical philosophy. The task of