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# Religion in Hegel's Refutation of Moral Skepticism

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## Abstract

This paper explores the role Hegel accords to religion in his refutation of moral skepticism. Hegel's defense of morality is one in which the concept of  $\alpha\tau\alpha\rho\iota\sigma\tau\eta\tau\alpha$  (happiness) is ambivalent. The ambivalence is inherited from the roots of Hegel's moral thought in Aristotle and Kant. Although Hegel considers himself to be a Kantian, his rejection of the "empty formalism" of Kantian morality has generated a secondary literature of its own. Since the most prominent contemporary forms of moral constructivism cite Kant's ethics as a precedent, the question may be raised of whether Hegel's criticism of Kant applies to them, as well.

Thom Brooks has argued that a defense of Kant from Hegel's criticism would require an understanding of the role of religion in Kant's system. The role of religion in Hegel's moral thought is then contrasted with the Kantian strategy. Finally, it is concluded that Hegel's ethical thought may also be considered to be a form of moral constructivism. Keywords: Hegel, Morality, Religion.

## Hegel on Skepticism

Skepticism was a hotly debated issue during Hegel's times. The discussion was focused mostly on general skepticism, although particular attention was given to skepticism about religion and morals. Skepticism (*Skeptizismus*) (from *skepsis* ( $\sigma\kappa\epsilon\pi\sigma\iota\varsigma$ ), 'inquiry, investigation', not 'disbelief' or 'doubt') was contrasted with dogmatism (*Dogmatismus*). Kant's critical philosophy was often seen as a third alternative: *Kritizismus*. A skeptical attack on Kant's critical philosophy was made in an essay by Gottlob Ernst Schulze (1761–1833) that was published anonymously under the title *Aenesidemus*, after one of

the ancient Greek skeptics of the first century B.C. In the essay, Schulze defended the position that Kant's critical philosophy was unable to answer the doubts posed by Hume, and, thus, that the critical philosophy was a disguised form of dogmatism.

With regard to Kant's moral philosophy, in particular, it was charged that Kant failed to provide a successful justification for his claim that the realization of human freedom is to be found through the will to do one's duty because the motivation to act in accordance with duty might be the result of irrational fears and desires rather than from the exercise of practical reasoning. Hegel sought to undermine the skeptical attack of Schulze by arguing that the kind of skepticism advanced by Hume and Schulze did not go far enough—it is these skeptics who are too dogmatic! Hume and Schulze direct their skeptical attacks at philosophical positions, arguing from their disagreement, while they maintain a reliance on common sense, perception, and sensation as given certainties. Hegel proposes that the more consistent ancient skeptics extended doubt to all of these areas. The overcoming of doubt, Hegel proposes, is only to be found in placing the various philosophies in a dialectical progression in which corrections are made at successive levels of the dialectic for the inadequacies at more primitive levels.<sup>1</sup>

For Hegel, if we want to understand how to defend morality against skeptical challenges, we need to examine how moral skepticism became effective in overturning moral systems through the course of history, and how what succeeded the overturned systems was not the absence of any morality, but new forms of ethical life.<sup>2</sup> The fit between history and dialectic, however, is not a strict correspondence. Historically, for example, Plato and Aristotle are antecedent to Stoicism; but in Hegel's dialectic they are more advanced than Stoicism and Skepticism, which are treated together with the "unhappy consciousness" (*das unglückliche Bewußtsein*) as primitive forms of rationality.<sup>3</sup>

In this way, we find skepticism linked with the concept of happiness in Hegel's writings—not because of doubts raised by the skeptic about the concept of happiness; but because of the unhappiness of consciousness that is expressed in Stoicism and in Skepticism. Unhappiness becomes a more important source of motivation in the *Phänomenologie* than happiness, because successive attempts to overcome this unhappiness motivate the transitions to further stages in the dialectic. In his Lectures on the Philosophy of World History, Hegel puts the point in Aristotelian terms:

*...possibility points to something destined to become actual; the Aristotelian dynamis is also potentia, power and might. Thus the Imperfect, as involving its opposite, is a contradiction, which certainly exists, but which is continually annulled and solved; the instinctive movement — the inherent impulse in the life of the soul — to break through the rind of mere nature, sensuousness, and that which is alien to it, and to attain to the light of consciousness, i.e., to itself.*<sup>4</sup>

The discussion of skepticism in the *Phänomenologie* comes after the famous treatment of the master/slave relationship, a relationship that is undermined because it both requires and prevents each from giving the other recognition. Out of the inadequacy of this relation is born a rationalism by which the slave is able to retreat into an intellect immune from the oppressive conditions of external contingency.

This retreat, according to Hegel, prevented the Stoics from developing a substantial ethics and confined them to such platitudes as the claim that the good life is that which is in harmony with reason.

The optimism of the Stoic hope that happiness can be achieved through the life of reason is next seen as being dogmatic by skeptics who advance a more thorough rationalism that demands reasons for the Stoics' assumptions. The skeptical rationalism undermines itself as the principles of its own rationality are doubted. Hegel's discussion here sets up the Stoics and skeptics as precursors to the positions taken by the Kantians and Schulze, respectively. Later, we will examine Hegel's charge that Kantian ethics is an "empty formalism." For, now, we merely note the similarity with the charge that the Stoic ethics is reduced to platitudes.

The unhappy consciousness arises from the contradictions of the skeptical position, and manifests itself in various inadequate forms of Christian piety, all of which are marked by unstable divisions in the self. Later, Hegel calls these sorts of divisions in the self—alienation [*Entfremdung*], a state where one seems to be in contradiction with oneself, which is explained by Terry Pinkard as "a state of being committed and not committed at the same time. It is the experience of having the commitment imposed on oneself while not having undertaken it, but nonetheless it remains a commitment."<sup>5</sup>

## [§ 401: The Unhappy Consciousness](#)

Kant's rejection of the Aristotelian ethics of [§ 400: Aristotle's Ethics](#) is more complex than his occasional betrayals of misunderstanding when he describes happiness as a feeling. Kant was responsive to various modern currents of thought that had reached the conclusion that an ethics of [§ 400: Aristotle's Ethics](#) was no longer defensible. First, there was the objective/subjective division which placed any kind of happiness on the subjective side of the divide, along with the feelings among which Kant located it. Second, there was a general suspicion of teleological theories. In the natural sciences mechanical explanations were favored over teleological ones; and in ethics, too, the idea of happiness as a natural end of man became doubtful. Third, the ethical views of the ancient Greeks had come to appear to be egotistic; and Christianity seemed no improvement if all moral behavior was motivated by hopes and fears for the afterlife.

This may be seen as another outcome of the objective/subjective division. Morality seemed to employ instrumental rationality to attain personal ends, so that ethical behavior was motivated subjective desires. The developments of both utilitarian and Kantian ethics take different directions designed to avoid what was perceived as the egoism of the ancients. Utilitarians held that the best actions result in the greatest happiness for the greatest number, regardless of the personal outcome for the agent; and Kant offered his deontology with the claim that we should not aim at happiness, but at making ourselves worthy of happiness. In his conception of the supreme good, the *summumbonum*, however, the objective goodness of morality and the subjective goodness of personal happiness are combined.

Hegel called himself a Kantian, although he was one of Kant's most penetrating critics. Fundamental to Kant's critical philosophy is the dualism between things as given in experience, phenomena, and things as they are independent of how they are conceptualized, noumena. Hegel rejected this dualism, and its repercussions in the various fields of the sciences. Kant's ethics separated reason from sensibility, and duty from desire. In *The Spirit of Christianity* (1798), Hegel took up a suggestion by Schiller that love should be placed at the center of ethics instead of duty. Love could provide motivation and it could be in harmony with reason.

Most importantly, love is essentially relational; as such it could overcome the extreme individualism for which Kant's idea of moral autonomy was criticized. It is noteworthy that at this stage, Hegel's *Liebe*, like Aristotle's  $\psi\chi\eta$  is described as "activity of soul (the life principle) in accordance with virtue".<sup>6</sup> It was not long, however, before Hegel became dissatisfied with this idea because he became convinced that love could only be a motivating force in small groups, in families and circles of close friends. Love is a social relation that exists only at a very personal level of close relationships. Love could not serve as the motivation for the moral behavior among the members of societies and the citizens of nations.<sup>7</sup>

Hegel then turned to Aristotle's views about the soul as the key to a solution to the problems with Kantian psychology and ethics. Hegel writes that Kant "appears all the more meager and empty when compared with the profounder ideas of ancient philosophy on the conception of the soul or of thinking, as for example the genuinely speculative ideas of Aristotle" (WL2: 492, SL778).<sup>8</sup> Subsequently, Hegel repeatedly praised Aristotle's views about the soul, and he taught  $\psi\chi\eta$  (*De Anima*) repeatedly over the course of several years when he lectured on the history of philosophy, using his own translation of the Greek text. What attracts Hegel to Aristotle is, firstly, that Aristotle is concerned with the soul not so much as a substance but as activity, effectiveness, *Wirksamkeit*.

*In spirit or the soul, the essence is not apart from its manifestation because it is activity. Activity, let us recall, is the translation of energeia; Wirksamkeit of entelecheia. Hegel has in mind the definition of the soul as the first actuality or entelechy of a natural body potentially possessing life (De an. II 1, 412a 27–8).*<sup>9</sup>

Secondly, Hegel finds inspiration in the Aristotelian succession of vegetable, animal and rational souls.

*Hegel, who expresses himself in these terms ("daß der Mensch auch Tier und Pflanze ist," VGPh203), finds it "profound" on Aristotle's part not to look for the common definition ("das Gemeinshaftliche," ibid.). He adds that the meaning of the consecution of the three souls, or the shapes, is that the first is the "truly universal" (ibid.) in that the vegetative soul is potentially or ideally contained in the sensitive soul the way a predicate inheres in a subject (VGPh204). In this fashion, each form becomes matter for the superior form. Aristotle has rightly considered spirit as "a series of successive determinations" (VGPh199); his great insight is that the different souls are not to be conceived as independent but as ideal moments, as forms of a functional unity. In light of this principle, the inferior forms of a subject inhere in the activity as sublated moments, predicates of a unique subject. Only thus can the individual*

be considered a concrete universality. [10](#)

Hegel thought that this view of the levels of the soul as constitutive of a whole could overcome the problems of moral philosophy that arise when desires and reason are seen as separate opposing forces.

Thirdly, Hegel is inspired by Aristotle's emphasis on education. Recall how Korsgaard [11](#) discusses the various interpretations of how the passions can be controlled by reason. Desires and drives should be obedient to reason, in harmony with it, susceptible to argument, healthy and perceptive. All of these elements come together in the Aristotelian emphasis on education. Although Korsgaard defends the view that analogous points can be found in Kant's works, or are at least consistent with Kant's views, this was not the way that Kant was understood in Hegel's days. Hegel, like other critics of Kant, viewed him as pitting action determined by the categorical imperative and duty against natural drives and desires. While Korsgaard convincingly argues that Aristotle's conception of  $\alpha\epsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  is different from Kant's, so that they are talking about different things rather than actually disagreeing, Kant presented his ethics as a rejection of eudemonism. Hegel seeks to reconcile elements of the Aristotelian idea of  $\alpha\epsilon\tau\epsilon\rho\alpha\iota\sigma\tau\epsilon\sigma\iota\varsigma$  with a reformed view of moral autonomy. [12](#) Hegel agrees with Aristotle and Kant that practical reason requires that natural desires be tamed. The taming, Hegel insists, is not the work of the individual agent's faculty of reason alone; rather, it is a social effort, an activity that takes place in a community.

An examination of human nature reveals that man is not only a rational agent, one who deliberates, for man is a social as well as a rational animal. It is through socialization that agents learn to evaluate and offer practical reasons for their actions and the actions of others, as "forms of mutual recognition give that normativity a shape it cannot otherwise have in animal life." [13](#) The function argument [14](#) should show us that the human function of deliberation is one that takes place in a social context, and that within an agent's community one is able to exercise practical reasoning only to the extent that one enjoys freedom, where freedom is not a mere absence of coercion, but the interpersonal and personal conditions that allow one to act authentically in the nested spheres of agency in which human activity occurs.

Freedom, in Hegel's philosophy, is no mere lack of constraint. Hegel sees freedom as being brought to the forefront by Christianity. In Augustine, the core of the self is the will. It is the will that is good or bad and is rewarded or punished in the afterlife. The reification of the will is absent from Greek philosophy; and Kant's proclamation of a good will (*einguter Wille*) as the indispensable condition for

worthiness to be happy (*die unerlaßliche Bedingung selbst der Würdigkeit glücklich zu seyn*) is a testimony to this Augustinian legacy. [15](#) Hegel's concept of the self is one in which the desires, drives, morals, and social-ethical life are integrated; and freedom is the achievement not of the individual self, but of selves in community, as this integration is accomplished. [16](#) Hence, Hegel proposes a return to Aristotle that retains the Christian emphasis on freedom, but without taking the will to be a separate faculty of the soul:

*Spirit is thought in general, and the human being is distinguished from the animal by thought. But it must not be imagined [fichvorfellen] that a human being thinks on the one hand and wills on the other, and that he has thought in one pocket and volition in the other, for this would be an empty representation [Vorfellung]. The distinction between thought and will is simply that between theoretical and practical attitudes. But they are not two separate faculties; on the contrary the will is a particular way of thinking—thinking translating itself into existence [Dafein], thinking as the drive to give itself existence.* [17](#)

Hegel's actually free person is like Aristotle's person of virtue in having a comprehensive conception of the good. For Aristotle, it is summarized in the notion of happiness as the active life of virtue, which is like a target at which one aims. For Hegel, the target is one that is produced through the trajectory of the social evolution of freedom. Knowing how to actualize one's freedom is a form of practical knowledge that cannot be given any specific formulation and cannot be reduced to some set of rules. However, freedom does not mean that one should disregard religious and moral injunctions: "the ethical is an obedience in freedom, a free and rational will, an obedience of the subject toward the ethical." [18](#)

Pinkard compares Hegel with Aristotle and Kant as follows:

*Where Aristotle's conception of freedom (as the voluntary) goes awry, so Hegel thinks, is that it keeps its analysis of agency at the level of "substance" and therefore at the level of the purely causal explanation of behavior, rather than moving the explanation in the direction of explaining action in terms of "subjectivity." Kant, however, commits the opposite error: He thinks that explanation by "substance" (causal explanation) is so completely at odds with explanation by "subject" that he concludes that if one is to explain how a subject can freely bind herself to norms, one requires a nonstandard view of causality for such agents, that is,... his own transcendental idealism....* [19](#)

*However, to understand that the truth is to be comprehended "not merely as substance but also equally as subject" is not ... to reject ... the relation between subjectivity (or agency) and animal life (or "substance") as following from the very nature of agency itself. ... To actualize one's subjectivity is, to state Hegel's conclusion all at once, to act in terms of character.* [20](#)

The idea of acting from character is shared by Hegel with the Romantic idea of an ethics of authenticity;[21](#) but for Hegel, authenticity is not determined by arbitrary choice and the accidents of personality, but by the concentric social spheres of the agent and the norms appropriate to them, beginning with the subjectivity of the

agent and ending in the state. To actualize one's subjectivity, then, is to act in character only when one's character has been educated. The education of character is the work of the various social arrangements in which we participate, and religion plays an essential role in this process of education at all its various levels, including the political.

Although Hegel defends a secular state, that is, a state that is independent of the legal authority of the Church, there is another sense of "secular" in which Hegel's state is not secular, for it is founded on

religious values. Hegel noted:

*The content of religion is absolute truth, and it is therefore associated with a disposition of the most exalted kind. As intuition, feeling, and representational cognition [vorstellende Erkenntnis] whose concern is with God as the unlimited foundation and cause on which everything depends, it contains the requirement that everything else should be seen in relation [Beziehung] to this and should receive confirmation, justification, and the assurance of certainty from this source. It is within this relationship that the state, laws, and duties all receive their highest endorsement as far as the consciousness is concerned, and become supremely binding upon it...*[22](#)

Here, Hegel goes so far as to insist that the binding nature of all legislation, whether of state laws or moral duties, depends on the foundational relationship of religion to morality, the ethical life, and politics.

## Hegel's Charge of the Empty Formalism of Kant's Ethics

Kant's categorical imperative is formulated in the *Grundlegen* in various ways.[23](#) Hegel focuses exclusively on the Formula of Universal Law: Act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law, which provides a provisional statement of "the supreme principle of morality". Kantians object that Hegel misunderstands Kant, for Kant never meant this to provide a self-sufficient criterion for moral permissibility.

Hegel's criticism is that if we restrict ourselves to what can be known by merely logical considerations, we will never arrive at any substantive ethical principles. This is actually a very Kantian point. In theoretical reason, Kant had argued that pure reason does not provide knowledge of substantive metaphysical claims on the basis of which to prove the existence of God, human freedom, or the eternity of the soul. Logic cannot offer such proofs, according to Kant, because it is purely formal. Hegel argues that if logic is purely formal, then substantive conclusions cannot be derived on its basis alone regardless of whether we consider theoretical or practical reasoning. According to Hegel, the Kantian insistence on 'duty for duty's sake' is an uninformative platitude.[24](#)

Kant's defenders point out that there is more to Kant's moral theory than the principle of non-contradiction! And they accuse Hegel of giving an overly simplistic interpretation of Kant's position. Hegelians respond that however Kant's position is interpreted, it is clear that he leaves out considerations of the communities in which agents live; but there can be no understanding of one's duties except with reference to the ethical life in community.

In his commentary on Hegel's *Grundlinien*, Thom Brooks writes:

*...for Hegel, morality is in danger as an 'abstract universality . . . without content' (PR, §135). We overcome this worry by moving from the moral point of view and subjective standpoint towards 'ethical*

*actuality' within a more objective standpoint (see PR, §153). A more objective standpoint is to consider ourselves in our full reality as members of a community. In other words, we seek not only to understand how the free will wills the free will, but how the free will can will freedom for citizens both engaged in market-place activities and members of a family. Any view of morality is incomplete on this picture because morality cannot be satisfied with itself: it must move beyond itself to consider ourselves in our full reality. This full reality is called 'Sittlichkeit'[the ethical life].*

Brooks defends Kant against Hegel by suggesting that the completion and substantive content of morality for Kant is only supplied through religion:

*Kant's moral philosophy offers us more than a procedure by which we can determine acceptable principles, it also presents us with a picture of what is 'holy' (see CII, 5:86–7). This view of morality not only serves as the best standard of right and wrong, but it leads us to religion (see R, 6:6). This is because after we understand that reason justifies a certain picture of morality, we ultimately discover that this same picture is justified as well by God (see MM, 6:443).[25](#)*

Hegel holds that moral theories like Kant's fail because they do not consider the individual as part of a community. Brooks continues:

*Instead, we need a theory that can account for individuals as members of a larger community, a theory of ethical life. Only an ethical, not moral, theory is adequate for an ethical community. In the picture presented, Kant is arguing that his view of morality applies to an ethical community because its truth transcends the community and it is grounded in religion. Kant's views on morality might have a place in Hegel's theory of ethical life if Hegel left a space in this theory for universal principles which derived their content from religion.[26](#)*

Indeed, Hegel does appreciate the need for a religious basis for the ethical life of the community. As for the content of the moral law provided by religion, one need only turn to the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion to see how the content of religious injunctions becomes ever more rational in the course of its dialectical development. Brooks quotes Hegel's Encyclopedia:

*true religion sanctions obedience to the law and the legal arrangements of the state – an obedience which is itself the true freedom, because the state is a self-possessed, self-realizing reason – in short, moral life in the state. Thus, and thus only, can law and morality exist. (ES, §552 (emphasis added [by Brooks]))*

*The religious point of view shares much in common with ethical life. Both are rational developments of freedom that are mutually compatible: when I act in accordance with religious precepts, I satisfy the highest demands of ethical life. Thus, there is no opposition between religion and the state. Crucially, the religious point of view furnishes individuals with ethical principles (see PR, §§270, R). These principles are universal and we can comprehend them individually (see PR, §270A). Our understanding of these principles is not a 'matter for conscience': such would be the activity of the moral, not religious, point of*

*view (see PR, §270R). The primary difference between these views is that the moral point of view considers ourselves in abstraction and the religious point of view situates us within our more complete reality. However, not only does the religious point of view consider us within ethical life, but it does so through universal principles given to us from reason. Kant's self-understanding of his moral philosophy is very similar. Both offer us universal principles that claim to consider us in our full reality. Moreover, both also claim that they embody higher rational truths beyond the state derived from religion.* [27](#)

So, Brooks offers two complaints against Hegel's criticism of Kant. First, Brooks argues that the formality of Kant's moral theory is supplemented by his views on religious life. So, the Kantian moral philosophy can be seen as comparable with Hegel's Sittlichkeit when it is seen to include a place for religion.

Robert Wallace also admits that Hegel is unfair in his treatment of Kant, or, at least, that Kant is capable of giving more content to the categorical imperative than Hegel imagines. Wallace (following Allen Wood) holds that "Hegel's deeper charge against Kant's treatment of the Categorical Imperative is that Kant assumes, without sufficient argument, that it is not possible to be fully autonomous without caring about the freedom and autonomy of others as well as of oneself." [28](#)

With reference to Hegel's *Logik*, Wallace explains that what Hegel means by calling Kant's principle of duty "empty" is that it fails to contain the basis for the differentiation and development of its concept to yield the realization of an entire system. Wallace sides with Hegel and claims: "Kant fails to demonstrate that the only way to be fully autonomous is to care about the freedom and autonomy of others as well as of oneself; and thus Kant fails to demonstrate that the fundamental principle of his ethics in fact generates an ethics." The solution to the problem suggested by Brooks is to supplement Kant's ethical writings with his writings on religion.

Hegel is suspicious of religiously grounded appeals to moral conscience, because he considers intuitions generally to be unreliable unless integrated with evolving rational constraints. The discussion of the unreliability of the conscience serves to introduce the topic of evil, since people may cleverly twist their own reasoning in such a manner as to satisfy the base desires of the agent. Conscience may also be abused by leading one to refrain from taking any kind of action and adopting a condemnatory self-righteous attitude toward others while imagining that one is cultivating a "beautiful soul". Conscience is not generally condemned, however, for when properly developed it reflects the unity between the subjective judgment and the objective good found in ethical life. The problem with a reliance solely on conscience, however, is that it remains subjective.

Conscience strives toward the good, but evil may impose itself in place of the good as the object of this subjective interest. The evil will and the purely abstract good are incapable of achieving the reality which is the aim of Objective Spirit. The evil will fails to be fully free because it commits itself to a particular interest against the universal objective good. "The abstract good fails to achieve this reality because it fails to achieve concrete form in the external world." [29](#)

Hegel discusses asceticism, the Terror of the French Revolution, and Schlegel's stance of irony

(especially relevant to postmodernism) as ways in which the moral conscience can be perverted when it stewes over its own thoughts and feelings without engaging in the moral community through ethical life.

The role of religion in the ethical life is brought out in Hegel's *Phänomenologie* in the section on confession and forgiveness that comes before the transition to the topic of religion. Here, Hegel considers the inadequacies of the Romantic stance, the attitude of what he calls "the beautiful soul" (*die schöne Seele*).<sup>30</sup>

The moral conscience, Hegel claims, "knows the inner voice of his immediate knowledge to be the divine voice." But the beautiful soul that knows its moral conscience to be divine is unable to act without a particularization that sets it in opposition to the universality of duty and is understood as hypocrisy. The agent will then be led to confess the limitations of particularity to the others of his community, and they respond likewise. In this there is a mutual recognition of human limitations. From this mutual confession arises a reconciliation between the abstract and the concrete, the universal and the individual— "areciprocal recognition which is absolute spirit." (*ein gegenfeitiges Anerkennen, welches der absolute Geist ist.*)<sup>31</sup>

## Hegelian Constructivism

Constructivism is primarily an epistemological thesis. It claims that moral knowledge is acquired through the use of practical reasoning and through reflection on this use. There is also a metaphysical component to constructivism, which is that moral facts (if there are moral facts) are grounded in practical reasoning. (This could also take the form of a semantic component: moral truths are grounded in practical reasoning.) To say that moral truths are grounded in practical reasoning is to say that there are moral truths because of practical reasoning.<sup>32</sup> This does not mean that practical reason has to be seen as the sole factor from which moral truths emerge, but it is an essential one. Morality is an artifact of practical reasoning in the social and historical contexts in which practical reasoning is employed.

Different ideas about the nature of practical reasoning will generate different styles of constructivism. Intuitionist–realism, on the other hand, claims that moral knowledge is acquired through intuitions. Some intuitionists claim that we have a moral sense, while others claim that rational intuitions justify knowledge claims about universal moral judgments. Some, like Rawls, call for a balancing of particular and universal intuitions in a reflective equilibrium that is achieved in the framework of a constructivist theory. Often, however, intuitionists in the Moorean tradition claim that moral intuitions provide moral knowledge because they are grounded in moral facts (or are partially grounded in such facts). Some constructivists and realists will agree that moral facts and properties exist and that moral truths are objective; although some constructivists might deny these claims. For Aristotle, at least some moral truths are grounded in practical wisdom,  $\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha$ . Not only does the practically wise agent know what to do through the exercise of practical reasoning; it is the nature of practical reasoning that makes claims about  $\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha$  true.

This is because of the [§ 433](#) argument. It is the function of the agent to deliberate, Aristotle argues, and so one will be a good agent only if one deliberates well. Deliberating well and acting accordingly requires the ordering of the faculties and the pursuit of desires and ends in accordance with reason; this ordering and the exercise of deliberation and agency under these conditions constitutes the active life of virtue, that is, [§ 434](#). Likewise, for Kant, moral knowledge comes through practical reasoning, and moral truths are grounded in practical reasoning.

Practical reasoning requires the conclusions of deliberations to accord with the categorical imperative. The categorical imperative is not an a priori truth that is independent of but discovered by reason. The categorical imperative stipulates a condition for properly using our deliberative faculties. Kant's moral views have inspired many other philosophers, some of which have also developed moral theories that we may consider to be variants of Kantian constructivism, including the theories of Rawls and the communicative ethics of Karl-Otto Apel.

Hegel's metaethics is also a form of constructivism,[33](#) but it is a complicated one. Central to Hegel's view of practical reasoning is the notion of recognition. This places an emphasis on the social dimension of practical reasoning that is not as prominent in discussions of Aristotle and Kant, although both of these philosophers were also sensitive to the relation of ethics and society.

Recognition is a key element in Hegel's moral epistemology because it is through the various forms that recognition takes that the multiple dimensions of normative relations are established. Hegel's theory of recognition is based upon a developmental "anthropology," under which heading Hegel discusses the nature of the soul and its faculties, which leads to an elaboration of the successive levels of consciousness, as elaborated in the *Phänomenologie*. Here we also find that recognition develops through education (*Bildung*) as inadequate forms of consciousness are successively overcome. When the ethical becomes the general mode of behavior, it appears as a custom, and the habit in the agent is referred to as a second nature. This second nature is spirit. Spirit emerges through ethical life because it is in ethical life that the subjective and the objective merge as a shift is made from the "I" of morality to the "we" of ethical life.

The spirit emerges in degrees: first, in the family whose mode of recognition is love and friendship; second, in the civil society, whose mode of recognition is institutional recognition; third, in the state, whose mode of recognition is national.[34](#) *Geist* is introduced as a universal "We" that results from recognition. According to Robert Williams: "This inclusive teleology of the We constitutes the transition from subjective spirit to objective spirit and is constitutive not only of abstract right but also of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) itself."[35](#) Through recognition freedom becomes actual and takes on its ethical significance. Moral knowledge is acquired by the formative education in which one learns the sorts of recognition that are constitutive of morality and ethical life.

Hegel may be considered to have a constructivist metaethics because (1) he holds that moral knowledge is acquired through the use of and reflection on practical reasoning, including recognition and trained

moral conscience; and (2) moral truths are grounded in practical reasoning. Moral judgments are not true independent of the normative features of social life in which human actions are evaluated and deliberations are conducted. These evaluations and deliberations constitute practical reasoning. Recognition is to be included in practical reasoning because these evaluations and deliberations cannot be successfully carried out without it. For Hegel, practical reasoning is not significantly guided by practical syllogisms or by categorical imperatives, but by balancing purposes, commitments and desires that arise from the various kinds of recognition on which one's identity is based, including the demands of subjective and objective spirit.

*[Laws] are not merely something external for us, as are sensible objects, so that we can leave them behind or pass them by; rather, in their externality, they also ought to have, for us subjectively, an essential, subjectively binding power.* [36](#)

Since the most important judgments of moral knowledge are those that are grounded in the social norms of ethical life, Hegel's treatment of moral epistemology may be considered a form of moral relativism; but it is not a form of relativism that prohibits any moral evaluation that is not limited in its authority to a given society, for Hegel holds that the various normative arrangements that structure societies can be compared and evaluated from a world historical perspective with respect to the increasing realization of freedom (even if this perspective in practice will always fall short of the absolute, and can only be a projection). Hence, there is a sense in which the games of the gladiators were a permissible form of entertainment for the Romans, although they were not permissible in the subsequent Christian society; while in another sense the entire Roman ethical life may be judged to be morally inferior to a monotheistic one.

We can understand Hegel's constructivism as distinct from those of Aristotle and Kant because of the distinct conception Hegel has of practical reasoning. Dean Moyar calls it a performative view of practical reason.

*The view is performative because it is guided by the conception of the determinate action actually carried out by an individual. For ethical content to be valid (in Hegel's terms, to be actual), it must be such that individuals can act on it according to the dynamics of practical reason ... of setting a purpose (the major premise), implementing the purpose through the specific deed (the particular means), and identifying oneself with the accomplished action as instantiating the intended purpose.* [37](#)

According to Moyar, a proper assessment of Hegel's view of practical reasoning will be one that features both the role of moral conscience and recognition; however, the moral conscience must be one that is trained by virtue, so that moral intuitions cannot play the sort of foundational role that they have in Moorean moral epistemology.

*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 the objective institutional purposes and on individuals being indirectly recognized through their actions within those contexts.* [38](#)

So, in Hegel's philosophy we can find a kind of moral constructivism elements of which may be taken to complement or enhance those found in Aristotle and Kant.

## The Positivity of Religion

Brooks suggests that Kant's answer to the charge of empty formalism is to be found in his appeal to religion. It is not difficult to gather textual evidence that will lead us to the conclusion that Hegel would remain unmoved. Indeed, Hegel compares the reliance on religion independent of the exigencies of social institutions to the reliance on an abstract good devoid of positive content:

*Those who refuse to go beyond the form of religion when confronted by the state behave like those who, in the cognitive realm, claim to be right even if they invariably stop at the essence instead of proceeding beyond this abstraction to existence [Dasein], or like those who ... will only the abstract good and leave it to the arbitrary will to determine what is good.* [39](#)

Hegel continues that in view of the contingency of the needs of the state in different circumstances, an insistence on the priority of religion can be taken in two forms, both of which are disastrous. First, if religion is taken to be a private affair entirely divorced from politics, it could be abused to condone personal lawlessness with the excuse: "Be pious, and you may otherwise do as you please." Second, if religion is given social expression, it could lead to a fanaticism that repudiates all institutional forms, such as constitutions and the mechanisms of a republic, as unduly restrictive limitations on inner religious convictions.

Instead of these incorrect forms of religiosity, Hegel proposes another in which religion and reason are joined. He describes his proposed alternative as: "The truth, however... is the momentous transition of the inner to the outer, that incorporation [*Einbildung*] of reason into reality which the whole of world history has worked to achieve. Through this work, educated humanity has actualized and become conscious of rational existence [Dasein], political institutions, and laws."[40](#) Hegel goes on to argue that genuine religion will acknowledge and endorse the state, and require individuals who are dedicated to the service of the community. The state, in return, will give the religious community "every assistance and protection," although it will not impose any doctrine by force unless required to do so by the exigencies of the interests of the state. Hegel insists that the rejection of fanaticism is not to be equated with a liberalism that considers religion to be purely private:

*But the doctrine of the Church is in turn not just an internal matter for the conscience; as doctrine, it is in fact an expression, indeed the expression of a content which is intimately connected, or even directly concerned, with ethical principles and with the laws of the state.* [41](#)

The task of philosophy is to show the coherence of religion and politics:

*It is philosophical insight which recognizes that Church and state are not opposed to each other as far as their content is concerned, which is truth and rationality, but merely differ in form.* [42](#)

Philosophy and religion, each in its own way, are to instill in the minds of the citizens that they are bound to have “respect for the state as that whole of which they are branches.” [43](#)

These concerns are also enunciated in Hegel’s Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion.

In sum, while Brooks contends that Kant can give content to the abstract norms of practical reasoning by appealing to religion, Hegel objects that religion is not fit to play this role on its own. The positivity needed for normative content is to be found in the exigencies of the collective drive toward ever more rational social arrangements and institutions, including the family, civil society, and the state, through which freedom is made actual. But this drive of rationality is insufficient to provide the binding nature of normative obligation unless it is coupled with religion in the mutually supportive relationship of sentiment and reason in whose development Hegel sees the answer to moral skepticism.

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- [1.](#) These ideas are first broached in articles that Hegel published together with Schelling in the *Kristishes Journal der Philosophie* in 1802. See (Giovanni 1985) for discussion and translation of the articles. Hegel's response to skepticism is elaborated in his *Phaenomenologie des Geistes*. For a more detailed discussion of Hegel's views of skepticism throughout his career, see (Forster 1989).
- [2.](#) See (Forster 1989), 56–57; 72–73.
- [3.](#) (Stern, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Hegel and the Phenomenology of Spirit* 2002), 85–89.
- [4.](#) (Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* 2001), 73.
- [5.](#) (Pinkard 2012), 147.
- [6.](#) See (Harris 1972), 338.
- [7.](#) (Beiser 2005), 40–41.
- [8.](#) (Ferrarin 2004), 245.
- [9.](#) (Ferrarin 2004), 248.
- [10.](#) (Ferrarin 2004), 249–250.
- [11.](#) (Korsgaard 2008), Ch. 5.
- [12.](#) An indispensable resource for the details of Hegel's development of the notion of autonomy is (Yeomans 2015).
- [13.](#) (Pinkard 2012), 192.
- [14.](#) See: (Korsgaard 2008), Ch. 4.
- [15.](#) (Kant 2011), IV 393; (Ferrarin 2004), 339–340.
- [16.](#) See Wood's n. 7 in (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* 1991), 429–430, for a discussion of how Hegel sees the relation between knowingly sinning and objective wrongness with reference to the debates between Jesuits and Jansenists about effective grace.
- [17.](#) (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* 1991), 35.
- [18.](#) (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, the Lectures of 1827* 1988), 484.
- [19.](#) (Pinkard 2012), 96.
- [20.](#) (Pinkard 2012), 97.
- [21.](#) See the extended discussion in (Stern, *Understanding Moral Obligation: Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard* 2012), 103–147.
- [22.](#) (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* 1991), §270N; also see (Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, the Lectures of 1827* 1988), 194. In this regard Thomas Lewis writes: "Hegel accepts the claim that religion constitutes the foundation of the state, but the key to grasping his views on the relation between religion and the state lies in properly interpreting this statement. Despite his concern to ground the state in appeals to reason, Hegel provides religion with a more expansive role in social and political life than does much modern Western reflection on religion and politics. He attributes to religion and religious institutions a major role in shaping... our deepest convictions on topics broadly relevant to the political order." (Lewis 2011), 233.
- [23.](#) See (Paton 1947), 129; and more recent discussion in (Wood 1999).
- [24.](#) (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* 1991), §135R, A.
- [25.](#) (Brooks 2007), 59. Brooks' abbreviations of Kant's works are: CII = *The Critique of Practical Reason*; R = *Religion within the Bounds of Reason Alone*; MM = *The Metaphysics of Morals*.
- [26.](#) (Brooks 2007), 59.
- [27.](#) (Brooks 2007), 60.
- [28.](#) (Wallace 2005), 231.
- [29.](#) (Wallace 2005), 302.
- [30.](#) (Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* 2013), §§632–671.

- [31.](#) (Hegel, The Phenomenology of Spirit 2013), §670. For critical discussion, see (Jaeschke 1990), 188ff.
- [32.](#) For more on grounding, see (Correia and Schneider 2012).
- [33.](#) For insightful discussion on some interpretations of Hegel's constructivism, see (Laitinen 2013).
- [34.](#) A major failing of Hegel's philosophy is that he envisions no higher form of the development of recognition and spirit, although his discussions of absolute spirit seem to require this.
- [35.](#) (Williams 1997), 6.
- [36.](#) (Hegel, Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion: One-Volume Edition, the Lectures of 1827 1988), 394–395.
- [37.](#) (Moyar 2011), 38.
- [38.](#) (Moyar 2011), 143.
- [39.](#) (Hegel, Elements of the Philosophy of Right 1991), §270N.
- [40.](#) Ibid
- [41.](#) Ibid
- [42.](#) Ibid
- [43.](#) Ibid

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