Hegel, Norms and Ontology[[1]](#footnote-1)

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**Abstract**:

This paper lays out two recent accounts of Hegel’s practical philosophy and presents them with a challenge. Stern and Alznauer both offer readings of Hegel, where he attempts to ground our ethical practices in ontological norms. I argue that we cannot ground our ethical practices in this way. However, I also contend that Stern and Alznauer’s conception of reality as both conceptual and normative is still be able to play a useful role in practical philosophy, namely, helping to defuse a general sceptical worry about ethics.

**Keywords**: Hegel; Ethics; Ontology; Constitutivism.

There are two emerging strands in work on Hegel’s practical philosophy. One strand, exemplified by Brandom (2009) and Pippin (2008) emphasises Hegel’s continuity with Kant, and in particular the Kantian thought that normativity is not to be found in the world, but is something that we bring to the world.[[2]](#footnote-2) The other strand, exemplified by Thompson (2008) and Stern (2015, 2016, 2017) emphasises Hegel’s continuity with Aristotle, and in particular the thought that the world itself possesses a conceptual – and normative – structure.[[3]](#footnote-3)

There is a lot to be said for each of these strands of thought, both as readings of Hegel and as philosophical positions in their own right. In this paper though, I want to focus on the second strand. I am interested in recent developments in the accounts of Hegel that emphasise his affinity with Aristotle. Both Alznauer (2016) and Stern (2015, 2016, 2017) have recently put forward forms of Hegel’s practical philosophy, where, in different ways, they both attempt to ground our ethical practices in ontology. I want to challenge this, and will argue that we cannot ground our ethical practices in this way.

The structure of the paper is relatively straightforward. I will begin (§1) by discussing Alznauer’s (2016) and Stern’s (2015, 2016, 2017) accounts of Hegel’s practical philosophy. After having laid out their positions, I then (§2) argue that appeals to ontological norms cannot ground our ethical practices. In the final section, I outline an important role that I think these norms can play (§3).

# Norms and Ontology

Robert Stern draws our attention to Hegel’s discussion of the Concept [*Begriff*] in Book III of the *Logic*.[[4]](#footnote-4) Hegel’s analysis of the Concept culminates in the concrete universal. The key result, for our purposes, is that Stern (2009: 156) claims that the concrete universal “supports normative statements (‘because this person is irrational, he is a poor example of a human being’)”. So conceived, concepts are normative. To be something – a bee, a wolf, a person – comes with various norms, which one can fail to meet; one can be a poor example of a bee, a wolf or a person. Here we see an affinity with Aristotle.[[5]](#footnote-5) According to Stern’s reading of Hegel, the world has a conceptual and normative structure.[[6]](#footnote-6)

It is important however, to note that Stern does not think that the world only contains natural norms. For instance, persons are different kinds of beings than bees; persons are rational, self-conscious and free in ways that bees are not. Given this, the norms that are constitutive of persons will be different in kind from the norms that are constitutive of bees.

Mark Alznauer (2016) draws a distinction between two types of normativity in Hegel to account for this. He distinguishes between *natural* and *spiritual* normativity, where *spirit*, for our purposes, can be understood as self-conscious human activity. Alznauer though goes on to argue that both forms of normativity should be understood *constitutively*. His account of natural norms is similar to the neo-Aristotelian,[[7]](#footnote-7) but he sees Hegel’s distinctive post-Kantian move as the claim that, with *spirit* – or self-conscious human activity – the norms are those that are constitutive of thinking and willing.[[8]](#footnote-8)

The thought then is that we can ground our ethical practices in these norms. As Alznauer notes:

[…] for Hegel normative evaluation is primarily a matter of a thing’s answerability to its own constitutive norms […] This is to concede a crucial point to the Aristotelian camp: namely that normativity is rooted in ontology. (Alznauer 2016: 197)

So conceived, we are a particular type of being – thinking, willing and self-conscious. Moreover, there are norms that are constitutive of both thinking and willing, and our ethical practices are grounded in these norms.

Before continuing, it is worth making explicit what distinguishes Hegelian constitutivism from Kantian constitutivism. One key difference is that Kantian constitutivists sometimes argue that the formula of universal law is constitutive of rational agency, where Hegel famously worries that this formula is empty and emphasises the importance of *ethical life* in its place (I will return to say a little more about this in the next section). But this is not the only difference between Kantian and Hegelian constitutivism. Another important difference is that, at least for Alznauer’s (2016: 197) constitutivism, “normativity is rooted in ontology”, and moreover a realist ontology. Both Stern and Alznauer conceive of the world itself as having a conceptual – and normative – structure, unlike the Kantian, for whom, very roughly, the (empirical) world is structured by us.[[9]](#footnote-9) They both also look to ground our ethical practices in these norms.

There are however, some differences between Stern and Alznauer’s accounts. For one, Alznauer calls his position *constitutivism*, where Stern calls his position (post-Kantian) *perfectionism*.[[10]](#footnote-10) However, I think that despite this difference in terminology, their two accounts share something fundamental. As we have seen, Alzanauer (2016: 197) thinks that “normative evaluation is primarily a matter of a thing’s answerability to its own constitutive norms” and that this “concede[s] a crucial point to the Aristotelian camp: namely that normativity is rooted in ontology.” Stern agrees:[[11]](#footnote-11)

[…] evaluative claims are based on comparisons between objects as they actually are and the kinds or types of objects they belong to, where the latter brings with it normative implications. (Stern 2016: 197-8)

Both Alznauer and Stern think that evaluative claims are rooted in ontology. They both also think that we are distinctively self-conscious beings, and that this comes with distinctive norms – the ethical.

The difference between their two accounts seems to be in part a matter of terminology, but also a matter of emphasis. Alznauer (2016: 197), for instance, thinks that the distinction between *natural* and *spiritual* norms distances Hegel from Aristotle, whereas Stern (2016: 203-4; 2017: 100-1) emphasises the compatibility of Aristotle and Hegel on this point, noting that Aristotle too goes beyond a certain type of naturalism in thinking that what makes human beings distinctive is their rationality.[[12]](#footnote-12)

In what follows, I will not focus upon this difference. Instead, I want to pose a challenge that I think applies to both of their accounts.

# The Challenge

Stern and Alznauer look to ground our ethical practices in the norms that are constitutive of being human, rational or spiritual. I now want to push back against this, before in the final section of the paper turning to an important role that I think such norms *can* play.

Allow me to begin with a simple example. Let us grant that certain norms are constitutive of being an agent.[[13]](#footnote-13) Let us further assume that being honest is one such norm.[[14]](#footnote-14) There are then roughly two constitutivist positions here.[[15]](#footnote-15) The first is that, if one is to be an agent, one has to be honest; if one fails to be honest, one fails to be an agent. The second is that, if one wants to be a non-defective agent, one has to be honest; if one fails to be honest, one is a defective agent.

For either account though, one can ask a question about normativity. The constitutivist tells us that if we want to be agents (or non-defective agents), we should be honest. But we can ask: is it *good* to be such agents in the first place? One could reply that it is, but this raises another question, namely, is it *ethically* good to be such agents? And if the answer to this is “yes”, then it looks like the constitutivist is no longer grounding our ethical practices in ontological norms, but instead supplying ethical norms all the way down.

We can bring this out through considering a well-known objection to constitutivism.[[16]](#footnote-16) Imagine that we fail to be honest, and so fail to flourish as agents, but instead flourish as agents\* – agents in every respect, apart from their lack of honesty. The crucial issue concerns the normative difference between these two: honest agents and dishonest agents\*. One thought is that it is *ethically* better to be an agent rather than an agent\*, but this moves us away from an ontological foundation for our ethical practices, instead providing us with an ethical reason to be an agent (rather than an agent\*).

One possible response to this might be to claim that, as a matter of fact, we are agents and not agents\*. And in being dishonest, we are defective as agents. But this seems to leave unaddressed the crucial question of whether we have *reasons* to be agents in the first place. It is not enough to show that we are agents, as we can quite easily be defective agents, but great agents\*. What matters is to show that we have reasons to be agents rather than agents\* in the first place.

Another response is to claim that such an agent\* is not possible. One could object: what would it mean to be an otherwise flourishing agent and yet generally dishonest? And the objection here draws upon the thought that ethically positive properties are not entirely conceptually distinct. Honesty for instance, might be importantly connected to integrity, sincerity and even being a good friend: and what would it mean to flourish without all of that? I am sympathetic to this general line of thought, but do not think it overcomes the problem at hand. To see this, we can tweak my original example. Imagine now that the difference is between: someone who is almost always honest; and someone who is generally honest, but fails to be when being dishonest is to their advantage (and they know they can get away with it). This doesn’t seem like a far-fetched character, nor does it seem far-fetched to imagine that, otherwise their life is going well. Now, the constitutivist can once more claim that they are failing to be an agent, but our opportunistic dishonest character turns out to be an excellent agent\*\*. And then the original problem returns: what *reason* do they have to be an agent rather than an agent\*\*?

At one point, Alzanauer remarks that:

Hegelian constitutivism […] rises or falls with the ontological possibility of something that admits of this third type of self-contradiction: a contradiction between an existing individual entity and its own universal concept. (2016: 202)

I am happy to allow for this ontological possibility. As we have seen, my worry is slightly different. I worry that Hegelian constitutivism might succumb to problems that face other versions of constitutivism. (Having said that, in the final section of this paper, I will return to say something that counts in favour of Stern and Alznauer’s Hegelian accounts.)

Moreover, I think we can find a variant of this worry in Hegel’s own empty-formalism charge. The empty-formalism charge is usually understood as a challenge to Kant’s attempt to generate substantial moral claims from a merely formal principle. In the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel famously argues that the formula of universal law lacks content.[[17]](#footnote-17) This has generated a long-standing debate between Kantians and Hegelians on whether the formula of universal law can rule out any actions, or whether it remains, as Hegel worried, entirely empty.[[18]](#footnote-18) I want to leave this debate aside here, to focus on another aspect of the empty-formalism charge.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel remarks that:[[19]](#footnote-19)

It would be strange, too, if tautology, the maxim of contradiction, which is admitted to be only a formal criterion for the cognition of theoretical truth, i.e. something which is quite indifferent to truth and falsehood, were supposed to be more than this for the cognition of practical truth. (PS: §430, 259)

Here we can find another challenge to Kant. The challenge is that, while a formal principle might not be entirely empty, that is, while it might be able to generate some normativity, it is not clear how it could generate *ethical* normativity.[[20]](#footnote-20)

As Stern (2015: 143) himself has suggested, part of the empty formalism objection is a general challenge to the Kantian who takes the principle of universalizability (along with the principle of non-contradiction) to generate *ethical* normativity. One major problem is that there seem to be both serious and trivial violations of this principle. For instance, the following two maxims seem to fail the universalizability test: 1) I will go to the cafe when no one else is there, to enjoy my coffee in peace; 2) I will murder everyone in the cafe to enjoy my coffee in peace. The first maxim appears to involve an ethically trivial violation of the principle of universalisability, where the second does not. The problem is that if you think *all* ethical normativity comes from this principle, then it is hard to account for this difference.

I think that both Stern and Alznauer end up a little too close to Kant on these issues. Consider the following passage from Alznauer:[[21]](#footnote-21)

[…] when an agent acts in a way that prevents the realization of her own end, her activity can prove to be contradictory […] That is, it can contradict a norm implied by the agent’s own conception of willing: say, that one should apply the necessary means to one’s ends. In cases like these, a particular act of the will can be said to be defective *qua* act of the will and so be defective in the specifically evaluative sense (even if we are not yet talking about moral wrongness). (Alznauer 2016: 206)

This is an important passage. Alznauer notes that certain actions might be defective *qua* acts of the will, and I am happy to grant him this. The crucial issue comes at the end of the paragraph, when Alznauer remarks “even if we are not yet talking about moral wrongness”. The worry is that, if we try to ground evaluative norms in constitutive defects of the will, we will be unable to account for specifically ethical (or moral[[22]](#footnote-22)) right and wrong doing. This relates to part of the formalism worry about Kant. If we think that all wrongness boils down to self-contradictions, then we are unable to account for the difference between what appear to be trivial and serious cases of self-contradiction.

Consider a simple example: I want a clear head to read some Hegel, but drink too much coffee and end up thwarting my own willing (and thinking). Here, I am in contradiction with myself, but this is of little ethical significance. Now imagine a more serious case: Assume I am an exploitative jerk, and also assume that – in some way – such behaviour is in contradiction with my willing (and thinking). Even if we grant that the constitutive norms of willing (and thinking) can rule out such behaviour, it is not clear how the constitutivist can normatively distinguish between this and the coffee case without introducing other norms. Both involve a self-contradiction with the norms constitutive of willing (and thinking). But we want to say that one of these is ethically trivial, while the other is not. If we think that all (spiritual) evaluative norms come from the standards that are constitutive of willing (and thinking), then it is hard to normatively distinguish ethically trivial and serious violations of such norms.

I have just claimed that Alznauer is unable to distinguish between ethically trivial and ethically serious cases of self-contradiction without introducing other norms. At this point, one might ask:[[23]](#footnote-23) then why cannot Alznauer introduce such norms? And here, I think he faces something of a dilemma. The norms he introduces will either be: more non-ethical norms; or ethical norms. If he introduces more non-ethical norms, the challenge remains as to whether these norms can help distinguish between ethically trivial and ethically serious cases of self-contradiction. On the other hand, if he introduces substantial ethical norms, that will overcome this challenge, but will do so at the expense of the ambition to ground ethical norms in the non-ethical norms constitutive of agency. I am pushing Alznauer towards this second option. But of course, he could resist this, and look to provide additional non-ethical norms that help overcome the challenge at hand. And whether or not this works will depend upon the specific norms in question. I will shortly go on to consider one such possible addition.

Before turning to this however, it is worth saying something about the connection between the general critique of constitutivism and this specific variant of the empty-formalism objection.[[24]](#footnote-24) I think they are separate objections, but they both involve a worry about attempts to generate ethical normativity from non-ethical norms.[[25]](#footnote-25) The type of constitutivism I have in mind attempts to ground ethical norms in the norms constitutive of agency (or some such thing). According to these accounts, if we fail to comply with these norms, we will fail to be agents (or be defective agents) because we will be in (self-)contradiction with the norms constitutive of agency. The criticism I have been pushing is that it is not clear why this failure is of *ethical* significance unless we have *ethical* reasons to be agents in the first place. How then does this relate to the empty-formalism objection? As noted earlier, the empty-formalism objection is typically thought of as a challenge to whether a merely formal principle could generate any normative content at all. But there is also an additional element to it, which concerns whether a merely formal principle could generate any *ethical* normativity. And in claiming that wrongness boils down to a certain kind of self-contradiction, I think that Alznauer invites this worry.

I now want to consider several possible responses to the objections I have raised in this section. The first response appeals to ‘ethical life’ in order to claim that, for Hegel, there are different types of self-contradiction. The second and third responses involve detailed treatment of Alznauer’s and Stern’s positions, drawing upon Alznauer’s *developmental* account of the will and Stern’s discussion of foundationalism, to push back against my objections.

The first response runs as follows: Despite the similarities between my two examples of self-contradictions, there is an important difference between them. Only the second case (being an exploitative jerk) involves what Hegel calls ‘ethical life’. The first case (drinking too much coffee) concerns my own personal activities, and my failing to be rational here does not affect others, whereas the second case does.

What can I say in response to this? Firstly, while this is definitely a difference between the two cases, it is not clear that it helps either Stern or Alznauer. They seem to want to claim that ethical norms are grounded in the norms constitutive of being an agent, and the appeal to a sphere of ethical life might introduce other norms that take us beyond this; so conceived, ethical norms are not just about self-contradiction, but *affecting* others. But they could resist this, and claim that certain *social* norms are constitutive of what it is to be a person.[[26]](#footnote-26)

However even if Stern and Alznauer could incorporate this appeal to sociality or ethical life, the initial examples can be altered to accommodate this. Imagine that I am to give a paper at a Hegel conference and that I, once again, drink too much coffee, and end up delivering a spectacularly rambling, confusing, and boring paper to a large audience. Also assume that, once more, this conflicts with my willing and thinking. Here then we have another case of self-contradiction with the norms constitutive of willing and thinking, and a case which *does* affect others (who were bored and confused by my talk), but there still remains an important ethical difference between this case and the case where I am an exploitative jerk.

One could respond here that being an exploitative jerk – unlike just giving a bad paper – is ethically wrong, not because it *affects* others, but because it *interferes* with others in some problematic way. Maybe that is right, but it seems to move us away from Stern and Alznauer’s position, where rightness and wrongness is supposed to be grounded in the norms constitutive of willing or thinking.

In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel himself remarks that:

It is not [...] because I find something is not self-contradictory that it is right; on the contrary, it is right because it is what is right (PS: §437, 262).

I think this is right. And I want to relate it back to the example in this section: Being an exploitative jerk is not wrong because it is self-contradictory (with the concept of us as agents); on the contrary, it is wrong because it is what is wrong.

I should note that the above remark occurs roughly half-way through the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel is yet pass through the various guises of *Geist*, not to mention *Religion*; and given this, there is a genuine question about whether we are encountering Hegel’s voice here, and not just that of another form of consciousness. The worry is that perhaps this voice is instead the voice of *immediate spirit*, who naively takes its norms to immediately exist. The thought then might be that, as we process through the various guises of *Geist*, we end up with a different picture of the self-contradiction involved in immoral action, whereby the contradiction involves more than just the norms involved in willing or thinking, but also other substantive norms. As noted above, I think that this is a more promising option, but one that takes us beyond Stern’s and Alznauer’s accounts.

The second response can be found in Alznauer’s (2015) book, *Hegel’s Theory of Responsibility*.[[27]](#footnote-27) Alznauer (2015:28) argues that Hegel is offering a *developmental* account of the will, where he “aims to show how the will *becomes* free or rational”.[[28]](#footnote-28) On Alznauer’s account, there is a crucial development from the natural and arbitrary will to the rational will. He lays this out as follows:

What ultimately distinguishes the rational will from the other two shapes is precisely the recognition of the objective reasons, reasons that are not contingent on the agent’s motivational tendencies of her choices, but which are tied to the conditions of the agent’s freedom. It is the recognition of these sorts of reasons that transforms someone into a free being: moving her from the space of merely pragmatic or instrumental reasons to the space of moral reasons broadly speaking. (Alznauer 2015: 58-9)

This leads to a key difference between Kantian constitutivism and Hegel’s position.[[29]](#footnote-29) The Kantian constitutivst wants to establish that *all* rational agents are subject to the moral law,[[30]](#footnote-30) whereas on Alznauer’s account, Hegel instead wants to establish that *once* we have come to recognise ourselves as subject to certain norms, we are rational to continue this.[[31]](#footnote-31)

Alznauer sets out this crucial contrast in the following way. On the one hand:

If I fail to achieve a contingent end, I can certainly admit that I failed to achieve what I set out to do, but if I no longer will the end, there is a sense in which I am freeing myself of blame. (Alznauer 2015: 59)

On the other hand:

[…] when a person with a rational will acts in a way that does not conform to what she takes herself to have reason to do, she cannot simply relinquish or change her end because this end is not the produce of choice but the product of insight. It follows that she must accept responsibility for her failure to achieve that end. (Alznauer 2015: 59).

I think that this is a helpful distinction. However, I am not sure that it helps Alznauer to avoid the objection I am pressing.

Alznauer’s distinction allows us to differentiate between contingent ends that we are free to give up, and ends that we are committed to, because we recognise that we have objective reasons for these ends. But this does not seem to track the distinction I am pushing, namely the difference between actions that I can be blamed for in some minimal sense, and actions that are *ethically* wrong. And we can see this through returning to my previous examples. Imagine that I have a developed will, and objective reasons to give a good paper at a Hegel conference, but I fail to do so. Now, perhaps I could give up this end, but perhaps not. I might not just *choose* to give this paper, or merely *want* to, but instead really have objective reasons to give a good paper on Hegel, (and recognise these reasons).[[32]](#footnote-32) While one could then hold me responsible for my failure to achieve this end, one would not think I had committed an *ethical* failure. There still seems to be a difference between failing to achieve ends that I have objective reasons to, and *ethical* failings.[[33]](#footnote-33)

The third response concerns my claim that Stern is a perfectionist, who looks to ground ethical norms in ontology. There are some additional complexities to this claim that a close reading of Stern brings to light.[[34]](#footnote-34) And the thought is that these complexities allow Stern to circumvent my objections.

For while Stern does look to ground ethics in ontology, [[35]](#footnote-35) there are other types of foundationalism that he is keen to avoid. Indeed, at one point, Stern (2017: 96-7) suggests that he rejects “the idea that perfectionism and flourishing could ground ethics from the perspective of the individual who is outside ethics”. This however is primarily an *epistemic* and *motivational* point. The epistemic point draws upon McDowell and Aristotle, where ethical reasons are only available to someone who has been brought up the right way. The motivational point is a little more complicated. Stern wants to walk an interesting middle path here. He looks to ground ethics in ontology, but does not want to provide non-ethical *motivations* for acting ethically.[[36]](#footnote-36)

In attempting to walk this middle path, Stern looks to distinguish between something like *motivating* reasons, and *grounding* reasons. The appeal to an external conception of flourishing is then not supposed to motivate our actions, but rather to provide some justification or grounding for them. In a passage that Stern (2017: 96n7) cites, Rosaline Hursthouse (1999: 194) makes a similar point:

The naturalistic conclusions are *not* intended to produce motivating reasons. They are not supposed to be providing motivating reasons for the mafioso drug baron […] And they are not supposed to be providing motivating reasons for those within the ethical outlook either. Secure within the outlook according to which the life I want to lead *is*the life in accordance with honesty, temperance, courage, charity, justice, etc., I am not in need of motivating reasons, and when I explore the claims of ethical naturalism, such motivating reasons are not what I am looking for. I’m looking to see whether my beliefs about which character traits are the virtues can survive my reflective scrutiny and be given some rational justification.

Both Stern and I agree with the thought that we should be motivated by the relevant parts of our ethical practices (and not our flourishing as human beings or perfection as agents).

However, Hursthouse (1999: 194) also appeals to our flourishing in order to:

[…] see whether my beliefs about which character traits are the virtues can survive my reflective scrutiny and be given some rational justification.

Stern (2017: 101) makes a similar claim, arguing that:

[…] naturalism can serve […[[37]](#footnote-37)] [the role of] reassuring us that ethical life is along the right lines, by appeal to a conception of what it is to be a good or bad human being, qua exemplar of that kind.

I want to resist this thought. Our ethical beliefs can survive reflective scrutiny and be given rational justification, without having to invoke anything external to our ethical practices.

Here is McDowell (2009b: 39) on this point:

I have suggested that someone who possesses the *that* isnot devoid of the *because;* full-blown possession of the *because,* the intellectual virtue of practical wisdom, is no more than possession of the *that* ina reflectively adjusted form.

This is cryptic, but McDowell’s claim seems to be that the motivating reasons *are* the justifying reasons. Elsewhere, he discusses this through the example of courage:

[T]he point of a particular courageous action lies not in the fact that human beings in general need courage, focused, as it were, on the circumstances at hand, but in the fact that this action counts as worth-while in its own right, by the lights of a conceptual scheme that is second nature to a courageous person. (McDowell 1998: 192)

His thought seems to be that the reasons that properly motivate us to act courageously just are the reasons that justify such action.[[38]](#footnote-38)

In these passages, McDowell is recommending against the kind of foundationalism that Hursthouse and Stern seek, namely a non-ethical reassurance or grounding for our ethical practices. At one point, McDowell makes this anti-foundationalism more explicit:

We find it difficult to not want a foundation, but that is because of a location in the history of thought that separates us from Aristotle. To understand his naturalism correctly, we need to achieve a willed immunity to some of the influence of our intellectual inheritance of which Aristotle was simply innocent. That way, we can stop supposing the rationality of virtue needs a foundation outside the formed evaluative outlook of a virtuous person. (McDowell 1998: 174)

Now one might worry that we cannot return to Aristotle in the way that McDowell is suggesting. Perhaps we face sceptical challenges to ethics that Aristotle was unaware of. And in suggesting that we return to Aristotle, we are dogmatically ignoring these challenges. But this will depend upon what exactly the specific sceptical challenges are. In the next section of the paper, I will argue that a neo-Aristotelian conception of nature or Hegelian conception of the world can help us defuse one such threat.

Before we turn to that though, I want to say one last thing about McDowell’s position. I take it that McDowell’s worry is that any *external* foundation for our ethical practices would involve some sort of *given*. If we make sense of the value of the virtues in terms of what human being in general need, then this raises a question about the value of what human beings in general need. Is what we need valuable? If so, we remain within our ethical practices, and so no longer have an *external* foundation for ethics. And if what human beings need is not valuable, then we seem to have a mythical given on our hands – an appeal to something external to our practices that is supposed to justify them.

# A Role for Hegel’s Ontology

Where does this leave Stern and Alznauer’s accounts of Hegel’s practical philosophy? Perhaps the criticism I have offered in the previous section counts against them both as positions in their own right, but also – insofar as these positions succumb to Hegel’s own empty-formalism charge – as readings of Hegel. I think this would be too hasty. And in what follows, I want to leave aside the exegetical issue of how best to read Hegel’s practical philosophy to continue to focus on the plausibility of Stern and Alznauer’s positions in their own right.

Returning to this, do my criticisms in the previous section mean that I think we ought to entirely abandon Stern and Alznauer’s accounts? No. Even if my worries about grounding ethics in ontology are well-founded – and I suspect both Stern and Alznauer will have much to say in response – I still think there is an important role that their conception of the world can play.

To bring this out, I turn once more to the work of John McDowell.

In a paper on Pippin and Hegel, McDowell makes the following remarks:

Hegel would join Kant also in rejecting a pre-critically rationalistic intuitionism: a position that conceives the space of reasons as a peculiar tract of reality, constituted independently of anything human, into whose layout we are capable of insight by virtue of a more or less mysterious faculty that we naturally, or perhaps supernaturally, have. (McDowell 2009a: 170)

Hegel aims to liberate us from the felt need to have philosophy fill what, when we feel the need, presents itself as an alarming void: the supposed need that expresses itself in an empiricist foundationalism, or in a rationalistic postulation of insight into the independently constituted intelligible structure of reality (McDowell 2009a: 184)

Now this could just be McDowell’s familiar *epistemic* point that he takes from Aristotle, namely that we need to be brought upon into certain practices in order to see value.[[39]](#footnote-39) However, in these passages, there also seems to be a further claim that there could be no normativity independently of us. Alongside his realism, there is also an anti-realist tendency in McDowell, where he (at least sometimes) suggests that there could be no normativity that is independent of the standpoint of rational agents.

Alznauer and Stern’s accounts of Hegel take us away from this. So conceived, Hegel, like Aristotle, provides a conception of the world that contains concepts *and normativity* independently of us, and this counts against McDowell’s (occasional) anti-realism. The world contains concepts *and norms*, and thus there is an independently constituted intelligible structure of reality.

Of course, all of this depends on accepting a certain type of neo-Aristotelian or Hegelian world picture, which one might want to reject in the first place.[[40]](#footnote-40) I think that there are some important things that can be said in favour of it, but will not make that case here.[[41]](#footnote-41) Instead, here I hope to have shown some of the work that such a world picture can – and cannot – do.

On the neo-Aristotelian and Hegelian pictures, the world contains norms independently of us. Concerning the natural norms, there is a sense in which it is good for wolves to hunt in packs and for bees to waggle-dance, and this has nothing to do with us.[[42]](#footnote-42) Alznauer and Stern argue that Hegel introduces another distinctive set of norms, namely those associated with being an agent. I have argued that attempting to ground our ethical practices in these norms is problematic.

However, these norms can still do some important work.[[43]](#footnote-43) They can help disarm a sceptical threat, namely the worry that nature might be *entirely* *alien* to normativity. Recall for instance, Mackie’s famous remark:

 If there were objective values, then they would be entities or qualities or relations of a very strange sort, utterly different from anything else in the universe. (Mackie 1977: 38)

Here, my suggestion is that, if the world contains norms, this can help defuse part of Mackie’s worry. Ethical norms would still be *sui generis*, but they would no longer be so “utterly different from anything else in the universe”.

So conceived, these norms play a role analogous to McDowell’s invocation of second nature.[[44]](#footnote-44) Here is McDowell on second nature:

I am using the notion of proper upbringing only to defuse the threat of metaphysical peculiarity, not as a foundational element in some sort of ethical theory […] (1998: 101)

I think the neo-Aristotelian and Hegelian world views can play a similar role. We can use them to defuse the threat of the metaphysical peculiarity of the normative, but not as a foundational element in ethical thinking.

# Conclusion

In this paper, I have laid out a recent account of Hegel’s practical philosophy and have presented it with a challenge. I have argued against Stern and Alznauer’s attempts to ground our ethical practices in ontological norms, but have claimed that their conception of reality as both conceptual and normative might still be able to play a useful role, namely, helping to defuse a sceptical threat to ethics.

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2. Of course, not everyone reads Kant in this anti-realist way. However, Brandom and Pippin do, and they also read Hegel in this light. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. A similar split can be seen in work on Hegel’s *theoretical* philosophy, with Kreines (2015) and Stern (1990, 2009) emphasising the affinity with Aristotle, and Pippin (1989) again emphasising Hegel’s continuity with Kant. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. For a short statement of Stern’s views, see Stern (2016: 198-200). [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. See Foot (2001: 34-35) for a classic statement of Aristotle on this. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. It is worth noting that in Stern’s account of the concrete universal (and his account of Hegel more broadly), he emphasises the importance of the relationship between universality and particularity; see Stern (2009: 153-8). This also applies to his account of Hegel’s practical philosophy; here, Stern (2016: 204) appeals to Hegel’s discussion of the will in the *Philosophy of Right* (§§5-7), where the determination of our will is to be neither too particular nor too universal. This is an important feature of Stern’s work, but I leave it aside for the purposes of this paper, as I think it makes no difference to my objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an extended account of the differences between Aristotle’s and Hegel’s conceptions of natural norms, see Rand (2015); in addition, see Alznauer (2016: 202-205) for some remarks on Rand (2015). [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. As noted above, Stern (2016: 204; 2017: 102-104) draws upon Hegel’s discussion in the *Philosophy of Right* (§§5-7) to suggest something similar, namely that the norms that are important for us are those that are constitutive of a human will. See also Rand (2015: 80-82). [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. While Kantians typically view the empirical world as (in some sense) structured by us, they disagree as to whether or not value is something that we bring to the world; Amongst others, Guyer (2005: 152) and Stern (2012: 28-9) argue in favour of reading Kant as a moral realist, whereas Bojanowski (2012) and Korsgaard (2008: 319-26) make the case that he is not. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. See Stern (2015: 190-201) for his account of what is distinctive about *post-Kantian* perfectionism. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. See also Stern (2017: 92): “Perfectionism […] involves a picture of the proper development of our capacities as the kinds of creatures we are, and it builds normativity out of that”; cf. Stern (2017: 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. For another recent account of some of the ways in which Hegel moves beyond Aristotle’s conception of biological flourishing, see Rand (2015) and Gleeson and Ikäheimo (forthcoming: §2, (iii)). [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. For the remainder of this paper, I will frame the discussion around the concept of *agents*. I suspect that the challenge could also apply to the concept of a self-conscious being, finite rational being, a human will or finite free will, or perhaps even persons. However, here, I focus on agents for simplicity’s sake. [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. Honesty merely serves as a place-holder here. [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. We can find a similar distinction in Hegel; see Alznauer (2015: 33-4; 54-5). [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. See Enoch (2006; 2011) for the classic statements of this objection. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. See Hegel (PR: §135, pp.162-163; PS §§ 430-1, pp.257-259). [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. See, for instance Stern (2015: 140-3) on the Hegelian side, and Allison (2011: 139-40) and Engstrom (2009: 184-239) on the Kantian side. [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. I should note that this passage occurs in the Reason section of the *Phenomenology*. I will say something more about this shortly. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. Scanlon (1998: 151) makes a similar point. As a small matter of clarification, I do not mean to claim that Hegel thinks that a formal principle can generate theoretical normativity *in general,* but merely that it can generate some theoretical normativity, namely the *formal* kind. In addition, I am not trying to run together the distinction between the practical and the theoretical, but instead just want to point out that Hegel worries that a certain kind of practical normativity – the *ethical* – cannot be generated from anything merely formal. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. Cf. Stern (2016: 204). [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. Up until now, I have treated the terms ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ as roughly synonymous. I will shortly say something about Hegel’s distinctive conception of ethical life. [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for prompting me to think about this question. [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. I would like to thank an anonymous referee for inviting me to clarify this. [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. Or, as it is sometimes put, they attempt to pull a rabbit from a hat [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. We find something like this position in Ikäheimo (2011: 175), who argues that “*interpersonal recognition is* […] the *core of Hegel’s normative essentialism about the human life form*”. However, it is not clear that Ikäheimo’s account of – what he calls – normative essentialism in Hegel shares Alznauer’s and Stern’s ambition to ground ethics in ontology. For instance, Ikäheimo (2011: 156) remarks that: “it is possible for a thing to instantiate the features or structures essential to it in different degrees, and that the more it does the better, *in some relevant sense of goodness*” [emphasis mine], rather than explicitly claiming that this goodness is ethical. See also (Ikäheimo (2011: 186), where he claims that “the goodness of recognition and the badness of its absence is *both functional and ethical* in nature”. [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for suggesting this response to me. [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. See Alznauer (2015: 56): “[…] he is not offering a mere analysis of the conditions of willing, but a developmental account, one that shows why the will must advance from an instrumental self-conception (such as we find in the natural and arbitrary will) to a more Kantian self-conception (the rational will) if it is to realize its full potential for rationality”. [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. For an account of the ways in which Alznauer’s Hegel differs from Korsgaard’s specific form of Kantian constitutivism, see Alznauer (2015: 42n9). [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. I should note that some Kantians think that this is a virtue of their account, as opposed to Humean forms of constructivism, where morality only applies to us if we possess certain sentiments and sympathies;see, for example, Bojanowski (2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. In a response to Westphal (2016), Alznauer (2017) makes this especially clear. He writes that Hegel has: “a fundamentally different conception of the task of moral philosophy than the foundationalist one Westphal takes for granted. Hegel is not mounting an argument that shows us why any individual in any historical or geographic community must accept and obey the norms of justice as necessary for the solution to the social coordination problem […] Instead he is showing us something more peculiarly Hegelian: why those of us who already accept and obey the norms of right in the modern state are fulfilling our destiny as free beings.” (Alznauer 2017: 54). It is worth noting that Alznauer thus rejects a *certain* form of foundationalism, while nevertheless maintain another form of foundationalism, where as we have seen, he claims that “normativity is rooted in ontology” (Alznauer 2016: 197). [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Alznauer (2015: 39) notes that “Hegel’s claim is that when I have genuinely willed something, I experience my ends not only as having been determined by me but also as *mine*”, and it seems possible that I might genuinely will giving a good paper on Hegel in this way. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. Of course, one could claim that the only things that one has objective reasons to do (and that one can recognise) are precisely *ethical* things, but I worry that this might be both ad hoc and implausible. Intuitively, the domain of objective reasons seems larger than the domain of ethical reasons. [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. I am grateful to an anonymous referee for inviting me to discuss these complexities. [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. See, for instance, Stern (2016: 197-8; 2017: 92; 101). [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. He worries that this would be to commit the mistake Prichard warned us about. This is a common theme in Stern’s writings on ethics; see Stern (2015: 74-89) for an attempt to read Korsgaard and Kant in a way that does not fail Prichard’s challenge, and Stern (2015: 157-170) for an attempt to read Bradley, Green and Hegel in this way as well. [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. In this deletion, Stern attributes this thought to McDowell. However, I think this is not quite right. As I will go on to argue, I think Stern and McDowell differ on this point. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. For a Hegelian challenge to this identification, see Moyar (2011: 61-73). [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. In his earlier criticisms of ethical realism, he seemed to be objecting to the intuitionist *epistemology* of realism; cf. McDowell (1998: 157-62). [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. See, for instance, Lenman (2006). [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. This would move us to a debate about Hegel’s theoretical philosophy; see Kreines (2015) and Stern (1990) for two compelling attempts to argue in favour of such a conception of the world. [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. In some places, McDowell (1998: 193) seems to agree with this. [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. See McDowell (1998: 190-1) and Stern (2017: 94-6) for discussion of other work that these norms might be able to do. [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. The flipside of this is that this move is susceptible to the same criticisms that McDowell’s is, namely that it does not provide a full account or explanation of how freedom or ethical norms come about from nature in the first place. Of course, McDowell (1996: 178) himself does not think this is a problem: “If we take ourselves to be addressing [… the question “what constitutes the structure of the space of reasons?”], my invocation of second nature, sketchy and unsystematic as it is, will seem at best a promissory note towards a proper response. But that would miss my point. I think the response we should aim at being entitled to, if someone raises a question like [that….] is something like a shrug of the shoulders […] Their sheer traditional status cannot by itself oblige us to take such questions seriously. Rather, there is an assumed background that is supposed to make them urgent. When I invoke second nature, that is meant to dislodge the background that makes such questions look pressing, the dualism of reason and nature. It is not meant to be a move – which could be at best a first move – in constructing a response to that question.” Here, I suggest that natural and spiritual norms might be able to play a similar role in defusing Mackie’s worry that ethical norms would be entirely unlike anything else in the universe. [↑](#footnote-ref-44)