

# *‘Acting On’ Instead of ‘Stepping Back’: Hegel’s Conception of the Relation between Motivations and the Free Will*

CHRISTOPHER YEOMANS

*Purdue University*

One of the most important elements of Hegel’s philosophical anthropology is his moral psychology. In particular, his understanding of the relation between motivations and reason plays a crucial intermediate role in connecting his anthropological meditations on the complete nature of the human being with his political theory of actualized freedom. Whereas recent important work on Hegel’s moral psychology has detected a Kantian distinction between natural desires and the rational perspective, the activity of practical reason actually takes place within motivations themselves on Hegel’s view. The exercise of the free, rational will is best understood in terms of its role in shaping the experience of malleable, indeterminate motivations. Rather than *stepping back*, the free agent on Hegel’s account delves further into the motivation, *acting on* it in the dual sense of being guided by and transforming it. This is what it means for Hegel to conceive of agency as self-expression while maintaining the centrality of reason for Free Will. Hegel says that when we go further into the motivations in this way, we should stop speaking of motivation in terms of *drives* and instead begin speaking of *character* (EG§482R).<sup>1</sup>

On the Kantian interpretation of Hegel’s moral psychology, reason is constitutive of the free will because it provides a privileged perspective from which to evaluate our natural desires. Robert Pippin provides the standard language of the view: “I am not simply a complex of contingent desires seeking satisfaction. I can stand above them and evaluate them, pick and choose which ones are worth satisfying.”<sup>2</sup> Here, the authority of reason and the way it constitutes self-determination is understood in part as an independence of reason from desires, expressed through the metaphor of the distance of the rational perspective from the desires. In this metaphor, the greater value of the rational perspective is expressed through its ability to survey from on high the lands within its domain, and to decide which of those lands are to be cultivated

by the activity of the self.

Though this view is certainly correct in grasping the internal connection between reason and freedom on Hegel's view, its articulation of this connection through the divergence between reason and motivations is unacceptable for related textual and philosophical reasons. Philosophically, this picture requires an account of the rational perspective that makes it both substantive (so as to avoid Hegel's emptiness objection against Kant) and yet self-justifying. Commentator's attempts along these lines are unpersuasive,<sup>3</sup> and the power of similar objections even to more deflationary hierarchical accounts in the contemporary philosophy of action does not suggest that this is a promising avenue for rational reconstruction.<sup>4</sup> More fundamentally, it is far from clear that this picture is a plausible account of the experience of agency. Our practical reasoning is generally first-order, and such abstract rational principles are perhaps better suited to the role of rational reconstruction of the justification for the outcomes of such reasoning rather than to the role of anchoring a phenomenological description of the process itself.<sup>5</sup> Further, as post-Kantian philosophers such as Jacobi clearly saw, this split between natural desires and pure reason makes action anonymous, as it is grounded either in the causal nexus of nature or in an abstract pure reason that is no individual subject.

Textually, this picture of agency is in fact rejected by Hegel in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, and re-introduces a Kantian dualism between personal desires and impersonal reason that Hegel condemns as an internal slavery.<sup>6</sup> In the Introduction, the Kantian conception is identified with the finite or natural will. In this picture, the basic tension in the concept of free will between our independence from specific motivations and our identification with specific motivations is understood by dividing the abstraction of the former from the specificity of the latter. The abstraction then takes the form of a formally infinite choosing capacity or rational will that is confronted with the specific content as embodied in particular, given desires (PR§14). But on Hegel's view, this is a particular interpretation or *conception* of the basic *concept* of free will, and not one that he accepts. As Hegel describes the *concept*, free will is doing two very different things at once: "dissolving" or "disintegrating" the limiting character of the content of our specific motivations (PR§5), and identifying with or positing some specific motivation as a vehicle for self-expression in action (PR§§6-7). The former makes us independent of our motivations; the latter makes us the specific agents that we are. In the conception of the natural will that provides the textual foothold for the Kantian interpretation, this fundamental tension is further interpreted in terms of the related divisions (a) characteristic of consciousness between *subjectivity* and *objectivity* (PR§8) and (b) between the universal *form* of the will as a choosing faculty and its particular *content* as a given impression or experience (PR§13, §24R).<sup>7</sup> With respect to the first

opposition, Hegel argues that the question of the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in agency is much more complicated than the Kantian picture allows (PR§§25-6). With respect to the second opposition, Hegel's most interesting suggestion is the idea that the natural form of the desires – i.e., the form that specifically distinguishes them from the more universal rational perspective – is in fact *produced by reflection*, and that the truly free will is the one that no longer projects immediacy and particularity onto the 'natural' drives but rather understands them in their richer universality (PR§21R).<sup>8</sup> Now one might take this production of nature by thought in a systematic direction, and connect it with the distinction between nature and spirit.<sup>9</sup> Independent of the virtues of this approach, I think that Hegel is making a more specific point about the phenomenology of agency here: desires do not necessarily appear to us as given, but rather take on that form when we consider ourselves abstractly as constituted by a simple choosing mechanism.<sup>10</sup> When the will's self-image is abstract, it can only understand its content in an external and alienated way.

This is an insightful diagnosis of the pathology of Kantian moral psychology, since it seems to explain why Kant's libertarianism is tied to his heavy-handed distinction between reason and desires. The interpretation that I recommend here can be usefully contrasted with the Kantian along these lines. The Kantian commentators on Hegel want to jettison the libertarianism while retaining the reason/desire distinction (though as modified as compared to Kant), and the 'stepping back' metaphor helps to translate apparent claims about indeterminism into claims about the role of reason in autonomy. In contrast, I suggest that Hegel takes the alternate route of jettisoning the reason/desire distinction while retaining (in a modified form) Kant's libertarianism.

As Hegel's response to the conception of the natural will shows, the fundamental sin to be avoided in discussions of free will is to see only a *negative* relation between reason and desires as a result of thinking that the elements of moral psychology have to be *fixed* and *external* to each other. Hegel's view, in contrast, must have the form of a *positive* relation between reason and desires in which the elements are *malleable* and *internal* to each other. This is an application of Hegel's logic of reflection to the specific sphere of moral psychology, but the resulting picture is hard to make out. One clue comes from Hegel's remarkable suggestion that the immediate phenomenal presentation of our motivations is general and indeterminate, both with respect to the objects that will satisfy them and the means chosen to obtain satisfaction (PR§12). So while we might think that the indeterminacy was something that produced by reflection through blocking our desires so as to create space for deliberation, Hegel suggests just the opposite: in the normal case, the immediate presentation of our motivations is indeterminate, and the job of rational willing is to resolve that indeterminacy. When we interpret this claim through the lens of

Hegel's attempt to find a form of practical rationality that is fluid and internal to motivation rather than fixed and external, the result is a picture in which the experience of our motivations is the experience of something malleable, and the free will is our ability to form our motivations in and through our experience of their force.

The most natural way of understanding this resolution of indeterminacy is similar to the Kantian interpretation. Instead of choosing among desires that have their own definite objects and means, we choose from among the objects and means that are available for the satisfaction of whatever desire we rate as most important. In the Kantian interpretation, the plurality is one of desires, whereas on this view the plurality is one of objects and means with respect to each desire. But there are important implications of this subtle shift for the cognitive relation of the agent to her desires. First, this understanding of the location of the relevant plurality within the desire means that the initial appearance of indeterminacy is at least implicitly grasped as a manifestation of the articulated structure of possibility that the motivation contains as its deeper rational form. To say that a specific desire can be satisfied by different actions is to see that desire itself as an experience that can take on many possible forms in the active life of the agent, where each form is in part characterized by the object, means, and sense of relative significance through which the agent chooses to particularize that desire in action. This is a first level of meta-awareness that must be implicit in the agent on Hegel's account. Like in the Kantian picture, the Hegelian agent is aware of herself as exercising choice in a field of possibilities, but in Hegel's case this field is identified as constituting the motivation itself.

This shift leads to a second form of agential self-awareness: in action the free agent moves down one pathway of particularization with the awareness that within the same motivation (or for the same reason) other pathways were available and even perhaps appropriate. Part of the significance of the very action chosen is its internal connection to actions that were not chosen. The other actions or objects not chosen do not just represent opportunity costs for the agent who has to choose one thing rather than another; rather they represent other ways of doing what the agent did. Both their similarities and differences may provide significance to the agent's actual action. Consider a food example: if a chef serves me seared pork belly and poached egg for a dinner appetizer, the reference is to breakfast when pork belly smoked would be bacon.<sup>11</sup> The experience of eating the appetizer is made worthy of a three-star restaurant bill by the way in which attention is drawn, within the experience of the satisfaction of hunger, to other ways in which hunger can be satisfied. It is not merely an intellectual but also a sensuous reference.

This contrastive element in the agent's self-relation to motivation introdu-

ces an additional and important axis for characterizing agency, which concerns how the agent understands the relation between the action chosen and those that were not. On the Kantian view, the relation must be one of opportunity cost. To choose to satisfy one motivation is to block another, and in fact Kant's analysis of the feeling of respect for the moral law seems to depend on this form of the relation.<sup>12</sup> It is certainly possible for a Hegelian agent to take the same position, though the structure of their attitude will be slightly different. Rather than feeling that one desire is left out because of another, the feeling will be that some versions of the experience exclude other versions (either intrinsically, or because of scarce resources). But a further form of the relation is available to the Hegelian agent that is unavailable to the Kantian agent, which is to think of the action chosen as the completion or fulfillment of the relevant motivation rather than just its satisfaction. The Hegelian agent is open to seeing her action not simply as an application of a general desire to an object chosen for external reasons, but rather as focusing all of the significance of that desire into a form of the experience that makes reference to other possible forms and thereby includes their meaning and enjoyment within the particular form of experience that has been chosen in the given action.

For example, it makes quite a difference to the experience of love whether the lover is acting on a general motivation inclining her to love people of a certain type of which her beloved is merely a token or instance, or whether that motivation is experienced much more narrowly as a motivation to love her beloved as a specific individual. On Hegel's view, the more complete form of the relationship is the 'concrete universal,' which is the relationship in which the motivation to love that specific individual is simultaneously imbued with all of the different levels of significance made possible by the abstractive capacity, including artistic representations, religious characterizations and other love relationships (whether possible or actual). This kind of love is true freedom because it is the ability, *within the motivated relationship*, to move up and down the levels of significance and see all of the different resonances that are made possible only by the fact that both lovers possess this ability to move within the conceptual space of their own intentional experience and actions. The fact that the lovers could act on the motivation at a higher level of abstraction with someone else as the beloved is intrinsic to the significance of their continuing to act on that motivation with their beloved, and makes it possible to think of that relationship as the complete fulfillment of a certain kind of love.<sup>13</sup> This captures Hegel at his best — seeing how apparently abstract conceptual differences have profound existential consequences — and it helps us to understand one of Hegel's most quizzical sayings about free will, that it "lies neither in indeterminacy nor determinacy, but is both at once," which he contrasts with the stubborn person who insists on a very specific form of motivation instead

of being flexible about how he desires (PR§7Z). Here we start to make some phenomenological sense of Hegel's insistence on finding an internal and malleable relationship between the rational agent and her desires.<sup>14</sup>

In a broader sense than is usually acknowledged, this is what it means to 'act on' a motivation: we act on it not only by doing something in the external world that responds to the goal constitutive of the motivation, but also by reflecting on it. *To reflect on a motive is a way of 'acting on' that motive in the dual sense of being behavior motivated by that motive and of shaping that motive.*<sup>15</sup> Thoughtful action is this kind of reflection, which is precisely what is implied in the idea that actions *express* motivations, since motivations are both presupposed and articulated in this process, which comes from Hegel's notion of reflection as a unity of positing (*Setzen*) and presupposing (*Voraussetzen*).

This alternative interpretation of indeterminism helps us to see how Hegel can hold that the will involves an abstractive ability without falling into the trap of reifying that ability as a separate faculty that ranges over choices that have a fundamentally different provenance, and thus how Hegel avoids the problems with hierarchical accounts such as Kant's. Motivation always has an abstractive component built into it in virtue of its generality, and all abstraction is motivated in the sense of being internal to a conative attitude. The will need not be separate from its motivations, because it is just a way of being motivated. Hegel tries to get at this difference in his preference for the term '*sich entschliessen*' as a way of describing the executive, deciding function of the will rather than '*etwas beschliessen*', since the former indicates not only that the will itself is transformed but that it is the germinal source ('*der Urkeim*') of all of the content of the will (PR§12R). The deeper point Hegel is making here is that the flexibility of thought and therefore rationality is present in all of our motivations and desires – there is no need to undertake the pursuit of a separate foundational goal proper to the rational perspective as such, as Charles Taylor and Allen Patten suggest.

In this way, Hegel tries to capture the internal relation between reason and free will that motivates the Kantian approach. Exercising the flexibility of thought is a way of taking the immediate presentation of the universality of the motivations as indeterminate – which is a relatively thin form of universality – and seeing it as the phenomenal appearance of the deeper conceptual universality that is precisely the forking-path articulation of the different distinctions, possibilities and connections with other motivations that are inherent in the kind of motivation that it is (what Hegel calls "immanent universality") (PR§13R). This explains Hegel's otherwise puzzling close identification of universality and indeterminacy (PR§§5-7), and connects indeterminacy with the sense of significance whose appreciation requires thought. The motivations themselves are not overcome, either as an issue of justification or as an issue

of moral psychology; rather they are transfigured by their thoughtful expression in action. This is connected to the idea in PR§112 that the subjectivity is maintained in the objective realization – only the immediacy of subjectivity is overcome. The rational will therefore discovers itself within the desires, and the effective desires within itself.

This connection between the immediate universality of indeterminacy in the experience of motivations and the deeper, immanent universality discovered by the free will casts new light on the way in which both forms of universality are realized in the social institutions that Hegel develops out of the concept of the free will. In suggesting that the deeper conceptual universality is a way of making the initial indeterminacy determinate in the sense of specifying the options and their significance so as precisely to facilitate the movement of the agent between options for experiencing the motivation, we have a way of seeing how the very social ties of 'ethical substantiality' that are introduced later in the *Philosophy of Right* broaden rather than restrict freedom *even in the normal, libertarian sense* by expanding the conceptual network along which we can travel to find new ways of experiencing our motivations. That is, if a kind of libertarian freedom of alternate possibilities is built into the very conceptual fabric of the ineluctable phenomenal experience of motivation, and the individual fabric is extended by being knitted together with the experience of others, we can see how potentially every new relationship makes the agent more free than she was before. In his transition from the free will to objective spirit in the *Encyclopedia*, Hegel argues that the free will is driven to recreate the system of its own elements in the objective world through the rule of law recognized by social custom (EG§§484-5). This external version of the systematic structure of the free will has the "form of necessity," and it has seemed to many commentators perverse to identify freedom in the world with necessity. But the system of necessity is, paradoxically, the system of possibility because it is the system of necessary interconnections between the different routes through experience, where the consequences (which can be represented as certain kinds of connections, e.g., forking paths) are recognized. It is important in this regard that the law and customs do not in every case specify what is to be done; rather they specify what things mean, which is to specify the resonances up and down the levels of significance (the vertical axis of motivated willing). Customs and character provide opportunities just as much as they suggest responses to certain conditions. But the advantage of custom is that the scope and stakes of decision are made clear in public: the shape of the network of motivated decision is a kind of public object in which people can recognize each other. So it is interesting that the libertarian element in Hegel's philosophy of action (in the action-theoretic sense of 'libertarian') can blunt the liberal or libertarian (in the political sense) concerns that Hegel's political philosophy substitutes

social participation for true freedom by showing that precisely the common-sense conception of freedom is enhanced by interpersonal relationships.

Rational, free willing is a more competent or powerful way of desiring in the sense that the agent displays a kind of mastery *of* desiring (not a mastery *over* desires) that is shown by the flexibility with which they manipulate the experience of that desire so as to deepen and articulate it from their individual perspective. The kind of flexibility involved in acting on motivations is internal to those motivations and *motivated by those motivations*; the existence of alternate possibilities is determined by desire. The flexibility is a way in which those motivations act on themselves, i.e., a way in which they are forms of self-consciousness, which is another of Hegel's most distinctive claims about moral psychology. This kind of flexible abstraction is intrinsic to the nature of desire because 'desire' is just a naturalistic way of talking about goals, and goal-directedness always involves plasticity and persistence. This is why there is no fundamental opposition between motivation and alternate possibilities on Hegel's account, as traditional libertarianism had always assumed. Traditional libertarianism had therefore always been tempted to split the two sides of agency into fundamentally different capacities (e.g., the passive capacity to be affected by the world through desires as opposed to the active capacity to be self-determining), but this temptation disappears on Hegel's account. Practical reason is mastery of desire, but where that is understood as a talent or competence at a certain skill, rather than as dominance of one aspect of the will over another.

Hegel's view then suggests a way to understand this "pure thinking of oneself" that first finds articulation in Kant's moral law, but in a way internal to the desires that constitute the motivational shape of our experience, without sacrificing Kant's insight into the absolute power of that self-reflection as a form of self-determination. One of the important advantages of this way of construing 'acting on' a motivation is the way that it makes even refusal to satisfy that motivation in its usual form into action that is motivated. For example, ascetic or religious celibacy is different from the sexual non-activity of someone with no sexual desire; it is abstinence rather than mere absence. To put the point in some of Hegel's favorite terms, the negation of something is not a mere nothing, but a specific result conditioned by the initial element that was negated; so ascetic celibacy is a particular way of acting on sexual desire (i.e., it is action that is in part motivated by that desire). To put the point in more contemporary terms, one way of working with or acting on a desire is to sublimate it. Whether one thinks of sublimation in Freudian or in ascetic terms, it is the radical transformation of a drive or motivation so that its object and character is fundamentally altered. This connects Hegel's account with some of the most subtle observations in Kant's second *Critique*, namely the discussion



of the feeling of respect that comes from acting in accord with one's moral principles (Kant 1990, Ak. 5:72-9). Kant comes to this discussion in pursuing the task of explaining in what way the moral law becomes an incentive, i.e., becomes active in our moral psychology. Since the moral law articulates the internal causal structure of free will and practical reason, this is essentially to get as close as Kant can get within the confines of his transcendental idealism to a theory of the phenomenal form of free will. On the one hand, this part of the second *Critique* is the only place in Kant's account in which a thought is necessarily and universally connected with a feeling, but on the other hand the causal opposition between the moral law and desires is on full display here as well. Stripped of the artificial distinction between universal principles and particular desires, this profound feeling can be understood as the experience of the height of the power of the free will in an agent's ability to completely transform a motivation by experiencing it at such a level of generality that a radical change in the direction of the desire can be effected. Whereas Kant looks for two completely different kinds of causation (the heteronomous, passive determination by desires and the autonomous, active determination by the moral law (e.g., Kant (1997), Ak. 4:446)), the same qualitative difference is captured on Hegel's view by the extent of the flexibility agents have to re-direct their motivations. Quantity turns into quality. Many questions remain – foremost is the relation of this conception to the idea of self-integration – but here we at least have an indication of how Hegel tries to maintain the valorization of reason as a prerequisite of agency without the division of the agent into opposed or even incompatible parts that results in the anonymity of agency.

#### ENDNOTES

1 Parenthetical citations are to Hegel's *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse* (1830). Dritter Teil: Die Philosophie des Geistes (EG) and *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts* (PR), which are volumes 10 and 7, respectively, Hegel (1970). Both are cited by section number, with 'R' indicating the remark and 'Z' the addition. Translations of the latter (sometimes modified) are from Hegel (1991).

2 Other recent interpreters taking this Kantian approach include Patten (1999), 51 and Wallace (2005), 16 and Primoratz (1986), 30-1.

3 See, e.g., Taylor (1979), 28-31 and Patten (1999), §3.5.

4 See Gary Watson's critique of Harry Frankfurt in Watson (2003), 348-50.

5 See Watson (2003) and Arpaly (2004). Patten (1999) clearly distinguishes between motivation and justification, and sees the question of the role of reason in free will in terms of the latter.

6 See, e.g., Hegel's discussion of the divergence between Kant and Jesus on this point in Hegel (1971), 210-2, and the discussion of this passage by Wallace (2005), §2.2.

7 It is certainly true that some finitude of the will is retained in Objective Spirit. This is the formal finitude of a will that confronts a world that it must change. But the will of the agent made free by the practices described in the *Philosophy of Right* is already infinite in terms of content, since the will gives its content to itself. So though one should not overstate the case

by saying that the agent in Objective Spirit is infinitely free in every respect (that would have the implication that Absolute Spirit represented no advance in the freedom of the agent), the Kantian interpretation makes the opposite mistake of understating the extent to which the agent of property, morality, and ethical institutions is free. See Dudley (2000), 176-7.

8 Patten carefully distinguishes reflective freedom (*Willkür* or choice from among desires) from rational freedom (will as generating its own content), but his conception of rational freedom recreates the will's negative dependence on drives due to its radical differentiation from them at the meta-level of rational freedom in the search for a ground that is explicitly cleansed of all inclination. Though for Patten the question is rather one of justification than of the phenomenology of agency, that distinction itself is symptomatic of the problematically dualistic character of the Kantian perspective. See Patten (1999), Ch. 2.

9 See, e.g., Pippin (2009).

10 I will use 'desire,' 'motivation,' and 'drive' interchangeably in this paper to refer to those states of an agent that include or provide ends and in some way involve the agent in moving towards an action.

11 The example comes from Bruni (2008).

12 See Kant 1990, Ak. 5:72-3.

13 This helps to redeem an intuition that is sometimes suggested as providing the stakes of the free will problem, which is that the value of our personal relationships somehow depends upon alternate possibilities. See, e.g., Ekstrom (2000), 12-3.

14 Ulrich Steinworth also emphasizes flexibility in characterizing the free will, but his conception is constrained by the traditional phrasing of the problem of free will in terms of given options and their acceptance and rejection. See Steinworth (1995), 412.

15 Neither 'acting on' a motivation nor 'acting for' an internal reason are Hegelian formulations; but I suggest my particular formulation of those terms as a way of paraphrasing Hegel's idea into a modified form of contemporary discourse as an alternative to the 'stepping back' or 'going beyond' locutions.

## REFERENCES

- N. Arpaly, 2004, *Unprincipled Virtue*. Oxford: Oxford.
- F. Bruni, "A Witty Kitchen that Rarely Winks," *New York Times*, Feb. 20, 2008 (available at <http://events.nytimes.com/2008/02/20/dining/reviews/20rest.html> as of July 14, 2009)
- W. Dudley, 2000, "A Limited Kind of Freedom: Hegel's Logical Analysis of the Finitude of the Will," *Owl of Minerva* 31(2).
- L.W. Ekstrom, 2000, *Free Will: A Philosophical Study*. Boulder: Westview.
- G.W.F. Hegel, 1970, *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K.M. Michel. Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1971. "The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate," in *Early Theological Writings*, trans. T.M. Knox. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 1991. *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- I. Kant, 1990, *Kritik der praktischen Vernunft*. Hamburg: Meiner.

- \_\_\_\_\_, 1997, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- A. Patten, 1999, *Hegel's Idea of Freedom*. Oxford: Oxford.
- R. Pippin, 1997, "Hegel, Freedom, The Will," in *G.W.F. Hegel: Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, ed. L. Siep. Berlin: Akademie.
- \_\_\_\_\_, 2009, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*. Cambridge: Cambridge
- I. Primoratz, 1986, *Banquos Geist: Hegels Theorie der Strafe*. Hegel-Studien Beiheft 29.
- U. Steinorth, 1995, "Zum Problem der Willensfreiheit," *Zeitschrift für philosophische Forschung*, 49(3).
- C. Taylor, 1979, *Hegel and Modern Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge.
- Robert Wallace, 2005, *Hegel's Philosophy of Reality, Freedom and God*. Cambridge: Cambridge.

