

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit¹

Dean Moyar

It is widely acknowledged that Hegel's ethical thought moves in a naturalistic direction away from the pure practical reason of Kant's moral philosophy. But the exact character of that naturalistic turn has proven elusive, in part because Hegel so insistently foregrounds the theme of *freedom*. He often opposes self-determination through freedom to being determined merely by nature, and while Hegel's incorporation of the natural into his theory of freedom has been emphasised by many recent commentators,² there remains a fundamental lack of consensus about how nature and freedom intersect in Hegel's ethics. My goal is to shed light on this issue by examining Hegel's distinction between Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit. This distinction between two domains of inquiry and two perspectives on human action is fundamental for understanding his views about the natural and the normative in ethics. My central claim is that by advocating a division of labor between these domains, and by showing how they are integrated, Hegel is able to capture the best elements of naturalistic inquiry into human psychology and to preserve the distinctive character of the ethical domain.

This paper aims to open an avenue for future research into Hegel's naturalism and to demonstrate Hegel's relevance for contemporary debates. In focusing on the difference between Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit, I am already taking on a large topic for a single essay, and there are many related issues in Hegel that will necessarily go untouched. Some of these are worth mentioning up front. First, one would expect a paper about Hegel's naturalism to explore Hegel's view on nature in general, namely, the content of the *Philosophy of Nature* which forms the middle part of the *Encyclopaedia*. Without an account of how Hegel conceives of nature, it seems that we have to assume a conception of nature foreign to his system, and using that to measure his views would seem to violate a number of hermeneutical strictures. While I admit that this is a problem, it is simply beyond the scope of this paper, and I hope that using an intuitive account of the natural, and Hegel's claims about *human* nature, is enough at least to get this project going. The project itself can then provide a further spur to examining Hegel's views on non-human nature.

Second, there is a strong case for thinking that Hegel's full account of freedom and nature turns on his understanding of *absolute* Spirit, so that an account that focuses on the distinction of Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit is bound to be incomplete.³ Once again, this is a real problem, but one that would take us away from what I think is the core set of issues regarding naturalism and Hegel's ethics. The need for art and religion to complete man's relation to nature is a consequence of the issues that arise in Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit, and thus can best be tackled once the basic framework is spelled out.

Third and finally, I would like to caution that in this paper I am not claiming to demonstrate that Hegel is a full-blown naturalist in any of the commonly held senses in which naturalism has been defended of late. I am claiming that Hegel aims to *incorporate* the results of naturalistic inquiry into his own philosophical system, but I am not espousing an overall reading of Hegel's philosophy as either naturalistic or non-metaphysical. The issues surrounding those claims are too complex to even begin to entertain here, and I take seriously the recent worries about making Hegel into a contemporary 'soft naturalist'.⁴ No one disputes Hegel's engagement with the natural sciences of his day, or that he did find a place where he could for the genuine insights of empirical research. As long as we begin carefully, and avoid simply assimilating Hegel's position to any contemporary framework, there is no reason to fear engaging with naturalistic ethical theory.

I. The New Naturalism in Ethics

The 'New' before 'Naturalism' contrasts recent work with the first wave of naturalism in analytic ethics, which came with Harry Frankfurt and his desire-based model of autonomy.⁵ The first wave was naturalistic in detaching the concept of autonomy from pure practical reason, making it something we could in principle get our hands on if we could identify the relevant desires. These accounts were sometimes criticised for relying too much on the inner world of the subject, and not enough on external dimensions of action. The new naturalism of the past decade or so was sparked by advances in the sciences of the mind and by new psychological approaches to ethical intuitions. Advocates of a strongly rationalist normative approach to ethics are supposed to be embarrassed by much of the recent research, since it supposedly reveals, among other things, that people's moral judgments are made through their feelings, and in parts of their brain that have little to do with conscious reasoning.

A leading example of an ethical judgment that the new naturalists trace to brute feeling is the judgment condemning incest. The psychologist Jonathan Haidt describes to his experimental subjects a scenario of brother and sister who make love on one occasion, in secret, using birth control, and who find that it has strengthened their relationship. Almost everyone interviewed in the experiment says that this act is wrong. But they quickly run out of reasons for that judgment. When, in response to the reason that the children will be

disfigured, it is pointed out that birth control was used, they look for other reasons, which also turn out not to apply. Haidt concludes from this experiment:

The point of these studies is that moral judgment is like aesthetic judgment. When you see a painting, you usually know instantly and automatically whether you like it. If someone asks you to explain your judgment, you confabulate. ... Moral arguments are much the same: Two people feel strongly about an issue, their feelings come first, and their reasons are invented on the fly, to throw at each other. (Haidt 2008: 21)

As this passage makes clear, these new naturalists are not afraid to talk about moral values and to conduct experiments that are specifically value-laden. Their main point in seeking the root of judgment in basic emotions is to unmask the pretensions of rationality and objectivity for our ethical norms.

Jesse Prinz, one of the leading *philosophical* advocates of the new naturalism, has developed a complex subjectivist ethical theory on the basis of the psychological data. He writes of Haidt's study:

Subjects were presented with decisive counterarguments to every argument that they gave against consensual incest. They tended to concede that the counterarguments were successful, but only 17 percent changed their initial moral judgments. The others typically bottomed out in unsupported declarations and emotional exclamations. Incest is nasty! Incest is just wrong: it's gross! Reasons fell by the wayside, but moral convictions and moral emotions were recalcitrant. [...] subjects have *no reasons* for their moral judgments. They simply have a gut reaction that consensual incest and laboratory cannibalism are wrong, and a few post hoc rationalizations, which play no important role in driving those reactions. (Prinz 2008: 30-31)

The emphasis here is on the powerlessness of arguments to alter one's firmly held moral convictions. Like Haidt, Prinz claims that these cases show that emotion, gut feelings, are the basis of moral judgment. This is in large part just a restatement of Hume's famous claim that reason is a slave to the passions. As Prinz puts it, 'when we get down to basic values, passions rule' (Prinz 2008: 32). Emotions do not merely influence but, rather, constitute our moral judgments. Though Prinz sometimes goes too far with his subjectivist inferences from the psychological research, the idea that reasons run out when we get to basic values is sound, and is an idea shared by Hegel. Prinz does not in fact fully endorse the last part of the quote above, though he thinks it is almost right. His considered views is the following: 'We

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

might say that people have no reasons for their basic values, but it would be better to say that basic values are implemented in our psychology in a way that puts them outside certain practices of justification' (Prinz 2008: 32). Hegel's conception of Objective Spirit also goes beyond the concept of justification through reasons alone in advocating a view of basic values that are not amenable to the practices of justifications that ask for law-like principles for every case of action.⁶

As I see it, the problem raised by naturalism in ethics is that one seems forced to choose between what *explains* our judgments and actions, on the one hand, and the reasoning, arguments, and values that we take to *justify* our judgments and actions, on the other. There is a good deal of pressure from the side of the natural sciences to discount conscious reasoning and justifications as mere *confabulation*, as rationalizations made up after decisions are reached through unconscious mechanisms. On the other side, the normative ethicists insist that what we say about our actions just is their reality as intentional actions, and that, insofar as we need moral reasons and values to justify our actions and to explain the moral practices that we engage in, we can safely ignore merely descriptive psychological and neurophysiological accounts. For the scientific naturalist, however, this just begs the question about the explanation of action, for it in effect redefines explanation so that our reasons and values explain what we do.

The challenge of a cognitivist ethics that is sympathetic to naturalism is to find a way to include the results of biology and psychology (broadly conceived) as *relevant* to ethics without reducing ethical action to those terms. This is where Hegel comes in. While the conclusions cited above seem quite foreign to Hegel's claims about freedom and self-determination, and while it is certainly the case that these authors overstate the import of their experiments, there are important connections between the naturalistic research program and Hegel's views. I do not think that Hegel would have been surprised or alarmed by the experimental findings, but he would certainly have questioned the assumptions behind the reduction of judgment to gut feeling. I will say more about Hegel's views on moral feeling and the incest case later. Before doing so, I want to begin by looking at the basic contrast that Hegel sets up in his programmatic statements in the *Encyclopaedia* about the differences between Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit.

II. Levels of Spirit

Right at the outset of the *Encyclopaedia* 'Philosophy of Spirit', Hegel presents the main difficulty in giving a philosophy of Spirit with multiple levels. He addresses exactly the problem of how the low-level dimensions of ethics, such as immediate emotional responses, can be mistaken for the basis of ethics itself. He writes:

Observation of the *concrete* nature of spirit brings with it the peculiar difficulty that the particular stages and determinations in the development of its concept do not remain behind together as particular existences confronting its profounder shapes. In the case of external nature they do however: matter and motion have their free existence as the solar system, the determinations of the *senses* also exist retrogressively as the properties of *bodies*, and even more freely as elements etc. The determinations and stages of spirit occur in the higher stages of its development essentially only as moments, conditions, determinations, so that what is higher already shows itself to be empirically present in a lower and more abstract determination, all higher spirituality, for example, being already in evidence as content or determinateness within sensation. Superficially, it might therefore seem necessary to regard that which is religious, ethical, etc. as having its essential placing and even root as the content of the simply abstract form of sensation, and to regard the determinations of it as particular kinds of sensation. If lower stages are regarded with reference to their empirical existence however, higher stages will have to be simultaneously recollected. Since they are only present within these higher stages as forms, this procedure gives rise to the anticipation of a content which only presents itself later in the development. (*PSJ* §380)

The ‘peculiar difficulty [*eigentümliche Schwierigkeit*]’ is that the different characteristics of Spirit – human action in the case I am taking as central – cannot be completely broken down into isolatable components. To the extent that we can do this, we run the risk of taking the basic elements or building blocks of action, such as feeling, to be the ground or proper level of explanation for the higher elements such as ethical norms. Many of the current experimenters and psychologists of emotion are doing just what Hegel thinks the superficial treatment of these multiple levels entails, namely, treating the moral and religious determinations ‘as particular kinds of sensation’. To go from subjects ‘bottoming out’ in emotional exclamations to the claim that such emotional reactions are constitutive of ethical value is to do exactly what Hegel is warning against here.

We can also see from the above passage, however, that Hegel does take these feelings seriously as manifestations of the ethical and religious. The question is how he draws the line between the natural feelings and the normative realm in which ethical content finds its full determination. On the view I present here, what Hegel calls Subjective Spirit conceives of the individual human being in psychological terms quite amenable to the contemporary naturalistic program. Objective Spirit is the normative realm in which natural explanations have a subordinate role and ethical value has an objective standing.

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

Hegel aims at integrating these domains first of all through the dialectical transitions from one realm to the other, which establish both the *limits* of the claims of each realm, and that the concepts are indeed parts of a single rational system. He provides a *developmental* organisation of the material of Subjective Spirit, and conceives of the normative realm of right in a way that incorporates the categories of Subjective Spirit. Hegel's focus on the integration of the two realms can threaten the separation of the two domains, as Hegel acknowledges in his lectures, where he says: 'The distinction between subjective and objective Spirit is thus not to be regarded as rigid' (*PSS* §387Z). Certain key terms, such as *interest*, appear on both sides of the divide, and can seem to blur the distinction between levels. We thus have the interpretative challenge not only of integrating the two realms but also of preserving a clear and workable distinction between their claims.

I will first focus on his contrasting descriptions of Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit to get a grip on the distinction and the continuity between the realms. Hegel writes that Subjective Spirit presupposes an independent nature at the same time that its various forms progressively idealize nature by developing the subject's capacities to judge and act within the world. Subjective Spirit is from the beginning defined as *reflexive*, as a relation of the self to itself, so it is not reflexivity that sets Subjective Spirit apart from Objective Spirit. Yet the reflexivity of Spirit is what allows Hegel to give a dialectical progression of shapes of Spirit, and that leads him to criticise the practices of empirical psychology. The criticism is that the psychologists treat the human soul as a mere non-reflexive thing, a kind of box that emits noise when properly stimulated:

The ordinary psychological approach makes statements as to what spirit or the soul *is*, what *happens* to it, what it *does*, presupposing it to be a ready-made subject within which such determinations appear only as *expressions*. These expressions are supposed to make know what it *is*, i.e. what inner faculties and powers it has, it not being realized that in the concept, in that it posits *for itself* the *expression* of what it *is*, the soul has gained a higher determination. (*PSS* §387)

Because the determinacy of Spirit (of the mind) is posited for itself, and Spirit is self-developing, approaching the subject as a 'ready-made subject' misses the very essence of Spirit. Theorising the mind as a set of faculties and powers also makes it unclear how there can be lower and higher determinations that give progressively richer and more explicit expression to the same content.

Hegel alludes in this passage to his dialectical method, according to which each of the subject's determinations proves to be limited, as Spirit's reflexivity (negativity) pushes beyond each finite shape. Hegel's claim is that the higher stage is reached through the

knowledge of what the previous shape proves to be when 'it posits *for itself*' the lower determination. This conception of a dialectical transition *could* be amenable to naturalism in ethics, insofar as the transition is supposed to *make manifest* the limitations of psychological accounts for self-interpreting subjects. These transitions are highly idealized, to be sure, but they are akin to *experiments*, as Fichte, the originator of the dialectic, explicitly stated.⁷ The typical non-natural move is simply to assert 'higher capacities' that cannot be traced to the natural at all. Hegel's higher claims, by contrast, are justified with reference to the lower *determinate* insufficiencies, where the lower levels of ethical agency are precisely the natural capacities.

Though he is critical of empirical psychology, Hegel is very far from rejecting the human sciences altogether. Indeed, he claims that empirical study is necessary for arriving at the shapes in the development of Subjective Spirit. We find the following in the lecture notes:

We have to grasp spirit at the outset not as mere concept, as mere subjectivity, but as Idea, as a unity of subjective and objective, and each progression from this goes beyond the initial simple subjectivity of spirit, since it is an advance in the development of its reality or objectivity. This development brings forth a series of shapes, which certainly have to be specified empirically. In philosophic considerations they may not remain externally juxtaposed however, for they are to be known as the corresponding expression of a necessary series of specific concepts, and it is only in so far as they express such a series that they are of interest to philosophic thinking. (*PSJ* §387Z)

The problem is not with empirical study of the mind's capacities, 'which certainly have to be specified empirically', but rather with how the capacities are interpreted and classified. In Hegel's conception of philosophy, they must be ordered in 'a necessary series of specific concepts'. They are thereby of 'interest to philosophical thinking' because they can be necessary stages on the way to the complete system. The *completeness* that is the telos of the movement of Subjective Spirit is only achieved in Objective Spirit and ultimately in Absolute Spirit.

Having seen the basic claims about Subjective Spirit, the next question is whether the following descriptions of Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit can be mapped onto a distinction between the natural and the evaluative/normative. Hegel writes:

In its development, spirit occurs,

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

I. in the form of its *being related to itself*, the *ideal* totality of the Idea being within it [*innerhalb seiner*] and for it, i.e. that which constitutes its concept is for it, and it has being in that it is with itself [*bei sich*] i.e. free – subjective spirit.

II. in the form of reality, as a world it is to bring and has brought forth, freedom being present within this world as necessity, – objective spirit. (*PSS* §385)

Hegel foregrounds the distinction between the *ideality* of Subjective Spirit and the *reality* of Objective Spirit. The ideality of the former consists in it depicting subjective capacities of individuals, and the 'reality' of the latter consists in the objective realization of the Idea in the world. I propose that the sense in which this corresponds to a natural/normative contrast is the following. As subjective capacities, the concepts of subjective Spirit can be studied through testing of individual human subjects. Psychology, or the 'empirical', cannot determine what content counts as the 'totality of the Idea', but within that totality it can provide material for the shapes. In Objective Spirit, by contrast, we are dealing with the reality of a world. The reality here is a practical reality of value that is binding on the wills of individual agents, and it is not surveyable simply in terms of subjects' felt responses to stimuli. The phrase 'freedom being present within this world as necessity' indicates not only the normativity (necessity), but also the leading value of freedom. As 'brought forth' by Spirit, this value emerges from the level of feeling, but is not *constituted* by feeling.

We can look ahead to the transition from Subjective Spirit to Objective Spirit to get a better grip on their difference. It is only at the very end of Subjective Spirit that Hegel moves beyond the drives and feelings of the practical will to arrive at his conception of 'free Spirit'. This is the decisive break between the mind naturally conceived and the world of *value* realized in Objective Spirit. The free spirit is '[t]his *universal* determination [that] has the will as its object and purpose' (*PSS* §481). The process of Subjective Spirit is complete because the will now wills itself, rather than projecting its purposes onto an external reality. Hegel claims that this idea has become widespread through Christianity. According to this idea, 'the individual *as such* has an *infinite* value' (*PSS* §482), which was expressed in Christianity through the love of God for every individual, and through the idea that each human being has the divine within him/herself. The move from Subjective Spirit to Objective Spirit thus involves an introduction of the infinite value of the free will, a *final* value/purpose that goes beyond the mere instrumental purposes that characterise interests and drives in Subjective Spirit.

In the opening section of the *Encyclopaedia* account of Objective Spirit, Hegel emphasises that the individual will is still *finite* in Objective Spirit because it still has a variety of needs and still acts in an external world full of contingency. But the trajectory of this

sphere is to determine a world of value that renders this contingency a minor aspect in the lives of free individuals. Hegel gives a fuller description to indicate how Objective Spirit is a realm of freedom despite its limitations:

But the purposive action of this will is to realize its concept, freedom, in the externally objective side, so that freedom is a world determined through the Concept, in which the will is thus at home with itself [*bei sich selbst*], locked together with itself [*mit sich selbst zusammengeschlossen*], and the Concept [is] thereby fulfilled as the Idea. Freedom, shaped into the actuality of a world, receives the *form of necessity*, whose substantial context [*Zusammenhang*] is the system of determinations of freedom and whose appearing context is *power, being-recognized* [Anerkanntsein], i.e. its validity in consciousness. (PM §484)

The goal of this purposive activity, realized in Ethical Life, is to produce a world of freedom ('shaped into the actuality of a world') in which individuals recognise values as necessarily binding on their wills. The way that Hegel himself draws the contrast between Objective Spirit and the previous level of practical Subjective Spirit supports my claim of a complementary relation between the two realms along the natural/evaluative dimension. He writes:

[T]he content has its true determinacy only in the form of universality. When posited with this determination as authoritative power for the intelligent consciousness, it is the *Law* – freed from the impurity and contingency that it has in the practical feeling and in drive, and at the same time no longer in that form, but rather grafted in the subjective will in its universality, so as to become its habit, temper, and character, it exists as *custom*. (PM §485)

The laws of this world have 'authoritative power', and are freed from the impurity and contingency they had in practical feeling and drives, that is, in the higher stages of Subjective Spirit. These laws have a deontic force that cannot be captured within the non-evaluative terms of scientific naturalism. Yet Hegel is quick to point out here that these laws also are rooted in the subjective dispositions of individuals, and thus do not appear in opposition to the determinations of nature.

By stressing the value dimension of this move, I am not saying that Hegel endorses a fact/value distinction. Quite the contrary. The goal is to eliminate the gap between the evaluative and the descriptive. Values are facts in the world of Objective Spirit. These facts are not accessible by scientific naturalism, but also they are not metaphysically weird entities

(as on the caricature of supernaturalism as the only alternative to naturalism). Rather, the values are rooted in the value of the free Spirit, of the free individual human being.

III. Feeling, Drive, and Interest

An obvious place to begin our examination of the specific shapes of Spirit is with the 'Psychology' section of Subjective Spirit. A crucial stage in Subjective Spirit for our argument is that of 'practical Spirit', which for Hegel includes 'practical feeling', the 'drives and inclinations', and individual 'arbitrary choice [*Willkür*]'. In addition to several important elaborations of the relation of these capacities to Objective Spirit in the *Encyclopaedia* account of Subjective Spirit, Hegel also discusses the relation of the drives to Objective Spirit in the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*. According to Hegel, this relation turns on a proper understanding of the distinction of form and content, in particular on the way that one and the same content can be expressed in a variety of forms. This claim allows Hegel to say that the feelings and drives are essential elements of ethics while denying that they are at the right level, in the right form, fully to express the content of ethics.

Hegel's account of 'practical feeling' does not so much contradict the recent research on the moral emotions as it puts that research in its proper place. Hegel thinks that feeling can express ethical content in a way that is superior to the abstraction of 'the understanding', but he also argues that moral feeling is not fit to serve as a foundation of ethics. Hegel writes that when feeling is 'appealed' to in right and morality and religion, this has,

1. The correct sense, that these determinations are its *own immanent* determinations, 2. and then, in so far as feeling is opposed to the *understanding*, that it *can* be the *totality* against the one-sided abstractions [of the understanding]. But feeling *can* also be *one-sided*, inessential, bad. The *rational*, which is in the shape of rationality something thought, is the same content that the *good* practical feeling has, but in its universality and necessity, in its objectivity and truth. (*PSS* §471)

The feelings of the individual are his '*own immanent* determinations' because they have developed through education and repeated action. Feeling contrasts with the understanding as an immediate responsiveness that can express the totality of the ethical in a way that the understanding, which analyses and tries to come up with specific reasons, cannot.

With the reference to the totality against the one-sided abstractions, Hegel is describing here just the data or evidence cited by the new psychologism in morality. It would come as no surprise to Hegel that people run out of reasons when it comes to certain ethical norms, for given the right prompts, individuals can be forced to rely on the resources of the

'understanding' alone. If they are left with saying 'it just feels wrong', and refuse to give up their judgment even when they run out of reasons, this only impugns a certain conception of judgment rather than the rationality of the norm.

Hegel's criticism at the end of the passage above is that it can easily be the case that mere feelings point us towards bad actions, for feelings are bound up with the immediacy of our individuality and the contingencies of our biography. Ethical norms need the form of 'universality and necessity' in order to be a reliable guide to action. After writing that 'the **ideas** of god, right, ethical life can also be *felt*', Hegel continues: 'But feeling is nothing other than the **form** of the immediate characteristic individuality of the subject, in which each content, as also every other objective content that the consciousness also ascribes objectivity, can be posited' (PSS §471). We may connect certain emotions to certain ethical determinations, but there is no necessary connection one can draw between a feeling and an ethical content. He claims of the feelings that 'the content comes into them *from outside*' (PSS 472Z), so one cannot use them as the ground or foundation of ethical content.

Hegel gives an account of the prohibition against marriage between relatives that sheds considerable light on his understanding of the relations between ethical norms and feeling. He writes:

Marriage between *blood relations* is therefore at variance with the concept of marriage as an ethical act of freedom rather than an association based on immediate natural existence [*Natürlichkeit*] and its drives, and hence it is also at variance with genuine natural feeling [*Empfindung*] ... obscure feelings have been cited as the only reason for prohibiting marriage between blood relations, such arguments are based on the common notion [*Vorstellung*] of a state of nature and of the naturalness of right, and on the absence of the concept of rationality and freedom. (PR §168)

Hegel's point in the second part of the passage is that while there are natural feelings one can refer to in such ethical determinations, to take them as 'the only reason' is to assume that the only real reasons are ones that are valid in the state of nature. We can derive reasons from 'the concept of rationality and freedom', and then they tap into the value of the free will. We also need not deny a role for feeling. The reference to 'genuine natural feeling' is a reference, I take it, to the feelings of *second nature*, or the structure of sensitivities of those who have been raised in a society where norms of freedom are in operation. It is thus possible, according to Hegel, to defend both the ethicality of feeling and the objectivity of moral norms.

One could argue that the above passage does not really answer the challenge of Haidt and Prinz, which is based on the example of the incest prohibition, because Hegel is writing

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

of the institution of *marriage* rather than the simple act of *incest*.⁸ Even though the Hegelian can refer to freedom as the nature of marriage in defense of objective form against mere subjective feeling, it might still be that there are no good objective grounds for condemning the isolated sexual act of incest. Hegel does go one step further in the lecture notes, where he addresses mere sexual union between blood relations: "The power of procreation, like that of the spirit, increases with the magnitude of oppositions out of which it reconstitutes itself (PR §168Z). Here we have once again a use of the Concept as the rational basis for the prohibition. Of course, Haidt and Prinz will argue that their hypothetical siblings were protected against procreating, so that Hegel's procreation-based argument cannot be the support for our judgment. But viewing this argument in relation to Hegel's discussion makes clear that Haidt's experiments rob the judgment of its normal context by removing all possible consequences. With the action insulated from all consequences, it should come as no surprise that the feeling (the 'genuine natural feeling') remains even though no grounds can be given.

The next level up in Hegel's account of Subjective Spirit is that of the drives and inclinations. In the introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*, where Hegel restates much of his discussion of practical Spirit, he writes of the drives as the immediate or natural will. This will is rational yet burdened with a disparity of form and content:

The will which is free as yet only *in itself* is the *immediate* or *natural* will. The determinations of the difference which is posited within the will by the self-determining concept appear within the immediate will as an *immediately* present content: these are the *drives, desires, and inclinations* by which the will finds itself naturally determined. This content, along with the determinations developed within it, does indeed originate in the will's rationality and it is thus rational in itself; but expressed in so immediate a form, it does not yet have the form of rationality. *For me*, this content is admittedly entirely *mine*; but this form and that content are still different, so that the will is a *finite* will *within itself*. (PR §11)

The most surprising thing about this passage is that Hegel holds that the natural will is rational. It contains the difference 'posited in the will by the rational concept', and it is 'rational in itself. The drives are in a form such that they are *for me*, which accounts for why this will is formally rational at all. In the remarks to this passage, Hegel criticises empirical psychology for going about finding these 'in experience', or believing it does, and then classifying them in a wholly unsystematic way. Empirical psychology is mistaken in claiming that it simply finds the drives in experience because the determinacy of these drives is in fact only secured when they are described as the drives of the rational content.

Following his discussion of the concept of arbitrary choice [*Willkür*], Hegel brings the content of Objective Spirit into very close proximity with the drives considered as a system of natural determinations of the will. I take it that Hegel's idea is that the drives should be determined so that there is no need for arbitrary choice. He writes:

Underlying the demand for the *purification of the drives* is the general idea that they should be freed from the *form* of their immediate natural determinacy and from the subjectivity and contingency of their *content*, and restored to their substantial essence. The truth behind this indeterminate demand is that the drives should become the rational system of the will's determination; to grasp them thus in terms of the concept is the content of the science of right. (PR §19)

What we discover in this passage is that the drives themselves can *be* the rational system of the will's determination, and also that the account of the content of right gives the system of the drives. Though Hegel follows this passage with a critique of using the language of the drives as 'Facts of consciousness' simply found in consciousness, he clearly does think of the content of the drives and of right and duty to be the same. He also writes that 'the same content, which appears here in the shape of drives, will recur later in another form, namely that of *duties*' (PR §19).⁹ The basic move is taken from Fichte's *Sittenlehre*, where Fichte derives the content of ethics as the drives of the will. Hegel thinks that Fichte did not properly integrate his conception of the drives with determinate norms, but Hegel certainly owes a great debt to Fichte's innovations. The drives have a purposive structure and a motivational efficacy that are central to Hegel's conception of duties in Ethical Life.

I close this section by noting that the last two elements of Subjective Spirit before the free Spirit, interest and happiness, reappear in Objective Spirit as the right of satisfaction and as Welfare. Hegel's claim about interest in Subjective Spirit is a claim about the nature of ethical content and how it is actualized through the liveliness of the subject. He writes:

But drive and passion are nothing other than the very liveliness of the subject: they are needed if the agent is really to be in his purpose and the implementation thereof. The ethical concerns the content, which as such is the *universal*, an inactive thing, that finds its actualizing [*Betätigendes*] in the subject; and finds it only when the content is immanent in the agent, is his interest and – should it claim to engross his whole effective subjectivity – his passion. (PSS §475)

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

It is through the content of the ethical that actions are justified, but this content must be immanent in the agent if action is to take place at all. The content must hook into the drives and passions, though it would be a mistake to think that the content must be grounded in those drives and passions.

Hegel's claim in Objective Spirit (in 'Morality') about the particular satisfaction of one's interest is at first glance identical with the claim from Subjective Spirit. Yet Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* makes a point of referring to the *value* of the individual introduced by Christianity (the value he referred to in the transition from Subjective Spirit to Objective Spirit):

The right of the subject's *particularity* to find satisfaction, or – to put it differently – the right of *subjective freedom*, is the pivotal and focal point in the difference between *antiquity* and the *modern* age. This right, in its infinity, is expressed in Christianity, and it has become the universal and actual principle of a new form of the world. (PR §124)

This principle gives to an individual's particular interests the status of objective value. This might seem to be simply baptising the natural (subjective interests) with the name of freedom, while not fundamentally changing the natural basis of the value. On the other hand, we need to inquire into the source of this right. The fact that it underlies 'a new form of the world' is typical of Objective Spirit, which (as I emphasised in the previous section) thinks of value as having an objective status independent of this or that individual. That subjective freedom *has become a right* is a historical development that can be identified with a shift in the understanding of the status of individuals and the institutions that govern them.

Hegel also emphasises a shift in self-understanding in discussing 'Welfare' within the 'Morality' chapter of the *Philosophy of Right*. By contrast with the concept of happiness from subjective Spirit, 'Welfare' is a right, a source of claims on other agents. Welfare puts a definite value on happiness, which is otherwise the merely natural sum total of one's drives: 'Happiness is represented as no more than an immediate definite existence in general, whereas welfare is represented as justified in relation to morality' (PM §505). This 'represented as justified' raised the issue of how practice of justification can shape the capacities that an individual brings to ethical reasoning. We run into the question of the status of *recognition* already here, though I postpone taking it up until the final section.

IV. Explaining the Judgment of Conscience

I have emphasised that Hegel's account of Objective Spirit is based on the intrinsic value of free Spirit, on the free will of the subject. One might think that Hegel's view could

nonetheless be seen as naturalistic in that ethical values are projections of humans onto the (naturalistically conceived) world, so that it only departs from the naturalistic program in asserting the absolute value of the free individual.¹⁰ But when Hegel makes the transition to the full abstract statement of moral value in the Idea of the Good, he gives ethical value an independent status that is very hard to square with many versions of naturalism. The Good is '*realized freedom, the absolute and ultimate end of the world*' (PR §129). This is just an abstract statement of the claim of Objective Spirit generally to be a *world* in which reality is determined by the value of freedom. Because the Good is abstract, it must be actualized through the *conscience* of individuals. I will return to the questions of the status of the Good and of the source of value in the next section. I first take up the issue of conscience, which helps to focus the naturalism question on the relation of explanation and justification. Most contemporary ethicists would say that conscience is best conceived as a psychological capacity of exactly the sort that can be studied through brain scans and that is grounded in the emotions. We can thus bring our question about Hegel's ethical naturalism to a head by asking whether/how for him conscience, as a subjective capacity, involves a break from the natural.

The claim to be acting on conscience is clearly a strong normative claim that Hegel thinks we must respect for much the same reason that we value free Spirit generally. But when Hegel analyses the agent who claims to act solely on his conscience, the natural comes to the fore once more. If the individual, as what Hegel calls merely 'formal conscience', tries to determine what is right without any reference to the objective content of what is right, his decision must be made on the basis of the natural drives and desires. In the *Phenomenology* he writes that conscience 'determines from *its own self*; but the sphere of the self into which falls the determinateness as such is the so-called sense-nature; to have a content taken from the immediate certainty of itself means that it has nothing to draw on but sense-nature' (PS: ¶643). This means that what the agent takes to be certainty in the rightness of an action is in fact the product of natural factors. This sounds very much like the claim of the new naturalists that judgment comes from the natural drives and the reasons are tacked on later.

In these passages, Hegel is analysing how we must think about judgment in a moral vacuum. He is making a point about the contextual nature of justification and explanation. He is saying that, if your only *justification* is the fact or strength of your belief, then we are entitled to *explain* your judgment in natural terms. On the face of it, this is quite close to the claim of the new naturalists, which they buttress through analysis of brain imaging in moral reactions. But with the new naturalists the inference from this case is that *all justification* is illusory, since all judgment can be *explained* from natural feeling. On Hegel's view, by contrast, the lesson here is that we need to move to a different context of both justification and explanation, a context that does not force us to conclude that an individual's justifications are merely ex post facto rationalizations.

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

There is another important aspect to Hegel's discussion of conscience that makes clearer his view of the instability of explanation and justification in 'Morality'. Along with his critique of formal conscience, Hegel also criticised the perspective of the moral judge who wields universal judgments without actually acting himself (*PS* 665-67 and *PR* §140, section d). Hegel's point about this judge is that he too, like the agent who appeals merely to his feeling of conscience, has an unredeemed particularity to his judgment. We can say that in excluding all determinate reasons from the incest prohibition, the experimenters force the subjects to take the position of this judge. With only an abstract universal and no possible particular reasons, there is nothing but sheer feeling to assume the other moment of the Concept. In Hegel's transition from conscience to Ethical Life, it is in fact the identity of this judge with formal conscience that instigates the *Aufhebung* to the new context.

What kinds of explanation of judgments and actions are appropriate to the new contexts, the institutions of Ethical Life? Much of what Hegel says about Ethical Life suggests a picture of individuals raised and trained to have certain dispositions and to respond reliably to various ethical situations. If training and reliability are all that matters, there seems little objection to thinking of the Hegelian agent in naturalistic terms. The key term will be 'second nature' (*PR* §151), but that is compatible with many varieties of naturalism. Justification could refer simply to one's social roles and the fact that 'this is how we do things here', and there would be no need to split the perspectives or refer to anything problematically non-natural.

Hegel's theory of agency within Ethical Life is normative in a more robust sense than suggested by the preceding picture. He writes of true or actual conscience as successful action in a well-defined social context. Does that capacity remove the individual from determination by the natural? Yes and no. On the one hand, the language Hegel uses when describing true conscience is that of the *disposition*, the *Gesinnung*, which is closely aligned with themes of habit and second nature that emphasise the immediate and reliable responsiveness of the individual. Yet we can say that this capacity is non-natural in the sense that it is a responsiveness to the ethically true, where truth is secured by a system of Ethical Life that Hegel calls the '*living* Good'. This couches the matter in terms of life, and can be read in a quasi-Aristotelian sense as human flourishing. It is fundamentally a self-reproducing system of *objective value*. In the introduction to Ethical Life in the *Philosophy of Right*, the ethical powers, which he likens to Greek gods, rule the lives of individuals. This suggests that justifications and explanations in Ethical Life are irreducibly normative, explanations in terms of rational content and value.

This point is brought out in Hegel's statement (from the 1819/20 lectures on the philosophy of right) that when an agent claims to be acting solely on his conscience, we need not agree with his explanation: 'If someone appeals only to his conscience and the action contains objective determinations, then he has not merely acted according to his conscience'

(Hegel 1983: 113). Since the action contains objective determinations (i.e., objective content), we can use those objective determinations to explain and justify the agent's action. Feeling or strength of conviction is not the proper form of explanation when there are valid norms in play.

Hegel clearly thinks that we can not only justify our actions in terms of value but also explain actions based on the *content* and on the truth of that content. The problem is just how to defend Hegel as not simply begging the question about the reductive naturalistic explanation of action. A full answer to this question from within Hegel's system would have to take a closer look at the 'Teleology' section of the *Science of Logic* and the subsequent treatment of 'the Idea'. For now, it is enough to note that Hegel does emphasise the need to unify the 'theoretical' and 'practical' in the *Logic*, and that we can read that unification as promising to overcome the split between the stances of explanation and justification.

The issues surrounding explanation in Ethical Life are complicated by the difference between the first-person and third-person points of view. The agent of conscience is the pinnacle of the first-person perspective, while the third person perspective is represented by the right of objectivity that is taken to an abstract extreme in the figure of the judge mentioned above. Both one-sided perspectives are overcome in the transition to Ethical Life, so it would be a mistake to think that a third-person explanatory perspective dominates Ethical Life. As a system of value, Hegelian Ethical Life will explain the functioning of the component parts as contributing to the overall self-reproducing structure of the system. The behaviour of individuals can typically be explained through their place within the social whole. From the perspective of individuals within Ethical Life, however, it is not enough to explain actions in terms of the system. The notion of justification to others is central to being a free agent, and central to participation in the institutions of *modern* Ethical Life. One of the key questions in interpreting Ethical Life is how to bridge the gap between the first personal view of conscience and the third personal explanations of value and system. I turn in closing to mutual recognition as the terrain on which the naturalism question is to be decided.

V. Mutual Recognition and Value

Mutual recognition is the most dramatic instance of a theme that plays a central role in both Subjective Spirit and Objective Spirit. I would like to close with some brief suggestions that analysing recognition can help solve the impasses over nature and value, explanation and justification. There are two basic points. One is that locating intersubjectivity at the very basic level of the constitution of the person means that an agent's motivational structure is already informed by reason prior to conscious moral reflection. The second point is that locating value in contexts of mutual recognition gives us a way of thinking of value as

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

emerging from primitive forms of social control though not in the present reducible to such forms. The *institution* of value, if one traced it all the way back to its historical origins, is not hard to capture in naturalistic terms, as the forceful imposition of certain behaviour. But *that* explanation, Hegel insists, is largely irrelevant at the level of Objective Spirit, with an up and running system of values grounded in freedom which can serve both as the source of justifications and explanations.

The basic struggle to the death for recognition and the ensuing Master-Servant dialectic are contained in the 'Phenomenology' section of subjective Spirit (and of course in the 'Self-consciousness' chapter of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*). The process of recognition is the way in which 'universal self-consciousness' is constituted starting from individuals characterised as mere individual desiring beings. Hegel is more explicit in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* than in the *Encyclopaedia* that the shape of immediate self-consciousness as desire is a function of the concept of *life*. The key task in both accounts is to show how to think of the freedom of self-consciousness as arising from the immediate self-consciousness that finds its satisfaction merely in consuming things that it desires. Desire alone continually reproduces desire rather than genuinely satisfying it, because merely consuming desired objects is only a temporary fix.¹¹ The initial process of recognition aims to overcome the contradiction between the immediate naturalness, or liveness, of the subject, and the abstract freedom of self-consciousness. Only through the struggle to the death can the subjects show each other that they are indeed free. This struggle can be described in wholly naturalistic terms, and is quite amenable to current evolutionary approaches to ethics which try to view human norms as the outgrowth of primitive forms of social cooperation and struggle.

One main reason to view the struggle for recognition within subjective Spirit as conceivable in naturalistic terms is that it results in an asymmetrical compromise with roots in life. Hegel writes: 'In that life is just as essential as freedom, the struggle ends first of all as the *one-sided* negation with the inequality that one of the combatants prefers life' (*PSS* §433) and becomes a servant. This is an incomplete resolution to the problem of freedom, which is reflected in Hegel's comments on the relation of this master-servant dialectic to full freedom within the State:

The struggle for recognition and the subjugation under a master is the *appearance* out of which man's social life, as the beginning of the state, emerges. *Force*, which is the ground of this appearance, is not on that account the ground of *right*, but only the *necessary* and *legitimate* factor in the passage from the *condition* of self-consciousness sunk in desire and individuality into the condition of universal self-consciousness. Force, then, is the external or *phenomenal beginning* of the state, not its *substantial principle*. (*PSS* §433)

The contrast in this passage between the emergence of the State and the substantial principle of the State captures nicely the difference between the naturalistic element of Subjective Spirit and the strongly normative element of Objective Spirit. Force is the paradigm case of naturalistic, non-normative authority that is comprehensible, measurable, in terms of the concepts of the natural and social sciences. The cooperation arising out of this stage of asymmetrical recognition is based on the satisfaction of needs, or an instrumental rationality. There is as yet no final purpose or intrinsic value to serve as the basis of State authority.

By contrast, the universal self-consciousness that arises out of the work of the servant is a mutual recognition that is the heart of the relationships and values of Objective Spirit. The recognition relationship is essential to Objective Spirit because in every claim of right, as ‘the *definite existence* of the *free will*’ (PR §29), an individual is recognised as free. When Hegel describes the free will in §7 of the *Philosophy of Right*, he uses the example of friendship as being with oneself in otherness. This is clearly a version of the reciprocity of mutual recognition. When we act ethically, we act on values that have come to have public standing in our social world, and neither the values nor the first-personal authority over one’s own action are capturable in baldly naturalistic terms. The more primitive, power-based mode of recognition does not disappear in Ethical Life, and is indeed too often obviously at work in our social interactions, but in a well-ordered society sheer power neither explains nor justifies what we do.

For contemporary psychological and philosophical research and dialogue, it is important to see that mutual recognition enables us to conceptualize the promises and limitations of naturalism at a more intuitive level. One source of resistance to crude forms of naturalism stems from the sense that our relations to each other would be impoverished if we treated each other as mere loci of brute feeling. Could I recognise you as a friend if I thought of your judgments as independent of your reasonings? The revisability of our beliefs through interactions with others becomes rather mysterious on the emotionalist view. While it is not hard to imagine rechanneling our feelings through training, we are used to thinking that reasons and justifications we give to each other can and do have an effect on their beliefs. If the reasons were just what we ‘throw at each other’, in Haidt’s words, it would be hard to make sense of the kind of discourse we commonly engage in with each other. One can imagine psychological research performed in the second person stance of recognition, and that it would necessarily give more complex ‘data’ than the hypothetical third-person judgment in the incest study. We could ask participants to be agents, actually to do things or to imagine themselves having performed certain actions. We could then ask ‘How would you justify your action to another? What reasons would you give? What values would you invoke?’ If we were going to reject various reasons, as in the incest study, we would do so in the voice of someone who shares the agent’s context. With suitable scenarios and prompts, we could look for components and levels of recognition, test how deep the intersubjective

Naturalism in Ethics and Hegel's Distinction between Subjective and Objective Spirit

structure is within the mind, and so on. The results of such studies may not be quantifiable, but they would tell us more about how we actually relate to each other.

Hegel's systematic conception of philosophy, with distinctions in levels and overlapping patterns of explanation and justification, can give a satisfying account of the normative/natural relationship. We have seen at several points that Hegel is open to the input of psychology and empirical studies of moral feeling. We have also seen, however, that he gives us resources for thinking through the limitations of that research. While the new naturalists tend to think of reason as working at a superficial level compared to more basic natural processes, Hegel's conceptions of reason and Spirit incorporate the natural within an overarching account of human activity. With Hegel's account as a blueprint, and by engaging with new naturalism, we can work towards an enriched notion of the ethical world and our place within it.

Dean Moyar

Department of Philosophy

Johns Hopkins University

dmoyar@jhu.edu

Notes

¹ Abbreviations of Hegel's works:

PM: Hegel (1971)

PS: Hegel (1977)

P.S.S: Hegel (1978)

PR: Hegel (1991)

I would like to thank the audience of the 2008 conference of the Hegel Society of Great Britain for helpful feedback on this essay.

² See Wood (1990), Quante (1997), and Pippin (2008), for excellent attempts to sort out the place of the natural in Hegel's ethics.

³ See Dudley (2002) for a strong argument that Hegel's theory of freedom is radically incomplete without taking Absolute Spirit into account. I am also thinking of George di Giovanni's recent claim that 'religious praxis had indeed been in general, from the beginning, spirit's response to the anonymous power of enchanted nature' (Di Giovanni 2009: 232).

⁴ Gardner (2007).

⁵ Frankfurt (1971). See Quante (1997) for a direct comparison of Hegel's view of autonomy with Frankfurt's.

⁶ This is one of the main lessons of the end of the 'Reason' chapter in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

⁷ Fichte writes that the philosopher 'is to engage this living subject in purposeful activity, to apprehend it, and to comprehend it as a single, unified activity. He conducts an experiment' (Fichte 1971:I: 454; 1994: 37).

⁸ I would like to thank Robert Stern for pressing me on this point.

⁹ 'The content of this science can be expounded, with reference to all its individual moments such as right, property, morality, family, the state, etc., in the following form: man *has* by nature a drive towards right, *and also* a drive towards property and morality, *and also* a drive towards sexual love, a drive towards sociability, etc.' (PR §19).

¹⁰ This is a natural way to read Korsgaard's Kantian view; see Korsgaard (1996).

¹¹ The naturalism of the set-up of recognition has been highlighted recently by Axel Honneth, who writes: 'Not least for the purpose of countering the anti-naturalism of his contemporaries, Hegel builds a second stage of "desire" into the process of acquiring self-consciousness. In this stance the subject assures itself of its own biological nature in such a way as to express its superiority over all other beings. By virtue of its capacity to differentiate between what is good or bad for it, it is always certain of the element of its consciousness that separates it from the rest. For Hegel, the confirmation of desires, i.e. the satisfaction of elementary, organic needs, plays a double role with regard to self-consciousness. The subject experiences itself both as a part of nature, because it is involved in the determining and heteronomous "movement of Life", and as the active organizing center of this life, because it can make essential differentiations in life by virtue of its consciousness. ... As long as humans view themselves as need-fulfilling beings and are active in the framework of their desires, they have unmediated knowledge of their double nature, which allows them to stand both inside and outside nature at the same time' (Honneth 2008: 82).

Bibliography

- Dudley, W. (2002), *Hegel, Nietzsche and Philosophy: Thinking Freedom*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fichte, J. G. (1971), *Sämmtliche Werke*, ed. Immanuel Hermann Fichte. Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Fichte, J. G. (1994), *Introductions to the Wissenschaftslehre and Other Writings*, ed. Daniel Breazeale. Indianapolis: Hackett.
- Frankfurt, H. (1971), 'Freedom of the Will and the Concept of a Person', *The Journal of Philosophy*, vol. 68: 5-20.
- Gardner, S. (2007), 'The Limits of Naturalism and the Metaphysics of German Idealism' in Espen Hammer (ed.), *German Idealism: Contemporary Perspectives*. London: Routledge.
- Di Giovanni, G. (2009), 'Religion, History, and Spirit in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*' in Kenneth Westphal (ed.), *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Haidt, J. (2006), *The Happiness Hypothesis*. New York: Basic Books.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1971), *Hegel's Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

- Hegel, G. W. F. (1977), *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1978), *Hegels Philosophie des subjektiven Geistes/Hegel's Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*, ed. and trans. M. Petry, 3 vols. Dordrecht: Riedel.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1983), *Philosophie des Rechts: Die Vorlesung von 1819/20 in einer Nachschrift*, ed. Dieter Henrich. Frankfurt: Suhrkamp.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1991), *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet, ed. Allen Wood. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Honneth, A. (2008), 'From Desire to Recognition' in Dean Moyar & Michael Quante (eds.), *Hegel's Phenomenology of Spirit: A Critical Guide*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Korsgaard, C., et al. (1996), *The Source of Normativity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pippin, R. (2008), *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Prinz, J. (2008), *The Emotional Construction of Morals*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Quante, M. (1997), 'Personal Autonomy and the Structure of the Will' in Jussi Kothavirta (ed.), *Right, Morality, Ethical Life: Studies in G. W. F. Hegel's Philosophy of Right*. Jyväskylä: University of Jyväskylä. 45-74.
- Wood, A. (1990), *Hegel's Ethical Thought*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.