

Hegel and Aristotle on Ethical Life: Duty-Bound Happiness and Determined Freedom

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Abstract

Hegel's account of ethical life can be shown to contradict Aristotle's in two main ways: first, Hegel follows Kant in emancipating virtue/duty from the particularity associated with the content of motivational drives and with Aristotle's *eudaimonia*. Hegel thus rejects Aristotelian happiness as the final end of rational action and prioritizes duty. However, against Kant, Hegel unites (1) abstract duty and (2) determined drives within a speculative notion of ethical duty: rational agents find happiness in heeding duty's call. Second, Hegel follows Kant in emancipating agency's subjective dimension from the all-encompassing determinacy of Aristotelian substance metaphysics. At the same time and against Kant, Hegel unifies agency's undetermined, subjective dimension with the determinacy of objective norms and habitual praxis: ethical praxis must be animated by undetermined subjectivity *whilst* being determined. In both cases, Hegel goes beyond Aristotle by resting his argument on the speculative structure of 'the concept of the will'.

Hungry livestock,
though in sight of pasture,
need the prod.¹

I. Introduction

Within the wider context of Hegel's philosophy of mind, his reference to ethical life as 'second nature' (*PR*: §4, 26)² has provided a cue for recent commentaries on his practical philosophy to revisit the relationships between nature and spirit³ and objective norms and subjective reflection.⁴ While some agree that Hegel does not revert back to naturalistic, happiness-focused accounts of ethical life that are compatible with Aristotle's substance metaphysics⁵ but rather seeks to integrate Kantian notions of autonomy, Hegel's metaphysical reasons for doing so remain underexplored.

This issue seems especially pressing given Hegel's criticism of Kant's allegedly subjectivist notions of morality and duty. Hegel accuses Kant of prioritising unconditioned duty over happiness and of privileging subjective, self-conscious reflection over objective norms (*PR*: §135A, 132). But since Hegel also refuses to revert back to Aristotle's objective and thus content-specific, happiness-oriented 'naturalism', (*PR*: §133A, 130) one may wonder how Hegel's own notion of modern ethical life hopes to reconcile (1) duty and happiness and (2) freely choosing subjectivity and objective norms?

In an attempt to fill this explanatory gap, it will be argued that Hegel's account of modern ethical life is based on his metaphysics of 'the concept of the will', which, in turn, rests on the ultimate port of call of the Hegelian system, the logical concept. This entails that Hegel rejects Aristotelian ethical life because of its underlying substance-metaphysics and their immediate and self-undermining identification of these two conceptual moments: (1) indeterminacy (virtue, agents' subjectivity) and (2) determinacy (happiness, institutions' objectivity). Instead, Hegel's freedom-based—and thus Kant-inspired—'concept of the will' is designed to balance these moments in a unity that preserves their difference *whilst* enabling their identification.

The discussion is structured as follows: first, an analysis of Kant's critique of Aristotle's concept of happiness grounds the argument that Hegel agrees with Kant against Aristotle that ethical duty differs from happiness and that duty constitutes the ultimate end of rational action. This motivates the second part's analysis of Hegel's distinctly modern notion of ethical life and the proposition that Hegel draws on the concept of the will (1) to unite the two conceptual moments of (a) 'reflecting, choosing agent' and (b) 'objective norms and practices' and (2) to defend his Kant-inspired notion of the legal and moral equality of agents against Aristotle's claims to the contrary.

II. Kant and Aristotle on duty and happiness

II.i. Kant's Aristotle

In the *Metaphysics of Morals*, Kant rejects Aristotelian virtue ethics as 'eudaimonistic':

[An] eudaemonist says: [...] The concept of duty does not determine his will *directly*; he is moved to do his duty only *by means of* the happiness he anticipates. But since he can expect this reward of virtue only from consciousness of having done his duty, it is clear that the latter must have come first. (*MM*: 378)

According to Kant, *eudaimonism*—and thus Aristotle—equates rational with virtuous action but then argues that such action is desirable because it renders the agent

happy. Aristotle thus defines happiness and not ‘virtue for virtue’s sake’—what Kant calls ‘duty’—as a rational action’s final end.

This is problematic to Kant because unlike virtue’s universality, each person’s happiness is particular: every agent has particular drives that level particular demands at her and the satisfaction of these entails particular happiness (*MM*: 215). This contradicts the universal orientation of practical reason and the agents’ independence: in the pursuit of the particular ends of happiness, the agent depends on something external. Furthermore, insofar as the Aristotelian agent’s degree of *eudaimonia* is affected by agent-external, particular⁶ factors such as luck of birth, social environment, upbringing, chance, birth, ethnic and cultural background, health, community life, etc., the agent is not self-determining (*MM*: 378).

In defence of Aristotle, one might question whether Kant sufficiently considers the role virtue plays in *eudaimonia*. Since Aristotle does not strictly separate universal virtue/duty and particular happiness in the way demanded by Kant, Kant can be accused of begging the question: within Aristotle’s *eudaimonia*, happiness and virtue/duty are immediately intertwined.⁷ Happiness *is* duty and vice versa. This immediate unity of the moments saves *eudaimonia* from being Kant’s ‘amoral’, universality-independent happiness.⁸ And it makes it impossible to think of one being prioritized over the other in the way Kant does when he privileges duty over happiness. Kant even admits that *eudaimonia* might be closer to ‘moral’ or dutiful happiness and thus akin to what Kant labels ‘moral contentment’⁹ (*MM*: 378) than to brute pleasure-based happiness. What to Kant seems like Aristotle’s prioritization of happiness over duty might just be Aristotle’s way of talking about *eudaimonia* as their immediate unity. Aristotle could as well have defined duty as the final end rather than happiness, given that to him, the two are one, anyways.

II.ii. Kant on the priority of duty

However, it is exactly this identification that Kant is concerned with. *Eudaimonia*’s identity-emphasizing structure contradicts Kant’s insistence on the dichotomy between happiness and virtue/duty that guarantees virtue/duty’s unconditionality.

When Aristotle fails to sufficiently *differentiate* between universal duty/virtue on the one hand and particular happiness on the other, Kant argues, virtue/duty becomes particularised and is rendered dependent. This undermines the universality and unconditionality of virtue/duty that Aristotle himself assigns to it by implication.¹⁰

So when Aristotle conflates happiness and virtue/duty within *eudaimonia* and bestows priority upon happiness, he fails to acknowledge that the same particularity of the drives that defines happiness affects virtue/duty due to the latter’s immediate identification with happiness: within *eudaimonia*, happiness’ particularity and contingency is transmitted onto virtue/duty, thus undermining virtue/duty’s

universality.¹¹ Aristotle might thus claim that virtue/duty and *eudaimonia* are universal, but he cannot prove it.

In response, a defender of Aristotle might maintain that we are only happy because we do what universal virtue demands, going so far as courageously laying down our lives for the city-state and thus undermining the notion of our personal-particular happiness altogether. However, even this is done *also* for the sake of happiness and motivated by duty/virtue-external elements: Aristotle's truly virtuous person could not live dishonourably and be happy.¹² Meanwhile, the decision to lay down one's life also depends on particularities like one's education, habituation, etc. (*NE*: 1095a). Even the most composed and virtuous Aristotelian agent thus relies on particular, internal¹³ and external factors that differ from the spontaneous, undetermined universality that Kant argues should define moral duty and the agent's ability to self-determine (*MM*: 214).

What is Kant's remedy to this perceived dependence? He offers a twofold argument and demands first that universal duty and particular happiness as well as particular empirical factors must be clearly differentiated: the drives' particular content and the related happiness is particular-positive (*MM*: 219) while duty's universality is 'negative and restricting in character' (*MM*: 226). Second, with respect to motivation, universal duty has to take precedence over all particularity, including all empirical factors. In combination, these steps guarantee universal duty's unconditionality and independence:

[I]n reason's practical use the concept of freedom proves its reality by practical principles, which are laws of a causality of pure reason for determining choice independently of any empirical conditions (of sensibility generally) and prove a pure will in us. (*MM*: 222)

When Kant's moral subject does its duty, it does what pure and unconditioned universality itself demands. This ensures that the actions correspond to what the agent essentially is: a self-determining being defined by and oriented towards 'universality' (*MM*: 225).

This notion of moral action also motivates Kant's rejection of Aristotelian 'habit' (*NE*: 1103a): unless the self-conscious moral subject knows what it does and why it does it in a regular manner, it is not free: one's habitual thoughts and actions might depend on happiness-oriented and thus particular ends or other external factors such as social conditioning. In contrast, Kant's own notion of 'virtue' (*MM*: 380) implies duty-oriented, (self-)conscious reflection:

[T]he capacity and considered resolve to withstand a strong but unjust opponent is fortitude [...], and with respect to what opposes the moral disposition *within us*, virtue. [...] [V]irtue is

not to be defined [...] and valued merely as an *aptitude* and [...] a long-standing *habit* of morally good actions acquired by practice. For unless this aptitude results from considered, firm, and continually purified principles, then [...] it is neither armed for all situations nor adequately secured against the changes that new temptations could bring about. (*MM*: 380)

II.iii. Hegel's ethical duty

What does Hegel make of this disagreement? He sides with Kant against Aristotle on the unconditional character of duty and agrees that happiness-related, merely particular external and internal factors are philosophically irrelevant (*VGP*: 244/366). Hegel thus accepts Kant's strict differentiation between universal duty and particularity-informed happiness and agrees that fully rational action must be oriented towards duty and not 'happiness' (*PR*: §20, 41). To Hegel as well as to Kant, purely happiness-oriented action is *willkürlich* (arbitrary) as it is directed at *merely particular*, contingency-implying ends, even if their arrangement and pursuit for the sake of happiness betrays more universality than unsystematic, immediately arbitrary action:

When reflection is brought to bear on [*Willkür's*] [drives], they are imaged, estimated, compared with one another, with their means of satisfaction and their consequences, and so on, and with a sum of satisfaction (i.e. with *happiness*). (*PR*: §20, 41)

Hegel thus argues that in our pursuit of happiness,¹⁴ we, as principally universality-oriented subjects, depend on the *mere particularity* of our drives as something universality-external. A prudent, systematic hedonist is still victim to her happiness's particularity. However, despite this agreement with Kant, Hegel takes issue with Kant's prioritization of duty over drives-related happiness: if Kant's universal duty is pursued for its own sake whilst excluding all particularity, then no particular, drives-motivated end, feeling or any other determination qualifies as duty-compatible (*PR*: §15R, 38).

To Hegel, Kant's commitment to the priority of duty's utterly unconditioned universality entails that whatever determined-particular ends Kant claims are supposed to be compatible with duty, cannot be deductively shown to be so (*PR*: §135R, 131). By Kant's own definition, the determinacy-negating, 'ought'-based (*MM*: 225) striving for duty implies that the rational agent negates the happiness-enabling drives as motivational forces: the rational agent neither wills or wants the satisfaction of the drives. However, this must also hold in situations where the duty-bound agent's drives are satisfied accidentally (*MM*: 318). Since such satisfaction is against the agent's will, he cannot be happy because of it.

Kant's unity of happiness and virtue thus remains only possible and cannot be actual.

Given Kant's arguments for an irreducible incompatibility between particular drives and universal duty, Hegel equates the latter with 'form', the former with 'content' and labels Kant's account of dutiful action an 'empty formalism' (PR: §135R, 131): the priority of duty's negative formality over the drives' positive content renders Kant's notion of duty void.¹⁵

And yet, in a manner seemingly similar to Kant's moral agent, Hegel's rational agent pursues ethical duty: 'As substantial in character, these [ethical] laws and institutions are *duties* binding on the will of the individual' (PR: §148, 156). Like Kant's rational agent, so Hegel's does not do what he happens to want but wants to do what must be done *because* it must be done (PR: §27, 46).¹⁶ In so far as this ethical duty is universal, it is not dependent on the agent's particularities nor does the agent depend on its particularity: Hegel's ethical agent is as unconditioned by mere particularity as Kant's moral agent: '[I]n [ethical] duty, the individual finds his *liberation* [...] from dependence on mere natural [drive]' (PR: §149, 156–57).

II.iv. *Ethical duty's concreteness*

And yet, parting with Kant, Hegel also maintains that dutiful, ethical action is compatible with the particular content furnished by our drives (PR: §11, 35) and thus the happiness that flows from their satisfaction — even if this happiness is not the final end of action. For in contrast to mere happiness-oriented drive satisfaction, ethical duty's drive-given, particular content is not *merely* particular. Instead, Hegel thinks of it as *universal duty in particular form*:

The content of [the philosophical science of right] through every single one of its moments, e.g. right, property, morality, family, state, and so forth, may be expounded in the form: human beings have by nature the [*drive*] towards right, also the [drive] to property and morality, also the [drive] of love between the sexes, the [drive] to sociability, and so on. (PR: §19R, 40)

The satisfaction of the drives' particularity and the ensuing happiness can accordingly be subsumed under ethical duty's *concrete*, that is particularity-enriched, universality. Hegel thus bases his own account of ethical duty on Kant's strict differentiation between the conceptual moments of (1) abstract, universal duty and (2) abstract, drives-related particular content. But unlike Kant, Hegel *also* unites them in a mediating unity that contains the moments in their irreducible difference. Within Hegel's concept of ethical duty, the moments are differentiated so that each has its immediate meaning: abstract duty is truly universal, the drives' content

is properly particular. *At the same time*, each moment is defined as the other's negation and thus mediates and explains the other: abstract duty is 'not particular content' while particular content is 'not abstract duty'. This difference is embedded within Hegel's speculative concept of ethical duty that preserves and assumes each moments' characteristics and thus avoids the particularisation of virtue/duty in the manner of Aristotle's *eudaimonia*: Hegel's ethical duty is as universal and unconditional as abstract duty and as contentful and objective as the particular drives and the happiness that flows from their satisfaction. In the free unity of ethical duty, abstract duty and particular content are differentiated *in* being united. Their identity and difference are simultaneous: the mutual mediation of the moments enables their differentiation and definition *whilst* their identification ensures their compatibility.

Hegel's ethical action is thus committed for the sake of duty, it is duty done for its own sake, only that this 'self' *includes* the content and the happiness that flows from satisfying the particular, albeit duty-oriented drives (PR: §20, 41). So in contrast to Kant,¹⁷ who only differentiates the moments and then prioritizes abstract, universal duty over particular content, Hegel simultaneously identifies *and* differentiates them. And in contrast to Aristotle's *eudaimonia's* immediate unity of the moments that renders them particular, Hegel differentiates and mediates them, thus enabling ethical duty's unconditional universality *and* contentfulness.

Hegel's ethical agents thus do have particular, motivating drives, needs and desires. But these are arranged in line with the demands of universal duty because they *are* duty: universal, ethical duty takes the particular form of drives and needs that are satisfied in a happiness-inducing manner. Tautologically, everything within ethical duty's concrete unity of abstract, universal duty and particular drives *is* duty and is thus defined by ethical duty's universality.¹⁸

Insofar as this concept is coherent, it enables Hegel to argue against Kant that dutiful action *does* have particular content: its content is drive-related and determined. However, as opposed to Kant's abstract duty's pure universality that absolutely negates particularity and content, the content of Hegel's ethical action is truly universal and thus expressive of duty. Due to the content's particularity, ethical duty is concrete and happiness is accommodated within it and due to ethical duty's overarching universality, it is unconditionally valid. Hegel's ethical agent is bound to unconditional duty *and* finds happiness in its pursuit.¹⁹

II.v. Freedom and the pursuit of happiness

This unity of the moments within ethical duty also enables the notion of the agent's independence: since the choosing and reflecting, ethical agent is defined by ethical duty's universality and so are the duty-informed drives, the agent does not depend

on or pursue anything ‘fundamentally else’ or ‘radically different’ from its own essential, duty-oriented universality. He thus maintains his universality-based self-identity or ‘completeness’ in the pursuit of ethical duty. From the conceptual rather than the empirical point of view, he ‘stays with himself’ throughout his duty-bound actions, ‘seeking’ as an end merely what he always already is:

Every [agent’s] self-consciousness knows itself (i) as universal, as the possibility of abstracting from everything determinate, and (ii) as particular, with a determinate object, content, and aim [*Zweck*]. Still, both these moments are only abstractions; what is concrete and true [...] is the universality which has the particular as its opposite, but the particular which by its reflection into itself has been equalized with the universal. (*PR*: §7R, 32)

In each successful ethical act, the empirical agent is one with the end (*PR*: §22R, 43). This equalization embeds the difference between choosing subject and chosen end in an identity: subject and end are the same so that the end is always already achieved. This also undermines the notion of a ‘pursuit of ends’ or ‘teleology’ (*EL*: §204, 279ff.) altogether insofar as it implies a fundamental difference between agent and end. What ‘appears’ and thus empirically manifests as the striving of the self-conscious, individual agents is truly the agents’ self-resting in ethical duty.²⁰

In contrast, the agent that seeks mere happiness depends on the particularity of the drives as something ‘other’ and ‘external’ that teleologically levels ever-new demands at the agent’s universality-based faculty of choice. This implies an incessant and insurmountable lack of content within the agent (*PR*: §8, 33), rendering the pursuit of mere happiness tragic:

[The will’s] ability to go beyond any other choice, which it may substitute, and so on *ad infinitum*, never enables it to get beyond its own finitude, because the content of every such choice is something other than the form of the will and therefore something finite. (*PR*: §16, 39)

Reaching a drives-based end automatically gives rise to another. The happiness-seeking agent thus acts to achieve something that he is not and can never be and the search for mere happiness keeps undermining itself: it renders true, duty-compatible happiness impossible by placing ever new, ever different ends in front of an agent who cannot find himself in search or achievement.

So while both the content of Hegel’s ethical duty and of the pursuit of happiness are particular, the former is universality in the form of particularity whilst the latter is *mere particularity*. And while mere particularity implies a radical difference between universally oriented agent and ends that entails dependence, ethical duty’s *universality as particularity* enables the notion of an overarching, universality-

based identity between the agents and their particular ends (*PR*: §22, 42).²¹ Achieving happiness thus becomes a function of living up to the demands of universal, ethical duty (*PR*: §148R, 156).

This also means that ethical agents do not act to be happy in their particular ways. Instead, they act in accordance with duty and find happiness therein. Doing one's duty has become the condition for happiness and is synonymous with making oneself happy: the rational agent does not want to be and cannot be happy but in the pursuit of duty. From his perspective, *Willkür*-based happiness has lost its appeal and is immature, egotistical, illegal or evil in comparison to the happiness achieved in the pursuit of ethical duty.²² Agents striving for particular happiness alone thus display a lack of self-comprehension as they misunderstand that it is their rational purpose to seek the particularized universality of ethical duty rather than the universalized particularity of happiness.²³

According to Hegel, the happiness that results from meeting the drives' demands is thus normatively justified by being an aspect of the realisation of ethical duty. This parallels Kant's demand that agents earn their right to be happy (*CPrR*: 130) by following duty instead of the demands of happiness. However, while Kant's agents must pursue duty at the expense of happiness to merit a 'happiness' they cannot want as long as they pursue duty, Hegel's agents earn the right and the ability to be happy by acting in accordance with duty.

II.vi. Three argumentative strategies

What does this tell about the differences between Aristotle's, Kant's and Hegel's accounts from a methodological point of view?

From Hegel's perspective, Aristotle undermines the universality of virtue/duty when he lets happiness particularise virtue/duty within the unity of *eudaimonia*. But in so doing, Aristotle also undermines particularity because it must be defined as the opposite of universality to be what it is: particularity can only be understood in negative contrast to universality and vice versa.²⁴ However, since *eudaimonia* undermines virtue's universality with the particularity of happiness, there is no universality with which to contrast particularity. This entails that particularity loses its meaning: *eudaimonia*'s particularization of universal virtue undermines particularity. Unless particular happiness is contrasted from universal duty, neither is defined. And yet, both must be defined to enable *their* unity. So when Aristotle argues that within *eudaimonia*, virtue *is* happiness, he deprives himself of the means required to define this unity as an identity of two distinct moments.

To avoid such self-undermining, Kant places duty and happiness on the same logical plane by means of mutual negation: duty is 'non-happiness' and vice versa, both terms define and mediate each other via negation. However, since Kant is committed to the unconditionality of duty, he then prioritizes duty over happiness:

duty is universality as non-particular and thus as non-determined (*MM*: 213). In turn, this defines happiness, its particular content and any determination as the radically ‘other of duty’ that is negated in favour of duty. Duty and content have become incompatible.

To avoid such nullification of particularity and prioritisation of duty, Hegel differentiates particular content and abstract duty *whilst* speculatively (*EL*: §82A, 132) uniting them in a non-hierarchical, egalitarian manner: abstract duty and particularity are two different aspects of the same ethical duty, transferring their difference-based properties onto it. Ethical duty is concrete, it is a particularity-incorporating, ‘true’ universality (*EL*: §236, 303). This ensures ethical duty’s unconditionality and independence from the mere particularity of happiness: ethical duty incorporates particularity along with abstract, universal duty so that neither dimension limits or defines ethical duty horizontally.

Hegel’s account of ethical duty is thus designed to conceptually combine and, in Hegel’s distinct terminology, to ‘sublate’ (*SL*: 82/I: 113) the identity of *eudaimonia*’s immediate unity of the moments with their difference as defined by Kant. How and why does Hegel do so? What conceptual structure informs his argumentative strategy?

II.vii. Hegel’s concept of the will

In the *Philosophy of Right*’s first paragraph, Hegel argues that the relationship between duty’s universality and happiness’s particularity is informed by the ‘free self-positing’²⁵ of an ontological principle. He calls it ‘the concept of the will’ (*PR*: §1, 17) and assigns to it three conceptual moments. The first of these is defined as ‘universality’ or ‘indeterminacy’ (*PR*: §5, 28). On its own, this is spontaneous, self-referential subjectivity²⁶ and grounds the notions of pure duty, self-determination and active self-consciousness in general: “This [pure indeterminacy] is the unrestricted infinity of *absolute abstraction* or *universality*, the pure *thought* of oneself’ (*PR*: §5, 28). In its unconditioned form, this conceptual moment is not available to Aristotle as his substance-metaphysics contain universality only as immediately particularized.²⁷

Hegel then defines the second moment of the concept of the will as ‘particular determinacy’: ‘the I is also [...] the *differentiation*, *determination*, and *positing* of a determinacy as a content and object’ (*PR*: §6, 30). It grounds the objectively valid, determined character of the happiness-enabling drives and of the concrete patterns of rational behaviour, norms and institutions. In contrast to Aristotle, who also considers empirical and psychological determinacy in his philosophical discussions, Hegel follows Kant in excluding any normatively irrelevant, merely contingent, empirical²⁸ determinations such as upbringing, appearance, health, gender, ethnicity, wealth, etc., from the domain of conceptual determinacy.

In a third and final step, Hegel then defines the concept of the will's 'individuality' as the 'speculative' unity of its moments (*PR*: §7R, 32). It is the simultaneity of their immediacy and mediation: on its own, each moment is but an abstraction from the identity that accommodates them as immediate and mutually mediating. The same unifying principle defines itself as each moment and, in uniting the moments, it connects to itself:

[The will] is the *self*-determination of the I, which means that at one and the same time the I posits itself as its own negative, i.e. as restricted and determinate, and yet remains with itself, i.e. in its self-identity and universality. (*PR*: §7, 31)

Given Hegel's notion of systematicity (*PM*: §573R, 273ff.), this raises the question of how Hegel grounds his definition of the concept of the will. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel briefly states that he presupposes the reader's acquaintance with the arguments of the *Science of Logic* (*PR*: §2R, 19). This provides a clue regarding the origins of the structural parallels between the concept of the will and the logical concept that Hegel defines as 'freedom' (*EL*: §182A, 259).²⁹ Also the logical concept's individuality is a unity of universality and particularity:

[The concept] contains the moment of [individuality], as the inward reflection of the determinacies of universality and particularity. This singular negative unity with itself is what is in and for itself determined, and at the same time identical with itself or universal. (*EL*: §163, 239)

This parallel suggests that the logical concept functions as origin for the concept of the will, making the concept of the will a more concrete variation of the logical concept. Both are the same insofar as they are both concept and they differ insofar as the concept of the will is more concrete than its logical counterpart.³⁰

Should this be the case, then the concept is the reason why Hegel's ethical duty as unity of abstract duty and happiness is decidedly more post-Kantian-idealist than Aristotelian — and thus more modern-idealist than substance-metaphysical 'realist' or 'naturalist'. As opposed to the kinds of causality that are typical of substance metaphysics (*SL*: 472ff./II: 196ff.), the self-positing unity of Hegel's concept is driven by subjectivity's universality. It preserves its moments' difference and is actively self-referential so that all determinacy takes place within it, becoming self-determinacy. (*EL*: §160, 236) Since the concept's dynamic unity is 'prior' to its moments, on their own, they are 'abstractions' (*SL*: 589/II: 353). From the perspective of Hegel's concept, Aristotle is thus correct in claiming that the abstract moments are united. But he fails to account for their unity-internal, difference-based mediation. Meanwhile, Kant is correct about duty's unconditionality and the moments' difference. But fails to unite them.

However, Hegel's ontological grounding of his account of rational action does not end with the concept. He argues that since the subjective concept of the will has no objective manifestation, it determines itself as objectivity and then unites itself with this objectivity to become 'idea' (PR: §21, 41):

The Idea is what is true in and for itself, the absolute unity of [concept] and objectivity. Its ideal content is nothing but the [concept] in its determinations; its real content is only the presentation that the [concept] gives itself in the form of external thereness; and since this figure is included in the ideality of the [concept], or in its might, the [concept] preserves itself in it. (EL: §213, 286)

In the context of the will, this means that there objectively exist instances of ethical willing with empirically varying degrees of conceptual adequacy: (PR: §2, 18; PR: §27, 46)³¹ even the most empirically deficient act of volition exists because the concept of the will is to some degree objectified, and is thus idea.³²

III. Hegel's account of ethical life: Subjects and institutions

Hegel's concept-based disagreement with Aristotle's notion of *eudaimonia* also provides a cue regarding Hegel's rejection of Aristotle's description of the relationship of the conceptual moments of (1) choice-exercising and essentially undetermined subjectivity (PR: §105ff., 109ff.) and (2) the determined objectivity of socio-political norms and ethical habit (PR: §151, 159).³³ On Hegel's view, both Aristotle and Kant propose opposing takes on the relationship of these moments.

While Aristotle allows for subjectivity-based agents' 'choice' (NE: 1106b) and responsibility, he prominently emphasizes the importance of objective social context and habit's seemingly 'automatic' and determined ethical action. His virtuous individuals have internalised socially manifest, ethical patterns of action, adopted their determination as their own and enact them regularly without (self-)conscious reflection. To Kant, this renders agents determined, dependent and thus undermines their freedom. In order to protect agents' self-determination, Kant thus prioritizes the moment of self-conscious, reflective subjectivity over habit's and context's objectivity (MM: 408): his agents are only virtuous insofar as they have self-consciously chosen moral reasons for action. How does Hegel react to these conflicting accounts?

III.i. *Hegel and Aristotle on ethical life*

On the one hand, Hegel rejects the absoluteness of the subjectivity-based, reflective point of view that he associates with Kant (PR: §133A, 130). On the other hand, he defends the validity of objective habits (PR: §150, 157) and socio-political institutions in a manner reminiscent of Aristotle. Hegel even draws allegories to the kind of naturalist substance-metaphysics usually associated with his classical predecessor:

Hence the ethical order is freedom or the will in and for itself as what is objective, a circle of necessity whose moments are the ethical powers which govern the life of individuals. To these powers individuals are related as accidents to substance, and it is in individuals that these powers are represented, have the shape of appearance, and become actualized. (PR: §145, 154–55)

However, not only are several of Hegel's ethical determinations inspired by Kant's attempt at a definition of a decidedly modern account of rational socio-political institutions in the *Metaphysics of Morals*. But a closer look at the architecture of Hegel's argument for the superiority of modern ethical life over the determinations of (Roman) abstract right and (Kantian) morality³⁴ shows that these concepts have not disappeared in his account of modern ethical life. Instead, they feature in it: their strengths and limitations originate in differentiations within a decidedly post-Kantian and thus *modern* account of ethical life³⁵ that places unconditioned subjectivity at its core.

For example, Aristotle notoriously defends the institution of slavery,³⁶ insists on killing disabled infants (*Politics*: 1335b1) and renders political and legal status dependent on gender, social status and property (*Politics*: 1266a1). He supports the notion of ethical inequality amongst individuals due to differences of (self-) education, natural talent, one's birth, social status, upbringing, etc. (*NE*: 1099b) and seems to have no notion of utterly unconditioned moral reflection: while he insists that choice and reflection are real (*NE*: 1106a) and ethically relevant, he also maintains that whether one acts virtuously or not always involves a moment of contingent and external determinacy (*NE*: 1103a).

In contrast, Hegel is committed to universal and egalitarian personhood, property- and contract rights (PR: §34ff., 53ff.) and the value of unconditioned, subjective moral reflection and conscience.³⁷ He argues for the rationality of a family life and an economic and political order that respects individual rights to choice of occupation, political participation, institutional transparency and civil rights and liberties. Against Aristotle, Hegel maintains that slavery is irrational (PR: §57R, 69) and calls for legal proceedings that consider the value and importance of subjective moral deliberation (PR: §142ff, 154ff.).

Hegel's account of ethical life is thus infused with Kantian notions of legal and moral equality alien to Aristotle. While this has been noted by a variety of commentators over the decades,³⁸ Hegel's claims about the systematicity (*EL*: §14R, 39) of philosophy once more provoke the question of how he attempts to *justify* his commitment to these notions. Again, a closer look at the architecture of his account of objective *Geist* suggests that his reasoning is grounded in the concept of the will.

III.ii. *Subjects and institutions*

As is the case with the unity of duty and happiness, so Hegel's notion of ethical life is grounded in 'the concept of the will'. Now, the will's first moment of 'universality' defines the notion of agents' subjectivity-based 'pure self-reflection' (*PR*: §5, 28) while the second moment stands for 'determined' (*PR*: §6, 30) dimension of ethical life, that is objectively valid norms, habits, institutions and practices.

Following the logical sequence of the concept of the will's moments, Hegel defines the undetermined subjectivity as the unconditioned, independent negation of determined norms: since the subject is fundamentally unconditioned, it can reflect on, reject and choose *any* determined end. No empirical determinacy inevitably causes the subject's conscious or unconscious choice.³⁹ By endorsing certain norms, Hegel's subject appropriates them: in emotional, intuitive, reflective or conceptual form, she knows and is committed to what she is doing.

Meanwhile, the second moment's particular determinacy is defined as determined, objective norms, practices and institutions. These are unconditioned and independent from subjectivity in the sense that their validity does not depend on subjective endorsement: objective, determined ethical norms are valid in a 'realist' sense because they are defined as what they are, not because subjects endorse them or would endorse them under ideal circumstances. Even if enacted unconsciously, on emotional or intuitive grounds or out of animated habit, such norms have ethical validity. Once more, each conceptual moment is immediate: it is what it is unconditionally and independently of what it is not.

However, Hegel maintains that *at the same time*, the moments mediate each other. Each refers to its opposite via negation: undetermined subjectivity is 'not the determined objective institutions and norms (objectivity)' and objectivity is 'not subjectivity' (*PR*: §6R, 30). This mutual relation points to their interdependence and compatibility and enables their unification in the concept's third moment: subjective agents *are* determined norms in the sense that subjects implicitly or explicitly choose determined norms. Meanwhile, the norms *are* the subjective agents in the sense that the determined norms freely orientate the subjects.⁴⁰ Due to their difference, subjects and norms could be disconnected and yet, their free unity renders them compatible (*PR*: §7, 31).

Both moments are thus connected via an identity while they remain distinguishable in virtue of the difference that results from the concept of the will's internal self-differentiation: the subjects could act otherwise but do not, the determined norms could not orientate behaviour but they do. As unity of its moments, the concept of modern ethical life assumes their properties: ethical life is subjectivity-driven *and* determined at once.⁴¹

III.iii. *Determined freedom*

Hegel thus argues that the ideal balance of agents' subjectivity and the norms' objectivity within the concept of ethical life ensures the life and determinacy of socio-political reality: in order to lead rational lives, ethical subjects must choose to commit to determined institutions. An ethical order where the determined institutions are not properly endorsed disintegrates into wilfulness (*Willkür*), where each agent does what she or he deems correct on particular grounds. At the same time, an ethical order where the objective institutions are blindly followed, e.g., out of mechanical habit, without the subjective agents having properly endorsed and thus given life to them, is inwardly dead and prone to disintegration (*PR*: §324R, 307).

The concept-based unity of subjectivity and objectivity within ethical life thus implies that each moment informs the other: the subjects must engage with the objective institutions in a life-inducing, ethos-like manner. Institutions must be 'subjectivized', that is accepted, internalized, realized and thus imbued with life by acting subjects. To 'live' and be effective, institutions must receive life and meaning from subjective agents (*PR*: §151, 159).

At the same time, subjectivity has to be 'objectivized' in order to will anything determinate at all. By engaging in rational practices, subjects actualize their own freedom, giving it an objectively determined shape. From the agent's perspective, ethical freedom means to commit to and thus animate objective institutions against the backdrop of the constant possibility of 'being able to do otherwise': determined ethical practices are 'alive' thanks to subjectivity *while* subjectivity has orientation thanks to objectivity.

The same irreducibility of the subjective dimension also allows for Hegel's Kant-inspired notion that all subjectivity-possessing subjects enjoy principled moral and legal equality: to Hegel, every mind-possessing being is defined by the same unconditional and thus unquantifiable subjectivity. Everyone is the ethical (*PR*: §209R, 198)—and thus also the legal and moral—equal of every other, irrespective of merely empirical differences such as gender, faith, anthropological and cultural background, etc. It is on this basis that Hegel rejects the Aristotelian notion that determined, empirical differences such as upbringing, psychological

and physical attributes, socialization, etc., play a role for the subject's *principled* status as virtuous/ethical agent.

III.in. Aristotle's substance metaphysics

Once again, Hegel's commitment to a Kantian notion of unconditioned subjectivity is the main cause for his rejection of Aristotle's 'naturalist' ethics. While Hegel justifies this commitment by appeals to his concept of the will, Aristotle subsumes the subjectivity that enables choice and reflection under the same objective principle that defines determined norms: 'naturalist' substance.⁴² Since substance is itself determined and determining (in the sense of activity), it grounds the objective determinacy of the institutions but undermines the universality-based indeterminacy that enables the unconditionality of (modern) subjectivity. Aristotle's agents' thoughts and choices are aspects of substance's activity: they depend on other substance-caused facts and events and thus on substance's own, determined activity.⁴³ Objective determinations such as institutions and habits are 'first' and agents' thoughts and choices 'second' so that the latter depend on the former: subjectivity depends on and is thus determined by substance's overarching determinacy.⁴⁴

On both Kant's and Hegel's views, this particularizes agents' subjectivity and thus undermines the notion of their independent thought, choice as well as of their equality: 'natural laws' (*MM*: 215) and other agent-external factors are relevant for who agents are, for their thoughts and choices and for their degree of *eudaimonia*.

From Kant's and Hegel's modern, subjectivity-committed perspective, Aristotle's account of ethical life thus fails to sufficiently differentiate its subjective and objective moments: by defining subjectivity as particular and as immediately intertwined with determinacy, Aristotle subsumes the unconditionality of the agents' subjectivity-based choice under substance's objectivity. This undermines agents' ability to reflect and act in a properly independent manner. To Kant and Hegel, this parallels the dependence of Aristotelian virtue/duty on particular happiness within *endaimonia* and entails the disappearance of agents' undetermined subjectivity in the overarching principle of determined substance.⁴⁵

To avoid this, Kant posits reflecting subjectivity as logically first, thus rendering it unconditioned by any objectivity. However, while Hegel appreciates the ensuing liberation of subjectivity, he also argues that this undermines objectivity's status as properly objective: Kant's 'objective' institutions only exist because there are subjectivity's individuals who could think and choose otherwise.⁴⁶ This undermines the norms' necessity-implying objectivity: they could be different.

In contrast, Hegel's own notion of concept-based ethical life preserves the irreducibility of both moments *while* uniting them in a balanced manner: agents' subjectivity animates objective norms *while* objective norms orientate subjective

agents. This parallels the integration of the moments of abstract duty and happiness within ethical duty. By the same conceptual logic, the moments of ‘agents’ subjectivity’ and ‘objective institutions’ are freely integrated in the concept of modern ethical life: properly objective institutions are part of a living ethical order animated by subjective agents.

In both cases, Hegel argues, the same concept of the will is manifest in reflecting and choosing subjects,⁴⁷ in objective norms and institutions, in duty and in happiness.⁴⁸ In contrast to Aristotle’s *eudaimonia* and his substance-based notion of ethical life, Hegel’s concept-based account is thus designed to guarantee the unconditionality of duty, agents’ uncoerced reflection and choice, the determinacy of their ethical commitments and their legal, moral and ethical equality. In the manner of Kant’s rational agents, so Hegel’s guide themselves to the ‘pasture’ of ethical life’s determined freedom.

IV. Conclusion

Hegel’s concept of ethical duty as unity of abstract duty and happiness is informed by the same ‘free’, self-positing conceptual structure that defines his concept of ethical life as a unity of agents’ subjectivity and objective institutions. In both cases, these moments are differentiated, mediated and placed within a compatibility-guaranteeing unity. This enables the notions of (1) unconditioned, yet concrete, drives-satisfying ethical duty and of (2) modern ethical life where unconditioned subjects endorse objective institutions.

The concept-based, difference-respecting unity of these moments renders Hegel’s account distinctly post-Kantian in contrast to the determinacy-based, substance-metaphysical identity of the moments that Aristotle’s champions with his accounts of *eudaimonia* and pre-modern ethical life.

Whether Hegel’s argument for the ‘concept of the will’-based, simultaneous differentiation and unification of these moments succeeds, ultimately depends on the validity of his account of the logical concept. Hegel does not establish or defend it in his writings on practical philosophy directly but maintains to do so in his discussions of metaphysics/logic.⁴⁹

While any systematic engagement with his work will thus have to take these works into account, it suffices to say for the present purpose that the structure of the logical concept’s free self-positing ‘causality’ is inspired by Kant’s transcendental unity of apperception (*SL*: 515/II: 255), that Hegel presents several arguments against substance metaphysics in the logic of essence (*SL*: 333/II: 13), and that he constructively criticizes the notion of immanent teleology that is central to Aristotle’s thought in the logic of the concept (*SL*: 651ff./II: 436).

Still, while Hegel fundamentally commits to a post-Kantian, subjectivity-based conceptual structure, his simultaneous concern with irreducible, determined objectivity can be read to betray his appreciation of Aristotle's substance-based objectivism. Instead of taking Hegel as siding with Kant or Aristotle against the respective other, he might thus be best read as wanting to preserve and harmonize the central insights of both his predecessors in the service of what he thought is philosophy's unique concern: unconditioned, conceptual truth (*SL*: 748/II: 571).⁵⁰

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Notes

¹ Heraclitus 2001: aphorism 55.

² Abbreviations used:

CPtR = Kant, I., *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. W. S. Pluhar (Cambridge: Hackett, 2002). Page references are to the Akademie-Ausgabe pagination.

EL = Hegel, G. W. F., *The Encyclopedia of Logic: Part I of the Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, trans. T. F. Geraets, W. A. Suchting and H. S. Harris (Cambridge: Hackett, 1991).

MM = Kant, I., *The Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. M. J. Gregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991). Page references are to the Akademie-Ausgabe pagination.

NE = Aristotle, *The Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. W. D. Ross, rev. L. Brown (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

PM = Hegel, G. W. F., *Philosophy of Mind*, trans. M. Inwood (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

PR = Hegel, G. W. F., *Outlines of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

SL = Hegel, G. W. F., *The Science of Logic*, trans. and ed. G. di Giovanni (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2010)/*Wissenschaft der Logik* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986, 2 vols.).

VGP = Hegel, G. W. F., *Lectures on the History of Philosophy: The Lectures of 1825–1826*, Volume III, *Medieval and Modern Philosophy*, ed. R. F. Brown, trans. R. F. Brown, J. M. Stewart and H. S. Harris (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990)/*Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986).

³ Cf. Kervégan 2018, Khurana 2017.

⁴ Cf. Kervégan 2018, Novakovic 2017.

⁵ Cf. Kreines 2015, Novakovic 2017: 25, 26.

⁶ By which are meant social, physical, historical and psychological factors.

⁷ '[T]he lovers of what is noble find pleasant the things that are by nature pleasant; and virtuous actions are such, so that these are pleasant for such men as well as in their own nature [...] virtuous actions must be in themselves pleasant. [...] Happiness then is the best, noblest, and most pleasant thing in the world' (*NE*: 1099a).

⁸ '[T]he good man tends to go right and the bad man to go wrong, and especially about pleasure; for this is common to the animals, and also it accompanies all objects of choice' (*NE*: 1104b–1105a).

⁹ *Zufriedenheit—moralische Glückseligkeit*. Hegel will argue that Kant's duty and any positive emotion cannot be united in the same will given Kant's most fundamental commitment to their mutual negation.

¹⁰ Cf. *MM*: 378, 'and every virtue we choose indeed for themselves (for if nothing resulted from them we should still choose each of them)' (*NE*: 1097b). While one might accuse Kant of begging the question against Aristotle regarding the difference of duty and happiness, Hegel will argue that Kant rightfully, if implicitly, rejected the self-undermining consequences of the immediate unity of the moments within *eudaimonia*.

¹¹ 'For we know freedom (as it first becomes manifest to us through the moral law) only as a *negative* property in us, namely that of not being *necessitated* to act through any sensible determining grounds' (*MM*: 226).

¹² '[Professional soldiers fear] death more than disgrace; but the brave man is not that sort of person' (*NE*: 1116b).

¹³ Such as habit, upbringing, etc.

¹⁴ Cf. Thompson 2019: 58.

¹⁵ Cf. Stern 2015: 140ff.

¹⁶ Cf. Moyar 2011: 173ff.

¹⁷ To Hegel, duty and the drives' content are thus able to line up because conceptually speaking, they are always already identified. Insofar as empirically given individuals align them, they do what they are conceptually oriented to do. According to Hegel's Kant, this is impossible within the same will due to their fundamental difference.

¹⁸ While this alignment of drives and duty requires much education and constant work on behalf of any empirically given individual, it is very difficult but not impossible to maintain throughout a lifetime.

¹⁹ This highlights a methodological difference between Hegel and Kant: to Hegel, philosophy must describe the actuality-defining conceptual structure that renders happiness and duty compatible. Meanwhile, Kant philosophically defines them as different and leaves it to concept-external, empirical contingency to unite them.

²⁰ Cf. Yeomans 2019: 3ff. Still, insofar as this self-resting must appear, it cannot but take the form of individuals' striving.

²¹ This does not imply that they lose their particularity and that everyone's happiness is the same. But it means that everyone serves the same ethical duty in their own, particular and thus happiness-compatible way.

²² This also applies to the pursuit of individual interests in civil society: as long as society's individuals pursue their self-realization in a rationally legal manner, they act in accordance with ethical duty. If they adopt happiness as their final end, they are willing to break the laws governing civil society.

²³ The unethical pursuit of happiness amounts to actions that undermine family, civil-society and the state.

²⁴ Cf. *EL*: §163, 239.

²⁵ Self-positing can be described as a variety of metaphysical causality, grounding, material explanation, etc. Its unique, speculative structure defines post-Kantian idealism in contrast to other metaphysical schools.

²⁶ Cf. 'that pure reflection of the I into itself' (*PR*: 28).

²⁷ Cf. Stein 2018.

²⁸ 'psychological' (*VGP*: 221).

²⁹ Cf. Plevrakis 2017.

³⁰ The ontological concept's philosophical justification depends on the truthfulness of the deductions that lead into the concept's description in the *Logic*. While this raises larger questions about the relationship between the three parts 'logic-nature-*Geist*' of Hegel's system insofar as the concept is part of the *logic* and the concept of the will features in the philosophy of *Geist*, it might suffice to mention in the present context that Hegel provides purely logical grounds for the claims in his practical philosophy.

³¹ Cf. Pinkard 2019: 150.

³² Cf. Krijnen 2019: 136.

³³ Cf. Novakovic 2017: 21.

³⁴ See *PR*: §34ff, 53ff.

³⁵ *PR*: §142ff, 154ff.

³⁶ *Politics*: 1255a1.

³⁷ Cf. Moyar 2011.

³⁸ Cf. e.g. Findlay 1958 and Kervégan 2018.

³⁹ Cf. Pippin 2008: 283. To avoid the morality-related connotations of 'choice', one may substitute it by 'commitment'. Cf. Houlgate 2017. Cf. also Ostritsch 2014: 55ff.

⁴⁰ Cf. Kervégan 2018: 344.

⁴¹ In this sense, choice is not absolute and there is but one choice that must be chosen by the rational agent. Cf. Houlgate 2017: 38ff.

⁴² *Metaphysics*: 995b1.

⁴³ Cf. Stein 2018.

⁴⁴ Kant refers to this as the 'order of nature' (*MM*: 378).

⁴⁵ Thereby undermining substance's own universality (cf. Stein 2018).

⁴⁶ While Kant argues that universal reason demands that individuals endorse only the norms deduced in the *MM* with necessity, Hegel argues that Kant's individuality- and thus finitude-based notion of reason undermines the norms' claim to this necessity.

⁴⁷ What this means for the relationship between concept and individual thinker/agent and the latter's freedom, I have discussed in Stein 2018.

⁴⁸ Cf. Kervégan 2018: 352.

⁴⁹ Cf. *EL*: §§157 and 158, 232ff.

⁵⁰ For their very helpful comments on an earlier drafts of this paper, I would like to thank Felix Stein and Thimo Heisenberg. For elucidating discussions of the problems presented here, I would like to thank Prof. Christopher Yeomans.

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