

Hegelian Anthropology and Ethical Cultivation in the Modern World

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ON ONE HAND, HEGEL STRESSES THE IMPORTANCE of the cultivation of an ethical self through a wide range of practices at an early age. On the other hand, he offers virtually no advice for specific practices, does not recommend self-conscious ethical self-cultivation, and devotes no attention to what we might typically think of as ethical excellence. Thus, while the first aspect of Hegel's ethical thought shares a great deal with classical virtue ethics, he seems at another level to diverge dramatically from the central ethical concerns of both classical and contemporary virtue ethics. In some sense this should not be surprising; many have noted that Hegel seeks to appropriate Aristotle for modernity. Moving beyond such general rubrics to appreciate the nuances of Hegel's view, however, requires attending to his remarkably understudied philosophical anthropology.

My focus in this short paper will be on articulating the interrelationships among different elements of Hegel's thought as they bear on this issue; I seek here to fit the puzzle pieces together. The issue shows the complex, mutual imbrication of his anthropological, political, and religious thought. To pull these elements of his thought together in such a brief presentation, I necessarily draw on interpretations of Hegel's anthropology and his political thought developed elsewhere in my work. After a brief overview of central elements of Hegel's anthropology, I argue that this anthropology combines with Hegel's interpretation of modernity to support an ethical conception oriented toward the population as a whole, not just ethical adepts, and incorporates a formation or training to question and thereby move beyond one's formation.

Hegel articulates the core of his mature philosophical anthropology in the philosophy of subjective spirit. Until recently available principally in the outline form of the *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften*, this section can now be studied in significantly greater detail due to the 1994 publication of his *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Geistes*. This section of Hegel's

system elaborates a complex and subtle anthropology that constitutes an underlying endowment [*Anlage*] implicit in all human beings. He elaborates this structure in terms of three spheres of development: “*Anthropologie*” (which constitutes only one aspect of Hegel’s philosophical anthropology), in which the principal movement is the partial overcoming of natural determination through habituation; the “*Phenomenology of Spirit*,” which traces the emergence of self-consciousness and reason; and the “*Psychology*,” which considers the developments of both will and intelligence into free spirit. The individual human is initially formed through a largely unconscious process of habituation. Through the developments traced in later stages, however, we become able to reflect critically upon the habits that have shaped us. Such reflection provides a standpoint from which we may work to reform our habits, though Hegel holds that habits form us at such a deep level that they are not easily shifted. Some reform is possible, though he gives little room for optimism regarding dramatic transformations.

This anthropology has profound implications throughout Hegel’s philosophy of spirit—particularly in objective spirit but also in the philosophy of religion. Less appreciated but no less important are its consequences in the absence of certain forms of ethics in Hegel’s thought. Given the inclusiveness of his system as a whole, Hegel devotes surprisingly little attention to specific practices of ethical formation, to an account of virtues or to an account of practical reason comparable to Kant’s *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals* or *Critique of Practical Reason*. This point must be made carefully: I am not suggesting that Hegel does not have an ethics. To the contrary, as I have argued elsewhere, Adrian Peperzak is right to claim that Hegel’s anthropology “*is at the same time a fundamental ethics*.”¹ Thus, what is striking is the shift in the form and focus of Hegel’s ethics vis-à-vis many of the prominent alternatives.

This shift in the focus of ethical thought derives from Hegel’s anthropology, but it also depends upon his account of the newly emergent “modern” world. The anthropology is particularly significant because of the central role it attributes to habit. For Hegel most human action results not from self-conscious deliberation but from habituated patterns of activity. Although Hegel initially develops the account of habituation in relation to very simple physical activities—such as ignoring the feel of the chair against one’s back or walking upright—the structure of habit plays an essential role in his accounts of ethical life as well as religion.² While Hegel’s account of the will and conception of freedom involve a much greater role for conscious, rational self-determination than many critics have thought, it is still the case that, for Hegel, most people’s daily actions do not involve such reflection and that this action is not peripheral to ethics but central to it. Most people act out of habit most of the time, and Hegel views the ethical (or unethical) character of most of one’s daily activity

as being largely the result of training and habituation. Consequently, a great deal depends upon how we are raised, and Hegel frequently repeats the dictum that the best way to raise good children is to raise them in a good state.³

Even though Hegel attributes this claim to Socrates, Hegel's appropriation transforms it in two crucial respects. First, whereas historically virtue ethics had generally been conceived for an elite, Hegel is concerned with society more broadly. Second, prominent among the habits inculcated in Hegel's vision of the modern world is the practice of critical reflection on this inheritance.

With regard to the first, the cultivation necessary for ethics is not that of ethical or religious elites pursuing excellence through a regime of exercises reserved for a few. Though Hegel's notion of *Bildung* is linked to classical conceptions of *paideia*, Hegel's transplantation of the concept into the modern world involves a shift from the cultivation of elites to the formation of the "ethical everyman." Hegel opposes virtually anything resembling a monkish withdrawal from the world.⁴ Rather, the training that matters, for Hegel, is the more ordinary process of *Bildung* instilled at home, in school, and in church. This claim is easily overlooked, but its significance is dramatic. Thus,

Die Pädagogik ist die Kunst, die Menschen sittlich zu machen: sie betrachtet den Menschen als natürlich und zeigt den Weg, ihn wiederzugebären, seine erste Natur zu einer zweiten geistigen umzuwandeln, so daß diese Geistige in ihm zur *Gewohnheit* wird. (PR § 151 Z, emphasis in original)

This formation in some sense begins in the home, with the parents' upbringing of their children:

Ihre *Erziehung* hat die in Rücksicht auf das Familienverhältnis *positive* Bestimmung, daß die Sittlichkeit in ihnen zur unmittelbaren, noch gegensatzlosen *Empfindung* gebracht [werde] und das Gemüt darin, als dem *Grunde* des sittlichen Lebens, in Liebe, Zutrauen und Gehorsam sein erstes Leben gelebt habe, – dann aber die in Rücksicht auf dasselbe Verhältnis *negative* Bestimmung, die Kinder aus der natürlichen Unmittelbarkeit, in der sie sich ursprünglich befinden, zur Selbständigkeit und freien Persönlichkeit ... zu erheben (PR § 175, emphasis in original)

Similarly, the practices of the religious community instill, particularly in children, a sense of what is most hallowed and how one appropriately relates to this absolute. The child is thereby educated into the representations and practices of the tradition, generally without full consciousness of the process (VPR 3:356-62).

As a result, the burden of ethical cultivation now falls principally on institutions available to most members—at least most male members⁵—of society, and Hegel deems these institutions broadly effective in instilling the appropriate

ethical habits. There are important caveats, but this aspect of Hegel's thought represents a profound shift in the direction of universal access.⁶

At one level, acting ethically is principally a matter of acting in accord with these instilled habits:

Was der Mensch tun müsse, *welches* die Pflichten sind, die er zu erfüllen hat, um tugendhaft zu sein, ist in einem sittlichen Gemeinwesen leicht zu sagen, - es ist nichts anderes von ihm zu tun, als was ihm in seinen Verhältnissen vorgezeichnet, ausgesprochen und bekannt ist. Die Rechtschaffenheit ist das Allgemeine, was an ihn teils rechtlich, teils sittlich gefordert werden kann. (*PR* § 150 A)

In a social context such as Hegel's, wherein the mores are generally rational, most ethical action simply involves acting according to the conventional norms. The ethical activity with which Hegel is most concerned is a matter of *Rechtschaffenheit*, not courage or *agape*, for instance. Although *Rechtschaffenheit* can itself be broken down into more specific virtues, the concept functions for Hegel to signal that, in what he sees as the modern world, acting virtuously is largely a matter of acting as accepted conventions dictate. Situations in which extraordinary virtue is required are rare today: Such virtue is needed, he holds, only when norms come into conflict with each other. In contrast, when the existing ethical institutions were less rational, such conflicts arose more often and exceptional forms of virtue had a more prominent role (*PR* § 150 A) Hegel's account of the rationality of the general structure of the newly emergent modern social order corresponds to his view that the habits instilled by the central currents of modernity are essentially rational. These habits are not in need of substantial criticism or reformation. Consequently, the kind of attention to one's own ongoing ethical development that is so prominent in much Christian thought as well as classical philosophy, plays little role in Hegel's picture of the modern world. It is not in principle precluded, but Hegel's vision of modern ethical life entails that there is not great need for it.

Attending to Hegel's underlying account of habit as well as to his account of the distinctive character of the modern context is essential to comprehending his apparent championing of adhering to existing norms. Already these elements reveal him to be calling for more than simply following whatever norms happen to be in place. Many critics, however, have argued that his picture calls for a dangerous conformity. Responding more fully to these criticisms requires drawing out another aspect of his ethical thought that simultaneously expresses other elements of his anthropology and reflects his distinctive view of modern ethical habits.

If at one level Hegel seems to be satisfied with good habits, at another level he calls for more. Though he does not condemn those who remain at the level of habit or devote significant attention to exhorting people to move

beyond habit, he does care about the difference between performing such actions merely out habit and doing so out of the recognition of their rationality. Even though it may not involve acting differently, only the latter fulfills the “absolute Gebot,” “*Erkenne dich selbst*.”⁷ The transformation, however, does not involve a reformation of practices or dispositions but rather a new comprehension of the same practices. This development beyond habit is essential to Hegel’s account of human self-realization and in this respect can be seen as a vital aspect of his ethical thought.

While habituation entails a liberation from natural determination, it is also unfree by virtue of not involving self-consciousness or a self-determined will. The latter develop only on the basis of the subsequent spheres of Hegel’s anthropology. In the “Phenomenology of Spirit,” Hegel analyzes the emergence of self-consciousness as a social process through which we come to view ourselves in abstraction from natural determination. In the *Enzyklopädie* and the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Geistes* in particular, one of the central elements of the progress achieved by the bondsman or slave derives from developing a consciousness of his or her ability to subordinate physical desires.⁸ This capacity is one of the keys to developing a sense of oneself as distinct from such desires. The resulting conception of ourselves as I’s underlies our capacity to abstract from what is merely given.⁹ In Hegel’s “Psychology,” both the intelligence and the will develop from heteronomy to autonomy, from determination by the merely given to self-determination. Each of these elements of Hegel’s anthropology must also be given expression in a satisfactory ethical life.

Each of these points obviously merits much more attention than we can give them here. Nonetheless, even this brief sketch (which is based on my more extensive argument in other work¹⁰) raises the question of how the expression of these aspects of ourselves can be incorporated into ethical life itself. Insofar as modern ethical life involves customs that have become our practices, the tension seems real. One might suspect that these elements of Hegel’s ethical thought are external to—if not in conflict with—each other. Yet part of what distinguishes the habits of the modern world, for Hegel, is that they incorporate respect for individual subjectivity. This conception is central to the project of the *Philosophy of Right*. Insofar as ethical life expresses who we are—the anthropology—individuals possess their freedom in these practices. This entails, in part, that these practices encompass the space to pursue our own particular desires (*PR* § 153). Yet the incorporation of these elements of the anthropology involves more than space for our particularities: more fundamentally, it requires that the practices not be accepted simply by virtue of their existence; rather, we ultimately should be in a position to endorse them on the

basis of our own evaluation of their rationality.¹¹ Consequently, we must be habituated to question our habits.

While this notion is implicit in Hegel's entire conception of modern ethical life, he provides some of the most informative material on this point in the *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*. In the 1827 lectures, Hegel lays the groundwork for this point already in the introduction. In situating his own thought in relation to current alternatives, he devotes significant attention to the view that "faith" consists most fundamentally in an immediate knowledge of God. He identifies this view most closely with Friedrich Jacobi, but associates it with Friedrich Schleiermacher as well. Despite its inadequacy, this view has a significant positive aspect:

daß der Glaube im Innersten, in meiner tiefsten Eigenheit seine Wurzel hat, mein Innerstes davon untrennbar ist – dies allgemeine Prinzip, wie der religiöse Glaube in neuerer Zeit bestimmt wird, unmittelbares Anschauen, Wissen in mir das schlechthin nicht von außen kommt. Damit ist schlechterdings alle äußere Autorität, alle fremdartige Beglaubigung entfernt. Was mir gelten soll, muß seine Beglaubigung in meinem Geist haben; es kann wohl der Anstoß von außen kommen, aber der äußerliche Anfang ist gleichgültig. Daß ich glaube, dazu gehört das Zeugnis meines Geistes". (*VPR* 1:70-71)

This insight, however, is not merely a notion that happens to be widely circulating; it is ultimately central to what makes Protestant Christianity the consummate religion:

Abstrakt genommen ist das Prinzip des protestantischen Geistes, die Freiheit des subjektiven Geistes in sich, daß der Geist des Menschen frei ist, daß der Geist des Menschen dabei sein muß, wenn es ihm gelten soll, daß keine Autorität statt findet.¹²

Protestantism teaches—or, more concretely, Protestant churches teach people, principally as children—that we are implicitly free and that no authority ultimately stands over against us.

As Hegel elaborates in his extensive account of the cultus, the community's practices transmit such teachings to children from a young age.¹³ That is, Lutheran churches, according to Hegel, habituate children to prize their own judgment, not simply to accept what is given or what they have been brought up with. Hegel links this appreciation of freedom to modern political life in particular, and this point constitutes the crux of Hegel's claim for the Christian character of the modern state (*VPR* 1:344). As Walter Jaeschke writes, "This ethical life is to be termed Christian insofar as it is mediated with the principle of subjectivity, which acquires a shape for the first time in the Christian world. In this and nothing else, in Hegel's view, does the Christian character of the

modern state reside.”¹⁴ Christianity is the religion of the modern state precisely because it cultivates a consciousness of freedom from the given. And precisely in doing so, it teaches us to move beyond habit.

Only insofar as our institutions—particularly families, schools, and churches—instill this self-consciousness do they play the role that Hegel envisions. These modern institutions, Hegel holds, cultivate precisely the sense of autonomy that allows us to think for ourselves and question more traditional modes of action. Only such a training does justice to the complexity of Hegel’s anthropology and enables us—when the need does arise—to question existing institutions and recognize either their immanent contradictions or the rationality in them. It is thus a habituation to move beyond habituation, with the realization that much of our action will always remain habitual. While we may be less sanguine than Hegel regarding the actual institutions of the modern West, articulating the anthropological and ethical scaffolding of Hegel’s view uncovers resources that may be more valuable today than many of his more concrete judgments on the modern world.

ENDNOTES

1 Adriaan Peperzak, *Selbsterkenntnis des Absoluten: Grundlinien der Hegelischen Philosophie des Geistes* (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1987), 49, emphasis in original, my translation.

2 I have developed this interpretation at length in Thomas A. Lewis, *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel: Reconsidering Anthropology, Ethics, and Religion* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), 54-59, 137-46, and 191-94 as well as in Thomas A. Lewis, “Speaking of Habits: The Role of Language in Moving from Habit to Freedom,” *Owl of Minerva* 39, no. 1-2 (2007-2008): 25-54.

3 See, for example, G. W. F. Hegel, *Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus, vol. 7, *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), § 153 A. Hereafter cited as *PR*.

4 See, for instance, G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Religion*, ed. Walter Jaeschke, 3 vols. (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1983-85), 3:263. Hereafter cited as *VPR*.

5 Hegel’s view of women does seem to exclude them from much of the relevant formation.

6 Despite this larger shift, Hegel does maintain a variety of forms of elitism. See Lewis, *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel*, 166-83. The same elitism is also operative in his claim that philosophy is only available to a few and that religion is the form in which truth appears for most people; see *VPR* 1:292 and 3:96-97.

7 See G. W. F. Hegel, *Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)*, ed. Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus, vol. 8-10, *Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), § 377, emphasis in original. Hereafter cited as *Enz*.

8 *Enz*. §§ 434-37 and *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie des Geistes*, ed. Franz Hespe and Burkhard Tuschling (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1994), 171-75.

9 For an excellent account of this material that highlights intersubjectivity, see Robert R. Williams, *Hegel’s Ethics of Recognition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998),

69-91.

10 See Lewis, *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel*.

11 See Lewis, *Freedom and Tradition in Hegel*, 135-61.

12 G. W. F. Hegel, *Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie, 1818-1831*, ed. Karl-Heinz Ilting, 4 vols. (Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1974), 4:650. See also *VPR* 1:344

13 See *VPR* 1:336 n.

14 Walter Jaeschke, *Reason in Religion: The Foundations of Hegel's Philosophy of Religion*, trans. J. Michael Stewart and Peter C. Hodgson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 262.