

Is Hegel an Unwitting Humean?

Hegel is famously critical of Kant's claim that pure reason can legislate for the will; more specifically, he is critical of the claim that moral deliberation requires radically stepping back from everything empirical about ourselves. The question I take up in this paper is whether this criticism places Hegel in familiar territory occupied by Humeans. If deliberation does not involve radically stepping back from everything that is particular about ourselves, then must normative claims, specifically reasons for action, have their source in desires? This question is of vital importance not only for Kantian and Humean ethics, but also for any attempt to develop a distinctively Hegelian approach in ethics. In what follows I sketch a Hegelian response to two distinct Humean claims about reasons and desires. This response rejects normative Humeanism but advances an amended version of motivational Humeanism.

Motivational Humeanism and Normative Humeanism

It sometimes seems that desires are forces operating upon us, pushing and pulling us in conflicting ways. But unruly as they sometimes may be, Hume thinks that moral theory should not treat desires as alien forces to be subdued by reason. Instead, he contends, if we observe how desire and reason combine to bring about action, we find that desires play an essential role in moving us to act. Agents must take an interest in what they do, or they will not do anything at all. This may seem like a trivial point, but it is one that Hume thinks rationalist views obscure. Hume's contention is that desires are not just an unfortunate side effect of the fact that we are all empirical as well as rational beings; desire is instead indispensable to action. In contrast, what is distinctive about the

faculty of reason is that we use it to make assertions that are capable of being true or false. We do use reason to deliberate about how to act, but such deliberation is not uniquely practical.¹

Hume's claim in the *Treatise* that desire is necessary for action is one that subsequent thinkers have found compelling. Motivational Humeanism is the view that desires provide a necessary animating force behind all actions. Donald Davidson has developed a primarily explanatory account of the connection between desires and reasons for action. He proposes that reasons "rationalize" actions in the sense that they explain why actions appear rational to agents given their particular desires and beliefs.² It is significant, however, that Davidson does not address the question of what counts as a good or a normative reason. Instead, he limits himself to explaining what happens when an agent acts on something she takes to be a reason. But are all reasons *good* reasons?

This is a question that normative Humeanism attempts to address.³ Bernard Williams argues that agents have normative reasons to act in ways that satisfy their aims when those aims are not "unreasonable" in Hume's original sense.⁴ Consider Hume's provocative assertion that it is not unreasonable to "prefer the destruction of the whole world to the scratching of my finger."⁵ Hume takes this to be a direct consequence of the claim that reason can only serve desire. Reason cannot judge one preference to be better or more correct than another, and so a desire to avoid one harm at the cost of another (even a greater one) is not in itself unreasonable.⁶ Williams revises this view into the claim that reasons claims are normative so long as they do not depend on false beliefs. It is

¹ If practical reasoning is deliberation guided by practical principles, then Hume does not offer a theory of practical reasoning. John Rawls emphasizes this point in his *Lectures on the History of Moral Philosophy*, pp. 33-4 and 49-50. See also Elijah Millgram, "Was Hume a Humean?"

² See Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes".

³ T.M. Scanlon draws a similar distinction between what he calls "motivational Humeanism" and "justificatory Humeanism." He attributes the former to Hume, but not the latter. See *What We Owe to Each Other*, pp. 19-20.

⁴ See "Internal and External Reasons". Only slightly less dramatic than Hume's example is one that Williams develops: if an agent who abuses his spouse really would not be motivated to stop after due deliberation, then we cannot attribute to him a reason to stop.

⁵ *Treatise*, 2.3.3.6. Only slightly less dramatic is an example in which Bernard Williams claims that if an agent who abuses his spouse really would not be motivated to stop after due deliberation, then we cannot attribute to him a reason to stop. See "Internal and External Reasons", p. 107.

⁶ As Hume claims, it is not "contrary to reason to prefer my acknowledged lesser good to my greater" (*Treatise*, 2.3.3.6).

possible (and indeed common) for agents to have false beliefs about reasons and to be unaware of true reasons. Agents do not simply have reasons to act in whatever ways they are motivated; rather, the truth of the beliefs on which a real reason is based distinguishes it from other considerations that could merely explain action. Reasons thus “rationalize” actions in a sense that is stronger than Davidson proposes. They not only explain why an action *appears* rational to an agent; rather, reasons explain why an action actually *is* rational in light of one’s wants and interests. That an action is rational in this sense, Williams contends, is precisely what it means for someone to have a normative reason to act in some way.

The distinction between normative and motivational Humeanism is important to keep in mind as we turn to consider whether Hegel’s approach to ethics is fundamentally Humean. Motivational Humeanism claims only that all actions are motivated at least in part by desires. Normative Humeanism makes the stronger claim that desires (when they do not depend upon false beliefs) give us normative reasons for acting.

The Hegelian Critique of Normative Humeanism

As an interpretive matter, there is little to be said about Hegel’s reception of Hume’s ethics. Though Hegel often discusses the views of other thinkers, he seems to have had little interest in Hume. We know that he was at least acquainted with Hume’s work, since he includes a brief discussion of Hume in his *Lectures on the History of Philosophy*,⁷ and also in his 1830 *Encyclopedia Logic*.⁸ He views Hume as a secondary figure in empiricism who followed Locke’s ideas to a skeptical conclusion. Hegel seems surprised that Hume made such a strong impression on Kant, and it is this impression which he took to be Hume’s most significant contribution to philosophy.

⁷*Vorlesungen über die Geschichte der Philosophie III*, pp. 275-281

⁸ *Encyclopedia Logic*, §39, §47, §50 and §53

Yet Hegel's critiques of Kant do have, at least superficially, a rather Humean flavor. Hegel argues that moral theory should not be radically divorced from who we are as concrete, particular agents; it should not require us to be alienated from everything that is not purely rational about ourselves. As I will argue, however, Hegel is also consistently critical of theories that attempt to ground normative claims in facts, either social or psychological, just as such. This criticism is especially prominent in his repeated attacks on several post-Kantians who developed anti-rationalist responses to Kant's moral theory.

At the heart of Hegel's criticism of his contemporaries is his discussion of what he calls the "contents" of different desires.⁹ The content of a desire is the thing that is desired, i.e. the end toward which the desire is directed. Agent *A* has desires *D1*, *D2*, ...*Dn*. Taken together, these desires form what Bernard Williams has termed *A*'s 'subjective motivational set', a set which includes projects and commitments and interests as well as feelings, wants, and needs. Hegel points out that if desires *just as such* give us normative reasons, then the contents of those desires, i.e. the ends to which they are directed, are normatively irrelevant.¹⁰ But why should we think that all desires have normative authority, irrespective of their content? There must be something that confers this authority on desires as such.

Perhaps the status of being subjectively 'mine' is supposed to lend normative authority to feelings and desires. This is an idea that Hegel encountered in the work of some of his contemporaries. One prominent post-Kantian moral theory advocated an "ethics of conscience," according to which each individual's conscience is a uniquely authoritative source of insight into

⁹ *Encyclopedia*, §471

¹⁰ Recall that, for Hume, no desire is unreasonable so long as it does not depend upon false beliefs; thus it is not unreasonable to prefer world destruction to a scratched finger. But is there nothing more, Hegel asks, that can be said about which desires are good and which are bad, which desires we should act upon? Hegel raises this first question directly in §474 of his 1830 *Encyclopedia*. The second question is raised indirectly as part of his discussion of intention in both the 1830 *Encyclopedia*, §507-512, and the *Philosophy of Right*, §123-126.

how to act.¹¹ But is every individual's conscience always correct in its judgments, i.e. is every conscience always "true?" If we are to rely on the voice of conscience, then we need to be able to determine whether what conscience "declares to be good is also actually good."¹² But how are we to do that if conscience is proclaimed to be the definitive judge of right and wrong? The ethics of conscience, Hegel charges, denies that we might meaningfully ask whether conscience is correct in its pronouncements.¹³

Hegel contends that such an approach undermines the very idea of normative authority.¹⁴ If what is decisive is that *my* conscience tells me to act in some way, then it is immaterial how *my* conscience arrived at its judgment. In other words, if the content of what conscience tells me to do does not bear on whether or not I ought to listen to the voice of conscience, then there is nothing that we can say about good reasons beyond pointing to the fact of conscience.¹⁵ But is the voice of conscience always right? Why should it be considered a source of normative authority? These are questions that Hegel thinks the ethics of conscience leaves unanswered.

Another prominent post-Kantian approach advocated what we might today describe as an "ethics of authenticity." The Romantics were critical of Kant for treating emotions and desires as inherently alien forces to be suppressed by pure reason. Some responded by arguing that our actions ought to express our authentic individuality, in particular our feelings and desires. Hegel was sympathetic with the Romantic criticism of Kant. But he objected to their proposed alternative: that whatever "wells up from each individual's heart, emotion and enthusiasm" is right and good, just

¹¹ Hegel concedes that conscience plays an important role in deliberation, and he thinks that "true" conscience is a reliable guide to what is right and good (*Philosophy of Right*, §137).

¹² *Philosophy of Right*, §137R

¹³ Hegel again puts this point in terms of content: the account of reasons as grounded in conscience puts "whatever content it pleases into its knowing and willing." This passage continues: "It [conscience] is the moral genius which knows the inner voice of what it immediately knows to be a divine voice" (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §655).

¹⁴ "It is precisely the essence of conscience to have no truck with the calculating and weighing of duties, and to make its *own* decision without reference to any reasons" (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 645).

¹⁵ As Hegel puts it, there is nothing more to be said about what might count as a reason other than "the consciousness of having fulfilled one's duty" as determined by the voice of conscience. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 644.

because it comes from the heart.¹⁶ What, Hegel asks, makes the heart just as such normatively authoritative? Feelings and desires do sometimes lead us astray, tempting us to act against our better judgment. Why then should the search for reasons bottom out in appeals to facts about what we want and feel? The *content* of our desires is then beside the point, since it is supposed to be just in virtue of wanting something that one has a good reason to pursue it. But now reasons seem to just be describing facts about us rather than grounding the authority of our normative claims.¹⁷ Such an approach, Hegel charges, reduces normative authority to an “empty” concept.¹⁸ It is empty in the sense that it does not have any real application: if so-called normative claims just describe facts about us, then they are not really normative at all.

What do Hegel’s critiques of his contemporaries reveal about how he might respond to normative Humeanism? Whereas Hume objects to moral theories that depend upon supposed facts about human nature and/or God, Hegel objects to theories that depend upon facts about the contents of one’s subjective motivational set. In both cases, the criticism is that an ‘is’ is taken to have normative authority even though it is unclear why the ‘is’ should have that authority. Those who might read the Hegelian account as conventionalist take it to be advocating the view that *just because* we hold certain identities and are committed to certain social practices, these motivations and identities give us normative reasons. But this sort of conventionalism is rejected by Hegel because it fails to show how such motivations and identities are justified.

Recall that the idea that reasons rationalize actions relative to desires is crucial to Bernard Williams’s normative Humean account. Reasons rationalize actions only up to a certain point, namely until we reach facts about how we feel and what we want. The Hegelian argument is that if

¹⁶ *Philosophy of Right*, pp. 15-17

¹⁷ This problem becomes especially visible, Hegel thinks, when we consider the Romantic notion of irony. Socrates used irony to pursue truth; it was only the views of the Sophists that he treated ironically. The Romantics, in contrast, treat the very ideas of truth and right with irony. Each agent, according to Romanticism, “wills and resolves in a particular way but may equally well will and resolve otherwise” (*Philosophy of Right*, § 140R).

¹⁸ *Philosophy of Right*, § 140R

we stop looking for reasons beyond a set of psychological (or, for that matter, social) facts, then we can never really know whether our reasons are good reasons. To respond by asserting that these are facts about *me* and so they give *me* reasons does not help.¹⁹ Why should others acknowledge the normativity of our reasons and view them as justifying, rather than just explaining, actions?

Or put slightly differently, the Humean argument for why reason cannot evaluate desire is only a negative one: the faculty of reason has limited powers. But this does not amount to a justification for thinking that that feelings or desires give us normative reasons. It may be the case that we often think that our desires give us good reasons for acting, but this does not show that desires as such are normatively authoritative.²⁰

Amending Motivational Humeanism

I opened this paper by asking whether Hegel's approach to ethics is Humean in important respects. In arguably the most important respect, the answer is no. Hegel rejects the claim that reasons have their source or basis in desires as such. Yet Hegel is also famous for his critiques of Kant's rationalism and for his attempt to integrate empirical facts about us as actual agents into his ethical theory. In the remainder of this paper, I sketch a Hegelian amendment to motivational Humeanism that (1) preserves Hume's attempt to integrate desires into moral theory but (2) still rejects Hume's anti-rationalism. Hegel argues that there are no *purely* rational motives; acting on rational principles always involves acting on the wants and interests we have as beings who are both rational and empirical.

¹⁹ This is a point that Hegel briefly makes about Hume in particular, claiming that a Humean approach gives rise to an "infinite diversity of what counts as right and duty among mankind" (*Encyclopedia Logic*, p. 53).

²⁰ This is a point that Williams seems to concede when he strongly resists identifying reasons with the rightness of an action. The normativity of our reasons, he contends, in no way reflects on whether the proposed action is right or wrong. See "Internal and External Reasons", as well as *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*.

Hegel's contention is that all of our actions are motivated at least in part by desires; even the most principled actions depend to some extent on motivations that Kant regards as "impure." This contention plays a prominent role in his introduction to the *Philosophy of History*, where he considers how principles and ideas become actualized through the deeds of particular agents. It is true, he concedes, that history is replete with instances of people acting violently in order to fulfill their desires. This might lead us to think that acting on rational principles requires that we put aside all of our wants and interests as empirical beings.²¹ But Hegel thinks that it is a mistake to think that morality requires that we act independently of actual wants and interests.

Unlike Hume, however, Hegel does think that the faculty of reason enables us to formulate and apply principles about how we should act. Instead of adopting Hume's view of the limitations of the powers of reasoning, Hegel focuses on the question of how we translate rational principles into action.²² His argument is roughly the following: principles are, by their nature, general. 'One should do one's duty', 'One should be kind to strangers', and so forth. In order to follow such principles, we must identify determinate courses of action that reflect or actualize those principles. 'I should give up my seat for the elderly man who just got on my bus', 'I should lie to the man at the door who means to murder my friend', etc. Such proposed actions have determinate ends; what they aim at is concrete and specific, unlike the general principles under which they fall. Such determinate ends appeal to us not just because they reflect the principle(s) in question, but also because of our particular wants and interests.

²¹ The view with which Hegel is concerned holds that "passion...is a thing of sinister aspect, more or less immoral. Man is required to have no passions," at least insofar as he acts morally. Kant of course never claims that we should try to rid ourselves of desires (*Philosophy of History*, p. 23). Hegel's point, however, is that ethics should not treat desire as external to moral action, as though we might act as purely rational beings whose actual desires are beside the point.

²² See *Philosophy of Right*, §133 ff.

Hegel's claim is that it is only through the mediation of actual wants and interests that we can specify determinate ends in accordance with our principles. He puts it this way: "aims, principles, etc., have a place in our thoughts...but not yet in the sphere of reality....The motive power that puts them in operation, and gives them determinate existence, is the need, instinct, inclination and passion of man."²³ Acting on a principle, he thinks, *requires* being motivated by determinate ends as well as by the principle itself. Our actual interests, which belong to us in virtue of being empirical as well as rational beings, enable us to translate our abstract principles into practice. They do so not only at the end of our deliberation, when we attempt to act on our decisions, but also during deliberation itself. To take an example, the details of one's friendships (to whom and in what specific ways) are central to determining how to actually treat one's friends. Such commitments and interests (which are both types of desire, broadly conceived) are not at the periphery of the matter, but rather are crucial to how we translate initially abstract principles into determinate courses of action.

Consider what it would be to try to do the right thing only because it is right, i.e. to act only for the sake of duty. Any attempt to specify actions that fall under a principle such as "doing the right thing" requires setting determinate ends which in part reflect our wants and interests. Hegel argues that the attempt to preserve one's own moral purity by refraining from mixing one's principles with one's desires is ultimately a form of hypocrisy. This is a point that he makes as part of his discussion of the Romantic notion of the "beautiful soul" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. If I attempt to preserve my moral purity by insisting that my motives remain pure, "I act morally when I am conscious of

²³ *Philosophy of History*, p. 22. Further: "when I actually act, I am conscious of an other, an actuality that is at hand...; I have a determinate end and fulfill a determinate duty. There is something in it that is other than pure duty. when the moral consciousness declares pure duty to be the essence of its action, this pure purpose is a dissemblance of the truth of the matter; for the fact is that pure duty consists in the empty abstraction of pure thought, and has its reality and its content only in a specific content, in a reality which is the reality of consciousness itself...as an individual" (*Phenomenology of Spirit*, §637).

performing only pure duty and nothing else but that; this means, in fact, when I do not act.”²⁴ Hegel has in mind the figure of a moralist who claims to occupy a high moral ground but who in fact fails to take actions in accordance with his or her principles, lamenting that his motives are never pure enough. In order to truly keep one’s hands clean in this way, one must be willing to refrain from acting altogether. Even if we can arrive at formal principles independent of our desires, we cannot put them into action without focusing them through the lens of our actual wants and interests.

These considerations lead Hegel to claim that an expectation of the “satisfaction” of one’s desires is a condition of acting at all,²⁵ and that “all activity is founded on some need.”²⁶ This view shares with motivational Humeanism a commitment to the claim that desire, broadly conceived, is necessary for action. But notice that it is not anti-rationalist. Hegel insists that in order to retain this insight, we need not adopt an account of practical reason that reduces it to the status of being the slave of the passions. Doing so generates an insufficiently weak account of normativity, one that grounds normative claims on facts without providing a further rationale or justification.

What this reveals is that a Hegelian approach to ethics does not neatly map onto the debate between Kant and Hume, and this is a strength of the approach. Hegel proposes that there is a way to integrate elements of the two theories, and this is perhaps what is most interesting about the possibility of a Hegelian approach: the attempt to draw upon key insights from both both theoretical standpoints.

²⁴ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §637. See also Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology*, pp. 214-217.

²⁵ *Philosophy of Right*, §124.

²⁶ *Lectures on the Philosophy of Right* (Suhrkamp 17), 234.