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Abstract

Hegel famously argues that Kant's account of critical distance depends upon an impoverished conception of freedom. In its place, Hegel introduces a richer conception of freedom, according to which the self who is capable of self-determination is multifaceted: wanting and thinking, social and individual. This richer conception gives rise to an account of critical reflection that emphasizes engagement with our motives and practices rather than radical detachment from them. But what is most distinctive about Hegel's account is the idea that when we reflect upon motives and practices, we draw upon shared self-understandings that are neither universal nor just particular to individuals. There is, Hegel argues, no presocial identity or self that can be detached from our socially constituted contexts of thought and value. This has important implications for how we conceive of critical reflection.

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The ability to critically reflect upon one's desires seems, as Kant argues, essential to deliberation. But is reflective distance, then, the optimal mode of deliberation? I consider this question from a perspective that is relatively unexplored in contemporary ethical theory, namely Hegel's ethical thought. My point of departure is Hegel's critique of the idea that we deliberate best when we radically distance ourselves from our desires. Views which hold that the optimal mode of deliberation is one of distance from oneself, Hegel argues, rely upon an impoverished conception of freedom. More specifically, he charges that Kant's moral theory fails on its own terms to provide an account of what it means to be fully self-determining. In this paper, I develop and defend this critique in light of three Kantian responses. I conclude by proposing a distinctively Hegelian account of reflection which emphasizes not only distance, but also engagement with our motives and practices.

Distance and Alienation

Hegel's famous empty formalism critique has received much scholarly attention in recent years.¹ However, a second critique also poses a significant challenge to Kantian moral theory. Hegel charges Kant with introducing a radical account of reflective distance, one which depends upon an impoverished conception of self-determination. If this charge is successful, then Kant's theory fails to show how critical reflection enables us to become fully free and self-determining.

Hegel discovers a radical account of reflective distance in Kant's core texts on practical philosophy, where Kant emphasizes pure reason's independence from all empirical content. Although these texts do not exhaust Kant's moral theory, they do highlight its essential components.

At an important moment in the *Groundwork*, Kant raises the possibility that morality is a mere “phantom of the brain.”² This remark comes after he has argued that hypothetical imperatives are by their nature unfit to serve as moral principles. Only a categorical imperative, unconditioned by anything empirical, could provide a sufficient grounding for the normative force of moral claims. But, he concedes, there are grounds for skepticism concerning whether we are really capable of acting on principles determined purely by reason. Examples of self-interested behavior predominate. Even when we act in accordance with duty, it is usually out of concern for the “dear self,” i.e. in order to satisfy our inclinations.³

Rather than trying to refute such skepticism by pointing to actual instances of non-self-interested behavior, Kant undertakes a critique of the faculty of reason which is intended to show that moral action is at least possible for us. This requires a new approach, one which focuses on the conditions for the possibility of self-determination. Kant’s approach is meant to contrast with theories which regard moral claims as conditional upon empirical facts about agents, specifically motivations or feelings. Kant has in mind not only Hume, but also the moral-sense theorists Shaftesbury and Hutcheson, both of whom he criticizes at length.⁴ Their theories, he charges, fail to provide a genuine grounding for morality. The moral law cannot originate in empirical facts, if that law is to be self-authored rather than imposed upon us.

Kant develops a radical account of critical distance that is prominent both in his conditional argument (that if morality exists, then it is essentially categorical), and in his subsequent attempt to establish that moral action is indeed possible. For Kant, freedom is first and foremost an independence from everything not purely rational about oneself. An agent’s “true” or proper self is purely rational, and all of the qualities that attach to us as situated and particular persons are appearances of that true self.⁵ By this, Kant does not mean to suggest that we are not also empirical beings. We are situated in actual social contexts and we have particular motivations, and these

things are real in a way that the language of appearance obscures. But what is essential to critical reflection is the ability to abstract the rational self away from everything which falls outside of pure reason. The distance metaphor is apt, then, since Kant thinks that sound deliberation requires reflection that is unconditioned by anything empirical about oneself.

Hegel charges that this account of reflection makes normative authority wholly internal to the faculty of pure reason and wholly external to all aspects of oneself that fall outside that faculty. Kantian agents must, then, experience all genuinely moral claims as impositions “that stand over and against the [empirical] self.”⁶ Recall that Kant thinks that an agent’s true or proper self is purely rational; it is to this self that an optimally reflective agent steps back when evaluating motives and practices. The legislation of the purely rational self is, by definition, supposed to be foreign to the desires, practices, and self-understandings of the empirical self, even when the two do not conflict. And only the purely rational self is capable of authoring genuinely normative claims.

Kant describes the result as a kind of internal autocracy, wherein the rational self has absolute authority over the empirical self.⁷ If we were purely rational beings, then there would be nothing from which to distance ourselves, and so our volition would be “of itself necessarily in accord with the law.”⁸ Instead, we also have feelings and desires that can conflict with the legislation of pure reason, and so we experience that legislation as a command. Hegel argues that Kant’s moral theory thus entails that we must be alienated from ourselves just because we have motives and practices upon which we must critically reflect, i.e. just in virtue of being rational as well as empirical creatures. Self-alienation is, on Kant’s theory, thus characteristic of all beings like ourselves.

At issue is how we are to understand the self that is capable of self-determination. Self-determining agents are subjects to, as well as authors of, the moral law, and as subjects we must conform our empirical selves to that law. Self-determination consists, for Kant, in pure reason’s self-legislation, which is achieved only through the radical alienation of the empirical self. So even a

fully self-determining agent would still experience morality as foreign or alien to his or her actual self, despite its also being self-legislated.⁹ This is because it is only as purely rational beings that we are capable of identifying with the legislation of pure reason.

The critique is that, in Kant's haste to deny Hume's assertion that reason is the slave of the passions, he introduces another sort of slavishness and unfreedom: the subordination of everything empirical about oneself to a standard of pure reason.¹⁰ The language that Hegel uses to describe Kant's theory that of self-mastery but also self-enslavement.¹¹ The difference between individuals ruled by others and those ruled by pure reason is "that the former have their lord outside themselves, while the latter carries his lord in himself, yet at the same time is his own slave."¹² The Kantian claim is that anything outside of pure reason "counts as an alien cause, including the desires and inclinations of the person."¹³ Even an optimally reflective agent is supposed to be fundamentally divided against him or herself, with the empirical self commanded by the rational self. The self-determination of a purely rational self, the only kind of self-determination about which Kant theorizes, thus depends upon the subjection of the empirical self. It offers a degree of freedom, but it also requires a degree of self-subjection and alienation.

One line of response to this critique might point out that alienation is sometimes very much appropriate, as when we distance ourselves from destructive impulses. Hegel, however, is not denying that alienation, even radical alienation, in some instances is quite appropriate. Distance from a motive or practice can indeed provide a vehicle for achieving a greater degree of freedom. But Hegel's claim is that a theory which regards radical alienation as the optimal mode of critical reflection depends upon a flawed model of freedom. We strive for self-determination, he contends, because it offers the possibility of becoming less, rather than more, alienated from what we do and why we do it. When we reflect upon our motives and practices, we aspire to become able to fully take ownership of our reasons and our deeds, as actual agents rather than as mere abstractions of

ourselves. We seek, in other words, a freedom which extends beyond the legislation of a purely rational self.

A second response to the critique might draw upon Kant's claim that we often take some satisfaction from radical critical distance. He proposes that a special kind of contentment can arise when we reflect by having successfully excluded all empirical influences.¹⁴ This sublime satisfaction is distinct from other feelings of pleasure in that it accompanies the consciousness of virtue rather than the fulfillment of desire. Kant describes it as an intellectual contentment, and he emphasizes that it can only be felt as a consequence of employing pure reason. One cannot achieve this contentment by aiming for it; instead, experiencing it depends on achieving radical distance even from the desire for such contentment.

This response, however, serves to underscore rather than refute Hegel's critique. It is not uncommon to take pleasure in alienation, as, for example, when an intellectual enjoys professing ignorance of popular culture, or a workaholic takes a strange pleasure from being too busy for family and friends. Though some such alienation may be inescapable in life, what is problematic is the extent to which Kant builds radical alienation into his definition of self-determination, as though alienation were something to which we ultimately aspired. What Kant thinks the rational self enjoys is precisely its radical independence from the empirical self. Such satisfaction can arise only as a consequence of systematic alienation; one can experience it only by wholly excluding everything empirical from the grounds of reflective judgment. The fact that such detachment can be somewhat satisfying or enjoyable does not imply that it is any less alienating.

A third response to the critique might claim that Hegel's critique saddles Kant with an uncharitable and implausible view of critical reflection. Kant recognizes that, all things being equal, it is pragmatically better when inclinations do not conflict with the legislation of pure reason. Yet, he also insists that self-determination in no way depends upon any actual integration of one's

empirical and rational selves. What Hegel objects to, however, is Kant's claim that freedom requires standing "under a discipline of reason, and in all our maxims we must not forget our subjection to it."¹⁵ Our purely rational selves alone author the moral law which our empirical selves must follow. Such self-subjection precludes the possibility that one could be self-determining as an actual agent who is empirical as well as rational; it excludes the possibility of ever becoming able to regard one's motives and practices as more than alien influences upon the purely rational will.

Yet, the radical nature of Kant's account of critical distance continues to resonate with moral theorists today. Contemporary Kantians make use of the notion of an ideally rational agent who steps back to reflect independently of any empirical features about his or her actual self. This notion is developed, for instance, in the work of both Christine Korsgaard and Michael Smith.¹⁶ They argue that the optimally reflective version of oneself is essentially impersonal, stepping back to engage in precisely the same universally valid reflection that any other agent would ideally engage in. Another adaptation of Kant's account of critical distance can be found in the work of David Velleman.¹⁷ He holds that within each of us there are different metaphorical voices speaking as we deliberate about how to act. In addition to a self whose voice represents us as empirical beings, there is a purely rational self who speaks with what Velleman calls the voice of conscience. It is this self who authoritatively judges what reasons we have and determines how we ought to act. Stepping back, then, is a matter of lessening the grip of the empirical self in order to listen to the more authoritative voice of the purely rational self.

What such Kantian views share is a commitment to the thesis that the optimal mode of critical reflection is one of radical distance. It is worth noting that the notion of an ideally rational agent is not uniquely Kantian. Hume and contemporary Humeans also make use of the notion of an agent who is the most rational version of him or herself. What is distinctively Kantian, however, is the claim that radical distance is essential to sound deliberation. Such a degree of distance is necessary,

Korsgaard argues, if we are to answer the normative question, i.e. the question of how to ground the authority of normative demands.¹⁸ Only unconditioned by empirical facts can normative claims genuinely obligate us, and so the only alternative to a morality based on feelings or desires is one that grounds normative claims in pure reason. This represents a reprisal of Kant's claim that motivation and reflection must be independent of one another if our reflection is to have genuine normative authority. Either we are capable of using pure reason to evaluate our motivations, or we are limited to evaluating motivations in terms of one another. If this way of framing the matter is correct, then a Kantian approach would seem to be the only alternative to desire-based subjectivism.

Contemporary Kantians have responded to the charge of alienation by attempting to show that pure reason can derivatively confer normative authority upon projects, commitments, and practical identities.¹⁹ Velleman, for example, focuses on the question of whether we should love others only for their purely rational selves, or whether we should love them instead for all of their concrete particularities. What is at stake is whether, from a Kantian perspective, love should be understood as having genuine normative import. Velleman articulates the view that love is a special form of respect for the purely rational self of another member of humanity. But love, he argues, also requires care for the non-rational parts of a person. The upshot is that attending to the empirical features of those we love has derivative moral worth insofar as it contributes to showing respect for their purely rational humanity. Thus, we need not radically distance ourselves from feelings of love every time we deliberate about how to act; love is sometimes, as Velleman puts it, a moral emotion.

This approach is one that Korsgaard takes up at a more general level. She suggests that radical distance is not appropriate in many ordinary cases of deliberation. More commonly, we evaluate feelings and desires in terms of our projects, commitments, and practical identities. But projects, commitments, and identities sometimes fail to be genuinely valuable and worthwhile; how are we to evaluate them? Korsgaard proposes that we rely on ever more fundamental practical identities,

increasingly abstract self-conceptions that underlie our particular projects and commitments. A problem of regress threatens, however, unless there is something that ultimately grounds all of our evaluations. Korsgaard contends that there exists a final identity that all agents share just in virtue of being agents, and that is the purely abstract identity of rational humanity. Ultimately, then, our motives and practices must be capable of being reflectively endorsed in light of an abstract conception of ourselves as purely rational beings.

Although this response does help to moderate Kant's tendency to overlook the significance of feelings and desires, it fails as a refutation of Hegel's critique. Korsgaard and Velleman are right to point out that Kantians need not be committed to the view that all instances of critical reflection require radical distance. It is appropriate in many instances to remain immersed in motives and practices while reflecting upon them. But Kant's moral theory defines the ultimate seat of normative authority as isolated and removed from who we are as actual persons. At best, then, our motives and practices can have only derivative value for us; we reflectively endorse them insofar as they provide vehicles for respecting our purely rational selves. Radical distance, though perhaps not called for in every instance of deliberation, is nonetheless Kant's paradigm of critical reflection. What is distinctive about Kant's project is that it aims at grounding normative authority in pure reason alone. And this is precisely what is alienating. Responses that point to ways in which pure reason can confer derivative normative authority on the empirical self fail to address our alienation from the *grounds* of that authority.

The ability to reflect critically is essential to achieving self-determination. On this point, Hegel and Kant are in agreement. But Kant also thinks that the optimal mode of reflection is one of radical distance from everything which falls outside of pure reason. Only the purely rational self is capable of self-determination, and only that self is a source of genuine normative authority. This view gives rise to an alienating account of reflection, one that enjoins us to become estranged from

ourselves and from the actual sources of value in our lives. If everything that is not purely rational about us is excluded from the normative grounds of our actions, then we cannot be fully present in and identified with those actions. And so, Hegel concludes, Kant's moral theory fails on its own terms to provide an account of what it would mean for agents to be fully self-determining.

Freedom and Engagement

Hegel proposes that we should give up the notion that self-determination can be achieved only through radical independence from our empirical selves. If we aspire to the self-determination of a purely rational self, then we should reflect so as to radically free that self from all empirical influences. If, however, our goal is the fuller self-determination of an actual self who is empirical as well as rational, then we must reflect in a more engaged manner. Hegel's contention is that our conceptions of self-determination, i.e. how we understand what it actually means to live freely, are essentially thick rather than thin to the point of abstraction. And these thick conceptions of self-determination are regulative, i.e. they structure and guide our reflection. As we will see, this approach generates a new and distinctive account of critical reflection, one which emphasizes active engagement with our motives and practices rather than radical distance from them.

Hegel introduces his model of freedom by diagnosing what he ultimately takes to be the underlying flaw in Kant's approach. Kant defines freedom in a way that is, in a key respect, similar to early modern definitions of freedom. Hobbes, along with many of his contemporaries, defines freedom just as the lack of impediment to doing what one wishes.²⁰ But such liberty from coercion, Kant (as well as Rousseau) realized, is only negative and hence partial freedom; full freedom also requires positive self-determination. Kant attempts to supplement the negative definition with a positive one, but he identifies positive self-determination with radical reflective distance and the legislation of pure reason. The result, Hegel contends, is a richer but still incomplete model of

freedom. But like Hobbes' definition, Kant's is still impoverished; without being aware of doing so, each restricts itself to articulating one important kind of freedom and thereby neglects another important kind.

The kind of freedom which Kant neglects is what Hegel calls "living freedom."²¹ We strive to become self-determining because we hope to become better able to identify with our actions, to see them as really our own rather than imposed upon us. As Hegel puts it, each of us aspires to be "present in everything that he does," as beings who are empirical as well as rational.²² We seek to be able to recognize our actual selves in our motives and practices, and thereby be able to count them as genuinely our own. Instead of becoming more alienated, we thus endeavor to become able to reflectively embrace the motives and practices behind our deeds. This, rather than the independence of pure reason, is the self-determination to which we ultimately aspire.

Hegel distinguishes such living freedom from the purely inner freedom of thought and intention which is the centerpiece of Kant's moral theory. Inner freedom of thought and intention is certainly significant, just as freedom of choice, i.e. liberty from external coercion, is significant. We cannot live fully self-determined lives if we are controlled, either by the dictates of others or by the dictates of our own impulses. But inner freedom of thought and intention is not yet living freedom. It is a private relationship between the parts of oneself. It is getting one's own house in order, which is distinct from living in a way that is generally self-determined. It is, Hegel contends, merely the abstract concept of freedom, which may or may not be realized in the actual living of one's life. And what it means to actually live freely cannot be spelled out in purely abstract terms, without reference to a thick conception of what it is to be self-determining person with actual motives who participates in actual practices.

By way of illustration, I offer two examples. One familiar way in which we can fail to attain living freedom is through the lack of liberty. Consider the example of James Stockdale, a man who

was both a Navy pilot and an avid student of Epictetus. After his plane was shot down in the Vietnam War, Stockdale was subjected to extended torture as a prisoner of war. Drawing upon his recall of Epictetus helped him to endure without losing his integrity and sense of self. He discovered a freedom of the mind, an ability to control his own thoughts and feelings, which was especially appropriate in his circumstances. It is clear, however, that he also lacked a significant kind of freedom; being a prisoner of war stripped him of liberty. As a result, though Stockdale was free in a purely inner sense during his imprisonment, he was not living what we could plausibly describe as a fully self-determined life. The conditions, practices, and norms of his experience were ones with which he could not identify. The inner freedom of radical detachment which he achieved is, thus, not the only sort of self-determination to which we ultimately aspire.

We also aspire to be at home in the world, to identify with the conditions of our lives and with our own motives and practices. But an agent can be free in thought and intention as well as free from external coercion, and yet fail to live a fully self-determined life. A second example, this one fictional, illustrates this point. Lawrence Selden is a man possessed of both liberty and a reflective nature. He is not rich, but his wit and agreeable personality have made him popular within the wealthy social circles of 1905 New York. Though Selden has no interest in really joining high society, he sometimes accepts invitations when they are proffered. Yet, because he is quite thoughtful and reflective, Selden is also keenly aware of the proliferation of intrigue and gossip in that social world, and he deliberately remains aloof from its pettiness. As Edith Wharton depicts him, his stance is one of ironic distance. He participates in high society only as a casual observer, detached and fastidious in his resolve not to become enmeshed in its pervasive shallowness and manipulation.

Selden's resolve is admirable, and it makes him the most independent and self-determining character in *The House of Mirth*. But he is also a tragic figure, alienated from the social world in which

he participates, and ultimately from his own motives and feelings. His studied and deliberate distance from the foibles of high society prevents him from realizing that he has fallen in love with Lily Bart, a woman who moves in that society. Only when it is too late does he act upon his feelings, with the result that he loses any hope of being with the woman he loves. It is Selden's tragedy, Wharton suggests, that his detachment simultaneously frees him from the entrapments of a corrupt society and prevents him from listening to his own heart. He gains inner freedom of thought and intention only by adopting a highly distanced stance which interferes with achieving the loving relationship he seeks. He is deeply alienated from himself as well as his social world, realizing only a limited degree of living freedom.

Perhaps, one might object, Selden's inability to identify with his own actions, to be at home with himself and his social world, stems from a failure to fully embrace his purely rational self. He is not wholly self-determining because he does not gain a sufficiently radical degree of distance from his motives and practices. But, at least as Wharton depicts him, it is unclear how a greater degree of detachment might ameliorate Selden's alienation. He is not alienated from his rational faculties, but from those parts of himself which Kant regards as impure, namely his own motives and practices. His distance is commendable insofar as it enables him to critically reflect upon practices which others blindly follow. But he is only partially self-determining because his freedom ultimately consists just in maintaining as much detachment as possible from his actual self. Selden is a tragic instance of what Hegel calls a "beautiful soul," someone so concerned with maintaining inner moral purity and reflective distance that he fails to substantively engage with his actual self and his actual world.²³

The optimal model of reflection, Hegel proposes, is not characterized by such radical distance from our motives and practices. But what is the alternative? Becoming unreflective wantons and mindless conformists? Such a response would address the problem of alienation only by

abandoning critical reflection, a reply which Hegel explicitly rejects.²⁴ Instead, he argues that we already employ another kind of critical reflection with great success, even if moral theorists have not focused much attention upon it. Reflective engagement aims at achieving living freedom instead of inner freedom of private thought and intention. Properly understood, engagement is a mode of reflection in which we attempt to grasp the extent to which our motives and practices are themselves self-determined, rather than merely imposed upon us. Instead of private detachment, we seek to become persons who reflectively participate in actual practices and who are reflectively motivated by actual concerns.

The sense of engagement relevant in this context, I propose, is that of participating or involving oneself in something. We often use the term in this sense, as when we speak of engaging in conversation or being engaged with an idea. We engage in or with such things by allowing ourselves to participate in them, by metaphorically stepping toward them rather than stepping further back. Hegel identifies this mode of reflection using the verb *fassen*, to grasp.²⁵ *Fassen* connotes understanding something in the sense of gripping or taking hold of it. To really grasp something is to adopt or embrace it. When we reflect in an engaged mode, we thus seek a richer understanding of our motives and practices, an understanding whereby we can recognize ourselves in them. We attempt to grasp or appropriate our motives and practices as our own, to experience them as genuinely ours rather than as alien forces acting upon us.

Reflective engagement does require some initial reflective distance. Stepping back from a motive or practice enables us to examine and evaluate it instead of thoughtlessly following its dictates. But how far should we step back? After having initially distanced oneself from a motive or practice, is it optimal to further seek radical distance from all motives and practices as such? Hegel's approach combines two insights: reflective distance is freeing, but not fully freeing. Critical distance opens up a gap between two senses of ourselves: motives and practices are in one sense already part

of us, yet in another sense they are also distinct. When we reflect in an engaged mode, we attend to them as putative parts of ourselves. We regard them with an eye to bridging rather than widening the gap between these two senses of self, to determining whether our motives and practices can be adopted as genuinely our own, and in this sense be grasped as self-determined.

But how could our motives and practices ever be self-determined, given that they originate outside of our control? Our motives and practices are never entirely self-authored, originating at least partially in our biology and our social contexts. Nonetheless, the Hegelian claim is that some motives and practices can indeed be self-determined in the sense that we arrive at them through our own reflection. Consider, for example, motives such as commitments, projects, and identities that we must arrive at and actively take up, rather than passively finding that they simply arise within us. They are what Thomas Nagel calls “motivated” (as opposed to “unmotivated”) desires.²⁶ Motivated desires present themselves to us as more than just psychological facts about what we happen to want, since they depend on our own reflection for their existence. Though such motives are still conditioned by various factors outside of our control, we are often able to reflectively grasp them as our own and identify ourselves with them.

Many motives, however, seem to arise almost entirely independent of conscious thought. We experience them more passively, as forces pushing and pulling upon us. Are any of those motives capable of being reflectively adopted as self-determined? Hegel proposes that a motive need not be self-originated in order for it to be self-determined. Motives can, through reflection, come to be self-adopted even if their source or origin lies outside of conscious thought. By way of example, let us consider a class of motives which Kant regards as especially foreign to reason, namely sexual desires. Considered just as facts about wants, sexual desires are not self-determined. Indeed, they are a paradigmatic example of motives over which we have little control. From the standpoint of pure reason, all sexual desires appear to be merely alien forces operating upon us.

Yet, even though sexual desires may originally arise independent of deliberation, individuals are often able to reflectively adopt and identify with at least some of those desires. Hegel himself discusses this process only in terms of heterosexual marriage, but the more general point is that within certain contexts, some such desires can come to take on new significance.²⁷ They may help to realize, for instance, the goods of love and companionship, goods which are of great importance for beings like ourselves. What was initially experienced as a mere impulse can thus later, through reflection, come to be embraced as genuinely part of oneself. In this way, such motives can come to be grasped as self-determined rather than alien forces merely imposed upon one. Imagine an individual who is unable to thus identify with any of his or her sexual desires. Such an individual would experience an extreme degree of alienation, even if he or she was optimally rational in the Kantian sense. As in the example of Lawrence Selden, such alienation would represent not the height of freedom, but rather a failure to achieve full self-determination.

Hegel proposes that not only motives, but also social practices can be self-determined in this sense of being grasped and embraced as part of oneself. We have even less individual control over the social world than we have over our own motivations. But we aspire to become able to identify with, to be at home within, the complex social contexts in which we find ourselves. If one is merely complying with social practices, then one's participation in them is perfunctory rather than self-determined. Someone who is married but feels no commitment to her partner will thus experience the relationship as burdensome and obligatory, rather than as realizing her own will in the matter. And someone who is the citizen of a free state but feels no sense of civic duty will only experience its laws as external impositions. Such individuals are freer than someone, such as a slave, whose relationships, norms, and institutions are fundamentally coercive. Yet, even in the absence of such coercion, alienation from our actual practices indicates a lack of full self-determination, i.e. it indicates one respect in which we fail to live freely.

These examples help to illuminate the sense in which Hegel thinks that motives and practices can be grasped as self-determined, but they also re-open the question of normative authority with which Kant and his followers are concerned. On what basis should one decide whether to adopt a practice or motive as genuinely free and self-determined? Hegel's response to this question, I contend in the next section, generates a novel and interesting account of the authority of critical reflection.

The Sociality of Reflection

Hegel, I have argued, critiques Kant's account of critical reflection and his related conception of freedom. In its place, Hegel proposes a new model of freedom that emphasizes active engagement with motives and practices. Hegel is, however, not alone in developing a view along these lines. Harry Frankfurt's recent work also emphasizes a kind of reflective engagement. And like Hegel, Frankfurt thinks that there is an important kind of freedom which is not captured by Kant's approach. This kind of freedom, which he calls "wholeheartedness," requires some initial reflective distance, but it is ultimately realized by bridging, rather than intensifying, that distance.²⁸ One is most free, according to Frankfurt, when one achieves internal volitional unity, a state in which one's first-order desires do not conflict with higher-order desires. The greatest degree of freedom, then, is supposed to be found in internal coherence, a lack of private tension or discord.

Frankfurt's account, however, is vulnerable to a version of the criticism which Kant levels against Hume. Is it not possible to be wholehearted and yet deeply misguided? Frankfurt's account seemingly commits us to regarding a wholehearted murderer as more free and self-determining than someone who possesses murderous desires but refrains from acting on them.²⁹ In his critique of Frankfurt, Gary Watson focuses on precisely this issue.³⁰ He charges that Frankfurt fails to show why we should attribute more normative authority to higher-order desires than to first-order ones.

Higher-order desires are still desires, and psychological facts do not seem to possess normative authority just as such. By conflating self-determination with psychological harmony, Frankfurt's account thus undercuts the normative dimension of reflection.

This challenge reprises Kant's claim that our evaluations cannot be conditioned upon empirical facts if they are to have genuine normative authority. It is a challenge which a Hegelian account of reflection must also address: Without radically distancing ourselves from our motives and practices how can we correctly judge whether those motives and practices should count as genuinely, rather than just apparently, self-determined? Is there some principle to which they must adhere in order to be correctly grasped as one's own?

Hegel's response involves rejecting the assumption, common to both Kant and Frankfurt, that self-determination consists in an essentially private and socially abstracted self-relation. He instead proposes that there is no pre-social self that just happens to be situated in one social context or another. Instead, we are social all the way down, such that our fundamental self-understandings are constantly developing through our interactions with one another. Our conceptions of self-determination are thus not only thick and regulative, but also socially constituted. This thesis, I argue, gives rise to a new and distinctively Hegelian answer to the question of normative authority.

From the moment we are born, we enter into a complex social world in which normative claims are exchanged and evaluated. Our interests and our faculties, but also the self-understandings which underlie and connect our interests and faculties together, develop largely in response to how we are actually situated within this world. In Hegel's terminology, social recognition is at the heart of self-understanding. We define ourselves in relation to one another, developing our understanding of who we are through our diverse interactions with others. To be oneself is, in part, to participate in a thick and socially constituted conception of what it is to be an agent and what constitutes the best realization of that agency.³¹ These fundamental self-understandings are neither universal nor

particular to individuals just as such; rather, they are constantly developing through our participation in the actual social world.

An architectural metaphor helps to explain this idea. A building has a specific structure and architectural design which differentiates it from others. The framework creates and defines the space within, providing a field of reference for decisions about how the space can be used. Those who occupy the space within must together determine how to actually use it, but their decisions are shaped and guided by the specific structural elements they encounter. The Hegelian thesis is that our fundamental self-understandings function in an analogous way: they frame the normative space within which we reflect on motives and practices. Our ideas about who we are and what is possible for beings like us give shape to our reflection, providing a structure or field of reference for our critical reflection.³² These fundamental self-understandings are essential, rather than incidental, to critical reflection. How we define ourselves in relation to one another provides a framework for determining which considerations to bring to bear when reflecting upon our motives and practices.

Interpreted weakly, this view might not seem controversial. A lack of external goods, whether social or material, can make it difficult or even impossible to reflect well. Barbara Herman develops this claim in her recent work on moral competence.³³ Our rational faculties are pre-socially constituted, she argues, but we do require various social conditions in order for those faculties to become fully activated. To become morally competent, we must have access to goods such as love, friendship, respect, and fair treatment. The absence of such social goods makes it doubtful that we will become thoughtful and sensitive moral agents, able to engage in sound critical reflection.

Hegel would not disagree, but his thesis about the sociality of reflection is much stronger. Reflection is something we have learned to do as we have developed, in relation to one another, our understandings of who we are and what beings like us are capable of achieving. These fundamental self-understandings represent a collective achievement in the development of our shared normative

space, rather than fixed and timeless identities. When we reflect, we do not take up an impartial standpoint outside of the actual normative space in which we are situated. Instead, our reflection is internal to our socially constituted self-understandings, framed by how we actually understand our agency and what counts as its best realization. Reflection is thus itself a social practice, and its starting point is the actual field of considerations which present themselves to us as putative reasons.

When reflecting in an engaged manner, we do not appeal to a purely abstract conception of ourselves as rational beings, but rather to our developing idea of what it means to actually live freely. We might describe such reflection as akin to a test of reflective endorsement, but in a very different way than proposed by Korsgaard. Critical reflection always occurs from within our thick and collectively achieved self-understandings. Recall the example of Lawrence Selden. *The House of Mirth* offers an extended critique of the social world of 1905 New York, and specifically of the thoroughgoing alienation produced by that social world. Selden resists fully joining high society because he correctly realizes that he can retain some independence by remaining detached from its intrigue and manipulation. And yet, he is isolated and alone, estranged from his motives and practices. Wharton locates the source of this alienation in the self-understandings available within Selden's social contexts, ones whose flaws are revealed by the deep conflicts experienced by agents attempting to live within them. Selden's mistake, she suggests, lies in accepting a false binary: either embrace a corrupt society, or maintain an ironic distance from it. Ironic distance is a better option than embracing society as it stands, but distance alone produces tragic consequences for Selden. Full self-determination may not even be possible in Selden's social context. Wharton's novel is thus itself an exercise in critical reflection upon the limitations of that social context. The novel simultaneously critiques and appeals to actual conceptions of self-determination, rather than referencing a purely abstract standpoint which is detached from actual social contexts.

Hegel's approach represents a significant departure from theories which presume that our capacity for self-determination is pre-socially constituted. Kantians assume that our rational faculties exist as such independent of any empirical conditions. They thus contend that radical distance is the optimal mode of reflection for all agents, irrespective of social context. And while Frankfurt instead emphasizes wholeheartedness, he still assumes that our reflective faculties can be defined in abstraction from our social contexts. In both cases, the paradigm is one of a solitary agent who engages in private self-examination, treating one part of herself as the ultimate source of normative authority. This paradigm rests on an assumption that sound critical reflection draws upon essentially inner faculties which all agents possess as such.

Hegel challenges this assumption. Kant and Frankfurt are correct to associate agency with freedom and self-determination, but their mistake lies in taking a socially abstracted approach. A study of intellectual history, Hegel argues, reveals that the association between self-determination and agency is not timeless and universal, but instead specifically characteristic of modernity.³⁴ Today, we assert that agents are capable of self-determination, and we insist upon being free to make up our own minds and choose our own actions. But this self-understanding, Hegel notes, is distinctively modern. Though many pre-modern societies possessed the concept of freedom, that concept did not play the fundamental kind of role that it plays for us today. The Romans, for example, developed an advanced legal system that protected a limited number of liberties.³⁵ Yet such liberties were not considered a human right, but instead reserved for an elite group. It is only in the early modern period that the idea became prominent that all persons have a right to a wide spectrum of freedoms. This idea developed in response to authoritarian power structures which could not tolerate reflective criticism and dissent. As the insistence on freedom became increasingly widespread and pervasive in modernity, it began to fundamentally alter political and religious

institutions as well as social and religious life. It gradually became, Hegel contends, essential to how we understand ourselves and relate to one another.

In modernity, we have learned to think of ourselves as fundamentally capable of determining for ourselves how to act and what to believe. Self-determination is now something that we strive for throughout our diverse realms of activity. The aspiration for freedom and self-determination has taken such firm root that it now connects together and provides a context for our various thoughts and behaviors, within both private and public contexts. In Hegel's terminology, freedom is now the "idea" that organizes and structures our lives together.³⁶ By this he means that 'freedom' is, in modernity, unique amongst the variety of concepts that we employ. What is unique about it is that we understand our agency principally in terms of the concept, i.e. in terms of what we take to be our concrete prospects for self-determination. This self-understanding is fundamental in the sense that it underlies and connects together our other identities, providing a framework for reflecting upon our motives and practices.

This historicized model of self-determination forms the basis of Hegel's response to the question of normative authority. If we pay close attention to how, historically, fundamental self-understandings arose and were later amended and revised, we can see more than mere change occurring. There is a progressive pattern of development, wherein self-understandings develop in response to difficulties experienced within earlier ones, in a way that is analogous to how architectural designs develop in response to problems in previous designs. Within every self-understanding thus far, perhaps even including our own, conflicts emerged as agents tried to live within them. In response to those conflicts, agents either amended their self-understandings or developed new ones which did not share the previous faults. They then attempted to live within them, at least until conflicts emerged within the new self-understandings, and then the process began again.

Though inescapably social, our self-understandings are thus, Hegel contends, more than just facts about us. They represent collective accomplishments in developing a shared understanding of what it is to be an agent and what constitutes the best realization of that agency. Today we take our self-understandings to make more sense than those which preceded them; we take our conceptions of self-determination to be better than previous conceptions. And we are justified in doing so: our self-understandings are more rational than those that came before.³⁷ But what this means cannot be spelled out in terms of a timeless standard that is valid independent of our location in an actual normative space. Our thick conceptions of self-determination develop by way of a feedback loop, subject to constant revision as we reflect upon our experiences.³⁸ The modern emphasis on freedom and self-determination developed in response earlier to self-understandings which emphasized authority and obedience rather than critical reflection. When we discover limitations in our modern self-understandings, they too must be reconsidered and amended.

Today we identify as oppressive certain practices which were previously thought to be the height of freedom. Hegel contends, for example, that the most fully self-determining family structure is one based on the rigidly defined gender roles of nineteenth century German. We now realize that this family structure, with its exclusion of women from the public sphere, is oppressive. Hegel was wrong to think that the gender roles of his own time were fully self-determined. In asserting that, we refer to our thick and developing idea about what it actually means to live freely and what it actually means to be oppressed. It is reasonable to expect that future generations will continue to revise and improve upon our thick conceptions of self-determination.³⁹ But recognizing this should not stop us from continuing to develop and make use of those conceptions. We can continue striving to live freely, even while acknowledging that our conceptions of self-determination are conditioned by the concrete circumstances of our lives.

Our account of critical reflection, Hegel thus contends, should recognize that our underlying self-understandings are hard-won achievements. But this implies that there is no fixed and unchanging standard for sound critical reflection.⁴⁰ We find ourselves already to be participants in social practices that have been shaped by evolving conceptions of self-determination. And those practices also shape our individual motives. Living freely requires critically reflecting upon those motives and practices in light of our thick conceptions of what it means to actually live a self-determined life with others. But our conceptions of self-determination must themselves be continually assessed and revised in light of how they are realized in the lives of actual agents. When we thus evaluate our motives and practices, we do so from within our actual self-understandings, even when evaluating our practice of critical reflection itself.

This response to the question of normative authority asserts neither an immutable grounding for normative claims, nor a decision procedure that is meant to be valid for all agents at all times. But it does provide a richer model of freedom and of the normative space within which we engage in critical reflection. Our conceptions of self-determination consist in fundamental self-understandings which structure and provide a field of reference for our reflection. They are thick, specifying concrete practices and motives which we attempt to grasp as actually self-determined. And they are socially constituted, such that the specific nature of the self-determination to which we aspire is constantly developing through our interactions with one another. When we reflect upon our motives and practices, we draw upon the resources which we have inherited, not as beings with a fixed set of faculties and capacities, but as participants in an evolving normative space. The authority of our reflection, then, depends not upon self-alienation, but rather upon the actual self-understandings which we have collectively developed and refined.⁴¹

¹ See especially Sally Sedgwick, “Hegel on the Empty Formalism of Kant’s Categorical Imperative,” in Stephen Houlgate and Michael Baur, eds., *A Companion to Hegel* (Blackwell Publishing, 2011).

² Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. Mary Gregor (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 4:445.

³ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:407.

⁴ See especially Kant, *Lectures on Ethics*, trans. Peter Heath (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 239-246.

⁵ Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:457

⁶ Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A.V. Miller (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 1977), §639. See also Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §147.

⁷ See Kant’s *Lectures on Ethics*, pp. 137-142.

⁸ *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*, 4:14.

⁹ See also Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), pp. 116-118.

¹⁰ In a similar vein, Peter Railton argues that the demand for impartiality requires alienation from our actual feelings, desires, commitments, and projects. Moreover, it requires alienation from friends, partners, and family members, i.e. from all those persons to whom we might be partial. Really abiding by Kant’s moral theory would thus cause us to be detached from our affective selves in a way that is detrimental to human flourishing. See “Alienation, Consequentialism, and the Demands of Morality,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 13 (1984).

¹¹ By reflecting as Kant enjoins, Hegel claims, “you are setting up for yourself and for others an alien power over your deed; you are elevating into an absolute what is only a fragment of the whole of the

human heart. Thereby you are making the laws dominant, while you make your sensuous side or your individuality a slave” (“The Spirit of Christianity,” trans. T.M. Knox, *Early Theological Writings* (Philadelphia PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992), pp. 217-218.

¹² Hegel, “The Spirit of Christianity,” p. 211. Though there is little to suggest that Hegel had Hume in mind when he wrote this, he effectively charges Kant with offering the converse of Hume’s famous dictum that reason is the slave of the passions.

¹³ Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 97.

¹⁴ See especially Kant, *Critique of Practical Reason*, trans. Mary J. Gregor, in *Immanuel Kant: Practical Philosophy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 5:117-118.

¹⁵ *Critique of Practical Reason*, 5:82.

¹⁶ See especially Christine Korsgaard, “Skepticism about Practical Reason,” *Journal of Philosophy* 83 (1986), and Michael Smith, “Internal Reasons,” *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 55 (1995).

¹⁷ See especially David Velleman, *Self to Self* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

¹⁸ See especially pp. 7-16 of Christine Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*.

¹⁹ See Velleman, *Self to Self*, and Korsgaard, *The Sources of Normativity*. See also Lara Denis, “Kant’s Ethics and Duties to Oneself,” *Pacific Philosophical Quarterly* 78 (1997): pp. 321-348. Denis argues that Kant intends the legislation of pure reason to merely take priority over feelings and motivations. But Kant’s claim is stronger: pure reason takes priority in such a way that the empirical self is, as such, alienated from the grounds of normative authority. It is thus only the rational self which is supposed to be capable of achieving any degree of self-determination whatsoever.

²⁰ “Freewill,” Hobbes claims in *Leviathan*, means just that man “finds no stop, in doing what he has the will, desire or inclination to do” (Indianapolis IN:Hackett Publishing Company, 1994, XXI).

²¹ *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §200. See also §439 of the *Phenomenology*. In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel calls this the “concrete” conception of freedom, in contrast to Kant’s purely abstract conception (§7A).

²² *Philosophy of Right*, §107R. See also §597 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

²³ See especially §635-637 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

²⁴ See especially §137 of the *Philosophy of Right* and §655 of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

²⁵ See especially Hegel, *1817 Encyclopedia*, trans. Gustave Emile Mueller (New York NY: Philosophical Library, 1959), §431 and *Philosophy of Right*, §19.

²⁶ See *The Possibility of Altruism* (Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press, 1979), pp. 27-32.

²⁷ See especially §161-163 of the *Philosophy of Right*.

²⁸ See especially pp. 14-19 of *Taking Ourselves Seriously and Getting It Right* (Stanford CA: Stanford University Press, 2006).

²⁹ This example is akin to that of the abusive spouse discussed by Bernard Williams. Williams, who also emphasizes the significance of integrating one’s subjective set of motivations, concedes that there could exist an abusive spouse who has no reason to cease his or her abuse. See Williams, “Internal and External Reasons,” in *Moral Luck* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1981).

³⁰ See especially Gary Watson, “Free Agency,” in Gary Watson, ed., *Free Will* (Oxford UK: Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 337-51.

³¹ Charles Taylor calls these “self-interpretations,” fundamental conceptions of ourselves which underlie our other practical identities. See *Human Agency and Language* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

³² See also Terry Pinkard, “Shapes of Active Reason,” in Kenneth Westphal, ed., *The Blackwell Guide to Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit* (Oxford UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), pp. 136-152.

³³ See Herman, *Moral Literacy* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).

³⁴ Though not explicitly Hegelian, J.B. Schneewind develops a similar thesis in *The Invention of Autonomy* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

³⁵ See especially Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §477-83.

³⁶ See especially Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §1 ff.

³⁷ See also Robert Pippin, “Hegel and Institutional Rationality,” *Southern Journal of Philosophy* 39 (2001): 1-25.

³⁸ The “principle of development” of an idea, Hegel contends, “does not present the harmless tranquility of mere growth, as does that of organic life, but a stern reluctant working against itself.” See Hegel, *Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York NY: Dover Publications, 1956), pp. 54-55.

³⁹ Hegel is well-aware that his focus on social context might be interpreted as positivist, and he repeatedly denies that he is advocating an unquestioning acceptance of the status quo. “Man must meet with his own reason,” he contends, and a law “is not valid simply because it exists” (*Philosophy of Right*, p. 4). Indeed, two of the most famous sections from Hegel’s writings, the master-slave dialectic and his interpretation of *Antigone*, are explicitly concerned with the evaluation of positive laws and norms. See especially Terry Pinkard, *Hegel’s Phenomenology* (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 46-63.

⁴⁰ See especially the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, §84.

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