

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

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

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

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 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

because it comes from the heart.¹⁶

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

Hegel's contention

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,