Hegel's moral philosophy [1]

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Does Hegel have anything to contribute to moral philosophy? If moral philosophy presupposes the soundness of what he calls the 'standpoint of morality [*Moralität*]' (PR §137), then Hegel's contribution is likely to be negative. As is well known, he argues that morality fails to provide us with substantive answers to questions about what is good or morally required and tends to gives us a distorted, subject-centred view of our practical lives; moral concerns are best addressed from the 'standpoint of ethical life [*Sittlichkeit*]' (ibid.). Hegel's criticism of morality has had a decisive influence in the reception of his thought. By general acknowledgement, while his writings support a broadly neo-Aristotelian ethics of self-actualization, his views on moral philosophy are exhausted by his criticisms of Kant, whom he treats as paradigmatic exponent of the standpoint of morality.[2] My aim in this essay is to correct this received view and show that Hegel offers a positive argument about the nature of moral willing.

1. Texts and interpretation

The primary text for the following discussion is the second part of the *Philosophy of Right*, 'Morality'.[3] Additional material comes from the paragraphs devoted to morality in the 'Objective Mind' section of the *Encyclopaedia Philosophy of Mind* and from the analysis of the

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[2] That Hegel has an ethics is a consensus of relatively recent origin; in 1990 Wood saw the need to address the question 'Does Hegel have an ethics?' (Wood 1990: 12) and argue against interpretations, which absorb Hegelian ethics into social or political theory; e.g. Walsh 1984, though see too Brooks 2012. Wood 1999 is a key statement of the neo-Aristotelean ethical naturalist interpretation; see too Taylor 1979, O'Hagan in Priest 1987, Moyar 2011 and Pinkard 2012, esp. 187-196. The literature on Hegel's criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy is vast. A classical source is Priest 1987, recent discussions include: Pinkard 1991, Lottenbach and Tenenbaum 1995, Patten 2002, Stern 2011, Freyenhagen 2011, Vieweg 2012, Sedgwick 2012: 2-7, McCumber 2014.

[3] In what follows I cross-reference the 'Morality' section of the *Phenomenology* but do not focus on it. For an excellent discussion of morality in the *Phenomenology* see Pinkard 1996: 193-220. Hegel refers the readers of the *Philosophy of Right* to the *Phenomenology* for supplementary critical argumentation, but by the same token he shows that his interest has shifted to what remains vital about the moral standpoint. See the famous PR §135 paragraph, which contains critical discussion of Kant's moral philosophy: 'The further antinomies and configurations of this never-ending ought-to-be, in which the exclusively moral way of thinking –thinking in terms of relation-just wanders to and fro without being able to resolve them and get beyond ought-to-be, I have developed in my *Phenomenology of Mind*' (PR §135 Z). For a discussion of the early writings that focuses on the relation to Kant, see Deligiorgi 2011.

idea of the good in the *Science of Logic*. The reason for focusing on these works is that in contrast to the early writings and, to some extent, the *Phenomenology*, Hegel spends little time repeating his criticisms of Kant's moral philosophy. Instead, he devotes himself to the task of providing a positive characterisation of moral willing.

Before we turn to these arguments, it is worth asking why morality is treated in a work entitled *Philosophy of Right*, which contains material about property rights, state constitution and political economy. For readers whose expectations are shaped by contemporary discussions of morality, a historical comparison with Kant's *Metaphysics of Morals* will be useful, since this latter also contains a theory of right that covers property rights, contracts, marriage, state and international law, as well as a doctrine of virtue with advice about teaching and practicing virtue. Hegel's book starts with 'Abstract Right', which deals with property, contracts and punishment, continues with 'Morality', and concludes with 'Ethical life', a very wide-ranging section, which, besides a brief but significant discussion of virtue (PR §§ 150, 151), treats of family and working life, politics, international law, and even world history. Despite their differences, both books show a shared concern to deal with political, judicial, moral and social matters consistently and in the round, rather than in a piecemeal fashion.

Still it is striking that Kant subsumes his treatment of these various matters under 'morals', *Sitten*, and Hegel under 'right', *Recht*. The extent to which Hegel considers political arrangements to be directly relevant to morals is illustrated in his retelling of the Pythagorean anecdote about a father who, in response to his request for advice regarding the ethical education of his son, is told: 'Make him a citizen of a state with good laws' (PR §153). As we can see from the way Hegel organizes his argument in the book, however, the state with the good laws is already an *ethical* whole, and conversely, ethical life is politically organized. The unifying concept for the range of phenomena that Hegel treats in his book and which make up our practical lives, from the 'law of the land' and the 'morality of everyday life' to 'religion' (Preface 3, 13-4), is what he calls 'the ethical [*das Sittliche*]' (Preface 6, 19 and 8, 21).[4] Hegel's aim is to show that the ethical can be grasped in its 'rational form [*vernünftige Form*]' (Preface 3, 13-4). So his task is not just descriptive, to record what people take to be ethical phenomena. Indeed, he is quite scathing about such projects (Preface 3-4, 14). The book is a *philosophy* of right and as such not concerned with mere narration of happenings (*SL* 588, II:260). To understand what the philosophical treatment of the ethical involves we need to get to grips with Hegel's idealist and systematic commitments.[5]

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[4] Knox translates *das Sittliche* as 'ethical life', and 'ethical order', Nisbett as 'the ethical' (Wood 1991: 16).

[5] Following Houlgate 2001, Vieweg 2012, Brooks 2012, I read the *Philosophy of Right* as a systematic text. However I favour a reconstructive, rather than an immanent reading and so I am sympathetic to non-systematic interpretations, see Hardimon 1994, Wood 1999 Franco 2002, Patten 2002, Neuhouser 2003.

Hegel's idealism is contested territory. Robert Pippin cites a number of possible contents for the term, romantic world-soul idealism (Pippin 1989: 61), 'wild idealism' manifested in indifference to the world as in some sense arbiter of our notions (op.cit.: 202), conceptual scheme idealism (op.cit.: 233) and so on.[6] On Hegel's own definition, idealism amounts to treating the finite as 'ideal' in the privative sense of 'lacking true being' and then searching for the 'underived' or 'absolute' on which the finite depends (*SL* 154, I:172). Applying this definition to Hegel's own philosophy needs to be done with care. Importantly, and as we shall presently see, the 'absolute' is not to be sought behind or beyond finite appearances.[7] The philosophical treatment of the ethical requires that we 'apprehend in the show of the temporal and transient the substance which is immanent and the eternal which is present' (Preface 10, 25).[8] Although 'temporal' and 'transient' are also finite, and therefore, on the privative definition of 'ideal', they lack true being, they are not nonentities, because they somehow form part of what Hegel calls 'the substance' and 'the eternal'. It may help here to distinguish between two senses of 'what is', the first amounts to an ordinary claim that such and such entity exists or state of affairs obtains. A second sense, sometimes indicated by the qualifier 'true' -as in 'true being'- but more usually by the term 'actual' and 'actuality', carries the idea of something that is *worthy* of being or rationally vindicated, as when Hegel announces that 'ethical actuality' is 'justified through rational thinking' (Preface 2, 12). This explains how Hegel can say both that philosophy is its time apprehended in thoughts and that its task is to grasp 'what is ... because what is, is reason' (Preface 11, 26).

In the quote just given, if 'what is' and 'reason' are the same, then we have an unhelpful tautology, if they differ, the question is how does a philosopher identify the actual from everything else that is? Just to call the actual 'rational' as in the famous assertion, 'what is rational is actual and what is actual is rational' (Preface 10, 24), does not help because we lack a measure of 'rational'.[9] Here is where Hegel's systematic commitments are relevant.

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[6] Pippin defends conceptual scheme idealism (1989:8) and a version of anti-realism (99). He does not seem concerned with the distinctiveness of moral philosophy, which can accommodate relatively easily commitments that may sound 'wild' from a theoretical perspective, for example, there is a significant constituency of defenders of aprioristic ethics, for whom moral notions are not derived from experience and are not reducible to empirical facts. For critical discussion of Pippin see Ameriks 1991 and Stern 2009. I return to this issue in the last section.

[7] See too: 'The true ideal is not what ought to be actual but what is actual, and the only actuality. If an ideal is held to be too good to exist, there must be some fault in the ideal itself, since actuality is too good for it' (LHP 95, 19:110), and more resonantly, that 'nothing is actual except the Idea' (Preface 10, 25).

[8] See too the 1818-19 Preface 'The genuine condition of the eternal cannot remain with the historicist view of legal conditions, for this view counts as just only that which prevails' (Brudner 1978:50) and the discussion of the 'historical treatment of law' (67-69).

[9] We followed here a rather ambitious interpretation of 'actual' as what has true being and is expressive of or identical with the 'Idea'. An alternative, more modest account is given by Allen Wood. Against Humean views that reason is idle or merely passive, Wood asserts the causal efficacy of reason and invites us to understand 'actual' as 'practical', pointing out that reason 'constantly works changes in the world through human actions' (Wood 1990: 11). Both the ambitious and the modest interpretations however face the task of explaining what is to count as 'rational'.

Hegel does not spell out the criteria we as philosophers may use to vindicate the practical phenomena that make up the ethical. The rational form of the ethical is to be discovered through his analysis of the concepts that map out this territory. This analysis is to proceed entirely immanently: different concepts are explicated and their use is justified in context by way of reciprocal relations established with other concepts. Stephen Houlgate, a key exponent of Hegel's holistic method, explains it thus: 'a moment gains its character from the whole that it helps to constitute' (Houlgate 2006: 428).[10] Each 'moment' or concept depends for its content and rationale on other such 'moments' or concepts in a structure of mutual support. But then it is unclear how in the absence of any content counting as basic, these concepts do not merely dissolve into relations.[11] The systematic question for us then is how relations among concepts can be explanatory and justificatory *for* these concepts, if all we have is just relations of explanation and justification. Although this question seems a long way away from morality, it will concern us in the later sections because how we resolve it will be crucial in getting the right measure of Hegel's claims about moral willing.

2. The good of willing

A striking aspect of 'Morality' in the *Philosophy of Right* is the near absence of what nowadays is called normative ethics, that is, arguments about right and wrong, duties and virtues. Instead Hegel discusses intention, purpose, willing, action, deed; issues treated in contemporary action theory. The reason for this is that the topic of this part of the book is a certain conception of the will, which he introduces at the end of the previous section on 'Abstract Right'. So this is what we need to examine first.

The concluding discussion in 'Abstract Right' concerns the conditions under which punishment for wrong-doing can be understood as justice, rather than as revenge.[12] At issue is not whether the concepts of revenge and of justice go together; revenge justice models show that they do.[13] Hegel is interested in how things look from the agent's perspective, how she can see her own punishment as justice, rather than as society's tit for tat. The concept that is needed, and which takes the discussion forward to 'Morality', is of 'a will [*Wille*] which, though particular and subjective, yet wills the universal as such' (PR §103). Let us for the moment treat 'the universal' as indicating an expanded moral horizon

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[10] Houlgate discusses the *Logic* here. But his defense of holism is applicable to Hegel's other systematic works. Houlgate argues that ideality is about *being* a moment in a process, which gives us the 'ontological structure of things' (430). Stern argues that the idealist sees the world holistically, not as made up of atomic entities but 'as parts of interconnected totality' (141). There is a debate about whether such holism is implausibly ambitious (Ameriks 1991) or quite modest (Stern 2009).

[11] The argument, from Bradley 1930:26, is that we cannot have *a* understood in terms of *b* and *b* in terms of *a* exclusively (nor *a* in terms of *b* in terms of *c* and so on until we are back to *a*); see Candlish 2007:167-70.

[12] 'The annulling of crime ...is principally revenge, which is just in its content insofar as it is retributive... Hence revenge, because it is a positive action of a particular will, becomes a new transgression; as thus contradictory in character' (PR §102). 'The demand that this contradiction ...be resolved... is the demand for a justice freed from subjective interests... it is the demand for justice not as revenge but as punishment' (PR §103).

[13] See Gerber and Jackson (2013).

and so as being roughly equivalent to 'morally right'; what Hegel seems to be saying here is that absent any sense of moral rightness, the wrong-doer simply lacks the resources to conceive of her punishment as justice.[14] The focus on the particular will is characteristic of the transition from matters of abstract right to morality. Whereas in the earlier sections 'will' is understood in terms of legally defined practices and the abilities these presuppose, in the sections we are about to examine the topic is the nature of willing itself.[15] It is tempting here to think of 'will' as an executive function, part perhaps of our soul or mind, with a future-oriented temporal structure. As becomes clear in the course of the discussion, Hegel distances himself from such views of willing. The purpose of 'Morality', he writes, is to analyse the 'will's immanent actualisation in accordance with *its* concept' (PR §104, emphasis added) and this concept is nothing less that the good.[16] The claim to be defended then is that moral willing, that is, willing 'guided by the good' is basic (see PR §131).

Hegel defends this bold claim by focusing on what the will does. Instead of engaging in philosophical introspection, he considers the immediate context in which willing is philosophically important, and this is the context of doing things. The doing of the will is an action, *Handlung* (PR §113, see too E§113). An action has the character of something done, it 'sets up an alteration in this state of affairs confronting the will' (PR §115, see too E§505; 250, 313). Hegel introduces the term 'deed', *Tat* to pick out this evental character of action: as deed, the action is also 'an event, a situation which has been produced' (PR §115 R). If we ask, what makes an action different from an event -why it is *also* an event rather than just an event- the simple answer is that action is *ex hypothesis* a product of the will. This is obviously unsatisfactory. What we want to understand is how invoking the will helps separate deeds from other events. This way of thinking about it suggests that the will adds something to what would otherwise be mere event, and so we obtain 'action'. Hegel proposes another way of thinking about it by asking how it is that a publicly observable performance can be attributed to and owned by a subject, or 'be known to me as *my* action' (PR §113). If we allow that at least one function of will is to establish

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[14] In the *Encyclopaedia* transition Hegel describes 'morality' as the will that is reasonable and lets go the 'wilfulness and violence of the state of nature' (E§502). Hegel qualifies 'universal' later on in the 'Morality' section as 'substantive universal' (PR§141, and E§469), which is a more intriguing notion that we will seek to clarify later on.

[15] It is 'as subjectivity that the concept has now been determined ... it is ... the will of the subject as a single individual aware of himself' (PR §106). See too the idea of will 'as author of its own conclusions' (E§ 469 and E§503; 249). As we shall see, the psychology of action is intimately connected with the good (see too E§54). Therefore the Quante and Pippin/Houlgate disagreement about whether this is action theory or ethics is easily resolved; see Quante 1993, Pippin 2008:169 and Houlgate 2010:155. The material contains elements of both; see Moyar 2011:14f on conscience as skilled agency. It also contains a meta-ethical argument that 'for the truth of agency, more is needed …than merely knowing the good' (Pinkard 2012: 93).

[16] '[T]hought determines itself into will and remains the substance of the latter; so that without thought there can be no will, and even the uneducated person wills only insofar as he has thought; the animal, on the other hand, because it does not think is also incapable of possessing a will' (E§468 A). See Pinkard 2012:31-33. Hegel treats the modern concept of the will as reducible to its manifestations: 'the phenomenon of the will ... sinks into itself' (E§512).

ownership of the deed, which makes sense in the context of morality to the extent that responsibility, praise and blame, are germane to our topic, then it is reasonable to concern ourselves with the ownership question. Most of 'Morality' is devoted to answering this question (PR §§112-132). The argument roughly is that ownership can be settled provided we accept that the concept of the will is the good. In what follows I present a reconstruction of this basic argument and in the following section I examine whether the conclusion about will and the good is safe.

The main premises of Hegel's argument are:
      1. Deeds are actions, if deeds are intentional.
      2. Deeds are intentional, if they realise some end presented to the agent as worth pursuing.
      3. An end is presented to the agent as worth pursuing, if it links up with *the* good.

1. *Deeds are actions, if deeds are intentional.*

Hegel uses the inner/outer conception of what is in the mind and what is in the world, while also depriving it of metaphysical significance. So for example, he states that an agent is able to 'objectify' her aims (PR §112), and describes this ability as 'externalisation' of the agent's will (PR §113). Objectification and externalisation aim to draw attention to the fact that whatever else an action is, it is also a public performance and as such an event. Hegel is not caught up in the concerns about actions and events that dominate the contemporary debate. He simply assumes that when someone is doing something, at least for ordinary cases of 'doing' that involve moving one's limbs about, there is a publicly observable alteration. He then asks what is needed to connect the doing with the doer, so that it can properly be *hers*.

The first step is the claim that intention is a mark of action, a deed is an action just in case it is intentional. To get to the supporting argument, I will use throughout, adapted and expanded, Hegel's example about burning wood from PR §119. To burn the wood, the agent has to take into account the materials at her disposal. This taking into account has nothing to do with her and everything to do with the behavior of physical things, wood, fuel, and matches, when they interact. At the same time, if she is to claim the deed as hers, it must be possible to disentangle the event that is her doing from its 'complex environment' (PR §118). Whilst she is not responsible for the properties of the materials at her disposal, once she takes these facts into account and successfully lights the fire, she is the one burning the wood. We could of course say that the burning agent –along the lines of 'cleaning agent'- is the fire. This is true. Merely locating an agent within its 'complex environment' does not allow for identification of the agent responsible for *setting up* the alteration in the environment. [17] The burning of the wood is the deed. We have an action only if we can establish that it is *her* burning of the wood (PR §113, E§469).

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[17] The deed, the burning of the wood, is also describable as an event of wood burning; the deed qua event is causally connected to environmental facts in the complex ways that events are. The subset of deeds that are intentional actions, which interest Hegel here, allow for an agent to be inserted in the description: the burning of the wood *by* her. Intentional actions have reasons as explanatory for the

Establishing this is not easy:

> An event, a situation which has been produced, is a concrete external actuality which because of its concreteness has in it an indeterminable multiplicity of factors. Any and every single element which appears as the condition, ground or cause of one such factor, and so has contributes its share to the event in question, may be looked upon as responsible for the event or at least sharing responsibility for it (PR §115 R).

What complicates things is not just the past causal history of a deed but also the causal chains it sets off; like any worldly occurrence, the deed 'has connexions in the field of external necessity' and becomes 'prey to external forces' (PR §118) *as soon* as it is performed, e.g. this wood burning may set the fence on fire. Deed attribution and demarcation of the bounds of the deed seem to go together, and, Hegel suggests, can be treated together through what he calls the 'right to know' (PR §117).

The 'right to know' is the will's 'right' to recognize parts of the deed that it is conscious of. There is a subjective side to this right, the 'right of intention', the 'universal quality of the action' as is 'known by the agent and so shall have lain from the start in his subjective will'. And there is an objective side, the 'right of objectivity', the action 'as known and willed by the subject as *thinker*' (PR §120).[18]

Let us start with the right of intention and the subjective side. 'Universal quality of the action' means a general description of the action as a deed, as it might be available to any onlooker, the neighbor for example witnesses the burning of the wood (see PR §119). The right of intention means simply that the agent doing the deed 'owns' it insofar as she is doing it intentionally. It is presented as a right to *know* in the sense that while the agent is doing whatever she is doing intentionally, she knows *what* she is doing, she knows, for example, she is burning wood. If we now look at the objective side, in this context, the right of objectivity allows us to add *that* she knows what she is doing as brought about by her. It is a 'right' insofar as the agent insofar as she is doing whatever it is she is doing intentionally can rightfully claim knowledge of it. This is not an item of theoretical knowledge, such as whether plywood is flammable, it is knowledge she has as the agent who is now burning the wood. Hegel presents intention and objectivity as elements in a single complex right to know because it allows the agent to assert ownership of her action as agent. She can say 'the burning is mine, because I know I am doing it and I am, just now, in the process of doing it!'

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deed, and since the deed is something done, whatever brought it about must also count as causal, so in the Hegelian picture reasons are causal for deeds; I discuss intentional action in Hegel in Deligiorgi 2010. Note that Hegel is not concerned with the contemporary question of *how* reasons can be efficient causes, because he does not consider causality to be adequately captured as efficient causality only (Schick 2014) and is sceptical of the modern reason/cause dichotomy (de Vries 1988).

[18] Again evaluative and action theoretical concerns are treated together, since description has of moral and legal implications, 'tidying the backyard' warrants different judgments and attitudes than 'arson'.

Unfortunately, being in position to assert this right does not answer the ownership question. The burning qua deed is and remains a stretch in a chain of external relations (PR §119 R). In the *Phenomenology*, Hegel provides a critical argument about attempts to locate agential presence within stretches of causal chains and derides such efforts as 'vertigo inducing' (PS 548, 453). Causal chains indeed have this characteristic that they can extend as far as back as the explanatory demand goes; each causal stretch is qualitatively identical to any other and merely made relevant by its proximity to the deed. To firm up the gains achieved we need a more robust conception of the agent not just as intentional doer but also as thinker.

2. *Deeds are intentional, if they realize some end presented to the agent as worth pursuing.* Agential intention can be firmed up only if it is supported by considerations that pertain to evaluations about what is 'worth' doing or is in the agent's 'interest' (PR §122), well-being, or happiness (PR §123).

The account presupposes that there is something the agent wants to achieve by her doing, yet nothing has been said so far about her willing of what she is doing. The burning of the wood does not come out of nowhere, someone is able to claim it as her doing, but this claim, the very assertion of the right to know, *also* does not come out of nowhere, it is a right the subject asserts 'as a *thinker*' (PR §120). This shows how demanding willing is. It is not just a matter of 'I want x'. Willing involves having some ends one cares about. Wants make sense with reference to these ends (and so count as instances of willing). This demanding conception of willing is needed, Hegel suggests, because without it intention disintegrates. If the agent has no reasons *for* burning the wood, then she cannot properly lay claim to the action. Examples Hegel considers include 'children, imbeciles, lunatics etc.' who are unable to own their actions, because they are short of reasons. However, there is a range of attributable deeds that are reason-deficient, which Hegel does not consider, e.g. arational, purposeless, idle deeds ('No reason I just felt like it!') or those performed acratically ('I did not really want to do it, I hate myself for having done it'). The explanation is likely to do with the fact that these deeds are by their very description tenuously attached to the agent as *agent* (the agent is rather a patient).

The right of intention as we discussed it earlier is about the agent claiming her action, she knows what she is doing, she is burning wood. On this more robust conception of intention she claims here intention as an end, her intention, to burn wood is expressive of some interest she has in the realization of the end. That interest in turn is graspable by the agent in light of some view of her well-being or *Wohl* (PR §123).[19] She wants to burn the wood because she wants to tidy the garden, and keeping things tidy is a reason for her

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[19] *Wohl* has a subjective procedural side, reasoning about what makes the subject feel good, and an objective content-full side, about whether the upshot is *Wohl*-promoting/ expressive/ compatible. For Hegel, who is exploiting here an ambiguity in empiricist and eudaimonist conceptions of 'good', the two pairs are conceptually not ontologically distinct.

because the end satisfies her, this is how she sees her well-being. Her willing's orientation towards her conception of well-being is what gives her a reason for doing whatever she sets out to do. Whilst *Wohl* type considerations give reasons to any agent to pursue ends (PR §123), these are not infallible. The phenomenon of self-reproach (PR §125) illustrates this. *Wohl* then is not merely a subjective concept. *Wohl* shows an end as worth pursuing by showing it as *Wohl*-promoting or *Wohl*-expressive or *Wohl*-compatible. The difference between 'end *e* looks to her worth pursuing' and 'end *e* is really worth pursuing' allows Hegel to ratchet up the ownership conditions: if the agent gets her *Wohl* wrong, and realizes this, then she effectively disowns her action (this is why self-reproach matters), if she gets it right, and knows this, then *Wohl* is a candidate at least for goodness or *das Gute* (PR §129). The question is how can this connection to goodness be established.

3. *An end is presented to the agent as worth pursuing, if it links up with the good*.
Clearly reasoning about the *Wohl* can be good or not; in some border-line cases bad reasoning may be practically indistinguishable from absence of reasoning. The key claim is that the agent's view of *her* good ties up with an objective conception of the good because good practical reasoning is sound reasoning about the good. Roughly the thought seems to be this: either the agent gets the goodness of an end right, in which case it is not subjective or she gets it wrong in which case it is not good. The question is how we get objective worth or goodness from well-being.

First though let us start with a subsidiary issue: it looks as if we can disown all foolish and bad actions. If disowning is refusal of responsibility for the action this would be troubling and count against the account. But disowning can also be a matter of repentance, or at least that the agent does not persist in affirming the foolish or wrong thing she did. I suspect that this sense is what Hegel is driving at. Ownership can be seen then as consonant with the earlier discussion about the actual: it implies rational vindication of the worth of the action, or conversely the availability to the agent of a better self, or 'knowledge of the worth which the action has in this objectivity' (PR §132). From this perspective, disowning would amount to confirming that some action the agent performed lacks worth.

With respect to the connection between well-being and good, the notion of 'subjective worth or interest' (PR §122) is crucial. The agent lights a fire, because she wants to burn some old wood. Her interest is in burning of the wood. This interest is not final, she wants to burn the wood because she wants to tidy her garden. The interest in a tidy garden is in turn relative to some other end that has subjective worth for her. Just like the chains of causes, which tend to evacuate the agent from the deed, these chains of justifications tend to evacuate the end from the action, since they reduce the action to a mere 'means', insofar as the end 'is something finite, it may in its turn be reduced to a means to some further intention and so on ad infinitum' (PR §122). The assumption is that if we reach no final reason, we have no justification for the action. For reasons to play their justificatory role, they must link up to some conception of the good that allows the series to end. Otherwise reasoning would end arbitrarily or with a reason that is the equivalent of stomping one's

foot: 'I just want!' For Hegel this kind of brute fact about wanting threatens to corrode willing. Others may look at this more kindly and accept it as a fact of human desire. For our purposes, this argument against what he calls 'abstract', that is content-neutral, practical reasoning matters because it introduces the idea of a final good into the account: 'The particular subject is related to the good as the essence of his will' (PR §133).

3. The good and the actual

Two worries may arise regarding the relation between will and *das Gute* outlined in the previous section. The first is expressed in the following quote by Bernard Williams:

> In any ordinary understanding of *good*, surely, an extra step is taken if you go from saying that you want something or have decided to pursue it to saying that it is good , or (more to the point) that it is good that you should have it (Williams 1985 p. 58 see too 210 n.9).

Williams points out that wanting and judging something to be good, or good to have, are two different things. Although on Hegel's account, wanting and judging to be good can fall apart, they do so only in defective instances of actions. If Williams is right, these instances show something important about willing, that is has no essence, that it is mere want. The second worry is that *Wohl* need not connect to an objective, singular and terminal conception of the good, *das Gute*.

Among recent interpretations of Hegel's practical philosophy, Robert Pippin's 'self-constitution' (Pippin 2008:19) model offers a promising way to address these concerns. The position has obvious affinities to Christine Korsgaard's interpretation of Kant; both are constructivist and naturalist.[20] Pippin's naturalism requires accepting that 'we simply have the wants and desires and passions and limitations that we do' (Pippin 2008 p.115). These are natural facts about human beings, they do not ground values and are not in themselves normative.[21] The constructivism of the self-constitution view requires that there are no mind-independent normative and evaluative facts. Evaluative concepts and norms do not exist apart from the practices to which they apply and which exemplify them. Such practices in turn exist, because human societies and cultures exist that shape them and are shaped by them; 'we alone (collectively, over time) can be responsible for the norms that direct our lives' (Pippin 2008:150). That human beings are what they make of themselves as social beings is stating a fact about what is necessary for human life, it is a natural fact with social content; this is crucial for Hegelian self-constitutivists.[22]

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[20] See Korsgaard 2008. For the basic commitments of self-constitution in Hegel see Pippin 2008, 2005, 1997; see too Pinkard 2002, and Speight 2001. The naturalism is consistent with Williams 1985 pp.121-2; see too Pinkard 2012.

[21] It would be a 'capital misunderstanding' to take as the truth 'the beginning which forms the starting point in the natural evolution or in the history of the developing individual' (*SL* 588, II 260). See also the discussion of life in E§221 and E§ 222. Hegel later both acknowledges organic life (E§350) and argues for an overcoming of nature by mind (E§ 376) that is simultaneously a recognition of our natural being (E§ 376 A).

[22] See Pinkard 2012:5 and 47, Yeomans 2012: 57, Pippin 2005: 219 and Marmasse 2011: 45.

With these assumptions in place, the self-constitutivist can offer two different answers to Williams. The first starts with the observation that the wants of human beings qua natural beings originate and are satisfied within social contexts (Pippin 2008:169, 1997:425 and 448 and Pinkard 2012: 62-63). Social contexts are effectively normative contexts, given the self-consitutivist conception of the practices that make up societies and cultures. Given this, any expression of want, either in a statement, 'I want this', or in a doing, can in principle and without exception be subject to evaluative and normative questioning by others just by virtue of the want's social, public aspect. On this view, to want is to be liable to evaluative and normative reflection whether the desiring individual has undertaken that step herself or not; she cannot decline this liability without declining membership in the social context in which her wanting places her. In her answer to Williams, the self-constitutivist does not challenge the substance of Williams's claim merely its importance: what matters is that all wants are *apt* for evaluation about goodness. The second answer straightforwardly contradicts Williams. It depends on an ontological claim about wants, no want is mere want, even if it appears as such to the desiring agent. The argument goes like this: social context is a condition for reflection about what is to count as appropriate or good, and such reflection guides individuals 'to constrain or to elect to satisfy those urges' (Pippin 2008: 115).[23] Any want or urge, whether it explicitly appears as such to specific agents, has a value. Wants or urges have an integral evaluative aspect because agents constitute themselves as agents by reflecting about what counts as appropriate or good to want. Another way of saying this is that responsiveness to values and norms and so possession and exercise of the capacity to make judgments of goodness is a necessary condition for wanting by humans qua social beings; wanting is a practical achievement of 'minded' animals (Pinkard 2012: 5 and 30). Although this view of human wants appears quite ambitious, it need not be, if we see it as contextualizing wants in human societies in a way that chimes with Williams's broader meta-ethical commitments without being overly theoretically taxing.

Let us grant that the self-constitutivist has the resources to respond to Williams, does she also show that the essence of willing is the good? If *das Gute* is whatever has the role of directing willing (see Pippin 2008: 19, 2005: 219, 1997: 163), then it seems that the lines between what is good for the agent, what is satisfying for the well-socialized agent, and what is socially acceptable blend into one another, allowing no alternative conception of the objective good. We can have 'good for' -an agent or a collective- but no objective, singular and terminal conception of the good. Given the denial of mind-independent normative and evaluative facts, the self-constitutivist can stand her ground and insist that it makes no sense to speak of the good outside *some* collective which gives the concept its application. For the Hegelian self-constitutivist, this is no obstacle in claiming that something is objectively good since the distinctions between subjective and objective, good and no good, are perfectly possible within particular instances of ethical life. The upshot of

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[23] Both Pippin and Pinkard are interested in the normative rather than evaluative nature of such reflection; for this portion of the argument this does not matter since the reflection in question is about whether 'any of the motivations of his animal nature deserve to be put to practice' (Pinkard 2012: 63).

'Morality' is that we should abandon talk about the good and consider candidate goods within ethical life, we can only have goods and judge them as such relative to our *sittlich* concerns and situation.[24] To test this interpretation we may turn to a text where Hegel discusses explicitly the idea of the good, in penultimate chapter of the *Science of Logic*, 'The Idea of Cognition', which consists of two sections, 'The Idea of the True' and 'The Idea of the Good'.[25]

Hegel begins the section by stating that the good appears 'with the worth of the universal because it is within itself the totality of the Notion' (*SL* 818, II 542 translation altered). The self-constitutivist might seek to explain this characterization of the good is by offering an aggregative interpretation of 'totality of the Notion'. The summation of various local evaluations of goodness permits us to form a conception of *the* good without sacrificing the commitment to local *sittlich* concerns. The question is how we can identify mistaken evaluations in order to neutralize them in the summing up.[26] To do this we need to know for sure that they are mistakes. This, however, would require prior knowledge of the good. Note, however, that we are not entirely bereft when it comes to judging goodness even if we may not claim to possess the good in its totality. Here is how the self-consitutivist might cast the matter. An end is what appears as worth pursuing to an agent and it appears as worth pursuing because of some idea of goodness that structures the agent's willing. This idea of goodness in turn depends on the nexus of evaluations to which the agent is sensitive by virtue of her membership to the structures of ethical life. Of course, the availability of the self-constitutivist position presupposes successfully blocking pervasive skepticism about evaluations; in the language of the *Logic*, evaluations must *already* possess the 'the worth of the universal' (*SL* 819, II 542). But then the self-constitutivist might ask whether pervasive skepticism even makes sense, from the worldly perspective we inhabit, we can only make sense of specific worries relative to this or that judgment about the good, this or that action, this or that practice. The position is consistent. The question is whether this interpretation captures the sense of universality Hegel attributes to the idea of the good as it 'appears' (*auftreten*).

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[24] This seems to be the conclusion of Pippin 1997: 417-450. Moyar 2011 argues in a way that is more sympathetic and accommodating of Williams, by effectively absorbing *das Gute* into other considerations determining agential identity (74-6).

[25] In the *Encyclopedia Logic* the structure is similar; however there is greater emphasis on willing both in the introductory remarks on cognition E§225 and in the analysis of the good proper (E§§233-234). In the *Philosophy of Right* Hegel writes about the concept of the will (PR §129) and then the essence of the will (PR §133) in a way that reverses the logical progression from essence to concept. This can be explained if we consider the progression of the argument within the *Philosophy of Right* where the aim is to move from 'abstract characterization of the good' (PR §136) to a discussion of conscience (PR §137) and thence to ethical life.

[26] There are two further alternatives: all valuations are correct or acceptable, but this cannot be Hegel's view because it is a form of 'finitism', which he explicitly condemns; or the aggregative process is self-correcting, this is the view I associate with the rationalist interpretation of Hegel's conception of the good.

To examine this we need to look more carefully at Hegel's argument here. The main task of the section is to undermine the idea that the world is 'something intrinsically worthless' (*SL* 821, II 547).[27] Hegel argues that this is the source of all conceptual mistakes about the good. On the one hand we end up with valuations being thought of as merely subjective:

> [T]he subjective bearing of the objective Notion is reproduced and made perpetual, with the result that the finitude of the good in respect of its content as well as its form appears as the abiding truth' (*SL* 822, II 547).

One way out of the problem is to accept the perspectival nature of the good; after all pervasive skepticism is most potent, when the idea of the good as 'objective Notion' is in play (*SL* 820, II 544). Hegel does not opt for this quick way out, rather he diagnoses a problem in the objective Notion's 'own view of itself' (*SL* 822, II 547). The aim of objective notions of goodness is to connect it with truth.[28] One option is to say that goodness makes contact necessarily with non-evaluative 'given' features of the world (*SL* 821, II 545). Such non-evaluative features can be differently evaluated however. This exacerbates the skeptical worry that valuing is 'something subjective and individual' (*SL* 822, II 547).[29] So we need a different understanding of the relation between truth and goodness. What we want is for evaluations to be true *qua* evaluations and for human knowers to have the means to identify the true ones. At the same time though we want the idea of the good to direct practical thought not just to be a matter of identifying something correctly, in Hegel's words, 'what is' must be seen as 'altered by the activity of the objective Notion' (*SL* 823, II 548). To conceive of what is as altered by the activity of the objective Notion, we need a conception of actuality as the realisation of the 'absolute end' (ibid.). This absolute end just is the idea of the good as neither subjective, and so not truth-evaluable, nor objective, and so potentially inert, but rather as the 'Idea of the Notion that is determined in and for itself' or 'absolute Idea' (ibid).

To assess the good in this its final incarnation, we need to get a better sense of the content conveyed through this highly abstract analysis. In the 'Morality' section of the *Philosophy of Right*, the discussion of willing the good is preparatory for the discussion of actual judgments of goodness made by more or less skilled judges in 'Ethical Life'. By contrast, in the *Logic*, the analysis of the Idea of the good abstracts from the contents of putative judgments in order to show how such judgments can be right or the 'Notion' of good objective. What connects the two is the thought that moral willing is basic: 'The particular

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[27] See too the criticism of direction of fit in the *Encyclopedia Logic*: 'The subjective idea ...is the Good. Its drive to self-realization is ...the reverse of the idea of truth and rather directed towards moulding the world it finds before it into a shape conformable to its purposed End. This Volition has on the one hand the certitude of the nothingness of the presupposed object; but on the other it presupposes the purposed End of the Good to be a mere subjective idea' (E§233).

[28] The idea of the good, Hegel says, 'can find its fulfillment only in the idea of the true' *SL* 821, II 545 translation altered). Hegel plays here with the idea of objective reality as given being a mere 'filling' *Erfüllung* (see also *SL* 818, II542) and as true value realisation or fulfilment *Ergänzung* of the good. Miller gives 'integration' for the latter.

[29] Hegel refers here to the act not the valuing, but the valuing of the act parallels the valuing of the end.

subject is related to the good as the essence of his will' (PR §133). The self-constitutivist makes sense of this demanding conception of willing by minimizing the force of the good in it: the good is partly a formal matter of self-constitution and partly acknowledgement of plural local goods that enable the agent to constitute herself as such. The final section examines whether this is the best way to capture the meta-ethical commitments of the discussion of 'absolute end'.

4. The end and the Idea

In the *Logic*, the absolute end is presented as a solution to the subjectivist/objectivist seesaw. The objectivist seeks to define the good as a feature of the world; the good-making features of willing correspond to or reflect this objective good. The subjectivist seeks to account for the practical aspect of goodness as an end realised by agents, which results in identification of 'good-making' and 'willed' or 'pursued'. The absolute end bridges the gap with the thought of an end worth pursuing full stop. There are at least four ways of spelling out the meta-ethical commitments of this position:

(i) Contextualist-particularist. The very abstraction of the description of the absolute end shows that we can only speak sensibly about particular ends we judge to be worth pursuing. For each particular end there are going to be specific things to be said for or against it. The reasons agents adduce for doing things can be judged, criticized and vindicated contextually and this is all we can say about objective goodness.[30] There is no trans-historical absolute, the absolute is always some end that appears to some agent as worth pursuing full stop.

(ii) Valuing as attitude. Granted that we should not seek to speak of goodness as such, abstracted from ends we deem worth pursuing. However, when we speak of particular ends as worth pursuing, we already do more than that. Implicit in practices of moral evaluation and normative justification is an action-guiding aspect, that what is judged as good or right is to be done, which is what Hegel seeks to convey by describing the Idea as self-determining.[31]

(iii) Self-constitutivist. Granted that when we speak of particular ends, which we judge to be worth pursuing, we already do more than that. What we do is constitute ourselves as agents, it is because we aim at this further end that we have the practical commitments we do and conversely through our various practical pursuits we constitute ourselves as agents.[32] The Idea is self-determining, because it is the Idea of ourselves as minded agents.

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[30] That seems to fit (β) and (γ) in PR §113, and PR §141. On contextualism and particularism see Moyar 2011.
[31] Hegel acknowledges the relevance of 'interest' in moral willing, which captures subjective involvement but also commitment to the universal content of the aim (E§ 475); see too the description of ethical life as 'a subjective disposition …imbued with what is inherently right' (PR §141 A).
[32] See: 'the subject now exists as *free, universal self-identity*' (*SL* 823, 548).

(iv) Rationalist. Granted that when we speak of specific ends, which we judge to be worth pursuing, we already do more than that. We place our faith in our rational capacities and in a progressive rational teleology that supports the practices of criticizing and correcting our reasons for doing things, guaranteeing that we get it right in the long run. The Idea is actualised through such progressive teleology.

The first two positions would struggle with the idea of universality that Hegel associates with both good and willing (PR§103, §141, see too E§469, *SL* 819, II 542), the contextualist-particularist because the view is formulated in antipathy to universalist claims, the valuing as an attitude because it picks out a feature of evaluative and normative assessments, it does not seem concerned with universality as content of the good or end of the will. This leaves us with the self-constitutivist and the rationalist interpretations. Each gives a different slant to Hegel's universalist commitments. To see this, we need to return to some of the larger issues about systematicity and idealism broached in section 1.

The attempt to explain the idealism and so the claim about the rationality of the actual led us to a holistic conception of philosophical vindication of specific phenomena by reference to their relation to other phenomena. We then encountered the problem of potential dissolution of any content presented for philosophical analysis and vindication into mere relations. On the self-constitutivist interpretation, relations are indeed primary in terms of what can be vindicated and asserted. The self-determining Idea states this truth economically and succinctly. In forming practical thoughts, we find ourselves in an axiological circle: the value concepts we use are the product of our collective self-authorship. Not all evaluations survive in the long run, some become obsolete, a loss retrospectively rationalised in the on-going process of collective self-authorship. In other words, the activity of minded beings such as ourselves consists fundamentally in identifying, rejecting, and vindicating *prima faciae* goods. Such vindication is never itself absolute; what matters is the activity not the goods, since in the long run they all turn out to be *prima faciae*. Universality is a feature of the process of self-constitution not of the content of willing. The totality of the Notion is always relative, it means the sum of our best current judgements about the good, those that survive each retrospectively rationalising episode or stage. The position is modest in that it does not presume to allow us to assert any content as good beyond our practices of practical judgement, which is just to re-state that goodness is tied to practices.

The rationalist, by contrast, sees the dissolution into relations as a serious problem and seeks to avert it by conceiving the Idea substantively as a rational end that shapes the entire system, 'as an objective world whose inner ground and actual subsistence is the Notion' (*SL* 823, II 548). The rationalist shares with the self-constitutivist the belief that values and norms address us as subjects, the issue is explaining what is a subject in this context. The rationalist has a somewhat more ambitious conception of subjectivity than the self-constitutivist. She starts with a conception of reality as whole consisting of differentiated processes, including interaction of massive objects, organic generation, episodes of practical thought. These are continuous and dynamically connected. There are

no gaps. Subject is what becomes of this reality as a whole. What allows for this is a progressive teleology aimed at the realization of the absolute end. If we understand this as an ontological claim, it states that every layer of the whole is subject to normative forces and therefore appraisal. If we understand this as a statement within a closed system, then this progressive teleology is a conceptual process through which we attain ever more distinct and perspicuous evaluative and normative concepts. If we understand this as descriptive of a historical process that contains but also exceeds the system, the claim is that as rational animals we get better at appreciating where we stand within the whole in which we find ourselves and so we get progressively better in our evaluations of our ends and in how best to bring them about. [33] In any case, the rationalist can assert universality as feature of content of the absolute end, which amounts to saying that the good prevails.

It is not my purpose here to adjudicate between different versions of the rationalist interpretation, nor between it and the self-constitutivist one. In different ways, each option leads beyond moral philosophy, which is the topic of this essay. But it is by paying attention to Hegel's positive argument about moral willing that led us here. We are now in position to appreciate the role of that argument, not just as a stepping-stone to the substantive ethics of 'Ethical Life', but as essential to the larger project, which aims to show the actuality of the good.

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[33] Hegel leaves it to Aristotle to spell it out at the end of the *Encyclopedia*: 'for the actuality of thought is life, and God is that actuality; and God's self-dependent actuality is life most good and eternal' (E§ 557, and *Metaphysics* 1073a12)

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