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Introduction

As one would expect for a figure whose primary period of philosophical activity was the first third of the nineteenth century, Hegel's views cannot be immediately identified with positions in our own contemporary debate on free will without substantial risk of anachronism. In fact, one way of beginning to come to terms with Hegel's views on free will is to see him as offering a neglected alternative to the array of positions in the field that has developed in Anglophone philosophy since the mid-twentieth century.

To oversimplify a bit, we can think of that field as being defined by the question of whether free will and determinism (or some version of necessity) are compatible with each other. This then combines with views about the truth or falsity of determinism to generate three standard positions. Hard determinists or skeptics about free will accept that our actions are necessary (i.e., determined), that such necessity is incompatible with their being free, and thus argue that our will is not free. Libertarians also hold that free will is incompatible with determinism, but assert that determinism is false and we do have free will. Compatibilists, however, tell us that the purported incompatibility between our actions being free and their being necessary is more apparent than real, and that if we just think more carefully about free will we can see that there is nothing in the core of the notion that is inconsistent with the necessity of action in a deterministic world. Hegel represents a neglected alternative that is akin to contemporary compatibilism in the following sense: he also wants to convince us that the purported incompatibility between free will and necessity is more apparent than real, but to do so by thinking more carefully about the notions of *determination* and *necessity* rather than about the notion of freedom. So it will turn out that we can perfectly well say of an action *both* that it was free *and* that it was necessary or determined.

But, in fact, Hegel thinks that to accomplish this deeper thinking about determination and necessity we must trace them to their mutual source in the notion of explanation. The kind of determination that is relevant for the question of free will is essentially explanatory determination, and necessity is one specific form of such an explanatory determination. On this view, the deeper way of framing the problem of free will is to see it as an apparent conflict between our (theoretical) commitments to the thoroughgoing explicability of the world and our (practical) commitments to our self-conception as free sources of our own actions. The key to solving the problem of free will is then to

investigate the notion of explanation and its specific forms. The heart of this investigation is to be found in Hegel's metaphysics, and proceeds in three parts: first, a theorization of the explanatory relation as such; second, a conceptualization of the modalities (actuality, possibility, and necessity) as forms of explanatory relations; and third, a reconstruction and prioritization of teleological over causal/mechanical forms of explanatory relations.

Three Challenges to the Possibility of Free Will

In this section, we will tackle each of these three investigations in turn. For each, we will first set out some reasons for thinking that the concepts at issue are at least *prima facie* incompatible with free will. Then we will briefly consider Hegel's conceptualizations of those concepts, and finally, we will suggest how the conceptualizations he endorses show that the incompatibility is merely apparent and not real.

With respect to the contemporary Anglophone debate, one of the virtues of Hegel's way of framing the problem of free will as the contrast between *explicability* and free will rather than *determinism* and free will is the way that it draws into the core of the debate an argument from Galen Strawson that has been very influential and widely anthologized. This is an argument that purports to show that the constraint that free action be rational, and thus, explicable, is sufficient to rule out the possibility of free will, independent of the truth and falsity of determinism.

There is neither need nor room to reconstruct Strawson's argument in any detail here. Obviously, Hegel did not have access to Strawson's argument, and Strawson himself thinks that the argument's force is largely independent of its specific form. Simply put,

- (1) You do what you do because of the way you are. So
- (2) To be truly morally responsible for what you do [i.e., to have a truly free will] you must be truly responsible for the way you are—at least in certain crucial mental respects. But
- (3) You cannot be truly responsible for the way you are, so you cannot be truly responsible for what you do on pain of an infinite regress.

(Strawson 2003: 219)

The "because of" in (1) gets its force and structure from representing the constraints of true or full explanation.

This is not a new argument; some version of it goes back at least to Hobbes, who claimed that "The will is not voluntary. For a man can no more say that he will will, than he will will will, and so make an infinite repetition of the word will, which is absurd, and insignificant" (Hobbes 2008: Chapter 12, paragraph 5). But the real question is, what is it about the nature of explanation that generates this conflict with free will by way of an infinite regress? It is our expectation of the *externality* of the explanation, that is, our need to have something other than or outside of the original phenomenon do the explaining. In the case of free will, it seems natural to think of this something—the explanans, to use a technical term—as a choice or decision that is external and perhaps prior to the action it explains (the explanandum). That prior choice then becomes an explanandum that requires its own explanans, and we are off on an infinite regress.

Hegel, however, thinks that this expectation has to be balanced by a corresponding *internality* of the explanation, and in two related senses. First, the explanans has to be

internal to the *explanandum* in at least some respect, otherwise it is difficult to see how an explanation is supposed to improve our understanding of the original phenomenon. When we explain things, we don't just add another fact to the neighborhood of the original phenomenon; rather we learn more about it. Second, the explanans has to be internal to itself in the sense that it cannot automatically require a further explanation—if this were the case then we would never have any true or full explanations of any kind of phenomenon whatsoever. This point about internality has been recognized by a wide variety of contemporary Anglophone thinkers on explanation, and is at the heart of ordinary physical explanation (e.g., of the behavior of water by appeal to the fact that it is H₂O, or the explanation of the movement of a billiard ball by appeal to conservation of force).

Traditional accounts of free will essentially involve the internality at issue here. To cite only two examples important for Hegel, J.G. Fichte claimed that what we want out of a conception of free will is a kind of internal power whose exercises would be self-explanatory (1987: 20, 21), and for Aristotle the heart of voluntary action is the notion of an internal moving principle (1999: III.i). Nonetheless, it is important that Hegel's view is not primarily oriented by the attempt to save free will—it is just an attempt to save explanation as such. And that attempt leads to the result that all explanations have to be at least partially self-explanatory or, to use a term from Robert Nozick, self-subsuming (1983: 120).

There is no room to delve into the substantial complexity of Hegel's attempts to generate a structure that will balance both the internality and externality of explanation, but we have enough already to see how Hegel's conception of explanation demonstrates that the conflict between our commitments to the explicability of the world and to free will is more apparent than real. Strawson and Hobbes conceive of free rational action as being a function of principles (or mental states) that are independent of that action, and then demand that the action that follows from those principles can only be free if they are themselves chosen, that is, a function of a further set of principles (or mental states), and so on *ad infinitum*. But on the self-subsuming model of explanation suggested by Hegel, the principles of which the action is a function can be thought as features of the action itself (e.g., its consistency with the moral law, or its serving as a means for a good end). Conversely, we can think of the action itself as weighting the reasons and thereby making them a good explanation for the action. If this is the case, then there need be no infinite regress of choices.

It is easier to see the apparent conflict between free will and necessity and we can use the current locution 'alternate possibilities' to describe the feature of free will that appears to contrast with the necessity of action. On a rather natural construal of the modalities (i.e., of actuality, possibility, and necessity), if what we do is one from among a number of *alternate* possibilities, then what we actually do is *merely* possible and not necessary. If it is necessary, in contrast, then we couldn't have done otherwise. Thus, it looks as if we have to give up either our commitment to explaining events in the world in terms of necessitating conditions and/or natural laws, or our commitment to seeing ourselves as freely initiating courses of action. Hegel, however, thinks that a free action could be both merely possible in the relevant sense and necessary. And as with his thoughts on explanation, his claims about the modalities are motivated by general metaphysical reasons rather than specific intuitions about agency.

In fact, Hegel develops two different models of the relation between alternate possibilities and necessity, which go under the names 'real' and 'absolute' necessity. Both

models are common, both have their value in our everyday and scientific understandings of the world, and on neither model are alternate possibilities and necessity incompatible with each other. To put it another way, there is a kind of indeterminism even within the necessity of an event, and the two models provide different interpretations of that indeterminism. In real modality, indeterminism is a kind of looseness of fit between the conditions and the event that leaves the latter undecided; in absolute modality, it is precisely the tightness of fit between the two that points to the fact that other tight fits are possible. We can briefly illustrate the difference here using an example (see Yeomans 2011: Chapter 7). One might think that it was necessary that person with a quick temper would become angry in response to an insult. In Hegel's view, that necessity is an explanatory relation between a possibility (the insult and the temper as conditions) and an actuality (being angry in some particular way). But this necessity, which would be a reliable piece of information in a workplace situation or in a detective novel, is compatible with a number of different responses. For example, the person insulted might hit the insulter, or might respond verbally by returning the insult. In such a situation, we might say that it was necessary that the person with the temper respond in some way, even though there might be a range of responses that would be compatible with that necessity. This way of thinking about the example uses the model of real modality, in which necessity is compatible with a looseness of fit between general conditions (the insult and the temper) and specific actualities that follow from it (hitting or responding verbally).

To use the model of absolute modality to analyze the example we come back to the point about internality discussed in the previous section on explanation. In this model, the temper (i.e., the agent's character) is itself the necessitating, explanatory connection between the condition of possibility (the insult) and the actuality (the response). But here, this necessary relation will not just mediate externally between the insult and the response; instead, it will make them what they are. Take the condition: for some statement to be an insult it must be *taken as* an insult by some hearer (either the target or bystanders, but here we focus on the former). As a character trait, a quick temper is in part defined by the readiness to take many statements to be insults. Modally speaking, Hegel thinks that there is something even deeper going on in cases like this. In shaping the conditions, the relation of necessity constructs a continuum of alternate possibilities in terms of which the actual response is to be interpreted. Both the condition and the actual action could have been formed differently by the agent's character: the insult could have been perceived to be more or less severe, and the resulting action could have been more or less far along a continuum running from minor annoyance to physical aggression. This means that the agent's character could have manifested itself anywhere along this continuum, from inappropriately self-deprecating to having a chip on her shoulder. Anywhere along that continuum we would find an intelligible, necessary relation between the condition (the insult) and the actuality (the response), and this intelligibility is inherently connected with recognition of the other possibilities along that continuum. So here, understanding the example under the model of absolute modality, we have a deeper necessity but also a deeper sense of alternate possibilities—here one defined by the tight fit character makes between conditions and responses.

In fact, Hegel thinks that we do frequently look at the will in these two ways, and he connects the modal distinction to a distinction in models of the will indicated by two German terms, *Willkür* (freedom of choice) and *Wille* (free will). We use the model of freedom of choice when we consider the conditions of an action as independent

antecedent events and ask what is necessary on their basis. Since Hegel thinks that our motivations are generally underdetermined in a variety of ways, even if we had very strict relations of necessity to attach to them, the outcomes would remain underdetermined—this is looseness of fit again. From this point of view, the agent has precisely the alternate possibilities posited by libertarian theories. We use the model of free will when we take motivations to be specified and determined by the action itself, and thus, to have the tighter fit between conditions and responses characterized by absolute modality. But because that tight fit is generated by the process of action along a continuum of other possible tight fits, there remain alternate possibilities in the more compatibilist sense of different possible characters.

There is thus a sense in which Hegel's view too is a "compatibilism of incompatibilism and compatibilism," as Allen Wood has characterized Kant's view (1998). But the contrast is no longer between our commitments to the explicability of the world and our self-conception as free agents; rather, each modal model is available within the operation of each commitment, and there is no conflict within each model. The purported conflict results from a syncretism that takes the determinacy of motives from the free will model (without acknowledging the dependency of that determinacy on the agent's activity), and combines it with the independent, antecedent status of motives from the model of freedom of choice (without acknowledging the indeterminacy of motives which comes with such independence).

The basic problem of causal or mechanical explanations is one of passivity. If the world is exhaustively constituted as a causal web or chain, each link of which is an effect, it can come to look as if each link simply receives and passes on an impetus that comes to it from the prior link of the chain. But agency seems like an active phenomenon, an origination of some sort rather than a receptive continuation of some prior course of events. Furthermore, in the exhaustively causal picture whatever distinctive contribution each link makes would appear to be a matter of a fixed dispositional response to that impetus, which doesn't look like what we usually take to be agency either. The paradigmatic instances of agency seem instead seem to take initiative, to use resources given by the world in pursuit of the agent's goals. In Hegel's terms, there is an elasticity to goal-directed agency as opposed to the fixed passivity of causal relations. Thus there is an apparent conflict between our teleological self-conception and the explanatory commitments to an exhaustively causal world that at least eighteenth-century science seemed to demand.

Here we must be even briefer about the metaphysics. Suffice it to say that Hegel takes teleological explanations to be more fundamental than causal explanations because the identity conditions for the objects or events that are then causally related must be specified teleologically. That is, if objects and events did not have a teleological form that individuated them, there would be no stable relata for causation to relate, so teleological relations or processes are conditions for the possibility of causal relations. This argument does not deny that (efficient) causation takes place in the mental and natural world; it merely denies that *only* such causation takes place, or that all teleological processes can be reduced to efficient causal processes. The teleological processes in the world are ways of deploying causal processes in plastic and persistent attempts to achieve goals in given circumstances.

To turn to free will, the central difficulty for causal accounts of action is determining what particular kinds or forms of causal relations between motivations and outcomes make for action, out of all of the innumerable causal relations that are possible. Here is

an example to motivate the difficulty: a waiter who desires to startle his employer by knocking over a stack of glasses is so unnerved by that desire that he involuntarily steps into the glasses, knocking them over and startling his employer. It seems that there is a causal relation between the desire to startle and the employer being startled, but it doesn't seem to be of the right kind. We are inclined to say that the waiter nonetheless *inadvertently* startled his employer (Wilson 1989). But it is difficult to see what general form proper, intentional causal chains have that distinguishes them from wayward, or deviant causal chains that make for unintentional actions.

The teleological account Hegel offers provides some resources to solve this problem. In this account, the end or goal represents the constancy of systematic orientation that is maintained behind but also through the manifold and changing causal processes that make up goal-directed behavior. Consider another version of the waiter example, in which the waiter feels his nervousness coming on and recognizes it as a resource that might be used to do what he might otherwise not have the nerve to do. He refrains from controlling his nervousness and instead lets it play out next to the stack of glasses. The glasses are spilled and the employer is startled. In that case, we should say that the waiter intentionally startled his employer.

What accounts for the difference between the cases? We might be tempted to locate the difference in an additional causal chain, for example, control by the higher order mental state. In this way of seeing things, the intention would cause the recognition of the nervousness as a resource and then its utilization. But it is not clear how this differs from the first case, in which the intention caused the nervousness which then caused the glasses to be spilled and the employer to be startled. Rather, we ought to say that the waiter in the second example acts intentionally because the control of the intention is represented by the plasticity with which the realization of that intention is pursued, and the way in which new means are recognized when they present themselves. That is, the plasticity or elasticity shows the way in which the goal illuminates context so as to reveal conditions as means, and this is an aspect of agency that cannot easily be captured on the model of a causal process or power.

Goal directedness gives us the orientation towards and in the world that is necessary for our self-understanding as originators of courses of action. If Hegel is right that such goal-directedness is both more fundamental than strictly causal connection, and is a metaphysical feature of both the natural and mental worlds, then again he has shown that the conflict between our commitment to explaining the world and our commitment to free will is more apparent than real.

Hegel as Source Incompatibilist

In the introduction to this chapter, I characterized Hegel as a neglected kind of compatibilist, because he held that our actions could be both necessary and free, so long as one understood necessity in the right kind of way. But here there is always possible a similar kind of response to the one that incompatibilists have to compatibilist understandings of free will. Just as incompatibilists complain that the compatibilist analysis of free will isn't *really* what we mean by that term, it is natural for both incompatibilists and more usual compatibilists to complain that Hegel's view isn't *really* what we mean by 'determinism' and 'necessity.' Those terms, so the objection goes, mean something more ordinary, something like efficient causation governed by natural laws. (Assuming, of course, that the natural laws at issue required particular outcomes rather than a

probabilistic distribution of outcomes). On this construal, Hegel just holds that determinism is false, and must be so for us to have free will. Furthermore, one of the frequent motivations for compatibilism is its relative metaphysical modesty: it purports to present a view of free will that is consistent with a wide variety of metaphysical descriptions of the causal structure of the world (even, perhaps, indeterministic descriptions). As a result, most compatibilists have had relatively little interest in working on the other side of the equation, that is, developing a concrete account of the causality of the world and our actions within it. In the division of labor of this conversation, that task has been left to the libertarians. Hegel, in contrast, is very far from modest in the scope of his metaphysical claims and in their integration with his conception of the free will.

For both these reasons, Hegel might equally be characterized as an incompatibilist. And, in fact, I want to close this chapter by suggesting that the figure in the contemporary debate to whom Hegel is closest is actually a libertarian, Robert Kane. Kane is sometimes labeled a *source incompatibilist*, which simply means that on his view alternate possibilities matter to free will not in themselves, but because they are necessary if we are to be the ultimate sources of our own actions. For both Kane and Hegel, the need for this kind of singular significance—to be someone who matters in the world in virtue of being the author and sustainer of one's own course of life—generates a remarkable series of pluralities. That is, the number and kind of alternate possibilities are multiplied, even to the extent of partially undermining the agent's control in precisely the way that compatibilists and skeptics suspect. For Kane, truly free actions (what Kane calls "Self-Forming Willings") are cases in which we struggle to set the end that we want to set, and specifically because we also *want* to set some competing end, we *could* also set that competing end, and we have good *reasons* to do so. So as Kane sees it, these Self-Forming Willings are plural in three senses: they are plural voluntary, plural controlled, and plural rational. These track the three sense of willing itself, that is, that the will is desiderative, striving, and rational. (Strictly speaking this isn't quite right, since [a] voluntariness involves not merely desiring but desiring more than any other alternatives [and thus the plurality of voluntariness involves not merely desiring different things but the possibility that different things could be most desired]; and [b] voluntariness also requires lack of coercion. See Kane 1998: 30).

The indeterminism that makes Kane's view incompatibilist is most directly tied to plural control. Kane holds that this plurality has a consequence that compatibilists and hard determinists have often raised as an objection to libertarianism, namely that it actually undermines the agent's control. As Kane puts it,

Paradoxical as it may seem, in order to have *ultimate* control over their destinies, possessors of free will must relinquish another kind of control at pivotal points in their life histories, namely, an antecedent determining control that would guarantee how things will turn out in advance.

(Kane 1998: 144)

That is, in order to originate our actions, it has to be the case that even our own actions, resolutions and decisions do not completely eliminate alternate possibilities for future action. The objection is not wrong, but it does not have the force that the objector thinks it does. It simply shows that we are incomplete or imperfect originators of our actions, which is about as much as we ought to have expected to start out with.

Hegel deeply accepts this paradox in his analysis of human free will. On the one hand, our rational will makes possible an active mental life that is of infinite value and is worthy of fundamental respect. On the other hand, the deep necessities of character that manifest themselves in that life are always also contingent and capable of radically altered manifestation in the practical circumstances of action over which the agent often has somewhat limited control. As does Kane, Hegel sees within each agent an internal plurality of goals that coexist in constant and sometimes uneasy tension with each other. The executive function of the will involves managing that tension, but it can only do so by identifying with particular goals, and so agents are constantly and necessarily imperfectly attempting to express the whole of their character through identification with one of its parts. This is a tough and interminable task, and so free will cannot be located in any simple causal or structural relation between an agent—*or her intention*—and an action. But we do sometimes succeed, and such success is a real achievement. Free will would not be worthy of such respect if it were not so difficult.

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