

Hegel's Argument for an Ethical System: Development and Preservation of Conscience

Much of the work of Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel addressed the apparent tension between individuality and society. In his book *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Hegel makes a strong case for the compatibility of the individual and society by appealing to conscience. Hegel broadly defines *conscience* as individual self-awareness and subjectivity while defining *ethical life* as the institutional context that provides a path toward the objective good. Hegel emphasizes both the subjective and objective in these definitions, and that their relationship exceeds mere compatibility. Ultimately, Hegel argues that conscience cannot sustainably exist without ethical life.

Hegel's argument that conscience needs an ethical system is twofold. First, he emphasizes that human beings will only develop a conscience within a social and ethical framework, so to deny an ethical system would deprive individuals of a conscience. Second, by stressing the threat that the unchecked subjectivity of the individual poses to the very existence of conscience itself and by pointing to ethical life as the only source of the necessary objectivity that can preserve conscience, Hegel makes a persuasive case for the continued necessity of an ethical system even *after* the initial development of conscience.

Conscience as Developed in an Ethical System

By demonstrating that humans require the social structures of an ethical system to develop subjectivity, morality, and a basic level of freedom, Hegel proves that conscience is fundamentally a product of ethical life. Hegel posits that humans are naturally social beings from birth. Although he recognizes that children “do not belong as things either to others or to their parents,”¹ Hegel describes how children are “guided by an alien authority.”² As a result, they are subjects—as all living organisms are—who hold “only the possibility of

¹ Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood, trans. H.B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), §175.

² *Ibid.*, §26.

personality.”³ They become “people” when they grow aware of their subjectivity. However, this growth into awareness does not happen autonomously, which Hegel uses as the basis for a “child’s right to its upbringing.”⁴ According to Hegel, parents are responsible for raising their children properly, which includes providing “a circle of love and trust.”⁵ Within the family, children become “free personalities”⁶ who are aware of their subjectivity. According to Hegel, conscience is precisely this “formal subjectivity.”⁷

By developing subjectivity and conscience, an ethical upbringing inevitably develops morality. As established, awareness of one’s subjectivity is the mark of personality, but Hegel adds that this “[p]ersonality [also] contains in general the capacity for right.”⁸ Possessing a *capacity* for right necessitates that the person knows what constitutes right. Knowing right requires knowing wrong, and with knowledge of this distinction between right and wrong, the person achieves a moral position. As such, Hegel demonstrates how morality grows out of the subjectivity and conscience that originates in the ethical context. At this point, Hegel’s “human being” is a moral subject with a personality and the capacity for right.

This morality then comes to represent the origin of freedom within the individual. Hegel explains how “morality...represents in its entirety the real aspect of the concept of freedom.”⁹ Since morality inherently contains moral distinctions between right and wrong, its framework lends itself to a moral choice. With the ability to choose, the individual has at least a basic level of freedom. In short, since freedom originates in morality, morality originates in subjectivity, and subjectivity in ethical life, Hegel demonstrates that all three are the product of ethical life. Ultimately, Hegel emphasizes the comprehensive reach of an

³ Ibid., §35.

⁴ Ibid., §174.

⁵ Ibid., §175.

⁶ Ibid., §177.

⁷ Ibid., §139.

⁸ Ibid., §36.

⁹ Ibid., §106.

ethical system to highlight its necessity not just for the development of conscience but for morality and freedom.

As Hegel reveals, humans need a social and ethical framework to develop subjectivity, conscience, morality, and freedom. It follows that limiting or removing the ethical system restricts or even prevents the formation of conscience. At this point, Hegel has provided the first part of his twofold argument that conscience requires an ethical system. However, rather than conclude his examination with a discussion of morality and freedom, Hegel continues his critical analysis of subjectivity. In introducing the freedom to choose, subjectivity inherently opens the door to wrong and, Hegel argues, even evil. Although he agreed with Kant's belief in the creative power of subjectivity, Hegel criticized Kant for "wholly ignor[ing] its capacity for evil."¹⁰ Instead, Hegel views conscience as the ultimate example of a double-edged sword; it is the origin of the very best and most evil within humanity. Moreover, as American philosopher Allen W. Wood describes in *Hegel's Ethics*, Hegel views conscience as naturally prone to "self-centeredness, even self-worship."¹¹ When left without the structure of ethical life, conscience tends towards individuality, isolation, and evil. As such, the development of conscience brings the individual to a crossroads, but a crossroads where they are inclined to take the evil rather than the moral path. Hegel argues that an ethical system directs the individual in the moral direction.

Individual Subjectivity Poses an Existential Threat to Conscience

By diving into an analysis of subjectivity, Hegel concludes that uncurbed subjectivity has dangerous consequences. Further, by underscoring the need for something objective in countering the subjective, Hegel presents an ethical system as the indispensable source of that objectivity. For Hegel, subjectivity has a propensity towards "inwardness."¹² In that sense,

¹⁰ Dudley Knowles, *Routledge Philosophy GuideBook to Hegel and the Philosophy of Right* (London: Routledge, 2002), 215.

¹¹ Allen W. Wood, "Hegel's ethics," *The Cambridge Companion to Hegel*, ed. Frederick C. Beiser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 224.

¹² Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §139.

subjectivity inherently works in favor of the individual. Although conscience puts a person at a crossroads where they can choose to make either “the universal” or “arbitrar[y] particularity” their principle, Hegel points out that the person is inevitably drawn towards their particularity.¹³ If the individual lingers in their subjectivity, they withdraw into themselves and cease communicating with the ethical system that raised their conscience. Peter Dews, a philosopher and author on Hegel, describes the process as the individual “singularizing [themselves] in a way that cuts [them] off from the universal.”¹⁴ The person “exalts [their] own power of choice, failing to acknowledge the prior claim of the shared human world in which [their] very existence is grounded.”¹⁵ At this point, the individual believes in the absolute certainty of their subjectivity and grows mistrustful of others and social institutions. However, conscience can be wrong. As Hegel describes, we cannot assume that what an individual’s conscience “considers or declares *to be good* is also actually good.”¹⁶ He adds, “For *to err is human*, and who has not been mistaken about this or that circumstance.”¹⁷ Placing complete certainty in one’s subjective perspective becomes dangerous when conscience can deceive. However, does that danger threaten the very existence of conscience? The success of Hegel’s project rests on his argument that it does.

In effect, Hegel argues that if conscience lingers in this state of inwardness, its subjectivity will eventually begin to dissolve the conscience itself. Hegel describes this dissolution of conscience in §140 of his *Philosophy of Right*, although in somewhat convoluted terms. An exploration into the position of John Paul II on conscience teases out the workings of the process. In *Veritatis Splendor*, a 1993 encyclical letter addressing questions of the Catholic Church’s moral teachings, John Paul II succinctly describes this

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Peter Dews, “Chapter 3 Hegel: A Wry Theodicy,” in *The Idea of Evil* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 83.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §137.

¹⁷ Ibid., 140.

descent into radical subjectivity and its threat to conscience. His perspective adds depth to our analysis and reveals why Hegel is so intent on the need for ethical life.

John Paul II expresses concern about the developing subjectivity and relativism in the world. Like Hegel, Paul points to the strong affirmation of the individual conscience: “The individual conscience is accorded the status of a supreme tribunal of moral judgment which hands down categorical and infallible decisions about good and evil.”¹⁸ If one affords one’s conscience absolute authority, “one’s moral judgment [would be] true merely by the fact that it has its origin in the conscience.”¹⁹ In this state of complete and certain subjectivity, the objective difference between good and evil breaks down. John Paul II describes how this “radically subjectivistic conception of moral judgment”—where the individual conscience is given “the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil”—leads to the loss of “a universal truth about the good.”²⁰ He asserts that when “[t]aken to its extreme consequences, this individualism leads to a denial of the very idea of human nature.” Once this truth of the good is lost in individual subjectivity, “inevitably the notion of conscience also changes.”²¹ Essentially, once the idea of a universal truth about the good is lost, which it is in the context of absolute individual subjectivity, the whole idea of conscience becomes subjective. In denying the objective experience of human nature, the individual denies its personhood. Recalling Hegel’s definition of a person as a subject that has developed personality due to growing into an awareness of themselves, this loss of personhood challenges the individual’s awareness. Without self-awareness, the subject loses their conscience.

Hegel reflects on this loss of personhood derived from the individual’s boundless subjectivity. If the conscience “is able to assert that [a] deed is good in its own

¹⁸ John Paul II, “*Veritatis Splendor*” (encyclical letter, Vatican City, August 6, 1993), 53.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

estimation...we have reached that even higher level of subjectivity which knows itself as absolute.”²² Hegel’s description of this “higher” level of subjectivity mirrors John Paul II’s notion of radical subjectivity. Hegel continues: “Under these circumstances, any semblance of ethical objectivity has completely disappeared” as the “distinctive outlook of the individual and his particular conviction” is equated with the ethical.²³ Hegel acknowledges that this “higher” level subjectivity may appear “in the eyes of the world [as] an utterly indifferent happening,” but he asserts that the degradation has profound implications for our value system.²⁴ If the “subjective conviction [is] said to....give actions their value...a person is able to transform whatever he does into something good.”²⁵ In turn, the individual loses the *ability* for evil, yet crucially only from their perspective. Recall that one’s conscience, no matter how authoritative, can still err; therefore, the individual can still act in evil ways, objectively speaking. The individual no longer makes moral calculations based on *knowledge* of the difference between good and evil because “good and evil become so blurred that, in individual instances, the opposite poles prove interchangeable.”²⁶ While John Paul II associated this radical subjectivity with “a denial of the very idea of human nature,” Hegel describes the state as “subjective emptiness.”²⁷ In this state of emptiness, even “subjectivity...fades away inasmuch as it is empty of all objectivity and thus has no actuality of its own.”²⁸ Simply put, “subjectivity descends into a hole of its own making.”²⁹ And since conscience is “formal subjectivity,”³⁰ conscience also fades away in its emptiness. Without a conscience, a person loses any claim to personhood and retreats to mere subjecthood. It is from this return to subjecthood that Hegel argues for an ethical system.

²² Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §140.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Knowles, *GuideBook to Hegel*, 220.

³⁰ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, §139.

Conscience as Preserved in an Ethical System

Hegel is a committed moral realist, not a relativist.³¹ He defends moral objectivism and moral cognitivism.³² In his view, an ethical system provides precisely the objectivity necessary to curb a person's descent into radical subjectivity and its inevitable dissolution of subjectivity and conscience.

First, ethical life requires connecting with others. Since conscience and its subjectivity tend towards "inwardness," by requiring interaction with others, an ethical system continually exposes the individual to the subjectivity of others. While these interactions do not explicitly expose the individual to objectivity, Hegel's reflections on objectivity demonstrate that, implicitly, they do. Hegel envisions objectivity as a product of the "self-actualization" of spirit, which, in turn, "needs the course of human history...to realize itself."³³ Only subjective human activity gives rise to objectivity.³⁴ Therefore, when humans interact with other subjective individuals and act within an ethical environment, they approach the necessary objectivity.

Hegel insists on the importance of language in facilitating this connection within the ethical system. Through the human faculty of language, an agent's subjective assurances are "ambiguous and open to interpretation by others."³⁵ Individual subjectivity meets individual subjectivity as the collective approaches knowledge of the objective good through learning from mistakes. Within an ethical system, individuals seek out opposing viewpoints because they trust that others will forgive them if their conscience errs. In contrast to Kant, Hegel saw objectivity as "the whole" and "not something that transcends existence."³⁶ Individuals within the system are "organically and inseparably related to every other," giving their finite and

³¹ Knowles, *GuideBook to Hegel*, 215.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ellie Anderson, "Hegel: dialectical philosophy," YouTube, uploaded by Overthink Podcast, Oct. 15, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IFvY-nBJEsg>.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Wood, "Hegel's ethics," 224.

³⁶ Glenn Alexander Magee, *The Hegel Dictionary* (United Kingdom: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2010), 19-20.

subjective existence “its place in the whole, as part of the system of reality itself.”³⁷ While the person *without* an ethical system withdraws from others and mistrusts social institutions, the person *in* an ethical system leans into the productive dynamics of the collective and recognizes the transformative and crucial properties of ethical life. In short, after a human develops a conscience within the social context, an ethical system continues to provide the implicit objectivity that channels that individual’s subjectivity away from self-destruction and towards objectively good ends.

A Counterargument from the Perspective of Freedom

In making such an imperative case for an ethical system, Hegel inevitably opens himself up for critique. The most substantial critiques oppose Hegel’s conception of ethical life from the standpoint of individual freedom. According to these critics, since Hegel locates individual freedom in conscience and an ethical system appears to counter that subjectivity, his proposal does not sufficiently protect that freedom.

Looking past the fact that unchecked subjectivity will undermine the existence of conscience, Hegel makes a compelling response by positing that *true* freedom is found in one’s duty to an ethical community. As described above, a person within an ethical system is a part of the larger whole. Every subjective individual contributes to the whole through continuous action. It is in this collective responsibility to the realization of objectivity that Hegel grounds his argument for true freedom. As stated by Allen Wood, “Freedom for Hegel...consists in ‘being with oneself in an other.’”³⁸ Although some may view this “other,” i.e., ethical life, as restricting an individual’s freedom, Hegel views the “other” as the true expression of that individual’s freedom. Wood describes how “[w]hen the other which I distinguish from myself does not limit but expresses my self, then it is not a hindrance on me, but is in fact the very actualization of my freedom.”³⁹ While the individual may have an

³⁷ Ibid., 20.

³⁸ Wood, “Hegel’s ethics,” 219.

³⁹ Ibid.

arbitrary form of freedom upon gaining a conscience, an individual obtains true freedom within the workings of social and ethical life. In turn, by making the case for a higher form of freedom, Hegel's response to this common critique further strengthens his argument.

Conclusion

By asserting that an ethical system is responsible for both the development and preservation of conscience, Hegel makes a persuasive argument that conscience needs an ethical system. Hegel first describes how humans develop personhood and, subsequently, conscience, morality, and freedom within our social upbringing. In this way, the family serves as the fundamental educator and facilitator of the *development* of conscience. Hegel then delves into the potential dangers of subjectivity and even concludes that individual subjectivity poses an existential threat to conscience unless guided by something objective. By demonstrating that an ethical system provides that necessary objectivity, Hegel establishes ethical life as the *preserver* of conscience. With ethical life established as both the developer and preserver of conscience, Hegel makes an overwhelming case for pursuing and protecting our ethical systems. Beyond its logical appeal, Hegel's argument for ethical life is also *morally* persuasive. Ethical life harmonizes individual subjectivity and ethical objectivity, all while setting people on the path toward the objective good.

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