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## Hegel and Agent-Relative Reasons

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Explicating Hegel's ethics through distinctions in reasons for action is a project that seems to run counter to Hegel's self-understanding. The most prominent mention of justification through 'good reasons' in Hegel's corpus comes in the catalogue of degenerate forms of moral subjectivity in *Philosophy of Right* (hereafter *PR*) §140. His worry, expressed in his linking of acting on reasons to subjectivism in ethics, is that reasons, when taken in isolation, can be manipulated by the moral subject to excuse unethical deeds or inaction. Yet there is another sense in which Hegel's own action-theory, stressing as it does the role of intention in fixing responsibility and attribution, makes contemporary discourse of reasons a natural fit. Contemporary distinctions in types of reasons can help us come to grips with the conceptual development in Hegel's account of normativity.<sup>1</sup> As a theory oriented by mutual recognition between free agents, Hegel's ethical theory is naturally described in terms of social processes of giving and asking for reasons. In this paper I investigate the place of agent-relative reasons within Hegel's account, and how that account can help us better understand modern ethical theory and practice.

The distinction between agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons has proven very useful in recent moral theory. The distinction became prominent in Anglo-American philosophy as a way of resisting the idea that all reason and value must be of a single type, in particular as part of the struggle to resist consequentialism in ethics. Arguing for agent-relative reasons has been a way to argue for the importance of the agent's point of view and thus against the dominance of consequentialist considerations.<sup>2</sup> Agent-relativity captures the sense in which it is *my* reason for *my* action rather than a reason, holding for anyone, that some result (i.e., some consequence) be brought about in the world. The distinction

helps account for the richness and difficulty in living a moral life, for it allows us to see the tension between the claims of, say, helping others and living in the world in a way authentically one's own. The frequent assumption that there is no such tension or conflict in Hegel's ethics is mistaken. Though he is optimistic that modern individuals can achieve a non-alienating form of ethical freedom, he does not conceive of this freedom as conflict-free. Hegel is suspicious of theorists who focus on the conflict of duties in modern life, yet he is quite willing to admit that negotiating such conflict is a central aspect of modern ethical agency.

One of my two main aims in this paper is to interpret Hegel's complex architecture of normativity in the *Philosophy of Right* in light of the distinction. The distinction is especially useful in understanding the transitions from Kantian morality to the morality of conscience to Ethical Life. It is sometimes assumed that having overcome the standpoint of conscience, the reasons of Ethical Life will be agent-neutral. I argue that on the contrary all the individual's reasons for action in Ethical Life are agent-relative. This might seem an unlikely conclusion given the ways in which Hegel appears to submerge the individual agent within an impersonal social substance. I argue that we need to distinguish the questions of reasons and values in order to understand how the agent-relative and agent-neutral factors work in his theory of Ethical Life. Most importantly, while for Hegel the value carried by social substance is agent-neutral, the values and reasons of individuals within that social substance are not.

My second main aim is to show that Hegel has resources within his theory for resolving some of the problems with the contemporary ways of drawing the agent-neutral/agent-relative distinction. I use contemporary theory to explicate Hegel's theory, but I also use Hegel's theory to educate us about how we draw out distinctions. I therefore begin by presenting the contemporary distinction and outlining three problems.

### 1. The contemporary distinction

The contemporary distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons stems from the work of Thomas Nagel. In *The Possibility of Altruism (PA)*, Nagel distinguished subjective and objective reasons, and he later adopted the terminology of Derek Parfit to call these agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons. In *PA* Nagel holds that subjective or agent-relative reasons contain a 'free-agent variable.' He contrasts two formulations of one's reason for moving out of the way of an oncoming

truck: 'that the action will prolong his life,' and 'that the action will prolong someone's life' (Nagel, 1978, p. 91). The former reason is subjective or agent-relative because the 'his' is a free-agent variable, while the latter is an objective or agent-neutral reason.

After introducing the subjective/objective distinction in *PA*, Nagel seems to undermine its importance with an argument that all subjective reasons must be backed up with objective reasons and values. He writes:

The thesis which I propose to defend is simply that the only acceptable reasons are objective ones; even if one operates successfully with a subjective principle, one must be able to back it up with an objective principle yielding those same reasons as well as (presumably) others. Whenever one acts for a reason, I maintain, it must be *possible* to regard oneself as acting for an objective reason, and promoting an objectively valuable end.

(Nagel, 1978, pp. 96–7)

Nagel also states his thesis as a claim about the basis of all reasons: it is, he writes, the 'thesis that all reasons must be derivable from objective principles' (Nagel, 1978, p. 97). Though he stresses the objective principles, the intuitive force of this derivation model relies on a claim about 'promoting an objectively valuable end.' The distinction in reasons thus depends on a parallel reasoning about values. In his subsequent thought, Nagel is much more willing to grant that agent-relative reasons may 'retain some independent force' even after the objective correlate of the subjective reason has been appreciated.<sup>3</sup> He also is clearer that the distinction extends to value, and he thus writes of agent-neutral/relative reasons and values.

In *The View from Nowhere* (*VN*), Nagel gives a concise definition of the two kinds of reasons and his most detailed account of which kinds of reasons fall on which side of the distinction. The distinction relates to the central theme of *VN*, namely a distinction in perspectives or points of view. The agent-relative essentially involves the perspective of the specific agent, whereas the agent-neutral is defined as accessible in the view from nowhere. Nagel defines agent-neutral reasons as follows:

If a reason can be given a general form which does not include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-neutral* reason. For example, it is a reason for anyone to do or want something

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that it would reduce the amount of wretchedness in the world, then that is a neutral reason.

(Nagel, 1986, pp. 152–3)

Nagel thus thinks of agent-neutral reasons in consequentialist terms. Consequences, conceived as states of affairs in the world, are easy to view from ‘nowhere,’ when one thinks of oneself as a generic agent.

Nagel defines agent-relative reasons and values by the ‘essential reference’ they include to the person who has the reason. The language of essential reference replaces the language of ‘free-agent variable’ from *PA*. Nagel writes,

If on the other hand the general form of a reason does include an essential reference to the person who has it, it is an *agent-relative* reason. For example, if it is a reason for anyone to do or want something that it would be in *his* interest, then that is a relative reason.

(Nagel, 1986, p. 153)

Nagel no longer holds that these reasons and values can be derived from agent-neutral reasons and values. He gives a rather expansive set of agent-relative reasons and corresponding values, consisting of three main categories (Nagel, 1986, p. 164ff.): (1) ‘Reasons of autonomy’ are those reasons generated by an agent’s ‘desires, projects, commitments’ (Nagel, 1986, p. 167). These generate reasons for me that are not reasons for others unless those others share the same desires, projects, or commitments. (2) ‘Deontological reasons’ are those prohibitions against certain acts (e.g., murder) that function as reasons for the agent apart from, and even contrary to, considerations of the impersonal good that the action would achieve. It is here that the agent-neutral/agent-relative contrast most closely tracks the consequentialism/deontology contrast, for Nagel thinks of these as agent-relative mainly because of a contrast with the maximization of good consequences. (3) Reasons stemming from ‘special obligations,’ namely from our relations to our family, friends, and communities. My attachments to others generate agent-relative reasons because I place special value on these people and communities, whose reason-generating value is thus relative to my agency.

In what follows I focus on three major problems with Nagel’s version of the distinction. I present these briefly here and show in subsequent sections how Hegel addresses the problems to arrive at a more satisfying account of the distinction.<sup>4</sup> The first problem concerns the requirement

that we must consider the 'general form' of the reason in order to determine whether there is an agent-relative reason in play or not. Let us call this the *General Form Problem*. This requirement seems to involve a commitment to a certain controversial conception of practical reasoning according to which when we act on a reason it is always a reason in a general form that enters into our deliberation (or could on some ideal reconstruction). This already excludes the conception of reasons advocated by moral particularists (though not exclusively by them), according to which one's reasons are provided by particular states of affairs. It is the person in front of me in pain who provides the reason, not the general consideration that whenever someone is in pain I am to help him.<sup>5</sup> The agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction will be seriously compromised if it requires that all reasons be expressed in general form. The challenge is to preserve the distinction even if one rejects the claim that all reasons take a general form.

The second problem is determining what exactly it means for a reason to include an 'essential reference to the person.' I call this the *Essential Reference Problem*. The reference is essential because the agent takes there to be a reason *for him* that is not necessarily a reason for others. This is the sense of the agent-relative that Nagel tries to capture with his example of something being in the agent's interest. In this case essential reference seems to require just that the reason stem from some *particular instance* of subjective concern. But this would make the agent-relative anything that is a reason *for an individual agent*, since the concept of interest is broad enough to include a virtually unlimited range of objects (even donating to charity fulfills an interest of mine). The problem is that essential reference so conceived says nothing about the end or *content* that the agent is interested in, and nothing about what makes the agent different from other agents. If the agent is just conceived as numerically distinct from others, it is easy enough to say that a particular reason for an agent will be relative to that agent. But the force of the agent-relative reasons (such as those generated by devotion to a baseball team) comes not from personhood or agency as such, but rather from an agent's specific goals and attachments. A reference to the agent is *essential* for a reason only if there is something determinate about my agency that helps generate the reason.

The third issue has to do with how to maintain a unified conception of both reasons and of values. How can we theorize a relation between the types of value and between types of reasons while resisting the urge to make one the basis of the other? I call this the *Interdependence Problem*. While Nagel in *PA* claimed that the agent-relative (subjective) were

derivable from the agent-neutral (objective) and thus threatened the distinctness of the reasons, his position in *VN* threatens to bifurcate the agent-relative and agent-neutral to an unacceptable degree. Korsgaard has raised this problem as part of her attempt to undermine the distinction itself. She notes that Nagel's claims about value imply that objective value, what is good-absolutely, is *metaphysically* distinct from subjective value. She writes that his position seems to be what she calls Objective Realism (which she associates with G. E. Moore), according to which values are neutral because they exist independent of all subjective concern (Korsgaard, 1996). Coupled with the demand that the subjective be anchored in the objective, this would imply the odd thesis that the valuing of individuals derive from value that is independent of agents' concerns. Korsgaard's concern is that when the objective or agent-neutral is conceived in a way abstracted from the subjective or agent-relative, the normative grip of the agent-neutral on agents themselves goes missing. The worry addressed by Nagel's original argument for derivation is that without a strongly neutral or objective basis for reasons and value, the specter of a general relativism about values and reasons raises its head. The challenge of the Interdependence Problem thus is to theorize the distinction in a way that preserves the independence of the two sides while establishing a clear relationship between them. As we shall see, Hegel's understanding of reasons and values in Objective Spirit is well-suited to providing a satisfying solution to this problem.

## 2. The free will and the reasons of morality

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel presents various conceptions of the agent and practical norms as so many levels of 'right.' The challenge for interpreting Hegel's position in terms of types of reasons is that the developmental method he uses to construct his account of right does not lay out the nature of the operative reasons in any clear-cut manner. Hegel defines right as 'the *definite existence* of the *free will*' (*PR* §29), a rationally articulated activity that contains the logical moments of universality, particularity, and singularity (*Einzelheit*, often translated as individuality) (*PR* §§5–7). Hegel conceives of these three moments of the Concept as the moments of the self-reference of the I. Hegel's analysis of the will's logical structure lends itself naturally to addressing the *Essential Reference Problem* in Nagel's distinction between the agent-relative and agent-neutral. Hegel's account is oriented by *self-reference*, but his conception of self-reference is compatible with there being no

*essential* reference in the sense needed to secure agent-neutrality. Rather than discussing these moments of the will in isolation, I proceed in this section through 'Abstract Right' and 'Morality' to see the Concept at work in the operative reasons.

Each level of right contains all three moments, yet one moment predominates in each of the three main spheres. Universality predominates in the legal relations of 'Abstract Right,' which are based on the concept of the *person*. In the reasons that I use in the actions distinctive of this sphere I refer to myself as a person, which is a shape of the free will that Hegel calls 'the will's self-conscious (but otherwise contentless) and *simple* reference to itself in its individuality' (§35). This formal universal self-reference has no content and thus demarcates reasons that have the same force for all agents. I am one person among others, and the reasons operative in this sphere refer to legal relations that hold from an external (neutral) perspective on actions. The main norms here are respecting the property of others and honoring contracts. 'Because it is a persons' property' or 'because we have a contract' are reasons that are agent-neutral because nothing in the normative force of the reason depends on the agent's specific characteristics.<sup>6</sup> Of course the relations of abstract right between persons take particular objects—contracts are to perform certain services or transfer certain property. But the force of the reasons simply stems from the legal practices and institutions in which all individuals are considered identical. Abstract Right is atomistic in that agents are considered as discrete units, and the reasons are agent-neutral or impersonal because no determinate difference between agents underlies the normative force of the reasons. The reference to the agents is not 'essential' in a sense that can render the reasons agent-relative.

The transition from 'Abstract Right' to 'Morality' introduces the agent's own *particular* perspective as a factor that must be taken into account in determining reasons. What Hegel calls 'the *right of the subjective will*' is a claim for the authority of the agent's point of view. In Morality 'the will can *recognize* something or *be* something only in so far as that thing is *its own*, in so far as the will is present to itself in its subjectivity' (§107). Given this strong agent-oriented language, we must be careful not to think that every kind of reason discussed in 'Morality' is agent-relative merely because an individual must take something as 'its own.' Both agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons are *for* an individual in this sense. The trajectory of the conceptual development in 'Morality' is to move from a particular self-reference to a conception of universal moral reasons.<sup>7</sup> By the end of 'Morality' the agent's reasons will be universal, taking others into account, and self-determined by particular

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individuals. With the individual presuppositions of Morality, however, the relation of the moments of particularity (of the agent-relative) and universality (of reasons in general) is unstable even at the completion of the development. It is this instability that necessitates the crucial transition to Ethical Life.

For much of the first two sections of 'Morality' Hegel discusses formal requirements of intentional action. These requirements do not demarcate a certain normative content, but rather set the terms on which intentional actions can be attributed to agents (e.g., should one be held responsible for patricide when one does not know it is one's father one is killing). Hegel first thematizes the content of the reasons when he introduces the agent's own 'welfare.' Welfare is initially a *non-moral* source of agent-relative reasons (in the sense of not other-regarding), which in the further determination of the will becomes moral and agent-neutral. In the dialectical development of right, the purpose of individual welfare quickly leads to the aim/purpose of 'the welfare of *all*' (§125), a source of agent-neutral moral reasons. This is an initially indeterminate demand that provides no specific purposes. Hegel in fact raises the standard worry about this kind of agent-neutral, consequentialist reasoning. He states that reasons of welfare cannot justify any action that is wrong in itself.

Hegel's conception of the Good brings together the particularity of the moral perspective and the universality of 'Abstract Right.' The Good is a comprehensive formulation of objective value: the 'unity of the *concept* of the will, and the *particular* will . . . *realized freedom, the absolute and ultimate purpose of the world*' (§129).<sup>8</sup> We can think of the Good as a consequentialized version of all the *Philosophy of Right's* preceding shapes ('abstract right, welfare, the subjectivity of knowing, and the contingency of external existence'), and on the surface at least it is solely a source of agent-neutral moral reasons.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, Hegel goes out of his way to say that the only moral reasons available at this point are agent-neutral reasons: 'all that is available so far is this: to do *right*, and to promote *welfare*' (§134). These abstract agent-neutral reasons are given in general form, expressing the universality of the Concept to the exclusion of the particularity. Hegel praises this universality and its expression in Kant's motivational requirement of acting for the sake of duty alone. He then critiques Kant's ethical theory for the agent-neutrality required by the Categorical Imperative's form of lawfulness. In part this is an argument against the general form requirement, which Hegel thinks is an obstacle to thinking through the determination of particular reasons. We can also see Hegel's charge of emptiness as the claim that the



reference in Kant's universal law and motivational requirement is not the kind of essential reference required for the agent-relativity of the singular individual's ethical actions.

The move from Kantian duty to conscience is naturally read as a transition from agent-neutral to agent-relative reasons. The certainty of oneself characteristic of conscience seems to establish *reasons for me* that are not necessarily *reasons for anyone*. Hegel writes in *PR* §136,

Because of the abstract composition of the Good, the other moment of the Idea, i.e. *particularity* in general, falls within subjectivity. Subjectivity, in its universality reflected into itself, is the absolute certainty of itself in itself, the positing of particularity, the determining and deciding factor—the *conscience*.

It appears that this particularity, this determining factor, is precisely that essential reference to the person that marks the relativity of one's reasons for action. We have to be careful here, though, for Hegel makes it clear that the authority of conscience as a source of reasons presupposes that the agent actually wills 'rational content which is valid in and for itself' (§137). In this section he writes that right and duty are not 'the *particular* property of an individual,' and that they have 'the form of *laws* and *principles*' (§137). This suggests that these reasons involve no essential reference to individuals and that they are given in 'general form.' But since Hegel nowhere spells out such moral principles, I take him to be offering here an abstract bulwark against subjectivism and relativism, not an endorsement of a view of ethics as a catalogue of principles. He just wants to emphasize that the agent misunderstands conscience if he thinks that his reasons are *merely* his own such that he need not be able to explicate them in terms that others can understand.

Hegel does endorse the claim—against the general form requirement—that individual judgment about what specific action is right cannot be reduced to a calculus of general agent-neutral reasons. The individual of conscience must deliberate on action as a whole, arriving for himself at a specific action. The complexity and specificity of moral judgment in a modern context mean that many practical judgments do not transfer easily to other cases, cases invoking different agents with other specific objects of concern. Conscience supports reasons for action that do not take a general form, and this produces both decisiveness in moral judgment and, as Hegel frequently points out, instability in the ethical landscape.<sup>10</sup>

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Apart from its role in judgment of specific cases, formal conscience generates a category of agent-relative reasons, namely Nagel's deontological reasons. As the seat of one's integrity, conscience marks out a realm of reasons that are not automatically overridden by abstract agent-neutral demands. If I say that it goes against my conscience to kill someone, even if that does mean that several other people die, I am referring to myself as a source of deontological reasons. These agent-relative reasons of conscience are problematic, since it is not clear that they can be supported by the recognition of any value other than the individual's simple integrity. Hegel's own analysis of the perspective from which these deontological reasons are generated highlights a problem with this form of agent-relativity. The idea that I cannot commit certain acts, no matter what good consequences may result, could easily produce the enervating inactivity that Hegel associates with romantic longing and the beautiful soul.

Though conscience does support the idea of agent-relative reasons, it is important not simply to identify conscience with action on agent-relative reasons. If we do, we might think that Hegel's extended critique in §140 of how moral subjectivity can go wrong is a blanket argument against agent-relative reasons. Yet the critique works both against the agent who thinks that his own agent-relative reasons make the action right, *and* against the individual asserting agent-neutral reasons without acting on them. Hegel's objection is not just directed against ways in which the agent might seek to be a pure unaccountable source of reasons, which by itself might support a reading of this critique as directed against agent-relativity. Hegel's objection is also directed against the attitude towards action that remains at the level of 'willing the good' in the abstract.<sup>11</sup> Hegel's reflections on this posture are intended to show how abstract agent-neutral moral principles can also fail to count as *reasons for action*. Typically they are wielded by the self-righteous judge, towards whom Hegel's famous comment is directed—'those psychological *valets de chambre* for whom there are no heroes, not because the latter are not heroes, but because the former are only *valets de chambre*' (§124). The psychological valet always finds something agent-relative in the action in contrast to the heroic ideal of someone responsive only to agent-neutral considerations. Such agent-neutral reasons are more often used to criticize others than they are actually acted upon.<sup>12</sup>

Hegel's double-edged critique is that within the context of Morality the self-reference of the individual as a source of determinate moral reasons is highly unstable. The universal and particular moments of the will are not yet adequately integrated, so reliance on agent-relative reasons

can seem like an avoidance of ‘real’ agent-neutral reasons, while those agent-neutral reasons can seem unfit for navigating concrete contexts of action.

### 3. Agent-Relative reasons in ethical life

The paragraphs of the *Philosophy of Right* that introduce Ethical Life seem at first glance to imply that the reasons operative in this sphere are agent-neutral. Hegel writes of ‘a circle of necessity whose moments are the *ethical powers* which govern the lives of individuals, and in these individuals, who are accidental to them, these powers have their representation, phenomenal shape, and actuality’ (§145). The upshot of this claim seems to be that the institutions do not rely on any particular individuals for their authority and reproduction, and that the reasons they generate hold for any agent.<sup>13</sup> Yet we must be very careful with Hegel’s claims in these introductory paragraphs. On my reading, Hegel’s claims about ethical powers are claims about the agent-neutral *value* realized in institutions. These claims do not imply that individuals within the institutions act on agent-neutral reasons. My thesis is that in fact every sphere of Ethical Life is characterized by individuals acting on agent-relative *reasons*.<sup>14</sup> There is a story (that I tell in the next section) about how the agent-relative reasons of individuality hook into the agent-neutral values of institutions. The key point to appreciate up front is that Hegel’s split between individuals and institutions allows him to make strong claims for the agent-relativity of the reasons of individuals.

The individual in Ethical Life possesses determinate and stable *reasons for action*, rather than remaining in ‘that indeterminate subjectivity which does not attain existence’ (§149). Both the agent who relied on agent-relative reasons and the judge who wields agent-neutral reasons suffer from this indeterminacy, and neither ‘attain existence’ in the sense of performing an action backed up by stable reasons. The duties of Ethical Life primarily take the form of ‘necessary relations.’ The system of these relations replaces a ‘theory of duties’ that offers a catalogue of those actions that anyone is obligated to perform qua human. Hegel writes that ‘The fact that the ethical sphere is the *system* of these determinations of the Idea constitutes its *rationality*’ (§145). It is not just that the system as a whole is rational, but also that individuals, in occupying various roles within the whole, can act on non-general reasons that have their standing as reasons through the form of life, the shape of Spirit, that provides the background rationality for the action. This rationality is a function of organic interrelations rather than abstract universality.

The operative reasons bring to the fore the self-reference of the agent as singularity. The agent refers to herself as having specific identities—as a family member, citizen—that demarcate specific sets of duties.<sup>15</sup>

Hegel affirms the respect accorded to the agent's own perspective, and he thus affirms the agent-relative character of the reasons. He writes that the 'right of individuals to their *particularity* is likewise contained in ethical substantiality' (§154). These individuals are dependent on one another. But this interdependence is fully compatible with their lives being guided by interests and attachments that set them apart from others. The hallmark of *modern* ethical institutions is precisely this regard for the particularity, the contingency, of individual agents.<sup>16</sup> Unlike in Morality, particularity is incorporated into self-conceptions that can be, and are, recognized by others as valuable.

Hegel writes that a central function of the institutions of Ethical Life is to 'liberate' the individual from the demand to aspire to agent-neutrality. Individuals are liberated from the requirement to act on reasons that can be expressed in 'general form.' In many cases, such as family life, making sure that one acts on a reason with general form would mean having a 'thought too many,' in Bernard Williams' phrase (1981, p. 18). The pressure to conceive of reasons in terms of their general form comes from taking reasons as having their force in isolation from other reasons and from their context of application. The idea behind the use of the general form is that it expresses what *anyone* would have a reason to do in these circumstances. But this appeal to 'what anyone would do' is not only useless, but actually pernicious in Ethical Life, where the question is always what I should do, within a complex context, with these particular interests and identities. Here it is legitimate to refuse to answer the question about what 'anyone' would do, because the question assumes that the particulars in one's reasoning (one's wife, children etc.) are placeholders for a generic type (a wife, some children) rather than the particular people they are. This is not to say that one cannot make the move in reflection to reasons with a general form, but reasons in that form are not typically what one acts upon.

Examining the characteristic actions in the institutions of Ethical Life shows that the operative reasons fall within two of Nagel's categories of agent-relative reasons. Nagel's category of *special obligations* stemming from relationships is most evident in the first sphere of Ethical Life, the family. It would not be wrong to say that family relationships are constituted by the commitment to treat family members differently—better—than others. I would not be a genuine

husband if I treated my spouse like I treat everyone else. My reasons are highly particular, and thus not reasons that I can expect other people to have.

Turning to Ethical Life's second sphere, Hegel's conception of Civil Society correlates quite clearly with Nagel's first category, 'reasons of autonomy.' Civil Society is the realm of infinite particularity where individuals pursue their own economic well-being in competitive contexts as well as in particular associations of value. Hegel writes, 'The concrete person who, as a *particular* person, as a totality of needs and a mixture of natural necessity and arbitrariness, is his own end, is *one principle of civil society*' (§182). Hegel argues that the interconnections of individuals within the 'system of need' make it the case that our reasons and values are not as particular, not as relative to ourselves, as we might think. He writes, 'But this particular person stands essentially in *relation* to other similar particulars, and their relation is such that each asserts itself and gains satisfaction through the others, and thus at the same time through the exclusive *mediation* of the form of *universality*, which is *the second principle*' (§182). It is here that Hegel's strategy of finding the universal within the particular, and thus relativizing the relativity of the agent's reasons, is most clearly on display. I come back to this point in the next section.

The remaining sphere of Ethical Life, the State, is in one sense an arena of special obligations, expressed in Hegel's claims about patriotic attachment to one's own State. But in another sense the State seems to be a realm of agent-neutral reasons. It seems I do my duty to the State for reasons that could belong to anyone (in that State) and for the reason that the State accomplishes the comprehensive agent-neutral aim of promoting the Good. Yet Hegel denies that the duty to the State is purely universal in the sense that my reasons make no essential reference to myself as a particular. In his discussion of the union of 'right' and 'duty' as a union of two elements that are 'different in content,' Hegel writes that it is 'of the greatest importance' to understand that the duty towards the State must be connected to the individual's particularity. He writes:

in the process of fulfilling his duty, the individual must somehow attain his own interest and satisfaction or settle his own account, and from his situation within the State, a right must accrue to him whereby the universal cause becomes *his own particular* cause.

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The reasons for doing one's duties to the State are thus linked to one's agent-relative reasons. At the same time, Hegel is wary that the State not be seen as a mere service-provider for individuals. The above passage does raise the question of how exactly we are to think of the individual's relation to the State as a relation to 'divine ethical substance.' If individuals are to think of their duty as grounded in reasons relative to their own interests, doesn't this undercut the value the State has on its own account?

I postpone answering this question until the next section, and first consider a possible counterexample to my argument that all reasons for action of individuals in Ethical Life are agent-relative, namely Hegel's discussion of moral duties within 'Civil Society.' In discussing the bad side effects of the markets, Hegel writes that there may even arise those duties of beneficence often associated with agent-neutral reasons (he actually writes that '*Morality* has its proper place in this sphere' (§207)). But rather than contradicting my thesis, this reemergence of seemingly agent-neutral reasons actually confirms my claim that the characteristic reasons for action of Ethical Life are agent-relative. These moral duties in Civil Society are not agent-neutral duties to humanity as such, but rather agent-relative duties of special obligation, for they arise through the specific practices of modern capitalist economies and are binding in so far as agents are benefiting from those practices within a given state. Hegel is forthright that Civil Society includes the practices that make people poor and miserable. This is why there is a duty to help those in need (see esp. *PR* §238). Only *within* Civil Society as a determinate context of need does the abstract duty to do what I can to help others come into its own. That is, the duty is an obligation because of the agent's participation in the economic practices. Hegel writes that 'contingency in the satisfaction of the latter [ends of welfare and of particular needs] makes even contingent and individual help into a duty' (§207). We have a duty to help those who suffer the ineliminable side effects of modern economic practices. These duties are generated within this sphere itself, and draw their actuality in part from the benefit for us (prosperous agents) of the conditions that make others miserable. Central among these practices are private property and contract. Since I have claimed that private property and contract involve agent-neutral reasons, this discussion of Civil Society may seem to conflict with my earlier claims.<sup>17</sup> The point is that the normative force of those reasons does not depend on any identity other than sheer personhood. The normative force of the moral reasons in Civil Society, by contrast, stems from our relationships to each other in this system.

#### 4. Agent-Neutral value and ethical institutions

I have focused my discussion thus far on the individual's actions and reasons while mostly bracketing the role of the institutions. Understanding each level, and their interaction, is essential for a full characterization of Ethical Life. The two-level structure of agency in Ethical Life is among the main sources of confusion in thinking about Hegel's view of reasons and value. In this section I sketch the relation of the institutional and individual, and show how the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction bears on that relation.

We can begin from Hegel's suspicion about the role of individual acts of charity in Civil Society. Hegel's main worry about charity is that it can draw attention away from the institutional solutions to Civil Society's problems. Hegel remarks that charity 'is mistaken if it seeks to restrict the alleviation of want to the *particularity* of emotion and the *contingency* of its own disposition and knowledge' (§207). He is saying that the demand of individual beneficence has contingent conditions of subjective realization and is contingent in its actual efficacy at alleviating need. Hegel thinks that institutional (i.e., governmental) remedies for social ills are to be preferred to charity, not only because the recipient of charity would be better off getting the same help from public authority, but also because the actual benefits possible at the level of institutions and law so far outweigh the benefits of individual acts of charity. For Hegel institutional action is based on agent-neutral reasons and aims to realize the agent-neutral Good. Hegel glorifies the State, the highest institution, in large part because of its ability to act successfully on such agent-neutral reasons and to realize agent-neutral value.

What then is the relationship *for the individual* of these two levels, of agent-relative reasons of individuals and agent-neutral reasons/values of institutions? While I have defended the thesis that the reasons for action characteristic of Ethical Life are agent-relative, clearly the individual agent stands in a relationship to the institutions and their agent-neutral value. Most agents do value not only their particular attachments and occupations, but also the *institution* of marriage, the free market, and the idea of the State in the abstract. We value the institutions for the agent-neutral value that they provide and realize. But this valuing is not typically the direct source of our reasons for action. Reasons for action and beliefs in the value of the institutions must be kept distinct. When Hegel writes of patriotism as a disposition [*Gesinnung*], he is referring to a settled belief in the value of the institution of the State. Such dispositional belief affirms the institutional framework and its overall purposes

at a very deep level. This framework is the context in which my individual purposes and agent-relative reasons are situated, but in most cases the institutional framework is not directly my reason for action.<sup>18</sup>

The distinction here can be made clear by considering the reasons one acts upon in specific cases, and by trying to replace those reasons with the beliefs affirming the institutions as a whole. There would be something seriously wrong if my basic reason for my domestic actions—Why are you getting up in the middle of the night to hold your crying baby? Why are you taking your wife out to dinner on your anniversary?—was always ‘because I support the institution of the family.’ Your family members would be right to complain if this were the case. The belief in the value of the institution of the family is more like a standing motivational backup, operative mainly in crisis situations, when one—for example—questions whether one wants to continue in a marriage at all. Even then one’s *reasons for action* should be agent-relative, and should refer to *this* marriage, *this* spouse.<sup>19</sup> The valuing of the institution is a kind of bulwark against the vicissitudes of our relations, and a spur in times of crisis to search harder for those reasons that bind us to our particular spouses, careers, and so on.

This separation of individual and institutional levels allows Hegel to provide a satisfying answer to the *Interdependence Problem*. I submit that in the *PR* the interdependence of the agent-relative and agent-neutral works at the level of value rather than at the level of reasons. For Hegel there are subjective values (ends/purposes) that are nested within the objective values (ends/purposes) of institutions, and that thus have an objective basis. The ends that individuals pursue as valuable are not reducible to the value expressed in the institutional form, but they can be referred to that form as the horizon of their general intelligibility. Hegel’s way of backing up the subjective with the objective has the great advantage over Nagel’s of not mystifying the relation between the two sorts of value. Objective value is not a metaphysically distinct kind of value, but rather is represented by those institutions that have developed over time through processes of mutual recognition. What Hegel calls *Geist*, Spirit, progressively develops as a system of value and of the increasingly diverse reasons individuals can employ in action. According a distinct space for agent-relative reasons is one of the great developments of modern ethical life.

We can now see too how Hegel deals with *the Essential Reference Problem* in distinguishing between types of reasons. Recall that Nagel had no clear way to distinguish between simple reference and essential reference to the agent. The modern practice of conscience and the



institutional contexts of Ethical Life have developed precisely in order to secure space for the essential self-reference of modern singularity (and this is why conscience immediately precedes Ethical Life). It is not just that we concede these reasons to individuals, but we expect them to be engaged with their actions in a way that is distinctively their own. This does not lead to the disintegration of normative space and ethical substance because within that essential self-reference there is an implicit connection to the objective values of the institutions.

### 5. Reasons and ends

I would like to conclude with a brief comparison of Hegel's position with Korsgaard's Kantian attack on the agent-relative/agent-neutral distinction. This comparison will allow us to see more clearly the work done by Hegel's split between individual and institutional action and value. Korsgaard holds that reasons are always shared, and thus not agent-relative, because they stem from our common humanity. She attacks Nagel's conception of agent-neutral value as an Objective Realist conception, and finds that this renders his distinction of reasons and values unintelligible. On Korsgaard's *Intersubjectivist* conception of value, value arises through human interactions, much like on Hegel's view of intersubjective recognition. Hegel and Korsgaard agree that the agent-neutral should not be identified with consequentialist considerations, for Hegel too holds that agent-centered claims (e.g., 'treat others as persons') can be agent-neutral. Given the similarity between Hegel and Korsgaard on several key points, it is striking how far they diverge on the status of agent-relative reasons and value.

For Hegel the shared institutional context is key for securing the sharability of agent-relative reasons. We have seen that there is nothing in the idea of agent-relative reasons that requires that we think of them as 'merely *my* property,' as Korsgaard (1996, p. 297) charges. The reasons can be communicated, and I can bring you to see why my reasons have the force for me that they do. Such sharing of reasons for Hegel typically refers to the social practice or institution that is the context for my valuing. If others understand the institution they will acknowledge the force of my reasons even though they will not literally share my reasons.

I have stressed that one's relation to one's particular valued people or projects and the reasons stemming from those relations are immediate in a way that is often lost in the process of communication or translation to the abstract level. If I explain to you why I value my daughter and the

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kinds of reasons she generates, I can do so with reference to the institution of the family and the value we place on the family's purposes, such as raising independent persons. But in my everyday actions she does not serve as a source of reasons solely because she is objectively valuable and fits into the agent-neutral institutional aims. To see the Kantian tendency to move to agent-neutrality, consider Korsgaard's example of romantic love and her claim that its reasons are not agent-relative. She writes:

Although I may not suppose that the happiness of my loved ones is objectively more important than that of anyone else, I certainly do suppose that their happiness is objectively good. The structure of reasons arising from love is similar to that of reasons of ambition. I think that someone should make my darling happy, and I want very much to *be that someone*. And others may have good reason to encourage me in this. But if I try to prevent someone else from making my darling happy or if I suppose that my darling's happiness has no value unless it is produced by me, that is no longer an expression of love. Again, it is a very familiar perversion of it.

(Korsgaard, 1996, p. 288)

To me this seems just plain wrong as a description of romantic love. Love is not this selfless, nor should it be. The exclusion essential to romantic love does not imply that my darling's happiness has no value unless it is produced by me, but it does imply that I do not make an inference from 'someone should make my darling happy' to 'I want to be that someone.' What I want, among other things, is to be valued as exclusively as I value my beloved.

Though Korsgaard (over)emphasizes the objective goodness of an agent's attachments and projects, she also curiously undervalues the independent standing of our ends. Korsgaard writes that reasons 'spring from our respect for one another, rather than from our respect for one another's ends' (Korsgaard, 1996, p. 290) The ends themselves do not generate agent-relative reasons because they only have reason-conferring value if we recognize them as agent-neutral products of humanity, since humanity is the source of all value.<sup>20</sup> Hegel's account of objective value gives a much more independent standing to the ends. The objective values have come into being through the processes of recognition that have shaped the social practices. One's agent-relative ends (values) are 'nested' within the agent-relative ends (values). By placing the objective values in the institutions, Hegel enables individuals

to realize agent-relative values in pursuing their ends and use agent-relative reasons without reflecting on their neutrality/objectivity (their source in 'humanity,' in Korsgaard's terms). Korsgaard would take issue with Hegel's conception of Ethical Life because it is essential to Hegel's picture that freedom (humanity) be *in the ends or purposes*. An adequate ethics is only possible according to Hegel if it is oriented by a social system of ends rather than by the abstract original value-conferring activity of end-setters. I take it that Korsgaard would object to the Hegelian conception of the State, in particular, which Hegel describes as a 'living God' precisely because its ends embody the Good and it provides an overarching context for all other spheres of activity.

I conclude with a few words about the intersubjective basis of value and respect that is central to both Korsgaard and Hegel. By contrast to Korsgaard, Hegel holds that it is because we respect ends that we are able to sustain our respect for each other as subjects. Of course in principle we all respect each other as persons and should treat each other as persons. But to be a particular source of reasons is, in Hegel's terminology, to be a *subject*, and we respect each other as subjects through the ends we set and carry out. What sustains our civility, our respect for each other as subjects, is that we recognize the general (if not the particular) ends that we are pursuing. We do not need to see each other as reflective value-conferers in order to recognize each other. This is why Hegel worries less than many think he ought to about how much reflective insight individuals have into the practices in which they live. Of course reflection is good, but we can respect those who do not query their ends because we respect the ends themselves. Your reason may not be a reason for me, but if I can recognize your ends as falling within our common practices, that will be enough to know that you are rational.

### Notes

1. In my *Hegel's Conscience*, I examine Hegel's relation to the internal/external reasons distinction, which is sometimes confused with the different distinction at issue in this paper.
2. In the following I focus on Nagel's role in making the distinction current. See also Scheffler, 1982; Dancy, 1993. For a good overview of the issues surrounding this distinction, see Ridge, 2008.
3. Nagel, 1978, p. vii. This passage comes from the postscript published 8 years after the original.
4. Of course it might seem anachronistic to say that Hegel is addressing just these problems, since the language he uses to formulate the issues is needless to say quite different, and the background assumptions of his theory are so much different than those of contemporary moral theorists. But in

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- so far as we can show that Hegel addresses the same concerns with agency and normativity that concern us today, there is no obstacle to bringing his thought to bear on the contemporary distinction.
5. See Dancy, 1993, p. 195. 'The expression 'if a reason can be given a general form' raises in me unfortunate memories of his remark "If I have a reason to take aspirin for a headache or to avoid hot stoves, it is not because of anything specific about those pains but because they are examples of pain, suffering or discomfort." The idea that every reason accepts a general form of this sort without distortion seems to me to create a very strange test of agent-relativity.'
  6. In writing of 'normative force,' I am invoking what is sometimes referred to as the bindingness, the *Verbindlichkeit*, of the laws, duties, etc.
  7. Hegel writes, 'it is the development of the *right* of the subjective will—or of its mode of existence—whereby this subjective will further determines what it recognizes as its own in its object so that this becomes the will's true concept—i.e. becomes objective in the sense of the will's own universality' (§107).
  8. The Good includes 'abstract right, welfare, the subjectivity of knowing, and the contingency of external existence.'
  9. This is Hegel's way of bringing Kant's conception of the Highest Good down to the earth. Contemporary ethicists sometimes write as if the idea that deontological considerations can be consequentialized is a recent invention. See Dreier, 1993. But Hegel is doing just that in the claim about the Good.
  10. I explore these issues in much greater detail in my *Hegel's Conscience*.
  11. I am referring to section (d) of the remarks to *PR* §140.
  12. Allen Speight (2001, pp. 119–21) raises the issue of agent-relative reasons in relation to the conflict and reconciliation of the acting conscience and the moralistic judge at the end of the 'Spirit' chapter in Hegel's *Phenomenology*. The encounter in the *Phenomenology* that ends in 'forgiveness' is not identical to the encounter between 'the Good' and 'conscience' in the *Philosophy of Right*, but they are closely related. The defect in Speight's account is that he assimilates agent-relative reasons to what Bernard Williams has called 'internal reasons,' linked to something in the agent's 'motivational set.'
  13. This impression is reinforced several sections later when Hegel writes that 'the self-will of the individual, and his own conscience in its attempt to exist for itself and in opposition to ethical substantiality, have disappeared' *PR* §152.
  14. I say 'proper to' because the agent-neutral reasons from the earlier spheres remain as reasons even when we are in a context of Ethical Life. They are not, however, duties that properly belong to Ethical Life.
  15. Drawing on the work of Christina Hoff Sommers, Allen Wood (1990, pp. 211–3) writes of Hegel's distinction between duties of morality and duties as 'necessary relations' as the distinction between 'equal pull' and 'differential pull' of our duties. This distinction overlaps with the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, but should not be assimilated to it. Wood is writing only of 'duties to others,' whereas the claim about reasons applies to reasons for action in general.
  16. Part of this liberation has to do with ethical motivation, for in 'Morality' it seemed that one had to root out one's particular desires in order to genuinely

act on moral reasons. In Ethical Life, by contrast, one can do what comes naturally, though this presupposes that one's nature has been informed by rational social practices.

17. I would like to thank Arto Laitinen for pressing me on this point.
18. The picture is somewhat different for individuals actually employed by the State at various levels, for their immediate ends are the ends of the State. This also has implications for how we would have to revise Hegel's theory for contemporary democracies in which *voting* is one of the characteristic public actions. Given our conception of democratic political participation we do value reflection for each individual more than Hegel did, but that does nothing to blur the distinction between reasons for action within institutional contexts and beliefs endorsing those contexts.
19. This is structurally akin to the secondary motivation that Kantians such as Barbara Herman and Marcia Baron associate with the Categorical Imperative. See Herman, 1993, pp. 1–22; Baron, 1995, chapter 4.
20. At points Korsgaard (1996, p. 282) indicates a more nuanced thesis. She writes, for example, of many possible sources of value, such as 'friendships, marriages, local communities, and common interests . . .'. Her conclusion is ambiguous, for though she claims to have undercut the distinction, her closing remarks suggest that all she has accomplished is shifted the terms of the debate to the sources of different kinds of reasons.