MORAL SUBJECTS AND ETHICAL INDIVIDUALS

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MORAL SUBJECTS AND ETHICAL INDIVIDUALS. OF ETHICAL LIFE: WE MURDER TO REFLECT

At a moment of high drama in the most celebrated philosophical conversation on record, Plato has Socrates say "We are discussing no trivial question, but how a man should live" (Plato, *Republic*, 352D). I need not remind you that the discussion of Socrates' question has continued, almost without halt, up to the present day.[1] The twists and turns of the conversation have been richly varied, but one of the recurrent themes has been whether philosophy is capable of any answer. I shall use the term 'moral philosophy' to designate the tradition in which Socrates' question has been regarded a proper subject for philosophy. Socrates himself seems to have been confident that philosophical inquiry was suited to decide moral questions, but many, beginning perhaps with Aristotle, have found the resolution of moral questions beyond the reach of philosophy. I shall call this tradition 'ethical philosophy.' Ethical philosophers recognize that Socrates' question does arise in the course of everyday reflection but they do not think that philosophy has any special qualifications for answering it. The proper topic of ethical philosophy is the *disposition* rather than the *decision* to act. In my sense of the word, Hegel was an ethical philosopher, but one who, unlike Aristotle, thought in a world where everyday life as well as philosophy had become preoccupied with Socrates' question, and hence morality. While not a practitioner of moral philosophy, he took the moral dimension of everyday life seriously and tried to describe its scope and limits.

I have tried to capture one of the pervasive themes in the debate between moral and ethical philosophers with the title of this paper: moral subjects and ethical individuals. The derivation of terminology will be familiar to all students of Hegel. Also well-known is Hegel's characterization of Socrates as the inventor of morality. But there is no consensus among those who write about Hegel whether the two terms, morality and ethics, indicate opposed and irreconcilable standpoints—the one, say, modern and the other ancient.[2] I cannot hope to resolve such a fundamental intra-Hegelian controversy in this paper. But the contrast drawn by Hegel is, I believe, somewhat different from what it is often taken to be and worth exploring in its own right. That is what I propose to do.

The paper will have three parts. In the *first* I will consider ordinary discussions 'how a man should live' and notice that the word 'man' is used in many ways, some pointing to the intra-species sense of an ethical individual and some to the inter-species sense of a moral subject. In the *second* part the transition from ordinary to philosophical discussions of moral subjects and ethical individuals will be considered. In the *third* and final part I will assess the question whether the dispositions guiding the actions of ethical individuals are incompatible with the sense of objective legitimacy in actions sought by moral subjects. I shall conclude with the suggestion that a principal aim of Hegel's system is to

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1 Socrates' question has most recently served as the point of departure for a refreshing critique of moral philosophy: Bernard Williams' *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy*, a book which came to my attention while drafting this essay; it should be of great interest to all students of '*Moralität und Sittlichkeit*.'

2 A well-known spokesman for the incompatibility of the allegedly 'modern' and 'ancient' standpoints in Hegel's *Rechtsphilosophie* has been Karl-Heinz Ilting.

identify ethical formations in the 'modern' world that imbue their members with dispositions to do what is objectively good.[3]

I. Moral subjects and ethical individuals in everyday life

When we consider how a man should live, not in the Socratic sense (expecting a philosophical answer), but in the course of our everyday lives, we normally make no fuss when the word 'man' is used in many ways. If pressed we might acknowledge that our usage was logically inconsistent. But outside classrooms we are seldom pestered by logical gadflies. Without explicitly saying so, it is second nature for us to be confident, even while using the non-restrictive word 'man,' that we will be understood to talk about something more specific, about a human being in certain self-understood conditions: as a member of, say, the Smith family, as a member of the medical profession, or as a citizen of Australia. When we talk this way we may be said to talk as ethical individuals. Indeed we would be lost if we were somehow deprived of this ordinary form of discourse. There is nothing particularly philosophical about such talk. We make sense to one another in so far as we have a common sense of what it is like to share a certain way of life. We do not question that certain ethical worlds predetermine a range of—as we say—'appropriate ways to live.' It is easy to see that, as ethical individuals, we do not ask Socrates' question at all. We are usually satisfied to talk about others who are what they are because they share an ethos, a definite and recognized way of life. We know what distinguishes ethical individuals: we know them by their habits.

But there are also well-established traditions of everyday discourse in which man is understood as a species by contrast with what is less or more than man. In one of these *inter-species contrasts* man is understood as "the fairest of the animals"; in another he is taken to be "a little lower than the angels." Together, these inter-species contrasts provide a clue to the notion of a moral subject. Whether man is understood by his[4] antithesis to *feritas*, as in some secular moralities, or by antithesis to *divinitas*, as in some monotheistic traditions, the entity in question is a moral subject if he is understood to have certain rights and obligations strictly in virtue of membership in our biological species. There are, of course, countless problems associated with the moralist's assumption that biological similarity should, by itself, entail membership in a common world of practices which are, by themselves, anything but biological. One indication of this is the recent reëmergence of controversy over animal rights, which raises *the question of extension*: Are we guilty of 'speciesism'? The partisan of animal rights hands a moral subjectivist the perplexing onus of showing grounds for restricting moral status to just our species.

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[3] It is the mark of morality that objectivity is grounded in norms transcending the real structures of practical interaction—esp. in a transcendental notion of language (e.g., Habermas' 'ideal speech situation') or logic. Hegel does allow that the moral subject's quest for objective legitimacy is sometimes 'appropriate' in forms of ethical life that are merely local or not yet 'modern.' In Habermas such a quest for legitimacy is called 'emancipation.' The critical question separating Hegel and critical theory is whether this quest for emancipation is *to* or *from* the main structures of ethical life already established in the modern world. For further argument see K.R. Dove, "Zur Kritik der Habermas'schen Geschichtstheorie."

[4] It will be evident that species membership is not conditioned by gender. My use of the masculine gender for personal pronouns in this sentence and elsewhere is strictly conventional; at this stage in the development of English usage all other conventions remain artificial.

To moralists sensitive about sensation, for example, the obvious question is: "do not other animal species have feelings of pleasure and pain?"

Another everyday moral perplexity arises in the current debate on abortion, in which the presumed biological transmission of moral status comes down to *a question of timing*. A fellow moral subjectivist asks, 'When does it occur?': at conception?, in the first, second, or third trimester?, or at birth? From a strictly moral point of view, any answer seems to be arbitrary.[5] Further examples of moral dilemmas could be multiplied.

Nevertheless, something like the moralist's presumption that there are 'human' rights, rights accruing solely in virtue of species membership, does seem to be deeply embedded in the ordinary ethical life of the modern world. The critical question for ethical philosophy is whether the disposition to recognize the rights of other members of our species is ultimately dependent upon moral norms or whether it is embedded in the actual structures of our ethical life.

A feature of ordinary 'ethical' talk is that it seems to provide a way around such 'moral' dilemmas. Instead of the species-orientation characteristic of moral reflection, ethical individuals are 'practical' in that they focus—appropriately enough—upon our 'ethos'; they are ethnocentric. Hence the critical distinctions are not between man and the other animals or man and the angels but rather among men, or, better, human communities. Questions of ethical life are discussed in terms of *intra-species contrasts*. The guiding contrasts are between those who share our ways of life, our ethnic groups, and those who do not. We are quite literally 'at home' within ethnic worlds which are our own whereas we feel alien in other ethical worlds.

Are there, among the many ethical worlds inhabited by our species, also some which *happen to* embrace all members of our species? In ordinary ethical life this frequently appears to be so. But we don't bother to explain it. (When we try, we tend to moralize.) The stories we tell are enough to make our habitations plain. But ethical philosophy is what it is because it does try to understand such facts of ordinary ethical life. It does not seek a foundation (*eine Begründung*) of these facts in *another* order (that is the mark of moral philosophy) but to explain such facts in the ordinary ethical world.

In point of fact, one of the plainest indications of being 'at home' in an ethical world is that we can tell stories and engage in conversation with other members of our world. They share with us a common sense of what is common-sensical, of what is 'self-understood,' and especially of what is good. We don't have to justify ourselves or our actions or our words. Our stories and conversations, even our gestures, make plain how we fit into our communities. Any justification would be out of place.

For a plain, even banal, example of such an ethical individual take Mr. Smith, father of an upper-class American family. Among members of affluent families in the advanced industrial world it is generally self-understood that a portion of any family's resources should be set aside for the education of its children. Engaged in conversation within this ethical world, Mr. Smith can be

[5] From an ethical point of view, on the other hand, it is fairly obvious that habits take shape post-natally, in the actual world of ethical life.

confident that talk about his family's plans for a daughter's college education will normally receive unquestioned approval; in fact, any attempt by Mr. Smith to 'justify' such action would seem odd, perhaps even unethical. In an ethical world such 'moral discourse' would be inappropriate. If pressed it could even undercut membership in that world. But a critical question for ethical philosophy is whether the ethical world of Mr. Smith is one of the elementary forms of modern ethical life.

Let us now consider another example of ethical life, an antipode of banality. Among those who have been liberally educated in the western classical tradition, the best known and most prestigious example of intra-species ethical contrasts was that drawn by the Hellenes to distinguish themselves from the 'barbarians,' those who neither speak 'our' language nor share 'our' habits of household and political life. It also happens to be the pre-modern form of ethical life whose ultimate dissolution into morality Hegel described in chapter VI of his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.[6] The two-fold root of its dissolution was that it lacked objectivity (*Objektivität*) and that it became an explicit object (*Gegenstand*) of knowledge rather than an implicit structure of interaction. In what follows I will stress the second, or 'gnostic,' aspect.

In the Hellenistic world of Greek as a second language and Hellenic civilization as a cognitive acquisition—a world born among the Hellenized peoples in Alexandria and developed to the highest level of articulation by Cicero—the term 'barbarian' was attached to a new 'them': the non-Hellenized, the vulgar, those who lack '*paideia*,' not in the sense of habituation to an ethnic solidarity but in the quasi-gnostic sense of a 'cultivated' blend of 'classical' learning and genteel urbanity. Under these circumstances what had been a kind of ethical individual (say, a citizen raised in 5th century Athens) became a moral ideal (open, in principle, to any human being). Our closest modern counterparts for this reflective notion of acquired civility emerged in the seventeenth century[7] with figurative uses of terms such as 'cultivation'—hitherto restricted to plant and animal husbandry—to indicate the improvement and development of a child's manners "with good precepts and counsels." Finally, 'culture' in the nineteenth century came to mean not only 'a general state or habit of the mind' but also 'the general state of intellectual development, in a society as a whole,' 'the general body of the arts,' and, finally, 'a whole way of life, material, intellectual and spiritual.'[8] From this grand notion of 'culture' as an object of knowledge, the route to the discredited sense of 'culture' in our century is not hard to trace. By this route the originally Hellenic mode of discourse about ethical individuals came to be 'moralized,' that is, made into a norm and an object of reflective discourse about 'how a man should live.' But, to paraphrase Hegel, it is one thing to be Hellenic and quite another to believe in Hellenism (*Rph*, § 147A).

In addition to the ethnocentric ideas of national culture which crystalized in the nineteenth century, two other culture-specific ethical contrasts have arisen on the basis of two intra-species

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6 It follows from the argument of this paper that the difference between '*Sittlichkeit*' in the *Phenomenology* and in the System of Objective Spirit is not a matter of Hegel's development but a difference in substance. The former is a "culturally specific" ethical world. The latter describes the "main structures" of modern ethical life. On the contrast "culturally specific"/"main structure" see Bernard Williams, *Ethics*, p. 35.

7 For examples of early occurrences of this figurative usage in seventeenth century English see OED, s.v. 'cultivate,' 'cultivated,' 'cultivation,' and, of course, 'culture.'

8 See Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: 1780–1950*.

biological contrasts: race and gender: 1. a system of racially coordinated slavery, the black slavery which was instituted by Europeans in the Americas during the sixteenth century[9] and which led to the struggle to detach civil rights from racial qualifications in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and 2. the persistence of gender-based restraints upon participation in certain spheres of society. And surely it is true that there are racist and sexist forms of solidarity, just as there are aristocratic, bourgeois, and proletarian solidarities. These are facts. They are 'ethical' facts. And members of such solidarities are, in one sense of the word, ethical individuals. The question for ethical philosophy is whether this is the only sense of ethical individuality.

However much we may morally disapprove, all of us are intimately familiar with ethical solidarities of the sort described, including the kinds of conversation appropriate within their precincts. But some of us do disapprove, especially when we consider the self-understood dimensions of solidarities which exclude us, whose intra-species contrasts make their 'us' into our 'them.' As moral, disapproval takes the form of identifying and excoriating these dimensions as matters of sheer prejudice. We attack 'them' as, say, French chauvinists, Aryan racists, aristocratic snobs, bourgeois conformists, proletarian rabble, or male sexists. If pressed to justify our wrath—a pressure no moral subjectivist can deny—we say that 'they' lack 'objectivity.'[10]

By this charge moral subjects do not normally mean that those attacked lack 'our' prejudices, that they happen not to belong to our solidarities. As moral subjects we intend to show that they fail to measure up to standards that apply to all humans, to all members of our species. Thus no intra-species contrasts—and hence no forms of ethical life—seem immune from attack when the moral question of objectivity is raised. As moral subjectivists, we refer to norms objective in the sense that they supervene upon the human species as a whole and stand in contrast to it as something knowable but nonhuman. To pertain to each of us equally, they must stand in contrast to and bind every human being as such. And yet we also know that there are ethical prejudices, as well as moral judgments, against racism and sexism. Perhaps there are forms of ethical life which have disposed us, at a pre-judgmental (or, literally, a 'prejudicial') level, to reject—without any reference to transhuman norms—ethnocentrisms that are 'inappropriate.' It is the business of ethical philosophy to articulate such 'prejudices.'

Moral objections to racism, sexism, and the like are a common feature of talk in the modern world; we do invoke the model of norms or objective rules. But we also act ethically; we have—in the earthy American expression—'gut responses' to unethical forms of life. Are ethical actions a matter of sheer 'prejudice' or blind intuition? Does an ethical individual lack 'objectivity' because he does not offer a justification for his action by founding it in transhuman norms or divine commands?

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[9] For a (to my knowledge, unique) documentation of this phenomenon as a whole see C. Duncan Rice, *The Rise and Fall of Black Slavery*.

[10] There have been theoretical attempts to absolutize the gnostic orientation of certain culturally specific solidarities and to assign them a normative status in contrast to all other solidarities. One thinks of Lukács' "*Klassenbewußtsein*" and Mannheim's "*freischwebende Intelligenz*." But any such effort to achieve an 'objective standpoint' from which to judge all others is a matter of moral, not ethical, philosophy.

We find these questions puzzling because, as members of the modern world, we have dispositions not merely to act but also to reflect. So disposed, our ordinary lives present us with the dilemma captured in Goethe's maxim: "Der Handelnde ist immer gewissenlos; es hat niemand Gewissen als der Betrachtende" (Goethe, *Werke*, XII, p. 399). We are—some might say, 'alas!'—both ethical individuals who act and moral subjects who reflect. This counterpoint within our composite nature—between *der Handelnde* and *der Betrachtende*—has driven some, like Kierkegaard, via despair to religion; for others, like Goethe, it has provided the subject matter of great art; and still others, like Hegel (perhaps there has been no other) have embraced the counterpoint in philosophical thought.

II. Transition from ordinary worlds to philosophy

Questions such as these, which arise in the course of ordinary discussions among what I have called moral subjects and ethical individuals, come to matter for philosophy. Moral philosophers are disposed to overlook ethical talk (in the sense specified) in their search for rules and norms. But in our everyday lives most of us talk in just this way. The principal issue for ethical philosophy is whether we can distinguish among the elements of ethical life which endure in the world and in our acquired dispositions. Many, no doubt, are local or culturally specific and most of these generate no ethical conflicts. But there are also some that form the main structure of ethical life.

Some of the culturally specific aspects of ethical life do produce conflicts with the main structure. When they do, we sometimes invoke moral arguments to buttress our ethical dispositions. If ethical life involved no objective dimensions living in our habits, desires, and dispositions, and in the ethical worlds where we acquire and live by them, then an objective account of ethical conflict would require either reference to transhuman norms—that is, moral discourse—or acquiescence in the brave new world of modern nihilism—that is, discourse which presupposes the need of moral objectivity while denying its validity. Is it true (as the nihilist supposes) that all talk about objectivity is bound to appeal to the moral philosopher's model of rules[11] and norms?

It is the mark of an ethical philosopher to articulate in his professional work what we all show in our everyday lives: that we are, at any time we act or speak, *already* ethical individuals and that we sometimes do so with objectivity in objective forms of ethical life.

III. Moral subjects and ethical individuals in philosophy

It is notoriously hard to say just what makes a form of human inquiry philosophical but it seems likely that an individual gets introduced to philosophy, as to the other arts and sciences, by a process of training in which the habits of the discipline are acquired by imitating established practitioners and, if possible, integrating these new habits with one's ordinary and pre-established habits of thought. If it is true that all men by nature desire to know, there should be considerable continuity in the transition from one's ordinary habits to those characteristic of philosophy. But ordinary as well as philosophical habits do change over time and one of the characteristics of both in the modern world is a high degree of reflection. In ordinary as well as philosophical modes of inquiry

[11] I borrow this expression from the title of Ronald Dworkin's essay "The Model of Rules," *University of Chicago Law Review* (1967) and reprinted as chapter 2 of *Taking Rights Seriously*.

we moderns tend to place a good deal of emphasis upon detaching ourselves from our subject matter and viewing it as an object. A feature of most education in philosophy today is to radicalize that attitude of detachment and objectivity.

One consequence of these reflective habits, intensified by philosophical training, is that when we consider Socrates' question philosophically, we tend to transform ethical individuals into moral subjects. Perhaps the clearest indicator of this tendency in recent philosophy has been the famous "veil of ignorance" argument in John Rawls' *A Theory of Justice* (pp. 136ff.). It is a procedural device explicitly designed to enable a theorist to strip away all the determinate features of his ethical world and his ethical individuality. Viewing oneself through the veil of ignorance, one is supposed not to know any of the particulars shaping his identity—class position, social status, the place of his ethical world in history, and the like. In this circumstance, which Rawls sometimes calls "*reflective* equilibrium," one is supposed to be able to choose the principles of 'how a man should live'—the principles of justice—in a disinterested and 'objective' manner. That is the key to Rawls' notion of "justice as fairness."

The fairness does not, as one might suppose, refer directly to the substantive principles of justice but rather to the *procedures* under which *any* principles might be chosen or (if one wishes to imagine plurality under such a veil) agreed to. The idea is that the resulting principles would be just if the procedures under which they were chosen were fair. In other words, if one chose in ignorance of one's ethical identity, one could make a non-self-interested or moral choice. There are few contemporary philosophers who have made the non-ethical dimension of a moral subject so clear. But it is the clarity, not the general philosophical direction of his thought, which is distinctive of Rawls. In a footnote he observes that "[t]he veil of ignorance is so natural a condition [that is, it fits so naturally the habits of modern philosophy] that something like it must have occurred to many" (p. 137n). He is no doubt right. His "veil of ignorance" is a striking example of what, in the words of Alexander Pope, "oft was thought, but ne'er so well expressed."

Which is not to say that Rawls has given the best expression of moral philosophy *per se*. Without any doubt, that honor belongs to Immanuel Kant, especially in his *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*. Like Rawls, Kant structures his argument to specify the transition from ordinary life to moral philosophy.[12] But whereas Rawls' procedures for achieving reflective equilibrium involve an explicit rite of passage from the life of an ordinary *ethical* individual to the philosophical standpoint of the moral subject, Kant presupposes that ordinary life is already populated with ordinary *moral* subjects, those who are implicitly convinced that "the way a man should live" can never devolve upon one's habits, dispositions, or desires to be happy, but rather upon "our very *worthiness* to be happy" (Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 61). On Kant's reading, the ordinary man already knows that he can only be worthy if his *will* is good. What moral philosophy can teach the ordinary moral subject is very much like what the grammarian can teach the native speaker of a language: the logic of moral discourse, e.g., that "'I ought' is [for members of our species] properly an 'I will' which holds [not merely for our species,

[12] See Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, chapter I, "Passage from Ordinary Rational Knowledge of Morality to Philosophical."

but, provided that pure rational will is the sole cause of an action] for every rational being" (Kant, *Groundwork*, p. 117). Kant is the paradigmatic moral philosopher because, at the deepest possible level, he depicts the struggle to determine 'how I should live' precisely as a struggle *against* all aspects of ethical individuality—lifeworld, habit, or disposition—as illegitimate contributors to that determination. What in Rawls was a procedure for arriving at a choice of principles is in Kant a purgation of the very chooser itself: pure moral philosophy is a philosophy of the purified will, a moral subject without ethically individuating habits.

Given the radical antithesis in the philosophy of the moral subject between will and habit, one might expect that the philosophy of the ethical individual would simply invert the antithesis and argue habit against will. But this is not so.[13] As I mentioned at the outset, ethical philosophy does not aspire to answer Socrates' question. This is particularly evident in Aristotle, whose *Ethics-Politics*[14] remains the classic pre-modern exposition of the philosophy of the ethical individual. Though it tends to elude moral philosophers, his reasoning is quite simple. Ethics is a matter of ethos or habit (*EN*, II, 5). An individual does not become ethical by pondering Socrates' question or subjecting it to philosophical dialectic. Ethical life begins at home and it continues in the city. That is where the habits are formed which determine ethical character. Those who study ethical philosophy are presumed already to be ethical individuals in ordinary life. The point of ethical philosophy is not to make its students better but to better prepare them for their leadership roles in the institutions of ordinary life which are the only effective schools of good character: the *oikos* and the *polis*.

There are two ways of reading Aristotle which tend to make him irrelevant to what I have called ethical philosophy in the modern world. One is (A.) to 'modernize' him by reading, say, his *Nicomachean Ethics* as if it were on a par with the arguments of Kant, Mill, or Rawls. Such 'moralizing' readings have been common in the Anglophone world of analytical philosophy, where such topics as '*akrasia*' (rendered 'weakness of will') have been stressed. Another is (B.) to distance ourselves from Aristotle's ethical philosophy by directing attention to the ancient character of the ethical world and the ethical individuals which were ordinary in his day. A natural conclusion from this reading is that ethical philosophy is itself a matter of classical antiquity and mainly repays study in that context. This reading, like the first, reaffirms the modern predisposition to moral philosophy.

If, as I have said, Hegel is the second great example of an ethical philosopher, we should not be surprised that his account of *Sittlichkeit* has been subjected to parallel misreadings: Either (A.) his philosophy of the ethical individual is found in need of objective foundations—in logic, language, or some other "permanent neutral framework"[15]—and thereby transformed into a version of moral philosophy or (B.) his recourse to a doctrine of ethical life is taken to be a desperate attempt to counter

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[13] One fairly well-established reason for this is that neither Aristotle, nor his ethical world, nor the language he spoke had any place for what we moderns call 'will.' Following clues set forth by Hegel, Bruno Snell has elucidated this fact in his celebrated *Die Entdeckung des Geistes*.

[14] The hyphenation, 'Ethics-Politics,' is critical. Given what Aristotle has to say about practical philosophy at the beginning and the end of his *Nicomachean Ethics*, the subject matter of ethics and politics are thoroughly continuous. Properly understood, 'ethics' embraces both. I shall use the term in this sense.

[15] I adopt this phrase from Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 269ff. *et pas.*

the 'subjective principle' in modern life by artificially treating modern institutions as if they exhibited the same principles as described in the ancient philosophy of Aristotle.

It is of course true that Hegel attempted to integrate the self-regulating market—first discovered by Adam Smith—into his account of modern ethical life. If, as an ethical philosopher in the modern world, his principles were indeed 'derived' from Aristotle and thereby dependent upon the antique ethical world, then, given Aristotle's critique of '*chrematistika*,' clearly this feature in his account of 'civil society' was a mistake. If, on the other hand, my sketch of ethical philosophy pertains to Hegel, then it would be a mistake to regard his principles as derived from any external authority. Like Aristotle's, Hegel's ethical philosophy attempts to elucidate the main structures of actual ethical life. The several recently published sets of lectures on *Rechtsphilosophie* (1817/18, 1818/19, and 1819/20) add further evidence that Hegel tried to show how participation in the actual life of civil society, including its market dimension, contributed to the habit-formation of the distinctively modern ethical individual.

Whatever our assessment of Hegel, we can recognize that there are, as sketched in the first half of this paper, both moral subjects and ethical individuals in our everyday modern world. We can also see that Hegel tried—however successfully—to integrate both moral subjects and ethical individuals into his philosophy of the modern world. When we take account of more recent discussions of Socrates' question (as Bernard Williams has recently done), we can see that the ethical philosophy we associate with Aristotle and the ancient world—the philosophy of ethical individuals—may indicate a more fruitful direction for thinking about the modern world than recent philosophy (mostly moral) has tended to suppose (B. Williams, *Ethics*, pp. 197ff.).

Just as there are aspects of Aristotle's ethical philosophy that we find incompatible with the ordinary ethical world in which we have shaped our habits—his accounts of slavery and women, to name the two most obvious—so there are similarly alien features in Hegel's ethical philosophy, especially in the version published in 1821. But whereas the availability of a complete ethical life in Aristotle was limited to those who could participate fully in the *two* institutions of house and city—and these were only male heads of households and citizens in a polity—habituation in the ordinary ethical life of the modern world is mediated by the *three* institutions of family, civil society, and state. For whatever reason, we have all been habituated in the experience that complete ethical individuality is achieved only through participation in *each* of these spheres and that such participation is open to all. These happen to be just the intra-species dimensions of ordinary ethical life that Hegel described in his philosophy of objective spirit. Whatever the deficiencies of his account, that account is descriptive of the main structures of ordinary ethical life and it is universal to the human species not because it invokes transhuman norms but because it articulates those structures as they were and as they have remained.

It is one peculiarity of the modern ethical world that all members of our species happen to be habituated to participate in each of the main institutions mediating and sustaining the life of modern ethical individuals. Another peculiarity is that one of these, civil society, is a singular global institution, and is not, like families and states, actual in a plurality of instances. In Hegel's time the actual extent

of civil society, as an effective medium of habitation and habituation, was quite limited, even though the British were acknowledged to have put, for the first time, "*die ganze Welt*" (*Rph*, Vorlesung von 1819/20, p. 201) into a universal structure of market relations. In the meanwhile, and especially since the last world war, civil society has approached its planetary limit at an astonishing pace. Also the role of colonialism, as a means of its spread, has been significantly reduced. If, as seems likely, this development (see *Rph*, § 246) continues, then the economic sphere of ethical life, long dissociated from the *oikos*, will also become more and more dissociated from the state and will be an independent sphere of ethical life.

In our current transitional phase, with civil society still partially tied to the ethical life of particular states, the ideological discourse most widely used to articulate the market dimension of civil society is *moral* (participation in the market is justified in terms of the principles of 'subjective freedom'). But if—as Hegel's account indicates—the economic life of modern man is a dimension of his ethical life, then the essentially moral discourse still used to legitimate 'free enterprise' will become increasingly artificial. Since Hegel wrote at a relatively early phase of this development—even though his formulation of the main structures has been borne out—it would seem to be one of the tasks of ethical philosophy at the end of the twentieth century to consider the implications of the trimodal structure of ethical life as its realization approaches its natural limit on our planet. Surely a moral defense—just as a moral critique—of the economic sphere will become less apt as the participants in this sphere come to be seen more clearly as ethical individuals rather than as moral subjects. Is it not time for philosophers, and especially students of Hegel, to reconsider our disposition to interpret the world on the model of the moral subject?

It is hard not to acknowledge that Hegel, assuming that he ventured a philosophy of modern ethical individuals, failed in the very simple sense that the ongoing discussion of Socrates' question has—especially among 'Hegelians' who argue for a foundation of ethical norms—continued to predominate practical philosophy and keep it a matter of morality. But if we can agree that there is an ethical as well as a moral dimension in modern everyday life, and that that ethical dimension has main structures as well as culturally specific aspects, then it would seem an appropriate and important task for philosophy to articulate these main structures, showing them to be objective—not because they correspond to or can be deduced from some "permanent neutral framework" or logic as a matrix, but because of contrasting structures, *some* of which are clearly local and culturally specific while *others* are common or systematic wholes. In carrying out this task philosophers will find in Hegel's philosophy of objective spirit an ethical theory that points in just the desired direction.

Hegel's ethical philosophy will remain unavailable to us as long as we read the ethical structures he articulated as either (A.) objectively grounded in transhuman norms or (B.) culturally specific phases in the development of world history. The main structures in Hegel's ethical philosophy are—like those in Aristotle's—ingredient in ordinary ethical life but—unlike Aristotle's—living contexts for the adequate habituation of all fellow members of civil society, a structure of ethical life that is not merely universal (like the family and the state) but also a planetary or global particular. To be an ethical individual is as characteristic of modern man as to be a moral subject. But it is only through life *in* the world that modern man *becomes* an ethical *individual*. The moral subject is a *particular* who strives to

achieve objectivity by reference to *universal* and transhuman norms. If this outline of the difference between moral subjects and ethical individuals points in the right direction, then a major task of philosophy today will be to articulate an adequate theory of ethical individuality.

It is my guess that the main structures of modern ethical life will turn out to fit the main patterns detected by Hegel: the family, civil society, and the state. But however this may be, if philosophy were—following Aristotle and Hegel—to take as primary *ordinary ethical individuals* and the *institutions of ethical life* that inform our everyday habits (rather than peeling off their ethical dispositions in order to reach a core moral subject, in whose disinterestedness, i.e., detachment from ethical dispositions, access to the "permanent neutral framework" of moral philosophy is to be had), then, whether or not we ended up agreeing with Hegel on specifics, we would have the chance of making a contribution to the discussion of 'Hegel's question': How can philosophy help us comprehend ethical individuals, granted that, like the Owl of Minerva, it comes on the scene too late to fashion them after its own plan?

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