

The Historicity of Ethical Categories

The Dynamic of Moral Imputation in Hegel's Account of History

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I

History may be moved by many things in Hegel, but few would single out ethical obligations as a core contributing factor. I propose to reconsider this assumption by examining the role of moral imputation in Hegel's conception of historical progress, and by "moral imputation" I mean, very briefly, those experiences whereby agents confront their own culpability.¹ I believe taking up this issue will help answer two important questions. First, in what sense do ethical obligations "move" history? Second, in what sense can these obligations have any substantial ethical import if they are destined to change as the historical actuality of self-conscious communities alter? Simply put: Are ethical commitments of only instrumental worth for Hegel, stepping stones of ancillary value through which history reveals its own absolute telos, or are they something more, and if so, what could this "more" signify? What does Hegel mean in his lectures on history when he says that world history "occupies a higher ground" (*VpG*, 67/90) than that of morality, yet also insists at the same time that "the responsibility and moral value of the individual [*Schuld und Wert des Individuums*], remains untouched," and is shut away from the clamor of history (*VpG*, 37/54).² One of the first things that needs to be clarified here is the extent to which ethical obligations are an inevitable aspect of our historicity. This chapter addresses this issue by demonstrating how Hegel balances the necessity

of self-discovery as the true medium of history with the experience of moral imputation. Clarifying this issue will not solve all of the difficulties that beset Hegel's providential union of moral progress and history, but I believe it will illuminate to what extent issues of accountability serve as the unique fulcrum of spiritual self-discovery.

To understand the role of moral imputation is to appreciate its living warrant as the pivotal anchor of cultural existence. What interests me here is the way the manifold ethical obligations that cement self-conscious existence also serve as that vehicle through which the concerns of singular agents "crash" up against larger, and often competing, cultural norms, forcing the limitations of the historical warrants that govern agents' self-interpretation into the open. It is these experiences that question the viability of our own sense of identity and serve as the individual locus through which the various worlds of spiritual actuality, whether Oriental, ancient Greek, Roman, or German, are experienced firsthand in their existential disintegration.

Ethical concerns and commitments work to anchor our relationships to one another, which make accessible our common aspirations as historical subjects. They serve as the personal expression of the purposefulness that underwrites our existence, which also means they articulate how we recognize ourselves and what is important to us. How we evaluate our duties, then, is also a reflection of how we evaluate ourselves, because if it turns out that nothing substantial is at stake in our engagements with the world, so too there is nothing at stake in being a subject. What makes these concerns so central rests with the fact that the peculiar reality of these obligations, more than any other single experience, shows self-conscious agents the limitations and achievements of their own personal existence, embodying together the gamut of epistemological and metaphysical issues that show the character of an age in its most visceral expression. Ethical duties show, as Lewis Hinchman explains, how our identities are implicated in the desires and choices we pursue, along with the stances we take toward them.³ It is this friction, then, between the legitimacy of our duties to the norms of our culture and the burgeoning demands of our own singularity, that forces self-consciousness beyond the security of its various historical worlds. As Hegel attests in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*:

This is the seal of the absolute and sublime destiny (*Bestimmung*) of man—that he knows what is good and what is evil; that his destiny *is* his very ability to will either good or evil—in one word, that he is the subject of moral imputation [*daß er Schuld haben kann*], imputation not only of evil,

but of good; and not only concerning this or that particular matter, and all that happens *ab extra*, but *also* the good and evil attaching to his individual [*individuellen*] freedom. (*VpG*, 34/50–51)

In order to understand how our historical destiny is anchored in the unavoidable reality of moral imputation it is not enough to look at the rise of morality as an explicit institution and way of life, or the prevalence of conscience as the defining attribute of our modern spirituality, or even the struggle of the master and slave dialectic; rather, one must also indicate the extent to which the experience of moral imputation is the specifying matrix of all historical communities, whether explicit or not.⁴ This entails examining the unique role that moral imputation plays in the dynamic of historical progress, which draws agents into the multiple demands of mutual self-determination. And let me clarify once again that by moral imputation I mean, as Hegel indicates above, the capacity to feel implicated at the deepest levels of our identity—to experience the individuating anguish of guilt—and so become conscious of our accountability to all those actions and duties that promote both good and evil. As Hegel clarifies elsewhere: “An ethical state of humanity begins only with a state of accountability or a capacity for guilt . . . to have guilt means to be accountable, that this is one’s knowledge and one’s will, that one does it as what is right.”⁵ As I see it, focusing on the experience of moral imputation as the historical expression of a culture will help address not only how the capacity for guilt propels the world spirit toward unveiling freedom as “the fundamental object of history” (*VpG*, 55/76), but also aid in clarifying the unique character ethical obligations have for Hegel.

In order to make my discussion as specific as possible I turn my exegesis to the *Phenomenology* and concentrate on two distinct modes of spiritual qua historical existence, that of ancient Greece (ch. VI, A), and the rise of European culture, whose historical purview stretches roughly from the fall of the Roman Empire to the French Revolution (ch. VI, B).⁶ I appreciate that the role of history and the way it is depicted in the *Phenomenology* and the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* is a debate in itself. Suffice it to say that I do not see these two texts in any serious contradiction but rather—following interpretations such as Goldstein—as mutually complementary, with each offering a “retrospective reconstruction of the development of *Geist*” toward freedom, but emphasizing different vantage points.⁷ My present objective in turning to the *Phenomenology* is to supplement the view of moral imputation Hegel repeatedly touches on in his lectures on history, with a more detailed

description whose focus is not simply the state but also the underlying duties that moor the state as a determinate kind of cultural existence. Moreover, I believe the scope as well as the necessity of this moral dynamic of disintegration and transformation can be seen most clearly in the struggles of ancient Greece and developing Europe to contend with the reality of individual accountability.⁸ And so, far from contradicting his later orientation in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, I believe the *Phenomenology* specifies a level of normative experience and perspective that Hegel valued throughout his career, and which is necessary to appreciate the full scope of his account of history.

Before turning to Hegel’s *Phenomenology*, I want to offer a few brief clarifying remarks on how the notion of moral imputation, or what Hegel calls *Schuld* or *böse Gewissen*, operates in Hegel’s texts.⁹ As Hegel states much earlier in his *System of Ethical Life*, the experience of guilt refers to an “inner negation.”¹⁰ It surfaces from the defiance of a commandment whose violation brings the subject immediately into conflict with the sources of his or her own objective existence. The sense of guilt arises on behalf of an outer negation, an actual defilement of the “real” as it exists in the norms of culture. The objective negation then returns as an inward negation of the subject. In the *System of Ethical Life* Hegel describes this moment of inner negation as the implicit arrival of freedom insofar as negativity appears here in its transformation from real negation to “ideal” negation, or negativity as a mode of thinking. I want to describe how this individual experience of negativity disrupts both the security of Greek ethical life, as well as the boundless confidence of Enlightenment rationality. It is important to realize at the outset that what I propose to chart, the experience of moral imputation, is experienced in different ways by agents depending on the historical world they dwell within. The most substantial distinction is that between objective and subjective guilt. The objective experience of guilt is defined by the virtual absence of any rationalizing role for subjective intentions—that one’s fate is determined *tout court* by the will of the Gods or the state. The subjective sense of guilt, which is the modern sense of guilt we are familiar with, locates the experience of guilt solely at the level of subjective intentions and the personal knowledge of one’s circumstances.¹¹ As our discussion of Antigone in Ancient Greece and the perils of the French Revolution will make clear, although the experience of guilt is expressed differently depending on what historical world we examine, its relevancy for the consciousness of freedom as historical self-determination is indispensable, and the most visceral way in which agents come to realize the implications of their own singular individuality. Quoting Stephen Houlgate: “History is thus the process whereby human beings come

to new levels of awareness of their freedom, of their productive, active nature, and thereby produce new forms of social and political life.¹² The argument I develop here is that these "levels of awareness" would be largely meaningless if they did not emerge from a confrontation at the level of personal accountability.

II

Hegel begins his analysis of spirit in the *Phenomenology* with the historical word of the ancient Greek city-state.¹³ The significant aspect to note here is how ethical life rests upon and reaches actualization through natural characteristics; for example, age, character, and most significantly gender. These natural distinctions are endowed with a sense that is directly related to the larger organization of social/ethical existence, the intelligibility of which is seen as an extension of the larger cosmos and the natural order intrinsic to it.¹⁴

What is being examined here, as Hegel points out, is not the subjective consciousness of singular agents per se, but the constitutive elements that determine the "meaning" of one's existence as this is forged in the inseparable binds of intersubjective (living) communities, or self-consciousness in general: "Absolute spirit realized in the plurality of distinct consciousnesses definitely existing" (*PbG*, 466/292). The first thing to recognize at this level of natural ethical life is that issues of moral adjudication rarely, if ever, reach explicit thematization. However, it would be a serious mistake to assume from this lack of thematization that moral concerns are absent. Rather, these concerns are embedded in one's social identity, shaping the certainty of one's existence as cultural agent (*PbG*, 467/293).¹⁵

Natural ethical life flourishes through the continued interaction of the "family" and the "state" as organizations of one social totality. Although it is true that each sphere has its own priorities and purposes, the first being the exclusive preserve of women and the other that of men, these spheres do not exist in separation but as two facets of the same world that "confirm" and "substantiate" one another (*PbG*, 481/303). The state subsists on behalf of members who knowingly participate in all the concerns of objective social organization (the sphere of human law), while the life of the family persists through the folk wisdom of familial traditions handed down from generation to generation (the sphere of divine law).

These two spheres of human and divine law work to ground the meaning or point of all natural differences through stipulating, in two

elemental ways, what these differences mean for beings who also think the difference and do not just live it.¹⁶ As Hegel specifies, these natural determinations supply the "operative individuality" (*betätigenden Individualität*), while the "universal actuality" (*allgemeinen Wirklichkeit*) of this individuality is lived in the duties of nation and family (*PbG*, 479/302). As a result, the ethical concerns that underwrite ancient Greece are never explicit as distinct moral obligations since cultural existence is itself a totality of harmonious norms whose index runs so deep its vehicle is biological facticity itself. Consequently, reflection on these norms is not only superfluous, but would be construed as sacrilegious.

In their allegiance to human and divine laws, the state and the family rely on subjects in different ways. The real difficulty lies in the fact that each recognizes the duties of individual agency in only *one* way, which prohibits any robust notion of a mediated social identity from being fulfilled within the day to day concerns of cultural existence. The fault does not lie with either the family or the state, but the identity of both as a single functioning world: each recognizes singular agents in different ways, one as an explicit vehicle of universality, while the other as the preserve of individual agency through familial piety. It is when human beings seek to negotiate or mediate the demands of both spheres to accommodate their own experience as singular agents, their existence as either this man or this woman, that irreconcilable difficulties emerge. As Wilfried Goossens puts it, with natural ethical life we have two forms of self-consciousness (man and woman) that determine themselves according to only one facet of their substantiality, and so "not only the knowledge of but also the ignorance of a part of their own substance (the other law)," is embodied in each which creates the conditions for a "fatal internal contradiction."¹⁷

In order to press home his point about the potential problem of (natural) attribution and social organization, Hegel turns to the classic tale of Sophocles' *Antigone*. As a woman, Antigone must venerate her brother's death to fulfill the customs of the family, for as keeper of the familial order she recognizes that the death of her brother demands acknowledgment. However, in Antigone's case such action is prohibited by the state, the law of men, since her brother is seen as a traitor to the state; consequently, his body is to be left unburied as a sign of his transgression. What, then, is Antigone to do? Her identity as woman demands she do her duty and bury her brother. To refuse would be to relinquish the intelligibility of her own identity, since as woman her gender transcribes her into an order that directly supervenes upon the truth of whom she recognizes herself to be. This has the effect of forcing the simple immediacy of her duty as woman, the truth of her essential

identity, into question through placing her act in contradiction with the larger universality from which she coordinates her actions (the law of the state). In the natural ethical life of ancient Greece, one lives the certitude of ethical duties as the reality of social existence, enacting it as determining principle of one's experience.¹⁸ By following one course of action, Antigone rejects the authority of the law of men, excommunicating herself from the recognition accorded those who participate within a single cultural world of human community and commerce. It is from out of this disjunction that Antigone is paralyzed from all social interaction via the experience of guilt, whereby her sense of self becomes severed from her familial duties. Yet what, one might ask, is Antigone guilty of, and what bearing does it have on the disintegration of ancient Greece?

One must fulfill the law of their respective spheres. To decline this duty would be to deny the intelligibility of one's identity. The demands the institutions of state and family dictate are transcribed, as it were, into the very meaning of self-conscious existence. In seeking to fulfill the rights of one sphere, irrespective of the other, the opposition between consciousness (the known) and *self*-consciousness (the ignorance of our own singularity) surfaces for the first time through the experience of guilt. No amount of knowledge or foresight could prevent the impending transgression from happening, because it concerns two distinct ways of enacting one's duties that miss the implications of their own historical instantiation as facets of a *single* world.

Hegel explains that by her deed Antigone becomes guilty (*PhG*, 488/308). The moment she acts on the knowledge of her duty, Antigone is forced outside the security of her own identity as female agency. This occurs through the simple act of fulfilling her role, which differentiates the consciousness of her own singularity from the certainty of herself as an ethical being. In so doing Antigone, as Hegel puts it, "gives up the specific quality of the ethical life" and initiates its division (*PhG*, 488/308). Antigone epitomizes an experience that unveils the paradoxical nature of self-consciousness as *infinite negativity*, that the truth of experience is inseparable from the activity of determining (negating) facets of one's existence. Hegel defines the inward realization of this paradoxical condition as guilt (*Schuld*). This experience of guilt signals the arrival of self-conscious agency "for itself." The choice to act "is itself this splitting [*Entzweiung*], this explicit self-affirmation and the establishing over against itself of an alien external reality" (*PhG*, 488/308). Antigone experiences this truth at the deepest levels of her identity, but she, like all the agents of natural ethical life, is unable to articulate its significance for her own unique sense of selfhood, and so she grasps it as the inevitable consequence of fate.

If my reading of Hegel on this point is correct, Antigone's experience of guilt expresses one, if not the most, of the primordial ways that human beings realize the depth of their own identity as self-determining agents. It is an experience that disrupts not only our relation to independent others, but is primarily, as Robert Williams says of Hegel's concept of the "other," an "othering of self," an experience of self-estrangement.¹⁹ Antigone does not appear guilty in the modern sense of the word, since she is *compelled* to fulfill the divine law—she experiences what Hegel calls "objective guilt"—yet this by no means detracts from what can rightly be called the ethical wisdom of Hegel's point. What we should note here is the nature of this compulsion itself and the way it forces agents to confront what it means to be implicated in the experience of a common world. In looking at the experience of guilt in the natural ethical life of Ancient Greece, Hegel is demonstrating how agents are imputed beyond their immediate beliefs in recognizing a world that is no longer experienced as simply the natural extension of their own values, yet one that agents are powerless to disown. It is this problem in particular that unseats the security of natural ethical life, for the certitude that anchors one's sense of duty precludes its elucidation, every attempt at which must be seen as a betrayal of the trust that substantiates one's social existence. In taking this angle, Hegel specifies with some precision one fundamental way in which self-conscious agents inevitably come to confront the duties imposed upon them as specific agents.

As Hegel goes on to clarify, the moment of guilt signals the rise of the unconscious (*Unbewusste*) in the shape of one's own ineradicable singularity, which is the incarnation of the "possible." "The deed consists in setting in motion what was unmoved, and in bringing to light what was shut up as mere possibility [*Möglichkeit*] . . . linking on the unconscious to the conscious" (*PhG*, 490/309).²⁰ This experience of the possible is the education of self-conscious agency, which is an inevitable aspect of our existence as social/historical beings, and it is through this education that we confront our own contingency as singular entities. Hegel's analysis of guilt demonstrates how the reality of freedom is inescapable, since self-consciousness can at best only postpone, but never wholly avoid, the weight of its own interiority—that in this initial awareness of our own activity, however vague, is also concealed the "possible" as a category of actuality. What the possible signifies at this point, however, is only the *difference* between the knowledge of our ethical identity—what our duties consist in as subjects of a certain culture—and our inability to actualize such demands despite their intuitive certainty. Seen from this vantage point, what makes guilt such a pivotal moment in the experience of singularization so central to the

historical odyssey of self-consciousness, is the way it forces agents to confront the contribution of their own ineradicable presence as living subjects.

At the historical level in discussion here singularity has no substantial place, which threatens to leave those guilty of action traumatized by their own difference. And so although it is true that guilt centers out singular consciousness, this experience only serves to intimate the insubstantiality and indeterminacy of one's own self-identity. Within the historical reality of natural ethical life the actuality of freedom is as indeterminate as the sense of one's *own* singularity, yet it is guilt that opens the experiential space for such self-discovery. The rise of guilt dissolves the determinate identity of natural ethical life because the fact that we are "self-conscious" is given inadequate confirmation, which acts to occlude our common identity in equating natural determinateness with conscious determinations. This experience signals the transition beyond natural ethical life, for the attempt to restrict the meaning of spiritual (conscious) existence to a natural (contingent) determination, such as being a man or woman, leads to a restriction of the possibilities we are endowed with as self-conscious agents. The experience of guilt indicates that we cannot ground the articulation of our duties on the indifferent determinations of nature, because these determinations cannot bear the weight of the social experiences they are called upon to substantiate. With this the act of knowing is differentiated from its determinate source as immediate substance, initiating the transition of self-consciousness beyond its natural factuality. What's more, this event is rightly experienced as traumatic insofar as it is the effort to fix a difference that agents lack the means to articulate given the conceptual resources at their disposal.

What Antigone's act brings about is the negation of the harmony that underscores natural ethical life, which resurfaces as an ideal negation of her self-identity as guardian of the hearth. Although the "objective experience" of guilt exemplified by Antigone does not literally bring about the immediate collapse of the ancient Greek city-state, it points to the spirit of "subjective freedom" that will be its final downfall.²¹ What postpones its collapse is only the impeding reality of war for the Greek city-states, which forces self-conscious agents back into the realm of universality proper, thereby effectively "suppressing the spirit of individualism" (*Unterdrückung dieses Geistes der Einzelheit*) and returning it to its "natural" cycle (*PhG*, 497/314). Yet even the reality of war can only postpone the consciousness of a more subjective sense of freedom from taking hold, one whose ambiguous sense is conveyed most directly for the agents of Ancient Greece as the estranging experience of guilt.

III

An intrinsic sense of duty underscored the world of natural ethical life, yet there was no explicit concept of bad per se; wrongful action was simply any action that hindered the fulfillment of one's immediate obligations. With the world of culture, which Hegel designates in the *Phenomenology* as the spread of Christendom throughout Western Europe and the rise of the Enlightenment, the distinction between good and bad is brought into the open, as is the role singular agents play in sustaining this distinction. In calling this phase of existence "culture" (*Bildung*), Hegel is drawing our attention to the growing objectification of the natural world through the projects of self-consciousness. I want to look at how this process of objectification affects both the way agents make sense of the various duties placed upon them, as well as how it anchors their own sense of culpability.²²

It is only when the immediacy of natural ethical life is broken down, making its customs objectively distinct, that agents can first address these customs as something truthful to experience or not. To be sure, the defining issue of the European cultural experience is the way it rearticulates the nature of self-conscious existence, which is something that occurs most viscerally at the level of normative concepts of duty. These norms anchor the meaning of cultural experience for self-conscious agents in stipulating the binary opposition that exists between good and bad, which "stands as the absolute basis of all their action, where all their action securely subsists" (*es bleibt die absolute Grundlage und Bestehen alles ihres Tuns*) (*PhG*, 520/328). It is with the emancipation of self-consciousness away from the harmony of the natural world, that terms such as "good" and "bad," "right" and "wrong," finally become explicit as concepts. Yet the more the value of these norms is fixed as specific duties the more they become divested of their conceptual warrants—their certainty—as they become increasingly identified with the trends and ambitions of the time.

The moral experience of early feudal Europe unfolds as ethical distinctions gradually begin to intermingle, erasing the rigidity that defines them, pushing apart cognitive warrants and practical actuality—distinguishing the true from the good—while bringing the symbols of good and bad closer together.²³ In this gradual inversion, the norms that govern dutiful conduct become dependent on various media of culture, such as service and wealth, to determine the meaning of right and wrong.²⁴ Good and bad eventually lose their function as substantial modes of self-reflection or self-certainty, verifying what is inherently "right" from

what is definitely “wrong,” but come to exist merely as predicates that stand outside the life of self-conscious subjects (*PhG*, 526/332).

In this “transfusion” of values self-conscious agents experience the very purpose of life as eroding away, only to be replaced by an abstract system of regulative exchange. In reflecting upon its predicament and the meaning of its “own” existence in culture, Hegel states that consciousness confronts an “abyss” (*Abgründe*) in which “every solid base and stay [*Halz*] has vanished,” forsaking “all true spiritual import” (*sein Geist ist die ganz wesenlose Meinung, die geistverlässne Oberfläche zu sein*) (*PhG*, 539/342). It is here that human existence loses its sense of meaningfulness, seeing the source of all commitments has been completely ceded to the sphere of chance and contingency (the domain of wealth). This inversion marks the dissolution of dutiful agency into the indifference of pure universality, in which “self-existence is cut-off from essential being” (*PhG*, 546/347). What is acknowledged here is our own lack of obligation and purpose; our indifference to everything is taken as the genuine reflection of our own identity, having no positive or substantial ties to either the ideals of culture or the environing world such ideals circumscribe (*PhG*, 547/348). It is here, from this state of moral abandonment, that self-consciousness finally recognizes its “pure self” (*das reine Ich selbst*)—that consciousness is only the activity of self-movement, which is equally nothing determinate. With this recognition, self-conscious agents come to see their identity not in the substantiality of their own commitments, but the power of pure thought itself. Rather than outline the details of this intricate process, I want to focus on its final cultural result, that of the French Revolution. This final expression of spiritual revolt results from incorporating the infinite confidence of religious belief into the limitless powers of the Enlightenment project (pure insight), transforming the certainty of belief into the drive of political autonomy.²⁵ Thus, the cultural education of Western Europe comes to a close in the revolution (*Umwälzung*) of political self-definition (*PhG*, 600/385), where the abstract power of thought becomes an actual form of existence.²⁶

The move to actualize the freedom of pure thought in the world of culture, the final example of which is the terror of the French Revolution, is the move to re-forge cultural existence in the ideal image of what consciousness knows itself to be.²⁷ In so doing, self-consciousness sees the concept of utility as the practical truth of its own universality—that everything gains its value vis-à-vis the uses self-conscious agents can put it to in order to enhance their own projects. The implicit difficulty here is that such a criterion runs into serious problems when it comes

to justifying projects in any other way than appealing to what *appears* useful at any given moment. On account of this, the universal project of political self-definition is also rife with indeterminacy, lacking the means to concretely differentiate itself and its “vision” of the future from other versions of political autonomy. Given that the universal will to secure freedom as the absolute truth of existence has no way of determining or evaluating life-goals outside what appears applicable to agents *at any given time*, this universal will itself collapses into factions (*Faktion*), all of which want to instill their particular version of governance. As Hegel explains, in seeking to subjugate all singular wills to one particular purpose, the once-universal will toward freedom epitomized in the Enlightenment project becomes dismantled, placing the ideal of freedom explicitly on one side, and the citizens its seeks to govern on the other. This event occasions the arrival of “guilt” (*Schuld*).²⁸

To say the universal will to self-definition becomes guilty is to say that the members who compose it inevitably find themselves united by a specific interest, and no longer the desire to preserve the freedom of all. As Hegel explains: “The victorious faction only is called the government; and just in that it is a faction lies the direct necessity of its overthrow; and its being government makes it, conversely, into a faction and hence guilty” (*PhG*, 606/390). Once again, what I want to draw your attention to is how Hegel’s description of the rise of Enlightenment Europe and its final culmination, the French Revolution, works to reveal the way the vernacular of accountability itself is shaped in modern Europe, and its eventual reification. In the event of the French Revolution it is our particularity itself that eventually becomes suspect. This is true both of those self-conscious agents who manage to come to power, since their faction is potentially just another form of tyranny, as well as those who are not presently in power, since their intention to subversion can never be ruled out. Rather than risk intentions (*Absichten*) becoming objective, dominant members of the ruling faction seek to nullify the only thing left, “this particular existent self,” in other words, personal existence in general (*PhG*, 606/391).

With this “real” negation of itself, consciousness finally awakens to what the motivating power was behind the pure I and its universal will, which is a retreat from the mortality of existence by wholly negating the “meaning” of this existence in its singular significance.²⁹ The impending reality of death awakens self-consciousness to the realization that its absolute freedom as pure universal determination—pure will—is intimately connected to its existence as a singular being, and that they “ought” never to be separated.³⁰

What I hope to have made clear, is how the culmination of the French Revolution is inseparable from the experience of moral aban-

document that began with the disintegration of feudal Europe in the ascendancy of wealth, and whose realization at the guillotine expresses the final attempt to reduce self-conscious agency to a mere "thing." It is this "experience" of thinghood—a life without possibility, neither of denial nor affirmation—that instigates the revolt of self-conscious agency to reclaim its existence *for itself*. The peculiar catalyst for this realization is the rampant emergence of guilt, wherein agents are indicted merely because of the possibilities they embody as subjects. The subjective reality of an agent's inner intentions is treated as objective proof that each is a potential traitor. And so although subjective guilt was recognized in the historical world of the French Revolution, it was granted no independent status in assessing one's moral worth; rather, the fact one always has specific intentions served to cast doubt on all agents, placing them under a suspicion they could never be redeemed from. It is from the depths of this realization that "the vacuous negativity of self . . . turns round into absolute positivity" (*PbG*, 609/393), which sequences the transition to morality proper. With this move the indispensable importance of subjective guilt takes on unprecedented positive significance (the explanatory priority of personal intentions must be respected), signaling the rise of the modern conscience—"spirit certain of itself"—as the culminating experience of modernity.

In being unable to articulate any durable notion of accountability, the agents of the French Revolution come to experience their existence as mere things, a renewable resource like any other. The native limits of natural existence are traded for the limitless determinability of thought, and in so doing the substantial commitments that once defined the worth of human agency are relinquished for abstract truths. What's more, it should come as no surprise that this failure is experienced most concretely in the moral abandonment that follows from the subjectification of *all* nature to pure utility. Accordingly, the real problem with the European world of culture is not that self-consciousness is unsuccessful in educating itself about the world, but that it proves unable to think itself as part of this world in any deep way.

IV

It is the experience of moral imputation that points to the limitations of both the natural ethical life of the Greek city-state and the abstract character of Enlightenment Europe. In each case, it is the reality of our own unique efforts that is ignored, which arises in the attempt to negate the particularity of our commitments. Yet unlike in Ancient Greece, where the reasons for one's guilt were seen as an extension

of one's fate, the experience of guilt at the close of Enlightenment Europe is precisely the opposite. In forcing guilt upon agents "cut off" from any ethical order—that one is guilty simply for being mortal—the complete inadequacy of Enlightenment ideals as a concrete way of life is exposed. The experience of disjunction epitomized in revolutionary France forces the dignity of self-consciousness in its singularity to assert itself and confront the complete inversion of its own selfhood. It is this realization in its lived reality that ultimately brings home the limitations of Enlightenment Europe as a historical world, where finite selves crash up against the limits of the empty ethical vernacular their own culture has created.

Much more could be said here of the move to morality proper, and the discovery of the primacy of personal morality—of the transition to the supremacy of conscience and subjective guilt (ch. VI, C)—but I believe my point about the unique priority of moral imputation for the historical development of spirit should have some measure of plausibility. Returning to our first question, which concerns how the dynamism of moral imputation can be said to move history, I think my account makes clear the extent that issues of accountability reveal the inadequacy of a given age to accommodate the burgeoning reality of spirit's autonomy. Moreover, it should be stressed that the necessity of this movement in history is revealed reconstructively, through discerning the obligations that communities experience in exploring their own deepest possibilities.³¹ This means that although we can indicate the sources of spiritual transformation in history, this does not allow us to predict with precision the specific forms of ethical life that will inevitably arise in the future, but only indicate those general moral dilemmas that self-consciousness cannot avoid in the act of creating its own histories.³²

The second question we addressed was whether such experiences of moral imputation are only of transitional significance, or whether they can be said to have some intrinsic ethical value or "infinite worth" of their own. My answer to this question is that since no other experience than that of moral imputation has the power to push agents outside their historical facticity to confront the specter of their own singular worth, our ethical obligations do have intrinsic value in the sense that they are a unique and irreducible expression of the reality of freedom, without which no experience of concrete autonomy would be complete. Far from being "mere transitions" that testify to the relativity of moral concerns, the experience of moral imputation illustrates that the ultimate gauge of the development of freedom in history is the capacity of our various historical worlds to find a meaningful home for our own interiority.

The last major issue that we need to broach is whether there is any reason to believe that Hegel later renounced the importance of moral imputation for the development of spirit in his lectures on history. Although it is true that Hegel insists in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* that "world historical individuals" move history, meeting the needs of the age by unconsciously initiating the next phase of spirit's development (*VpG*, 30–31/46–47), this need not diminish the unique importance of moral imputation for the consciousness of freedom in history. No doubt, for Hegel, Caesar, Alexander, and Napoleon are the great agents of history, whose own ambitions brought them to wager the established practices of their age. These world-historical individuals are the primary initiators of historical change, and yet their moral vision, or lack thereof, plays no role for Hegel in assessing the necessity of their accomplishments. Despite this fact, I believe there remains another level of transformation that is much more subtle, and whose consequences Hegel would agree are that much more indicative of the maturity of spirit in history. This level of transformation refers to how we experience those ethical obligations that supply the final anchor for our sense of belonging in the world of nature. Consequently, although we may owe much of the explicit push of history, and the rise and fall of nations, to the ambition of world historical individuals, it is to the aftermath of their actions that we must look if we are to assess the true extent of spirit's self-discovery. That is not to condone the violence and senseless injustices of the past, but only to say we can learn from them.³³

Whether it is Enlightenment Europe or the Oriental world, ancient Greece or the Roman Empire, each is a lens through which the freedom that defines spirit is played out. Consequently each has its own unique ethical life, which cements the concerns of self-conscious individuals within a meaningful cultural totality. It is these concerns that show us glimpses of the life of spirit from the inside out, where the existential contest to forge a free society continues to press forward. As Hegel famously states in the *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*.

Spirit is at war with itself; it has to overcome itself as its most formidable obstacle. That development which in the sphere of nature is a peaceful growth, is in that of Spirit, a severe, a mighty conflict with itself. What Spirit really strives for is the realization of its Ideal being; but in doing so, it hides that goal from its own vision, and is proud and well satisfied in this alienation from it. (*VpG*, 55/76)

The most formidable obstacle of all to achieve is balancing the limitless depths of our power for self-determination with concrete actuality. History is the unique site of this balancing act, and there is no compelling reason to believe Hegel ever gave up this insight. The cultural worlds spirit engenders are the environments through which human beings experience the full reality of their own possibilities. This struggle is not easy precisely because it deals with that restless negativity which is the condition of all our accomplishments, good and evil alike. History is the confirmation of this struggle, which shows us again and again that we cannot avoid being imputed by the weight of our own interiority. To discern this charge in the unfolding of history is to learn one of the most enduring lessons that Hegel can teach us.

Notes

1. I use the term *moral* imputation rather than ethical because I want to draw attention to the peculiar difficulty that arises when agents are forced to assess the measure of their own accountability, rather than the security and meaning they experience when fulfilling the duties imposed by cultural life (which I take *Sittlichkeit* to indicate). For an account of some of the different roles the concept of morality plays for Hegel, consider the following: B. Bitsch, *Sollensbegriff und Moralitätskritik bei Hegel. Interpretationen zur "Wissenschaft der Logik," "Phänomenologie," und "Rechtsphilosophie"* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1977); Roland Pelzer, "Studien über Hegels ethische Theoreme," *Archiv für Philosophie* 13 (1964): 3–49; Allen Wood, *Hegel's Ethical Thought* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Robert Williams, *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992).

2. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 1991). Hereafter referred to as *VpG* with the English pagination preceding the German, *Vorlesungen über die Philosophie der Geschichte, Werke 12* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1999).

3. See Lewis P. Hinchman, "On Reconciling Happiness and Autonomy: An Interpretation of Hegel's Moral Philosophy," *The Owl of Minerva* 23 (1991–92): 29–48. Hinchman points out that the various shapes in Hegel's *Phenomenology* all disintegrate because they sense, but are unable to articulate, the missing moral dimension of their identity, 39–40. My own interpretation tries to make this idea more explicit at the level of historical transitions from one world of spirit to another.

4. Saul Tobias explores the limitations with taking Hegel's master and slave dialectic as a model of recognition in his article "Hegel and the Politics of Recognition," *The Owl of Minerva* 38 (2006–07): 101–26. I agree with Tobias that recognition should not be separated from a process of self-determination; a fact that becomes even clearer once the importance of moral imputation for Hegel is discerned.

5. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion* (1827) One-volume edition, ed. Peter C. Hodgson, trans. R. F. Brown, P. C. Hodgson and J. M. Stewart (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 214. For the German citation see *Vorlesungen: Ausgewählte Nachschriften und Manuskripte*, Vol. 4a, ed. Walter Jaeschke (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1984), 424.

6. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Mind*, 2nd ed., tr. J. B. Baillie (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1961). Hereafter referred to as *PbG* with the English pagination preceding the German, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, hg. Hans-Friedrich Wessels und Heinrich Clairmont (Hamburg: Felix Meiner Verlag, 1988).

7. Leon J. Goldstein, "Force and the Inverted World in Dialectical Retrospection," *International Studies in Philosophy* 20, no. 3 (1988): 19.

8. This is not to say that Hegel's treatment of the issue of moral obligation is confined to his analysis of spirit proper (chapter VI), since he also discusses this at some length in chapter V ("Reason," section B) "Realization of rational self-consciousness through itself" (and C) "Individuality, which takes itself to be real in and for itself," which can be seen as not only a criticism of Kant and Fichte's approach to morality, but of Rousseau as well; see subsection 2b of section B, chapter V, "The law of the heart and the frenzy of self-conceit." However, these positions are abstractions of morality in the sense they present explicit definitions of how morality is to operate, for instance, as formulating laws or following one's heart, that arise to a large extent in abstraction from the community, and thus from history. My interest is with indicating how the experience of moral obligation itself becomes concrete within actual communities, which initially arises in simply performing those duties expected of us, where morality has no explicit thematization.

9. As Jean Wahl comments in his book on the development of Hegel's concept of conscience, the notion of guilt played a central role in Hegel's earlier theological writings, which Wahl sees as the key concept in Hegel's transition away from theology to philosophy, a move that becomes explicit in the *Phenomenology*. As Wahl writes: "The capital notion that marks the entrance from an apologetic theology to the history that becomes a logic is the bad conscience [*conscience malheureuse*]." See *Le Malheur de la Conscience dans la Philosophie de Hegel*, 2nd ed. (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1951), VI.

10. Hegel, *System of Ethical Life*, trans. T. M. Knox and H. S. Harris (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1979), 132. *System der Sittlichkeit*, hg. Georg Lasson (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 1967), 41.

11. The importance of this distinction was drawn to my attention by Robert Williams, for which I am grateful. Hegel offers the following explanation of the distinction in his *Lectures on Aesthetics*: "The independent solidity and totality of the heroic character repudiates any division of guilt between subjective intentions and the objective deed and its consequences, while nowadays, owing to the complexity and ramification of action, everyone has recourse to everyone else and shuffles guilt off himself as far as possible. Our view in this matter is more *moral*, in that in the moral sphere the subjective aspect, i.e., knowledge of the circumstances, conviction of the good, and the inner intention, constitute for us a chief element in the action." See Hegel, *Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art*

Vol. I, trans. T. M. Knox (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 188. For the German see volume 13 of Hegel's *Sämmtliche Werke*, 247.

12. Stephen Houlgate, *Freedom, Truth, and History: An Introduction to Hegel's Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1991), 27.

13. Hegel is quite explicit about the fact that that all of the other forms of conscious experience up to spirit have been abstractions of sorts, which presuppose the reality of spirit as the originary ground of their existence (*PbG*, 459/288). I agree with John O'Donohue that these previous forms of spirit cannot be seen as actual presuppositions of spirit, but are "decisive moments" in the unfolding of experience that are unable to successfully stabilize themselves, pushing beyond themselves toward their underlying reality, spirit proper. Each is an attempt to thematize an element of spirit's development, which is necessary to show the extent to which spirit is self-grounding, yet they do not "exist," per se, in their own right, but are reflective moments that illustrate the inability of restricting the vitality of spirit to a single moment. See John O'Donohue, *Person als Vermittlung: Die Dialektik von Individualität und Allgemeinheit in Hegels "Phänomenologie des Geistes"* (Mainz: Matthias-Grünwald, 1993), Part III, section 11, 278–87, esp. 284. O'Donohue argues that the concept of "person" is the conceptual cornerstone of the *Phenomenology*, mediating the poles of universality and individuality in the development of spirit into concreteness. I largely agree with this approach to the *Phenomenology* and take a similar perspective in my own reading.

14. This process of spiritual development is not, contrary to what Kojève thinks, only a recapitulation of the master-slave dialectic (ch. IV, section A, "Independence and Dependence of Self-consciousness: Lordship and Bondage"). First, from the point of view of how spirit actually experiences its own unfolding, although it is true that elements of this "struggle to the death" periodically emerge, notably in the section on the French Revolution, the agents involved in this movement do not see themselves as either "slaves" or "masters," but as fitting into a *meaningful* totality from which they discover the import of their own singularity. The conflict is one of self-alienation, and not a fight to the death, since every affirmation of singularity (being-for-itself) also singularizes the spiritual community, forcing self-conscious agents into making sense of their essence on their own terms. It is the impossibility of doing so that sets the stage for self-consciousness to transcend its own singularity through the act of forgiveness, in which the move to religion as the awareness of spirit as an absolute totality is made (ch. VII). See Alexandre Kojève, *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. J. H. Nichols (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1980).

15. Terry Pinkard summarizes this point well by stating that the Greeks did not confuse "is" and "ought." "For them, what they *ought* to do followed from the way things *are*, from the background understanding that this is 'the way things are done,' which for them was a *fact* about social life." See Terry Pinkard, *Hegel's Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 140. Although I agree with Pinkard's initial description of this phase of spirit, he downplays the role of guilt in effecting the transition

out of the immediacy of the Greek city-state, overlooking an essential aspect of Hegel's account of natural ethical life.

16. For a good account of the importance of Hegel's insight here for issues of feminism and social criticism see Jeffrey A. Gauthier, *Hegel and Feminist Social Criticism: Justice, Recognition, and the Feminine* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1997), esp. Part One, "Emergent Action And Normativity in Hegel," and Shannon Hoff, "Restoring Antigone to Ethical Life: Nature and Sexual Difference in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*," *The Owl of Minerva* 38 (2006-07): 77-99.

17. Wilfried Goossens, "Ethical Life and Family in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*," in *Hegel on the Ethical Life, Religion, and Philosophy (1793-1807)* ed. A. Wylleman (Belgium: Leuven University Press and Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1989): 163-94, 172.

18. As Hegel specifies, what drives natural consciousness here, its "absolute right," is that its deeds are directly known—this is "the mode and form of its realization" (*PbG*, 487/307).

19. As Williams points out, Hegel employs the concept of "other" to indicate both an independent being, as well as the relation of self to itself, as something initially other. This "othering of self" is the process of "self-estrangement." See Williams, *Recognition*, 153. As I see it, the experience of moral imputation exemplifies this process of self-estrangement, which forces agents to confront the multiple implications of their own singular identity.

20. The full text reads as follows: "*Dem sittlichen Selbstbewusstsein stellt auf diese Weise eine lichtscheue Macht nach, welche erst, wenn die geschehen, hervorbricht und es bei ihr ergreift; denn die vollbrachte Tat ist der aufgehobne Gegensatz des wissenden Selbst, und der ihm gegenüberstehenden Wirklichkeit. Das Handelnde kann das Verbrechen und seine Schuld nicht verleugnen;—die Tat ist dieses, das Unbewegte zu bewegen und das nur erst in der Möglichkeit Verschlussene hervor zu bringen, und hiemit das Unbewusste dem Bewußten, das Nicht-seiende dem Sein zu verknüpfen*" (*PbG*, 490/309).

21. As Hegel reiterates years later in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*: "That very subjective Freedom which constitutes the principle and determines the peculiar form of Freedom in our world . . . could not manifest itself in Greece otherwise than as a *destructive element*," eventually plunging "the Greek world into ruin, for the polity which that world embodied was not calculated for this side of humanity—did not recognize this phase" (*VpG*, 253/309).

22. Now, the claim can be made that in the *Phenomenology*, at least at the level of culture, good and evil are not moral terms in the strict sense, but only metaphysical concepts, which is the claim that John O'Donohue makes. See John O'Donohue, *Person als Vermittlung: Die Dialektik von Individualität und Allgemeinheit in Hegels "Phänomenologie des Geistes"*, 316. Yet Hegel's point here is precisely that self-consciousness is initially unable to differentiate between cultural norms and moral concepts, not that moral warrants are inactive or inoperative. The concepts of good and bad are already moral, because they encompass the practical concerns of the subject by indicating how these concerns are fulfilled, as well as what my "particular" role is in fulfilling them.

I care about making the good choice because it matters to me *personally*. The underlying thematic concern is the attempt to unearth how and why it is that these concepts matter. It is this search that acts to differentiate the two poles, that of pure universality and moral imputation, whose unsuccessful resolution will result in the terror of the French Revolution.

23. Initially the "good" is what is universal, unquestioned and objective, stipulating the right way to live from the wrong, whereas the "bad" is identified with what is contingent, subjective, and relative. Thus, the good is what defines the meaning of objective reality, while the bad is what contradicts this reality, that which calls it into question (*PbG*, 519-20/327-28). Within this opposition, which permeates the entirety of self-conscious existence, the acceptable is distinguished from the unacceptable; the good is seen as that which appeals directly to all, while the bad exists as a force of exclusion, promoting personal welfare at the expense of social harmony.

24. Kainz makes the remark that "good" and "bad" function in this section as equivalent judgments to what does or does not cultivate subjectivity, yet it should be added that in the beginning of culture both good and bad contain their own warrants, they are "objective" and viewed as inherently meaningful; they are not attributes of the subject. They do eventually become "terms" of the subject, and with this identification lays the ruin of their conceptual legitimacy. See Howard P. Kainz, *Hegel's Phenomenology, Part II: The Evolution of Ethical and Religious Consciousness to the Absolute Standpoint* (Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1983), 44.

25. Pure insight and belief succeed in reestablishing the primacy of the true and the good through the rudimentary conceptual scheme of self and not-self: belief takes inwardness as *good* and externality as *bad*, while pure insight takes inwardness as *true* and externality as *false*. The compact solidity of the good and the true from which our analysis of culture began, has become completely separate domains of experience, each of which approach finite existence only in reference to its own pure vocabulary of universality (*PbG*, 578/370).

26. What should not be overlooked is how each universal shape of the pure I (that of belief and pure insight) arises out of an ethical crisis of commitments, reducing the truth of this existence to structures of pure consciousness. These two molds of universality totalize the lives of self-conscious agency, trading the reality of singular existence for an explanation of what it means to exist.

27. As Axel Honneth explains: "For Hegel, then, the real challenge posed by the age must have been the question generated by the Revolution, namely, how that sphere of abstract freedom which had been won through political struggle could itself be embedded in an overarching context so that it would not unleash its atomizing capacity *ad infinitum*, but rather become a positive formative element in an ethical community." See Axel Honneth, "Atomism and Ethical Life: On Hegel's Critique of the French Revolution," *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 14 (1988): 359-68, 361-62.

28. Hegel describes this frightful process in his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* as follows: "The principle of the Freedom of the Will, therefore, asserted itself against existing right. . . . The political condition of France at that

time presents nothing but a confused mass of privileges altogether contravening Thought and Reason—an utterly irrational state of things, and one with which the greatest corruption of morals [*die höchste Verderbenheit der Sitten*], of Spirit was associated—an empire characterized by Destitution of Right, and which, when its real state begins to be recognized, becomes shameless destitution of Right. The fearfully heavy burdens that pressed upon the people, the embarrassment of the government to procure for the Court the means of supporting luxury and extravagance, gave the first impulse to discontent [*gaben den ersten Anlaß zur Unzufriedenheit*]. The new Spirit began to agitate men's minds: oppression drove men to investigation. . . . The change was necessarily violent, because the work of transformation was not undertaken by the government . . . unwilling to surrender the privileges they possessed, either for the sake of expediency or that of Abstract Right" (*VpG*, 446/528). It is interesting to note that in his lectures on history Hegel attributes much of the widespread violence throughout the French Revolution to the abstract sense of religious belief that was operative throughout this period—the religious conscience—dismantling the concrete force of right from the legitimating power of moral conviction by separating the interests of the secular and the spiritual.

29. Shklar sees the fact of "mortal fear" as merely instructing individuals to accept discipline and restraint, thereby reuniting them with the "substantial reality" of spirit. See Judith Shklar, *Freedom and Independence: A Study of the Political Ideas of Hegel's Phenomenology of Mind* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 174. In seeing the only outcome of the self of absolute freedom as another type of submission, I believe Shklar completely misses the meaning of not only this chapter, but the text of the *Phenomenology* as a whole, which has very little to do with a "lament for Hellas" (85).

30. Hegel seems to confirm this view in stating that the development of spirit, which he describes as a "cycle of necessity" up to that point, would cease "if only complete interpenetration of self-consciousness and the substance were the final result" (*PhG*, 607/392). Indeed, the cultural worlds that spirit has created thus far need not be intolerable places to exist. As Hegel clearly states, it is possible that the particular individual (*Besonders*) "would be able to endure [*könnte ertragen*] the objective reality of universal spirit, a reality, excluding self-consciousness *qua* particular" (*PhG*, 607/392). Yet if consciousness could live with the recognition of itself as *instrument* of the universal, from whence comes the necessity to move onward; the answer is freedom, the move to take responsibility for the singularities that we are.

31. In taking this stance I side with scholars such as Kain who credit Hegel with a certain degree of freedom in the examples he chooses to emphasize, which points to Hegelian necessity in its retrospective elements, rather than prospective. See Philip J. Kain, "The Structure and Method of Hegel's *Phenomenology*," *Clio* 27, no. 4 (1998). That moral imputation is an issue for spirit is something ingrained in the texture of experience itself, yet the examples that make this most clear owe something to Hegel's own peculiar genius. What this means, *pace* interpreters such as Dove, is that Hegel's method in the *Phenomenology* is not simply observing, but a pedagogical lesson on how to read the dialectical

nature of experience in its comprehensiveness. See Kenley R. Dove, "Hegel's Phenomenological Method," in *The Phenomenology of Spirit Reader: Critical and Interpretive Essays*, ed. Jon Stewart (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998), 52–75. For a recent and informative summary on how questions of methodology relate to necessity, and the problem with approaches such as that of Dove, see Wendy Lynn Clark and J. M. Fritzman, "Reducing Spirit to Substance: Dove on Hegel's Method," *Idealistic Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 73–100.

32. For an informative and recent survey of interpretations on Hegel's account of historical progress, see Frederick Rausher, "The Regulative and the Constitutive in Kant's and Hegel's Theories of History," *Idealistic Studies* 32, no. 2 (2002): 121–42.

33. For a recent informative account of Hegel and his relation to the problem of evil in history, see Alice Ormiston, *Love and Politics: Re-interpreting Hegel* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), esp. 118–24.