

Hegelian Constitutivism and the Schmagency Objection

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I. Introduction

Constitutivism is the view that the norms of rationality and morality can be derived from the constitutive features of agency. The constitutivist claims that all persons, as agents, are bound by the norms of rationality and morality simply because they are agents. Any version of constitutivism must contend with what has come to be known as the “schmagency objection.”¹ The objection is simple. It seems that constitutivism must be wrong because for any conception of agency the constitutivist posits, persons can escape the normative demands of that conception of agency by claiming to be an agent of a different type—a schmagent.

Addressing Cristine Korsgaard’s Kantian constitutivism, on which the aim of self-constitution is constitutive of action,² David Enoch asks why, when presented with this version of constitutivism, the moral skeptic could not reply in the following way:

Classify my bodily movements and indeed me as you like. Perhaps I cannot be classified as an agent without aiming to constitute myself. But why should I be an agent? Perhaps I can't act without aiming at self-constitution, but why should I act? If your reasoning works, this just shows that I don't care about agency and action. I am perfectly happy being a schmagent—a nonagent who is very similar to agents but who lacks the aim (constitutive of agency but not of shmagency) of self-constitution. I am perfectly happy performing shmactions—nonaction events that are very similar to actions but that lack the aim (constitutive of actions but not of shmactions) of self-constitution.³

The moral skeptic, as described by Enoch, simply does not care to be an agent. For Enoch, the constitutivist must provide reasons for persons to be agents. Enoch claims that absent such reasons, constitutivism fails. This objection is powerful, and one that any constitutivist must take seriously.

¹ See Enoch (2006) for a compelling articulation of this objection.

² See Korsgaard (2009).

³ Enoch (2006), p. 179.

In this paper, I articulate a Hegelian version of constitutivism and argue that Hegelian constitutivism is able to provide a compelling response to the schmagency objection. Hegel takes it that one is a self, an agent, only to the extent that one is recognized as such by other selves. For Hegel, agency, selfhood, and, as a consequence, self-consciousness requires reciprocal recognition. If Hegel is correct, being an agent—or a schmagent—requires that one *do* something; namely, that one recognize another as an agent. Recognition, on the Hegelian conception, is constitutive feature of agency. In this way, Hegelian constitutivism is able to respond decisively to the schmagency objection.

In the next section, I articulate Hegel's conception of selfhood and self-consciousness, relying on Robert Brandom's contemporary interpretation of Hegel. In section III, I discuss the relationship between self-consciousness and bodily autonomy in Hegel's thought. For Hegel, self-conscious persons must recognize others as the owners of their bodies if they are to be selves and recognize themselves as such. In this section, I explain in further detail why Hegelian constitutivism is not threatened by the schmagency objection. In section IV, I articulate Hegel's conception of ethical life—the situation in which persons actually recognize one another as selves. In section V, I discuss evolutionary debunking arguments, those arguments that seek to undermine moral realism by appeal to the fact that our current moral beliefs were likely formed by evolutionary pressures. In explaining how Hegelian constitutivism fares against these arguments, we come to better understand the appeal of the Hegelian position.

In sections VI and VII, I explore further challenges that could be raised by the advocate of the schmagency objection. I conclude that one can escape the demands of morality not by becoming a schmagent, but by committing suicide. For Hegel, so long as one is alive and wishes

to conceive of oneself as a self of a particular type, one is bound by morality. I conclude by tracing out some implications of these final conclusions.

II. Selfhood and Self-Consciousness

In "The Structure of Desire and Recognition: self-consciousness and self-constitution," Robert Brandom develops an instructive, contemporary account of Hegel's concept of recognition. Brandom's account allows us to understand why self-consciousness (or, having a coherent conception of oneself) requires that one be recognized by those one recognizes.⁴

Brandom gives us a basic account of what it is to recognize someone. For Brandom, "[t]o recognize someone is to take her to be the subject of normative statuses, that is, of commitments and entitlements, as capable of undertaking responsibilities and exercising authority."⁵ To take someone to be the subject of normative statuses is to take it that their sayings and doings can be assessed in normative terms, that the terms "good," "bad," "right," "wrong," "authorized," or "unauthorized," can be used to characterize their deeds. Also, to take it that someone is the subject of normative statuses is to take it that they can be called on to *justify* their actions. In short, to recognize another is to take her to be "in the space of reasons," to borrow Wilfrid Sellars' phrase.

To illustrate, as a recognized person, A's assertion "I am in Boston" will be taken as a commitment, a commitment which also entitles her to claim that she is in Massachusetts. A is able to commit herself to this first claim because she is recognized as having the authority to do so. This authority also entails responsibilities. In the case under consideration, A's asserting and committing is also her undertaking the responsibility to *justify* her claim (in the appropriate

⁴ Brandom (2007). To my knowledge, no other contemporary interpreter of Hegel provides a conception of Hegelian recognition that is as fine-grained and illuminating as that of Brandom. Though, Pippin (2008) does shed light on the importance of the concept of recognition in Hegel's thought.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 136.

circumstances) and to not commit herself to a claim that is inconsistent with her original claim, to not commit herself to the claim that she is in Florida, for example.

Brandom also provides a general account of what one must specifically *do* in order to *count as* recognizing another. For Brandom, to recognize another is to treat that other's commitments as normatively authoritative for oneself.⁶ To continue with the above example, B counts as recognizing A if B takes A's commitment to the claim that she is in Boston as a reason to take on this commitment himself. To be sure, to treat another's commitments as normatively authoritative for oneself is not to simply take on all of that other's commitments. The reason provided by a recognized person's commitment is a *defeasible* reason. B is not rationally bound to take on A's commitment, but he is bound, by his commitment to recognize A, to treat A's commitment as a reason to be so committed himself.

To treat another's commitments as normatively authoritative for oneself is to take a stance toward that other in light of the norms she has committed herself to and to *actually* hold her accountable for her actions in light of those commitments. To do this is to demand that that other justify her commitments, to criticize her for undertaking commitments she is not entitled to, and to praise her for undertaking commitments she *is* entitled to. In short, to recognize another, to treat her commitments as normatively authoritative for oneself, is to treat that other as an occupant of the space of reasons.

Brandom distinguishes between two *types* of recognition: simple recognition and robust recognition. To simply recognize another is to take her to be the subject of *some* normative status. To robustly recognize another is to recognize her as one who simply recognizes others. In other words, to simply recognize someone is to take her to be in the space of reasons. To robustly recognize someone is to take her to be able to give and ask for reasons for claims about which

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 141.

persons are in the space of reasons. Thus, all who are robustly recognized are simply recognized (are recognized as being in the space of reasons), but not all who are simply recognized are robustly recognized (or recognized as capable of reasoning about which persons are in the space of reasons).

To illustrate, A simply recognizes B in taking it that at least some of her deeds are to be assessed using normative terms. A takes it that B's assertion "I own a black shirt," is her committing herself to a certain claim, a claim that she can either be (or not be) entitled to commit herself to. A is a simple recognizer. As a simple recognizer, A herself makes claims about the normative statuses of others. That is, A is in a position to say that B is not entitled to commit herself to the claim that she (B) owns black shirt because she does not, in fact, own a black shirt.

One can also assess the claims A makes as a simple recognizer in normative terms. One can take it that A was wrong to claim that B is not entitled to her claim. One who makes this judgment recognizes A as a simple recognizer, and, as such, robustly recognizes A.

Utilizing the concept of robust recognition, Brandom explains why one must be robustly recognized by one who one robustly recognizes in order to have a coherent conception of oneself, in order to be self-conscious. As Brandom explains:

It is a formal fact that *if* a relation is both symmetric and transitive, then it is also reflexive, and hence is an equivalence relation. That is, if $\forall x \forall y [xRy \rightarrow yRx]$ and $\forall x \forall y \forall z [xRy \& yRz \rightarrow xRz]$, then $\forall x [xRx]$. For we can just apply the transitivity condition to the symmetry pairs xRy and yRx to yield xRx . So *if* recognition were (for some reason) *de jure* transitive – if it were part of the nature of recognition that one is committed to recognizing anyone recognized by someone one recognizes – *then* achieving *de facto* symmetry of recognition would suffice for achieving *de facto* reflexivity of recognition.⁷

For Brandom, robust recognition is a *de jure* transitive relation. He claims that "[r]ecognizing someone as a recognizer is acknowledging the authority of his or her recognitions for one's own:

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 137-138.

recognizing whomever he or she recognizes." This seems wrong, however, in light of my rendering of Brandom's conception of recognition.

As stated above, to recognize another is to take that other to be the subject of one or several normative statuses. In recognizing another, one takes it that that other has the authority to commit herself to claims. This general authority, however, does not entail entitlement to any *specific* claim. Given this fact, it appears that robust recognition cannot be *de jure* transitive.

For robust recognition to be *de jure* transitive, it must be the case that *all* of the judgments regarding who counts as a robust recognizer made by one who is robustly recognized must be taken to be true. If A robustly recognizes B and must take it that *all* of B's judgments regarding who counts as a robust recognizer are true and B recognizes C as a robust recognizer, then A robustly recognizes C. But, in robustly recognizing another one is not required (conceptually) to regard as true all of that other's judgments on matters of recognition.

One who is robustly recognized could be wrong in taking it that some particular person is a robust recognizer. One who is robustly recognized is taken to have the *authority* to commit herself to claims about who is a robust recognizer, but this authority is not equivalent to her entitlement to any specific claim about who is a robust recognizer. Robust recognition is not *de jure* transitive.

The judgments of one who is robustly recognized must, however, be treated as *potentially* correct. One who is robustly recognized is the subject of normative statuses and, as such, her judgments can be assessed as either correct or incorrect. Her judgments are such that they *could be* correct.

Given the understanding of recognition under consideration, robust recognition cannot be *de jure* transitive, but robust recognition can be *de facto* transitive. One can decide to robustly

recognize all those who are robustly recognized by persons one robustly recognizes, thereby establishing *de facto* transitivity of recognition.

To illustrate, A robustly recognizes B, she takes it that B is in a position to commit herself to claims about which persons are robust recognizers. In addition, A decides to also robustly recognize all those who are robustly recognized by B. Assume B robustly recognizes C. In practical terms, A's robustly recognizing C because C is robustly recognized by B, is A's being willing to take C to be committed to true claims about which persons are robust recognizers based solely on B's word. That A has decided to robustly recognize those robustly recognized by B means that she need not confirm for herself that those robustly recognized by B should be so recognized. In this instance, A *trusts* B's judgment.⁸ That any robust cognitive relation is *de facto* transitive is a matter of the robust recognizer trusting the persons(s) she robustly recognizes with respect to certain judgments.

If we take it that any robust cognitive relation is at most *de facto* transitive, we can still reach the conclusion that Brandom wishes to draw—that is, that self-consciousness is only possible if one is recognized by those one recognizes. To start, we must observe that if it is the case that a robust cognitive relation between two individuals is *de facto* symmetric and *de facto* transitive, it is also *de facto* reflexive. If A robustly recognizes B, and B robustly recognizes A, and A robustly recognizes anyone who B robustly recognizes, A robustly recognizes herself. To be sure, in robustly recognizing herself, A also simply recognizes herself. She recognizes herself as being in the space of reasons and as able to reason about who else is in the space of reasons.

⁸ Note that my use of "trust" here is distinct from Hegel's use of the term discussed below. Hegel distinguishes between trusting a set of norms and identifying with those norms. Here I use trust to demarcate an attitude one can take with respect to the judgments of others, whereby one takes on those judgments without dispute.

I said above that Brandom's concept of recognition allows us to understand why self-consciousness is only possible if one is recognized by those whom one recognizes. However, I did not fully explicate the concept of self-consciousness. I now turn to that task.

For Hegel, to be self-conscious is to be *for* oneself what one is *in* oneself. This simply means that the person who is self-conscious is what she takes herself to be, that she *treats herself as* what she in fact is. As Brandom explains, "...to be a self, a subject, a consciousness – for Hegel as for Kant – is to be the subject of *normative* statuses: not just of desires, but of *commitments*."⁹ At the most basic level, then, self-consciousness is a matter of being a self and treating oneself as a self. It is a matter of simply recognizing oneself, as treating oneself as the subject of a normative status. Brandom labels this type of self-consciousness "simple self-consciousness." Additionally, for Brandom, in robustly recognizing oneself, one achieves "robust self-consciousness."¹⁰

We see, then, that in being recognized by those whom one recognizes, and whose *recognizings* one takes to be transitive, one is able to recognize oneself and, thus, achieve both simple and robust self-consciousness. Additionally, as Brandom and Hegel argue, *de facto* recognitive relations are *necessary* for self-consciousness. I now explain why one cannot achieve self-consciousness absent the recognition of others.

Self-consciousness is a matter of *being* the subject of a normative status and *treating oneself as* the subject of a normative status. To achieve self-consciousness absent the recognition of others, then, would be to determine for oneself that one is the subject of a normative status and to determine for oneself what counts as treating oneself as the subject of that status. One would

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 148.

necessarily fail in one's attempt to achieve self-consciousness in this way because one's conception of oneself, thus formed, would be incoherent.

To sign a contract for the sale of goods is to undertake a *commitment* to perform a certain action: to pay for or deliver the goods specified in the contract. In signing the contract, one becomes the subject of a normative status. Likewise, in purchasing a ticket to a concert one becomes *entitled* to attend the concert. In purchasing the ticket, one also becomes the subject of a normative status. As Brandom explains in *Making it Explicit*, "[t]here were no commitments before people started treating each other as committed; they are not part of the natural furniture of the world. Rather they are social statuses, instituted by individuals attributing such statuses to each other, recognizing and acknowledging those statuses."¹¹

However, if one were the sole determiner of whether one was the subject of a particular normative status, or normative statuses in general, there would be no distinction between *actually being* the subject of a normative status and *thinking that* one was the subject of a normative status. In this case, any performance that one *thought* was the signing of a binding contract would *be* the signing of a binding contract. And, likewise, any piece of paper one *thought* was a valid ticket would *be* a valid ticket. But if this were the case, as Wittgenstein famously observed, talk of right and wrong would become unintelligible.¹² In the same way, one cannot be the sole determiner of whether one is *treating oneself as* one who is the subject of a normative status. It must be possible that one could be mistaken in this regard.

We can also understand the incoherence of one's attempt to achieve self-consciousness absent the recognition of others in terms of force and content. The normative *force* of any commitment—the fact that one is bound by that commitment—is dependent on the stance one

¹¹ Brandom (1998), p. 161.

¹² See Wittgenstein (2001), §258.

takes toward that commitment. One is only bound by the commitments one has undertaken. It is up to A whether she will commit herself to be bound by the norms specified in a particular contract. However, if one is to genuinely *bind* oneself by undertaking a commitment, the *content* of that commitment must not be solely dependent on the attitudes of the individual who undertakes the commitment. If A is to truly bind herself by signing a contract, it must not be solely up to A what counts as fulfilling the terms of that contract. As Brandom puts it,

If not only *that* one is bound by a certain norm, but also *what* that norm involves—what is correct or incorrect according to it—is up to the one endorsing it, the notion that one is *bound*, that a distinction has been put in place between what is correct and incorrect according to that norm goes missing.¹³

If one is to achieve self-consciousness, it cannot be the case that both the force and content of one's commitments are dependent on one's attitudes.

For Hegel, while the force of one's commitments is dependent on one's attitudes, the content of those commitments is dependent on the attitudes of others—particularly, those others whom one recognizes. What one is committed to is determined by what those one recognizes take one to be committed to. That A is obligated to perform some particular action given that she has signed a particular contract is matter of others taking it to be the case that she is so obligated. In this way, Hegel is able to account for the difference between the source of a norm's force and the source of its content that must obtain if one is to have a coherent conception of oneself as being bound by norms.

And, for Hegel, that one is bound by a certain norm is not only a matter of the content of that norm being dependent on the attitudes of others. To be bound by a norm, for Hegel, is also for others to treat one as being bound by *actually* holding one responsible for acting in accord

¹³ Brandom (2007a), p.15.

with the norm. For Hegel, to be bound by a norm is to be bound in a very concrete sense in that persons reference the norm in approving and disapproving of one's actions.

In recognizing others as authorized to determine the content of one's commitments, and as entitled to normatively assess one's actions in light of those commitments, one is able to guide one's own behavior in light of those commitments. In recognizing the authority of others, one is able to be and treat oneself as the subject of a normative status. Any conception of oneself formed absent the recognition of others is incoherent.

From Brandom, then, we get an understanding of self-consciousness as necessarily involving cognitive relations which are *de facto* symmetric, transitive, and, thus, reflexive. We get a better understanding, that is, of what Hegel means when he writes that "[s]elf-consciousness exists in and for itself when, and by the fact that, it so exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged..."¹⁴

III. Recognition and Bodily Autonomy

Hegel takes it that at a minimum one must recognize others as owning their bodies, as having a certain degree of bodily autonomy, if one is to recognize oneself as the subject of any normative status. It is fairly easy to see why Hegel holds this position. Recognizing is something that one does with one's body. And, only persons who are afforded a certain degree of bodily autonomy are able to perform actions that count as genuine acts of recognition.

To illustrate, assume that B wishes to recognize himself as a property owner, as the owner of some particular car, for example. A's not interfering with B's use of B's car will not count as A *recognizing* B as authorized to use the car if A is B's slave. We can assume that the slave controls her body, but she is not *entitled* to move her body as she pleases. Practically, this means that the slave will suffer some type of punishment if she deviates from the commands of

¹⁴ Hegel (1977), p. 111.

her master. Most of the slave's bodily movements are performed under coercive threat. The slave, then, does not own her body. The bodily movements of the slave do not reflect her commitments, but those of her master. The slave is neither entitled to act, nor is she responsible for her actions. She is commanded.

The actions of the slave cannot count as acts of recognition, in part, because to recognize another is to treat that other's commitments as normatively authoritative for oneself, but the slave is unable to take on commitments—her actions simply reflect the commitments of her master.¹⁵

In this situation, B is like the singer who thinks of herself as talented because she is surrounded by people whom she has paid to applaud her singing. Just as the applause in this situation cannot have the significance that the singer wishes it to have, that A does not interfere with B's property cannot have the significance that B wishes it to have. Only persons who are not paid to applaud can give meaningful praise, and only those who are entitled to undertake commitments that are distinct from one's own can recognize one as a property owner.

Recognize too that the conclusion that one must recognize others as owning their bodies if one is to recognize oneself as the owner of anything, is just a specific application of the conclusion of Hegel's famous discussion of "Lordship and Bondage" in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (hereafter, "PS").¹⁶ Explicating the sections in which Hegel discusses the defective lord-bondsman (master-slave) relationship is beyond the scope of this paper. Briefly, Hegel's aim in this discussion is to demonstrate that no genuine norms can exist in a situation in which recognitive relations are not reciprocal. As Hegel argues in the PS, the master cannot be what he takes himself to be, that is, authoritative, if he does not recognize the slave as authoritative as

¹⁵ In §21 of the PR, Hegel writes: "The slave does not know his essence, his infinity, his freedom; he does not know himself to be an essence; and he lacks this knowledge of himself because he does not *think* himself." For Hegel, the slave is simply a tool of her master. Hegel (2008), p. 42.

¹⁶ See Hegel (1977), pp. 111-119.

well. Through a protracted struggle for recognition, both master and slave come to recognize that genuine norms are only possible within a recognitive community.

If Hegel is right, to recognize oneself as an agent—or a schmagent—one must also recognize others as the owners of their bodies, as having a certain degree of bodily autonomy. For Hegel any conception of agency, of selfhood, requires reciprocal recognition. Thus, one cannot escape the minimal demands of morality by opting out of some particular conception of agency. Hegelian constitutivism is not undermined to the schmagency objection.

Note that Hegel has very little to tell us about which particular actions count as failures of recognition. Clearly, Hegel takes it that treating another as one's slave is to fail to recognize that other as the owner of her body, but recognition comes in degrees and one can fail to recognize another by performing actions that fall short of treating that other as a slave. Just as Kant does not fully specify what it means to treat another as a means to an end, Hegel does not fully specify what it is to fail to recognize another.

Interestingly, in "Deriving Morality from Politics: Rethinking the Formula of Humanity," Japa Pallikkathayil argues that Kant is best interpreted as holding the view that indeterminacy problems that arise in his moral philosophy are to be solved politically. Pallikkathayil focuses her discussion on Kant's formula of humanity, the formulation of the Categorical Imperative (hereafter, "CI") that demands that one not treat another as a mere means to an end.

Pallikkathayil notes that Kant distinguishes between internal freedom and external freedom. For Kant, persons achieve internal freedom by acting in accord with the CI. Persons achieve external freedom, however, by physically directing their own actions, and not simply having their bodies moved by other persons. For Kant, as Pallikkathayil argues, the state is needed to establish external freedom, because the state both determines the scope of one's rights

and enforces those determinations.¹⁷ Pallikkathayil claims that Kant believes that in so determining the scope of our rights, the state gives content to the CI. She concludes that for Kant, "the content of many of our moral duties depends on the results of political philosophy and, indeed, on the results of actual political decision making."¹⁸

If Pallikkathayil is correct, Kant and Hegel offer identical solutions to the problem of indeterminacy. For Kant, the content of the formula of humanity is to be determined politically, and too, for Hegel, the content of the concept of recognition is to be determined by a legislative body. Both philosophers, it seems, understand our moral obligations as partially determined through a political process.

For Hegel, then, to be a self and to recognize oneself as a self, one must recognize others as having normative authority over their bodies. What *counts* as recognition in this sense is to be determined within a recognitive community. Being a self, on this picture, requires that one have some knowledge of the evolving norms that govern persons in one's community. For Hegel, one cannot avoid these demands simply by conceiving of oneself as a schmagent. Being a schmagent is a normative status just as being an agent is a normative status.

IV. Ethical life

For Hegel, ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*) is self-consciousness actualized in the world. It is a situation in which persons *actually* recognize one another as the subjects of normative statuses. And, this recognition is not merely cognitive, as we have seen, but is manifested in the way persons treat one another. Participation in ethical life—being a member of some recognitive community, that is— is constitutive of agency for Hegel.

¹⁷ Pallikkathayil (2010), p. 23.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

Hegel also has much to tell us about the attitudes of persons who participate in ethical life and their relation to the norms by which they are bound. Of the norms that govern ethical life,

Hegel writes:

...they are not something alien to the subject. On the contrary, his spirit bears witness to them as to *its own essence*, the essence in which he has a *feeling of his selfhood*, and in which he lives as in his own element which is not distinguished from himself. The subject is thus directly linked to the ethical order by a relation which is closer to identity than even the relation of faith or trust.¹⁹

In other words, for Hegel, persons who participate in ethical life are not alienated from, but identify with, the norms by which they are bound. Hegel later writes:

Faith and trust emerge along with reflection; they presuppose the power of forming ideas and making distinctions. For example, it is one thing to be a pagan, a different thing to believe in a pagan religion.²⁰

It is important that we be clear about what Hegel means when he says that participants in ethical life do not trust or have faith in the norms that govern ethical life, but *identify* with those norms.

To clarify the notion of identification with norms, I will first explain what it is for a person to be alienated from a set of norms, and then explain what it is to have faith in or trust those norms.

The nature of the identity relation will emerge in contrast to these other relations that a person can have to a set of norms.

To be alienated from a set of norms is simply to not view those norms as binding.²¹ Put differently, to be alienated from a set of norms is to be alienated from a community, the community on which those norms are binding because they *take* them to be binding. To be alienated from the norms of external property ownership, then, is to take it that one is entitled to take control over any and every item in the world, regardless of another's claim that that item is

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Recognize too that alienation, like recognition, is not an all or nothing affair. One can be more or less alienated from a norm or set of norms.

her property. The person alienated from the norms of external property takes her desire to control a particular item as authoritative, she does not acknowledge the authority of the norm that items that are recognized as the property of others should be respected as such. As Brandom puts it "[a]lienation is not identifying with...normative statuses, not acknowledging the authority of norms over one's attitudes [desires] by being willing to sacrifice attitudes for norms." I must still explain, of course, what it is to sacrifice one's attitudes for norms.

Hegel claims that participants in ethical life have a relationship to the norms that constitute ethical life that is distinct from that of faith or trust. I take it that faith and trust are *cognitive* states. To have faith in, or trust a set of norms is to *believe* that adherence to that set of norms is highly likely to bring about some result. In most cases, this result will be the satisfaction of some or all of the faithful person's desires. In other words, the person who has faith in a set of norms, in most cases, believes that adherence to that set of norms is likely to make her life better by facilitating the satisfaction of many of her desires.

For example, A's faith in the norms of external property ownership consists in her belief that adhering to those norms will allow her to, say, pursue her desire to paint portraits unencumbered by the worry that her easel and brushes could be taken away from her at any time.

A, in this case, perceives a difference between the norms of external property ownership and herself. That is, she believes that she could give up those norms and still continue to be the person she currently takes herself to be. A recognizes herself as a person who wishes to paint portraits and sees the norms of external property as allowing her to maintain this identity. If A ceases to believe that adherence to the norms of external property ownership will facilitate the satisfaction of her desires, she will likely give them up, thus becoming alienated from this set of norms.

Things are different with the person who *identifies* with a set of norms. First, identity is not a cognitive state, but a *recognitive* state. To identify with a set of norms is to be self-conscious as the subject of the normative status that is constituted by those norms. And, to be self-conscious as the subject of a normative status, recall, is to treat oneself a certain way. Specifically, to be self-conscious as the subject of a normative status is to take it that one is obligated to *sacrifice* one's attitudes (or desires) in order to adhere to the dictates of a particular set of norms. To identify with a set of norms, then, is to be willing to sacrifice one's attitudes for those norms.

Persons who identify with a set of norms do so in a very literal sense. The person who identifies with the norms of bodily ownership takes it that she simply *is* the subject of a certain normative status—the status of being the owner of her body. For her, there is no distinction between who she is and the norms she identifies with. As such, the person who identifies with a set of norms takes it that she will cease to exist if it becomes the case that she is no longer the subject of the normative status that is constituted by those norms. Because of this, she is willing to risk her biological life in order to maintain her normative status. She reasons that either she maintains her normative status or she ceases to exist, regardless of the status of her biological life.

To illustrate, if A identifies with the norms of bodily ownership, if she takes herself to be entitled to own her body, she will recognize others as so entitled because she understands her own entitlement as turning on her treatment of others. She cannot both recognize herself as entitled to own her body and treat all others as slaves. A, then, will refrain from committing acts which constitute her failure to recognize others as owning their bodies. In committing such acts, she would undermine her own status as the owner of her body.

If A identifies with the norms of bodily ownership, she will refrain from physically harming others even in situations in which she has a strong desire to do so. She is willing to sacrifice her desires for the norms of bodily ownership. In fact, A would rather risk her biological life than lose her normative status. She would rather risk death than relinquish her status as the owner of her body, and this means that she would rather die than commit acts that would seriously undermine this status. Put another way, she would rather die than murder another. In murdering, A not only fails to recognize her victim but also threatens to undermine the recognitive relations that constitute her community and thus her status as the owner of *her* body. In undermining the status of her victim, A risks completely undermining her own status, and thus risks the death of the person she takes herself to be.

Participants in ethical life, then, gain a sense of self, which is also a loss of self. As Hegel writes:

When I will what is rational, then I am acting not as a particular individual but in accordance with the concepts of ethical life in general. In an ethical action, what I vindicate is not myself but the thing. But in doing a perverse action, it is my particularity that I bring on to the centre of the stage.... When great artists complete a work, we can say: *that* is how it must be; that is, the artist's particularity has completely disappeared and no mannerism is detectable in it.... But the worse the artist is, the more we see in his work the artist, his particularity, his arbitrariness.²²

In ethical life, persons become selves by being the subjects of normative statuses, statuses that require that they sacrifice some of their particular desires in order to comply with the norms that govern their community. Their subjectivity becomes conceptually tied to the norms of the community, as the norms of the community exist because individuals identify with them. Ethical

²² Hegel (1998), p. 37.

life is, as Hegel puts it, the "'I' that is 'We' and the 'We' that is 'I'."²³ For Hegel, both agents and schmagents can only achieve self-consciousness within ethical life.

V. Evolutionary Debunking Arguments

While there are many types of moral realism, we can understand traditional moral realism as the view that moral facts are mind-independent. For the traditional moral realist, moral facts obtain regardless of the judgment(s) of any individual mind. Recently, there has been much discussion around arguments that seek to undermine moral realism by appeal to the fact that our current moral beliefs were likely shaped by evolutionary pressures. The general shape of these arguments is as follows: Given that our current moral beliefs were likely shaped by evolutionary pressures, it is highly unlikely that those beliefs are correct, in the realist sense. Those who seek to undermine our moral beliefs by appeal to evolution claim that it would be a huge coincidence if evolution somehow worked to put us in a position to possess the correct beliefs about morality. The claim, then, is not that moral realism is false, but that if moral realism is true, we have reason to doubt the truth of our current moral beliefs.²⁴

I think that we can better understand Hegelian constitutivism by understanding how it fares against these skeptical arguments. First, notice that the evolutionary debunking arguments are a species of the genus of genealogical arguments that seek to undermine morality. Nietzsche attempts to undermine our contemporary moral norms by telling a genealogical story, one in which those norms are simply a product of a power struggle between masters and slaves.²⁵ Foucault tells a similar story about our norms regarding sexuality, punishment, and mental health.²⁶ If our current norms were shaped by contentious power struggles, these philosophers

²³ Hegel (1977), p. 110.

²⁴ See Street (2006) for a powerful version of this critique of moral realism.

²⁵ See Nietzsche (1989).

²⁶ See Foucault (1990), (1995), and (1988).

argue, we have reason to believe that they do not reflect mind-independent moral truths. The evolutionary debunkers and the genealogists argue that it is highly unlikely that either evolution or historically contingent power struggles brought it about that we now have the correct moral beliefs. If these arguments are sound, the traditional moral realist has reason to be skeptical about the truth of our current moral beliefs.

Hegel, of course, is not a moral realist in the traditional sense. Traditional moral realists take it that moral facts are mind-independent. For Hegel, as we have seen, moral facts are very much dependent on the minds that constitute a particular recognitive community.²⁷ The fact that one is bound by a norm, and the content of the norms by which one is bound, are conceptually tied to the judgments of those one recognizes. Morality, for Hegel, is independent of any *individual* mind, but not wholly mind-independent. While Hegel is not a moral realist in the traditional sense, he is a moral realist in the sense that he believes that moral norms are independent of any individual mind and are genuinely binding on persons given that they occupy some normative status.

Hegel is able to provide a naturalistic story about morality that is not subject to the objections of the evolutionary debunkers or the genealogists. Hegel posits a natural desire—the desire for recognition—from which all of morality follows as a consequence. For Hegel, it is just the case that we, as socially situated human beings, desire recognition. Hegel believes that we want to be seen as we see ourselves, that we want to be recognized as the subject of some particular normative status. Hegel contends that this desire is expressed in our seeking the approval of others, in our desire to conform to the norms of particular social institutions, and, at

²⁷ Of course, Hegel takes it that facts about the relationship between self-consciousness and recognition are mind-independent. Hegel, unlike the traditional moral realist, takes it that the *particular content* of morality must be established within a recognitive community.

the most basic level, in our giving and asking for reasons for belief and action. For Hegel, we are by nature social.

I must explain, of course, how the desire for recognition gives rise to morality. The desire for recognition, like the desires for food, clothing, and shelter, is a natural desire. With any natural desire there comes a set of instrumental norms. These norms are simply statements of the means by which the desire may be satisfied. If one desires food, one *should* eat. If one desires clothing, one should craft or purchase clothing. And, if one desires recognition, one should recognize another. Only the actions of those whom one recognizes can count as genuine acts of recognition. Satisfying the desire for recognition requires that one interact with and grant authority to another self. In this way, the presence of the natural desire for recognition gives rise to genuine moral norms, norms of behavior that exist independent of any individual mind.

Note that cognitive acts *not* motivated by the desire for recognition do not give rise to genuine moral norms and will not allow one to coherently recognize oneself. This is so because the judgments of those who are recognized by acts not motivated by the desire for recognition will not be normatively authoritative for the recognizer. To see why the cognitive acts in consideration here must be motivated by a desire for recognition, consider the following case.

Assume that A wishes to be recognized as a good singer. She already thinks herself a good singer, but as we saw above, in order for her self-conception to be coherent it must be the case that what constitutes quality singing is not completely up to her. Assume that A, motivated by the desire to be recognized as a good singer, recognizes B as authorized to determine what constitutes good singing.

In this circumstance, B's judging that A's singing is not up to par constitutes a reason for A to alter her singing in order to meet B's standard. Her failure to live up to B's standard will

result in B not recognizing her. By failing to live up to B's standards, A undermines her own desire for recognition. Motivated by a desire for recognition, A's cognitive acts bind her to certain norms—the norms constituted by B's judgments with respect to her singing. Once these norms are in place, A can coherently recognize herself as a good singer.

Now, assume that A's recognition of B is *not* motivated by a desire to be recognized as a good singer. Here, A sings, but does not care to have her singing recognized as good. Though A recognizes B as competent to determine what constitutes good singing, she does not concern herself with B's judgments with respect to *her* singing. In this circumstance, B's judgments with respect to her singing do not constitute reasons for her to alter her singing. That A is not bound by any norms with respect to her singing entails that she will be unable to coherently recognize herself as a good singer. Thus, in order for A's cognitive acts to serve as a basis for her self-recognition, these acts must be motivated by a desire for recognition. And, generally, if one's cognitive acts are not motivated by a desire for recognition, one will not be able to coherently recognize oneself.

We see, then, that the cognitive acts in question, those that will serve as a basis for coherent self-recognition, and the institution of genuine moral norms, must be motivated by a desire for recognition.

That the desire for recognition is a product of evolutionary pressures does not undermine the authority of the norms instituted by efforts to satisfy the desire. The norms instituted by the desire for recognition are authoritative simply because they are instituted in this way. Hegel takes it that any alternative story about the authority of moral norms is incoherent. For Hegel, we need not worry that evolutionary pressures may have led us to form false moral beliefs. Without

the desire for recognition—which is presumably a result of evolutionary pressures—we could have no genuinely binding moral norms.

Additionally, for Hegel, the fact that the moral norms of a particular cognitive community are shaped even in part by power relations does not undermine their authority. A community's norms are binding on its members because those members recognize as authoritative the persons and institutions that posit the norms. Of course, it is up to the individual to decide whom she wishes to recognize. Persons are free to reject one cognitive community in favor of another. And, indeed, many norms are the result of struggles for recognition—struggles that is, over the content of the norms by which members of a particular community are to be bound. Hegel can agree with Nietzsche and Foucault on the point that many of our norms resulted from power struggles, but he need not agree that this fact undermines their authority. In fact, Hegel fully embraces the idea that genuine normativity can arise from a struggle for power and recognition. This is evidenced in his discussion of lordship and bondage in the PS, referred to above.

As we have seen, Hegelian constitutivism provides us with a decisive reply to the schmagency objection and is not undermined by genealogical debunking arguments. In order to be an agent—or a schmagent—one must recognize others. Genuine moral relations are instituted by person's efforts to satisfy the desire for recognition. In many cases, however, persons must struggle for recognition, for their status as agents.

VI. Another Challenge

I suppose at this point the advocate of the schmagency objection will claim that I, and Hegel, are making too much of the concept of schmagency. The schmagent, it can be argued, does not seek to achieve self-consciousness as a schmagent, nor does she take schmagency to be normative

status such that she is bound by certain norms simply in virtue of being schmagent. At core, the schmagency advocate will argue, the schmagent simply wants to achieve certain self-centered end, and she is only bound to take those actions that will bring about the results she cares about.

This schmagent does, however, conceive of herself as an instrumental reasoner. She takes it that she should be committed to undertaking the means necessary to achieve her ends. When she determines that she should have a car, say, she takes it that she should acquire the car by theft. When she determines that her annoying neighbor should feel pain, she takes it that she should inflict this pain. She takes it that her reasons for action do not stem from a normative status, but from what Kant calls the "hypothetical imperative," the principle that one ought to will the necessary means to the ends that one has set for oneself.

What this schmagent does not realize, however, is that the status of instrumental reasoner *is* a normative status. If this schmagent wishes to coherently recognize herself as an instrumental reasoner, she must recognize (and be recognized *by*) others. If what counts as acting as an instrumental reasoner is determined solely by the schmagent, then there can be no distinction between the schmagent's *thinking* that she is an instrumental reasoner and her *actually being* an instrumental reasoner. In other words, for this schmagent's conception of herself as an instrumental reasoner to be coherent, there must be a distinction between her merely *believing* that she is adhering to the norms of instrumental reason and her actually adhering to those norms.

In "The Normativity of Instrumental Reason," Christine Korsgaard contends that "willing an end just is *committing* yourself to realizing the end."²⁸ For Korsgaard, the normativity of the norms of instrumental reason can only be explained if we understand willing a particular end as a normative act—that of undertaking a commitment. I think that this is exactly right.

²⁸ Korsgaard (2008), p. 57.

The instrumentally rational person at least commits herself to undertaking the means that are necessary to the realization her desired end. And, as I argue above, one only counts as *binding* oneself in making a commitment if the source of the *force* of that commitment is distinct from the source of the commitment's *content*. For Hegel, the content of our commitments—what counts as adhering to the commitment, and what counts as deviating from the commitment—is determined by the judgments of those we recognize. For Hegel, other people bind us by *actually* praising or critiquing our actions in light of our prior commitments.

Note too that failure to adhere to the norms of instrumental reason is an all-too-common phenomenon. Given that A has determined that she should save money for her upcoming vacation, she fails as an instrumental reasoner in spending all of her money on clothing. Here A sets the end of saving money, yet fails to adhere to her commitment to save. This failure is something for which A can be blamed. And, if A has achieved full self-consciousness, the failure is something for which she will likely blame herself. Blame from members of A's recognitive community is, in part, what constitutes the fact that she is bound by a norm, and is what makes intelligible her self-criticism.

To coherently recognize oneself as an instrumental reasoner, then, one must be a member of a recognitive community; one must be recognized as such by those one recognizes. The schmagent who has no desire to be the subject of a normative status cannot escape the demand that she act in accord with the norms that constitute *some* normative status by conceiving of herself only as an instrumental reasoner. To be an instrumental reasoner is to be the subject of a normative status.

Recall that one cannot be recognized by one's slave because the slave does not own his body. While the slave can physically do many things, he cannot do so with impunity. He is

bound to act out the wishes of his master on pain of harsh treatment. The slave's bodily movements, then, do not reflect his own commitments, but those of his master. The actions of one's slave have the same normative significance as one's own actions and, as such, cannot count as acts of recognition. The slave must be recognized as capable of undertaking commitments of his own if his bodily movements (his sayings and doings) are to count as acts of recognition.

Coerced recognition is no recognition at all. Not only must one recognize others as owning their bodies if one is to so recognize oneself, one must recognize others as owning their bodies if one is to recognize oneself as the subject of *any* normative status. And, as a consequence, one must recognize others as owning their bodies if one is to recognize oneself as an instrumental reasoner. One cannot intelligibly recognize oneself as bound by one's commitments as an instrumental reasoner if one is not actually bound by others (others who afforded some degree of bodily autonomy, that is). Consequently, and perhaps surprisingly, one threatens to undermine one's own identity as an instrumental reasoner in undertaking the means to restrict the bodily autonomy of another.²⁹

The schmagent, then, cannot escape the constitutive norms of agency by conceiving of herself only as an instrumental reasoner. To be any type of self is to be bound by moral norms.

VII. Extreme Schmagency

Suppose now that the advocate of the schmagency objection accepts these Hegelian points, but still claims that Hegelian constitutivism is incorrect. The schmagency advocate will admit that even to conceive of the schmagent as an instrumental reasoner is to conceive of her as bound by certain norms. What the schmagency advocate wants, it seems, is a reason to enter or to remain

²⁹ Luca Ferrero is correct in claiming that agency is inescapable because there is no stance one could take outside of agency from which one could deliberate about agency. To deliberate, Ferrero claims, is to act as an agent. Ferrero simply fails to draw out the specific normative consequences that follow from one's existence in the space of reasons. Being an agent requires that one recognize others as agents. See generally, Ferrero (2009).

in the normative realm at all. The schmagency advocate, understood in this way, is simply asking the core metaethical question: why be moral?

If Hegel is correct, we must understand this core question as a very deep and radical question. The schmagency advocate is not just asking why she should conform to the standards of some particular normative status verses another, but she is asking why she should remain in the space of reasons at all. In essence, the schmagency advocate is asking why she should not take some action that would render her a non-self. For the Hegelian, the person who asks the core metaethical question—perhaps unknowingly— is seeking reasons to not commit suicide,³⁰ thereby escaping the normative realm. Hegel takes it that remaining alive and having a coherent self-conception requires that one recognize others.

Recognize that the question of whether to commit suicide is just the question posed by existentialist Albert Camus. Camus writes:

There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest— whether or not the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.³¹

There is a sense in which Camus is right. The norms of agency are only binding on those who are agents and who are committed to continue on as agents. If the question “Why be moral?” is interpreted as “Why not commit suicide?,” the Hegelian has no decisive answer. The Hegelian constitutivist cannot determine whether life—or one’s individual life—is worth living. In fact, Hegel condones risking and perhaps sacrificing one’s life in situations in which one’s normative

³⁰ Note that committing suicide is not the only means by which a sapient creature could escape the normative realm. Any act that would eliminate one’s ability to respond to reasons would suffice. Thus, slipping into a permanent coma, or suffering from severe mental degeneration would allow one to escape the normative realm.

³¹ Camus (1991), p. 3.

status is at stake. For the person who identifies with a certain set of norms, the loss of a normative status is tantamount to a loss of self, a constructive suicide.

For Hegel, there can be reasons to refrain from committing suicide, and reasons to commit suicide. Persons who are members of a recognitive community do have many other-regarding reasons to not commit suicide. Not only would the suicidal person's death likely cause sadness among her friends and family, but also her death could potentially undermine the self-conceptions of those she recognizes. This possibility is most likely within a small recognitive community. If A and B alone constitute a particular community, A's suicide will completely undermine B's self-conception. B is only what she takes himself to be because she is so recognized by A. Thus, there are reasons for persons who are members of recognitive communities to not commit suicide, even in the face of a strong desire to do so.

These other-regarding reasons, however, are not always overriding. Severe pain resulting from a terminal illness, or an extreme loss of bodily control can give one reasons to commit suicide that override the reasons provided by persons in one's recognitive community. Particularly, the loss of bodily control—which is a necessary condition for bodily ownership—can so undermine one's status as the owner of one's body that one can no longer reasonably consider oneself a member of one's community, as one who is *able* to recognize others. There are situations, then, in which self-conscious persons have reason to commit suicide.

I think that Bernard Williams is right in that we are propelled into the future by our “ground projects,” those projects and goals that give our lives meaning.³² The Hegelian constitutivist cannot tell any individual which ground project(s) she should embrace. At most,

³² See Williams (1982), pp. 20-39.

the Hegelian position entails that certain projects—those that require one to systematically fail to recognize others—are incoherent and thereby morally prohibited.

Hegelian constitutivism cannot answer the core metaethical question if this question is understood as the question of whether suicide is preferable to life as an agent. At most, Hegelian constitutivism tells us that if one is to be an agent, a self, an actor, one must recognize others as such. This result, however, should not be seen as surprising. A metaethical theory should provide reasons for persons to adhere to the dictates of morality. A metaethical theory need not answer Camus' core question. In a sense, one must answer that question for oneself.

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