
THE SPIRIT AND THE BONE

FINITUDE AS CONSTITUTIVE MOMENT OF MORALITY IN THE LIGHT OF A DYNAMIC MODEL OF HUMAN CONDITION

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Abstract

The paper presents a Hegelian model of human condition which interprets finitude not merely as a biological one, but as somewhat emerging in the intersubjective tension between the self and the other, and as somewhat connected with the human impossibility to create the synthesis of all possible perspectives. From this point of view, human condition reveals itself as essentially bounded to the necessity and vocation of coordinating different lives and actions, and the acceptance of this will be equally an ontological and a moral issue. The author argues in favour of the thesis that this Hegelian model of the dynamic structure of human condition helps us to handle in a more successful way contemporary issues about morality in the technical era. Our hypothesis is that: a) in the light of the dynamic structure of human condition, the respect of finitude will prove itself to be a constitutive moment of human morality; b) when this is so, then – albeit they appear under permanently changing circumstances – basic parameters of human morality are essentially *not* affected by technological enhancement.

Keywords: human condition, finitude, Hegel, infinite judgement, technological enhancement

1. Introduction

Contemporary debates about possibilities of human enhancement and the proper view of human condition in general are often concerned with the meaning of some of our basic concepts. These questions of meaning sound like ‘What does it mean to be a human being?’; ‘In what consist the boundaries between natural and artificial?’; ‘Does its finite character belong to the essence of human condition?’ or ‘Is the acceptance of our finitude a necessary component of human morality?’ These problems are intertwined in various ways, and all of them put in question somehow the ontological and ethical role of finitude in human existence. In this paper, I will try to present a Hegelian model of human

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condition and defend the thesis that this dynamic model will help us to handle in a more successful way contemporary issues about morality in the technical era. The source of this model is *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel's first major published work, the relation of which to the system is disputed in various ways among scholars [1-4]. I will not reproduce here these debates, I will confine myself to mention that *Phenomenology*, in my interpretation, is a reflexive foundation (*Begründung*) of the speculative system which contains all the main motivations and issues of Hegelian philosophy, but without the restrictive effects of their systematic discussion [5].

My hypotheses are two. First that, in the light of the Hegelian model of human condition, the respect of finitude will prove itself to be a constitutive moment of human morality, but the content of this finitude will be not a fixed, but a dynamic one. My second hypothesis is that, when we accept this interpretation of finitude, then – albeit they appear under permanently changing circumstances – basic parameters of human morality will prove themselves as essentially *not* affected by technological enhancement.

The proposed investigation will be realized in the following steps. First, I will reconstruct the Hegelian model of human condition, with special regard on the role of finitude in our understanding of morality. After that, I will examine the relation of this concept of finitude to that of the dialectic process which presupposes moving boundaries for each investigated phenomenon, including human condition and human self-understanding. In this concept of the dialectic process, it will prove as of substantial importance the progressing alternation of that what is given and that what is emerging, or progressing alternation of appropriating and alienating, exteriorisation and interiorisation. Finally, I will try to give a contemporary interpretation of the Hegelian concept of the infinite judgement to point out the way how the main misunderstandings concerning human possibilities could be avoided.

2. Dynamic finitude - a Hegelian model of human condition

Due to the specific goals of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* (namely, to show the possibility of the highest designation of human being, called absolute knowledge), the model of human condition developed in it focuses on the process of human self-understanding. As conscious and self-conscious being, man can be understood only if we accept that human condition can not be separated of the human *understanding* of human condition, briefly, from the self-understanding of man.

Perhaps the most innovative idea of the young Hegel was to conceive this self-understanding of man as something that does not emerge in the intimate interiority of the subject, but in the inter-subjective space of the mutual (ever so incomplete) recognition of the subjects. So, human self-consciousness shows itself as something essentially mediated, namely by other self-consciousnesses: self-consciousness “is only by being acknowledged or ‘recognized’” [6]. It seems that, for Hegel, is well-known the fact that he tries a way that no one have

tried before him, tracing back the self-consciousness to an action, and even an inter-subjective one. “Action from one side only would be useless, because what is to happen can only be brought about by means of both.” [6, p. 65]

So, the inter-subjective constitution of the self shows us a specific form of finitude. According to this, human being is a finite one not merely because it is ‘limited’ by other similar beings, but because that what happens with him/her, respectively what he/she acts, will be *never* exclusively his/her, but gets into an inter-subjectively shared public sphere where the meaning of things and events is formed by a public discourse. Things will never be exactly what they were meant to be, and this is not a defect of human condition (even less one that could be ‘repaired’), but a structural property of inter-subjectively shaped human phenomena, including institutions. Later, this will be more articulate in the analysis of the dialectic of intention, result and meaning. All these are not in contradiction with the Hegelian concept of the infinity of all phenomena, so far as it affirms that: a) everything what is, is both ‘identical’ and ‘different’ (affirmation and negation suppose each other); b) what can be differentiated, can be supposed as something separate; but c) the essence of the difference is the unity of the differentiated phenomena. Briefly: that what is, contains its *other* too, and they form together a unity [6, p. 57–58].

Has this all moral consequences? Definitely. Moreover, it is a very specific moral perspective in the history of modern philosophy, since, in a sense, builds itself on ontological reasons. This interlocking of the moral and the ontological can be described as follows.

As the inter-subjective constitution of the self is the effect of an action or of a set of actions – namely: recognition –, the ontological status of the inter-subjective sphere will be based on action. In public sphere, there *is* that what is emerging from the interferences of actions (“what is to happen can only be brought about by means of both” [6, p. 65]). That means that, on the one hand, that what happens depends on the all-time actors, it is their responsibility. But, with regard to the fact that the consequences of an action can be never controlled, it would seem that this character of the public sphere releases the actors from this responsibility. This misunderstanding of human condition appears in the famous chapter about “spiritual animal kingdom” [7]; or, in another translation, “self-conscious individuals associated as a community of animals” [6, p. 142] which describes a world in which people define themselves as mere individuals and do not count with the necessary interconnections of human action. The concept of the whole (‘the order of the whole’) counts for them as abstract generality, so they conceive their activity as something that does not change anything; “it is the mere form of translation from a condition of being invisible to one of being visible” [6, p. 140]. (Here comes to significance the Hegelian distinction between ‘action’ and ‘activity’.) As Ludwig Siep points out, the radicality of the naming ‘spiritual animal kingdom’ (‘*geistiger Tierreich*’) is not a coincidence at all, as human spirit conceives here as action something that is not an action at all [4, p. 161-166].

The logic due to what the consciousness of the ‘spiritual animal kingdom’ reveals his own deceive, is based on the following experience: as soon as the individual conceives action as mere ‘translation’, he/she confronts his-/herself with the complexity of sight: those to whom it lets something to be seen, do not see in the same manner as he/she does. Some kind of deceiving is therefore a constitutive part of any public action: either in the sense that the actor tries to adapt the object to the sight of others, or he will be deceived in the sense that the object will be misinterpreted by others.

A possible ‘strategy’ (albeit not a very reasoned one) to face this situation is that of the ‘honest’ consciousness [6, p. 145] who tries to master the apparent coincidence of different moments of activity by ignoring its complexity. The ‘honest’ consciousness knows that there must be something ‘essential’ in the chaos of purposes/intentions, works/results and interpretations, but conceives this ‘essential’ as something simple and immediate, so that it does not bring together the different moments of the situation. It has faith, but it believes in almost everything, so that it changes its convictions accordingly to its momentary impressions or interests [6, p. 145–146]. The problem is not that the ‘honest’ consciousness would think wrongly, but that it does not think at all.

This experience in its ‘non-spirituality’ is of prime importance for human self-understanding and morality: so far as it dissolves all determinable relations, it makes pressing the need for filling up with a content the existing notion of the ‘essence’ – the moral stake – of the action. The ‘honest’ consciousness brings so the experience that all moments of a situation are ‘essential’, and the supposed ‘fact of the matter’, ‘main concern’ or essence (*die Sache selbst*) „is only ‘fact’ in the sense of an action of each and all” [6, p. 148]. It speaks out the relation between being and action, briefly, that all action can be seen as objects in so far as it exists for others, but equally, that there is nothing that would be merely given, nothing that would be merely result, but all is a process too. In this concept of ‘action of each and all’ (*das Tun Aller und Jeder*), will be emphasized that both the moment of individuality and that of the community are equally essential. All this requires a morality that deals with the issues of the Kantian freedom of moral subject, but takes into account the need to contextualize all decisions too. This morality must also count with the structural properties of a medium – a public sphere of actions – that shows a dialectic tension between interior and exterior, intention and consequence, data and interpretation.

3. Anatomy of the public sphere - a second nature

Starting from the model of ‘spiritual animal kingdom’ which shows their interaction without a proper interpretation of them from the side of the actors themselves, the most relevant moments of all human actions and institutions are: 1. the intentions (the original goals of the action or institution); 2. the ‘work’ (the result of the action, respectively the state of affairs produced by the institution); and the 3. interpretation (the meaning of all possible moments for the plurality of actors) [6, p. 141–149]. And, as we have shown in the previous section, all these

moments are basically determined by the fact that the action or the institution comes to reality in a public sphere which has its own rules of functioning.

Which are these? First of all, the rules of the dialectic process in general. All human phenomena can be described as dialectic processes, mainly because the *par excellence* dialectic process is experience itself, seen by Hegel as not a static phenomenon, but as a dynamic one. "This dialectic process which consciousness executes on itself – on its knowledge as well as on its object – in the sense that out of it the new and true object arises, is precisely, what is termed Experience." [6, p. 32] As Andreas Luckner points out: by Hegel, there is no 'experience *per se*': there are an infinite number of possible experiences which are permanently changing, and the point for the philosophical investigation is even the comprehension of the rules according to which these changes occur [8]. These rules explain why and how exactly concrete experiences build themselves on each other and how they rotate, and the motor of these ordered changes will be that what Hegel calls 'determined negation': any result "must necessarily be taken as the negation of that of which it is a result – a result which contains what truth the preceding mode of knowledge has in it" [6, p. 33]. The mode of negation itself is not uniform at all; at the level of human self-understanding, we can distinguish at least three basic types: 1. when antithetic perspectives exclude each other mutually; 2. when antithetic perspectives emerge from the negation of each other (e. g. when an explanation of a phenomenon proves itself to be false, and an opposite perspective will be tried); 3. when a 'higher', more complex and comprehensive perspective realizes a negation of the negation of the precedent antithetic perspectives, offering a perspective in which they can be placed at a time and in their interrelation [1, p. 158-164; 5, p. 27].

But, as we have seen, in the case of social phenomena as actions and institutions, these aspects of logical or reflexive negations are completed by some more sophisticated moments, namely the objectivation of all phenomena in the public sphere. According to Hegel, paradigmatic cases of this are institutions and actions like language and labour. At a primitive level, both can be seen as merely representations (in the case of language) or realizations (as we have seen it in the case of the 'spiritual animal kingdom': 'translation from a condition of being invisible to one of being visible'). But, at a closer sight it turns out that not only the result of the action is exposed to the interpretations of others (as we have seen it by the case of the 'spiritual animal kingdom'), but also the language is just as able to mask the presupposed reality, as to reveal it. "Language and labour are outer expressions in which the individual no longer retains possession of himself *per se*, but lets the inner get right outside him, and surrenders it to something else. [...] because in speech and action the inner turns itself into something else, into an other, and thereby puts itself at the mercy of the element of change, which transforms the spoken word and the accomplished act, and makes something else out of them than they are in and for themselves as actions of a particular determinate individual." [6, p. 109] This means also that, once objectivated in a public sphere, the results of our actions and the institutions will function as a given context – a second nature, in a sense – which can be used for

different purposes, including goals that are exactly contrary to their original intentions. In the dialectic alternation of exteriorisation and interiorisation (*Veräußerung–Er-Innerung*), actors can make a convenience of the ‘given’ objectivity of the public sphere, just as they can be made used against them too. In this way, possibility to deceive and to be deceived is encoded in the structure of the public sphere [6, p. 109].

We find a lot of concrete examples by Hegel: a series of types of ‘languages’ – nowadays, we would call them ‘discourses’ – that, once established, turn to the opposite of the original intentions that made them to emerge. (The most important of them are: ‘advice’; ‘flattery’; ‘the language of the revolt’; ‘the language of disintegration’; the language ‘full of esprit’; the language of ‘conscience’.) But is there possible a conception of language that can deal with its dialectical and deceiving character? And, when we take Hegelian ‘language’ as a merely example for institutions, a similar question sounds: how can we establish institutions that can deal with this dialectical and deceiving character of themselves?

The question is the rather demanding, as all problems related to technological enhancement come up against the same institutionalization of technology: once established, a new technology, meant to solve certain problems, calls into being other problems that would not emerge without it. Furthermore, when a device created to correct a defect will be generally accessible, it will be used in arbitrary, even damaging ways too.

And so, the question raised about the Hegelian possibility of a language which could handle the alienating moment of any language guides us to the question if there is thinkable a set of institutions that could – if not eliminate, but – minimize the risk of the misuse of these technologies. The most optimistic wings of transhumanism or posthumanism affirm that even technological progress will lead us to a state of affairs that will eliminate the main motivations for the misuse of technology. But the Hegelian analysis shows that there is a major logical fault at the core of such conceptions.

4. The spirit and the bone - infinite judgement and human enhancement

As we have seen, the dialectic alternation of interiorisation and exteriorisation that makes actions and institutions able to turn even into their opposite is, according to Hegel, a structural – albeit dynamic – property of public sphere itself, and does not depend on the exact medium in which it occurs. From this point of view, it is equally absurd to suppose that technological innovations will solve the major problems of humanity, as was once the presupposition that general enlightenment or God’s millenary empire on earth does. Why? Because the most important problems of humanity – the moral ones – concern first of all the balance between intentions, instruments and consequences, briefly that what Hegel had named ‘*die Sache selbst*’. To presuppose that some technical achievements will teach humanity to manage better the needs, desires and will of its members is nothing else as assuming that

human will depends on endowments that normally would count only as instruments for the exercise of this will.

This is a similar discourse as that what Hegel identifies in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* as a shape of rationality called ‘infinite judgement’. This type of discourse occurs at the level when reason, after trying – without avail – to ‘observe’ in an objective way nature, then self-consciousness itself, tries to ‘observe’ in an also objective way the relation of the two. But, because it will describe their relation as mere ‘observer’, that is without taking into account its own nature (namely, that it is a self-consciousness too, so that it can not be an ‘objective’ observer), it turns out to conceive human being in an alienated, reification way. Physiognomy and phrenology are Hegel’s eminent examples for this attitude, the ultimate presupposition of phrenology, for example, being that spirit, *after all*, must be a *bone* – in the sense that spiritual properties as character, will or decision can be *immediately* traced back to physiological endowments as the shape of a certain bone [6, p. 108–123].

As Pierre-Jean Labarrière points out, the infinite judgement is not merely a shape in the structure of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, but it constitutes a turning point in human self-understanding, even because it shows an extremity of human mind, namely a rationality that identifies itself with a mere thing “in its immediate givenness” [9]. Its significance consists even in the fact that it is so much afar from to be able to explain properly human action, that it calls forth in human self-understanding the need for more meaningful explanations.

According to Labarrière’s analysis, there are still two main turning points in the process described by the *Phenomenology*. The shape of ‘utility’ represents the opposite extremity to the infinite judgement, appreciating all possible things and persons after their usefulness for a presupposed general subject. The third one, called ‘[moral] consciousness’, will be the reconciliation moment where human self-understanding reaches the point described above as real understanding of the concept of the ‘fact of the matter’, ‘main concern’ or moral essence [5, p. 70–74; 9, p. 192–207].

From this point of view, the discourses of ‘infinite judgement’ and ‘utility’ are morally deficient, as they fix one of the moments of a complex situation (the ‘infinite judgement’ fixes the side of the medium, the ‘utility’ that of the subject), and reproduce the moral irresponsibility of the ‘honest’ consciousness described above.

But what about ‘consciousness’, and what about the possibility of institutions that could manage their own deceitfulness? As regard to the paradigmatic example of the language, Hegel creates a communicative model described by means of the discourses named ‘confession’ and ‘forgiveness’ which show a reflexive attitude that makes possible the communication of all relevant perspectives about a given situation [6, p. 230–246]. It shows also a moral claim that could be named perhaps “the moral imperative of the communication of perspectives” [5, p. 93]. Hence, there is emphasized a structural property of the public sphere that facilitate the correction of the deceitfulness of every human institution. But there are no universal solutions, no

given formulas, no institutional guarantees. They would be the bone that kills the spirit.

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