

Moral philosophy as an object of Hegel's debate with Kant in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*

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Abstract. The history of Hegel's critical controversy with Kant's moral philosophy starts with the Frankfurt period of his work, when Hegel first opposed what he believed to be Kant's absolutisation of the concept of duty and his neglect of the social content of morality. Although Hegel more than once addressed Kant's moral philosophy, it is only in "Phenomenology of Spirit" that he formulated a more systemic and radical criticism. The basis of his critical argumentation is an attempt to reveal the main contradiction in Kant's ethics by showing that the fulfilment of unconditional moral requirements leads to the complete elimination of morality itself. By uncovering the internal contradictions in Kant's unconditional duty, Hegel demonstrates a certain kind of pragmatism in the interpretation of moral duty and offers instead a religious faith in the transcendental power of "communal" consciousness, which will become a principle that supposedly removes all contradictions of a moral worldview. These debates between the two most prominent classics of German idealism on the issue of whether moral demands are universal in nature or are always socially determined, has not lost its significance even today. This is because they present two substantially different ethical doctrines: one affirms the idea of the autonomy of moral consciousness and its formal unconditional character, while the other assumes that a certain moral duty can be legitimate only under specific socio-historical conditions.

Keywords: Hegel, Kant, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Kantian ethics, contradictions, moral duty

1 Introduction

The question of Hegel's attitude to Kant's moral philosophy or, differently expressed, the debates between the two most prominent classics of German idealism on the issue of whether moral demands are universal in nature or are always socially determined, has often been the subject of historical and philosophical studies and has not lost its significance even today (Couzens, 1989; Kain, 1998; Mills, 2018). This controversy is extremely important because Kant and Hegel present here two substantially different ethical doctrines. One affirms the idea of the autonomy of moral consciousness and its formal unconditional character, the

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intrinsic value of the moral act and its formal unconditional character. The other assumes that a certain moral duty can be legitimate only in specific socio-historical conditions; that, being a moment of a constantly changing living whole, the moral demands themselves must change with the change of society.

2 Hegelian criticism in the modern research

Many authors, who have written about the importance of this controversy in the twentieth and twenty first centuries, have found Hegel's critique of Kantian ethics to be essential, emphasising that Kant's thought was traditionally associated with the first of the above mentioned positions, and Hegel's with the second. However, these authors expressed diverse views of this controversy and especially concerning Hegel's critique of Kant's moral philosophy. Some of them found this critique rather superficial, believing that Hegel either misunderstood Kant's thought or had only a rather crude understanding of it. American Jesuit priest, philosopher and Hegel scholar Quentin Lauer, finds Hegel's treatment of Kant's ethics to be truncated and inadequate (Lauer, 1976). Philip Kain, professor of philosophy at Santa Clara University (USA), writes that Lauer's problem is typical for most other readers of *Phenomenology of Spirit* i.e. he fails to recognise that Hegel has been examining and criticising Kant's ethics throughout a much greater part of Chapter V – indeed, more than half of the text is dedicated to this issue. In his article “Hegel's Critique of Kantian Practical Reason” Kain tries to show that “once we do understand this, I think we must concede that Hegel's treatment is hardly truncated and that it cannot be described as shallow or inadequate... Hegel demonstrates a rather sophisticated understanding of, and gives a serious and thorough critique of, Kantian practical reason” (Kain, 1998, p. 376). The British philosopher Robert Stern shares his opinion, writing that there are those who believe that Hegel's arguments stem from a thorough study of the Kant's texts (Stern, 2012). There is also a tendency to combine these two points of view, believing that a rigorous analysis of the Hegelian reaction to Kant's ethical ideas allows us to find a convincing way to reconcile these two fundamental ethical doctrines (Geiger, 2007).

In order to give a brief account of the history of Hegel's critical engagement with Kant's moral philosophy, it should be noted that already in the Frankfurt period of his work Hegel first opposed what he saw as the absolutisation by the Konigsberg philosopher of the concept of duty and his decision to ignore the social content of morality. Hungarian Marxist, Georg Lukács, devoted one of the paragraphs of the fourth chapter of his work *The Young Hegel* to this issue. He showed that already in the early years, relying largely on Kant's ideas and sharing his positions in analysing the moral duties of the individual, Hegel nevertheless demonstrated a slightly different formulation of the question both in the most extensive work of this period – *The Spirit of Christianity and its Fate (Der Geist des Christentums und sein Schicksal)* and in the *System of Morality (System der Sittlichkeit)*, written already in Jena. It was then that he criticised Kant for neglecting the public content of morality and trying to derive moral requirements solely from the formal criteria of the concept of duty, with no mention of a constantly variable public whole (Lukács, 1975, p. 147). At the same time, Lukács (1975, p. 148) referred to Karl Rosenkranz, who wrote that Hegel “protested against the suppression of nature in Kant and the fragmentation of man in the casuistry springing from the absolutism of his conception of duty”. The book also provides evidence that this kind of controversy over Kant's ethics was widespread at that time, and that Goethe and Schiller were also involved, criticising Kant's ethics and trying to overcome it by applying aesthetic principles to life (*ibid.*, 147). Schiller's epigram, “Doubts of Conscience” (*Gewissenskrupel*), in which he tried to ridicule the rigidity of Kant's interpretation of pure moral duty and its emphasis on the contradiction between duty and inclinations, was at one time well known in Germany. However, it is also well known how inaccurate and unfair in

treating Kant's views the German poet was, attempting by all means to ridicule the Kantian ethical doctrine.

Already in post-Soviet times, the origins of the controversy between the two classics of German idealism were explored by the patriarch of Russian philosophical science, Teodor Oizerman, whose works are widely known in the West (Oizerman, 2007). He showed, in particular, that Hegel's first research experiments in the field of religion and theology were influenced by Kant's moral philosophy but, starting with drafts written in 1796 and 1798, his attitude towards Kant's ethics begin to change. Intending to complete the creation of the metaphysics of morality and to go further than Kant, developing his idea of the human being as an absolute free creature, Hegel did not accept Kantian dualism in the metaphysics of morality, according to which the empirical will of the human being in the world is not free (Oizerman, 2007, p. 480). Oizerman mentions in his book that later, in the first volume of the *Science of Logic (Wissenschaft der Logik)*, considering the principle of duty as the basis of Kant's doctrine of practical reason, Hegel would very positively appreciate Kant's idea that free will is no longer considered as a phenomenon subordinated to the laws of causality, but as something related to the intelligent world of things in themselves. However, the Russian philosopher explains that this, allegedly, did not happen on account of Hegel's deeper study of Kant's moral philosophy in Nuremberg, but because of the wide recognition of Kant and his teachings by most German universities. Hegel, according to Oizerman (2007, p. 490), always cared about public opinion. At the same time, in our opinion, this did not prevent the creator of absolute idealism from treating negatively those provisions that seemed unacceptable to him.

Such is the brief background of the polemic that is discussed in this paper, although, strictly speaking, this is not so much a polemic as simply Hegel's criticism of Kant's moral philosophy, since the great Königsberg philosopher could no longer reply to his opponent.

3 Criticism of Kant's principles of moral obligation and categorical imperative in the section "Reason" (V)

As already noted, the debates between the two most prominent classics of German idealism on the issue of whether moral demands are universal in nature, i.e. do not depend on any external conditions and circumstances, or are always socially determined, has not lost its significance even today. We have also shown that Hegel more than once, even before *Phenomenology of Spirit*, turned to Kant's moral philosophy and criticised him for asserting the superiority of his ethics over positive religion, for its abstract nature, for opposing duty to inclination etc. However, beginning with the *Phenomenology* this criticism became more systematic and radical, as will now be shown.

Initially, Hegel focused his attention on Kant's moral philosophy in the section of *Phenomenology* entitled "Reason" (V, C). Thus, in the study of "Reason as Lawgiver" (or the legislative reason), it literally falls upon Kant's principles of moral obligation, of which this form of consciousness becomes an expression. This mind, he believes, takes on the task of establishing unconditionally universal commandments, and reveals only a formal universality of the "essence of the matter": its principles turn out to be subjective and accidental, since their unconditional form falls into conflict with the conventionality and randomness of their content.

Hegel cites as an example two such commandments: "Everyone ought to speak the truth" and "Love thy neighbor as thyself" (Hegel, 1977, pp. 254, 255).

Let us consider briefly the logic of Hegel's reasoning, using at least one of them as an example: "Everyone ought to speak the truth. In this duty as expressed unconditionally, the condition will at once be admitted: if he knows the truth. The commandment, then, will now run: everyone ought to speak the truth at all times, according to his knowledge and

conviction. But, with this admission, it in fact admits that already, in the very act of saying the commandment, it really violates it. It said: everyone ought to speak the truth; but it meant: he ought to speak it according to his knowledge and conviction; that is to say, what it said was different from what it meant; and to speak otherwise than one means, means not speaking the truth. The untruth or inapt expression in its improved form now runs: everyone ought to speak the truth according to his knowledge and conviction at the time” (Hegel, 1977, p. 254). Thus, the all-necessary quality of this commandment, according to Hegel, has turned into a perfect coincidence, since it can be fulfilled only under conditions that depend only on pure coincidences. In Hegel’s opinion such legislative activity of reason turns out to be doomed to failure.

Further, the philosopher criticises the categorical imperative of Kant, without mentioning the name of his great compatriot, and sees it as purely formal because of the absence of universal absolute content in this imperative; for Kant does not say anything about what a person should do guided by this imperative. It turns out that the mind can set only the commandments based on the fitting, which are not valid laws. However, according to Hegel, it is impossible in principle to follow these commandments owing to the presence of a great variety of tricks for deviating from them: “Since, then, all idea of an absolute content must be given up, it can only claim a formal universality; or that it is not self-contradictory. For universality that lacks a content is [merely] formal, and an absolute content itself is tantamount to a distinction which is no distinction, i.e. to absence of content” (Hegel, 1977, p. 256).

It seems that Hegel did not understand that Kant deliberately presented his categorical imperative as only a *formal* principle, seeing precisely in the absence of an indication of the content of moral actions not a flaw, but the dignity of its formulation, which does not include anything empirical. This, in fact, constituted one of the main features of his interpretation of moral law.

4 Criticism of the “moral worldview” of Kant’s philosophy in the section “Spirit” (VI)

According to Kuno Fisher, the most acute “epigrammatic spikes” of Kant’s moral philosophy will be encountered in the section of *Phenomenology* devoted to the Spirit (section VI, “Morality, Moral Worldview, Permutation”) (Fisher, 1901, p. 405). Here Hegel brings us back to the topic of ethics, but already in its higher, new-look morality. “There has arisen the new shape of Spirit, that of the moral Spirit,” he writes, which is embodied in Kant’s moral philosophy (Hegel, 1977, p. 363). At the same time, he does not only expound and analyse it in the most detailed manner, but also seeks to disprove it in every possible way.

The basis of his critical argumentation is an attempt to identify the main contradiction of Kant’s ethics, which, according to Hegel, is that the fulfilment of unconditional moral requirements as necessary and unconditional postulates, of which morality consists, leads to the complete elimination of this morality itself. In the “moral worldview”, as the totality of all these postulates, Hegel (1977, p. 374) reveals a “whole nest” of thoughtless contradictions. However, what he calls the most acute “epigrammatic spikes” of Kant’s moral philosophy will be encountered in this section devoted to the Spirit and is entitled “Dissemblance or Duplicity”, since morality, perfectly aware of all these contradictions, sees itself forced to change “the position of their demands”, in other words, to put them differently, or to temper them (“to rearrange and at the same time pretend”). At the same time, moral consciousness falsifies itself, since it does not take its claims seriously because it is impossible to fulfil them.

Analysing in detail the moral postulates of the moral worldview (the unconditional nature of moral goals, the harmony between morality and the world, the harmony of morality and bliss, net debt, connecting previous postulates etc.), Hegel concludes that the human

consciousness, because of its limitations, imperfections and its sensuality, is unclean in its actions. Consciousness of duty and reality do not agree with each other, hence the solution of the problem of their harmonious unity is not possible and moves to infinity. Moral consciousness, therefore, cannot be serious about an unsolvable task and begins to juggle its positions. It is in this second chapter (b), entitled “Dissemblance or Duplicity”, that Hegel criticises Kant particularly sharply.

The whole pathos of this criticism is aimed at showing that in this world there can be no talk of harmony between morality and bliss, good and pleasure are distributed in it so unfairly that a good person lives badly and badly lives. Bliss cannot be earned by dignity, it is received only by mercy, which means that people do not seek to deserve it, but only expect and hope for it. Hegel concludes that there is not a single position of moral consciousness that could not be shaken by pointing out the contradictions contained in it, and so rejected. It is a question of the dualism of morality and reality. According to Hegel (1977, pp. 374, 376), such a form of consciousness as the moral worldview rests on it.

It should be noted that Kant really openly bred the moral ideal and reality. He spoke directly about the impossibility of its implementation: “Virtue, and with it human wisdom in its entire purity, are ideas. [...] Thus just as the idea gives the rule, so the ideal in such a case serves as the original image for the thoroughgoing determination of the copy; and we have in us no other standard for our actions than the conduct of this divine human being, with which we can compare ourselves, judging ourselves and thereby improving ourselves, even though we can never reach the standard” (*KrV*, A 569 / B 597; Kant, 1998, p. 552).

However, despite the fact that Kant did not allow the objective reality (existence) of these ideals, at the same time he did not consider it possible to call them chimeras on that basis, since “they provide an indispensable standard for reason, which needs the concept of that which is entirely complete in its kind, in order to assess and measure the degree and the defects of what is incomplete” (*ibid.*). He also believed that any attempt “to realize the ideal in an example, i.e., in appearance, such as that of the sage in a novel, is not feasible, and even has about it something nonsensical and not very edifying, since the natural limits which constantly impair the completeness in the idea render impossible every illusion in such an attempt, and thereby render even what is good in the idea suspect by making it similar to a mere fiction” (*KrV*, A 570 / B 598; Kant, 1998, p. 552).

Hegel unfairly considered such a break in the moral ideal with reality and the impossibility of its practical implementation to be evidence of the failure of Kant’s ethical doctrine, for whom such a break was laid down by the definition of the ideal itself.

Thus it was precisely from the contradiction between duty and reality that, according to Hegel, all the contradictions and postulates of the moral world outlook proceed. This dualism was removed in conscience, from which the opposition between the active and theoretical conscience in the form of a “beautiful soul” arises, as well as the subsequent contradiction between the “evil” and “discussing consciousness”, which is also removed and thus completes the moralism of the spirit. Both forms of consciousness have become equal to each other, evil has turned out to be on both sides, for the evaluation of one side has turned out to be as evil as the activity of the other, each side therefore must know its own insignificance, be cleansed and restore the purity of self-awareness. Thus, according to Hegel, the opposite will be resolved and so-called “forgiveness” and “reconciliation” will arise on both sides. This is what the philosopher figuratively calls “evil and its forgiveness”. He writes that “the wounds of the Spirit heal, and leave no scars behind” (Hegel, 1977, p. 407). At the same time, the opposite does not disappear, it remains in full reality and power: on each side there is real knowledge, self-consciousness, I, but so that they recognise and do not deny each other. Hegel writes that for the first time self-consciousness here has doubled in the true sense of the word, and he will call such mutual recognition “absolute spirit”. Thus, Hegel finally

completes his so extensive and complex section on the spirit and proceeds to the next stage in the development of consciousness – religion.

5 Conclusion

Evaluating the Hegelian doctrine of morality, developed by him in the pages of the third part of the section “Spirit” in *Phenomenology*, and comparing it with the ideas of Kant’s moral philosophy, I would like to refer to the judgment of one of the authoritative Russian scholars and historians of philosophy, Erikh Solovjov. He, in particular, believes that the moral views of these two thinkers rely on two different ethical doctrines. Thus, “Kant’s moral philosophy is based on the ethical doctrine of the Stoics, according to which to live virtuously meant, not paying attention to life circumstances, but corresponding to the abstract essence of man, which is revealed through speculation” (Solowjow, 1976, p. 130). Cultivated by the Stoics, “autarchy” presupposes the courage of a person in the face of hopeless circumstances and the dignity of an individual with a reasonable will, which together put in place the autonomy of the moral consciousness. In this case, the moral act is valued for itself, and the main thing for a person is to care, not about the consequences of good intentions, but about their formal correctness, purity and unconditionality. As for the Hegelian doctrine of morality, it has a clear Christian character, representing, in the words of the Russian philosopher Andrei G. Myasnikov (2010, p. 448), “the philosophy of compassion towards the weakness of individual human nature, which is capable of practically transforming itself and the world under the condition of abandoning its self-sufficiency”.

Hegel’s dialectic of the universal and the singular is particularly prominent; and dialectic of the universal and the singular manifests itself particularly vividly in ethics, where the conscience of a separate ‘self’ finds recognition and approval in a religious community, subordinates itself to the universal, becomes a conscience – general knowledge, and in this finds solace. Its attitude to duty is determined by the recognition and approval of the majority, which removes the responsibility for the fulfilment of this duty from an individual, especially if universal prudence promises greater benefit or requires lying for the sake of self-preservation. “A reasonable debt violation will be forgiven by the community, and the person will find reconciliation with it” (*ibid.*).

Revealing thus the internal inconsistency of Kant’s unconditional duty as incapable of implementing universal laws, Hegel continued his earlier thought that a certain moral duty can be legitimate only under certain socio-historical conditions; that, being a moment of a constantly changing living whole, the moral demands themselves must change with the change of society (Rumyantseva, 2014, p. 125). True, by demonstrating pragmatism in the interpretation of moral duty, he will offer instead, at least in his phenomenology, religious faith in the transcendental power of ‘communal’ consciousness, which will become a form-building constituent that supposedly will remove all the contradictions of the moral worldview.

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