

Dean Moyar

Hegel's Conscience.

Oxford: Oxford University Press 2011.

240 pages

US\$74.00 (cloth ISBN 978-0-19-539199-2)

Moyar contrasts Hegel's 'conscience' with the private subjective feeling or intuiting of moral truths—Hegel's individual 'Reason'—that we usually understand by it. He argues that it is better understood as a certain 'performative' conception of practical reason, than as the usual 'reflective' one. It is not a simple capacity for second-order reflection on an abstract universal law, but 'a complex set of capacities' (14) for first-order consideration of ethically salient features of the world. With the aid of various contemporary analytic models of moral agency and justification provided by, e.g., Richard Moran, Bernard Williams, Jonathan Dancy and Barbara Hermann, Moyar argues that a proper grasp of the concept is the key to a highly original and defensible Hegelian program of ethics.

Like other Hegelian scholars, Moyar sets up his basic interpretive problem in terms of Hegel's apparently ambivalent and conflicting attitudes toward subjective freedom, celebrating the victory of personal responsibility for one's own actions over the Catholic 'slavery of conscience' at times, and condemning the emptiness and non-actuality of the formal and abstract universal at others. Like most recent commentators, he resolves the problem in favor of subjective freedom. However—here lies Moyar's original contribution—while other liberal commentators resolve the problem by focusing on the fact that the 'concrete freedom' of individual subjects can be realized only through mutual recognition for Hegel, Moyar draws attention to the importance of the first-person perspective of these subjects for Hegel, and he tries to spell out those features of their agency which for Hegel makes it truly free. This agency is a practical reasoning which 'does not have a fixed structure that had always and everywhere existed as a human capacity' (14). It is, Moyar argues, roughly the conscience that only appears at the end of the 'Spirit' section of the *Phenomenology* and the 'Morality' section of the *Philosophy of Right*. He maintains, contra Alan Patten, that Hegel's conscience has nothing in common with Kant's respect for the moral law, except that both are to be understood from the first-person standpoint of self-consciousness.

Moyar sets out to clarify the difference by appeal to Moran's conception of first-person authority and Williams' internalism. On Moran's conception of first-person authority, the agent is responsible for his own beliefs and actions not because of some privileged access to his private mental states, but because of his willingness to avow them (17). Like Moran's first-person authority, the rational authority of Hegel's conscience is not some publicly inaccessible feeling, but a certain disposition of the agent, namely, his readiness to answer for his beliefs and actions to other individual or institutional subjects. As such, there is an essential inter-subjective dimension to conscience that makes it contingent not just on the agent, but also on his objective circumstances. Secondly, Moyar states Williams' internalism in terms of what he calls the Reasons Identity Condition (*RIC*), and goes on to argue that Hegel subscribes to a complex version of it:

RIC: In ethical action, an agent's motivating reasons are identical to the justifying reasons (44).

'Motivational reasons' are the reasons for which the agent acts, while 'justifying reasons' are the reasons that makes the action right. Moyar sees Williams as adopting *RIC* by claiming that there can be no reason justifying an action that bears no relation to 'the agent's subjective motivational set' (47). It is precisely such an internalist claim that is at work in Hegel's preference for the 'Way of the World' over 'Virtue' in his discussion of them in the *Phenomenology*. The virtuous person asserts an extreme form of externalism by taking, for the Good, an abstract universal that negates all particular interests and purposes of the agent. Internalism exposes such a Good to be a 'bluff, a mere blustering posture of universality' that 'only preaches without accomplishing anything' (51). The fact that Hegel regards the Way of the World as overcoming Virtue goes to show that a reason has ethical content for him only insofar as it is a reason *for action*—that is to say, insofar as it actually moves one to act. It is through conscience that we enter 'ethical life', 'not only because conscience has moved beyond the oppositions of the Kantian moral worldview, but also because conscience's reasons are motivating reasons that bring the agent to perform an actual action' (64).

However, the identification of, or even the capacity to identify, motivating and justifying reasons is not gratuitous, but a 'delicate achievement' (42), for Hegel, because he subscribes to a complex version of the *RIC*:

CRIC: In ethical action, an agent's motivating reasons stems from purposes that can be nested within broader purposes that provide the justifying reasons for the actions (74).

Moyar leaves it open as to who actually does the nesting. Nevertheless, the *CRIC* requires certain objective as well as subjective conditions to be met. This explains why conscience emerges only historically through the breakdown of the Greeks' beautiful ethical life, the self-alienated Christian spirit, and modern liberal democracy and capitalism. On the subjective side, though most individuals do not, and even cannot, provide a full account of the nesting relation, they must have a sense of the dependence of the full justification of their particular standing purposes on broader universal purposes. On the objective side, the system of institutionally structured universal purposes must in turn derive its legitimacy 'from the fact that the particularity of individuals within them is respected' (76). Thus the subjective and objective conditions stand in a dynamic relation of interdependence that cannot be reduced to one another.

Having outlined the conception of conscience which he wants to attribute to Hegel in terms of the performative view of practical reason, and having stated its requirement in terms of the *CRIC*, Moyar goes on to examine Hegel's criticisms of subjective freedom in order to show that they are specifically directed at the unprincipled 'detachment of belief, as one of the components of ethical action, from the normative status of the complex whole' (82). Hegel's criticisms presuppose what Moyar calls the

‘holism’ of conscience—the thesis that the agent’s knowledge of his actual circumstances which constitutes conscience already contains all that he needs to know in order to determine the right course of action. Moyar explains the epistemic stance of conscience here by appeal to Dancy’s distinction of ‘complex objective duty’ from ‘subjective duties’. According to Dancy, duties are objective insofar as objective features of an ethical situation make them right, but complex insofar as they include at least the distinct components of belief and purpose. On Dancy’s modal analysis, though it is a duty to act according to what we believe to be right, it is not our belief that it is right that makes it a duty: ‘we should avoid thinking of acting on conscience as a conditional requirement, and think of it instead as a requirement on a conditional. It is not the claim that if conscience approves a purpose...then the purpose is my duty. But rather, it is...the duty “if I believe *P* is right, do *P*”’ (85-6). In the same vein, Hegel is critical of subjectivism for detaching the component of belief and generating a duty from it. On the other hand, the duty to follow one’s beliefs, when taken correctly, is compatible with the justification of duties on the basis of features of the situation. This is the usual epistemic stance of conscience, which does not typically involve stepping back and ‘(choosing) from among one’s desires, but rather one views the normative landscape through those standing purposes (commitments) that one has developed over the course of one’s life’ (68).

In the final chapter, the conceptual tools that Moyar has patiently introduced in the previous chapters are employed to provide a positive account of how conscience does real work in determining and sustaining each of the three main institutions of ‘Ethical Life’, namely, the Family, Civil Society and the State. According to Moyar, the development of the institutions of Civil Society such as the modern labor market fails to secure full-fledged ethical content, insofar as it does not by itself meet the subjective conditions of *CRIC*. Conscience plays an indispensable role in meeting the subjective conditions of *CRIC* by ‘(requiring) a subject to maintain the unity between his particular motivating reasons and the universal justifying reasons’ (183). The latter reasons rests ultimately on the State understood as ‘a systematic relationship of individual activity and institutional activity’ (191). An action performed for the State’s purposes is meaningful in a way it would not be were it performed outside the context of these broader purposes.

It is open to question whether Moyar takes his solution to long-standing interpretative difficulties or his outline of a new approach to ethics to be the more important result of these investigations. Part of the difficulty in following the book’s argument is due to the dilution of Moyar’s ambitious multi-tasking. The book also assumes a certain level of familiarity with Hegel’s texts and facility with contemporary analytic approaches to ethics, and is thus not recommended for instructors or undergraduates looking for a concise introduction to Hegel’s ethics. Still, Moyar’s book will greatly reward the effort of those seeking a deeper understanding of Hegel’s practical philosophy, especially those exploring its potential as a vanguard of modern liberal values.

Kien-How Goh

Singapore Institute of Management University