

HISTORICALLY EMERGENT AGENCY

Antigone and Creon

You cannot learn of any man the soul, the mind, and the intent until he shows his practice of government and law. For I believe that who controls the state and does not hold to the best plans of all, but locks his tongue up through some kind of fear, that he is the worst of all who are or were.

— Speech of Creon in
Sophocles' *Antigone*

Normative theories inevitably rely upon certain assumptions about action and agency. So long as this reliance does not extend beyond the broad sphere of prevailing assumptions, it is not particularly problematic. It may occasion considerable confusion, however, when a conception of ethical acts or ethical agents is less than wholly explicit in its embrace of action-theoretic assumptions that are at odds with the prevailing set of views. This point has special relevance as regards recent investigations of Hegel's ethical and political philosophy. Often these have tended to de-emphasize the "metaphysical" or even "theological" aspects of his thought, and to focus instead upon the implications of his account of *Geist* as it concerns the social development of selfhood and agency.¹ If these implications are taken seriously, there is good reason to conclude that the assumptions of action and agency underpinning Hegel's ethical and social theory are at considerable variance with some of those dominating the philosophy of action as it has developed in Anglo-American philosophy.²

In this chapter, I consider certain aspects of Hegel's conception of action and agency that are of particular importance to the explicit discussions of feminist political theory in chapters to follow. It is important to outline Hegel's approach to historical "transformations" of ethical agency in some detail, because it contains some elements of both Kantian autonomous internalism and externalist approaches to justification, while being reducible to neither. I shall contend that this approach to normative justification helps to make sense of similar moves among feminist theorists. If feminists have seemed to waver between a call for "education" on the one hand and a call for "revolution" on the other, this may be a result of exactly the sort of complexities involved in the transformation of human agency on a global scale with which Hegel was centrally concerned.

In the first section, I shall outline some of the basic elements of Hegel's conception of consciousness as activity. In the second and third sections, I shall take up some of the more important ethical implications of this conception. In going about this, I shall make special reference to Hegel's account of the breakdown of ethical life in his discussion of the *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, an account wherein the transformation of agency is discussed in remarkable detail. I shall identify four basic Hegelian tenets concerning agency which follow from this account: (1) self-ignorance (or "other-dependency"); (2) collective agency; (3) self-knowledge through alienation; (4) the "right of the objectivity of action." All four of these doctrines will be important in clarifying Hegel's conception of the transformation of agency and in showing how Hegel's account of ethical justification differs from more conventional approaches.

From Activity to Agency

Among the most difficult and conceptually fecund aspects of Hegel's account of the self is its assumption that self-knowledge is a collective accomplishment. In his discussion of the development of Spirit, the self or "self-consciousness" comes into being only through the existence and activity of others. Moreover, the possibilities for interaction between self-consciousness and other people are determined by the practices and institutions of culture. Thus, some kind of society is a necessary condition for self-consciousness to come into being at all. This much may not seem terribly interesting, given the prevalence of "social constructionist" accounts in contemporary sociological and anthropological theory. What may be less obvious, however, is that self-consciousness is utterly dependent upon its socially conditioned relationships with others in order to come to particular knowledge of itself, that is, in order to become aware of just what it is doing at any given time. This would seem to have some importance for discussions in ethics, particularly those in which knowing what one is doing has a bearing on moral worth.

On Hegel's account, consciousness is activity. A conscious being first becomes aware of itself as an actor or agent—as one who is already engaged in activities having more or less definite social meanings in its culture. But consciousness cannot arrive at the meaning of its actions on its own. Rather, it must rely on the re-actions of others to learn the meaning of its acts, and thereby come to a more or less adequate reflection of what is initially shrouded in the "immediacy" of its own unthinking activity. This process begins with

our birth into a particular culture, but continues throughout life. It is only in this way that we can eventually attain a genuine sense of self-conscious agency, in which the activities in which we are engaged can become truly *self-expressive*. This self-expression is central to Hegel's conception of freedom, that toward which the ethical life aspires.

Charles Taylor (1983) has called attention to a number of important implications of this developmental conception of self-awareness for the philosophy of action. In particular, he is concerned to mark out certain contrasts between a Hegelian theory of action and that deriving from the classical Cartesian and empiricist views. Taylor points out that Hegel's assumptions here require us to understand the perception of our "inner states" as involving a kind of activity on two different levels. In the first place, as discussed above, coming to self-awareness is itself an activity that is carried out in the context of the institutions and practices of culture. As such, it is "something we can altogether fail to do, or do in a distorting or partial or censored fashion" (85). Secondly, the mental phenomena that are the result of this activity of "self-formulation" are not merely data or "givens," but are themselves "bound up with activity" (86). For Hegel, our desires, intentions, purposes, and so on are not simply so many "feelings," but reflect the purposes and values of the wider society of which we are a part. Just as our activities have social meanings (of which we are initially unaware), so the mental phenomena associated with them mirror wider life processes.

Among the most important implications of this account is that, contrary to the classical Cartesian and empiricist views, particular forms of self-awareness (awareness of my desires, intentions, perceptions, etc.) are neither incorrigible nor given directly to consciousness.³ It is exactly to the extent that elements of self-knowledge are direct or "immediate" that they are *unknown*, not reflected back to consciousness from others. Moreover, once such awareness begins to take place, far from being incorrigible, it is ever subject to correction and revision on the basis of our interactions with others. This revision may come about because of our initial awkwardness in coming to a grasp of how our actions are actually reflected in our culture (from our initially poor grasp of language, for example), or because the institutions and practices of society themselves offer vague or ambiguous readings of our activities. Hegel was himself particularly concerned with those periods of historical upheaval where social meanings are in flux, the times when new shapes of conscious awareness become possible.

Taylor also contends that among the consequences of this approach to the philosophy of mind is a repudiation of causal accounts of action. The

Cartesian and empiricist accounts distinguish actions from other kinds of events by reference to their peculiar mental causes (desires, intentions, purposes, sensations, emotions, etc.). On some classical accounts these mental causes may be further reducible to physical phenomena, but they are, in any case, ontologically distinct from the actions to which they are causally related (1983: 78). Because action is a “primitive” on Hegel’s account, Taylor argues that the mental component is inseparable from the action and thus incapable of standing in a causal role with respect to it. Although actions are “qualitatively distinct” from other events, this is in virtue of their being “inhabited by the purposes that direct them” and not their being caused by such purposes (78).

According to Taylor, this links Hegel’s conception of action to that of Wittgensteinian action theorists who call attention to an irreducible distinction between our knowledge of actions and that of other events. According to these theorists, to the extent that I am performing an action, and am not merely being acted upon, I must, in some primitive sense, “know what I’m doing.” For example, I experience a distinction between *raising* my arm to reach a shelf that is over my head, and merely noticing the arm *being raised* to the shelf (say, by means of a cable). I know that the former is my doing in a sense that the latter is not.⁴ Taylor, however, distinguishes this knowledge from that of experiencing mental phenomena as causes of action in that the latter involves perceiving the intention in a contingent relation to the subsequent act.⁵ Although actions are distinguished from other events by their fundamentally “purposive” character, this character cannot be captured by reference to their antecedent causal history.

Taylor’s discussion goes far toward clarifying Hegel’s discussion of agency in the context of contemporary analytic philosophy, and I shall be indebted to it in much of the discussion to follow. Nevertheless, his attempt to link Hegel’s account to the debate over causal and non-causal accounts of action raises certain important difficulties. In particular, Taylor’s contention that Hegelian agent-knowledge may come to something like “non-observational knowing,” and thus rules out “causal” accounts of action, seems to cut against some of the more striking features of Hegel’s descriptions of transformations of agent-knowledge. Most importantly, insofar as non-causal accounts must invoke some sense of the agent’s “knowing what she’s doing” in their descriptions of action, this would appear to introduce an element of “self-awareness” to the Hegelian account which could compromise its doctrine of “other-dependency.” As will become clear below, this social dependency has important implications for the relationship between politics and moral responsibility.

In the next section, I shall argue that some of Hegel's most interesting discussions on agency and self-awareness in the *Phenomenology* and the *Philosophy of Right* rule out even the limited form of self-access to which Taylor alludes. By making awareness of our mental states a socially mediated activity, Hegel allows for the possibility that our intentions may be entirely opaque to us in the absence of such activity. Moreover, Hegel's discussion of the self-transformation occurring with the move from complete opacity of intention to what may be a shocking and even tragic grasp of our purpose, is one of his most original and important contributions to our understanding of ethical agency.

*Self-Awareness and Self-Ignorance in the Antigone*⁶

In his account of the breakdown of the original Greek *Sittlichkeit* near the beginning of chapter 6 of the *Phenomenology* ("Ethical Action. Human and Divine Knowledge. Guilt and Destiny."), Hegel provides a rich and profoundly unorthodox account of agency and self-awareness. This breakdown of the ethical life is the necessary condition for emergence of the individual, who does not yet exist in the unity of the early Greek city-state:

[S]elf-consciousness has not yet received its due as a particular individuality. There it has the value, on the one hand, merely of the universal will, and on the other, of consanguinity, *This* particular individual counts only as a shadowy unreality. As yet, no deed has been committed; but the deed is the *actual self*. It disturbs the peaceful organization and movement of the ethical world. (1807: 464)

It is only with "the deed" (*die Tat*) that self is brought to actuality, and this deed, by its very nature, must upset the harmony of the extant community. Hegel takes up the dramatic events of the *Antigone* to illustrate the destructive process by which the individual comes into being at the end of Greek antiquity. Here, human law, embodied in Creon's command that the bodies of the attackers of Thebes remain unburied, comes up against the divine law, which Antigone obeys by burying her dead brother Polyneices. In upholding the bonds of the family and the gods over against the laws of the state, Antigone disrupts the ethical unity in which the community has subsisted. Moreover, in taking such a stand against human law, she exercises what is for Hegel a uniquely "feminine" agency. Women's unity with the divine law—"unconscious Spirit"—makes them a divisive force for Hegel, "the everlasting irony [in the life] of the community" (475).⁷

What is more important as concerns the relationship between politics and agency, however, is his detailed description of the manner in which the previously undisturbed unity of the state breaks out of its immediacy through feminine agency. The “universal self-conscious Spirit” which is manifest in Creon’s decree knows itself only as the expression of the law of the state. In acting as he does, Creon merely expresses the right of the community, through its law, to protect itself. Conflicts arising out of the exercise of the community’s prerogative (e.g., Antigone and her sister Ismene’s horror at the order that Polyneices go unburied) are unfortunate but involve no ethical dispute. The state, in its original unity, must see its actions as expressive of the right, and, in Antigone’s action, “only the self-will and disobedience of the individual who insists on being his [sic] own authority” (466).⁸

In violating the divine laws regarding burial, however, the state has, albeit in an entirely *unconscious* manner, occasioned a divided attitude toward the law.⁹ Though it would “one-sidedly” claim the right to recognize in its action only a legitimate decree, only that which was consciously intended, by acting, the state renounced such claims to innocence:¹⁰

By this act it gives up the specific quality of the ethical life, of being the simple certainty of immediate truth, and initiates the division of itself as the active principle, and into the reality over against it, a reality which, for it, is negative. (468)¹¹

Creon’s decree violates the divine law, and this is embodied in the outrage of the women, that law’s “natural” guardians. The state’s action, by turning “its back on the other (Antigone),” and violating her, is responsible for establishing its own “negation” and thereby passing over into “crime” (468). The state can in no way escape this responsibility, although in initially fashioning its decree it did no more than act according to its nature.

Clearly, Hegel’s example is fanciful. Nevertheless, it expresses certain principles that are basic to his conception of agency and the development of self-awareness. In the first place, it is a classic example of a shape of consciousness developing through a process of “negation.” This process has several identifiable steps: (1) an existing form of consciousness (*C*) exercises its agency (i.e., brings itself into actuality) in such a manner as (unconsciously) to set itself in opposition to an other (*O*); (2) *O* rebels against this opposition (literally, it re-acts), so as to reflect the nature of the negation back to *C*; (3) *C*, because it cannot escape the judgment of *O* (in the present case, whose “nature” has been violated), is compelled, contrary to all previous expectation,

to grasp its action in a negative light; (4) *C*'s agency, that by which its nature was brought into "actuality," is now transformed into "guilt," and/or "crime."¹² This process, of course, depends critically upon the assumption at (3) that *O*'s expression of outrage will be taken in such a manner as to transform *C*'s agency to guilt. Otherwise, *C* may simply dismiss the claims of *O* and go on interpreting her rebellion as "self-will and disobedience" (Hegel 1807: 466). I shall return to this point below. Before turning to that issue, however, it will be useful to consider some of the implications of this account for Hegel's conception of agency.

The Transition from Self-Ignorance to Agency

In the first place, Hegel suggests a scenario where consciousness not only lacks full awareness of what it is doing before it acts, but where its agency is utterly transformed by the "intersubjective" implications of its action. It would not be strange to say that one cannot always know fully the consequences of a particular action in advance, or even that an action may have unforeseen or surprising consequences. Presumably, no plausible account of action would deny that. The transformation that Hegel depicts here—from ethical consciousness to crime—is far more shocking, and entails a kind of "self-ignorance" that goes far beyond the usual sense of our inability accurately to predict the consequences of our acts. It suggests that, at least in certain pivotal historical circumstances, one's appreciation of agency may be entirely reversed by virtue of an act or a set of acts and the consequences which they occasion.

In order to understand how such a transformation of agency is possible, it is necessary to consider a second implication of Hegel's account, that of collective agency. In Hegel's gloss on the *Antigone*, the masculine agency of the human law embodied by Creon's decree violates the divine law. As such, it stands under the judgment of the latter, embodied in the action of Antigone. In this conflict, it is not primarily the guilt of a certain individual (Creon) and his act which is at stake, but that of an entire class (men) before the judgment of another class (women). Although an individual man experiences guilt:

[I]t is not *this* particular individual who acts and is guilty; for as *this* self he is only the unreal (*unwirklich*) shadow, or he exists merely as a universal self, and individuality is purely the *formal* moment of action as such, the content being the laws and customs which, for the individual, are those of his class and station. (1807: 468)¹³

For Hegel, the activities by which an individual achieves a concrete determination within a culture are not initially, if ever, her own doing. Her individual agency (the sense in which her act is genuinely self-expressive) is merely *formal* in that the *content* of her action takes on its meaning within the cultural institutions and practices in which she merely plays her part. The particular individual at this stage of social history is a mere placeholder in a collective system, and it is the system that is the actual locus of agency.

Hegel's conception of collective agency underpins the discussion of responsibility in the account. Were it the case that an individual's action represented only *her*, that is, *her* particular interests and desires, she could escape the judgment of the community and the meanings it assigns to her acts. She could not be so utterly mistaken with respect to an agency that was wholly her own. For Hegel, however, this kind of self-knowledge would reverse the actual developmental order of the social world, placing the individual and its interests prior to those of culture. The judgment of others is inescapable because the content of an individual's actions is not initially her own, but embodies publicly identifiable social practices and thereby asserts those within the society.¹⁴ To the extent that she does come to a sense of these interests as her own, it will be only through the reciprocal actions (judgments, punishments, rewards, etc.) of members of other classes in the society.

The importance of this point in coming to a grasp of Hegel's conception of self and agency can scarcely be overemphasized. To perform an action within the context of a society is fundamentally different from simply "acting out" a set of physical motions. Contrary to Taylor's assertion, however, this is not because of any special sense in which "I know what I'm doing." As the gloss on Sophocles' play makes clear, the agent may be utterly in the dark as to what she is doing as she performs the act.¹⁵ Moreover, this inseparability of private intention and the public reception of an action is not limited to the historical characters of the ancient world. As Hegel details in the *Philosophy of Right*, what is unique about actions within the context of society is their "universal" (*allgemein*) character, that is, their function within a meaningful system of social practices:

[T]he determinate character of the action for itself is not an isolated content confined to one external unit, but a *universal* content, containing within itself all its various connections. (1821: 119)¹⁶

As the embodiment of a wider system, my action is never isolated, but is part of and serves the interests of a group within that system in ways that may be

unknown to me (and to everyone else as well) at the time of my acting.¹⁷ Nevertheless, because my action has effects upon members of other groups within the system, and because I cannot escape the judgments of those groups, my self-ignorance is not invincible. By virtue of the effect my action will have on others (in the case of Creon's action, evoking "a volatile and now hostile enemy demanding revenge" [469]), I have, according to Hegel, implicitly willed the necessary condition for coming to know the content of my act. As I shall discuss in the chapters of Parts II and III, men's violations of the agency of women establish a similar set of conditions in which men may come to know the content of their character.

This suggests a third and critical implication of the account, the claim that self-knowledge arises through a process of "alienation." If I am to come to know the nature of my action, that knowledge is possible only through the action's estrangement from me—its reflection back to my consciousness through the action of certain others who are victimized or otherwise affected by it.¹⁸ Hegel states that in the action of Creon:

[O]nly one aspect of the resolve as such is clearly manifest. The resolve, however, is *in itself* the negative aspect which confronts the resolve with an "other," with something alien to the resolve which knows what it does. (1807: 469)

Thus, alienation, the splitting of the initial unity of the agent's "resolve," is a necessary condition for the agent's coming to conscious awareness of her action. Without it, the content of an action remains unrecognized, immersed in "the simple certainty of immediate truth" (468). In the absence of the reciprocal action of Antigone, the criminality of Creon's action remained unknown to him.

For Hegel, however, this kind of antecedent "self-ignorance" does not excuse the *agency* of the ignorant actor. Because the reciprocal action by which the original act is alienated is "in itself," or implicitly, included in the original willing, it is, for Hegel, within the agent's "intention." This suggests a fourth and most interesting implication of Hegel's account, his "right of the objectivity of action." This aspect of Hegel's concept of agency will prove most important in coming to a grasp of his approach to Kantian ethics, with its concern for the quality of the agent's intention in its assessment of moral worth.¹⁹

In the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel argues that for a consequence or set of consequences of my act to be a part of my purpose or intention, it is not necessary that I consciously will it prior to the act:

The external essence (*Dasein*) of an action is a varied set of connections which may be regarded as infinitely divided into *individual units* (*Einzelheiten*) But the truth of the individual (*des Einzelnen*) is the *universal*, and the determinate character of the action for itself is not an isolated content confined to one external unit, but a *universal* content containing within itself all its various connections. The purpose, as emanating from a *thinking agent*, contains not just the individual unit, but essentially that *universal aspect* already referred to—the *intention*. (1821: 119)²⁰

For Hegel, the purpose of the thinking or rational agent (the nature of which I shall address shortly) is inseparable from her action's "universal side," i.e., its reception by the community. The public meaning of the action thus plays a decisive role in determining its nature for the agent. This is consistent with the conception of meaning developed in chapter 1 of the *Phenomenology*, where Hegel argues that in order to mean anything at all, even to itself, consciousness must appeal to the universality of language (that which is *mein* is a function of that which is *allgemein*). Because self-conscious awareness can exist only as the reflection of a community of meaning outside itself, self-consciousness is in no position to repudiate the perceptions of that community.²¹ Such a repudiation would be, in a quite literal sense, "self-defeating." The development of a "self" is nothing other than recognizing that self, in perhaps a very unexpected or unpleasant manner, as it is alienated in action. "The accomplished deed completely alters its point of view" (1807: 470).

If the community has a right to name (universalize) the action of self-consciousness, however, self-consciousness has a reciprocal right that the universal meaning of its act be recognized as part of its intention.²² As a rational agent, that is, one with the capacity to come to a grasp of my action in its universal character, I can claim this character as my intention:

The *right of intention* is that the *universal* quality of the action shall have being not only *in itself*, but shall be known by the agent and thus have been present all along in his subjective will; and vice versa what we may call the *objectivity* of the action is the right of the action to assert itself as known and willed by the subject as a *thinking agent*. (1821: 120)²³

Hegel puts an interesting spin on the concept of autonomy here. The latter is usually understood as a capacity or set of capacities to evaluate and to guide one's actions according to motives and principles that a rational agent, under some description, could unqualifiedly endorse. To be "self-legislating" or "self-regulating" in this sense, one must be able to act independently of certain kinds of alien influences.²⁴ For Hegel, however, the autonomy of the agent is ex-

pressed in her capacity to accept the consequences of an action as falling within the compass of her intention after the fact (or after the "act").²⁵ This follows, once again, from the priority of action in constituting both its objective consequences and the subjective agency by which it assumes "moral" significance.²⁶ Before acting, the agent does not know the content of her desires and intentions and is thus in no position to render a judgment as to their rationality. The guilt occasioned by Creon's act, for example, does not derive from his failure to act according to a set of endorsable principles, but from an unforeseeable and tragic breakdown resulting from action in accord with those principles. Still, as a "thinker," the rational agent has the capacity to grasp the consequences of the act as her own once they have been publicly constituted.²⁷

As self-conscious agents, persons whose agency has developed through the meanings of a particular culture, all of us have the capacity to embrace our action, however blind or misdirected it may have been in its particular origins, from the "universal" point of view, i.e., that of the community.²⁸ To do this (at least within the context of our own culture), however, entails more than just recognizing another point of view on our acts. This is because, if I am to claim any meaning for my action, I must rely upon (must "posit" in Hegel's sense) others who will comprehend my meaning. To act so as to evoke condemnation from those others with whom I am in this relationship is nothing other than for me to posit the action's condemnation. It is thus that I experience the wrongness of the act as not merely an unfortunate consequence, but as the content of my own intention. Because my motive and intention come into "actuality" simultaneously with the social reception of my action within the community, my individual motivation is never clearly distinguishable from the social meaning of my acts: "Ethical self-consciousness . . . learns from its deed the developed nature of what it actually did."²⁹ The self-conscious agent, should its action occasion a breakdown in certain essential relationships in its society (e.g., if it is condemned for the act), experiences this break in such a way that it "cannot deny the crime or [its] guilt" (1807: 469).³⁰ Denial could issue only from a point of view outside the nexus of relationships within our community, and thus, in a real sense for Hegel, outside ourselves. On the other hand, to recognize our intention in the social reception of the act has a transformative effect upon our agency.

It is just such an "internal" transformation brought about by a certain "external" assessment of one's agency that was described at step (3) in the outline of the *Antigone* account above. If consciousness (*C*) cannot escape the judgment of an other (*O*), this can only be because *O*'s reading of *C*'s action expresses a socially accepted meaning of that action. In the sequence of events

in Sophocles' play, the social definition of Creon's act takes shape through the series of confrontations in the play. We find the chorus first expressing sympathy toward Creon's apparently accurate grasp of his decree, then growing concern as Haemon, Antigone, and finally Teiresias expose the tragic nature of that understanding. As with other critical transitions in the *Phenomenology*, we find a major historical shift in Spirit's self-understanding contained within the space of a single dramatic event. While actual historical shifts in social meaning may be far slower and more uncertain in their movements, on Hegel's account they too are marked by epic, and often tragic, transformations of agency.

I shall take up the normative implications of Hegel's conception of rational agency in greater detail in chapters to follow. Before concluding this discussion, however, it is important to address what may seem a glaring omission in the account as outlined so far. It may be objected that whatever the merits of Hegel's descriptions for moral psychology, the only *grounds* offered for ethical transformation are those of a defunct theology. Moreover, even if the theology is taken to be grounded in a broader set of institutions and practices guiding society, it is unclear how a Hegelian account could ever justify a critical stance toward those institutions and practices. By focusing upon the agent's emergence in and through cultural practices, Hegel's ethics seems uncritically bound to them.

Although it is impossible fully to address this issue here, it is important to outline two related, though distinct, Hegelian arguments against any conservative "communitarianism" such as that suggested by this objection. In the first place, it must be emphasized that the capacity to apprehend the public meaning of one's action as one's own entails constraints on what that meaning can be. It does not follow from the fact that an agent cannot develop rational agency apart from the institutions and practices of a particular social order, that *any* set of institutions and practices will suffice to develop that capacity. The institution of slavery, for example, constitutes an extreme example of failing to effect such development for the slaves. On this account, when ancient Greek society "universalized" an agent's actions as those of a slave, it failed utterly in respecting that agent's capacity as a self-determining individual. To be a slave is to find one's action, one's labor, defined as belonging to another—the master.³¹ To experience one's act publicly reflected back to oneself as that of a slave is to be *unable* to embrace it as one's own, as that would contradict its public meaning. My act belongs to another. In this extreme case, the agent's attempt to embrace the public meaning of her action as her own can generate only frustration, leaving her with the options either of trying to repress her capacity for autonomy altogether, or of rebelling against the society that would

define her action in such a way that she cannot take it up as her own.³² As I shall detail in chapters 4 and 7, Hegel's description of the failure that slavery embodies has special relevance for feminist normative claims. Of course, not all ineffective social systems are so confining as that of slavery, and, consequently, they may not occasion conflict quite so readily.³³ This has been the case with a variety of accepted social practices by which women have effectively been deprived not so much of their labor as of their bodies, thereby rendering them peculiarly deprived of agency.

Secondly, Hegel holds that the procedural constraints of the moral point of view can serve as an important, though underdetermined, "starting point" toward social recognition of the demands of self-actualization. Although, contrary to moral philosophers such as Kant, Hegel does not think that the simple *application* of a formal criterion of right action can ensure the universality of an agent's willing, universality remains the goal of modern social and political orders, a goal that is manifest in the demand that the individual be respected in her freedom. Although no moral procedure can assure in advance that this goal is met, unlike the case of the ancients, we "post-Kantians" have the reflective capacity to recognize the formal demands of self-conscious agency.³⁴ I take up Hegel's assessment of the moral point of view as a starting point, and how that discussion intersects with the conception of agency developed here, chapters 2 and 3.

Conclusions

Some of the most unique aspects of Hegel's conception of action and agency develop around the basic themes of self-ignorance, collective agency, self-knowledge through alienation, and the right of the objectivity of action. The first three of these concern primarily the means by which self-consciousness emerges from a state of mere potentiality to actuality within a society. The right of the objectivity of action, however, concerns the capacity of self-consciousness to grasp the socially determined purpose of an action as its own, even where such a grasp was entirely absent prior to the act. Moreover, this capacity exists as a consequence of our membership in a community that assigns "universal" meaning to our acts, and of our ability, as rational agents, to take up that meaning as our own. Thus, contrary to Taylor's contention, agency for Hegel does not demand that "we already have some sense, however dim, . . . of what we are doing" (1983: 80).³⁵ Even such a limited dependency on introspective awareness would place the individual before the

social in the development of agency, and would represent a return to the “Cartesian/empiricist” picture. The most original and important aspect of Hegel’s conception of action lies with its attempt to account for direction and purpose without any recourse to socially “unmediated” phenomena.

In the following two chapters, I shall turn to a more specific discussion of Hegel’s conception of moral and political justification. This will complete the groundwork for parts 2 and 3, where I argue that a Hegelian framework is useful for coming to an understanding of certain key aspects of a feminist critique of sexist society. To the extent that Hegel’s framework can be applied to a wider body of social and political criticism, it may serve both to provide a coherent conceptual underpinning to that criticism and to expand our understanding of the framework itself. It is to these tasks that I now turn.