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Hegel and Heidegger on the Phenomenology of Conscience

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Abstract

In this essay, I explore possibilities for phenomenology beyond Hegel with respect to questions of conscience, guilt, and ethics. In the first section, I briefly introduce Heidegger's phenomenology. The next section provides an interpretation of conscience in Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Like Hegel, Heidegger claims that conscience states my guilt prior to any specific wrongdoings; Heidegger's ideas around the 'call of conscience' are thus considered next. Building on differences and connections between Hegel's and Heidegger's phenomenologies of conscience, the final section outlines implications for a phenomenologically responsive ethics.

In this essay, I want to explore the significance of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* for phenomenology beyond Hegel with respect to the question of conscience. There are some striking connections between Hegel's analysis of conscience in his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and Heidegger's reflections on the call of conscience in *Being and Time*. Both of these 'phenomenologies' of conscience come to conclude that we are guilty—not because of any particular deeds, but because of certain features and shortcomings of our existence in the world.

Of course, I do not mean to claim that Hegel and Heidegger pursue phenomenology in the same sense. But there are some remarkable connections which I will develop in the first section, focusing specifically on a certain neutrality—that is, an attempt to withhold judgment and attend to experience—which their approaches share. Furthermore, I wish to show that it is this very withholding of judgment that allows developing ethical implications from their phenomenologies of conscience. Such implications are important because the main danger which could emerge from a philosophy that shows how we are always already guilty would be an attitude where it does not matter what we do, or where we would have no way of analysing our situation regarding ethical decisions. By contrast, I draw out implications from Hegel's as well as

from Heidegger's considerations that point us towards a responsive ethics: a phenomenological ethics that responds to our changing circumstances and situations and acknowledges that other people are always important factors to be considered in our responses as well.

I. Introductory remarks on phenomenology

Heidegger develops his idea of phenomenology by revising Husserl's idea. A main component of Husserl's phenomenology is the so-called *epoché*. It is a specific kind of doubt; it refrains (Ancient Greek *épêchein* = refraining) from positing the being of the world independently from consciousness. Any judgement about the existence of the world is suspended or left open. Husserl states that we 'bracket' (*einklammern*) or 'put out of action' (*ausschalten*) the general thesis of the natural attitude ('The world is/exists') (Husserl 1982: 65/54). Husserl says that this allows us to get back to the 'things themselves' (*Sachen selbst*). Similarly, Hegel states: 'Consequently, we do not need to import criteria, or to make use of our own bright ideas and thoughts during the course of the inquiry; it is precisely when we leave these aside that we succeed in contemplating the matter in hand as it is in and for itself' (*PbG*: 77/54).¹ By calling Hegel's suggestion similar, I do not mean to indicate that they are identical—especially since Husserl's initial idea of the *epoché* does not involve a historical dimension, as Husserl himself noted.

Husserl comments in his later writings that even though the universal *epoché* still strikes him as possible, it appears to have caused misunderstandings especially as to what is achieved by the shift of attitude (Husserl 1970: 158). Therefore, the late Husserl suggests a slower, more historical approach which takes him closer to Hegel as well as Heidegger. Heidegger points out explicitly: 'The only Western thinker who has thoughtfully experienced the history of thought is Hegel' (Heidegger 2002: 243).² Heidegger explains in Section 6 of *Being and Time* how a 'destruction' of traditional metaphysics by way of a stepwise approach has positive implications (rather than merely destructive ones). Furthermore, the idea of phenomenology which Heidegger embraces supplements Husserl's idea by focusing not just on what 'shows itself' but also on that which 'lies hidden'. When it comes to that which shows itself, Heidegger recommends a similar procedure to what we have just seen in Husserl and Hegel: 'to let that which shows itself be seen within the limits in which it shows itself' (*SuZ*: 34). That which lies hidden is what Heidegger calls the phenomenon in the phenomenological sense; yet it has to remain 'linked to what shows itself' in a particular fashion: 'so as to provide its meaning and ground' (*SuZ*: 35).

While it would be quite a stretch to call the relation between that which shows itself and its hidden ground a dialectic in Hegel's sense, I believe it could be

called a dialectical movement in a wider sense of *dia-legein*, talking through, such that our search for the hidden meaning is informed by what shows itself, and the exploration of the hidden ground in turn informs our future relation to that which shows itself. Heidegger's procedure involves circles in the hermeneutical sense, where we start from our pre-understanding and elucidate it as we go along. We can only get started with our inquiry into the meaning of Being, for example, because 'the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way' (*SuZ*: 25)—and not just must be, but is, as our discourse in which we use several forms of 'to be' shows. In *Being and Time*, we are not concerned with 'derivation', but with 'laying the bare grounds' for answering the question (*SuZ*: 28). Therefore, if there is a circle, it will not be a 'circular argument' as we know it. Heidegger says that the point about circles is not to try and avoid them, but to find the right entry point into them (*SuZ*: 152). It is this procedure of allowing conscience to show itself and let it 'talk through' its matters that we will now pursue first with respect to Hegel, then regarding Heidegger's reflections. In each instance, we will try to refrain from judgment and wait for conscience to reveal its deeper dimensions to us. Taking the *experience* of conscience as much as possible at face value would be the closest connection between Hegel's and Heidegger's ideas of phenomenology. The original title of the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, namely, *Science of the Experience of Consciousness*, testifies to this.

II. Hegel and the phenomenology of conscience

In the development of Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, conscience (*Gewissen*) arises as a fairly late stage. But although we are already in the realm of Spirit, conscience returns our focus in a certain sense to the individual. We will see that it is ultimately the conversation with others which leads beyond conscience—after a last attempt to enter more deeply into the standpoint of conscience and retain it by giving equal rights to everybody when conscience turns into the beautiful soul. Although it emerges at a much later stage of the dialectic, conscience bears some similarities with sense-certainty. Certainly, we are now concerned with a different, more advanced level; we are concerned with Spirit whereas sense-certainty relates to the individual. Yet the failure of sense-certainty to preserve its standpoint has essentially been connected to the fact that we are always in a community and conversation with others because the internal contradiction of sense-certainty becomes manifest when expressing its content.

Another connection between sense-certainty and conscience lies in the character of beginning which both of them exhibit. Sense-certainty forms the beginning of the journey of consciousness, and conscience forms the beginning of ethics, as it were. Hegel does not treat conscience at the very beginning of his

reflections on *Sittlichkeit* and morality; but if we disregard the exact order of the *Phenomenology of Spirit* for a moment, the phenomenon of conscience proves to be quite a fundamental phenomenon. For example, natural consciousness frequently turns to it for explanation. Hegel's analysis of conscience reveals—just like his analysis of sense-certainty—that there are no unconditional beginnings and that the allegedly unconditional claim of conscience does not occur out of nowhere.

At the beginning of the chapter on Spirit, we were already concerned with a law that *is* or exists—yet as a law pregiven to consciousness which consciousness had to accept. After the experience of the alienation of Spirit in *Bildung* and enlightenment, we are concerned with a law which bases its existence on the certainty of the inner world. Hegel makes reference to sense-certainty implicitly by using familiar formulations and explicitly in a comparison at the beginning of the analysis of conscience (*PbG*: 467/385). H. S. Harris points out that in the moral world, we are concerned with actions as 'things'—with multiple aspects of actions, etc.—, whereas conscience returns to the beginning (Harris 1997: 460). Furthermore, Harris compares the standpoint of conscience with the moral-sense philosophy developed by Shaftesbury and others: action is grounded in a moral sentiment.

Conscience³ is 'concrete moral Spirit' which has returned to itself. It is the immediate unity of moral essence realizing itself and action as concrete moral shape. In and through action, consciousness relates to the actuality (*PbG*: 466/385). Conscience exists concretely as it fulfils 'not this or that duty, but knows and does what is concretely right' (*PbG*: 467/385). Both the refinement of the concept of duty and the emphasis on concreteness continue Hegel's critique of Kant's philosophy which we cannot really explore further here; it evolves around what Hegel perceives as abstraction and lack of action in Kant's deontology. The positive result of Hegel's sustained critique of Kant's moral philosophy consists in solving the conflict of the moral worldview: conscience does not helplessly observe the conflict of various duties but proceeds to act. Conscience knows that it is in a unique or singular situation such that no casuistic approach can be helpful. When conscience acts, it is in a community with others. The deed is real, and it can be accepted or rejected by others. More precisely, the action is real exactly because it calls for recognition; to act means to translate what is individual into what is universal (*PbG*: 470/388). For Hegel, the good is not the good will, as Kant proposes (and which does not necessarily come to realize itself and thus cannot be recognized), but the good deed.

However, conscience knows very well about the difficulties of acting which stem from the fact that there are always some circumstances of my action that remain unknown to me. I am confronted with 'a plurality of circumstances which breaks up and spreads out endlessly in all directions' (*PbG*: 472/389). Conscience

is thus always already guilty since it is inevitably ignorant of at least some of the circumstances relevant to the action. The case of Oedipus takes this difficulty of not knowing the relevant circumstances to the extreme. Since conscience cannot achieve complete knowledge, it takes its knowledge to be complete. Otherwise, conscience would never come to act. The problem of the moral worldview consists exactly in the fact that it is too obsessed with its own deficiencies to proceed to action. The moral worldview is concerned with a conflict of duties which are, upon closer consideration, devoid of content; in contrast, conscience imports its content, taken from its individuality, into specific duties (*PbG*: 476/393).

Hegel's idea of circumstances spreading out endlessly in all directions points ahead to the key concept of world which becomes arguably the most significant idea of twentieth-century phenomenology, whether in the shape of the lifeworld, for Husserl, or as the main determinant of our existence which proves Being-in-the-world, for Heidegger. World is a network of references (Husserl), a context of involvements (Heidegger), a nexus of connections, etc. Actuality presents itself to us in the shape of horizons or worlds. In all these directions, we find plenty that is unfamiliar to us and can thus not be reliably predicted. This reflects another key Hegelian insight, namely, that the perspective of teleology—which Husserl shares—does not at all include being a prophet and making predictions about the future. When we act, we can overall not predict the outcome, although we nonetheless rely on predictions (which will reveal the extent of their reliability later).

Returning to Hegel's dialectics of conscience, we see how an aspect of inequality emerges since all action stays in contact with actuality and with others. The action is a determinate one, 'a *specific* action, not identical with the element of everyone's self-consciousness, and therefore not necessarily acknowledged' (*PbG*: 477/394). Conscience is never merely a private judgement but calls for general recognition. There are different consciences because everybody has a conscience. We do not know whether the other consciences are good or evil. Yet I take the conscience of others to be evil in order to assert my own self (*PbG*: 477/394). This is a kind of natural self-protection measure, in the widest sense: not so much to divert the actions by others as to divert their judgement which can reflect badly on me and hurt my feelings.

It is necessary for us to articulate our convictions. By giving reasons, we ward off assumptions about bad intentions which others explicitly or implicitly attribute to us. 'Here again, then, we see language as the existence of Spirit' (*PbG*: 478/395). With language, others truly come into play, and we are now dealing with Spirit in the genuine sense while moral consciousness previously remained 'dumb' or silent (*PbG*: 479/396). At this stage of the dialectic, language (rather than action) is our true connection to the world; language appears to eliminate

alienation. Language connects one self-consciousness to the other; it is the possibility of communication, justification and recognition. The role of language in Hegel points ahead to the significance of conversation and communication in twentieth-century phenomenology.⁴ What we share with others is *logos* as language which allows giving reasons for our actions, i.e. giving justification (*logon didonai*).

Although conscience seeks the recognition of others, it is ultimately convinced that it knows best what should be done, since it knows its own situation best. Others can ask for a justification, but from the perspective of my conscience, they owe me respect. As ‘moral genius’, conscience goes beyond the difference between abstract self-consciousness and its own self-consciousness, returns to itself and acquires its poorest position: the stage of the ‘beautiful soul’. The shape of the ‘beautiful soul’, which does not want its inner beauty to be contaminated by a real action, will not be treated in detail here, especially since Hegel also only mentions it briefly.⁵ The beautiful soul lacks power because it does not come to externalize itself. ‘In this transparent purity of its moments, an unhappy, so-called “beautiful soul”, its light dies away within it, and it vanishes like a shapeless vapor that dissolves into thin air’ (*PbG*: 484/400). This is the extreme standpoint of self-assertation by way of completely turning away from others—and as humans, this would lead to our demise (while there are certainly coping mechanisms to retain elements of ‘beautiful soul’, which often involve artistic or literary engagements). Language thus falls into the inequality of the individual being-for-itself. Language gives us possibilities to truly connect to others, make them understand my reasons, listen to theirs, and contemplate a solution together.

However, in Hegel’s dialectic, conscience makes one last attempt to assert its truth and avoid the discussion with others. Conscience trusts that it knows best what should be done since only it itself knows its own situation (*PbG*: 485/401). ‘Situation’ will prove a key concept for twentieth-century phenomenology when it comes to creating an ethics, which would need to be a description-based ethics (in order to remain true to the phenomenological principles as indicated above). ‘Situation’ designates world in the here and now; it has spatial as well as temporal dimensions. Yet in Hegel’s dialectic, the community in its observing role is still present, and it accuses conscience of hypocrisy. Conscience admits that it is evil since it acts according to its own law; by doing so, it acts against the others and ‘wrongs’ them (*PbG*: 486/402). Not only does the consciousness which gives its own law realize that it is evil; judging consciousness has to admit that it is evil as well because in its judging, it shares in the evil. Acting consciousness and judging consciousness are two sides of one and the same coin, as it were.

To judge means not to act; yet judging consciousness knows that acting needs to happen. Therefore, it shares the guilt. When judging consciousness makes itself equal to acting consciousness, it is recognized by acting consciousness as equal. Both recognize that they cannot be ‘objective’ because they cannot consider all possible aspects of the situation. Acting consciousness thus realizes that it is not inferior to judging consciousness. Instead of trying to claim a superior position, it offers forgiveness to judging consciousness—which judging consciousness does not immediately accept. Yet in the end, they admit that each is promoting its own self-interest and realize that they can forgive each other for this. Admitting their guilt opens up the possibility of improvement (Harris 1997: 502). Admission of guilt is inspiring because it creates a significant connection. Furthermore, it allows admitting of one’s own guilt which proves to be a deep human craving, from the perspective of phenomenological psychology.

The two forms of consciousness forgive each other, become reconciled, and recognize each other to be one and the same ‘I’. ‘The reconciling *Yea*, in which the two “I”s let go their antithetical *existence*, is the *existence* of the “I” which has expanded into a duality, and therein remains identical with itself’ (*PhG*: 494/409). It is part of this acknowledgment that we might have been dealing with one consciousness all along, or that the dialectical development also works for conscience as a split phenomenon within one ego which is very truthful to the phenomenology of conscience and its call, as we will see with Heidegger. With this insight, Hegel’s phenomenological analysis comes to a close; and we are indeed familiar with the fact that conscience as a phenomenon exhibits a strange duality. It determines the nature of conscience to carry out a dialogue within individual consciousness in which I take distance from myself, as it were, and assess my own intentions and actions. This is not a voluntary act but rather happens to me—almost as if I was experiencing an external voice speaking to me. Conscience is not a solipsistic phenomenon; it is not a mere monologue. Only because we are in a community and conversation with others do we have conscience. Conscience necessarily involves the interplay of individuality and universality. One conscience by itself cannot decide what is good. It seems adequate to our lived experience that we cannot always distinguish whether the ‘voice’ speaking to us is our own, or whether the voice might have different dimensions, as we will see with Heidegger.

III. Heidegger: the call of conscience

Heidegger’s reflections on conscience also emerge at an advanced stage of his project: in the second chapter of the second division of *Being and Time*. The general question of Division Two, Chapter Two, is ‘Who is the who of Dasein

in its authentic mode?'. This question requires us to briefly introduce the concepts of Dasein and authenticity. Heidegger introduces Dasein as follows: 'This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term "*Dasein*"' (*SuZ*: 27). Each of us is Dasein. It is mostly due to unwanted implications of the term 'human' (that emerged during its long history with various definitions of the human and humanism) that Heidegger decides to introduce his own concept. He chooses 'Dasein', which literally means 'being-there' and is in everyday language often used interchangeably with 'existence', to emphasize our special relation to our being-there, our existence. Our being is an issue or concern for us (cf. *SuZ*: 32).

Dasein has two modes or modalities: authenticity and inauthenticity. Inauthenticity is our everyday mode in which we behave as everybody else does. This has a disburdening effect on us. But occasionally and in rare moments, we recognize that a different mode of existence could be possible:

And because Dasein is in each case essentially its own possibility, it *can*, in its very Being, "choose" itself and win itself; it can also lose itself and never win; or only "seem" to do so. But only in so far as it is essentially something which can be *authentic*—that is, something of its own—can it have lost itself and not yet won itself. (*SuZ*: 68)

This possibility to choose itself is something which Dasein experiences particularly in moments of anxiety. Anxiety makes manifest to itself 'that authenticity and inauthenticity are possibilities of its Being' (*SuZ*: 235). Authenticity is enigmatic because we cannot prove that anybody has ever been authentic. There are good grounds for arguing that at best, authenticity is a matter of the moment. Heidegger is very clear that the neutrality discussed above in relation to the phenomenological approach is also advisable when it comes to authenticity and inauthenticity: Inauthenticity neither connotes a 'less' in Being (*SuZ*: 43) nor a diminishing of facticity (*SuZ*: 128). The distinction is 'not moralizing' (*SuZ*: 167), and inauthenticity does not constitute a 'negative evaluation' (*SuZ*: 175).

Conscience comes into the picture as Heidegger asks about the who of Dasein in its authentic mode. The 'who of Dasein' is the 'Self [*Selbst*];' yet this self is mostly concealed. For inauthentic Dasein, the answer would be the *Man*-self (the *they* self). Yet since we are now searching for the 'who' of authentic Dasein, this answer does not suffice. It is not even clear that Dasein has the potential or possibility to be itself in an authentic fashion. Section 54 therefore tries to broach this possibility as carefully as possible by asking: 'How can authentic existence (and our potential for being ourselves) be attested?'. It is announced that what we ordinarily describe as 'the call of conscience' can provide such attestation. The term 'attestation' appears suitable here as it points to an indirect approach.

The ‘who’ of authentic Dasein cannot be accessed in a direct fashion; we need a witness. Although it will not be possible to point to a witness in the flesh, the prospect of a testifying voice seems quite promising.

Since it is the essence of a voice to call, Heidegger can already announce that this voice needs to be examined with respect to the message it delivers and with respect to the appropriate hearing or understanding, but first and foremost with respect to who is calling and who is being called. Heidegger approaches conscience by asking for its existential-ontological foundations. These foundations or conditions are to be found in discourse (*Rede*) as an ‘existential’, i.e. as an essential feature of our existence. The possibility of discourse characterizes our existence in such a way that we can speak and listen. These abilities make it possible for the call of conscience to occur, and for us to listen to it.

Heidegger announces from the beginning that conscience calls ‘unambiguously’ (*SuZ*: 271). This feature distinguishes it from the ‘idle chatter’ of the *Man*. In the noise of idle chatter, the voice of conscience tends to get lost. Yet it is not in any literal sense that everyday noise drowns out the call of conscience: Heidegger points out right away that the voice of conscience is not so much a vocal voice which provides articulated utterances, but a voice which speaks silently, ‘giving us to understand’ (*SuZ*: 271). It is literally a giving which is at stake here, a giving which we can ‘take’ if we want to be reached by it.

The fact that the call of conscience is not a vocal utterance does not constitute a problem for Heidegger’s analysis since vocal utterances are in any case secondary to the original structure of discourse and understanding. We can very well understand something which has not been explicitly uttered. At the same time, Heidegger points out that the term ‘call of conscience’ is not an analogy, allegory, or comparison. It should be understood in terms of discourse as a mode of our Being-in-the-world, that is, as a way of finding ourselves in the world and existing in it.

Who is being called in the call of conscience? The appeal of conscience is made to Dasein. Heidegger says that this answer is ‘as incontestable as it is indefinite’ (*SuZ*: 272). The answer does not truly surprise us; there is, in fact, no alternative to it. Yet who issues the call of conscience? Heidegger maintains: ‘The call comes from me and yet overcomes me’ (*SuZ*: 275). When Heidegger states that the call is not willed or wanted by myself, but overcomes me, he is providing a phenomenological analysis of the call of conscience as we experience it. It appears that it is Dasein that calls, but in such a way that its voice is alien to itself. The call is uncanny or alien to us because we are used to Dasein speaking in the voice of the *Man*.

This analysis might appear somewhat problematic given that Heidegger does not want to stay with the everyday interpretation of conscience. However, a pure description of our experience of being called by conscience does not yet

entail a traditional interpretation of conscience as a critical or moral authority. When we simply describe how we experience the call that is ordinarily attributed to conscience, it turns out to be a voice that is not entirely our own, but also most definitely not somebody else's voice. Heidegger states that the call 'certainly does not come from an other who is in the world with me' (*SuZ*: 275).

The next important aspect of the call of conscience, taken up by Heidegger in Section 58, concerns the 'message' of the call. The call of conscience tells us that we are essentially guilty, or that 'so far as Dasein factically exists, it *is* also guilty' (*SuZ*: 281). Dasein is guilty before it has incurred any debt. We are guilty because we are thrown into this world without being the ground or basis of our own existence. Moreover, we are thrown into this world as free beings who have to engage in certain actions at the expense of not undertaking other actions. 'Freedom, however, *is* only in the choice of *one* possibility—that is, in tolerating one's not having chosen the others and one's not being able to choose them' (*SuZ*: 285). Dasein is always already guilty, not because of some particular deed, but because of the general structure of existence.

Heidegger explains how our everyday or ontical understanding of guilt does not break through to this deeper understanding of guilt; a phenomenological analysis can show how the everyday understanding of guilt is related to and based on the ontological concept. Our ontological guilt comes about because we are thrown into the world in such a way that our coming-into-the-world is out of our control. Heidegger speaks about Dasein being a 'nullity of itself' (*SuZ*: 330) which he in turn describes as giving rise to our freedom in the sense cited above. It is important to acknowledge that both of these statements operate on the ontological level, that is, the level which concerns our mode of Being or existence. They are not empirical or ontical statements which would be concerned with me not having chosen to be born into this specific country, or not having chosen a specific possibility. Rather, it is in principle the case that my coming into the world involves zero input on my part, and every choice I make involves not having selected various other possibilities. Guy Elgat (2020) explains very well how this ontological guilt needs to be understood in terms of my non-coincidence with myself or the fact that whatever I do, I will always remain 'indebted' to myself because there will always be something in my existence which is 'outstanding [*ausstehen*]' in the sense of an ontological debt: 'Being is annihilated when what is still outstanding in its Being has been liquidated. As long as Dasein is an entity, it has never reached its "wholeness"' (*SuZ*: 280).

Heidegger also explains that our ordinary understanding of conscience goes wrong in that it takes conscience to be negative, speaking exclusively about having a 'bad conscience'. Instead, we can learn to open ourselves up to the call of conscience and be ready for it. As Walter Brogan points out, this allows

Heidegger to introduce desire into our understanding: 'Wanting to have a conscience is the desire to be' (Brogan 2013: 39). This also relates to the topic of anxiety which is so prominent in *Being and Time*: Heidegger states that 'Wanting to have a conscience becomes a readiness for anxiety' (*SuZ*: 272). This does not mean to seek anxiety out; but it means to acknowledge it as a fundamental mood of existence and be ready for it.

Heidegger's final considerations on the call of conscience place emphasis on the concept of a 'situation'. Dasein is situated. Rather than being situated at a specific point in homogenous time and space, we are situated in the world, or in a specific situation within the world. The situation we are in places demands on us. Our ethical responsibility thus grows out of the situation. Rather than yielding a relativism which could diminish my responsibility, this emphasis on the situation actually increases my responsibility since it is *me* on whom the situation places demands.

IV. Guilt and responsive ethics

Hegel and Heidegger both argue that we are on a fundamental level guilty, and that being ethical means to act despite, and ultimately even because of, this realization. Locating this guilt on a fundamental level means to say that we are guilty in so far as we are human. There are limitations of our human knowledge and our possibilities that make it impossible for us to be fully right in our actions. Hegel's basic argument relies on the ways in which the circumstances of our actions are never fully known to us. We would need to know all relevant factors as well as future outcomes of our actions, neither of which is humanly possible. Heidegger relates our ontological guilt to our freedom, that is, the fact that we can in principle never do everything, but need to decide on one or more particular actions.

Reading Hegel and Heidegger on conscience has thus revealed several parallels especially around guilt, and these will be explored below to show implications for an ethics based on guilt and conscience. However, there are substantial differences between Hegel and Heidegger which should not be ignored. There are differences regarding their overall approaches where Hegel's phenomenology is a philosophy of absolute Spirit, even when he begins from the experience of consciousness. Consciousness is Spirit that has not yet recognized itself as Spirit, and which undergoes a dialectical movement to come to this realization. Hegel's original title was not *Phenomenology of Spirit* but *Phenomenology of the Experience of Consciousness*, and Heidegger reflects on this in detail in his lecture course on the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Heidegger is critical of the concepts of spirit

as well as consciousness, albeit mostly on grounds that relate to pre-Hegelian philosophy (and Derrida claims, to my mind rightfully, that Heidegger still retains certain elements of spirit—in the Hegelian sense—despite rejecting the term).

What Heidegger focuses on mostly in his Hegel interpretation is the concept of experience. It is experience that matters, for phenomenology in Hegel's sense as well as for twentieth-century phenomenology. The experience of conscience, that is, of having a conscience or experiencing the call of conscience, has several equivalent elements in Hegel and Heidegger, especially guilt and the emphasis on situations to which we will attend shortly. The main differences in describing this experience relate to the sustained dialectical process of conscience in Hegel and the considerations on forgiveness. Hegelian conscience attempts to justify its approach at length. In doing so, the realization emerges that acting as well as not acting are equally the grounds of guilt. Admitting this guilt is an important part of being human. It gives rise to the possibility of forgiveness—but in doing so, it yields another insight into human nature as we come to see that forgiveness in the full sense is not in our power but can only be granted by a higher being. The reason as to why Hegel deems only God capable of forgiveness in the emphatic sense seems to be that our human inability to fully evaluate a given situation and its complex circumstances prevents us from being able to grant full forgiveness. As a result, guilt emerges even more fully as a human phenomenon. Guilt is so intricately connected to our humanity that we cannot rid ourselves of it; this points to the need of making it the basis for any ethics to emerge.

For both Hegel and Heidegger, guilt is not a result of particular deeds or actions. Rather, it is connected to our human condition. In Heidegger's case, this is obvious already from the project of *Being and Time* and its focus on our existence. In Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*, reflections on conscience occur as consciousness approaches its realization that it is part of Spirit, and it involves the realization that in so far as we are human, forgiveness is not really in our hand. Examining the reasons for our guilt sheds further light on our human existence. For Hegel, our guilt arises because the circumstances of our actions spread out in time and space in such a fashion that there is always a significant amount of ignorance involved in our decision-making. If we are allowed to import the concept of world into Hegel's considerations, it is due to the way in which world is horizontal, that is, organized in a systematic fashion but such that only a portion of the world is accessible to us in each instance; we cannot overcome our ignorance.

World is organized in a horizontal fashion when it comes to space, but the same holds for time, and that is where Heidegger places his main emphasis: our actions extend into the future, and when we take up one possibility, there are many others which we do not take up. Passing up on these other possibilities makes us guilty because it is inevitable that some of these will be good, at least

to an extent. They are possibly better than the one we take up, but only time can fully tell.

There are thus somewhat different emphases which Hegel and Heidegger place in explaining our guilt, but the basic structure is the same, namely, that we find ourselves in situations which are always part of a larger whole: world. The temporal and spatial dimensions of the situation are limited and, as a result, we are never going to be entirely right, or if so, then only with an element of chance, because we never knew everything that was relevant to know, and we could never properly anticipate all results of our actions. Hegel places more emphasis on the factors that influence our decision, and Heidegger concentrates on the decision we make which always comes at the expense of other possibilities. It might thus seem that Hegel focuses more on the past, Heidegger on the future—but they both alert us to the ways in which the past reflects on the future, and in both instances, it is in the present that a decision must be made. It is thus the same structure of world in its spatial and temporal extensions that makes me guilty.

Heidegger emphasizes that our mode of existence is Being-in-the-world. This makes it even more plausible that our guilt comes about due to the nature of world as spatially and temporally horizontal, and due to our human nature as inevitably existing in a situation. Our guilt is exacerbated by the fact that we are in the world with others who exist in the same way that we do. World is shared, and language is the element of Spirit or the element in which we live. As we have seen above, Hegel explores in detail how others come to judge my actions and thus make my guilt explicit to me—until it emerges that being judgmental and righteous, which are also essential human features, contribute equally to our guilt. For Heidegger, the interpersonal component comes in the form of a voice that is mine and yet appears alien to me. Since Heidegger states explicitly that it is not the voice of another Dasein who is with me in the world, it seems more appropriate to think of this voice as the internalized ideas of others, which manifest partly by way of norms, partly by way of a habitual structure of conversation which evokes a steady dialogue in my head that calls on me to give *logoi* qua reasons for my actions. There are thus habitualized ways in which we judge ourselves, and others do not need to be explicitly present.

As Hegel points out that humans are not fully capable of forgiveness, and only God can grant forgiveness, it might seem as if Hegel acknowledged our finitude, in a fashion that would appear to bring him close to Heidegger. However, when it comes to Hegel's idea of God, Heidegger would raise a further point of criticism that places Hegel firmly in the tradition from which he emerges: 'And at once we are faced with the further question as to whether disclosure has its site in spirit as the absolute subject, or whether disclosure itself is the site and points to the site wherein something like the representing subject can first 'be what it is' (Heidegger 1998: 332). Such disclosure or 'unconcealment' does not properly

emerge in Hegel's thought because he would still consider it a dimension of spirit rather than a 'site' or precondition for spirit to arise.

Furthermore, if we want to follow Heidegger's invitation to think disclosure itself, we encounter the problem that we cannot really bring about such thinking by ourselves. At best, we can try to be open to such thinking by becoming attentive to the ways in which unconcealment is always linked to concealment, and concealment in turn cannot be made transparent, but needs to be attended to in its concealment. For Heidegger, our most promising route to approach concealment is by way of poetry which allows concealment to be experienced as such, without forcing it out into the open. By way of poetry, we can also learn lessons about ourselves and our own unintelligibility. Pippin explains this contrast between Hegel and Heidegger in helpful terms: 'Not only is existence an unfinishable temporal (or temporalizing) project, and so never something that can be taken in as an object of thought, one of its most distinctive characteristics is its very *unintelligibility* to itself. It finds itself uncanny, not at home anywhere, the anxious, null basis of a nullity' (Pippin 2024: 166). Moreover, it emerges from these considerations that the primacy of the theoretical which still determines Hegel's thought—yet which becomes open to practical considerations at moments such as the chapter on conscience—needs to be reconsidered more fully: 'This is another mark of our finitude [...] there is no *direction* for thought to take without this precedence of practical mattering' (Pippin 2024: 28). For the finite beings that we are, thought is always already motivated by practical matters, which is why the considerations on conscience present a crucial opening for asking about ethics.

What kind of ethics⁶ could then emerge from these realizations? In the remainder of this essay, I will indicate that based on Hegel's and Heidegger's reflections on guilt and situations, it would need to be a responsive ethics in the phenomenological sense (which is connected to German phenomenologist Bernhard Waldenfels, although he does not build explicitly on Hegel and Heidegger but on those French phenomenologists who were influenced by them). The need for responsivity emerges on several levels. Firstly, there is the realization that we find ourselves thrown into situations. In our decision-making, we need to be responsive to the situation we find ourselves in. General principles detached from experience cannot be satisfying but were rightfully dismissed by both Hegel and Heidegger before their considerations on conscience were properly started.

Secondly, as the temporal character of our existence means that the situation continuously changes, we need to respond time and again. Our actions have an impact on our situation, and along with this as well as the general flow of time, situations change. More radical changes to our situation are brought about

by history. Therefore, we need to always be prepared to re-evaluate our decisions and respond anew.

The third level is the interpersonal level. Here, it becomes obvious that responsivity does not just name the necessity to respond to changing situations, but also the need to respond in the more literal sense. We have seen that the situations in which we find ourselves will always involve other people, even when they are not literally present but by way of internalized voices and accepted norms. As we act, we need to negotiate such expectations, habits and norms with our assessment of the situation which is itself necessarily incomplete. Even the traditional concept of conscience includes such expectations and norms; but Hegel's dialectical considerations on the way in which judgmental consciousness is just as guilty can help us deconstruct norms in light of the demands placed by the situation, thus moving beyond traditional conscience. Responsivity becomes particularly relevant and interesting when specific others are involved in the situation, and when their wishes and fears need to be negotiated with my own evaluation of the situation.

Consequently, responsive ethics emerges as a complex, multidimensional and ongoing undertaking. In closing, I would like to indicate the benefits of responsive ethics by focusing on an admittedly rather idiosyncratic field: my phenomenological research on childbirth. Responsive ethics is particularly important when it comes to communication under complex circumstances. In considering the complex and intimate situation of childbirth, I have become convinced that these matters cannot be decided in general or across the board but require being responsive to the people involved and their volatile situation. Giving birth is a situation which we cannot properly anticipate. Providing people with different options as to where and how to give birth is crucial, and we should not allow for ideologies to get in the way of that. Moreover, it is a significant situation for responsivity because the experience itself might well be entirely different from any anticipation of it. Changing one's mind is a likely event to which those involved—partners, midwives, obstetricians—need to be responsive, over and over again. This involves a lot of non-verbal communication, that is, body language, because verbal communication is difficult. On the level of body language, we are also concerned with question, call, response, responsibility, etc. Given the complexity and unpredictability of the situation, it is more or less inevitable that mistakes will be made. Yet this does not mean it will not matter what we do; it matters very much. The situation is also likely to involve strong emotions—especially fear, anxiety, possibly shame, and wonder—which exert a call for open, non-judgmental responses. These emotions vary widely between different cultures. Equivalent considerations could be undertaken for sexual situations and some of the same emotions.

Overall, responsivity to my mind allows us to counter the spectre of relativism which always looms large when philosophies take situations, perspectives and singularities seriously. Responsivity calls on us to not capitulate but rise to the challenge. This challenge is an impossible one: it requires owning up to the complexities of situations and the people in them, with their life-histories, and try to respond to all that, as best as possible. Furthermore, the challenge is to repeat this response anew, in each moment, and take the changed situation and people's reactions into consideration, again and again. Even though we often fail to rise to this challenge, the challenge itself is intriguing. In any case, responsivity names an ongoing process, a movement that will never be finished, because responding to situations and people as they emerge in the 'here' and 'now' never comes to an end. Any 'one fits all' approach is definitely unsuitable. Conscience knows this. Being responsive to conscience as it picks up on the consequences of our actions means to constantly reassess—which is necessary because we acknowledge that we needed to start acting without properly foreseeing the consequences. We are always already guilty; but conscience also tells us to constantly carry on responding.

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Notes

¹ Abbreviations:

PbG = Hegel, G. W. F., *Phänomenologie des Geistes*, in *Werke in zwanzig Bänden*, ed. E. Moldenhauer and K. M. Michel (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1986), Vol. 3/*Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Oxford: Clarendon, 1977).

SuZ = Heidegger, M., *Sein und Zeit*, 17th ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993 [1927]).

² I agree with Robert Pippin regarding the 'deepest affinities between Hegel and Heidegger: that dealing with figures in the history of philosophy is not preparatory to philosophy or exemplary for philosophy but is the highest form of philosophy itself' (Pippin 2024: 165).

³ I will not follow every moment in the dialectic of conscience as this movement is quite extensive. Instead, I will focus on the main moments which later allow connecting Hegel's ideas to Heidegger's, with special emphasis on guilt. For more comprehensive accounts, see Harris (1997). Moyer (2011) discusses Hegel's analysis of conscience in the context of debates in contemporary metaethics, particularly with respect to Bernard Williams, Jonathan Dancy, Barbara Herman and Christine Korsgaard. Moyer also draws interesting connections between the *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right* regarding conscience.

⁴ For a comprehensive account of language in Heidegger, see Dahlstrom (2013).

⁵ H. S. Harris poses the question whether this shape must be passed through by necessity or whether it might be possible to reach the level of reconciliation directly (Harris 1997: 457). To my mind, modified and softened versions of the ‘beautiful soul’ are conceivable.

⁶ Moyar (2011) makes a detailed and, to my mind, compelling case for Hegel’s ideas on conscience indeed amounting to an ethics in the more general sense—whereas I am mostly interested in a phenomenological sense of ethics.

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