

Part Five Hegel on the Historicity of Normativity

Handout for Lecture 17

Genealogy and Magnanimity: The Allegory of the Valet

An important perspective on the concept of alienation is provided by two meta-attitudes that are in play throughout the final two-thirds of the *Spirit* chapter. Hegel's terms for these attitudes is "edelmütig" and "niederträchtig."

The *edelmütig* meta-attitude takes it that there really are norms that attitudes are directed toward and answer to. It treats norms as genuinely efficacious, as really making a difference to what individuals do. It understands attitudes as norm-governed, in the dual sense that norms provide standards for assessments of the correctness of attitudes, and that attitudes are subjunctively sensitive to the contents of the norms.

The *niederträchtig* meta-attitude sees only normative attitudes. The norms are construed as at most adverbial modifications of the attitudes: a way of talking about the contents of those attitudes by assigning them virtual objects. *Niederträchtigkeit* is the purest expression of the alienated character of modern normativity (hence culture, self-consciousness, and community).

The *Kammerdiener* passage on *Niederträchtigkeit*:

"[I]t holds to the other aspect . . . and explains [the action] as resulting from an intention different from the action itself, and from selfish motives. Just as every action is capable of being looked at from the point of view of conformity to duty, so too can it be considered from the point of view of the particularity [of the doer]; for, qua action, it is the actuality of the individual. This judging of the action thus takes it out of its outer existence and reflects it into its inner aspect, or into the form of its own particularity. If the action is accompanied by fame, then it knows this inner aspect to be a desire for fame. If it is altogether in keeping with the station of the individual, without going beyond this station, and of such a nature that the individuality does not possess its station as a character externally attached to it, but through its own self gives filling to this universality, thereby showing itself capable of a higher station, then the inner aspect of the action is judged to be ambition, and so on. Since, in the action as such, the doer attains to a vision of himself in objectivity, or to a feeling of self in his existence, and thus to enjoyment, the inner aspect is judged to be an urge to secure his own happiness, even though this were to consist merely in an inner moral conceit, in the enjoyment of being conscious of his own superiority and in the foretaste of a hope of future happiness. No action can escape such judgement, for duty for duty's sake, this pure purpose, is an unreality; it becomes a reality in the deed of an individuality, and the action is thereby charged with the aspect of particularity. **No man is a hero to his valet; not, however,**

because the man is not a hero, but because the valet—is a valet, whose dealings are with the man, not as a hero, but as one who eats, drinks, and wears clothes, in general, with his individual wants and fancies. Thus, for the judging consciousness, there is no action in which it could not oppose to the universal aspect of the action, the personal aspect of the individuality, and play the part of the moral valet towards the agent.”

[PG 665; emphasis added]

How should norms (what is or is not appropriate, correct, obligatory, or permissible) or normative *statuses* (responsibility, authority, commitment, or entitlement), on the one hand, be understood as related to normative *attitudes* (*taking* performances to be appropriate, correct, obligatory, or permissible, *acknowledging* or *attributing* responsibility, authority, commitment, or entitlement), on the other? The traditional, premodern view saw norms as independent and attitudes as dependent. The objective norms have authority over the subjective attitudes of individuals, which are supposed merely to reflect them, acknowledge their authority, apply them in deliberation and assessment, judgment and action. The modern view sees attitudes as independent, and norms as dependent. The subjective attitudes individuals adopt *institute* norms.

The *Kammerdiener* stands for a *niederträchtig*, relentlessly naturalistic alternative to this *edelmütig*, normative description of concept use. In place of the picture of “heroic” practical sensitivity to norms—trying, in deliberation and assessment, to determine what is really correct, what one ought to do, what one is obliged to do (what “duty” consists in), acknowledging genuine normative constraint on one’s attitudes—this meta-attitude appeals *only* to attitudes, which are not construed as the acknowledgment of any normative constraint on or authority over those attitudes. Reasons are traded for causes.

The general thought is that the possibility of offering a certain kind of *genealogical* account of the process by which a conceptual content developed or was determined can seem to undercut the *rational* bindingness of the norms that have that content.

The first way of understanding the relation between the *edelmütig* normativist and the *niederträchtig* naturalist is as a cognitive disagreement about a matter of objective fact. They disagree about the correct answer to the question: Are there norms, or not?

This objectivist, cognitivist way of understanding the status of the two meta-attitudes toward norms and normative attitudes is not the only one available, however. It is possible to adopt instead an almost diametrically opposed subjectivist meta-meta-attitude. According to this way of thinking, the normativist and the naturalist employ different vocabularies in describing the world. Using one rather than the other is adopting a *stance*. The two stances are incompatible; one cannot adopt them both. One either uses normative vocabulary or one does not. But both of them are available, and both of them are legitimate.

“Just as every action is capable of being looked at from the point of view of conformity to duty, so too can it be considered from the point of view of the particularity [of the doer].” [PG 665]

“No action can escape such judgement,” there is no action in which it could not oppose to the universal aspect of the action, the personal aspect of the individuality, and play the part of the moral valet towards the agent.” [PG 665]

“Nature and the world or history of spirit are the two realities. . . . The ultimate aim and business of philosophy is to reconcile thought or the Notion with reality.” [Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume 3, p. 545]

“The consciousness that judges in this way is itself base [niederträchtig], because it divides up the action, producing and holding fast to the disparity of the action with itself.” [PG 666]

The claim is that adopting the *niederträchtig* normative meta-attitude institutes a kind of normativity that has a distinctive, defective structure. To say that is to say that *Niederträchtigkeit* is in the first instance a kind of *recognition*, rather than of *cognition*.

“Faith . . . receives at [Enlightenment’s] hands nothing but wrong; for Enlightenment distorts all the moments of faith, changing them into something different from what they are in it.” [PG 563]

“To faith, [Enlightenment] seems to be a perversion and a lie because it points out the otherness of its moments; in doing so, it seems directly to make something else out of them than they are in their separateness.” [PG 564]

The third construal of the *niederträchtig* and *edelmütig* meta-attitudes toward norms and normative attitudes is then that they are recognitive attitudes that have the effect of *practical commitments*. Adopting the *edelmütig* stance of spirit is committing oneself to *making* what we are doing being binding ourselves by conceptual norms, so acknowledging the authority of such norms, by practically *taking* it that that is what we are doing—by recognitively treating ourselves and our fellows as doing that. On this view normativity (which, because the norms in question are for Hegel all *conceptually* contentful, is the same phenomenon as rationality) is not feature of our practices independent of our practical meta-attitude toward it. “To him who looks at the world rationally, the world looks rationally back,” Hegel says. Normativity and rationality are *products* of our *edelmütig* meta-attitudes, of our practically taking or treating what we are doing (recognizing each other) *as* acknowledging rational commitments. Spirit exists insofar as we *make* it exist by *taking* it to exist: by understanding what we are doing in normative, rational terms. We make the world rational by adopting the recognitively structured constellation of commitments and responsibilities I have—following Hegel’s usage in connection with the community Faith is committed to instituting—denominated *trust*.

If the determinate contentfulness of the thoughts and intentions even of the *niederträchtig* is in fact intelligible *only* from an *edelmütig* perspective, *then* anyone who in practice treats what he is doing as judging and acting is implicitly committed thereby to *Edelmütigkeit*. The apparent parity of the two metanormative stances is an illusion. No genuine choice between them is possible. By talking (engaging in discursive practices) at all, we have already implicitly endorsed and adopted one of them, whether we explicitly realize that or (like the *Kammerdiener*) not. On this reading, what Hegel is asking us to do is only to *explicitly* acknowledge theoretical and practical commitments we have already *implicitly* undertaken just by taking part in discursive practices—which is to say, by being acculturated. Explicitly adopting the *edelmütig* practical-recognitive attitude is accordingly just achieving a certain kind of self-consciousness: realizing something that is already true of ourselves.