

The misery of morality

Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* I (V-B)



I have always found it extremely regrettable that Hegel's illuminating reflections in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* on the genealogy of morality and the contradictions of its successive figures, contradictions that can only be resolved through political action, are not more widely present in public debate (or even in philosophical controversies).

It is, of course, because of his impenetrable style that Hegel is read by only a very small number of people. This, in my view, justifies the attempt to reconstruct the "novelistic plot" with its many twists and turns

and dialectical reversals, in the hope that this may clarify the issues at stake in a return to politics from the prevailing moralism.

Indeed, moral consciousness appears when self-consciousness recognizes itself in the consciousness of others (*an "I" that is a "We"*), a nostalgia for unity with others. However, by remaining paradoxically individual and abstract, these moral positions will then develop all their limitations and contradictions. Hegel thus illustrates the dialectical succession of their respective impasses: from traditionalism to hedonism, then from the utopian "law of the heart" to the discipline of virtue, soon reduced to individual merit and "good works," if not to personal development or even to a simple, more or less entertaining occupation... In turn, the desire to defend a moral law that is truly universal proves unenforceable, leading to a reflexive morality, a morality of responsibility and vigilance (which can go as far as civil disobedience) that ultimately leads to political engagement, the only means of making the world a little more just by overcoming the moral impotence and unhappy consciousness of the isolated individual.

For fun and to facilitate understanding, I will illustrate these different moral positions with more or less inappropriate contemporary figures (Finkelkraut, Onfray, Glucksmann, Foucault, Benasayag, Kouchner, Sartre, Morin, Rosanvallon, Slama, Bové), for which I apologize!

- Traditionalism

The first obvious response when we discover our connection to others and our social dependence is to adopt the local language and customs; it is imitation. The group takes precedence over the individual because the individual depends on the group for survival. The awareness of unity with others therefore takes the form of traditionalism, for which "*wisdom and virtue consist in living in accordance with the customs of one's people.*" It is less an awareness of others than an awareness of **what we have in common**, of our "roots," of a heritage, of continuity, of original unity, and of a common future.



Why, then, is this position not tenable *ad vitam aeternam*? For two compelling reasons: it is impossible to **justify** one religion over another, just as it is impossible to defend one tradition

against another. Opposition to others destroys the presupposed unity, but what finishes it off is its internal division, its hypocrisy: the obvious fact that the ideology renounces its true realization, that no one really believes in it, and that the worm is in the fruit! Moreover, those who refuse to accept these obvious facts are racists, chauvinists, and fanatics of all stripes...

Here we have the matrix of dialectics—in four stages, not three—where every position (1) is undone by opposition to the other (2) and by internal division (3) before the contradictions are recognized and the initial position is abandoned through the integration of what was rejected into a new synthesis (4). The negative moment is twofold (opposition then division). These are very simple things, but let's continue.

- The intellectual and society

"Then the individual stood up against laws and customs; they are only a thought without absolute essentiality; but the individual as this particular self is then to itself the living truth." This is the promotion of critical thinking in the face of the group as a pure product of the encounter between peoples and the knowledge of different traditions, which leads, for the unhappy consciousness of the critical intellectual, to the *"search for happiness,"* as if for this lost unity.

(a) pleasure and necessity (brutality)

The progress of awareness is embodied in the figure of the intellectual who has denounced the pretense of common values and now opposes society. He no longer believes in it and, like all those who have lost faith, his first reaction is to imagine that "everything is permitted" (a fatal error!), that only selfish **enjoyment** and the voice of the body count. What appears to be a return to things themselves is, in fact, the dogmatic product of false knowledge, false evidence, simplistic abstraction, and common prejudice, where unity with others is reduced to universal selfishness, consciousness and reason then paradoxically appearing to consciousness and reason as a foreign essence (*it is the mind that denies itself with the infinite force of the mind*)!



What can free us from this "tyranny of pleasures" and triumphant individualism? Quite simply the fact that pleasures are tyrannical, leaving us no autonomy, and above all that they have an end! Satisfied desire dies out and exhausts itself in a repetition that quickly sinks into boredom. Added to this external contradiction is internal turmoil, because in its exaltation of the flesh, where consciousness fades away, it is the agonizing presence of **death** that returns to consciousness in an increasingly irremediable way. *"Instead of throwing itself from dead theory into life itself, it has rather rushed into the consciousness of its own lack of life."*

Consciousness therefore suffers this violence of spoiling its own satisfaction, limited from its very existence. In the feeling of this violence, anxiety may well retreat from the truth and tend to preserve what is threatened with loss. But it cannot be appeased; in vain it wants to settle into thoughtless inertia; thought disturbs the absence of thought and its anxiety disturbs its laziness (Introduction).

How can we escape this impasse of a life of empty pleasures? The awareness of death is already the answer by which consciousness insists and reminds itself of its negativity. The distancing of consciousness from immediate enjoyment is also an awareness of the universal that dwells within us

and transcends our mortal condition. Pleasure does not have the last word because it is confronted with its end and its internal division, but also with this voice of **the universal** within us, which is impossible to silence! (We should probably add the encounter with the other). In any case, consciousness now knows that it contains within itself the dimension of the universal and of the law, that is to say, it has become moral consciousness (internalized). Man is a rational and political animal, a speaking being, not just a living body. We do not live in the present, we project ourselves into the future. Consciousness is not only life, it is also thought (*We cannot renounce thought at all; it is what distinguishes us from animals*, Philosophy of History, p. 22).

(b) The law of the heart and the delusion of presumption (utopia and madness)

Here, then, is a new figure of consciousness, the intellectual who no longer advocates pleasures but becomes the voice of the universal against a humanity "*subject to a foreign necessity*." This immediately felt moral aspiration proclaims itself **the "law of the heart,"** the opposition of its subjectivity to the world, with no other legitimacy than its inner strength of conviction and the certainty that it is defending the well-being of humanity. This rejection of external reality in the name of pure utopias by an individual consciousness that believes itself superior to the world can go as far as "delusions of grandeur." It is "*individuality which in and of itself wants to be law, and in this claim disturbs the established order*."

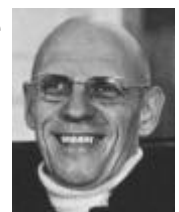


What could possibly cause this detractor to lose his composure? As always, it is primarily opposition to others (provoking *conflict between everyone*), the existence of other laws and principles, other activists for other causes, but it can also be the very realization of his ideal that does not hold up, revealing its internal divisions and all its perverse effects (the cure worse than the disease) to the point that one is tempted to invoke the intervention of a conspiracy, the hand of the devil, against pure intentions that turn into a nightmare! This can go as far as **persecution mania**, as we know only too well, as long as the disorder in the world is not attributed to the disorder of those who have disrupted it, to their pretensions to impose their arbitrary will on the course of the world, to their criminal madness...

(c) Virtue and the course of the world (reformism)

- The link between self-awareness and the universal

This third figure of the intellectual is completely opposed to the previous figures, since it is now the individual who will be accused of disturbing the course of the world. In order not to lose its mind, self-consciousness is forced to apply its zeal against its own subjectivity, through the discipline of an impersonal **virtue** and a transformation of the self that is a negation of the self, at least in its narrow individualism (but which can sometimes go as far as suicide). We find ourselves in a situation close to traditionalism but with greater internalization and therefore greater individualization as well, a sign of progress, and this time "*the experience of virtue can only lead it to discover that its goal is already achieved, that happiness is found immediately in the act itself*." Once we have decided to be virtuous, we can admire ourselves!



The party of virtue is not revolutionary, even if it maintains the illusion that the ideal society would result from the personal reform of all; it aims only at the elimination of the excesses and perversions of the existing order. We have seen that it is not only selfishness but egocentrism that is now rejected as the origin of evil. Yet, paradoxically, even though the course of the world to which virtue

is opposed is identified with the reign of universal selfishness, it must be admitted that virtue is entirely individual, realizable only to the extent of each person's abilities. Its personal **merit** therefore lies not so much in its objective result (its social utility) as in the effort and good will that go into it. Merit is measured by effort, a refrain familiar to all religions of individual salvation but which, of course, does not hold true in the world (and does not determine the value of goods, for example)!

- The course of the world as the effective reality of the universal

Giving priority to subjective merit over objective results, to **resistance** or counter-power over power, has the effect of revaluing the world that causes us suffering and allows us to reveal our opposition and our excellence, our virtue and our merit. The harshness of the world is necessary for our discipline; it is the place where it is exercised and where greater freedom exists. This is an ideology for winter times, which must be faced, but which can easily fall into complacency.



Indeed, from this perspective of personal trial and self-revelation, charity is primarily concerned with not lacking objects of pity, and the savior of the world with the world's need to be saved! This should not be seen as a "deviation" but as a simple logical consequence that ultimately wears down this spirit of resistance by denouncing its collaboration with the order it claims to fight indefinitely through a reformism of small steps.

- Individuality as the reality of the universal

After a while, the proclaimed virtue sinks into ridicule and hypocrisy, if not into petty personal affairs and contempt for others who are decidedly disappointing. We know how easily love for humanity can turn into hatred for a humanity that is decidedly not up to our dreams. Virtue sought to do away with individuality as evil, but by privileging effort, resistance, or even greatness of soul, it is the individual who is ultimately posited as the only reality and the only good. As a result, it is the course of the world and **individualism** that *"triumph over pompous speeches about the supreme good of humanity and its oppression, about sacrifice for the good, and the misuse of gifts; These are declamations which, in their diversity, express only this content: the individual who claims to act for such noble ends and has such excellent phrases on his lips is, in his own eyes, an excellent being; he puffs himself up and puffs up his own head and the heads of others, but it is empty puffery."* There is no such thing as a disinterested individual. It is better to admit it, even to claim it, if one wants to become someone. In any case, *"With this experience, the means of producing good through the sacrifice of individuality falls away."*



- Self-assertion

Individuality is now not only a certainty but **an end** in itself, an affirmation of oneself and of one's unity with others in one's very negativity, the singular universal of a duty to be. We have moved from the negation of the individual in the mass to his distinction and valorization in his relationship to others (beautiful individuality), from the transformation of the self to the expression and realization of the self.

(a) The reign of creators and deception

- The concept of real individuality

We have become modern. No longer are we traditionalists or naive individuals focused on our own excellence. We want to be judged by what we do. This is the Protestant principle, which is not satisfied with professed faith but judges the believer by his works, as the tree is judged by its fruit. Consciousness is only what it does; its truth lies in its personal **practice** (not yet in political activity), where it discovers itself.



Action is precisely the becoming of the spirit as consciousness. What it is in itself, it therefore learns from its own effective reality. Thus, the individual cannot know what he is until he has brought himself to effective reality through his own action... It is indeed from the operation itself that he learns to know the original essence that must necessarily be his goal; but in order to operate, he must first possess the goal. But it is precisely for this reason that he must begin immediately and proceed directly to action, whatever the circumstances and without thinking further about the beginning, the means, or the end.

At first glance, this call to creativity as a suspension of consciousness seems entirely beneficial, a **pleasure** of activity that relates only to oneself: "Whatever he does, it is the individual who has done it, and this thing is himself, because he knows that he always achieves his goal, so he can only feel joy within himself." This is a fairly satisfying image of happiness, a modern and positive image. Many stop there, as if expression and creativity were the goals of life.

- Individuality in one's works

The problem, however, is that it is not enough to create just anything. Works are fragile and multiple, ephemeral and do not necessarily find an audience. As usual, what undermines a work is first its confrontation with other works, then its perishable and imperfect nature, representing only a partial and distorted aspect of the individual. One can well claim that it does not matter, that there is no goal, that "the goal is the journey," that it is the sincerity of the endeavor, that it is "expressing oneself," as they say. But what then comes to mind is the distinction between the act of creation and the work created. "The true work is only this unity of doing and being, of wanting and accomplishing." Creation is then overvalued in relation to the work, at the risk of falling to the rank of a mere **occupation** (just as merit had replaced virtue). It thus gradually loses its value of accomplishment and truth.



Whatever way things turn out, it has always accomplished and achieved the thing itself... If it does not lead to an actual goal, it has nevertheless wanted to, that is to say, it then makes the goal the goal, the pure operation that does nothing, the thing itself, and it can thus console itself by saying that at least something has been done...

No matter how much we want to make the individual the goal and product of our actions, what is clearly lacking is at least **recognition** from others. It is not enough to encourage "creativity" when what is needed is the difficult courage to tell the truth and invent new solutions. We must seek to express a genuine collective need, which requires work and something quite different from self-expression...

- Mutual deception (the Republic of Letters)

For the moment, what matters is no longer the works or their creators, but the authors themselves. The return of the collective takes the form of a pretense, a false recognition of a supposed "Republic of Letters" that welcomes all works (a huge library where all



books coexist). This learned society (without collective action) comes together in the name of objectivity of knowledge and selflessness. In fact, behind this "honest conscience" (supposedly without pretensions) and the façade of tolerance of intellectual circles, there is fierce **competition** to capture attention or denigrate others, revealing the deception of a creation that would have us believe that it is exhausted in the creative act, when in fact it offers its work up to universal judgment, as well as the hypocrisy of a recognition that no one "takes seriously" but which, behind the scenes, conceals rivalry or contempt. The man of letters craves fame more than recognition by his peers; he seeks to be "known" for his fiction rather than recognized for his actions; he does not claim to be effective but rather "successful." His actions are purely verbal and self-centered: he shows off his talent through his talent, and if he wants to make a place for himself in the world, it is in the intellectual world, "above the fray" (he is not a citizen).

There is a real mutual deception in the importance they attach to their occupation, unduly considering themselves to be the "intellectual elite," but also in this strategy of stagnation where all works sink into what Lacan called "poubelliciation," which consists of "drowning the fish" in the mass or the market, with the result of equalizing all content by its container. Amidst this exchange of pleasantries and overly flattering praise, the works lose all value of truth or intervention, bathed in a generalized **relativism** that leaves only a noisy assembly of anonymous authors. It is not only the confrontation with others that nullifies the works, but the pretension of turning them into personal affairs, into problems of creators! We cannot deny the universal that binds us, nor can we set a goal while pretending not to want to achieve it.

There is also a deception of oneself and others if one claims to be concerned only with the pure thing; a consciousness that puts one thing forward experiences others rushing like flies to milk that has just been exposed.

(b) Legislative reason (the moralist)

Beyond the subjectivity of the artist reduced to pure distraction (for which everything is equal), moral consciousness seeks a more solid and less deceptive foundation than subjective creativity, an "objective" conduct that it finds within itself, a law that it gives itself in a completely *autonomous* manner. To this end, it claims to determine Good and Evil, which are eminently practical questions, not in action but solely in thought, in **universal** reason, which is the negation of the self as particular but the presence of moral law within me. "*Sound reason knows immediately what is right and what is good*"! As pure formal logic, this moral law presents itself as a law without exception, content to repeat ad infinitum that we must always act in such a way that our action can become universal law.



However, this implacable republican law enters into multiple contradictions and proves to **be inapplicable** to the point of no longer being a law but a mere commandment. "*It can also be said that such laws remain only in the realm of what ought to be, but have no effective reality; they are not laws, but only commandments... What remains to this legislative reason is therefore the pure form of universality.*" The unconditionality of the universal maxim is a formal constraint that does not allow for the concrete singularity of each situation to be taken into account (should one tell the truth to the Gestapo?).

To impose this law blindly and without reflection would in fact mean dispensing with the consciousness that grounds it and with rational judgment, which would be contradictory and a terrible regression. Hegel thus dismantles the two most famous maxims: "Everyone has a duty to

tell the truth" and "Love your neighbor as yourself," showing that their level **of abstraction** and internal contradictions render them devoid of any practical value.

"Everyone has a duty to tell the truth" - In this duty, stated as unconditional, the condition "if he knows the truth" must be immediately admitted. The commandment will therefore now be stated as follows: "Everyone must tell the truth, whenever they know and believe it to be true." Common sense, that is, the ethical conscience that immediately knows what is right and good, will explain that such a condition was already so closely linked to its universal sentence that reason has always understood the commandment in this way. But in this way it actually admits that already in its statement it immediately violated this same commandment; it said, "Everyone must tell the truth," but it understood it to mean, "He must tell it according to his knowledge and conviction," that is, it spoke differently from what it thought; and to speak differently from what one thinks means not to tell the truth. By correcting the untruth of the sentence, we now have the following expression: "Everyone should tell the truth according to their knowledge and belief on every occasion." But in this way, the universal necessity that the proposition wanted to express is reversed into complete contingency; it promises a universal and necessary content and contradicts itself through the contingency of this content.

Another famous commandment is: "Love your neighbor as yourself." It is addressed to singular individuals in relation to singular individuals, a relationship that is understood as taking place between the singular and the singular, or as a relationship of sensitivity. Active love—for inactive love has no being and, consequently, is not what we mean—aims to remove evil from a person and bring them good. To this end, it is necessary to discern what is evil in this man, what is the good appropriate to this evil, what his prosperity generally consists of, that is to say, I must love this man with intelligence; an unintelligent love would perhaps harm him more than hatred. But the intelligent and essential good, in its richest and most important form, is the universal and intelligent operation of the State—an operation in comparison with which the operation of the individual as an individual becomes something so insignificant that it is hardly worth mentioning. Moreover, this operation of the State is so powerful that if the singular operation wanted to oppose it, if it wanted to be solely for itself as a crime, or for the love of another to deceive the universal in regard to the right and the share it has in it, this singular operation would be completely useless and irresistibly broken. This benefit, which belongs to the realm of sensibility, therefore retains only the meaning of an entirely singular operation, of assistance that is as contingent as it is momentary.

(c) Reason examining laws (the critical intellectual, the ideologue)

An ethic based on self-consciousness cannot do without **examination** by conscience in order to be put into practice without falling into contradiction with its principles and good intentions. The maxim would then become "do what seems right to you, after examining the consequences of your actions."



Thus, the ethical essence is not immediately itself a content, but only a unit of measurement for establishing whether a content is capable of being or not being a law, i.e., whether the content does not contradict itself. Legislative reason is reduced to an examining reason.

No universal content can be derived from conscience outside the principle of non-contradiction and a purely formal logic, which is not a sufficient moral guide, but it is no longer the principle that

counts, it is the concrete result. Moral conscience is the universal in action, whose transitory content depends on the particular circumstances it encounters. What matters is reflection itself, the conscience that examines the law and appropriates it, interprets it. The law has no existence of its own and is thus reduced to its application by conscience (or its possible "civil disobedience" and "duty of insubordination"). This is a very reasonable position, but its limits are quickly apparent in the social disorder that can result from it, as well as in the Jesuitical **rationalizations** that equalize all content, since any cause can be argued, just as much as the opposite cause.

Thus, Hegel amuses himself by demonstrating, based on Kant's **antinomies**, that communism and private property are equally justified (in the abstract) and are (in reality) equally criticizable! Indeed, communism respects the equality of everyone but not the inequality of abilities or needs. Similarly, *property* is valid as the objectivity of the individual recognized by others, *"but this contradicts its nature, which is to be used and to disappear. It is valid at the same time as that which is mine, which all others recognize and from which they exclude themselves. But in the fact that I am recognized lies rather my equality with all, that is, the opposite of exclusion!"*

The legitimacy of interpreting or modifying the law once again comes up against the diversity of positions as well as its internal contradictions. Everything can be justified by an overly subtle dialectic in which everyone gets lost. We are in total confusion where there are no longer any laws! This genealogy of morality therefore concludes with the final denunciation of the **"misery of morality"** and the need to overcome it in politics. No theory, no moral principle, can in itself achieve effectiveness in the world or account for practical choices without falling into arbitrary dogmatism because it is devoid of all thought.

Theory now depends instead on **practice**, which has become collective and determines its perspective by constructing the social conditions of justice. It is undoubtedly out of disappointment with individual moral action and private life that the subject resolves to take collective action, but it is above all by taking into account the global context and concrete reality, going back to the material and social causes of injustice, that moral demands must be raised to the level of political commitment. The lesson to be learned from the failure of morality is that we must engage in politics!

The **overcoming** (*aufhebung*) of morality does not mean that we can do anything we want and that we can, as a certain Marxist tradition would have it, defend a cynical and amoral politics on the pretext that "the end justifies the means"! It is more like when "love abolishes the Law" in St. Paul, it is clearly to internalize it and realize it more completely, certainly more freely too, but the means cannot contradict the objectives pursued and belie the good intentions displayed. Even if only the result counts, the means used to achieve it leave their mark and are preserved in the result. The end of morality is only the end of individual morality and of an autonomous morality that would be valid in itself; it is the abandonment of great abstract principles, of the Good in itself or of the Just in itself. It is admitting that no authority is above conscience, which remains responsible for applying the law but must nevertheless renounce making its own law, its own inner voice, admitting that it does not have innate knowledge, that it does not have automatic (universal) answers, or ready-made convictions, and that it must examine each question concretely and publicly (by opening a judicial investigation and a contradictory debate). This is why we need a flesh-and-blood judge, with a prosecutor and a lawyer, a true institutionalization of dialectics: the law cannot be applied automatically. The end of individual morality means above all admitting that only collective action can make the world a little fairer and give some effectiveness to universal conscience,

whereas moralistic intellectuals lead us straight to either the tyranny of arbitrary law or the anarchy of contradictory laws.

We must scale back our ideals, without denying them, but rather to make them a little more consistent and feasible. Even if the Good is out of reach, conscience knows that it must try to do its best and make its ethics as effective as possible, that is, to realize them politically and give shape to our common world. Self-consciousness thus identifies with the effectiveness of self-consciousnesses, that is, with their **collective** consciousness and political action. Dialectics is no longer individual but becomes social and historical, situated in space and time, in what is, for the individual, his effective world and the various communities to which he feels responsible (today we would say that we are part of a larger communication system).

Finally, in political action and in our effort to transform collective consciousness, we are already realizing our moral ideal in our active relationship with the whole world, but we are also becoming aware of the fact that this collective consciousness that we find so repugnant is nevertheless the product of struggles between moral consciousnesses and of political history. This is what reconciles us with a world of the mind that is no longer so foreign to us in its terrible objectivity, but in which we participate and which depends on us (in the little way that we can!). **The objective mind** is very real, it produced us and we produce it, as real to us as the material world: it is the world of law and institutions, of symbolic links and discourse, as much as it is the world of technology and accumulated knowledge. It is the collective and historical dimension of all self-awareness, the reciprocal self-production of society and the subject in the constitution of a collective and its ideology, through which reason and the universal are realized in history through work, social struggles, and political action. The Spirit is Us, our share of effective consciousness, the state of opinion and our collective intelligence, the era in which we live and our dreams for the future...

The Spirit is ethical effectiveness. It is the Self of effective consciousness in the face of which the mind arises, or rather which opposes itself as an effective objective world; but such a world has now lost all meaning for the Self as a foreign element, and likewise the Self has lost all meaning as a being-for-itself separate from this world... This is the starting point of everyone's activity—it is their goal and their end as the thought-in-itself of all self-consciousnesses. This substance is also the universal work which, thanks to the operation of all and of each, generates itself as their unity and equality, for it is the being-for-itself, the Self, the operation in act... Each accomplishes its own work in it by tearing apart the universal being and taking its share.