

From Subordination, through Autonomy, to Mutual Recognition: Stages in the History of the Metaphysics of Normativity

Bob Brandom

Hegel sees all subsequent forms of understanding as developing from the rejection of the traditional metaphysics of normativity that I shall call “the subordination-obedience model.” The idea of superior-subordinate relationships as part of the objective order of things is the core of the neo-platonic Great Chain of Being (*scala naturae*) deriving from Plotinus.

The concept of the relative status of superior/subordinate can be construed as having nonnormative circumstances of appropriate application, but normative consequences of application in that the commands of the superior institute normative statuses of *obligation* in those related to them as subordinates.

One important modern idea is that the status of superior, having the *right* to command, to *oblige* those commanded to obey, can be taken to have not only normative *consequences*, but also normative *conditions*. This is the idea that being a superior is a normative status that one must *deserve* (for instance, through the fact of service or an attitude of benevolence).

Another is the idea that the status of being a superior, in the sense of having a *right* or *authority* to impose obligations and command obedience (as opposed to the mere power to punish noncompliance) might be dependent on the *attitudes* of the subordinates: on their having agreed or consented to, or otherwise *acknowledged* that authority.

While Hegel insists that this modern model expresses a genuine and important truth about the metaphysics of normativity, in the end he sees both the traditional and the modern models of normativity as one-sided: the first as hyper-objective and the second as hyper-subjective.

I understand Hegel’s use of “independence” and “dependence”, when addressed to self-conscious subjects, to be ways of talking about *authority* and *responsibility*, respectively.

I render his distinction between what things are “in themselves” as opposed “for themselves” or “for others” in the normative realm of Geist in terms of the distinction between normative *statuses* (authority and responsibility) and normative *attitudes* (claiming or attributing).

In the natural law tradition, paradigmatically among Catholic theologians, *intellectualists* (such as Aquinas), held that the authoritativeness of commands issued by superiors to subordinates (expressions of the attitudes of those superiors, including God) answered to (depended upon, are responsible to) *reasons* rooted in the same objective natures that determined their relative “primacy” as superiors/subordinates. This is the basis of Aquinas’ distinction between God’s “absolute” and his “ordained” power. By contrast, theological *voluntarists* (such as William of Ockham) reject the constraint on God’s normative attitudes by reasons rooted in objective natures. What makes something right or obligatory (institutes those normative statuses) is just God’s (the superior’s) normative attitudes towards them, his approval or commands. Those attitudes are not constrained by reasons stemming from any antecedent objective normative statuses.

Pufendorf understands normative statuses as instituted by normative attitudes across the board.

We may define our moral entities to be certain modes superadded to natural things and motions by understanding beings; chiefly for the guiding and tempering of the freedom of voluntary actions... [*On the Law of Nature and Nations* I.I.3.]

We create these “moral entities” as God creates natural ones:

As the original way of producing natural entities is by *creation*, so the manner of framing moral entities cannot be better expressed than by the term *imposition*. For these...are added at the pleasure of intelligent creatures to beings already perfect in the natural sense...and consequently obtain their whole existence from the determination of their authors. [OLNN I.I.4.]

Our business is to declare how, chiefly for the direction of the *will*, a certain kind of attributes have been imposed on natural things and motions...And these attributes are called *moral entities*, because the *manners* and actions of men are judged and tempered with relation to them; and do hence assume a face and habit different from the horrid stupidity of the dumb creation. [OLNN I.I.2.]

The natural law and sentimentalist traditions are alike in understanding normative statuses as *natural* products of human *social attitudes*. These three dimensions—attitude-dependence, naturalism and the social-practical character of the institution of norms by attitudes—mark them as distinctively modern approaches to the metaphysics of normativity, contrasting with traditional forms of the subordination-obedience model.

Rousseau performs a remarkable synthesis of the natural law tradition, which introduces the idea of attitude-dependence of normative statuses in the form of a distinctively modern version of the traditional subordination-obedience model, with the perfectionist tradition of self-governance, which includes commitment to the status-dependence of normative attitudes as part of its essential core.

The slogan for Rousseau’s reconceptualization is “Obedience to a law one has prescribed for oneself is freedom.” [Social Contract I.viii.]

Three innovative conceptual syntheses of Rousseau:

1. The self-governance tradition emphasizes the *status-dependence of normative attitudes*, the objective authority of attitude-independent reasons based in the ontological natures of things—exactly the converse of Rousseau’s pure attitude-dependence view. Yet Rousseau has managed to synthesize these seemingly incompatible lines of thought.
2. The subordination-obedience model of normativity grounds the normative status of obligation on the essentially asymmetric relation between the normative statuses of superior and subordinate. By contrast, Rousseau’s version resembles the perfectionist self-government tradition, which acknowledges no such asymmetry. For this tradition, all of us humans, like God himself, are in the same situation of striving to conform to the reasons that are inherent in the natures of things. Rousseau achieves this symmetry by identifying the commanding superior normative subject whose attitudes institute obligations by laying down laws with the obedient subordinate normative subject the appropriateness of whose attitudes is assessed according to those obligations. The subordination-obedience model looks completely different if it is the *same* normative subject instituting statuses by attitudes of commanding and obeying.
3. Rousseau transmutes the overarching goal driving the process of perfecting our capacity to govern our own attitudes by our appreciation of objective reasons into the form of a master-norm, *freedom*, to which *obligation*, the leading normative status according to the natural lawyers’ order of conceptual explanation, is subordinated.

Hegel says that “the principle of freedom emerges in Rousseau... This furnishes the transition to the Kantian philosophy...” [Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Volume III].

Kant gets from Rousseau the idea of thinking about positive freedom in *deontic normative* terms, by contrast to the empiricists’ negative concept of freedom understood in *alethic modal* terms of possibility and necessity.

In the place of the empiricist opposition of constraint to no constraint, Kant puts the opposition between two kinds of constraint: alethic and deontic, heteronomous and autonomous. That normative force, the bindingness of genuinely normative statuses of obligation, Kant understands as essentially mediated by and dependent on the attitudes of the ones who are bound by those statuses.

Kant turns Rousseau's definition of freedom into a criterion of demarcation for a distinctive sense of normative bindingness. He appeals to the symmetric attitudes involved in obedience to self-imposed obligations to define what it is for a status to count as a *normative* status, using autonomy as a criterion of demarcation for the normative.

Kant synthesizes the modern idea of the attitude-dependence of normative statuses (rooted in the voluntarist wing of the natural law tradition) with the premodern idea of the status-dependence of normative attitudes (rooted in the intellectualist wing of the natural law tradition).

What is a reason for what is a matter of the relation between contentful statuses that is not at all dependent on the attitudes of those whose statuses they are—or indeed, of any attitudes at all. Not only *that* one is subject to normative assessment as to the goodness of one's reasons for the commitments one has undertaken but also *what* would count as fulfilling that responsibility are not attitude-dependent in the way in which what ground-level commitments one undertakes is. In exercising one's authority to undertake responsibilities by adopting attitudes, one also subjects one's attitudes to assessment as to whether they suitably acknowledge those responsibilities and what they attitude-independently entail.

Hegel admires and applauds this synthesis of what each of the pre-modern and modern traditions got right: the structural reciprocity of normative attitudes and statuses, according to which each is both authoritative over and responsible to the other. Here, he thinks, Kant plants the seeds of a post-modern overcoming of the opposition between the one-sided traditional exclusive emphasis on objectivity (the authority of status over attitude) and the one-sided modern exclusive emphasis on subjectivity (the authority of attitude over status).

The point of my rehearsal of some of the large-scale strands of thought shaping the early modern metaphysics of normativity has been to make it possible to show how Hegel weaves them together in an altogether original way. His account of normative statuses as instituted by the proper social constellation of recognitive normative attitudes is the fifth model we need to consider. It is both the successor and product of the four we have already considered: the traditional subordination-obedience model, the modern subordination-obedience model epitomized by the Grotian tradition of natural law, the perfectionist-empiricist-sentimentalist tradition, and the radically modern Kant-Rousseau autonomy model.

According to Hegel's model, normative statuses are instituted by special sorts of normative attitudes when those attitudes exhibit a distinctive kind of *social* structure. The kind of normative attitudes a structurally suitable constellation of which are capable of instituting genuine normative statuses are attitudes of what he calls "*recognition*" [Anerkennung].

The distinctive social structure of recognitive normative attitudes that Hegel takes to institute normative statuses is *reciprocal* or *mutual* [gegenseitig] recognition. Recognitive attitudes attribute normative statuses. General recognition is attributing a kind of normative metastatus: the status of being a normative subject. Since according to the model this metastatus is instituted by recognitive attitudes when they are symmetric, when one is recognized by someone one recognizes in turn, it is a normative status that can in principle be exhibited only by those who both adopt normative recognitive attitudes and

have such attitudes adopted towards them. So to have normative statuses one must be both subject and object of normative cognitive attitudes.

The subordination-obedience model essentially incorporates an *asymmetric* social relation, however. One party commands and another obeys. Recognition, too is itself an asymmetric social relation. It has a recognizing subject and a recognized object. But it is the essence of Hegel's metaphysics of normativity that the cognitive attitudes in question be symmetric and reciprocal, in that sense, mutual. The roles of recognizer and recognized (being the subject and being the object of cognitive attitudes) are distinct, and the individuals playing those roles are distinct. But all parties must play *both* roles with respect to each other for their normative attitudes to institute normative statuses.

Kant and Rousseau achieved symmetry within a conception that is recognizably a version of the legislating/obeying model by adopting a *reflexivity* strategy: identifying the commanding with the commanded. Hegel does so by adopting a *symmetry* strategy: understanding the key social normative relation to be one where both subjects standing in that social cognitive relation play both roles. Both metaphysical models can be seen as versions of the idea that normative attitudes of command and obedience between individuals standing in subordination relations can institute statuses of obligation that are genuinely *normative* statuses only if they are intelligible as having the structure of *self-government*. The autonomy model applies that idea by requiring that the instituting attitudes be reflexive. The recognition model applies that idea by requiring that the instituting attitudes be symmetric. According to this new essentially *social* conception of normative self-hood, the self-constituting, self-conscious subject of both normative attitudes and the normative statuses they institute is what Hegel calls "the 'I' that is 'we', the 'we' that is 'I'." [*PhG* 177].

The retrospective rational reconstruction of a tradition of concept-applications is the process that "gives contingency the form of necessity." Viewed *prospectively*, the particularity and contingency of individual attitudes shows up: the sense in which they are explicable in terms of other attitudes without reference to governing normative statuses. Viewed *retrospectively*, the necessity codified in norms as statuses shows up: the sense in which individual attitudes are normatively governed by universals implicit in the tradition, to which they answer for their correctness. Seeing these dual perspectives as two sides of one coin, as indissolubly linked aspects of one rational process by which conceptual content is determined, is what allows Hegel to do justice both to the attitude-dependence of normative statuses and to the status-dependence of normative attitudes. The structure of authority and responsibility it embodies exhibits the structure of reciprocal recognition.

For Hegel the form of reason's march through history is the telling of a distinctive kind of retrospective rationally reconstructive story (an "Erinnerung") recounting a tradition that is expressively progressive in showing up as the gradual emergence into explicitness of determinately contentful conceptual norms and commitments that become visible as having been all along implicit.