

Culture and Belonging: A Hegelian Perspective

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Abstract

This thesis work explores the relationship between individual identity and sociocultural context, drawing on Hegel’s concept of “ethical life” to argue that just treatment of individuals requires recognizing the significance of the world they grew up within. Through an analysis of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*, the thesis emphasizes how individuals are shaped by their historical and cultural environments, particularly through the dynamics of recognition, ethical life, and conscience. In the first chapter, I explain these key Hegelian concepts to demonstrate how identity and agency are formed within a world of norms and values. In the second chapter, I apply Hegel’s insights to critique the imposition of values—whether by colonial powers or internal authoritarian governance—arguing that such impositions cause violence and objectification. Drawing on Frantz Fanon and Saba Mahmood, I explore the unjust consequences of disavowing individuals’ worlds and argue for respecting their embedded values. The third chapter explores a solution called “immanent change,” where cultural practices evolve internally rather than being imposed from outside. Using examples from Afghanistan, Egypt, and Iran, I show how Hegel’s ideas can help us understand justice in intercultural interactions.

Introduction

In this thesis work, I will argue that since individuals are shaped by their sociocultural context, with its specific norms and values, just treatment of those individuals requires recognizing and honoring that they inhabit such worlds and that these worlds matter to them. In other words, to be just toward individuals, we have to acknowledge that they are beings of what Hegel calls “ethical life,” and that it plays a significant role in constituting their identity. It is crucial to understand that individuals are not indifferent to ethical life. They live within a world to which they are deeply attached. I will defend that it is important to accept that individuals inhabit worlds that are meaningful to them, since they have become who they are through them.

I will begin by describing, using Hegel’s philosophy in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, how individuals are shaped and developed in relation to others within historical and cultural contexts. Then, drawing on Frantz Fanon’s discussion in *The Wretched of the Earth* and Saba Mahmood’s anthropological observations in *Politics of Piety*, I will explore why it is wrong to disavow the fact that the world is meaningful to them, and what this means both for intercultural interaction and for how a government relates to its own citizens.

This thesis consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, I will discuss three of Hegel’s key ideas in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that are relevant to my argument: first, recognition, particularly discussed in the section called “Self-Sufficiency and Non-Self-Sufficiency of Self-consciousness; Mastery and Servitude” (§§178-196); second, ethical life, explained in the section called “True Spirit, Ethical Life” (§§437-484); and third, conscience, discussed in the section called “Conscience; the Beautiful Soul, Evil, and its Forgiveness” (§§596-671).

In his account of self-consciousness, Hegel argues that individual self-consciousness depends on intersubjective recognition. The individual's consciousness of herself is developed on the basis of her interaction with the perspective of the other. Through interactions with others' perspectives and the physical world, she comes to perceive herself as "I" and to have a rich and meaningful sense of self. Subjective experience thus emerges through mutual interactions between the individual and the other. This is important to my thesis because it shows how we become who we are on the basis of who others are.

This discussion of recognition is the basis for Hegel's analysis of what he calls "ethical life" and its role in shaping self-consciousness, which will constitute the second part of the first chapter. In the movement from the realm of simple relationships to the broadly interpersonal world, I will focus, as Hegel does, on concrete historical reality. I explain ethical life and the profound influence that the historical and cultural context has in shaping the agency of the individual. Hegel explains the concept of ethical life on two distinct levels: the familial and the societal, each characterized by its specific values and customs. Ethical life, functioning as a more or less integrated system of social norms, becomes interwoven with individuals through their adaptations of social activities and practices. That is, while ethical life is the ground for individuals' actions, it is the purpose of their actions, too (§438). The cultivation within this framework provides individuals with a sense of what is right or proper.

However, individuals are not limited solely to "following" ethical life. Just because they are ethical beings does not mean that individuals have no capacity to act differently from what ethical life demands, or that their actions must always be in conformity with what it dictates. There exist situations in which individuals find some practices or values in their mode of ethical life that are unjust. In fact, there are situations in any form of ethical life in which individual

judgement is required—in which individuals are asked to judge whether what ethical life demands is just or not. In making this judgment, individuals are brought to rely on their own personal experience and insight.

This leads us to the third concept presented in the first chapter: Hegel's concept of conscience. Conscience is the concept with which Hegel shows that we can never simply follow what is done, but that we act on the basis of our own judgement as well, and that it is important to own up to that. In conscience, an individual has to decide what action would be right. Within Hegel's framework, abstract or universal moral principles are insufficient for dictating how one should act in a given situation. The individual is compelled to take action, based on the current situation, her past experience, and her limited knowledge, in response to the demands of reality. If their judgment leads to them no longer acting based on those values or practices, they give ethical life the possibility of changing.

At the beginning of the second chapter, I will focus on how Hegel's arguments can be useful for criticizing colonialism, analyzing the interaction between cultures, and critiquing authoritarian governance within a culture. Here I transition from a description, using Hegel, of recognition, ethical life, and conscience, to a second, normative argument on the basis of his description: showing that it is unjust to impose the values of one form of life upon another, but also that it is unjust for authorities internal to a culture to impose their values on their citizens. To support my argument, I will do three things.

First, following Frantz Fanon's insights into the "inherent violence" in both colonialism and anticolonialism, I explain that imposing values and a way of life on a group of people, at the cost of their own, leads to inevitable physical and psychological violence in that community, and I show that the imposition of practices by internal forces can also lead to violence. I explain that

the authority cannot impose their preferred values, without applying violent treatments, specifically when it confronts with the resistance of citizens.

The second point I will make in support of my argument is that disrespecting the world within which individuals are shaped is accompanied by the “objectification” of those who are imposed upon. The target individuals (i.e., the imposed upon) are usually considered as less-than human beings— as inferior to the imposer. The imposers look at the target individual as an object among other objects rather than a perspective through which the individual sees the world. In this case, the imposer not only denies that the imposed upon is a “perspective,” but it also loses the chance of being recognized through the imposed upon.

The third point in support of my argument is that, as the idea of ethical life shows, the self and agency of the individual are constructed within a world constituted in terms of specific social norms and values. Norms and values are internalized by individuals through the process of socialization. These norms and values become deeply initiated in individuals through the process of internalization. Cultural values, thus, are not like clothes, that people can take off. Exposing people (i.e., the imposed upon) to “new” values does not simply entail that they will forget about their established values and conform to the new values. Using two actual examples from Afghanistan, I argue that demanding that the imposed upon live according to the imposed values does not allow them to live in a way appropriate to their agency.

Finally, in the third chapter, I address the potential criticism of my argument. It may be argued that not all the established practices and values are just or favorable to individuals. Therefore, it is not necessarily unjust that we ignore or disavow ethical life within which individuals grew up. I address this criticism and propose a solution of “immanent change,” arguing that, because denying the reality of ethical life is an injustice in its own right, the culture

should be permitted to evolve through a bottom-up process from within. In this chapter, I will defend a process that enables immanent changes. I will argue against the idea that an authority or external enforcement should decide whether a practice is unjust. Since individuals within a culture are also, in Hegel's terms, "conscience," then they are also developing the capacity to judge for themselves, based on the context they live in, whether a specific action is unjust, or whether the practice no longer makes sense. Their personal judgments must have a say in determining the justness of a practice. Following those judgments, either by exercising or ignoring certain practices, by individuals, leads to a change. Because of the phenomenon of ethical life, those who live within a certain context or culture typically have a deep and well-developed understanding of the meaning and character of its values and norms, and are often, though not always, in the best position to judge what is right or wrong in that culture.

Since ethical life is deeply integrated into individuals' actions—their ground and their purpose—modifying these actions can result in significant contributions to ethical life over time. When individuals alter their behaviors, either by adopting new practices or rejecting old ones, they contribute to the evolution of cultural norms and values. These shifts (i.e., contributions) accumulate gradually, leading to a transformation of the ethical life. By providing examples from the Islamic country of Egypt, I illustrate how changes in ethical life can occur.

In this thesis, I will not focus on Hegel's overall project in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Instead, I am interested in exploring a few of his key ideas and applying them to practical issues. Hegel examines various aspects of human experience, including the experience of the world, the self, the experience of being inside of a society organized by norms expressed in customs, and the experience of the freedom. He draws conclusions about these experiences, each contributing

to a broader understanding of truth. I will take some of these conclusions and explore how they relate to the question of justice in intercultural contexts.

I will describe my own experiences and demonstrate that the principles Hegel identifies are at play in these contexts as well. My goal is to show how Hegel's insights are still relevant today by applying them to contemporary examples, particularly in the context of Iran's history and anthropological studies in Islamic countries like Egypt and Afghanistan. Through self-reflection and analysis of lived experiences, I will illustrate how individuals internalize social norms and values, shaping their identity and moral actions. These examples will help us understand Hegel's concepts of freedom, agency, and ethical life, and their relevance to current social issues.

These topics became relevant to me because of my own experience. In my country, there is a constant tension between local values and modern values. Exposure to Western values, particularly among the younger generation, has led to a gradual disconnection from domestic culture in favor of Western values. This shift is often met with resistance and sometimes violent behavior from radical groups, and it has entailed problems for the development and identity of individuals.

These circumstances prompted me to examine whether Western values should be dominant or rejected within our culture, or if there is a third way to address this issue. In this thesis, I argue against universally embracing or rejecting local values based on the assertion of their superiority. Instead, I advocate for Hegel's two-sided approach: he brings attention to ethical life while at the same time recognizing conscience, which acts within it and cannot be suppressed.

1 Chapter One: What makes an individual? A Hegelian Approach

As I explained in the introduction, my argument has two parts. The first part is a description of what the self is and how it is developed in relation to others and social values. In the first chapter, I am going to focus on the descriptive part of the argument. I will explain how selves are shaped, based on Hegel's explanations in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. To achieve this, I begin the discussion with the description of my own experience, by answering the question of what makes me, me, and then I extend it to human beings more broadly. I will use a self-reflective approach, drawing from my personal experience. I will loosely follow Hegel's method here, showing how we can see even in this other kind of self how recognition is happening.

1.1 Recognition

I was born in Iran, where Farsi is my native language. From a young age, I have felt a deep connection to the rich culture and literature that come with Farsi. This connection was different from that to Arabic, the language of my religion central to my Islamic upbringing. Growing up in a devout Muslim family, I naturally followed the Islamic traditions and practices that were part of our everyday life.

My life was also shaped by the fact that I was born after the 1979 revolution, when an Islamic ideology became dominant. This created a unique tension in the society, with religious and political influences touching all aspects of our lives. In school, Western ideas and practices were strictly off-limits, but at home, things were slightly different where there was a quiet acceptance of Western ideas, allowing me to explore and make sense of the two worlds. This blend of experiences—being rooted in local culture and Islamic tradition while also being

exposed to Western ideas—has deeply contributed to the construction of who I am. It has led me to constantly reflect on the complex and ever-evolving story of my identity.

Thus, to answer the question of what makes me, me, it can be said that I stand at the intersection of all the cultural and historical events that happen around me. It is a blend of conscious and subconscious influences achieved through perspectives upon me. I have been intertwined within such a non-transparent network of the other and the world. I am entangled in the threads of the context. One could not say which thread is making the knot. What makes me who I am is all the individuals I have met, the ways of life I inhabit, and the way these individuals transmit these ways of life. They make me, “me” because, in a specific time and place, I was born in a family belonging to a specific culture with a specific faith and ideology.

Who I am has been shaped by lived experience in the world. The I that comes into being is dependent on my lively interactions with the outside. I am who I am with all these contradictions, faiths, views, and perspectives upon me. The others here are my classmates, teachers, the principal, my parents, and the person who said, “Her glasses are ridiculous!”

Hegel, in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, names and discusses this idea—that our identity is determined through the people we interact with—as recognition (§186). Based on this idea, we are constituted through the other’s feedback. I was not born as who I am; I *became* who I am. Looking at myself, I can see the print of others on myself; I am the result of the views of others. I will discuss Hegel’s concept of recognition in the rest of this chapter.

The main point in the concept of recognition is that, in recognition, the individual is recognized as a perspective. Maybe the others have a lot of feedback about me. For example, when I was a little girl, my parents considered me an energetic person; my classmates looked at me as a nerd; as I got older, my colleagues thought of me as a good colleague. But what is

important in recognition is that, before all these views upon me, I have already been recognized as a *perspective*. I am something distinguishable from other things. In other words, beyond characteristics such as height, skin color, kindness, and social roles like being a student or a colleague, I have already been recognized as a perspective upon the world.

Recognition occurs between two *independent selves*. Recognition is not a matter of one individual's view being imposed on another individual. While the other is a kind of object that I have perspective upon, I recognize them as a perspective, in turn. I look at the world, and I recognize something outside not as a thing, but as a perspective upon me. I perceive a viewpoint on myself that is distinct from other things. They are irreducible to mere objects. When she looks at me through her eyes, it becomes evident that I cannot escape her centrality. Through each of her actions—smiling, gazing at me, checking her phone—she constructs a space around herself. I have come to affirm that perspective on myself.

There are many different aspects to this experience, which Hegel draws out; one of them is the experience of losing myself. That is the moment when I find myself “outside of myself” (§179). I catch myself in the perspective of another. I come out of myself. Just by being there, the other has asserted her perspective and imposed it upon me. I exist within her perspective. I am displaced from my own perspective.

I imagine myself as an object in those perspectives upon me. They take me away from myself. I become an object in their perspective. Consider my teacher at school. On the first day when she came to the class, she began to talk about the class rules. She assigned each of us a chair to sit on. She organized us based on height, with the taller students at the back of the class and the shorter ones at the front. It seems that we are treated as objects within her view, much

like chairs, tables, and the blackboard. Through her actions, she projects herself as the center amongst others, where everything is defined based on her perspective.

However, at that moment, through our actions, we escaped from her perspective. I changed my seat with another student to be close to my friend. I spoke with the student seated next to me; she whispered in my ear, and we both started laughing. We ignored the teacher and played tic-tac-toe in my notebook. It became apparent that I was no longer simply an object in her eyes. She had to also affirm that I had a perspective on my surroundings and made a space around myself based on my own point of view upon the world. I am a “vision” who constitutes reality based on my own perspective and escapes from her centrality.

Here is the moment when she returns “the I” to itself because she no longer sees me as an object like other things. It seems that, through *acting*, I say that “it is me. I am a human being”. I reclaim myself from the other. They perceive me as a perspective upon themselves. Hegel says, “it gives the other self-consciousness back to itself” (§181). Being affirmed by the other, I am no longer seen as an object over there. I have received myself back. This moment is when I am recognized through the other as a perspective.

The individual now perceives herself as “I,” observing and being observed from outside. The self comes to light through mutual interactions between the individual and the other. The individual comprehends herself as “I,” which is fixed by the other’s gaze. This is called “mutual recognition” within which both individuals recognize each other as a perspective.

In a non-genuine relationship, however, one individual’s perspective dominates the other. Hegel’s example of a non-mutual relationship is the master-slave relationship (§190). In this relationship, the master considers the slave as a thing to satisfy his needs, not a consciousness or perspective. Finally, it will be shown that the master is being self-contradictory and affirming the

meaningfulness of the slave's recognition even while enslaving them and deeming them thing. I will explain the master-slave relationship in more detail later in this section.

An individual's sense of herself is not something she develops as a single person. It relies on the other and is achieved through them. In a general sense, it is through acting and receiving feedback from the other that the individual becomes competent as an individual. In his analysis of Hegel's discussion of recognition, John Russon says that this experience of self-consciousness can be described as "being thrown outside ourselves" (2017, 20). To become a perspective, the very being of the individual requires a "vision" from the outside.

Generally, the individual's agency is shaped in coupling with three things: first, the other and recognition from them; second, the other within social and historical contexts, which Hegel calls "ethical life"; and third, materiality and physical reality. So far, I have tried to explain the significance of the other individuals in shaping the individual's self and becoming a perspective. Nevertheless, it is not always the case that we encounter the perspective of the other with no problems. In the "struggle to the death," Hegel gives a picture of how it can be challenging to encounter the perspective of the other (§187).

In the following sections, I will first explain the struggle to the death, a situation in which each one wants to prove her own independence by killing the other, whereas she needs the other to recognize her. This shows the challenge in becoming a perspective. Then I will explain how Hegel shows this struggle leads to the unequal relationship of the master-slave. Finally, I will show how the slave becomes a competent person through her work (labor). These explanations aim to show that engaging and acting (working) within life is necessary to become a competent person and realize self-consciousness.

1.1.1 Struggle to the Death: Fear of Death

In the struggle to the death, Hegel provides us with a picture of how encountering the other perspective can be challenging. The other challenges the individual's centrality in the world. Because to be an individual is to experience the world from one's own perspective, this other and its perspective is considered a threat. Each one experiences the other as someone who announces, by their very existence, that they, and not the other, are the "center of the world." The one encounters the perspective of the other taking her from herself and putting her outside herself. Her centrality has been challenged by the other's perspective upon her.

Hegel describes a situation in which two self-consciousnesses both want to prove their self-consciousness. Each self exhibits herself as an independent and free self-consciousness (§187). Their self-consciousness cannot be reduced to life. Hegel says that to show that one is beyond mere life, one puts "one's own life on the line" (§187). To prove her independence, each one tries to kill (eliminate) the other. In fact, putting down the other or devaluing the other can be considered an expression of killing the other. The individual no longer looks at them as a perspective who has a perspective upon her.

The consequence of the ignorance of the other is the loss of recognition from the other. In other words, by killing the other, she loses the opportunity to be recognized by the other perspectives. To be recognized, she requires the other to affirm her as a point of view. Another problem is that *letting oneself be killed* would mean giving up the possibility of self-consciousness, which she is fighting for. Because life, it turns out, is essential to self-consciousness. So, as Hegel says, she concludes that "life is as *essential* to [the self-consciousness] as is pure self-consciousness" (§189).

The struggle to the death again reminds us of the importance of mutual recognition between the individual and the other, discussed in the last section. Opening oneself to the other is a way to grapple with the challenge of the other perspective. Since the other is experiencing this too, the *ideal* would be that the other person has a perspective is reality, and they are within my perspective but not quite as object, because they are within it as something that exceeds my perspective. It turns out that there is a co-existence as perspective.

However, it is not always the case that we encounter the perspective of the other with no problem and in the ideal way. In the *struggle to the death*, Hegel gives a picture of how it can be challenging to encounter the perspective of the other.

This struggle is a life-and-death battle for the confirmation of one's own self-consciousness. The struggle does not result in mutual death because, for recognition to be meaningful, the other self-consciousness must remain alive to provide it. Ultimately, one self-consciousness submits to the *fear of death*, choosing to preserve life over risking it, while the other asserts dominance by showing a willingness to risk death. The outcome of this struggle leads to the master-slave relationship.

The slave is one who affirms the perspective of the master and subordinates their own. However, the master becomes the defining perspective. Here, there are two elements—life and perspective—and they belong together. Initially, in the master-slave relationship, it seems that these two elements are separated. We will eventually realize that they cannot be. This means that to have perspective, in addition to the other perspective, the individual needs to live life and interact with materiality. In the next section, I will explain the master-slave relationship in more detail.

1.1.2 The Master-Slave Relationship

The master-slave relationship has been served to show the deeper process of self-development. Hegel emphasizes the importance of engaging with the world, and of not enslaving people, by using this relationship. His exposure of contradictions in the master's stance show that he is not arguing that human beings should be subjugated for the sake of their development.

In fact, there are two elements that allow the individual to become competent. One is *fear of death* which motivates the individual back to life. The second element is *work*. The slave's fear of death leads to submission to life and the master. Her work eventually results in achieving skills and expertise that empower her to act in the world. Hegel's discussion is a philosophical exploration of how self-consciousness emerges as competent through an engagement with the material world. His emphasis is on the transformative power of engaging with the world.

The truth for the slave is "the self-sufficient consciousness existing for itself" *in the master* (§194). The slave sees the independent consciousness in the master and feels herself subordinated and dependent on him and things. She feels a fear of death that causes her to enter the service of the master and transform things into something consumed by the master. In this way, the slave is considered as a *thing or mediation, among other things*, to give services to the master.

To fulfill the master's commands, the slave begins working and giving form to objects. The formation of the object leads to a "negative relation" between the object and the slave. It means to the slave that the object has independence from him. The object becomes something separate from the slave: "I made it and gave it a form." The negation of the object from himself

leads to “the working consciousness arriving at the intuition of independent Being as of its own self” (§195).

Hegel discusses how the slave, through working on external objects, transforms not only the world but also their own self-consciousness. The slave’s interaction with the material world leads to a deeper understanding and development of self-consciousness, contrasted with the master, who remains more detached from this transformative process.

What we see here is somewhat unexpected. In the context in which an individual’s agency is suppressed, Hegel shows us that an individual’s agency develops. This is because agency results from engagement with objects and the ability to respond to the demands of the world. As we will show later, the master does not gain this experience because he does not engage with objects and the demands of the world.

The master “leaves the aspect of its self-sufficiency in the care of the servant, who works on the thing” (§190). The slave serves as a means through which the master fulfills his needs. The master is cultivated into a state of generalized incompetence. He fails to meet his own needs, as such require expertise, practice, and development, which he lacks. The master is incompetent when it comes to dealing with objects.

At first sight, it seems that the slave’s subservience is an expression of the independence of the master. However, it in fact reveals the master’s dependency on the slave. In fact, the master is dependent on the slave to meet his daily needs. Further, the master treats the slave as a mediator (“thing”) to satisfy his needs, not as an individual with a perspective. Thus, the master loses the possibility, which he wanted, of being recognized by that other perspective (§190).

Through labor and serving the master, the slave experiences a kind of ambiguity in her selfhood (§194). The slave, through her activities, gives things a new form. Within her, a

movement begins, and she starts to perceive herself as standing between the master and the things. Through working and dealing with things, the slave constructs a world that is an embodiment of her selfhood. She sees herself as a force that acts upon things. Engagement in the world helps the slave learn how to handle matter, gain expertise, and become competent in that world.

This is a sort of agency that the master never experiences. The slave can see an embodiment of her selfhood in the world constructed through her work. This world can be considered a manifestation of her agency and identity. This is where the slave looks at the transformed object and says, “*I did it.*” She can differentiate herself from the transformed things. She can say, “*I made them*” – she is not just a thing but a *power over* things. In other words, the slave starts having a feeling of self, a feeling of being for itself. Generally, through giving a new form to things, the slave sees, in that new form, an objectified manifestation of who and what she truly is; she becomes who she is.

The slave becomes self-consciousness that was initially supposed to be in the master’s control. The master’s needs can only be met through the slave’s mediation. The slave’s agency is achieved through engaging with materiality and giving a new form to things. That is why the master does not yield independent self-consciousness. In other words, through the existence of restrictions, the slave finds a capacity to develop her agency.

The slave is no longer merely a thing among other things. Through her engagement with materiality, the slave develops herself. She cannot achieve power over things unless she is among them, dealing with, and touching them. This is another point that Hegel aims to illustrate in the master-slave relationship. The direct confrontation with the materiality and acting are what help the slave to become a competent person.

In his discussion of the slave, Hegel shows that through engaging with the world, the individual has an opportunity to become a competent agent. I will now explain this point with an example from a different historical context. Although the example is not perfect and may overlook some aspects that Hegel has in mind in the case of slavery, it can be helpful to clarify the discussion. In my home country, Iran, after the Islamic Revolution, a specific dress code was mandatory at schools, and all students and teachers were to follow such dress code. I remember that my friends and I did not like the school's long uniform in its boring colors, such as navy blue and gray. So, over time, we tried to change them while we committed to the general style of that dress code. For example, we tried to decorate the sleeves of the uniform with some cloth with flower patterns or colored ribbons. In such cases, students had to accept the school uniform and submit to its strict rules. Students were limited by those restrictions, but they found a way to manifest their agency. In fact, in a world within which nothing was an expression of their agency, they tried to express their existence and agency by making small changes in their uniform.

Students have to submit themselves to those restrictions if they want to enter the school and become literate. Students, at school, have limited power to change the current situation, which is determined within restrictions of the educational system. Those restrictions give them the capacity to act within it and then change something. Although they have to wear clothes with specific styles, they are not prohibited from decorating the hem of their sleeves. By taking small actions and engaging with materiality, they construct a world that is an expression of their agency and makes sense for them. They know the meaning of the colorful embroidery flower on the hem of their coat sleeves. Through acting within these restrictions, they allow their agency to

flourish.¹ Those specific changes give an opportunity to the student to become a competent agent. The individual starts seeing her agency and power over things. These clothes are now an expression of their agency. She looks at her clothes' decoration and says, "I made it"!

Finally, it would be noteworthy to say that the master and the slave represent two aspects of self-consciousness: these are the perspective and thing. Hegel's discussion shows that these are both in the same self-consciousness, united in each human being. It actually shows the double-sided feature of self-consciousness, by which I mean that an individual's self-consciousness is considered as an *object* by the other. Similarly, the slave's experience involves being viewed as an object rather than an individual with a perspective, from the master's point of view. In contrast, self-consciousness as a subject, where an individual perceives and interprets reality, aligns with the master's experience; the master is seen as the defining perspective. However, what Hegel has in mind when he says both of them are essential is that both should be considered *united* in each human being. It is not that a perspective is considered the only one through which the other looks at the world.

In this section, I talked about the relationship between two individuals. However, in our lives, when we consider concrete institutions and social relations, we can see how this interpersonal domain is greatly multiplied. It is not merely one relation where one encounters another self-consciousness. Now, I am going to transition from an abstract relationship to the interpersonal world in all its historical richness and detail, as Hegel himself does in his introduction of "Spirit." I will explain ethical life and the significance of the other, *within a historical and cultural situation*, in shaping the individual's agency. Hegel explains how social

¹ This example is of course somewhat different from what Hegel means in the master-slave relationship. In my example, students are somehow self-motivated. However, in the master-slave relationship, the slaves are forced to engage in materiality to prepare something for the master. Through engaging with the world and changing things for the master, the slave sees her agency expressed in new things. She finds herself in a world that makes sense for her.

norms have been constructed over history through human beings' actions. In turn, those social norms form individuals' actions.

1.2 Ethical Life

In transitioning from interpersonal relationships in the abstract to a historical context, we start the discussion with the concept of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*). In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, Hegel explains the concept of ethical life as the *way of life* when we get the human being from it, they are culturally, socially, and historically specific. For Hegel, ethical life refers to the social institutions, customs, and practices that give individuals a proper sense of what is good or bad. Through engaging within it, the individual becomes a competent person and gains a feeling of what proper action is.

To illuminate the nature of ethical life (*Sittlichkeit*), it might be helpful to contrast it with morality (*Moralität*), which privileges the idea of duty and moral reasoning, which is more abstract. In Kant's discussion of morality, moral actions are decided by reasoning to universal principles, which, as universal, are more or less identical for all human beings. Kant argued that moral value originates from rationality, meaning specific duties must be derived from rational principles, not particular situations (Russon 2004, 150-152). However, Hegel points to the idea that the good cannot be fully determined by universal moral principles alone. Instead, it is closely connected to the specific customs, practices, and institutions of a particular society, which differ from one community to another. This focus on non-universality highlights the

importance of understanding ethical life in its concrete, historical, and cultural context, as opposed to an abstract, universal moral framework.

In this section on ethical life, Hegel analyses the way of life of a particular historical era—in this case, Greek ethical life. He talks about a culture that is represented in Sophocles' *Antigone*. In the play, what is construed as the basis of Greek culture is the duality of divine and familial laws, on the one hand, and human laws, on the other hand. Also, the idea that one is simply following what the customs and laws require.

The play centres around Antigone, a young woman entangled in a dilemma and faced with a terrible choice. Here, Hegel refers to what he calls the divine law: the law of family and familial obligations. Antigone feels compelled by this law and the duties it requires of her, which suggests that she must bury the dead body of her brother, who was killed in the war, as an unburied body is essentially damned according to Greek religion. However, the civil leader, Creon, tells her that she is not allowed to bury her brother's body, because he was a traitor to the state. If she obeys the state's laws, she betrays her brother; if she obeys the family's laws, she betrays the state's laws. In the end, she pays with her life.

Hegel discusses the phenomenon of ethical life in two domains: the family and the state, each with its specific values and practices. The values of each of those domains are embedded within the very being of individuals who are born into that culture, empowering them. Individuals learn how to respond to reality in ways that are deemed appropriate because they align with the norms and values of ethical life. This "appropriate" response is not just a matter of external conformity; in growing up in that society, they have already recognized and internalized their roles and responsibilities within the ethical framework.

The world of the family in ancient Greece, as discussed by Hegel, is closely related to the divine and matters of God. Its values and obligations are what the individual finds meaningful and obeys. Brought up in this reality, it and its characteristics define them as individuals. They find themselves becoming, being empowered, and gaining a point of view within these laws.

Human laws, on the other hand, are the result of particular habits, customs, and social practices in ancient Greece, but those who live in their terms also relate to them in an obedient way, taking up their role as deemed appropriate by these laws. In fact, people, through *acting* based on those practices, contribute to the existence of human laws. The family and state acknowledge different laws, but ordinarily, they are not inherently at odds with one another. While the content of these roles differs, the structure—where individuals are guided by a set of norms and roles that dictate appropriate behavior within a given context—remains similar. Indeed, they together constitute a single phenomenon, and it is assumed that they will harmonize with each other.

In the rest of this section, I will discuss separately both levels of ethical life, that is, family and public institutions. Through describing each one in personal experience, I try to show how they shape individual identity. Then, I will explain Hegel's idea of the intertwined relationship between individual actions and ethical life. Finally, I will explain how the agency of the individual who has been shaped and embedded within ethical life can be defined.

1.2.1 Family

What Hegel is exploring here is the sense that an individual behaves the way they do based on what others do, whether they react to or imitate somebody else's actions. Individuals

generally adopt forms of behavior from the people around them. They learn the language others speak. They learn how to eat with chopsticks, for example, through observing and imitating others' ways of eating. They learn a way of interacting with others that does not involve making eye contact, for example. The child finds herself in specific traditions and social norms that have been already established. Those norms surround and permeate her to such an extent that it would be impossible to imagine herself apart from them. In a general sense, they give her the capacity to think, interact, and become a *competent* person in that society.

Some examples from my own perspective, as someone who was born and raised in a Muslim family, help to clarify the point. I remember, as a little child, trying to imitate my mom's posture while she was praying. I looked at her and copied her movements. Even though I did not understand the Arabic words that she was saying in her praying, I tried to copy her accent on Arabic words. I had no idea of the meaning of that specific practice. Sometimes it was funny, and the family members laughed. However, some other times it was embarrassing as they are the words of Allah. In this case, my mother told me that I should not make fun of Allah's words and said that *I should respect and memorize them*. Sometimes she told me you can ask God for whatever you want to have.

One noteworthy experience happened during the holy month of Ramadan. In the Islamic culture, Ramadan is explained as God's feast. Fasting persons are considered guests of Allah. In those times, I did not have to fast, but the home atmosphere made me feel as if I was a guest of God. When we sat around the table, and the other members broke their fast, I thought that those foods were special meals God had gifted. Every situation, action, and movement was considered more sacred and spiritual in this month. It seemed that every action of a fasting person is more sacred. Most of the time, my mom was reading or listening to the Quran. I did not understand

their exact meaning, and I only found the Arabic sound so charming that it attracted everyone's attention. The words that were sung by *Qari* (someone who recites the Quran) were like soulful music. It was a state that cannot be described in words.

During Ramadan helping other people was also admired and rewarded more than usual. I tried to help my mom, who was fasting during the day. I even got up before morning prayer to help my mom. Every good action in Ramadan is said to be rewarded doubly, so I tried to be a better person in those days to get doubled rewards. We were told that the devil is chained up in Ramadan, so there was no obstacle to being a good person. At the end of Ramadan, I really felt that the burden of sin on my soul had been lifted.

At first, these practices for me were only a bunch of actions and reactions. I had no idea about them, and they had no meaning to me. I only did them because there was no other option available. Through engaging in these practices, it seemed that I was becoming normal because I was like the others. Gradually, I became a competent person within that society, and my actions made sense to others.

Through copying and imitating, I was gradually learning not only to respond properly to the others in my life, but also to engage in specific practices such as talking with God and asking God to help me become a good person. Initially only trying to copy another's behavior, soon the practice started making sense to me. I was been inducted into a non-transparent network of practices that project an interpretation of reality and ourselves— the world is sacred; we are Muslim.

In a general sense, customs from religious rituals and seasonal rituals rooted in the ancient Iranian culture, such as the Nowruz celebration, to detailed etiquette such as “sit respectfully in the mosque,” have been passed down from our families to ourselves. We have

learned them through being in a family. These are determinacies that have developed prior to our existence and before we knew them. Through living within those practices and internalizing them, the individual becomes a person and becomes more or less skilled and competent. The individual gradually gains a capacity for reflection as well, but only while already inside of this non-transparent web of specific cultures, habits, and traditions within which she grew up.

Beyond just inhabiting this web, she also develops a sense of attachment and belonging to the reality she inhabits. The individual within the culture develops a sense of familiarity with this reality, and when she is among those familiar practices she tends to have a feeling of being at home. The individual, if she fits in, tends to feel comfortable within ethical life, as the home, the familiar place. At home, everything can feel as it is designed to fit one's needs. Even though the cultural practices may not have been constructed in the best way, most members of a culture find that these practices fit them, as they are responsive to individuals inhabiting them.

The individual does not look at social norms as objects but lives through them. Living through them is something the self does before they even notice and make them objects of reflection. The individual achieves a sense of belonging through a sort of unconscious engagement in social norms. There is always a relationship between the self and the world. As Russon notes, the self and the world are co-happening; the self is experiencing the world through a lens given by the world itself (2017, 35).

The world provides a ground upon which an identity develops. That identity comes about through inhabiting those ways of life. For instance, I recognize myself as an Iranian person who celebrates the new year on the first day of spring with a special ceremony. I observe myself as a Muslim as I pray to God in a specific way, and our holy book is the Quran. I have become

an Iranian-Muslim person as much as someone who grew up in a Christian family and praises God in the church every Sunday becomes a Christian.

As I mentioned above, this is not an experience originally as a matter of choice. Children do not experience themselves *choosing* the most basic habits. They learn this as how to live and to be. They answer expectations of the people around them, and that is how they come into being: by answering those expectations. Identity is a response; it is not an original thing. It means that identity is not something innate within an individual from birth. It is a sedimented result of these external influences and responses rather than an intrinsic, pre-existing trait. The family, which accommodates us, uniquely shapes us such that we “live from it” (Russon 41).

1.2.1 The Social Institution of Schools

Later and when one gets older, other social and cultural institutions play crucial roles in forming the self. Social habits set the behavior of individuals in a specific way. The individual can have new experiences through belonging to larger social institutions, but these social norms are also forming the individual’s identity, and in turn, individuals perpetuate them by committing to them.

Let me start my discussion of how the individual is constituted through social norms with a personal experience. I will discuss the educational system in my home country, Iran, which was influenced by pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary events at the end of the 20th century. I will explain how the educational system was affected by the army and Islamic views as a model afterward. The point of describing the educational system is to show how much individuals who attended the school are shaped within pre-defined practices.

The individual who has been born in a culture is initially relatively impotent. She lacks the power or ability to influence or change that culture. She has been normalized through engagement with the current way of life. She does not think of herself as taking action for the sake of fitting in or communicating with others; she just gets this immediately, gaining these ways of acting through engaging with ethical life. She operates without the judgment that there is a norm governing proper actions. She “becomes normal” and makes sense to the other through immersing herself in that way of life. Individuals are deeply involved and integrated into the culture they are born into because they have no exposure to any other way of life. Their understanding of the world and how to live within it is shaped by the culture they are immersed in, just because they *lived within* that system at that time.

One of the institutions that provides the citizens of my country, like other citizens of other countries, with a specific way of life is the educational system. I will show that the government attempted to put forward a point of view for women which would shape our perspective for many years afterward. We looked at reality through the way it was introduced to us.

Schools were established in my country based on the vision of the first king of the Pahlavi dynasty, Reza Shah. Reza Shah saw the country would be great if it developed in modern ways and had a strong army. He believed in the army as a model to construct not only the modern “nation-state” but also the other civil institutions (Najmabadi 53). The same view was used in the construction of educational institutions. He construed each citizen as a soldier who should be disciplined and obedient, who could be made through education. This perspective on the school remained after the Pahlavi dynasty’s fall.

When I was a student, the organization of the school was based on a series of hierarchies, such as what we see in the army. We only saw the principal once a month in the morning line at 7:00 a.m. when, for example, a national celebration was upcoming. On those days, I had to get up early in the morning, so I was always yawning while standing on the line. In the queue, we had to keep an arm's length away from the person in front of us. One student was the monitor, and she had to organize students based on their height, with taller students at the back of the line.

The prominent part of this process, which always had the effect of waking me up, was when we had to put our right hand on the shoulder of the person in front of us and say, "Ready front,² God is great" (*Az Jelo Nezam, All-o-Akbar*) and take our hand away and say, "on the command, Khomeini is the leader" (*Khabar dar, Khomeini Rahbar*). If students did not yell with strong voices, the school organizer would ask us to repeat those words again and again, until our voices "make deaf the enemies of Islam," as the organizer said. In every morning line, we had to repeat these words.

My point here is that in those days, we never complained or commented on these practices. We mostly had no positive or negative feelings about them. We would never question these practices; they were simply what school was. We lived inside this structure and could not detach our minds from it. In Hegelian terms, we could say that those who experience such schools, and the Islamic atmosphere, were ethically charged with them. Right or wrong, and good or bad, were defined for us inside this already inherited system. We looked at the world from the lens given by this culture and judged and evaluated each other's actions through this lens and perspective.

²-These are military drill terms.

At that time, after the Islamic revolution, we were encouraged to behave in a modest way. One way to be modest was for girls to wear clothes that did not appeal to male attention, and so we had to wear a uniform at school, a long and loose set of coat and pants in a dull and dark color. The model for women was “Islamic-thus-modest,” which replaced the view encouraged in the period of Pahlavi, which was “modern-yet-modest” (Najmabadi 54).

In the Pahlavi period, the policy was to make a modern and progressive country; they tried to construct Iranian women through the values of European progress and greatness. In that period, women were encouraged and sometimes forced to follow Western women’s ways of clothing. In other words, the behaviour of women was shaped by Western and white perspectives.

However, in the post-revolutionary period, within which I was going to school, the authority’s ideal image of a woman was a woman who followed the Islamic Hijab and was equipped with knowledge, books, and even knew how to use weapons in war. The Islamic model, because of the popularity of the anti-colonialist views at that time, was welcomed by the women. At that time, what was strongly criticized was the “painted doll of Pahlavi” (Najmabadi 65), which suggests a woman who is intoxicated, who lives in terms of Western values, who looks at herself from the other’s (European) perspective. This woman wears tight and short clothes and uses excessive make-up to seem more modern. She has open relationships with men and laughs loudly in public. It is said that Pahlavi exploited these women to show international organizations that women had active social participation, without limitation, in Iran.

In contrast, the Islamic authorities introduced to us a different model of behavior, according to which a woman wears the Islamic Hijab, while engaging in social and political participation. Born into this culture, she adopted those ways of life, and gradually became fitted

and normalized to social habits. Her interactions give her a lens through which to see reality. Through that lens, the world and everything within it comes to make sense to her. She cannot make it separate and exclude it from herself. These values are what the individual has been ethically charged with as well. A good individual was defined based on the model that the culture presented to her. The ideal was to become a strong woman who only focused on academic responsibilities and spiritual growth, not on materiality. This Islamic model was implanted as an ethical mission in our minds.

Ethical life is pre-existing expectations and practices in which the individual, after birth, finds herself. These expectations are not thought of as restrictions. They are ways of life through which the meaning of life has been determined. A person adopts those ways of life to become a competent person. For me, the school had a meaning which is completely different from what is experienced by today's generation in my home country or students who study in other countries.

I hope that with these examples, I can demonstrate how much familial and institutional conditions, or ethical life, within a culture play a crucial role in shaping and developing competent persons. I wanted to show that "the I" is shaped through engagement within that ethical life. This is a more or less unreflective process through which someone becomes a competent person. In fact, she has no choice except to interact with the available culture, since she does not even know she has a choice until she has already incorporated it. Such an engagement leads to an intertwined relationship between the individual and ethical life, a topic to be discussed in the next section.

1.2.2 The We as an I and The I as a We

Now, what I will focus on is the concept of the ‘I’ within the framework of “I that is a We.” I will talk about the individual ‘I’ and its actions and explore how action plays a crucial role in ethical life and how agents emerge through their engagement with the world. I will show that there is not merely a passivity; rather, ethical life is shaped by active participation, where individuals assert their agency and make meaningful contributions to it.

An individual becomes itself in interaction with existing reality, in pairing with the world outside itself. Hegel says that there is a ground for our actions, and it is ethical life. We find ourselves already in a world that gives a kind of content and orientation to our actions. There is a ground upon which we act. We find ourselves becoming ourselves in an “unshakable and undissolved *ground and point of origin for the doing of each and all*” (§438). It is not an idea (or purpose) that an individual makes up or thinks of. Through engaging with those ways of life, the individual perpetuates and keeps alive this form of life.

As explained in the last section, the individual does not accept that ethical life consciously; she implicitly accepts it by behaving in its terms. That is, *acting*, throughout history, has constituted ethical life, and continual acting based on these forms of life keeps them alive. This is a pre-established substance by which our actions are inspired.

We may realize how much this invisible network depends on our actions, as we also depend on it. Although it is said that we act as individuals, our actions do not happen in abstraction from the action of everyone else. This context of ways of life exceeds us in all directions and makes its own life. It is not a product of *an* individual; it is a product of *We*. Hegel

says that this context is “the doing of each and all” (§438). It is *our* actions. We also bring into being a kind of *We*, because we are all acting on this ground. This *We* is enacted inside “each and all” perspectives and operates through them.

Let me come back to the cases mentioned above. Consider the holy month of Ramadan in Muslim countries. What is the holy month of Ramadan for Muslims? Does Ramadan exist in the world as an objective reality separated from the individual’s action? Definitely not. In fact, Ramadan is a part of the Muslim way of life expressed in individual actions, practices, and bodily activities. Ramadan is a way of looking at the world and it is enacted in the doing of the collective. It manifests itself in how we behave at a certain time of the year.

In their gathering to break their fast after sunset, Muslims do certain activities such as reading the Quran and praying to God at the mosque. Ramadan manifests itself in the body of the individual, which gets thin and weak because of fasting and avoiding eating food in those days. Ramadan is a part of a larger ethical life in which we live. Ethical life expresses itself inside of individuals’ every activity, gathering, and clothing. Ethical life has no way to express itself unless it actualizes itself in particular actions and bodies. It is only enacted through our actions.

Ethical life, as a more or less integrated system of social norms, is intertwined with individuals only through social activities and practices. We are enacting, in the same way, the basis of this shared ground, perpetuating our character as a unity. In fact, ethical life exceeds individuals’ actions. The *We* enacts itself using all the tools and resources it is provided. So, the *We* channels itself into the *I*, and the *I* confirms the *We* by enacting this context. The individual is an expression of this ethical life. She lives inside of this ethical life which is operating through human actions. This is why Hegel says, “We is I and I is We” (§177). Ethical life is “the ground

and point of origin” for individuals’ actions and provides them with meaning in their lives (§438). In turn, ethical life is the purpose and the result of individuals’ activities.

It may seem that in ethical life there is total control by ethical norms, leaving no room for the individual to *act freely*. But we see here in fact that individuals come into being and then take up the world that they inherit, acting to produce it. Here, where action comes in, there also enters room for accidental or intentional transgression.

The general point here is that we do not have a simple dichotomy in Hegel between submission (lack of freedom) and subversion (having freedom). For Hegel, freedom, due to the existence or nature of ethical life, differs somewhat from the traditional liberal view that privileges individual freedom as non-submission. Isaiah Berlin has famously distinguished between positive and negative freedom and calls the traditional liberal view “negative freedom” (Berlin 2002, 169).

Traditional liberals believe in freedom that is innate to each human being. As Berlin asserts, for classical liberals, freedom means the absence of any external interference (174). They argue that while individual freedom is crucial, it cannot be unlimited, as such boundless freedom would lead to social chaos, where individuals could endlessly interfere with one another, resulting in the suppression of the weak by the strong and the inability to meet basic human needs. So, they recognize that the right to freedom must be limited *later* by the government to maintain social stability (Berlin 2002, 173).

They believe that human beings have other purposes and values, such as justice, happiness, culture, security, and equality. To achieve these goals, they agree on the necessity of government or authority imposing some restrictions on individual freedom. Despite these necessary constraints, they argue that there should always exist a minimum area of personal

freedom that must be preserved (Berlin 2002, 173). For example, the liberal view protects religious freedom not because it necessarily enhances overall well-being or because religious life is inherently superior to a non-religious one but essentially because individuals have the fundamental right to follow their own religious beliefs or to have religious freedom (Tong 2009, 12).

In Hegel's view, a human being is not merely born free and then constrained by restrictions, such as a specific way of life. Hegel's view of freedom highlights what Berlin calls "positive freedom," whereby what might be considered obstacles in liberal ideas are actually the means to becoming an individual. The individual's identity and agency are shaped through them. Belonging to a way of life gives the individual the capacity to be free (Berlin 2002, 178). This way of life provides the individual with choices through which she can realize her agency and acquire self-mastery. It is clear that this kind of choice, determined by ethical life, is different from the liberal notion of choice (Mahmood 2005, 11).

The submission to social and cultural norms is, as Russon says, "simultaneously both liberating and imprisoning" (2017, 62). On the one hand, these norms do not permit the individual to act in any way she wants. However, these norms provide individuals with a specific point of view from which to perceive and reflect upon reality, thereby realizing and supporting their agency.

Through the perspective provided by ethical life, the individual can challenge and judge others' actions or specific ethical situations. Based on her judgment, she can decide whether to continue acting according to the specific norm or not. In this way, ethical life becomes the purpose of her actions. In the next section on conscience, I will explain how ethical judgment is made in ethical life, and how, even in its formative character, there is room for change. In the

third chapter, I will explain in more detail how ethical life can be changed by an individual's conscientious actions.

1.3 Conscience

The previous section explains how a pre-established ethical life constitutes the individual's self. The self is something that is defined within the context of social norms, and their ways of life are inseparable from who they are. In turn, reality is shaped depending on how we look at things. Ethical life gives the individual a perspective on how to look at reality. This is *I* who observes food in Ramadan as if it is respectable and part of the feast of God. *I* consider dark colors and long clothes as modest and not attracting the attention of men. *I* perceive that the new year *really* starts by sprouting trees and flowers. This is the individual who shapes reality. As *the I* has been shaped through enacting ethical life, it can be concluded that reality is ethical life. It defines the way in which individuals look at or perceive reality and thus how they constitute it.

The process of becoming self-conscious is time-consuming. We are always in the process of becoming who we are. It is a continual process that may occur in a person's whole life. In fact, through visiting new individuals with new ways of looking at the world, the individual learns to look differently at the world. They can make their lens broader and see a specific situation from a different lens.

In this section, I will discuss another dimension that arises here, when a moral situation arises in ethical life. I want to examine how an individual takes on the responsibility of performing an action in a moral situation. To achieve this goal, I will explain the concept

of *conscience*. Conscience is the requirement, simply operative in individual experience, that the individual discerns on her own her action. In fact, conscience allows the individual to make a moral judgment. There are two points in conscience that I will talk about in this section. The first is that it is required because situations are always particular or specific. The second is that it is possible for it to act erroneously.

Hegel starts his discussion of conscience by criticizing *standard moral* views, which he attributes to “moral self-consciousness” (§599). The moral self-consciousness takes herself to act according to moral principles. Hegel’s philosophy does not imply an abstract or universal definition of moral principles that tells us how to act. From his view, there is no possibility of harmony or agreement between duty in moral consciousness and a particular experience (§599). In other words, there is no possibility of simply applying abstract principles to specific situations.

Moral self-consciousness, in Hegel’s description of it, wrongly presumes that there is a conformity between the individual’s private life and abstract duty. However, there is always a gap between a specific situation and a general duty. As I explained above, from Hegel’s view, reality is shaped based on how I look at it. The moral situation is also part of reality, and I see it from my own perspective. For example, from a Muslim perspective, the words in the Quran, as they are Allah’s words, are sacred. So, it would be disrespectful for someone to touch them without a special practice (*Wodu*). Or it would be disrespectful to pay no attention when someone is reciting it. But someone who grew up in a different culture with ‘different religion’ or no religion has been charged with different values. So, those practices do not make sense to her. There is a gap between the way that she looks at the world and those ways of life. She repeatedly would ask herself: why is touching a book page without washing my face and hand considered disrespectful and sinful?

From Hegel's view, an abstract duty means little to people with specific ways of life. As Hegel says, in the moral worldview, there is a "complete indifference and the self-sufficiency of both nature and of moral purposes and activities with respect to each other" (§600). The laws of each part belong to itself, and they are not concerned with the other. In other words, a way of life that makes sense for an individual might have no meaning for the other. So, using an abstract duty to act morally in a specific situation would be difficult.

Hegel explains that there is a kind of hypocrisy in the moral worldview. As mentioned above, despite the lack of harmony between pure duty and the specific situation, the moral self-consciousness *pretends* that there is a consistency between them (§617). However, through acting in the world and being in a particular situation, the inconsistency gets revealed. By acting, the individual puts her action in the place of assessment through someone else who also claims to assess based on moral principles (the judge).

The hypocrisy is that each individual asserts that she acts based on moral duty when she does not. The individual actually pretends that she has moral principles, and her action is in conformity with those principles. From Hegel's view, in fact, principles are nothing without the judgment of what they require in the situation. Everyone is acting in a particular situation based on her own conscience and her past experience as reality seems to demand it. The inequality between morality and the actual moral situation leads to the rejection of the moral worldview through the *pure conscience* (§631).

To explain conscience, let me start by explaining the nature of a moral situation. A moral situation is a particular and specific situation. It is a part of reality that an individual already takes it in a certain way on the basis of her own perspective. What is crucial is that the individual *must* take action in a situation because reality demands it. As Russon says,

“conscience is a *call* to oneself” (2017 125). It is a call for the individual to engage and take action in reality. The individual feels called to take action in the specific situation. It is reality that seems to express a ‘must’ to her. The experience of conscience is the experience of oneself compelled by reality. It is a feeling of being compelled from the outside. The individual takes reality to be demanding something of her.

Here, Hegel explains the concept of conscience based on which the individual acts. In fact, we experience conscience as a demand coming from reality. When it is said that everyone acts based on their conscience, it means that they act based on how they see reality. One takes an action that, based on one’s perspective, seems right. One acts in a way that reveals how reality makes sense for one.

It is worth noting that conscience is “the experience of the finite moment as the happening of the infinite” (Russon 2017,125). In other words, it is a moment within which infinities are revealed in a limited context. One feels answerable to the idea of what is right. And the idea of what is right is universal. But that idea only manifests itself in this specific situation, this action, and life. Maybe this point makes Hegel’s explanation clearer—that universal moral laws do not have much harmony with a specific situation with cultural conditions in which the situation occurs.

Now, we discuss how the individual’s action is evaluated as right or wrong. When the action is done, it can be judged as to whether it is good or not. Hegel addresses this by introducing the concept of a judge, examining how the individual’s action is evaluated through the idea of a judge (§659). There are two people involved here: one is the actor, and the other is the judge. The judge evaluates the action based on her perspective on the world or the way she perceives reality.

At first sight, there seems to be hypocrisy in that each part thinks she is acting based on a true duty. However, Hegel explains that reconciliation between the judge and the actor leads to shared values between them. It comes to light that two living individuals are acting in one shared ground. I mean that each part of the relationship recognizes the other as a breathing and living individual having a perspective through which they look at reality. So, instead of acting based on an abstract principle irrelevant to the particular situation, they refer to each other, since each one has a perspective and looks at the situation through that.

According to Hegel, through being cultivated within ethical life, individuals gain a sense of what is proper. They develop a sense of answerability to the good. However, the actor acts according to her personal and past experience in a specific situation. Her action has a free-standing existence based on herself. There is no universal duty that can decisively guide her to do or not do that. She acts according to her perception of reality. Hegel says, “it is precisely the essence of conscience to cut itself off from this calculating and balancing of duties and to come to a decision solely on its own without relying on any reasons of that sort” (§645). Every action of a conscientious individual is based on values she grew up within. She does not act in the “indifferent world,” like what is discussed in the moral worldview. However, the individual acts in a specific situation while referring to her values to support her action. She becomes self-certified as there is no guidance, and the law and customs do not specify what to do in that situation. So, she places herself, in some sense, outside of the law, custom, and the realm of the good, making herself the authority over them, like the position of divine voice (§655). However, it does not mean that she *explicitly* considers herself a divine voice.

As soon as an action is taken, however, it can be evaluated through the other. The judge assesses the actor’s actions as well based on his personal experience. He evaluates the actor’s

action as hypocritical (§660). He accuses the actor of claiming that she is doing the good. What the judge mentions as good is the judgment that he (the judge) comes to, based on the way he perceives the world. He evaluates that specific situation as well based on his own inside evaluations.

After the judge's assessment, the actor "comes to see [her] own self in this other consciousness" (§664). She sees that the judge only evaluates the action based on his own personal experience. In other words, his assessments are as *self*-certified as the actor's. The judge claims that he is evaluating the action based on universal duty. However, that is not true because the judge brings the law down to the situation on his own authority; he is also self-certifying. So, the actor recognizes the judge as a hypocrite.

The actor's recognition comes to the point that *she confesses* that the judge and herself are not different. She turns to the judge and confesses, as Houlgate observes, "you are a hypocrite – just like me" (Houlgate 172). She confesses that she is acting on a one-sidedness. I did what *I* thought was right. She admits that she puts herself ahead of goodness and makes herself the authority over good. She accepts that her knowledge is limited and maybe the judge's perspective and insight also help her to broaden her perspective; it helps her to see things differently. In fact, she implicitly recognized the judge as an individual who has his own perspective upon the world and expects him to forgive her.

On the other hand, the judge does not easily accept her hypocrisy, and Hegel condemns this refusal to communicate. However, finally, the judge sees that it would be impossible to avoid action (§665). His reflection on the actor's confession is that he *forgives* the actor. He shows, in his *forgiveness*, that, while actions are not fully recognized as good, as they are one-sided, they are nevertheless also a medium through which good comes to being. He recognizes

the actor's unique perspective by affirming that her actions are based on her own perspective. The actor and the judge let go of themselves and come to be reconciled. They are now acting and judging on a shared value.

It is helpful to return to the concept of recognition in order to explain what shared value is. Based on Hegel's idea, the self becomes herself through being in the world and interacting with others. Others are a mirror through which the self is recognized as and becomes a self. While the self achieves its singularity through the other (gains her identity), her selfhood is an expression of values through which she becomes who she is. In fact, the self cannot be excluded from the social substance.

In the case of conscience and shared values, as Russon says, there is a "tacit recognition that 'those others are not outside me—they are me'" (2004 163). At first sight, it may seem that relationships with the other are external to individuals. However, after this tacit recognition, they recognize that those relations are already internal to them. In other words, they recognize that there is a sense of answerability to the good which is internal to them.

Returning to conscience, when it is said that the judge's evaluations are self-certified, we assert that conscience happens on the level of individuality. After reconciliation, the actor understands that the self is a manifestation of the other. Based on Russon's explanation, forgiveness can be defined here as this, "[she] must accept the actions of others according to the same standards as [she] uses in [her] own activity" (164). They conclude that actions are intrinsically governed by the same standard. Through reconciliation and forgiveness, the actor and the judge no longer act based on separate identities.

They come to share something insofar as each realizes they are acting on shared ground. They recognize that good can manifest itself in every particular action. Each action and

judgment, grounded in individual insight, can aid them in seeing things from different perspectives. They acknowledge the authority of the good and have the other available for their valuable insights. It represents the distinction between a mute, universal law and living, breathing individuals who are trying to figure out how to act in a moral situation.

So far, I have tried to explain the concept of conscience. Conscience is the individual's desire to do the right thing on the level of a particular moral situation which is fallible. As conscience is a response that reality demands of us in a specific situation, the individual tries to do the best based on what she confronts at that time. So, it is not necessarily the *most righteous* action. However, whether it is the proper answer within that specific situation is determined through the other's judgement. Each one defined the goodness of an action based on the situation in which she lives. Our response to reality is limited to the matter in our hands and the social context we live in. Let me clarify this point with a real example of a school uniform.

As we saw in the case of school uniforms, we students at school were faced with the moral question of whether wearing colorful and decorated clothes is modest. At that time, based on our personal experiences and familial and cultural values, we tried to respond to the situation by decorating our uniforms with colorful cloth or ribbons. In other words, our responses were limited to the matter (uniform), and a specific culture dominated at that time. For us, goodness was defined differently from what Iranian and Western students define it today.

The point is that over time the individual's conscience has changed. The individual only tries to make the best response to reality in a specific moral situation. In contrast, it is not necessarily an appropriate answer in another time and culture. As it is said, conscience is based on the way that the self perceives the world. As the self has always been changing through mutual recognition in the world, what she comes to as a proper response can change as well. In

other words, the universal question and issue is *what right is*. Depending on the particular moral situation, time and cultural context, this universal question manifests itself differently. A conscientious individual takes different actions based on her past experience and conscience in these situations. But what associates those different actions with each other is that those all are good though completely different actions.

In summary, from Hegel's view, in a moral situation, an abstract law does not address a particular situation. For Hegel, although the question of what is good is universal, it is enacted in the world within a specific situation. In fact, in a specific moral situation, the individual is compelled to act. Reality calls her for action in a particular situation based on personal and past experiences, which is referred to as conscience. The response that the individual comes to through conscience is not necessarily right, but whether it is the proper answer within that specific situation is determined through the other's judgment. The key point about conscience is that it is a recognition in which each individual affirms the other as a perspective through which she acts. Instead of imposing an abstract law on a particular situation, they strive to act within a shared ground to get to a solution.

In the first chapter, I focused on three significant concepts in Hegel's philosophy: recognition, ethical life, and conscience. In a general sense, the individual's identity is transgressive. I mean that the individual is recognized through the other. I tried to explain how an individual's identity is determined through being in a specific culture and social norms and interacting with the other. Human recognition is an ongoing process of becoming who she is.

Furthermore, in the section on ethical life, I explained that interpersonal relationships do not occur in isolation. The individual's self is surrounded by cultural and social norms that play important roles in constituting the self. This non-transparent network of cultural and social

conditions is called ethical life. Ethical life is a ground for an individual's actions, and, in turn, it is formed through individuals' actions. There is actually an intertwined relationship between ethical life and the self.

Ethical life is more or less an integrated system of social norms. However, there is always the possibility of tensions within ethical life, and there is always the need for the individual to act, based on her own personal experience, in a moral situation. To explain how the individual takes an action, Hegel introduces the concept of conscience. He explains that the individual acts based on her own personal experience and interpretations. From his view, what to do in these specific situations could never be dictated by abstract principles. He claims that a moral action is arrived at by an individual and evaluated through the other who evaluates the action based on what the judge has already experienced (from his own perspective).

After a detailed explanation of what happens between the acting and judging consciousness, Hegel says they come to a shared ground. They recognize each one as a perspective who acts and judges from their own perspective. Instead of using an abstract and universal moral principle, they try to come to a reconciliation within that particular situation. What is important here is that everyone recognizes that they are sharing a living ground for their acting instead of acting based on an abstract and universal principle.

These explanations, based on Hegel's philosophy, forms the descriptive part of my argument. My argument is that, given the intertwined relationship between an individual's identity and their culture, cultures should be respected as an integral part of the individual identity. In the next chapter, I will develop a normative argument based on Hegel's descriptions.

2. Chapter Two: Shaped Within Culture: The Importance of Honoring Practices and Traditions

In the first chapter, I discussed Hegel's ideas in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, particularly self-formation through social practices and the perspectives of others. My argument in this thesis, as mentioned earlier, is that the fact that individuals are shaped by specific social practices and ways of life should be respected; their attachment to these practices and ways of life should be honoured. The values and norms determined by those practices and ways of life have formed who they are, such that to respect them is to respect, in some basic way, these values, norms, practices, and ways of life.

In this section, I will explain how this description of human experience grounds specific normative claims. Before beginning, however, let me air some possible objections or alternatives. It might be suggested that, instead of *social* values and ways of life, individuals should live according to their personal values. However, as explained in the last chapter, individuals' personal values are not beyond the way of life they grew up in. Their choices have been shaped and provided by the culture they live in; their personal values have been determined by local values. So, saying that their local values should be respected is not necessarily different from defending their chance to live in terms of their own personal preferences and choices.

In addition, I am not suggesting that when individuals do not find the local culture and values just, those values should be imposed on them under the pretext that they are the best. Quite to the contrary, in this thesis I will argue against the imposition of values upon individuals. Instead, I will argue that their attachment to those values that are a matter of their culture should

be respected. However, if they feel disconnected from one of those practices, or find it unjust, they should have a chance to change that practice. I will explain, in the third chapter of this thesis, a mechanism that justifies why individuals, even in their possible attachment to their culture and its practices, nevertheless have the liberty of revising their own culture and its practices.

Generally, values can be imposed by either external or internal sources, and I will argue that both are unjust and can lead to violence. First, I will discuss the external imposition of values, with colonialism as a case in point. Based on Fanon's argument, I will explain that colonialism is *inherently* violent and understandably gives rise to violent behavior. Second, I will discuss how the imposition of values by internal forces can also be felt as oppressive and lead to reactionary violence.

External values should not be imposed on individuals under the pretext that they are better for individuals. This is what is claimed by colonialists. Fanon, imitating them, writes: "We made this land. We are the guarantors of its existence. If we leave, all will be lost, and this land will return to the Dark Ages" (Fanon 2004, 15). Discussing colonialism leads us to the first reason why I believe that the world that individuals grew up within should be respected by the other.

Fanon, a prominent anti-colonial thinker, argues that violence is an inherent and fundamental aspect of colonialism (Fanon 2004, 7). In his works, particularly in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon explores the psychological and social dimensions of colonialism. He argues that colonialism inflicts deep psychological wounds on the colonized. Colonialism also instills feelings of inferiority, self-hatred, and alienation (2004, 28). The constant dehumanization and

marginalization experienced by the colonized lead to a fractured identity and a sense of powerlessness.

This psychological violence is accompanied by physical brutality. When Fanon states that “torture is inherent in the whole colonialist configuration,” he means that colonialism is inconceivable without violent means (Fanon 1967, 64). To impose colonial rules, the colonizers need to use direct physical violence. As colonialists understand, violence is required to establish and maintain their supremacy. This includes military conquest, repression of uprisings, and brutal punishment of dissent. Fanon argues that the presence of colonial troops and the frequent use of coercive measures are clear indicators of the violent nature of colonialism (Fanon 2004, 147). Violence is the instrument in the hands of colonizers to bring what they call better values to the colonized and to maintain them.

By engaging with and understanding Fanon’s claim that colonialism is inherently violent, we can properly comprehend his other claim that “decolonization is always a violent event” (Fanon 2004, 1). Fanon famously argues that the liberation of colonized people necessitates violent struggle: “The colonized man liberates himself in and through violence” (44). He views this counter-violence not only as a means of overthrowing the colonial regime but also as a way for the colonized to reclaim their humanity and dignity. This revolutionary violence is seen as a process that allows the colonized to break free from the psychological wounds imposed by colonial oppression.

In new forms of colonialism, under the guise of the war on terror, the footprints of violence can still be seen. This violence may not be direct violence against the colonized, but many of the practices in the local culture which are considered unjust or fanatical are responses to the policies of the colonizers. Lila Abu-Lughod points out that Americans have

viewed many abuses toward women in Afghanistan as part of local practices and norms. However, these views ignore the fact that they are “the manifestation of new and *more brutal forms of subjugation* of the weak made possible by a criminal economy, total lack of security, and the erosion of bonds of trust and solidarity that were tested to the limit by war, social upheaval and poverty” (Kandiyoti, quoted in Abu-Lughod 2013, 52).

In the economy, one of the new policies was a change in agricultural policy. The shift from subsistence farming to opium production and arms smuggling has funded warlords, including the Taliban, and caused rural households to become indebted: “Men are no longer able to meet their obligations to women or fulfill their ideals of honor, protection, or generosity. This is the problem; this is the situation on the ground” (Abu-Lughod 52). These policies have stripped families and communities of their autonomy, creating insecurity and new vulnerabilities, especially for women. In rural areas, poverty, insecurity, and loss of autonomy have intensified, leading to a disturbing commodification of women.

Those unjust values in Afghanistan, in some cases, are the result of inconsistent policies implemented by colonizers, which conflict with Afghan culture. A lack of understanding of the economic, social, and political conditions of the colonized has resulted in indirect violence against them. Each man and woman acts based on Islamic culture and have their own responsibilities. These new policies have caused men to fail to fulfill their responsibilities to the extent that common sense would expect, leading to women’s dissatisfaction. Consequently, these rapid and unexpected changes in roles and social norms have increased violence among family members. Thus, these negative behaviors of the colonized are often mistakenly considered to be representative of the culture and values of Afghanistan.

These explanations show how much colonialism causes a rise in overall violence and illustrate the cyclical nature of colonial violence. Fanon's argument demonstrates that the initial violence of colonization leads to resistance among the colonized, resulting in further repression and conflict. The struggle for decolonization often becomes a long and bloody process, as the colonizers are unwilling to surrender their power peacefully, and the colonized see no alternative but to rise up forcefully. In the case of Afghanistan, there is a lack of understanding of the colonized cultural norms, which are intertwined with economic and social norms. Changes in one area lead to significant and detrimental changes in individuals' life conditions, particularly for women.

Based on Fanon's anti-colonialist account, I argued that the imposition of specific values on a group of people is an infamous aspect of colonialism. According to Fanon's argument, colonialism is inherently violent and inspires resistance that is itself violent. He argues that the colonized reclaim their dignity through that violence, insofar as they oppose the violence that would condemn them as human beings. Colonialism causes an increase in violence and undermines the chance of developing as a human being.

It may be argued that the colonized should adapt to values that are best for them, even if these values are not their own. If "we" see that there are values that improve their lives and "bring them out of darkness," it is thought that it would be better for them to adopt these new values, and so we should encourage them to adopt those new values. They may initially find it difficult to live by them, but eventually, they will learn how to adapt to those values and practices.

The case of Afghanistan opposes this idea. It is not the case that we have a simple set of values and practices that can be easily withdrawn and removed from the culture. We are faced

with a complex, non-transparent network of values and practices intertwined with other social, economic, and political practices. Changing one part of this network can cause other unjust practices to arise. As explained in the first chapter, those values are part of complex individual lives and identities. Adopting new values is not as easy as taking off clothes and putting on new ones. Even under the guise of encouragement, it can lead to violent behaviors.

We have now discussed issues of forcible imposition of values by external forces; let us now consider the phenomenon of forces internal to a culture or society imposing values upon that culture or society.

Consider the prohibition of the education of Afghan girls after sixth grade by the Taliban and the mandatory hijab in Iran. Both of these impositions come from local authorities. In Afghanistan, the crackdown on non-compliance with the dress code (Burqa) and the prohibition of girls' education has led to an atmosphere of fear and oppression. Any protests lead to Taliban forces beating and arresting both female and male protesters. Moreover, the mental wounds caused by such isolation of women from education and social activities have long-term effects.³

The imposition of the mandatory hijab in Iran has always been a target of opposition from scholars and ordinary people. The government tries to control the rare protests by arresting the protesters. Additionally, using the so-called morality police through which authority attempts to control women who wear "inappropriate" clothes leads to violence. In one of the world-famous violent actions taken by the morality police, Mahsa Amini was killed in their custody. Her killing led to a prolonged and violent protest across the country.⁴ It seems impossible for an internal authority to force citizens to act in a specific way without using violent actions. Being

³ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/3/8/afghan-women-stage-rare-protests-braving-taliban-reprisals>.

⁴ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2023/9/20/irans-parliament-approves-hijab-bill-harsh-punishments-for-violations>.

indifferent to most citizens' wants from authorities and citizens' resistance leads to the escalation of violence.⁵

The imposition of values makes those upon whom they are imposed into something like objects: they are projected as inferior and less human, a group that would not know right from wrong, a group that needs to be cared for. They are posited as immature and in need of saving through emancipatory programs of the superior group (Mahmood 2008, 81).

This dehumanization and the feeling of inferiority that can follow disallows individuals from feeling like agents with their own thoughts, desires, and identities, and fails to affirm their own connection with their values and standards. It causes individuals upon whom values are imposed to see themselves only through the lens of the imposers, as if they have no perspective or point of view. Imposers impose stereotypes on the target, reducing their complex identities to simplistic and often demeaning characteristics (Fanon 2004, 8).

Objectification is one of the methods used by colonizers, as Fanon says: "The colonized is not a human being in the eyes of the colonizer. The colonized is a sort of quintessence of evil. He is insensible to ethics" (2004, 6). They are considered as if they have not grown within and been shaped by any values and lack any perspective through which they look at the world. They are seen as needing to be rescued from darkness, with values shown to them and not by them. Objectification leads to alienation, where the colonized are estranged from their own culture, identity, and sense of self. This alienation results from both the imposed identity by the

⁵ Some may argue that the authorities could use peaceful methods to encourage individuals to adopt their preferred values. According to Iranian authorities, those who refuse to wear the mandatory hijab may be denied social services, banking services, and public transportation. Although various so-called peaceful methods exist, many of these methods encounter resistance from citizens, which often leads to violent responses from the authorities.

colonizers and the psychological trauma of living under constant dehumanization (Fanon 2004, 7).

Objectification is not limited to colonization or being objectified by external authorities. For example, in the case of the mandatory hijab in Iran, the authorities often argue that wearing the hijab is beneficial for women's participation in social activities. Popular expressions like "the hijab is not a limitation but a protection" are used. Another common argument is that the hijab prevents women from being viewed as sexual objects in the community. In all these expressions, the Iranian authority sees women as needing to be saved. While claiming to protect women from objectification, they actually treat women as objects. In Iran, regarding the hijab, women are dehumanized and reduced to objects. Women's abilities to determine what is right or wrong are denied, and thus the "correct" practice is imposed upon them at any cost.

One might ask why the imposer of values treats individuals as a means and what the final aim is for the imposer. The general aim behind different forms of objectification is for the imposers to exert control and impose their power upon individuals. By humiliating the values of Muslim people, some feminist literature *aims to justify* the United States' war on terror against the Muslim world (Mahmood 2008, 81). Muslims are seen not as full human beings but as inferior, subhuman entities, with the solution to save them "lying in promoting democracy in the Muslim world and Western values of freedom and liberty through religious and cultural reform" (82). In the case of Iran, it has been argued several times that if the government withdraws the mandatory hijab, women will protest and demand their other rights as well. It is sometimes said that the government prefers to control women who protest against the mandatory Hijab to prevent them from initiating further movements.

Objectification of individuals is an obstacle to the development of the individual within the terms of the richness of their social and cultural ways of life, but it is also noteworthy that colonizers also deprive themselves of the chance for self-development. As we saw in the discussion of recognition, genuine recognition is mutual, in which both sides acknowledge the other as a perspective. Here we notice that colonialists, like the master, lose the chance of being recognized by the other as well.

Working on the basis of the critique of the internal and external imposition of values, I will now focus on how the individual can fully develop her own agency. I will first discuss the intertwined relationship between self, identity, freedom, and agency as shaped by one's way of life. I will demonstrate the strong connection between the culture in which an individual was raised and the values to which they feel connected. Then, by providing real-life examples, I will show that when individuals are disconnected from these values, they can become unable to act in the same way. They can become confused and feel alienated from the new practices and values. This disconnection results in individuals losing their opportunity to develop their agency when new values and practices are imposed upon them.

As explained in the first chapter, the self is realized through the other's perspective and cultivated within a specific way of life. It is explained that an intertwined relationship exists between the self and social practices. As Charles Taylor says, the understanding that the self comes up with is sustained and defined "in conversation with others or through the common understanding which underlies the practices of our society" (Taylor 1985, 209).

Furthermore, not only the self but also our agency and our desire for freedom are determined within social norms. Social values are necessary for individual agency (Mahmood 2005, 151). Mahmood argues that agency is developed through those practices, not beyond those

restrictions as resistance. In other words, she does not suggest that if someone wants to be free, they should try to overturn social norms. Instead, these norms are necessary as they provide individuals with the resources with which to act and meaningful avenues that give substance to their action.

Based on her argument, individuals do not simply desire freedom from the limits presented by their way of life (8); rather, freedom has been shaped within these limits and restrictions. Those ways of life give individuals options to choose from and meaningful points of reference. Mahmood points out that these choices are not liberal choices. In other words, the individual has some choices within these values, and her freedom is defined based on the capacity (choices) that her way of life gives her. This means that their options to act freely have been offered by the culture. If she wants to act freely and develop agency, those actions tend to be in harmony with and shaped by the values given by the culture.

These explanations show the intertwined relationship among the self, identity, freedom, and agency shaped within the way of life. They lead us to the reason why we should not assert that the only legitimately free individual is the one who is disconnected from their own way of life. There is a strong cohesion between the culture within which an individual was raised and the values to which she feels connected. As Russon said, it is through these determinacies that “we exist as ‘I,’ that we exist at all” (Russon 2017, 36).

Let me clarify this point with a real example. Many external reasons have been proposed for the rapid disintegration of the Afghanistan Army and its surrender to the Taliban in August 2021. One reason discussed by scholars is the lack of a deep-seated commitment to the imposed values that Afghan soldiers were expected to defend (Carter Malkasian 2021; Basit 2021); due to

their alienation from these values, they lost the opportunity to realize their agency and themselves.

Consider a soldier or police officer who is assigned to defend liberal values such as human rights, women's rights, freedom, and so on. Initially, these soldiers were cultivated within Islamic cultures and practices. Their agency had been defined within those values and practices. Many of their actions are in accordance with those values, such as 'being close to God' (Mahmood 2005, 122). Afghan soldiers do not support Islamic fundamentalism or war (Jihad) against foreign invaders, as the Taliban does. However, this does not mean they are indifferent to Islamic values (Malkasian 2021, 332). Their actions still serve God's satisfaction. When these soldiers are asked to defend liberal values against the Taliban, who have more or less shared values, this can lead to a sort of confusion for them.

In another example, it can be seen how Afghan soldiers' Islamic commitment can motivate them to act to defend those values. On February 20, 2012, United States security personnel threw several Qurans into a burn pit along with 2,000 other books from the prison library, which were thought to be extremist. Afghan soldiers saw the burning Qurans and were very upset, leading them to protest outside the base. The incident quickly made headlines in the press. This protest was followed by multiple attacks on American advisors. Malkasian said that "the rage over the Quran burning faded but something stayed in the body of the police and army" (Malkasian 2021, 337). These attacks and protests show that belonging to those values is not eliminated in Muslim people who are not on the side of the Taliban.

Generally, having a sense of belonging to a recognized social framework is part of being treated justly. The imposition of specific values on people who have different ones, depriving them of their chance to cultivate themselves within the terms of their existing world and truly

develop their agency as a mode of being in that world, seems to be unjust. These values do not conform to their current situation. This is an unjust aspect of the imposition of values on individuals, which I have tried to explain in the third point. In the next section, I will address a possible critique that may be applied to the claim of this thesis.

3 Chapter Three: The Problem of Unjust Practices in the Local Culture

The claim that there is simply harmony between individual action and cultures, and that individual attachment to existing cultures should be respected, raises the possible criticism that this assumes all cultures and traditional practices are always welcoming and just. In other words, it could seem that my argument ignores the possibility that there may be times when individuals feel disconnected from the values within which they grew up. It is argued that individuals may feel disconnected from some practices recognized within their culture. So, in this case, is it not unjust to expect individuals to act according to or follow these values or practices?

There may be some unjust practices and values within Islamic culture. Examples people tend to give are polygamy, child custody, inheritance laws, and the status of women as witnesses (Mashhour 2005, 563). My argument is not naïvely claiming that individuals should be trapped within these unjust practices or that they must subordinate themselves to them. Instead, I acknowledge that it is important to be able to recognize and challenge practices that appear unjust. Individuals should have the ability to critically engage with and, if necessary, resist cultural norms that they find unjust or meaningless. This critical engagement is essential for the genuine development of agency and the promotion of justice within any cultural framework.

However, I nonetheless oppose the idea that it is the duty or responsibility of an external country or authority to force individuals to act based on their sense of just values or norms. I maintain that it is up to individuals within a culture to judge whether a practice or value is unjust. I defend an immanent process of change in practices. By immanent changes, I mean those that occur through individuals' own actions and their own conscientious judgments within their culture, rather than being imposed by an external group judging their practices and social norms.

The way that ethical life precedes our emergence as individuals does not mean there is no room for change. In other words, it is true and inevitable that we are born into already constituted social norms. However, this does not mean that individuals will forever view reality based on those values. Through being and acting in the world and through continual relationships with others, individuals gradually become familiar with alternative perspectives. Interactions with the outside world reveal that family, society, or individuals from other cultures provide lenses through which they can see a different piece of reality. At some point, certain current values may stop making sense to the individual. Such conflicts lead to ethical situations that demand individual responses. In this chapter, I will clarify these points by giving two real examples from the Islamic country of Egypt.

The following cases are extracted from Saba Mahmood's book *Politics of Piety*. Mahmood uses these cases to show that an individual's agency is determined by the capacity that social norms and values provide. I intend to discuss these cases to demonstrate how immanent changes can occur in social practices and values without enforcement from the outside.

Mahmood discusses women's religious movements in Egypt, referred to as the "piety movement." She explains that this is an Islamic and religious movement primarily raised against the liberal values that have prevailed in Egypt. The participants' main concern is the

secularization of their everyday lives, which have become devoid of Islamic practices and pious values (Mahmood 2005, 4). The goal of these women is to bring back the “spirit of Islam” to their everyday activities, as in schools and workplaces (43).

However, the obstacle to achieving this goal is that many participants see a sort of inconsistency between Islamic practices and modern life. In some cases, performing certain Islamic practices seems meaningless to them. Acting based on those values no longer makes sense to them. Consequently, some individuals, specifically young participants, consider those Islamic practices unjust. They see it as unjust to follow those values as an obligation (Mahmood 101-102).

As Mahmood emphasizes, these actions and choices do not intend to topple the entirety of Islamic values. Their arguments (or disagreements with those specific values) are still within the realm of religious juristic opinions (85). They remain committed to Islamic values, as evidenced by their active participation in mosque lessons to become more pious and closer to God. However, from time to time, they find a specific value or practice unjust or inconsistent with the rest of their everyday life practices.

Mosque lessons take place in three large mosques from different social classes in Egypt. In these lessons, there are teachers who provide religious instructions for women of different ages. The knowledge and religious pedagogy, which were mainly in the hands of men, can now be taught and learned by women (41-43). Gaining religious knowledge, partly due to the growth of libraries and social media, gives women the opportunity to interpret the Quran and the Prophet’s traditions themselves or to become familiar with less popular interpretations of the Quran. Apart from acquiring male-dominated knowledge, women have also gained access to the traditionally male-dominated space of the mosque (Mahmood 2005, 79-80).

The mosque lessons resulted in a shift in epistemic and religious authority. As will be shown in the rest of this section, learning religious knowledge provides women with a chance to *reinterpret* Islamic texts that have traditionally been read by men (103). Now, women have opportunities to interpret religious texts from a female perspective. Furthermore, they can frankly discuss their own questions and bring up issues related to themselves (112-113). Through Islamic knowledge, they have access to more choices within the Islamic framework, such as choosing the values that conform more to their current lives.

It is noteworthy that the main reason that brought women to the mosque lessons was their concern about the elimination of Islamic values from their everyday lives. Gathering in a male-dominated space and acquiring religious knowledge, in turn, gives them the opportunity to open their minds to each other. I mean they have a chance to see the way that the other looks at the world. This creates the possibility of changing what they find unjust within those Islamic values, representing an immanent change.

In the first case, let us look at the story that Mahmood discusses about the religious teacher Hajj Faiza. Hajj Faiza is a teacher in an upper-class mosque in Cairo, and her action of leading the collective prayer was controversial for all who attended the mosque classes. According to some Islamic juristic opinions, it is permissible for women to lead collective prayers for other women. However, based on common custom in Egypt, if a man is present, it is he who should lead the collective prayer. This common idea does not align with the majority juristic opinions (Mahmood 86-87).

Hajj Faiza, however, leads the women's collective prayers even when a man is present. So, she is often questioned about it because her actions violate popular Egyptian customs (110). Although Hajj Faiza's actions raise many questions among Muslim women, as Mahmood points

out, more than three hundred women pray with her in the mosque after finishing the lesson, demonstrating their implicit support of her actions (110).

Hajj Faiza and other Muslim women are still acting within Islamic practices while acting in a way to question the practice they found unjust. My aim here is to show the possibility of changing a practice that they find unjust. Hajj Faiza finds it unjust that women are usually ignored in leading collective prayers, even for other women. Although it is not against Islamic jurisprudence, Egyptian traditions have prohibited it. As a result, many people did not even know that many interpreters permitted women to lead collective prayers.⁶

My goal in mentioning the story of Hajj Faiza was to show that change within a culture is possible. But how? When individuals consistently act in accordance with societal norms, they reinforce and uphold these norms. Ethical life, as we have discussed in chapter one, is the result of individuals' actions based on it. We see that ethical life gives them options or choices to act upon. It is individuals' actions that keep norms alive in ethical life.

However, when individuals, through their small actions, challenge existing norms, they can *initiate* change. These small actions, like those of Hajj Faiza, can highlight deficiencies or injustices within ethical life, prompting reflection and possible reform. Her actions, observed by more than three hundred women who follow her, lead to a sort of cumulative effect. Through their small actions, individuals can reinforce or challenge social norms and practices, but this example of the piety movement shows that they do so *through* these norms and practices, and as *inspired* by them.

⁶ It is because many of the participants ask Hajj Faiza whether her action in leading the collective prayer is right or not.

In the above case, we saw that changes start with occupying a male-dominated space, the mosque, and regaining Islamic knowledge; gradually, this leads to actions, such as leading collective prayers. Unlike common social values, Hajj Faiza judges leading the collective prayer, by a woman, to be a right action that has no contradiction with Islamic values. If I were to explain it in Hegel's words about conscience, I would say that Hajj Faiza acts based on her past experience and Islamic background knowledge. She judges the leading collective prayer as the right action in the mosque. Furthermore, by acting in this way, she exposes her actions to the judgment of others.

The other women, as judges, look at and assess Hajj Faiza's actions based on their own perspectives. Some women find it a little challenging and ask Hajj Faiza about her action (Mahmood 110). In my opinion, the other women, about three hundred of them, by participating in the prayer led by Hajj Faiza, implicitly judge it as a proper action.

Hajj Faiza's action, and the actions of those who judge and follow her, actually open them to each other's perspectives and ideas. No one here wants to impose her own opinion or ethical judgment on others. According to common social norms, they should say their prayers led by a man. However, by her action, Hajj Faiza challenges the common norm of male-led collective prayer. A large number of women, by following her, judge her actions as right and show their disagreement with that the dominant norm. To weaken an unjust practice, women, through their own conscious actions within Islamic norms, take serious steps to weaken that unjust practice through a bottom-up process. But it is by assuming that practice that they do so; their commitment and attachment to that practice is being expressed at the same time as their critical revision of it is expressed.

It may be argued that in this case, Hajj Faiza is only acting based on ethical life, or that her action is merely a reminder of other Islamic ideas for women as if they are following again a universal Islamic principle. To answer this possible criticism, I would say that Hajj Faiza tried to challenge *the dominant tradition* of leading collective prayer by men, rather than Islamic jurisprudence. A part of the complicated network of intertwined norms and values that make up ethical life has been challenged through her and the other participants' actions. One small piece of this complex web is being challenged, without the whole framework being torn down.

It is noteworthy that Hajj Faiza's action in leading collective prayer is not an isolated individual action. It is accepted by three hundred individuals who follow her in prayer. They challenge the current practice and try to follow another one. It does not cause an overnight change but rather inspires motivation in others and leads to a gradual change in ethical life. Her action can be considered the beginning of the next steps.⁷

In another example, Mahmood discusses the Islamic issue of *Ikhtilat*, which refers to gender segregation and the conduct that governs interactions between men and women in Islam (Mahmood 100). In lessons at Nafise Mosque, the religious teacher advises the girls that, due to modern institutions such as mixed educational systems and workplaces, they should follow certain conditions for interactions with unrelated males to maintain a pious life. Based on a Quranic verse, she advises girls to lower their gaze and avoid eye contact when communicating with male teachers (Mahmood 101).

⁷ "On March 18, 2005, Dr. Amina Wadud made waves when she led Muslim prayers in New York City, a ritual almost always reserved for men. Wadud is an African American activist and a professor of Islamic studies at Virginia Commonwealth University." (see here: <https://hwpi.harvard.edu/pluralismarchive/amina-wadud-2005>.)

While the girls attend these mosque lessons to lead a more pious life, they find these recommendations very awkward. This disagreement between the young participants and the religious teacher leads to some tensions and an exchange of opinions. Some of them complain and find it impossible to commit to that practice. They find the practice useless and hard to follow. They argue that they cannot understand what the teacher says in class if they avoid eye contact with him (Mahmood 2005, 102)

Mahmood draws attention to a girl called Maryam and her discussion with the teacher. Maryam points out other conditions for interacting with men. She asked what it would be like if she knew the man was a well-respected person, and she knew herself to be a responsible woman who behaved in a pious manner. The teacher responds to Maryam by saying that they are not as pious as the companions of the Prophet, who commanded them to follow those practices. In another claim, Maryam attracts the teacher's attention (and the whole class) to another interpretation of these verses. According to this interpretation, those verses in the Quran are not supposed to be followed by ordinary Muslim women. Maryam pointed out the inapplicability of those verses to the conduct of Muslim women like herself, arguing that those verses are supposed to be followed by the Prophet's wives (Mahmood 2005, 103).

Maryam and some other women in the mosque lessons find the practices or values associated with interactions between men and women meaningless in their modern lives. Following these practices related to *Ikhtilat* reduces the quality of their work at the workplace or their learning and understanding at school. Therefore, they find the imposition of those practices unjust. Within the Islamic framework and knowledge, Maryam tries to act differently, making an ethical judgment about these practices and interpreting those Quranic verses from a new perspective that she has learned (103).

In each case, the individual who finds tension between Islamic practices and modern values tries to overcome those tensions. Their way of dealing with these tensions does not necessarily mean overturning Islamic values and embracing liberal ones. Instead, they try to negotiate with other individuals who view the situation from a different perspective (i.e., religious teachers) and come to a conclusion that works for them, and they do so out of their attachment to the whole of Islamic values.

Each individual has a chance to open her perspective to the other (whether teacher or attendee), and through this interaction, reconciliation can happen. As Hoff nicely says in her explanation of Hegel's forgiveness, "forgiveness is the recognition that the political arena is properly constituted as an arena for transformative negotiation between the authority of established norms and the authority of individual conscience" (2011, 195). The outcome of this reconciliation and negotiation is a *new* way of looking at the world.

In Hegel's philosophy, forgiveness is a vital mechanism that facilitates transformation within ethical life. By facilitation, I mean that when an actor takes action, and her action is judged by another, the other becomes part of her action. Instead of acting and judging based on universality, they engage with the singularity of the other. They are now acting and judging in a shared ground based on which everyone has a perspective from which they look at reality. Forgiveness provides an integration of the individual and the other, creating a kind of co-dependence between the individual who is engaging with the other from her own perspective.

It may be argued that, in the case of Maryam and the other girls, they are still working based on a universal principle, which is the interpretation of some Islamic jurisprudence. Therefore, they are not judging or acting according to the way they see the world from their own perspective, unlike Hegel's explanation of conscience.

I respond to this critique by stating that those girls are still judging based on the way the world appears to them. When they use words such as ‘awkward’ and ‘strange’ to describe the Ikhtilat practice, it seems clear that they see no meaning in this particular practice. They see no consistency between that practice and their everyday lives. So, it does not seem that a universal principle has influenced their judgment. It seems to me that as mosque participants are Muslim and define their identities within the Islamic tradition, maybe they formalize and justify their opinions in Islamic words.

In the case of Maryam, when she mentioned that if she sees herself and the other interacting as responsible persons, it seems that she disconnects the value of piety from the practices associated with Ikhtilat. This means that someone can be pious without following those Ikhtilat practices. She probably arrived at this conclusion based on her own personal judgment. What is important here is that individuals try to recognize each other’s perspectives from which they interpret the world and actions, and judge based on this living and shared ground.

Furthermore, it can be argued that in these cases, we are still confronted with women who want to be freed from restrictive Islamic practices, in a liberal or negative sense. In other words, can we think about mosque women’s freedom in a positive, not negative, sense? It is determined as a result of their confrontation and conflict with modern values and practices in their Islamic lives. They still view that conflict from an Islamic perspective and tradition. This kind of conflict occurs because they continue to see the situation from their perspective and seek solutions by attending mosque lessons. They still view the situation from their Islamic perspective and try to resolve the tension from that perspective. They seek another interpretation from Islamic jurisprudence to justify their own opinion or action, or to show that a practice is meaningless.

Thus, they still maintain an Islamic perspective and do not entirely overturn Islamic values in favor of a liberal choice.

Generally, in both cases, women try to adjust and make their Islamic framework more just if they find a practice or value unjust. To achieve this goal, they resort to a process that leads to changes within ethical life from the inside, without violent treatment, rather than through external force or internal coercion. In an atmosphere where no one tries to resist or force the other, individuals share their ideas in a welcoming manner. Opening up to the ideas of others and exposing their actions to others provides an opportunity for ethical life to change. Individuals' actions within these conditions have collective effects and introduce others to see the world from that perspective. A more just ethical life is the result and sedimented outcome of the individuals' engagements with each other.

In conclusion, in this chapter, I have argued that my argument does not suggest that individuals should be trapped within unjust cultural practices or that they must subordinate themselves to them. Instead, it has tried to give an account of an immanent change and the promotion of justice *within* ethical life. I argue against the imposition of values by external and internal authorities, emphasizing that the responsibility to judge and change unjust practices lies within the individuals and cultures themselves. Change can be an immanent process arising from within the culture through individual actions and conscientious judgments.

4 Conclusion

In this thesis work, I have argued that individuals, shaped by specific ways of life, norms, and practices, should be respected as such and empowered to live in and negotiate the values

inherent in those contexts. This supports the idea that people have a better chance of developing in their agency if they are free to navigate within the social norms by which they were raised. Hegel explains how individuals have been developed in the relationship with the other within historical and cultural contexts, and my argument builds upon this to make normative claims about how these contexts and human attachment to them should be respected.

The first chapter was devoted to the descriptive part of my argument and included three sections. The first section focused on Hegel's concept of individual self-consciousness, which relies on intersubjective recognition and emerges through interactions with others and materiality. The next section examined the role of ethical life in shaping self-consciousness, emphasizing the influence of historical and cultural contexts on individual agency. Hegel distinguishes between familial and societal levels of ethical life, each with its own values and customs. Ethical life integrates social norms into individual actions, providing a sense of what is right. The last section discussed the concept of conscience, a dynamic mechanism through which individuals have to rely on their own judgement to decide whether an action is right. Within Hegel's framework, abstract or universal moral principles do not immediately translate into an answer regarding how one should act within this situation. Individuals must judge a particular situation based on their past experience and their sense of the meaning of these principles.

In the second chapter of the thesis work, I argued that the attachment that individuals tend to experience with regard to their own values means that this attachment should be respected, as it is a major part of human experience, and values should not be imposed upon them. I first explored the colonial imposition of values through an external power, which, as Frantz Fanon described, inherently involves physical and psychological violence. Then I explored how power internal to societies and cultures can perform the same kind of value imposition.

Next, I explored how the imposition of values leads to the objectification of those upon whom these values are imposed, positing them as less than human beings. This deprives individuals of their agency and deprives recognition from those who impose upon them. Individual selfhood and agency are deeply intertwined with the social norms they internalize, making it difficult for them to adapt to new, imposed values. This is evident in examples from Afghanistan, where individuals struggle to develop their agency within imposed values.

The third chapter addressed particularly the potential criticism that not all local practices and values are just or welcoming. Here I proposed the concept of “immanent change”. This process allows for gradual changes from within, based on individual judgments about what is just or unjust. It is through their actions and decisions that local norms and values can change over time. The collective effects of individual actions contribute to the gradual changes within ethical life, ensuring that values and practices evolve in a way that reflects the lived experiences of the community. Through examples from Egypt, I illustrated how individual actions and judgments can lead to meaningful cultural change. I hope to have shown in this thesis how being shaped by sociocultural contexts is not inconsistent with the possibility of critiquing them, and that meaningful critique is bolstered and conditioned by the experience of belonging.

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