Hegel argues that we must recognize the essential role that contingency plays in moral action. Because the role that Hegel finds for contingency is both outside of one’s control and idiosyncratic, his view represents a significant challenge to the ideas that in morality we only account for what we can control and that our motivations should not be idiosyncratic needs. To bring out this significance, I look at three ways in which Hegel characterizes the relationship between the necessity of the moral law and the contingency of moral action, by drawing on three figures Hegel has emphasized in the history of moral action.

Introduction

We can see at least two reasons why a moral attitude can be defined in opposition to the contingent dimensions of action. First, morality is generally concerned with what one can do or control. We generally do not hold people morally accountable for things they could not have foreseen or controlled. As a result, these things are often seen to fall outside of moral consideration. Second, actions are often said to be moral insofar as they appeal to a law higher than one’s own idiosyncratic needs. In other words, what makes an action right for me is the same thing that makes it right for everyone. If I hold different standards for myself than I do for others, one might say I have begun to tread an immoral path. Both of these characteristics of morality lead one to focus on the universal truths of morality.¹ Hegel’s discussion includes these two moral considerations, but, as we will see in his discussion of conscience, his view of conscientious moral action is broader in scope than this and considers conscientious motives to be essential moments of moral action. This is a significant challenge to the ideas that in morality we only account for what we

¹ These two considerations are found most paradigmatically in Kant’s moral philosophy.
can control and that our motivations should not be idiosyncratic
needs, since, for Hegel, contingency is both outside of one's control
and idiosyncratic.

Moral action, as Hegel will argue, is ultimately about making
changes in the actual world. The actual world is filled with contin-
gencies that are beyond one's control. If morality aims to have a real
effect on the world, it must find a way to orient itself to the contin-
gencies of life. The study of the contingencies of action takes account
of how people orient themselves towards the ultimate contingency
of reality. We can treat these contingencies as indifferent or as essen-
tial to the moral value of the action. We relate to the contingent with
a stance of “indifference” when we take the contingent aspects of the
world to have no bearing on the morality of an action. In these cases,
we may treat what is contingent as no concern of ours. We take the
contingencies to be essential when we take them to be essential to
the moral action and, consequently, take these aspects of the action
to aid in determining the value of the action.

Overall, I understand Hegel to be committed to the idea that we
are ineradicably embedded in a world that cannot fully be grasped
by reason, and I understand his analysis of conscience to be his
analysis of the deepest and most concrete experience of this fact
about ourselves. To bring out this significance, I will look at three
ways in which Hegel characterizes the relationship between the
necessity of the moral law and the contingency of moral action by
drawing on three figures Hegel has emphasized in the history of
moral action. I will look at how the individual relates to her own
contingency in terms of Hegel’s interpretation of (I) the oracle in
Ancient Greek religion, (II) Socrates’s daimon, and (III) the figure of
“conscience” as presented in the Phenomenology of Spirit. My analy-
sis will focus on Hegel’s account of moral action in the Phenomenolo-
ogy of Spirit, supplementing this with the Lectures on the History of
Philosophy.

I will begin with the figure of the oracle in order to show how re-
lating to the oracle involves treating contingency as another's con-
cern. Here, one's decisions are made by something external to one-
self. Next, I will discuss the figure of Socrates’s daimon, which Hegel

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2 A strong case has been made for the necessity of contingency within Hegel’s
logic. See Dieter Henrich, “Hegel’s Theorie über den Zufall,” Kant-Studien, vol. 50,
no. 1–4 (1958/59): 131–48 or John Burbidge, Hegel’s Systematic Contingency
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). Christopher Yeomans follows the connection
between this argument from the logic and agency in chapters 7 and 8 of Freedom
interprets as presenting a shape of consciousness where the decisive power is moved inwards. Nonetheless, even though the task of interpretation and the power of decision-making is, in a sense, taken on by the individual (here Socrates), this power is not seen as his own power and so the relation to a daimon still treats contingency and the ultimate context for one’s decision as properly another’s concern. Finally, I will discuss conscience, which for Hegel is an experience that continues to refine these themes. Here, Hegel shows a shape of morality where one takes sole responsibility for the power of decision-making as well as the contingency upon which this is, in part, based. However, contra Dean Moyar, for example, who argues in Hegel’s Conscience that conscience “does not refer to a mysterious oracular source of moral truth,” I will argue that, whereas Hegel’s view of conscience no longer treats contingency as another’s concern, it still retains a sense of the oracular nature of moral action.

I. The Oracle

We will begin by looking at one of Hegel’s discussions of the Greek world in order to see one way in which we may view the contingent world as outside of our own responsibility. In the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel discusses how the Greeks would ultimately make their important ethical and political decisions. He writes,

We know that the Greeks undoubtedly had laws on which to form their judgments, but on the other hand, both in private and public life, immediate decisions had to be made. But in them the Greeks, with all their freedom, did not decide from the subjective will. The general or the people did not take it upon themselves to decide as to what was best in the State, nor did the individual do so in the family. For in making these decisions, the Greeks took refuge in oracles, sacrificial animals, soothsayers, or, like the Romans, asked counsel of birds in flight.  

4 G.W.F. Hegel, Werke in Zwanzig Bände. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), 492–93, tr. by E. S. Haldane and Frances H. Simson as Lectures on the History of Philosophy. 3 vol. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 423. References are to the Suhrkamp Werke, followed by the English translation, hereafter referred to parenthetically in the text as LHP.
Hegel here draws out the distinction between a law and the immediate need to make decisions. When decisions needed to be made, any humanly constructed law was seen by the Greeks to be deficient. Rather than turning to human rationality, the Greeks turned outwards because they believed that concerns about the existing world and the concrete outcomes of their actions were outside of their control and were put outside of their individual decision-making process.

The Greeks may often have turned to oracles or other divine signs out of a concern for the future because they did not take themselves to have ultimate control or insight into the future. The human faculties alone, for the Ancient Greeks, were inadequate tools for knowing what would be best to do in a given situation. Since it was recognized that the ultimate outcome was beyond their control, they turned to something beyond them for help. Hegel refers to Xenophon, for example, who says that we humans can know particular skills, and can marry or build a house, but we cannot know how these things will turn out—if we will be happy, or who will inhabit the house. (LHP, 493/423) Since knowledge of the ultimate results of our actions is beyond a human being’s capacity to know, this kind of knowledge is seen as divine knowledge. Consequently, in this era, one would turn to the gods. Since the ultimate result of action is not within the hands of the individual actor, but is, in the understanding of the Greeks at least, in the hands of the gods, the individual cannot have ultimate control over her actions and therefore cannot take ultimate responsibility for them. Hegel discusses this ancient relationship to contingency in a similar fashion in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

In the *Phenomenology of Spirit*, in his discussion of religion in the form of art, Hegel discusses the relationship between the individual and the ultimate contingency of her life: “For the contingent is something that is not self-possessed and is alien, and therefore the ethical consciousness lets itself settle such matters too, as by a throw of the

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5 In his *Memorabilia*, Xenophon attributes this same point to Socrates. In the context of defending Socrates against the charge of bringing in new divinities, Xenophon also writes, “He was no more bringing in anything strange than are other believers in divination, who rely on augury, oracles, coincidences and sacrifices. For these men’s belief is not that the birds or the folk met by accident know what profits the inquirer, but that they are the instruments by which the gods make this known; and that was Socrates’ belief too.” Xenophon, *Memorabilia. Oeconomicus. Symposium. Apology*, (tr.) E.C. Marchant and O.J. Todd (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1923), 3–5.
dice, in an unthinking and alien manner." Since all of the contingent aspects of action are not seen to be properly one’s own, people living out of this conception of reality will treat the contingencies as independent from themselves. In this case, one treats what is contingent as indifferent to the goodness of one’s own activity. Of course, as H. S. Harris notes, by comparing the oracle to a throw of the dice, Hegel is not saying that those who went to the Oracle treated it as contingent. They took themselves to be consulting the absolute authority of the gods. However, they recognized that it was not within their ability to decide these things, and so they did not determine their actions through their own thinking, but in the “unthinking” way that accompanies the consultation of oracles. One can imagine making a difficult decision, and concluding that one cannot find within oneself the ability to gain any certainty regarding which choice is best. In such cases, a person might give up thinking for themselves about their decisions, and ask someone whom they take to have access to the truth for the answer, perhaps someone in the community who is acknowledged as having expertise in “divining” the future. Now, it seems that what Hegel is highlighting with the “throw of the dice” is not whether or not the individual takes the other to have access to the truth, but how the individual relates to the contingent content of her action. Hegel writes, “For what is contingent is the impulsive, the alien, and ethical consciousness thus also lets itself, for example, with a roll of the dice, determine itself in an impulsive and alien manner about these things.” (PS, §712) In consulting a divine interpreter, one may take oneself to be taking the contingent part of reality seriously, and not to be indifferent to it. However, here, Hegel focuses on the fact that, when consulting an oracle, one lets the contingent remain separate from one’s own control and relates to it in an arbitrary fashion. This means that, while one wants to make the best decision possible, one is relying on something that one does not understand.

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8 We can hear a resonance here to Hegel’s discussion of the “Unhappy Consciousness,” where one practices and follows the dictates of what one does not understand. See §229 of the *Phenomenology*. In a similar way, Stoicism, according to Hegel, also takes up the problem of contingency by maintaining a stance of indifference to what is contingent. Hegel discussion of Stoicism in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* highlights how the Stoics claim that what is good is what is
Many concrete decisions that we need to make rely on the natural world. In his *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Hegel discusses the different ways in which people confronted the absolute through nature. In this discussion we can see a difference between the Greeks' relationship to the oracle and their relationship to the god Pan. For Hegel, Pan represents not just an alien totality that has no relation to humans, but something “friendly to the human spirit.” (LHP, 288/234) Nature or Pan is represented, not as the objective whole, “but [as] that indefinite neutral ground which involves the element of the subjective; he embodies that thrill which pervades us in the silence of the forests.” (LPH, 289/235) This god was not an object in the world, but the fabric of the world as such. It seems, accordingly, that he could not be feared, but rather provoked anxiety.9 Thus, this anxiety, as a relation to Pan, did not tell one what to fear, avoid, or pursue, but was indeterminate, and this general anxiety would have to be interpreted by an individual. So, whereas through Pan one could find some connection with nature, this connection did not present itself clearly; it would need to be divined from nature. In this Greek relationship to Pan we can see a difference between an alien external reality and an external world that is in communication with us. This is because in the relation one has with contingency when consulting an oracle, one takes the divine interpreter to have access to the truth behind the contingent appearances, whereas in the relation to Pan, one takes oneself to relate to the general ground of the external world, though it does not present a clear interpretation of how one should relate to this external world. As Heraclitus says, “The lord whose oracle is in Delphi neither indicates clearly nor conceals but gives a sign.”10 In this way, both the oracle and the relation to Pan are “oracular” in the sense that they

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are both ways of relating to a divine externality that requires human interpretation.\footnote{In the context of Hegel’s reference to Socrates’s \textit{daimon} in the \textit{Phenomenology}, Harris argues that that the oracle, Pan, and the \textit{daimon} are all considered “oracular” for Hegel: “It is clear that Hegel wants to regard all prophetic revelations as ‘oracular.’” (Harris, \textit{Hegel’s Ladder}, Vol. II, 593)} Thus, both the oracles and our relation to nature as Pan require an interpreter.

As we have seen, making contact with the divine externality found in nature requires a subject in order to interpret it. This necessary interpretation is described by Hegel in the \textit{Lectures on the Philosophy of History}. He writes, “we have, on the one hand, the Indefinite, which, however, holds communication with man; on the other hand the fact, that such communication is only a subjective imagining—an explanation furnished by the percipient himself.” (LPH, 289/235) The process of communication with the beyond as understood by the Greeks was not a simple transmission of the message; rather, the songs of the muses, for example, were “the productions of thoughtfully listening spirit—creative while observant.” (LPH, 289/235) This act of interpretation was called \textit{manteia}. This \textit{manteia} requires an interpreter, a mantis, to make sense of the delirium that was caused by nature. The gods, through nature, were consulted,

But the sounds of the bowls dashing against each other were quite indefinite, and had no objective sense; the sense—the signification—was imparted to the sounds only by the human beings who heard them. Thus also the Delphic priestesses, in a senseless, distracted state—in the intoxication of enthusiasm (mania)—uttered unintelligible sounds; and it was the \textit{mantis} who gave to these utterances definite meaning. (LPH, 290/236)

In his analysis of the Greeks, Hegel argues that human interpretation is required in order to make the divine signs meaningful. This is important because what Hegel is showing is that, although the Greeks wanted to maintain a stance of indifference to the contingent world by unburdening themselves of responsibility for contingency and placing this in the hands of the gods, making decisions without the use of their cognitive capacities, ultimately, when consulting their gods, they in fact did require the use of their own cognitive capacities.

Human intelligence is required to interpret the signs from external nature, which connect one to the empirical world that is essential
for action. The noise of the earth must be put into “intelligible sounds,” into language, and this can only be done by a skilled interpreter who can change the “sensuous into the sensible—the Intellectual.” (LPH, 291/237) Hegel describes this ability to interpret divine signs as a “meaningfully knowing perception.” (LPH, 291/237) Thus, despite the fact that one may want to “outsource” one’s decision-making to nature as an external oracle, the external world will still need to be interpreted before decisions can be made. Those consulting oracles, in the end, had to decipher their signs with their own interpretive power. Nevertheless, despite the fact that we can see that the external, contingent world required a human interpreter to give sense to things, in this conception of moral action, Hegel writes, “men derive their resolves (Entschlüsse) not yet from themselves, but from their Oracles.” (LPH, 306/250) Thus, when one is indifferent to the contingent, empirical world, one does not ultimately derive one’s resolve from oneself.

II. Socrates’s Daimon

We will now look at Hegel’s interpretation of Socrates’s daimon of Socrates in order to see a second way in which Hegel discusses one’s consideration of the contingency involved in action. The major difference between the oracle and the daimon of Socrates is the fact that whereas the oracle was outside of and separate from the individual, the daimon is found within the individual. Hegel says that the figure of the daimon “implies that now man decides in accordance with his perception and by himself.” (LHP, 490/421) Hegel writes of the Greeks that,

they took it [the individuality of judgment] to be a contingency of the individual, and hence, as contingency of circumstances is an external, they also made the contingency of judgment into something external, i.e. they consulted their oracles—conscious that the individual will is itself a contingent. But Socrates, who placed the contingency of judgment in himself, since he had his daemon in his own consciousness, thereby abolished the external universal daemon from which the Greeks obtained their judgments. (LHP, 499/431)

The “resolve,” which in the relation to the oracle had been placed outside of the individual, is now found within.

We can see this in Socrates’s discussion of his “daimon” in Plato’s Phaedrus. In the Phaedrus, Socrates, excited by Phaedrus’s reading of
Lysias’s speech, gave his own speech, in which he argued that Eros was to be avoided in certain sexual relationships. He later considered this to be a bad speech about Eros, one which would offend the gods since he has argued that the god Eros is to be avoided. As he leaves the spot where he and Phaedrus were speaking, he says, “just as I was about the cross the river, the familiar divine sign came to me which, whenever it occurs, holds me back from something I am about to do. I thought I heard a voice coming from this very spot, forbidding me to leave until I made atonement for some offense against the gods.” He continues,

In effect, you see, I am a seer, and though I am not particularly good at it, still—like the people who are just barely able to read and write—I am good enough for my own purposes. I recognize my offense clearly now. In fact, the soul too, my friend, is itself a sort of seer; that’s why, almost from the beginning of my speech, I was disturbed by a very uneasy feeling, as Ibycus puts it, that ‘for offending the gods I am honored by men.’ But now I understand exactly what my offense has been. (242c)

Socrates identifies his offence as impiety, and he atones for this with a prayer to Pan. Here we can see that the absolute is not posited as wholly other, since it can communicate to us (as Pan is “friendly” to the human soul). Socrates recognizes this by positing himself as in communication with it. With Hegel’s interpretation of Pan, we can see this relationship to the external world as reciprocal: Pan is friendly to the human spirit, and the human spirit is “friendly,” or able to relate to, what is divine. Both the external world and one’s self are posited as being of the same kind and so, in principle, they are able to communicate.

Not only does Socrates claim he is a seer, he claims that the soul itself holds the necessary capacity for interpretation. Socrates is thus not claiming to be unique in his capacity to interpret; instead, he suggests that all (who have a soul) have this possibility. It is because he has a soul that he can interpret “divinely.” Thus, Socrates claims.

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12 References are to Plato, Complete Works, (ed.) J. M. Cooper (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997), 242c.
14 This was something the Unhappy Consciousness was initially unable to accomplish.
15 This is the stance of reason that takes what is to be one’s own (Sein as Seinen).
that the soul is not different in kind from the Oracle, which can remind us of Hegel’s discussion of the transition from Catholicism to Protestantism. In this transition, Hegel locates the recognition that, if it is the case that a priest can communicate with the absolute, and if what is essential about each of us is the same, it is the case that, in principle, I can do this as well. Likewise, Socrates says he is “a seer,” though “not particularly good at it.” He treats the ability to be a seer as a skill that can be acquired because we all in principle have the ability to do what it is that the oracles and seers do.

Socrates thus posits the soul as of the same substance as the divine. This is also the case with his daimon, through which he communed with the divine. His daimon has a nature that partakes simultaneously of both god and man. This very point is made thematic and explicit in the Symposium. In the Symposium, Diotima tells Socrates that a daimon “is in between mortal and immortal.” She says, of Eros, “He’s a great spirit [daimon megas], Socrates. Everything spiritual, you see, is in between god and mortal.” They are “messengers who shuttle back and forth” between men and gods. The divine is no longer posited as wholly other; rather, the individual, says Socrates, can see herself as in communion with the divine and thus in communion with the ultimate context of our contingent reality.

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16 Hegel discusses this transition in his Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion and is discussed experientially in the Phenomenology of Spirit’s description of the Unhappy Consciousness. In the Lectures on the Philosophy of Religion, Hegel says that between Catholicism and Protestantism, there is a move from the external authority of the church and icons to the inner authority of the Holy Spirit within the individual. In the section on the Unhappy Consciousness in the Phenomenology, this is represented as the move from the mediator to reason in the second and third stages of the Unhappy Consciousness. As we saw earlier, consciousness “casts upon the mediator or minister its own freedom of decision, and herewith the responsibility for its own action.” (PS, 154/§228) As an “Unhappy Consciousness,” I “outsource” my decision-making to another and therewith I divest myself of my own responsibility. Here, what is essential to the decision-making is found in another. When consciousness moves from being an Unhappy Consciousness to the standpoint of “reason,” however, what is (“Sein”) is taken to be what is one’s own (“Seinen”). (PS, 164/§240) Socrates, moving from the external oracle to the inner daimon, follows a similar movement. See Hegel, LHP, Vol. 3, 49/147.

17 When this is recognized, the difference may only be that the priest is better attuned to the divine.

18 Compare also Cratylus 398c.
However, Socrates’s *daimon* is not Socrates himself: it is impersonal. Since Socrates’s *daimon* is not identified with Socrates himself, Hegel writes that,

> The Genius [*daimon*] of Socrates stands midway between the externality of the oracle and the pure inwardness of the mind; it is inward, but it is also presented as a personal genius, separate from human will, and not yet as the wisdom and free will of Socrates himself. The further investigation of this Genius consequently presents to us a form which passes into somnambulism, into this double of consciousness. (LHP, 495/425)

Socrates is present to himself as doubled. The locus of “resolve” is not in an external authority, but Socrates also does not identify it with himself. Hegel writes that

> The deficiency in the universal, which lies in its indeterminate-ness, is unsatisfactorily supplied in an individual way, because Socrates’ judgment, as coming from himself, was characterized by the form of an unconscious impulse. The Genius of Socrates is not Socrates himself, not his opinions and conviction, but an oracle which, however, is not external, but is subjective, his oracle.” (LHP, 491/422)

Thus, for Hegel, Socrates has moved the oracle inside of his own subjectivity; nevertheless, it is still a kind of oracle, that is, it remains something other than Socrates himself.

Consequently, one who has an “inner oracle” remains indifferent to the contingency of moral action. Hegel makes this point in the “Religion” chapter of the *Phenomenology*, writing,

> Just as that wise man of old searched in his own thought for what was good and beautiful, but left it to his ‘daemon’ to know the petty contingent content of what he wanted to know—whether it would be good for him to keep company with this or that person, or good for one of his acquaintances to go on a journey, and similar unimportant things; in the same way the universal consciousness draws knowledge of the contingent from birds, or trees, or the yeasty earth, the vapour from which deprives self-consciousness of its self-possession [*Besonnenheit*].” (PS, 466/§712)

Hegel is referring to Socrates, saying that Socrates used his mind for thinking of things like the good and the beautiful, because these were
accessible to thinking; however, Socrates would leave decisions concerning the contingent, empirical world up to his daimon. In the quotation above, the “universal consciousness” refers to the cultural community, wherein custom would dictate situations in which the oracle was to be consulted. In both cases, when the contingency is taken as external to one’s decision-making, then, with respect to decisions about concrete moral action, one loses one’s ability to be in Besonnenheit, in self-possession or level-headedness.

In sum, in Socrates’s relation to his daimon and Hegel’s understanding of it, we see a transition from the oracle. Unlike the individual who turns to the oracle, the individual who turns to her daimon takes on the responsibility, in a sense, for being the interpreter and does not leave this task to another being outside of her. She has taken on the task of “divining” as an individual act. Nevertheless, relating to the daimon still treats the contingencies of action as outside of one’s own responsibility. The daimon is not connected with the person of Socrates and so, importantly, the decision-making involved in moral action is ultimately not connected to his own resolve.

III. Conscience

Socrates’s daimon, on Hegel’s account, is a figure that places the responsibility for the interpretation necessary to make a decision within oneself. Socrates understands the need for interpreting the world with respect to the ultimate contingency of our actions and further develops this by positing the soul as able to interpret it. Nonetheless, we saw that, according to Hegel’s account of Socrates’s daimon, Socrates does not identify himself with the contingency of his action. The resolve, decisiveness, or determination (Entschlossenheit) is placed outside of himself as the person of Socrates, and into his daimon. As a result, this model for the relationship to contingency still places the resolve outside of the self. The locus of responsibility has not been completely taken on by the self.

Hegel’s discussion of conscience in the Phenomenology begins with the conscientious agent as a knower. Experiencing conscience involves the experience of knowing immediately what must be done in a given circumstance. We can contrast this way of knowing with deliberation. The conscientious agent could, in setting out to perform

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19 Conscience “conducts itself foremost as a knower vis-à-vis the actuality of the case in which action is to take place.” (PS, 421–22/§642)
some action that she feels she must do, set out to know comprehen-
Blew the conditions under which she could successfully act. For
Hegel, deliberation is not what is essential in the immediacy that he
finds in conscientious decision; rather, what is essential is to act. 20 As
conscience involves the immediacy of resolve, Hegel makes it clear
that deliberation is not essential to conscientious decisions. 21 Hegel
says that, while life involves a variety of options and possibilities,
conscience must decide on one of them, and, “the sifting of them in
the steadfast certainty of conscience to ascertain what our duty is,
simply does not take place.”(PS, 418/§635) A conscientious agent
typically does not make deliberation the ultimate concern for ethical
action. Hegel explains:

Contrasted with the simplicity of pure consciousness, with the
absolute other or implicit manifoldness, this reality is a plurality
of circumstances which breaks up and spreads out endlessly in all
directions, backwards into their conditions, sideways into their
connections, forwards into their consequences. The conscientious
mind is aware of this nature of the things and of its relation to it,
and knows that, in the case in which it acts, it does not possess
that full acquaintance with all the attendant circumstances which
is required, and that its pretense of conscientiously weighing all
the circumstances is vain. (PS, 422/§642)

This is because Hegel sees an element of contingency within deliber-
ation itself that we could not eliminate:

Any weighing and comparing of duties that might be made here
would be tantamount to calculating the advantage accruing the
universal from an action. Firstly, the result would be that morali-
ty would be made dependent on the necessary contingency of in-
sight. Secondly, it is precisely the essence of conscience to have
no tuck with this calculating and weighing of duties, and to make

20 See John Russon’s discussion of conscience in The Self and its Body in Hegel’s
Phenomenology of Spirit (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 100–107.
21 Here, among many places in this section, my reading differs from Dean Mo-
yar’s in Hegel’s Conscience. Conscience, for Moyar, is “action on a purpose that I
believe is my duty because I believe it is the purpose that is best supported by
reasons” (12). This seems to contradict Hegel’s repeated claim that though
deliberation, at best, may play a role in conscience, it is only one part of the
conscientious action. In order to remain within “secular ethics,” Moyar stays
away from discussions of religion (9). I think Moyar overestimates the extent to
which Hegel thinks that we have a cognitive grasp of ourselves.
its own decision without reference to any such reasons. (PS 425/§645)

To be dependent on the “contingency of insight” means that if we make deliberation as an essential factor, we are leaving moral decisions up to what the person happens to know about the situation. This will always be finite and insufficient. Instead, the conscientious stance of morality is characterized by the certainty of one’s conviction.

Later, in the “Religion” chapter of the *Phenomenology*, Hegel compares deliberation to consulting an oracle. Here, Hegel is discussing the difference between receiving wisdom from an oracle and from one’s own understanding. He writes,

> When an individual, by using his understanding, makes up his mind, and after deliberation chooses what is advantageous for him, this self-determination is based on the specific nature of his particular character. This latter is itself contingent, and therefore knowledge supplied by the understanding as to what is advantageous for the individual is just such a knowledge as that of the oracles or of the “lot.” (PS, 466/§712)

First, Hegel again emphasizes the “contingency of insight” involved in deliberation. He takes deliberation to be a finite activity, and, as such, this rational activity cannot fully grasp the situation in which it is involved. Second, there is a crucial difference between “outsourcing” one’s deliberation and taking on this task for oneself. For Hegel, one important difference is that, as he says, “he who questions the oracle or ‘lot’ thereby expresses the ethical sentiment of indifference to what is contingent.” (PS, 466/§712) Indifference to contingency is just how Hegel described Socrates’s relation to contingency through his *daimon*. The individual decision-making characteristic of conscience at the very least takes on the responsibility for affirming the necessarily essential relationship she has to contingency in moral action. Hegel continues, noting that “What is higher than both, however, is not only to make deliberation the Oracle for a contingent action, but, in addition, to know that this deliberate action is itself something contingent on account of its connection with the particular aspect of the action and of its advantageousness.” (PS, 466/§712) Thus, while deliberation is “higher” than consulting an oracle, since it does not take an indifferent stance to contingency, what is even higher is to deliberate with the knowledge that one’s deliberation is ultimately the same sort of activity as that of consulting an oracle.
The standpoint of conscience makes decisions based on what it takes to be its own self. Hegel writes “the acquaintance with, and weighing of, all the circumstances are not altogether lacking; but they exist only as a moment, as something which is only for others; and this incomplete knowledge is held by the conscientious mind to be sufficient and complete, because it is its own knowledge.” (PS, 422/§642) One’s relationship to deliberation within the standpoint of conscience as Hegel understands it can be contrasted with a relationship to an oracle and a daimon. By using oracles or a daimon as moments of one’s moral decision, one has not made a decision based on what is one’s own. The result is that one treats the contingency of action as falling outside of one’s own responsibility.

However, while the deliberations involved in the decision are one’s own, this moment of decision-making is ultimately not enough to make a decision. This is because, as we have seen, we cannot have rational access to all of the circumstances involved. Hegel writes that “this reality is a plurality of circumstances which breaks up and spreads out endlessly in all directions, backwards into their conditions, sideways into their connections, forwards in their consequences,” (PS, 422/§642) On this account, rational deliberation cannot ultimately decide how one should act. This means that, in order to act, the conscientious individual will not be able to rely on reason alone.22 In Hegel’s conception of conscience, one draws one’s ultimate action from one’s impulses and inclinations. (PS, 408–409/§622) One must draw upon oneself as a contingent, particular person acting out of a contingent, particular situation. Deliberation may be a moment of the decision, but it is not that from which conscience ultimately draws its decisions.23 Hegel writes, “The sphere of

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23 There is more to the picture of individual action for Hegel. In the Philosophy of Right, for example, we see the order of morality and ethical life reversed from that of the Phenomenology. Here, Hegel argues that one’s individual motivations
the self into which falls the determinateness as such is the so-called sense-nature; to have a content taken from the immediate certainty of itself means that it has nothing to draw on but sense-nature.” (PS, 423/§643)²⁴ By drawing on its own sensuous self, conscience is able to provide something positive in its action. It is able to supply determinate content and decide from among competing duties. Hegel writes, “It is as conscience that it first has, in its self-certainty, a content for the previously empty duty, as also for the right and the universal will that were empty of content. And because this self-assurance is at the same time an immediacy, conscience exists.” (PS, 416/§633) One achieves a positive decision by drawing on one’s own contingent body and character. As Hegel says, “what is positive in the action...belongs to the self.” (PS, 426/§646) This positive affirmation belongs to the self as a personal individual, and not to the self as an impersonal rational deliberator.²⁵ Terry Pinkard frames the differ-

are ultimately grounded the universality of ethical life. He writes, “The sphere of right and that of morality cannot exist independently; they must have the ethical as their support and foundation” (Zusatz, §141). Outside of one’s own immediacy, Hegel argues that one can find one’s universality in the law. For an individual action, one finds one’s actions grounded in ethical life. Aiming one’s actions or finding them within the universality of ethical institutions, one can find oneself acting beyond one’s mere immediacy and within the universality of spirit. In the terms of Hegel’s Encyclopaedia, morality, as subjective spirit, requires objective spirit for its realization. Thus, in the Lectures on the History of Philosophy, Hegel writes, “If anyone wishes to marry or to build a house, &c., the result is important to the individual only. The truly divine and universal is the institution of agriculture, the state, marriage, &c., compared to this it is a trivial matter to know whether, when I go to sea, I shall perish or not.” (LHP, 424) While it is true that from this perspective these matters are trivial, for an individual, it is likely not trivial whether her marriage will be a failure, her house will collapse, or she will die on the voyage. My focus is on how individuals necessarily draw upon contingency in their individual actions. In order to get Hegel’s full view, we would need to turn to his philosophies of history and the state. For the sake of this article, I have focussed on the necessity of contingency in an individual’s need to act.

²⁴ Hegel, again, notes a kind of arbitrariness to the “consultation” of one’s own immediate being. He says that “For conscience, however, self-certainty is the pure, immediate truth; and this truth is thus its immediate certainty of self, conceived as content, i.e. this truth is in general the caprice of the individual, and the contingency of his unconscious natural being [his sense-nature].” (PS, 423/§643) Insofar as what provides the content for conscience is its own feeling, conscience is capricious because its moral decision is dependent upon feeling. See PS, 422–24/§§643–44, where Hegel will specify that the content comes from caprice.

²⁵ Nor does it belong to the self purely as a member of an ethical community. On this point see J. Bernstein, “Conscience and Transgression: The Persistence of
ence in this way: “The ancients make the agent responsible for the contingent consequences of his actions; the moderns make the agent responsible for what he contingently happens to will.” What we have seen is that the way in which one relates to what one “contingently happens to will” is still “oracular” in the sense that, though it may be taken on as one’s own responsibility, the resources for how one’s own decisions are made are still found to be beyond an individual’s immediate grasp or comprehension.

Thus, while the figures of the oracle and daimon “outsource” the power of decisiveness and put an essential element of action beyond the self, Hegel still argues that our innermost self is elusive. We can see the ways in which our impulses and inclinations follow along this line of thinking. We often take ourselves, our bodies and our minds, to be within the sphere of our own agency. This gives us a sense of a sphere of control (our minds and bodies). However, if we reflect on the experiences we have of ourselves, on what lies within this “inner” sphere, we can see that our sense of ourselves as self-ruling agents is more problematic than it may have initially appeared. For example, while we may locate our “inclinations” within our inner selves, the experience we have of them tells us that they are not within our control in any straightforward way. We do not immediately set out to be inclined to desire any given thing; instead, we find ourselves being inclined in certain ways. What this shows us is that our experience of our inclinations is that of discovery. Inclinations are not, in their most immediate form, something I set out to achieve; instead, I find myself inclined in certain ways.

### IV. Conclusion

In conclusion, though Hegel’s description of conscientious agency can be contrasted with the figure of the person consulting an oracle and with Socrates’s daimon, fundamental features of the act of consulting an oracle have not been left behind. First, I concluded above, with Hegel, that deliberation is ultimately akin to consulting an oracle. Second, it seems that we can also conclude that if the conscientious agent must draw on inclinations to supply the positive con-

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tent of her action, this is also akin to consulting an oracle. We have seen that the experience of these inclinations is ambiguous. On the one hand, I experience them as what is most immediately mine, what I am in my most inner self, in the sense that these are the conscientious impulses that give me the certainty of who I am. On the other hand, the immediate inclinations affect me. This is in contrast to me, as a rational actor, choosing what impulses to have. If my conscientious self comes to me, or happens to me, then there is a sense in which my most immediate self, my impulses and inclinations, are beyond the grasp of an immediate, rational self.\textsuperscript{27} Having these immediate inclinations provide me with my own self-certainty stands in contrast to being able to decide purely as a rational agent. The “character” that possesses us in our conscientious decisions, on Hegel’s account, is “beyond” or more than a product of rational self-possession. The Greeks consulted oracles, and Socrates consulted his daimon, because both the oracle and the daimon make it possible to make a decision within the recognition that pure rational agency is insufficient. Conscientious agency, both in its moments of deliberation, and in what it ultimately draws on for its decision, shares this oracular element, that of recognizing the limits of one’s rational capacity.

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\textsuperscript{27} Lauer writes that we are not talking about an “isolated individual self, but one whose horizons have been broadened to take in a multiplicity of selves, all mutually recognizing each other as selves and thus constituting the only authentic concretely university self, the community.” Q. Lauer, \textit{A Reading of Hegel’s Phenomenology of Spirit} (New York: Fordham University Press, 1993), 256.