

Response to Simon Lumsden on “Second Nature”

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This article is a response to Lumsden, S. (2016), Second Nature and Historical Change in Hegel’s Philosophy of History, *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, vol. 24, pp. 74-94.

Lumsden’s paper discusses Hegel’s views on historical change with reference to the idea, imputed to Hegel, that a social formation resists change and maintains stasis by the force of habit of its individual citizens. To be authoritative, the norms of the social formation must be embodied, it is said, and ‘embodied’ means embedded in the habits inscribed in the body of each individual person. This claim is utterly implausible as a theory of psychology or social theory and is imputed to Hegel on the basis of taking his use of the terms ‘habit’ and ‘second nature’ in a few places to mean exactly what these terms mean in everyday modern speech. To impute such an implausible theory to Hegel is to discount a great thinker.

Lumsden points out that the same German word, *Gewohnheit*, can be translated as ‘custom’ or ‘habit’, and in ordinary English speech, likewise, ‘habit’ can be used in the sense of ‘the habits of a people’, that is custom, but it is a different concept, and personal habits and social customs have different bases and it is precisely this difference which is at issue here.

I shall suggest a more liberal and useful interpretation of what Hegel meant by ‘habit’ and ‘second nature’ which allows a realistic theory of social stability to be imputed to Hegel’s Philosophy of Spirit, rather than a quaint and scientifically untenable one.

Norms ‘habitual’?

The initial presentation of Lumsden’s claim is both plausible and I think consistent with Hegel’s idea:

“Why something has normative force for an agent is for the most part not a rational evaluation; norms guide action and are authoritative because they are embedded in and expressions of a form of life that is necessarily embodied and mediated through diverse elements in any culture. Second nature in this sense captures the positive way in which spirit is lived in embodied practices.”

Here is how Hegel puts it:

But when individuals are simply identified with the actual order, ethical life (*das Sittliche*) appears as their general mode of conduct, i.e. as custom (*Sitte*), while the habitual practice of ethical living (*Gewohnheit*) appears as a second nature which, put in the place of the initial, purely natural will, is the soul of custom permeating it through and through, the significance and the actuality of its existence. It is mind (*Geist*) living and present as a world, and the substance of mind thus exists now for the first time as mind. (Knox translation, PR§151).

There is nothing controversial in these formulations; the problem arises in how Lumsden interprets Hegel’s “habit” and “second nature” in these passages, as directly referencing Habit, as defined by Hegel in the Subjective Spirit, which is taken in turn to

be the same as 'habit' in the everyday sense, and "second nature" in the same sense as when one says: "Typing is second nature to me; I can do it blindfolded." That is, the acquired dispositions of individual persons, something quite different from the entrenched customs of a community. It is this difference which is the subject of this article.

After citing Hegel on Habit in the Subjective Spirit, Lumsden then moves to discussion of civil society, where he conflates custom and habit. He says, for example:

"Customs are habits that are forged across the breadth of a culture. Through the interconnected pathways of education and family life the subject develops habituated dispositions and customs that operate, as what might be described as affective or embodied norms.

"The education that takes place in one's culture, involves something external, the products of one's culture (such as norms and values), being internalised in the subject. ...

"Customs and habits have force for an agent not primarily on the basis of rational commitments but because they are embedded in shapes of life with which subjects affectively identify. They motivate them to act without reflection since they are material expressions of rules that are inscribed on the subject as self-imposed purposes, which once habituated operate more or less mechanistically."

So the argument is that custom and habit can be conflated: a custom is where everyone has the same or corresponding habits. It is habitual behaviour which sustains customs, and 'habit' is to be understood as a disposition inscribed in each individual's body. Hegel, it is claimed was not speaking figuratively or metaphorically in referring to customs (*Sitte*) as habit (*Gewohnheit*), but simply that custom is the generalization of habit.

My response is that this is not Hegel's position and flies in the face of the principal argument of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* against Kant's moral philosophy, and that it is in any case untenable. Hegel's conception of customs and habit can in fact be interpreted in such a way that it represents powerfully how social formations sustain themselves and develop in response to contradictions.

The first step in reconstructing Hegel's view on these matters is to return to Hegel's derivation of Habit in the Subjective Spirit and clarify exactly what was meant.

Habit in the Subjective Spirit

The Subjective Spirit is all those forms of human life which can develop without the support of customs and institutions, that is, Objective Spirit – forms of activity which have been developed in the past, and which individuals acquire from the world around them. Subjective Spirit includes the basic functioning of the specifically human organism up to the capacity for intellectual reflection, free will and the use of conceptual thinking.

Habit (1830, §409) makes its appearance in in the section of the Subjective Spirit where the primitive Feeling Soul (§403) makes the transition to the Actual Soul (§411). Here Hegel explains how Sensation emerges in an organism hitherto operating solely by means of an autonomous nervous system which just 'feels' and has no means of distinguishing between itself and other centres of activity impinging on it, no internal-

external distinction, and therefore no sensations, feelings which are indicative of an external source. The organism becomes habituated to a certain pattern of feeling, which constitutes its psyche (*Seele* or Soul); it is those feelings which stand out from the background, and so indicate the presence of something external, which generate conscious awareness; these feelings are sensations. Habituation to feelings – in which the organism distances itself from the immediacy of its own body and operations which merely adapt to conditions and do not require conscious control (Actual Soul) – is the ground of Consciousness (*Bewußtsein*, §418) of which the units are Sensations. Meantime, the organism continues in its normal operation, such as the working of internal organs and routine operations like eating, breathing, walking, and so on. The relegation of these background actions to habit (“second nature”) is the concomitant of the emergence of conscious awareness (Consciousness), based on those Feelings which turn out to be Sensations.

Three points about this: (1) The derivation sets up a logical form of movement which is characteristic of the Subjective Spirit and which is repeated as higher levels of the development of Spirit emerge out of the ordinary workings at lower levels of activity; this schema creates the basis for the metaphorical use of ‘habit’; (2) ‘Habit’ is introduced in relation to a very primitive level of organic development, prior even the formation of self-consciousness, the kind of activity which we carry on without conscious awareness; and (3) given that Hegel did not believe in the evolution of species, Hegel seems to be giving to habit and habituation a role in ontogenesis which goes beyond the normal conception of ‘habit’.

Later we learn of how Desire (§426) emerges as a species of Sensation, providing the basis for the emergence of Self-consciousness, and Reason (§438) emerges as a species of subjective notion which are found to be objective and universal, and so on. So Habit is a model or archetype for how higher levels of Spirit emerge out of lower levels: exceptions arising in activity at one level become the substance of the higher level, relegating the humdrum operation of the lower level to a background of routine, custom, habit. But Habit, as such, belongs to Self-feeling.

Psychological research (Leontyev, 1947) has given us a concept which plays more or less the role Hegel is looking for, namely, ‘operations’, but which are somewhat different to what is commonly known as ‘habit’. Also, Hegel lumps together the autonomic nervous system which eludes conscious control, with unconscious and acquired capacities which are accessible to conscious control.

An operation is an action which arises in the development of action as follows. At first an action is carried out without conscious control – for example, the natural behaviour of a newborn infant, or someone learning singing who cannot yet consciously control their breathing; these are operations. Next, the action is brought under conscious control, and is an action as such, not an operation. But then, as the action is mastered, it becomes ‘second nature’ and is carried on without conscious awareness, as when a child has learnt to walk, and a singer has reached a professional level. The point is that operations are controlled *by their conditions* – they are not simply automatic; they are successfully completed only thanks to continuous sensory interaction with the environment. An example can clarify.

It has been said that his neighbours could set their watches by when Immanuel Kant walked past their house on his way to work. Let’s suppose my walk to work is such a habit, and I think that I could do it blindfolded. I wouldn’t last 5 seconds, because my

walking relies on continuous sensory feedback from the road surface, signage and landmarks for me to successfully walk to work, even though I have done it a thousand times. But even walking with my eyes open, I don't think "move my left foot forward, now my right foot, etc." – that all happens autonomously; I can even step over the kerb without thinking. But if I trip for some reason, my actions immediately spring back under conscious control and I am 'present' as Hegel says, in my own body. So the multitude operations involved in walking to work are 'operations' which are controlled by the conditions and the final goal (my workplace) without conscious control. They are what Hegel refers to as 'habit'. Operations and actions are all the same thing (as are feelings and sensations), but actions are singled out because their motive is different from their goal – they are done for a reason, and so stand out from the general flow of operations which are carried on without conscious control.

This ingenious logical schema which Hegel devised to show how Spirit fashions itself from Nature without Divine intervention does indeed apply 'all the way up' and science has validated it in respect to operations at least. But there are some problems in Hegel's exposition of Habit and Habituation. Hegel makes no distinction between the autonomic nervous system which are outside of conscious awareness and control, and operations which can move in and out of conscious awareness; he makes no distinction between the beating of the heart, breathing and eating, each of which have distinct relations to conscious awareness. Hegel's description of habit as 'second nature' indicates that he does not think that autonomous functions of the nervous system are given as such by Nature, but are shaped by emergent awareness, which raises itself up from natural processes and in turn subordinates these natural processes to its own control.

This is not to diminish the brilliance of the insight made 200 years ago on the basis of philosophical reflection alone, but it does mean that we have to accept that Hegel did not mean Habit in the sense it is used in common speech today. Regular breathing and heartbeat are not 'habits' in this sense and nor is custom. But 'habit' is used both in ordinary English speech and by Hegel interchangeably with customs (the habits of a people) when in fact something quite different is meant. Reference to habit by Hegel in the section on Ethical Life does *not* mean that he believes that customs are executed by habit in the same way that one puts the left foot in front of the right when walking, let alone 'blindfolded'.

I must be noted that Hegel is frequently at pains to point out that the *objective* Ethical Order outlined in the Objective Spirit has no existence other than in the *subjective* free will of its citizens, but he chooses the language of *ethics* to examine that order. I agree that individuals do not make a rational assessment of every step they take, nor is it habit; doubtless there is a diverse and complex psychological formation at play in people perceiving what they ought to do and resolving to do it. The process is tackled by Hegel in the section entitled Morality.

How did Hegel think Customs were sustained?

The exposition in *Philosophy of Right* is in the language of ethics, not of social psychology, because the entities described are products of 'objective spirit' not 'subjective spirit'. Hegel does not see the modern state as a psychological formation. So the first source of misunderstanding is to read his exposition of *Sittlichkeit* as if social institutions were psychological formations. I cannot respond by offering an alternative

social psychological reading, but instead I will outline Hegel's idea of the Objective Spirit, so far as possible, in the terms in which it is presented.

It was Hegel who introduced for the first time a systematic distinction between Ethics (*Sitte*) and Morality (*Moralität*) (Inwood, 1992). *Sitte* could be translated as 'custom', but is never used in the individual sense as in: "It is my custom to ..." but only in the sense of a *social* custom of some kind. So despite the possible ambiguity of *Gewohnheit*, *Sitte* is not ambiguous – it is *social* custom. It was Hegel who introduced to Moral Philosophy the three-tiered distinction: Right, Morality and Ethical Life (*Sittlichkeit*), and it is these distinctions which are arguably the central thrust of Hegel's critique of Kant.

The remark to §135 of the *Philosophy of Right* sums up Kant's moral philosophy but:

... to adhere to the exclusively moral position, without making the transition to the conception of ethics, is to reduce this gain [autonomy of the will] to an empty formalism, and the science of morals to the preaching of duty for duty's sake. From this point of view, no immanent doctrine of duties is possible ... (PR §135n)

It is not the *intellectual* character of Kant's conception of Duty which is at issue, but his *individualist* conception. The *content* of Duty has to come from outside, from the ethical order prevailing in the community.

Since the laws and institutions of the ethical order make up the concept of freedom, they are the substance or universal essence of individuals, who are thus related to them as accidents only. Whether the individual exists or not is all one to the objective ethical order. It alone is permanent and is the power regulating the life of individuals. Thus the ethical order has been represented by mankind as eternal justice, as gods absolutely existent, in contrast with which the empty business of individuals is only a game of see-saw. (PR, Addition to §145)

This makes it abundantly clear that Hegel does not think that social institutions are projections of individual dispositions. This ethical order – the customs and laws of the community – arise from the working out of objective social processes which Hegel sees as rational and intelligible, a kind of 'logic of history', and are not as they appear to be, rules and manners freely chosen by citizens and rulers. The rationality of Objective Spirit Hegel sees as determined by a logic or concept which acts independently of the will of individuals and finds its highest expression in World History. Every individual citizen confronts these laws and customs as objective forms, every bit as objective, higher in fact according to Hegel, as laws of nature. People *adapt themselves* to these laws and customs, even when they change, in the same way as they adapt themselves to the law of gravity. From this perspective it is clear that customs are even more resistant to efforts to change them than they would be if they were simply manifestations of the citizens' habits.

So if customs are not sustained by the habitual behaviour of individuals, how are they maintained? I agree with Lumsden that Hegel is not particularly forthcoming on this question, beyond emphasising that *Sittlichkeit* is objective.

How are Customs and Laws Objectified?

Hegel seems content to claim that the historical development of laws and customs is rational – things are like they are for a *reason*, and to demonstrate that the community

self-consciously, through the Conscience of its citizens, the Family, regulative authorities and the State, for example, defends the ethical order. An ethical order can collapse either as a result of the impact of outside forces, such as in war, or because the essential principle of a people falls into contradiction with itself. Otherwise, change happens by a process of continual refinement of laws and customs, under pressure of internal necessity. For example, in §82 of the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel shows how a particular Wrong may expose Right to be merely an appearance of Right, and “right reasserts itself by negating this negation of itself. In this process the right is mediated by returning into itself out of the negation of itself; thereby it makes itself actual and valid, while at the start it was only implicit and something immediate.” This schema of development is different from the form of movement exemplified in Habit and described above, and leads to continuous change through the surmounting of contradiction. The rationality of laws and customs arises not from the rational faculties of judges and legislators so much as by the rationality of History, of Spirit, manifested in the resolutions of contradictions which arise in the ethical order, and resolved by modifications in the customs and laws. For example, lawmakers in the US prohibited the sale of alcohol in 1920, by the considered decision of its political and judicial elite; but they were shown to be misguided and the policy was permanently abandoned in 1933. Subjective rationality can only emulate this rationality which manifests itself in the objective course of events, even though those events unfold through ‘accidents’, sometimes minor, sometimes catastrophic.

Which is to say that Hegel did not, at least in the *Philosophy of Right* or the *Encyclopaedia*, provide an answer to Lumsden’s question about the source of stability. However, by drawing on Hegel’s idea of mediation in the early *System of Ethical Life*, we can formulate a basis for the stability of social formations which is consistent with Hegel’s conception.

... the child is the middle term as absolutely pure and simple intuition. ... In the tool the subjectivity of labour is raised to something universal. Anyone can make a similar tool and work with it. To this extent the tool is the persistent norm of labour. ... The *spoken word* unites the objectivity of the corporeal sign with the subjectivity of gesture, the articulation of the latter with the self-awareness of the former. It is the middle term of intelligences; it is logos, their rational bond. ... This ideal and rational middle term is *speech*, the tool of reason, the child of intelligent beings. (Hegel, 1804)

An historical example might serve to illustrate my point here. In September 1967, Sweden changed from driving on the left to driving on the right. Overnight Saturday/Sunday, all the road signs were changed, Swedes largely avoided driving on the Sunday, but come Monday, albeit nervously, the population took to the road, and only 157 minor accidents and few injuries and no fatalities resulted. Having been amply warned by news broadcasts and persuaded of the value of the change, citizens *adapted* to the changed signage embodying the changed custom. They did not drive by habit.

While emphasis is usually placed on customs as forms of *activity*, what is overlooked is that all the actions manifested in custom are *artefact-mediated* actions, actions which utilise the material existence of culture, the ‘second nature’ constructed by human activity and within which we live. It is in fact only thanks to the mediating artefacts that activity is material, and therefore something in which customs can be ‘embedded’.

Customs can be enacted only thanks to the availability of mediating artefacts. These artefacts include suitably educated and healthy human bodies – serviceable instruments of the mind; land, buildings, means of production, crops, domestic animals and technology of all kinds; and books, documents, artworks, clothing, speech and so on. These artefacts are “dead matter ... wholly external” as Hegel (1804) says, and yet they are indispensable for human action. As material things and processes, the mediating artefacts are universal attributes of the entire community, but they are invariably so disposed as to determine particular modes of activity and exclude others. Land, for example, may be parcelled into small subsistence farms, or united in large estates; factories may be old fashioned and decrepit, or modern and efficient; the human beings may be fit and healthy or starved and diseased. The habits inscribed in the bodies of individuals, must be included among the elements mediating activity, but they are a very small part of the material culture which constrains and affords the activities of the community. The proof of this is that habits are not inherited across generations as are the wider material culture and other elements of the human body. Why *do* people go along with customs? Customs are the culturally determined forms of activity which people *do* go along with, so the question leads to an infinite regress, but in short I would say because objective spirit is objective, like nature itself. A custom is most thoroughly objectified when it is embodied in a tool (as a hammer sets to norm for driving nails) or a software program.

So, as I see it, the element of stability in a social formation which resists change even when there is a subjective impulse for change is the *material culture* which mediates all the activity in the community. For example, in order to modernise a country, the first measure which must be achieved is land reform and this often entails violent civil war or the intervention of a foreign army. Sometimes change is enforced on an ethnic community by banning the use of their language; the discovery of gold has a dramatic impact on social development. Infinitely varied forms are to be found, but I believe that it is in general the stability of the material means of social reproduction which impart stability and momentum to a social formation.

This is comprehended within the Hegelian philosophy once we take Spirit to be *artefact-mediated human activity* (See Blunden 2016). In this context “second nature” very well expresses the totality of artefacts, the material existence of culture, both internal and external, matter shaped by and used in human culture and inhabited by human communities.

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