

Project Proposal
Freedom Beyond Our Control--
On “Non-Subjective Freedom” in German Idealism
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The Research Problem. The study of the emotions has enjoyed a resurgence in philosophy as well as in the cognitive sciences. This dual disciplinary interest is grounded in the subject matter itself—emotions are very much like Descartes's pineal gland, the function where mind and body most closely and mysteriously interact.

In attempting to account for their diverse and elusive features, scientists and philosophers alike have traditionally reduced, assimilated or analogized emotions to other kinds of physical and mental states with which they apparently have features in common. In the late nineteenth century, William James and Carl J. Lange, citing the close involvement of the emotions with the body, famously assimilated emotions to bodily sensations—physical pleasure and pain. In this account, we are essentially rational, free beings capable of self-determination, and, *also*, stand at the mercy of our feelings—non-rational forces, the products of nature and habituation, both equally beyond our rational control. The traditional view of emotions as irrational, and therefore divorced from our lives as freely acting rational beings, had thereby received its first paradigmatically modern scientific articulation.

This dualistic understanding, grounded in a split between non-rational affective experience and rational, free life, is notably alien to our common ways of self-understanding. While the idea that we are animals, with bodies subject to the laws of nature, is part of a naturalistic understanding of the world taken for granted by the natural and many of the social sciences alike, the idea that our mental activity is rational and free is not just the framework of traditional humanistic inquiry, but is the very heart of our ordinary ways of making sense of ourselves and one another. In our daily conduct we do not encounter an in-principle unbridgeable gap between our emotional states and our rational mental activity. Of course we find ourselves often questioning whether a particular emotion is reasonable or justified, but it is precisely this act of questioning which presupposes the possibility of rational emotional experience.

In the second half of the twentieth century, philosophers like Charles Taylor, Martha Nussbaum, Ronald de Sousa, and Amélie Rorty, to name the most insightful and influential, objected to the reduction of the emotions to brute facts, explicable in biological and psychological terms. They emphasized instead the ways in which emotions can reflect our beliefs, are capable of

justification and can reveal objective aspects of the world. To account for these features they proposed “cognitivist” theories of the emotions, which rely on analogies between the emotions and beliefs, propositional judgments and perceptions. Concurrently, scientists, chief among them Antonio Damasio, began exploring the intimate relationship between the emotions and rational, cognitive capacities from the scientific standpoint itself.

However, the emerging philosophical and scientific attempts at integrating the emotions into our self-understanding as essentially rational, free beings capable of self-determination face the following challenge: the exercise of freedom seems to require free *choice*, but, surely, we do not deliberate about and then choose how to feel. If emotions are divorced from the exercise of rationality, integration into a free life of reason seems impossible; but if the emotions are beyond our rational *control*, in what way can they be considered rational at all?

We therefore face an urgent philosophical task: to account for the distinctive and essential role that emotions play in our rational lives, we must uncover an idea of reason that is not exhausted by the notion of calculation and deliberation and an idea of freedom that is not reduced to exercises of free, individual, choice.

Proposed Solution. I propose to approach this problem through the study of the development, in post-Kantian German Idealist thought, of the idea of “non-subjective” freedom, which, I claim, is this tradition’s fundamental, unifying concern.

In my dissertation I argue that Kant, often taken to be a classical source of the opposition of freedom and feeling, is in fact one of the most insightful guides toward a coherent non-dualistic view of this relationship. I argue that implicit in Kant’s account of the feeling of moral respect is the remarkable idea that human emotion is a unique mode of self-consciousness—self-revelation and self-understanding—*constitutive of practical agency*, i.e., of freedom.

Disputing the received view of Kant on reason and feeling allows us not only to recognize an invaluable guide to a non-dualistic view of our rational and affective nature, but to problematize and nuance the relationship between Kant’s project and the project of later German Idealists. In light of the new understanding of Kant, the Idealists’ thought should be seen not simply as a critique of Kant but as a continuation and deepening of the project of understanding the human emotions as a condition and manifestation of reason and freedom.

While there have been excellent studies of the development of German Idealist thought, on the one hand, and illuminating readings of the significance of freedom to the thought of particular

German Idealist thinkers, on the other, there has not been a study which recognizes the centrality and continuity of the treatment of non-subjective freedom in the tradition. This is the idea of freedom that is not grounded in a so-called free will, exercised in individuals' acts of free choice, but is an accomplishment of a community that thinks of itself as a "we." In this account freedom emerges from the development, in human communities, of capacities for rational-affective access to the world. Our emotional life and the dependence on other persons, required for its development, emerge not as a threat to our freedom and an obstacle to ethical life, but as a necessary condition of both.

Broader Implications. Against the dualistic understanding of reason and sensibility advanced by the traditional reception of Kant, German Idealism and the idea of a comprehensive unity of our self-understanding as free *and* affected seemed not only obscure in itself, but useless from the perspective of contemporary intellectual concerns. My study will show the Idealists' project to be of enduring relevance to the most urgent contemporary philosophical debates, not only to the problem of conceptually incorporating our emotional experience into our self-understanding as rational and free, but to the broad goal of clarifying our apparently exclusive forms of self-understanding: the ordinary and humanistic, on the one hand, and the naturalistic, scientific, on the other. To fully realize this goal, it would be invaluable to enter into dialogue with researchers of diverse disciplines—particularly psychology, neurology, and evolutionary biology—a form of exchange that the work of scientists like Damasio and philosophers like de Sousa has proved to be extraordinarily rewarding.

Manuscript Chapter Overview: The first Chapter will focus on Schelling's last officially published work (although he continued to lecture for decades afterward), *Philosophical Inquiries into the Essence of Human Freedom* (1809).

The second Chapter will focus on Fichte's account of the acquisition of rational capacities in his account of education as a summons to rationality in his *Foundations of Natural Right* and *System of Ethics*.

The third and fourth chapters will explore Hegel's *Philosophy of Spirit* volume from his *Encyclopedia of the Philosophical Sciences*. The third Chapter, I will address first his account of subjective spirit and its opaque characterization of habit as, first, the form of all rational capacities and second, a mode of "self-feeling."

The fourth Chapter will turn to Hegel's account of objective spirit and his development of the idea of *Gewissen*, conscience, grounded in habit, and thus the idea that freedom is only "actually" possible in an embodied community in a rational state.