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Conflict, Recognition and the Development of Ethical Life in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*

I. Introduction

One of the principal features of many philosophical conceptions of ethics is the claim that ethical action involves transcending individual self-interest in some significant way. Kant, notably, finds the principle of ethical action in choosing to follow one’s duty – defined by the principle of universalisation formulated in his categorical imperative¹ – rather than one’s own individual interests and natural inclinations. While his system does not prohibit individuals from acting on their own self-positing interests, only those actions performed out of duty have ethical worth. In acting ethically the individual is ultimately constrained by, and must be prepared to sacrifice his or her individuality to, the universal good.

While Hegel agrees that acting ethically involves the transcendence of pure self-interest, he argues that it is wrong to assume that this involves the kind of sacrifice of

¹ In one formulation: “Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become universal law.” (Grounding for the Metaphysics of Morals. Trans. James W. Ellington. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1993. p. 30)

individuality that the categorical imperative implies. This, for Hegel, amounts to a misunderstanding of the very nature of action. Acting ethically does not involve subordinating one’s individuality to some abstract principles of selflessness or universality. Rather, it involves individuals freely acting on shared communal values – which for Hegel amounts to a kind of universal in its own right – through their actions. This involves pursuing actions whose ends and means, while reflecting shared interests and culture of a community, also reflect the self-conceived interests of individuals. Ethical life, then, involves a kind of harmony between what individuals consider worthwhile ends and acceptable means for pursuing them and those activities that sustain and reinforce the community as a whole.

This idea is explored in a passage in Chapter V of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* entitled “Virtue and the way of the world”². By examining it within the greater context of the *Phenomenology* – in particular, Hegel’s discussions of universal recognition and what its consummation might look like – I hope to reveal the central role universal recognition plays in Hegel’s account of ethical life. My approach will be to present two interpretations of “Virtue and the way of the world”. The first views the passage as one part of a sustained and thorough critique of Kantian practical ethics. The second treats the passage more generally. While the first approach misses a crucial feature of Hegel’s argument that is captured by the second, it does reveal an important way in which, for Hegel, normative ideals can be actualised in the world. Contrasting

² In Miller’s translation, pp. 228 to 235. All references to the *Phenomenology* are to Miller’s translation. All italics are as in original.

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these views, I will attempt to construct a more complete account of the passage in question and of the central features of Hegel’s account of ethical life.

II. Universal Recognition and Hegel’s *Phenomenology*

“Virtue and the way of the world” is part of the *Phenomenology*’s fifth chapter, entitled simply “Reason”. Broadly speaking, the consciousness that Hegel develops in the four preceding chapters is one that is driven by a desire for universal recognition. This drive will animate the movements of Chapter V, and therefore has an important bearing on the interpretation of “Virtue and the way of the world” and Hegel’s account of ethical life in general. Before examining that passage I want to put forth and develop an interpretation of Hegel’s concept of the desire for universal recognition which, I will argue, amounts to a desire to fully-develop one’s own self-consciousness as a being that is free to exercise its own will within an environment that contains nothing alien.

In the opening paragraphs of Chapter IV Hegel writes: “self-consciousness is *Desire* in general.” (Hegel, 105). This is an important point. For Hegel desire implies self-consciousness because, until there is a contrast between one’s environment as it *exists* and that environment as a consciousness *desires or wants it to be*, no practical distinction exists between objects as contents of awareness and the subject who is aware of them. As Richard Norman argues in his *Hegel’s Phenomenology: a Philosophical Introduction*, “once I act on the world in order to make it conform to my desires, I may acquire some minimal consciousness of myself as something distinct from the rest of my world.” (Norman, 46).

But the self-consciousness of Hegel’s universal recognition is something more than this. The minimal awareness of the existence of “otherness” that desire gives us, as

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Alexandre Kojève suggests in his *Introduction to the Reading of Hegel: Lectures on the Phenomenology of Spirit*, barely distinguishes humans from animals that may experience a sentiment of “I” (Kojève, 37). In Hegel’s terms, it “still has no truth.” (Hegel, 113). The self-consciousness of universal recognition, on the other hand, is one that, in Hegel’s terms, “exists for another; that is, it exists only in being acknowledged.” (Hegel, 111). In order for me to have this kind of self-consciousness, not only do I have to be aware of myself as a desiring subject, but I have to be acknowledged as such by another. This sharpens the distinction I posit between my environment and myself and helps to raise the certainty I have of myself to truth.

However, the self-consciousness implied by desire and the acknowledgement of that desire is not yet the self-consciousness that sees itself as free to exercise its own will. For this, I must receive from others more than the simple acknowledgement of being a desiring subject. I must be acknowledged as having a right to exercise that will. This also means that the desire for recognition in general is something to be distinguished from what we might call natural desires. While natural desires are directed towards some natural object such as, say, food, the desire for recognition is directed towards, to paraphrase Kojève, some transcendent object or “non-being” (Kojève, 40). For Kojève, this transcendent object is the recognition by another of my ownership of the objects of my desire. However, I think it can be more generally expressed as my right to exercise my will. In any case, as Kojève remarks: “It is only Desire of such a *Recognition* (*Anerkennung*), it is only Action that flows from such a Desire, that creates, realizes and reveals a *human*, non-biological I.” (Kojève, 40).

With this we have the first part of my definition of universal recognition – self-consciousness as a being that is free to exercise its own will. However, this self-consciousness is far from existing in an environment that contains nothing alien. Indeed, the development of self-consciousness that I’ve described so far implies that, as consciousness first becomes aware of itself, it does so by conceiving of itself as a subject very much *opposed* to its environment. If all humans want is to have others recognise their absolute and autonomous will, consciousness would get stuck in the dynamics of Hegel’s familiar master/slave dialectic. In this situation individuals either fight to the death or else renounce their rights to the objects of their desire and the recognition that would come with it by choosing not to risk their lives and instead submitting to a master. However, the fact that consciousness progresses beyond the master/slave dialectic indicates that the drive for universal recognition is more than a desire for some kind of absolute free reign of my will.

In fact, universal recognition is a mutual affair. In Hegel’s terms: “each is for the other what the other is for it” (Hegel, 113). Self-consciousness requires acknowledgement by another self-consciousness. But in order for that other self-consciousness to count as a self-consciousness in the first place it must, in turn, be acknowledged by me. The other must acknowledge my rights to exercise my will and I, in turn, must acknowledge the rights of the other to exercise his or her will. It is in this that the reconciliation between self-consciousness and its environment consists. The consummation of the desire for universal recognition will have to involve the emergence, development and/or creation of an environment that, in this sense, contains nothing alien. This happens as individuals pursue their own interests within a context of other agents

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pursuing their own interests. It is through this conflict of interests that humans learn to compromise, live together and achieve their own personal ends in a way that allows for the mutual respect of the ends of others.

Hegel gives us an idea of what this consummation of universal recognition might look like in the introduction to the second section of the chapter on Reason entitled “The actualization of rational self-consciousness through its own activity”. Here he speaks of “the *realm of ethical life*” or *Sittlichkeit* as the end of process initiated by the drive for universal recognition. “If we take this goal ..., viz. The self-consciousness that is recognized and acknowledged, and which has its own self certainty in the other free self-consciousness ... in this Notion there is disclosed the *realm of ethical life*.” (Hegel, 212)

Following Norman: “Hegel ... interprets *Sittlichkeit* as the ordering of one’s action by reference to the *customs* and *laws* of a society.” (Norman, 72). Customs, which are reflected in the law, are created as a result of a collective history and passed on as a shared culture to which members of a society are able to relate. As Norman writes: “The laws are the objective aspect; they are independent of the individual, who observes them. But at the same time they are embodied in the actions of individuals, as customs, and in this aspect the individual does not regard them as external, but as his own being.” (Norman, 72). In this sense the social environment contains nothing alien. Members of the society are oriented by these customs and governed by the laws that reflect them. When exercising their individual wills, citizens posit ends and employ means that reflect this cultural orientation. The individual, then, gives actuality to those customs. This is not to say that all societies exhibit this kind of coherence, but in so far as they do not, they

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are unable consummate the desire for universal recognition and therefore do not yet have a fully developed ethical life.

Likewise, societies that have achieved universal recognition can lose it. For Hegel, the Greek City states, at least in the early pre-Socratic era, had achieved the ethical life that universal recognition implies. As Charles Taylor notes in his *Hegel*, the strength of the Greek city-states rested on “their perfect unity of citizen and ethical substance.” However, the Sophists and Socrates gave rise to a “universal consciousness” in which individuals came to see themselves as having a direct link with universal reason unmediated by their particular culture (Taylor, 176). The break down of the city-state thus gave way to the beginnings of our modern conception of reason and the individualism that goes with it. The *Phenomenology* can be understood, at least on one level, as the attempt of consciousness to come to terms with this development and to yield a new, decidedly modern ethical life. As biographer Terry Pinkard writes: “The great tension running throughout Hegel’s life was that between his particularist, hometown experience and his universalist, Enlightenment education; he was always attempting to mediate these two features of his own experience and bring them together into a coherent worldview.” (Pinkard, 252). This is a key point and critical to understand Hegel’s conception of ethical life. It involves more than simply acting according to one’s given customs. As I will argue below, it also involves an important individualistic component. Individuals must see themselves reflected in their community. What is needed to accomplish this is a consciousness that has moved beyond a reason abstracted from the world of culture to one that is rooted in it. In so doing the desire for universal recognition

can once again be consummated. “Virtue and the way of the world” is one step in this process.

III. Virtue and the way of the world

“Virtue and the way of the world” involves a form of consciousness that seeks to achieve universal recognition by attempting to suppress individuality in its own consciousness as well as in the world at large. This principle of virtue, however, does not entail simply eradicating individuality. Rather, the virtuous consciousness seeks to preserve individuality through conscious subordination to, and unification with, in Hegel’s terms, the “discipline of the universal; the intrinsically true and good.” (Hegel, 228). Virtue is defined in opposition to the “way of the world”, which represents to consciousness a doctrine of individualism. Like the classical economic model, the “way of the world” involves competing, self-interested individuals whose interaction yields a kind of common good. Hegel writes that in the “way of the world” individuality is taken as “the essential moment, whereas what is *intrinsically* good and true it subordinates to itself.” (Hegel, 229). For the virtuous consciousness the “way of the world” is seen as yielding a universal that is “*perverted by individuality*” (Hegel, 229). It believes that, with virtue’s help, the “way of the world” can be reformed.

However, the virtuous consciousness is bound to be frustrated in its attempts to bring about the good simply through the sacrifice of individuality. If the virtuous consciousness acts on its ideals, it gets swallowed up in the collection of individual actions that is the “way of the world”. After all, the “way of the world” is, in Hegel’s terms, “the negative principle for which nothing is established or absolutely sacred, but which can risk and endure the loss of anything and everything.” (Hegel, 232). If virtue

doesn’t act, however, then it can have no real impact on the world and it cannot succeed in bringing its essential good to fruition. The “way of the world”, it seems, can’t loose; it can absorb any concrete actions that come its way and ignore the empty abstractions and principles of virtue.

In his paper “Hegel’s Critique of Kantian Practical Reason” Philip Kain argues that “Virtue and the way of the world” is one part of a thorough critique of Kantian practical reason which spans more than half of the *Phenomenology*’s fifth Chapter³ and that this interpretation amounts to a significant departure from standard accounts that tend to assume Hegel takes up Kant only in the two subsections of that chapter entitled “Reason as lawgiver” and “Reason as testing laws”. Although he concedes the obvious and varied references to other works contained throughout Chapter V of the *Phenomenology*, he argues that we cannot fully understand Hegel’s arguments in these sections unless we also understand them as critiques of Kantian ethics (Kain, 368).

In “Virtue and the way of the world”, Kain argues we have “ordinary Kantian virtue”: “the consciousness now before us no longer takes pleasure in acting on the universal; it no longer combines inclination and the moral law. It simply does its duty.” (Kain, 385). Virtue opposes itself to the “way of the world” attempting to manipulated it “to produce virtuous results.” (Kain, 385). The specific position that Hegel has in mind, Kain suggests, is Kant’s philosophy of history⁴. According to Kain’s interpretation, Kant argues that two forces shape history: the conflict of individual interests and morality (Kain, 385). The conflict of individual interests is animated by the interplay of a selfish,

³ Specifically, Kain refers to the sections entitled, “The actualization of rational self-consciousness through its own activity” and “Individuality which takes itself to be real in and for itself”.

unsocial side of human nature with a social side that understands the importance of cooperating with others to fulfill its needs. While the unsocial side leads to conflict and war, the competition involved in these conflicts also lead humans to develop their skills and talents. This combined with humanity’s social propensity eventually leads to the establishment of the common good in the form of peace and justice. Kain writes: “Aggressive self-seeking, given the interdependence of each upon all, produces a national capital, the wealth of the nation, that *common good*, out of which each struggles to gain their particular share.” (Kain, 386). As for Kant’s second historical force – morality – Kain argues it is based on the categorical imperative, which shows us we cannot universalize conflict and points towards peace and justice. The end that conflict ultimately leads to is the same one morality is after (Kain, 387).

Nonetheless, on Kain’s interpretation, both morality and conflict are necessary for Kant. Human corruption means reason and morality are not enough. On the other hand, war and conflict may drive us to “peace and legality” but this is not the same thing as morality (Kain, 387). Peace and justice may be the right outcome, but this is not enough. We have to believe in those values and put them into practice for the right reason (for Kant, because duty commands it). In addition, morality can even save us some trouble by helping us to avoid unnecessary conflict. If we as rational agents can conceptualize the idea of history eventually achieving peace and legality, which is the same practical end as morality, then we can skip ahead to that end, avoiding much of what would otherwise be necessary conflict (Kain, 387).

⁴ Specifically, Kant’s “Idea for a Universal History” in *On History*, ed. L.W. Beck. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963.

This, then, is the argument Kain suggests Hegel is attacking in “Virtue and the way of the world”. The virtuous consciousness believes that nullifying individuality, as the categorical imperative does, will yield the universal good. It is true that the “way of the world” will produce a good of its own that is substantially the same, but unless that good is embraced for selfless reasons it will still count as a perverted universal. Kain writes that, in opposition to Kant, “Hegel argues that, in fact, virtue’s assistance is *unnecessary*; the world is quite capable of realizing the universal on its own. The Quixotic assistance of the knight of virtue is a sham.” (Kain, 388). Furthermore, Kain argues that, for Hegel, individuality can’t be dispensed with because, “it is individuality, the conflict of particular interests, that actually realizes the universal.” (Kain, 388). Ultimately, Kain concludes, “The course of the world does better than virtue.” (Kain, 390).

There is good reason to take seriously the claim that Hegel’s critique of Kantian practical reason in Chapter V of the *Phenomenology* extends well beyond “Reason as lawgiver” and “Reason as testing laws”. Kant’s influence on Hegel was surely great and should not be underestimated. As Pinkard points out, “Hegel’s own intellectual relationship to Kant was something that he was always ready to admit and equally ready to conceal.” From a draft letter in 1822, Pinkard quotes Hegel as writing: “I cut my teeth on Kant’s work” (Pinkard, 339). In addition, Kant’s position, at least as Kain interprets it, does appear to bear some striking similarity to the one Hegel is attacking in “Virtue and the way of the world.” Furthermore, as I will argue below, a comparison with Kain’s account of Kant’s philosophy of history can shed some very valuable light on Hegel’s own conception of ethical life and his relation to Kant, although not in the way Kain

suggests. Before doing this, however, I want to look at another interpretation of “Virtue and the way of the world” that departs in at least one important way from Kain’s and, I will argue, conforms more closely to Hegel’s text.

In her paper “Hegel’s *Phenomenology*: The Moral Failures of Asocial Man”, Judith N. Shklar examines the same portion of Hegel’s text that Kain does. Like Kain, she agrees that the “man of virtue” (to which I have also been referring to as the “virtuous consciousness”) “sees individuality as the evil to be crushed, both within himself and in the world around him.” (Shklar, 270). However, while Kain argues that the man of virtue believes that the substantial end of virtue will eventually be realized by the “way of the world”, Shklar’s interpretation suggests that the man of virtue believes the universal good cannot come out on its own. The difference between the end virtue *seeks* and the end that the “way of the world” *will lead to*, is not simply a difference between doing the right thing and doing the right thing for the right reasons. On Shklar’s interpretation, not only does the man of virtue believe the “way of the world” will not value and enact peace and justice for the right reasons, the man of virtue believes the “way of the world” won’t necessarily lead to peace and justice at all until individuality has been nullified. While the man of virtue may believe the good to be something that everyone has inside, and that in this sense “virtue is inherent in society”, he also believes that selfish motivations mean that “this good and has simply been prevented from emerging” (Shklar, 270 - 271). The man of virtue wants to redirect a misguided humanity and set it on the path leading towards, to used Kain’s phrase, “peace and justice”, something the way of the world will not achieve on its own.

This interpretation appears to be borne out by Hegel’s text. He writes that consciousness believes that the “absolute *order*” (Hegel, 229), the intrinsic good that virtue is after, already exists within the “way of the world,” but only as an “*inner principle*” (Hegel, 230), a kind of hidden good that needs to be brought to the surface. The virtuous consciousness, then, doesn’t believe that this absolute order will arise on its own. Virtue, the nullifying of individuality, is still necessary. “It is from virtue that the universal is to receive its true reality by nullifying individuality, the principle of the perversion. Virtue’s purpose is, by so doing, to reverse again the perverted ‘way of the world’ and to make manifest its true essence.” (Hegel, 230). On Hegel’s account, virtue believes its role is indispensable, not because it simply wants to add some moralistic nuance to the outcome of the “way of the world”, but because virtue believes its universal will be a different one from what the “way of the world” will ultimately generate.

The point is significant, and Kain’s failure to understand it leads him to misinterpret the passage in question. His conclusion that “The course of the world does better than virtue” (Kain, 390), suggests that in the battle between virtue and the “way of the world”, the latter wins. While Hegel does say that virtue is “conquered by the ‘way of the world’” (Hegel, 233), his argument does not end here and this is not the lesson consciousness will ultimately take from this dialectic. “The way of the world” only fairs better so long as it is set up as one part of an either/or opposition with virtue. As Hegel writes, virtue is defeated because “its purpose is, in fact, the abstract, unreal *essence*, and because its action as regards reality rests on distinctions which are purely nominal.” (Hegel, 233). While “consciousness drops like a discarded cloak its idea of a good that exists [only] in principle, but has as yet no actual existence” (Hegel, 234), this result also

means that “that which as the ‘way of the world’ stood opposed to the consciousness of what existed [only] in principle, has in fact likewise been conquered and has vanished.” (Hegel, 235). If, in speaking of virtue and the “way of the world”, Hegel had in mind what Kain argues he does, he would undoubtedly reach the same conclusion as Kain does. But Hegel, as I have argued above, has something different in mind.

The actual point of “Virtue and the way of the world”, then, is that ideals must be given concrete actuality in order to make a difference in the world. This means they must be acted on through involvement in politics, the marketplace, social activism and so on or articulated in way that makes their meaning or their implication for action clear. Virtue fails only when it amounts to abstract rhetoric, when it urges us simply to act selflessly or to do the right thing without specifying what that might mean in any given real world context, or when it refuses to subject its views to discussions concerning its practical applicability. Reflective ratiocination can contribute to effective change in the world. But in order for the consciousness to realise this, and be able to contribute in this way, it has to give up its understanding of the “way of the world” as necessarily an *unconscious*, *unreflecting* conflict of desires.

Hegel illustrates the distinction between an abstract ideal and a concrete ideal by contrasting abstract virtue with the concrete virtue of the ancients. The empty rhetoric of modern virtue refuses to elaborate on the meaning of the “fine phrases” it utters. “The request to say what this familiar meaning is would be met either by a fresh flood of phrases or by an appeal to the heart, which *inwardly* says what they mean – which amounts to admitting that it is *in fact* unable to say what the meaning is.” The virtue of the ancient world, on the other hand, “had its own definite sure meaning ... Consequently,

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too, it was not directed against the actual world as against something *generally perverted*, and against a ‘way of the world’.” (Hegel, 234) As Shklar notes, when consciousness recognises this point it will “discover that there are a great many possibilities for doing good, for improvement, and for reform ... ‘The course of the world’ is not a territory to be conquered, but the realm of possible action. Conservation and innovation, not selfishness and self-sacrifice, are the real issues in history.” (Shklar, 272)

Hegel’s own involvement in the German constitutional debates of his time also supports this conclusion. In 1817, he published a pamphlet on the topic which, Pinkard writes, “concerned the very issues of modernism that were the centerpieces of his thought,” and, “In some ways, ... functioned as another way for Hegel to clarify for himself and for the public certain core ideas found in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*.” (Pinkard, 403). In this pamphlet, writes Pinkard, Hegel argued that:

Commitments sustaining the collective projects of modern life must be those that when brought to light and articulated can also be justified so that they can serve as a rational basis for self-identity in social life, and the dialectic of such reasons led (as the *Phenomenology* had shown) to a conception that reason must be universal, must be the kind of reasons that can be good for and shared by all others (Pinkard, 407).

In other words “the collective projects of modern life,” can only be sustained in so far as the commitments underlying them realise what I have called universal recognition. Projects sustained by reasons “that can be good for and shared by all other” are ones that lead to the establishment of institutions that contain nothing alien. Furthermore, Hegel put forth several concrete proposals, including concrete suggestions on what forms of popular representation would serve to fulfil this modern consummation of universal recognition (Pinkard, 410). Without going further into the contents of this particular

pamphlet, the very fact that Hegel engaged in this kind of intellectual activity appears to reflect his belief in the important role ideas can play in consciously shaping the world when they can lead to concrete prescriptions for concrete problems.

I remarked above that a comparison Kain’s account of Kant’s philosophy of history can shed some very valuable light on Hegel’s own conception of ethical life and his relationship to Kant, although not in the way Kain suggests. I want to take this up now. Recall that, on Kain’s account of Kant’s philosophy of history, morality can save us some trouble by helping us to avoid unnecessary conflict. If we as rational agents can conceptualize the idea of history eventually achieving peace and legality, which is the same practical end as morality, then we can skip ahead to that end, avoiding much of what would otherwise be necessary conflict. It now appears that Hegel is saying something very similar. If we are able to see that the conflict of particular interests will eventually lead to the consummation of universal recognition, we can, like Hegel appears to be doing in his comments on German constitutional reform, seek to speed up the process through the conscious articulation and advocating of universal recognition. In this sense, Hegel seems to be saying something very similar to Kant’s philosophy of History. Kain’s paper brings this out, albeit unwittingly.

There is, however, an important difference between Hegel and Kant on this issue. Recall that, in the introduction to this paper I argued that Hegel agrees with Kant that acting ethically involves the transcendence of pure self-interest. However, for Hegel this does not involve the kind of sacrifice of individuality that the categorical imperative implies. Rather, it involves individuals freely acting on a kind of universal reflected in shared communal values. Likewise, Hegel appears to agree with Kant that history can be

advanced by consciously positing its necessary end and trying to bring that end itself to fruition. For Hegel, however, the posited end cannot be meaningfully generated by the abstract mechanisms of Kant’s categorical imperative. An understanding of the modern consummation of universal recognition must be grounded in, and can only be achieved through, actionable prescriptions directly applicable to the existing social context. Commenting more generally on the relation between Hegel and Kant, Pinkard writes: “Finding the elements of a more social conception of ‘universal self-consciousness’ in Kant’s *Critique of Judgement*, Hegel had developed his own view of the nature of ‘universal self-consciousness’ as consisting in social norms” (Pinkard, 335).

IV. Conclusion

For Hegel, ethical life consists in a harmony between what individuals consider worthwhile ends and acceptable means for pursuing those ends and those activities that sustain and reinforce the community as a whole. But this does not imply that individuals should blindly follow the cultural norms of their communities. In order for a community to enjoy a fully developed ethical life, its culture must reflect individuals and individuals must actualise their culture. In achieving this, such a community would consummate a fundamental drive for universal recognition. Hegel also provides a prescription for those individuals whose societies have not yet achieved this fully developed ethical life. Having posited and understood the relationship between universal recognition and ethical life, we can consciously attempt to realise this ideal. However, this can only be achieved through action or through engaging in discussions concerning the practical applicability of actionable prescriptions that take into account the existing social and cultural environment.

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