

Common Morality as a Part of the Objective Spirit: Nicolai Hartmann's Insights concerning the Cultural and Historical Dimension of Morality

Moritz von Kalckreuth

Universität Erfurt, Max Weber Kolleg
e-mail: moritz.von_kalckreuth@uni-erfurt.de
 <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6667-6826>

The aim of this paper is to explore the cultural and historical dimension of morality, seldom discussed in contemporary moral philosophy. Referring to Nicolai Hartmann and his theory of the spiritual being, I show how morality fits into the totality of objective spirit and which general and specific features of morality may be discerned therein. Next, I discuss several promising insights following from that approach: regarding the relation between common morality and conscience, the emergence of generational conflicts concerning moral principles, and interactions between morality and other areas of culture and society.

Keywords: moral theory, historical change, culture, conscience, moral disagreement, moral progress, moral conflict

Introduction

When philosophers think about morality, they are usually interested in the question of whether certain moral judgements and principles are valid and how they can be justified. However, morality is not just a system of normative statements and their justification, but also a matter of habits, intergenerationally acquired attitudes and historical changes. Thus, it is part of our culture and life-

form.¹ The aim of this article is to examine this dimension of morality, showing that some of its cultural and historical aspects are essential for an adequate understanding of certain issues we face in ordinary life. Doing so, I will refer to Nicolai Hartmann's rather overlooked view on morality as part of the objective spirit. Even in specialised research on Hartmann's work, the discussion on morality is mostly dominated by the axiological background of his *Ethics*, i.e. a rather objectivist approach.² However, Hartmann himself has repeatedly pointed out (especially in his later writings) that our access to values is mediated by historical and cultural structures such as morality.³ By taking this insight seriously, I also hope to broaden the debate on Hartmann's moral philosophy.

After a general outline of his conception of the objective spirit, I will examine how the several characteristics of the objective spirit can be applied to morality. At this point, some exclusive features of morality will also be elaborated. Finally, I will point out some systematic issues that can be brought up on the basis of Hartmann's theory.

Nicolai Hartmann's Conception of Objective Spirit

Nicolai Hartmann deals with morality within the framework of his ontology of spiritual being, where it is described as one area of the objective spirit. In order to understand more precisely the various characteristics of morality and how it is related to other areas (such as science or language), it is useful to start by recapitulating some general points of his theory of the objective spirit. Hartmann assumes that there are different "layers of being" within the real world, of which the spiritual being is described as the highest and therefore most dependant layer.⁴

¹ One of the few volumes dealing with this problem is: *Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, ed. Lilly Alanen et al. (Basingstoke and London: Macmillan, 1997).

² Of course, the focus on his ethics is also a consequence of the fact that neither his later essays nor his *Problem des geistigen Seins* has been translated in English.

³ See for instance Hartmann, *Das Wertproblem in der Philosophie der Gegenwart* (Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2024).

⁴ Nicolai Hartmann: *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1962), 66–70. For a general discussion of Hartmann's layer-theory see for instance Predrag Cicovacki,

However, instead of understanding spiritual being merely as a specific form of consciousness, Hartmann assumes a division in three parts: According to him, the spiritual being consists of the mental acts and capacities realized by persons as the “personal spirit” (in current philosophy normally addressed as the *mental*), then cultural artefacts as “objectified spirit” and finally a mediating, interpersonal “sphere”—i.e. the “objective spirit.”⁵

Hartmann is well aware that grasping the objective spirit as something that is part of our reality (in a narrow, not metaphorical sense) requires particular justification: Referring to some spiritual or mental dimension of personhood seems completely unproblematic since it is grounded in a long philosophical tradition. Then, assuming some spiritual dimension of cultural artefacts may be justified by stressing the fact that they are brought about by persons and their spiritual acts. The assumption of a “spiritual sphere” that mediates personal acts and the reception and production of artefacts, though, might lead to a suspicion of some sort of speculative metaphysics.⁶ In order to defend his view against such suspicions, Hartmann points to various phenomena: Apart from the fact that the objective spirit performs a (real) mediation between persons, providing also a background in the production and reception of cultural artefacts, it has a “supra-personal” (*überpersönlich, überindividuell*) character.⁷ When we refer to *the* language, for example, we refer to something that is brought about and kept alive by the speech and vocabulary of many individual speakers, but at the same time it is a totality

The Analysis of Wonder. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 29–52; Keith R. Peterson, “Flat, Hierarchical, or Stratified? Determination and Dependence in Social-Natural Ontology,” in *New Research on the Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*, ed. Roberto Poli and Keith Peterson (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2016), 109–131, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110434378-007>. For an insightful comparison with the very popular concept of “second nature”, see Matthias Wunsch, “Das Verhältnis zwischen erster und zweiter Natur bei John McDowell und Nicolai Hartmann,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68, no. 2 (2020): 247–260, <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0015>.

⁵ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 71–74.

⁶ Ibid., 15, 84.

⁷ Ibid., 72. See also Antonio Da Re, “Objective Spirit and Personal Spirit in Hartmann’s Philosophy,” *Axiomathes* 12, no. 4 (2001): 317–326, <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015801404595> and Moritz von Kalckreuth, “Alltägliche Lebenswirklichkeit und ontologische Theorie,” *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68, no. 2 (2020): 278–283, <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0017>.

that cannot be understood in terms of individual actions. Thus, the “detached” (abgelöst) objective spirit exemplifies a certain independence from the individual persons.⁸ Due to this independence, the objective spirit and all its parts can be experienced as “resistance” (Widerstand) as soon as single persons try to oppose or to reshape them.⁹

But what are the different areas or parts of the objective spirit? Hartmann writes:

Der Überblick dieser Inhaltsgebiete lässt sich in strenger Vollzähligkeit nicht angeben. Die einzelnen Gebiete spalten sich wieder, zeigen vielfach keine scharfen Grenzen, weder gegeneinander noch gegen anderweitige Gebilde der Gemeinsamkeit. Es seien daher nur in loser Reihe die folgenden genannt: die Sprache, die Produktion und Technik, die bestehende Sitte, das geltende Recht, die vorherrschenden Wertungen, *die herrschende Moral*, die hergebrachte Form der Erziehung und Bildung, der vorwaltende Typus der Einstellung und Gesinnung, der tonangebende Geschmack, die Richtung der Kunst und des künstlerischen Verstehens, der Stand der Erkenntnis und Wissenschaft, die herrschende Weltanschauung, und zwar letztere in jeder Form, sei es als Mythos oder Religion, sei es als Philosophie.¹⁰

Hartmann maintains that all areas of the objective spirit have basically the same characteristics – which, despite all vagueness, allows us to ensure that certain collective and cultural phenomena do really belong to its totality. However, the various manifestations of these general characteristics are rather “unequal”, which is why they are more or less easy to identify.¹¹ With regard to morality, apparently, something may be learned from the specific manifestation of these general characteristics. In the following, some essential characteristics of the objective spirit will be elaborated.

A first feature has already been mentioned: The objective spirit mediates all acts, opinions, judgements etc. of individual persons. According to Hartmann, individuals only become persons by participating in supra-personal life-forms—i. e.

⁸ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 197, 221. See also Wunsch, “Das Verhältnis zwischen erster und zweiter Natur bei John McDowell und Nicolai Hartmann.”

⁹ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 272–273.

¹⁰ Ibid., 212—italics mine.

¹¹ Ibid.

the objective spirit.¹² This becomes particularly clear in the case of language: If, for example, I react to a sudden situation using a speech-act, then this reaction may count as being immediate, but this experienced immediacy depends on linguistic means that are shared with others.¹³ With this example in mind, it becomes also clear why Hartmann emphasises the great importance of habits: The objective spirit (and all of its areas) is characterised by being “taken for granted” by the single persons (and thus providing a background for personal life and action).¹⁴ A second feature has also been mentioned: The objective spirit is supra-personal, i.e. it cannot be reduced to the acts of a single person. Hartmann’s favourite example for this claim is science, because it is obvious that a single scientist cannot represent the entire state of knowledge of his discipline—not to mention science in general.¹⁵ But even if we assume a large quantity of scientists with their specific knowledge, it seems necessary to assume some sort of relation between the entirety of their knowledge by means all those perspectives (despite their differences and disagreements) are unified as *the* science.

The third feature does also concern the relationship between objective spirit and the individual person: Individuals initially “grow” into the objective spirit. That process can be unconscious and intuitive (for instance in the case of language), a conscious and systematic effort (in the case of science) or playful, practising cultivation (taste in art, fashion).¹⁶ At the same time, the objective spirit is

¹² In the debate on personhood, this point has been stressed by Matthias Wunsch and Moritz von Kalckreuth. See Matthias Wunsch, “Stufenontologien der menschlichen Person,” in *Person. Anthropologische, phänomenologische und analytische Perspektiven*, ed. Matthias Wunsch and Inga Römer (Münster: Mentis, 2013), 237–256, https://doi.org/10.30965/9783897858695_015; Moritz von Kalckreuth, *Philosophie der Personalität. Syntheseversuche zwischen Aktvollzug, Leiblichkeit und objektivem Geist* (Hamburg: Meiner 2021), 117–155.

¹³ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 182–188. This combination of mediation and immediacy seems to refer to Helmuth Plessner’s concept of “mediated immediacy” (*vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit*). For the historical and systematic relation between Hartmann’s ontology and Plessner’s philosophical anthropology see Joachim Fischer, “Nicolai Hartmann: A Crucial Figure in German Philosophical Anthropology,” in *The Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*, ed. Roberto Poli, Carlo Scognamiglio and Frederic Tremblay (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2011), 73–94, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110254181.73>.

¹⁴ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 154, 266.

¹⁵ Ibid., 221–225.

¹⁶ Ibid., 212–242. For a discussion on the importance of education see Carlo Scognamiglio, “Nicolai Hartmann’s Thoughts on Education,” in *New Research on the Philosophy of Nicolai*

kept “alive” by being taken for granted and shared by the various persons.¹⁷ This two-sided relation is described as a mutual “carrying” (*Tragen*) and “being carried” (*Getragensein*).¹⁸ Since the various areas of the objective spirit such as science, language, morality, artistic taste, law, production, technology etc. are not simply reproduced biologically, there is a need of keeping them alive through “tradition.”¹⁹ According to Hartmann, the practice of passing contents to the next generation by tradition is not much a matter of conscious choice, but of taking them for granted and sharing them within habits in everyday life.

The fourth characteristic of the objective spirit is its historicity: The different areas of the objective spirit are not simply static, but change from generation to generation. This change can be rather fast (in the case of fashion) or slow (religion, worldviews), whereby it also reacts to historical events such as wars, crises, etc.²⁰ The historicity of the objective spirit is also realised in the reception (and production) of artefacts and products of the objectified spirit: Apart from the fact that each generation produces ‘its’ literature, music, and artefacts, it also takes an individual stance toward the canon of ‘classic’ literature, art, law etc. and has its own stereotypes.²¹ For that reason, it is evident that there are at any time various opposing or perhaps even conflicting points of view favoured by different generations or groups within the same culture (not to mention the comparison of different cultures).²² For Hartmann, however, this cultural and historical pluralism is

Hartmann, ed. Roberto Poli and Keith Peterson (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2016), 297–311, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110434378-017>. For an interpretation of this “dialectical” movement see also Alicja Pietras, “The ontology of processual being: Nicolai Hartmann’s interpretation of the Hegelian dialectical process,” *Constructivist Foundations* 14, no. 1 (2018): 62–65 (accessed 21.12.2025).

¹⁷ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 202–204.

¹⁸ Ibid., 257. See also Kalckreuth, *Philosophie der Personalität*, 129–131.

¹⁹ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 213–215, 290. For a discussion of the phenomena of tradition see Steffen Kluck, “Tradition als Anthropinon?,” in *Nicolai Hartmanns Neue Ontologie und die Philosophische Anthropologie*, ed. Moritz von Kalckreuth, Gregor Schmieg and Friedrich Hausen (Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2019), 173–192.

²⁰ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 224, 318.

²¹ Ibid., 266–271.

²² Ibid., 281–300.

not a symptom of dysfunctionality or even decay, but ontologically grounded in the categorical structure of the spiritual being.²³

The necessity of ‘taking a stance’ returns also in the relation of a single person and the objective spirit of their time: Of course, their specific use of linguistic expressions, their taste in music or artwork, their religious sentiment or moral point of view does not perfectly conform with ‘the’ language, taste, religiosity, morality and so forth of their time. However, this deviation always takes place on the basis of numerous commonalities that ultimately make even the outsider in some way representative of his generation.²⁴ Furthermore, the various forms of possible deviation of individual persons from the ‘mainstream’ also reveals a fifth characteristic, which Hartmann calls the “power” of the objective spirit.²⁵ As long as we take our shared commonalities for granted, we tend to underestimate their importance for relating us to others in the intersubjective space. But if we dare to oppose the moral or legal views of our time, if we consciously try to drive forward changes in language (or fight against them), or if we try to introduce a system considered as ‘pseudo-science’ into the scientific discourse, we come up against considerable resistance, simply because we are challenging what others take for granted. According to Hartmann, the true power of objective spirit can be experienced in such situations.

Then, a sixth characteristic of the objective spirit is that the various parts and areas are interrelated and interact with each other. Hartmann admits that some areas are more expansive than others, i.e. have a particular tendency to “domi-

²³ At this point, there is an important link to Hartmann’s axiology: According to Hartmann, the individual and collective value-consciousness changes historically, a phenomenon that he compares with a moving “searchlight” in the dark, which is able to shed light on new values, but only at the cost of letting slip others out of sight. See Nicolai Hartmann, *Ethik* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1949), 158–160. The change of our collective value-consciousness is particularly grounded on the cultural mediation of our value-experience, for instance that of moral values by morality, that of aesthetic values by the dominant taste etc. See also Hartmann, *Das Wertproblem*, 51–59, 98–104.

²⁴ For instance, when I discuss a questionable law article with a colleague, there might be some sort of dissent and both of us may have the impression of defending completely opposing points of view. At the same time, for being able to argue about this certain article, we have to presuppose the same juridical basic principles, other laws etc.

²⁵ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 272–280.

nate” other areas of the spirit and bring about some sort of *unity* within the objective spirit.²⁶ In first regard, he is thinking of religion in pre-secular cultures and its transformative power with regard to science, morals, customs, etc., right up to fashion. Since personal acts and the reception of artefacts are mediated by the (in this case dominated) objective spirit, it can be argued that even these parts of the spiritual being may be influenced or shaped by a certain area. Looking at our present time, the whole sphere of economics and production would be a far more interesting example when it comes to reshaping other areas of objective spirit. It is certainly no exaggeration to maintain that contemporary science and technology is strongly influenced by economic purposes and possibilities of utilisation (including a valuation of the various disciplines in terms of their usefulness), that the development of contemporary genres of art, film and music are strongly linked to their commercial success, and that our current fashion (with its extremely fast rhythm of collections) is the result of economic optimisation. Furthermore, we may observe consume-like behaviour within non-economical parts of our personal life, for instance regarding love (dating-apps) or spirituality (classes of yoga or mindfulness).

What can be summarised up to this point? One central purpose of Hartmann’s philosophy of spiritual being is to present an ontologically grounded theory of cultural phenomena. From this point of view, the elaborated features of mediation, supra-personality, historicity, tradition and expansivity offer a conceptual framework that may help to understand various phenomena and dynamics within our culture. At the same time, Hartmann respects the fundamental differences between the various parts of the objective spirit considering that each area of the objective spirit realises general characteristics *in its own specific way*: Language, science, religion, fashion etc. do all change in history, yet each change does follow specific principles, and although it can be said that individual persons “grow into” all the different areas, the processes of growing-into is realised in a different way, depending not only on the general principles of objective spirit but also on the specific principles of the area in question.

²⁶ Ibid., 243–246, 258.

Morality within the Objective Spirit

How does our common morality fit into the general conception of the objective spirit? If we take Hartmann's descriptions seriously, it is clear that morality should somehow exemplify the various characteristics previously explained. Thus, it is to be asked what can be learned from its unique features and the specific way in which it realises the general characteristics of spiritual being.

Let us begin with the two fundamental characteristics of *mediation* and *supra-personality*: It seems rather uncontroversial that persons take stances or perform normative judgements in reaction on actions of others or themselves in a habitual, intuitive way. If, for example, I am sitting in a delayed train and witness how a stressed passenger blames the train-attendant for all the inconveniences in a very rude way, I may react with intuitive disapproval for this rude and unfair behaviour. According to Hartmann's view, such behaviour is rather to be construed as the result of participation on common morality than of rational deliberation. Thus, my reaction may involve my personal conscience, but is primarily based on moral principles that I have taken for granted (and which do also interact with my conscience, as will be pointed out later). As within other areas of the objective spirit, the *mediating* feature of morality grants the possibility to answer to actions or situations in a quite spontaneous way.²⁷

Concerning supra-personality, Hartmann maintains that it is justified referring to 'the' common morality in the sense of a supra-personal unity. It is certainly true that individual persons take up their own standpoints in regard of common moral requirements, questions or judgements—including the possibility of labelling certain moral standards as 'silly', 'petty' or 'bigoted'. Yet this fact does not necessarily conflict with the idea of 'one' morality: On the contrary, deviating from mainstream perspectives goes along with a reference to its commonality—not in the sense of a normative approval, but a recognition of what many others do take for granted.

Although morality does share its supra-personal character with other areas of spiritual being, there are two specific features that seem to be grounded on its *normative* dimension. The first becomes apparent comparing morality and mere

²⁷ Ibid., 226.

customs or conventions of etiquette: The user of certain etiquette formulas and phrases is normally aware of their limited scope. In fact, customs and etiquettes do function as a means of social distinction *because* of their limitation to certain groups, communities and classes, excluding others. Morality, on the other hand, does claim to apply ‘to everyone.’ In this regard, it seems to outrun even the law, which may still be constrained by different formal conditions or the status of a legal-subject. Anyway, morality does obviously contain a claim to universality that is *not* found in most of the other areas of the objective spirit. Whereas a scientist may believe in his theory and at the same time be sceptical because of implausible consequences, believing in the validity of morality includes not only the validity for oneself, but also for others. Then, its claim to be universal and its normative character lead also to some practical difficulty: For applying to everyone, morality and its principles must be sufficiently general and universal. At the same time, one crucial point of morality lies in its application to concrete situations and actions. Thus, one quite obvious and yet very fundamental challenge of all moral practice is simply to figure out if one individual case falls under the general principles (and which ones) or not. Unlike in law, this consideration of principles and individual situation is by no means systematic, but rather intuitive and habitual.

Concerning the process of “growing into” morality and the role of pedagogical relations, Hartmann points out particular difficulties: “Nichts ist bekannter als die Fruchtlosigkeit moralischer Lehren, Ratschläge, Ermahnungen. [...] Niemand wird durch fremde Erfahrung klug—nicht weil sie nicht auf ihn und sein Leben zuträfe, sondern weil sie nicht die seine ist. Man muß selbst Lehrgeld zahlen.”²⁸

Why is passive learning from others and their principles, counsels, and experiences not sufficient in the case of morality? One important point is that “moral maturity” seems to require an insight into certain values, which can only be gained through one’s own life experience.²⁹ Others may contribute to such value-experience by playing the role of a “model person” (*Vorbild*), (metaphorically) opening the person’s eyes for certain values that remain yet out of sight, but any value-experience requires some sensibility or resonance of the person that cannot be

²⁸ Ibid., 226–227.

²⁹ Ibid., 227–234. See also Moritz von Kalckreuth, “Werterfahrung und moralische Reife,” in *Werteerziehung durch die Schule*, ed. Katarina Weilert (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck 2023), 23–44, <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-162228-1>.

‘caused.’³⁰ Something similar applies for the previously mentioned necessity of deliberation whether certain moral principles are relevant for a given situation: This requires some sort of sensitivity that belongs to a person’s moral maturity but cannot simply be taught ‘from the outside.’

Concerning the relation of common morality and the individual stance, the situation seems to be quite similar to that of objective spirit in general: Individual persons may in their judgements and conduct deviate from the moral ‘mainstream’ of their time and culture. Even if such a deviation or opposition may be rather ‘silent’ without any articulated standpoint emphasised in a public discourse, it has the potential of leading to open conflicts. For example, let us imagine a business-person from northern Europe with a rather progressive attitude towards sex and gender issues. Moving to a small town in the US, they find themselves in a very conservative milieu—realising that their progressive view on the sexuality of her adolescent children is not only perceived as unusual, but even as morally reprehensible. However, as long as this matter is only dealt with at home, there may be no conflict at all. This could change, though, if their children’s comments at school cause indignant reactions of other parents, leading to severe discussions at upcoming parents’ meetings and a bad reputation.³¹

Concerning the relation of individual persons and the objective spirit in terms of morality and ethics, it is also important to consider an extraordinary feature: Any relation between the individual person and the objective morality does also involve their *conscience*. According to Hartmann, the phenomenon of conscience is to be understood as a personal self-relation in which the person is “touched” or re-concerned (*rückbetroffen*) by the consequences of their own actions and decisions (especially of those that bear consequences for others).³² That includes not only some sort of (epistemic) coming to know, but also an evaluative

³⁰ Ibid.; Hartmann, *Ethik*, 129–131. Concerning the notion of model persons, scholars like Eugene Kelly have shown that Hartmann strongly agrees with Max Scheler. See Eugene Kelly, *Material Ethics of Value: Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), 212–214, <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1845-6>.

³¹ At this point, we can also clearly observe the aspect of “power” mentioned above.

³² Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 146, 230. See also Kalckreuth, *Philosophie der Personalität*, 137, 146.

and normative aspect by experiencing the value (or worthlessness) realised by actions and taking a stance towards them.³³ This insight leads to remarkable consequences: First, Hartmann himself emphasises that conscience can only occur within the *personal spirit*. Supra-personal moral principles, rules and structures of justification cannot experience the consequences of their own application, which is why there cannot be any conscience within the objective morality and the objective spirit.³⁴ For this reason, Hartmann stresses the importance of the personal perspective, that cannot be simply replaced by rules and conventions. At this point, it is also important to note that our consciousness does not only apply to uninfluenced choices and actions, but also to circumstances in which we follow moral rules, principles or conventions. In fact, it seems to occur quite often that rules are fair in terms of generality, but nevertheless lead to consequences that we experience as inadequate or wrong. Or, to put it even more bluntly: Moral principles, rules, commands and prohibitions are *unconscionable*, which is why their rigorous obedience may run the risk of becoming unconscionable, too.

What can be said about the *historicity* of morality? First of all, it is quite obvious that moral standards and judgements do also change in the historical movement of different generations. This change may be less evident regarding fundamental moral judgements on killing and betrayal, but it may become pretty clear observing our stance towards situations in ordinary life, such as racist jokes or violence in education. One of the many examples from the present day is the moral judgement on violent fairy tales or Astrid Lindgren's stories: If parents from the younger generation claim that it is morally problematic to read Lindgren's *Emil of Lönneberga* to their own children because it depicts parental violence (after his pranks and mishaps, Emil gets often beaten by his father or is chased in the woodshed, where he is locked in for several hours), those who judge differently will have difficulty to accept this statement. As Hartmann emphasises concerning the objective spirit in general, the mere emergence of controversy is not a symptom of deficits (not to mention cultural decline) but rather indicates historical change, which (from a normative perspective) is always open-ended, i. e. it can

³³ For a reading of conscience that is more focused on Hartmann's *Ethics* see Kelly, *Material Ethics of Value*, 111–116.

³⁴ Hartmann, *Das Problem des geistigen Seins*, 342–343.

lead to good or bad consequences.³⁵ Nevertheless, in the area of morality we may observe a certain tendency towards confrontation that is not inherent to other areas of the objective spirit: In science, aesthetic taste, fashion or social convention, different points of view or preferences can coexist without causing serious conflicts, even if they are in relation of concurrence with each other. In morality, though, the plurality of different standpoints seems to provoke fundamental controversies more easily, simply because of their (implicit) claims of universal validity.

Finally, morality does also interact with the other areas of the objective spirit. Moral principles, for example, can influence how we dress (fashion), how we practise our religiosity (religion) and what we perceive as legally right and wrong (law). At the same time, morality is also influenced by other areas, of which religion might be again a classical example. From our present western perspective, however, perhaps it may be even more important discussing to what extent our morality is influenced by the economy, by science and technology. Concerning the influence of economy and commercialisation, it could be noted that there is a 'demand' for moral expertise in ethic-committees or ethic-courses for medical or military personnel, in talk-shows and in advice literature. Without overdramatising such phenomena, it is not implausible to diagnose some sort of commercial logic including a notion of moral 'experts' that deliver some sort of service. At the same time, there is a certain expectation that moral principles should be weighed up against other interests in a somehow 'economic' way. Talking about science and technology, it may be argued that both have contributed to a specific understanding of moral "progress": When we talk about technical or scientific progress in our ordinary life, we do not just refer to mere historical change but to some sort of *improvement*. After five to ten years, we usually know things we didn't know before and have gained new technical possibilities. Nevertheless, this identification of historical change with improvement *cannot be applied* to the objective spirit in general and neither to morality. In morality and other areas there is a constant change, but it is open-ended and may include both a subtler awareness

³⁵ As remarked before, such different perspectives and generational changes do often coincide with highlighting or preferring different values. In terms of morality, for instance, one generation might be more concentrated on balancing and harmonising a manifold of different values (*die Fülle*) or on concentrating on one single value (*die Reinheit*). See Hartmann, *Ethik*, 402–415.

of certain normative issues and losing sight of others.³⁶ From Hartmann's point of view, it would be quite unrealistic—not to say naïve—to assume that the morality of future generations will 'automatically' be more profound and improved.

Until this point, we have seen that Hartmann's localisation of morality within the objective spirit is not a mere accidental point, but can be well justified showing that all essential characteristics of the objective spirit in general—for instance including supra-personality, mediation and historicity—do also apply to morality. At the same time, there is a specific way in which these characteristics are realised in the area of morality and that can be quite informative.

Systematic Insights

After the discussion of Hartmann's theory of common morality, it is now time to face the question which phenomena and issues may be articulated on the basis of the elaborated view. Three topics appear particularly promising.

Firstly, Hartmann's insights on personal value experience *and* supra-personal morality offers systematic resources that allow us to articulate conflicts between the individual ethos and common morality. According to this perspective, a conflict of conscience is not simply to be understood as an 'inner' conflict of a moral judgement and a decision to act, but as something in which one's own value-attachments, moral principles and possibly doubts (concerning the legitimacy of both of them) fail to come into a harmonic relation.³⁷ Such a conflict of conscience can also consist in the fact that the rigorous obedience to a principle or rule (that is legitimate in itself) appears unconscionable in individual cases precisely because of its impersonality. On the other hand, our shared morality does offer a point of view—perhaps no Nagelian "view from nowhere," but at least a quite objective one—from which one's own intuitions and value experiences can be criticised and questioned. It may happen that values and ethically relevant facts remain invisible for me, that I underestimate certain values or that I fanatically

³⁶ See Hartmann, *Ethik*, 157–160.

³⁷ In general, Hartmann does elaborate a very resourceful account on personal conscience—not referring to some sort of 'implicit' judgement or an exaggerated emphasis on the individual authenticity, but to the relation of intersubjective positionality and value-experience.

lose myself in the experience and realisation of certain values.³⁸ In such situations, our morality can help us to avoid becoming egocentric. Altogether, Hartmann offers a theory to understand how ‘personal’ and ‘objective’ forms of normativity can be intertwined and provide perspectives to correct each other.

Secondly, Hartmann’s view on the historicity and cultural relativity of morality offers a less pessimist approach to the description and interpretation of generational conflicts over moral standards and principles. In many societies, such conflicts are currently framed in a rather dramatical way, talking about a ‘moralisation’ that has got out of control or of a ‘social divide.’³⁹ Since Hartmann is less interested in a normative evaluation of moral principles or judgements, he provides systematic resources to grasp the embedding of different points of view in the ‘spirit’ of different generations, not taking their plurality to be a problem. For him, the fact that we argue about moral principles and question the perspectives of others is no evidence for a ‘decline’ or ‘degeneration’ of society.

Thirdly, Hartmann’s position can be used to describe and interpret interactions and influences between the various areas of the objective spirit, including the possibility of grasping the different influences on morality. For instance, this enables a discussion whether some economical, technological or scientific framework does expand into morality and which following phenomena may be articulated (just to name an example). Of course, Hartmann’s theory of spiritual being is not the only approach that offers some articulation of such relations. In fact, there is a long-standing tradition of critical theory that is far more interested in such phenomena dealing with problematic developments in modernity—which includes a fundamental critique of the growing influence of capitalism.⁴⁰ Although Hartmann seems to have less to say about such problems, it shall be noticed that his methodological self-understanding allows a quite differentiated view: According to his phenomenologically influenced ontology, the philosophical task would be to elaborate relevant relations referring to correlating phenomena. Such an analysis, though being able to justify a normative critique, would itself be rather

³⁸ See also Aurel Kolnai, “Erroneous Conscience,” in *Ethics, Value, and Reality* (London: Routledge, 2017), 1–22.

³⁹ See for instance Craig Calhoun, Dilip Gaonkar and Charles Taylor, *The Degeneration of Politics* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022).

⁴⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002); Rahel Jaeggi, *Alienation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016).

descriptive. Thus, Hartmann would clearly avoid the assumption of strong normative narratives such as the identification of modernity with an unstoppable “alienation” and “economisation,” not to mention carrying out any philosophical analysis from the outset of a normative ‘denunciation’ with the primary intention of changing society.⁴¹

Conclusion

The aim of this article was to discuss Hartmann’s view on morality as part of the objective spirit and draw systematic consequences from his position. Whereas morality is normally conceptualised in terms of specific normative judgements and their specific justifications, his philosophy of spiritual being allows to think about common morality as a collective, cultural and historical phenomenon. After elaborating the most important characteristics of the objective spirit in general, it was shown that they also apply to morality, leaving nevertheless enough space for the recognition of its specific features. In a final step, some interesting systematic insights have been discussed: By considering the cultural character of morality, we may articulate phenomena grounded in the relation of morality and individual conscience, conflicts between different generation and their moral standards or the expansion of other spiritual areas to that of morality. All these issues play an important role in individual and collective life, but are hard to grasp in terms of contemporary ethics (in which the dimension of culture and history is almost completely ignored). Apart from these systematic points, there are also important insights concerning Hartmann’s philosophy: In research on Hartmann, the role of morality is often reduced to an axiological access to moral values. Stressing his notion of common morality as part of the objective spirit, however, is fundamental to understand his attempt to connect axiology with a theory of culture and historical change.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Bibliography

- Calhoun, Craig, Dilip P. Gaonkar, and Charles Taylor. *The Degeneration of Politics*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2022.
- Cicovacki, Pedrag. *The Analysis of Wonder. An Introduction to the Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*. New York: Bloomsbury, 2014.
- Commonality and Particularity in Ethics*, edited by Lilly Alanen, Sara Heinämaa, and Thomas Wallgren Basingstoke/London: Macmillan, 1997.
- Da Re, Antonio. "Objective Spirit and Personal Spirit in Hartmann's Philosophy." *Axiomathes* 12, no. 4 (2001): 317–326. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015801404595>.
- Fischer, Joachim. "Nicolai Hartmann: A Crucial Figure in German Philosophical Anthropology—Without Belonging to the Paradigm." In *The Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*, edited by Roberto Poli, Carlo Scognamiglio and Frederic Tremblay, 73–94. Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110254181.73>.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Twelve Lectures*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Ethik*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1949.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Das Problem des geistigen Seins. Untersuchungen zur Grundlegung der Geschichtsphilosophie und der Geisteswissenschaften*. Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1962.
- Hartmann, Nicolai. *Das Wertproblem in der Philosophie der Gegenwart. Aufsätze zu Wert und Sinn*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2024.
- Jaeggi, Rahel. *Alienation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2016.
- Kalckreuth, Moritz von. "Alltägliche Lebenswirklichkeit und ontologische Theorie." *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68, no. 2 (2020): 275–287. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0017>.
- Kalckreuth, Moritz von. *Philosophie der Personalität. Syntheseversuche zwischen Aktvollzug, Leiblichkeit und objektivem Geist*. Hamburg: Felix Meiner, 2021.
- Kalckreuth, Moritz von. "Werterfahrung und moralische Reife. Philosophische Überlegungen zum Zugang zu Werten." In *Werteerziehung durch die Schule*, edited by Katarina Weilert, 23–24. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2023. <https://doi.org/10.1628/978-3-16-162228-1>.
- Kelly, Eugene. *Material Ethics of Value: Max Scheler and Nicolai Hartmann*. Dordrecht: Springer, 2011. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-1845-6>.
- Kolnai, Aurel, "Erroneous Conscience." In *Ethics, Value, and Reality*, 1–22. London: Routledge, 2017.
- Peterson, Keith R. "Flat, Hierarchical, or Stratified? Determination and Dependence in Social-Natural Ontology." In *New Research on the Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*, edited by Roberto Poli and Keith Peterson, 109–131. Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110434378-007>.

Pietras, Alicja. "The ontology of processual being: Nicolai Hartmann's interpretation of the Hegelian dialectical process." *Constructivist Foundations* 14, no. 1 (2018): 62–65. <http://constructivist.info/14/1/062> (accessed 21.12.2025).

Scognamiglio, Carlo. "Nicolai Hartmann's Thoughts on Education." In *New Research on the Philosophy of Nicolai Hartmann*, edited by Roberto Poli and Keith Peterson, 297–311. Berlin and Boston: Walter De Gruyter, 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110434378-017>.

Wunsch, Matthias. "Stufenontologien der menschlichen Person." In *Person: Anthropologische, phänomenologische und analytische Perspektiven*, edited by Matthias Wunsch and Inga Römer, 237–256. Münster: Mentis, 2013. https://doi.org/10.30965/9783897858695_015.

Wunsch, Matthias. "Das Verhältnis zwischen erster und zweiter Natur bei John McDowell und Nicolai Hartmann." *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie* 68, no. 2 (2020): 247–260. <https://doi.org/10.1515/dzph-2020-0015>.

Streszczenie

Zbiorowa moralność jako część ducha obiektywnego: Nicolaia Hartmanna rozumienie historycznego i kulturowego wymiaru moralności

Artykuł stanowi próbę omówienia kulturowego i historycznego wymiaru moralności. Aby uzyskać dostęp do tej, raczej pomijanej w dzisiejszych debatach strony moralności, odwołuję się do filozofii bytu duchowego Nicolaia Hartmanna. Badam, w jakim stopniu moralność wpisuje się w całość ducha obiektywnego i jakie ogólne lub specyficzne cechy można w niej dostrzec. Następnie wykazuję, że na podstawie przedstawionego tutaj podejścia można sformułować różne kwestie systematyczne, takie jak relacja między moralnością a sumieniem osoby, konflikty pokoleniowe w odniesieniu do zasad moralnych oraz wzajemne oddziaływanie moralności i innych zjawisk kulturowych.

Słowa kluczowe: teoria moralności, zmiany historyczne, kultura, sumienie, spory moralne, konflikty moralne

Zusammenfassung

Die gemeinsame Moral als Teil des objektiven Geistes: Nicolai Hartmanns Einsichten zur geschichtlichen und kulturellen Dimension der Moral

Der vorliegende Beitrag versteht sich als Versuch, die kulturelle und geschichtliche Dimension von Moral zu thematisieren. Um einen Zugang zu dieser, in den heutigen Debatten

eher vernachlässigten Seite der Moral zu erarbeiten, wird auf Nicolai Hartmanns Philosophie des geistigen Seins zurückgegriffen. Dabei wird untersucht, inwiefern sich die Moral in die Gesamtheit des objektiven Geistes einfügt und welche allgemeinen bzw. spezifischen Charakteristika sich an ihr aufweisen lassen. Im Anschluss wird aufgezeigt, dass sich ausgehend von dem hier vorgestellten Zugang verschiedene systematische Themen artikulieren lassen, etwa die Relation von Moral und persönlichem Gewissen, Generationskonflikte in Bezug auf moralische Prinzipien sowie gegenseitige Einflüsse von Moral und anderen Kulturphänomenen.

Schlüsselwörter: Moraltheorie, geschichtlicher Wandel, Kultur, Gewissen, moralischer Konflikt, moralischer Fortschritt, moralische Differenzen

