Axel Honneth
The Pathologies of Individual Freedom: Hegel's Social Theory.
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Why go back to good old Hegel, a philosopher whose 1821 *Philosophy of Right* is notoriously antidemocratic, teaches the subordination of the individual to the state, and subjugates political thought to a metaphysics that has become completely incomprehensible to us (4)? According to Honneth, because there is a crisis of contemporary political philosophy, a crisis that can be traced to—or at least manifests itself through—an excessive reliance on a Kantian-influenced normative paradigm of politics, as evidenced in the work of Rawls and Habermas. However, not any reading of Hegel will do. The one Honneth proposes is an 'indirect reactualization of the *Philosophy of Right*' (5), centered on the concepts of 'objective spirit' and 'ethical life', and politely dismissive of Hegel's ambition to build an all-encompassing system. Honneth explains that Hegel's notion of 'objective spirit' means that 'all social reality has a rational structure and any breach of that structure by using false or inadequate concepts to try to understand it will necessarily have negative effects on social life' (6). The second Hegelian intuition that Honneth wants to rescue is 'ethical life', i.e., the idea that in social reality we come across spheres of action in which inclinations and moral norms, interests, and values are already fused in the form of institutionalized interactions (6).

For Honneth, the situation facing progressive political philosophy since the late 1990's is similar to the one faced by Hegel in the aftermath of the French Revolution. For Hegel, the problem of modern political philosophy was how to conceive a society in which individuals are able to maximize their freedom while preserving the features of a solidary closely-knit community and thus avoiding the tragedies of the Jacobin Terror and the Thermidor. According to Honneth, this is exactly what is at stake in the discussion—facilitated by the demise of Marxism—between the Kantian formalists (represented by Rawls and Habermas) and the communitarians (represented by Taylor, Walzer and McIntyre). Honneth also assumes in his account that the mature *Philosophy of Right*, in spite of all its shortcomings, represents a refinement over Hegel's earlier attempts to offer a solution to this conundrum (8).

As mentioned, Hegel adopts as the central principle of his *Philosophy of Right* the idea of 'free general will', i.e., the insight that, in modern times, any definition of morality or rights can be justified only in terms of individual autonomy and self-determination. He distinguishes between: i) a merely negative version of free will, i.e., free will as the ability of the individual to distance himself from needs, desires and drives that might be experienced as a restriction of the independence of the self; ii) free will as self-determination, the ability to make informed choices between given contents (representing the points of view of Kant and Fichte)—what Honneth names 'the optional model'; iii) a more complex model in which 'even the material of individual self-

determination loses every trace of heteronomy because it can be imagined as a product of freedom'.

While there are different ways of interpreting this third model, Honneth prefers the one exemplified in Hegel's description of 'friendship' in the Addition to §7 of the *Philosophy of Right*. The central sentence in the paragraph, as quoted by Honneth, reads: 'willingly limit ourselves with reference to an other' (Honneth, 13). Honneth interprets as follows: 'Here in contrast to the two defective definitions', i.e., will as negative freedom and will as optional freedom, 'Hegel answers the question how "free will" is really to be understood…in order to be able to will itself as free, the will must restrict itself to those "needs, desires and drives", in short its "first order volitions" the realization of which can again be experienced as…an expression…of its own freedom. But this is possible only if the object of desire or inclination itself has the quality of being free, because only such an "other" can really enable the will to experience freedom' (14). According to Honneth, this model 'clearly reveals the contours of a communicative model of individual freedom'. On the basis of this interpretation of Hegel's notion of free will it is possible to claim that, for Hegel, a just social order is the one that allows the development of each individual as a free will, in the sense that Honneth, following Hegel, understands it (15). The opposite will be a pathological social order—what Honneth refers to, rather enigmatically, as one 'suffering from indeterminacy', a concept that appears on several occasions in the text, and in the original title to the lectures which are at the origin of this book. It is only in the new English translation that the concept of 'pathology' becomes central, following Honneth's adoption of this notion in recent publications.

Next, Honneth uses the three concepts of free will as a blueprint for the tripartite division of the *Philosophy of Right* (abstract right, morality and ethical life). Honneth shows that we can describe the three different spheres in terms of the communicative and cognitive capabilities that an individual needs to master in order to be competent in the language games played in each one. Honneth interprets the tripartite division of the *Philosophy of Right* as follows: there must be a framework in which individuals learn to understand themselves as persons bearing rights—this corresponds to the section entitled 'abstract right'—and there must be a moral order that makes it possible for individuals to understand themselves, in addition, as bearers of an individual conscience (this corresponds to morality). The frameworks become pathological when these different models of freedom cannot be adequately coordinated. Out of the many aims that Hegel tries to achieve in the morality section, Honneth chooses to concentrate on two: i) the establishment of the ethical value and boundaries of the idea of moral autonomy; ii) the explanation of why all the prerequisites for the realization of free will can be found only in the communicative sphere of 'ethical life' (36-7). These two aims are related because, in Honneth's interpretation, for Hegel, to reveal the narrowness of the 'moral standpoint' is also to show the necessity of the sphere of ethical life.

The passage from morality to ethical life is depicted as a liberation from suffering. Honneth claims that liberation in this context means not only the liberation of an extremely one-sided perspective (i.e., negative freedom) but liberation in a therapeutic sense, which Honneth interprets in a Wittgenstein-inspired sense, the recovery of

familiarity with the rational content of our practice of living (44). The full weight of the therapeutic metaphor becomes clear when Honneth adds: 'the moment readers accept the offer of an interpretation of their lifeworld as an instance of ethical life, they should liberate themselves from the deceptive attitudes that have so far prevented them from realizing their freedom' (46).

The third chapter explores Hegel's normative theory of modernity. This chapter is divided into two sections. In the first, Honneth further develops his communicative interpretation of Hegel's concept of 'ethical life', while the second section is devoted to criticism of Hegel's over-institutionalization of 'Ethical life'. Honneth begins his account reminding us that for Hegel 'abstract right' and 'morality' are only imperfect materializations of human freedom. Freedom can be achieved only under certain conditions, which Hegel sums up with the concept of 'recognition', an 'effortless mutual acknowledgement of certain aspects of the other's personality' (50). Also, Honneth claims that Hegel describes 'the entire sphere of ethical life as a staggered arrangement of different forms of recognition' (51).

The last sections of the book deal with the way in which Hegel's insights are ruined by Hegel's belief that the social institutions of his time already embody the requirements of recognition and ethical life. Hegel develops in his *Philosophy of Right* a sort of 'authoritarian liberalism', and yet Honneth believes that 'a democratic rounding off of his theory of ethical life would have been perfectly compatible with the aims of the theory of justice he pursues in his *Philosophy of Right* as a whole' (80).

Since publishing this book, Honneth has continued working on the project of an Hegelian inspired political philosophy, whose most recent exposition is his just published *Das Recht der Freiheit*. Honneth intends to show not only that Hegel's theory of right can be interpreted from a democratic and communicative point of view, but more importantly, that from the seeds of Hegel's philosophy he can grow a political philosophy that is insightful for our times.

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