

Concrete Freedom and Other Problems: Robert Pippin's Hegelian Conception of Practical Reason

– A critical notice of Robert B. Pippin, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life*. Cambridge University Press, 2008.

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Robert Pippin sets out to defend Hegel's theory of freedom from the politically toxic charges of conformism, ethical substantialism, and conventionalism. In the course of his innovative developments of a number of Hegel's central claims Pippin, rather than extinguishing the perception of Hegelian freedom as 'an ideologically distorted fantasy' (p. 281), actually supplies that perception with new grounds. Pippin's Hegel narrows the possibilities of practical reason to exercises that can be validated only intra-institutionally. The form in which Pippin externalizes reasons deprives the agent of legitimacy when attempting to act 'rationally' – i.e. with reasons of her own – against its normative order.

Pippin takes himself to be engaging with Hegel 'philosophically' (p. 33n) and through 'rational reconstruction' (p. 34). These interpretative approaches involve him in setting out Hegel's arguments in ways not found in the original texts, drawing connections between conceptions that Hegel himself did not, and defending the theory built on those connections from charges of which Hegel was unaware. The Hegelian theory that is developed in *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* is Pippin's project. That is not to say that Pippin misrepresents Hegel, though some of Hegel's ambiguous formulations tend to be settled in favour of Pippin's narrative. Pippin's reconstructive work and his willingness to devise philosophical arguments for that reconstruction mean that any dispute one has with the theory is in the first instance a dispute with Pippin. For that reason, I shall attribute the philosophical difficulties of the theory to claims and arguments whose articulations belong to Pippin.

* In *International Journal of Philosophical Studies*, Vol. 19 (2011) (pp. 753-760).

Pippin sets out to develop a cohesive Hegelian response to the Kantian thesis that the individual's free agency is irreducible to sociality. For Kantianism, the capacity for freedom lies in some feature of the individual not determined by the individual's history or socio-biography. Citing Hegel, Pippin contends that we cannot explain how 'considerations arrived at by [such] an individual as a result of rational deliberation alone... could have much content or could be action guiding' (p. 22). The force of this objection obliges theory to abandon the notion of the transcendental purity of the agent with its decontextualized constructivism. We must instead refer our explanation of the preferences that an individual acts upon to some determinative background that presents options that are meaningful to that individual. This background turns out to be the institutions that supposedly constitute an agent's practice identity. The institutional theory of freedom, as I shall call it, is for Pippin 'more philosophically promising than the confabulations of voluntarist theories or the concessions and compromises with naturalism of the traditional compatibilist' (p. 122).

Pippin invokes the 'priority of the social' thesis (p. 247) and shares with other theories that are committed to that thesis the worries about detached agency. In a distinctive way, though, Pippin develops his notion of sociality within the Hegelian notion of recognition. The dangers that accompany communitarian conceptions of agency take on a new form. As the dialectic of master and slave seems to show, freedom is not a primitive property of individuals, and nor can individuals either generate or experience freedom without relating to other individuals. Pippin notes that 'freedom is understood by Hegel to involve a certain sort of self-relation and a certain sort of relation to others; it is constituted by being in a certain self-regarding and a certain sort of mutually related state' (p. 186). This mutuality appears to be operative not solely at the level of direct personal interactions. Pippin maintains that the recognitive process – this mutuality – informs those institutions through which an individual as a rational agent is constituted and through which she freely acts. Rationality, in this context, refers to the act of giving reason for one's action-guiding preferences. Freedom, recognition, and institutions are effectively interlocked. Pippin writes:

for the action to count as mine, it must make a certain kind of sense to the agent, and that means it must fit in intelligibly within a whole complex of practices and institutions within which doing this now could have a coherent meaning. (p. 5)

The recognitive process is at work in that complex, in that the very making sense to the agent of her actions requires the validation and endorsement by others – or by the institutional norms sustained by others – of the rationality of those actions. Recognition is provided by others who participate in that institution and who, notionally at least, affirm the individual's actions as the actions that a rational agent working within that institution should wish to undertake. Despite their centrality, however, Pippin never sharply establishes just what institutions are or what, if any, their differing degrees of normative hold might be, though he finds them at work everywhere. Yet many of the instances he cites, with a pragmatist frame of mind, might be considered conventional social roles or forms of life that it would be fanciful to determine as institutions. (In this regard I take him to be at odds with Hegel.)

The process of giving reasons that is characteristic of (a certain conception of) autonomy is explained from within a theory of this institutional world. The self-legislating individual acts for reasons, that is, on grounds that can enter into justificatory exchanges. For Pippin, however, there can be no justification without 'institutional norms' (p. 131). When we act we do so through normative rules that emerge from our existing and personally constituting institutional commitments. It is within this reality – not that of abstracted agency – that we must account for the process of self-legislation. Self-legislation, in other words, is to be explained through the framework of the sociality thesis. Acting under reason means acting under norms to which the individual is committed and whose content demarcates the individual in a specific way as a socio-historical being involved in a particular normative order. Pippin regards the alternative, 'complete reflective abstraction' from these involvements, as a fantasy (p. 67). Individuals cannot divest themselves of their historically situated, normatively oriented agency to become a 'pure contemplator-of-the-good' (p. 136). Throughout Pippin's book the sole alternative to sociality is presented as little more than a profoundly misconceived and hopeless subjectivism.

Pippin tells us we need to think of the individual and her freedom as ‘socially mediated’ (p. 18). Mediation is not supposed to mean suborning the individual to society (i.e. ethical substantialism) and in no way precludes, but rather supports, freedom as the experience of ‘a wholly self-sufficient life, one in which nothing from outside, nothing not-me, determines my actions’ (p. 136). Freedom is mediated through institutions. Given the load-bearing function of mediation in Pippin’s institutional theory of freedom its processes require some adumbration, though none is offered. Institutions, within rational circumstances, are not experienced as alien to the individual since the individual is constituted through them. Hence acting on the norms of those institutions that benignly mediate me is autonomous. The ‘self-relation crucial to agency’, he writes, ‘cannot be understood apart from social relations; my relation to myself is mediated by my relation to others’ (p. 149).

The way in which the individual self-determines, Pippin argues, ‘always relies on and is oriented by the practices and proprieties authoritative at a time’ (p. 133). The free individual is, he also says, ‘very clearly circumscribed in such formulations by a variety of social conventions, proprieties, and so forth’ (p. 169). But we are not to think of circumscription as antithetical to autonomy. When the individual acts according to circumscribing authoritative norms, and when the individual acts out of rational considerations, and when the individual acts institutionally she, Pippin claims, acts freely.

Institutions are freedom enabling, however, only when rational agents operate within a rational society. A rational social world is one in which human beings are informed by rational norms that, as rational beings shaped fulfillingly by those norms, they would wish to act upon: ‘So “conforming to right” and “being rational in and for itself,” and participating in certain institutions, all amount to the same thing, and the same thing they amount to is the state of actual freedom’ (p. 245). In this ideal rational world of Pippin’s construction no tension is to be found between the needs of the subject, as identified to her by her own free reflections, and the claims of society.

But what, as Pippin himself rightly asks, does it mean ‘to say that certain modern institutions are rational’ (p. 247)? He concludes – following an insightful discussion – that ‘objective rationality’ is neither an abstract ‘indirect subjective rationality’, nor is

it the set of necessary ‘conditions for the actualization of individual agency’ (p. 258). Pippin’s account of the historical development of objective rationality rules out those transcendental notions. It is a heavily accented account – pragmatist and non-metaphysical – of Hegel’s notion of universal history in which we can observe ‘a growing capacity by human beings to understand what is required by collective self-determinations’ (p. 112). His narrative repeats and endorses fundamental elements of modernity’s self-understanding: that we moderns have overseen the ever expanding reach of reason, all the way to its full realization through the over-turning or the refoundation of what was once accepted as natural authority, the governance of people by laws whose principles are accessible to (some form of) rational scrutiny, the concept of citizenship. A fully rational world is one in which reason structures society in the sense that all of its institutions are rationally acceptable. The criterion of rationality in this context is not formal but is rather the capacity of society to act with individuals who seek to organize themselves and their social environments. Through that process we have acquired collective and discursive forms of self-regulation not as a compromise with others but positively as the production of ‘a form of normative and genuinely autonomous like-mindedness’ (p. 112).

This theory of freedom is a ‘concrete’ one, Pippin frequently reiterates. It is concrete in that it places individuals within a constituting, normatively structured socio-historical reality. That reality presents the situated individual with options that seem relevant to the kind of agent she takes herself to be:

Reasoning and coming to have reasons will, it appears, have a great deal more to do with participation in social practices, and the sorts of reasons relevant to the achievement of genuine freedom, full rational agency, will depend on the character of those practices and institutions. (p. 246)

This is an audacious claim, given its revisionary implications. Yet it is not supported by any explication of what it means to be in an institution; that is, a discussion of the degree to which institutions frame what the individual experiences as options. Individuals do sometimes take themselves to be thinking or act against the normative order of their social environments. The *Schwerpunkt* is the normative basis of that normative discontent. Certainly, pure practical reason or transcendental detachment,

as Pippin argues well, would be controversial candidates for that role. The alternative to an abstractly positioned self, however, cannot simply be the homogenizing answer ‘institutions’. Individuals act in different ways towards the institutions of their societies, including not acting within them at all. Normative differences between people even in the most apparently homogenous societies are to be found. Obviously, too, individuals experience complex pluralities of overlapping, competing, and disparate personal commitments that a generalist thesis about sociality and institutional life can barely begin to talk about. Yet the thesis persists if we think that a philosophical theory can decide on questions about the normative makeup of any given individual within a set of prior and clearly defined institutions.

Pippin’s position gives rise to a number of obvious worries, most of which are familiar to those who have followed the liberal-communitarian debate. Those questions emerge from the thesis that our social constitution limits the content what we can normatively commit ourselves to. Critical reason – if it is to survive at all – is necessarily geared towards internal justification of institutions and practical reason is the business of negotiating our ways within those institutions. I want to leave aside those worries, however, and concentrate on the difficulties of what I think is a quite original entailment, developed by Pippin, of the sociality thesis. That is the idea that individual agency is, in effect, a social possession.

Pippin maintains that being an individual subject ‘is something like a collective or social normative achievement’ (p. 9). It is because the institutions, through which the individual is self-determining, are collectively supported that agency is a collective ‘achievement’. The notion of self-constituting individuality is supposedly undercut by that thesis as the ontology of the individual is, rather, social. How far does the sociality of the individual reach? For Pippin it reaches into the very experience of selfhood. He argues that not only does our self-understanding as agents rely on our institutional positionality – and that should entail the kinds of choices that appear meaningful to us – but so too does our ability to take ownership of our intentions. What this seems to mean is that self-relatedness – my familiarity with the ongoing processes of my thoughts and intentions – does not actually occur without some kind of recognition from others that I do indeed self-relate in the way I think I do.

Pippin argues that one cannot be said to have ‘executed an intention successfully unless others attribute to you the deed and intention you attribute to yourself’ (p. 173). Pippin understands this claim to be a corollary of the recognition thesis. He tells us that agency is ‘as much, if not more, a matter of retrospective justification and understanding and mutual recognition than a matter of prior deliberation and the power to choose’ (p. 146). The agent is in a ‘contextual and temporal field’ in that its ‘deeds’ have a dimension looking ‘backwards’ (the concrete environment ‘prior’ to ‘the acting subject’). But there is also a forward dimension ‘such that the unfolding of the deed and the reception and reaction to it are considered a constitutive element of the deed, of what fixes ultimately what was done and what turned out to be a subject’s intention’ (p. 152). The interpretation of the acts informs, somehow, the intention itself. The meaning of the intention is therefore provisional upon future interpretation. Yet what Pippin proposes here seems to merge two processes: having an intention and the ongoing interpretation of the consequences of what was enacted by that intention. The intention as a mental act is a temporally specifiable act: it arises for the agent at a particular time. Nevertheless Pippin, as we have just seen, thinks of the intention – not simply the deed – spreading through history. It is, for Pippin, he adds, ‘temporally fluid, unstable across time and experience’ (p. 153). What this notion leads to, I think, is the deletion of agency precisely as the bearer of intentions. It takes from the first person ownership of her intentions in that their status is dependent upon others ‘to attribute’ to her ‘the deed and intention’ she attributed to herself. That one cannot be said to have had an intention unless others affirm it turns the agent into an absolutely externalized being, who operates with a provisional internal life, and without the capacity to intend, on her own terms, self-determining actions or to reflect in private space.

The externalization of intentions thesis – in this form, at least – has rather serious implications for critical-practical freedom. The intentions of those who wished to act against institutions – the embodiment of prevailing norms – might have to accept that they have no intentions to that effect were satisfied others to decline to attribute that intention to them. The ‘collective’ – or self-styled rational community, perhaps – not oriented towards the institutions in the same ways as the individual seeking to act against them, would find in what the agent claims as her intention a meaning wholly different – even meaningless – from what the agent intended. Recognition of the

intention would be denied. Pippin's analysis, in which he externalizes intention, turns out to be based on the dream of a perfect, rational, harmonious society. This is how he describes that world:

In the vast majority of cases, one's prior, determinatively formulated intention unfolds and is expressed in actions taken to be just these actions by other agents. It is the possibility of this not happening in this way... that interests Hegel and... which he takes to show that there is no privileged role due the agent's formulations. (p. 160)

In a rational world there is, in other words, no experience of the non-recognition of one's intentions because what the rational individual thinks so too does the rational collective in which she lives. But when the individual is not so fortunately situated her own authority over what she is intending has no weight against consensus. (Pippin chooses a notably strange example with which to explore the differences in how intentions are designated by competing normative perspectives, that is, when what the individual attributes to herself and what others attribute to her 'come apart' (p. 160). He states that the anti-apartheid activist in earlier South Africa might be taken to be a terrorist under the 'socially authoritative view' (p. 160). It was, of course, the white minority who were more likely to use this designation whilst much of the rest of the world – society in a larger sense – overwhelmingly supported that resistance, which it distinguished from terrorism. And how apposite is the trope of a 'coming apart' for situations of oppression?)

The anti-critical implications of an absolutely externalized intentionality stem from Pippin's flat institutionalism. He understands norms to be essentially communal and private norms are insubstantial, of no weight, and, by implication, provisionally meaningless. The labours of any given individual to shift the normative basis of society – to change any of its institutions – has no legitimacy within his theory since that individual's efforts begin with an irregular intention. Only when that intention gains some kind of consensus can the norms change. And norms change, he writes,

because we can be said to change them. Normative authority, a norm's 'grip,' can fail. In the collective sense that interests Hegel all that it means for a practice or

institution to fail is that it is no longer acknowledged as authoritative by a wide enough spectrum of a community... (p. 74)

Correlatively, the individual cannot, in fact, have any authority over the norms which guide her unless her norms fit with the majority's collective view (are recognized). And this, obviously enough, undercuts the normative quality of any acts which would seek to direct themselves against the normative order of society.

Perhaps some readers of *Hegel's Practical Philosophy* will be struck by a number of qualifying remarks offered by Pippin that appear to pull him back from the dangers of constrictive institutionalism that I have discussed here. Here are two potentially pivotal comments. (i) '...participation in a practice, offering, accepting and rejecting institutional reasons, is all that Hegel counts as having the sorts of reasons that allow the action to be counted as free, genuinely mine' (p. 263). This suggests that one might sometimes reject institutional reasons. That is obviously right yet it not in any sense consistent with Pippin's theory. As we have seen, in his anxiety to identify practical reason with an institutional position and his blunt identification of extra-institutional positionality with fantasy he leaves no place for a standpoint not saturated by institutional norms, from which one could choose to reject 'institutional reasons'. (ii) On the final page of the last substantive chapter Pippin writes: 'it is important to note in closing that Hegel is not denying that human reason can set ends, or determine action on its own...' (p. 272). If that is true the same cannot be said of the anti-deontological Hegelianism that Pippin himself has developed. Throughout the book – and we have seen a number of clear articulations of this position – setting reasons has been understood as an exercise in institutional self-understanding. Reason itself is intelligible, according to his theory, only within institutional practices. There is, again, no space in his theory for reason determining 'action its own'.

I mentioned at the outset that Pippin's Hegelian theory of freedom gives new grounds to the old political worries. Pippin's Hegelianism narrows the normative range of the individual to what we are to accept as rationally existing institutions from which we cannot separate ourselves. Pippin tries repeatedly to convince us that practical reason is geared towards reflection on role performance, but he undermines reflection on the validity of roles. He holds that radical critique of institutions is misguided in so far as

it is always bound to institutions (no distinction between degrees of boundedness is or can be offered). We have to imagine a world in which no tensions exist between the rational agent and the rational society in order for this theory of freedom to be ideologically defanged. That is an unfamiliar world, and maybe an undesirable one. It is a theoretical figuration that belies Pippin's repeated invocations of concretion.