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Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life by ROBERT B. PIPPIN,
(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008. Pp. xi + 308. Price £50 h/bk; £18.99
p/bk).

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Robert Pippin is a fine philosopher and he has delivered a fine book. *Hegel's Practical Philosophy* sets out to explain and for the most part defend Hegel's difficult thesis that free agency is a social achievement, possible only for the citizens of an ethical social world. Much of the material has been seen elsewhere, but this publication marks a significant advance. It should be read as a coherent monograph presenting Pippin's view of the central theme of Hegel's social philosophy as a coherent whole with a carefully developed argument. Pippin writes well (though some of his 120 plus word sentences can strain one's concentration). He has an acute historical sense which helps him to place Hegel's arguments as both developments and criticisms of the work of his predecessors (notably Rousseau, Kant and Fichte on freedom and the moral law), a deep and wide knowledge of Hegel's texts and modern Hegel scholarship, and a familiarity with the resources of contemporary philosophy, particularly the philosophy of action, which he brings to bear effectively on his Hegel studies. This last characteristic is especially important, since Pippin believes that we shall not get to the bottom of Hegel's views, shall not unearth whatever truth there might be in Hegel's 'very unusual', 'controversial', 'odd-sounding', almost 'paradoxical' doctrines, unless we interrogate them with all the critical tools we can muster, *thinking* along with him, actively probing what seem weaknesses or unclarities, asking continually whether a philosopher [Hegel]

was entitled to the claims he makes, imagining how a position could respond to objections other than those posed in the text' (p.33). This is an exemplary statement of how to study the history of philosophy, and in the particular case of Hegel, himself the father of the academic study of the history of philosophy and a tough and perceptive grappler with the texts he reads and reports, it is especially apposite. What is more, Pippin, like Hegel himself, is good at it: this is best practice on display and a real achievement in point of what the reader, whether specialist or tyro, might learn.

[Let me insert an indulgent parenthesis to this review: the more one reads, the more one comes to distinguish philosophers in order of what one might learn from them, quite independently of whether the views they advocate are true or false, well- or poorly argued, plausible or implausible, hard- or easy work, serious or lightly cast off: why otherwise would anyone read Plato, Nietzsche . . . or Hegel? I find this criterion – hard learnt – dictates more and more of my reading. Pippin, I recommend, is always worth reading for what one might learn.]

In this book, Pippin tackles head-on the most challenging feature of Hegel's moral and political philosophy: Hegel's claim that rational agents express their freedom when their agency is guided by the rational norms that constitute the ethical life of their communities – the rational state, broadly construed. As he notices, this is the aspect of Hegel's work that has attracted the severest criticism and the highest ridicule (Pippin cites Bertrand Russell's 'famous quip that Hegelian freedom is the freedom to salute the police' (p.26)). In explaining how Hegel reaches this conclusion, he is concerned to make Hegel's

argument clear and plausible – at least plausible enough to reject a swift judgement of *reductio*, if not to defend all the details of the Rational State as Hegel describes it in the *Philosophy of Right (PR)*. To this degree, he will offer a qualified defence as well as an interpretation of Hegel’s position. To achieve this, he gives, first, an account of Hegel’s *Geist* (spirit) as an activity informed by a distinctive quality of human ‘mindedness’ rather than a distinctive substance (Chapter 2). Secondly, he charts Hegel’s transformation of Kant’s understanding of freedom as self-legislation into a socially mediated or collective account of human autonomy (Chapter 3). Thirdly, he explains how that ‘social mediation’ amounts to the structuring of persons’ practical reason in accordance with some actual system of social norms: which norms make it possible for citizens to endorse them once they are properly understood by agents who are rational in their reflection on the sources of their agency (Chapters 4 & 5). This last statement concerning the norms which constitute individuals’ agency had better be consistent with the best account we can give of what it is to act for a reason, so, fourthly, Pippin develops an expressivist account of acting for a reason which has much in common with Charles Taylor’s accounts of both human action and Hegel on action (Chapter 6). Fifthly, he will connect up the account of free agency as a social achievement with the account of inter-personal recognition that Hegel develops as integral to *Geist* in the *Jena Phenomenology* (Chapter 7). The implication of this connection is that recognition is to be taken as a central category *throughout* the later *Philosophy of Right*, so the importance of equal, mutual social recognition is not a young man’s insight that Hegel unfortunately drops, nor a structuring element of the Abstract Right part of *PR* which is transcended, to be thought of as engulfed or lost altogether in the actual social structures of Ethical Life.

Finally, in chapters 8 & 9 and before his concluding remarks, Pippin discusses his reconstruction of Hegel's account of modern society as socially constituted free agency in light of a variety of well-known challenges: is the commitment to rationality (in persons, in the norms to which they subscribe, and in the institutions they inhabit) consistent with the historicist aetiology of the constitutions of such persons, such norms and such institutions, or does his position collapse into relativism, whistling into the winds of an uncertain future? Is the embedment of persons in their communities consistent with an intelligent liberalism which can endorse practices of social recognition but which yet insists on the complete transparency of the practice of giving reasons for and finding reasons in the actions of oneself and others? Pippin's probing of these questions is deep, honest, and thoughtful, if not ultimately convincing.

Let me mention two of the issues on which I have doubts, one a matter of general importance, the other perhaps a matter of detail. The first problem concerns the form of argument within the *Philosophy of Right*. It is important for Hegel that in the modern world, as against the world of Ancient Greece (on his account), we see ourselves as individuals. In one modality of individualism we are discrete atoms – bare particulars – insisting on a moral standing that distinguishes each of us from each other. That is, we see ourselves as distinct 'persons' (for Hegel, a technical term with a perspicuous history), in which capacity we claim negative rights against each other and, in consistency, recognize the rights that others claim against ourselves. We observe the imperative of right: 'Be a person and respect others as persons' (*PR* §36). These initial insights into our moral status are further articulated at two levels: within Abstract Right,

rights to person, private property and contract, and to punish and be punished are distinguished and further described. These rights are then embedded and no doubt much more closely specified within Ethical Life, in Civil Society, notably. This is easily understood. Civil Society describes a form of economic organization and the legal administration necessary to regulate private property and other personal rights, together with the associated institutions of the police and corporations. There is no reason, at first sight, to believe that the social structures of Civil Society in particular (but also the family and the state as a political institution, the other elements of Ethical Life) might compromise rather than further articulate and establish as positive (or actual) the insights of Abstract Right into the nature and rights of personhood. Still, two important questions are still open: Do rights as claimed by persons and described in Abstract Right constrain in any way the structures of Ethical Life? And: Does Hegel believe that Ethical Life is necessary in order for personal rights to gain full expression and achieve a transparent meaning for those who possess them? I think Hegel can answer 'Yes' to both questions. By contrast, I think the account of collective autonomy and the social embedment that freedom that Pippin develops commits him to answering the first question in the negative. If it is a condition of our freedom that we are fully, thickly, socially constituted, then it cannot be even a part of our identity that we are the discrete atomic individuals that the status of being a person requires.

Exactly the same form of argument can be used to challenge both Pippin's and, this time, Hegel's own account of the second modality of individualism in *PR* – that of the moral subject, as described in part two 'Morality'. Here, on my reading, Hegel both concedes,

and likely compromises, ‘the *right of the subjective will* . . . that whatever it is to recognize as valid should be *perceived* by it *as good*’ (PR §132). I say ‘likely compromises’ because I believe the citizens of the Rational State that Hegel describes are so firmly engulfed (i.e. blinded) by the institutions that constitute their social identities that they would be quite unable to ‘perceive them as good’, in any more substantial sense than ‘take their ethical credentials for granted’. To be sure, to clinch this criticism it is necessary to present and discuss the kind of detail of Hegel’s constitutional settlement that Pippin carefully eschews (unless he can take a swipe at those responsible for Hegel’s later dismal reputation, as at pp.261—2). But I have my doubts that in this vicinity one can draft an acceptable ‘Hegelian’ position which prescind from the Master’s dark blunders. Either the right of the subjective will is a substantial constraint on the sort of philosophical account the modern state can give of itself or it is not, and it is fair comment (as well as an open invitation to those who would defend an Hegelian position) to insist that Hegel himself did not demonstrate how that constraint might operate in the actual workings of Ethical Life.

My second line of criticism is more specific and more technical. Pippin sides with Charles Taylor on a matter of both Hegel interpretation and contemporary philosophical substance. The background issue is whether action explanations, as when I say to my inquisitive travelling companion, ‘I’m going to Hereford to buy a bull’, are causal or somehow non-causal. Pippin reads Hegel as arguing that action explanations do not give the causes of actions and that Hegel is right on this philosophical point and for good reasons. I think action explanations are causal, that Hegel faces two ways on this issue (in

one way right and in one way wrong) and that Pippin is wrong in respect of both Hegel exegesis and substance in his views on the matter. Let me explain.

Hegel himself argues (in the *Science of Logic*) that the form of scientific explanation employed to explain events in the non-organic physical world, the motion of billiard balls, say, or planets, is not appropriate for the explanation of human actions (or biological phenomena). Nonetheless he accepts that we do use the language of causality in a loose or figurative sense when we explain our own actions and those of others. I believe we use the language of causality to signal that whatever configuration of attitudes and beliefs might truly be ascribed to an agent at a particular time, it was some determinate purpose which was motivating on the occasion of a specific action and which therefore explains his action. Pippin does not see that Hegel is committed to our practice of using causal explanations in this loose sense (*in uneigentlichem Sinne* to cite Hegel's own phrase), and for his own part, he rejects any such account.

Central to his own position is the claim that 'the social dependence that conditions any action' makes it possible that the reasons agents give for their own actions are often 'provisional and not fully coherent' (p.131). Whilst not denying a measure of first person authority, Pippin stresses our proneness to error and exaggeration as we say what we think we are doing (p.154). Our intentions, he believes, are only disclosed to us *after* we have acted: 'Only as manifested or expressed can one (*even* the subject herself) retrospectively determine what must have been intended' [by the action one has performed] . . . we can only know what we intended to do after we have actually acted'.

(p.156). No doubt these things are often true – it would be a clot who denied these possibilities. But to my mind, these possibilities do not impugn the standard case wherein agents form intentions and act them out knowingly. Right now I am finishing my review of Pippin’s book and have full first-person knowledge of this as I type. So it is quite wrong of Pippin to use the opacities of social dependence and the time-ordering within which a clear knowledge of one’s intention is sometimes achieved to challenge the causal model. Donald Davidson himself was quite clear that one who is capable of first-person knowledge may get things wrong in a particular case. First-person knowledge of one’s intentions is not first-person infallibility. Hegel insists that the moral subject has ‘*The right of intention* [which] is that the *universal* quality of the action shall have being not only *in itself*, but shall be known by the agent and thus have been present all along in his subjective will’ (PR §120). ‘Been present all along . . .’, Hegel writes. This does not read as the conclusion of one who believes that intentions emerge only when actions are finally completed.

Evidently these reflections are to be carried on further. In this task one could not have a more stimulating companion than Robert Pippin’s splendid book.

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