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Social Freedom and Self-Actualization: “Normative Reconstruction” as a Theory of Justice

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In *Freedom's Right* Axel Honneth seeks to provide a theory of justice by appropriating Hegel's account of ethical substance in the *Philosophy of Right*, but he wants to do so without endorsing Hegel's more robust idealist commitments. I argue that this project can only succeed if Honneth can offer an alternative, comparatively robust demonstration of the rationality and normative coherence of existing social institutions. I contend that the grounds Honneth provides for this claim are insufficient for his purposes. In particular, I argue that Honneth's claim that “justice and individual self-determination are mutually referential,” even were it to be accepted, would be insufficient to underwrite his more robust identification between the normative foundations of justice, autonomy and reciprocal self-realization. In the final section of the paper, I turn to Honneth's analysis of the “social institution” of friendship, which he, following Hegel, holds up as a paradigmatic instantiation of social freedom understood as, in Hegel's words, “being with oneself in another” (*Beisichselbstsein in einem Anderen*). I argue that an analysis of the normative import of friendship wholly in terms of mutual recognition misses an important aspect of the kind of self-realization that friendship makes possible.

KEYWORDS Axel Honneth, G.W.F. Hegel, Aristotle, social freedom, self-actualization, justice, mutual recognition, friendship

1. Introduction

In *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, Axel Honneth presents what he calls a “normative reconstruction” of the historical development of the institutions and practices he takes to be normatively central to modern liberal democracies.¹ In so doing, Honneth self-consciously follows “the path Hegel laid

¹ Axel Honneth, *Freedom's Right: The Social Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity, 2014); originally published as *Das Recht der Freiheit: Grundriß einer demokratischen Sittlichkeit* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2011).

down in the *Philosophy of Right*” and seeks to provide a theory of justice through an analysis of society, that is, an analysis of the often explicit, sometimes implicit, normative orientations of existing social institutions. Like Hegel, Honneth seeks to demonstrate “the largely rational character of the institutional reality of his time, while conversely showing moral rationality to have already been realized in core modern institutions,” but he wants to undertake such a demonstration without endorsing Hegel’s more substantive idealist commitments.² In the following, I argue that this project can only succeed if Honneth can offer an alternative, comparatively robust demonstration of the rationality and normative coherence of existing social institutions to the one Hegel offered. I contend that the grounds Honneth provides for this claim are insufficient for his purposes.

The sections of this essay are meant to correspond to the three major parts of *Freedom’s Right*, although unlike *Freedom’s Right* the balance of the argument will be less concerned with sociological and historical detail and more concerned with methodological questions under a fairly broad conception of what one means by “methodology.” In §2, I introduce the question of whether Honneth’s Hegelian approach to a theory of justice can succeed without endorsing Hegel’s more ambitious systematic commitments. What will be significant here is whether, given the “moderate value realism” to which Honneth is elsewhere committed, the demands of justice can be adequately captured through an analysis of existing social institutions as rational embodiments of social freedom, without some broader theoretical defence of the claim that the forms of self-actualization made possible by those institutions exhaustively coincide with our ethical obligations.³ Or, to put this point in the terms Hegel uses in the *Philosophy of Right*, the question is whether the attempt “to comprehend and portray the state as an inherently rational entity” can answer, even in principle, the question of the moral legitimacy of social orders without a demonstration of the coincidence within the realized ethical community of rights and duties. I suggest that it cannot.⁴

In §3, I focus on the internal relation between the ideal of self-actualization and the model of social freedom Honneth offers. What will be at issue here is whether Honneth’s claim that “justice and individual self-determination are mutually referential,” even if it were to be accepted, would be sufficient to underwrite his identification between the normative foundations of justice, autonomy and reciprocal self-realization. Again, I suggest that it cannot.

In §4, and in the light of the issues raised in the previous two sections, I address Honneth’s analysis of the “social institution” of friendship, which he, following Hegel, holds up as a paradigmatic instantiation of social freedom understood as, in Hegel’s words, “being with oneself in another” (*Beisichselbstsein in einem Anderen*). I argue that an analysis of the normative import of friendship wholly in terms of mutual recognition misses an important mode or aspect of self-realization

² Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 2.

³ On the extent of Honneth’s value realism and its connection to his commitment to a “robust conception of (historical) progress” see A. Honneth, “Grounding Recognition: A Rejoinder to Critical Questions,” *Inquiry: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Philosophy* 45, no. 4 (2002): 499–519.

⁴ G.W.F. Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, ed. Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), Preface.

that friendship, or at least certain kinds of friendship, makes possible. I conclude by suggesting that this aspect of self-realization has broader normative implications that extend outside of the social institution of friendship.

2. Hegel, Honneth, justice and the philosophy of right

The admirable and ambitious project Honneth undertakes in *Freedom's Right* is to articulate the ethical substance of modern democratic societies and to bring to light the social pathologies and normative mis-developments that threaten to undermine the modern project of the realization of freedom. Despite the impressive body of positive, synthetic and reconstructive analyses provided in the work as a whole, its theoretical motivation is at least in part polemical. The introduction positions Honneth's work against most contemporary political philosophy insofar as the latter becomes "fixated on purely normative principles ... decoupled from an analysis of society." While Honneth acknowledges that certain theorists have struggled against the dominance of "purely normative theories of justice" and have sought to revive the project of social analysis, he claims that these theorists "nearly always attempt to hermeneutically adapt normative principles to existing institutional structures or prevailing moral beliefs, without proving whether the substance of these institutions is itself rational or justified."⁵ And it is here that Honneth invokes Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* as his model in his attempt to avoid the contemporary analogues to two opposed errors Hegel diagnoses in the introduction to that work. These two errors are: 1) the error of using a formal definition or representation (*Vorstellung*) as a criterion to judge the very reality that alone could provide that definition or representation with its ultimate intelligible content, and 2) the error of mistaking a demonstration of the historical dependence of a current determination of right on existing legal institutions with a demonstration of the validity and rationality of that determination. The first we could call an error of illegitimate *formal* abstraction; the second we could call an error of illegitimate *material* abstraction. But both errors lead, for Hegel and for Honneth, to a subjugation of the substantial reality of normative principles to prevalent moral beliefs or opinions however inchoate.

According to Hegel, the science of right presented in the *Philosophy of Right* avoids these two errors by taking as its object of inquiry what he calls the Idea (*Idee*) of right, understood as the achieved unity of the concept of right with its existence (*Dasein*) in actuality. Now, Hegel is characteristically uncompromising when asserting the necessary unity of concept and existence in the Idea of right. It is, he says, a unity in the sense that body and soul are a unity, a unity where form and content are mutually co-determinative. It is not just a harmony, he says, but a complete interpenetration. Hegel is also characteristically uncompromising when articulating the scientific character of his work. The science of right must be comprehended as a part of philosophy, which is to say, a part of Hegel's developed philosophical system; it must concern itself solely with the immanent development of the Idea out of the concept; and must take as its starting point the deduction of

⁵ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 2.

the concept of right as presented in the *Encyclopedia of the Philosophic Sciences*. It is on the basis of this comprehensive conception of the work undertaken in the *Philosophy of Right* that Hegel claims to have presented a scientific proof of the Idea of right as the Idea of freedom.

Of course, in *Freedom's Right* Honneth does not want to take on board Hegel's philosophical system as a whole. He seeks, in the first instance, to prescind Hegel's account of what Honneth calls, following Fred Neuhouser, social freedom from the idealism and the ambitious teleological framework in which it is embedded.⁶ And I believe that there are good reasons to think that, with appropriate qualifications, this much can be done. That is, I think that one can endorse the claim that the concept of freedom must ultimately be apprehended in terms that *point towards* the realization of ethical agency within the context of a just social order, without thereby being committed to Hegel's idealism. I will return to this point below. The question for now is whether this account of freedom can be understood as providing a theory of justice without Hegel's broader systemic commitments.

To answer this question it is important to understand why, if we were to accept Hegel's broader account, the kind of analysis offered in the *Philosophy of Right* could reasonably claim to have provided such a theory. We can begin by noting the significance Hegel assigns in the preface to his claim that philosophy always comes too late to instruct the world how it ought to be. Philosophy, as the thought of the world, can appear only when the historical process of ethical-conceptual cultivation has attained its completion and has come to an end. The human community (or at least that part of it that Hegel cares about) has come to be reconciled with the architectonic norms embedded in modern society, and the structured spaces of possibility articulated by its social institutions. While this does not imply that Hegel is committed to simply endorsing the political *status quo*, a point that defenders of the progressive potential of Hegel's practical philosophy are keen to stress, he does emphasize that philosophy's role is to discern and explicate the rationality already inherent in the normative foundations of the modern state.

What all this means is that, on Hegel's account, any genuine willing, that is, any aspiration towards self-realization with coherent content, is already *ex hypothesi* embodied, at least in principle, in the realized ethical community. For that reason any claim to be (from the side of freedom) limited by or (from the side of justice) in principled opposition to the realized ethical community must be an expression of an obstinate desire for abstract freedom. And this desire Hegel believes he has shown to be ultimately self-undermining, because, as Honneth puts it, in abstract or negative freedom "the 'content' of action cannot itself be grasped as 'free'." Hence Hegel can claim that, in the ethical realm, "duty and right coincide in this identity of the universal and the particular will, and in the ethical realm, a human being has rights in so far as he has duties, and duties in so far as he has rights."⁷ More generally, we can say that if Hegel's idealist project were successful, he would appear to be warranted in claiming, as he does, the substantial identity between the concepts of freedom, self-actualization and justice.

⁶ Frederick Neuhouser, *Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 6.

⁷ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 197.

In *Freedom's Right*, Honneth does not want to claim that Hegel's idealist project is successful, but he apparently wants to assert the substantial identity between these three concepts, and he seeks to do so by means of what he calls a "normative reconstruction." It is worth noting, however, that Honneth's version of Hegel's method appears to be notably less conceptually demanding than Hegel's own account of that method. Honneth writes:

(I)f we use our own terminology, we could say that Hegel employs a method that is meant to create an equilibrium [*Äquilibrium*] between historical and social circumstances and rational considerations ... As he proceeds to compare reflections on which aims individuals should rationally pursue and the empirical determinations of the socialization of needs in modernity, the aims that subjects must realistically pursue in order to achieve self-realization under given conditions should gradually emerge. In order to make Hegel's intention more clear, we could label this search for a balance [*Ausgleich*] between a theoretical concept and the historical reality a 'normative reconstruction'.⁸

The distance between this "normative reconstruction" and the standards Hegel imposes upon himself can be seen fairly clearly, I think, by considering the following reflection on the relation between historical and philosophical investigations from §2 of the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*.

To consider the emergence and development of determinations of right as they *appear in time* is a *purely historical task*. This task, like that of recognizing the logical consistency of such determinations by comparing them with previously existing legal relations, is meritorious and praiseworthy within its own sphere, and bears no relation to the philosophical approach – unless, that is to say, development from historical grounds is confused with development from the concept, and the significance of historical explanation and justification is extended to include a justification which is valid in and for itself.⁹

It is worth noting in this context that the significance of Hegel's claims concerning the distinction between historical and philosophical approaches to the science of right does not depend upon whether we read Hegel as a non-metaphysical thinker, as a pre-critical metaphysician, or as offering a distinct metaphysics of his own. Indeed, it is for this reason that I have not referred to Hegel's commitment to an idealist *metaphysics*, but rather his commitment to idealism throughout this essay. What is at issue is rather Hegel's claim about the necessarily retrospective temporal character of the philosophic articulation of the science of right. Hegel is quite explicit in the *Philosophy of Right* that historical arguments can only exhibit the substantial manifestation of the actuality of a process whose normative validity has been demonstrated in terms of "the immanent development of the thing [*Sache*] itself." For this reason, Honneth's conception of an "equilibrium" (*Äquilibrium*) or "compromise" (*Ausgleich*) between theoretical and historical considerations appears to have more in common with John Rawls's conception of a "reflective

⁸ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 56.

⁹ Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 29.

equilibrium,” particularly when that conception is extended (in “wide reflective equilibrium”) to include empirical considerations, than with Hegel’s explicit claims about his philosophic method.¹⁰

My point in highlighting the apparent divergence between Hegel’s conception of the philosophical work done in the *Philosophy of Right* and Honneth’s “normative reconstruction” is, of course, not to suggest that a faithful reconstruction of Hegel is required for an adequate theory of justice. It is rather to suggest that without Hegel’s more substantive systematic commitments, one cannot avail oneself of argumentative resources that are only warranted if we can assert as confidently as Hegel does, that, at the most fundamental level, there is no essential conflict between existing social and political institutions and the demands of justice. Without Hegel’s commitments, we would need to provide a comparatively robust argument for the substantial coincidence of the normative foundations of contemporary social institutions with the demands of justice before we follow Hegel in, as Honneth puts it, “revers(ing) the relationship between legitimating procedures and social justice,” and this will be the case even if we accept, with Honneth and with Hegel, that “we grasp subjects as truly ‘free’ only on the condition that their aims can be fulfilled or realized within reality itself.”¹¹

It will be, perhaps, useful at this point to distinguish between two ways in which we can try to appropriate Hegel’s method in his practical philosophy. One of the signal contributions of Hegel’s thought, and one of the reasons for contemporary interest in his philosophy in certain areas of Anglo-American philosophy, is the particular way in which his work exemplifies an understanding of practical norms more commonly associated, in contemporary contexts, with the later Wittgenstein. Hegel and Wittgenstein share the thought that normative principles, both epistemic and practical, cannot be adequately comprehended without at the same time comprehending particular human “forms of life” which instantiate or exemplify those norms. To put the epistemic point in non-Hegelian language, the claim is that in order to comprehend adequately a given normative principle, for it to be fully intelligible to us, we must be able to find intelligible, and in some sense participate in (“agree in”), a kind of practical engagement for which that normative principle is in some sense constitutive. For both Hegel and Wittgenstein, however, this does not imply that an apprehension of these normative principles is achieved simply by a description of the practical forms of life expressive of the principles. Rather, the practical form of life must be comprehended *as* an instantiation or exemplification of the norm.¹² The practical complement of this epistemic claim in Hegel’s thought is the claim that human desire and will have as an immanent practical telos the goal of realizing oneself, and recognizing oneself as realized, within the substantial ethical community.

The point I want to make here is a relatively simple one. One can endorse these complementary theses as articulating the theoretical and practical conditions

¹⁰ See John Rawls, “The Independence of Moral Theory,” *Proceedings and Addresses of the American Philosophical Association*, XLVII (1974/75): 8.

¹¹ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 57.

¹² A failure to pay due attention to this latter point invalidates, in my view, many contemporary appropriations of both Hegel and Wittgenstein, but it is a point to which *Freedom’s Right* is particularly and admirably attentive (7–8).

for an adequate positive theory of justice without asserting that these conditions have been fulfilled, even in principle. The most obvious example of a philosopher in the Hegelian tradition who affirms this account of the conditions for an adequate positive theory of justice while denying anything like the substantial realization of those conditions is Theodor Adorno. But one need not subscribe to Adorno's comprehensive negativism, or accept his claim that we have no positive access to or knowledge of the good, to think that one can accept in outline Hegel's theoretical ideal for a theory of justice without thinking that that ideal has been realized. If, however, one does not accept what Fabian Freyenhagen has identified as Adorno's *meta-ethical negativism*, that is, the claim that one can found a normative theory on an immediate experience of the injustice of the current social order, one will need to provide some alternative account of our mode of access to these normative principles.¹³ My own favoured approach is broadly Aristotelian, a point that will be of some significance in the final section of my paper.

3. Social freedom and self-actualization

What I hope to have indicated by the foregoing, relatively lengthy excursus into Hegel's method, is the following relatively modest claim. If Honneth is right that we, as "children of a materially enlightened era, cannot hold onto the idealistic monism in which Hegel anchored his dialectical concept of Spirit," if we are "forced to find another footing on which to base his idea that objective Spirit is realized in social institutions," that footing must be fairly conceptually robust if we are to be warranted in the claim that a rational articulation of those institutions will provide us with a theory of justice.¹⁴ By this I do not mean to suggest, contrary to Honneth's explicit methodological commitments, that he needs to provide "a free-standing, constructive justification of norms of justice prior to immanent analysis."¹⁵ It does, however, place a fairly heavy argumentative burden on his claim to prove, not only "that the prevailing values are normatively superior to historically antecedent social ideals or 'ultimate values'," but also that these values are sufficiently coherent and consistent with one another that one could identify individual freedom, or any other ethical value, as a "dominant" value which provides the normative foundation for the whole.

On the first of these two points, the normative superiority of prevailing values to historically antecedent values, Honneth claims that a historical-teleological perspective is "an inevitable element of modernity's self-understanding."¹⁶ In support of this claim Honneth refers to his 2007 essay "The Irreducibility of Progress," but the conclusion of that essay appears to be only that a moderately teleological perspective is a subjective practical requirement imposed upon

¹³ See Fabian Freyenhagen, *Adorno's Practical Philosophy: Living Less Wrongly* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

¹⁴ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 3.

¹⁵ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 4.

¹⁶ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 18.

those who “actively side with the moral achievements of the Enlightenment.”¹⁷ It is hard, for me at least, to see how such a claim “strips” our putative commitment to the superiority of prevalent values of “its contingent historical character.”¹⁸ Later in *Freedom’s Right*, Honneth supplements this argument with a reference to the “‘transcendental’ interpretation of Hegel’s confidence in historical progress,” according to which the “fact that subjects actively preserve and reproduce free institutions is theoretical evidence of their historical value.”¹⁹ This latter claim, however, even if it were to be accepted, cannot establish what Honneth requires, for quite evidently, establishing the historical value of an institution or practice is not equivalent to establishing the normative superiority of prevailing values to historically antecedent values.²⁰

In any case, for my purposes it is the latter point that is the more significant one. When Honneth outlines in the introduction to *Freedom’s Right* the “general premises that guide [his] investigation,” his first premise is “that social reproduction hinges on a certain set of shared fundamental ideals and values.”²¹ This is a plausible, if contestable, claim about a necessary condition for the reproduction of social institutions. Even were we to accept this premise, however, it would not be sufficient to orient a theory of justice, unless it can be shown that: 1) these shared values form a normatively consistent or hierarchically ordered set, and 2) that our most broadly shared values are also those which are most fundamental.

The premise that social reproduction depends on a set of shared fundamental values does not in itself preclude the possibility that existing social conditions embody radically disparate or incommensurable normative orientations. Even the most committed value pluralist could assent to the claim that the reproduction of a social order requires some degree of normative consensus. The crucial question is how far, and how deep, this consensus extends. In particular, the claim that the value of individual freedom, or self-determination, is shared by all modern subjects and is a crucial aspect of the reproduction of modern social institutions does not show that this value is the normative foundation for our deepest value orientations. It may, rather, suggest that it is precisely due to deep unresolved conflicts between the disparate value commitments embedded in current social institutions that the value of individual freedom is the one value we can all agree upon. Here we can briefly call to mind Nietzsche’s contention that not only modern societies, but modern human beings are in themselves battlegrounds for “opposite, and often not merely opposite, drives and value standards that fight each other and rarely permit each other any rest.”²² The broad consensus enjoyed by the modern liberal democratic conception of freedom, in Nietzsche’s analysis, is a symptom of the

¹⁷ See A. Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory*, trans. J. Ingram (New York, NJ: Columbia University Press, 2009), 18.

¹⁸ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 18.

¹⁹ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 59.

²⁰ For a more extensive articulation and engagement with Honneth’s “transcendental” argument for historical progress, see Jörg Schaub, “Misdevelopments, Pathologies, and Normative Revolutions: Normative Reconstruction as Method of Critical Theory,” *Critical Horizons* 16 (2015): 107–30.

²¹ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 3.

²² F. Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*, trans. Walter Kaufmann. (New York: Random House, 1966), §202.

failure of modern social institutions to provide any sufficiently robust normative orientation for human life.²³

The point I want to make here is that for Honneth to respond to this Nietzschean worry, he needs to give us persuasive grounds not only for the claim that existing social institutions depend upon *shared values* for their reproduction, but also for the claim that these social institutions are sufficiently normatively coherent that they form a unified form of ethical life worthy of Hegel's appellation of ethical substance. Hegel's account, were it to be accepted, would warrant such a claim insofar as it has demonstrated that any attempts to articulate robustly oppositional value orientations have been dialectically sublated. What does Honneth offer us in its place? It seems that he offers us two kinds of arguments, the first rather narrowly conceptual, the second, rather broadly historical.

First, the conceptual. The introduction to Part I, "Historical Background: The Right to Freedom," presents a series of arguments that purport to show that the idea of freedom "forms the normative foundation of all conceptions of justice."²⁴ But as far as I can see, this claim depends upon illegitimately conflating arguments that show the necessity of referring to the concept of individual freedom in any modern account of justice with arguments that show that the concept of individual freedom is normatively foundational in the sense that the normative import of all other values can, in some sense, be reduced to that of individual freedom. Consider in this context the following two passages.

1. "In modernity, the demand for justice can only be shown to be legitimate by making **some kind of reference** to the autonomy of the individual; it is neither the will of the majority nor the natural order, but individual freedom that forms the normative foundation of all conceptions of justice."²⁵
2. "But once we have discovered this internal connection [*interne Zusammenhang*], as soon as we know that justice and individual self-determination are **mutually referential** [*zirkulär aufeinander verweisen*], any resort to older, pre-modern sources of legitimacy must appear to exterminate the perspective of justice altogether. It is no longer clear what it would even mean to demand a just social order without simultaneously calling for individual self-determination. Therefore, this **fusion** [*Verschmelzung*] between conceptions of justice and the idea of autonomy represents an achievement of modernity that can only be reversed at the price of cognitive barbarism."²⁶

In the first passage, Honneth moves from the claim that the demand for justice must make "**some kind of reference** to the autonomy of the individual" to the claim that

²³ While Honneth indicates, in his accounts of "reflexive freedom" and legal freedom (77), the need to make space for a limited ethical pluralism, he also clearly states the reasons why any sufficiently robust value pluralism appears incompatible with the Hegelian approach he seeks to appropriate. "While Kant's proceduralist approach can suppose all imaginable aims and intentions as long as they meet the conditions of (moral) reflexivity, Hegel cannot be satisfied with this kind of pluralism. Because he seeks to equate a just order with the sum of social institutions necessary for realizing intersubjective freedom, he must determine in advance the aims that individuals can achieve together solely through reciprocity" (56).

²⁴ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 17.

²⁵ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 17, my emphasis.

²⁶ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 17, my emphasis.

“individual freedom ... forms the normative foundation of all conceptions of justice”; in the second passage he moves from the claim “justice and individual self-determination are **mutually referential** [*zirkulär aufeinander verweisen*]” to the claim that “conceptions of justice and the idea of autonomy” have become fused.

Even if we were to accept the claim that, in modernity, justice and individual freedom are mutually referential, that is, the claim that the meaning of each term can only be articulated with reference to the other, or that the concepts are semantically interdependent, that does not imply mutual entailment of propositional claims about justice and freedom, much less substantial identity between the concepts of freedom and justice. Indeed, even a moderate semantic holism will involve an indefinite number of mutually referential terms. There will be a relation of mutual reference between a semantic whole and any of its proper parts. Individual freedom is, arguably, a proper part of modern conceptions of justice. But this does not imply anything like an inability to discriminate in thought between the concept of individual freedom and the concept of justice.

The second kind of argument Honneth offers, in his accounts of Negative Freedom and Reflexive Freedom, is a kind of historical argument. I say a kind of historical argument because, given the broader methodological commitments of the work, it was surprising to see that the account given in these sections appears to be a largely internalist and cognitivist history of ideas. Honneth presents the development of the concept of freedom through a series of conceptual innovations on the part of philosophers, whose ideas achieved greater or lesser dominance over the social world. Now, I think there is important work to be done by internalist and cognitivist approaches, but I was not entirely clear how Honneth intends us to understand the relation between this approach and the broader theoretical commitments that apparently underwrite his appropriation of Hegel’s concept of social freedom. In any case, it is clear that we are to conclude from the arguments of this part of *Freedom’s Right* that certain theoretical approaches to the questions of freedom and justice, and their interrelation, have become in some sense untenable. Given the fact that every approach Honneth discusses still has more or less vociferous defenders within the philosophic community, again, I was not exactly clear how to understand this series of arguments. Space constraints prevent me from engaging in any detail the specific analyses Honneth offers. I only want to highlight one fact. It seems that central to the argument is the claim that “all modern ethical ideals have been placed under the spell of freedom” and while they may “infuse this idea with greater depth or add new accents ... they never manage to posit an independent, stand-alone alternative.”²⁷ It would seem, however, a trivial consequence of Honneth’s Hegelian approach that *no* ethical ideal could posit an independent, stand-alone alternative. The question is whether various aspects of modern ethical ideals indicate ethical demands that cannot be seen as an extension or modification of the normatively foundational ideal of individual freedom. In the final section of my paper, I will suggest that the normative ideal of self-actualization is one such ethical ideal.

²⁷ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 15.

4. Aristotelian friendship and self-actualization

I have devoted the majority of this essay to some fairly abstract, broadly methodological questions concerning the relation between an analysis of social institutions and a theory of justice. I have suggested that without some fairly robust argumentative support for the claim that existing social institutions embody, at least in principle, the conditions for an adequate communal self-realization, we cannot derive from such an analysis an account of justice. One might think, however, that in proceeding in this way, I have not done justice to the methodological commitments of Honneth's work. I will, therefore, in the final section of this paper, follow Honneth's example and turn to consideration of the social institution that he, following Hegel, takes to be paradigmatic of social freedom understood as "being with oneself in another."²⁸

Guided, in part, by Aristotle's account of friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, I will suggest that our experience of friendship can, and in the best cases, does involve a kind of self-actualization, and an essential normative orientation, an inherent demand to do justice to the phenomena of our experience, that cannot be adequately captured in terms of the concepts of autonomy and mutual recognition. I will therefore be seeking to conceptually discriminate between justice and the idea of autonomy, the fusion of which, Honneth claims, "can only be reversed at the price of cognitive barbarism." If, however, holding to the superiority of Aristotle's account of self-actualization to most modern accounts of freedom is cognitive barbarism, it is a price I am willing to pay.

Despite acknowledging Hegel's debt to Aristotle in his account of the social institution of friendship, Honneth claims that the "modern form of friendship" is a child of the eighteenth century. The conception of "a second form of social relationship in addition to family attachments, one in which subjects are bound to each other solely by mutual affection and attraction" was first given systematic articulation by the thinkers of the Scottish Enlightenment and quickly became the dominant philosophic conception.²⁹ But, Honneth avers, "[a]nother 150 years would have to pass, before this new social form would transcend the narrow limits of the educated classes and take hold among the general population."³⁰ And here I would like to register my fundamental disagreement with the historicist character of Honneth's account of friendship. Even if we were not to concern ourselves with the centrality of the notion of friendship in the philosophic arguments of Plato, Aristotle and Epicurus, it seems to me that we can see quite clearly in Plato's literary representation of the life of Socrates exemplifications of friendship relations that embody all of the characteristics Honneth wants to attribute to a peculiarly modern institution. One need only think of Plato's depiction of the day of Socrates' death in the *Phaedo*. Socrates, on his last day, spends a good half of it hanging out with his friends. This group of friends is made up of both Athenian citizens and foreigners, and while most of them are wealthy, and hence educated, they include as a central figure Phaedo of Elis, someone who was both a foreigner and, according to tradition, a former slave. This meeting of friends, on the

²⁸ See Hegel, *Philosophy of Right*, 42.

²⁹ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 136.

³⁰ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 137.

occasion of the execution of the friend whom they most admire as a criminal and a threat to the social order, certainly appears as free from “considerations of economic advantage or the formation of social alliances” as any we are likely to find in modern contexts.³¹ Socrates’ friends are there to speak to their friend about the kinds of things they have always talked about, and to console one another, more than him, about their impending loss. They argue, they joke, they tease one another, there are confessions of profound anxiety – at a crucial moment in the *Phaedo* Socrates takes to stroking Phaedo’s hair, which he calls beautiful.³² And while I think the *Phaedo* is a particularly good place to look for this kind of thing, one could easily multiply the examples from Plato’s dialogues and Xenophon’s Socratic works. Given all this, it is very hard for me to accept that what we now think of as genuine or authentic friendship was first experienced by the bourgeois classes of the eighteenth century, and that this is because it is in some sense founded on modern social institutions and modern conceptions of freedom.³³ Instead, I find much more plausible the claim that the particular and profound possibilities for self-realization offered by the model of friendship Honneth holds to be paradigmatic were, in pre-modern societies, much harder to come by for a number of historical, cultural, economic and technological reasons. It is, in part, because we recognize the inherent ethical significance of such relationships that we consider it a matter of justice whether the conditions which help to foster such relationships are restricted to the few. But I find very implausible the claim that the normative ideal of authentic friendships as ones in which “selfish calculations are replaced by mutual interest in the well-being of the other” is a distinctly modern phenomenon.³⁴ Consider in this context the following passage from the Talmud.

All love which depends on something – if the thing ceases, the love ceases. If it does not depend on something it ceases not for ever. What love is that which depends on something? This is the love of Amnon and Tamar. And that which does not depend on something? This is the love of David and Jonathan.³⁵

More generally, I think that Honneth overestimates the significance of a historical shift in the normative significance of friendship for human beings and underestimates the significance of changes in the material conditions that allow for the broader cultural dissemination of certain forms of friendship and familial relations. The extent to which familial and friendship relations have been dis severed from considerations of political and economic benefit in modern, wealthy democratic societies depends in great part on the degree to which modern democratic institutions have taken up certain roles, for example of mutual defence

³¹ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 132.

³² Plato, *Phaedo*, *Platonis opera*, vol. 1, ed. J. Burnet (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1900 (repr. 1967)), 89b.

³³ It is worth noting in this context that recent historical scholarship is decidedly more sceptical of this claim than *Freedom’s Right* might suggest. Honneth references Liz Spencer and Ray Pahl’s *Rethinking Friendship: Hidden Solidarities Today* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2006) in support of his contention that friendship is an “institution in a sociological sense” (134 n. 12). In that work, however, citing the historical research of Steven Ozment and B.A. Hannawalt, Spencer and Pahl argue that “sociology’s uncritical acceptance that a new emotional order began in the 18th century” is “outmoded” (2006: 246).

³⁴ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 138.

³⁵ M. Avot 5:19, translated by R. Travers Herford, in *The Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament in English*, vol. 2: Pseudepigrapha, ed. R. H. Charles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 709.

or care of the elderly, that were previously taken up by extended networks of familial and friendship associations. In the *Republic*, Socrates shows in his conversation with Polemarchus that “helping friends and harming enemies” is not a good definition of justice. But this is not because in the social, political and economic conditions of the time such a view was *prima facie* implausible. Modern democratic institutions allow many of us the possibility of bracketing to a historically unprecedented degree certain instrumental considerations when forming and pursuing friendship relations, but I think that this ideal form of friendship is much more limited, and much more dependent on existing economic conditions, and hence more historically and situationally fragile than Honneth seems to suggest. (The claim, for example, that “lovers, friends and spouses can now be understood as persons to whom we are bound by nothing except sexual desire, esteem or affection” is hard to reconcile with the experience of cohabiting couples who deliberate about whether they can afford to separate.)³⁶ Honneth, I think rightly, emphasizes the ways that “increasing individualization and more intense pressures to perform” could lead to a restriction on the *opportunities available* to express the kinds of mutual comfort, esteem and affection that are necessary to maintain friendly relations.³⁷ He is, however, relatively sanguine about the historical robustness of the societal consensus on the normative ideal.

Turning now to Aristotle, I think that one of the distinct virtues of his extended and nuanced account of friendship in Books 8 and 9 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* is the fact that he returns again and again to the difficulty of separating even the friendship of virtue entirely from issues of utility. Indeed, it is only at the very end of Book 9, in his brief discussion of friends who philosophize together, that we get a glimpse of that aspect of friendship that would seem to be most divorced from instrumental or utilitarian concerns. While his account implies that this aspect of friendship has been implicitly at work in the friendship of virtue, it points beyond such friendship. And it does so, I suggest, in terms of a model of self-actualization that cannot be accounted for in terms of mutual recognition or autonomous self-determination.

There are a number of important differences in detail between Honneth’s account of the modern social institution of friendship and Aristotle’s account of the friendship of virtue. One of these to which I have already alluded is Aristotle’s implicit emphasis on an irreducibly agonistic element in the friendship between two “morally serious” (*spoudaios*) individuals, each of whom, insofar as he is *spoudaios* will allot “more of the noble to himself” even if that means nobly allowing his friend the honour of nobly sacrificing himself (1169a).³⁸ More significant, however, is the difference in their accounts of esteem or admiration, to which Honneth assigns a largely instrumental role in the maintenance of friendship. After outlining significant obligations of mutual care, concern and trust as the normative core of the friendship relation, Honneth adds:

³⁶ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 132.

³⁷ Honneth, *Freedom’s Right*, 140.

³⁸ Translations from *NE* in this essay largely Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. R. Bartlett and S. Collins (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2011). I have, however, freely altered those translations when necessary.

As Aristotle was well aware, friendships that obey these vaguely outlined rules, which are always open to interpretation, normally presuppose reciprocal esteem not only for each other's externally perceptible actions, but also for the beliefs and decisions that motivate them.³⁹

In contrast, mutual esteem or admiration is foundational to Aristotle's account of the friendship of virtue, a point that will be essential to my argument. Nonetheless, Aristotle's account of the true friend as "another self" (*allos autos*) readily lends itself to an articulation in terms of a broadly Hegelian account of mutual recognition as essential to self-actualization.⁴⁰

The account of friendship Aristotle gives is notably complex, but it culminates in two claims about the necessity of having good friends for self-knowledge. The first occurs at the conclusion of Aristotle's account of the friendship of virtue, and the kind of knowledge involved is knowledge of our practical activity. At *NE* 1169b-1170a, Aristotle argues that even the blessed human being will need friends who are good if he is to contemplate (*theōrein*) actions (*praxeis*) that are decent (*epieikeis*) and his own (*oikeias*), and he will do so by looking to the actions of his friend. The reasons Aristotle gives in the immediate context are, first, that since the friend is another self, her virtues and her actions will also be (in kind if not in number) the virtues and actions of her friend and, second, that we are better able to contemplate those near us than to contemplate ourselves, and their actions better than our own.

Now the latter claim, that we are better able to contemplate the actions of the friend than our own actions, may have a certain *prima facie* plausibility, but we can only understand its significance if we see it in the context of the problem of self-love, a problem that largely structures Aristotle's account. In brief, Aristotle indicates that all human beings are naturally disposed to love whatever they take to be their own – their kith and kin, their fatherland (*patris*; 1169a18–20) – simply because they are their own. Aristotle memorably, if unpleasantly, underscores this natural disposition by comparing paternal affection to the feeling one might have in relation to a tooth or hair that one has lost. "Parents feel affection for their children on the grounds that they are something of their own . . . for what comes from the begetter itself is its own – for example, a tooth, a hair, or anything whatsoever in relation to its possessor" (1161b17–22). "Parents, then, love children," Aristotle says, "as they love themselves (for those who come from them are like other selves separately existing)" (1161b26–7) – the first occurrence of the locution "other self" in the *Ethics*. The movement in Aristotle's argument from this kind of self-love to the proper self-love embodied in the virtuous friendship is, in Hegelian terms, a movement out of a kind of felt immediacy. By perceiving the virtuous actions of our friend, we can come to see our own actions as good, admirable, and virtuous freed from the distortions of natural self-love. Through the mediation of the friend, we can come to see our own actions as inherently worthy of

³⁹ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 138.

⁴⁰ For a detailed defence of Aristotle's account of friendship as centrally involving mutual recognition in Hegel's sense, see Robert R. Williams, "Aristotle, Hegel, and Nietzsche on Friendship," in *Tragedy, Recognition, and the Death of God: Studies in Hegel and Nietzsche* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 54–85.

admiration, rather than feeling that they are admirable because we are their source. To put it in the terms Socrates uses in Plato's *Symposium*, we can come to see our activity as our own insofar as we recognize it as good, rather than seeing it as good because it is our own. It is, moreover, through the mediation of the friend that our activity acquires the kind of objectivity that allows it to become an object of theoretical contemplation.

This is, however, only the first of two arguments concerning the necessary relation between having good friends and self-knowledge. The second is notably more complex, and involves a turn to the relation between friendship and the activity of philosophy (*NE* 1172a1–6). In this second argument, the contemplative element uncovered in the friendship of virtue is no longer conceived as means to the end of an awareness of one's achieved *praxis*, but is now rather conceived as the essence of oneself as an active living being. Rather than a relationship of mutual confirmation of one's objective existence in a realized ethical community, a philosophic friendship is said to involve a perceiving together of one another's activity (*energeia*) in an essentially ongoing inquiry.⁴¹ This shift from the friendship of virtue to a philosophic friendship centrally depends upon shifting the focus from contemplation as a means to self-actualization to contemplation itself as self-actualization.

Transposing this opposition into a more mundane key, I would like to suggest the following simple point. An essential part of our experience of friendship is the kind of self-actualization that comes, not from the confirmation that we receive from our friend's esteem, but in the experience, the perception, of our friend as estimable, valuable, lovable. It is, I suggest, in our capacity to recognize the good in another, to find them as inherently valuable, not because everybody is *ex hypothesi* valuable, but because we have seen something that calls upon us to value in our friend. The very perception of value, of beauty, of worth, is a significant aspect of the self-actualization that we can find in at least some forms of friendship. This self-actualization, it seems to me, is not an expression of mutual recognition, nor is individual freedom its normative foundation, though individual freedom and mutual recognition are both enabling conditions of it. This perception of value in our friend, moreover, inscribes within it a certain normative demand that can be expressed in terms of justice – justice, to quote *Freedom's Right*, “[i]n the classical sense handed down to us from antiquity, . . . the ‘binding and permanent intention to render to everyone his due’.”⁴²

5. Conclusion

In *Freedom's Right*, Axel Honneth wants to avoid what he sees as one of the greatest limitations of contemporary political philosophy, its fixation with “purely normative principles” (*die Fixierung auf rein normative Principien*), by which he means normative rules (*Regeln*) that are formulated in isolation from

⁴¹ See Ronna Burger's illuminating discussion of this passage in, *Aristotle's Dialogue with Socrates: On the Nicomachean Ethics* (Chicago; London: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 183–89.

⁴² Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 4.

reflection on concrete ethical life.⁴³ He contends that a theory of justice must nonetheless provide robust normative criteria against which to assess the legitimacy of existing social institutions and practices. These two commitments lead him to an appropriation or approximation of Hegel's attempt, in the *Philosophy of Right*, to provide an immanent demonstration of the validity of the normative foundations of those institutions. For such an immanent analysis to provide a plausible theory of justice, however, it would need to provide adequate grounds for the claim that these normative foundations are sufficiently consistent and sufficiently comprehensive so as to leave no possibility for legitimate dissent from either the side of freedom or from the side of justice. I have argued that Honneth cannot avail himself of Hegel's positive arguments for the coincidence of rights and duties within the realized ethical community, because those arguments depend on aspects of Hegel's philosophic system Honneth rejects. I have argued, further, that Honneth provides inadequate argumentative support to independently motivate the claim that the normative orientation of existing social institutions are in principle just. Neither his conceptual nor his historical arguments give us good enough reasons to exclude the possibility that the normative foundations of modern liberal democratic institutions are fundamentally limited or contradictory or inchoate.

Does this mean that Honneth's attempt to pursue a theory of justice that is at once robustly normative and grounded in reflection on concrete ethical life must be abandoned? I do not think so, but I do think that the attempt to do so is hindered by Honneth's broad identification of human self-realization with autonomous self-determination. Trying to show why this might be so was the focus of §4 above. Honneth claims that our capacity to bring existing social orders into question and seek out their moral legitimation is "the basis for the whole perspective of justice."⁴⁴ This claim seems to me fundamentally right. But it seems to me a mistake to identify that capacity simply with autonomous self-determination, whether individual or collective. I think our capacity to seek out moral legitimation is inseparable from our capacity to perceive the value of disparate forms of human self-realization, both actual and possible, forms of self-realization we are responsive to but not responsible for. I think, moreover, that this perception of value is itself a mode of human self-realization. To defend this latter claim in any depth is fairly obviously outside the scope of the present essay. My invocation of Aristotle's complex account of friendship was intended to suggest in outline one way this thought might be pursued. It should also serve to suggest one line of defence against Hegel's complaint against a kind of normative thinking that seeks to instruct the world as it is about how it ought to be. On the view I am suggesting, just institutions and practices are as such oriented towards the way things ought to be, and without such orientation they would not be the spaces of self-realization they are. This thought, I expect, is one that Honneth would find congenial, but I do not see how it fits with the theory of justice outlined in *Freedom's Right*.

⁴³ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 1.

⁴⁴ Honneth, *Freedom's Right*, 17.

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