

Response to Heikki Ikäheimo on “Normative Essentialism”

Andy Blunden, December 2016

This response to Ikäheimo’s chapter, “Holism and Normative Essentialism in Hegel’s Social Ontology” in *Recognition and Social Ontology*, edited by Arto Laitinen and Heikki Ikäheimo, will focus on the question of “normative essentialism” in Hegel’s philosophy. Ikäheimo’s explanation of “normative essentialism” is engaging and has merit as far as it goes, so I want to recapitulate Ikäheimo’s explanation and then go on to show how this explanation is inadequate, and use the opportunity to demonstrate how I deal with the functionalist illusion in my own interpretation of Hegel’s social philosophy.

Ikäheimo explains “normative essentialism” by beginning with an explanation of what is usually understood by “essentialism,” namely the idea that some feature(s) of a kind of thing is essential to its being that kind of thing; for example, that having female genitals is essential to what a ‘woman’ is and consequently that anything lacking them could not be a woman. In mainstream (positivist) science, a concept means simply the list of such essential features necessary and sufficient for something to be subsumed under the concept. In this view, then, the aim of social ontology is to determine “the essential and thus necessarily universal features of structures of the human life-form.” Essentialism in this sense is widely accepted in our times.

Ikäheimo goes on to tell us about Aristotelean, “normative essentialism,” which is the claim that something may instantiate an essential feature in degrees, more or less, and “the more it does the better, in some relevant sense of goodness.” According to Aristotle, “the nature [of a substance ...] is a ‘this’ or positive state towards which movement takes place.” (*Metaphysics* Λ.3), and according to Hegel, Ikäheimo says, “essences have some kind of tendency towards actualization.”

As Ikäheimo points out, this view is almost universally rejected by thinkers of our time, but “in fact, we do take normative essentialism perfectly seriously in some issues, and it is arguably very difficult not to do so. Indeed normative essentialism is part of common sense.” Ikäheimo illustrates his point with “useful artefacts,” taking chairs as his example. I will cite Ikäheimo’s argument here at length.

“It makes perfectly good sense to ask what is the essence of a chair, or in more colloquial terms, what is it that makes something a chair. A rather workable general answer would seem to be something like ‘sittability’. Sittability, it seems, is an example of essence in the normative sense, meaning that the more or better a chair instantiates this general functional (and clearly relational, since chairs should fit human backsides) property—or to use another term, practical significance—that makes it a chair in the first place, the better a chair it is.

“When something exemplifies this feature or significance to a very high degree, it inspires essentialist judgments in satisfied sitters of the kind ‘now this is what I call a chair’. At the other end of the scale, something’s being absolutely horrible to sit on means that it is likely not to be taken as a chair at all, but either as an object with some other function or then just junk. Of course what exactly are the more precise features that comprise the general essential feature of sittability, or in other words what are the

more precise features that makes a chair good to sit (for an average human backside), is a matter of further debate, but people designing chairs are expected to have a good enough answer.

“Indeed, it belongs to the essence of chair designers that they are actualist essentialists on chairs: to stay in the business of chair-designing and thus to be a chair-designer one not only needs to have a good enough idea of the more exact constituents of sittability, but also to accept sittability as an essential feature of chairs, and not just as an accidental feature of them such as, say, colour. This, of course, assumes that chair-consumers too are essentialists on the sittability of chairs, which is likely for obvious reasons: sit on really bad chairs long enough and you will become unable to sit at all. In short, it is normatively essential to chairs that they are good to sit on.

“Hence, chairs easily fit the first two bills that make Hegel’s essentialism normative: they can instantiate the features, structures or significances that are essential to them in different degrees, and the more they do the better—in a functional or instrumental sense of goodness. As to the third element of Hegel’s normative essentialism—self-actualisation—focusing merely on the practice of sitting (and thus abstracting from intervening factors such as, say, the practice of capitalist economy), there clearly is a tendency towards chairs exemplifying their general essential feature of sittability well and thus being good chairs. This tendency is immanent to chairs in the sense that it is immanent to the practice where chairs are constituted as chairs: between sitting on better or worse chairs, people tend to choose the better ones if they can. To say that we should not be talking about *self*-actualisation of the essence of chairs because it is actually a social practice that does the actualising is to miss the point that this social practice is not external to chairs, but constitutive of their being chairs in the first place.” (pp. 157-158)

Ikäheimo goes on to point out that the essentialism of common sense reflected in the above observations are essential features of the social practices in which chairs are manufactured and used, and *therefore* of the chairs themselves and *therefore* a social ontology has to accept that “normative essentialism is *true* about usable artefacts *because* it is *constitutive* of them” (p. 158). But, Ikäheimo says, proving that “normative essentialism” is true of many human practices is not sufficient to prove Hegel’s claim that it is true of the human life-form *as a whole*, that is, that essential features of the human life-form, which are good, “have an immanent tendency towards actualisation” (p. 159). illustrated in the following remark:

“all historical views of the justice of slavery and lordship, depend on regarding man as a natural entity pure and simple, as an existent not in conformity with its concept. The argument for the absolute injustice of slavery, on the other hand, adheres to the concept of man as mind, as something inherently free. This view is one-sided in regarding man as free by nature, or in other words it takes the concept as such in its immediacy, not the Idea, as the truth. This antinomy rests, like all others, on the abstract thinking which asserts both the moments of an Idea in separation from one another and clings to each of them in its

independence and so in its inadequacy to the Idea and in its falsity. Free mind consists precisely in its being no longer implicit or as concept alone, but in its transcending this formal stage of its being, and *eo ipso* its immediate natural existence, until the existence which it gives to itself is one which is solely its own and free.” (Remark to PR §57)

So freedom is an essential attribute, but not like being a language-user is, in the sense that every individual is actually free; clearly they are not, and at the beginnings of human life people were mostly not free, but it can be argued that human life moves *towards* freedom, and people are only truly human when they are free.

In my view, it is neither possible nor necessary to accept “normative essentialism” in respect to a *totality* of human development, but we *can* adopt a more nuanced and less ambitious concept which nonetheless goes a lot further than “useful artefacts,” subject to a transformation of Hegel’s idealistic formulation of the principle.

Secondly, sceptics will be quick to show that production and use of “useful artefacts” such as chairs is not acceptable as a model for human practice in general, including such practices as the nuclear family, the Westminster political system, asbestos production, nuclear war, smoking and fast food. If Hegel is taken to mean that social practices such as these are, like chairs, products of design, human or Divine, then this is exactly why modern writers reject him. Production of artefacts such as chairs and motor cars may get better and better, may *progress* in that sense, but to argue that the *totality* of human life simply gets better and better, that is, to argue for Progress as a necessary feature of History, has gone out of fashion for very good reasons. Comparison between totalities is in principle impossible, so the idea of progress is inapplicable to totalities. For example, if someone emigrates from India to the USA; this does not mean that the USA is judged to be a *better* country than India. It would mean, however, that one particular scale, perhaps education, perhaps job opportunities, the USA was judged better than India. Comparison between particulars is valid, but the whole of human life cannot be judged, and this fact is important to people today. The example of artefact production is a good one, but it needs to be qualified.

In producing or purchasing a chair, there is relatively good agreement that sittability is the essential concept of a chair; in seeking government, political parties differ dramatically in what constitutes the good, and it is the working out of these very disagreements that a social ontology needs to be able to shed light upon. If we were to treat all practices as if they were like chair-production then we would be presupposing a world somewhat like Stalin’s USSR, in which the Politburo sets targets for all industries in a rational administration of the nation, or the fictional world imagined by market fundamentalists. In either case, the concept driving social practices is immune from problematisation.

Hegel saw the immanent tendency of practices to conform to their concept as “Inner Design,” in contrast to the modern view of Design which implies a designer separate from the practice itself, something he rejected. The Idea, whose essential nature is Freedom, is more closely allied to a ‘logic of history’. Misunderstanding is possible because *The Philosophy of Right* is an ideal, but an ideal which carries its own historical logic within it. The Good is the outcome of the Purposes and Intentions of independent individual actors (§114) and familiarity with Hegel’s Logic would make it clear that the Idea forms a concrete concept through multiple false starts. So not every particular

Intention is fulfilled in the Good – some are malignant. To assert that it will all work out to the best ‘in the end’ would be empty.

Were Ikäheimo to propose simple artefact production as a model of “normative essentialism” it would look a lot like functionalism, with every social practice satisfying a corresponding social need. In response I will outline the Projects approach which I advocate as an interpretation of Hegel’s social philosophy which is free from the problems of Hegel’s metaphysics.

Ikäheimo goes on to elaborate a long, and in my view overly abstract argument to justify what he calls the basic principles of Hegel’s ontology towards establishing his own claim that the central principle is Recognition. To this end, Ikäheimo refutes a number of competing concepts of Recognition (from Kojève, Pinkard, Brandom, Pippin) and concludes that mutual recognition is “simply is a relationship of intentionalities that instantiates concrete freedom as mutual conscious-being with oneself in one another” (p. 174). This is, according to Ikäheimo, the more concrete concept of what Hegel refers to as “freedom” in the above quotation from the *Philosophy of Right*. But nowhere does Ikäheimo attempt to convince the reader of the usefulness or validity of Hegel’s “normative essentialism” beyond the example of the common artefact.

Recognition is essentially a relation or transaction of one person to another, mutual recognition a relation between two people, one-on-one. Stretching “Recognition” to “recognising” the law and such like just muddies the waters. According to Ikäheimo, it is by recognising each other as persons, thereby constituting a ‘we’, that the “realm of spirit” (the truly human life-form) is constituted. Thus, “the phenomenon of interpersonal recognition is the core of Hegel’s social ontological holism” (p. 175).

Indeed, according to Hegel, mutual recognition as persons is the basis of abstract formal (i.e., liberal) right:

- (1) Personality essentially involves the capacity for rights and constitutes the concept and the basis (itself abstract) of the system of abstract and therefore formal right. Hence the imperative of right is: ‘Be a person and respect others as persons.’ (§36, PR)

Abstract Right is the first category of the Objective Spirit, the *prerequisite* for the development of social cooperation, and eventually, collaborative care for the general good and the construction of a State,— all of which is built upon the foundation of abstract right, the kind of freedom taken by libertarians as absolute. I find no basis however for a claim that personal Recognition has a larger role for Hegel, or that the deep care and mutual respect associated with Recognition by Ikäheimo has such a meaning for Hegel. Ikäheimo never touches on the distinction between the three parts of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right: Right, Morality and Ethical Life, leading to a suspicion that he conflates them, under the cover of not agreeing with Hegel “on details of ideal institutional design.”

Ikäheimo’s claim is that individual persons and truly human communities are mutually constituted through the process of recognition, and that this is the basis for Hegel’s *holism*, the other aspect of Hegel’s philosophy signalled in the title. The principle that holism consists in the mutual constitution of the whole and the smallest unit is in general a Hegelian principle with which I agree, but the problem with Ikäheimo’s ontology is the unstated, taken-for-granted assumption that the basic unit of the human life form is the *human individual*. This individual is shaped through “normative

essentialism” into a citizen of a modern state, just as modern states are shaped by their citizens.

It is the one-on-one relationships between individuals who ‘recognise’ each other as persons which is the engine driving this process and its final outcome. The implied question which is being asked in such an ontology is: how can individuals live together?

Pointing to the role of concepts in the organisation of social life and the development of human beings, Ikäheimo points out that concepts are embodied in words of a natural language which is “administered, as to their content, by a collective of language-users recognizing each other as co-authorities of correct word-usage.” That is, human beings en masse are taken a priori as a utopian egalitarian collective which “administers” word meanings which, since all are “co-authorities,” escapes the kind of power relations widely recognized to be vested in language.

“As to the *practical* side, shared administration of conceptually organised epistemic world-view is only possible among subjects who also pacify and organise their practical intentionalities and therefore concrete co-existence by collectively authorised and administered *practical* norms.”
(p. 176-177)

With the structuralist argument that something exists because it is needed to explain something else which is or will be observed, Ikäheimo claims that practical norms are also “collectively authorized and administered” by this same egalitarian collective, and individuals become habituated to them, and the norms and customs are inscribed in each individual without the need for institutions of social control. But semantic and practical norms have existed since the dawn of the human species; if mankind is free by nature, with such egalitarian practical and semantic norms, then no “normative essentialism” is required, man is already actually free. But if on the other hand the hypothetical egalitarian collective is only *implicit*, and in reality semantic and practical norms have been and continue to be constructed under regimes of oppression and exploitation, then these norms cannot be called upon as a support for universal mutual recognition.

I take it that the egalitarian collective of mutual recognition is intended to represent an ideal towards which human society moves, in the sense of Hegel’s “normative essentialism.” The problem is that the ideal state presented by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right*, is, unlike Ikäheimo’s society of universal mutual recognition, simultaneously its own logical history; every element is there because it is the solution to a problem which arose from prior elements. In that sense, it is like the Logic. Abstract Right, for example, arises as a solution to the problem of (potentially) free human beings finding themselves in an uncivilized world, and the first step is the institution of private property. It is not necessary to presuppose a strategic plan for overcoming the various problems which people confront as they construct conditions for their own freedom; if analysis can show that a certain problem must arise and what is ultimately *necessary* to solve that problem, and the problems which in turn arise from that solution, etc., then it is possible to unfold a set of institutions which look like artefacts, in the sense of being deliberate products of human labour to meet specific human needs. A workable solution to a problem does not always present itself right away, and the real working out of the problem of freedom may follow a complex and unpredictable path, but running through it is a thread of necessity, and it is this thread which Hegel seeks to reveal. It is not necessary to follow the institutional details of the ideal state which Hegel described, because it arose in response to the historical experience of his own times, but the overall

architecture of the book most certainly stands. Certain things have changed in the world, and they need to be taken into account.

A world in which people can live together in freedom means overcoming the successive problems which arise in *getting there* and that end point will be the sum total of all those problems and solutions. The point to which the human life-form is moving is the path which it traces itself along the way. At the outset people know they need to be free, but they cannot form an adequate concept of that freedom which can only be a distant end point but more likely imagine viable solution(s) to the problems immediately confronting them at the time. Hegel would say that freedom is *implicit* at the outset. The concept which may later embody their freedom is successively realised but it is not explicit at the outset; the social formation “moves towards” that concept. What was implicit becomes explicit.

It is not that there is a concept of something first, and then the thing moves towards that concept. No, at first there can only be a generalised conception; what a thing is, *is* the process of getting there. The treaty which settles a civil war becomes the constitution of the resulting state. Hegel poses it in his own idealistic way, and if we want to overcome Hegel’s metaphysics, it just has to be turned around.

Projects instead of “normative essentialism”

As a philosopher, Hegel took it that concepts were the primary “substance” of the world and constructed a social philosophy in which concepts exist and provide the important motivating structures of human social life. But from what I read of philosophers and non-philosophers alike, both Hegelian and non-Hegelian, people have no idea what a concept is. This situation is problematic for a social philosophy which bases itself on Hegel because concepts play such an active part in Hegel’s social philosophy. We can’t use concepts as basic givens of our social theory if we don’t really know what concepts are – what could it mean to say that “an existent [is/is not] in conformity with its concept”? I contend that a social ontology can take as its given substances actions, practices and artefacts. With a little explanatory clarification everyone can understand what these are, and on this basis we can explain what concepts, norms and ideals are.

I have outlined a Social Ontology (Blunden 2016) on this basis, but instead of “practices” I use *projects*. The difference is that projects have a life-cycle whereas practices by implication are steady ongoing elements of social life. Practices are the end product of historical development; projects are the historical development itself.

I will outline what a project is and its life cycle, from which it will be clear that projects provide a foundation for a more nuanced concept of “normative essentialism” and an understanding of what a concept is.

A project is a aggregate of many artefact-mediated actions (not an aggregate of people) all directed towards realising a common object. A project is something one joins rather than launches oneself, though every project is launched by someone(s) at some time, and in that sense is objective. The project is oriented by its concept of the object, rather than something simply objective, and that concept is immanent within the project itself. A project therefore is an activity, a social practice, but it comes into being in response to some specific situation, characterised by a concept of that situation, but that concept undergoes development in the course of the project. The life-cycle of a project is mapped out in general form in Hegel’s Logic, which Hegel describes as the genesis and development of a concept. It is important that throughout the unfolding of the project it

has a concept of its object, *but this concept is subject to indefinite change*. What is ultimately realised may be very different from what was initially imagined as a solution to the original problem.

In the first place there is some situation, some problem or opportunity. Here the project does not exist, it is only implicit, in itself, implicit in a problem affecting some social group in some social formation. It can be determined by objective quantitative and qualitative analysis, but those involved are not conscious of it as a situation, *as such*.

Then someone puts a word to it, or embodies a solution in some technical device, either naming the problem or naming the solution, and this first reflection, the first consciousness of the problem situation as such sets off a social movement. Or more accurately, a cascade of such movements, which set out to solve the problem – which make mistakes, redefine the problem, try out different tactics, learn and eventually manage to create a concept which adequately captures the situation, mobilizes people and enters into conflict with the established set up to change that situation. By “create a concept” I mean a social practice which represents the object of the project, a diagnosis and remedy for that situation.

Through interaction between the existing social formation and the social movement itself, the concept becomes institutionalized – laws are changed, government departments are created, courses are taught and a new word enters the vernacular. The social movement which brought all this about begins to fade in equal measure as its objectives begin to be realized. The project is now simply a word in the language, an aspect of social practice alongside others in the life of the whole community. It is naturalized. This whole process is a ‘project’.

The material catalyst or focus of the project is not necessarily or only a word – it may be a body of land, a technical invention, a disability, a style of dress – any material thing or process which is given meaning by the project and is in that specific sense an artefact. The project and its object is nothing but millions of artefact-mediated actions.

At any given point in the life of a project participants all have some kind of mental representation of the situation they are striving for and this representation is objectively manifested in the actions they take in contributing to the project. There will be dissonance between these actions because there is not simply one unambiguous state of affairs representing the desired end point of the project. There may be a number of conflicting concepts at work. However, all the actions taken together express the meaning of the situation to different participants at that moment. The concept of the project is all those meanings, taken together with the particular project(s) motivating the individual actions and the artefact(s) which are deemed to be or denote the concept.

As the project goes on, there is a learning process, the situation changes and the concept people have of the object of their struggle changes. The goal posts keep moving. In the process of realizing a concept, the participants in a project *discover* what was really essential in the concept, and what was contingent, transient, even harmful. The end point was implicit in the original situation, but it had to be brought to light in the struggle to realize it.

All the concepts we find in our culture have been produced by projects, but having completed their life-cycle and merged with the entire life of the community, the situation which brought the concept into being is ultimately forgotten. Chairs, for example, have only been around since the 16th century as items of household furniture. Before that chairs were more like thrones and they conferred status. Growing industrial

strength and an egalitarian sentiment made it possible for *everyone* to have a throne, and thus arose the modern chair. Now the status conferred by sitting on a chair rather than on the floor or a handy box is almost forgotten, but is nonetheless implicit in the use of chairs in contemporary life – imagine inviting a friend around to dinner and have them sit on the floor while you sat in a chair! This status aspect of a chair is implicit in all chairs, but so integrated is it in the norms of contemporary society that we overlook it.

By ‘project’ I mean the on-going activity, together with the meaningful words and objects around which the project and all the actions making it up are organized, right up to the point where its existence is almost invisible because it has become an on-going social practice. A concept is the object of a project, implicitly including all the individual artefact-mediated actions making up the project. Once a concept has entered the language and the social movement which gave birth to it has faded away, the world is already changed so that that concept fits in, so to speak, as part of a changed whole. The concept may be mistaken for a fixed routine or an existent thing. The project is already history and things have changed.

Conclusion

The task is to formulate an ideal which incorporates what is rational in today’s world, having in mind that:

“Mankind thus inevitably sets itself only such tasks as it is able to solve, since closer examination will always show that the problem itself arises only when the material conditions for its solution are already present or at least in the course of formation.” (Marx, 1859)

Utopian conceptions of universal fraternity are of no use whatsoever.

References

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