

Agency and the Will, from Hegel to Vygotsky

Learning to master one's own behaviour by internal and social processes

2027 Book Proposal

Introduction

People care about “agency” because living in this modern world makes us all intensely aware of the powerful activity of state, economic and natural processes determining our lives while at the same time fostering an identity which is hyper-individualist. In this situation people crave assurance that the individual can make a difference.

This has resulted in interest in the term “agency.” We shall see however that this term belongs to everyday discourse and is not a scientific term. It is deployed with multiple different meanings in supposedly scientific literature.

Science and philosophy has, on the other hand, been discussing the problem of if and how an individual can “make a difference” in the context of the concept of the Will, since the concept was introduced into Christian theology and Roman law by Augustine of Hippo c. 391AD. On the other hand, both Martin Luther and Spinoza did away with the Free Will altogether.

Empiricism began with Bacon’s aphorism: “Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed,” but was subject to criticism culminating in Kant’s Critical Philosophy. Kant’s Moral Philosophy confined the Will to limits which are more or less indeterminate, providing no satisfactory response to Scepticism or solution to the problem of the freedom of the Will.

I follow Hegel’s narrative of the Will, in three stages. Firstly, I show how Hegel resolved the conundrum of modern philosophy by showing that the relation between mind and nature was always both mediated and immediate. The Logic built on this principle concludes with the syllogism of action demonstrating the inseparability of thought and Will and the necessity of a subject to use an element of the external world as a means to act upon the external world as object, and that only in this way can the Will be made objective. But the means is always superior to the aim.

I then trace the development of volition in animals from the natural will to the human mind, and then through the Philosophy of Right, from private property to the State. Here the importance of the Will both as an element of thinking and of social processes is introduced. The Will becomes objective through the construction of decision-making organisations leading up to the independent State.

Next I will deal with Vygotsky who begins an examination of the psychology of the Will with the most elementary use of an artefact to set-up neutral connections in advance of a situation requiring acting according to a decision. Meanwhile *action* itself proceeds according to natural processes.

Vygotsky traced the development of the Will from birth to adolescence by tracing the development of voluntary control of various aspects of behaviour. The final level of the development of the adolescent is the construction of a peer group. Present-day neuroscience is in agreement with Vygotsky in rejecting the concept of an organ of the Will in favour of various aspects of volition.

Although, with the founding of Activity Theory, Vygotsky's followers created a basis to go beyond Psychology, conditions in the Soviet Union made it impossible to develop a scientific social theory. They developed instead a variety of Functionalism, similar to that of Talcott Parsons in the U.S..

Rather than directly moving to the problems of social theory with a critique of Activity Theory, I will begin with a critical review of the work of the Anthony Giddens's critique of Structuralism in the 1980s and introduced the term "agency." Giddens, however, relied on Freud and a mixed bag of psychological theories to support his concept of agency and structure. I will endeavour to recover the concept of "agency" as Giddens framed it, but in the light of the insight of Hegel's conceptions of the Will and Vygotsky's Psychology. I will then sketch in outline the development of the Will. That is, moving from Vygotsky's "learning to master one's own behaviour by internal processes" to "learning to master one's own behaviour by social processes," from peer group to social democratic state. I will draw on work from my "Origins of Collective Decision Making" here.

In the light of this, I will then make a brief and focussed critique of the idea of "agency" as it appears in present-day human science.

I may also include a critique of the idea of the "Revolutionary Party" as a realisation of the Universal Will capable of instituting Socialism on behalf of the industrial working class.

Part I. Philosophy on the Impossibility of Free Will

1. Early Roman Law and the conversion of Augustine of Hippo

To understand the Will, we must look back to before the concept was founded; Early Roman law worked ok without the Will; seems unjust in our eyes; examples; C.f., today's criminal law re driving cars; the conversion of Augustine of Hippo; no sin without the Will; the Will, which is essentially free, became essential to Christianity; later Roman law *mens rea*, etc. This created a potentially political economy for the Church; Martin Luther denounces the Church selling of indulgences and their claim to be able to absolve guilt with the cooperation of the person. Luther claims that the Will is a prisoner of its own desire.

2. Spinoza and the Negation of Free Will

Spinoza's place in the history of philosophy; The rehabilitation of Spinoza; The context; Spinoza's argument in outline; Spinoza's contributions to Science; Shortcomings of Spinoza; The Antiquity of Spinoza's philosophy; Spinoza's 'Mechanical Materialist' Legacy;

cause-and-effect in lieu of free Will; the natural Will; determinism; Spinoza posed the problem, but was unable to solve it.

3. The Impasse in Western Philosophy

The Copernican Revolution; Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia; Empiricism; Dogmatism vs Scepticism; David Hume; Kant's Answer to Scepticism; Outline of Kant's Moral Philosophy; Critique of Kant; Herder; Fichte.

Part II. Hegel's Interdisciplinary Concept of the Will

1. Introduction. Spirit and Dualism

The problem of the starting point; Immediate and mediated knowledge; The structure of the *Logic*; The *Logic* on the Will; The Syllogism of Action;

2. Hegel on the Natural Will

The Psyche ; Consciousness; The Intellect; The development of natural Will; feelings, sensations and meaning; unity of theoretical and practical Spirit; the foundation of the *Philosophy of Right*.

3. Rousseau and Hegel on the Will 'for itself'

The Will in social theory The Will in social theory; Freedom and personal autonomy; Hegel on the Free Will; Social Theory as Ethics; Rights, Morality and Ethical Life; The Will 'for itself'; Purpose, Intention and the Good; Actions; Purpose, Intention and Welfare; Purpose, Goal and Means; Responsibility; Intention; The truth of intentions; Welfare; The Good and Conscience; Conclusion.

4. Rousseau and Hegel on the Universal Will

Freedom and the Will; Rousseau on the general Will; Why Hegel opposed general elections; Hegel on Civil Disobedience; The Right of Heroes; Conclusion.

Part III. Vygotsky on the Psychology of the Will

1. Self-control

Introduction; The Higher Psychological Functions; Behaviour; the reflex arc; the conditioned reflex; practical intellect; voluntary behaviour; Self-control; "Original Sin"; The structure of the Higher Psychological Functions; Germ Cell and Unit; Volition and the Will; from Psychology to Social Theory.

2. The development of the Will through childhood

Childhood; Adulthood; the crises of childhood; social situation of development; The structure of the crisis of the Will; the definition of the periods; 'Gradual' development; The Six Crises; birth; infancy; crisis at 1 year; crisis at 3; crisis at 7; crisis at 12; crisis at 17; adolescence.

3. The Will as the configuration of volition; voluntary association and the limits of the peer group; perezhivanie; otnosheniye; joining a profession; identity formation.

4. Activities

The development of activities; concepts and activities; the identity of the individual and the collective. Commitments (*otnoshiniya*), *perezhivanie*.

Part IV. Sociology on Structure and Agency

1. Structuralism

Sociology: Structuralism, Levi-Strauss, Althusser; the functionalism of Talcott Parsons; Leontyev's Activity Theory.

2. Anthony Giddens' critique of Structuralism

Overview; structure and agency; emptiness of structuralist explanations; likewise functionalist explanation; knowledgeability of actors; routines; practical consciousness; concepts and motives; unintended consequences; institutions and social movements; conclusion.

Part V. An interdisciplinary theory of the Will

1. From peer group to state

The peer group as a transitional form; the decision making group as a unit of analysis; the collective Will; the Will in institutions and social movements; the universal Will.

2. A critical review of the use of "agency" in the caring professions.

3. A critique of the "revolutionary party."

Conclusion.

Giddens plus Collective Decision Making plus life-cycle of activities with Vygotsky in place of Freud and Co. Authority, hierarchy and delegation. Freedom and the Will.