

Freedom in Hegel – Why the Concept of Self-Consciousness is a Precondition for a Theory of Causality –

By Norman Schultz

The idea of nature is often contrasted with the idea of freedom. On the one hand, nature is understood as a closed system of causal relations; on the other hand, freedom is perceived as an intervention within such a closed system. Freedom, moreover, means that such actions are not only an intervention in the causal system, but that there is also an agent who experiences these interventions as justifiably his actions. Pippin writes therefore about the *mine-ness* of an action:

“If they are “mine,” they shouldn’t seem or be alien, as if belonging to or produced by someone or something else or as if fated or coerced or practically unavoidable, and so forth.” (Pippin, R. 2008, p.37)

This means that if actions were caused by something else in me, or outside of me, these actions could not be called mine and thus they would not be free. We can, however, conceptualize ourselves as being embedded in a network of causal relations, and can understand each of our actions as being caused by something else. This perspectival possibility is in contradiction with our common conception of freedom.

In the following passages, I will try to reconstruct both perspectives, namely the mechanistic, causal framework of nature, and the framework of freedom. By ‘causality’ I refer here to the universal principle that everything that is, must have a cause. It is thus not understood as a pragmatic description of the relation between two phenomena, but as the universal principle for all that is. First, I will demonstrate some internal difficulties of both frameworks that will lead to a different conception of causes, namely that of causes being

based on existence. The Hegelian perspective is well-known to provide arguments that reveal internal contradictions in the mechanistic, causal model.¹ I will, however, give a shorter account of a contradiction that is different from the complex Hegelian arguments in the greater *Logic*.² As a result, I will discuss the condition for a theory of causality and freedom that is a theory of self-consciousness.

Internal Contradictions of Mechanical Causality

My first epistemological argument against the causal idea, namely that everything that is, is caused by something else, is that the principle contradicts itself. First, the principle is claimed to be evident. Second, everything that is, has to be caused by something else. This implies that if the principle is, it has to be caused by something else. Since principles, however, are first beginnings, it cannot be caused. Therefore the principle cannot be.

This argument is convoluted by premises about the ontological status of principles. Can principles, for example, be caused? Are principles physical entities? Are principles first beginnings? On the one hand, I mention this argument, because this is a central critique by Hegel who does not accept the evidence of principles.³ Hegel does not pursue an epistemology composed from principles. On the other hand, I mention this argument, because

¹ Hegel's critique focuses mainly on the impossibility of thinking mechanical objects as independent and being in causal relations with other objects (see Hegel: *Encyclopädie: Logik*, p. 356, §199).

² I focus here on contradictions. Contradictions are normally taken to be indications of why we should correct or deny our premises. For Hegel, however, contradictions are inevitable, since contradiction is, on the one hand, the content of reality, and, on the other hand, a problem of determinative language. I regard the discussion of physical principles as metaphysics, while the discussion of physical laws concluded from concrete observations is physics. Contradictions between principles, on the other hand, arise because of the insufficient mode of language to determine them. Thus contradictions are indicators for the insufficiency of language, and point, in a certain sense, beyond the structure of sentences to their higher truths of judgements and syllogisms. This is basically the course of Hegel's greater *Logic*. A contradiction for the causal model as well as for the model of freedom should therefore be expected. For further clarification, Hegel does not deny the principle of non-contradiction by this, but he assumes that contradictions, for whatever reason, are inevitable on the level of determinative language.

³ This is also why he does not accept the evidence of the principle of non-contradiction, which by no means entails that it is unreasonable in many situations for one to assume this principle to be true.

if we only assume the principle of causality, then it is a pragmatic decision to follow it. If we, however, assume the principle of causality as grounded on something else, then it cannot be a foundation of science. Since I do not want to go deeper into this discussion of the ontological status of principles, my second argument will be independent from the argument against the evidence of principles, and metaphysical in nature.

If we assume the principle of causality, then the first cause could not exist, since everything that is, must have a cause. If there cannot be a first cause, then we have to assume an infinite chain of causes. This, however, raises the question of why this chain of causes exists at all. If we assume a cause as the being of the chain of causes, then we eventually regress into the same problem of not giving a sufficient cause as to why there are causes at all. The being of this chain, however, must have a cause; otherwise it could not be according to the principle of causality. Thus we need a first cause, but there cannot be a first cause.

The remainder of this argument is that there exists something, but its relation to causes is unclear, because it cannot be a cause. There are, however, more problems: if we assume that something causes existence, then it must be caused by something that exists, and thus the principle of causation presupposes the concept of existence. Existence then, however, must be perceived as uncaused which is also not in accordance with an entirely mechanistic, causal model.

By ‘existence’ I mean therewith the fact that something is. By ‘fact’ I mean here, that it does not need to have a cause (I do not mean that it is evident). Obviously existence cannot be caused, because every cause, in order to work as a cause, has to exist, and thus we would presuppose existence. By ‘existence’ I mean therefore the facticity of phenomena that we are dealing with, which must be thought as being outside of the scheme of causal explanation.

I do not want to understand existence as a given, and an uninterpreted stuff that is the underlying ground for causes. It is also not the stuff that is taken up and interpreted in conceptual, mental structures. I think these theses would be in some situations pragmatic to assume, but metaphysically insufficient. If we take the mental, for example, to be an expression of a causeless existence, and if we called this mental being free from causes, other problems will immediately follow. I will discuss these problems in the following.

The Internal Contradictions of Freedom

If we understand freedom in terms of a free, causally unconstrained choice, meaning that it is independent from mechanical causes, then freedom becomes arbitrary. So, for example, I might be free to fire Smith or Jones, as Pippin points out (see Pippin, R. 2008, p. 38), but if it is entirely reduced to an arbitrary choice, so that it is independent from the content, how then should I make a meaningful decision? Hegel argues that such an act is not an act of choice:

“It is inherent in arbitrariness [*Willkür*] that the content is not determined as mine by the nature of my will, but by contingency, thus I am also dependent on this content and this is the contradiction which underlies arbitrariness.” (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p.44, Remark 10)

From the arbitrariness of choosing content it follows that the content is not mine, because it is attributed randomly to me. The concept of freedom is thus also running into an internal contradiction that means if I am entirely free from restrictions of the world, I am not going to be free.

Self-Consciousness as a Presupposition for a Theory of Causality

The question of the mental and its position in a closed Physicalism is a subject of great discussion. I, however, argue, that presupposing these principles is already mistaken, because abstract principles are only applied to empirical, determinative objects in order to regulate pragmatic questions. On the other hand, we have no immediate justification to take these principles as constitutive. As a result, we need to understand the problem of causality and freedom differently, namely as two regulative principles that our pragmatic understanding has to use, in order to construct something determinate. We thus do not start with the assumption of something being constitutive. Hegel tries to develop a different starting point:

“Freedom is to will something determinate, yet to be with oneself (*bei sich*) in this determinacy and to return once more to the universal.” (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 42)⁴

So for Hegel freedom is a relation between something that is finite, the determinate content, and something that is infinite, the universal. To clarify, the finite object of the will has to be the content that is, indeed, pursued, since otherwise our freedom would be arbitrary. Moreover, we cannot view the content as causing our will, since this would throw us back into the contradiction of causality. So firstly, self-consciousness⁵ depends on content, and secondly its content is not caused. Instead the content is only conceptualized as being outside of us and thus understood as being embedded in a framework of causes. Only in that regard is self-consciousness framed as the universal, namely being the opposite of the content outside.

⁴ Most of the following Hegel quotes may also be found in Pippin’s book *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy* (2008). The book focuses on the social dimensions of Hegel’s concept of freedom.

⁵ I refer here to a theory of self-consciousness, yet I do not give a clear definition of self-consciousness, since it is the original Idealist problem to develop a coherent notion of this concept. For Kant self-consciousness is understood as the necessary structure that must accompany all representations. For Hegel, however, it cannot be such a transcendental structure of freedom for the reasons given above. When Hegel refers to his conception of freedom, I take this as a reference to self-consciousness, while self-consciousness is not entirely independent from the content, but also not subordinated to its content. The concept of self-consciousness should become clearer in this essay, but will not entirely be clarified. For our immediate purposes now we may take it to refer to the idea of opposing something determinate to itself as the universal.

We are interested in this process of self-consciousness, because it is the more fundamental structure for producing the principles of causality and freedom.

In this process of building oppositions there is at first an action to will something determinate. To will something determinate itself, on the other hand, is in opposition to the determinate. By virtue of its opposition this is the universal and indeterminate. Yet again, understanding this indeterminate as unconstrained would only be a mistaken result from the opposition to determinate objects. Instead Hegel tries to ground self-consciousness in this process of how we relate ourselves to content, or of how determinative content is produced.

Pippin interprets this self-consciousness as free and relates it to a social practice:

“This state of self-consciousness and socially mediated self-reflection, defined in a highly elaborate systematic way as a rational self- and other-relation counts as being free. This is an active state, a state of doing, a way of being that involves activities and practices that are distinguished as free by all being undertaken in a certain way in relation to others, not by having a special cause origin or by being undertaken by a causally exempt being.” (Pippin, R. 2008, p. 39, 40)

How can we understand an agent’s causation? It must be preceded by a theory of self-consciousness. A theory of self-consciousness, however, is not based on a principle of cause and effect. The thesis is that causality is rather the derivative of a theory of self-consciousness. The central aspect in such a theory of self-consciousness is instead the necessary relation of concepts. Causal relations are then replaced by reciprocal, conceptual relations:

“In history generally, there are indeed spiritual masses and individuals in play and influencing each other; but it is in the nature of spirit, in a much higher sense than it is the character of the living thing, that it will not admit another *original principle in within itself*, or not to let a cause continue to work its causality in it undisturbed, but will rather interrupt and transmute it. (Hegel, *Science of Logic*, p. 496)

So Hegel replaces the concept of causality by reciprocal conceptual relations (“in play and influencing each other) – a back and forth between determinations. I assume that this could also be called dialectics, and this means, for example, that will and being are not entirely distinguished from each other, but are the occurring phenomena in the self-exploration of self-consciousness. Accordingly, mechanistic causes are then only helpful constructs, conceptualized in order to deal with something determinate, that for a moment is perceived to be as something other than ourselves. In another frame of reconstruction it might be a part of us (think about our body, for example: in one frame, we rule our body, in another frame we are subordinated to its causality. In one instance the body is mine, in another instance the body is something that belongs to the causal framework.) This, of course, sounds like an unrestricted constructivism⁶, which it is not. We will clarify this in the following by a further investigation of self-consciousness.

Hegel’s Emphasis of the Practical Attitude

Hegel’s account of self-consciousness is not entirely found in the *Logic*, but is developed in the *Philosophy of Spirit*:

“The philosophy of *spirit* can be neither empirical [I take that to be the causal view] nor metaphysical [I take that to be the view of freedom], but has as its task to consider the Notion of spirit in its immanent, necessary development out of itself into a system of its own activity.”

(Hegel, W15, p. 217, according to Pippin, Robert 2008, p. 41)

This means that instead of proceeding with the schemes of causality and freedom that are internally contradictory, we try to understand why these contradictions necessarily occur. Contradiction, for Hegel, is a necessary result of our own activity, or, as Hegel describes it,

⁶ By ‘unrestricted constructivism’ I mean the concept that all our concepts depend on the subjective conditions of reconstruction and that we cannot claim these concepts as objective.

as: “existence [Dasein] – i.e. as something opposed to itself” (Hegel, PR, 54). This conceptual activity of self-consciousness as self-opposing is crucial for a reconstruction of Hegel’s concept of absolute freedom (we will discuss this self-opposing in further detail below). This self-consciousness in its freedom, however, is not an empty concept of arbitrarily choosing something:

“[T]he metaphysical manner of analysis wants to do only with the concept, without regard to its appearance; the concept is only an abstraction, and the determination of it only itself a dead concept.” (Hegel, W15, p.217 according to Pippin, R. 2008, p. 41)

Instead of pursuing therefore a metaphysical system of a free subject that lives in an unknown transcendental space, or a theoretical assumption of causal closed-ness of the world, Hegel opens an account to spirit according to which the concept manifests itself through nature and society. He writes:

“Spirit is this essentially: to be active, that means - to bring itself and indeed only its concept to appearance, to manifest its concept.” (Hegel, W15, 217, according to Pippin, R. 2008, p.41)

The concept appears, however, in forms of contradictions that lead us to the dynamics of dialectics. The former theoretical metaphysics of freedom, or the empiricism of physics, and the skeptical philosophy of Critical Philosophy will always become a problem of contradiction, according to Hegel’s dialectics. For us as existing individuals, contradictions appear not as philosophical problems but as different dilemmata. For example, the dilemma “Am I a free person in a causal space?” is a theoretical question of people who have chosen to be physicalists or philosophers, but is motivated by more urgent questions like: “Do I have to follow the law that is imposed by the obtaining of various physical states?”, “What is my responsibility, if I am only a causal mechanism?” Contradictions also appear in questions concerning ways to live such as the question “Should I be monogamous while my mechanistic, causal nature is polygamous?” These questions seem arbitrarily chosen. They

depend, however, on issues that are currently asked in our society, and arise under these social conditions. They do not only depend on the theoretical dilemma of Physicalism, but depend on how our society brings these questions into play as relevant questions, and how our society demands that the individual gets in contact with them. The problem is therefore not only about free individuals or causal mechanisms that guide us, but about humans who express these theoretical tasks as really experienced dilemmas.

I am not saying that this is an unrestricted constructivism that has no objective constraints, but the expression of our problems depends on how we as self-conscious beings experience these contradictions as unbearable. This is a sort of empirical realism that does not presuppose an outside, mechanistic and causal real without considering the conditions of self-consciousness in the form of a social existence beforehand.

Realism

I need to make some points concerning why Hegel does not simply introduce an unconstrained constructivism, but rather a realism that does not start with causality. Swindal defines realism:

“A realist holds that a proposition, in principle, can express, picture or represent the way things really are.” (Swindal, J. 2012, p.5).

I disagree with this definition, because I produce knowledge without representing how things really are, and representations are only a subordinate practice of this knowledge production. So, for example, I can play a game of chess and win, because I might play a superior opening with regard to the opening of my opponent. This does not mean, however, that I represent the reality of chess. It only means that I produce knowledge that is superior to other knowledge. So the opening with the queen’s pawn (that seems to be a current trend in chess), for example,

can be superior to the openings that were played recently (openings with the king's pawn), but this does not mean that the correct game of chess starts with the queen's pawn. The correct game of chess might start with the a-pawn, even though this seems to be very unlikely. My win, however, is not based on how the perfect game of chess really is played, but it is based on the status of current incomplete knowledge about chess. When I therefore make the judgement 'd4 is a superior move' I do not represent how things really are, but I refer to the current status of chess in our speaker's community. Chess is a finite game, for this reason we can produce a reality of chess by assuming a perfect game of chess following certain rules consistently. Let us assume, however, somebody makes the judgement 'The sun is the center of the solar system'. This is 'a superior move' compared to the one made by someone who claims that the earth is the center of the solar system. The reason, however, that makes it superior is not because it describes a situation closer to how things really are. It might, for example, turn out that the earth is not only the center of the solar system, but the center of the universe. I agree that this is very unlikely, but changing frames of reference drastically, it is a possible reality. However, I do not represent things in the first place, but compare my conceptual framework with the productivity of other conceptual frameworks and this makes the statement that the sun is the center of the solar system superior in our current scientific society.

Societies use conceptual frameworks that are compared with other conceptual frameworks in terms of their productivity, and thus Hegel delivers a scheme of how we operate in such open worlds without pre-concluded principles of how things really are. Instead he focuses on how we produce realities by using concepts.

Reality, for Hegel, is a derivative concept of subjectivity. The subject, according to Hegel assumes the notion of reality as guiding principle for its knowledge-production. But reality is

not only an idealized, regulative condition produced by the subject. There are two reasons why reality is real for subjects: first, a subject that assumes that all knowledge is subjective, effectively assumes that there is no knowledge, and would thus deny itself as a fantasy. I would be an illusion for an illusion. Second, subjects that are entirely free, according to our argument above, would choose arbitrarily and could therefore no longer be considered reasonable subjects. The idea of a mere subject would turn out to be internally contradictory. For these two reasons subjects posit that there is a necessary reality (Hegel discusses this as objectivity), but this reality is not about how things really are, but about how subjects stand in relation to reality and thus produce a form of reality for themselves. Hegel calls this activity of self-consciousness something opposing itself to itself (we will discuss this below).

Subjects, as already argued, are not transcendental unities of freedom, but also not determined, causal mechanisms. This, however, does not imply that I need to picture how things really are, but that I demonstrate how actions and thinking are taking place. My point is therefore that reality is not something outside of the concept, but an inner part of a systematic framework that depends on a structure of self-consciousness. If we understand reality as being a part of subjective thinking, then the problem of freedom and causality is secondary and we have to analyze what self-consciousness is beforehand.

Final Remarks on Self-Consciousness

Self-consciousness is not a thing among other things. It is not a substance, determined once and for all. Since the simple attribution of substance to self-consciousness would be a categorical mistake, the problem of self-consciousness rather presents itself as an existential dilemma: Am I free (non-causal), or am I the result of causes (and thus disappear as an epiphenomenon)? The most correct answer here is: we are both. This, however, is not a

compatibilism. The answer is most correct, because we reconstruct ourselves incorrectly according to the frameworks of causality and freedom; we are precisely this self-opposing. The best way to acknowledge this existential dilemma then is to make decisions with regard to circumstances, and to develop a theory that goes beyond determinative language as, for example, discourse theory attempts. According to determinative language, we cannot posit ourselves as being free, nor as causal mechanisms. Hegel suggests therefore:

“The distinction between thought and will is simply that between theoretical and practical attitudes. But they are not two separate faculties; on the contrary, the will is a particular way of thinking – thinking translating itself into existence [Dasein] – thinking as the drive to give itself existence. (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 35)

Again Hegel refers to the concept of existence, but here it is a coming to be, an actualizing of something that is not yet being. While the theoretical is the idea that the world is structured in a determinative way that can be understood, the practical is the idea that we set ends in order to translate ourselves into something determinate that is grasped in theoretical understanding. Hegel, on the other hand, sees also a subordination of the theoretical under the practical:

“It is equally impossible to adopt a theoretical attitude or to think without a will, for in thinking we are necessarily active. The content of what is thought certainly takes on the form of being; but this being is something mediated, something posited by our activity.”
(Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 36)

So the assumption is that all our thinking is activity. The mental is not simply something that is there, before we act, instead it is also already an action that simply exists. Since existence, according to our metaphysical reconstruction above, is a presupposition of causes, it must be the ground of causes in a metaphysical framework.

Pippin, similarly, tries to explain the unity and difference of the will and action by describing them as different directions of one distinction:

“[...] in the theoretical attitude, we attempt to “make” the objective subjective; and in the practical attitude we attempt to make the subjective objective, all such that freedom, the true realization of spirit, requires the appropriate sort of mediated subjective-objective relation.” (Pippin, R. 2008, p. 134)

We have already discussed the subordination of the objective (in terms of reality) to the subject. Reality is a necessary part of subjectivity, so that the subject is not simply fantasizing. From this reconstruction of the subject as something that is directed against its own subjectivity, or its randomness of constructing, the transition to the object has to be explained. Hegel concludes therefore the following:

“It is true, or rather it is truth itself, because its determination consists in being in its existence [Dasein] – i.e. as something opposed to itself – what it is in its concept; that is, the pure concept has the intuition of itself as its end and reality. (Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, p. 54)

So the opposition of the subject against itself is something that Hegel grasps as existence and that at the same time defines its will and thus its progression towards reality (the sphere of determinative objects). This structure of opposition and the production of the object from subjectivity is Hegel’s project of self-consciousness. Causality in this regard is only the objectified other of the subject.

There are also some comments we have to make on the prevalence of the mental. It seems, according to the common view, that freedom is the premeditated mental state before action arises. The mental, in this scenario however, can be seen as only the result of other mental states; it would be the result of a causal mechanism. However, thinking, even though the outer body might not act or move, is an action, and not before action. It would be a misattribution to seek for man’s existence in the pure mind, a free starting point like an unpreceded chain of causes. Such a conception of the mind is only the dualistic complement

to what we call the physical, and thus a result of a mistaken view in the first place. If we, however, have a flawed conception of the physical in the first place, how then should we have a correct concept of its complement? It might be, however, that our investigation reveals that we should frame action and thought dialectically (compare Pippin, Robert 2008:239). Thus Hegel writes:

“[...] an individual cannot know what he really is until he has made himself a reality through action” (Hegel, *Philosophy of Spirit*, p. 240)

The individual, also a theoretical, metaphysical term, remains in a state of potentiality that, however, is never known, because it is only a pragmatic conception to regulate our practical problems. Action, however, connects this metaphysical individual with the universal, while the universal is a result of formal thinking and also only a regulative result. The universal is also metaphysical if it is thought to be substantial in this case. The action, however, is conceived to be the mediation between the improper metaphysical conceptions of the individual and the universal. It is conceived to be what we are dealing with in the first place:

“The action is thus only the translation of its *individual* content into the *objective* element, in which it is universal and recognized, and it is just the fact that it is recognized that makes the deed a reality. (Hegel, *Philosophy of Spirit*, p. 388)

So I say that the scheme of causality does not capture what existence is, but that the contradiction of causality provides an opening to Hegel’s theory of action. I have yet not said what I mean by ‘action’. It is actuality, in the metaphysical sense of the term, or existence as the idea of a residue that is not yet comprehended, but that is understood with regard to what we are as a self-explanatory structure. By virtue of self-consciousness’ self-exploration by opposing determinate concepts against itself, we are free from causal beginnings, but only because causal beginnings are a misinterpretation in the process of a self-exploration that

extends its results too far. Rather we should conceive ourselves as a self-explanatory structure that achieves a relation between the individual and the universal. Based on these conceptions Hegel concludes what man is:

“The *true being* of man is rather his deed; in the individual is actual, and it is the deed that does away with both aspects of what is [merely] ‘meant’ [*Gemeinte*]: in the one aspect where what is ‘meant’ has the form of a corporeal passive being, the individuality, in the deed, exhibits itself rather as the *negative* essence, which only *is* in so far as it supersedes [mere] being. Then too the deed equally does away with the inexpressibility of what is ‘meant’, in respect of the self-conscious individuality. (Hegel, *Philosophy of Spirit*, p. 193,194)

In conclusion, a theory of causality and a theory of the mental have to be preceded by a theory of self-consciousness. Self-consciousness, however, cannot be understood as a free unity in a transcendental space, but is what emerges in our societies and occurs in the form of the problems we are dealing with. The principle of causality is then a mistaken extrapolation of the original problem, as well as the conception of a pure self-consciousness. Hegel offers an account of how self-consciousness, in terms of the subject, delivers a conception of reality (determinative objects). Objects are then understood according to causal laws. This positing of opposites, however, is the original action of self-consciousness; it is not part of the framework of causality or freedom, but turns out to be their foundation. The theory of self-consciousness is for Hegel not a logical endeavor, but a historical task described in the *Philosophy of Spirit*.

Bibliography

Pippin, Robert B. "Hegel's practical philosophy: rational agency as ethical life." Cambridge University Press 2008.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften, vol. 8. Edited by Eva Moldenhauer and Karl Markus Michel. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp 2014.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich, and Allen W. Wood. "Hegel: Elements of the philosophy of right." Cambridge University Press 1991.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "The science of logic." Cambridge University Press, 2010.

Swindal, James. "Action and Existence: A Case for Agent Causation." Palgrave Macmillan UK 2012.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich: "Phenomenology of Spirit.", trans. *AV Miller* 1977.

Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich. "Gesammelte Werke." Vol. 19, ed. Rheinisch-Westfälische Akademie der Wissenschaften. Hamburg: Felix Meiner 1968, according to Pippin, R. 2008.