

Agency and the Will, from Hegel to Vygotsky

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

2027 Book Proposal

1. 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, Spinoza did away with the Free Will altogether.

After a brief introduction on Kant’s conception elaborated in his moral philosophy, I will follow Hegel’s narrative of the Will, first in 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. Next I will deal with Vygotsky who traced the development of the Will from birth to adolescence by tracing the development of voluntary control of various aspects of behaviour. 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.

Using Vygotsky to inform the critique of Giddens 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.

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

To understand the will, we must look back before the concept was founded; I am not an aficionado on ancient philosophy; 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.

3. Spinoza's Determinism

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

4. Kant's Moral Philosophy

Kant's critique of European philosophy; Outline of Kant's moral philosophy; legislate the laws of one's own actions; Hegel's critique of Kant on Morality.

5. Hegel's Logic, Subjective Spirit and the Philosophy of Right.

- (1) Briefly on the subject matter of the *Logic*; the Syllogism of Action;
- (2) the Subjective Spirit on the development of natural Will; the foundation of the Philosophy of Right;
- (3) the Will in the *Philosophy of Right*; an interdisciplinary concept of the Will.

6. Vygotsky on Self-Control and the development of the Will in childhood.

- (1) Self-control as first unit of analysis, artefact-mediated action;
- (2) the Will is the totality of self-control;
- (3) the development of the Will through childhood: new born; infant; early childhood; pre-school child; primary school child; adolescent.
- (4) The Will as the configuration of volition; the limitations of the peer group.

7. Activities

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

8. Structuralism

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

9. 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.

10. An interdisciplinary theory of the Will, 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.

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

12. 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.