

Rehabilitating Social Philosophy's Normative Criteria

A Review of Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation*,
translated by Frederick Neuhouser
and Alan E. Smith (New York: Columbia
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Only recently translated from German into English some ten years after its initial publication, Rahel Jaeggi's *Alienation* aims to rehabilitate a key normative criterion within the tradition of social philosophy that has long been discredited, or at any rate underutilised. Jaeggi's aim, to be more precise, is to reestablish the critical concept of "alienation" [*Entfremdung*] in order to diagnose extant "social pathologies"—or, in the terminology of the current issue, various modes of "precarity"—that are either neglected by, or irreducible to, the prevailing Rawlsian account of (in-)justice. At the same time, Jaeggi is adamant that this diagnostic task or function cannot rely on any problematic essentialist claims for justificatory support à la Hegel and Marx.¹ Her approach is therefore neither strictly liberal nor "universalist", but rather aims to "mediate between these unsatisfying alternatives" (48).

Alienation is divided into three discrete yet thematically linked parts. Part 1 sets out a historico-philosophical reconstruction of the critical concept of alienation. It begins with a preliminary definition of alienation as a “relation of *relationlessness* [*eine Beziehung der Beziehungslosigkeit*]” (22). That is to say, alienation does not designate a state or condition marked by the *absence* of a relation, but rather the *presence* of a normatively deficient relation—to oneself, others, or the (social) world more generally. Jaeggi traces the origin of the concept of alienation back to the figures of Rousseau and Hegel. Whereas the former, in Jaeggi’s view, identified systemic alienation in the form of the pathological dependence of subjects on false patterns of intersubjective recognition and morally vacuous social norms and institutions, the latter is said to have conceived of alienation in the exact opposite terms; namely, the “*cleavage* between individual and society rather than in the individual’s loss of self *through* society” (28). From here, the evolution of the concept of alienation tracks two separate trajectories—the “socio-economic” and “existential”—instigated by Marx and Heidegger respectively. The Marxist trajectory links alienation to economic structures and conditions peculiar to capitalism, which systematically impede the ability of human beings to fully realise their “species-essence” [*Gattungswesen*] through non-alienated modes of production. By contrast, the Heideggerian trajectory concerns itself with various “inauthentic” phenomena that are, in a specific instance, by the deep-ontological detachment from one’s innermost self.

Leaving these conceptual and methodological differences to one side, Jaeggi devotes the remaining section of part 1 to an assessment of the concept of alienation in the light of the challenges posed by the two nominally unified camps of political liberalism and poststructuralism. To pose the challenges addressed in this section in the form of a question: has the dual descriptive-diagnostic appeal of alienation not been completely exhausted, since it is underpinned by certain objectivist and perfectionist premises that are irreconcilable with the historicist and value-pluralist tendencies of contemporary philosophical thought? While Jaeggi is intent on answering this question, she is also careful to avoid the pitfalls associated with Rawlsian and

Foucauldian approaches (respectively, abstractness and an autonomy-denying conception of “subjectivisation”). For this reason, Jaeggi posits that a modified conception of alienation, which is suitable to a contemporary readership, hinges on the ability of such a proposal to position itself midway between, as she puts it, “ethical subjectivism and objectivism, between espousing from and espousing substantial moral conceptions of the good life, between abandoning the idea of autonomy and holding onto illusory conception of subjectivity” (48). Key to this reconceptualisation is Jaeggi’s establishment of an adequate evaluative criterion against which various alienated relations can be *immanently criticised*, one that makes no claim as to the fixed or immutable nature of the “human life-form.”² Jaeggi appeals here to the concept of “appropriation” [*Aneignung*], arguing that the conceptual inverse of alienation ought to be understood not in terms of freedom from external constraints (Hobbes), and still less in terms of *eudaimonia* (Aristotle). Appropriation should instead be understood as the *positive* capacity to establish practical relations to oneself, others, and society, such that one may take them to be “one’s own” [*sich zu Eigen zu machen*] via a process of reflexive identification. As Jaeggi argues,

The conception of appropriation refers to a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the world, a way of dealing with oneself and the world and of having oneself and the world at one’s command [über sich verfügen können]. Alienation, as a disturbance in this relation, concerns the way these acts of relating to self and world are carried out, that is, whether processes of appropriation fail or are impeded. (51)

According to this strictly formal definition, alienation implies an ethically deficient mode of praxis whereby subjects are unable not only to be reconciled with, but also actively transform aspects of themselves, others, and the social world. In consequence, indifference, reification, meaninglessness and even precarity are all species of alienation.

In contrast to the historico-philosophical orientation of part 1, part 2 concretely analyses the phenomenon of “self-alienation” [*Selbstentfremdung*] with reference to four case studies. For Jaeggi, the received view of self-alienation, which hypostatizes the existence of a true, inner self that is unable to realise itself, amounts to nothing other than an antiquated, essentialist distortion. The alternative form of self-alienation that Jaeggi attempts to bring into view is defined as “a condition in which one is unable in crucial respects to *appropriate* the life one is leading and in which one does *not have oneself at one’s command* in what one does...” (61, emphasis in original). Under this categorial framework, Jaeggi looks first at the example of a young academic who, without directly intending it, settles down into the proverbial middle-class, suburban way of life—a way of life to which he is nevertheless unable to relate to meaningfully—as an instance of *powerlessness*.

The second and third case studies, which involve an ambitious employee who attempts to affirm his place within his workplace, and a so-called ‘giggling feminist’ whose self-image is belied by her own actions, serve to illuminate the phenomenon of self-alienation from the perspective of *social roles* and *personal division* respectively. Finally, *indifference* is embodied in the character of Perlmann, the protagonist in Pascal Mercier’s novel *Perlmann’s Silence*, inasmuch as his general mode of comportment as a linguistics professor is so saturated in apathy as to warrant the metaphorical description of him as permanently anesthetised. These examples of powerlessness, prescriptive roles, division, and brute indifference, all of which are instantiations of a broader phenomenon of self-alienation, do much more than simply bring the concept of alienation into sharp relief for the reader. For the light that these case studies shed on the psycho-social problems facing modern subjects is highly engaging and challenging, and evinces the kind of attention to everyday, practical situations too often missing from contemporary philosophy.

In part 3, Jaeggi attempts to systematically explicate the model of subjectivity implied in her previous historico-philosophical and phenomenological analyses of alienation. Partaking of certain elements

of German idealist (Hegelian) and existential philosophies, Jaeggi's so-called "appropriative" model of the self is distinguishable both from the traditional essentialist view of the subject and the post-modern take on subjectivity. The self, we read, is neither a fixed ontological structure endowed with universally applicable capacities and functions, nor a radically indeterminate entity comprised of a plurality of personality-forms whose realisation hinges on little more than free choice. Eschewing these two extremes, Jaeggi's conception of the self is "*simultaneously given and made*" through dynamic appropriative relations with oneself and others that are concretely embedded in the world (158, emphasis in original). The self therefore amounts, on this functionalist-expressivist model, to nothing other than a mode of *doing* that realises itself through those self-determined deeds or actions externalised within a shared "social space."³

Jaeggi's monograph concludes with the recognisable Hegelian thesis concerning the fundamentally *social* nature of human subjectivity. Developing an earlier train of thought, Jaeggi reaffirms that alienation can mean one of two very different things: either alienation *from* others and the social world (Hegel), or alienation *by* intersubjective-social conditions (Rousseau). A fierce proponent of the former camp, Jaeggi summarises her argument in these terms: "My reconstruction of the concept of alienation has aimed to show that it is only by relating appropriatively to social practices that determine our lives and not by (to use Hegel's terms) abstractly negating them that an unalienated relation to self is possible" (202). For Jaeggi, the flight or escape from those "others" by which one is necessarily determined is a mere illusion, as reflected in Hegel's concept of "abstract freedom" [*abstrakte Freiheit*]. Positively stated, then, other subjects and social-institutional structures or conditions assume the role of the essential determinants of human subjectivity insofar as both contribute to the actualisation of a non-alienated relation-to-self, itself understood—somewhat inconsistently, it must be said—in terms of the achievements of self-determination and self-realisation (204).

On the whole, there can be little doubt that *Alienation* successfully realises its stated goal: to resurrect a central normative criterion

within the tradition of social philosophy. The great virtue of the monograph lies, in my view, in Jaeggi's consistent ability to chart a middle course between the two opposing stances she sets up between Rawlsian liberalism and its abstractness, on the one hand, and Hegelian and Marxist universalism and its putative ethical overburdening, on the other. With her modified conception of alienation, Jaeggi is therefore able to diagnose various distortions within the social field in a meaningful way, and therewith to maintain the viability of social philosophy as a specific discipline.⁴

Having said this, questions remain over *Alienation's* exegetical and philosophical adequacy. One of the philosophical problems of Jaeggi's monograph is its failure to afford any systematic attention to the *objective* component of alienation. From part 2 onwards, the centrality of the *subjective* aspects of alienation are self-evident. While Jaeggi's treatment of self-alienation, appropriative subjectivity and other attendant concepts and phenomena are never positioned outside or beyond society, the fact that other subjects and social norms and institutions are addressed only ever passing seems to yield a truncated social-philosophical account, one that is lacking the requisite descriptive and normative depth. In view of Jaeggi's insistence that an ineliminable structural connection exists between self and society, one might have expected her monograph to say much more about alienated intersubjective and social relations and practices within contemporary societies, or at any rate the embeddedness of self-alienation within such relations and practices.⁵ To this end, *Alienation* would appear to align much more with the Heideggerian, existential camp of alienation theories than with the Marxist, socio-economic camp, and future research would do well to redress this apparent one-sidedness.⁶

One of the exegetical problems with *Alienation* is its all-too-common misrepresentation of Hegel's *Realphilosophie* and of his concept of freedom in particular. As recent scholarship attests, Hegel is increasingly being understood as a *normative* or *evaluative essentialist* of a broadly Aristotelian stripe, but not in the way, or for the problematic reasons, that Jaeggi outlines in *Alienation*.⁷ In the *Philosophy of Spirit*,

Hegel argues that “concrete freedom” [*konkrete Freiheit*], understood as the relational achievement of “being-with-oneself-in-the-other” [*bei sich Selbstsein im Anderen*], is the *formal essence* of “spirit” [*Geist*], or *mutatis mutandis*, of the “human life-form.”⁸ Freedom so conceived applies—not unlike Jaeggi’s own model of appropriation, incidentally—in a highly differentiated manner to all of those relations with “others” upon which human persons are necessarily dependent, including with internal and external nature, other persons, and historically conditioned social norms and institutions. Crucially, this reading is free of the kind of totalisation (unity, in Hegel, is always accompanied with difference), metaphysics (*Geist qua* God-like “substance” plays no role whatsoever in this reading), and substantialism (the actual *content* of concrete freedom is always necessarily historically and socially specific) commonly attributed to Hegel by Jaeggi, among others. It therefore arguably satisfies the very same theoretical criteria that Jaeggi seeks to introduce in *Alienation*; namely, normative or evaluative significance and formality.

Though it will of course require further elaboration and justification, my own recommendation is that Hegelian concrete freedom assume—ideally, alongside Jaeggi’s own proposal of appropriation—the role of an immanent evaluative criterion against which alienated relations in respect to various others can be criticised as “defects” [*Mangle*].⁹ The appeal to concrete freedom would also have the additional benefit of correcting a perceived flaw in Jaeggi’s terminological-cum-philosophical formulation of the achieved state or condition of non-alienation, which, as I have intimated, seems to vacillate between the concepts of appropriation, self-determination, and self-realisation. If, as I am suggesting, Jaeggi’s Hegel amounts to nothing more than a straw man, and her reluctance to embrace even “weak” versions of essentialism proves to be unfounded, then the Hegel identified above is as good an ally as any for contemporary social philosophers who, like Jaeggi, attempt to make good on their programmatic ambitions to normatively or evaluatively criticise extant social pathologies.¹⁰

Notes

1. On the notion of “social pathology” and its programmatic function within social philosophy, see Axel Honneth, “Pathologies of the Social: The Past and Present of Social Philosophy,” in *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), 3–49.

2. On the (left-)Hegelian methodology of “immanent critique,” see Axel Honneth, “Reconstructive Social Critique with a Genealogical Proviso: On the Frankfurt School,” in *Pathologies of Reason: On The Legacy of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 43–53.

3. Here, Jaeggi comes very close to Robert Pippin’s (post-Kantian) Hegelian account of freedom as *socially mediated rational self-determination*. See Robert Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 198–99.

4. Below I will argue against Jaeggi’s misrepresentation of Hegel’s universalism or “evaluative essentialism”. Most importantly of all, Hegelian essentialism, rather than being merely naturalistic *pace* Aristotle, is distinctly *evaluative*; in other words, it does not concern fixed or immutable natural potentials, but rather the *ethicality* of the distinctly “spiritual” [*Gestig*] phenomenon attributable to the “human life-form.”

5. So, too, one may well question the conspicuous absence of alienated relations to the natural world (as opposed to social world).

6. Axel Honneth has arguably made some progress in this direction with his recent work. See Axel Honneth, *Freedom’s Right: The Normative Foundations of Democratic Life*, trans. Joseph Ganahl (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014).

7. See Heikki Ikäheimo, “Holism and Normative Essentialism in Hegel’s Social Ontology,” in Heikki Ikäheimo and Arto Laitinen (eds.) *Recognition and Social Ontology* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 145–209; Allen Wood, *Hegel’s Ethical Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), Robert Stern, “Why Hegel Now (Again)—and in What Form?” (forthcoming).

8. As Hegel states: ‘The formal essence of spirit is therefore *freedom*, the absolute negativity of the Notion as self-identity.’ G. W. F Hegel, *The Philosophy of Mind*, trans. W. Wallace and A. V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), paragraph 382.

9. See my “*Contra* Pippin: An Evaluative Essentialist and Holistic Reading of Hegelian Concrete Freedom” (forthcoming in the *Hegel-Jahrbuch*).

10. See Heikki Ikäheimo, “Ethical Perfectionism in Social Ontology—A Hegelian Alternative” (forthcoming in *I That is We, We That is I—Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel*).