SENIOR SEMINAR PHIL-490 2018/2019

Contemporary Interpretations of Hegel’s Conception of Agency:

Robert Pippin and Slavoj Zizek on Agency, Identity, and Modern Liberal Politics

KALAMAZOO COLLEGE

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Offices Hours:
  • Tuesday: 1:00 – 2:00
  • Thursday: 1:00 – 2:00
  • By Appointment.

COURSE DESCRIPTION:

This year’s Senior Seminar examines late 20th- and early 21st-century interpretation of Hegel phenomenological account of human agency, freedom, and identity, particularly in connection with social recognition and political agency. More specifically, we will examine Robert Pippin’s and Slavoj Zizek’s distinctive and apparently incompatible interpretations and defenses of Hegel’s account of human agency. While Pippin appropriates Hegel as defending the various institutions of modern political liberalism – family, civil society, and state – Slavoj Zizek appropriates Hegel as advocating a radical form of political agency that shatters liberal institutions and free-market capitalism. It’s startling to face two such contradictory interpretations of a single figure, and we will critically examine their differing conceptions of agency.

The debate between Pippin and Zizek is wide-ranging, but we will concentrate on their distinctive and (apparently) incompatible approaches to interpreting Hegel’s phenomenology of freedom. While Pippin interprets Hegel from a semantic-epistemological orientation to rational explanation, Zizek interprets Hegel from an ontological orientation to how subjectivity (spirit [Geist]) and substance (nature) intertwine. Pippin adopts a semantic orientation to rational accountability, while Zizek adopts a psychoanalytic orientation to erotic vitality. We will examine how these different exegetical approaches – Pippin’s semantic-epistemological and Zizek’s metaphysical-ontological – lead to their radically divergent stories about political agency and emancipation. To oversimplify, Pippin locates Hegelian freedom in the giving and asking for reasons within a recognitive social context, while Zizek locates such freedom in the radical act of breaking out of such social contexts, the former focusing upon rationality and the latter focusing upon eroticism.
First, Pippin works within the revitalization of German idealism by such figures as Wilfred Sellers, Henry Alison, Terry Pinkard, John McDowell, Robert Brandom, and Sebastian Rödl, who analyze Kant and Hegel through the lens of Anglo-American philosophy of language. In contrast, Zizek spearheads the Slovenian School of Lacanian psychoanalysis and its surprising re-appropriation of German idealist thought. To oversimplify, Pippin’s interpretation is driven by a sophisticated inferentialist semantics coupled with a robust appreciation of radical historical conceptual change, while Zizek’s interpretation is driven by Lacanian psychoanalytic theory coupled with a Marxian historical materialism. Second, Pippin’s interprets Hegel as advancing a systematic semantic-epistemological account of rational explanations as such, while Zizek interprets Hegel as advancing a novel ontology of nature and hence “second nature” or human subjectivity. Third, Pippin’s champions Hegel as defending a novel account of rational agency as inextricably emerging from and sustained within social practices, communication, and institutions that function as the enabling “space of reasons,” while Zizek champions Hegel as demonstrating the way in which the social domain of “Big Other” (Hegel’s “ethical life”) radically decenters, colonizes, and subordinates erotically driven individual psyches. Fourth, each provides a distinctive portrait of political agency: Pippin offers a Hegelian defense of modern bourgeois institutions as a bulwark against rampart Capitalism, while Zizek offers a Hegelian critique of bourgeois institutions as impotent against the onslaught of global capitalism. Their debate regarding how to understand Hegel – Pippin’s Hegel a champion of Enlightenment rationality, Zizek’s Hegel a staunch critic of Enlightenment rationality – focuses our attention upon contemporary conceptions of political agency in the our current 21st-century. Fifth, For Pippin, the individual agent who attempts to break free from ethical coexistence risks suicide, while Zizek considers such an act of refusing the ‘Big Other” as both “abyssal” and yet emancipation. Finally, while Pippin considers any such “abyssal act” (Rüdiger Bubner’s phrase) that breaks from ethical life (Lacan’s “Big Other”) to be deeply anti-Hegelian, Zizek considers such a radical act as a precondition for political agency amidst global capitalism.

The historical background for this exegetical debate is the great antithesis at the close of the 19th Century between Hegel and Nietzsche, who offer radically opposing views on the social and historical conditions of modern agency. While both Hegel and Nietzsche appropriate Kant’s discovery of radical freedom – his “Copernican Revolution” in modern philosophy – they provide opposed conceptions of how such social conditions function vis-à-vis modern agency. Hegel offers a “phenomenology of spirit,” a historical-developmental account of how reason arises from, and remains rooted in, modern social practices and cultural institutions. In contrast, Nietzsche offers a “genealogical of power,” a deconstructive account of how the will to power frees itself from debilitating social and cultural conditions. Both offer, then, a critique of modernity inheritance of the Enlightenment, but their respective views on how freedom appropriates itself appear to be radically and irreconcilably opposed. This apparent dichotomy between Hegel’s Enlightenment aspirations and Nietzsche’s Anti-Enlightenment cynicism sets the stage for our critical analysis of Pippin’s and Zizek’s opposing interpretations of Hegel as, respectively, defending and attacking modern social institutions.

We will examine this contrast Hegel’s developmental phenomenology of rational
agency and Nietzsche’s deconstructive genealogy of erotic power by reading the work of a philosopher who is also trained as a psychoanalyst: Elliot Jurist. In Beyond Hegel and Nietzsche: Philosophy, Culture, and Agency, Elliot Jurist contrasts Hegel’s phenomenology of spirit and Nietzsche’s genealogy of power as two different ways of fathoming the social and historical conditions of modern agency. According to Jurist, Hegel’s constructive developmental account of human agency was appropriated and empirically developed by Anglo-American ego psychologists, who consider the strength of the rational ego as a positive, liberating accomplishment. Nietzsche’s alternative deconstructive genealogical account was appropriated by the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose psychology of the (unconscious) subject provided a radical alternative to Anglo-American ego psychologists. French poststructuralist philosophers such as Foucault, Derrida, Althusser, Lyotard, and Bourdieu refined and extended this genealogical, deconstructive skepticism regarding modern sociality, unmasking rationalization as social reification. Jurist discusses this dichotomy between a phenomenology of rational spirit and genealogy of erotic power with a great sensitivity to how differently ego psychologists and psychoanalysts of the subject conceive, organize, and conduct analysis. It’s precisely Jurist’s great sensitivity to the analytic setting – with its emphasis upon therapeutically guided self-fathoming amidst modern forms of human suffering and crisis – that allows Jurist to so sharply contrast Hegel’s and Nietzsche’s opposing views of modern agency. Familiarizing ourselves with Jurist’s work allows us to appreciate, first, how Hegel is characteristically interpreted as opposed to Lacanian psychoanalysis and, second, the difficulties Zizek faces in offering a Lacanian interpretation and appropriation of Hegel. In this way, Jurist sets the stage for us to critically assess the differences between Pippin’s and Zizek alternative exegetical approaches to Hegel. While Jurist embraces the psychoanalytic appropriation of Hegel, he emphatically rejects Lacanian psychoanalysis as adequate to the task, and this allows us to appreciate the challenges Zizek faces in his Lacanian approach. I am asking students to read this text during the summer to prepare for our seminar.

In the first part of the fall seminar, we examine Habermas’ distinction between self-determination (i.e. universal moral self-identification) and self-realization (i.e. individual biographical self-identification) as crucial to Hegel’s respective distinction between becoming a particular instance of the universal and the universal’s becoming individual or singular. A good deal of the debate between Pippin and Zizek turns on this difference between particularity – becoming a particular instance of the universal – and individuality – becoming individual of the universal. For Habermas, self-determination is the capacity on the part of speaking and interacting agents to communicate about what anyone owes anyone else in regard to moral consideration. Self-realization, in contrast, is the capacity to communicate about who I am as a unique individual among all others. Self-determination allows agents to become particular instances of the universal capacity of moral reciprocity, while self-realization allows agents to become individuals who present themselves as unique and distinct among all others. Different types of communication and discourse accrue to each: respectively, a context-transcending moral discourse that suspends (aufgehoben) one’s individual motivations and history, and a hermeneutic or context-inhering discourse that secures one’s historical and motivational biography. Moral discourse suspends – albeit tentatively, provisionally, incompletely – one’s individual situatedness, while hermeneutic discourse re-secures and re-solidifies it.
Habermas’s distinction between self-determination and self-realization allows us to more precisely understand Hegel’s distinction between particularity and individuality, which is a central point of contention between Pippin and Zizek.

We then address the central texts of the seminar: namely, Pippin’s *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* and Zizek’s *The Ticklish Subject: The Absent Centre of Political Ontology* and *Less Than Nothing*.

**REQUIRED TEXTS:**

1) **Summer Reading:**
   a. **Required:** Jurist, Elliot L.
   b. **Recommended:** (two short books).

2) **Required Readings Posted on Moodle:**
   i) Jürgen Habermas:
   ii) Slavoj Zizek: Excerpted chapters from *Less Than Nothing*:
      (1) Introduction: *Eppure se muove*
      (2) “Fichte’s Choice”
      (3) “Not only as Substance, but Also as Subject”
      (4) “Suture and Pure Difference”
      (5) “Objects, Objects Everywhere”
      (6) “The Foreshore of Struggle, historicity, Will . . . and Gelassenheit”

3) **Required Textbooks:**

4) **Background Reading:**


READING SCHEDULE FALL TERM

HABERMAS’ ACCOUNT OF THE SELF-DETERMINATION AND SELF-REALIZATION:

- Week One: Habermas’s formal-pragmatic study of communication and critical diagnosis of modernization and rationalization:
  - Jürgen Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action*:

- Week Two: Habermas’s communications-theoretic account of self-determination and self-realization and analysis of communicative pathologies.
  - Jürgen Habermas:

PIPPIN’S INTERPRETATION OF HEGEL’S ACCOUNT OF RATIONAL AGENCY AS ETHICAL LIFE:

- Week Three: The Psychological Conditions of Freedom:
  - Pippin:
    - Introduction: “Leading a free life”
    - Pippin: “Naturalness and Mindedness: Hegel compatibalism”

- Week Four: The Psychological Conditions of Freedom:
  - Pippin:
    - “On Giving Oneself the Law”
    - “The Actualization of freedom”
• Week Five: From Psychological to Social Conditions of Freedom:
  o Pippin:
    ▪ “The freedom of the will: psychological dimensions”
    ▪ “The freedom of the will: social dimensions”

• Week Six: The Psychological Conditions of Freedom:
  o Pippin:
    ▪ “Hegelian sociality: recognitive status
    ▪ “Recognition and politics”

• Week Seven:
  o Pippin: The Institutional Conditions of Freedom:
    ▪ “Institutional rationality”
    ▪ “Concluding remarks”

ZIZEK’S LACANIAN INTERPRETATION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN 19TH- AND 20TH-CENTURY PHILOSOPHY: THE POLITICAL UNCONSCIOUS IN POST-STRUCTURALIST CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY:

• Week Eight: The Discovery of the Unconscious:
  o Zizek:
    ▪ “The Deadlock of Transcendental Imagination, or Martin Heidegger as a Reader of Kant”
• Week Nine: Hegel’s Critique of Kantian Transcendentalism:
  o Zizek:
    ▪ “The Hegelian Ticklish Subject”
• Week Ten:
  o Zizek: Contemporary Post-structuralist Critical Social Theory:
    ▪ “The Politics of Truth, or, Alain Badiou as a Reader of St Paul”

WINTER TERM

• Week One: Post-structuralist Critical Social Theory:
  o Zizek: “Political Subjectivization and its Vicissitudes”

• Week Two: Gendered Selves:
  o Zizek: “Passionate (Dis)Attachments, or, Judith Butler as a Reader of Freud”

• Week Three:
  o Discussion and Dinner
ZIZEK AS A READER OF GERMAN IDEALISM: LESS THAN NOTHING

- Week Four:
  - NB: If students have papers accepted for conference presentation, then we
    will shift to a workshop format in preparation for the conference.
  - Zizek: Introduction: Eppure se muove
- Week Five: Fichte’s Critique of Kant:
  - Zizek: “Fichte’s Choice”
- Week Six:
  - Zizek: Hegel’s Appropriation of Fichte’s Conception of Spontaneity:
    - “Not only as Substance, but Also as Subject”
    - “Suture and Pure Difference”
- Week Seven:
  - Conference presentations
- Week Eight:
  - Conference presentations
- Week Nine:
  - Conference presentations
- Week Ten:
  - Conference presentations
Senior Seminar Format for Student Presentations

Presenters,
- Work together in pairs to present the week’s readings.
- Prepare a three- or four-page handout with key points and passages, with a clean summary paragraph about the central argument of the chapter.
- Present, when possible, clear examples and illustrations from their own lives or from favored artworks.
- Come to class prepared to both present and lead discussion.

Remaining Seminar participants,
- Frame three, precise, textually based questions and email these questions to seminar all participants by Sunday evening.
  - One or two interpretive question(s).
  - Two or one critical question(s).
- Come prepared with these questions and others to class, drawing upon the text to raise, first, interpretative questions and, second, critical appraisal of the position.
- Actively engage with presenters during and after their presentation.

The overall idea of having students either present the material during designated weeks or engage in sustained question-and-answer with presenters is to focus upon the honing of student verbal skills, the type that are needed for participation in professional conferences. Because students will be presenting their own research at a professional conference during winter term, we will use Senior Seminar to prepare them for this exercise. Here is the department’s assessment rubric for conference presentations:

Conference Presentation Rubric

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>CONTENT:</th>
<th>Beneath Expectations</th>
<th>Adequate</th>
<th>Good</th>
<th>Outstanding</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clarification of Key Question Addressed</td>
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<td>Scholarly Context</td>
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<td>Presentation of Others’ Views</td>
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<td>Articulation of Argument</td>
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<td>Consideration of Alternative Views</td>
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<td>Explication of the Significance of the Issue and the Argument</td>
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<td>Quality of argument</td>
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**Philosophical Approach**

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<tr>
<th><strong>VERBAL STYLE:</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>Demeanor (nervous versus calm, poised versus fidgety)</td>
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<td>Clarity of Voice &amp; Level of Enunciation</td>
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<td>Pace &amp; Tempo of Presentation</td>
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<td>Eye Contact &amp; Connection with Audience</td>
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<td>Re-presentation of Audience Questions</td>
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<td>Response to Audience Questions</td>
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<td>Sympathetic Tone with Audience Members</td>
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<td>Ability to Manage Critical Pressure</td>
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