

SPIRIT, LIFE, AND FREEDOM

A RESPONSE TO MARTIN HÄGGLUND'S 'THIS LIFE'

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A prominent theme of Martin Hägglund's *This Life* is the relation between *spirit* and *life*, which is also a central theme of three philosophers Hägglund finds especially compelling: Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, all of whom endorse conceptions of spirit that make it metaphysically continuous with natural life. For these thinkers, as for Hägglund himself, this topic also concerns the nature of freedom – that is, of *spiritual* freedom, the kind of freedom appropriate to human beings. For those who espouse the metaphysical continuity of spirit and nature, one constraint on a satisfactory account of freedom is that there must be something in nature that approximates the freedom of spiritual beings. Before addressing Hägglund's account of this isomorphism, it is important to get clearer on precisely what he takes spiritual freedom to be. With the aim of thinking *with* rather than *against* Hägglund, I will argue that there are tensions, or at least ambiguities, in how he conceives of spiritual freedom.

THE MAIN CLAIM OF HEGEL'S SOCIAL PHILOSOPHY IS THAT THE INSTITUTIONS OF WESTERN MODERNITY HAVE MADE THE REALIZATION OF FREEDOM NOT MERELY POSSIBLE BUT ACTUAL

Describing Hägglund's account of spiritual freedom as beset by internal tensions is not the worst thing one could say about it. Human freedom is a complex phenomenon. Of the three philosophers mentioned above, Hegel is the most sensitive to the complexity of human freedom, and in this respect, as in many others, Hägglund is deeply influenced by him. Hegel deals with this issue by distinguishing various types of freedom and showing that they are jointly realizable. The main claim of his social philosophy is that the institutions of Western modernity have made the realization of freedom in all its guises not merely possible but actual. Another philosophical possibility, of course, is that the various dimensions of human freedom are so complex

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that realizing them together is impossible. This would amount to a more tragic view of human existence than Hegel settles for, and Hägglund is firmly on Hegel's side of this issue: human existence is finite but not for that reason tragic. It is not, in other words, the case that some of the fundamental aspirations of spiritual beings can be realized only by sacrificing others.

Let us begin with Hägglund's initial characterizations of natural and spiritual freedom. Most forms of animal life are said to possess a certain kind of freedom, or self-determination, because they are capable of "self-movement" in the pursuit of ends deriving from their own nature, in this case, biological self-maintenance and reproduction. What distinguishes natural from spiritual freedom is that the former "provides a freedom of self-movement, but only in light of imperatives that are treated as given and ends that cannot be called into question by the agent itself", while the latter "requires the ability to ask which imperatives to follow in light of our ends, as well as the ability to call into question, challenge, and transform our ends themselves".

If one focuses on these lines alone, it can appear that



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Hägglund offers a standard Kantian definition of spiritual freedom: to be free is to have the capacity to set ends for oneself, including the values in light of which one sets one's ends. Missing from this definition is something that Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche build into their conceptions of spiritual freedom, namely, some relation to *life* that counts as free. For these thinkers, spiritual freedom is inseparable from life activity, or the reproduction of biological life. It is important to note, however, that Hägglund says that spiritual freedom *requires* the ability to decide how to pursue our ends, as well as the ability to question those ends themselves. In other words, spiritual freedom requires, *as one of its conditions*, the ability to set and evaluate ends, but it is not exhausted by that ability. I take Hägglund to claim, following Hegel, Marx, and Nietzsche, that spiritual freedom involves more than merely taking up a certain subjective relation to one's ends, but that it also requires some worldly realization. Indeed, this must be Hägglund's view if the importance he accords to democratic socialism – which surely is not merely an external condition of being free but a form of life within which spiritual freedom is positively realized – is to make sense.

For Kierkegaard, on the other hand, spiritual freedom consists entirely in a subjective relation one has to one's own agency, and this makes him more a follower of Kant than of Hegel. Hägglund provides a long and interesting discussion of Kierkegaard, which raises the question of how the latter's picture of freedom fits together with the Hegelian strands of Hägglund's larger vision. These appear to be incompatible with Kierkegaard's exclusive emphasis on subjectivity, as expressed in the claim that "what renders the world meaningless – or meaningful – is not an objective feature of what there is but proceeds from the degree of your attachment to what you see". For the Hegelian tradition, in contrast, there are substantial objective constraints on being able to find what you do meaningful, and Hägglund clearly wants to endorse this element of Hegel's legacy. At best, Kierkegaard's vision of spiritual freedom might be taken by Hägglund to impose certain subjective constraints on spiritual freedom. Hegel himself is moved by a similar thought in his treatment of the subjective elements of *Moralität*. Presumably Hägglund envisions a similar appropriation of Kierkegaard's conception of freedom, although it is not entirely clear what he wants to retain from that conception and how

it fits in with his larger picture of spiritual freedom.

What, then, beyond the mere capacity to set one's ends, is required for spiritual freedom? One clue to Hägglund's answer might be his claim that "secular faith is the condition of freedom". This characterization of freedom goes beyond the earlier one because it makes it clear that freedom is not a mere capacity that, as Kant would have it, every rational being possesses simply by virtue of possessing practical reason. If secular faith is the condition of spiritual freedom, then the latter is not something we simply have but something we must win for ourselves (through secular faith). But because secular faith, too, might be taken to consist simply in a subjective orientation towards one's finitude and towards one's particularity – echoes, again, of Kierkegaard – this does not yet explain how or why spiritual freedom must be realized in the world to be complete.

One concept that plays an important role in Hägglund's vision of spiritual freedom appears in his discussion of Karl Ove Knausgård's *My Struggle*: "the struggle is how to make this life your own." This suggests that spiritual freedom involves *appropriation*, where this, at least for Hegel, consists in making something your own that was previously "other," although only on the further condition that what you appropriate also retains for you a part of its initial otherness. The appropriation involved in spiritual freedom cannot be a mere swallowing up of the other; to relate spiritually to one's other is to see it as at once oneself and not oneself, a relation Hegel describes as "being *at home in the other*." The mark of spirituality, then, is the enduring of contradiction, in this case the ambiguity involved in relating to something you take to be both you and not you. Hegel's most illustrative example of such a relation is love, in which I see my beloved as part of me but without forgetting that we are also separate persons.

What, though, does appropriation have to do with realizing spiritual freedom *in the world*, as opposed to merely internally? If freedom consists in establishing a relation to something that retains some of its quality of being "other," then my freedom can be fully realized only if it has some existence external to me. Presumably, the spiritual freedom realized in democratic socialism will involve our ongoing activity of participating in, and thereby reproducing, social institutions that we

can recognize as "a home." If we want to bring spiritual freedom in relation to natural freedom, we might recall that for Hegel, even nonhuman animals, through their life activity, are constantly engaged in negating the otherness of the world and making it "their own." One way they do this is by taking up elements of the surrounding world that first appear in a form they cannot immediately use and working them into a form that can serve their own life purposes. But they also make the world into a home more literally: beavers build dams; bees build hives; birds build nests – all of which is to say that they both negate *and* preserve the external world in a way that enables them to be at home within it. For Hägglund, I take it, the spiritual analogue of dams, hives, and nests is democratic socialism.

THE MARK OF SPIRITUALITY IS THE ENDURING OF CONTRADICTION, IN THIS CASE THE AMBIGUITY INVOLVED IN RELATING TO SOMETHING YOU TAKE TO BE BOTH YOU AND NOT YOU

Another way Hägglund characterizes spiritual freedom is related to appropriation without being precisely identical, namely, "recognizing yourself in what you do". Freedom in this sense is realized in activity that gives expression to one's practical identity, an idea one finds in Kant and, more forcefully, in Hegel. This vision of freedom is not incompatible with other conceptions of freedom discussed by Hägglund, but it emphasizes something different from the conception of freedom as setting your own ends. Here the emphasis lies not on how you come to adopt the ends you act on but on whether what you do expresses "who you are," where, as both Kant and Hegel hold, "who you are" may not be something you choose or explicitly adopt.

The final component of spiritual freedom I want to discuss concerns an ambiguity in Marx's discussion of freedom in post-capitalist society with respect

to whether spiritual freedom is most fully realized within the sphere of life activity or externally to it. According to one (Hegelian) strand of Marx's thought, life remains a constitutive element of free spiritual activity, such that the latter consists in a variety of ways in which subjects relate freely to life, including to their own nature as living beings. In the domain of the social, spirituality is at work wherever humans engage in activity that reconciles their natural neediness with their aspiration to be free. On this view, the form of social life appropriate to our nature is one in which every life activity is a site of freedom and every expression of freedom addresses our needs as living beings. This ideal animates Marx's early thought, for which unalienated labour, the hallmark of "true human emancipation," satisfies both our material needs and our aspiration to be self-determining, and, as a well-known passage in *Capital* attests, it is also present in his later work. As depicted in this passage, spiritual freedom is realized when cooperative activity responding to material needs is both transparent and self-organized. This vision of freedom gives full due to human finitude, taking into account our material neediness and dependence on others in satisfying those needs.

In the very same passage, however, Marx claims that "true" freedom arises only once the needs of life have been taken care of, implying that activity directed at satisfying those needs can be free only in a limited sense. What motivates Marx to say this is the thought that material production is "determined by need and external purposiveness," where, by the latter, he means activity that has only instrumental value for the person undertaking it. This, however, confuses two concepts that need to be held apart, namely, activity that satisfies the needs of life, and activity that is undertaken only for an end outside itself. It is wrong to think of activity that serves the ends of life as necessarily less meaningful, less "for-its-own-sake" than activity divorced from our nature as living beings. There is an unfortunate residue here of the Kantian view that needs imposed on us by nature are necessarily a source of unfreedom. Even if there are human activities done only for their own sake and unrelated to natural need, why consider them higher expressions of freedom than what can be had in our everyday activities of labour and family life, as long as these are organized and affirmed as meaningful by us? In other words, what makes alienated labour unfree is its purely instrumental significance for the labourer,

not the fact that it serves the ends of life. Mostly Hägglund appears to agree with this, identifying Marx's "realm of necessity" with labour that is "merely a means", although at times he fails to distance himself clearly enough from Marx's confusion.

I have distinguished six ways of thinking about spiritual freedom that are not obviously compatible:

- 1) the capacity to set ends and to revise them in light of values we freely espouse;
- 2) a purely subjective attitude – attachment – to who one is and what one does that renders my activity meaningful;
- 3) appropriation: establishing a practical relation to something "other" that rids the other of its otherness without, however, completely eliminating it;
- 4) recognizing yourself in what you do;
- 5) reproducing life in a way that is transparent, self-directed, and valued as an end in itself; and
- 6) activity not determined by the needs nature imposes on us and done purely for its own sake.

These distinctions raise several questions: Are all of them conceptions of spiritual freedom for Hägglund? Is it plausible that all six conceptions can be realized in a single form of life? Which are most intimately related to the main concept of *This Life*, secular faith? Hägglund's answer to the second question might be, following Hegel, that these various conceptions – extending from Hegel to Kierkegaard to Marx – are all *dimensions* of spiritual freedom and that "true" freedom involves realizing them jointly. If so, that is a further illustration of the non-tragic character of Hägglund's vision of a finite but spiritually free human existence.

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