Review

Practical necessity, freedom, and history: From Hobbes to Marx

David James,
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Many left-leaning individuals in the post-Cold War era came to see living with capitalism as a matter of what David James calls ‘practical necessity.’ In other words, they find capitalism unattractive, but they are resigned to its persistent reality because in their eyes there are no meaningful alternatives. James argues that such appeals serve an ‘ideological’ function by concealing actually existing possibilities for the sake of maintaining socio-economic power asymmetries (p. 8). ‘Practical necessity’ could therefore be viewed as an instrument suppressing the human potential for freedom.

However, James also draws attention to the other side of the coin. For instance, ‘practical necessity’ was arguably also a motor of the early institution building toward the European Union. Few political decision-makers were keen on constraining state sovereignty, but the fresh memory of war’s devastation convinced many that there are no meaningful alternatives to forming a new institutional arrangement in Europe. Hence one could regard ‘practical necessity’ also as an instrument in a progressive narrative of history toward freedom in which something good results from and justifies past suffering and evil. James asks if we could detach ourselves from such secularized theodicy and nevertheless think in a principled way about a future political community in which necessity and freedom are ‘reconciled.’

This book is not an analysis of how contemporary capitalism reproduces itself or how supra-national institutions may evolve. It examines important questions that underlie such issues theoretically by considering the intricate relationship between the concepts of necessity, freedom, and history in the works of canonical figures of modern political philosophy from Hobbes to Marx.

James approaches this task in a methodologically ambitious way. Three distinctive aims are woven together throughout the book. Firstly, the book is an intellectual history that proceeds chronologically and selectively reconstructs certain themes from Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, Hegel, and Marx with a view to revealing how the notions of necessity, freedom, and history mutually constitute each other in their works. Even though this is essentially a close textual analysis, the conceptual debates are often embedded in historical events, such as European colonialism or the Terror phase of the French Revolution.

Secondly, James also evaluates these arguments. His critique is, generally speaking, of an 'immanent' kind, namely working with many of the premises of each philosopher but uncovering their inconsistencies, false conclusions, and unfulfilled potentials. His engagement is guided by the 'regulative ideal' of a future society in which freedom and necessity are 'reconciled.' This ideal is gradually developed in each chapter throughout the book but more fully fleshed out only toward the end.

Finally, the Introduction frames this critical reconstruction as a response to the classical 'two concepts of liberty' debate. James provides a more expansive understanding of what constitutes a 'constraint' on freedom, along with a positive concept of freedom as self-determination. He characterizes negative freedom as the absence of (actual and potential) constraints on pursuing whatever one desires (pp. 1-2). In contrast, an agent is self-determining when taking a reflective distance from 'immediate desires' and acting on 'principles of action' that are conscious formulations of 'higher-order desires' (pp. 42-43). When the constraints on action are self-imposed, freedom and necessity are 'reconciled.'

This intricate methodological approach is at once intellectually challenging and enjoyable. Nevertheless, its ambitious nature comes with certain difficulties, on which I would now like to briefly comment, using James's analysis of Hegel as an example. He reconstructs Hegel's argument that the Terror is a historically necessary outcome of the French Revolution as a manifestation of 'absolute freedom,' which is an one-sidedly universalistic understanding of freedom that does not give its due to difference and particularity. Through this painful historical experience, humanity learns the deficiency of 'absolute freedom' and is thus led to develop an alternative, higher concept of freedom, which James calls 'ethical freedom.'

James reconstructs the relevant sections in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in a refreshingly intelligible manner and claims that Hegel fails to demonstrate the Terror's 'historical necessity.' As he is aware, Hegel's response to this claim would come from his later *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, which grounds the necessity in question on the speculative logic developed in his *Science of Logic*. James mentions this possible response, but chooses not to dwell on it (pp. 115-117). That is ultimately because he abstains from taking sides in the long-standing debate in the Hegel literature among those who develop 'anti- or post-metaphysical' interpretations of his practical philosophy and those who assign a foundational role to the speculative logic (p. 126). But does he really not take a side? In fact, by claiming that Hegel fails to demonstrate the necessity of the said historical process while remaining silent on his speculative logic, he is *de facto* taking a position against the latter group of Hegel scholars, but does so without explicit justification.

It may well be that case that James is right. However, the point that I wish to make is different. Hegel's speculative logic distinguishes between many different senses of necessity and contingency, and without engaging with that rich logical analysis and the hard question of its relationship to Hegel's practical philosophy, James cannot even state with sufficient precision in what sense Hegel claims to demonstrate that the aforementioned historical process is necessary (and at the same time contingent).

This avoidance is not a merely a pragmatic decision, but is deeply grounded in the methodological approach of the book. Hence, one could make similar points with reference to the other chapters on Hobbes, Rousseau, Kant, or Marx. In each case, the author carefully avoids engaging with the underlying, foundational ('metaphysical,' if you will) questions in their notions of freedom, necessity, and contingency. The downside of this methodological choice is that these key concepts of the book leave much to be desired in terms of their philosophical depth. Yet the benefit is that it allows the author to leave the notion of 'practical necessity' thin and flexible enough to cover this ambitiously wide variety of thinkers. However, this very choice lands him to the following difficulty, the response to which would require precisely an engagement with the foundational questions that James seeks to circumvent. Let me first specify a little further what James means by 'practical necessity.'

A relatively clear-cut case of 'practical necessity' in James's sense could be illustrated as follows. Suppose that a robber threatens an individual with a gun and asks for his wallet, and he complies. Of course, the individual could have refused and risked death, hence his action was in one sense not necessary. One can nevertheless say that he acted out of 'practical necessity' because refusing to accept the constraint imposed on him by the robber could have come at great cost to himself. He would have most likely acted differently if he thought that there were other meaningful options available. James mentions 'the desire to avoid harm' and 'the desire to satisfy basic material needs' (p. 3) as constraints that are sources of 'practical necessity.'

James later widely extends this notion of constraint so as to count even a 'self-understanding and normative picture of the world' (p. 102) as a source of 'practical necessity' in order to be able to apply it to Hegel's argument on the French Revolution. This is where the difficulty arises. A 'self-conception and normative picture of the world' may be a constraint in the sense of a 'principle of action' (or the foundation thereof), with which an agent positively identifies and self-imposes. Such a constraint may also be analogous to the robber's demand in the example above.

That a constraint may be both at once, namely that an agent may positively identify with a 'robber's demand' (e.g., 'the ideas of the ruling class' in Marx and the claims of ‘the phenomenal self’ in Kant) as *his own* ‘principle of action,’ is a fundamental worry that motivates all the defenders of positive freedom discussed in this book. Consequently, they all (implicitly or explicitly) have the conception of a ‘true self’ as the source of legitimate, as opposed to fraudulent, ‘principles of action,’ thanks to which they hope to identify genuine cases of self-determination (as opposed to self-enslavement).

The Hegelian version of such a theory of self is ultimately rooted in ‘the self-thinking thought’ of his speculative logic, which finds practical expression in his notion of freedom as ‘the free will which wills the free will’ (p. 132). However, since James avoids getting involved in this foundational level of the debate, his defense of positive freedom remains silent in the face of this most basic challenge posed by the Janus-face of ‘practical necessity.’

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