

SYNERGETIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND FREEDOM¹

The aim of this essay is to reflect on synergetic anthropology and freedom. This reflection has at least two dimensions: Synergetic anthropology *and* freedom can mean synergetic anthropology *'as'* freedom and denote the analysis of the place of synergetic anthropology in the contemporary philosophical discourse, and it can mean synergetic anthropology *'on'* freedom and refer to what synergetic anthropology has to say about freedom. Both dimensions need to be clarified when we want to understand why and how synergetic anthropology should be of relevance for the contemporary political philosophical discourse. I will linger only briefly on the first dimension, synergetic anthropology *as* freedom, and will then turn to the second dimension, synergetic anthropology *on* freedom. After a brief overview over the discussion of negative and positive freedom in contemporary political theory, I will suggest that synergetic anthropology can offer a fresh perspective on the topic of positive liberty.

Synergetic anthropology *as* freedom

Synergetic anthropology *as* freedom has been my topic of research for some years already. (Stöckl 2006; Stöckl 2007; ШТЕКЛЬ 2007) I have tried to show that synergetic anthropology constitutes an independent intellectual achievement within the realm of contemporary Orthodox thinking. It stands in the tradition of Russian religious philosophy and émigré-theology and it represents a particular interpretation and philosophical elaboration of Neo-Palamist theology. Synergetic anthropology overcomes the century-old polemical divide between the Eastern Orthodox intellectual tradition and Western thought, and it revisits the Orthodox tradition in the light of the experience of totalitarianism. It thereby responds to problematics that are intrinsically modern – What is the nature of the human subject? What is the meaning of individual freedom? How can a modern individualist anthropology account for community? Synergetic anthropology tackles these questions as universal, recognizing that they concern Orthodox societies as much as Western societies, especially after and in the light of the shared experience of totalitarianism. Instead of assuming an outsider's position from where phenomena of Western modernity are being judged, as is the case for a large part of Orthodox philosophizing about modernity, synergetic anthropology seeks to identify elements of an alternative anthropology in all intellectual

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traditions, Eastern and Western. One could say that instead of merely speaking about modernity, it operates *within* the condition of modernity. In this sense, synergetic anthropology itself can be described *as* an act of intellectual freedom. This assessment, it seems to me, is the precondition for asking further what synergetic anthropology can add to the contemporary philosophical discourse.

Synergetic anthropology on freedom

In this essay, I want to shift my perspective from the intellectual phenomenon “synergetic anthropology” to the actual body of ideas. I ask what contribution synergetic anthropology makes with regard to one particular issue in modern political philosophy: to the problematic of human freedom. This problematic can be summed up as *how to conceptualize the relationship between the freedom of the singular human being and its being bound in a common life-world*. Standard discussions of freedom in political philosophy have, as I will show below, difficulties in reconciling individual freedom and the common. As a result, contemporary political theory prioritizes individual freedom over the question what people have in common. Synergetic anthropology, I would like to suggest, might offer a way of giving equal weight to both issues and thereby help to re-evaluate the relation between individual freedom and the common.

Freedom in political philosophy is usually discussed in binary terms – the freedom of the ancients versus the freedom of the moderns, or positive freedom versus negative freedom. In the aftermath of the French Revolution, the philosopher Benjamin Constant made his famous distinction between “the freedom of the ancients” and “the freedom of the moderns”. The ancient concept of freedom was said to be participative and elitist, the modern political ideal of freedom representative and egalitarian. For Constant, the ancient ideal of freedom had been overcome once and for all by the modern understanding of freedom.

One hundred and fifty years later, the Russian-American philosopher Isaiah Berlin confirmed and strengthened Constant’s conclusion. In his famous essay *Two Concepts of Liberty*, written in 1958, Berlin distinguished between two kinds of liberty, negative and positive. (Berlin 1969) Negative liberty he defined as the absence of obstacles to someone’s actions, positive liberty as personal autonomy, opportunity and capacity to act. Berlin admitted that both concepts of liberty represent valid human ideals, but he pointed out that historically, the positive concept of liberty had been susceptible to political abuse. He argued that the concept of positive liberty, put forward by thinkers such as Rousseau, Kant and Hegel, had frequently served to justify demands for collective control, leading to the

paradoxical situation that under the name of freedom individuals and certain groups within a society were coerced for the good of society as a whole. Negative liberty, by contrast, regarded any kind of constraint or discipline as a danger to individual liberty and thus insisted strictly on liberty as non-interference. In Berlin's view, negative liberty, the principle of non-interference, was superior to positive liberty in guaranteeing the freedom of individuals within a society. Berlin's analysis set the parameters for political theory in the second half of the twentieth century. Liberal political theory was built on the priority of negative freedom (Rawls 1993).

Critique against the paradigm of freedom as non-interference came from communitarian philosophers, who argued for the common with the help of sociology. Their basic argument was that every person is initially embedded in the context of a family, of a religious tradition, of a local community or the like. (Taylor 1989) These various kinds of community are, from the communitarian viewpoint, indispensable for the proper functioning of the polity. However, despite their focus on the value of community, communitarians do not clarify the difficult relationship between the freedom of the singular human being and its being bound in a common life-world, they assume this relationship as given. Communitarians see the task of politics to guarantee "the freedom to exit" from pre-given communities and "the freedom to enter" into bonds chosen freely out of self-interest. (Walzer 2004) The dichotomy of negative and positive liberty remains unaltered by this argument.

A critique of the dichotomy of negative and positive freedom can be found in the work of the British historian of political thought Quentin Skinner. He has proposed "a third concept of liberty" (Skinner 2002). Skinner recuperated, as historian, the intellectual tradition of civic republicanism, and, as political philosopher, the political tradition of republican freedom, of freedom as non-domination. (Skinner 1998b; Skinner 1998a; Van Gelderen and Skinner 2002) Skinner argues for an alternative understanding of negative freedom. His focus is the good of the community, but not in the sense that the personal freedom of the members of a community is subordinated to this good. In the republican tradition, a citizen is considered as free only in a *free state*. The question is therefore how to maintain a free state. The precondition for a free state and non-domination is economic prosperity and the active political participation and engagement of each citizen. In other words, people have *to do something* for their freedom. Such an understanding of freedom is more demanding than the liberal concept of negative freedom. Not simple non-interference is the republican ideal of freedom, but an active engagement with the scope of maintaining the freedom of the individual and the freedom of the polity. Also the concept of community in republican theory is more demanding

than the communitarian concept. Community is not merely a social given, it is the result of active engagement and cooperation beyond pure self-interest.

Where before we had the dichotomy of negative and positive liberty, we now have, after Skinner's intervention, a three-fold constellation of liberal negative freedom, republican negative freedom and positive freedom. However, the republican insistence on the relevance of the common good still presupposes a negative concept of freedom (non-domination). It is not concerned with the second half of the dichotomy, with positive freedom. Skinner accepts Berlin's analysis of positive freedom as potentially totalitarian: For Skinner, advocates of positive liberty believe that human nature has an essence and that human beings are free only if they succeed in realizing that essence. The danger connected with the idea of an essence is clear: "Those who imagine that human nature has an essence, and thereby hold that there is just one goal to which we all ought to commit ourselves, tend to bully or at least to behave self-righteously towards those of more pluralist allegiances." (Skinner 2002, 242)

This last statement makes clear that positive freedom, when bound up with an ontology of essences, cannot escape the totalitarian trap. But what if the problem were not the notion of positive freedom, but the ontology of essences that is attributed to it? What if we were to re-conceptualize positive freedom from the perspective of a non-essentialist ontology? In the remainder of this essay, I want to argue that synergetic anthropology represents one example for how this can be done.

Let me first briefly recapitulate how synergetic anthropology develops a non-essentialist ontology. Synergetic anthropology puts forward an alternative to classical anthropology. There, man was defined by his centre and it was assumed that a person's being in the world hinges on this centre. The clearest example of this is Descartes' reduction of the self to its bare minimum, the *cogito*. In Sergej Horužij's anthropology of the border, the contrary movement is taking place. Not a reduction towards a centre, but a triple unfolding towards the outer limits of the self. Horužij suggests that man is first and foremost constituted by his relationship to the 'Other'. This relationship unfolds in three principled dimensions – the ontological, the ontical and the virtual, and in their possible combinations ('hybrids'). Where before we would have man as an essence and a centre, and where the post-metaphysical philosophy of the twentieth century identifies a lack, Horužij puts man as an energetic constellation and as a pluralistic being endowed with a triple border. His main point is that the borders are not closed, but that they are realms in which processes of interaction with the respective 'Other' can take place. These processes aim at what Horužij calls 'unlocking' (*razmykanie*), the interaction of man's manifestations with the energies of the 'Other'. From

an 'anthropology of the border', Horužij thus moves to an 'anthropology of unlocking, synergetic anthropology (*sinergijnaâ antropologiâ*). (Хоружий 2005)

At the heart of synergetic anthropology's attempt to offer an alternative to the Cartesian subject lies the realization that the Orthodox tradition in particular (and spiritual traditions in general) are built around an experience which Cartesian metaphysics cannot account for: the experience of *theosis*, deification. This experience is described in the ascetic literature of the Fathers of the Desert and it is explained in the theology of Hesychasm. Its basic element is the understanding that man exists vis-à-vis another form of being and that a transformation of human being in view of this 'other-being' is possible. Horužij reminds the reader that once we take the anthropological reality of mystical experiences and spiritual practices seriously, we are inevitably led to a reconsideration of the classical anthropological paradigm of man as an autonomous subject. What Horužij wants to offer is a philosophical anthropology that is open – but not limited – to the reality of mystical experiences. Horužij is putting forward a philosophical anthropology that has a place for religious experience while not being a religious anthropology itself.

Horužij's entire work about Hesychasm can be read as an exemplary discussion of the ontological border of man. In Hesychasm, the practitioner treats himself as an energetic formation in a series of ascetic and spiritual practices ('the ladder') with a view to effecting a *trans*-formation. Notably, this energetic transformation cannot emanate from the human self alone, it must rely on an interaction with the 'Other'. From the Christian perspective, this 'Other' is the triune God, and transformation, *theosis*, takes place in view of Divine grace (*blagodat'*). In short, it is at the ontological border where the person makes a 'religious' experience, an experience of an existential transformation. Needless to say that Horužij does not think of this experience as 'belonging' to any of the confessions or religious traditions. He is making a more general argument for the reality of religious experiences, made tangible in spiritual and ascetic practices.

Synergetic anthropology thereby puts forward a perspective on religious experience that differs radically from the modern conception of religion. Modern politics tend to attribute to religious traditions the tendency to develop totalitarian and fundamentalist characteristics, to turn into closed systems of interpretation and identification and to guide their members with an essentialist logic of positive freedom. A look into the history of religious conflicts and of the various struggles between politics and religious institutions makes clear that there are valid reasons for this modern stance and for the consequences that have been derived from it: the separation of church and state, the delegation of religion to the private. However, the

reading of synergetic anthropology reminds us that the modern perspective is informed by an ontology of essences. Such a perspective can bring into focus religion first and foremost in terms of institutions. It turns a blind eye to religion as spiritual practices, because the anthropology which underlies the reality of spiritual practices does not square with an essentialist ontology. An important contribution of synergetic anthropology to the topical task of theorizing the place of religion in political modernity, it seems to me, lies precisely in making this blind spot visible.

The positive freedom we find in synergetic anthropology is no longer one of ‘realizing an essence’, but of ‘realizing an unlocking’. Let me explain this assertion step by step: A religious spiritual tradition is defined by a body of ideas and a body of practices. The stability and continuity of teaching and practices in view of a shared *telos* is necessarily borne by a community, it cannot be the work of the singular human being alone. Individual progress within a spiritual tradition is a unique and personal matter, a free decision, but it is the community that provides the tools for this progress and at the same time flows out of the shared practices. (Horužij 2006) This double-constellation of personal freedom and shared practices stands neither for an entirely negative nor for an entirely positive understanding of freedom. The freedom of the person lies in the autonomous choice whether to strive for an existential unlocking or not.

From the Christian point of view, this is the freedom of the human being to accept the idea of being created in the image of God or to reject it. Most importantly: Even when the person understands him- or herself in the image of God and seeks an ever more adequate realization of this image (this is the meaning of *theosis*), there is no ‘end’, no ‘essence’ to be realized. What is sought after in this positive freedom is not ‘essence’, but ‘unlocking’ – hypostatic relationship. Prototypical for this movement are the ascetic practices of Hesychasm (‘the ladder’), which is also why Horužij makes this topic the centre of his research. (Хоружий 1998)

Hesychasm is centred the mystery of the triune God. The Divine has both the properties of unity and of diversity. God is both one as well as three. In *Being as Communion*, Joannis Zizioulas has explained how, when elaborating the meaning of the Trinity, the Greek Fathers did not determine as the ‘cause’ of the Divine one unity or substance of which existed three hypostases (as happened in Western theology, where Augustine chose to refer to Divine substance with the abstract noun *divinitas*). For the Cappadocian Fathers the ‘cause’ of the Divine was the person of God the Father. The Fathers described the qualities of the person of God the Father as *freedom* and *love*: freedom, because God creates the world *ex nihilo*, in an

act of freedom, and love, because he brings forth the Son and the Spirit, in other words, he makes his being identical with relatedness or communion. (Zizioulas 1985)

Created in the image of God, the human subject has the qualities of freedom and relatedness. However, for the human being the quality of relatedness is a potentiality, the realization of which is predicated on the first quality, on freedom, on free choice. Man has to choose to enter into relationship. It is important to bear in mind at this point that central to the Christian understanding of the human subject is the event of the fall. Only through this event does the Orthodox understanding of the person become plausible. Man is in the image of God in the principle of freedom: “[...] man is capable of either accepting or rejecting the ontological precondition for his existence, he can refuse [...] personal communion, and say ‘no’ to God [...].” (Yannaras 1984, 20) Man has, in fact, said ‘no’ to God with the event of the fall. The meaning of the original sin is that man has refused the relationship with God and has forfeited relatedness to his fellow human beings. From a Christian view it is precisely through the person of Jesus Christ, namely in the celebration of the Eucharist and in repentance, that a reversal of this ‘no’ is possible. In the Church, the restoration of the quality of relatedness in personal relationship with God and with fellow human beings takes place. Being truly ‘in the image of God’ means for Christians not only exercising freedom, but exercising freely relationship. What follows from this is that from Christian viewpoint a human subject conceptualized only in terms of individual freedom is incomplete. A human being is only truly ‘person’ when in relationship with others. This relationship, however, is not borne by the human subjects alone but takes place in the light of man's existential relatedness to the Divine. It takes place in view of a transcendental *telos* which is defined as freedom and relatedness.

This understanding of the nexus between human freedom and relatedness leads to a, from a modern point of view, paradoxical constellation: For modern everyday understanding, we are free when we are not bound by anyone and anything (non-interference), and we are unfree when we are bound in a relationship. From the perspective which synergetic anthropology derives from Orthodox theology, we are free when we are in relationship. Such an understanding of freedom is incompatible with the classical distinction between negative and positive liberty. Whereas Skinner proposes a ‘third concept’ of liberty in the form of an alternative concept of negative freedom, we could derive from synergetic anthropology a ‘fourth concept’ of liberty in the form of an alternative concept of positive freedom. Skinner's neo-Roman concept of liberty and the Christian understanding of freedom are merely two sides of one and the same coin: the neo-Roman argument denies, “that the will can be

autonomous unless it is also free from dependence on the will of anyone else” (Skinner 2002, 263), the Christian argument upholds that man, created in the image of God, is autonomous from the Divine will, and is thus free to make a choice between positive and negative freedom, but that the acceptance of positive freedom bears even greater freedom. From this perspective, positive liberty is subject to free choice and does not consist in ‘essence’ but only in an ever larger ‘unlocking’. It seems to me that such an understanding of freedom can resist the totalitarian potential of positive liberty, because it does not allow for the formulation and institutionalization of an ‘end’ to which personal relationships are the ‘means’. ‘Realizing an essence’ suggests that there is an end-point to positive freedom, a stage where this freedom is finally achieved and realized. The idea of ‘unlocking’ knows no such end-point. It is an ongoing process of relating.

Practices of freedom

Asceticism, a Christian concept of liberty, freedom as ‘unlocking’, is this at all a response to the problematic of freedom in political modernity? As a short-cut answer, it certainly is not. However, it seems to me that with the elaboration of an ‘ontology of unlocking’ synergetic anthropology responds directly to some of the shortcomings of the contemporary philosophical discourse.

It contributes, in particular, to the highly topical task of analyzing the role and place of religion in political modernity. Synergetic anthropology is not a religious anthropology, but it is an anthropology which accounts for religious experience. Such a perspective offers a more differentiated analysis of religion than merely a focus on religious institutions. More generally, it responds to the problem of grasping the relationship between the freedom of the human subject and its being part of a community. What we can take from this analysis of synergetic anthropology and freedom is that the freedom of the human subject need not be reduced to simple non-interference, nor to the ‘freedom to exit’. On account of synergetic anthropology, freedom is not either negative or positive, but it may become either that or the other by faculty of the human subject who is the bearer of this freedom. On this point, it seems to me, synergetic anthropology does indeed have a strong argument to add to the political philosophical discourse. Just like Skinner’s ‘third concept of liberty’ emphasizes the role and responsibility of the individual for personal and communal freedom and well-being, synergetic anthropology brings into focus that we might better not talk about freedom as being *in principle* negative or positive, but about freedom *in practice*.

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