

# Mediation and Intention in Hegel's Theory of Action

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**Abstract:** This paper addresses two much overlooked elements of Hegel's theory of action — the place of artifact-mediation elaborated in the Syllogism of Action in the *Logic*, and the contradiction between Purpose and Intention in the *Philosophy of Right* which constitutes the sociality of action. Both elements are essential to making sense of the “cunning of reason,” and the principle uniting the three books of the *Encyclopedia*.

## Artifact Mediation — The Syllogism of Action

It is the contention of this paper that the Syllogism of Action [*der Schlusse des Handelns*], elaborated in the penultimate phase of the *Logic*, just before the Absolute Idea when “the Notion ascends as a free Existence” (1816, p. 844), is a crucial foundation stone of Hegel's theory of action. And yet, for example, Michael Quante does not mention it in his ground-breaking work (2004) on Hegel's theory of action and nor do any of the eminent writers collected together in Laitinen and Sandis' (2010) volume on the topic, all of whom focus exclusively on the Morality section of the *Philosophy of Right*. With a key link connecting the three books of the *Encyclopedia* obscured in this way, I believe it is impossible to grasp the significance of Hegel's theory of action and the fundamental relation between his social theory and the *Logic*. The Syllogism of Action is the final section of the Idea, uniting the Idea of the True with the Idea of the Good, opening to the Absolute Idea.

‘In the syllogism of action, one premise is the *immediate relation of the good end to actuality* which it seizes on, and in the second premise directs it as an external *means* against the external actuality.’ (Hegel 1816, p. 821)

This syllogism makes the obvious but important point that in order to change the world according to the subject's own conception of the good, it is necessary to use as means another part of that same actuality. This may be simple common sense when interpreted as a maxim for social and political action, but it also contains an even more fundamental truth about *all* purposive action: a subject's thoughts become material realities which confront other subjects as objective material reality only thanks to the mediation of the action by material means, that is, by means of *mediating artifacts*. Such artifacts maybe the voice or a hand activated by the actor or a tool or tract of land used in labor; it may be a symbol such as marks on a page or a screen, or a tool or machine. Again, this may seem to be plain common sense, but I have never met the Hegel scholar who grasps the significance of artifact mediation for human action. I will elaborate on artifact mediation below.

And the Syllogism of Action has another important implication. It explains how the categories of the *Logic* pass into external existence, and are thus manifested in Nature and social life. In this syllogism, material reality *acts upon itself* according to its own inherent nature, irrespective of the subjective intentions of the actor and thereby realizes the Concept as something objective, conforming to Nature, precisely *through* human action.

An action realizes what is already implicit in Nature taken together with the changes already wrought in Nature by human activity. The Realized End may or may not be what the subject had in mind in taking up the material means to realize his or her ends, which is a merging of the intentions motivating the subject and objective tendencies inherent in Nature and culture. For example, when you fly an airplane, you may reach your destination, but no laws of physics are violated thereby, but a thunder storm could lead to an unintended result.

As Hegel put it (in a passage littered with italics for emphasis):

‘The purposive activity [*zweckmäßige Tätigkeit*]\*, with its means [*Mittel*], is still directed outwards, since the purpose [*Zweck*] is also *not* identical with the object, thus it must first be mediated with the object. The means, as the object in this *second premise*, is in *immediate* relation with the *other* extreme of the syllogism, the objectivity as presupposed, the material. This relation is the sphere of mechanism and chemism now *servicing* the purpose that is their truth and free concept. That the subjective purpose as the power of these processes in which the *objective dimension* rubs up against itself, keeps itself *outside them* and is what *preserves itself* in them — this is the *cunning* of reason.’ (Hegel 1830/2010, §209)

‘Reason is as *cunning* as it is *powerful*. The cunning consists generally in the activity of mediating which, while by letting the objects, in keeping with their own nature, act on one another and wear themselves out on one another, without meddling in this process, achieves *its* purpose alone.’ (Hegel 1830/2010, §209 addition)

The subject and object are each mutually independent totalities, but the means, *that is, the object*, is, according to Hegel, more powerful in the long run:

‘That the end relates itself immediately to an object and makes it a means, as also that through this means it determines another object, may be regarded as *violence* in so far as the end appears to be of quite another nature than the object, and the two objects similarly are mutually independent totalities. [...] the *means* is superior to the finite ends of *external* purposiveness: the plough is more honorable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends.’ (Hegel 1816, p. 746)

So whilst a person can do as he or she chooses, as natural and cultural human beings our ends are, in fact, *given* to us:

‘The *tool* lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. In his tools man possesses power over external nature, even though in respect of his ends he is, on the contrary, subject to it.’ (Hegel 1816, p. 747)

As Hegel says in the “Philosophy of History”:

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\* *Tätigkeit* in Hegel’s system means activity in the sense of behavior, irrespective of intentions, but the qualification “*zweckmäßige*” restricts *Tätigkeit* to object-oriented actions, *Handlungen*.

‘It is not the general idea that is implicated in opposition and combat, and that is exposed to danger. It remains in the background, untouched and uninjured. This may be called the *cunning of reason*, – that it sets the passions to work for itself, while that which develops its existence through such impulsion pays the penalty and suffers loss.’ (Hegel 1817, §36)

In this section of Hegel’s theory of action, located in the Logic, it is seen that individual human beings and the formations of consciousness in which they act are simply the means by which Spirit unfolds itself. Insofar as our actions are to have any effect, we are both motivated and constrained by natural necessity, and the affordances embedded in the material culture surrounding us by our own actions, and those of previous generations. The absolute necessity for external means in mediating human intentions is at the root of this claim. So we have to look more closely at what is entailed in artifact mediation.

### Artifact Mediation of Actions

Purposive action (as opposed to habits and reflexes) is essentially conceptual. There are other grades of behavior and consciousness, purposive action necessarily entails conceptual thinking. Social practice is inclusive of the formation and enacting of purposes and intentions. But we must ask ourselves: how is it that thoughts become active in the external, material world? The answer to this question is *artifacts*.

By ‘artifact’ I mean not only useful objects like tools, clothing, etc., but also symbols like written or spoken words and even natural formations, such as stellar constellations vested with significance in human activity. But also, parts of the human body used in action, especially the organs of speech and the hands and other limbs, must also be seen as ‘artifacts’ in this context, as material objects fashioned and used in purposive human activity. Hegel prefigured such a category in his 1802/3 “System of Ethical Life” in which he referred to the tool as the ‘norm of labor’, speech the ‘tool of Reason’, and the child as the ‘absolute mediating term’. All these categories of artifact are *both* external material processes *and* shaped by and used in human activity. Only thought conformable to such material objects and processes, and manifested by their means, are active in the world, part of *Geist*. “Philosophy has to do with ideas or realized thoughts, and hence not with what we have been accustomed to call mere conceptions” (Hegel 1821/1952).

But not just any relevant material object or process functions in this way is the manifestation of Spirit. For example, the weather which all of us here in Melbourne experience makes conversations about the weather between Melbournians mutually comprehensible. But we all experience that weather differently, so the fact that when we talk with one another we both have experience of the same object is neither necessary nor sufficient for mutual understanding and action. If I tell you about the weather, the weather does not participate in that action; only the spoken words mediate my action upon you. If you do not speak English or you are deaf, the communication will fail. The role of shared experience or material conditions is *another issue*, nothing to do with Hegel’s theory of action.

According to the syllogism of action, there are *two* links between between subject and object — one is immediate, such as experience of the weather, and the other is mediated, such as the words and forms of expression with which we have learnt to

respond to the weather. Hegel's words in the essay opening to the *Science of Logic*, "With What Must Science Begin?" are of the utmost importance here:

'there is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation, so that these two determinations reveal themselves to be unseparated and inseparable.' (Hegel 1816, p. 68)

When the lumberjack engages with the tree he does so simultaneously by his immediate perception of the tree as a source of wood, and mediately with his axe, which has been fashioned for the purpose of obtaining wood from the tree, and the lumberjack conforms his behavior both to his object and the axe which functions as the norm of labor for a lumberjack. Concepts are transmitted culturally down the generations by means of artifacts — both forms of words describing, explaining, mandating, etc., and tools and other artifacts embodying norms of behavior, enabling and constraining activity. Individuals in general do not make these up as they act; we use the means inherited from past generations, and it is the use of this inheritance which characterizes Objective Spirit.

In the immediacy of my act, my subjectivity is superseded; if I have a wrong idea on the quality of the tree or how to use an axe, then my action will fail. No concept is possible other than by means of intermediating objects which are in general already both external (as material objects) and thought determinations [*Denkbestimmungen*] or bearers of Spirit in their capacity as products and norms of human activity.

## The Free Will

The next section of the *Encyclopedia* which must be seen as an integral component of Hegel's theory of action is the section on the transformation of the natural will into the free will in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*. It is not my aim to provide a gloss of Hegel's theory of action, but simply to point to what I regard as significant deficiencies in existing expositions of Hegel's theory of action. To that end, it is only necessary to mention that this section is also invariably omitted in treatments of Hegel's theory of action.

## Purpose, Intention and Welfare

All expositions of Hegel's theory of action focus on the section of the *Philosophy of Right* on Morality, and indeed it is an extremely rich chapter entirely worthy of book-length treatment on its own. However, I shall restrict attention entirely to the structure of action elaborated by Hegel underpinning his exposition of moral right. I omit entirely all questions of moral right, attribution and responsibility. My aim here is solely to point to a deficiency in current readings which in my estimation negates the whole efficacy of Hegel's theory of action, both in its moral dimensions and in its analytical aspects, viz., the failure to examine the *contradiction* between the purpose [*Vorsatz*] and intention [*Absicht*] of an action [*Handlung*] and the contradiction between intention and welfare [*Wohl*]. These concepts are not merely different, or at different levels of abstraction, but are *contradictory*. The ground of this contradiction is rational human action.

Hegel provides only the barest outlines of this structure. It covers about 14 paragraphs of the *Philosophy of Right*, but overwhelmingly these paragraphs are concerned with moral questions. To reconstruct the structure we have only a few sentences to go on.

There no doubt that the questions of responsibility and attribution are key components of his theory of action, as such, but the existing literature has dealt with these questions exhaustively and there is no need to recapitulate these aspects of the theory. It is solely the practical structure I shall be concerned with.

In general, writers have followed Michael Quante's interpretation, the groundbreaking work originally published in 1991, so I will summarize his reading here.

Firstly, in approaching his interpretation of 'intention' Quante first notes that "the relationship of 'intention' and 'purpose' does not emerge with any clarity from the elaborations" (2004, p. 99) — "'purpose' and 'intention' appear not to be disjunctive concepts" (2004, p. 101). But Quante then goes on to say that, on the contrary, "they are not disjunctive concepts [but] 'purpose is different from intention'" (2004, p. 126) and the distinction between purpose and intention represents "a higher development of subjective freedom" (2004, p. 124) and then goes on to weigh alternative interpretations of Hegel's text. One such interpretation is that "the proposed (i.e. purpose) in an action can be conceptually contrasted with the *intention with which* an action is implemented" (2004, p. 125). The outcome, as I read it, is that Quante sees Hegel's text "as an attempt to conceptually determine the *intentionality* of actions as a *cognitive* structure: the specific form of the agent's belief in reference to his act" (2004, p. 129). This scheme is right as far as it goes, but I believe it significantly understates what is at stake.

Although the section of the *Philosophy of Right* at issue is the section on morality, the structure of action elaborated is not merely a cognitive or affective structure pertaining to the individual actor, but rather represents the conceptual structure of the entire community. Action appears in the Logic as its culmination, by means of which the Logic becomes a 'free existence'. Action then appears in the section on morality where, as the bearer of concepts (thanks to the mediation of cultural artifacts), it enters into processes in which the Logic (the truth of the experience of consciousness) is manifested in World History and completes the circle of action, so to speak.

I will now sketch Hegel's theory action, without reflecting on issues of attribution and responsibility, simply focusing on the structure of action. My gloss is intended to reveal that what is at issue is not just a cognitive structure, but rather the social and ethical structure of the entire community. Cognition implies nothing more than the appropriation of the conceptual structure of the life of the community in action.

## Purpose

Hegel calls the concept that I have of the immediate act my *purpose*:

'... the action as carried out in immediate existence, shall be in principle mine, that thus the action shall be the *purpose* of the subjective will.'  
(1821, §114 (a))

The purpose entails the universal concept of the action, the particular content and the judgment to do it. The purpose also entails a means (again, the universal concept of the means, the particular content and the judgment to use it) which is used up and an object which is acted upon. All these constitute the purpose of the action. My purpose may be to damage some property, and entails the selection of a window and the resolution to do it, and the idea of throwing a stone at it, entailing the selection of a cobblestone and ripping it out of the pavement. None of this includes any notion of *why* I am doing it.

My reason for doing it Hegel calls my *intention*:

‘The particular aspect of the action is its inner content [a] as I am aware of it in its general character; my awareness of this general character constitutes the worth of the action and the reason I think good to do it — in short my *intention*.’ (1821, §114 (b)(α))

So continuing the example, my Intention may be to contribute to the campaign against the imposition of the poll tax by demonstrating my anger. My concept in having this intention is that many others will be carrying out similar actions which will have a cumulative effect on the government causing them to abandon their planned new tax. Obviously, without the like action of others, my action would be pointless. I do not intend to change the law by my action, without the expecting corresponding actions by others.

What I hope to achieve by acting with this intention, what I hope to get out of it, is my *Welfare*:

‘Its content is my special aim, the aim of my particular, merely individual, existence, i.e. *welfare*.’ (1821, §114 (b)(β))

Continuing the example, my welfare is the success of the campaign, with the government revoking the poll tax. Whether this does or does not make me happier is not the point; the concept I have of the tax system, a concept also guiding others in the campaign, and perversely those persuaded by it. It is what makes the success of the campaign a Good – “the Idea as the unity of the concept of the will with the particular will” (1821/1952 §129).

But whatever my particular aims may be, ultimately, my welfare is secured only by means of the general *good*:

‘This content (as something which is inward and which yet at the same time is raised to its universality as to absolute objectivity) is the absolute end of the will, the *good*.’ (1821, §114 (c))

It remains to find out whether the tax is buried forever, whether taking everything into account, the community finds that the tax was wrong and misconceived. In the fullness of time we may have to reconcile ourselves to it, or supporters of the tax will have to abandon it. This will be worked out long after everyone who was there on the day is long in their graves.

### If Purpose is the same as Intention

The reason that “Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side,” is funny is that unlike humans, chickens do not do things for a reason, they just do. But people also occasionally do things for their own sake. If I take a walk in the bush, not for my health, or to watch the sunset, but just for its own sake, perhaps by habit, then in this instance, I act like a chicken, and my intention is the same as my purpose, it is not a judgment and I do not form a concept of my act. But this is not normal human behavior.

As Hegel puts it,

‘The right of intention is that the universal quality of the action shall not merely be implicit but shall be known by the agent, and so shall have lain from the start in his subjective will ... willed by the subject as a *thinker*.

[Remarking that this] ... entails the complete, or almost complete, irresponsibility of children, imbeciles, lunatics, &c., for their actions.' (1821, §120)

Whether it is right to say that such an act has no intention or that the intention is identical with the purpose is a matter of no import, because the intention is the “universal side of the action” (Hegel 1821/1952, §119) implicit within the purpose, and its significance is only its difference from the purpose. In the case of ‘mindless action’, both purpose and intention are simply immediate, the kind of action common to all animate beings.

### If Purpose differs from Intention

Normally, we do things for a reason. For example, if I walk around the corner and put a letter in the postbox, the purpose of my act is putting the letter in the postbox, and the attendant walk is part of the same action, fulfilling the same purpose [*Vorsatz*]; the walking and stepping over obstacles along the way is all part of the action [*Handlung*] along with lifting the lid and placing the letter in the slot, my aim [*Zweck*]. There is no contradiction between all of these deeds because they are simply responding to conditions to the end of placing the letter in the postbox — posting it.

But what is my reason for doing it? Obviously, I don’t do it for its own sake. Hegel calls my reason for doing it my *intention* [*Absicht*]. In this case, I am submitting a postal vote in the upcoming election and it is my intention that by means [*Mittel*] of the postal ballot I will cast my vote, that is, my vote will be counted. A whole series of action are entailed in casting this vote, all united by the same intention. I do this in full knowledge of the Australian postal service and electoral system; these are not merely a ‘beliefs’ (though they are that as well) but founded in practices in this country which have continued since long before I was born, and my intentions actualize in my actions the social practice of voting in Australia. Indeed, this social practice would not exist other than through the concept of voting being shared amongst millions of Australian citizens and the intentions of us all to act, according to our circumstances, on that concept. My intention is the “universal side of the action ... a chain of external relations” (1821/1952, §119).

But my aim [*Zweck*], to place the envelope in the postbox realized other concepts, too, in particular the concept of a postal service. I know that the red pillar boxes on street corners are artifacts produced and used in the longstanding social practice of a postal service dating back to the Victorian era; such a concept of my aim is essential to my purpose. I believe in this concept and correctly so, for the same concept is shared by millions of Australians, including those who work for the postal service.

However, this concept means something different for different people. Let us suppose that the collector comes at 6pm and clears the box as scheduled, but instead of taking them on board, completing his run and delivering all the envelopes to the sorting office, he seizes upon one letter at a time and rushes all over the country delivering the letters to their addressees. Clearly this postie has not grasped the concept of ‘postal service’, at least its meaning for him. But if, as is most likely, he clears all the boxes and delivers them to the sorting office and all the other employees act according to the true meaning ‘postal service’ has for them, then my intention will be fulfilled, and if the officers of the Electoral Commission act according to the universally shared concept of elections in Australia, my postal vote will be counted, and my intention fulfilled. That is, unlike my

purpose which I fulfilled personally, my intention was fulfilled by a series of actions taken by *others*. This is why intentions must be *concepts*. The is what is universal about my intention.

‘The achievement of my aim, therefore, implies this identity of my will with the will of others, it has a positive bearing on the will of others.’  
(1821/1952, §112)

The point is that my intention is realized in a range of social practices which continue my purpose and complete my intention. Such a complex social practice is possible only in a community of human beings all of whom grasp the nature of their world and their place in it *conceptually*. My purpose (placing an envelope in the postbox) was not the same as my intention (to cast a postal vote). My purpose is not only different from my intention, but in essential *contradiction* to it, the ground of which are a number of social practices grasped in shared concepts by other members of the community. The contradiction between purpose and intention is the characteristic of intelligent creatures, creatures who think in concepts.

‘the transition from purpose to intention lies in the fact that I ought to be aware not simply of my single action but also of the universal which is conjoined with it. The universal which comes on the scene here in this way is what I have willed, my intention.’ (1821/1952, §118 addition)

But there is a further level of complexity which arises in modern societies.

### Intention differs from Welfare

It’s all very well for the postie to help complete my purpose by delivering my envelope to the sorting office, but one may well ask: What’s in it for him? A postal worker may well be motivated to successfully complete the intentions of users of the service and a great many employees and employers are so motivated, but this is not the concept by means of which modern societies work. Perhaps in some utopian future, but not in the present reality. The postie does his job, completing the intentions of users of the system, with the intention of completing his own projects, typically raising a family and so on, which rely on the Postmaster General paying him a salary, etc., etc. Although my intention is completed by the counting of my vote, my *welfare* is completed only in the recording of a majority for the Greens. My right to vote does not confer a right to have my preferred party elected to government. In general, *all* the participants in the complex of social practices which go into counting my vote in the election do so motivated by their own welfare [*Wohl*]. All have different concepts of their welfare, a contradiction which can only be fulfilled by social transformation taking place over a long period of time.

The moment of intention manifests mutual understanding of a shared concept, even though the concept has different meanings for particular groups. The moment of welfare manifests mutual differences within shared social practices. The contradiction between intention and welfare is the driving force for changes in relation between classes and other groups and all manner of social policy aimed at overcoming sources of social discontent and tension. But the existence of this contradiction is necessary to modern social life.

## Summary of structure of social action

The kind of modern society which Hegel knew, and which remains the case today, is characterized by a series of contradictions. The contradiction between purpose and intention is characteristic of a *human* society in which conceptual thought is realized in the form of a complex of social practices. The contradiction between intention and welfare, on the other hand, is characteristic of a *state* with a division of labor, free citizens and on-going struggle over social and political policy.

The development of a social structure entails the production of numerous artifacts, such as the postbox referred to above. The postbox was the artifact which mediated the action which completed my purpose in posting my postal vote. All modern societies rely on a vast constellation of such mediating artifacts (including the electoral legislation in my case) so that syllogisms of action are realized in a way which reproduces and advances the conceptual structure of the state.

The structure of social practices constituting a state are manifested in the contradiction between the various concepts of purpose, intention and welfare. These concepts are realized in actions and interactions which manifest judgments and syllogisms in the sense Hegel ascribed to these categories in the Logic, and the Logic is realized in social change and the historical unfolding of social practices.

## Units of Action

For Hegel, 'an action' includes all the thinking going into the decision to take action and all the consequences which follow from the action until actions by others intervene in the unfolding of consequences. This poses the question, however, of how one action is delineated from another. The contradiction between purpose and intention provides this distinction. So long as all the deeds carried out by a person are governed by a single intention, without the intervention of others, this marks a single action, and can be judged as such. The same point can be made about the contradiction between intention and welfare, marking out the various social practices from the universal form of life of which they are constituents.

## Gaps in the discourse on Hegel's Theory of Action

I believe that above words have demonstrated the importance of artifact mediation and the contradiction between purpose and intention to the entire import of Hegel's theory of action.

While many writers recognize the important place of action in Hegel's thinking, and many agree with me that Spirit can be usefully and consistently interpreted as human activity en masse. However, these two important features of Hegel's theory of action are omitted in all hitherto published accounts of that theory. I have mentioned Michael Quante's important 1991 study; I could add Mark Alznauer's *Hegel's Theory of Responsibility* (2015), Robert Williams' *Hegel's Ethics of Recognition*, the writings of Robert Brandom, and the volume edited by Laitinen & Sandis, *Hegel on Action* (2010), which includes 15 authors including Charles Taylor, Robert Pippin, Alasdair MacIntyre, Paul Redding and Michael Quante. Hegel tells me that the syllogism of induction misses the fact that the very next writer I consult may prove my hypothesis to be wrong. Nonetheless, if all these authorities on Hegel have overlooked these important issues, I think I am justified in asking that attention be drawn to them.

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