

Artefact-mediated Intersubjectivity as the basis for a Non-metaphysical Appropriation of Hegel

by Andy Blunden

Much social philosophy in recent decades has based itself on intersubjectivity and ideas of Recognition allegedly appropriated from Hegel[¶], whether extrapolated from Hegel's master-servant dialectic, early more expansive elaborations of Recognition or passing references in later works. While these relations could have rational application in the study of interactions between collective subjects, such as states and social movements, by and large they have little relevance to relations between *persons* and yet the relation between individual subjects is surely the very heart of the Hegelian philosophy and social philosophy of all kinds.

The specific character of the master-servant relation is that it appears to be unmediated. In fact this is not the case, because by the splitting of each subject into needs and labor, the two subjects find the resources to mediate their relation.[‡] But such a relation between persons is unthinkable; intersubjectivity is invariably *mediated*, whether by land and tools, by shared laws, customs, language or other norms, or collaboration in a shared project. Difficulties in intersubjectivity usually arise from problems originating in the means of mediation, and it is by the imprint of interactions on the mediating elements that history and culture are produced. It is also notable that post-Marx social theory tends to ignore material conditions or render them solely as 'text', blinding us to the mediating role in human intercourse of *artifacts*.

"There is nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation" (SL §92). — To posit intersubjectivity without specific attention to artifact mediation is to either suppose universal telepathy or subsume the human body, its means and its actions *into* the subject, a move which leads to an infinite regress. But the insight that identity formation is possible only through the mediation of relations to *other people* is so general and so abstract as to be almost contentless.

Consequently, I use as the model of intersubjectivity the triadic relation in which a subject, A, acts upon an object, B, by means of an existing material sign or tool, X. This scheme of action, both immediate and mediated, was introduced by the Soviet psychologist, Lev Vygotsky, not for anything to do with Hegel, but to represent how people incorporate artifacts from their cultural environment into their activity, interaction and learning.[†] In this way Vygotsky laid the foundations for a cultural psychology which is widely used across the world, especially in child development and educational psychology. I have taken my cue from experimental work Vygotsky carried out into the psychology of concepts, but my aim is not psychology (which is already a *fait accompli*)*, but rather an interdisciplinary approach to *social theory*.

Rather than continue with a focus on intersubjectivity, which is a tremendous obsession in these times of rampant social and methodological individualism, I want to show how *concepts* can be understood in such a way that the same conception makes sense in the domain of psychology and in the domain of social theory while facilitating a consonant 'non-metaphysical' reading of Hegel's Logic without relying on metaphors or introspection.

Contemporary analytical psychology of concepts takes a natural object as its archetype. For scholars of Hegel it is surely self-evident that, while a natural object can be the subject of a concept, this approach leads directly to sense perception as the model of concept-formation, and is a *dead end* in terms of understanding concepts of a kind which could be of interest in understanding social life at any level.

Concepts have their existence in human activities, invariably coordinated by the use of artifacts of some kind. Human beings are intelligent, social creatures and we are well equipped to pay

[¶] Axel Honneth, Robert Brandom, Robert Williams and Nancy Fraser for example.

[‡] See Masters, Servants and Mediation (2007) for further elaboration of this claim.

[†] Hegel likewise said that the tool is the norm of labour and speech the tool of Reason, the child the absolute mediating term. System of Ethical Life, 1802/3, and in the Jena Lectures of 1805/6, he saw Recognition being mediated by the value of a person's property.

* Hegel's Psychology, elaborated in part C of the Subjective Spirit, also presaged Vygotsky's approach.

attention to each others' actions and the signs and other artifacts people are using. We actively perceive these activities and grasp them mentally and viscerally. Whether we are talking about concepts as units of a social formation and manifested in activities, or we are talking about concepts as units of a person's consciousness, or we reify them, we refer to them with the same word.

Hegel says that a concept is an identity of three moments, Universal, Particular and Individual, each of them the whole Concept (SL §1313). The **Universal** exists as artifacts, as material things and processes – as words or other signs *for* the concept, or as bodies and objects which are said to *be* the concept, objects shaped by and incorporated in human labor. Rather, lest I be seen to be engaged in some kind of reductionism, I should say: the Universal exists as the *ideals* of such material entities incorporated in human life – and these go from works of literature to land masses to spoken words and human bodies themselves. The **Particular** exists as activities, or *projects*, in which people vest material objects (and their lives) with meaning – again as the *norms* of such activities.[†] The **Individual** has its existence in each artifact-mediated *action* making up an activity, and mediated by the Universal.

The Universal is *material* in that it is the same for everyone. It is what it is irrespective of your point of view. A word may have different meanings for different people and in different contexts, but the word, whether written or spoken, is a material entity, just like a natural object and it is *invariant*, and in that sense universal. But it is interpreted or given a specific meaning by its inclusion in a human activity. The *norms* do not exist outside of the construction of concepts in activity. These activities on the other hand exist only in and through the coherence of very many individual actions all of which are directed at a common object.

We exist in a sea of activity. Immediately, what we perceive is all kinds of artifacts being used in meaningful and productive actions. We are generally able to make sense of it all, we can usually surmise the meaning of the different artifact-mediated actions and understand the project motivating each action. We can discern the norms at work and grasp the world around us, not merely sensuously, but *conceptually*.^{*} The myriad actions utilize signs or tools in pursuit of various intersecting or overlapping projects, providing meaning and motivation for people's actions. As cultured human beings we know about these projects, we participate in them, we use words and other artifacts, we can reflect them and feel them in our entire body. And we act them out. It is this *human activity*, composed of *artifact-mediated actions*, each directed at the realization of some *project* or other, which I take to be the substance of Hegel's philosophy – Spirit. Hegel abstracts the norms of these activities from their instantiation in the material world – as indeed we have to in order to discuss and think them – but it is real human activity which always remains the true subject.

I refer to 'activities' as 'projects' – not in the sense of Existentialism, personal plans rising from an individual's psyche – but 'collaborative projects', projects which are already going on in the world, which people can participate in, but only rarely have the opportunity to launch anew – medical science, Hegelian philosophy, Australia, socialism, ... Projects are on-going, but have a finite life-cycle and are born at some point when a need arises and fade away at some later time; projects are oriented to some object. Projects are composed of individual artifact-mediated *actions*, not individual people. It is the projects which give meaning and motivation to actions. (The reason it is absurd to say that the chicken crossed the road to get to the other side is that we always do something *for a reason*, to further some project, and the proximate goal of an action always differs from its motivation.)

Projects have a life-cycle, and this life-cycle is mapped out in general form in Hegel's Logic.

In the first place there is some situation, some problem or opportunity. Here the project does not exist, it is only implicit, in itself, implicit in a problem affecting some social group in some social formation. It can be determined by objective quantitative and qualitative analysis, but those involved are not conscious of it as a situation, *as such*.

Then someone puts a word to it, either naming the problem or naming the solution; sexism or women's emancipation, and this first reflection, the first consciousness of the problem situation

[†] "the topic of philosophy is normativity in all its guises and inference in all its forms." (Brandom, *Reason in Philosophy*, 2009, p. 18)

^{*} See "[Vygotsky on the Development of Concepts](#)" for how this is achieved.

as such sets off a social movement. Or more accurately, a cascade of such movements, which set out to solve the problem— which make mistakes, redefine the problem, try out different tactics, learn and eventually manage to create a concept which adequately captures the situation, mobilizes people and enters into conflict with the established set up to change that situation.

Here, through interaction between the existing social formation and the social movement itself, the concept becomes institutionalized – laws are changed, government departments are created, courses are taught at university and a new word enters the vernacular. The social movement which brought all this about begins to fade in equal measure as its objectives begin to be realized. The project is now simply a word in the language, an aspect alongside others in the life of the whole community. It is naturalized.

The material catalyst or focus of the project is not necessarily or only a word – it may be a body of land, a technical invention, a disability, a style of dress – any material thing or process which is given meaning by the project and is in that specific sense an artifact. And all this is made up of nothing but millions of artifact-mediated actions.

This is the life-cycle of a project, which as I am sure you recognize, is as described in Hegel's Logic, which is, according to Hegel, the genesis and unfolding of a concept. By 'project' I mean the on-going activity, together with the meaningful words and objects around which the project and all the actions making it up are organized. The project then is something concrete, an instantiation of a concept in its full development. Once a concept has entered the language and the social movement which gave birth to it has faded away, the world is already changed so that that concept fits in, so to speak, as part of a changed whole. The concept may be taken as a fixed routine or an existent thing. The project is already history and things have changed. So what we talk about as 'concepts' are often the dead or routinized sediment of past battles. But those struggles are implicit in the culture to which the concept belongs.

So when we are dealing with concepts, especially when we are dealing with the birth of new concepts, we need to know them as living things, in their life and death, and not just as given data, facts. And this was after all, surely, the purpose of Hegel's Logic.

Returning briefly to intersubjectivity. From this standpoint it is surely obvious that when two people come across one another they are already participating together in a range of projects whose marks they bear and which conceptually structure their interaction – the languages they use, their acquired bodily hexis, the relevant laws and social positions ... something quite different from an unmediated encounter with a polar bear at the North Pole.

So in my social theoretical and historical research I deal with *projects*, and this approach is not only rational in itself, but it gives me a user manual written by the master – Hegel's Logic.

As I have already remarked, the Psychology based on this conception of *mediated* intersubjectivity is already a *fait accompli*, going by the name of Cultural-Historical Activity Theory, even though its proponents are on the whole unschooled in Hegel, especially the younger generation for whom Hegel is someone who wrote something about masters and slaves. This complements the situation in which Hegel scholars talk about Reason, Intuition, Desire, Experience and so on, as if these concepts could be meaningful without being informed by *some* theory of Psychology. (See "[Psychology and Critical Theory](#)")

My proximate aim in appropriating Hegel is social theory. In the main, social theory takes its units to be individuals and groups of various kind and extent and recoils in horror from teleology. By contrast, the approach I have developed from Hegel takes as its principal unit *projects*. That is, I see the world as made up of projects in which all the component actions are motivated by a concept, and this concept is the self-consciousness or object of a project. This approach is particularly well-adapted to understanding social change, because it takes as its units those elements which are vehicles of change and takes them in the whole range of their life-cycle: problem situations, social movements, institutions and naturalized concepts. And rather than seeing material conditions as a passive background or 'influence' for human affairs, material conditions – literature and texts of all kinds, land and water, infrastructure and technology, human bodies – are fully incorporated into human action as the mediating elements. Human history is not like billiards, with atomistic individuals bouncing off each other on a level playing field, but on the contrary, the Idea is made and remade and passed on in the *material conditions* of human life and knowing how to use them. I do not talk about the world *as a whole* being self-determining, and so on, but projects *are* self-determining, and projects work things

out between them. One can accept Hegel's account of norms and concepts without the *reductio ad absurdum* reached by extending these ideas to totalities.

Freedom is a practical problem; by participating in collaborative projects, under conditions inherited from the past, we can create new concepts and realize them in the world.

See also "[Robert Brandom on Concepts](#)" and "[Intersubjective Interpretations of Hegel and Mediation](#)" (a review of Robert Williams on Recognition), and [An Ontology of Social Life](#), for an explanation of 'mediation' and 'artefact'.