

Andy Blunden 2017

## Hegel on Action

There are two aspects of Hegel's conception of action which are deeply significant for contemporary human science — firstly, activity as the substance of Hegel's entire conception of reality, and secondly, the place Hegel gives to human action in the unfolding of history, that is, the problem of agency in social theory.

### 1. Activity as the Substance of Reality

In every philosophy or world-view, there are entities which are what they are and cannot be said to be composed of other things. These are called the *substances* of the philosophy. Everyday consciousness has a plethora of such substances, but when pressed, most people will come to the view worked out by the Empiricist and Rationalist philosophers of the 17th century, which still forms the basis for mainstream natural science, namely, that the universe is made up of *matter*. You cannot say what matter (in this philosophical sense) is made up of, only what form it takes – mass or energy, particle or wave, atom or molecule, solid, liquid or gas, organic or inorganic, and so on.

The problem is that not *everything* is matter; matter is what exists *outside* of my consciousness. Were I to claim that my ideas of things is as much matter as the things themselves then I am by definition delusional. My idea of this table may be well-founded, but my idea of the table is not subject to the laws of gravity and the other laws of physics and chemistry, but only to my opinions. I can change my mind without the use of electrodes and hypodermic needles. So in saying that everything that exists outside of and independently of my mind is some form of matter, Enlightenment philosophy created a dualistic world view, one based on two substances – mind and matter. But this created a problem: what is the relation between these two substances? — So long as this dualistic foundation is maintained, this problem has proved to be unsolvable.

The human body is made of matter just as is any other organism, and as such is obedient to the laws of Nature like every other material entity. So we have a paradox: the material basis for our thoughts (our nervous system and the world we reflect upon) is obedient to laws of Nature, but the thoughts themselves are not.

Over and above this we have the problem of how to understand our actions. Being a conscious human being, or an agent of any kind, entails the conviction that whenever I deliberately do something I did it because of my thought to do it, that is, that our minds seem to act on our bodies as a *cause*. The brain responds lawfully to all its material interactions and causes us to have thoughts and these thoughts in turn cause us to interact in this or that way. So, mind and matter are involved in a reciprocal causal relation. But there are a host of problems with this view. For example, neuroscientists tell us that a person has already begun to act slightly *before* they have the thought to act; people do most of their activity without conscious awareness of it at all. But most problematic of all is this: the conception of the mind as simply a state of the nervous system, responding to natural forces like any other material entity, rules out the intuitively compelling conviction that we are agents in the world and not just things driven hither and thither by natural forces, passively observing our own actions without the capacity to control them.

In very broad outline this is the world view on which everyday rationalism and mainstream natural and social science is based. It is this view that Hegel challenged when he made *activity* the sole substance of his world view, as opposed to the dualistic view in which the substances are mind and matter.

One of the peculiarities of a philosophy which has only one substance is that so long as the philosophy is systematically developed, it makes no difference what name is given to that primitive substance – you can call it activity, mind, spirit, thought, God or whatever. And Hegel's philosophy, as set out in the *Encyclopedia of Philosophical Sciences*, is such a systematic philosophy and it can be interpreted in different ways. Hegel himself refers to the fundamental concept variously as thought or Spirit (*Geist*, also translated as Mind), and for this reason he is sometimes called an *objective idealist*. However, a reading of his early works and the *Phenomenology of Spirit* in which he subjected epistemology and ontology to criticism, makes it clear that a consistent reading of Hegel's systematic philosophy is possible only by interpreting the subject matter as *human activity*.

Human activity is essentially both thought and matter, but human actions are *not* the sum of a thought and a material interaction. Thoughts and behaviors are *abstractions from* actions, and all Hegel's theories are built on actions, not thoughts and behaviors. We have to work our way through Hegel's *Encyclopedia* to the point where Hegel makes thinking and acting the specific subject matter in the Subjective Spirit, to learn just how Hegel sees the relation between consciousness and human behavior.

### Activity as the substance of Concepts

To say that a concept is a form of activity when the subject matter of the concept is some social practice is a tautology. The only issue is that many social practices are commonly understood as *things* or as groups of people. A university, for example, is a form of activity, instantiated in the activity of numerous people, all acting *as if* they were working at a university, and other people recognizing certificates, paying money, visiting buildings, etc., recognizing their activity as that of a university. The various artifacts, such as buildings and documents, contribute to instantiating a university, though only by means of their use in university activity: the buildings, books, etc., and the people enacting those actions: professors and students, — but they are not the university as such. A university is a particular configuration of artifact-mediated actions, an activity or social practice normalized in modern societies.

What about the artifacts though? In what sense can we say that a chair is a form of activity? A chair is a material object, this is not in question, and forms of human activity *always* include artifacts as mediating elements in actions; the point is that it is the system of activities in which the chair is included which make the material object in question a chair, not the physical properties of the object itself, even though these physical properties are sometimes important to their mediating role in activities.

Further, modern societies have created whole industries for the manufacture of chairs and everyone expects to find such objects suitable for sitting up at tables within buildings. It doesn't matter whether they are wooden with four legs or made of a single piece of tubular steel – it is the way they are provided and sat upon which makes them chairs. As participants in such communities we learn to emulate these practices of providing chairs and sitting in them at appropriate times and sometimes extremely odd-shaped things are instantiated as chairs by these forms of activity. So a chair or any other artifact *is* a social practice which produces and/or consumes certain material processes, and we have a habit of speech and mind of identifying the concept with the material artifact. But a moment's reflection will demonstrate that it is not the material object, but the *entire activity* which is represented in the concept of a chair or whatever artifact. Hegel would call chairs 'thought-determinations' (*Denkbestimmungen*).

What about the logical concepts with which Hegel begins the *Encyclopedia* – concepts like Being, Measure, Appearance, Concept, etc.? These philosophical concepts are instantiated only in the discursive activity of philosophers, but according to Hegel "philosophy is its time apprehended in thoughts" (*Philosophy of Right*, Preface). The mediating artifacts used by philosophers are words, and just as we are inclined to identify the concepts of ordinary artifacts with the material object itself (rather than the entire activity mediated by the artifact), so we are inclined to talk about the concept indicated by the word 'being' as if the word were itself the concept. These philosophical concepts are implicit in the life of the communities in which they exist and are made explicit only in the literary work of their philosophers. Concepts expressed with precision in the discursive activity of philosophers are thus implicit in activity of people living in some community insofar as these activities are *normative* for life in that community, that is, the philosophers are participants in the historically articulated project of philosophy as it stands in the given community.

On this basis, Hegel is able to construct a *conceptual logic* which equally makes sense when interpreted as the logic of corresponding normative forms of activity. Hegel elaborates this logic by subjecting to philosophical criticism claims of the form "Everything is C," where C is some philosophical concept; he shows that the claim is true only up to a certain point, and beyond this point the concept falls into contradictions and a new concept presents itself. These philosophical claims each typify a certain form of activity and it turns out that philosophical criticism of the claim also demonstrates the fate of the relevant form of activity. Thus conceptual logic turns out to be the logic of social formations, instantiated in the development of culture and history, as already demonstrated

in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Note that this is not a claim that intellectual history emulates Hegel's *Logic*, just that social change is the field in which Hegel's *Logic* can be validated.

The *Logic* is a remarkable work; it is written entirely in the language of logic, demonstrating each of its steps in logical critique of the successive concepts of philosophical discourse – nothing is said (except in occasional illustrative notes) which speaks of activities. And yet, if we are able to discern the form of activity represented by each of the logical concepts, the logic can also be read as the elaboration of the logic of activity – after all, every action is a *judgment*, a concrete judgment which 'entails externality', every time we act, we make a judgment on numerous norms bearing on the current situation we are in. Life experience, especially experience in the more complex and problematic domains of social life, provides the best foundation for understanding Hegel's *Logic*.

The absolute idea may in this respect be compared to the old man who utters the same creed as the child, but for whom it is pregnant with the significance of a lifetime. Even if the child understands the truths of religion, he cannot but imagine them to be something outside of which lies the whole of life and the whole of the world. (*Enc. Logic*, §237 note)

### Activity as the substance of Nature

'Nature' is the concept of what exists independently of human activity. Reading the *Philosophy of Nature* today, it is difficult to make sense of it in terms of Spirit understood as human activity creating Nature itself. However, once we have understood how a concept can be a form of activity, it is not too great a leap to see that the concept of Nature can be a form of human activity, too, even though, unlike institutions and artifacts, Nature itself is by definition, *not* the product of human activity.

As I showed in connection with the concepts of ordinary artifacts, the concept of something includes the fact that the relevant activity has a basis in material reality and thus provides a relatively rational basis for the reification of concepts, be they concepts of finite artifacts or concepts of natural processes.

The concept of Nature, a concrete totality of human activity, is how we grasp Nature, as a totality existing independently of human existence to which human activity is adapted. The idea that the concept of Nature and all the subordinate concepts (the concepts of mathematics, physics, chemistry, etc.) are *forms of human practical activity* which have been *reified* – that is, deemed to exist independently of the human activity by means of which we grasp and measure them – is a profoundly important insight that took natural science a century to fully grasp after it was formulated by Hegel.

Prior to 1905, and for everyday consciousness to this day, 'space' is an emptiness existing independently of us in which things happen. Hegel proposed that 'space' be taken as the abstract concept of Nature and that a concrete concept of Nature (i.e., natural science) be constructed by beginning with this 'germ' – a critical examination of how space is determined by Spirit, to be interpreted as practical human activity, that is in effect, the *measurement of space*, and on from there. In 1905, Einstein formulated the Special Theory of Relativity, based on a critical analysis of how distance and time are measured, and rather than taking length and time as entities which exist independently of human activity, took length and time intervals as properties of human practical activity with some material object.

So Einstein not only confirmed a lot of things that were later to be verified by experiment, he also confirmed the essential correctness of Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. Hegel, however, failed to predict how such a critique of the measurement of space would pan out and it would have been impossible for *anyone* to do so before the surprising result of the Michelson-Morley experiment of 1887. Hegel's idealism lay in his exaggerated confidence in the power of logical analysis to prefigure the results of practical social and scientific experience – his basic idea was correct, and his logic as good as it could be, but the world simply had to wait for practical scientific experience to uncover the key contradictions which would allow Hegel's program to be realized.

Hegel claimed that "In Nature there happens 'nothing new under the sun'" – perpetual movement and change but nothing new, no development, and that it was only in human *history*, as Spirit comes to consciousness of itself, that development takes place.

In our day, this claim is usually seen as absurd. Darwin's theory of the evolution of species showed that the biosphere is itself a process of permanent development and cannot be conceived of otherwise. Meanwhile, cosmologists have demonstrated that the entire physical universe can only be understood

only as a process of development following the Big Bang. But Hegel was not entirely wrong. The modern cosmologists could not discover or defend the theory of the Big Bang other than relying on some basic, underlying laws of Nature which have remained *unchanged* throughout the 13.8 billion years since the Big Bang. Equally, the processes Darwin observed on the Galapagos Islands in 1835 he took to be fundamentally the *same* processes which had existed since the formation of the Earth 4 billion years ago. So Hegel was at least half right on these questions, but the fact remains that the discovery of the concepts of these developmental processes was the outcome of centuries of *human practical activity*, not the ruminations of a philosopher of logic.

### Activity as Subjective Spirit

Beginning from Space, the *Philosophy of Nature* culminates in animal life; that is, Hegel claims to demonstrate that the emergence of animal life is necessarily entailed in the simple concept of Nature. The *Philosophy of Nature* concludes with the observation that animals have a pressing need to acquire individual subjectivity, or ‘soul’, which Hegel describes as “the concept in the idea of life” – self-feeling. This concept represents the simplest concept of ‘Life’. It forms the abstract starting point of the *Subjective Spirit*, in which he constructs a plausible process of development for how a living organism, a part and product of Nature, can become a creature capable of conceptual thought and self-conscious control of its own activity.

The *soul* of a creature has no reference to another, no subject/object distinction. It is the regulative function of a finite organism, but it does so naturally, without distinguishing itself from other centers of activity. It just *feels*. The mental life of the psyche is the registration of a single neurophysiological system of activity embracing the entire organism. Its feeling is the totality of the processes of mediation between sentience and the organism’s activity. The first step towards independence of the psyche from immediate concern with its feelings is *habit*, which enables the psyche to gain a distance from its own activity.

Through *habituation*, the organism becomes inured to feelings encountered in the normal course of life, and only those unexpected feelings coming from ‘outside’ gain attention. These feelings take on the significance of a signal of something originating from another center of activity, something *else*. This feeling is *Sensation* and constitutes the basic unit of consciousness.

Consciousness makes the transition to ‘free mind’, i.e., human intelligence, by producing artifacts for use in controlling its own activity and incorporating these artifacts, which stand out as meaningful from the natural background, into its psychic processes.

“The principle of free mind is to make the merely given element in consciousness into something mental, and conversely to make what is mental into an objectivity”  
(*Phil/Spirit*. §440 remark)

By mastering the control of its own consciousness by the use of external objects, human beings learn to distance themselves from their own desires, thus freeing themselves of domination by their own nature. However:

“In his tools man possesses power over external nature, even though in respect of his ends he is, on the contrary, subject to it.” (*Sci. Logic* §1615)

At the conclusion of the *Subjective Spirit* Hegel demonstrates that such a creature faces contradictions which can only be resolved through the realization of the concept of Right. The German word, *Recht*, entails both ‘rights’ and the wider sense of the ‘rule of law’. ‘Right’ then forms the foundation stone for the *Philosophy of Right* – Objective Spirit – in which the concepts are explicitly as well as implicitly forms of human activity.

### Activity as Objective Spirit

Objective Spirit is a world made up of distinct nation-states, each of them instantiating a particular system of rights, morality and ethics, each with their own constitution and state, and relating to each other as independent entities fashioning world history through their development and interaction. A state is, self-evidently, a form of activity, regulated by the concept the state has of itself, with the various laws and customs of the state its subordinate concepts.

According to Hegel, the most primitive and basic form of right is private property; respect for private property is the form of activity which makes the building of civilized communities possible. In each

state, the system of rights takes the form of a series of concepts representing different types and grades of right which are normative within the given community. Hegel demonstrates that progress from the 'negative freedom' of a regime of individual rights to genuine 'positive freedom' in which people are free to realize themselves, has to be mediated by the moral education of the citizens, in which individuals exercise a conscience and aim to promote the common good while still pursuing their own particular interests. This process of moral education or *Bildung* Hegel takes under the concept of Morality.

According to Hegel, the human beings who create these formations are implicitly free, even though at the first moment of the appearance of states, most people live in slavery. So the answer to Rousseau's question: "How is that man is born free but is everywhere in chains?" (*Social Contract*, Book I) is the *further perfection* of the state, not a return to a state of brute nature. Hegel believes that freedom is inherent in the very concept of a person; once a creature of Nature has acquired the capacity to regulate Nature and its own activity through the creation and use of tools and language, the struggle for freedom is impelling. In the course of overcoming the difficulties people encounter in life, the laws and customs and cultural beliefs of the community are gradually changed, and changed in such a way that freedom must ultimately be realized for all. But history does not unfold according to any plan, human or Divine:

In the course of this work of the world mind, states, nations, and individuals arise animated by their particular determinate principle which has its interpretation and actuality in their constitutions and in the whole range of their life and condition. While their consciousness is limited to these and they are absorbed in their mundane interests, they are all the time the unconscious tools and organs of the world mind at work within them. The shapes which they take pass away, while the absolute mind prepares and works out its transition to its next higher stage. (*PR* §344)

This conception is offensive to contemporary sensibilities because for two reasons: firstly, because it casts people as powerless flotsam on the tide of history, and secondly because it implies an ordering of totalities – realizations of freedom in the various states – which cannot be justified. I would contend, however, that this progressivism is not essential to Hegel's philosophy and an interpretation which omits this ever-upwards conception is quite tenable.

The question before us is this however: if the state is a realization of freedom, and through this historical progress individuals have increasing capacity to freely determine their own actions, have we reached a point where purposive human action can play a conscious role in *social and cultural change*? But even the heroes who found states are, according to Hegel, "living instruments of the *Weltgeist*" (*PR* §348).

This is the problem of agency, and Hegel considers it under the concept of Morality – being morally responsible for an event is the spiritual equivalent of *causing* the event.

## 2. The Problem of Agency

### Action

The German word translated for Hegel as 'action' is *Handlung*, in contrast to *Tat* (deed) from which we have *Tätigkeit* (activity). This is a surprising choice because modern German usage, like Marx, prefers *Tätigkeit* for 'social practice' or purpose activity, and *Tat* means a deed or purposive act. But for Hegel *Tat* is the 'deed' – the changes the actor brings about in the world irrespective of the consciousness (if any) with which it is done, while *Handlung* is 'action' (or 'activity') – a unity of the actor's consciousness and the change they bring about in the world. My action is what *I* did and what *I* am responsible for. An action (*ein Handlung*) is in that sense a *unit* of action.

'Action' here refers only to *human* action, and *purposive* human action at that, rather than the preconscious behavior characteristic of non-human forms of life or the autonomous functions of the human organism, such as hiccups, goose bumps or withdrawing the hand from fire. 'Action' includes however those actions which are first done with conscious awareness and control, but with mastery come to be carried out unconsciously, such as tying shoelaces or stepping over the curb. Although not done with conscious awareness, these operations are consciously acquired and if something unexpected happens, they are called back into conscious control. So for example, using a sexist

expression which violates social norms Hegel would take as an action for which the speaker is morally responsible, even though it was unconscious.

Hegel does not explicitly discuss the question of what is a unit of action, but it will be possible to reconstruct his answer to this problem. One of the meanings of *Handlung* is 'plot' or 'story line', and this parallels the way the action for which an individual agent is responsible hangs together as a unit extended over time and space. Hegel takes a person's action as one continuous story line, uniting both inner and outer aspects of activity in a way which makes the 'story line' intelligible. This plot is a series of actions, which constitutes who the person is:

“What the subject is, is the series of his actions.” (*PR*, §124)

## Purpose, Intention and Welfare

To follow Hegel's analysis of action I will clarify the terms he uses to represent the objects and motivations of actions. The translation of each of the set of terms Hegel uses into English is conventional; in normal speech many of them are interchangeable.

### Purpose, Aim and Means

The German word translated as “purpose” is *Vorsatz*. Purpose is linked with *Zweck*, what is aimed at (*Zweck* originally meant the bull's eye in a target), and *Mittel* (means) is the external object used by the subject to act upon the object (*Gegenstand*), transforming it into the realized purpose.

But the immediate action has consequences – “Action presupposes an external object with a complex environment” (*PR* §115) and these consequences may be deemed to be *part of* the action as the purpose unfolds and is realized.

The purpose goes through a development in the course of the action. Initially the purpose is a subjective purpose – a universal concept of an aim embedded in the external world. The discrepancy the subject perceives between the subjective purpose and its object (*Gegenstand*) produces an action to resolve the discrepancy. The *subjective* purpose is transformed by the action into the *realized* purpose. The realized purpose inevitably differs from the aim, but the purpose is nonetheless preserved in the realized purpose because as a result of the action – the object bears the impression of the subjective purpose. The realized purpose unites the subjective purpose with the objectivity of the external world, and becomes part of the changing conditions for further action. “The End achieved consequently is only an object, which again becomes a Means or material for other Ends, and so on for ever” (*Enc Logic* §211).

The purpose is a concept and therefore has the three moments: universal, particular and individual. So the subjective purpose is a universal concept particularized in the determinate object of the action and the subjective decision to act is an individual moment, issuing from this concept.

The means, the “middle term” between subjective purpose and realized purpose “is broken up into two elements external to each other, (a) the subject's action and (b) the object which serves as Means” (*Enc Logic* §208). This object is an external object brought under the power of the subject as a means for the subject's purpose, and directed against other objects, and using its mechanical and chemical properties to shape the object to the subject's own purpose. The distinction between the activity of the subject in using the means, and the means itself is important and the two should not be conflated. Whereas the subject's own activity is subjective and manifests the subject's own will, the means is external and exists, interacting with the object as a part of the whole external world, the complex objective environment beyond the subject's control. This external world is a material culture which is objective, that is, outside the subject's control, the product of the activity of past generations, as are the norms and beliefs which I acquire and which inform my intentions.

In the meaning of ‘action’ and ‘purpose’ in connection with the actions of an individual person, the external object is not something vague like the weather or an institution or situation – it is a *material object*, even if that material object is a part of the subject's own body. The subject's will cannot be made objective without the use of a material object as means.

The same logic applies when the subject of action is not an individual person but a corporate actor, institution or social movement of some kind. Here, ‘external’ means ‘Object’ in the sense of the Logic, activity whose centre is not the subject itself but its Other. In this wider sense, we should add to the “mechanical and chemical properties,” social properties, that is, the social significance or

meaning of the objects concerned in the relevant cultural environment. A party or social movement cannot achieve an external aim solely by means of its own internal resources; it has to use people and institutions beyond its own ranks as a Means.

The object is transformed, but the means is *preserved* in the action, although it is ‘worn out’ by its use and in repeated use is ultimately used up:

“the Subjective End, which is the power ruling these processes, in which the objective things wear themselves out on one another, contrives to keep itself free from them, and to preserve itself in them. Doing so, it appears as the Cunning of Reason.” (Enc Logic, §209)

That is, by acting in the external world, the subject subordinates itself to processes immanent in the wider world, including both the object and the means, and “I must be aware of the universal character of any isolated deed” (PR, §118 addition).

Further, by taking a particular action and thereby changing the object, alternative actions that may have been available may be subsequently excluded.

If the subject’s intention is exhausted in the realized aim then the action is not a rational action, but simply a *deed*. All forms of life perform actions of this kind, in which the Intention is identical to the Purpose and the subject’s desire is satisfied immediately in consumption of the object, and not mediated through consciousness. A rational action (and it is only such actions which are the substance of Hegel’s social philosophy) is done *for a reason*, a reason different to the achievement of the end (*Zweck*), and the purpose is realized only by a *series* of such actions, each of which is a means to some more remote end, and this series of actions is not necessarily entirely composed of actions by the subject themselves, but by other agents. That is, when a subject takes a rational action, they are relying on the actions of others to complete their intention. All actions are irreducibly social in nature.

Further, an action presupposes an external environment and that external world is as yet independent of the subject’s will of which the subject has only more or less incomplete knowledge, and there will be unforeseen consequences.

The opening up of a difference between purpose and intention marks the beginning of action proper, i.e., doing something for a reason. When Hegel talks of a “series of actions,” actions united by a common intention, it is the contradiction between purpose and intention which marks off each unit in this series, although as we shall see, an action does not terminate with the formation of a new purpose, but is continued in the consequences of the deed.

## Intention and Responsibility

As a rational human being, I am a free being capable of forming intentions which are contrary to my immediate desire and inclination or the will of others. The worth (*Wert*) of the action and the reason I think it good to do it is my *Intention*.

A person always has responsibility (*Schuld*) for their immediate deed, without qualification, and for the immediate purpose they pursue. But where the intention is identical to the purpose, that is, the action is a simple reflex, the subject is probably not a rational agent (a child perhaps).

Hegel takes a very ‘hard line’ on this question. A slave who is obliged to carry out a wrong action under duress is responsible for their action, and in fact, according to Hegel, a slave is responsible for being a slave even if rebellion is punished by death. A person’s will cannot be forced, even if the consequence of a person’s action is severe.

“Yet if a man is a slave, his own will is responsible for his slavery, just as it is its will, which is responsible if a people is subjugated. Hence the wrong of slavery lies at the door, not simply of enslavers or conquerors, but of the slaves and the conquered themselves.” (PR, §58 addition)

Analysis of rational action means taking into account the intention (*Absicht*) with which the action was taken, related to the benefit (Welfare or *Wohl*) sought and the concept (*Begriff*) the agent had of their action – the reason for doing it, not just the immediate purpose of the action.

*Absicht* is part of the verb *absehen*, to look away, and Hegel takes this to mean that the intention is some kind of abstraction from the concrete thing, either a universal concept or “the isolation of one or other of its single aspects which is alleged to be the essence of the action on its subjective side” (PR §119). Most of the discussion about Hegel’s theory of action is concerned with how the subject’s

intention and the interconnection of the object with the whole external environment determine the agent's responsibility for the changes that take place as a consequence of the immediate deed – where does *my* action and *my* responsibility begin and end?

Commentators on Hegel's theory of agency usually follow Hegel in using the lighting of a fire to illustrate his idea, and I will use this example as well, as it very graphically exhibits the main features of Hegel's idea. However, a natural process cannot adequately stand in for the process of world history about which Hegel's theory of action is intended to enlighten us. "Bottom up" explanations tend to suggest reductionist and simplistic approaches while a "top down" explanation such as posed by dramatic interventions in social life, may provide a more meaningful grasp of the issue.

Note that Hegel takes this problem under the heading of Morality, concerned with assigning *responsibility* for some change in the world. But it can equally well be read as a practical *social theory* for the activist who takes on responsibility to make changes in the world.

So, consider the position of someone, say Guy, who sets fire to the dry grass in their back yard. The first thing is that Guy is responsible for that immediate deed, irrespective of his intention. If it was a day of total fire ban, it is no good Guy telling the police "But my wife told me to do it" – he is responsible.

Further, for Hegel, the action does not end with Guy throwing the burning match into the grass, the immediate deed. If the fire spreads to the neighboring property and burns down the neighbor's house, on the face of it, that is part of Guy's action, for which he is responsible, too.

Does Guy's intention in lighting the fire matter?

"The will's right, however, is to recognize as its action, and to accept responsibility for, only those presuppositions of the deed of which it was conscious in its aim and those aspects of the deed which were contained in its purpose ... – this is the right to know." (*PR*, §117)

The 'right to know' is a formal right which turns out to have a limited scope, because when Guy decides to set fire to the grass he has the responsibility to know that the fire could get out of control and could spread to his neighbor's property. If he intended that the fire should spread *or* if he did not take the trouble to see if it might or take action to prevent its spread, he is responsible.

But what if Guy's wife had secretly hidden her savings in a box in the grass and the money was destroyed by the fire? If Guy had no reason to believe that something of value could be hidden there, he is not responsible for the destruction of what his wife hid in the grass – it was not part of his purpose. Hegel contrasts this with the ancients for whom the agent's knowledge was not to be taken into account in assigning responsibility — Oedipus was condemned for killing his father, even though he did not know at the time that King Laius was his father.

Formally, the agent is not responsible for unintended consequences of their action:

"the moral will has the right to refuse to recognize in the resulting state of affairs what was not present inwardly as purpose." (*PR*, § 115 addition)

But as a rational person, the subject has a responsibility to be aware of the complexity, interconnectedness and contingency of the world they intend to act in:

"The consequences ... represent the universal implicit within that state of affairs. Of course I cannot foresee the consequences – they might be preventable – but I must be aware of the universal character of any isolated deed. The important point here is not the isolated thing but the whole, and that depends not on the differentia of the particular action, but on its universal nature. Now 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." (*PR* § 118 addition)

The agent's intention is realized in the action and the consequences of the action belong to the action, so the subject is responsible for all the consequences of their immediate action. What frees Guy from responsibility for the destruction of the money his wife hid in the grass is that the actions of another agent with another intention intervened and their action combined with Guy's action so as to bring about the unfortunate consequence.

"The action, as the aim posited in the external world, has become the prey of external forces which attach to it something totally different from what it is explicitly and drive



it on into alien and distant consequences. Thus [in this case] the will has the right to repudiate the imputation of all consequences except the first, since it alone was purposed.” (PR §118)

So the agent is free of blame for “something interposed from without and introduced by chance, and this is quite unrelated to the nature of the action itself” (PR §118 remark). But what of “moral luck,” that is, when a wrong action may or may not lead to serious consequences? Hegel takes a ‘hard line’ on this as well:

“It happens of course that circumstances may make an action miscarry to a greater or lesser degree. In a case of arson, for instance, the fire may not catch or alternatively it may take hold further than the incendiary intended. In spite of this, however, we must not make this a distinction between good and bad luck, since in acting a man must lay his account with externality. The old Proverb is correct: ‘A flung stone is the devil’s.’ To act is to expose oneself to bad luck. Thus bad luck has a right over me and is an embodiment of my own willing.” (PR §119 addition)

Hegel’s idea here is that the state has made laws which are designed to avoid harm caused by unintended consequences, and the person who steps outside of the law, if they are a rational agent, must take responsibility for consequences which they, lacking the historical wisdom of the state, did not foresee. On the other hand, if a person acts in a way which is consistent with law and custom, then they cannot be blamed for *unintended* consequences of their action. If serious unintended consequences transpire, this may be an occasion to make a new law.

What if Guy didn’t light the fire, but a youngster he hired to tidy up the garden did? In this case, Guy is responsible even though the lighting of the fire cannot be imputed to him – his action was in failure to supervise the youngster’s work.

### Action as Unity of Purpose and Deed

Hegel disagrees with both modern behaviorists and ancient tragedians in that he does not limit ‘action’ solely to what is objective, but makes his basic category action, to include both subjective consciousness – the agent’s self-consciousness, knowledge and intention – *and* the consequential changes in the external world, both foreseen and unforeseen, although he excludes from the action those consequences which flow from other, alien centers of activity. The grouping of consequences together in this way cannot be made intelligible in abstraction from the agents’ consciousness, all the more so because action is an irreducibly social not individual process, and fulfillment of the agent’s intention necessarily entails the collaborative action of others. (For example, when I send a message, give a direction, lend aid to others or simply respond to event which others also will respond.) On the other hand, the intention is not immediately manifested in the purpose as a number of different intentions could underlie one and the same purpose. (For example, I might kiss my friend to welcome him or to identify him to the police.)

The unity of intention and deed means that action extends temporally and spatially beyond the immediate deed, as consequences unfold and the agent continues the action in response to the unfolding consequences. The unity of intention and deed is also extended back in time, such as when I plan my day at work while commuting in the morning. The quality of my planning is manifested in the deed which it has prepared. Indeed, all the imaginary voices, dreams of glory and other fantasies I have exist only in the actions which express them in the external world. People are unreliable reporters of their own thoughts, which are to be judged only by the series of their actions. As Hegel puts it in the Remark to the very first paragraph of the *Philosophy of Right*: “Philosophy has to do with ideas or *realized thoughts*, and hence not with what we have been accustomed to call mere conceptions.”

### The truth of intentions

As I pointed out above, the purpose undergoes a transformation through the action which transforms subjective purpose into the realized purpose. The intention is the reason for the agent’s action, so while the purpose is exhausted in the realized purpose, the universal content of the action, the intention remains, and will be manifested in further actions.

“The universal quality of the action is the manifold content of the action as such, reduced to the simple form of universality. But the subject, an entity reflected into

himself and so particular in correlation with the particularity of his object (*Zweck*), has in his end his own particular content, and this content is the soul of the action and determines its character.” (PR §121)

Thus, the series of actions are bound together by a shared content, the intention, each individual action expressing a particular purpose subsumed under universal concept of the intention. Two things follow from this. Firstly, the subsequent actions may be done by the same or other agents, each continuing or contributing to the intention with their own particular purpose, each a means to each others’ ends. Secondly, with the development of each purpose from subjective purpose to realized purpose, the intention is realized in the development of the concrete whole. The logic of this process is the subject-object process described in Hegel’s *Logic* — the subject (an intention) interacts with other projects and is manifested concretely in the development of the whole community. Things do not generally work out just as anyone originally intended, but the outcome is not that of the agent alone, since other agents will contribute to the unfolding of the intention. Nonetheless, as the intention unfolds and concretizes itself the subject sees the truth of their intention. Throughout, the subject is guided by pursuit of their own welfare as they see it, which is implicitly the Good of the whole community, and the subject may be satisfied or not.

Most of the above is written as if the agent or subject involved were an individual person. But in general the subject can be a corporate actor such as a political party or an institution, or a social movement united by some universal ideal in the absence of actual organizational ties. The subject identifies itself by means of a concept of itself and its welfare and shared intentions.

The only correction which needs to be made in what I have written above is that if the subject is a corporate actor then “external object” used as Means is not necessarily a material object – it can be simply an object whose existence is grounded in a center of activity alien to the subject, such as another corporate subject or individual.

What this suggests is an approach to a social theory in which agency is given its rightful place through units, each of which is an *intention* — some universal concept which is the shared content, the soul, of each aggregate of actions. The term for this unit is a ‘project’.

Any activist needs to think through the insights offered by Hegel under the heading of ‘Morality’. When a social movement, for example, raises a new demand, or a trade union calls a strike, or whatever, it is just like our friend Guy who sets fire to some grass in their backyard. The organizers needs to recognize that their action is done in a complex and interconnected world and a bush fire may result. They need to have good reason to believe that their insight into possible consequences is well founded. On the other hand, when their campaign concludes in a situation which has not changed in line with their subjective intention, it is necessary to accept that this is *the truth of their intention*, not something alien. But at the same time, if the intervention of alien forces turns their action towards bad consequences they should not be blamed for that. They have a right to answer only for what was *in the nature of their intention*, even as the truth of their intention only comes to light through its realization.

Further, for the individual social or political actor, it should be noted that in general the intention motivating an action they take will generally be a universal represented in an *already existing form of activity*, that is, some project which is already under way. For an individual, taking action generally means *joining* an intention, rather than formulating one. Individual agency is generally manifested as *participation* in social action, rather than in individual action as such.

## The End Justifies the Means?

Hegel dismisses the maxim “The end justifies the means.” (See the footnote 1(c) and (d) to §140 of *The Philosophy of Right*). Provided the end is truly just and the means is truly a means, it is a truism, he says, but what is usually meant is “to commit a crime as a means to a good end.” Rather than responding with a qualified variation of the maxim, Hegel demolishes it logically. He has dealt comprehensively with the question of the morality of means and ends in the second section of the *Philosophy of Right*, and no version of the end-means maxim can substitute for that analysis.

Hegel begins with a critique of what he calls the “abstract good” by which he means the will simply to do good, in abstract, without regard to the duties and ethical obligations of the subject in their actual social situation. He points out that every action will have both good and bad in it, and the question is: which aspect of the action, the good or the bad, is to be deemed essential? In the case of an action in

which the intention is abstract good, it is only the subjective opinion of the actor that it is the good which is essential. “In the strict sense there are no wicked men, since no-one wills evil for the sake of evil ... simply to will the good and to have a good intention in acting is more like evil than good, because the good willed is only this abstract form of good and therefore to make it concrete devolves on the arbitrary will of the subject.” Pursuit of your own abstract opinion about what is good, irrespective of ethical and moral constraints, is just what evil is.

How did Hegel see Means and Ends though? The first thing for Hegel is that Means and Ends have to be understood holistically. The End is a condition of the whole community (the object), in which one aspect is singled out by the subject as desired. Likewise, the means is divided into the object and the activity of the subject. The realized end is the whole of the object, transformed by the activity of the subject with the means. In what was reviewed above, Hegel has outlined the moral parameters of action, and the justice of the action does indeed depend on the ultimate consequences. However, the subject is also bound to respect the law, having in mind that the subject is not the judge of what is good nor in control of the ultimate consequences of their action. Every person or party who have it in their nature to step outside the normal bounds of custom and practice has to realize that they risk doing evil and take a corresponding responsibility on their shoulders for that.

In general, for Hegel, morality requires that a person seek to further the good of the community, having a care for unforeseeable consequences of their action and to participate in the life of the community, having regard to rights and duties which are not of their own personal creation, but are products of the community. The law, as Hegel sees it, has developed historically, and on the whole is a repository of objective wisdom that is beyond what is available to the individual, subjective judgment. But there are two exceptions to Hegel’s conservatism.

Hegel does not see law and custom as standing still, but on the contrary constantly changing in response to the changing practices of the community and external pressures. How does this change take place? Even though Hegel sees the educated elite as having responsibility for social reform, “philosophy cannot teach the state what it *should* be” and nor can social reformers. Law changes in response to disasters which expose weaknesses in existing law. So for example, restrictions on the supply of untested drugs were introduced in response to the thalidomide tragedy. This observation does not take away from the fact that such responses are mediated by social movements. But laws also change in response to crime. When there is a bad law, or a bad government, people break the law as part of challenging the status quo. Does the martyr do good if for example a bad law is repealed or a bad government falls as a result of their criminal action? History will answer that, but Hegel does insist that in breaking the law, the criminal must recognize that the punishment they receive is part of their own action, and as such is just. That is the price of civil disobedience.

Hegel goes further than this. He was an ardent admirer of Napoleon and he introduced the category of ‘hero’ into his social theory having Napoleon in mind. He recognized that sweeping changes like the abolition of the feudal relics in Germany and the introduction of the *Code napoleon* could only be made by heroes – individuals who acted as instruments of the Idea, History if you like – with a ‘higher right’, to sweep away old institutions and create new ones, and these heroes would necessarily, by lights of their own community, do wrong, even evil and what is more would generally not be thanked by posterity either. Hegel talks about the role of heroes in founding new states out of a state of nature, but also (*PR* §351) that the same considerations apply where, for example, ‘civilized’ nations trample on the rights of ‘barbarians’, and pastoral people treat hunters and gatherers in the same way. In other words, where an historic leap in state form, such as that posed between hunter-gatherers and pastoral peoples or between pastoral peoples and ‘civilized’ states, and so presumably between capitalism and socialism, then this can only be achieved by ‘rightful’ coercion and sweeping aside the old laws.

## Conclusion

Every political actor needs to study ethics, not for motherhood statements which reduce politics to a game, but because ethics, as elaborated in Hegel’s theory of action, is the very substance of politics. According to Hegel, “Philosophy has to do with realized thoughts. ... The conception and its existence are two sides, distinct yet united, like soul and body.” To openly declare that the subject matter of his Philosophy was *human activity* was out of step with the spirit of his own times, but such a reading is entirely appropriate today. In the above, I have demonstrated how rich such a way of reading Hegel may be.

Coming from my own familiarity with Soviet Psychology, I have paid attention to the question of *units*. I believe that Hegel's ideas can be fruitfully developed with greater attention to the isolation of units of complex processes such as human action. I have shown that while units of action, i.e., actions and activities, can be reconstructed from Hegel's theory of action, there is vagueness and ambiguity. I have advocated for the purpose-intention contradiction to give us a unit of action, together with the incorporation of the mediating element in each action, and that Intention provides us with a unit of activity, suitable as a foundation for social theory and ethics.

I have emphasized the importance of the mediating object in Hegel's conception of action, as set out in his *Logic*, something commonly overlooked in studies, not only of Hegel's theory of agency, but in the substance of his philosophy as a whole.

### References

Hegel, G.W.F., (1816/1969) *The Science of Logic*, trans. A. V. Miller, London UK: George Allen & Unwin. § represent paragraph numbers in [the internet version of this book](#) (*Sci. Logic*).

Hegel, G. W. F., (1821/1952) *Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, translated with Notes by T. M. Knox, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (PR)

Hegel, G.W.F., (1830/2009) *Hegel's Logic*, tr. Wm. Wallace. Pacifica, CA: Marxists Internet Archive Publications. (*Enc. Logic*)

Hegel, G.W.F., (1830/2007) *Hegel: Philosophy of Mind*, Part Three of the Encyclopedia of the philosophical sciences, tr. Wm. Wallace & A. V. Miller with revised introduction and commentary by M. J. Inwood. Oxford UK: Clarendon Press. (*Phil/Spirit*)

Andy Blunden, July 2017