

An ontology of social life

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I will outline an ontology of human social life which posits artefacts, actions and activities as the most fundamental kinds of entity which exist, the substrate for norms, ideals and concepts which constitute the subject matter of social theory and philosophy. This supplements what I have said in my paper: “Artefact-mediated Intersubjectivity as the basis for a Non-metaphysical Appropriation of Hegel.”

It is only in his early manuscript, “System of Ethical Life” (§1.A), that Hegel explicitly incorporates artefact mediation in his system: “the child is the middle term as absolutely pure and simple intuition ... the tool is the persistent norm of labour, ... *speech*, the tool of reason, the child of intelligent beings.” In the context of the *System*, Hegel saw the child, the tool and the spoken word as archetypes of three levels of mediation through which human life is constructed, three ways in which human beings mediate the construction and reconstruction of culture. The *System* was just a moment in the development of Hegel’s thinking so it would be a diversion to elaborate on just how Hegel develops this idea. The purpose of mentioning it here is (i) to provide a precedent for taking, as I do, the child, the tool and the spoken word as three archetypal *artefacts* and (ii) to prove that this insight was also part of Hegel’s thinking in the formation of his philosophy, not something alien to it.

Artefacts

An artefact is a material object or process which is both a product of human activity and used in human activity. By ‘material’ I mean having properties which exist independently of human activity and consciousness. Institutions and practices, social formations constituted in the purposive activity of human beings, are *not* artefacts, only material objects and processes which are manufactured and interpreted in activity, whose *meaning* depends on human activity, but not their *existence*. It is the mediating role of artefacts in the development and performance of human life represented by the child, the tool and the sign which makes them ‘artefacts’.

The Highway Code, by which I mean a collection of written documents, is an artefact, but driving on the road in accordance with the Code is a practice, not an artefact. A coin is an artefact – it has material properties such as its metallic composition and its shape, and is therefore material, but it also has social properties such as its value in this or that country and its provenance which distinguish it from a counterfeit. Artefacts differ from natural objects in having *meaning* and use in human practices.

The designation by Hegel of three levels and three archetypes of artefact – child, tool and sign – does not signify that artefacts can be divided into three types; the categorisation is a *functional* one, depending on how the artefact is being used. A wave of the hand may be a tool for brushing flies off your face or a sign meaning “No!”; a shovel may be displayed outside the shop as a sign of their trade, or as a tool for digging; a spoken word may be a sign to another person or a tool to activate a voice-operated device.

The intention behind an artefact’s production and the concrete labour entailed in that production, its provenance and social history, are not necessarily impressed in the material properties of the artefact but are ideally or implicitly properties of the artefact. Ideal properties are *social* properties, but their existence nonetheless relies on material processes because humans are material beings. A footprint in the sand is an artefact created unconsciously by the weight of the walker but is used by the tracker as a sign of who has passed by.

A gemstone is a product of the Earth, but becomes an artefact when it is found and extracted by a human being. The only aspect of the spatial-temporal location of the stars of the Water Carrier relative to the planet where we live which is a product of human activity is the location of that activity here on Earth. Nonetheless, the use of the constellation in navigation and astrology is possible only thanks to those material properties and the constellation counts as an artefact, a product of Earthly labour. The usefulness of an artefact *always* relies on its natural properties – writing on water does not have a future in the publishing industry. There is no such thing as an artefact which is not a material thing or process, which exists only ‘in the mind’, so to speak.

Consider the letter ‘a’. Every time that letter is reproduced, in a particular font, on some piece of paper or on a screen somewhere, what is produced is an individual artefact, an instance of ‘a’. But the interpretation of the artefact as ‘a’ relies on the extent to which the artefact conforms to a particular *ideal* associated with ‘a’ in the given context. An “ideal” is a type of “norm” applicable to artefacts rather than actions, but like norms, ideals have an ‘ideal existence’ implicit in the human actions using the artefact. An artefact is a material object or process, with natural properties independent of an observer’s point of view; the ideal which is implicit in the artefact has a social existence and not only depends on the point of view of a user, but exists *only* in and through the social use of the artefact. The spoken ‘a’ differs considerably from a written ‘a’. Those ideals which are all ‘a’ but differ from one another in the material substrate and in other properties (such as the font) I refer to as a *constellation* of artefacts. Like constellations of stars, constellations of artefacts are associated by their use in human activity and have a shared meaning.

The tool/sign distinction is an important functional distinction. A sign is an artefact used to control the mind, one's own or someone else's. In this context, a book is a sign, so long as it is being used for reading, and a computer likewise is a sign, so long as it is used for reading, writing and messaging. A tool is an artefact used to control material objects and processes. A book is a tool, then, when used as a door stop and a computer is a tool when used control a manufacturing process. Even in this strictly functional definition, the distinction is not dichotomous. Sometimes, social interaction is so entangled with the control of material processes, the two cannot be extricated from one another. When I fill out an on-line form, for example, I cannot tell whether the form is to be processed by a robot or by a human being. Tools and signs are closely interconnected in their historical development, too, but the distinction retains its importance.

Although the sign is oriented to the ideal world and the tool is oriented to the material world, both are themselves part of the material world, even though the properties which constitute them as signs are ideal, or *social*, properties. The way the material properties of a tool afford its ideal properties differs from how the material properties of a sign afford its ideal properties – the sharp point on a knife enables its use for cutting differently from how the sharp point on a “V” affords its use in spelling “vet” but not “but.” Physical properties become ideal properties because the artefact is part of a whole system of artefacts, like a key which fits some locks and not others. It is the materiality which guarantees the interconnection of every object or process in the universe which underpins the constitution of ideal properties as universal properties. But a fake masterpiece is a counterfeit not because of any physical or chemical property of the replica, but because of the social circumstances of its production. A damaged masterpiece remains a masterpiece however, despite the damage and the perfect copy is still a fake.

There is a fad these days to refer to any *means* as a “tool” – a method or a theory or a concept or a person is called a “tool.” This may be a perfectly good metaphorical use of the English language, but the concept of tool elaborated here has the same narrow meaning it has in common speech: it is limited to artefacts, that is, material objects and processes. On the other hand, my use of ‘sign’ to include not only written and spoken words, but whole books and even computers is unconventional. There is no ontological distinction which arises from the combination of a large number of signs in a single symbolic artefact.

Like Hegel, I take a spoken word as the archetype of the sign-artefact. The fact that the spoken word is not persistent is indeed an important distinction – the invention of writing marked a new epoch in cultural history, allowing words uttered

long ago and far away to mediate communications in the here-and-now. However, the invention of the spoken word heralded not just a new cultural epoch, but a new *species*. Spoken words are signs along with written words, the sign-language used by the Deaf community and all the electronic forms of communication in use nowadays. ‘Word’ here means the smallest unit of sound which is meaningful in the context, so in some cases a phrase counts as a word, sometimes just a grunt. A meaningless sound is not a word.

I have taken the spoken word as an artefact although it would seem that I could just as easily have taken the spoken word as an action. I take actions to be essentially *artefact-mediated*, so, like gestures and other communicative uses of the body, speaking is simply an action in which the mediating artefact is a spoken word. An act of speech requires the use of a word which is meaningful in language of the listener, even though how, where and when it is said is freely chosen. Spoken words and gestures lack what many other artefacts have, namely persistence, and this is an important difference in cultural history and psychology, but it is not an ontological distinction.

Hegel’s third archetype – the child – is very different from the spoken word and the tool inasmuch as the sign and tool mediate day-to-day activity and at first sight it appears that the child does not. Firstly, it is in the *raising* of children, feeding them, fostering their good health, inculcating the beliefs, habits and speech appropriate to their culture and social position, that human culture is passed on from generation to generation. In that sense, like any other artefact, the child is a product and bearer of human activity. So ‘artefact’ does not carry the connotation of non-living process or thing – domestic animals and plants are equally artefacts. Our bodies are material entities, obedient to the laws of physics, chemistry and biology, and products of social history.

Secondly, ‘the child’ is within us adults in the sense that we *use* what we acquired as children in what we do as adults. The transition from child to adult is of course a gradual one, but there is an important distinction: the child is essentially a *product* of the social circumstances into which it is born; the adult is essentially free and self-determined. The distinction between the cultural inheritance a person carries within their body and their own free activity is a vital one. Human history is produced by adults, albeit on the foundation of how they were raised. The same principle applies to the skills acquired as an adult – we fashion our own bodies to be fit for our own purposes.

The child is a product of human labour just as much as the built environment into which they are born, and is therefore an artefact. A good pair of eyes is not essentially different from a good pair of spectacles; a blind person ‘sees’ with their stick. ‘The child’ stands for the human being to the extent that it is a

product of millennia of social history, its upbringing and the conditions of life a person has enjoyed.

The body can be used as a sign or a tool, and likewise 'the child' has to be understood as an artefact in which functional distinctions apply. A person "uses" their body in order to carry out sign-mediated and tool-mediated actions, and sometimes the sign or the tool is the body itself.

I noted above that institutions such as a university or the nuclear family are *not* artefacts, even though they are undoubtedly products of activity, because they are not material objects or processes – they are composed of actions. A Bushman who walked on to a university campus would see everything there except a university. Nonetheless, the existence of such institutions is inconceivable without the use of appropriate artefacts – campuses, university buildings, libraries, lecture theatres, published statutes and other documentation, signage and so on, necessary for the existence of a university. These artefacts on their own are not sufficient to constitute a university, however – they have to be *used* in relevant actions; unlike "Melbourne University Private" which was founded in 1998 but through lack of recognition from hoped-for students or academic and business collaborators, was wound up in 2005. All these artefacts together make up that part of the material world which is *humanised*, our 'second nature', *our* material world. The three archetypal artefacts are intended to indicate the entire field of material culture; the specification of further archetypes is arbitrary.

How can we distinguish between an object or process which is simply natural and one which is an artefact? We cannot, because as soon as you indicate what you mean by naming or pointing or whatever, it is an artefact. By naming mountains and bays and rivers and so on, we transform a natural environment into a humanised one, and we use these identified features to find our way around it. Just as anything can be made into a work of art by hanging it on the wall of an art gallery, any natural object can be made into an artefact by naming it and incorporating it into a social practice of some kind.

There is a world of difference however between taking an artefact as our archetype, and taking a natural object as the archetype as Feuerbach did and as cognitive psychologists of our own time do – even though the first tools and signs were natural objects included in human practices. When a chimpanzee picks up a stick and uses it to catch ants, we recognise this as the rudimentary manufacture and use of an artefact. As Hegel noted, it is in artefacts that the norms of human social life are objectified. Natural objects are significant in social life and thinking only to the extent that they are transformed into artefacts.

So what did Hegel mean when he said “the tool is the persistent norm of labour”? The full context is: “In the tool the subjectivity of labour is raised to something universal. Anyone can make a similar tool and work with it. To this extent the tool is the persistent norm of labour.” The relevant ‘norm’ is how such a tool is made and used, so it is a figure of speech to say the tool *is* a norm of labour; but a figure which has a certain kind of truth. The tool is an objectified or materialised norm. Heidegger is a writer who gave artefacts in this sense their rightful place in his ontology, but because he gave no place to human activity in fixing the meaning of artefacts his ontology was one-sided. Equally one-sided is the ontology of the linguistic turn which takes all artefacts as signs (a.k.a. ‘texts’). The Pragmatists came closest to the Ontology offered here but they failed to recognise the human body as an artefact, and as a result they failed to distinguish between the artefact and the action. Peirce’s objectivist semiotics, in which everything is a sign, is a break from the narrow focus of the linguistic turn, but Peirce’s semiotics cannot distinguish between human social life and a natural process such as a chemical reaction – all are semiotic processes. Further, none of these currents of thought grasped the significance of the difference between action and activity discussed below – everything is immediate.

Donald Winnicott, with the idea of a transitional object facilitating successful weaning, and G. H. Mead, with his symbolic interactionism, have both been appropriated by Critical Theorists, but the role of a mediating artefact in their work has never been developed.

Norms

Whereas ideals are the social forms and properties implicit in artefacts – material objects and processes, I am reserving the word ‘norm’ for social forms and properties implicit in the *human activities themselves* rather than artefacts. So the value of a coin is an ideal, but the practice of buying commodities at the listed price is a norm. The word “hello” is an idea, but saying “hello” when you meet someone you know is a norm. Norms are instantiated by *judgments*, a type of action, and implicit in every human action.

The relation between norms and the real activities which instantiate norms is a difficult one to explain, but it is a relation which, in its fully developed form, is almost definitive of human life. It is the same as the relation between an individual thing or event and the concept or ideal under which the individual is subsumed. (See “Concepts. A Critical Approach” for an extended study of this relation.)

Following Hegel, we understand that this relation is *not* one of sharing a common attribute, an idea characteristic of analytical philosophy. The relation between a concept and an individual instance of the concept is irreducible: it is simply a

foundational relation which can be exemplified, but which cannot be reduced to some other relation, it is a relation which is produced in social life and responds to its exigencies. Definitions may serve to clarify norms and concepts, but are subject to infinite regress. Norms and concepts are indefinitely sensitive to context, always relative and definitions or deontic rules misrepresent the essential character of judgments.

Further, I do not take it to be implicit in a norm that it is necessary *binding* or approved, like customs and laws, simply that it is a socially valid *interpretation* or judgment of an action, whether it is judged customary, criminal, wise, etc., etc.

To clarify this relation, I will follow Robert Brandom with a 3-part categorisation of norms as semantic, practical and theoretical.

A semantic norm is the interpretation placed on a sign-artefact in a given context, which may be more or less standardised according to particular circumstances. It is what makes speech and symbolic culture generally possible. So for example, it is a semantic norm to refer to this text an article rather than a book, and to use the first person singular pronoun to refer to yourself.

A practical norm is the concept under which an action is interpreted in a given context. It is what allows institutions and social practices to exist in a community and be subject to more or less shared interpretation. It is practical norms which give us our bearings and orient all our actions in a community. So, for example, it is a practical norm to quietly in a lecture, unless you are the lecturer, in which the practical norm is to talk loudly and at length.

A theoretical norm or a norm of belief are all those judgments which express relations such as causality and the natural, or generally shared beliefs as to what constitutes good reason for an action, and which are implicit in a person's actions and serve to explain them. Theoretical norms are the ideology of a community. So, for example, it is a theoretical norm that people learn by listening to lectures and that exams measure how much someone has learnt about the material taught.

I take it that distinctions between these types of norm them are mobile and themselves subject to interpretation, but they are all, nonetheless, norms. Making judgments, that is, recognising people, events, actions, activities in a way appropriate to one's culture and social position, is how human beings organise social life, their relation to Nature and their institutions and day-to-day activity. So norms and judgments are realised in action, by people acting accordingly.

Those practical norms which are prescriptive in some way are a subset of norms, but when and how they may be prescribed or prohibited presupposes that they are first of all norms in the sense elaborated here. The distinction between practical norms which are prescribed, expected, conventional, habitual,

permitted but morally evaluated, criminalised or despised is mobile and my aim here is to set out an ontology which is *not* mobile, which can provide a firm basis on which the mobility within and between these fundamental entities can be understood and described. Rigid categorisation is unhelpful where in reality boundaries are mobile and uncertain.

Norms and ideals

Norms and ideals are of a kind, but norms are abstracted from *actions* and ideals are abstracted from *artefacts*, though both are constituted by activity. An ideal may be realised as a material object or process, and a norm may be realised as a pattern of actions. I have chosen to use two different words so as to maintain the clear distinction between actions and artefacts.

When an artefact is judged according to a semantic norm this entails both *determining* the ideal to which a sign-artefact conforms *and interpreting* the ideal by responding to it appropriately. For example, if I see that someone has smiled at me, I might respond with another smile returning good will, or run for my life because my pursuer has recognised me. When Jean-François Champollion first looked at the Rosetta Stone he could easily determine the range of ideals to which the hieroglyphs were conforming, despite incidental differences, but determining the *meaning* of the hieroglyphs was an act of genius. Likewise, a picture of an elephant is easily recognised as a picture of an elephant, but its *meaning* varies considerably from one culture to another. I can write in Finnish (by copying) even though I don't speak a word of the language. Ideals are in that sense *universal*, whereas semantic norms entail a particular interpretation of the ideal. Flowers of different species grow naturally so as to realise various horticultural ideals to which they have been bred. Flowers are artefacts, products of the horticultural industry which long since departed from their once natural origins, and the ideals of beauty to which they conform are products of fashion and taste, but nonetheless, the flowers approximate these ideals by natural processes, people respond to them according to their culturally acquired sensibilities. The ideal inheres in the artefact (even if only in its provenance), the norm inheres in the action.

But before we can make sense of norms and ideals, an ontological anatomy of activity is necessary. I shall begin with the smallest unit of activity, an action.

Actions

Actions are the basic units of activity[†]. They are characterised by the fact that their goal (intention in Hegel's terminology)

[†] 'Activity' used in this way without an article, as a mass noun, refers to the general substance; 'activities' used in the plural or with an article, as a count

differs from their motive (purpose in Hegel's terminology). An action can be completed by a single person, and is defined by a goal of which the person is consciously aware, and which differs from its motive. The motive is an object which can be realised only by a large number of actions, possibly by different individuals, and each individual action is meaningful thanks to a shared purpose. Unforeseeable consequences of action are not taken as part of the action, only those consequences which were foreseeable by the actor are part of the action. (See §114 of *The Philosophy of Right*.)

If I announce that I am going to walk down to the shopping centre, I could be legitimately asked "Why?" – to buy the paper, get exercise or whatever – other than "to walk to the shopping centre." So walking to the shops is an action. But if asked why I put my left foot forward after my right foot, I might just say "I never thought about it." All actions serve some relatively remote purpose which is a *causa sui* so far as the agent is concerned, and need no further justification; these are called activities or projects.

Actions differ from behaviour because behaviour abstracts from the consciousness associated with the action and which makes it explicable and meaningful. Consciousness, on the other hand, can be abstracted from the actions in which it is realised. In this ontology I do not include consciousness as a distinct entity, but nor do I exclude it: both behaviour and consciousness are irreducible parts of an action. If I jump when you startle me by dropping by knocking your coffee cup off the table, neither of us can give a reason for what we did; or rather if we give a reason, it is part of a chain of cause-and-effect, not the motivation for an action. Behavioural acts happen independently of consciousness in this sense, like events in the natural world.

A series of actions, each pursuant to successive goals are not taken as a single action, as each action is controlled by the intended goal, which is different in each case. However, actions which are not consciously controlled, but controlled by their conditions without conscious awareness, are called *operations*. For example, walking down the street I step over the kerb without thinking about it, but if I trip, I immediately bring my walking under conscious control to avoid falling; but walking is generally executed by operations without conscious awareness. (Hegel calls these 'habits'. See §410 of the *Philosophy of Spirit*), but Hegel does not distinguish between operations and the activity of the autonomous nervous system.)

Operations arise firstly in the evolution of new types of actions while the actor (an infant or a novice acquiring a technical skill) is unaware of every component of what they are doing,

noun, refers to molar units of activity. Likewise with 'action' which is a synonym for 'activity' and 'actions' which is a molecular unit of activity.

and once the operation is brought under conscious control as an action, and goes on to become 'automatic' again, it can be carried out without conscious control as an operation. Despite the fact that the goal of an operation differs from its motive, sensuous interaction between the body and its environment is able to control the activity on the basis of simple conditional reflexes. A student learning to sing, when they first meet their teacher, will be unaware of the way they use various muscles in their throat; under instruction they will bring these movements under conscious control, but later, as an accomplished singer, they will be conscious only of the finer points of interpretation while controlling their larynx without conscious awareness ... unless perhaps their teacher criticises how they delivered some line, and they bring it again under conscious control.

Operations are of interest to psychologists and are necessary for the completeness of this ontology, but are of lesser interest in an ontology of social practice. Likewise, introspection may be of interest to psychologists, but there should be no illusion that introspection gives a subject direct access to their own consciousness. Introspection is an activity in its own right, but people most often deceive themselves about the nature of their own motivation. It is more instructive to observe one's own *actions*. Human behaviour is inexplicable if the consciousness connected with it is ignored, and to put aside ideas of direct observation of consciousness is not in any way to diminish the reality of consciousness as an irreducible part of social life.

Mediation

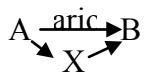
Actions are something radically different from artefacts – actions entail not only human beings, but conscious awareness and control on the part of the actor. Nonetheless, actions can only be realised by the use of artefacts as mediating elements. Telekinesis is not something real. It is important to understand the very precise meaning attached to mediation here. An action is both mediated and immediate and this is possible only by means of artefact-mediation because only material objects and processes act immediately and can only mediate human intentions if they embody social significance.

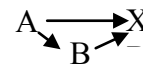
Note that I do not treat the subject as a human body which may or may not have conscious awareness, I do not subsume the activity of the mind into the body on which its existence depends. It is a major claim of this ontology and its use in the interpretation of Hegel's philosophy that the mind can be understood only in and through its existence in the social life of human beings, but this is not to suggest that the mind can be subsumed under the body and treated as one of its functions. As noted above, the human body is taken here as an artefact, just like the prostheses we use, the clothes we wear, and the tools and signs we use. Since we cannot move objects with telekinesis or communicate with telepathy, so it is self-evident

that all actions entail mediation by artefacts. (See *Philosophy of Right*, addition to §1 and §48.)

Consider the utterance* of a spoken word: it is immediate because a meaning is evoked in the mind of the hearer by the **immediate** sensuous impact of the material properties of the word, not whatever is in the mind of the speaker, which nonetheless, with greater or lesser efficacy is conveyed to the listener **mediately** via the utterance. (See *Philosophy of Right*, §42-43.)

Consider perception of the natural world: a mother walks her child through the park pointing at various plants uttering their names as she does so; as a result, the child's perception of the natural world is structured by its mother's perception, picking out plants which were named by its mother.

So  represents person A communicating with person B with sign X.

But equally  shows A's perception of the object X mediated by the person B. Note that the relation of A to the object (even perception of the natural world).

Artefacts are saturated with social relations – every use of words and technical tools expresses a person's social position and their cultural origins. Consider any kind of technical labour: the labourer uses tools and machinery as well as their own work-hardened hands to act upon the *Arbeitsgegenstand* (object of labour). That is, the tools mediate the relation of the labourer to the material. The material itself, once transformed by labour, mediates the relation between the labourer and an employer, fellow worker or a buyer, depending on circumstances, just as the employer and the customer mediate the worker's relation to their material. Every purchase and sale is mediated by artefacts, otherwise no exchange has occurred.

Artefact-mediation is by no means the only kind of mediation implied in activity, in particular, when people collaborate in common projects the shared practice and its object can be said to mediate the actors' actions. This very important kind of mediation is widely recognised (though also often ignored), but artefact-mediation is usually overlooked. Artefact-mediation is however an essential, ineliminable component of all interactions between actors. When I speak to you or pass you a note, our interaction is mediated by that sign-artefact – I cannot directly share with you my state of mind. Any artefact mediating an action is a social product and therefore is always implicitly the bearer of a relation to *other* people. Mediating artefacts have a social (or ideal) character.

* I am not using "utterance" in the technical sense given to it by Bakhtin. I mean the performance of the spoken word as opposed to the sound or meaning abstracted from the performance.

Every action is therefore both an immediate transaction between the subjects, *and* an enactment of the shared cultural history implicated in the history of the mediating artefact, selected from the constellations of artefacts available to the actors according to their social position.

It is not just the case that the mediating artefact is the context of, the background for, an influence upon, a restraint upon, or gives meaning to the action: the mediating artefact is an *irreducible element of the action itself*. Without a mediating artefact no action is possible at all. While the action is freely produced by the subject, the action can only be effected by means of an artefact which is sourced from the social and cultural environment.

The place of the artefact in actions gives us an idea as to what constitutes a *unit* of culture. An artefact, that is, a unit of culture, is the smallest material object or process which may be used to achieve a meaningful end other than the immediate performance of the action (i.e., the differentiation of goal and motive, or intention and purpose).

Activities

Activities (or projects) are units of activity, composed of a large number of actions and nothing else; artefacts, behaviour and consciousness are included insofar as they are entailed in the component actions. Activities are *molar* (or macro) units, and actions are *molecular* (or basic) units of activity, and these two units provide the basis for an interdisciplinary science of human society*, which is possible only because artefacts are already included in actions, rather than forming a resource or background to activity, as is generally the case in Critical Theory. Activities are the underlying reality supporting concepts, norms and ideals.

Note that projects are composed of actions, not individual people, and normally people are committed to a number of projects at any given time, while participants in a given project come and go over time. Unlike actions, projects are aimed at realising the object which is also their motivation. However, since projects are social rather than psychological entities, and made up of actions by different people, the idea of a project having a 'motivation' needs some clarification.

Each participant, indeed each action, necessarily has a different motivation, which is simply to say that each action is a subjective representation of the object, or putting this another way, each realises a particular meaning of the object in their

* Hegel includes a third level beyond Intention (action) and Purpose (activity), viz., the Good. This is the unfolding of History when all the competing projects promoting different visions of the Good exhaust themselves and merge in the actualisation of new social arrangements. I see no need to introduce a new category here however.

own way. This is the difficult irreducible relation mentioned above of individual instances to the concept under which every instance is subsumed. Every member may have a different motivation in belonging to the construction union, CFMEU, which will be reflected in their actions, and what this means is that a concrete concept of the CFMEU must reflect *all* these things the union stands for to different people.

Secondly, the concept which expresses the shared object of the project is not something which exists outside of the project, but on the contrary its existence is immanent within the project itself – the project is one of the moments of the concept. The *Arbeitsgegenstand*, the object worked upon, is not something existing outside the project either, because it is a mediating object for many of the actions making up the project. The project is the source and the realisation of the teleology of social life.

Thirdly, it is in the nature of projects that their object-concept undergoes successive change as the realisation of the concept contradicts expectations at every turn and the concept has to be revised. So there is always a contradiction between the subject and object of the project. How often do we find that a party's vision of the country turns out to be very different from what they used to think after they've been in power for a year or so?

Fourthly, projects are generally entities which people *join* rather than launch (though every project is initiated by some group of people at some time) and fade away, at some later time, either through exhaustion, failure or success. No-one is indispensable, as the saying goes. In that sense, projects are objective and their object-concepts are also objective with respect to any and all participants. People can be mistaken, but the object of a project is always something in the real world, even if it turns out to be different from how they imagined it. Projects are on-going and typically outlast the participation of any one individual, but they have a finite life span.

Without projects, human life would not be human at all. It would be just so many individuals each eking out a hand-to-mouth subsistence. History would stand still. The basic units of activity which make up social life would come to nothing were it not for the *collaboration* which binds individual actions into a form of social life, and collaboration is realised only in the pursuit of a common object. It is the mediating function of the object-concept which is overlooked by Habermas in his theory of communicative action, where understanding is to be reached among an indefinitely large group of people through communication without any motivation to do so. Writers like Bakhtin, who see social life as simply transactions between individuals, take for granted the shared conceptual, linguistic and motivational resources which can only be produced by projects. Projects and their concepts are not something imposed on the social world in the imagination of social theorists, but on

the contrary are the objective existence of those concepts. Nonetheless, these projects can exist only thanks to the capacity of the human brain to grasp concepts and build elaborate systems of social cooperation.

Although this ontology takes projects as the fundamental molar unit of activity, social groups do exist. The relation of social groups to projects is the same as the relation between abstract general concepts (pseudoconcepts) and true concepts. Prior to the formation of a self-conscious project, a number of individuals who all have in common some social position or attribute may be spoken of as a group and consequently those people who are subjects of such abstract categorisation also see themselves as a group in the same abstract way. This may go absolutely nowhere (like the category of ‘gingers’) but if some problem or opportunity arises for those who occupy that social position, then there is a basis for the formation of a project. Prior to such a moment, a social group is just a project ‘in-itself’. As soon as someone names this problem (or opportunity) then this movement supersedes the former abstract categorisation and a project is launched with the object to realise the concept.

In general, social groups exist as a consequence of the bureaucratic nature of modern states, which find it more convenient to deal with large numbers of people in this abstract way, rather than by facilitating concrete participation. As a result of bureaucratic structures, the superficial ideology of social groups will have some basis in modern states. However, insofar as social groups have real significance, there will be a response to this categorisation and this response will take the form of a project and a corresponding self-concept or conversely a prejudicial project such as racist movements or philanthropic activities.

So any social formation is saturated with numerous projects which are at various stages of conceptual development, all co-existing with one another.

Projects provide the substance for concepts, and the crucial product of this ontology is an understanding of the objective, social existence of concepts made possible by the formation of artefact-mediated actions into coherent collaborative projects (or activities). Concepts are norms; a norm expresses the concept under which an action is judged. So all the actions making up a project pursue the object-concept of the project in the same sense as it can be said that they conform to a project norm.

See my Introduction to a collection of articles on projects, “‘Collaborative Project’ as a Concept for Interdisciplinary Human Science Research” for further detail.

Concepts

Most of the concepts which we come across in literature and day-to-day speech are products of social conflicts which have long since faded away and what we know and refer to as a concept is their residue. To understand what a concept is it is necessary understand the life cycle of a concept, that is to say, the life cycle of projects. But here I shall outline the manner of their existence in social life, their ontology.

The word 'concept' is often used to denote some kind of mental entity, but then in other contexts is used to indicate something with a social existence, as in "Newton's concept of gravity." Concepts have a *social* existence and when we talk about concepts as mental entities, we are referring to the subjective reflection of concepts (as opposed to other kinds of subjective phenomena), in actions which are part and parcel of the existence of concepts as social formations.

A concept exists in constellations of sign and/or tool and/or human *artefacts*, and in *activities* in which particular meanings are acted out, and implicit in the *actions* of individuals. In each of these three moments a concept has a more or less tenuous existence, subject to reinforcement by the other moments, so that ultimately the concept exists only through the coordination of all three moments. The concept of 'socialism' exists in the texts and spoken words about it, in the social movements which aim at realising it and the mass of actions taken by individuals in those movements, using those words, and in the obvious contradictions amongst them.

In the first (universal) moment, the concept is found in constellations of material objects and processes which have been fashioned by human labour and therefore express human needs and aims. These artefacts include everything written about the concept, whether in dictionaries or literature and the concept can be grasped by a study of this residue of past activity, even many years after the authors have died and possibly after the social formation in which they lived has disappeared. The artefacts which realise concepts also include buildings and machines, land forms, domesticated plants and animals, again, fashioned according to human designs, or perhaps created accidentally, unintended side-effects of human activity and those 'technical' artefacts which may be said to *be* the concept as well as those symbolic artefacts which are *about* the concept. Archaeologists can do a great deal towards recovering the concepts of ancient people by the study of the material culture they leave behind. The interconnection between technical and symbolic culture is an element of a concept, and to some extent this will be implicit in the literature and images of a culture.

This universal moment is material and independent of human activity and in that sense objective. What if I read a definition of a word in a dictionary, but when I used the word, people

laughed at me, because in fact the word is not used in that sense at all in contemporary speech? What if I read the story of a person, and only later discovered that the book was fiction? What if the definition is written in a language I do not speak? So the concept is implicit in artefacts, but is not real until those artefacts are used in artefact-mediated actions as part of an object-oriented activity. Archaeology is always guesswork to some extent.

In the second (particular) moment, concepts are realised in people acting out their commitment to the concept. Unlike “Melbourne University Private,” the University of Melbourne is a real concept because people give and attend lectures, pay salaries, issue awards, etc., as if the University actually existed, and in such a case, if everyone acts as if a concept exists, then the concept exists. All concepts are implicit in some way in activities pursued in the communities where the concept exists.

This particular moment is essentially social and cultural. The relevant practice may exist in this or that community, among people of this or that social position, in this or that epoch, and it is a real, living thing. To the extent that people participate in the activity they can be said to understand it, even though it may not be with conscious awareness. The reality of the particular moment of a concept is not determined by asking people in an opinion poll, for example, but in observing their participation in relevant social practices. Change is manifested in the particular moment of a concept, as a practice interacts with other practices and concepts and undergoes the test of experience. Things often turn out other than was expected and concepts change just as practices change.

The individual moment of a concept, the psychological moment, exists and is manifested in every artefact-mediated action, every judgment. Every action betrays a person’s consciousness and their own interpretation of the concept governing the activity in which they are participating. A practice is, after all, only real to the extent that everyone participates in some coherent way in enacting the practice. Although I referred to this individual moment as the ‘psychological moment’, this should not be taken to suggest that the concept is some kind of psychic representation existing inside a person’s head. Consciousness exists, but we only get to know about it by the traces it leaves in action. The problem of the reality of the subject matter of psychologists is no different from the problem of the reality of the subject matter of historians, geologists, particle physicists or anyone else.

Just as artefacts are effective according to their ideal properties, and actions conform to norms, activities pursue not the object itself, but a particular concept of the object.

Concepts are a type of norm relevant to projects. That is, concepts are implicit in constellations of artefacts, in activities and artefact-mediated actions. They have no separate existence

apart from those artefacts, activities and actions in which they are implicit – human life consists in making them explicit (to borrow a turn of phrase from Robert Brandom). See my book, “Concepts. A Critical Approach” for further explanation.

Units

To understand complex material processes and human activity, it is of the utmost importance to identify the smallest unit which exhibits the essential properties of the whole process. To this end I have taken care to spell out the three units of activity (operations, actions and activities or projects). An ontology which does not make this explicit, talking instead of mass nouns – such as matter, thought, activity, society, language and such like – must fail. Such units are realised in processes, ‘objects’ or things being a limiting case, but as processes they are nonetheless finite, such as the spoken word, as opposed to abstractions like ‘language’ or indefinite processes like ‘speech’. This is because the grasping of a concept is itself a finite not an infinite process. See “The Germ Cell of Vygotsky’s Science” for further explanation.

Conclusion

In the above brief sketch, I have outlined without the necessary argument and reference to sources and authorities or extended elaboration and illustration, an ontology which is adequate for all the human sciences. The basic substances – artefacts, operations, actions and activities which exhaust the field of materially existing entities, provide the basis for ideals, norms and concepts. The basic substances and relations between them may be subject to indefinite analysis and differentiation, but I am confident that nothing has been omitted nor any distinction left unclear.

See also “Artefact-mediated Intersubjectivity as the basis for a Non-metaphysical Appropriation of Hegel.”