

# The Hegelian Sources of Cultural Historical Activity Theory

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**Abstract:** It will be shown that at least five foundational concepts of Cultural Historical Activity Theory were previously formulated by Hegel, viz., (1) the unit of analysis as a key concept for analytic-synthetic cognition, (2) the ubiquity of mediation and double-stimulation and in particular, (3) the centrality of artifact-mediated actions, (4) the definitive distinction between goal and motive in activities, and (5) the distinction between a true concept and a pseudoconcept.

Five key foundational concepts of Cultural Historical Activity Theory were previously formulated by Hegel.

## 1. The Unit of Analysis

In the section of the *Science of Logic* on The Idea in which Hegel outlined the method of Analytic and Synthetic Cognition, he specified how the division of the subject matter of the sciences is to be carried out according to the inner nature of the subject matter itself, rather than by some arbitrary, subjective scheme imposed from without.

Here is the key passage from the *Science of Logic*:

The progress, proper to the Notion (*Begriff*), from universal to particular, is the basis and the possibility of a *synthetic science*, of a *system* and of *systematic cognition*. The first requisite for this is, as we have shown, that the beginning be made with the subject matter in the form of a *universal* (*Allgemeinen*). In the sphere of actuality, whether of **nature or spirit**, it is the **concrete individuality** (*die konkrete Einzelheit*) that is given to **subjective, natural cognition** as the *prius* (*das Erste*); but in cognition that is a *comprehension*, at least to the extent that it has the form of the Notion for basis, the *prius* must be on the contrary **something simple** (*das Einfache*), **something abstracted from the concrete**, because in this form alone has the subject-matter the form of the **self-related universal** or of an **immediate based on the Notion**. (Hegel 1816/1969, p. 801, S 779. The italics is Hegel's, the bold is mine)

“*Prius*” is a translation of the German “*der Ersten*,” the first, or what is primary. The *prius* is the concept from which each science is to begin.

Firstly, Hegel is saying is that the *synthetic* phase of a science must begin with this “*something simple*.” This prescription applies to “actuality, whether of nature or spirit,” (i.e. the natural and human sciences) but not apparently to the *Logic*. Examples of this simple something include: “Line,” or “Taking Possession” or “Purpose.”

Secondly, Hegel describes this “*something simple*” *Erste* as “the concrete individuality that is given to subjective, *natural* cognition.” *Einzel* means “single,” so *Einzelheit* means a “single-ity,” or “individuality.” “Natural cognition” refers to the common sense or normative perception of a process within a given social formation, prior to analysis or any effort of critical analysis or synthetic cognition.

The *Logic* cannot be structured according to this method because logical categories cannot be apprehended as “something simple” by “natural cognition,” but in the *Logic*: “the method is the consciousness of the form of the inner self-movement of the content” (Hegel 1816/1969, p. 53, S. 45). This is not the case for the sciences dealing with the natural and human sciences for which the subject matter is apprehended as *external* to

the subject. The *Erste* is the product of analytical cognition, and at nodal points in the development of a science, a “simple something,” is abstracted from concrete of experience, and subjected to *synthetic cognition*, that is, the dialectical reconstruction of a whole process. These nodal points mark out the alternation between analytical cognition and synthetic cognition.

This “something simple” must be “*abstracted* from the concrete” by analysis. So the beginning of a science (other than the *Logic*) requires the abstraction of such a concrete individuality from the whole concrete field of experience which can be made the starting point for a synthetic reconstruction of the concrete in theoretical form. This act of abstraction requires an insight into the whole process:

analytic cognition ... starts from a *presupposed*, and therefore individual (*einzeln*), *concrete* subject matter; this may be an object already *complete in itself* for ordinary thought, or it may be a *problem*, that is to say, given only in its circumstances and conditions, but not yet disengaged from them and presented on its own account in simple self-subsistence. (Hegel 1816/1969, p. 787, S. 753)

The aim of this insight is made clear when Hegel says that “the first requisite for this is, as we have shown, that the beginning be made with the subject matter in the form of a *universal*.” That is, the concrete *individuality* which is the product of analysis is simultaneously *the universal*, that is to say, it is an *archetype* or “germ cell” of the entire organism which is to be synthesized in theory. This process is represented in the first volume of the *Logic: Being and Essence*.

Note that the “something simple” is an *individuality* and this is the difference between, for example, “Morality” and moral *actions*, between “Art” and a *work* of art. An individuality is discrete, bounded, and not continuous or intangible, a particle rather than “matter,” a something rather than a generality, an action rather than a practice. Marx expressed it succinctly in his *Notes on Adolph Wagner* in connection with *Capital*:

I do not proceed from the “concept of value” – What I proceed from is the *simplest social form* in the which the labor product presents itself in contemporary society, and this is the ‘commodity’. (Marx, 1989/1881, p. 544)

According to Hegel, an exposition of the science following the path of synthetic cognition must then make its beginning from this concrete individuality which is deemed to be an abstract (i.e., simple, and abstracted from its concrete circumstances) instance of the Universal which is the subject matter of the science, and which is deemed to be universal, and proceed from there to the various particular forms of the universal. Here the exposition of the science is as demonstrated in the *Logic*: the a *concept* of the concrete individuality enters the exposition (and may require clarification at this point), and is then subjected to immanent critique, successively surpassing its limits, exploring the particular forms implicit in it, until arriving at a contradiction which can be resolved in actuality only by the discovery of some new concrete individuality.

It should be noted that Hegel does not believe that the natural and human sciences can be elaborated by logic alone, without reference to observation and experiment:

Their (the sciences’) commencement, though rational at bottom, yields to the influence of fortuitousness, when they have to bring their universal truth into contact with actual facts and the single phenomena of experience. In this region of chance and change, the adequate notion of science must yield its place to reasons or grounds of explanation. (Hegel, 1830, §16. S. 70)

In the Logic, the simple concepts which mark the beginning of each book are, respectively: Being, Reflection and Abstract Concept. These concepts are in a certain sense also “simple somethings,” and their development offers a model of synthetic science applied in the natural and human sciences, but as categories, they cannot be described as *Einzelnen* nor “abstracted from the concrete” whole.

The remainder of the *Encyclopedia* demonstrates the use of “simple somethings” which have the form of the self-related universal, including:

- The first book of the *Philosophy of Nature* ostensibly begins with “Space,” but much more determinate concepts are his immediate beginning: the Point, the Line, and the Plane (or Surface, which can enclose a space).
- The second book of the *Philosophy of Nature*, ostensibly begins with “Mechanics,” but actually begins from the Particle.
- “Organic Physics,” ostensibly about “Life,” actually begins from an Organism.
- The three books of the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* are “Soul,” beginning with Feelings, “Consciousness” beginning with Sensations, and the Finite Mind.
- In the *Philosophy of Objective Spirit*, “Abstract Right,” or Private Property, goes through: Possession = (Taking Possession, Use & Alienation); “Contract” = (Gift, Exchange & Pledge) and “Wrong” = (Non-malicious Wrong, Fraud & Crime).
- “Morality” goes through: Purpose, Goal, Means, Intention, Welfare, the Good, among others, and
- “Ethical Life” goes through: Family, Market (the System of Needs and Labor), Public Authorities, Corporations, State, among other institutions.
- In the *Philosophy of Absolute Spirit*, Art is ostensibly about the “shape of beauty” (*die Gestalt der Schönheit*), but begins from the Work of Art; Revealed Religion begins from the ‘Concrete Individuality’ (*konkrete Einzelheit*); and Philosophy from the Syllogism.

As can be seen from the above list, each of the sciences taken up by Hegel in the *Encyclopedia* has a general phenomenon as subject matter, unified by synthetic cognition beginning with a discrete simple entity or act which, while being singular, is also universal.

### Vygotsky on Unit of Analysis

Vygotsky called this the ‘unit’ (*Einheit*) of analysis. In the first chapter of *Thinking and Speech* he said:

The word is comparable to the living cell in that it is a unit of sound and meaning that contains – in simple form – all the basic characteristics of the integral phenomenon of verbal thinking. (1934, p. 46)

and explained:

This form of analysis relies on the partitioning of the complex whole into units. In contrast to the term “element,” the term “unit” designates a product of analysis that possesses *all the basic characteristics of the whole*. The unit is a vital and irreducible part of the whole. (1934, p. 46)

## 2. Mediation and Dual Stimulation

Hegel's introduction to his mature works is contained in the 107-page introduction to the *Encyclopaedia*. §§26-78 (60pp.) are devoted to the three "positions of thought towards objectivity." The first position is Metaphysics, and refers to the dogmatic approach of philosophers prior to the Lutheran Reformation and the Copernican Revolution, and belongs to another epoch. Hegel sees his philosophy as arising as a critique of modern philosophy, including the second position, which is Mediated Knowing, divided in two: I. Empiricism and II. "Critical Philosophy," i.e. Kant, and the third position, Immediate Knowing, which groups together I. Descartes and II. Jacobi. That is, Hegel constructs his own philosophy as a third position subsuming the attitudes to knowledge as either mediated or immediate.

For Empiricism, knowledge is mediated through observation and experiment; people derive the categories and theories by successive sorting of the data of experience into groups and 'patterns'. Upon reflection it can be seen that Empiricism naively takes for granted the cognitive structures through which the sense data is acquired and made sense of. Kant exposed this naivety and turned his attention to the forms of knowledge, or categories, themselves, but came to the conclusion that nothing outside of experience could be a valid object of knowledge: all knowledge was mediated. Kant could not, however, explain where these forms of knowledge came from, but simply took it as given that they existed and were accessible to all human beings.

Rene Descartes rejected the naivety of the Empiricists and subjected sense knowledge to absolute skepticism. He claimed however that true knowledge could be arrived at by means of rational reflection, by reason alone. Hegel places the Rationalist Descartes in the same category as the Pietist Jacobi, who claimed that knowledge of God could be acquired through Faith. Hegel showed, however, that the knowledge acquired by this simple immediacy could not go beyond "I exist" or "God exists," and could determine nothing about the actual nature of the world beyond its existence, without recourse to mediated knowledge, be that empirical science or revealed religion.

Neither the theory of mediated knowledge (Bacon and Kant) nor the theory of immediate knowledge (Descartes and Jacobi) could account for human knowledge. Hegel summed up his standpoint in the essay opening the *Science of Logic*, 'With What Must Science Begin?':

'there is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation, so that these two determinations reveal themselves to be unseparated and inseparable.' (Hegel 1816/1969, p 68, S. 78)

Vygotsky shared this orientation to the ubiquity of mediation:

"With full justification, Hegel used the concept of mediation in its most general meaning, seeing in it the most characteristic property of the mind. He said that the mind is as resourceful as it is powerful. In general, resourcefulness consists in mediating activity that, while it lets objects act on each other according to their nature and exhaust themselves in that activity, does not at the same time intervene in the process, but fulfils only *its own proper role*. Marx refers to this definition ...] (LSV CW v. 4 p. 61)

and goes on to cite the footnote in *Capital* which will be discussed in the section below, on artifact-mediation. Vygotsky illustrated this observation with the well-known

diagram showing “mediated activity” dividing into two kinds: “use of tools” and “use of signs.”

### 3. Artifact-mediated actions

In the penultimate phase of the *Logic*, just before the Absolute Idea when “the Notion ascends as a free Existence” (Hegel 1816/1969, p. 844, S. 859), Hegel elaborates the Syllogism of Action [*der Schlusse des Handelns*] – a crucial foundation stone of Hegel’s theory of action which provides the key link between the three books of the *Encyclopedia*, connecting his conception of natural science with the *Logic* and his social theory back to the *Logic*.

All of the *Logic* up until this passage concerned logical categories, and does not touch on ‘externality’ (to use Hegel’s terminology), but with the Syllogism of Action externality makes its appearance in the *Logic*. The Syllogism of Action is distinct from the series of syllogisms in the earlier section of the *Logic* called Subjectivity, being the final section of the Idea making the transition to the Absolute Idea.

In the syllogism of action, one premise is the *immediate relation of the good end to actuality* which it seizes on, and in the second premise directs it as an external *means* against the external actuality. (Hegel 1816/1969, p. 821, S. 817)

Hegel explained the Syllogism of Action (in a passage littered with italics for emphasis) somewhat more lucidly in the *Encyclopedia Logic* as follows:

The purposive activity [*zweckmäßige Tätigkeit*]<sup>1</sup>, with its means [*Mittel*], is still directed outwards, since the purpose [*Zweck*] is also *not* identical with the object, thus it must first be mediated with the object. The means, as the object in this *second premise*, is in *immediate* relation with the *other* extreme of the syllogism, the objectivity as presupposed, the material. This relation is the sphere of mechanism and chemism now *erving* the purpose that is their truth and free concept. That the subjective purpose as the power of these processes in which the *objective dimension* rubs up against itself, keeps itself *outside them* and is what *preserves itself* in them — this is the *cunning* of reason. (Hegel 1830: §209, S. 599)

Reason is as *cunning* as it is *powerful*. The cunning consists generally in the activity of mediating which, while by letting the objects, in keeping with their own nature, act on one another and wear themselves out on one another, without meddling in this process, achieves *its* purpose alone. (Hegel 1830: §209 addition, S. 600)

And although it is likely that Vygotsky never read Hegel, in *The Problem of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions* he cites Marx citing this passage in *Capital*, and was therefore aware of the origin of the concept of artifact mediation and its profound significance in Hegel’s philosophy.

The syllogism makes the obvious but important point that in order to realize the subject’s purpose, it is necessary to use as means another part of the same actuality which the subject intends to change. You can’t change the world with thoughts alone. This may be simple common sense but it is an important and fundamental truth about *all* purposive action: a subject’s thoughts become material realities and confront other

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<sup>1</sup> *Tätigkeit* in Hegel’s system means activity in the sense of behavior, irrespective of intentions, but the qualification “*zweckmäßige*” restricts *Tätigkeit* to object-oriented actions, *Handlungen*.

subjects as objective material reality only thanks to the mediation of the subject's actions by material means, that is, by means of *mediating artifacts*. Such artifacts may be the voice or a hand activated by the actor or a tool or tract of land used in labor; it may be a symbol such as marks on a page or a screen, or a tool or machine. This passage is routinely overlooked in introductions to Hegel's philosophy, mystifying the passage from logical categories to the concepts of natural science concerning material processes, not to mention *social* processes.

The syllogism of action also explains how the categories of the Logic come take on an apparently external existence, and are manifested as forms of Nature and social life. In this syllogism, material reality *acts upon itself* according to its own inherent nature, mediated by the human subject, whatever the subjective intentions of the actor and thereby realizes the Concept as something objective and natural, as part of the material culture of the community, *through* voluntary human action. It is through the mediation of action by external objects and processes that the subject forms a concept of Nature.

What people use as means in their actions are not generally elements of Nature as such (though they are *always* that as well) but are products of the activity of other human beings, generally cultural products which are used in normative ways for purposes which are in a sense objectified in artifacts themselves, like the shape of a hammer which is manifestly meant to be used to hammer nails. Consequently the human subject not only "makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to make other substances subservient to his aims" so that "Nature becomes one of the organs of his activity," (Marx 1867, p. 189) but he or she makes use of the entirety of the culture of the community of which she or he is a part.

As Hegel sees it, the subject and object are each mutually independent totalities, but the means and the object, are more powerful than human intentions in the long run:

That the end relates itself immediately to an object and makes it a means, as also that through this means it determines another object, may be regarded as violence in so far as the end appears to be of quite another nature than the object, and the two objects similarly are mutually independent totalities. [...] the means is superior to the finite ends of external purposiveness: the plough is more honorable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends. (Hegel 1816/1969: p. 746, S. 676)

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

The *tool* lasts, while the immediate enjoyments pass away and are forgotten. In his tools man possesses power over external nature, even though in respect of his ends he is, on the contrary, subject to it. (Hegel 1816/1969: p. 747, S. 677)

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

Hegel (1802/3) prefigured the category of artifact in when he referred to the tool as the 'norm of labor', speech the 'tool of Reason', and the child as the 'absolute mediating term'. All these categories of artifact are *both* external material objects or processes *and*

shaped by and used in human activity. Only thought conformable to such material objects and processes, and manifested by their means and objects, are active in the world, are part of *Geist*.

Not just any relevant material object or process functions in this way in the manifestation of Spirit, however. For example, the weather which all of us here in Melbourne experience makes conversations about the weather between Melbournians mutually comprehensible. When we talk with one another about the weather, the fact that we all have experience of the same object is neither necessary nor sufficient for mutual understanding, since we all experience that weather differently. If I tell you about the weather, the weather does not participate in that action; only the spoken words mediate my action upon you. If I speak in English only those meanings found in the English language will be understood and if you do not understand English, the communication will fail altogether. The role of shared material conditions is *another issue*. Concepts of the weather are realized only through communications about the weather and weather-related activities. Insofar as weather is merely a background to activity, a concept of weather cannot exist.

According to the syllogism of action, there are *two* links between between subject and object — one is immediate, such as experience of the weather, and the other is mediated, such as the words and forms of expression with which we have learnt to respond to the weather. The mediating element does not exclude immediate contact with the object, acting as a buffer between subject and object, but ‘directs’ it, so to speak.

### Vygotsky on Artifact Mediation

Despite a consensus among Vygotsky scholars by the 1980s that Vygotsky used ‘artifact-mediated actions’ as his unit of analysis for much of his work, Vygotsky (1930) was at pains to distance himself from the use of the category of ‘artifact’ in this way, lumping tool-use in labor together with the use of symbols in communicative action. The conflating of these two kinds of mediation carried the risk, so Vygotsky believed, of *reducing* symbolic action such as speech and writing to labor, a tendency which manifested itself in the later writings of some of his colleagues (See Leontyev 2005). Vygotsky also used units of analysis other than artifact mediated actions, as I have outlined elsewhere (2017).

## 4. The distinction between Actions and Activities

Hegel expounds his theory of activity within the section on Morality in the *Philosophy of Right*. The *contradiction* between the purpose [*Vorsatz*] and intention [*Absicht*] of an action [*Handlung*] and the contradiction between intention and welfare [*Wohl*] are the key concepts of his analysis. These concepts are not merely different, or at different levels of abstraction, but are *contradictory*, and the ground of these contradictions is rational human action. The structure of action Hegel elaborates is not merely a moral, cognitive or affective structure pertaining to an individual actor, but rather the conceptual and ethical structure of an entire community.

I will now present a gloss of Hegel’s theory of action, without reflecting on issues of attribution and responsibility, simply focusing on the structure of action.

### Purpose

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

... the action as carried out in immediate existence, shall be in principle mine, that thus the action shall be the *purpose* of the subjective will. (Hegel 1821/1952, §114 (a))

The purpose entails the universal concept of the action, the particular content and the judgment to do it. The purpose also entails a means (again, the universal concept of the means, the particular content and the judgment to use it) which is used up and an object which is acted upon. All these constitute the purpose of the action. There is not a purpose on one hand an action on the other.

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

The particular aspect of the action is its inner content ( $\alpha$ ) as I am aware of it in its general character; my awareness of this general character constitutes the worth of the action and the reason I think good to do it — in short my *intention*. (Hegel 1821/1952, §114 (b)( $\alpha$ ), S. 348)

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

Its content is my special aim, the aim of my particular, merely individual, existence, i.e. *welfare*. (Hegel 1821/1952, §114 (b)( $\beta$ ), S. 348-9)

The welfare is what makes the successful fulfillment of my intention a Good – “the Idea as the unity of the concept of the will with the particular will” (Hegel 1821/1952, §129). But just as the general good cannot exclude the ultimate interests of the individuals who are part of the community, whatever my particular aims may be, ultimately, my welfare is secured only by means of the general *good*:

‘This content (as something which is inward and which yet at the same time is raised to its universality as to absolute objectivity) is the absolute end of the will, the *good*.’ (Hegel 1821/1952, §114 (c), S. 349)

The Good I seek is not identical to the universal good, but the tension between them is a contradiction which must be resolved. Let’s look at the various contradictions between Purpose, Intention, Welfare and the Good (*das Gute*).

If Purpose is the same as Intention

The reason that “Why did the chicken cross the road? To get to the other side,” is funny is that unlike humans, chickens do not do things for a reason, they just do. People also occasionally do things for their own sake. If I take a walk in the bush, not for my health, or to watch the sunset, but just out of habit, then I act like a chicken, and my intention is the same as my purpose.

As Hegel puts it in his own peculiar way,

The right of intention is that the universal quality of the action shall not merely be implicit but shall be known by the agent, and so shall have lain from the start in his subjective will ... willed by the subject as a *thinker*. [Remarking that this] ... entails the complete, or almost complete, irresponsibility of children, imbeciles, lunatics, &c., for their actions. (Hegel 1821/1952, §120, S. 371-2)

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

## If Purpose differs from Intention

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

But what is my reason for doing it? Obviously, I don't do it for its own sake. Hegel calls my reason for doing it my *intention* [*Absicht*]. In this case, I am submitting a postal vote in the upcoming election and it is my intention that by means [*Mittel*] of the social practice of postal voting I will cast my vote, that is, my vote will be counted. A whole series of action are entailed in casting this vote, all united by the same intention, which different from the Aim of posting a letter. I do this in full knowledge of the Australian postal service and electoral system; these are not merely a 'beliefs' (though they are that as well) but founded in practices in this country which have continued since long before I was born, and my intentions actualize in my actions the social practice of voting in Australia. Indeed, this social practice would not exist other than through a concept of voting being shared amongst millions of Australian citizens and the intentions of us all to act, according to our circumstances, on that concept. My intention is the "universal side of the action ... a chain of external relations" (Hegel 1821/1952, §119, S. 367).

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

My intention in posting the envelope is not given simply in the concept under which posting is subsumed. As Hegel remarks in connection with committing a murder:

The murder was not done for the sake of murdering; the murderer had in view some particular positive end. (Hegel 1821/1952, §121 addition, S. 378)

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

The achievement of my aim, therefore, implies this identity of my will with the will of others, it has a positive bearing on the will of others. (Hegel 1821/1952, §112, s. 343)

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

the transition from purpose to intention lies in the fact that I ought to be aware not simply of my single action but also of the universal which is conjoined with it. The universal which comes on the scene here in this way is what I have willed, my intention. (Hegel 1821/1952, §118 addition, S. 366)

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

### Intention differs from Welfare

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

The moment of intention manifests mutual understanding of a shared concept, even though the concept has different meanings for particular groups. The moment of welfare manifests mutual differences within shared social practices. The contradiction between individual welfare and the societal good is the driving force for changes in relation between classes and other groups and all manner of social policy aimed at overcoming sources of social discontent and tension. But the existence of this contradiction is necessary to modern social life. This is a contradiction which was never studied by the Soviet Activity Theorists, for whom the motive of an activity was 'objective'.

### Action and Activities in the work of A. N. Leontyev

A. N. Leontyev, the founder of Soviet Activity Theory, theorized these concepts in terms of Actions with their Goals and Activities and their Motives. Readers should be aware though that German translations of Leontyev's work do not use the same terms as Hegel used.

For Hegel, ‘an action’ includes all the thinking going into the decision to take action and all the consequences which follow from the action until actions by others intervene in the unfolding of consequences. I don’t think this problem has ever been resolved among Activity Theorists. The enlarged concept of ‘an action’ poses the question, however, of how one action is delineated from another. The contradiction between purpose and intention provides this delineation. So long as all the deeds carried out by a person are governed by a single intention, without the intervention of others, this marks a single action, and can be judged as such.

This conception of actions with their purposes and intentions replicates in different terminology A. N. Leontyev’s theory of activity, in which artifact mediated actions and object-oriented activities are the units of analysis. In agreement with Hegel, Leontyev made the contradiction between purpose and intention definitive of the concept of an ‘action’:

Processes, the object and motive of which do not coincide with one another, we shall call ‘actions’. (2009, p. 187)

and likewise differentiated between the *Zweck* (goal) and *Wohl* (motive):

The basic ‘components’ of separate human activities are the actions that realize them. We regard action as the process that corresponds to the notion of the result which must be achieved, that is, the process which obeys a conscious goal. Just as the concept of motive is correlative with the concept of activity, so the concept of goal is correlative with that of action. (Leontyev, 1978)

What was less clear in Leontyev’s theory was the relation of Motive to the Good. Where these are in contradiction, they can only be reconciled by social transformation.

## 5. The distinction between Pseudoconcept and True Concept

In Hegel’s time, most logicians took concepts to be tantamount to a list of attributes which are essential to the concept, and the same is true to this day. The subject matter of Hegel’s *Logic* is concepts, their genesis and development, and Hegel revolutionized what is meant by ‘concept’ (*Begriff*). Up until about 1931, Vygotsky understood ‘concepts’ in the conventional way, consistent with formal logic, and this conception is reflected in the work Luria did in Central Asia in 1929. Possibly as a result of working together on a project with some followers of the Soviet philosopher, Deborin, Vygotsky changed his view, and this is reflected in all his works post-1931.

Hegel differentiated his idea of ‘concept’ from the abstract generality of formal, metaphysical thinking as follows:

(1) The concept is generally associated in our minds with abstract generality, and on that account it is often described as a general conception. We speak, accordingly, of the notions of color, plant, animal, etc. They are supposed to be arrived at by neglecting the particular features which distinguish the different colors, plants, and animals from each other, and by retaining those common to them all. This is the aspect of the notion which is familiar to understanding; and feeling is in the right when it stigmatizes such hollow and empty notions as mere phantoms and shadows.

But the universal of the notion is not a mere sum of features common to several things, confronted by a particular which enjoys an existence of its own. It is, on the contrary, self-particularizing or self-specifying, and with undimmed clearness finds itself at home in its antithesis. For the sake both of cognition and

of our practical conduct, it is of the utmost importance that the real universal should not be confused with what is merely held in common. ...

The universal in its true and comprehensive meaning is a thought which, as we know, cost thousands of years to make it enter into the consciousness of men. ...

The distinction referred to above between what is merely in common, and what is truly universal, is strikingly expressed by Rousseau in his famous *Contrat social*, when he says that the laws of a state must spring from the universal will (*volonte generale*), but need not on that account be the will of all (*volonte de tous*). Rousseau would have made a sounder contribution towards a theory of the state, if he had always kept this distinction in sight. The general will is the concept of the will: and the laws are the special clauses of this will and based upon the notion of it. (Hegel, 1830/1867, §163n, S. 507-509)

It would go beyond the scope of this article to elaborate just *how* Hegel conceived of a 'concept' beyond what was said above in connection with the unit of analysis.

The 'abstract generality' referred to above by Hegel, Vygotsky aptly called a 'pseudoconcept' - a form of abstract generalization, uniting objects by shared common features, which resembles conceptual thinking because, within a limited domain of experience, they subsume the same objects and situations as the true concept indicated by the same word.

The pseudoconcept is not the exclusive achievement of the child. In our everyday lives, our thinking frequently occurs in pseudoconcepts. From the perspective of dialectical logic, the concepts that we find in our living speech are not concepts in the true sense of the word. They are actually general representations of things. There is no doubt, however, that these representations are a transitional stage between complexes or pseudoconcepts and true concepts. (Vygotsky, 1934/1987, p. 155)

It is remarkable that these two authors distinguished between abstract generalizations and true concepts in the same way, one from the point of view of developmental psychology, the other from the point of view of logic.

## Summary

The five concepts mentioned above do not exhaust the ways in which Vygotsky, Leontyev and their followers continued the project begun by Hegel. In particular, the following could be mentioned:

(1) Vygotsky, like the objective idealist, Hegel, sees concepts as implicit in the constellation of material culture and the manner of its use in a community, rather than as subjective formations created by an individual brain.

(2) Vygotsky's conception of the genesis of speech and intellect:

2. Up to a certain point, speech and thinking develop along different lines and independently of one another.

3. At a certain point, the two lines cross: thinking becomes verbal and speech intellectual. (Vygotsky 1934/1989, p. 112)

Hegel conceived of the genesis of the modern state in the same way: the various powers of the state – the legislature, the executive, the monarch have distinct origins historically, but are drawn together as elements of a single organism, and in a mature state, although none can exist without the whole organism, each organ works

independently according to its own powers, just as adults are capable of thinking something without saying it and saying something while thinking of something else.

(3) Although Vygotsky made some statements about Free Will which exhibit a lack of philosophical literacy, he solved the problem of the Free Will in an exemplary way in his theory of child development (See Vygotsky 1934/1998), showing how the natural will of the new-born is transformed through a series of phases of development in which the child becomes physically, biologically, psychologically, socially, and finally, societally autonomous, eventually attaining the Free Will of the adult citizen, freely acting in awareness of their social position and its historical context.

Hegel proceeded in the same way in the *Philosophy of Right* (See Hegel 1821/1952, Introduction). Human beings emerge from the animal kingdom with a natural will which leaves them prisoners of their own desires, subject to the available means of their satisfaction and the forbearance of their neighbors. However, in the final stages of phylogenesis, with the mastery of language, and then the subsequent historical formation of states able to guarantee rights, foster the development of a person as a moral subject and their participation in a sovereign state, the human being *develops* a Free Will. Vygotsky and Hegel shared this developmental approach to the problem, rather than metaphysically opposing the Free Will to the Natural Will and becoming tangled in the resulting contradictions.

\* \* \*

The synergies are extensive, because Vygotsky's approach is a developmental one, rather than one based on fixed categories, and this approach to reality was initiated by Hegel.

It is remarkable that the three of the five conceptions highlighted in this review (1, 3, & 4), although well-known to Vygotsky scholars and, as we have seen, explicitly foreshadowed by Hegel, have rarely been observed by Hegel scholars. Given that it is likely that Vygotsky never read Hegel (See Blunden 2009), Vygotsky's achievement is all the more remarkable.

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