

# Agency and the Will. Committing to make a difference

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## Table of Contents

<b>Table of Contents .....</b>	<b>2</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>Part I. The Will in Western Philosophy.....</b>	<b>8</b>
1. The Will and the Conversion of Augustine of Hippo .....	8
Roman Law before the Concept of the Will; Early Roman law; Augustine’s resolution of conflict of motives; Sin in the Old Testament; The New Testament; Legal discourse after Augustine; Martin Luther; Conclusion.	
2. Spinoza and the Negation of Free Will .....	14
Spinoza’s place in the history of philosophy; The rehabilitation of Spinoza; Spinoza and the Second Reformation; Spinoza’s argument in outline; Spinoza’s contributions to Science; Shortcomings of Spinoza; The Antiquity of Spinoza’s philosophy; Spinoza’s ‘Mechanical Materialist’ Legacy; Conclusion.	
3. The Impasse in Western Philosophy .....	23
The Copernican Revolution; Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia; Empiricism; Dogmatism vs Scepticism; David Hume; Kant’s Answer to Scepticism; Outline of Kant’s Moral Philosophy; Critique of Kant; Herder; Fichte.	
<b>Part II. Hegel’s Interdisciplinary Concept of the Will.....</b>	<b>30</b>
1. Introduction. Spirit and Dualism.....	30
The problem of the starting point; Immediate and mediated knowledge; The structure of the <i>Logic</i> ; The <i>Logic</i> on the Will; The Syllogism of Action;	
2. Hegel on the Natural Will.....	37
The Psyche ; Consciousness; The Intellect.	
3. Rousseau and Hegel on the Will ‘for itself’ .....	39
The Will in social theory The Will in social theory; Freedom and personal autonomy; Hegel on the Free Will; Social theory as ethics; Rights, morality and ethical life. The Will ‘for itself’; Hegel's theory of action; Purpose, intention and the good; Actions; Purpose, goal and means; Responsibility and the unforeseen consequences for our actions; Intention; The truth of intentions; Welfare; The Good and conscience; Conclusion.	
4. Rousseau and Hegel on the Universal Will.....	55
Freedom and the Will; Rousseau on the general Will; Why Hegel opposed general elections; Hegel on civil disobedience; The right of heroes; Conclusion.	
<b>Part III. The Psychology of the Will .....</b>	<b>62</b>
1. Self-Control .....	62
Introduction; The Higher Psychological Functions; Behaviour; the reflex arc; the conditioned reflex; practical intellect; voluntary	

behaviour; Self-control; 'Original Sin'; The structure of the Higher Psychological Functions; Germ Cell and Unit; Volition and the Will; from Psychology to Social Theory.

2. The development of the Will through childhood.....73  
 Childhood; The six crises of childhood; social situation of development; The structure of the crisis of the Will; the definition of the periods; 'Gradual' development; Critical phases; Analysis by Units.  
 The Six Crises; 1. The Crisis of Birth and the newborn; 2. Infancy; 3. The crisis at one; 4. The toddler, early childhood; 5. The crisis at age 3; 6. The pre-school child (3-7); 7. The Crisis at age 7; 8. The school age child (7-12); 9. The Crisis at age 13; 10. Adolescence; 11. The crisis at age 17; Summary of the crises of childhood.  
 Conclusion.
3. The development of the Will through adulthood .....94  
 Introduction; Leontyev's theory of personality; Vasilyuk's theory of personal crises; *Otnosheniye*; *Perezhivanie*.

**Part IV. Sociology without the Will .....102**

1. Functionalism .....102  
 Introduction; Leontyev's Activity Theory as a social theory; Leontyev's conception of an activity; Operations, actions and activities; Motivation; objects and ideals; Objectivism; Personal sense; Ideology; Dogmatism; Productivism; Functionalism; Functionalist Sociology
2. Althusser's Structuralism .....108  
 Relations of production, Apparatus, ideology, and subject; subjects; apparatuses; Ideology; Science; Ideology; The subjected subject; Contradictions and social change; Agency; Real issues; Conclusion.
3. Bourdieu's Structuralism..... 119  
 Field and habitus; hysteresis; Class and habitus; Cultural capital and educational capital; Social capital, Body capital, Linguistic capital, Political capital; Cultural relativism; Idealism; Objectivism; Political opinion formation; Systems of status subordination; Social capital theory; Axel Honneth's critique of Bourdieu; Subjectivity; Conclusion.

**Part V. The Subject versus the Structure ..... 131**

1. Anthony Giddens' Critique of Structuralism..... 131  
 Introduction; People can be experts, too; There are no 'natural forces' in social life; Agents; The conjuncture; Giddens' critique of Functionalism; The Knowledgeability of Social Actors; Giddens' Psychology; Resources; Routines; Motivation; Conscious awareness; Practical consciousness; Conflict of motives; Conscious awareness; Unintended Consequences and Conceptual Development; Agency; Institutions and social movements; Activities; The formation of routines; Conscious awareness; Conclusion.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre’s Virtue Ethics.....	144
Practices; Internal Goods; 'World-historical' practices; Institutions; Virtue; Ethics, Consequentialism and deontology; Goals and Motives; Virtues and Practices; The ethics of social-change traditions; Conclusion.	
<b>Part VI. Making a Difference.....</b>	<b>153</b>
1. Activism and Utopia .....	153
Prefigurative Politics; Anarchism and Virtue Ethics; The remote future; Ethics and Utopia; The history of the revolutionary party; Working class organisation; Making revolution; The political landscape in Australia today; Building the revolutionary party; The conditions today; Social Movements; Conclusion.	
2. The Social Change Agent .....	172
Solidarity; Socialist revolution; Social change; Other forms of organisation and activity.	
3. Agent of What? .....	179
Solidarity; Socialist Revolution; Social Change; Other forms of organisation and activity; Changing your profession; The trainee dilemma.	
4. Conclusion: Committing to make a difference .....	186
Introduction; The Psychology of the Will; Commitments; The Will; The horizon of foreseeable consequences; Virtue rthics; Socialism and solidarity; Summary.	
<b>References .....</b>	<b>193</b>
Index.....	198

## Introduction

People are anxious about their *agency*. Every day, we see on our TV screens and in our own lives that we are dominated by vast and powerful forces – economic forces, governments, both our own and those of great powers, pandemics, wars, climate change – all manifestly beyond our control. And yet, we are constantly told that we alone are responsible for our own fate.

‘Agency’ expresses the feeling that, yes, these great structures govern the waves and tides that surround me, but surely it is possible for me to *make a difference*?

The word ‘agency’ has been borrowed from Structuralism on the understanding that agency is the opposite of structure, that events are jointly produced by structure and agency. But this is not what the Structuralists meant at all! For example, Louis Althusser (1970) speaks only of ‘the agents of exploitation (capitalists, managers)’, ‘the agent of repression’, and so on. The Structuralists borrowed the word ‘agency’ from legal discourse in which ‘agency’ refers to being an agent *of* some *other* actor. For the Structuralist, the agent is necessary for the structure to realise itself; it is not an opposite to structure.

Nonetheless, the anxiety expressed by people in our time is valid. But there has been no sufficiently rigorous scientific effort to provide this everyday concept of ‘agency’ with a scientific basis.

That is the task of this work. Can a person really ‘make a difference’?

This problem has become particularly acute in our times, the period following World War II. But thinkers have wrestled with this problem since antiquity. More precisely, it has only been with the rise of Christianity that this concern could fully manifest itself. One might think that Alexander the Great would have been quite comfortable in the conviction that he could shape the world around him. However, in those times it was the normal business of warrior-kings like him to make war and conquest. There was no moral crisis over ‘agency’ for someone in the ruling class of ancient city-states. On the other hand, the plebeians and slaves could scarcely imagine that they had any say in affairs of the wider world.

Beginning with the conversion of Augustine of Hippo in 386 CE, the concept of the ‘Will’ became the vehicle for concerns about whether it was possible to ‘rise above your own nature’ and act contrary to your natural inclination.

Ever since, the existence of a Will, manifested whenever a person freely chooses to do something, has been taken for granted by most people as an empirical fact. Only the most systematic thinkers such as Baruch Spinoza and Martin Luther insisted that there could be no such thing as a Will; it was, respectively, the laws of Nature or the laws of God that determined a person’s every action, however trivial.

The problem of the Will was one of a number of seemingly insoluble problems which brought European science and philosophy to an impasse in the late eighteenth century. It was only the philosophy of Hegel that showed a way out of this impasse and provided a rational, albeit speculative theory of the Will.

Moreover, Hegel followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau in taking the Will as the foundation for a social theory; the state was to be conceived as the *universal Will*.

Hegel's analysis of the Will was, however, entirely speculative, resting on natural science as it stood in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. The research did not exist to provide a genuinely scientific explanation of the human Will.

It was the psychology of Lev Vygotsky (1931) that provided a sound and enduring foundation for the concept of the Will in experimental science. Vygotsky was inspired by Hegelian philosophy, which he read through the lens of Marx and Lenin. His general theory of psychology was founded in concepts which were inherently interdisciplinary. Vygotsky's followers among the Soviet Activity Theorists continued Vygotsky's work in a way that suggested a new approach to social theory based on concepts which made sense within psychology as much as in social theory. They did not carry this project through, however, being constrained by the orthodoxy of Soviet Marxism.

In particular, I propose the concept of a *commitment*: some *really existing* project or activity to which someone is committed. A commitment is simultaneously a concept of psychology, social theory, and ethics. It is an immensely productive interdisciplinary concept. It conforms to Vygotsky's requirements for a unit that it be both subjective and objective, and is a *countable noun*.

Having traced the problem of the Will from antiquity up to the period following World War II, I note that the word 'Will' was largely dropped from the vocabulary of both psychology and social theory. It is almost as if the stain of Nazism had made the Will unmentionable.

Furthermore, the geopolitical landscape which emerged after the Second World War was indeed much as it appears to those who introduced the word 'agency' into everyday speech. It was not until the mid-1980s that Anthony Giddens was able to mount a convincing critique of Structuralism and its twin brother, Functionalism. Giddens (1984) showed that 'there is no such entity as a distinctive type of "structural explanation" in the social sciences'. However, there were two specific shortcomings in Giddens' theory. Firstly, he had no theory of psychology explaining how agents actually used the authority and resources bestowed on them by social structures. Nonetheless, Giddens deserves great credit for demonstrating that sociology requires a theory of psychology. Second, he had not provided a sufficiently general concept of the units of social structure that bestowed agency. The psychology of Vygotsky and the Activity Theorists responds to these two shortcomings.

On the basis of my borrowing from Hegel, Vygotsky, the Soviet Activity Theorists and Giddens, I present an alternative approach to social theory which responds positively to the need for agency. And not merely for consolation, but as the foundation for a social theory which explains how agency can be acquired, how a person can make a difference.

The first question to ask, however, is 'agency of what?' It is here that the interdisciplinary concept of a commitment comes into its own. Commitments

are always shared, so there is always a fund of insights and institutions which are made available to you when you make a commitment.

I also appropriated from Giddens and Hegel the concept of a *horizon of foreseeable consequences*. Depending on the situation and the action under consideration, there is a point beyond which the consequences of your action cannot be foreseen. Hegel's response to this fact was the State, which he took to be the vehicle of historical wisdom. Ever since the 1830s, such confidence in the state, even a democratic state, has proven unfounded. The class which rules in civil society almost always also rules in the state. But Hegel was right in this, that the response to the horizon of foreseeable consequences has to be found in ethics. Consequently, I appropriate from Alasdair MacIntyre what I take to be the rational core of his *virtue ethics*.

Further, I propose *solidarity* – ‘assisting a struggling party, but so far as possible under their direction’ – as the virtue that all proponents of progressive social change should adopt as their guiding light. To be a socialist means to practise the duty of solidarity, understanding that if the socialist utopia means anything at all it means that social formation in which solidarity has become universal. Anything beyond that is beyond the horizon of foreseeable consequences. As a socialist, solidarity is your universal commitment.

The result of this critique of social theory is about how to *make a difference* in the world. No one can be persuaded to pursue any program that does not offer an outcome in line with their own commitments. If the outcome is claimed to arrive only in the remote future, then it must be taken as meaningless. Nonetheless, solidarity is meaningful, because not only is it the right thing to do, it is generative: those who experience the solidarity of others are likely to practise solidarity themselves, and after all, socialism is nothing but universal solidarity. One need not be a prophet to believe in socialism.

Included in the work that follows are criticisms of those who pursue the socialist utopia by means of building a ‘revolutionary party’ or by ‘prefigurative politics’. These criticisms are offered in the spirit of solidarity.

But I shall make my beginnings from early Roman law.

## Part I. The Will in Western Philosophy

### 1. The Will and the Conversion of Augustine of Hippo

#### Roman Law before the Concept of the Will

In my book *The Origins of Collective Decision Making* (2015), I found it necessary to look back to a time before either majority voting or consensus decision-making existed.

Likewise, Marx wrote *Capital* by beginning from a form of life that pre-dated capital and identified the conditions that provided the preconditions for it, namely, bourgeois society, the social marketplace. Bourgeois society had existed in the interstices of pre-capitalist social formations before it was subsumed under capital. Bourgeois society provided both a conceptual and historical basis for capital, the subject matter of Marx's *Capital*.

The subject matter here is the Will, a concept that is crucial to present-day jurisprudence, psychology, sociology and political science. In short, approached from whatever angle, the study of human freedom is the study of the Will. But this concept has not always existed.

Volition itself, the function of the Will, has existed for as long as human beings have existed, and I do not intend to complicate this study by tracing the development of the natural will in non-human nature and in human evolution. That is not my object here. The Will, as I am concerned with it here, is the concept of the Will in philosophy, science, religion, and legal theory. The concept of the Will does not figure in everyday discourse, but it does exist in those sciences which concern themselves with the norms of everyday life and the changes in the way we all live, i.e., law, religion, political science. Consequently, my task is to determine when the Will first appeared as a concept in religion, philosophy and science, and identify the historical conditions that made such a concept possible and necessary.

I found that the ancient Greeks, Aristotle in particular, did not have a concept of the Will. The Will first occurs with Augustine of Hippo, around 386 CE (Dihle, 1982). Accordingly, I must begin with early Roman law, prior to Augustine's conversion to Christianity.

My purpose here is genealogical, not historical. As Marx himself said in the *Grundrisse*: 'it is not necessary to write the real history of the relations of production' (Marx, 1857, p. 460). I need to know when the concept of the Will was born, what needs it responded to, and what conditions made it possible – not the full history of Roman law.

#### Early Roman law

Looked at from our own time, it is hard to grasp how a highly developed legal system could, even in its early days, regulate a vast empire with a diversity of cultural groups under its rule, with many great cities and elaborate infrastructure, without a concept of the Will. A despotism, perhaps – but surely not a society with its own self-governing civil life. And yet early Roman law worked quite well, in its own terms, without any such concept. From our perspective, however, it often appears profoundly unjust.

Roman law did not need a concept of the Will because it governed action *juridically*, not psychologically. *Juridical* here refers to what belongs to the normative ordering of social relations, not to subjective rights, moral guilt, or inner intention – all of which are more modern conceptions. And the norms of social life can be regulated without reference to the mind.

Roman life was governed by a rich system of publicly recognised norms regulating status, roles, obligations, and the permissible forms of action of every person. This system was called *ius*. *Ius* did not include concepts of moral blame or a theory of intention. Mental states did not figure in *ius* at all. Roman jurists were strikingly uninterested in what was going on ‘inside’ a person’s head. They asked instead: *under what form of action did this act fall?* and judged it according to entirely objective criteria. In particular, was the act appropriate to the status and role of the actor in the relevant circumstances?

Depending on whether one was a free person or a slave, a citizen or a non-citizen, a *paterfamilias* or a dependent (so long as one was regarded as sane) one’s actions and commands carried weight just insofar as they accorded with one’s status. Outside those conditions, it mattered neither who one was nor what one intended; intention simply had no juridical relevance. Any action outside the bounds of what was appropriate for a person of one’s status would be punished under early Roman law.

Roman law did recognise deceit (*dolus*), negligence (*culpa*), and accident (*casus*), but judgments on these matters were still made entirely through normative classifications of conduct, including speech, and made no reference to internal states of mind such as intention.

Roman law was thus a technology of social cooperation, not a theory of subjectivity or a moral code. It governed what people did together, not what went on inside their own heads. In Roman law, *voluntas* referred only to *declared* intention, not to any inner mental state. Legal acts were always tied to external forms – acting, speaking, writing, witnessing. Roman law avoided the metaphysics of the Will by never making responsibility depend on inner psychology in the first place.

From a modern standpoint, this often results in what appear to be grave injustices. For example, under the *Lex Aquilia*, legislated around 287 BCE and governing wrongful damage (*damnum iniuria datum*), a person could be held fully liable for killing another’s slave or animal even where there was no intention to kill, no hostility, and no negligence in the modern sense.

A standard juristic example is this: a man is throwing a spear on a training ground. Someone unexpectedly walks into its path and is killed. Under early Roman law, the thrower is liable if the act occurred in a place where others might reasonably be present – even if he had no intent to harm, and even if the *victim* was careless. Under early Roman law, people were responsible for the unforeseen consequences of their actions, even if the action as such was not beyond the horizons of their legal capacity.

This conception is not entirely absent from modern law. Consider contemporary traffic law. If a driver accidentally kills a pedestrian through no fault of their own, they will not face prosecution. If, however, they are drunk, unlicensed, or driving recklessly, they will be convicted of these offences irrespective of

whether any injury results, though sentencing may be influenced by the consequences of a crime.

Early Roman society was highly structured. Every person's actions were regarded *juridically*, according to the kind of person they were and consequently, their place within the social structure, without reference to motives or intentions. Social position, generally determined at birth, defined a well-delimited scope of permissible action.

The limitations of this form of administration were exposed with the Christianisation of the Roman Empire between 313 and 392 CE. It is widely accepted that Christianity triumphed because it addressed the problem of social cohesion and moral authority in a vast and increasingly unstable empire more effectively than its rivals. The majority of Rome's subjects never saw Rome nor were educated in its laws and customs. Rome had to rely on the initiative and responsibility of its subjects for the empire to function.

Today it is obvious that human behaviour cannot be understood, far less regulated, without reference to consciousness. Greek philosophy did not have a concept of consciousness at all, and the absence of such a concept is reflected in the juridical character of early Roman law.

I will examine the key moment when the concept of the Will was invented by Augustine upon his conversion to Christianity. To highlight what was new with Augustine's introduction of the concept of Will into Christian theology, I will examine pre-Christian conceptions of sin by reference to the texts of the Old Testament. I will then clarify the Christian concept of the Will that was to be the basis of European law and theology thereafter. I can then follow the religious conception of sin and absolution and their place in the Roman Church, culminating in the intervention of Martin Luther in 1517.

#### The conversion of Augustine of Hippo

Augustine of Hippo (354–430 CE) was born and died in Roman North Africa. He became an imperial professor of rhetoric in Milan – a public intellectual, teacher, and writer. In 386 CE, at the peak of his career, he underwent a prolonged intellectual, moral, and psychological crisis, culminating in his conversion to Christianity.

Augustine experienced a profound inner conflict: he knew what he ought to do, and he wanted to do what was right, and yet he also desired to do what was not right. Resolving this conundrum required Augustine to invent the concept of the Will (Dihle, 1982).

He describes this interior paralysis vividly:

I was split within myself... I was both willing and unwilling.  
*Confessions*, Book VIII

In a famous scene in the garden (386 CE), Augustine hears a child's voice saying *tolle lege* ("take and read"). He opens the Bible at Paul's *Epistle to the Romans* (13:13–14), which calls for the renunciation of worldly desire.

At once, with the end of doubt, there was infused into my heart something like the light of full certainty.  
*Confessions*, Book VIII

His conversion to Christianity was consummated when he was baptised by Ambrose in 387 CE. The concept of the Will thus arose through Augustine's experience of a 'conflict of motives' (a concept central to the work of Vygotsky to which I will return much later). More specifically, the Will arose in the context of acting contrary to one's desire. Augustine went on to write his epoch-making work, *De libero arbitrio (On Free Choice of the Will)*.

Responsibility for one's actions now shifts from the juridical register to the Will as an interior self-relation. But if the Will is divided against itself, how can it ever be unified?

### Augustine's Resolution of Conflict of Motives

Augustine resolved the conflict of motives not by choosing more decisively, but by relinquishing the idea that choice alone could resolve the conflict. He discovered that the conflict was not between two external options, but within the Will itself. He could both will and not will the same action. Deliberation did not resolve this; it only made the division clearer. The idea that the Will could unify itself through its own power failed.

The resolution came when Augustine ceased trying to will the good by himself and instead allowed his Will to be reoriented. In Christian terms, this is *grace*. The conflict could not be resolved by stronger intention, better knowledge, or 'moral effort', but only by a reconfiguration of the Will's relation to itself. The Will can only be unified by something outside oneself. Only God can give the grace needed to heal the Will.

### Sin in the Old Testament

It would seem that the concept of Will is just as essential to the concept of *sin* as it is to legal guilt or blame. But reference to the Old Testament shows that this is not quite the case.

Early Rome was a polytheistic society, but like Judaism, Christianity was a monotheistic religion. To understand how sin was understood prior to Augustine's invention of the Will, I will turn first to the Old Testament.

The Hebrew Bible certainly judged acts 'objectively' like early Roman law, that is, by their conformity to law and their consequences, but it also has *graded* culpability with explicit categories that can be mapped onto degrees of intention. The Old Testament did have concepts such as 'missing the mark', that is, unintentional failure, 'iniquity', generally understood as wilful wrongdoing, and 'transgression and rebellion', that is, intentional defiance. But it did not have the concept of the Will.

The Torah strongly distinguishes inadvertent wrongdoing from defiant wrongdoing – a distinction which is central to later Jewish and Christian moral thinking, and the nearest analogue to *mens rea* before the phrase existed. The Decalogue forbids coveting, which is an inner orientation or desire without any reference to unlawful action. Yet despite this attention to inner states, the Old Testament has no concept of the Will.

### The New Testament

The Christian New Testament, however, is far more focused on *interiority*.

This is illustrated by Christ's Sermon on the Mount: Jesus explicitly treats lustful looking 'in the heart' as already adultery. Mark 7 locates 'defilement' in what comes 'from within ... out of the heart', listing 'evil thoughts' among the defiling sources.

Wrongdoing has become increasingly readable as a matter of inward motive and intent, not merely outward form. Mental states have become the subjects of religious teaching and judgment.

Most importantly, Christianity introduced a universal conception of the moral person, according to which each individual is answerable in their own right for what they will, independently of social status, office, or role. It is easy to see how revolutionary this was in the context of early Rome. The slave, the nobleman, the citizen and so on are all *persons*, and responsibility is *personal*, not merely juridical, entailing obligation, guilt, and merit.

Under these conditions, sooner or later the concept of the Will is surely unavoidable. Actions are no longer judged objectively, simply against the normative expectations of the person according to their social rank. The Will of any individual person was now the subject matter of normativity, irrespective of their rank.

With the Will now at the centre of moral and legal responsibility, a new set of problems emerged – problems that would occupy theologians and jurists for centuries.

#### Legal discourse after Augustine

The Latin discourse on law was mainly conducted through the institutions of the Church over the following centuries. Moreover, Church figures were generally consulted in the drafting of laws in the nation-states that grew up in the aftermath of the collapse of the Roman Empire.

The commission of a sin left the person burdened with guilt, and while the state applied penalties to maintain social order, the Church also played a central role through confession and penance. This apparatus demanded the means of classifying inner states such as contrition, intention and deliberation about one's actions. These distinctions became formalised in canon law. Over time, canon law cross-fertilised with secular legal doctrine about culpability. This contributed to the sharpening of mental elements in criminal liability ('guilty mind'), although the mature common-law concept of *mens rea* became canonical only centuries after Augustine.

In his writings, Augustine had set out the basic principles underlying these laws.

In *Confessions* he tells of inner consent and divided willing. In *De libero arbitrio* we find that responsibility depends on will, not the outcome. And in *De civitate Dei* we learn that culpability before God depends on intention.

Sin is not defined primarily by *what happened*, but by *what was willed*.

But this system, in which the Church claimed authority to dispense grace through penance and indulgences, was bound to lead to corruption – and to rebellion.

Martin Luther (1483–1546)

The problem with this system was that it created a certain political economy for the Roman Church which was bound to lead to corruption – the selling of indulgences for absolution.

The German Peasants' War (1524–1525) was in large measure the result of this practice. It was a brief but massive uprising, not a single rebellion, but hundreds of local revolts that briefly coalesced. It extended across much of southern and central Germany, involving 300,000 peasants, and ended in catastrophic slaughter. This was the largest popular uprising in Europe before the French Revolution.

The war was triggered by demands for justice grounded in Scripture and conscience, not arbitrary priestly judgment and Church authority. It shook the Holy Roman Empire to its foundations.

The peasants' demands were articulated most clearly in the *Twelve Articles of the Swabian Peasants* (1525): abolition of serfdom, reduction of excessive rents and tithes, communal control of land and forests, and justice according to 'God's law', not arbitrary lordship.

And they appealed not to tradition, but to Scripture and conscience. They demanded not just socio-political emancipation, but the inner freedom of conscience.

The peasants initially saw Martin Luther as being on their side, but when the revolt turned violent, he condemned the uprising and urged princes to suppress it mercilessly.

100,000 peasants were killed, many were massacred after surrender, entire villages were destroyed and leaders were executed publicly and often with extreme cruelty.

The rebellion ended not in reform but in *terror and repression*.

In his 1525 polemic *On the Bondage of the Will*, Martin Luther argued that the Will is not free in matters of salvation. Left to itself, the Will is bound, enslaved by sin, unable to choose the good. Against the Scholastics, who held that human cooperation played a role in salvation, Luther insisted that the Will is not merely impaired, as Augustine had shown, but entirely in bondage, determined by what it loves and trusts.

Luther explicitly attacked the moral-psychological conception in which inner effort can heal inner division. Deliberation does not liberate the Will, and moral striving only deepens self-deception. Accordingly, indulgences from the Church were also a *fraud*.

In continuity with Augustine, Luther denied that the Will can unify itself. But where Augustine saw a divided Will that could be healed by grace, Luther saw the Will as entirely bound. There is no *path* from natural will to free Will for Luther – only *bondage*. *The Will can be reoriented by God's grace*, but grace cannot be *earned* or dispensed by the Church. The practice of dispensing grace was not just corrupt, but *conceptually false*. Sin could not be remitted through *penance or purchased by indulgences*.

In his *95 Theses* (1517), Luther argued that the Pope cannot remit guilt – only God can – and that true repentance renders indulgences unnecessary.

The Will is real enough, determined by what is desired and who is trusted, but it is certainly not free.

The Dissenting sects which emerged in Protestant Europe and in England, the Anabaptists, Collegians and Quakers radicalised inwardness, rejected priestly mediation and emphasised conscience, simplicity and the inner light.

Luther had destroyed the Church's claim to mediate grace, but he had also left the Will imprisoned – either by sin or by grace, with no human freedom in between. This was the problem Hegel and Vygotsky would eventually resolve.

## Conclusion

The personalism of Christianity required the introduction of the concept of the Will. Christianity proved to be historically resilient in the civilisations which arose in the wake of the Roman Empire in surviving and flourishing after the departure of the Roman troops. From the beginning, the idea of the Will confronted the problem of the conflict of motives, and scholars could not figure out how such inner conflict could be resolved. The idea that God or His earthly agents in church and state could resolve the conflict in the Will or reorient the Will towards the good became untenable in the consciousness that arose in the Reformation. But this left the Will a prisoner of the person's own desires.

## 2. Spinoza and the Negation of Free Will

The Will entered European science and philosophy through the Christian Church, but I now turn to the excommunicated Jew Baruch Spinoza (1632–1677), the first to challenge the concept systematically. Spinoza plays a decisive role in the genealogy of the Will because he negated the freedom of the Will entirely, without recourse to Scripture.

He did so by subsuming human beings under the totality of Nature, alongside not only other animals but also stones and trees. Beings act according to their nature: their striving is determined by necessity, not by choice. Nature is governed by endless chains of cause and effect; the freedom of the Will is therefore a delusion. Freedom can extend no further than acting under the compulsion of one's own nature and the necessity of Nature.

For Spinoza, Nature is the domain of cause and effect. This view is widely shared to this day. Even Lev Vygotsky demanded *causal* explanations from science, but causality does not settle the question of freedom.

Although Spinoza is a thoroughly antique philosopher, he has 'come into fashion' again in recent years. I will not simply present his critique of Free Will, but also examine his rehabilitation in the 1790s and his reception in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

My aim is to outline Spinoza's contribution to the European philosophical conception of the Will by drawing out those ideas that carry this narrative forward, as well as the often-overlooked aspects of his thought that are thoroughly antique. I will draw extensively on Evald Ilyenkov's (1960) evaluation of Spinoza.

As Hegel noted, the Will is free according to its concept; an unfree Will is a contradiction in terms. However, the Will is always somewhere between the *natural* will found in every organism and an absolutely Free Will.

Thus, as the target of philosophical criticism, absolutely Free Will is a 'straw man'. Spinoza negates Free Will but not volition or striving (*conatus*). The Will, he says, is a mode of *conatus*, not its source. *Conatus* is:

the striving by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being.

*Ethics*, III, prop. 6

This idea of *natural striving* is Spinoza's enduring contribution to the development of a scientific conception of the Will. Spinoza demotes the Will from being the source of action in its own right to being a 'mode of *conatus*'. *Conatus* is natural. There is nothing specifically human about *conatus*.

### Spinoza's place in the history of philosophy

Spinoza goes further than merely rejecting the ideal of an absolutely Free Will. Taking human beings to be part of Nature, he subsumes the human condition under a conception of Nature as God, leaving room only for a natural will shared by all creatures. 'Natural will' refers to tendencies manifested in the behaviour of even the simplest organism, which lacks any kind of consciousness.

Spinoza is often credited as a founder of philosophical materialism. His excommunication from the Portuguese-Jewish community in Amsterdam was a reaction not only to what was taken to be his atheism, but also to his political radicalism, including association with radical religious movements such as the Anabaptists. He is also credited with having cured modern philosophy of the dualism introduced by Descartes' invention of the concept of consciousness. For centuries thereafter, Spinoza served as a role model for philosophically minded revolutionaries and materialist philosophers.

But not only for revolutionaries and materialists. Hegel famously remarked that 'thought must begin by placing itself at the standpoint of Spinozism; to be a follower of Spinoza is the essential commencement of all philosophy' (Hegel, 1805–6). For Hegel (1817), the germ cell of all philosophy is the syllogism. It is Spinoza's attempt to construct an understanding of the human condition strictly on the basis of syllogistic reasoning that constitutes the most antique aspect of his philosophy.

### The rehabilitation of Spinoza

Prior to his rehabilitation in the 1790s, Spinoza was effectively taboo, and his ideas were largely inaccessible to scientists and philosophers of the time. Although his works were suppressed for more than a century after his death, his rehabilitation in the 1790s by Lessing, Herder, and Goethe, allowed his ideas to enter fully into the currents of science and philosophy leading to the present day. Vygotsky (1931–1933) also declared himself a follower of Spinoza and he will be a key figure in my narrative. It is worth noting, however, that aspects of Spinoza's philosophy are markedly antique and incompatible with even eighteenth-century philosophy and science, let alone contemporary science.

A central figure in Spinoza's rehabilitation was Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803), a critic of Kant and a friend of Goethe. In 1787, Herder published *God: Some Conversations* (1787/1940), in which he rehabilitated Spinoza and adapted Spinoza's pantheism for a modern readership. According to Herder, God – i.e., Nature – was *active*. Nature was not a gigantic machine, but was full of intentions, striving, and opposing forces; human beings were *part* of that necessary activity which belongs to all living things. For Spinoza, however, *conatus* was not restricted to humans or even animals, but also to stones and plants: it was not a psychological concept but an ontological one. Activity was natural and did not need to be explained by any extramundane life-force or soul – or even by intentions, far less by the grace of God.

Thus, instead of taking Spinoza's consignment of human beings to the natural world and thereby abolishing Free Will in favour of causality, Herder used the idea of *conatus* to inject vitality, activity – and, in a certain sense, freedom, into Nature itself. The Will arose from a striving that permeated the universe. So rather than leading to Stoic passivism under Spinoza's determinism, human beings were, by nature, *active*.

If we are going to speak of being Spinozists, however, we must also take note of two things: first, aspects of Spinoza's philosophy that reflect his antiquity and are untenable today; second, other aspects that have been taken up more recently by currents of thought antipathetic to the line of Herder, Hegel, Marx, and Vygotsky that guides this book. But first, it will be helpful to outline the context in which Spinoza was working and to sketch the broad outlines of his vision.

### Spinoza and the Second Reformation

Spinoza was an active participant in the Collegiant movement in Holland (Zabel, 2018). The Collegians were Christian Dissenters who met in what might best be called study groups, part of a broader movement termed the 'Second Reformation'. Their meetings had no priest and practised free speech. It should be remembered that, writing in 1677, the English Revolution – which had culminated in the execution of Charles I in 1649 – was very recent. Dissenters had constituted the most militant wing of that Revolution before repression under Cromwell had driven the Quakers into Quietism.

Mennonites, Anabaptists, English Quakers, and Arminians attended meetings, and non-Christians were welcomed. Commitment to Christ as saviour was minimal; emphasis fell instead on the 'light within', as the movement edged toward Rationalism. Inherited from their Anabaptist roots was a commitment to simple living, the rejection of worldly goods, and the cultivation of the Will as a means of freeing oneself from 'the flesh'. Spinoza's writings were composed for this milieu rather than for a general public, and a group of Collegians acted as a reference community while he drafted the *Ethics* (1677).

This is the predominant form in which Rationalism developed in the seventeenth century. The central argument was not whether God existed, but what God is and how God can be known. Spinoza's ethics were, in important respects, those of the Dissenting community of which he was a part. But religious sects were subject to brutal repression by the Calvinist establishment; the suppression of Spinoza's writings formed part of that broader repression.

Spinoza cannot be understood merely as a link in a chain of Great Thinkers. He was also part of a movement in transition from Protestantism to Rationalism. His critique of Descartes set him apart, but in many respects he expressed the ideas and aspirations of Dissenters of his time.

Spinoza directed his philosophy to a self-chosen elite: individuals capable of becoming conscious of their emotions and bringing them under control through the intellectual intuition of God, thereby rising above the populace who would remain ignorant of their bondage to the flesh. His social theory corresponded to a utopian image of a community in which everyone thinks and feels alike, and therefore, bonds firmly to the common good – an outcome he recognised as impossible without that homogeneity.

Spinoza's argument in outline

Each thing, insofar as it is in itself, endeavours to persevere in its being.

*Ethics*, III, PROP. 6

The striving by which each thing endeavours to persevere in its being is nothing but the actual essence of the thing.

*Ethics*, III, PROP. 7

So this 'striving' (*conatus*) is part of a being's nature; it cannot but strive to preserve itself. What is experienced as will, intention, and emotion is not independent faculties but determinate modes through which this striving is expressed and, in some cases, consciously apprehended.

For Spinoza, people are slaves to their emotions and, failing to understand the causes of their desires, suffer from the illusion of Free Will. On the contrary, we are 'driven about by external causes ... like waves of the sea driven by contrary winds', tossed to and fro 'unwitting of the issue and of our fate'. (III, PROP 59). As parts of Nature/God, our affects are determined by necessity like any natural process. Since an emotion can be overcome only by a stronger emotion, the practical task is to counter negative affects with positive affects that enable one to act according to one's own nature. Every event is the effect of some cause, which in turn is the effect of other causes, and so on to infinity; thus everything is determined by necessity. Equanimity is achieved only by acquiescing in this necessity through understanding.

Such understanding is possible not by received opinion or fragmentary experience, not even through reason – though reason can go some way toward *ordering* the affects – but only through intellectual intuition, through which the eternal necessity of God/Nature can be grasped and a person can achieve blessedness.

This provided Spinoza with an alternative to the irrational ethics preached by Church leaders, who asked people to bear suffering and forego pleasure in expectation of reward in the afterlife, ascribing behaviour to Free Will under the influence of Good and Evil. In Spinoza's view, the Church denied the status of human beings as parts of Nature, subject to causality like any other part of Nature. But God is knowable through the concrete study of God's particular manifestations. Religious teachings that separate God from the material world only serve to mystify God and keep people ignorant of their own nature.

As I see it, any doctrine that denies Free Will altogether cannot withstand criticism and falls into hopeless contradiction with itself. If you take determinism down to the lowest level, how is one to make sense of the wise person who learns to control their emotion? For example, Spinoza allows:

Again, it is not within the free power of the mind to remember or forget a thing at will. Therefore the freedom of the mind must in any case be limited to the power of uttering or not uttering something which it remembers.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, III Prop II

But if you grant the Free Will to utter or not utter something you remember, why stop there? Your case is lost. Only the dialectical concept of the Will as elaborated by Hegel (1821) in his *Philosophy of Right* and given a scientific explanation by Vygotsky can transcend this contradiction.

### Spinoza's Contributions to Science

Spinoza can be credited with a number of principles that are crucial for my argument. In the numbered points below I appropriate the work of Evald Ilyenkov (1960)\*.

1. There is no need to unite thought and matter if there is 'only *one single* object, which is the *thinking body* of living, real man ..., only considered from two different and even opposing aspects or points of view'. Note that the formulation in terms of 'points of view' differs from that in terms of a substance having two distinct *attributes*.
2. Thinking cannot be understood by restricting the object of investigation to the immediate situation (e.g., a sensation affecting a body). Spinoza held that infinite Nature had to form the object of investigation, rather than restricting inquiry to human life alone.
3. Spinoza desisted from filling gaps in scientific knowledge with unfounded philosophical speculation, as Descartes and all the Scholastics had. Instead, Spinoza left the resolution of outstanding enigmas to the science of the future. By appealing neither to Experience nor Scripture, Spinoza was the first *philosopher* of the Will.
4. Spinoza solved the puzzle that we perceive the form of external bodies themselves and not the impression they make on our sense organs, stating that the capacity of human beings which made thinking possible was: '*The capacity of a thinking body to mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body*, to coordinate the shape of its movement in space with the shape and distribution of all other bodies'. From this it followed that:
5. It was this capacity to mould its actions to the form of any other body that needed to be investigated, 'to elucidate and discover in the thinking thing those very structural features that enable it to perform its specific function'.

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\* Ilyenkov is evidently working from a Russian translation and I have been unable to source his quotations from Spinoza. The quoted passages here are from Spinoza but the sources were not given.

6. Rather than seeing thought as something distinct and unique to human beings, Spinoza held that *all* creatures, though especially the higher mammals, possessed this capacity in degrees; the human body was marked out only by the fact that our capacity was *universal* and not limited to a specific range of objects and environments.
7. Spinoza eschewed introspection as a method for the investigation of thinking.
8. It is in the *activity* of the human body conforming to the shape of another external body that Spinoza saw the key to the solution of the whole problem. In Ilyenkov's words:

Within the skull you will not find anything to which a functional definition of thought could be applied, because thinking is a function of external, objective activity. And you must therefore investigate not the anatomy and physiology of the brain but ... the 'anatomy and physiology' of the world of his culture, the world of the 'things' that he produces and reproduces by his activity.

Ilyenkov, 1960

To Ilyenkov's list of the positive contributions made by Spinoza I would add the following, not mentioned by Ilyenkov.

For Spinoza, the concept of emotion plays a fundamental role. Whether in passions, affects, or actions, retreating or attacking, the mind is active, not passive. There is no need to *unite* emotion (taken as inner readiness to act) and activity (taken as outer movement with inner correlates), let alone *choose between them* as fundamental concepts. Action and emotion are *one single process*, with varying modes of external manifestation – the 'idea of the body'.

This is a very fruitful idea, alongside Spinoza's effort to overcome Cartesian dualism for which he is most renowned. It shows how false it would be from a Spinozist point of view, to counterpose the study of object-oriented activity – our practical life – to the emotions and feelings which underlie both our consciousness and our behaviour.

For Spinoza (and Hegel), intellect and Will are not 'linked', but are two abstractions from the same whole. By conceptualising emotion as a whole that differentiates into the passions and activity, Spinoza has given us an even more fundamental category. *This* approach to overcoming dualisms – the formation of a concept which is primary to and deeper than the opposing moments which unfold from it – has proved to be a much more fruitful approach than the approach usually associated with Spinoza: the conception of the opposing moments as *attributes* of an ineffable substance.

### Shortcomings of Spinoza

The above observations are an impressive set of signposts for future psychologists and philosophers. However, Ilyenkov noted certain shortcomings of Spinoza's vision.

- Spinoza held that 'the individual body possessed thought only by virtue of chance or coincidence', and a human body was not *necessarily* capable of thought, i.e., the ability to mould its activity to any external body.

- Spinoza held that ‘thinking is a necessary premise and indispensable condition *in all nature as a whole*’, whereas we now know that the universe existed for countless years without a thinking body anywhere.
- But as Marx affirmed, only Nature that has achieved the stage of man *socially producing his own life* – nature changing and knowing itself in the person of man, or of some other creature like him – necessarily thinks. This is an insight of great significance that Spinoza failed to see.

### The Antiquity of Spinoza’s Philosophy

Not only does Spinoza see thought and extension as two attributes of one and the same Substance, but there are *infinitely many other* such attributes, unknown to us. Herder, in tune with the spirit of his own times, suggested that this could be interpreted as an infinity of forces, but this is hardly more satisfactory. It could simply be said that human knowledge can never exhaust what is to be known about the material world.

Ilyenkov (1960) reformulated Spinoza’s idea of one Substance having thought and extension as two attributes. As quoted above: ‘only *one single* object, which is the *thinking body* of living, real man ..., only considered from two different and even opposing aspects or points of view’. This seems eminently sensible to modern consciousness, but this is not really what Spinoza had in mind.

For Spinoza, both extension (that is to say, spatial form) and thought (the idea of a thing) are essential properties of *all* things, not thanks to human conception. According to Spinoza, although the mind cannot exist without the body, it is not caused or produced by the body or any part thereof; there is no interaction, no unity between mind and body! Every idea and every body are each subject to an infinite chain of causality.

The order and connection of ideas is the same as the order and connection of things, and vice versa the order and connection of things is the same as the order and connection of ideas ... one and the same chain of causes.

#### II, PROP 7

So the coordination of mind and body (and the illusion of Free Will) is produced by the fact that each (the idea and the object in itself) is produced by an identical, infinite chain of necessary causality from some original point of identity in God. For Spinoza, the idea of a stone is not the product of a human being who thinks about a stone. Rather, it is the stone’s essence as it exists under the attribute of thought, co-extensive with its existence under the attribute of extension. By moulding our activity to the spatial form of the stone, we simultaneously mould our mind around the idea of the stone. Later philosophers interpreted this idea in something like the way Ilyenkov suggested: thinking was ‘*the capacity of a thinking body to mould its own action actively to the shape of any other body*’. This brings to mind the construction of a concrete idea of a material object through use of the object. The idea being inherent in the object itself was hardly what we would have in mind.

So the outcome of Spinoza’s effort to overcome Descartes’ dualism is two parallel causal chains, one of ideas and one of bodies. It should be noted then that there was no sense in which Spinoza saw ideas as social or ideological

constructs. Ideas were inherent in their object, so Spinoza was dogmatic in that sense.

Finally, Spinoza was a *determinist* and firmly rejected the idea of Free Will at any level. Herder welcomed this, remarking:

Lessing goes on to speak about the freedom of the Will. ‘I desire’, he says, ‘no freedom of the Will. I remain an honest Lutheran, and retain that more brutish than human blasphemy into which Spinoza’s clear, pure mind also found its way, ‘that there is no free Will’. ... I know of no philosopher who has expounded the bondage of the human Will more thoroughly and who has defined its freedom more excellently than Spinoza.

1787, *Fourth Conversation*

The ‘freedom’ Herder refers to is the Blessedness achieved through understanding and acquiescence in necessity. Spinoza was an enthusiastic participant in the dissenting religious movements of his time, and influenced by Anabaptist currents.

None of the above points are intended to detract from Spinoza’s place in the history of philosophy or the importance of the principles outlined above. To be a ‘Spinozist’ today obviously means placing oneself in an entire tradition of thinking that long ago left aside those antique aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy. However, there are other aspects of Spinoza’s philosophy that are live issues today, in which we find Spinoza in the opposite camp.

### Spinoza’s ‘Mechanical Materialist’ Legacy

(1) Spinoza’s psychology was methodologically individualist, and there was no place in it for ideology, social position, language, or class.

(2) Spinoza can be read as an Emotivist in Ethics. That is, he regarded ‘good’ and ‘bad’ as simply words for what gives us pleasure and what gives us pain, nothing more:

we in no case desire a thing because we deem it good, but, contrariwise, we deem a thing good because we desire it.

*Ethics*, Prop. 49

And the highest virtue is the rational and effective pursuit of individual desire.

Varieties of the Emotivism promoted by David Hume became popular during the period in which natural science enjoyed high social esteem (late-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries), and were regarded as the ‘scientific’ approach to Ethics. This view was also supported by G.E. Moore’s (1903) ethical naturalism. Emotivism is a reactionary current in Ethics and is a gross distortion of Spinoza’s thought.

Spinoza’s emotivism was moderated only by his claim that we love that what is like us and wish to promote fraternity and fellow-feeling with those who are like us.

Therefore, to man there is nothing more useful than man – nothing, I repeat, more excellent for preserving their being can be wished for by men, than that all should so in all points agree that the minds and bodies of all should form, as it were, one single mind

and one single body, and that all should, with one consent, as far as they are able, endeavour to preserve their being, and all with one consent seek what is useful to them all. Hence, men who are governed by reason – that is, who seek what is useful to them in accordance with reason, desire for themselves nothing, which they do not also desire for the rest of mankind, and, consequently, are just, faithful, and honourable in their conduct.

Spinoza, *Ethics*, IV, PROP. XVII

(3) Despite the principle of activity first mentioned above in the list of principles Ilyenkov attributed to Spinoza, Spinoza was an Associationist in learning theory:

if the human body has once been affected by two external bodies simultaneously, the mind, when it afterwards imagines one of the said external bodies, will straightway remember the other.

*Ethics*, II, PROP. XVIII

The ideas of Associationism were continued by Locke and Hume and to this day Associationism is embraced by classical Behaviourism, and was one of the main currents against which Vygotsky developed his ideas about concepts and learning. Like Emotivism, Associationism benefited from the prestige of natural science, but nowadays it is bankrupt position in social science and psychology.

(4) Ilyenkov was quite correct when he quoted Marx:

Even with philosophers who gave their work a systematic form, e.g. Spinoza, the real inner structure of their system is quite distinct from the form in which they consciously presented it.

Ilyenkov, 1960

But it remains the case that Spinoza had not elaborated a logic suitable for philosophy, and his brilliant investigation was forced into a form – the ‘geometric method’ – that is quite unsuited to its object. It was left to Hegel and Marx to formulate a suitable logic.

Spinoza said:

It is no part of my design to point out the method and means whereby the understanding may be perfected, nor to show the skill whereby the body may be so tended, as to be capable of the due performance of its functions. The latter question lies in the province of Medicine, the former in the province of Logic. Here, therefore, I repeat, I shall treat only of the power of the mind, or of reason.

*Ethics*, Preface

Philosophy must solve philosophical problems by philosophical means, and desist from unwarranted speculation over what are empirical matters. This is where Spinoza took a giant step forward from Descartes. So he was right in the second instance. But Spinoza was wrong in believing that Logic could simply be left to the logicians. Hegel developed the dialectical logic that is absolutely essential for the solution of the problems Spinoza posed to himself.

Conclusion

Present-day Philosophers of Mind still claim to rely on formal, propositional logic. Formal logic has made considerable progress since the days of the

Geometric philosophers, but it has never managed to make sense of the conundrums of Free Will. John R. Searle, for example, opposed the concept of Free Will, but got tied up in serious contradictions because of his reliance on Formal Logic. See, for example, this author's brief review (2006) of Searle's *Mind a Brief Introduction* (2004).

In summary, the call to be a Spinozist is not as straightforward as might seem at first sight. It can only be made sense of as a call to restore *particular Spinozan principles* to their place. That is to say, Spinoza's philosophy must be *critically appropriated*. 'Spinozism' means something quite different to Antonio Damasio (Blunden, 2006a) than it meant to Evald Ilyenkov or Lev Vygotsky, and something different again from what it meant to Ivan Pavlov or G.E. Moore.

Let us recognise *striving* as a universal condition of all creatures from the single-celled organism to the human animal. It then remains to understand how the Will emerges from this natural striving. That is, how a person can gain voluntary control over their own behaviour. For this we need a *concrete* concept of the Will that recognises that the human body is an organism like any other, not something endowed with any divine impulse. What we cannot have, however, is a supernatural faculty of the Will that relies on God's grace to resolve the conflict of motives.

The next step forward in my narrative is with Hegel, but before I can deal with Hegel it will be necessary to look at the complex of responses to European science and philosophy in late eighteenth century German philosophy which formulated the problems to which Hegel responded.

### 3. The Impasse in Western Philosophy

The Copernican Revolution (1543)

The Reformation not only licensed the faithful to find spiritual guidance from the light within, it also opened the door for the Copernican Revolution in natural science – all without reference to Scripture or the mediation of priests.

Though largely separated from theology by this time, science and philosophy were not yet fully distinct disciplines. Disputes over how to understand Nature and our place in it became the central axis of the development of science and philosophy in Europe for the next 400 years.

I have already discussed the work of Spinoza, who was a follower and critic of René Descartes (1596–1650), and together they constituted the Rationalist camp in philosophy. Rationalism arose as a critique of Empiricism, whose founding figure was the Englishman Francis Bacon (1561–1626). Both Rationalism and Empiricism belittled the value of ancient texts as sources of knowledge of God and His works. The Empiricists advised that nothing could be more fruitful than experience, especially experiments designed to shed light on the underlying laws at work in Nature. The Empiricists were sceptical of theorising that was not immediately based on experiment.

The Rationalists taught, on the contrary, that we should consult the faculty of Reason with which we are endowed and be sceptical of experience as a reliable source of fundamental knowledge.

We have seen that, in the person of Spinoza, Rationalism had arrived at the conclusion that Free Will was a delusion – human beings were slaves of their own emotions and the best that could be hoped for was to *understand* those emotions, and in a sense, to rise above them.

Spinoza had rejected Descartes' ontological dualism, but as I have indicated, the questions that Spinoza posed could not be taken up until the last years of the eighteenth century.

#### Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia

Descartes' ontological dichotomy persists in ordinary consciousness to this very day. Consciousness is indeed something entirely incommensurable with extension, or matter, which is nothing but what lies outside consciousness. There is no halfway intermediate substance or any substance that is a mixture of matter and consciousness. The problem is not the mind/matter dichotomy itself, but *making a beginning* from this distinction rather than deriving the distinction from some prior ontological starting point.

It was Descartes' correspondent, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, who raised the problem with Descartes' ontology for the understanding of the Will: How can an immaterial, unextended thinking substance determine the motions of an extended body, given that all causation we understand involves contact or extension? There is no rational answer to this question. Once consciousness is accepted as a substance, that is to say, an irreducible, fundamental component of reality, the dualism is insoluble. Free Will must be an illusion.

So, by a different path, Descartes' Rationalism had arrived at the same negative conclusion as Spinoza as regards the Will, except that Descartes could still have recourse to divine intervention, something that Spinoza would not allow.

The Empiricists were largely untroubled by Descartes' dualism and the problem lay unresolved until the end of the eighteenth century. I shall now turn to see where Empiricism took us in our understanding of the Will.

#### Empiricism

Francis Bacon formulated his program as follows:

[I]n nothing else does the aspiration to deserve well show itself than in that things are so arranged that people, freed both from the hobgoblins of belief and ignorance of experiments, may enter into a more reliable and sound partnership with things by, as it were, a certain literate experience.

Bacon, 1607

As to the Will as such, Bacon was not so troubled by conundrums like those later posed by Spinoza. Bacon saw himself as a devout Anglican, but he did not exclude the human body from Nature. So like any other aspect of the human being, the Will had to be understood by the same means as any other phenomenon of Nature. His response to the problem posed by Spinoza can be taken as implicit in his famous aphorism:

*Natura non vincitur nisi parendo*

(Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed).

Bacon, 1620, Book 1, Aphorism 3

To this day, this aphorism stands up to sceptical criticism. However, the argument about *how Nature can be understood* was far from settled by Bacon's aphorism.

### Dogmatism vs Scepticism

The struggle between Rationalism and Empiricism was not resolved. The criticism of Empiricism continued and defenders of experience as the sole source of knowledge responded by building various 'systems' to rationalise what was given in experience (Newton, for example). Natural science has continued like this to this day, and it always demands a reasonable degree of epistemological tolerance to withstand criticism. In an age in which science is subject to distrust and incessant scepticism on the public stage, this should be evident.

The project of constructing models of Nature to 'explain' experience without offering any *direct* means of verification is called 'dogmatism' – the construction of a metaphysical system that goes beyond what can be verified by experience. I characterise the next phase in the history of European Philosophy as Dogmatism *vs.* Scepticism. David Hume (1711–1776) represents the culmination of Scepticism.

### David Hume

David Hume (1711–1776) would challenge the claim that you can be absolutely certain that the sun will rise tomorrow:

That the sun will not rise tomorrow is no less intelligible a proposition, and implies no more contradiction, than that it will rise. ... All inferences from experience suppose, as their foundation, that the future will resemble the past.

Hume, 1772, §IV

In short, a causal explanation of appearances is no more a warrant of truth than an elaborate description of what has always happened in the past. Causality is always an assumption; it is not given in experience. No practising scientist exercises this degree of scepticism in relation to their own experience. And this is despite the fact that present-day conceptions of how the world works rely on sophisticated instruments and arcane mathematical theories all far from everyday experience.

Under sceptical attack, the dogmatic illusion that the nature of reality could be definitively determined by experiment collapsed. The everyday experience that constantly demonstrates to common sense that human beings possess Free Will has been shown incapable of withstanding serious philosophical criticism, even if it seems to work adequately for everyday life.

For Hume, all actions are based upon *impressions and associations*. People will act as they do according to habit and their interests and desires. Having knowledge only of appearances, they have no rational basis for determining their own action. So there is no room for Free Will here, actions being fully determined by desire and unfounded belief.

Having been subject to sceptical critique, Empiricism joined Rationalism in finding no reliable basis for Free Will.

## Kant's Answer to Scepticism

Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) left us an expressive report of the impact on him of Hume's scepticism:

I freely confess that it was the remembrance of David Hume which, many years ago, first interrupted my dogmatic slumber and gave my investigations in the field of speculative philosophy a completely different direction.

Kant, 1787, Preface to the second edition, B xiii

Hume had claimed that causality is not given in experience, so if all necessity were derived from experience, then natural science could have no objective validity.

Kant responded with his *critical* philosophy, claiming:

The first step in regard to the subjects of pure reason, and which marks the infancy of that faculty, is *dogmatic*. The second, which we have just mentioned, is *sceptical*, and it gives evidence that our judgment has been improved by experience. But a third step, such as can be taken only by fully matured judgment, based on assured principles of proved universality, is now necessary, namely to subject to examination, *not the facts of reason, but reason itself*, in the whole extent of its powers, and as regards its aptitude for pure *a priori* modes of knowledge. This is not the censorship but the *criticism* of reason, whereby not its present *bounds* but its determinate and necessary *limits*, not its ignorance, in regard to all possible questions of a certain kind, are demonstrated from principles, and not merely arrived at by way of conjecture. Thus scepticism is a resting place for reason, in which it may reflect on its dogmatic wanderings and gain some knowledge of the region in which it happens to be, that it may pursue its way with greater certainty; but it cannot be its permanent dwelling-place. It must take up its abode only in the region of complete certitude, whether this relates to the cognition of objects themselves, or to the limits which bound all our cognition.

Kant, 1787, II

Kant's intervention marked the turn to Idealism, that is, an examination of the character, means and limits of knowledge itself, rather than making competing claims about the nature of the material world.

Descartes and Bacon had agreed that definitive knowledge of God (i.e., Nature) was possible; according to Descartes by Reason, according to Bacon, by Experiment. But by Kant's time, both had come to the point where it seemed that Reason and Experiment could lead only to knowledge of *appearances*, while direct, unmediated access to Nature as it is in itself was impossible.

To get to Kant's views on the Will, it will be necessary to outline Kant's Moral Philosophy (1785), since it is through this lens that Kant gives us his theory of action. It seemed that the problem of the Will cannot be solved as a problem of science, as a matter of cause and effect. Nonetheless, people act according to what they take to be right, as expressions of their own moral philosophy, so to speak. What a person does reflects what they take to be right at the time. But

how does someone know what is right? This question cannot be answered in terms of a person's upbringing or inclinations or habits, but only by moral discourse.

What is right must be determined by the exercise of Reason, and Kant (1787) claimed to prove that human beings did indeed have an innate faculty that already contains certain a priori forms – pure intuitions of time and space, *categories* such as causality, substance, unity, plurality, necessity, etc., and crucially, the capacity to Reason. An examination of these ideas is central to the history of Western philosophy, but they are not relevant to the current problem, namely, the Will.

### Outline of Kant's Moral Philosophy

Kant does not set out to construct a moral code prescribing what a person should do in this or that instance, just as he did not (generally) construct models of 'how Nature worked'. But just as with his critique of Reason, he investigated the *limits* of what *could be a good action*.

His first conclusion is that the only thing that is *good without qualification* is a *Good Will*. A Will is good *because of the principle on which it acts*, not because of its consequences, that are in general unforeseeable. The problem then reduces to determining *laws* against which actions can be judged. The laws Kant has in mind, however, are the laws a person makes, or could have made, *for themselves*.

So already, Kant has introduced the Will into his conception, because the person formulates the limits to which they will subject their own action. But he is not making any psychological claims here. The concept of the Will arises necessarily from a reasonable examination of action.

In summary, Kant concludes that an action has moral worth *only if* it is done *out of duty*, not merely *in accordance with duty*. Further, moral obligation is not learned from experience: it is a priori, necessary, and universal.

According to Kant (1787), causality is a condition of possible experience, and conversely, the moral law is a condition of possible moral action. The problem is to determine such moral law by the exercise of Reason alone.

The moral law that Kant arrived at is referred to as the *Categorical Imperative* (CI). The CI is expressed in several different formulations, the most famous being:

Act only according to that maxim whereby you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.

Kant, 1785

Note that for Kant the subject gives this law to themselves. This is Kant's definition of freedom and thus effectively his definition of Free Will. It is clear that this does not tell a subject *what* their duty is, but merely places a *limit* on what their duty could be. Beyond setting moral limits on action, Kant can tell us nothing about how a person might exercise the faculty of Will. The subject that 'legislates' the law governing their own actions therefore has autonomy, so long as the law is in conformity with the CI. So autonomy as opposed to heteronomy is central to Kant's conception of freedom, and this includes:

Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never merely as a means.

Kant, 1785

What one actually does is indeed driven by desire, belief, custom, habit and so on, but the Will is free insofar as it exercises moral reason by limiting its actions so as to act only according to a law that conforms with the Categorical Imperative.

The old question of how the Will can co-exist in a human body governed entirely by the laws of Nature is not even touched upon by Kant.

This is as far as Kant goes in granting freedom of the Will. Frankly, Kant has not solved the problem at all. He largely vouched for what the Empiricists and Rationalists had already agreed to: there is no basis in Science for the concept of Free Will, only the appearance of a Free Will.

In the 1990s, Habermas (1998) interpreted the moral reflection of an individual in terms of everyone concerned with a decision negotiating a collective decision, and developed a 'procedural' interpretation of Kant's moral philosophy. I will not pursue this line of development, however. but restrict myself to responses to Kant in his own times.

### Critique of Kant

In Germany, during the fifty years following the publication of the *Critique of Pure Reason*, the central axis of Philosophy and Science was the critique of Kant. This was an extraordinarily rich period in the history of Western thought. The definitive outcome of this period is Hegel's Idealism. Otherwise, the endless debates between Rationalism and Empiricism and between Dogmatism and Scepticism continue to this very day.

I will deal with the materialist critique of Hegel in the next chapter and this will constitute the central line of my argument. Suffice it to say that in the aftermath of Hegelianism there was a decisive split between philosophy and science, both natural and human sciences. For the next century, science developed mostly independently of philosophical reflection on any vision of the whole. Scientists each focused on 'problem solving' in relation to very specific domains of experience. Insofar as scientists had a sophisticated philosophical conception of their own work it was thanks to Kant. But Kant only provided the *limits* of possible knowledge, little else.

The period of Classical German Philosophy culminated in Hegel. I will mention just a couple of important stimuli that showed a way forward for Hegel.

#### Herder

In the first place, I must mention Johann Gottfried Herder (1744–1803). Herder was a critic of Kant from the beginning, and as noted above, he was central to the rehabilitation of Spinoza, along with the idea that Nature itself was saturated with striving. Thus, the basis of the Will existed already in the living nature.

Herder formed a friendship with the great poet and naturalist Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832). Goethe shared a deep hostility toward 'Newtonian'

science, that is, science that relied upon invisible and abstract ‘forces’ acting as causes but in themselves beyond possible experience. In conversation with Herder, Goethe developed the concept of *Urphänomen*. An *Urphänomen* was a simple something, the smallest and simplest instance of some phenomenon, something which was accessible to the senses but at the same time open to reason. In Goethe’s day, microscopes did not have the power to reveal the microworld of cell life. However, the biological cell aptly expresses Goethe’s intuition. Once you have identified the cell of an organism, then it is possible to reconstruct the development of the organism without recourse to metaphysical ‘forces’. This insight remains central to my approach.

### Fichte

A friend and one-time mentor of Hegel as he worked on his critique of Kant was Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762–1814). Fichte is remembered as a Subjective Idealist in the sense that he wanted to reconstruct society as a whole by beginning with the individual. He was an extreme liberal in this sense. However, by adopting this project, Fichte identified the *limits* of this methodological individualism. Fichte was the first to introduce to philosophy the concept of *recognition* from the theory of international relations. If a state held a monopoly of violence over some territory, this was not sufficient to claim that it was a *state*. To be a state also required *recognition as a state by other states*.

Likewise, personhood is subject to the same qualification. Until a person is recognised as a person by other persons who treat them as a person and demand that they *act* as a person, they are not yet truly a person. It is thanks to this recognition by others that the person gains self-consciousness.

This is a key insight with respect to how a Free Will can arise in a natural being. It is in being *recognised* as a free person *by another* who demands that you exercise that freedom, that you become free. Fichte drew this idea from the French Revolution. This insight is needed to make sense of Vygotsky’s psychology of the Will.

In Hegel’s view, Fichte was wrong to attempt to understand the whole by beginning with the individual, but he did appropriate the concept of ‘recognition’, and made it the central theme of his Jena lectures in 1805–1806.

In conversation with Herder, Goethe developed the concept of the *Urphänomen* – the smallest part of a phenomenon in which the whole was already present. Hegel appropriated this concept and it remains a key element of the solution to complex problems like the Will.

These are the essential ideas that led to Hegel’s philosophy, to which I will now turn.

## Part II. Hegel's Interdisciplinary Concept of the Will

### 1. Introduction. Spirit and Dualism

The major problem that remained for Hegel was the *dualism* inherited from Descartes. Hegel overcame dualism with his concept of *Spirit* and by reducing ontology and epistemology to *logic*.

Kant accepted what a century of philosophy had proven: all knowledge begins from experience, and experience cannot give direct access to the world as it is in itself. All we can learn from experience is how things *appear* to us, nothing about what the world is *in itself*. Yet science is not an illusion. Somehow, we *do* have an adequate knowledge of the world despite having access only to its appearances.

All attempts to 'get around' Descartes' ontological dualism had failed. Kant accepted this dualism and did not attempt to subvert it, but simply to show how science was possible despite the fact that the world could only be known by its appearances, not in itself, not directly. The rigour that Kant's critique introduced into philosophy did make the issues at hand clearer. However, it did not eliminate unproductive dualisms. In fact, every distinction Kant introduced to clarify the problem only generated more dualisms. What followed was an intense period of philosophical debate *criticising* Kant's own Critical Philosophy, struggling to overcome the dualisms in Kant's philosophy. This philosophical movement culminated in Hegelianism.

The problem of the starting point

An ontological dichotomy ('There are two kinds of thing in the world, so ...') becomes a dualism if it appears as the *starting point* of an enquiry. Self-evidently, philosophy is centrally concerned with making clear and careful distinctions. But if a beginning is made with *two* (or more) substances (such as mind and matter), a dualism necessarily arises that cannot be resolved within the terms of the theory. The two fundamental substances cannot be 'joined together' later on, without recourse to some other mediating substance.

One must *begin* with a single substance, and then make distinctions within that one substance subsequently. So the problem of making a beginning in philosophy requires that a concept is determined in which both mind and matter are already implicit. The relation between each side of the distinction is then already given by the nature of the substance itself, and there is no dualism. The distinctions remain, but they are now *mediated*.

The starting point is always difficult. Descartes said that philosophy had to start from something certain, and determined that the only thing he could be absolutely certain of was that he existed. This led to mind/matter dualism.

The mistake was to *begin* an epistemological enquiry with an ontological dualism.

So we have to begin any science from *one* concept ('Everything is ...'). The whole science then is an examination of this one concept and the elaboration of all the relations implicit within it. The nature of the one concept will determine the kind of science you build. Hegel began his Logic from Being, not a proposition

like 'Being is ...' this or that, which would therefore import something extraneous into the logic. Being is just the noun from the verb 'to be'. Logic differs from any other science in that it contains *no definite content*, whereas all other sciences *do* contain a specific content. That is why the *Logic* had to begin from an empty concept.

Contrary to Spinoza, Hegel believed that he could solve the problems generated by Kant's epistemology and ontology, not by proposing a novel ontology, but via *logic*. Hegel's Logic would begin from a critique of the concept of Being rather than an axiom – the traditional way of beginning a science. That is, Hegel reduced ontology to logic. He also observed that ancient Greek philosophy had begun when, instead of speculating about the nature of the world outside of thought (the three elements, etc.), the Eleatics declared 'All is Being'. So it was an historical fact that philosophy properly so-called had begun from that single concept.

The *Logic* is the method. I will come back to the *Logic* later.

Hegel's *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* takes as its subject matter *Spirit (Geist)*, and Hegel developed in outline the complete range of sciences from mechanics to biology to psychology and sociology, all of which were concerned with various 'forms of Spirit'. *Each* of the various sciences he dealt with in the *Encyclopaedia* also started with the critical examination of *one* simple concept of Spirit.

It is not possible to give a definition of 'Spirit' because Spirit is the sole substance of science as Hegel sees it. It is not 'Spirit and ...' something else, just Spirit. If I were to give a definition of Spirit, I would then have to make a beginning from the terms of that definition, not Spirit. So given that Spirit is just Spirit and not spirit and something else with which it can be contrasted, there can be no definition of 'Spirit'. The reader will already be familiar with the word and will understand it in some general sense depending on their own life experience. And as they read their way through the *Encyclopaedia* the concept will take on an increasingly concrete meaning. It is not defined in advance, but is clarified by the philosophy itself, which is elaborated according to the *Logic*.

This may seem shocking, but consider for example the philosophical concept of 'matter', as Rousseau correctly defined it: 'everything outside myself, everything which acts upon my senses, I call matter' (Rousseau, 1755), and nothing more definite than that. That concept has proved quite adequate to construct all the natural sciences, and avoids confusion like that which arose in quantum physics in the early years of the twentieth century. By the beginning of the nineteenth century, science had arrived at a point where a dichotomy between mind and matter had tied science into knots and was no longer tenable. So Spirit, or *Geist*.

How a present-day reader interprets Hegel's philosophy hinges very much on how they interpret the word 'Spirit'. If you think that *Geist* means something like 'ghost' or 'mind', or 'consciousness', then it is likely that you will dismiss Hegel as an early nineteenth century German philosopher who has nothing to say to us about Science. This would be a big mistake.

Think of *Zeitgeist* – the spirit of the times. I read Hegel on the basis that *Geist* is *human practice in general*. And Hegel's *Logic* is the *logic of human practice in general*. The whole of Hegel's *Encyclopaedia* can be read coherently in this light.

Like Hegel, I don't intend to offer a definition of 'human practice in general'. I presume that the reader is familiar with this expression.

### Immediate and mediated knowledge

The problem posed by the Copernican Revolution was this: is the relation between the mind and the Absolute (i.e., God, or the world in itself) mediated or immediate?

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 and the opposition between them to be a nullity.

Hegel, 1812, *With What must Science Begin?*

In the Introduction to the *Encyclopaedia*, Hegel exhibits the only instance in his work of the trope: 'Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis'. This idea appears in the form of a genealogy of mediation in philosophy since the Reformation.

Some philosophers had proposed that we do have immediate knowledge of the world. Descartes had claimed that Reason gives us access to the Absolute by quiet reflection. In Hegel's own times, Jacobi had claimed that we can know God through Faith, without the mediation of the Church.

On the other hand, Francis Bacon claimed that knowledge of the Absolute was possible by observing His works, that is to say, access to the Absolute was mediated by Experiment, not immediate. And with his Critical Philosophy, Kant agreed – only knowledge of appearances was possible; that is, direct knowledge was possible only of the mediating element, be that sensation or feelings.

Both lines of reasoning had failed. Hegel responded: access to the Absolute was *both* mediated *and* immediate!

In his critique of Jacobi, Hegel explained it this way:

When we regard this opposition more closely all knowledge may be termed immediate, but all immediate knowledge is likewise mediated in itself. This we know within our consciousness, and we may see it in the most general phenomena. I know, for example, of America immediately, and yet this knowledge is very much mediated. If I stand in America and see its soil, I must first of all have journeyed to it, Columbus must first have discovered it, ships must have been built, &c.; all these discoveries and inventions pertain to it. That which we now know immediately is consequently a result of infinitely many mediations.

Hegel, 1805–06, §3.A

This is the logical key that untangled the knot into which European philosophy had tied itself. All knowledge is *both* immediate *and* mediated.

So, how does this maxim overcome the roadblock that had stymied philosophy ever since the Reformation? To say that experience can give us knowledge 'only' of appearances is itself a fallacy. One or several experiences do not give us the thing-in-itself, that is true. But the sum total of *all* possible appearances tells us *everything* about external reality. The 'in-itself' that remains is Nothing, an empty abstraction.

This definition of Idealism which Hegel gives in the *Science of Logic* (1812) makes this point forcefully:

The proposition that the finite is ideal constitutes Idealism. The idealism of philosophy consists in nothing else than in recognising that the finite has no veritable being. Every philosophy is essentially an idealism or at least has idealism for its principle, and the question then is only how far this principle is actually carried out. ... A philosophy which ascribed veritable, ultimate, absolute being to finite existence as such, would not deserve the name of philosophy; the principles of ancient or modern philosophies, water, or matter, or atoms are thoughts, universals, ideal entities, not things as they immediately present themselves to us, ... in fact what is, is only the one concrete whole from which the moments are inseparable.

Hegel, 1812, §316

A human being cannot grasp *the whole*, concretely. It is a journey. But there is no ‘thing-in-itself’ hidden behind appearances that is inaccessible. The ‘thing-in-itself’ is nothing.

It remains now to elaborate the *Logic* that bases itself on the unity of mediation and the immediate. Then we must examine experience. As Kant has said: ‘all our knowledge begins with experience’ (Kant 1787) – using the *Logic* as our method.

#### The *Logic* on the Will

Although the *Logic* begins with concepts like Being, Measure, Identity, Causality and so on, as the reader gets to the later parts of the *Logic* we find concepts like Chemism, Subject, Life, Living Individual, Cognition, the Good,... which sound like they don’t belong in logic, but in the natural sciences or sociology. But they are indeed logical concepts, just not *propositional* logic.

The ‘Subject’, which occupies a central place in the *Logic*, refers to the *active* moment within a ‘Concept’. These terms can be interpreted in the traditional way, but Hegel develops them in such a way that logic becomes something useful for understanding human experience, which propositional logic is not. The *Logic* will stand on its own terms, but for the modern reader it makes a lot more sense if the *Logic* is taken as the logic of human practice. In its developed form a ‘concept’ is a science, a science interpreted as a form of practice – developing theories, gathering evidence, engaging in scientific discourse, etc.

This is the reading of the *Logic* that I defended in *Hegel for Social Movements* (2019). The Subject is not necessarily a social movement, however. It is *any* active entity, any living being. It could be a biological cell, an animal, a person, a state, a corporation, a social movement or any active entity. Human practices are the most highly developed forms of Spirit, so all the moments of Spirit can be exhibited in the history of human practice. Thus, when Hegel gets to the most developed concepts of the *Logic* he draws on words already present in the language to express the logical content of the concept.

Hegel’s logical examination of the Concept culminates in the Idea of the True and the Idea of the Good. It is a mistake to think that a concept is somehow free of purpose and intent. Concepts arise *only* as the solution of some problem,

some practical situation. Implicit in every concept is the Good that motivates it. Consequently, the Will arises from the last section of the *Logic* as the unity of the True and the Good. The Will is not itself a logical concept, but a subject is bound to strive to make actual what it holds to be both true and good in its own terms.

When I turn to the Will, there will be no definition of the Will ('The Will is ...'). Such a definition could make a beginning of the enquiry, but it lacks concreteness. A critical examination of such a definition would lead to successively more and more concrete concepts of the Will. But in itself, the *Logic* can give us no more than such a beginning. The *Logic* defines the Will as the unity of the theoretical Idea and the practical Idea.

Admittedly, this is not very helpful if you are not already an aficionado of Hegel. To make Hegel's idea of the Will a little clearer, I will refer to remarks he later made in the Introduction to the *Philosophy of Right*.

Freedom of Will is best explained by reference to physical nature. Freedom is a fundamental phase of Will, as weight is of bodies. ... that which is free is the Will. Will without Freedom is an empty word, and Freedom becomes actual only as Will ... The distinction between thought and Will is only that between a theoretical and a practical relation. They are not two separate faculties. The Will is a special way of thinking; it is thought translating itself into reality; it is the impulse of thought to give itself reality.

Hegel, 1821, §4 Addition

Returning to the *Logic*, for a complete outline of Hegel's *Logic*, see my book, *Hegel for Social Movements* (2019). Our subject matter here is the Will, and the only other passage of the *Logic* that is relevant to the topic of the Will is 'The Syllogism of Action'. This passage is found in the penultimate section of the *Logic*, following the unity of the Idea of the True and the Idea of the Good, and before the Absolute Idea. Given that the Absolute Idea is nothing more than a synopsis of the *Logic*, the Syllogism of Action is in a strong sense the outcome of the *Logic*, the final word in the logic of human practice.

### The Syllogism of Action

In the context of the *Logic*, 'subject' could refer to any living organism, individual or collective. If a subject has determined the truth of its situation and knows the good it aims for, all that remains is to take action. In Hegel's always arcane way of putting things, taking action means:

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, §1773

Francis Bacon would heartily agree. 'Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed' (1620, Book 1, Aphorism 3).

For 'the external actuality' read the world as you find it immediately before you. The *situation* is the relation between what is willed and this actuality. In order to conquer the situation, one must seize upon some element of this same

external actuality as means and use it against the problematic element of this same immediate actuality. Not something else. This does imply, however, that 'the situation' must be taken very inclusively, taking everything into account, as indicated in Hegel's definition of Idealism given above.

The action only realises what was already implicit in the social situation itself, though not necessarily what was intended. The outcome of the action is what Hegel called the Realised End, that is, the whole situation that is brought about by the subject's action. This is not necessarily what the subject may have had in mind. The Realised End is now the Subject's new external actuality.

External actuality is the sum of all the Realised Ends of the various enterprises at work in the world. Any subject realises or fails to realise its Will only by means of using the very same external world as the means by which it aims to change the external world.

As Hegel put it:

Purposive action, with its Means, is still directed outwards, because the End is also not identical with the object, and must consequently first be mediated with it. The Means in its capacity of object stands, in this second premise, in direct relation to the other extreme of the syllogism, namely, the material or objectivity which is presupposed. This relation is the sphere of Chemism and Mechanism, which have now become the servants of the Final Cause, where lies their truth and free notion. Thus the Subjective End, which is the power ruling these processes, in which the objective things wear themselves out on one another, contrives to keep itself free from them, and to preserve itself in them. Doing so, it appears as the Cunning of Reason.

Hegel, 1831, §209

A few words of clarification of this very dense paragraph are in order.

'The sphere of Chemism and Mechanism' refers to all those processes at work in the situation *other than* the subject. In particular, 'Mechanism' refers to those processes that are at work independently of each other, solely according to their own nature, while 'Chemism' refers to processes that produce outcomes resulting from the synergy between them, rather than from each on its own.

'The Final Cause' refers to the reality as a whole as it unfolds as an outcome of all the enterprises and causes at work, seemingly according to some plan of its own. 'The Subjective End' is what the Subject himself (such as an individual person or organism, or some project engaging many individuals together).

Hegel says specifically that the Subjective End, the 'power ruling these processes', continues after each effort as part of each new cycle of activity. On the other hand, 'the objective things' that are used as means (such as the materials and tools used, but also including people who are used by the subject) 'wear themselves out'.

Over and above this astute observation about the condition of all living things, Hegel also defines here the distinction between the actor, that 'preserves itself', and the means, that 'wear themselves out'. Hegel concludes that things unfold not as the subject may have intended but rather according to a destiny that was already present in the objective situation that the Subject aimed to use for its

own ends. It is as if the situation was unfolding according to some greater, unseen power. This is what Hegel calls the 'Cunning of Reason'.

Marx cites this passage in the context of the situation of a worker employed in the labour process:

An instrument of labour is a thing, or a complex of things, which the labourer interposes between himself and the subject of his labour (*Arbeitsgegenstand*), and which serves as the conductor of his activity. He makes use of the mechanical, physical, and chemical properties of some substances in order to make other substances subservient to his aims.

Marx, 1867, Chapter 6

and in a footnote cites Hegel:

Reason is just as cunning as she is powerful. Her cunning consists principally in her mediating activity, which, by causing objects to act and re-act on each other in accordance with their own nature, in this way, without any direct interference in the process, carries out reason's intentions.

Hegel, 1831, §209, Note

Marx is making the point that it is the nature of the means of production (used up in the labour process) that determines how things work out, not the intentions of the workers or their employers.

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

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

Hegel, 1816, §1614

A person does as they please, but the ends a person pursues are generally not chosen. So *in this sense*, Hegel agrees with Luther and Spinoza: we are slaves to our own ends:

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, §1615

Enquiry into the ends that people pursue is not the business of the *Logic*, however. For that, we must first enquire into the human being as a natural being, and then into the forms of society that human beings have constructed for themselves.

With these methodological insights, Hegel cleared the way to the solution of puzzling problems like that of the Will. He also made significant progress in finding solutions to the problem of the Will itself.

## 2. Hegel on the Natural Will

Nowadays, people tend to read only Hegel's *Logic* and his *Philosophy of Right*, skipping over the rest of the *Encyclopaedia*. However, the problems posed by the Will can only be grasped by following how a natural organism can exercise Free Will. For this, I must follow how Hegel makes the transition from the realm of Nature to the thinking human being.

The Syllogism of Action shows that a subject can form concepts of the world outside human practice only because it uses aspects of that external world to act on the external world. The concept of the external world formed through such activity is what Hegel calls Nature.

It is beyond the scope of this enquiry to follow Hegel's *Philosophy of Nature*. Nature is Spirit in itself. That is to say, in Nature, the Will is 'in itself'. This means that there is no Will in Nature as such, but Nature has the *potential* for the Will to arise and this potential begins to show itself as soon as there is sentient life. More specifically, as Hegel sees it, the Will only begins to be realised in animal organisms. In plants and minerals, the Will is still 'in itself', mere potential.

I shall not examine the Will in connection with non-human animals, who, in Hegel's terms, have a 'natural will'. I shall investigate, however, how Hegel understands the genesis of the Will in natural organisms culminating in the human being. For this we must turn to Hegel's *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*.

The *Subjective Spirit* can be read as a logical reconstruction of the individual human organism. Hegel reconstructs the basis of the Will in the human organism through three phases: the Psyche, Consciousness, and the Intellect.

### The Psyche

First there is what Hegel calls the soul (*die Seele*), but 'the psyche' is closer to modern usage. The psyche is a moment of the mental life of a viable and self-contained organism. It encompasses the entire organism, registering the totality of the organism as its own given being. The body's autonomous functions and phenomena like shivering, goose-bumps or blushing, are part of the 'psyche'.

Its determinations are *feelings*, but the psyche does not register these feelings as intuitions *of* an object and therefore does not take itself as a subject. Its mental life lacks both subject and object – it just *feels* afraid, content, anxious, angry, sleepy or whatever. The psyche encompasses both the outward behaviour and the inward feelings of the organism, mediating between the two, and is an integral function of the whole organism.

The psyche develops by means of *habits* and *habituation* so that the organism comes to distance itself from the immediacy of its own body. The distinction between itself and objects that belong to an external world thus begins to stand out in relief against this background when its feelings are disturbed. The most primitive organisms are not capable of forming habits and undergoing habituation, but those that can form habits open the way to consciousness.

## Consciousness

Mind that is habituated to its own feelings and orients itself to stimuli evidently coming from outside is called *consciousness* (*das Bewußtsein*). What distinguishes consciousness is that it takes an object with which it interacts and is the source of stimuli to be something with an independent unity of its own – something *else*.

The out-of-the-ordinary feelings, feelings to which it is *not* habituated, are imputed to an objective world, and are called *sensations*.

While consciousness directs the body in its activity in relation to given objects, the psyche all the while continues its work of regulating the functioning of the body, now responding in addition to the stimuli of its own consciousness. Indeed, consciousness can only sense objects thanks to the feelings of the psyche.

But consciousness is not at first *self-consciousness*. In the earliest stages of consciousness, even though consciousness takes the object to have an independent unity, it is not *self-aware*. It comes to know its own subjectivity only mediately through interactions with other, objectively existing self-consciousnesses. Once it comes to see its own subjectivity reflected as something objective and objectivity itself as potentially subjective, then it has reached the threshold of Spirit as such – Reason.

## The Intellect

This third grade of Mind, based on Reason, Hegel calls psychology, but I will call it the *intellect*, because for us ‘psychology’ has taken on a much broader meaning. Intellect culminates with the use of *language*. However, there is also pre-linguistic intelligence, which knows an object to be meaningful, but has not yet acquired *universal* self-consciousness made possible by the acquisition of language. Recognising fever as a sign of influenza requires practical intelligence, but to know that it is called ‘influenza’ requires symbolic intelligence. Intelligence is universal self-consciousness, an entire world of pure meanings.

Whereas the psyche knows nothing of subject and object, and consciousness takes its object to be objective, the intellect understands its objects to be both subjective and objective – to be both a thought determination and an object that exists in the world independently of its own activity. With intelligence we have not only self-conscious activity, but *thinking* activity. Intelligence becomes *actual* when its Will becomes objective, and the subject recognises *itself* in objects and processes in the external world.

Each individual mind is a concrete whole, but differentiated according to the categorically different relations to the world characterising the psyche, consciousness and intelligence, that is, in turn through feelings, sensations, and concepts.

At the end of the *Subjective Spirit* we arrive in a sense just where we arrived at the end of the *Logic*. However, we are now dealing not just with the logical necessity governing the life of a subject, but the activity of the specifically human organism for whom objects in the external world are recognised not just as material objects in themselves, but as objects having a subjective sense,

having meaning, that is, *signs*. Sign-meanings are the basic units of the intellect, the capacity to *think*.

This is the specific character of the human being that is a feature of its biological make-up: that objects in the world are taken as meaningful. The human being is already a being capable of producing and using objects and processes in the material world, but the human being is also capable of producing and using objects and processes in the world as signs. This is called thinking. This opens up new ground for the Will.

Hegel's philosophy is predicated on the idea that all beings *strive* to preserve themselves in the face of barriers and threats. This is, after all, the same observation that Spinoza had made on a strictly materialist basis, without any reference to anthropomorphism, God, spiritualism or voluntarism. And Herder had confirmed this. Vegetable and mineral beings may exhibit only the appearance of Will; animal beings exhibit a natural will, but remain prisoners of their own natural drives. Striving is natural and exhibits a natural will.

Hegel's argument is that an organism that can make and use elements of the external world as *signs* has the capacity to free itself from the natural conditions of its life. But on its own, even the organism blessed with an intellect remains a part of Nature and a prisoner of the material situation in which it finds itself.

It should be noted that there is nothing in Hegel's psychology that suggests a *faculty* of the Will. Hegel agreed with Rousseau, that Will is inseparable from thinking. The ability to think gives to the natural striving of all beings the potential for self-determination, for Freedom. It gives the subject the ability to not only to act upon the material world according to its own desires, but also to think about its own desires.

A free intelligence, capable of determining where its happiness lies, must necessarily determine its activity accordingly and thus strives to make its determination actual. This is the Will.

Nonetheless, on its own, a thinking being is no more capable of self-determination than any other natural being. The issue is *how is the Will to become free?*

Freedom is never absolute, but it can become more and more free. A single organism or group is always a prisoner of its circumstances. True freedom is only attained through the development of rights that can only be provided by the building of a state. Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* is where he considers just how the Will *becomes free*, and it is here that we find Hegel's crucial contribution to the conception of the Free Will.

### 3. Rousseau and Hegel on the Will 'for itself'

The Will in social theory

Despite the protests of Luther, Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia and Spinoza – and the scepticism to which the Empiricists had been subject – Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778) accepted the reality of the Will (*la volonté*) as it was commonly understood in his time. Rather than relying on Psychology or Theology, Rousseau reasoned that the Will is known from one's

perception of one's own actions and observation of the actions of others. No further proof was required.

As Rousseau put it:

There is no real action without Will. This is my first principle. How does a Will produce a physical and corporeal action? I cannot tell, but I perceive that it does so in myself, I will to do something and I do it; I will to move my body and it moves, but if an inanimate body, when at rest, should begin to move itself, the thing is incomprehensible and without precedent. *The Will is known to me in its action, not in its nature.* I know this Will as a cause of motion, but to conceive of matter as producing motion is clearly to conceive of an effect without a cause, which is not to conceive at all.

...

The motive power of all action is in the Will of a free creature; we can go no farther. ... Man is therefore free to act, and as such he is animated by an immaterial substance.

Rousseau, 1755

It was Rousseau who first made the concept of the Will foundational to social philosophy, and Hegel followed Rousseau in making the Will the starting point of his social theory – the *Philosophy of Right* (1821). Holding that man was free in the 'state of nature', Rousseau argued that:

... every one must see that as the bonds of servitude are formed merely by the mutual dependence of men on one another and the reciprocal needs that unite them, it is impossible to make any man a slave, unless he be first reduced to a situation in which he cannot do without the help of others: and, since such a situation does not exist in a state of nature, every one is there his own master.

Rousseau, 1754

Famously:

Man is born free; and everywhere he is in chains.

Rousseau, 1762

Hegel responded to the contrary, saying that man is born unfree, but in a modern state he could *become* free:

The Christian doctrine that man is by nature evil is loftier than the opposite that he is naturally good, and is to be interpreted philosophically in this way. Man as spirit is a free being, who need not give way to impulse. Hence in his direct and unformed condition, man is in a situation in which he ought not to be, and he must free himself. This is the meaning of the doctrine of original sin, without which Christianity would not be the religion of freedom.

Hegel, 1821, §18 Addition

The Will had been the central problem of Ethics and Moral Philosophy since Augustine. Hegel agreed with Rousseau that Will must also be the central concept of social and political theory. Both writers saw human society in ethical terms, rather than as a domain of cause and effect.

For Hegel, human beings were in essence free, but must actualise that freedom in and through the social formation they construct. Thanks to the concept of Will, Rousseau and Hegel overcame the individual/social dualism in modern philosophy and science. When a person exercises their own Will, they must do so as an individual part of a sovereign whole.

#### Freedom and personal autonomy

For Rousseau, Freedom means obedience to a law one prescribes to oneself, but the 'self' is collective, not individual. Someone who refuses to obey the law will be *forced to be free*.

In order then that the social compact may not be an empty formula, it tacitly includes the undertaking, which alone can give force to the rest, that whoever refuses to obey the general will shall be compelled to do so by the whole body. This means nothing less than that he will be forced to be free;

1762, Book 1, Chapter 7

This goes further than the enforcement of the law by punishment, and perhaps contains the seeds of the Terror unleashed by the French Revolution when it attempted to make Rousseau's philosophy the official creed.

#### Hegel on the Free Will

Rousseau had openly declared that he had no response to the conundrum posed by Descartes and Elisabeth of Bohemia and offered no analysis of the nature of the Will. Hegel, however, had established the nature of the Will in the *Philosophy of the Subjective Spirit*.

Having the capacity to take objects in the external world as *signs*, a person can develop a *free intelligence*. As such, a person is capable of determining a course of action that can realise its happiness rather than reacting directly to the immediate situation. The Will is the impulse of such a free intelligence to realise itself by regulating its natural striving and making itself objective.

Most of the Introduction to *The Philosophy of Right* is taken up with a discourse on the development of the Will. The question to be answered is this: how can human action become genuinely free, rather than being determined by basic psychological drives, structural imperatives, ideology and basic needs?

Hegel insists that freedom becomes possible only in a state in which people have rights, beginning with the right to private property:

The territory of Right is in general the spiritual, and its more definite place and origin is the Will, which is free ... the system of right is the kingdom of actualised freedom.

Hegel, op. cit. §4

The German word *Recht*, translated as 'Right', simultaneously refers to three different domains. First, 'Right' in the sense of a person having certain rights; second, in the sense of doing what is 'right' according to moral reflection; and third, in terms of obedience to and the protection of the custom and law. Accordingly, the *Philosophy of Right* has three sections: 'Abstract Right', 'Morality', and 'Ethical Life'.

Hegel's logical reconstruction of the Will begins from a 'state of nature' in which human beings are taken to be living in localised subsistence economies in immediate connection with Nature.

It is noteworthy that both Rousseau and Hegel built what would nowadays be called a *social* theory on *ethical* foundations. This approach reflects the fact that both writers took human beings to be in essence 'free creatures' (Rousseau, 1755), rather than natural creatures governed by the laws of cause and effect. Human beings collectively create norms of action that individuals respond to as ethical beings.

The first phase of the Will is the natural or direct will. The direct will is all the 'impulses, appetites, inclinations, by which the will finds itself determined by Nature' (Hegel, op. cit. §11). This content itself comes from the Will, since, as natural beings, what we strive for is given by our vital needs, not caprice or fancy, so the Will is also implicitly rational. However, 'in its immediate directness it has not yet the form of rationality' (op. cit.).

As a natural being, I am subject to impulses, but as a result of having intelligence, I can determine whether and how I respond to an impulse.

The contradiction inherent in the direct will is that it 'exists only as a *multiplicity* of impulses, ... but at the same time universal and undetermined, having many objects and many ways of satisfaction' (op. cit. §12). Recall that Augustine invented the concept of the Will precisely because of the need to resolve a conflict of impulses. The Will actualises itself by resolving this conflict of impulses, not by *creating* an impulse *ab nihilo*. Every action is thus a judgment, and indeed a mediated judgment, and in that sense every action is a *syllogism*.

The conflict between different impulses and means is resolved by reflection. For Hegel, in thinking we are active – the intellect and the Will are inextricably bound together in this activity. The only distinction is that between the theoretical relation and the practical relation – they are not two distinct faculties – both are present in every thought and every action.

Hegel says that so long as people live in a 'state of nature', the Will is still other-determined. This is not the case, however, in the case of a subject living in a rational state. Hegel explains this in terms of the great artist who, when completing their work, knows that it *had* to be just so. Any action, if it is rational, is found to be necessary, and not a matter of 'free choice'. Hegel agreed with Rousseau when he said that: 'when I will the rational, I do not act as a particular individual but according to the conception of ethical life in general' (Hegel, op. cit §15).

The human Will is undetermined and therefore universal – human beings can turn their Will to any task. But in order to be free, the Will must first make *itself* its own object. That is, rather than willing this or that, the subject must rationally determine what it is that they should be striving for. Only by closing upon itself in this way, making a circle, can the Will become infinite – i.e., not externally limited. This 'closing upon itself' is achieved collaboratively through the construction of institutions that direct, constrain and educate the Will.

As was determined in the *Logic*, we learn about the external world by using aspects of it to realise our subjective aims. In doing so we also collectively shape

each other's activity. The result of this process is that human beings construct institutions that allow them to fulfil their aims but that at the same time tend to direct their activity towards the general good. The *Philosophy of Right* is an exposition of *how* this takes place.

That a reality is the realisation of the Free Will, this is what is meant by a right. Right, therefore, is, in general, Freedom as idea.  
op. cit. §29

### Social Theory as Ethics

17 years before Adam Smith published *The Wealth of Nations* (1776), he published *Theory of Moral Sentiments* (1759), and the underlying subject matter was essentially the same. When other people's preferences have been objectified in practices and institutions, then those same institutions appear to you as part of the external world, as a 'second nature'. This 'second nature' plays the part that Nature plays in the animal world.

In establishing the science of Political Economy, Smith and the other political economists studied human behaviour in the industrialising countries as a quasi-natural process that exhibited 'laws of second nature' in the way people dealt with each other. It could be argued that this shift reflected the character of life in these societies as more and more experienced by their denizens as a 'state of nature', in which the world was governed by economic laws, indifferent to an individual actor.

Bourgeois society, the social formation in which independent producers exchange their products on the basis of necessary labour-time, is based on an ethical principle of equality that was also reflected in the voting system instituted in the guilds when artisans and merchants formed voluntary associations.

As Brenkert (1983) wrote:

much of Marx's writings, for example the *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts*, the *Communist Manifesto*, even *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*, sound very much like moral tracts' ... even though Marx never uses the traditional language of ethics and morality, words like 'good,' 'bad,' 'right,' 'wrong,' etc.

Economic science, like Political Science and all the human sciences are sciences of the Will.

The nature of the Will is not a purely psychological question. As Rousseau saw, the Will can be understood by a study of human activity. But actions are the mode of being of human beings, and human beings are not 'black boxes'. When we get to Vygotsky we will see that the functioning of the mind can be a subject of science. As a result, human activity en masse is not 'natural', but the product of both internal subjective processes and objective interpersonal processes.

Those sciences, such as Economics, Sociology, and Political Science as they are generally practised today, treat human behaviour as natural processes that can be studied without reference to the mind, and in this sense can be described as 'inhuman'.

Once we recognise human behaviour as the product and manifestation of the exercise of the Will we can construct a genuinely human science without recourse to voluntarism.

### Rights, Morality, and Ethical Life

The Free Will must, in the first instance, give itself reality in external things, and this leads to the first category of *The Philosophy of Right*, Property.

If a person simply possesses something, they are left in the unenviable situation of having to defend that possession against all comers. He or she becomes the prisoner of their own possession. The advent of Property means that a person's possession is given recognition and becomes their Right. This is how the Will becomes something objective – not simply imputable to a person's behaviour, but existing in the human community beyond the horizon of a single person's activity.

For Hegel, Property is the simplest, immediate, undeveloped form of Right, thus 'abstract' Right. Hegel finds that abstract Right is *implicitly* personal autonomy, that is, the right against slavery and coercion. So for Hegel, you can't be 'forced to be free' (cf. Rousseau, 1762). Note that Freedom arises not from possession, which is found in Nature, but through property, a *right*, that is located in the whole social formation, not in the person as such. Freedom begins from Right, not from natural will.

Hegel uses this conception as the definition of 'person'. It follows that everyone must be a person respecting the rights of every other person. This is more or less what has come to be called 'human rights'.

However, the rights of a person as defined here are what Isaiah Berlin (1958) called 'negative rights'. The well-known downside of a society in which persons enjoy only the negative rights of being protected from the negative effects of living in proximity with others, is that people receive none of the positive benefits. For this to be possible people must act beyond what is demanded by respect for the rights of others and take actions for mutual benefit. They do so by reference to their own conscience. Thus, the second section of the *Philosophy of Right* is Morality.

Hegel calls the actors in this section 'subjects'. A subject differs from a person in that they take responsibility for their actions beyond the simple mandate to respect the rights of others.

The defect in Morality is that a person is responsible for the unforeseeable consequences of their actions as well as the consequences they intended. However, this is clearly beyond the cognitive scope of a subject, and it is for this reason that Hegel argues that ethical life requires a State – not just to protect citizens' rights, but to protect citizens from the unintended consequences of well-meaning actions.

Any reader who wishes to 'make a difference in the world' should pay close attention to this section. This is especially true of any 'world-historical activist' – i.e., someone whose intention is to create some utopia in the remote future. Hegel's observations reviewed here are crucial for the conclusions of this work.

Note that Hegel does *not* argue for the State on the basis that subjects must be *forced* to act in this or that way. It is self-evident that States do in fact do this,

but it is not due to the finite *goodness* of people but rather because of their finite *intelligence*. A subject should know that their own welfare depends on living in a good state.

Over the generations, the state accumulates what we nowadays call ‘corporate memory’, and on this basis makes laws that regulate subjects’ behaviour within bounds that ensure that they will not violate the rights of others inadvertently. The duty of the subject, as Hegel sees it, is then to pursue their own welfare within bounds set by the state. The subject will come to know that their own welfare is furthered by promoting the common good. In this Hegel agrees with Rousseau, but it is not a question of forcing the subject to act for the common good, but rather of educating the Will to pursue the common good as its own end.

The *person* who bears Rights and the *subject* of Morality, becomes the *citizen* of a state. Whereas all human beings are persons, and subjects are only those persons who are capable of acting according to their own conscience (i.e., excluding children and insane people), the duties and responsibilities of the citizen depend on their social position. A citizen’s social position was not, as in ancient Rome, something you were born into, but largely a position that people enter into voluntarily or are appointed to. So within the institutions of the state and civil society, not everyone is equal. This is the same today; an ordinary citizen does not have the same rights and duties as a CEO or MP.

Unlike Rousseau, Hegel did not advocate a direct relation between the individual citizen and the State, but as *mediated* by their membership of (a) a family, (b) a voluntary organisation, such as a professional association or estate, or (c) the State. In the next chapter, I will consider the implications for our study of the Will in connection with Hegel’s analysis of civil society and the State, including his rejection of universal suffrage.

See my book, *Hegel for Social Movements* for a more detailed commentary on the *Philosophy of Right*. In the meantime I shall review Hegel’s unsurpassed theory of action – the manifestation of the Will in the activity of individual actors.

#### The Will ‘in itself’ and ‘for itself’

As Hegel saw it, property is the germ cell of Right, i.e., civil law, in which the Will is merely ‘in itself’. Mediating between civil law and the state is what Hegel called Morality, where the Will is ‘for itself’ – the rights-bearing person becomes an active *subject*.

The single action is the germ cell of the Will. Accordingly, Hegel’s most important contribution to the theory of the Will lies in his Theory of Action, the major component of the section of the *Philosophy of Right* on Morality. I have outlined the method of beginning from a germ cell in the first chapter of my recent book, *Marx’s Capital. Hegelian sources* (2025).

Rousseau had observed that while he did not understand the nature of the Will, the Will was manifested in an *action*. Hegel had already determined a great deal about the nature of action in his *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit* (albeit speculatively), but in Morality Hegel developed his ‘Theory of Action’. Being

responsible for their action, the person becomes a *subject*.<sup>\*</sup> The state is thus the Will 'in and for itself'.

What follows is Hegel's analysis of actions, the Will for itself. The point of this section is the fine distinctions that Hegel makes in his exposition of the appearance of the Will. Other writers usually fail to make these distinctions. The key insight Hegel offers here is that the finite knowledgeability of actors combine with repercussions of a person's actions that may go far beyond what the actor intended. Only an ethical theory of social life can respond to this conundrum.

## Hegel's Theory of Action

### Purpose, Intention, and the Good

The Will is for social theory what causality is for natural science. In social theory we have to understand actions in terms of their motives and the concept a subject has of the context of their action. Before proceeding to elaborate how Hegel analyses an action, there are some difficulties of translation to which I should first draw attention.

The German word usually translated as 'action' is *Handlung*, in contrast to *Tat* (deed) from which we have *Tätigkeit* (activity). This contrasts with Marx's usage in which *Tätigkeit* means activity in the sense of purposive activity or practice, and *Tat* means a deed or purposive act. But for Hegel, *Tat* is the impact of the action on the world, irrespective of the consciousness with which it is done. I will translate *Handlung* as 'activity', referring to an aggregate of purposive actions in the context of which an actor's purposes make sense. I will use 'an action' to mean a 'purposive act', and not the aggregate of such acts ('activity') or the 'deed' that I will reserve for Hegel's *Tat*. I will *never* use 'action' or 'activity' to refer to generalised goings-on.

The German word translated as 'purpose' is *Vorsatz*. Purpose is linked with *Zweck*: what is aimed at (*Zweck* originally meant the bullseye in a target), for which I will use 'goal' or 'aim'. The *Mittel* (means) is the external thing or activity used by the subject to act upon the object (*Gegenstand*), transforming it into the realised purpose. (I shall *never* use the word 'object' in the sense of 'goal' or 'aim'). Intention (*Absicht*) differs from purpose (*Vorsatz*) in that purpose refers to the *immediate* intended outcome of my action, while intention refers to the more remote outcome of my action along with other foreseeable actions by myself and others, that provides the motivation for my action. I will not refer to the German words hereafter, but for those who read Hegel in German, the above notes on translation will be helpful.

### Actions

My actions are what I do and what I am responsible for. An action is a *unit* of activity (social practice), a primitive concept. The relevant purpose, knowledge, intention, responsibility, goal, motivation, etc., arise from an analysis of and/or are manifested in the development of the action itself.

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<sup>\*</sup> 'Subject' has a different meaning in the *Logic* and in the *Philosophy of Subjective Spirit*. The meaning referred to here is specific to the *Philosophy of Right*.

‘Actions’ here refer only to *purposive human* actions, rather than the preconscious behaviour characteristic of non-human forms of life or the autonomous functions of the human organism, such as hiccups, goose bumps or withdrawing the hand from fire. ‘Actions’ include, however, those actions that are first done with conscious awareness and control, but with mastery, and come to be carried out without conscious awareness, such as tying shoelaces or stepping over the kerb. Although not done with conscious awareness, these operations are consciously acquired and if something unexpected happens, they are called back into conscious control.

### Purpose, Goal, and Means

Every action, even an action carried out without conscious awareness, has a Purpose – what the subject set out to achieve (irrespective of the benefit the actor saw in doing it, and of the particular goal by which this purpose was fulfilled). There may be more than one way of realising a purpose, and the subject must *select* a goal to suit their purpose. For example, with the intention of getting a view of the countryside, their purpose will be a vantage point, so the subject will have to *select* their goal from a number of nearby hilltops. (This still does not touch on why the subject wanted a view of the countryside).

The action must use some Means to act upon an Object. The Means may be *used up*, but the subject’s Purpose is to *change* the Object. These are the immediate elements of an action. The Purpose is the universal concept of the action (e.g. ‘break a window’), the particular content (e.g., that window there) and the *judgment* to do it.

The Means is the external object (a cobblestone), my activity to make it my means (ripping it up from the road) and my activity in using the properties of the Means against the object (throwing it at the window).

The Object (a shopfront) is transformed into the Realised Purpose (its window is broken), the changed object is meaningful – an act of protest perhaps – and my purpose is preserved in the realised purpose. The cobbled street that provided my Means has been partially ‘worn out’, but even if it persists, it was not my object. Note that each of the concepts making up Hegel’s concept of an action is itself *concrete*, and the examination of each leads to further insight.

But ‘action *presupposes* an external object with a complex environment’ (Hegel, op. cit., §115) and so has consequences that are deemed to be *part of* the action as the purpose unfolds and is realised. So the action is not complete when the subject stops acting. If I throw a stone, the action is not complete until the stone hits the window and the last shard of glass has landed. My intention – my reason for doing it – is so far irrelevant.

The purpose goes through a development in the course of the action as my subjective Will interacts with the complex and infinitely interconnected external world. Initially the purpose is a *subjective purpose* – a universal concept of the goal embedded in the external world. The discrepancy that the subject perceives between the subjective purpose and its object (*Gegenstand*) stimulates an action to resolve the discrepancy. The subjective purpose is transformed by the action into the *realised* purpose. The realised purpose inevitably differs from the goal, but the purpose is nonetheless preserved in the realised purpose because as a

result of the action, the object bears the impression of my subjective purpose. Even if the window fails to break, the stone lying nearby remains evidence of my purpose. The realised purpose unites the subjective purpose with the objectivity of the external world, and becomes part of the changing conditions for further action. 'The End achieved consequently is only an object, that again becomes a Means or material for other Ends, and so on for ever' (*Enc. Logic*, §211). As action never truly ends; it merely becomes the condition for further actions.

The Means, the 'middle term' between subjective purpose and realised purpose 'is broken up into two elements external to each other, (a) the subject's action and (b) the object that serves as Means' (*Enc. Logic*, §208). This object is an external object brought under the power of the subject as a means for the subject's purpose, and directed against other objects, and using its mechanical and chemical properties to shape the object to the subject's own purpose. The distinction between the activity of the subject in using the means, and the means itself is important, and the two should not be conflated. The subject's action itself is subjective and manifests the subject's Will. The means is external and as such interacts with the whole, interconnected, external world – the complex objective environment beyond the subject's control. For example, if I am in the habit of burning off my garden waste, but do this action on a hot, dry day, my action may prove to be dramatically different, even though my subjective purpose is the same as usual. The external world is a material culture that is objective, independent of the subject's Will, the product of the activity of past generations. Likewise, the norms that I acquire and that shape my intentions. It is from this material culture, in which all human action is embedded, that the 'implicit teleology' that Hegel calls 'Spirit' arises, apparently acting 'behind the backs' of the actors themselves.

A person's 'action' and 'purpose' entails some external object that is not something general, like the weather or knowledge of English or a situation, but a *material object*, even if that material object is a part of the subject's own or someone else's body. This was made clear in the Syllogism of Action. The subject's Will cannot be made objective without the use of a material object as means. If I want to go to Sydney, I can use a car, a plane or my feet, but I cannot fulfil my purpose without using *some* external object.

The same logic applies when the subject of action is not an individual person but a corporate actor, institution or social movement of some kind. Here, 'external' means 'Object' in the sense of the Logic, activities whose active centre is not the subject itself but some other. In this wider sense, the 'mechanical and chemical properties', include *social* properties, such as the social significance of the objects in the relevant cultural environment. A party or social movement cannot achieve an external aim solely by means of its own internal resources. To achieve anything it has to use the people and institutions beyond its own ranks as a Means.

By acting in the external world, the subject subordinates itself to processes immanent in the wider world, including both the object and the means, and 'I must be aware of the universal character of any isolated deed' (Hegel, 1821, §118 Addition). So the NGO worker who intervenes in a community with the purpose of helping stigmatised individuals cannot ignore the possible reaction of other members of the community that could lead to everyone being worse off. A

worker, for example, who has enjoyed fair wages at a foreign social enterprise may never be given work again in their own town.

Further, by taking a particular action and thereby changing the object, alternative actions that may have been available may be subsequently *excluded*. So giving food to the starving also has the effect of undermining the viability of local farms. The subject is responsible for all these foreseeable consequences.

### Responsibility and the Unforeseen Consequences for Our Actions

Hegel's theory of action is concerned with the actor's responsibility for the changes that take place as a consequence of the deed – where do *my* action and *my* responsibility begin and end?

Hegel uses the lighting of a fire to illustrate the problem, and I will use this example as well as it vividly exhibits the main features of Hegel's idea. Interventions into social problems can trigger a 'runaway' response not unlike a bushfire. Morality is concerned with assigning *responsibility* for a change in the world. But it can equally well be read as a practical *social theory* for anyone who takes on responsibility to make the world a better place.

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

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

Guy's purpose in lighting the fire – whether just to burn off his own land or to create a firebreak – is immaterial. But:

The Will's right, however, is to recognise as its action, and to accept responsibility for, only those presuppositions of the deed of which it was conscious in its aim and those aspects of the deed which were contained in its purpose ... – this is the right to know.

op. cit., §117

When Guy sets fire to the grass he bears the responsibility to know that the fire *could* get out of control and *could* spread to his neighbour's property.

But what if Mrs. Fawkes had secretly hidden her savings in a box in the back yard and the money was destroyed by the fire? Since Guy had no reason to believe that something of value could be hidden there, he is not responsible for the destruction of what Mrs. Fawkes hid in the grass – it was not part of his purpose. Hegel contrasts this with the early Greek and Roman law where the actor's knowledge was not to be taken into account in assigning responsibility – Oedipus was condemned for killing his father, even though he could not have known at the time that King Laius was his father.

Formally, the actor is not responsible for unintended consequences of their action that were not implicit in his purpose:

the moral Will has the right to refuse to recognise in the resulting state of affairs what was not present inwardly as purpose.

op. cit, §115 Addition

The actor's purpose is realised in the action and the consequences of the action belong to the action, so the subject is responsible for all the consequences of their immediate action. What frees Guy from responsibility for the destruction of the money his wife hid in the grass is that *the actions of another subject* (Mrs. Fawkes) with another purpose intervened and their actions combined with Guy's action so as to bring about the unfortunate consequence.

The action, as the aim posited in the external world, has become the prey of external forces which attach to it something totally different from what it is explicitly and drive it on into alien and distant consequences. Thus [in this case] the Will has the right to repudiate the imputation of all consequences except the first, since it alone was purposed.

op. cit. §118

So the subject is free of blame for 'something interposed from without and introduced by chance, ... quite unrelated to the nature of the action itself' (op. cit. §118 n.), and conversely cannot take credit for it.

But what of 'moral luck', that is, when a wrong action may or may not lead to serious consequences? Hegel takes a 'hard line' on this:

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

op. cit. §119 Addition

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

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

Since an action unites both purpose and deed, the action extends temporally and spatially beyond the immediate deed, as consequences unfold. It also extends back in time, such as when I plan my day at work while commuting in the morning. The quality of my planning is manifested in the deed that it has prepared. Indeed, all the imaginary voices, dreams of glory and other fantasies I have exist only in the actions that express them in the external world. People are

unreliable reporters of their own thoughts, that are to be judged only by the series of their actions. As Hegel puts it in the Remark to the very first paragraph of *The Philosophy of Right*:

Philosophy has to do with ideas or *realised thoughts*, and hence not with what we have been accustomed to call mere conceptions.  
op. cit. §1

If the subject's purpose is exhausted in the immediate goal then the action is not a rational action at all, it is just a deed. All forms of life manifest purposes of this kind, in which the Intention is identical to the Purpose and the subject's desire is satisfied immediately in consumption of the object, and not mediated through a conscious intention.

*A rational action implies a purpose that differs from the intention.*

### Intention

As a rational being, the subject is aware of the complexity, interconnectedness and contingency of the world in which they act before they act. Among the consequences that flow from the completion of my purpose is my Intention:

The consequences ... represent the universal implicit within that state of affairs. Of course I cannot foresee the consequences – they might be preventable – but I must be aware of the universal character of any isolated deed. The important point here is not the isolated thing but the whole, and that depends not on the differentia of the particular action, but on its universal nature. Now the transition from purpose to intention lies in the fact that I ought to be aware not simply of my single action but also of the universal which is conjoined with it. The universal which comes on the scene here in this way is what I have willed, my intention.

op. cit. §118 Addition

A rational action (and it is only such actions that are the subject matter of Hegel's social philosophy) is done *for a reason*, a reason distinct from the purpose, that may be worthless in itself. The intention may be realised only by a *series* of such actions, each of which is a means to some more remote end, and each action in the series may be done by a different subject. That is, when a subject takes a rational action, they may rely on the actions of others to complete their intention that is universal in nature. All actions are irreducibly social in nature.

The opening up of a difference between purpose and intention marks the beginning of action proper: doing something for a reason. When Hegel talks of a 'series of actions', actions united by a common intention, it is the contradiction between purpose and intention that marks off each unit in this series, and is continued in the consequences of and reactions to the deed.

But where the intention is identical to the purpose, that is, the action is a simple reflex, the subject is probably not a rational actor (a child perhaps) who cannot be blamed for their action.

As a rational human being, I am a free being capable of forming intentions that are contrary to my immediate inclination or the Will of others. The worth (*Wert*) of the action, the reason I take it to be good, it is my Intention.

If my intentions are rational, this worth must be a universal. For example, my intention in handing out food may be to alleviate a famine, to raise my country's humanitarian credentials, or increase business at my restaurant; in each case, the purpose is a step towards the Intention that is the ultimate motivation, but is not fulfilled by the deed alone. We judge an action by the universal the Intention falls under. Analysis of rational action means taking into account the Intention with which the action was taken, related to the benefit (Welfare, *das Wohl*) sought and the concept the subject had of their action – their intention in doing it, not just the immediate purpose of the action.

A person always has responsibility (*Schuld*) for their deed, without qualification, and for the immediate purpose they pursue. If the deed was in contradiction to the purpose (the brakes failed), then I may disown that action, but good intentions cannot justify a wrong act. Hegel takes a very 'hard line' on this question. As Hegel saw it, a slave or servant who is obliged to carry out a wrong action under duress is still responsible for their action, and in fact, according to Hegel, a slave is responsible for being a slave even if rebellion is punished by death. A person's will cannot be forced, even if the consequence of a person's refusal of an action is their own death.

Yet if a man is a slave, his own Will is responsible for his slavery,  
just as it is its Will, which is responsible if a people is subjugated.  
Hence the wrong of slavery lies at the door, not simply of enslavers  
or conquerors, but of the slaves and the conquered themselves.  
op. cit., §58 Addition

Nowadays we are more forgiving, and 'blaming the victim' is condemned.

On the other hand, Hegel supports the 'right of distress', under which a person in imminent danger may steal or trespass blamelessly, and a debtor should never forfeit the tools of their trade that would render them unable to earn a living. Here, modern law is less forgiving.

#### The truth of intentions

The purpose undergoes a transformation through the action that transforms subjective purpose into the realised purpose; what was implicit becomes explicit. The intention is the reason for the actor's action, so while the purpose is exhausted in the realised purpose, the universal content of the action (its meaning for everyone else – a crime? a heroic rescue?), the intention, remains.

The universal quality of the action is the manifold content of the action as such, reduced to the simple form of universality. But the subject, an entity reflected into himself and so particular in correlation with the particularity of his object (*Zweck*), has in his end his own particular content, and this content is the soul of the action and determines its character.

op. cit. §121

Thus, a series of actions is bound together by a shared content, the intention. What happens in consequence of the original deed and all the deeds in the series expresses a particular purpose subsumed under a universal concept of the intention. The intention is not merely implicit, but is known to the actor and is what provides the motivation for the action, even if others see it differently.

Two things follow from this. Firstly, the subsequent actions are generally done by other actors, each continuing or contributing to the intention with their own particular purpose, each a means to each other's ends. Secondly, the intention is not limited to the immediate context of the goal, but is realised in the development of the concrete whole. The logic of this process is the subject-object process described in Hegel's *Logic* – the subject (an intention) interacts with other projects and is manifested concretely in the development of the whole community. Things do not generally work out just as anyone originally intended, but the outcome is not that of the subject alone, since other actors will contribute to the unfolding of the intention. Nonetheless, as the intention unfolds and concretizes itself the subject sees the *truth* of their intention. Throughout, the subject is guided by pursuit of their own welfare as they see it, that is *implicitly* the Good of the whole community.

What is most important is that the action is not completed with the original deed. The actions of others acting to fulfil the intention of the subject's action is *part of the action*. If I post a letter, all the actions of postal employees that act to complete my intention with the delivery of the letter are part of my action.

### Welfare

The content of the intention is the Welfare of the subject. Welfare is a unity of Happiness and Right. This contrasts with Worth.

When Hegel says that: 'A person is the series of their actions' (op. cit. §124), he means that the personal motives someone may have had in participating in some project – the pleasure gained from collective action, the honour and praise awarded for their achievement or even less laudable pleasures such as the exhilaration of command – are irrelevant to estimating the *worth* of a person's work. A subject's intention may be to further the welfare of all, but equally well it may be personal glory.

Whether my intention is my own welfare, the welfare of others like myself, or the welfare of all cannot justify an action that is Wrong, that is, an action that violates abstract Right. So for example, to sacrifice the rights of another person for what the subject takes to be the greater good, is Wrong.

An action is not to be judged wrong and therefore inadmissible just according to whether it furthers the general Good. The idea of the 'general Good' does not, for Hegel, belong to the sphere of Morality, but rather to Ethical Life and the State. The general Good is worked out by citizens in their professional associations and legislative bodies, and belongs to a different sphere. The moral subject is responsible for actions within their sphere of responsibility, but is not responsible for determining what serves the 'general Good'. The moral subject is responsible for interpreting and understanding the *law*, but is not in a position to make judgments about the 'general good'.

### The Good and Conscience

The Good is the Idea as the unity of the concept of the Will with the particular Will. In this unity, abstract right, welfare, the subjectivity of knowing and the contingency of external fact have their independent self-subsistence superseded. ...

op. cit. §129

Subjects come to know enough about their own situation that in seeking their own welfare and respecting the rights of other persons, they contribute to the realisation of Freedom, as Hegel sees it. It turns out that the welfare and right of the particular is essentially universal welfare. The Good can only be realised by means of the subjective Will, so the subjective Will has to be 'caught up in' the Idea of the Good, that can only be the outcome of a long-drawn-out process of development of rational laws and the education of the people.

A subject's *own* apprehension of the Good and their acceptance of this as obligatory for themselves is Conscience.

The subject cannot be counted on to look to religion or the law to be told what is Good, but rather their own insight is what is decisive. However, their 'insight is capable equally of being true and of being mere opinion and error' (op. cit. §143n.) and potentially Evil. 'The road to hell is paved in good intentions', it is said. Acting solely according to one's conscience can just as well end in Evil. The subject's well-meaning potential to do evil can only be mitigated by citizens acting in the family, civil society and the State. The finite horizon within which the consequences of our actions are foreseeable is crucial for anyone who is interested in making a difference in this world.

According to Hegel, subjects cannot achieve either their own Welfare or the general Good alone through the exercise of their Conscience. Free Will can only be realised through the activity of *citizens* in the various associations of civil society and the State. Outside of this the Will is more likely to result in Evil.

### Conclusion

Rousseau and Hegel have provided the basis for an ethical theory of the Will in the social domain.

The problem Hegel addressed is: how can the Will become free? People are born with a natural will, but if they live side-by-side with each other under the 'law of the jungle', people would be enslaved to the struggle to survive. To become free presupposes that everyone recognises each other's right to personal autonomy but act together to further the common good.

As Hegel sees it, the Will is not Free where an action violates the rights of others. Such an act is not as it ought to be. Any seeming immediate benefit will be obliterated by the wrongful nature of the act. The Will cannot be coerced or determined by cause-and-effect. The Will is free only when, as a result of reflection, the subject acts as it should. But what *should* a person do? Kant's moral philosophy could not answer this question concretely, only that a person must obey a law they drafted or could have drafted themselves.

The principal problem of the Will has turned out not to be how thought moves matter, but rather how the Will resolves the conflict between opposing impulses. But left to its own devices conscience cannot determine what is good. For that people require ongoing forms of association through which they can construct a collective Will through deliberation and making their own laws.

Both Rousseau and Hegel saw the formation of the state as ideally an extension and emancipation of the Will, rather than a limitation of the Will, and it is reasonable to presume that the same principle applies to lower levels of governance.

The reliance of both on small states can be taken as an unresolved problem. Further, Hegel and Rousseau's critique of general elections based on the inevitability of government by 'caucuses' applies with even greater force to Hegel's preferred form of collegiate democracy. For all its faults, it seems that elections by universal suffrage with electors casting their votes in private is an essential component of determining the general Will, supplementing rather than replacing participation of electors in democratic deliberation at a level relevant to their own experience. Rousseau's demand that citizens be well-informed is clearly in contradiction to their deliberation in private, and his idea of government by plebiscite misconceived even in small states.

I will now look at a couple of controversial questions that challenge the boundaries of an ethical theory of social life.

#### 4. Rousseau and Hegel on the Universal Will

##### Freedom and the Will

Until now, we have discussed the Will as if it pertained only to a single person. But groups can act together with a common motive, and when they do, it makes sense to speak of a common Will. When the group is the entire community – the nation as a whole determines itself to act towards some end – it would be reasonable to refer to the 'Universal Will'. When a smaller group acts together, whether a formal decision-making body or an informal class, I will call this a 'particular Will'.

Looked at in this way, the term 'Universal Will' seems to be a metaphor. But this appearance is merely the result of the fact that in both the historical record and in my explanation we *began from the individual*. We have already touched on Hegel's criticism of Fichte for mistakenly trying to reconstruct an understanding of the whole society beginning from the Ego. It is rather more true to say that the individual is an instance of the whole than to say that the whole is the sum of all the individuals.

Hegel has already said that 'that which is free is the Will. Will without freedom is an empty word' (1821, §4 Addition). The Will is self-determination, the realisation of freedom. It is not difficult to see that an individual's Will is best understood as an *instance* of the freedom of the whole. The individual Will is, however, something distinct from the Universal Will, while the Universal Will exists only in and through the collaboration of many individual Wills.

In the *Logic*, Hegel had already introduced us to this way of understanding *all* concepts. What is universal is instantiated in many individual subjects; the individual Will is a part of the Universal Will, even though each individual Will may be different and distinctive. For example, a collective Will may be determined by majority.

The problem of determination and realisation of the Universal Will is not merely a theoretical problem but a *practical* problem. Both Rousseau and Hegel developed their ideas about the Universal Will as participants in the struggle to realise freedom in Europe. The problem of realisation of the Universal Will is the problem of the formation of a good State. A person becomes free by building a good State.

According to Hegel, 'The State in and by itself is the actualisation of freedom' (1821, §258 Addition). As Hegel saw it, a State that failed to express the Universal Will and that suppressed freedom does not deserve the name of 'state'. The problem Rousseau and Hegel both addressed is how an individual could be free whilst living in mutual dependence with thousands of other human beings. They agreed that the key to freedom in a large community is the moral education of the people and the formation of a general Will embodied by a State, by means of which the citizens formulate laws binding on them all.

Rousseau's solution was direct democracy in small states. Hegel recommended a different path – one that also rejected universal suffrage, but for different reasons.

The chief difference between Rousseau and Hegel on this question was that Rousseau sought a *direct* relation between citizens and the State, whereas Hegel argued that citizens' relation to the State must be *mediated* by civil and political associations embedded in their own lives in which they could benefit from direct participation. Both opposed elections based on universal suffrage.

#### Rousseau on the general Will

Rousseau (1762) understood the modern state in terms of a 'social contract'.

The social contract is based on a foundation myth, according to which, when people could no longer maintain themselves in the state of nature, they joined together as equal citizens in a social contract.

Each of us puts his person and all his power in common under the supreme direction of the general Will, and, in our corporate capacity, we receive each member as an indivisible part of the whole.

Rousseau, 1762, Book 6

As a result of this contract, the citizens form a single body that acts according to a general Will. However, the general Will is an *ideal*.

The general Will is always right and tends to the public advantage; but it does not follow that the deliberations of the people are always equally correct. Our Will is always for our own good, but we do not always see what that is; the people is never corrupted, but it is often deceived, and on such occasions only does it *seem* to Will what is bad.

1762, Book 2, Chapter 3

For a variety of reasons, when the citizens seek to determine the general Will, they may be mistaken. A central question is then, what conditions cause the people to err when they seek to determine the general Will?

The general Will differs in principle from an individual Will, but in determining their own Will, an individual should always ask themselves: 'What is the common good', not what is good for me?

Majority voting may be a means of determining the general Will, but it is only a method and may be *fallible*. The first condition for the people to be able to correctly determine the general Will is that the people are well-informed so that they can understand what is for the common good.

Secondly, Rousseau believed that if there were no communication between individuals, each would tend to produce the same conception of the general Will. And thus: 'Each citizen should think only his own thoughts' (Book 1, Chapter 3). So there must be no factions, or at least no faction should be so great that its particular Will should have excessive weight in determining the general Will.

In Rousseau's words:

If, when the people, being furnished with adequate information, held its deliberations, the citizens had no communication one with another, the grand total of the small differences would always give the general Will, and the decision would always be good.

1762, Book 1, Chapter 2

There is often a great deal of difference between the Will of all and the general Will; the latter considers only the common interest, while the former takes private interest into account, and is no more than a sum of particular Wills: but take away from these same Wills the pluses and minuses that cancel one another and the general Will remains as the sum of the differences.

1762, Book 1, Chapter 3

Sovereignty belongs to the *citizens assembled*, and it cannot be represented by delegates. Rousseau held that laws have to be made by direct democracy and not by the deliberation of delegates.

The English people believes itself to be free; it is gravely mistaken; it is free only during the election of Members of Parliament; as soon as they are elected, it is enslaved, it is nothing.

1762, Book 3, Chapter 15

The general Will must always be expressed in terms of universal laws and not policies in relation to this or that contingency. Generals or civil servants are all responsible for determining policies in their respective domains, but must do so governed by the general Will, that alone is sovereign.

So his vision of a democratic republic entailed periodic assemblies of the people who voted directly on laws as *citizens*, rather than as private individuals. Elections can be used to appoint administrators, but not to make laws.

Like Hegel, Rousseau was aware that his ideal was impractical in a large state. So, both favoured smaller republics. In his later writings, Rousseau advocated for federations as preferable to large states that would make the assembly of citizens impracticable. In Hegel's time, the German Federation was composed of just 38 component states, each with an average population of about 600,000 – less than the population of Paris at the time. And his conception was geared to this reality. In 1871, the Paris Commune reasoned in the same way and did not advocate for the whole of France to form a commune, but rather expected other cities to take control of their own local communes.

### Why Hegel Opposed Universal Suffrage

Hegel argues consistently for highly mediated forms of representation and against universal suffrage. He makes a powerful argument against universal suffrage.

As for popular suffrage, it may be further remarked that especially in large states it leads inevitably to electoral indifference, since the casting of a single vote is of no significance where there is a multitude of electors. Even if a voting qualification is highly valued and esteemed by those who are entitled to it, they still do not enter the polling booth. Thus the result of an institution of this kind is more likely to be the opposite of what was intended; election actually falls into the power of a few, of a caucus, and so of the particular and contingent interest which is precisely what was to have been neutralised.

1821, §311n.

According to Hegel, the deputies in the Legislature should represent the various real interest groups in society and should give each equal weight. The electorate must not be seen as an agglomeration of individual atoms (op. cit. §311).

Universal suffrage, on the contrary, requires every individual to cast their vote privately, as an isolated atom. Hegel believed that the public must be educated in national affairs, and he saw the assemblies of the Estates\* as a means of achieving this. Political discussion 'at his fireside with his wife and his friends' can never be better than 'building castles in the sky'. Participation in assemblies is essential for the political education of the masses.

Here Rousseau and Hegel are at odds. Rousseau wanted the citizens to be well-informed, but then 'think for themselves'. Hegel ridiculed this idea of 'thinking for yourself'. The whole point of education was to introduce people to all the most powerful ideas in the world and then encourage people to 'rethink' them, to *appropriate* ideas and make them their own.

Hegel understood that the truth is concrete. In order to understand a problem and all its diverse aspects, a person needs to have personal experience with the issue. The overwhelming majority of the citizens do not have practical experience in making laws but they do have a concrete knowledge of the affairs of their own life. The citizens make complex and rational decisions in those organisations immediately concerned with their everyday life. In Hegel's day, these included the guilds in which artisans and merchants regulated their own trade, in municipal corporations and in civil society organisations such as the courts, regulatory bodies and local voluntary associations. In the case of the rural community, Hegel believed that only the landed aristocracy was able to rise to the level of political participation.

Hegel wrote 200 years ago, and while means for participation in the political process have greatly expanded, so have means for the manipulation of the people. The essential feature of Hegel's idea of the citizens' role in the drafting of laws was that it should be mediated through their participation in these civil society forms of organisation. On this matter, Marx was in agreement with Hegel.

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\* Hegel recognised three estates: the Agricultural Estate who were represented by their aristocratic landowners; the Business Estate, who were represented via the Guilds, and the Universal Estate, that is, the civil servants.

Rousseau was opposed outright to 'factions', but Hegel proposed the Estates in lieu of what are today, political parties. Here, as elsewhere, Hegel was turning an existing form of association to his purpose. Each of the Estates had their own internal means of determining policy, and each estate was to be given an equal say in the Legislature. Here again Hegel opts not for the untrammelled voice of each individual citizen, but for the considered, mediated voice for each particular section of the citizenry.

'Public opinion' is the name given to 'individuals ... in their having and expressing their own private judgments, opinions, and recommendations on affairs of state' (Hegel, op. cit. §316). Public opinion is therefore 'a repository of genuine needs and correct tendencies of common life', but 'infected by all the accidents of opinion, by its ignorance and perversity, by its mistakes and falsity of judgment', and Hegel quotes Goethe: 'the masses are respectable hands at fighting, but miserable hands at judging'.

Thus, Hegel agreed that the people must be engaged in creating laws, but not by each citizen directly relating to the State. It was in their guilds and Estates that the citizens participated in the political process. But members of the Legislature, having concrete connections with the people, made decisions in deliberation with each other, not as mandated delegates.

#### Hegel on Civil Disobedience

Hegel believed that an individual subject does not have the resources to determine what is right, so the State is required to enact laws. So it follows that Hegel believed that every subject has to obey the law. He is hardly on his own in that belief. But it is a fact that most progress has happened thanks to people *breaking* custom and the law. So what did Hegel have to say about civil disobedience?

Hegel's demand of obedience to law is not absolute. As the form of life develops, customs and laws prove to be inadequate. Contradictions arise when an apparent Right turns out to be wrong (or vice versa), a social crisis results, and the customs and laws have to be changed. If moral subjects meekly deferred to law and custom no crisis would ever arise; the community would stagnate and become hidebound by antiquated laws and customs.

In fact, when custom or law come into conflict with the social practices that have grown up within them, people do object, and knowingly violate customs and laws and insist on their being right and the relevant law being wrong. In other words, law develops by means of either civil disobedience or post facto defence of their actions by people who unwittingly committed a wrong. But Hegel did not sanction civil disobedience; it was the courts and public authorities (that Hegel saw as parts of civil society, not the State), that had the responsibility to react to contradictions and act appropriately.

However, according to Hegel, the subject who defies a law with the intention of stimulating a change in the law must accept responsibility for all the consequences of their act, including their own punishment under law so long as this punishment does not threaten their existence.

Hegel also recognises two other situations in which it is right to break the law. First, the 'right of distress':

In extreme danger and in conflict with the rightful property of someone else, this life may claim (as a right, not a mercy) a right of distress, because in such a situation there is on the one hand an infinite injury to a man's existence and the consequent loss of rights altogether, and on the other hand only an injury to a single restricted embodiment of freedom, ...

op. cit. §127

So for example, under Scottish law, a starving person had a right to steal a sheep to forestall their own death or that of their family. Likewise, according to Hegel (PR §127n.), a debtor has the right to retain their tools, etc., needed to earn a living, and cannot be denied these by a creditor.

Second, Hegel held that a slave has no duty under the law at all and:

It is in the nature of the case that a slave has an absolute right to free himself and that if anyone has prostituted his ethical life by hiring himself to thieve and murder, this is an absolute nullity and everyone has a warrant to repudiate this contract.

op. cit. §66 Addition

So in a situation in which an absolute wrong is mandated by law, that is, the law violates human rights, then that law has no force over the moral subject, who has not only the right but the obligation to repudiate the supposed obligation.

### The Right of Heroes

Hegel was an ardent admirer of Napoleon, and he introduced the category of 'hero' into his social theory, having Napoleon in mind. He recognized that sweeping changes like the abolition of feudal relics in Germany and the introduction of the *Code Napoléon* could only be made by heroes – individuals who act as instruments of 'History'. Such figures enjoyed a 'higher right', to sweep away old institutions and create new ones. These heroes would necessarily, in the eyes of their own community, do wrong, even Evil and would generally not be thanked by posterity either. Hegel talks about the role of heroes in founding new states out of a state of nature, but

Once the state has been founded, there can no longer be any heroes.

They come on the scene only in uncivilised conditions.

op. cit. §93 Addition

But Hegel believed that a constitutional monarchy with a market economy was the highest possible form of Right. If there were a higher form of society, however, the leap to such a State could not be achieved by the gradual evolution of the existing laws and customs, but only by 'rightful' coercion and the sweeping aside of the old laws, as Napoleon has demonstrated.

This cannot be achieved by a single actor acting alone, however.

### Conclusion

First Rousseau and then Hegel argued that the problem of the freedom of the Will could only be resolved by the construction of a good State. Rather than the abstract rules of Kant's moral philosophy, Rousseau and Hegel held that practical forms of association had to be built so that the citizens could actually create *together* the laws that constituted the Universal Will.

Until now, the problem of the Will has arisen through the reflections of theologians and philosophers. Hegel made a commendable effort to understand how the individual Will arose out of the aimless striving of inanimate nature. But his ideas were entirely speculative. He did not even have access to Darwin's theory of evolution or the knowledge of the microstructure of plants and animals, that later became accessible through the microscope.

By the 1930s, however, science had made gigantic leaps forward in understanding the human psyche and intellect. Powerful theories of sociology were being developed to understand the problems that Hegel and Rousseau had only begun to tackle.

In the succeeding chapters, I will deal with the findings of psychology and sociology, which now pose the problem of the Will in a concrete scientific form. It is important to understand, however, how the problems confronted by present-day psychology and social theory have been prepared by the thousand years of thinking which went before.

## Part III. The Psychology of the Will

### 1. Self-Control

#### Introduction

Writing in the aftermath of the Russian Revolution, Lev Vygotsky and his collaborators – especially Alexander Luria (1902–1977) – founded a current of psychology that he referred to as sociocultural theory.

Vygotsky built his theory through immanent critiques of the whole range of psychological theories current at the time. Although he never read Hegel, his study of Marx's *Capital* allowed him to appropriate Marx's use of Hegelian logic. Vygotsky declared that psychologists 'must create our own *Das Kapital*' (1927, ch. 13), noting in particular the use of the 'germ cell method' or 'analysis by units' alluded to by Marx in the Preface to the first German edition of *Capital*.

Vygotsky used this method together with experiments (some of them thought-experiments) in which subjects – usually children – were placed in situations while the researcher intervened to offer the subject a means of resolving the problem. This method allowed Vygotsky to understand the development of the human mind from birth to adulthood through social interaction and the subject's use of cultural artefacts.

What Vygotsky did *not* study, however, was the processes that produced the social situations in which subjects would actually find themselves, that is the subject matter of social theory. In the next chapter, I will deal with Activity Theory, later developed by Vygotsky's followers, a development of Vygotsky's ideas in psychology that sheds more light on the sources of motivation and, consequently, on the formation of social situations.

We have learnt from Rousseau and Hegel that the study of the individual Will alone cannot complete the science of the Will. For that we must venture into social theory, which will be the topic of the next section. Crucial to social theory is understanding the source of subjects' motivation and how this can create situations in which they are called upon to exercise their Will. Although Vygotsky and the early Activity Theorists confined themselves to psychology, their theory was by its very nature interdisciplinary. In the current chapter, however, I will confine myself to Vygotsky's *psychology* of the Will.

In their investigations of the Will, nineteenth-century physiologists could only explain the trivialities of behaviour in terms of involuntary reflexes. Voluntary behaviour remained as much a mystery as it had been for Spinoza. Using his unique experimental technique, Vygotsky was able to identify and study the locus of voluntary behaviour in what he called the 'higher psychological functions' – complex assemblies of 'auxiliary reflexes' that are artificially introduced into a person's mind as they are raised and educated in childhood and interact with other people.

#### The Higher Psychological Functions

Vygotsky made epoch-making discoveries in the understanding of the psychology of the Will through his study of the 'higher psychological functions'.

A higher psychological function is distinguished by (1) not being present at birth but constructed through the experience of the individual organism, (2) replacing the function of each innate organ of the brain (memory, attention, etc.) with a system that performs the same function by means of a combination of those innate organs and (3) enabling *voluntary* control of the organism's behaviour.

## Behaviour

To clarify this, it is first necessary to understand the difference between the four distinct ways in which the behaviour of an animal is controlled by its nervous system: stimulus–response, conditioned reflexes, practical intellect and voluntary control.

### 1. The reflex arc

The reflex mechanism was first identified by the British physiologist Marshall Hall in the 1830s, and during the nineteenth century, physiologists identified nerve pathways throughout the body in both humans and animals. Helmholtz had even measured the time taken for nerves to travel to and from the brain. So by the beginning of the twentieth century, mechanical models of animal behaviour based on the 'reflex arc' were well developed. The reflex arc is found across the animal kingdom including human beings and functionally similar biochemical mechanisms exist in plants.

The reflex arc, – stimulus→response – takes the place of cause→effect in the case of living matter. Rather than being an immediate causal process, in the reflex arc the connection between the cause/stimulus and the effect/response is mediated by a nervous system. In all but the most primitive animals this involves 'messages' to and from a central nervous system.

In general, nineteenth- and twentieth-century physiologists rejected spiritual explanations of human behaviour, and correctly believed that the mechanical process they had discovered lay at the roots of human behaviour. None of them, however, had any viable explanation for the rich and complex character of human life, and to this very day physiologists and neuroscientists do not have an adequate explanation for the conscious awareness of human beings. Behaviourists such as J.B. Watson and B.F. Skinner have only ever been able to explain the most trivial aspects of human psychological phenomena on the basis of reflexes.

All behaviour from that of a cat when it hears the rustle of a nearby mouse to the seasonal migration of storks, is explicable in terms of reflexes in combination with Darwinian evolution. The entire complex behaviour of animals can be explained by intricate networks of *excitatory* and *inhibitory* reflexes that function like the binary code of a neural network.

However, only the natural will can be explained by reference to the reflex arc. The voluntary behaviour of human beings and of many animals cannot be explained by Behaviourism – the science that aims to explain behaviour without reference to consciousness.

Nonetheless, just as the natural will resolves itself ultimately to the reflex arc, an understanding of the human Will must also have the reflex arc at its foundation,

because the reflex is how our biology works – the same biology we share with the rest of the animal kingdom.

## 2. The conditioned reflex

In 1903, I.V. Pavlov described an experiment in which a dog was trained to salivate in response to the sound of a bell. A dog normally salivates in anticipation of food; that is to say, the sight or smell of food is an excitatory reflex. This reflex is built into the biology with which the dog is born. The sound of a bell, however, is normally a *neutral* stimulus, neither excitatory nor inhibitory. What Pavlov did was to train a dog to *associate* being fed with the sound of a bell, thereby acting on an *already existing* reflex curve. The bell became an excitatory stimulus just like the sight of food, with a corresponding result. Pavlov called this a ‘conditional reflex’, though the idea has come to be referred to as ‘conditioned reflex’ and the process of training the dog ‘conditioning’. The sound of the bell is called an ‘auxiliary stimulus’.

No new reflex is introduced into the dog; the same reflex is attached to a different stimulus. This is an important distinction because the reflex is, at root, a biochemical process and nothing has changed in the biochemistry of the dog. A new connection has been made, though. Nothing in the behaviour of the salivating dog is voluntary; it did not choose to be subject to conditioning, and having been conditioned to expect food where it hears the sound of the bell, its salivation remains involuntary.

Pavlov banned any reference to ‘consciousness’ in his lab. He regarded any reference to consciousness as unscientific, convinced that the entire human experience would eventually be explained through the conditioned reflex.

Conditioned reflexes are well known to animal trainers, but the process is not limited to deliberate training. Young birds learn their song by hearing their mother’s song just as wild animals learn to avoid areas populated by humans.

But the conditioned reflex is part of human learning as well. When we learn to drive a car we train ourselves to respond to red lights by hitting the brake – that is to say, to act appropriately without thinking about it, just as sports-training centres on creating complexes of such conditioned reflexes. A great deal of human behaviour can be explained by means of the conditioned reflex, but as with the innate reflex, conditioned reflexes are largely confined to the trivialities of human psychology.

This led Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) to suggest in 1896 that Psychology should be divided into two, Experimental Psychology based on physiology and a Cultural Psychology based on the analysis of human culture and its history. Wundt believed – correctly as it has turned out – that conditioned reflexes could not on their own explain the whole richness of human mental life.

## 3. Practical Intellect

Karl Bühler identified a higher form of behaviour that he called ‘problem-solving’. Vygotsky reflected on this form of intelligence as observed in apes. The ape’s ability to solve problems was limited by the requirement that all the elements of the solution to a task had to be within its field of vision at the same time. If the ape saw the key and the lock in the same scene, it could use the key.

The sight of the key would then take on a certain functional significance for the ape whenever it saw it.

The sight of each of the components of the solution to a problem was not therefore *neutral* stimuli; they were *part of the situation*, and the ape learnt to recognise them as such.

But what the ape could *not* do was to hold the image of the key in its mind as a solution when it was not present. Furthermore, this kind of behaviour, that manifests an elementary level of the freedom of the Will, was peripheral in the life of an ape. It can nevertheless be regarded as a rudimentary form of what became the dominant form of behaviour of human beings in which objects together with their functional significance can be held in the mind even after they have left the field of vision.

#### 4. Voluntary behaviour

The great contribution Vygotsky made to the study of the Will was to show how *voluntary* human behaviour is built on reflexes, that nonetheless remain *involuntary* processes. As with Pavlov, Vygotsky's experiments created an entirely *new* connection to include an otherwise neutral stimulus in the reaction. The problem was not solved by learning to recognise some aspect of the situation, but by *introducing a stimulus previously unrelated to the situation*. Further, unlike with Pavlov, the new connection is made by the subject themselves, *voluntarily*.

The entire range of human activity, including conscious awareness and verbal thinking, is built on the capacity for voluntary control of all the basic psychological functions. This is possible because human beings are social beings and the development of their voluntary behaviour begins as soon as another human being recognises them as a person and begins to treat them as a person, just as Fichte had proposed.

The first step, the 'germ cell' of all voluntary behaviour, is a person learning to choose between two simple actions by introducing a simple new stimulus into the situation. Vygotsky described an experiment to demonstrate this in Chapter 12 of the manuscript on the higher psychological functions, entitled 'Self-Control'.

#### Self-Control

The chapter on Self-control was entitled 'Learning to master one's own behaviour by internal processes', but was published in English under the title 'Self-Control' (1931/1997). This formulation of the subject matter nicely anticipates the development of the Will through social means, a topic Vygotsky did not live long enough to study.

In this chapter, Vygotsky describes an experiment in which children were required to choose freely between two possible actions. The subject would not be instructed as to which action to take; they were required to decide for themselves which action to take.

The child was asked to choose between something that the child finds pleasant and something they find unpleasant. The task of making the choice is then complicated such that the task exceeded the child's psychological capacity to

resolve the choice and decide which action will give them the desired result. This could be done by requiring the subject to resolve ambiguous instructions or by giving the subject insufficient time to think.

The experiment thus modelled the situation of a *conflict of motives*, in which a subject is motivated but cannot decide which action is the right one. This is the same situation that prompted Augustine of Hippo to invent the concept of the Will and that later Hegel made the starting point of his study of the Will.

Once the difficulty of the task begins to induce hesitation, vacillation and suspension of motives in the subject, the researcher places on the table a dice with alternate black and white faces and allows the child to play with it. The researcher may then allow the subject to observe another child using the dice to solve the problem, or if necessary, asks the subject to *try* using the dice. But the observations were made only when the subject adopted the use of the dice as a *voluntary* means of making the decision.

The researchers observed that once the task was made sufficiently difficult, the subject readily resorted to using the dice. In doing so, the subject:

introduces into the situation new stimuli that are completely *neutral* in comparison with the whole situation and ascribes to them the force of motive. He decides in advance that if the dice turns black side up, he will choose one series, and if it turns white side up, the other series. In this way, the *choice is made in advance*.

Vygotsky, op. cit.

This neutral stimulus is called an ‘auxiliary stimulus’ and the device is called an ‘auxiliary motive’. The subject leaves the choice to the auxiliary device. Is the action taken by the child free or unfree? On the one hand, it was not free because the action was completely determined by the dice in response to the stimulus generated by the dice. On the other hand, it cannot be said that the dice in any way *compels* the subject to take this or that action; the subject themselves ascribed the force of a motive to the dice *in advance* and themselves linked one action to the white side and the other to the black side of the dice. The subject did this freely with the aim of determining their selection. The first part of the action is completely free. Nothing compels the subject to use the dice or assign this or that side of the dice to this or that action. The action as a whole is completely voluntary.

This is just the same as when I can’t decide what to have for dinner, so I go to the kitchen and maybe flick through my recipe book until something strikes my eye. Making a difficult voluntary decision always entails the use of an external stimulus.

The child recognised the necessity of having a motive in order to act. Freedom of the Will is not freedom from motives. By recognising this necessity and using the auxiliary device to provide the motive, the subject demonstrated the well-known maxim that ‘freedom is the recognition of necessity’.

Vygotsky observed:

The basic law of our behaviour states that behaviour is determined by situations and reaction is elicited by stimuli; for this reason the key to controlling behaviour lies in controlling stimuli. We cannot

master our own behaviour except through appropriate stimuli.  
op. cit.

So human behaviour is no exception to the laws of Nature.

I shall note in passing that Vygotsky used a dice in the experiment to be sure that the auxiliary stimulus was entirely independent of the nature of the situation itself, and in that sense 'neutral'. But there is no implication that *randomness* has any part whatsoever to play in the development of human activity. The randomness is simply a condition of the *experiment*.

Note that unlike the stick that an ape might use as a tool to act upon a problem in the material world, the device here is not doing anything to the material world; it is simply generating a *sign* that the subject uses to *control their own behaviour*. It is widely agreed that the routine use of objects as *tools* was crucial in the evolution of Homo-sapiens, but the development of tools proved to be a gateway that opened the way to the use of *signs*. It is the use of objects as signs to act upon the minds of *others* and subsequently to control one's *own* behaviour that constitutes the truly voluntary form of behaviour characteristic of human beings.

Marx and Hegel had observed the determinative role of the means of labour in the historical development of labour. But tools only indirectly act on the mind by transforming the scope and character of human labour. Signs, however, act *directly* on the mind.

Vygotsky offers a couple of examples from outside the laboratory that show how we freely control our actions by means of auxiliary stimuli. If, reluctant to get up in the morning, I tell myself 'I will get up on the count of three', and then count out loud: 'one, two, three ...' I will respond with a conditioned reflex to the sound of 'three!' But I gave *myself* that auxiliary motive, so my getting up was a voluntary act even though it happened under the compulsion of a conditioned reflex.

Lewin gave the example of deciding to drop a letter in the mailbox. I go out on to the street and when I come to the mailbox, the sight of the slot acts as an auxiliary stimulus and my hand moves automatically, without any voluntary control on my part, to put my letter into the slot. My memory recalls the connection between the mailbox and the posting of a letter, and as soon as I decide to post a letter, this memory creates an intention. Lewin calls this reaction a 'quasi-need' because it acts in the same way as any natural need.

Vygotsky points out that a need, such as this, differs from a *habit*, that can be formed in much the same way as a conditioned reflex. However, whereas a need is exhausted by the reflex, a habit is not exhausted and may even be reinforced. But I do not put a letter in the slot every time I pass a mailbox as I would if I had created a habit. Essentially therefore, intention creates a need.

Intention is a typical process of controlling one's own behaviour by *creating* appropriate situations and connections, but *executing* it is a process that is completely independent of Will and takes place automatically. ... the paradox of the Will consists in that the Will creates involuntary acts.

Vygotsky, op. cit.

Human behaviour that does not have a specific intention is subject to the power of the situation.

the great uniqueness of the Will consists of man having no power over his own behaviour other than the power that things have over his behaviour. But man *subjects to himself* the power of things over behaviour, makes them serve his own purposes and controls that power as he wants. He changes the environment with his external activity and in this way affects his own behaviour, subjecting it to his own authority.

op. cit.

Another oft-cited example is the waiting room experiment, devised by Lewin, but referenced by Vygotsky in this chapter. A subject is asked to wait in an empty room. The researcher does not return, but secretly watches the subject. The subject becomes more and more agitated by being abandoned and is torn between two conflicting motives: to be a cooperative subject and wait patiently for the researcher to return, or having been abandoned, to free themselves and leave the room. Sooner or later, the subject seizes on something, typically, they look at the wall-clock and select a time, say 3 pm, and tell themselves: 'When the clock turns to 3 pm, I'm going!' Lacking any motive to act, like the subjects in Vygotsky's experiment with the dice, they find some artefact that can generate an auxiliary stimulus that *provides a motive for them to act*. There is no such thing as an unmotivated action.

The phase of a voluntary action in which a subject selects the stimulus that is to provide the motive for some action is called *closure*, because it is like fixing a new link in a network. A 'cerebral apparatus' is constructed in advance of the situation arising, using the same biology by which as habits are formed by repeated exposure to a situation. A certain stimulus is linked to a certain action.

The *actuating process*, that is, executing the cerebral connection already formed in the closure phase, and carrying out of the voluntary action, happens exactly the same way as an action carried out as a result of *any other* initiating stimulus, automatically, according to conditions. It is just as one does not alternately think about your left foot and your right foot, etc., as you walk down the street. The nervous system controls such actions entirely independently of consciousness. Thus,

the paradox of the Will consists in that we create with its help an involuntarily acting mechanism.

op. cit.

Vygotsky distinguished between stimulus and motive. A stimulus is 'the more or less simple stimulation acting directly on an already established reflex curve' while a motive is 'a complex *system* of stimuli connected with the construction, formation, or selection of one of the reflex curves'. A stimulus becomes a motive when it activates a 'complex reactive formation' in the nervous system that evaluates the stimulus as a motive. It is not the stimuli that are in conflict, but such 'assemblies' of reactions that are in conflict. The conflict between these 'reactions' is a conflict over the whole motive field for the control of the closure mechanism, for the choice of closure path, not for control of the actuating mechanism itself, which is involuntary.

The implication of this is that the essential conflict takes place not at the moment of action, but at an earlier moment, like a plan that is actuated only at the decisive moment according to conditions. This also means that very strong stimuli do not necessarily overcome weaker stimuli because in fact it is not the stimuli but the motives that have to be resolved. A strong stimulus may become a weak motive. In this way, a patient will endure pain at the hands of a doctor if the pain was anticipated and is known to be necessary for the cure of a serious illness.

Also, these reflections show us that the freedom of the Will means control 'in itself', or 'potentially', in advance of the actual situation. At the moment of action, it is the *situation* that will determine action to the extent that the subject has recognised what the situation demands.

Human freedom consists specifically of man's ability to think, that is, that man is cognisant of the developing situation.

op. cit.

The implication of this maxim is that human beings perceive the world not just immediately, as it is, but also perceive the *meaning* of a situation.

Vygotsky consistently approached all the problems of psychology from a developmental point of view. In the development of the Will he shows how the two phases of a voluntary action (the closure and the actuation) each have independent origins in the cultural development of the child. This I will deal with in the next chapter.

#### 'Original sin'

The astute reader may have observed a 'sleight of hand' in Vygotsky's explanation of the freedom of the Will as I have presented it above. In each case, the voluntary action is preceded by the voluntary process of 'planning' how to respond to a situation. The voluntary act is only voluntary to the extent that the preceding closure was voluntary. So it appears that I have set up an infinite regression in which an action is free only thanks to a *previous* free action. Pavlov's dogs were not free, because their natural will played no part in the conditioning to which they were subjected. By contrast, the actions of an athlete who has choice to train is voluntary.

The solution to this infinite regression lies in child development. Fichte's (1796) observation – that a person becomes conscious of themselves as a free person only thanks to being treated as a free person by other people – remains true. A newborn child has no freedom of the Will at all, but only a natural will. The child acquires all the higher psychological functions, that is to say, mastery of all aspects of their own behaviour, thanks to their induction into a definite cultural formation by their parents and others who treat them as persons and potential subjects.

All living creatures have a 'natural will', that is to say, a system of reflexes that has evolved through phylogeny. Hegel was correct when he remarked that the problem of the Will is not whether the Will is free but *how* the Will *becomes* free, and there is nothing of self-determination in the natural will. Freedom and self-determination surely means that the organism is able to make a decision about how to act, and Vygotsky has shown that this is possible only to the extent that

the organism is conscious of the developing situation and creates a plan of action prior to the formation of the decisive situation. The Will is therefore tied up with the development of *conscious awareness*. The formation of the reflex substrate that underlies conscious awareness and the Will is a result, as Fichte had long ago said, of other people, especially the people who raised us from infancy, treating us as free beings and demanding that we control our own behaviour, implanting in the child's mind *artificial* auxiliary stimuli.

At a certain stage, a child gains control over their own behaviour by appropriating the methods that adults have used to control them. But more of this in the next chapter.

Vygotsky traced the process of development of the child through a series of phases in each of which the Will developed to a qualitatively distinct stage. That is the subject of the next chapter.

Single acts of voluntary sign-mediation do not have an isolated impact on the mind. Each such action leaves behind an enduring connection in the nervous system. The accumulation of such connections form organised systems of reactions, 'higher psychological functions'.

The structure of the higher psychological functions

It is thanks to the 'higher psychological functions', Hhat are unique to human beings, that persons have mastery of their own behaviour. Vygotsky used the same method of placing an experimental subject in a situation that was beyond their psychological capacity to resolve, and then intervening by offering the subject an artificial means of resolving the situation. He applied this method to memory, attention, selection, comparison, obedience, intention, decision, and so on and in each case he observed the conditions under which the subject was able to use the artefact successfully.

In particular,

Using *words* as a means of remembering was enough to make all the processes connected with remembering the instruction assume a single direction.

Vygotsky, 1931, Chapter 4

A child may use memory cards as reminders, but at any earlier age the memory card only confuses the child and at a later age the child can solve the puzzle without the use of a memory card. An infant cannot use a pointing finger to direct their attention, but soon learns to do so and use their own finger to control their attention, and later do so by entirely internal means.

In their actual life, it is not a researcher who offers an artificial means of action to a child, but more likely a parent. In the first months of a child's life, their every function is controlled by the adults around them, but over time, the child takes control of their own behaviour.

The child begins to apply to himself those forms of behaviour that adults usually apply to him, and this is the key to the fact of mastery of one's own behaviour.

op. cit.

Human beings are born with a complete range of psychological functions with distinct 'organs' controlling attention, perception, volition, etc. At birth, these

primitive functions form a working system constituting a viable organism, albeit dependent on the assistance of other people.

This layer of primitive functions operates by means of reflex arcs connecting *object-stimuli* to the organism's response apparatus. Over this primitive layer an entirely new layer of 'higher psychological functions' is constructed entirely of *auxiliary stimuli*. Systems of these auxiliary stimuli overlay and incorporate the primitive functions with which a person is born. Immediate reactions to stimuli from the object are replaced by *mediated* responses to signs.

Everything that in human behaviour is connected with the use of artificial means of thinking, with social development of behaviour, and specifically, with the use of signs  
op. cit.

Moreover, these mediated forms of action are increasingly aimed at *other people* rather than the actual object of their Will. Once a person is using words to control their behaviour, their memory, their attention, etc., the *visual field* is completely structured by words. This is what is behind the optical illusion where what at first looks like a vase is suddenly recognised as the silhouette of two people facing one another. *Meaning* structures how we see and hear.

In a very early speech (1924), Vygotsky went so far as to say: 'Consciousness is only the reflex of reflexes' (1924). From a philosophical point of view this cannot be correct, but we *could* say that the material substrate of consciousness is this assembly of reflexes of reflexes.

So it is that the mind is a system of systems of systems: an overall system of higher psychological functions incorporating the innate systems. The formation of concepts is the product of both the system of the mind that produces representations and the system of the mind that determines actions, that is, the Will.

The higher psychological functions develop throughout childhood, and with this comes increasing conscious awareness of the subject's own thinking. Thus:

Thinking in the true sense, formation of concepts, judgment and conclusions are based on the intervention of Will in a representation.  
op. cit.

It is the way sensual representations and feelings are suffused with meaning that constitutes conscious awareness. So:

the focal point of development for the school-age child is the emergence of the higher psychological functions, functions which are distinguished precisely by intellectualisation and mastery, by conscious awareness and volition.

Vygotsky, 1934, Chapter 7

### Germ cell and unit

I have presented in some detail Vygotsky's analysis of how a person gains mastery over decision-making. Only the behavioural act that is subject to voluntary control can be called an 'action'. Rousseau and Hegel likewise took *actions* to be the units of the Will and began their discourse on social life from this germ cell. Vygotsky has drawn attention to the fact that the voluntary action

is always essentially a *mediated* action. So it is the nature of the available artefacts and how they are used that impresses a particular cultural shape on to activity, that is, cultural development.

The mediated action is therefore the starting point of any science of human life, be it Psychology, Law or Economics. However, it is not quite true to say that the mediated action is a 'unit of analysis' (the term Vygotsky coined for 'germ cell' or 'unit'). Any particular phenomenon of human life is characterised by the *particular* nature of the object and especially by the particular means used, the mediating artefact. Marx and Hegel have both said as much in their reflections on the labour process.

The mediated action is the germ cell of the Will, but 'the Will' is, of course, an extremely general concept, present in any human endeavour whatsoever. Further, in any science a number of different units will be generated at a successively more general levels of action. But the basic unit is always one or another type of mediated action, be that a commodity or a spoken word.

### Volition and the Will

In the classic texts, 'the Will' is spoken of as if it were a distinct function, like in the modern neuroscientific concept of the 'executive function', and we see that Vygotsky continued with this form of speech. It must be noted, however, that *all* the psychological and practical functions of an adult human being are *systems* of means-reflexes that incorporate the entire psyche of the person; not just taking an action (the manifestation of the Will), but also thinking, reading, running, feeling, and so on.

In Psychology, what is referred to as the Will is the system of volition, voluntary control, of the various psychological functions. So there is no inconsistency in Vygotsky referring to the Will as if it were a distinct function alongside other psychological functions; all psychological functions are functions of the entire nervous system. But in a strong sense, the Will is the master psychological function that both incorporates and leads all the other high psychological functions.

Nevertheless, the Will does not arrive fully fledged. As in the case of other psychological higher functions it is constructed during childhood and modified gradually throughout a person's life. In particular, voluntary control of different psychological functions is achieved at an early or later age and the place of every function in the functional systems of the Will varies as the child develops.

### The bridge between Psychology and Social Theory

In addition to the development of the Will in ontogeny (which I will deal with in the next chapter), the nature of the Will changes with the development of the productive forces that place into our hands qualitatively different means.

Just as the use of one tool or another dictates the whole system of a work operation, *the character of the sign used* is the base on which the construction of the rest of the process depends. The same fundamental relation that lies at the base of the higher structure is the special form of organisation of the whole process which consists of the process being constructed by involving certain

artificial stimuli in the situation as signs.

Vygotsky, 1931

Consequently, the nature of the Will develops also on the cultural and historical planes as well as on the ontogenetic plane.

### Conclusion

Hegel had tried, on almost entirely speculative grounds, to reconstruct the structure of systems of natural, biological functions up to the point where volitional behaviour, that is to say, the Will, could emerge.

Vygotsky achieved this task strictly on the basis of experimental science. He showed that, like all the other higher psychological functions, volition, that is to say, mastery of one's own behaviour, developed by appropriating the use of artefacts, and in particular *signs* used by others.

The germ cell of the Will is an artefact-mediated action.

But

what replaces the hand of the experimenter who deliberately evoked the process in the laboratory?

Vygotsky, 1931.

Hegel had remarked in relation to tools:

The *means* is *superior* to the *finite* ends of *external* purposiveness: the *plough* is more honourable than are immediately the enjoyments procured by it and which are ends. 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, §1615

Once we learn to use a sign to master our own behaviour, the sign lasts and will be used to control our activity in future situations. Our ends develop, however, as we develop and the scope of our experience expands.

As I remarked above, it was outside the scope of Vygotsky's work to answer this question, but I will return to it in the next section where I will have to review the findings of social theory.

## 2. The development of the Will through childhood

### Introduction

I have already outlined how the Will is constituted within the psychology of an individual person, but I have yet to explain *how* a newborn, barely manifesting even a coherent natural will, becomes an adult citizen able to raise a family, earn a living, vote, etc. This chapter remains within the *psychology* of the Will, outlining *how* the Will becomes as free as it can be within the domain of psychology. It will become clear how Vygotsky's psychology is inherently interdisciplinary and will set us up to approach the problem of the collective Will on solid, scientific ground in the next section.

The development of the Will in ontogeny has to be understood across two different domains: childhood and adulthood. The development of the Will in

adulthood follows different principles, which will be taken up in the next chapter.

Throughout childhood, the Will passes through a series of six crises demarcating six different periods of stable development, and only at the end of this passage do we find an adult whose personality is fully formed such that they can enjoy all the rights and opportunities of citizenship. Each stable phase of development establishes the conditions for a crisis which brings it to an end and inaugurates a new developmental period. Each of these phases of crisis is characterised as a *qualitative leap forward in the development of the Will*. The stable periods of development provide the personality with *resources* on which the Will relies.

One of the benefits of examining each successive phase of development of the Will is that the narrative form provides an *analysis* of the Will into its essential components, as its components are built one element at a time. None of the accomplishments of childhood are absolutely irreversible, however, and the successive crises work out differently according to the circumstances of each child. Every person enters adulthood with a character reflecting the unique experiences of their childhood.

Vygotsky notes the following qualification in relation to one of the critical phases, but the same caution applies *mutatis mutandis* to all the crises:

The facts show that in other conditions of enculturation the crisis unfolds otherwise. In children moving from a nursery to kindergarten, the crisis flows differently than in children entering kindergarten directly from families. However, the crisis always takes place in the normal course of child development.

Vygotsky, 2021a

### The six crises of child development

The crises dealt with below are named according to the age Vygotsky assigned to each crisis on the basis of his experience in the young Soviet Republic. As cited above, however, all these crises will be experienced in one form or another, sooner or later. They will happen differently, and the different ways the crises are experienced will mark the character of the adult. Sometimes, the ‘crisis’ passes unnoticed, sometimes it is traumatic, and sometimes parents do not respond to the changing demands of the child, and development can be disrupted. I will not touch on issues specific to neurodiversity or people with disabilities as this would complicate the already difficult task at hand.

One of the ways in which an age period is identified is that the culture always has a word indicating a child currently in that developmental period. This not only verifies that the period is *real*, rather than a figment of the researcher’s imagination, but it also fixes the expectations on a child of this age and directs adults as to what to expect and how to respond to the child.

Further, every culture has fixed ages for admission to the various institutions for the care and education of children, such as nursery, kindergarten, primary school and secondary school. These more or less fixed ages both indicate the stage of development expected of a child of the given age in a given nation and are also one factor determining the pace of psychological development.

Each stage of child development is marked by a particular mode of freedom or independence of the Will from the parent.

### Social Situation of Development

The key concept in the dynamics of each period in a child's life is the unique 'social situation of development' which drives development in that period. In Vygotsky's words:

... at the beginning of each given age period there exists a completely original, exclusive, unique and unrepeatable relationship between the child and the environment specific to that age alone, which we will call the *social situation of development* of a given age. The social situation of development of a given age is the starting point for all of the dynamic changes occurring in development during a given period. It determines wholly and entirely the forms and the path by following which the child acquires newer and newer properties of his personality, drawing them from the environment as the main source of his own development, the path by which the social becomes the individual.  
op. cit.

Vygotsky conceives of the social environment in which the child finds itself and the relationship of the child to other people, not just as a collection of factors, but concretely as a *predicament*. This is the meaning of the word 'situation'.

In each age period, the child's needs are met through a specific social arrangement. As stable development proceeds, this arrangement becomes restrictive, and the child experiences it as a constraint that must be overcome. The child *must* develop in order to emancipate itself from this trap. With their Will blocked or disabled, the child will begin to display 'difficulty' or awkwardness. In this crisis stage, the child disrupts the existing situation in order to develop.

In a *stable* phase of development, this striving brings specific psychological functions to maturity, bringing into being a new predicament. In *critical* phases, the child breaks from this situation and establishes a new mode of behaviour and interaction.

The situation is shaped by the expectations of adults and institutions, which both respond to and constrain the child's development. As the child develops, these expectations become out of step with the child's emerging capacities.

Each period is characterised by the emergence of a *central* neoformation that organises development of the whole.

In the case of gradual phases of development, having reached a certain level of maturity, the central neoformation continues to develop throughout life, but loses its position of leading the process of development. Rather, its development becomes a subordinate factor in the development of the whole child driven by the neoformation of each age period.

An infant may be quite happy having its mouth stuffed with food ... up to a point, but it soon feels the need to have a say over what is put in their mouth. That is to say, their Will has developed to a point such that it is being frustrated through lack of recognition.

During the critical period which results, the whole personality undergoes a structural transformation and all the psychological functions are rearranged according to the success of this transformation towards a new relationship between the child and their environment.

#### The structure of the crisis of the Will

The child becomes aware of new needs but is unable to satisfy them, both because of their own limitations and because adults continue to treat the child according to their earlier capacities. The situation is therefore experienced as a restriction. For example, a two-year-old is easily manipulated by its mother because it cannot act contrary to its own desires. But at a certain stage it will begin to refuse to do something it actually wants to do simply because its mother asked.

Development in the crisis phase depends on the adults recognising the child's emerging needs and responding to them. If this does not occur, development is blocked. If the child does not strive to overcome these constraints and emancipate itself, then the child will not develop. For example, a young teenager who never feels any need to criticise the views and ways of their own family may never fully develop as an adult citizen and take their own position in society. Thus the child must become aware, at their level, of the limitations of their current position and of the possibility of a new role.

A one-year-old at a certain point wants to do away with the playpen. But once the parents have given way to the child's Will and taken away the playpen, the parents' fears are immediately confirmed – never having had the opportunity to walk more than a metre without adult support, the child now stumbles and falls, repeatedly. This is the second phase of the crisis period; the child has won the argument but they are not yet competent. They have a terrible time in the school playground, crash the family car or get mixed up with the wrong people, or whatever. They get through this period, but most likely not without pain.

Vygotsky characterised each crisis phase by the development of the Will which is accomplished in the particular crisis. Very often, the nature of the crisis is well-known among parents because the crisis phases are almost always marked by *difficulty*.

This contrasts with the accomplishments of the phases of stable development each of which creates a stable base for the next period of development. The neoformation which characterised it, far from fading away, continues to develop although now in a subordinate position.

#### The Definition of the Periods

A culture offers a finite number of roles corresponding to stages of life – 'toddler', 'school child', 'teenager', 'adolescent' and so on. These roles define specific, normative relations between the individual and those around them. These culturally defined stages are what is significant. The numerical ages attached to them are approximate and vary historically and culturally.

The driving force of development is the contradiction between the child's emerging needs and the existing social means of satisfying them. This contradiction is universal, but its concrete form varies with cultural conditions

and the expectations of adults. If these expectations fail to respond to the child's emerging needs, development may be distorted. For example, the infant may grasp for its mother's breast, but the mother may or may not respond; the child's predicament is the same, but the outcome is different.

#### 'Gradual' development

Each crisis phase passes over into a phase of stable or 'gradual' development, during which the person develops unique resources for the Will.

The stable phases are not strictly gradual; development like 'trial-and-error', producing a gradual *adaptation* to the situation. The child establishes a stable relation to the environment, and develops the psychological functions required for that role, building on earlier achievements and preparing for the next stage. Continued development in a stable relation to the world gradually changes the child's relation to the world. For example, the toddler's walking becomes steady and speech becomes coherent – new opportunities begin to show themselves.

This is adaptation because having assumed a new social role, the child simply adjusts to its demands. The ideal form of the role is present in the environment and guides development, often through trial and error. Each error may provoke a small crisis through which adjustment is refined.

Stable phases contain two stages: the first consolidating the function launched by the preceding critical phase, the second maturing the central neoformation that emerged during that crisis, thereby laying conditions for the next crisis.

#### Critical phases

During the crisis phase the child refuses to adapt, overturns their previous relation to the world, and demands a change in how they are treated.

Each critical phase has two stages: first, the breakdown of the previous stable relation; second, the birth of a new stable relation.

The critical phases and the phases of stable development are inextricably linked to one another and both equally necessary for successful adulthood. Child psychologists tend to focus on the various psychological functions which are mastered during the successive phases of gradual development, because the psychological formations accomplished in the period of gradual adaptation continue to develop throughout life. The difficult behaviour of the critical phases, on the other hand, is transitional and fades away.

Each critical phase is characterised, however, by the establishment of a new level in the development of the Will. Specific new psychological functions will emerge which Vygotsky calls 'neoformations'. One of them has the status of a *universal*, inasmuch as it drives the development of all the neoformations of the new phase of gradual development.

The critical phases take on the appearance of mere rites of passage *between* age periods and their significance is easily overlooked. The textbooks on these periods of development give the periods of gradual development their due and I will deal with them only briefly, but sufficiently to bring out the predicament resolved by the crisis phase.

One or several neoformations may be manifested in a critical phase, development being driven by the demands of the crisis.

Each critical phase has a zone of proximal development in which the new relation the child seeks can be realised with adult assistance. This creates a tension for adults, who must both restrain and support the child's emerging independence.

In the first stage of a critical phase of development, the difficult behaviour by means of which the child changes its relationship to its environment (the central neoformation), fades away as the new situation is stabilised.

The critical phases reveal the anatomy of the Will, however, and leave a lasting residue in its development.

#### Analysis by units

Vygotsky insists that analysis of child development must be based on units that include both the child and the environment. The concept of *perezhivanie* – an experience – is an example of a concept understood in this way. All neoformations must be understood like this, however, including those with only a *particular* as well as those with a *universal* role in the child's development.

The child's personality is constructed through the critical phases, each of which is a *perezhivanie*, or experience, that transforms the child's relation to their environment and gives rise to a new one. Personality is understood as the relation of the person to the world.

Thus all key psychological concepts – behaviour, experience, situation, personality, Will – must be understood not as internal functions, but as relations between the subject and its environment, above all its social environment.

### The Six Crises

I rely below on the excellent new translations of Vygotsky's pedagogical works (Vygotsky, 2021; 2021a; 2024; 2024a) where the periods of stable and critical development are explained in great detail, together with Vygotsky's hesitations and ambiguities at times, and with helpful editorial commentary.

#### 1. The Crisis of Birth and the newborn

Approximately the first month after birth, when the child is known as a 'newborn', constitutes a *critical phase* in the development of the child.

The psychic life of the newborn is predominantly linked to the subcortical centres of the brain and is not retained as such in the subsequent development of the child, although it is included as a subordinate instance in psychic formations of a higher order. The cortex is quite underdeveloped but the psychic life of the newborn exists and must be described as *rudimentary*.

The helplessness of the newborn human compared to the relative independence of the newborns of other species, indicates that the ancient brain mechanisms are less autonomous in their functioning thanks to their links to still immature phylogenetically newer parts of the brain. Even the natural will is disabled and the behaviour of the newborn is marked only by uncoordinated instinctive movements – grasping, snuggling, sucking.

With birth, the newborn acquires the first condition for freedom of the Will in being separated from the mother *physically*, but not biologically, as it still relies on the mother for its biological needs. The newborn is still entirely dependent

on the mother for food, warmth, protection, and even basic mobility. The life of the newborn is one of dozing, with sleeping and waking states not yet differentiated. The development of the psychic substratum that began with conception continues after birth, not particularly affected by the moment of birth.

The social situation of development, the predicament defining the newborn phase of life, is the utter dependence of the child on their social environment, with the total absence of communicative speech.

The act of birth and the first month or so of the life of the newborn is a critical phase of development distinct from the underlying gradual development of the substratum of life that began with conception. With birth, the newborn breaks from its life in the womb and prepares for an independent life. The newborn knows only feelings and not sensations (in Hegel's sense), and consequently, no distinction between self and other, nor any distinction between human beings and inanimate objects.

There are no inborn representations, no valid apperceptions, i.e. no understanding of external objects and processes as such, nor, finally, any conscious Will or aspiration.

Vygotsky, 2021a

The newborn feels only the situation *as a whole*, threatening or welcoming, diffusely, without being able to *ascribe* the feeling to any feature of their own condition or of the objective world or even differentiate between sight and sound. The sensori-motor nervous system is undifferentiated between perception and movement.

The central neoformation established in the newborn phase of life is the capacity to distinguish between figure and background:

The law of structuring or separating out the figure and the background constitutes, apparently, the most primitive feature of psychic life, forming the starting point of the subsequent development of consciousness.

op. cit.

The end of the newborn phase of development is the appearance of a smile in reaction to the human voice. This reflex is the beginning of the child's active participation in social life, which is possible only on the basis of an individual psychic life, and the essential precondition for the development of consciousness and a Will.

## 2. Infancy

Infancy, approximately the first year of life after the newborn phase, is a phase of stable development. The infant is still immobile and dependent on adults to meet their every need so their actions are directed not at objects, but at adults around them. Every action the infant takes relies on the collaboration of an adult, and yet the infant lacks communicative speech. The infant can now perceive the presence of an adult and in time recognise its mother's face. This is the predicament creating the social situation of development in infancy.

At the beginning of infancy, the child's muscles and skeleton are too weak for the child to do more than lie in their cot, but during this phase the infant begins

to have enough motor control, strength and energy to actively interact with others. The brain increases in weight by a factor of 2.5 with the development of myelin sheaths around the nerve fibres.

The accomplishment of the newborn phase was the ability to distinguish figure from background, and on the basis of this newfound ability, the infant begins to take not just a passive, but an *active* interest in the outside world, even interrupting feeding to open its eyes, and is able to distinguish between stimuli from the different sense organs and coordinate them. Its first social reaction, to smile in reaction to pleasure and surprise, is used to secure the collaboration of adults. The infant begins to have an influence on the stimuli it receives, with a growing sensorimotor nervous system, reaching for objects and taking visual impressions of the world. The infant's active interest in the outside world shows

the capacity to actively go beyond direct drives and instinctive tendencies. For the child it is as if the external world has been discovered. This new relationship to reality signifies the beginning of the infant period, or rather – of its first stage.

Vygotsky, op. cit.

In the second stage of infancy, the active interest in the world leads to prolonged processes of behaviour rather than distinct actions, drawing attention to objects, searching for missing toys. Imitation appears for the first time.

Whereas the newborn benefited little from its experiences, all their movements being determined by innate drives, the infant experiences the world through *conditioned reflexes* and thus begins the long process of adapting to the cultural world into which they have been thrust.

The infant's ability to recognise human voices and faces has still not allowed the infant to distinguish their *own* limbs from those of others. Their own limbs appear to it as alien objects. Affect is still driven by basic needs, but these basic needs can only be met in collaboration with their adult carers; they cannot yet handle material objects on their own.

Vygotsky characterises the psychology of the infant as an '*Ur-wir*', that is, a primordial 'we'. The editors, Kellogg and Veresov, nicely liken this consciousness to what we all experience while singing in a chorus, marching in a protest or watching our football team. The *Ur-wir* is a stable formation gradually increasing the scope of the infant's activity and the central neoformation of the phase of infancy.

Lacking higher psychological functions, but with relatively well-developed motor skills and muscles, and interacting with the world around them thanks to participation in the *Ur-wir*, qualitatively new expressions of the child's actions become available, and this sets the scene for the crisis at one.

### 3. The crisis at one

There is no completed manuscript of Vygotsky's views on the crisis at age one, and the editors of the *Pedological Works* (2021a) have used 'transcriptions of the spoken lectures apparently given while he was thinking through the chapters which he intended to write'. The same applies to the two chapters following.

Vygotsky says that there are three neoformations to be found in the crisis at one year: 'hypobulic seizures' (i.e., sudden loss of initiative or Will), 'autonomous

speech' and the child's first attempts at walking. Since the child's efforts at walking continued through into infancy, and although new, they are *not transitory* formations, they are therefore not characteristic of the crisis phase. Both the 'hypobulic seizures' and the 'autonomous speech' with its associated behaviour fade away at the end of the transitional period. The question concerns the structure of the transition taking place as the infant begins to extricate itself from the Ur-wir and establish the Ich. Which neoformation is leading?

Autonomous speech is composed of single-word indexical exclamations, what could be called 'verbal pointing'. The object indicated varies from one situation to the next. The meaning of the word is chain-like, one object being connected to the next by some feature, each object in turn being connected to the next by some other feature. The words do not function as any kind of generalisation and although sounds are drawn from adult speech, they are not words in the adult lexicon. They form part of a behaviour in which the toddler draws attention to some object or expresses active interest in or surprise at the object. It seems to me that this behaviour may lead to the first crack in the Ur-wir.

The 'Ur-word' of autonomous speech functions as a means of communication with adults, but the child cannot yet use adult words, even though it may recognise adult words and respond to them appropriately. The Ur-word is the embryo of speech in that it is its first means of verbal communication, but the child at this age does not use adult words, and adults have great difficulty in understanding what the child means. Vygotsky believes that 'all of the hypobulic displays of the child stem from the difficulties of mutual understanding'. This is all the more frustrating for the child, because the child is unaware that their adult carers do not share their consciousness. Why then is my effort to gain the adults' assistance failing?

The child's Will is directed at mastering this crucial form of behaviour.

Vygotsky repeatedly points out that the child's behaviour at this age, including its autonomous speech, marks the first manifestation of the child's own Will:

What does this affective-volitional content of child words mean? It means that what the child expresses in speech corresponds not to our assertions but rather more to our exclamations, with the aid of which we make affective appraisals, affective attitudes, emotional reactions and volitional tendencies. ... It is saturated with volitional and not intellectual moments.

op. cit.

The close connection between affect and Will is found here in an undifferentiated form.

The child who is in the period of crisis of one year, if unhappy with something, will often sit on the floor, lie on his back, throw himself on the floor and pound it with his arms and legs. In the crisis of the first year of life, the most significant feature of hypobulia consists in the non-differentiation of affect and Will; i.e. the child's volitional motives stem from an instant of affect, which possesses the child at that moment. Undifferentiated affect and Will.

op. cit.

Vygotsky continues:

the crisis of age one, which, like all the critical ages, is characterised by the rapid development of affective life and marked by the first appearance in the child's affects of his proper personality – this is the first step in the development of the child's Will.

op. cit.

The tantrums fade away when the infant succeeds in its first real speech act and abandons its autonomous speech. With this, the Ur-wir begins to open and the child can speak for itself. Its stumbling efforts to walk gradually improve as it explores the world around it. In making its first genuine speech act, albeit with difficulty, the child has expressed its own independent Will for the first time.

#### 4. The toddler: early childhood

Between the ages of one and three, the child is colloquially called a 'toddler'. The child is now separate from the mother physically, but not *psychologically*. This is the predicament that creates the social situation of development.

A child who has begun to walk is already separate from the mother biologically but not yet psychologically separate – he still has no notion of himself as existing separately, outside of those concrete situations where he always has to deal with other people.

op. cit.

This rich and complex phase of development is nonetheless a stable phase. The toddler progresses from baby talk to the mastery of communicative speech, from conditioned reflexes to an active interest in the world and exploration of objects and their use, from crawling to toddling, able to move around in space, exploring and looking at the world from different vantage points.

Vygotsky says that it is the child's *perception* that develops first and is the neoformation that subordinates and determines the development of every other function. It is with the first communicative speech act that the child first manages to name an object in a way that makes sense in the adult language. Speech now indicates objects belonging to a certain general *type*, rather than just their immediate presence. Therewith perception itself becomes *semantic* perception, in which the visual field is structured not only by patterns of light, etc., but also by meaning. Vygotsky explains the meaning of 'semantic perception' as being how a chessboard is seen by someone who knows how to play chess, as compared to an infant who only sees pieces of different shapes, colours, etc.

In conjunction with the child's active exploration and experimentation with the objects around it, these objects take on stable size, shape, and colour in the child's mind, irrespective of the conditions of perception. On the back of this semantic perception the child for the first time becomes consciously aware of the surrounding reality, though they remain conscious only of what lies within their field of vision. They remember only by recognising the object again in their field of vision, and cannot yet think or speak of an object that is not within their field of vision, and are incapable of uttering counterfactual propositions. They do not play in the proper sense of the word; when a little girl plays with a doll it is a doll, not her daughter. Toddlers are 'slaves to their own visual field' (op. cit.).

An Ich appears within the Ur-wir, and in the second stage of early childhood, 'the child opposes its own independent actions to shared actions with adults' (op. cit.) and the Ur-wir is dispensed with. However, the child still does not realise that adults do not see what they see. Although they now use words semantically, they do so *unconsciously*, and cannot use a word separately from what it indicates or dissect the word into its parts. 'The first questions of the child appear to be immediately linked to the development of semantic perceptions of reality' (op. cit.).

Perception is strongly linked to affect and it is *affect* that links one object to another and initiates action; whatever the child sees, it wants to touch:

Early childhood is characterised by a relationship of separate functions such that a perception that is affectively coloured and therefore through the affect leads to action constitutes the dominant function and is located at the centre of the structure, and around this operate all of the other functions of consciousness.

op. cit.

The acquisition of speech changes the social situation of development. Speech is a means of communication, and its appearance changes the child's relation to its environment. The child now has an active relation to *other* people, external and collaborative, made possible by semantic perception. This brings about gradual, molecular changes in the child's relation to others in their world that eventually leads to a crisis.

## 5. The Crisis at Three

The child is now independent of the mother physically, but not psychologically. In the crisis at three, the child emancipates itself from the psychological control of the mother and establishes a new relation to its social environment in which it is able to act independently of control by adults.

The form of difficulty the three-year-old manifests may be described as negativism ('the child refuses to do something, even though in some cases it is something that the child actually wishes to do'), stubbornness ('he insists on something it is not because he wants it badly but because he has asked for it') and recalcitrance ('directed against the norms ... the desire to insist on one's own desires'), self-will ('the child insists on doing things alone'), protest or rebellion, despotism and jealousy in relation to siblings. At this stage, the child may even master sarcasm!

This crisis is known colloquially nowadays as 'the terrible twos'.

During early childhood, affect leads directly to action. Now, the child still wants to act, to hold their favourite toy perhaps, but this desire is now overridden by a more powerful impulse: the need to defy the adult who is offering the attractive object. The toddler could be easily manipulated by the mother who could offer the child a sweet if only the child did what she wants. The child is now determined to emancipate itself from this psychological manipulation whether by reward, threat or command. The object of the child's Will is not the object it desires or is deprived of, but the adult who seeks to control their behaviour. This need to defy the mother also extends to norms of behaviour impacting on the child. The child must become the master of its own Will.

Vygotsky is insistent that the target of the child's rebellion is not the object of desire that has hitherto enslaved it and that they continue to desire, but the adults and especially parents who have psychological control over them.

the child is motivated in his acts not by the content of the situation itself but by his relationships with other persons. ...

What, in essence, is reconstructed during the time of crisis? The social position of the child in relation to surrounding people, to the authority of the mother, the father.

op. cit.

A leap in the development of the Will is required for the child at this critical stage to free itself psychologically from the mother and restructure its social relations.

This is no mechanism of volition, with the aid of which the child acquires a certain freedom in his actions; this is *a step in the development of this Will*, when this Will possesses him, when the child finds himself maximally incapable of volition.

op. cit.

The mother is the most powerful figure in the child's life; in freeing its Will from its mother, the child at the age of three liberates its Will from affect *as such*. For the first time, there is a differentiation between affect and volition and the child manages to *act contrary to its own inclination* as a result of which the child attains for the first time a real level of self-determination, of volitional activity properly so-called.

Hypobulic behaviours give place to the development of volitional behaviours in the child and form part of the moment which arrives at the age of preschool. ... Development which lacks the crisis, this is development whose result is lacking Will.

op. cit.

## 6. The preschool child (3–7)

Preschool is a stable phase of development, and not a crisis phase, so the established neoformations, that include make-believe and rule-based games, do not disappear. For the preschool child, it is *memory* that is the leading neoformation. At the start of the preschool period, memory is still tied to perception but throughout this period memory develops greatly, and fosters the child's intellect and provides its foundation. The preschool child thinks by remembering; the school-age child will remember by thinking.

The child masters the ideal through imagination, obtains the unobtainable through creativity, and subordinates action to intention through meaningful play.

Already freed from the domination of the Will by affect, the child now acts according to rules or according to a plan, rather than responding immediately to the environment. The child has lost its childish directness and immediacy, and becomes more and more aware of their place in the world.

The preschooler develops an intellectual orientation, exhibited in its ability to play rule-based and role-playing games, and act volitionally. As their memory

develops, they are able to remember objects and events that are no longer in their field of vision.

It is the *intellect*, this new intellectual orientation made possible by the crisis at three, liberating the Will from affect, that is the central neoformation of this age. It is the development of the intellect that drives the child's interest in imaginative games, and the games that in turn foster the development of the child's intellect. The child still thinks by remembering however, so the intellect is still at an early stage of development.

## 7. The Crisis at Seven

The preschool child has become increasingly *aware* of their own experience. The crisis at 7 develops when they begin to think about what they are doing, even things that they would formerly do without thinking. This brings about a kind of 'self-consciousness' in the sense of feeling naked in front of strangers or when trying to perform a new dance step. This manifests itself in exaggerated mannerisms – a shifty walk or a squeaky voice or 'fooling around', for example. They have lost their childish naiveté.

It is this awkwardness that characterises the neoformation of the crisis at age 7. Suddenly aware of the significance of their own *perezhivaniya*, they feel naked and exposed and the characteristic awkward behaviour is the way they deal with this. This transitional neoformation fades away.

The crisis at seven resolves this difficulty through a differentiation between an outer persona and an inner self. The child learns to act in an outwardly normal way while their intellect is reflecting on what is going on. Consequently, when the 7-year-old has an experience, they remember it as an experience that *they* had, rather than just as a representation of the situation. They remember its significance for themselves. They develop what could be called self-respect and self-esteem.

Thus emerges in the 7-year-old a semantic orientation to their own *perezhivaniya*. Just as a 3-year-old discovers his own relationship with other people, so too the seven-year-old discovers the fact of his own *perezhivaniya*.

The most essential features of this crisis at seven consist in what might be called the differentiation of inner and outer facets of the child's personality. What underlies the impression of naiveté and spontaneity in the child's behaviour before the crisis? Naiveté and spontaneity mean that the child outside is the same as inside; that what is inside and what is shared are little differentiated from each other.

op. cit.

The child's self begins to emerge as the child has developed an inner relation to themselves ('an angry child understands that he is angry'). The excessive self-consciousness is not lasting, but separating what the child is doing from what they are thinking or feeling, frees the Will from the immediate domination of the environment. Without this differentiation between consciousness and behaviour, life in the schoolyard would be impossible. The child can act thoughtfully and strategically. As a result, the child will be able to deal with inner conflicts and make decisions. An action is not truly an action unless it is

mediated by thinking, so in this sense the Will properly so-called emerges only in this phase.

The semantic *perezhivaniya*, that is, the ability to make generalisations about one's own experiences, are retained in the school-age phase of development that follows, along with self-respect and self-esteem and interest in make-believe and rule-based games.

#### 8. The (Primary) School Age Child (7–12)

The primary-school-age child already has a mature elementary memory and semantic perception, and by this age, all the psychological functions that were undifferentiated in the infant are now adequately differentiated. The intellectual moment that emerged in its embryonic form in the crisis at 7 will now dominate the development of all the psychological functions of the primary-school-age child. The child can think about what it is doing.

The central neofunction in school age is thinking; that is, the intellectualisation of functions, but not the intellectualisation of thinking itself, since this can only happen with concept formation in adolescence.

op. cit.

The development of all the other functions, such as memory, perception and attention, serve the intellectual development of the school child and become intellectualised as a result.

The preschool child thinks only by remembering, but the school-age child now remembers by thinking, that is to say, by making connections between one moment and another. All the functions, in fact, collaborate in a single system of the intellect. The preschool child could remember and perceive, but they could not tell you *how* they remembered or perceived. But because all of the psychological functions are now executed thoughtfully, the child is conscious and aware of their own mental activity.

As a result, all the psychological functions are becoming *volitional*. Putting this another way, the Will of the school-age child now encompasses every aspect of their mental and physical activity ... except thinking itself.

It is a universal law that a person cannot be consciously aware of how they carry out one or another psychological function until they have already mastered it. It must first develop without conscious awareness. Thoughts are remembered better than any other material, but thinking itself is neither consciously aware nor free-willed.

In the development of school-age children nearly all psychological functions become intellectualized, i.e. become consciously construed and volitional, except for intellect itself. Intellectual operations are not consciously construed and are not volitional in this age. ... the child of school-age thinks and is capable of complex operations of thinking but is not consciously aware of thought. ... without the capacity to voluntarily make use of these operations.

op. cit.

So we can now define 'conscious awareness':

Conscious awareness consists of an act of consciousness the object of which consists in the very activity of consciousness ... to generalize one's own psychological processes.

op. cit.

The school-age child thus develops 'verbal introspection' and is able to communicate what they are thinking, and can start to make generalizations in the area of their own inner processes. Conscious awareness develops to the degree that generalisation develops and is linked to the mastery of one's own psychological functions.

The primary school child is developing concepts, indicating conscious awareness of its own act of generalisation, but their concepts are not yet true concepts; that must wait for adolescence.

If we understand consciousness not simply as an aggregate of subjective experiences but instead understand consciousness in the strict sense of the word, going far beyond the merely psychological understanding of consciousness, and treating it as a relation to reality in the broadest sense of the word, as a relation to reality that is typical of humans, as a conscious relationship to reality. This is a general neoformation that consists of a new architecture of consciousness, one that emerges in the school child at the end of school age.

op. cit.

## 9. The Crisis at 13

The primary-school-age child is aware of their own thinking as the infant is aware of the external world, that is to say, as an undifferentiated whole. The central neoformation of the difficult phase that nowadays arises around year 8 (c. 13 years old), Vygotsky refers to as *dissociation*. That is, the child begins to differentiate, or disarticulate, the memory of their various experiences, thereby making it possible to isolate and reflect on single experiences. The child also becomes consciously aware of different aspects of their own thinking. Vygotsky compares this newfound insight to the ability to distinguish figure and background in perception, that the infant masters in the crisis beginning with birth, but now in relation to their own thinking.

This insight is a precondition for conscious awareness and control of their own thinking, i.e., volitional thinking, and above all the formation of true concepts. The Will now extends to the child's own thinking processes.

However, just as in the crisis at age 7, becoming self-conscious in this way brings about a kind of awkwardness, and as in the crises at 1 and 3, the loss of the wholeness of consciousness brings about inner conflicts and results in a range of difficult behaviour that in the case of the crisis at 13 is called *schizothymia*.

It is in the crisis at 13 that the child first begins to take control of and become consciously aware of their own thinking, thanks to the dissociation that begins in this phase. That is to say, thinking itself now becomes volitional, an organ of the Will. This ability is a precondition for the formation of true concepts that are to be the central neoformation of adolescence.

The chaotic nature of the crisis period leaves in its wake an ability for quiet reverie and introspection once the child has mastered true concept formation. This process may extend however well into adolescence, the stable period that follows.

#### 10. Adolescence, or the transitional age

Adolescence is a stable period of psychological development, but complex and uneven nonetheless. The maturation of sexual development and other important physiological changes have a considerable impact on the adolescent's place in the world and their consciousness. They are becoming physiologically strong enough to be actors on a broader stage alongside adults.

The development of the personality of the adolescent begins, according to Vygotsky, with the development of *interests* as quasi-needs that are as real as the needs that are natural or arise from the social process. The formation of interests is a neoformation that arises in the earliest stages of adolescence. 'Interests' covers activities such as reading, collecting, sports, dancing, hobbies and so on.

The key to the whole problem of the psychological development of the adolescent lies in the problem of interests in the transitional age ... the basic psychology of development rests above all on the evolution of the behaviours and interests of the child, the structure of the orientation of this behaviour.

Vygotsky, 2024a

Interests are quasi-needs, orienting the person to certain activities in the world that meet a need within the person and through which they develop corresponding skills that begin to shape their personality. It seems to me that the interests of a young adolescent foreshadow the commitments of the adult, but without actually prefiguring them.

The emergence of sexual drives creates a chaotic phase in the adolescent's life that tends to disrupt their earlier development of interests with the adolescent taking up new and perhaps more lasting interests.

However, the central neoformation of adolescence is the capacity to form true concepts. The formation of a true concept begins with instruction and requires conscious control of the adolescent's own thinking. The mastery of true concepts matures only at the end of the stable phase of adolescence.

True concepts always belong to systems of concepts that are related to one another by hierarchies of generality and invariably have their relevance in some problem that has arisen in the past and has been passed on to the current generation through the institutions, professions, practices, etc., in which the problem has arisen, and for which the problem remains of concern. Concepts always relate in some way to the resolution of such problems. Problems, or contradictions, can only arise where there exists some systematic practice or activity directed towards the realisation of some interest or commitment.

Such true concepts are passed on to new generations via institutional arrangements of some kind and degree. That may involve schools, universities and professional organisations, or social and political movements. But they do

not arise from the immediate experiences of the adolescent learner. People have to be *taught* such true concepts.

Vygotsky refers to ‘scientific concepts’, but as is now widely recognised, science is but one example of institutions that create and propagate true concepts. ‘True’ is meant in the sense of ‘concepts properly so called’. True concepts are contrasted with the complexes and pseudoconcepts of childhood, and everyday concepts that are vague and unstable in their meaning. A ‘true’ concept differs from other concepts not so much by its nature as by its path of formation. A true concept begins with an abstract definition according to institutional norms, and becomes more concrete over time, as the many-sided meanings of concepts are acquired through life-experience.

The younger adolescent cannot grasp true concepts, however, without an active *interest* in the subject matter, consequently, the intellectualisation of the schoolchild’s thinking in the crisis at 13 and the flowering of interests in the first phase of adolescence prepares the youth for the development of true concepts.

The infant learnt to control their own actions by using the commands their mother uses to control them to control themselves. The adolescent mobilises the wisdom of generations to control their own activity. It is thanks to the formation of concepts that attention, memory, thinking, and action become volitional.

Literacy allows the adolescent to enhance the volitional character of their thinking, separating their use of concepts entirely from the immediate sensuous situation.

Thought has its origins in the motivating sphere of consciousness, a sphere that includes our inclinations and needs, our interests and impulses, and our affect and emotion. The affective and volitional tendency stands behind thought.

Vygotsky, 1934

True concepts are never simply descriptive or indicative; at their roots is always some problem. A true concept is only fully grasped when the problem it solves is grasped. Through the true concept, a human being draws on the strivings of all the generations that have gone before and bequeathed to us. It is language above all that connects a person to the practices that gave birth to a concept and has subsequently accreted increasingly more concrete meaning through the ongoing experiences.

## 11. The Crisis at 17

Volume 5 of the *Collected Works of L.S. Vygotsky* was published in 1998 as a translation of the Russian-language *Collected Works* published in 1983. This volume includes a manuscript entitled *The Problem of Age*, that covers much of the same material as that covered by the 2020-2021 translations cited extensively above, but far more briefly.

At the end of Chapter 1, Vygotsky provides a list of all the crises treated above and includes at the end of the list ‘The crisis at 17’. There is, however, nothing in that article, in the 2020-2021 translation or anywhere else that gives any indication of what crisis Vygotsky was referring to.

As a result, I shall draw on the work of the later Activity Theorists that covers later adolescence as well as adulthood. A.N. Leontyev (1945) introduced the

term 'leading activity' to be understood in connection with the 'central neoformation' that is exercised by the leading activity. Vygotsky did not use the term 'leading activity' in this specific sense beyond his claim that 'play is a leading activity for the preschool child' in the sense that 'the child moves forward essentially through play activity' (Vygotsky, 1933).

Interaction with peers is suggested as the leading activity for older adolescents. Many, including Cole (1992, p. 107), suggest that the motive for this is sexual attraction and the search for sexual partners. Although peer interaction has certainly played an important role in children's development up until this point, in the period of adolescence it is theorised to become the *leading* activity in terms of its motivational importance, and its developmental significance during adolescence. Authors point out that adults are still important mediators of adolescents' activity during this period, only less directly than when children were younger.

Activity Theorists have continued Vygotsky's work, however. The Activity Theorists mark development in terms of 'leading activity' rather than neoformation. Nonetheless, although in different terms, the Activity Theorists describe the same path of development as Vygotsky. According to Y.V. Karpov (2005),

Within interactions with parents, adolescents adopt social norms and values, whereas within interactions with peers they master, explore, and internalise these norms and values as their 'own' personal choices.

p. 227

Further, when I reviewed the work of all the scholars I know who work with young people of this age group, they invariably mention gangs, homeless youth, or drug addicts, suggesting that this is an age period in which people experience crisis.

I will provide my interpretation of the 'crisis at 17' but there is no consensus on this matter among Vygotsky scholars. The issue is further complicated by the fact that it is widely recognised that 'the teenager' is a product of the twentieth century, particularly its later decades. In addition, adolescents today mostly attend higher education for four or more years even for careers that never previously have been described as 'professional'.

In the Australian context, 17 roughly marks the beginning of the university entrance curriculum, in my home state of Victoria, the VCE (Victorian Certificate of Education). Students at this stage are expected to display much more maturity and interest in their future beyond school than was expected in their earlier school days.

An adult of the twenty-first century is no more or less developed than an adult of antiquity. But they are different. The way the crisis at 17 plays out in our times is most likely different from how it would have played out in Vygotsky's time or any other epoch. However, my concern here is not a universal theory of human development, but simply the experiences and character of the people of our time.

So, in outlining the dynamics of the crisis at 17 I shall be looking for psychological phenomena having the character of a critical phase of

development in later adolescence as indicated by Vygotsky and broadly characterised above in which the neoformation:

- breaks the youth from the conditions of the previous period;
- may be difficult or awkward;
- opens the way for the central neoformations of the phase of development to follow;
- is transitory;
- is identifiable in popular culture and institutions;
- opens the way for a qualitative development of the Will.

There is a time, familiar to all parents of adolescents, when the adolescent takes as their reference group for opinions and norms of behaviour, not their parents but their peers. This is true to some extent throughout the years of schooling, but in their late teens there is a *rupture* from the family's social position and the commitments that go with that. The teenager becomes serious, oppositional, often dangerous and exhibits a wide variety of symptoms of 'difficulty'. This is a notoriously difficult phase, as the youth 'mixes with the wrong kind', has unprotected sex and may even become involved in illegal activities.

Alas, I am not in a position here and now to research this transition and its specificity but it is well-marked in popular consciousness. Teens going through the crisis at 13 exhibit a range of difficult symptoms but they tend to be inward-looking, whereas in the later period of crisis the symptoms are *outward*-looking. What we have in the later teens is marked by a temporary severing of the youth from the influence of the family in favour of the youth's ties with their peers outside the bounds of the family and sometimes even extending into different social strata.

Adolescents at this age may be at pains to distance themselves from their parents' social views and customs, not because they are 'too grown up now', but because they reject these values and express hostility towards them.

Thus the youth forcefully tears themselves away from the home and builds for themselves a new milieu that now operates as their reference group.

In a strong sense, the youth now liberates themselves *socially* from their parents and endeavours to make a new place for themselves in the world they have inherited. If 'consciousness is my relation to my environment', then in order to truly liberate themselves from their family and the family's social position they must make their own environment – their *peer group*.

Now it must be said that not every parent experiences the turmoil of this period in the psychological development of their offspring as sketched above. The crisis may be much smoother, and is often quite brief and the adolescent's choice of peers may be benign. But an adolescent who moves smoothly from the family home and school to take up a career and a partner is still governed by the circumstances of their birth. A crisis in which the child emancipates itself from the conditions of its birth is quite normal

This phase of development is recognised institutionally with a school curriculum oriented to preparation for a profession and personal autonomy.

The youth can distance themselves from their own family and social position and take control of their own social relations by selecting their own peer group, that

will become the reference group for their relation to the world until they take up a career and/or take a partner.

But *almost* invariably, and especially if the parents practise forbearance, this period of difficulty passes and as the young adult moves on towards a career and a family of their own they patch up the rupture from their parents and exhibit some qualified affirmation of their legacy.

The youth who passes through ‘the crisis at 17’ may move on to several years of university and enter a profession of some kind or move directly to find a job. Life becomes serious now. The young adult must make commitments that may be lifelong. But this is not a continuation of their life under the guidance of parents and teachers. They are now making their own life in whatever ways are made possible by their social class and must now enter into social relations that are not as voluntary as they were with their peer group, but nor as immutable as the family of their birth. They are now themselves responsible for any crime or injury they commit, not their parents or teachers.

They have to choose a road, and their first attempt at choosing a path for themselves outside the family is during the ‘crisis at 17’. Some will still retain ties with the friends of their youth, but with the demands of work and family they usually don’t have time for them. People move on.

So the crisis at 17 is a transitional period from life under parents and teachers to taking up a career and a partner, and going on to make a living and raise a family, and all the other social duties that come with adulthood.

For those who go into years of formal education to enter a profession there is still one more difficult transitional period to come, that has been called ‘the Trainee Dilemma’ (2026). Not everyone passes through this critical phase and not everyone becomes a professional, but for those who do this is yet another critical phase of development. See Part VI, §3 below.

#### Summary of the crises of childhood

Kretschmer ... attempted to push the teaching that the Will in the development of the child progresses through a number of stages such that each stage presents a qualitatively new formation than those it follows.

Vygotsky, 2021a

Now Kretschmer was a Fascist of the first order and no one would wish to cite him as any kind of authority, and Vygotsky bitterly denounced him. The editors of the *Pedological Works*, Kellogg and Veresov, say that ‘Vygotsky uses Kretschmer’s holistic laws of transfer of brain functions as a framework for much of Foundations of Pedology, but he is much more critical of Kretschmer’s work on the problem of age, precisely because of these biologising tendencies’. However, I find that Kretschmer’s observation as quoted above is indeed a theme in *The Problem of Age*.

For Rousseau, Hegel, Marx and Vygotsky, the Will is about freedom, not power. The conception of the Will found in Fascism is completely different to the concept of the Will used by those whose interest is human *emancipation*.

I will illustrate this in reference to each of the *critical, transitional phases* in turn.

*The crisis at birth* is a rupture in the organic process that began at the moment of conception as a part of the body of the mother, a process that continues for about six months after birth as the life of the newborn. Throughout this period one can only speak of the *natural will* – instinctual patterns of behaviour, not even conditioned reflexes. But with birth it is at least the *child's* own natural will, rather than organic processes of the mother. The child has freed themselves from their mother *physically*. The achievement of this period of crisis is the newborn's first perception of figure and background, marked by the appearance of the smile reflex at the sound of a human voice or the sight of a human face, the beginning of the social life of the child, and the only tool in their toolbox for now.

*The crisis at one*, Vygotsky says, marks 'the first step in the development of the child's Will', though the child's behaviour is still governed by conditioned reflexes and the 'pleasure principle'.

The crisis at one is manifested in 'autonomous speech' that generally fails to communicate with the adults. Mastery of speech is the achievement of the crisis at one and is manifested in the child's first meaningful word, a word that belongs to the adult language and marks the child's first communicative act. Autonomous speech fades away but the child has now freed themselves from the mother *physically* because they can now use words to secure the collaboration of any adult to meet their needs. At the same time, the child's first attempts at walking will develop to reinforce their physical emancipation from the mother. Both neoformations of this phase serve the physical emancipation of the child from its mother. The child's Will now extends to securing the collaboration of others.

In *the crisis at 3*, the child frees themselves from their mother *psychologically* by separating their Will from their inclination, beginning with the child's determination to defy their mother even when they fervently *want* to do whatever it is that pleases their mother. In the period of early childhood that follows this newfound independence from their mother a general separation of behaviour from inclination is established. They are no longer slaves of their own desires. The preschool child can Will that which it does not desire.

*The crisis at 7* is marked by the loss of childish naïveté and the development of an external persona differentiated from their inner self. They are conscious of what is their *own* experience, freed from impulses of the immediate environment. The behaviour is differentiated from their consciousness. Though not yet capable of thoughtfully controlling their own internal processes, they are now *conscious* of them, a step that will enable the school-age child to master their internal processes, such as memory, attention and so on. The Will of the school-age child becomes a thoughtful Will.

In *the crisis at 13*, the child becomes consciously aware of their own thinking process and the child begins to take control of their own thinking and for the first time can be properly said to be consciously aware of their own thinking. This opens the way for the child to learn to use true concepts and utilise the wisdom of the ages in the conscious deployment of their own activity. The Will is no longer merely thoughtful, but acts on the light of the historically acquired knowledge of the community of which they are a part. This opens the way for the young person to become a *citizen*.

In *the crisis at 17*, the young adult takes control of their own relation to their environment by freeing themselves from the domination of their family and their own *social position* and building a peer group of their own that acts as a reference group through which the young adult can craft their own position in society, and *be* a citizen.

Each crisis represents the emancipation of the child, the growth of his activity, his separation from his environment. However, such a separation, such a differentiation, and such activities do not necessarily imply the isolation of the child, but rather imply the emergence of more complex relationships of the child.

Vygotsky, 2024

From this point on, the development of the Will will depend on the course of the person's passage through adult life. Different concepts are needed to conceptualise the development of the Will in adult life.

## Conclusion

The actor we meet at the end of this journey is well-known to us because we are ourselves such an actor. There is so much that we take for granted in how we act; it is worth having retraced this journey to see all the transformations that a simple animal, obedient to the laws of Nature, has had to undergo in order to become such an actor, not merely a prisoner of their own desires – desires implanted in us by Nature or by others – someone who can endure suffering in order to achieve a goal. Nor are we lone wolves who do what they do without the continuous collaboration of others. We know how to gain that collaboration and work with it. We appreciate the mastery of a shared language that makes doing anything at all in the world conceivable and possible. And, not being prisoners of ideology, we understand the processes of rational deliberation that we self-consciously apply to solving the problems of life. Rather than just exercising the rights and opportunities of the social class into which we were born, driven by the social prejudices of the day, we choose our own path with an aim of working with others to make the world a better place for all.

But at this point, we have just set out along this road.

## 3. The development of the Will through adulthood

### Introduction

I take 'adulthood' to refer to those ages generally after leaving secondary school when a person has entered training or further education, or is in a job or looking for work, in general, making their way in the world, up until the time when mental and physical decline predominate.

Although it was Vygotsky who devised the basic principle of the development of the Will in adulthood, he did not live long enough to develop it. Consequently, I also draw on the work of Vygotsky's younger collaborator, A.N. Leontyev, and the work of Leontyev's student, Fedor Vasilyuk, before Vasilyuk abandoned Marxism for Orthodox Christianity.

The crises of adult life that shape the Will and the entire personality are associated with rites of passage, career changes, marriage and divorce, deaths in

the family, commitments to new life-projects and, in turn, the conflicts, triumphs, crises, and blockages that such life-projects encounter. While no life is lived without such crises, each life story is unique.

These experiences differ from those that arise in the course of child development chiefly because, here, the person is fully developed psychologically, whereas in childhood, the subject is as yet only partially developed and is not legally responsible for their own actions and their goals are set for them by adults. The adult does not face a series of more or less predetermined hurdles in order to reach predetermined goals; they more or less voluntarily set their own life goals under whatever conditions they encounter, and are responsible for dealing with what comes their way as a result, even if tragedy or good luck often shape their life more than their own decisions.

This chapter intrudes into the territory of *social theory* but remains centrally concerned with the psychology of the Will. In order to develop a theory of the Will in the domain of social theory it is not possible to simply 'extend' a theory of psychology into the wider domain. Social theory concerns phenomena that are essentially rooted in the interaction between very large numbers of people, and there is a long and rich history to the study of these phenomena. It will be necessary to conduct an *immanent critique* of the existing theories of sociology. That is not yet my focus, but it will be dealt with in the next section. Nonetheless, this chapter can be taken as a 'hinge' linking the two domains.

Whereas I have learnt at Vygotsky's feet insofar as I have learned something about the development of the Will in childhood, my appropriation of the work of A.N. Leontyev must be qualified. Nonetheless, his formulation of a theory of the personality applicable to adult life makes the starting point for my enquiry.

### Leontyev's Theory of the Personality

A.N. Leontyev was Vygotsky's youngest collaborator, though Vygotsky broke relations with him before his own death. Leontyev went on to found the current of psychology known as Activity Theory. He managed to survive the Stalinist purges and was Dean of the Faculty of Psychology at the Moscow State University at the time of his death in 1979.

'Personality' is a complex and chameleon-like concept – which attributes of an individual are to be counted under the heading of 'personality' and are which not? A.N. Leontyev relegated to the category of 'substructures' of the personality 'such various traits as, for example, moral qualities, knowledge, habits and customs, forms of psychological reflection, and temperament' (1978, p. 154). What he sees as composing the structure of a personality are units that he called 'motives'. The motivational structure that results gives meaning to a person's life, their identity, or, more generally, forms the *structure of meaning* for the person. The word 'motive' refers to the really-existing activity that motivates a person; conversely, an activity is referred to by the motive that is shared by all the actions composing it – the intention, in Hegel's terms.

Note that the concept of 'motive' has both a moment of the psychology of a subject and a moment of the world – it expresses an aspect of the subject's relation to the world. All the units that Vygotsky used have this feature as do the

key concepts in this work. Only by the use of such concepts can the conundrums of dualism be avoided.

What is more usually understood as 'personality' today more closely approximates what Leontyev calls 'forms of psychological reflection', but, as I hope to show, it is precisely the structure of meaning more or less as understood by Leontyev that is of importance in connection with the development of the Will and the framing of an interdisciplinary social theory, even if it is only partially explanatory in the domain of psychology.

The Russian word normally translated as 'personality' in this discourse is *lichnost* (личность). This word is probably better translated as *persona*, inasmuch as it refers to the 'face' a person shows to the world, as opposed to what A.N. Leontyev rather dismissively called 'substructures' of the personality.

For the purpose of a study of the Will, it is quite satisfactory to take 'personality' in the sense of 'persona' or *lichnost*. There are psychological features relating to how a subject processes reality that are already more or less fixed by the end of childhood. A shy child tends to become a shy adult, but the adult *learns* how to cope with their shyness and may go on to become an entertainer or politician notwithstanding their shyness. Alas, little has been bequeathed us by Soviet Psychology as to how these 'substructures' of the personality are formed in the crises of childhood. However, they do not bear on the subject matter of this work. The shy person who does not speak up in a meeting can learn to 'put on a face' and adopt the persona of a person who speaks up in meetings and has their voice heard. How they do this is no different from any other issue in the psychological development of the adult, discussed below.

As Leontyev saw it, during the first phase of development of a personality the child or youth is mostly just an expression of the class fraction and cultural group in which they have been raised (bearing in mind the limited scope of personal attributes that Leontyev has in mind).

The subject's belonging to a class conditions even at the outset the development of his connections with the surrounding world, a greater or smaller segment of his practical activity, his contacts, his knowledge, and his acquiring norms of behaviour. All of these are acquisitions from which personality is made up at the stage of its initial formation.

1978, pp. 178–9

Leontyev says that at this stage it cannot properly be said that there is a personality, because the person is merely an 'object' of their social group:

Later this situation is turned around, and they become a *subject* of their social group, unconsciously and then consciously, ... decisive or vacillating ... at every turn of his life's way he must free himself of something, confirm something in himself, and he must do all this and not simply 'submit to the effect of the environment',

1978, p. 179

What were formerly the traits of a person of their kind later become merely the *conditions* for the formation of a personality properly so-called. The subject gradually frees themselves from their biography, discarding some aspects of the personality they had as a child, while consciously developing others.

Personality thus no longer seems to be the result of a direct layering of external influences; it appears as something that man makes of himself, confirming his human life. He confirms it in everyday affairs and contacts, as well as in people to whom he gives some part of himself on the barricades of class struggles, as well as on the fields of battle for his country, and at times he consciously confirms it even at the price of his physical life.

1978, p. 185

A person's motivation is represented to them in the shape of the activities to which they are committed, so, to the extent that the subject actively commits themselves to an activity, acquiring, in the meantime, the knowledge and skills, the norms and all the attributes associated with that activity, these motives, represented by the intention of the activity, become a stable part of the person's personality. The activities themselves wax and wane, prove successful or fail – their fate depending largely on factors in the wider social world. The personality, however, constitutes a relatively stable base in the inner world of the subject. The development of the personality is tied up with the development of the subject's Will and the subject's emotional life is linked to the fate of these activities, but the personality remains a relatively stable psychic formation, according to Leontyev.

In the next logico-historical phase of development, the subject arranges the units of their personality into a *structure*. The units of this structure are the 'motives', so this lifeworld could also be called a 'motivational structure'. Some motives make their way to the top of a hierarchy, dominating and leading others that become conditional upon it. Sometimes the personality becomes split, with some motivations dominant in some situations while others predominate in others. There will also be conflict between motives, and development of the personality entails resolution of these internal conflicts, either subsuming a motivational conflict into more profound motives that transcend the conflict, or by relegating or discarding one motivation.

Although Leontyev claims a 'stable psychic formation' for the personality, it is surely self-evident that, if seen this way, the personality itself is subject to the fate of the various activities that are the basis of a person's motives.

The final phase of the development of a personality is entailed in the motivations connected to the material needs tied up in maintaining life in their social group becoming subordinate to more abstract motivations and ultimately, following Aristotle, 'the good life for humanity' becoming the leading motive, conditioning and leading other motivations in the subject's life and personality. This rosy opinion of the senior citizen is not necessarily shared, but this was Leontyev's view.

In the earliest stages of personality development, it is driven by *need*, according to Leontyev. Needs develop, of course, and do not remain at the animal level. 'Personality cannot develop within the framework of need; its development necessarily presupposes a displacement of needs by creation, which alone does not know limits' (1978, p. 186). Once the subject begins to free themselves from subordination to the needs and norms of their social group, and their personality is composed of ideal social motives, Leontyev increasingly refers to the motives as *otnosheniya* (отношение, *pl.* отношения) rather than motives

(МОТИВОВ). ‘Отношения’ is usually translated as ‘relations’, but it is also used to mean ‘priorities’, or ‘attitudes’ or ‘orientations’. I will translate this word as ‘commitments’.

... the personality of man also ‘is produced’ – it is created by the *otnosheniya*, into which the individual enters in his activity.

1978, p. 152

I will examine the word *otnosheniye* in more detail presently, but note that like ‘motive’, it contains moments of both the subject and the object.

These priorities or relations are the commitments that the person makes to activities and that take up more or less leading or subordinate positions in the structure of their motives. What is indicated is an ideal motive, that I would prefer to call a ‘life-project’ inasmuch as, in the fully developed personality, it does not represent a ‘need’ or even really a ‘quasi-need’, but a commitment to an ideal of some kind.

Leontyev (1978) notes a pathology of the personality found in ‘superprosperous consumer society’ when the intrinsic value of objects as means of satisfying needs has been lost and commodities perform only the function of confirming a person’s prestige. In such a situation the personality may take on a ‘configuration of flatness devoid of real summits when what is small in life man takes for something large, and the large things he does not see at all’ (1978, p. 183).

Although Leontyev correctly emphasises the subjective side in the formation of personality, his theory lacks a satisfactory explanation of how the subject comes to adopt motives and discard others in the early formation of the personality or how and why a person might change their lifeworld. It seems to me that the concept used by Vygotsky and later by Fedor Vasilyuk, *perezhivaniya* (*переживания*) – deeply felt or possibly life-changing crises in a person’s life together with the person’s response to them – has the necessary power. In the course of a political conflict against Vygotsky, Leontyev denounced the use of this concept, and it was only restored to its central place later by Vasilyuk.

Leontyev’s Activity Theory remains a powerful and complex approach to the psychology of the personality, especially if it is used in conjunction with Vygotsky’s Cultural Psychology. In the above, I have focused on Leontyev’s *theory of the personality*. My focus is on the Will, so I have passed over his otherwise important treatment of how the interaction of ideology associated with a person’s social position and their personal experiences together shape the *sense* that each activity to which they are committed has for them, and other aspects of Leontyev’s work.

### Vasilyuk’s Theory of Personal Crises

Fedor Vasilyuk was a postgraduate student at the Faculty of Psychology of Moscow State University when he wrote his PhD thesis later published as *Psychologia Perezhivanie* (1984). Vasilyuk became the Chair of Individual and Group Psychotherapy at Moscow State University of Psychology and Education.

As Vasilyuk saw it, a patient comes to a psychotherapist because they face some *impossible situation* (see Blunden 2015). Basing himself broadly on Leontyev’s theory of the personality, Vasilyuk saw such impossible situations as resulting

from one of four types of dilemma arising from the fate of the life-projects to which the patient was committed. The set of life-projects to which a person is committed constitutes their 'lifeworld'. These life-projects are selected from among those activities existing in the society and arranged in the structure of the person's *lichnost*, personality.

He defines a *difficult* lifeworld in which a person's life-project is blocked in some way, and a *complex* lifeworld in which a person finds life-projects in conflict with one another. The easy/difficult and simple/complex dichotomies provide him with a four-part taxonomy of archetypal crises. In each case, the relevant commitments have to be identified and the subject must engage in a *perezhivanie* – understood as the cognitive and emotional labour required to reorient their commitments so as to resolve the impossible situation. In each case, a particular kind of work has to be done and a particular virtue developed according to the type of lifeworld the patient must restructure.

Vasilyuk was a psychotherapist, however, concerned with how people survive 'impossible situations'. That is, he looked at these impossible situations as the counsellor, whose task was to help the patient survive when their Will could not resolve the situation that was, by definition, impossible.

Despite what the change managers like to tell us, there is a significant difference between your partner dying and your boss making your job redundant, or the government cutting your pension. In the latter two cases, although things appear to be impossible, they *can* be overcome in reality as well as survived subjectively.

The concern of this work, however, is the psychological issues that arise when the aim is to not just survive but to *transform the apparently impossible situation* – make a difference in the world. Granted, a life-partner who has died cannot be brought back to life, but there are many other apparently impossible situations that *can* be resolved. This is what people are talking about when they speak of 'having agency'. I will remain within the discourse of the *Will* for the moment because we can benefit from the centuries-long history of the study of the Will that I have reviewed above.

### *Otnosheniye*

Etymologically, *otnosheniye* means 'to carry from', and the dictionary says that *otnosheniye* can be translated as 'attitude', 'relationship', 'connection', 'how someone feels about someone or their connection to someone' and can refer to diplomatic ties. It is a relational word, expressing a person's relation to something else, but what? Alex Kozulin, a Russian-speaking Vygotsky scholar reviewed Vasilyuk's book in 1991 and referred to *otnoshiniya* as 'life-projects'. Vygotsky, A.N. Leontyev and Vasilyuk's each used *otnosheniye* in a similar sense, in which what is being connected to is some *activity*.

In Activity Theory, an 'activity' is a very general concept.

Activities are the units of Activity Theory; everything is an activity or is made up of activities in one sense or another. Activities are usually named according to the intended form of the object being acted upon (see Blunden 2023); intention in Hegel's theory of action, but more generally the ideal that orients and provides the motivation for the actions making up the activity.

I find that *otnosheniye*, in the sense used by Vygotsky, Leontyev and Vasilyuk, can be adequately translated as a 'commitment'. A 'commitment' is some *really existing* project or activity to which someone is committed. So it satisfies Vygotsky's demand for a unit in that it *contains moments of both the environment and consciousness*. The commitment could be the subject's job, their family, or their country; it could be the environment, Socialism, honesty, prosperity, Hegel, the subject's home town or Country, or Donald Trump. Whatever a person is committed to functions as a unit of the motivational structure of their personality. So, for example, even something as diffuse as 'honesty' I do not conceive as a 'value'. Rather, alongside Feminism, Social Democracy, Science, and Christianity, and so on, as a *really existing aggregate of actions* in the real world in which the subject lives, all directed at, working on, or embodying that common ideal. Values are abstractions, but people develop commitments only to *concrete, really existing ideals*, invariably alongside others committed to the common ideal.

With all the above caveats, I embrace Vasilyuk's conception of a person's 'lifeworld' as the structure of all those activities represented in the subject as the structure of their commitments.

The object of analysis is the 'lifeworld'. This has external and internal aspects, denoted ... as 'external world' and 'internal world'. The external world can be either easy or difficult. The internal world can be either simple or complex.

Vasilyuk, 1984, p. 92

Thus a person's fate is tied up with the fate of the projects to which they are committed. Exactly *how* it affects the subject depends on the project's position in the structure of the personality; how it affects the rest of the community depends on the place of the project in the totality of all those projects that make up the activity constituting the community to which the subject belongs.

I propose that for an interdisciplinary theory of the Will, the units be *otnoshiniya*, understood as active commitments to really existing activities. This contrasts with social theories that see social formations in terms of units such as groups of people singled out by some shared attribute, or intangible structures, or those phenomenological social theories that take the units of social formations to be individual persons who create bonds between them, or axiological theories of the persona based on an ordering of abstract 'values'.

The choice of commitments as a unit is not a simplifying assumption – there are more commitments than individual people, and more commitments than there are activities in the sense Leontyev intended.

A commitment is the smallest irreducible unit of social life. The Will is a structure of commitments.

### *Perezhivanie*

Augustine of Hippo invented the word Will, so as to be able to name the personal crisis he faced: his inability to choose between two courses of action to each of which he was committed in different ways. Likewise, even though the Will is active in every action we take, we can best make sense of the Will when we are considering such *crises* – Vasilyuk's 'impossible situations'.

*Perezhivanie* is a common word in the Russian language (see Blunden 2016); it simply means ‘an experience’. But the term in Russian differs from the English because (1) it carries a connotation of *suffering*, (2) it is active, not so much something that happened to you as how you dealt with a difficult situation and (3) it is inclusive of the catharsis, that is, the way you changed your personality as a result of surviving. Etymologically, *pere-zhivan-ie* means *sur-viv-ing*. Russian speakers can, however, use the word in an everyday way just as we use the word ‘experiences’. However, *perezhivanie* does differ from the Russian word *opit*, that is like ‘experience’ in the expression ‘work experience’ when you’re filling out your CV, and is not generally used as a countable noun.

So *perezhivaniya* are like the chapters of your autobiography – the critical situations you’ve faced, and how you survived them and made yourself the kind of person you are today, specifically, the commitments you hold to.

Vasilyuk’s work is entirely about the mental labour of, for example, taking up a new project in lieu of the project that has come to an end, such as launching a charity in the name of the loved one who has died. Or when two life-projects come into conflict with one another, re-evaluating your commitment to one or the other. And so on.

The issue for us is different, however. Rather than just changing our relation to the world, adapting to the difficult and complex reality, the question is, in general: how can we change that reality?

This chapter has argued that the adult Will develops through crises (*perezhivaniya*) that a subject responds to by restructuring the commitments (*otnosheniya*) making up their personality.

By definition, every emancipatory action is always also a transgression, always violating social norms. But it also has to make sense according to those same mores, otherwise it will go nowhere. It has to also ‘tap into’ dispositions that already exist. I must now move to social theory as such.

## **Part IV. Sociology without the Will**

### **1. Functionalism**

#### Introduction

I have traced the concept of the Will from the invention of the concept by Augustine of Hippo in 386 up to Hegel's interdisciplinary concept of the Will stretching from the natural will of any living creature up to the universal Will of a human community. But this was speculative. The detailed study of human behaviour that was needed to give this concept a scientific basis could not be carried out by a single philosopher living in early 19th century.

Lev Vygotsky, working in the 1920s and '30s in the Soviet Union, basing himself on all the psychological research available at the time and doing his own experimental research, bequeathed us a psychology of the Will. Vygotsky died at 38, before he was able to complete this work, so I have drawn on the work of his followers, including A.N. Leontyev and the Activity Theorists. Vygotsky's Psychology was potentially interdisciplinary, and that of the Activity Theorists even more so. However, under conditions in the Soviet Union, it was not possible to even to talk about, let alone develop, a scientific social theory, beyond the maxims of Soviet Marxism. Nevertheless, Leontyev did venture into the domain of social theory with his concepts of actions and activities.

It is impossible to produce a concept of the Will suitable for deployment in social theory without first conducting immanent critiques of the main currents of twentieth-century social theory. Y. Engeström has 'expanded' Vygotsky's and Leontyev's psychology to study the organisational culture of organisations. Engeström has now expanded his theory into a full-blown social theory, but without an immanent critique of existing social theories. The result is unconvincing and of little scientific use.

I will begin with Leontyev, even though, as a social theory, it is inept. Leontyev's extension of his psychology into the domain of social theory turned out to be a variety of Functionalism. After a treatment of Leontyev's social theory, I will briefly review the Functionalism of Talcott Parsons.

In the second chapter of Part IV, I will examine Structuralism through the work of Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu. In the third chapter of that Part, I will examine Anthony Giddens's critique of Structuralism. It was Giddens who popularised the term 'agency'. Through a critique of Giddens, and drawing on my own critique of Activity Theory (2023), I will propose an adequate theory of the Will and a viable concept of 'agency'.

#### **A.N. Leontyev's Activity Theory as a Social Theory**

Activity Theorist. However, there are problems with A.N. Leontyev's initial elaboration of the theory.

In his theory of child development, Vygotsky insisted that the unit used in the analysis of each stage of development had to be a unit both of consciousness and the environment, both subjective and objective. This was Leontyev's intention, too, but the concept of activities as units for social theory was not fully worked out.

Activities took the place of concepts in Leontyev's psychology. Activities are largely open to direct empirical investigation, but nevertheless, allow the researcher to reconstruct the subjective ideals that represent the activity in consciousness. Meanings and concepts are manifested in actions and activities, so nothing is lost in the study of psychology by beginning from actions and activities rather than meanings and concepts.

Fedor Vasilyuk's interpretation of 'activity' in terms of *otnosheniya* (commitments) largely dealt with the shortcomings in Leontyev's Theory of the personality. Vasilyuk's concept of a lifeworld also suggests itself as a conception equally a unit for psychology and social theory. However, we cannot respond to the problem of how to 'make a difference' without an adequate social theory as such.

Given that Leontyev himself did try to extend his theory of activity into the domain of social theory, I must consider his effort first.

Activity Theory is defined as follows:

Activity Theory is the science that takes social life to be an aggregate of activities. This is what it means to say that it takes activities as 'units of analysis'.

Blunden, 2023

A number of problems remain in where Leontyev went with this idea, however.

(-1) The definition of 'activities' makes no distinction between activities according to their stage of development and integration into everyday life; states, business enterprises, political parties, social movements, street gangs, families, passing fashion styles, or sexual mores. All must be theorised in the same way or not at all.

(-2) All activities are conceived on the productivist model of Soviet Marxism – institutionalised activities motivated to meet given social needs.

(-3) Leontyev *in fact* took as the 'unit' not an activity but a *type* of activity, such as 'work' or 'play'.

(-4) Russian speakers made no distinction between 'activity' (as in 'there's a lot of *activity* in the street today') and 'an activity' (as in 'building a Left party in Australia proved to be a difficult *activity*'). When explaining his theory to non-Russian speakers, Russians use the word 'activity' in the sense of a mass noun, rather than a countable noun, making the concept of a 'unit' incomprehensible.

(-5) Needs stimulate activities and activities generate needs. A consistent Activity Theory must make activity the primary unit because it is activities that people do, the active part of the equation. Leontyev, however, made needs primary, transforming Activity theory into a kind of Functionalism, in which human activity is merely a response to given needs.

I will not elaborate on these shortcomings of Leontyev's implementation of Activity Theory, as I have dealt with these questions comprehensively in my earlier book (Blunden, 2023).

Leontyev uses 'motive' or 'activity' interchangeably to refer to the same entity, depending on the context. Instead, I will develop the concept of 'commitments' as an interdisciplinary unit. That is, 'a commitment' refers both to the commitment a person has to the ideal realised in some practice *and* that

practice itself. So, for example, my commitment to socialism provides the motivation for much of what I do, and also motivates me as part of the movement we call 'socialism'. A commitment is an ideal that shapes a person's personality and is realised in social practices.

In the way I develop this concept, I will avoid the five problems I have identified in how Leontyev developed 'activity' and 'motive'. The aim is not to create a new social theory based on commitment, but an approach that will open the way to critical appropriation of existing sociology and solving certain difficult problems, such as how to 'make a difference'. Whether this constitutes a 'new social theory' or not, only time will tell.

A.N. Leontyev's social theory reflects life in the Soviet Union and the fables its upper strata told themselves. The Political Committee determined all society's needs, administrators implemented the plan, and workers were concerned only with their wages. However, its problems also reflected conditions in the twentieth century on both sides of the Iron Curtain.

Nonetheless, there are some features that Leontyev introduced that must be retained.

(+1) The distinctions between operations, actions and activities.

(+2) The distinctions between 'merely understood' motives and 'really effective' motives.

I will elaborate a little on these two features.

#### Operations, actions and activities

Vygotsky had determined that the units of the Will – the simplest manifestations of volition – were *artefact-mediated actions*. But an artefact-mediated action can only be understood in connection with its motive. Actions make sense only in the context of a series of actions by the actor and the foreseeable, interrelated actions of other actors that share the same motive – *activities*.

The *motive* is an ideal that provides not only the motivation for all the actions making up the activity, but also a normative representation of the object and the norms of collaboration required to realise the motive.

The psychological investigation of activities was Leontyev's central project.

It is not immediately obvious what the distinction between an action and an activity is. An activity is made up of many actions, usually carried out by different people, and an action is made up of many *operations* each of which is executed without conscious awareness according to conditions (like stepping over the kerb when you cross the road or the *routine* actions of employees). So there is a *nesting* relationship between activities, actions, and operations.

For example, an activity, such as a surgical procedure, can be part of a larger activity, such as a hospital, that in turn is part of the health service, and so on. From the point of view of the surgeon, anaesthesia is also an action that is part of a surgical procedure serving the motive of the surgery. However, for the anaesthetist, anaesthesia is a complex activity entailing many different actions before, during and after surgery. Anaesthesia is also an action that includes many operations, such as hooking up a saline drip, until something goes amiss –

the bag falls off the hook – and the operation springs back into conscious control.

What then is the difference between an action and an activity?

Leontyev answered: *the goal of an action differs from its motive*. This is the definition of an action – *a form of behaviour the motive for which is not identical to its goal*. An action is done for some reason over and above its goal, not for its own sake. Further, it is done with conscious awareness.

This is an important insight. In any setting, there is generally an activity whose motive is taken as given, such as a surgery, while all the subordinate actions serve intermediate goals each of whose motive is a successful surgery.

### Motivation

Leontyev and other Activity Theorists never clarified themselves about what is meant by ‘object’. The object being worked on – in German, the *Arbeitsgegenstand* – is often referred to as ‘the object’. The motive is the normative concept of the object in this sense.

‘Motive’ is normally taken as a *psychological* category, and so is not really an appropriate term to apply to the expected outcome of a whole activity, that is properly a concept belonging to *social theory*. Not everyone engaged in an activity (such as the production of tyres) is motivated by a need for the outcome (tyres); in fact, probably none of them are. Most of the workers in a tyre factory are motivated by the wage they expect to receive at the end of the week. Their interest in tyres is highly mediated and conditional. Leontyev distinguished between the ‘really effective motive’ (the wage or the profit, depending on who you are) and the ‘merely known motive’ (the efficient production of tyres for the market). It is the business of supervisors, administrators, leaders, and bosses of all kinds to *arrange* that participants have an effective motive and understand the merely known motive and their role in achieving it, for which they are duly remunerated.

In this way, Leontyev writes of the *personal sense* of an object being what it means for that person. Specifically, the personal sense of the object reflects the motivation of the person determined by their role in the activity.

Leontyev’s Activity Theory provides an effective theory for examining motivation, *given* the motive of the activity. However, the theory of motivation that he actually developed was somewhat monochrome. Workers were motivated by their wage. The ‘merely known motive’ of the activity was determined by the Political Committee in its five-year plan or was simply what was ‘needed’. For social theorists, these questions are the *whole point* of having a social theory. *Is there* really a need for motorcars, for example, or a need for heroin? And why? Who is doing something about it? And can we really presume that a worker’s only motivation for working? Suppose, for example, they are a social worker or teacher; is their motivation solely their wage? Can it be otherwise? *How* does a leader motivate their employees? *How* is the already-understood motive determined? Will it change? These questions are rarely broached in Leontyev’s Activity Theory.

However, it is an important insight that the *personal sense* that a person has of some activity has a different degree and quality according to their relation to

that activity. Not everyone involved in some activity has the same commitment, even though there is only one 'already known' motive.

### Functionalism

The social theory that flows from Leontyev's theory, in which *needs* are given and activities are *derivative*, is a variety of Functionalism. Functionalists see the society as an *organism* in which all the constituent parts have 'functions', i.e., answer to the question, 'What is this *for*? What is its *role*?' Like biological organisms, social formations *evolve* and exhibit an inherent tendency towards stability; disturbances to their functioning stimulate new processes that restore the status quo. It is descriptive to an extent, but it is *not explanatory*.

This is called 'the teleological fallacy'.

Leontyev sees social activity in terms of various objects, each of which represents some social need and every social formation has evolved social arrangements such that these objects 'command the activity of the subject' (1978) and thereby determine the actions of everyone in the community.

But *who* determines the needs of a society? How does that subject gain the authority and resources to act on their determination? 'The needs of society' is not even a coherent notion. In Leontyev's world, that had supposedly surpassed class differences, 'anarchy of production' and alienation of capitalism, it was the Political Committee that determined all the needs of society and set goals and objects for the various industries in five-year plans. But it is widely accepted now that such a view was always a fantasy. The real subject was always a certain stratum of administrators, usually basing their judgments on lies from their subordinates and wildly out of touch with the realities of life in the Soviet Union. In the case of a 'liberal' capitalist society, the situation is just as bad, if more mysterious. Consideration of the needs of the whole community is a truly marginal activity. Anarchy of production reigns.

Since every existing activity is by Leontyev's *definition* directed at a definite social need, we evidently have to count among those needs war, drugs of addiction, advertising, cigarettes, obesity-producing foods, and climate-destroying chemicals. The theory may be descriptive, but it simply *fails as an explanatory tool*. The market is not a process for determining and balancing the needs of the community, any more than nature is 'for' human enjoyment. Certainly, *demand* regulates the economy, but 'demand' is conceptually quite distant from 'need'. Need places limits on human behaviour, but these are very elastic limits. Further, the object of every capitalist firm is the accumulation of capital. Any collateral social benefit is secondary.

Priority is given to the *needs* that stimulate activities, as opposed to a consistent theory of activities that generate needs. But beyond the most basic life-needs of *Homo sapiens*, needs are what are demanded by an activity; activities are the 'independent variable', whose motivation is often obscure.

Implicit in this claim is a categorical definition of 'Functionalism' in which the function of an activity in ensuring the ongoing stability and reproduction of the system is deemed to be *explanatory*. There have been a number of attempts to build functionalist theories of society, and not all are as simplistic as Leontyev's. Leontyev was a psychologist and made no claim to be a social theorist. How

could he? Such a theory was already known: Soviet Marxism. Leontyev's psychology was explanatory so long as it was restricted to problems of psychology, and Leontyev knew better than to propose a 'phenomenological' theory of society, that is, a social theory for which the explanatory principle is individual consciousness. But Leontyev made no attempt to engage with existing social theory or the problems it was addressing, so his social theory remained primitive.

Any attempt to set out from a good theory of psychology and *adapt* or *extend* it to a theory that is explanatory of modern society is doomed. Before the insights of Soviet Psychology can inform social theory, two things are required.

The first is to provide an adequate unit equally of both psychology and social theory; 'commitments' fulfil this role. The second is to use this concept of 'commitments' to conduct an *immanent critique* of existing social theory, social theories that are the product of countless minds that have addressed themselves to the project of determining a scientific theory of social life. None of the advocates of Activity Theory have taken this second step. Without an engagement with existing social theory, the concept of commitment cannot escape the bounds of psychology. It is this immanent critique that is the task of the chapters to follow.

### Functionalist Sociology

Sociology originated in the work of Auguste Comte, Herbert Spencer and Émile Durkheim, and from the beginning these writers took societies as organic wholes whose parts could only be understood in terms of the whole. These writers and many who followed saw societies as the products of social evolution. It is common to enquire into any feature of a plant or animal species by asking, 'what is it for?' on the understanding that any particular feature of a species must have some 'evolutionary value' for the species in the context of Darwin's theory of evolution. In the same way, the Functionalist tendency in social theory is marked by the question: 'What is it for?'

For this discourse, the problem that I have posed as the problem of the freedom of the Will was posed by Sociology as the *structure/agency problem*. Sociology was taken to be a discipline distinct from Psychology as a science of consciousness whereas Sociology was a science of social action. As with Behaviourism, action was to be understood without reference to consciousness.

The most prominent figure associated with Functionalism in twentieth-century Sociology is the American Talcott Parsons. Parsons intervened in a wide range of subjects and issues through the middle third of the twentieth century and advocated diverse positions at different times. He did however push the functionalist principle to an extreme that has led to him being widely regarded as the archetype of Functionalism.

Robert K. Merton later corrected some of the overstatements of Parsons' Functionalism. Societies are conflictual, not harmonious; not every component is useful, some are dysfunctional or have no function at all; existing functions are not necessary, there are alternatives, and so on. But the basic method of explanation by function remains the same, simply moderating Parsons' universal Functionalism with a measure of empiricism. Because it still responds

to the question: how does the social system reproduce itself and maintain its stability, Functionalism expresses an essentially conservative standpoint.

Functionalism is fundamentally tautological, mistaking need for cause; need cannot in itself function as an explanation. There has to be some real history behind an institution wherein its explanation could be found. Institutions sometimes create the very need they fulfil, and are responding to a multiplicity of conditions, but in any case only exist because people *acted* to bring them about.

Parsons founded the Department of Social Relations at Harvard where he brought psychologists like Gordon Allport, together with systems theorists like Norbert Wiener, and sociologists like George Homans with a clear aim to produce an interdisciplinary theory.

Parsons coined the acronym, AGIL, to represent the four requirements for system continuity; the system must *adapt* to its environment and transform the environment to meet its needs (e.g. an economy); define and achieve its primary *goals* (e.g., a government); *integrate* its components so as to maintain cohesion; and *latency*, maintain and renew the motivations of individuals and cultural patterns.

Parsons denied that his theory had a 'system/agency problem' because in his theory of social action, subjects occupied a *situation* created by the system while subjects' actions were regulated by system *norms*, and the subjects' *goals* were also rooted in the system that had arisen to meet those needs. Thus, via subject position, norms, and needs the subjects' actions were fully encompassed within the system theorised by Functionalism. Every element of the subject's action is produced by the system.

This product of mid-century American Sociology was in perfect agreement with the Dean of the Faculty of Psychology at the Moscow State University. The anxiety of a generation that had experienced the Great Depression and two World Wars, was expressed in the need for stability and the conformism of McCarthyism and Stalinism.

Although Functionalism played an important role in the development of social theory, the dominant social theory of the twentieth century was Structuralism, to which I shall now turn.

## 2. Althusser's Structuralism

Louis Althusser is one of the most influential Marxists of the post-World War Two period, and a philosophical opponent of humanism, denying any role in the world for the human Will. I shall summarise Althusser's Structuralism and show that it is internally inconsistent and implausible. Far from providing a critique of capitalism, Althusser's theory refutes the possibility of a political response to capitalism and is itself a reactionary product of the modern capitalist labour process.

The context of Althusser's most significant writings of the 1960s is Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin in 1956 and the rise of 'socialist humanism', especially among dissidents in Eastern Europe. Althusser cast the ideas of the socialist humanists as 'ideology', as opposed to Marxist 'science', and supported the political line of the Chinese Communist Party, minimising the significance of

Stalin's crimes. According to Althusser, the USSR was at the stage of ending the 'dictatorship of the proletariat' and opening up a new historical stage of the 'withering away of the state'. Changing historical tasks were accompanied by changing ideology among the masses, reflected in the writings of the socialist humanists, which were not to be credited with any claim to validity. As to the capitalist world, Althusser denounced every alternative at a time when vast social movements were just getting underway.

Althusser's polemic against the subject is the vehicle for his denial of the Will, individual or collective. So it is the concept of the *subject* as the bearer of a Will that I must defend here.

#### Relations of Production, Apparatus, Ideology, and Subject

Althusser's concept of the *subject* flows from his concept of *ideology*:

ideology has the function (which defines it) of 'constituting' concrete individuals as subjects, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning.

Althusser, 1971a

Ideology and subjectivity are in turn inseparable from *practice*:

1. There is no practice except by and in an ideology;
2. There is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects.

Althusser, 1971a

Practice and ideology are to be understood in turn via his conception of the institutions in which practice takes place, the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs) – institutions constituted by ideology – in which people's activity is constituted as social practice.

The state, in the orthodox Marxist sense of the term, he calls the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA), the organisation of violence used by a (capitalist) ruling class in order to maintain conditions for the production and reproduction of the (capitalist) relations of production. The RSA and the ISAs are both instruments wielded by the state power, i.e., the dominant social *class* (the bourgeoisie). Both function by means of both ideology and violence, violence acting as a last resort, but the RSA is predominantly violent, while the ISAs are predominantly ideological in their functioning.

What are the ISAs? The church, the family, the law, the political system, including the various political parties, the trade unions, the media, the 'Cultural ISA' (including artists and the various institutions that publish, teach, fund, display literature and art, etc.), and, according to Althusser, the dominant ISA – the education system.

#### Subjects

Althusser tells us that he borrowed the concept of 'subject' from legal theory, so when he uses the word, he means simply an individual person who is responsible for their own actions in the legal sense. As will be seen, Althusser rejects the concept of a collective subject and therefore of a collective Will.

In his conception, it is *classes* whose interests, consciousness, and power are at work in society and history, but classes are not 'subjects'; there are *no* subjects acting in history at all; history is a process without a subject. In *Marxism and*

*Humanism* (1964) he claims that in ‘the Marxist theory of history ... the ‘subjects’ of history are *given human societies*’. But Althusser signals that he does not share even this conception by placing quotation marks around the word ‘subject’. He takes Marx’s use of the term *Träger* (bearer) in *Capital* in the sense of people being ‘bearers’ of economic relations ‘... personified and endowed with a consciousness and a will’ (Marx, 1867, v. 1, ch. 4) to be evidence that Marx regarded economic relations to be the true ‘subjects’ of capitalism.

Althusser refuted the idea that History is the work of a Hegelian Spirit or of a subject, Man, an idea that he ascribed to the ‘Young Marx’ – perhaps before 1846, when Marx said:

*History does nothing*, it ‘possesses *no* immense wealth’, it ‘wages *no* battles’. It is *man*, real, living man who does all that, who possesses and fights; ‘history’ is not, as it were, a person apart, using man as a means to achieve *its own* aims; history is *nothing but* the activity of man pursuing his aims;

Marx, 1846

If History is not to be the work of a singular *Subject*, then apparently there can be *no* subjects acting in history at all, excluding the crucial possibility of *many* subjects by sleight of hand.

Institutions, such as the state apparatus, are instruments *used* by the class that is the state power; classes wield power, struggle against one another, and make alliances. Class struggle is a central concept for Althusser: ‘Ideologies always express *class* positions’ (1970a). But Althusser does not hold that a class acting as ‘a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions’ warrants its being called a ‘subject’. Nevertheless, he talks of classes *as if* they were subjects, struggling, having interests, a Will, and consciousness.

By his rejection of the concept of a *singular* Subject at work in history (God, Man or Spirit), Althusser sees himself as having done with all notions of a *collective* subject, whether it be a ‘scientific’ conception of *collective* subjects (such as nations, social movements, institutions or social classes) or ‘spiritual’ conceptions such as he attributed to Hegel. For Althusser, just as for Descartes, Kant, and Hegel, subjects are morally responsible individuals; the question is only what it means to be such a subject.

What Althusser has left out is any consideration of whether, by combining together in some form of voluntary collectivity – some self-conscious system of activity or social movement – people can rise to a level where they are capable of becoming collectively – ‘a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions’ and become subjects in their own lives, collectively, that is, wielding a collective Will as envisaged by Rousseau and Hegel. Categorical ensembles, like ‘Man’ or ‘Society’, can only be understood as subjects if one adopts a spiritualistic conception. Lukács’ conception of the working class as a subject in history, for example, depended on the Communist International being the actual leadership of an international workers’ movement, a movement in which millions of individuals saw themselves as communists, actively looked to the Comintern for leadership, and transmitted that commitment to those around them. That reality proved to be transitory but not entirely illusory.

All sorts of corporate entities, from nations to companies, *do* act as subjects embodying a collective Will, as well as more diffuse social movements, whose collective Will is still in the process of formation. Isn't there room for a concept of subjects that lies *between* the mysticism of *Geist* and the idealism of the Kantian transcendental subject, *between* the Romanticism of 'Man' and the Positivism of the isolated individual? This is territory into which Althusser does not venture. It is presumed in advance that all institutions and movements are already captured by ideology.

### Apparatuses

Although all social institutions are called Ideological *State* Apparatuses, they may be public or private, formal or informal, because they are deemed to function to reproduce the capitalist relations of production and therefore serve the interests of the capitalist class; thus they are deemed *state* apparatuses. Althusser was writing in France in the 1950s and 1960s, a time when the Keynesian welfare capitalist state rested to a large degree on the trade unions, and in which there was a high degree of social integration (notwithstanding the war in Algeria). The Marshall Plan suppressed popular discontent in Europe following the Second World War. This brought a kind of peace and prosperity to the masses that made capitalism appear homogeneous – the same situation that had prompted Herbert Marcuse to write *One-Dimensional Man* (1964). As a Maoist, Althusser included the trade unions as an Ideological State Apparatus, as part of the system of ideological domination by the bourgeoisie. Under Khrushchev's policy of 'peaceful co-existence', the French Communist Party and the PCF-controlled CGT could be included in that characterisation. The idea that the family is the bedrock of capitalist society is still widespread, but the inclusion of the arts as a 'cultural ideological state apparatus' makes it clear enough that *any* institution to be found in capitalist society is *ipso facto* an apparatus by means of which the bourgeoisie maintain bourgeois relations of production. 'The system' not only pervades everything, but all these institutions are *instruments* of 'the system'.

Is it reasonable to paint a picture of modern society that is utterly closed to criticism, so homogeneous, so impenetrable? Is absolutely every route to change closed in advance?

### Ideology

Just as a 'discourse' constitutes an institution, for Althusser, each of the institutions he refers to as ISAs corresponds to an *ideology*, a religious, ethical, legal, political or other ideology. The material existence of these ideologies is the rituals and practices of the corresponding ISA, organised around a concept such as God, Law, or Art. An ideology expresses a class position through a specific regular form of material practice (ISA) that functions ideologically to ensure the reproduction of capitalism, and is backed up by violence, either internally or through the RSA.

But – and this is a virtue of Althusser's approach – all the ISAs are *relatively autonomous* with respect to one another. Each apparatus has its own logic and operates to some degree independently of the others. Although each serves to facilitate the reproduction of elements of the capitalist relations of production,

they are not purely and simply products of the capitalist mode of production, understood as an 'expressive totality'.

Each ISA, with its various rituals and characteristic forms of practice, constitutes the material existence of the relevant ideology. Art (the ideology of art) is materially constituted by the practices of the art world – its methods of evaluation, control, distribution, and production, and so forth. The objective material actions of individuals performing these (or other) practices constitute the ideas that make up this ideology.

[A subject's] ideas are his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which derive the ideas of that subject.

Althusser, 1970a

Discourse is the medium of ideology, and consciousness is internal verbal discourse. Thus consciousness is an internalisation of the material practices of the ISAs in which a person participates, language being the principal transmission mechanism of this process of internalisation.

### Science

Althusser claims that science is a 'subjectless process' that transforms ideology into knowledge. But if science is constituted in regular, institutionalised forms of practice – with its own journals, conferences, funding bodies, and hierarchies – then it is indistinguishable in form from an ideology. The only difference is Althusser's assertion that science is true and ideology false. This is not a criterion; it is a dogmatic claim.

In the foreword to a collection of his writings, Althusser claimed that 'The struggle for Marxist science and Marxist philosophy is today, as it was yesterday, a form of political and ideological class struggle' (1970b). But Science, it seems, remains subjectless even while it serves the class struggle, and is permeated with a class position, that of the industrial proletariat. Both cannot be true.

The identification of Science with proletarian class struggle was still uncontroversial in Althusser's day, but that has long since ceased to be the case, thanks in some measure to the 'socialist humanists' who were Althusser's chief target.

Althusser sees *Capital* as a work of science (as did Marx), but by making an absolute out of science, Althusser himself has fallen prey to Ideology. All knowledge is *for something*; knowledge arises only in connection with certain forms of activity and not others. But the practice of Science is necessarily tied up with Ethics, Economics, as well as what anyone would characterise as class interests. 'Proletarian science' is ideology.

### Ideology

For Althusser, being a subject, 'believing in' an ideology, and participating in the rituals and practices of an Ideological Apparatus are all one and the same:

The decisive central term on which everything else depends is the notion of the *subject*. ... the category of subject ... is the constitutive category of all ideology, ... only ... insofar as all ideology has the

function (which defines it) of ‘constituting’ concrete individuals as subjects, ideology being nothing but its functioning in the material forms of existence of that functioning.

Althusser, 1970a

‘Subjects’ in Althusser’s understanding, far from really being free, responsible actors, are *subjected* beings. ‘Subjects’ are individual human beings, not classes or nations:

The individual ... behaves in such and such a way, adopts such and such a practical attitude, and, what is more, participates in certain regular practices which are those of the ideological apparatus on which ‘depend’ the ideas which he has in all consciousness freely chosen as a subject. ... and freely accepts, must ‘act according to his ideas’, must therefore inscribe his own ideas as a free subject in the actions of his material practice. ... these practices are governed by the *rituals* in which these practices are inscribed, within the *material existence of an ideological apparatus*.

op. cit.

Only a concrete individual person can be a subject, but to be a subject, the individual must be taken up by forms of practice constituted by *timeless* ideologies, ideologies for which there is ‘no outside’, constituting an imaginary relationship of the individual to their real conditions of existence and functionally determined as ideological apparatuses for the maintenance of the dominant capitalist mode of production.

Despite the relative independence of the various ideological and repressive apparatuses, they form a closed universe in which no consciousness is possible other than an illusory, functionally prescribed, bourgeois consciousness. The individual subject’s belief that they act of their own Free Will is an illusion. At birth, they are destined to bear their father’s name; their role is determined before they know it themselves – their gender, their abilities, their family, etc. – the subject is always-already the subject they come to know themselves as, when they are called and ‘find their place’ in society by being inserted into a position in an Ideological State Apparatus. This is the process that Althusser calls ‘interpellation’ – the individual’s recognition of themselves as answering to an identity ascribed to them by the Ideological State Apparatus, materially – the insertion or subsumption of their activity into practices constituting the ISA.

Althusser takes Christianity as an example of an ideology, claiming that ‘the same demonstration can be produced for ethical, political, aesthetic ideology, etc.’ (op. cit.), and then goes on to make points about religion that are claimed without demonstration to be also applicable to (for example) Ethics. So ‘there can only be such a multitude of possible religious subjects on the absolute condition that there is a Unique, Absolute, *Other Subject*, i.e., God’ (op. cit.). So we have each ISA as constituted by a Principle – God in the Christian Church – to which subjects are subjected when they are socialised into practices and rituals within the given ISA. Through the subjects’ recognition of the ‘Subject’ (capital-S, i.e., God or Law, or Art, etc.) and each other, individuals come to recognise themselves as subjects. On this basis, with the absolute certainty of a closed world, the subjects are free to ‘work by themselves’ (op. cit.), unsupervised.

## The Subjected Subject

Althusser can cap off his 'proof' of the subjected character of the self-deluded subject with a sleight of hand:

... The whole mystery of this effect lies ... in the ambiguity of the term *subject*. In the ordinary use of the term, subject in fact means: (1) *a free subjectivity, a centre of initiatives, author of and responsible for its actions*; (2) *a subjected being, who submits to a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission. ... the individual is interpellated as a (free) subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall (freely) accept his subjection, ...*

The two opposite meanings of the word 'subject' have distinct genealogies. Descartes used the Latin translation of Aristotle's *υποκειμενον* (*hypokeimenon*), *subjectum*, to mean the substance (*substantia*) to which all attributes adhered, i.e., (for Descartes) the individual self-consciousness and cogito. This meaning persisted in philosophical discourse. 'Subject' entered the English language in the 14<sup>th</sup> century in the sense of someone under the dominion of or owing allegiance to a sovereign power, being *subject* to its laws and enjoying its protection. In ordinary usage, 'subject' retained this passive meaning, and took on further usages, such as being the subject of a poem or an accusation, or being subjected to taxes, and so on, while in philosophical discourse it followed Descartes, Kant, and Hegel with the contrary *active* meaning.

Rather than an ambiguity, what we have is effectively two different words, two different concepts. The connection between the two meanings of 'subject' is *historical*, not logical. It is a Structuralist trick to suggest a necessary connection between *being a subject* (i.e., a self-conscious, knowing author of one's own actions) and *being subjected* to a higher authority. The two meanings are opposite in their meaning and have different contexts.

## Contradictions and Social Change

Like Functionalism, Structuralism easily explains how a social system reproduces itself, how any disturbance in the structure is overcome and normal development is restored. According to Althusser, change also occurs thanks to contradictions inherent in the economic system, as outlined by Marx in *Capital*. Further, modern societies are subject to a multiplicity of determinations over and above the principal contradiction (as Mao has famously explained). The capital-labour contradiction is also determined by:

the forms of the *superstructure* (the State, the dominant ideology, religion, politically organised movements, and so on); specified by *the internal and external historical situation* which determines it on the one hand as a function of the *national past* (completed or 'relapsed' bourgeois revolution, feudal exploitation eliminated wholly, partially or not at all, local 'customs' specific national *traditions*, even the 'etiquette' of political struggles and behaviour, etc.), and on the other as functions of the existing *world*

*context.*

Althusser, 1962

Overdetermination, uneven development, and contradictions across levels – all are sources of social upheaval and change, more so, in fact, than contradictions inherent in the capital-labour conflict underlying the structure. But for Althusser, the changes resulting are still products of structural causality, not of any human Will, individual or collective.

Can even the principal contradiction be adequately conceived as a single integral structure? As the Regulation Theorists (Boyer, 1990) have shown, the variety of national instances of the capitalist system shows that capitalist social formations are characterised by very different assemblies of the wage-labour nexus through unions and a particular wage system, forms of competition with greater or lesser degrees of oligopoly, different monetary and banking systems, welfare states of widely different size and focus and differing degrees of state intervention, with each nation occupying a unique position in the network of international relations.

The image of a social formation entirely determined by ‘bourgeois ideology’ becomes less and less convincing. To live under capitalism in the USA is a very different thing from living under capitalism in India or Norway.

But Structuralism cannot determine how change comes about, it can only describe how the conditions of social change arise – contradictions of various kinds which disturb the normal working of the system. The human practice that is necessary to utilise these conditions and implement one change or another is an exercise of the human Will, both collective and individual. All the national differences, like those listed above, are the outcome of social struggles in which one or another structural principle is abolished or modified, and another structural principle adopted.

As Leontyev explained in his theory of the personality, ideology rooted in social position is only one part of the personality, the rest is made up of personal experiences shaped through an individual person’s life course. There is no such thing as a personality entirely determined by ideology, even jointly by a number of ideologies.

Structure, in its multiplicity of determinations, will still position a person with a greater or lesser capacity to effect social change. Still, crises disrupt the social order, and movements, leaders, and new ideologies arise independently of structural determination. The actualisation of a new social order is always a unique act of Will, and in the variety of capitalist societies, we see the residue of such acts.

Even change that directly arises from a contradiction within the principal axis of the structure still has to be resolved and changes still have to be *implemented*, and classes privileged by the status quo ante have to be overcome. But so long as ‘science’ is to be the exclusive property of an elite, a revolutionary idea is unlikely to grip the masses.

## Agency

Althusser introduced 'agency' into sociological discourse, once again borrowing its meaning from legal discourse, referring to a person acting *on behalf of* an institution:

The school (but also other State institutions like the Church, or other apparatuses like the Army) teaches 'know-how', but in forms which ensure *subjection to the ruling ideology* or the mastery of its 'practice'. All the *agents* of production, exploitation and repression ... must in one way or another be 'steeped' in this ideology in order to perform their tasks 'conscientiously'

Althusser, 1970a

Althusser's solution to the riddle of the subjected subject entails the conception that while he, Althusser, is but a humble subject, nevertheless, as a scientist, he is able to participate in and be the bearer (mouthpiece, vehicle, or agent) of Science. Science in his conception is not an Ideology but *truth*, and as such is a process without a subject; it is a subjectless, objective process. But its truths find their way into print via the pens of humble subjects who should not delude themselves about having made a discovery or having been responsible for creating anything. This is despite the claim that science is only possible 'from a proletarian class viewpoint, and with the new practice of philosophy that follows from it' (Althusser, 1970d).

This leads to the absurd and reactionary position that Althusser must teach his students a scientific point of view, namely that history is a process without a subject, but at the same time tell them that the working class can rise only to the level of socialist humanism, an *ideology*, and encourage his readers to keep science to themselves, and propagate ideology to the workers instead.

In *Marxism and Humanism*, Althusser explains that not 'even a communist society could ever do without ideology, be it ethics, art, or 'world outlook'':

... it is not conceivable that communism, a new mode of production implying determinate forces of production and relations of production, could do without a social organisation of production, and corresponding ideological forms.

So ideology is ... a structure essential to the historical life of societies.

Althusser, 1964

For Althusser, ideology is somewhat like Plato's 'beautiful lies', the Christianity of Hobbes and Kant, Robespierre's 'Festival of the Supreme Being', or August Comte's 'Religion of Humanity' – popular illusions necessary to maintain the institutions of society. The philosopher does not believe in it, but for practical purposes people have to be persuaded to believe in it, just as people have to believe in the fairness of institutions to ensure compliance and social peace. Althusser accepts that not only is socialist humanism necessary for the proper functioning of the institutions of socialist society, but:

When I say that the concept of humanism is an ideological concept (not a scientific one), I mean that while it really does *designate a set of existing relations*, unlike a scientific concept, it does not

*provide us with a means of knowing them.*

op. cit.

Nevertheless, it would seem hard to see why a 'scientific concept' that does 'provide us with a means of knowing' existing relations, cannot also function like ideology as the 'relay whereby ... the relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all' (op. cit.). Are we 'bound to divide society into two parts, one of which is superior to society' (Marx, 1845)?

The problem here is that communism is not for Althusser a struggle for self-emancipation, but rather a process without a subject, a process leading from one set of institutions to another, and under such conditions, the very notion of 'emancipation' is meaningless. Not something you're likely to lay down your life for.

Althusser was writing as Jean-Paul Sartre was writing his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960), and one can see how Althusser and Sartre confronted similar problems and shared many of the same assumptions, but they came to different conclusions. Sartre is trying to grapple with how mass social movements – 'fused groups' – that are real, living expressions of subjectivity, eventually become transformed into a reactionary and ossified bureaucracy like the USSR. Althusser, on the other hand, believed in the myth of the USSR as en route to socialist society via the withering away of the state, and characterises opponents of the bureaucracy as unscientific ideologues.

One gets a real feeling of discomfort as Sartre wrestles with these problems. Not so with Louis Althusser, who even puts the word 'abuses' in inverted commas in referring to the crimes of the Stalin period – after all, these were just problems in the superstructure, not the real foundations of socialism.

Althusser greeted the student uprisings of May–June 1968 first with silence (he was hospitalised at the time), later describing them as simply infantile Leftists. Sartre perhaps went a little overboard in his enthusiastic support of the students, but he knew which side of the barricades he stood on.

The idea that every aspect of culture in capitalist societies is completely determined by bourgeois ideology, leaving no room at all for social movements which genuinely challenge capitalism, was a powerful idea in its day – an idea that both *expressed* and *supported* the strength of bourgeois society. The idea that the only threat to capitalism came from an entrenched bureaucracy in the USSR and China was also plausible in its day, being expressive of mainstream bourgeois ideology and an important prop for capitalism. The idea that humanist criticisms of Stalinism and capitalism were just unscientific delusions, while truth was available only thanks to the work of a privileged stratum of 'scientists', expressed the spirit of certain social layers for a time. Nothing could better express the ethos of contemporary capitalism than a theory that explains that individuals are nothing but deluded pawns of the system and that, if there is anything to be done about the situation at all, then it has to be left to the experts.

The question has to be asked though: at *what point*, coming down from epochal shifts in history, to changes in government, to events in union branches or workplaces, to deciding when to take a lunchbreak, is there room for a Free Will? Surely there is some line below which individual people really do have a say, but

nothing in Althusser makes it possible to find such a dividing line. Given their social position, at what point is a person simply choosing to do what, in any case, they *had to do*, or what their previous actions had inevitably led them to do, and at what point is the agent's well-chosen or mistaken action an original factor in the situation not to be understood in any other way than as the result of their intervention?

There may have been only one road across the Alps but Hannibal still had to find it.

### Real Issues

Nevertheless, Althusser raises some real problems. Looked at from a distance, the impact of individuals on the course of history does appear as nothing more than a wiggle on the historical trajectory, so to speak. History does appear to unfold according to laws that can be the object of Science, laws which cannot be altered by the intervention of individual subjects.

History is made by the movement of masses of people, and such movements are constituted by shared systems of belief that could be called 'ideology' inasmuch as their principal function is not theoretical but 'practico-social'. Masses of people, moved by ideology that, from an outsider's point of view, represents only an imaginary relation of people to their conditions of existence make history, and in doing so, such movements more closely resemble tidal movements than they resemble self-conscious, knowing, sovereign actors. But isn't Science also capable of moving masses? And doesn't the project of emancipation require that Science, and not self-deception, be the weapon of choice? In the nineteenth century, it was very difficult to convince people to take vaccines, but by the first decade of the twentieth century, Science had convinced the mass of people to accept vaccination, and millions of lives were saved.

Althusser certainly did expose the naïveté of most of the leaders and members of the Communist Parties of his time. But Althusser's theory also leads to some horrific and counterintuitive conclusions: that scientific ideas are not suitable for general distribution, that *ideology* should instead be promoted for general distribution, that the scientist is as much a creature of ideology as anyone else, and that he or she is not the creator, but a mere bearer of the science she or he produces, that history unfolds as an entirely objective process, with no subjective component at all, or even any openings for subjective intervention. That is, history and society are natural processes that Science can understand and control, but even Science itself develops as a natural process, just like its objects.

The long march of history does have to be understood independently of the actions of individuals, with the possible exception of a Napoleon or a Genghis Khan. But that is not the point. It *matters* whether Putin continues to make war on Ukraine and whether the Palestinians in Gaza achieve emancipation this year, this decade, or this century, even if the *final* outcome were inevitable.

However, it is not sufficient to respond to Althusser with a conception of individuals as sovereign subjects, answerable only to laws of their own making (Kant, 1785). Nor can we believe in a Communist Party that is not subject to all the same social processes that are present in the broader society and able to stand outside and above it.

Nevertheless, it is in this ‘third position’, between the World Spirit – mystical extramundane Subjects working behind the backs of human actors – and the Individual Subject known to common sense, that we must find a way forward. Collective subjects do not stand outside society. All social life is animated by the interpenetration and mutual transformation of a multiplicity of social subjects. Collective subjects have consciousness, feeling, Will, and intentions, thanks to those of the individual participants, who are instances of them as social subjects.

### Conclusion

Through a critique of the idea of a collective subject, in favour of subjectless processes that could be understood only by an elite class of ‘scientists’, Althusser expressed the view that became the real nightmare experience of modernity for millions of people in the industrialised world. While learning from everyday experiences that they were individual subjects responsible for their own actions, even casting a vote, they simultaneously became aware that their fate and the fate of the world were being determined by great inhuman processes, insight into which was available only to an elite. It was a world in which everything was already decided, and there was nothing one could do but watch it unfold. The school, the Church, the workplace, even the family, were all in thrall to these processes. Bureaucracies and governments never really changed, whoever won the elections.

It was from this spiritual wasteland that people began to hanker for confirmation that they did indeed have some say in events in their part of the world. This affirmation of one’s own self-determination is known as a ‘feeling of agency’. Althusser, the writer who most clearly affirmed this nightmare, also introduced the word ‘agency’ into social science. But what Althusser meant by ‘agency’ was being an agent of oppressive institutions!

### 3. Bourdieu’s Structuralism

If social class is defined by its relation to the means of production, this still does not tell us *how* classes are *constituted*, nor how the complex status hierarchies of capitalist societies are articulated and internalised by individuals or how other systems of subordination are integrated within an economic system of economic class domination. On its own, possession of greater or lesser title to means of production (economic capital) explains very little about the dynamics of capitalist society.

With reference to modern France, Pierre Bourdieu (1984) claimed to show how knowledge, the use of cultural artefacts and the body, and taste – for everything from food, clothing, and lifestyle to films, music and painting – constitute multiply sublimated transformations of a single relation of dominant to dominated class. These are the relations which moderate the myriad struggles between classes and class fractions in modern capitalist society. He shows how people learn to tailor their expectations and their view of themselves to their place in a hierarchy of political power and their share of the social product, at the same time as finding vehicles to *contest* the place their class fraction occupies in that hierarchy and the place an individual can lay claim to within a given class fraction.

Bourdieu's Structuralism is full of conflict and struggle, in which the stakes are real.

Bourdieu also claims to offer an understanding of how other deep-seated archaic relations of subordination, especially age and gender, merge with economic and cultural relations of subordination in sublimated forms, shedding light on how multiple forms of subordination articulate with one another. However, I find the way that Bourdieu tries to turn all these pairs of opposites into a single, universal ordering principle, such that all dichotomous ordering principles are in some sense 'the same', unhelpful. The idea originates from Saussure's linguistics and Lévi-Strauss's anthropology, but it adds nothing to what he has achieved. Bourdieu's sensitive application of the idea of *distinction* to postwar France is very productive.

I shall clarify some of Bourdieu's main concepts.

### Capital

Let us take it as read that the concept of 'economic' capital is understood, and that it can take various interchangeable forms – legal title to factories, warehouses, stockpiles, intellectual property, shares, finance capital – that is put into circulation in the expectation of a profit. What is required to justify the concept of *forms of capital* that are not economic is to establish that they can be *converted* into 'economic capital', and thus that everything deemed to be a form of capital can be arranged, under specified conditions along a single axis, i.e., quantified, in terms of the resources and authority it grants the owner.

Projection onto a single axis creates a continuous, linear, homogeneous, one-dimensional series with which the social hierarchy is identified, whereby the different types of capital are reduced to a single standard. This abstract operation has an objective basis in the possibility that is always available, of converting one type of capital into another. The exchange rates vary in accordance with the power relation between the holders of the different forms of capital, that vary from time to time and place to place. Formulating the principle of convertibility of different kinds of capital is the precondition for reducing the space to one dimension.

On the other hand, the construction of a two-dimensional space can show how the *exchange rate* of the different kinds of capital is at stake in all the struggles between the class fractions whose power and privileges are based on one or the other of these types of capital. In particular, this exchange rate is a stake in the struggle over the dominant principle of domination (economic capital, cultural capital or social capital?), that goes on at all times between the different fractions of the dominant class. (Bourdieu, 1984, p. 125)

Bourdieu extends the concept of capital according to an underlying concept that only in principle relies on convertibility into capital in the normal economic sense. The underlying concept appears to be a combination of enjoyment, exchangeability, and domination, that maintains itself across different forms of capital. The in-principle convertibility of different forms of capital allows us to surmise, from the place of capital in capitalist society, a general notion of 'capital' as Bourdieu sees it. Marx's definition of capital, 'buying in order to sell more dearly', gives us a definition of economic capital. However, being the *dominant* form of capital, economic capital has a concrete impact on the form of

life via the labour process that is not illuminated by this simple definition. Likewise, the entirety of Bourdieu's work is required to demonstrate the impact of capital in his generalised sense on social life and what it means to a person to own it. A neat definition a capital is not required.

Capital is the resource, command of which enables one to exercise and resist domination in social relations, or, to put it another way, to maintain a position in the status hierarchy of society. More generally, capital is an *organising principle*. 'Composition of capital' thus refers to the composition of total capital, comprising cultural and economic capital (with the other types of capital playing a subordinate role), creating a 'plane' across which dominance increases monotonically towards the top-right corner (economic capital +, cultural capital +) but with the gradient at every point on the plane being subject to contestation. Thus, 'capital' in this sense is capable of ordering the relation between any two people in any given part of social space, but such an ordering principle does not necessarily produce a *complete* ordering of society along a single axis of subordination.

This conception marks Bourdieu's concept of capital off from the everyday concept of 'wealth'. Capital is about domination rather than enjoyment.

Conceived in this way, 'capital' represents the degree of command a subject has over whatever it is that, in a given society or social stratum, that confers the capacity to subordinate others. This principle relies on the fluid systems of change and exchange which characterise modern capitalist society.

Bourdieu accepts 'economic capital' as the dominant principle of domination in capitalist society, but observes that the efficacy of economic capital as a principle of domination is constantly under challenge by fractions of the dominant class (artists, professionals, academics, politicians, etc.) who are relatively poor in economic capital, but who, by dint of their social role and wealth in cultural or other forms of capital, strive to exercise and enhance their own specific form of capital as a rival principle of domination.

This conception is not dissimilar to the struggles that have gone on down the centuries between landed property, industrial capital, and finance capital. The capacity to define what is valid art (or science, or body shape, or lifestyle, or 'connections' or whatever) by those capable of elaborating it is a powerful lever of domination. So it seems not unreasonable to designate command of such authority as a 'form of capital'. So struggles over art (or science, or body shape, or lifestyle) take on the appearance of struggles between social classes, just like the struggles of industrial capital with landed property and finance capital over the rates of rent and interest.

### Field and Habitus

Bourdieu sees the social world through the lens of *field* and *habitus*, complementary concepts that represent the social and psychological processes that moderate the actions and attitudes of individuals so that stable systems of interpersonal and class relationships spontaneously reproduce themselves.

A *field* is a institution conceived as a normative and evolving set of rules, roles, and relationships that determine how various rewards, such as, status, authority, income, resources or autonomy are distributed among individuals acting in

roles within the field. Examples of fields are politics, academia, the world of romance, the art world, and the village, where different capabilities are rewarded with appropriate roles bringing commensurate rights, responsibilities, and rewards. *Habitus* refers to deeply ingrained, durable dispositions – habits, skills, and tastes – acquired through social upbringing and experiences within a class fraction.

Subjects acquire a habitus appropriate to the field in which they expect to make their living, while the field motivates subjects to carry out the its functions and ensure its maintenance. The field acts somewhat analogously to an ecosystem or habitat, and habitus describes the kind of creatures that live in that habitat and maintain it.

These concepts capture very successfully how people occupying *disadvantaged* or denigrated positions in the broader social formation actively seek to *maintain* that position and ‘police the boundaries’, so to speak, punishing individuals who stray outside the norms appropriate to the habitat, by adopting features or practices that are denigrated in that habitat.

### Hysteresis

However descriptive a social theory might be, it is worthwhile to the extent that it can explain how a social formation reproduces and maintains itself, and how crises and social change are generated. The key dynamic in Bourdieu’s social theory is the relation between field and habitus. It is clear enough that subjects will adapt themselves to the demands of living in a field and the field will adapt itself to the availability of subjects with a relevant habitus. However, Bourdieu shows that the habitus is formed mostly in the home and typically takes decades for a community to change its habitus. It is in the nature of things that efforts to change a habitus will meet fierce resistance. Fields, on the other hand, can change very rapidly and dramatically under the impact of economic and political pressures coming from beyond the horizon of those living in the field. That is, there is a *lag* in the adaptation of the habitus to the field, and this mismatch is what generates crises in the social formation. This can be seen when a steelmaking town runs out of coal or iron ore and has to make a living in the service sector, or when a sleepy rural town suddenly becomes home to a coal mine.

But for Bourdieu, there is no habitus that changes or challenges the field. It is all about *adaptation*. It is always the subject changing to suit the field, never the subject changing the field.

### Class and habitus

The concept of ‘habitus’, borrowed from Aquinas, plays an important role in Bourdieu’s theory.

To reconstruct what has been pulled apart [the different practices performed in different fields] ... one must return to the practice-unifying and practice-generating principle, i.e., the class habitus, the internalised form of the class condition and of the conditionings it entails.

Bourdieu, 1984, p. 101

and

Social class is not defined solely by a position in the relations of production, but by the class habitus which is 'normally' (i.e., with a high statistical probability) associated with that position.

op. cit., p. 372

Thus the 'habitus' is the 'internalised form of the class condition and of the conditionings' by which a member of the class knows, without thinking about it, just how to react to different cultural stimuli, what he or she finds 'pretentious' or 'vulgar', 'gaudy' rather than 'attractive', 'dignified' or 'beautiful'. Habitus is not a direct reflection of the conditions of existence of a class, but a *sensibility* acquired through a lifetime and an upbringing in those conditions. The habitus also contains the possibilities included or excludes, with a future (including a future for one's children) that offers prospects, or, on the other side, a past remembered when things were better or gains were made.

Thus, whether a person *actually* has money or skills, education or family, in practice turns out to be secondary to the habitus they have acquired, which may sometimes be at odds with the life-style – attitudes, the way of using the body, command of language, friends and contacts, preferences in art and aspirations, etc., – that are *normally* associated with the conditions of life. Thus, we have the phenomenon of the miner's son who leaves town to become a dancer, or the junior clerk who bluffs his way into being accepted as a well-heeled investor and by good luck turns pretension into reality. But the point is that these are *rarities*. The wealthy man's son is accepted into a management position despite knowing nothing about the actual business while the skilled worker waits a lifetime for promotion – that is the norm.

Disappointment of working- and middle-class French people about the failure of the postwar boom to deliver a better life for them was the stimulus for Bourdieu's work. He was very successful in explaining the stability and reproduction of cultural and social formations despite people's expectations. His study of how mass higher education failed to improve the lot of the millions of lower-class French people who entered university for the first time in the 1960s, was a remarkable achievement.

Can a habitus be changed, perhaps by individuals who challenge its norms – style-setters, organic leaders? Fields change in response to changes in the labour process that come from outside the horizon of subjects. The acquired habitus of subjects are constantly being undermined by technical change, as manifested in hysteresis.

'Field' and 'habitus' are meso-level concepts and as such are amenable to theorising the mediation between actor and structure. However, the contest over the exchange rate for a habitus is all Bourdieu offers. The disappointment of lower-class French people in the 1960s and '70s was explained, but it offered only consolation to the young participants in the uprising of May–June 1968. The workers and students were never going to unite.

#### Cultural capital and educational capital

Cultural capital is the capacity to play the culture game (to borrow an expression from Wittgenstein), to recognise the allusions made in a novel, what is being

quoted or refused in a work of art, to know what to approve and disapprove, and how to avoid the question, if necessary, to have internalised appropriate manners and acquired a taste for appropriate art, to know the directors (or actors) of movies, *avant-garde* (or popular), to know how to make dinner conversation, how to wear clothes, how to occupy space, how to look down your nose, and give or not give someone your time, and so forth. All these manners infallibly identify you for others as a person of a culture, popular, *avant-garde*, or 'legitimate', with a likely trajectory in life (declining or rising), suitable for access to certain circles or not, and with more or less right to express an opinion on political or economic matters, or whatever.

Thus ... the social order is progressively inscribed in people's minds. Social divisions become principles of division, organising the image of the social world. Objective limits become a sense of limits, a practical anticipation of objective limits acquired by experience of objective limits, a 'sense of one's place' which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.

op. cit., p. 471

Bourdieu's research shows that possession of cultural capital is closely predicted by social origins. The bourgeois child knows the price of an Impressionist painting at auction and where it should hang in the drawing room, just as the working-class boy knows who won the World Cup and how to change a spark-plug. Professionals know from an early age who is a good director, just as a working-class youth knows the actors and actresses of popular cinema.

The educational system offers a way for parvenus to acquire culture and a certificate to prove it, but Bourdieu's research shows that 'scholastic' culture can never quite duplicate the ease and depth of the cultural capital acquired by constant exposure from an early age at home. As the educational system in France was opened to wider and wider sections of the populace, a struggle went on to redefine qualifications and jobs and create new certificates, moving the goalposts so as to restore the social order or, on the other hand, to open new doors to young graduates. At the same time, there is a constant struggle going on between *rising* class fractions and those in *decline*, between technocratic executives with degrees in business management and all kinds of cultural mediators redefining their own lifestyles upwards, while shopkeepers and skilled tradespeople, for example, decline inexorably. The autodidact, meanwhile, according to Bourdieu, enters a race that he has lost from the beginning.

Thus we have the phenomena that Bourdieu describes as judgments of classification that are themselves classified and classifying acts. As is well known in respect of all internecine struggles, no distinction is so vital as the distinction between social neighbours. Thus one sees all the acts of *refusal* in which what is valued by one is refused by the other, explicit in respect to *avant-garde* art in relation to legitimate (i.e., mainstream or classic) art.

The main axis of these struggles, according to Bourdieu, is *within* the dominant class, between those who lack economic capital and those wealthy bourgeois who, relatively speaking, lack culture. Professionals of various kinds promote their own status by trying to shift the dominant principle of domination towards

cultural forms, distinguishing themselves from the uncultured wealthy by emphasising a taste for the refined and offbeat, as against the acquisition of rare and expensive cultural goods. On the other side, among those lacking in economic capital, among the dominated classes, there is an effort to promote the sensibilities of professional skills acquired by hard work through the public education system or artistic production, to gain entry to the lower ranks of the dominant class. At the same time, the working class, making a virtue of necessity, calls to order anyone of their number who gets above themselves and thereby threatens class solidarity.

Appreciation of culture is thus reduced, with little or no residue, to *pretension* – people acquire and express a taste that expresses their pretension to be recognised in a given class fraction, refusing the vulgar or the common, the difficult or the fancy, according to the need for distinction. The whole business of cultural appreciation is reduced by Bourdieu to a status game.

On the other hand, the fields seem to be taken as given. What Bourdieu offers is a way of describing fields. The fields do not appear to produce anything other than the rewards offered to maintain their own internal structure of domination. Were a collective subject seeking emancipation to come into view, then it could only be a new field for the exercise of enjoyment and domination by its participants. The origin of such social movements would be as much outside Bourdieu's view as the origins of a new technology or industry. There is no place in the scheme for the human Will.

#### Social capital, body capital, linguistic capital, political capital

Although cultural capital and economic capital constitute the principal axes of subordination within capitalist society, Bourdieu also talks of other forms of capital. *Social capital* is 'connections' needed, in particular, to make use of one's cultural or *scholastic* capital (certificates). *Body capital*, both given by nature and that acquired through the socially approved diet and exercise regime and so on, also constitutes a resource that give an individual leverage in social struggles. *Linguistic capital* is basically a subset of cultural capital, consisting in appropriate ease in the command of language. *Political capital*, a variety of social capital, is standing in the political world and the ability to command votes and support in political conflicts.

All these types of 'capital' share the same basic conditions of production as economic and cultural capital.

#### Cultural relativism

At the end of reading *Distinctions*, one is left with the impression of an extreme relativism in cultural criticism; everything, it appears, is appreciated solely for the purpose of establishing markers of one's social status, albeit unconsciously. 'Real motives' are everywhere disguised or sublimated.

Taste responds to two kinds of stimuli, on the one hand, the pleasure connected with basic human needs, and, on the other, 'quotation' and 'association' which refer to other points in the cultural universe in a kind of 'in-group' conversation. The latter responses create distance from the material world and entry to a social world structured and populated by cultural references and the social universe of the dominant class – essentially, domination.

According to Bourdieu, all the dichotomies of cultural criticism are successive sublimations of one basic distinction between the dominated class and the dominant class, beginning with animal nature versus human culture, so we have crude/heavy versus fine/light and so on.

These distinctions can undergo inversion when the dominated fractions of the dominant class use the same contrast to indicate ascetic/serious versus lightweight/frivolous, etc. in contrast either to the culturally poor, economically dominant bourgeoisie, or the simple enjoyments of the unpretentious worker.

Bourdieu also finds that the basic dichotomies of gender and age are deployed to express or reinforce distinctions of cultural dominance. So, for example, one has the contest of immature/mature against youthful/aged, and all the contested markers of archaic subordination penetrate and express the language of cultural subordination.

Although the dominant class's appreciation of art is sublimated through multiple shifts, it is basically stimulated by the same need for a feeling of distinction or distance from the crude necessity of the life of the dominated classes. Through multiple sublimations, culture constitutes itself as a relatively independent domain, but the taste for a work of art can ultimately be traced back to the pleasures of either enjoyment or domination.

Thus, we have a window into class struggles as they are played out in the domain of culture:

Taste is at the heart of these symbolic struggles, which go on at all times between the fractions of the dominant class and which would be less absolute, less total, if they were not based on the primary belief which binds each agent to his lifestyle. A materialist reduction of preferences to their economic and social conditions of production and to the social functions of the seemingly most disinterested practices must not obscure the fact that, in matters of culture, investments are not only economic but also psychological. Conflicts over art or the art of living, in which what is really at stake is the imposition of the dominant principle of domination within the dominant class – or, to put it another way, the securing of the best conversion rate for the type of capital with which each group is best provided – would not be so dramatic if they did not involve the ultimate values of the person, a highly sublimated form of interests.

op. cit., p. 310

The means of domination has shifted:

substituting seduction for repression, public relations for policing, advertising for authority, the velvet glove for the iron fist, pursues the symbolic integration of the dominated classes by imposing needs rather than inculcating norms.

op. cit., p. 153-4

### Objectivism

Reading *Distinctions* also leaves one with an overwhelming feeling of *objectivism*, in the sense that all the social actors appear to be pursuing illusions – tastes and desires that derive from unconscious internalisations of their social

position. 'Culture is the ultimate fetish', he says, and there undoubtedly is such a pessimistic flavour to the work, but it is nuanced.

In his analysis of the French newspapers, Bourdieu shows how the culture addresses itself to the bourgeois as 'subjects of history, or at least subjects of a discourse about history', whereas the habitus of the working class centres around the worker as an *object* of politics.

The social arrangements reflected in Bourdieu's analysis therefore capture the form of rule active in bourgeois society. There is no suggestion, however, of how the working class, acclimatised to subordination and ruling themselves out of matters of state, could transform themselves into subjects of history.

With mass market cultural products – music whose simple repetitive structures invite a passive, absent participation, prefabricated entertainments which the new engineers of cultural mass production design for television viewers, and especially sporting events which establish a recognised division between the spectators and the professionals, virtuosos of an esoteric technique or 'supermen' of exceptional ability – dispossession of the very intention of recognition of dispossession.

op. cit., p. 386

#### Political Opinion Formation

Somewhat as an aside to the main argument, as part of a critique of the naïve use of questionnaires to measure political opinion, Bourdieu refers to three modes of political opinion formation:

First, a *class ethos*, a generative formula not constituted as such which enables objectively coherent responses, compatible with the practical premises of a practical relation to the world, to be generated for all the problems of everyday existence.

Secondly, it may be a systematic political 'slant' (*parti*), a system of explicit, specifically political principles, amenable to logical control and reflexive scrutiny, in short, a sort of political 'axiomatics' (in ordinary language, a 'line' or a 'programme') ...

Thirdly, it may be a two-stage choice, i.e., the identification, in the mode of knowledge, of the answers consistent with the 'line' of a political party, this time in the sense of an organisation providing a political 'line' on a set of problems which it constitutes as political.

op. cit., p. 418

There is no sense of self-mobilisation here. In Bourdieu's day, the PCF spoke for the industrial working class in the language of the dominant class. All that was at stake was the improvement or defence of the material conditions of life. Political leaders acquire political capital and are rewarded with success in the political field and maybe there will be a wage rise, or the retirement age will not, after all, be raised. There is no room for an emancipatory consciousness here.

#### Systems of Status Subordination

Nancy Fraser (2003) sees capitalist society as marked by the coexistence of *two* forms of subordination, 'the class structure and the status order.' According to

Fraser, it is necessary to utilise two different systems of concepts to grasp the two systems of subordination and understand the interaction between the two.

By contrast, Bourdieu's approach to subordination along *multiple* axes allows a kind of utilitarian analysis whereby subjects choose a strategy that maximises their benefit for the particular composition of capital that they command, in combination with the struggle by classes to valorise their own lifestyle in competition with others. But Bourdieu treats economic capital as just one of a number of mutually exchangeable measures in a multidimensional status order. Cultural capital and economic capital are orthogonal, but so also are social capital, body capital, academic capital, etc.

Thus we have the observation that (in 1960s France) working-class women don't bother about their appearance and prefer to be homemakers and make their men happy, because the jobs on offer for them are rotten anyway, while the daughters of the bourgeoisie dress up, get educated and corner prestigious jobs as 'cultural mediators' because this offers the optimum route to improving or maintaining their own status.

Bourdieu is also attuned to many observations found in Fraser's work, such as the deployment of gender stigmatisation in gendered forms of labour, with consequences such as male nurses suffering from low pay and the pay rates of trades falling when they are opened to women, and so forth.

It is Bourdieu's claim that different forms of capital are essentially interchangeable and expressible on a single scale, that is unique.

### Subjectivity

Bourdieu is pessimistic about the prospects for the working class, or any fraction thereof, transforming themselves from objects into subjects of history. Indeed, he observes that those who act as spokespeople for the working class are forced to adopt the language of the dominant class in order even to express the political demands of the working class.

On the other hand, his description of the class habitus, contributing as it does to the understanding of class consciousness, and his elucidation of the mechanisms of class struggle within the domain of culture, provides a necessary understanding of how class struggle is motivated and of the kind of barriers that radical politics faces.

Certainly, Bourdieu provides an impressive exposé of professional and petit-bourgeois claims to high pay and status, as against the undervalued skills and labour of the working class. There is a sense in which Bourdieu's philosophically inclined analysis expresses the spontaneous working-class prejudice that bourgeois culture is nothing more than a pretension aimed at making its connoisseurs look smarter and working-class and rural people look stupid, even demeaning their body shape. In that sense, his relativist conceptions have an egalitarian flavour.

However, it is implicit in this whole approach that the actors altogether *lack insight* into their own motivations. Under these conditions, it is difficult to see how a class or class fraction could develop a genuine collective Will beyond the consciousness of a mob. But people read newspapers and they read books. If a

sociologist can gain insight into their own motivation and that of others, why are the objects of social sciences excluded from having such insight?

Bourdieu's Structuralism is certainly more humane than Althusser's, mainly because Bourdieu's subjects do struggle and do make changes in the structure, even if it is limited to improving the exchange rate for their habitus. They are not absolute structural dopes. But there is no action in this world that is not produced by the structure. Rather than Althusser's structure that resists all practical efforts to change it, Bourdieu's structure is more like a process that is continuously adjusted and renewed by internal struggle. If the subjects in this world were granted insight, then change would be possible.

## Conclusion

One has to appreciate the power of Bourdieu's insight into how an entire social formation, like modern-day capitalism, is internalised in the most intimate feelings and desires of its people.

Everyone grasps the element of truth in the claim that scientists write papers for recognition, promotion, overseas travel and so on, not *just* in pursuit of truth – but this can be *exaggerated*. And Althusser would tell us that Science is a subjectless process, so the intentions of its protagonists are irrelevant. But are they?

If Bourdieu's critique applies to Art, why not Science? Why not Sociology? Althusser carved out a place for himself as part of an elite which was historically conscious, but Bourdieu does not. Is his book mere pretension, then?

All these fields – Science, Art, etc. – have an objective basis *irrespective* of delivering external rewards (MacIntyre, 1981) to the participants in the given institution, and the objective basis of an institution also provides motivation for the individual participants. And most people, I would hazard to say, appreciate the *internal* rewards of their work to a greater or lesser extent according to economic hardship.

Bourdieu's sociology is the inverse of Leontyev's Activity Theory in this sense. Leontyev never investigated how the nature of the object of activity lies behind the ethos inside the activity. Bourdieu, on the other hand elaborates the ethos within a field taking for granted the relation of this ethos to the object of the field. But both took the object of the activity/field as given. And yet it is the changing demands of social reproduction that are surely the ultimate source of revolutionary transformation.

Bourdieu has given us a rich and compelling theory of the dynamic equilibrium of modern capitalist society, but what we really need is a theory of social transformation, and one in which subjects are deemed to have some insight into their own situation.

Whereas Althusser could only provide generalisations in which every aspect of human life was drained of any trace of the human Will, Bourdieu has given us three things. First, a compelling image of the social struggle as it is fought in all the various corners of modern society. He shows *how* this struggle is undermined and stymied at every step, but nonetheless we see *struggle*, wilfulness. Second, he has introduced a number of concepts which *mediate* between the entire social formation and the experience of each individual

subject, viz., habitus and field. As a result, we have new concepts with which to understand how a social structure is experienced by its denizens. Third, he has given us a theory of crisis, viz., hysteresis – a displacement of Marx’s conflict between the forces of production and the system of property relations – a process that we witness all around us.

Bourdieu, like Althusser, expressed the conviction of French intellectuals at that time that the working class had been nobbled and there was no opening for revolutionary change. But Bourdieu has given us a series of concepts which show how the system of domination is experienced by people and how it motivates people to resist, even if only for a ‘better deal’ – if only we could grant human beings *insight* into their own situation.

The concept of ‘field’ is too totalising. It is dystopian. What is needed is a theory of how a field can be destabilised or subverted, or simply how it changes at all. Fields may or may not have a ‘motive’ – i.e., something such that if it did not exist, it would have to be invented, like Leontyev’s *activities*. But the fields of romance or sport, for example, are not the same as the world of science or the world of manufacturing, even though both can be theorised as fields and both are colonised by capitalism. A different way of conceiving of the relation between an institution and the subjectivity of individuals within the institution is needed in which a person may have an investment in the outcome as well as in their own reward and in which a human consciousness has some surplus over and above their shaping by the system of domination. And we need a better theory of the relationship between the habitus and a person’s conditions of life.

As an entire system that explains the *stasis* of modern capitalism, Bourdieu’s Structuralism must be rejected. Nonetheless, his theory is replete with concepts that vividly express how the class struggle is experienced by all the diverse classes and class fractions of modern capitalism. He also sheds light on the necessary tensions that exist between different classes and broadly how the labour process determines the outlook of the various classes.

These concepts are an important contribution to an interdisciplinary social theory and are compatible with Vygotsky’s psychology. The concepts of habitus and field provide a valuable interface between psychology and sociology beyond the narrow frame of economics. The concept of habitus highlights the limits and possibilities for the formation of a common Will across the subordinated classes. All that is required is to grant subjects insight into their situation – something lacking from all varieties of Structuralism.

## Part V. The Subject versus the Structure

### 1. Anthony Giddens' Critique of Structuralism

#### Introduction

Giddens' key insights are the bounded knowledgeability of actors, reflexivity, and the rejection of structural determinism. Giddens provided a rational conception of 'agency' consistent with its original meaning in legal discourse, and demonstrates the need for a theory of the psychology of such agents. However, as I will show, Giddens' psychology fails while Activity Theory supplies what is missing. Giddens' project succeeds only when complemented by a theory of the Will.

Anthony Giddens' theory of structuration aims to find a 'third way' between two opposing currents in social theory. On the one hand, there are objectivist approaches like Functionalism, systems theory, Structuralism, and Post-structuralism, that emphasise the pre-eminence of the social whole (structure). For these approaches, the system determines or at least constrains individual participants whose insight into their own actions is discounted as merely a product of the structure. On the other hand, we see subjectivist or voluntaristic approaches like Hermeneutics and Phenomenology. These approaches see the social whole in terms of the production and reproduction of individual actors who are essentially taken to be autonomous and understood in psychological terms.

People can be experts, too

Giddens pointed out that the individual subjects whose activity is being studied, Structuralism takes to be 'sociological dopes', simpleton prisoners of ideologies. Structuralism discounts the knowledgeability of participants in social processes, their capacity to understand their own experiences.

A distinctive feature of his theory of structuration is the idea of 'reflexivity':

There is no mechanism of social organisation or social reproduction identified by social analysts which lay actors cannot also get to know about and actively incorporate into what they do.

Giddens, 1984, p. 284

There are no 'natural forces' in social life

So when a sociologist describes a social phenomenon they must expect that those whose actions are being described will read or hear about the sociologist's ideas and modify what they do in the light of those ideas. It is for this reason that the 'laws' that are the currency of natural science can never be manifested in social theory because the objects of research do not act independently of the knowing subject. Natural science itself had come across this problem at the turn of the century when physicists discovered that it was impossible to completely describe a particle independently of the material means used to measure it.

As a result, it can be seen that the predictability manifested in social life is largely *made to happen* by *strategically* placed social actors, rather than in spite

of them or behind their backs. Far from people being driven to do what they do by remote or invisible 'structural forces', Giddens pointed out that:

there is no such entity as a distinctive type of 'structural explanation' in the social sciences; all explanations will involve at least implicit references both to the purposive, reasoning behaviour of agents and to its intersection with constraining and enabling features of the social and material contexts.

Giddens, 1984, p. 179

The appearance of inevitability in the actions of actors arises from the limited options available to them on condition that they act rationally, and therefore actually rests on the presumption that social actors have good reasons for doing what they do. This is the meaning Giddens attaches to Marx's famous maxim:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past.

Marx, 1852.

## Agents

Giddens refers to 'agents' in the same sense as Althusser, i.e., *persons acting on behalf of some institution*. However, Giddens grants agents the capacity to act rationally rather than as mere instruments in the hands of ideology and mythical 'structural forces'.

The relative predictability of events arises not only from the rationality of agents, however, but also from the material conditions as a whole, and the objects (i.e., motives) of the institutions on whose behalf agents act, together with the resources that the agents have at their disposal, and the capacity of these institutions to motivate their agents to act according to that object or motive.

## The conjuncture

The social and political conditions that had motivated Parsons, Bourdieu and Althusser had been eroded by the time Giddens was writing.

By the mid-1980s, the stability of the postwar period had been shattered; Keynesian welfare economics had been discredited, the Soviet Union was losing its hold, and labour, socialist and feminist movements in the West were fragmenting and in decline. The obvious fragility of the social structures cast their theoretical images into doubt. Fordist methods of production and social control had become outmoded. The idea of compliance with the demands of structure failed to shed light on what was going on in the world. The labour process itself was demanding initiative from its subjects. People were crying out for the recognition of a human voice in social theory. The time was ripe for a rebellion against the stifling and inhuman theories of the Structuralists and Functionalists from both Left and Right. Anthony Giddens answered this call.

Reflexivity also implied that social theorising is itself an intervention in social life and history. Althusser and Bourdieu's conviction that they belonged to an elite class of experts whose ideas were inaccessible to the actors in social life and could have no effect on social life was demolished. In a time of universal tertiary

education in all the industrialised countries, there was no longer any sharp line between the experts and ordinary folk who, rightly or not, took themselves to be experts, especially in matters relating to their own life experiences.

The 'findings' of the social sciences, as I have emphasised, are not necessarily news to those whom those findings are about.

op. cit. p. 335

Taking object and subject together, to a great extent it can be said that events unfold in a way reflecting reasoned, reflective activity by many different actors, with varying resources. Ideology remains, but it is not impenetrable or unseen.

The consequential position now granted to agents opens up new questions. The sociologist must appeal to the psychologist for the very existence of the basic units of their science.

Agents live in the world, and we are missing any account of how agents form and resolve the competing motives that necessarily act on every person.

Giddens, however, still takes for granted the agent's motivation *as an agent* of the relevant institution as it stands. This begs the question of how social change takes place. Social change is inexplicable under Giddens' conception because an agent is presumed to be an agent of *one* institution whose existence they monitor and preserve. But in reality, every person is an agent of *multiple* activities and understands the objects and motives each of them. Each such activity is therefore a potential source of motivation that interferes with the agents actions on behalf of another. The conflict between institutions, practices, movements, and so on, corresponds to conflicts in agents' motives. The capacity of a person to resolve a conflict of motives is the basis on which Augustine of Hippo had invented the concept of the Will. Giddens skirts around the problem and never touches on the problem. It seems that after the Second World War, no one wanted to mention the Will any longer, despite millennia of debate about the Will as a central problem of human life.

#### Giddens' critique of Functionalism

Giddens also makes a critique of Functionalism based on the teleological fallacy that I dealt with in the earlier chapter. The teleological conception of causality can form part of a valid *explanation* of a regular feature of some social formation only to the extent that knowledge of this predictability forms part of *some* agents' reasons for doing what they do. The need for the prior action to *regularly* produce a given observed outcome is in itself no explanation, unless this outcome is the purpose of those strategic agents, based on experience in the behaviour of the given social formation. People have reasons for what they do and any explanation for their actions has to be in terms of their own reasons and those of other actors, irrespective of whether the outcome is an expected result, or for some of the actors, is an unexpected consequence.

For example, the relatively predictable outcome of a 'frictionless' market relies on agents who make it their business to ensure that the market is indeed frictionless. The tendency of monopolies to exclude smaller competitors is found only when corporate managers act as predators and regulators allow them to.

Giddens' conception of the knowledgeability of social actors is not purely a sociological question, but is, on the contrary, also a question of psychology.

This brings us to Giddens' conception of the knowledgeability of the social actors who are the objects of social theory, and the manner and extent to which the outcomes of their activity are a product of their reasons and their resources.

### The Knowledgeability of Social Actors

The core of Giddens' ideas about agents' knowledgeability is his conception of practical and discursive consciousness.

The obvious fact, from which he makes a beginning, that social actors have a relatively sound practical knowledge of the activities in which they are engaged, is a vast improvement over structuralist and functionalist 'explanations' of the activity of ideologically determined actors.

The category of discursive consciousness is relatively clear, and 'every competent social actor ... is *ipso facto*, a social theorist on the level of discursive consciousness' (op. cit., p. 18). All this is a gigantic leap forward from the 'sociological dopes' of Structuralism and Functionalism. However, the basis of this conception in psychological research is not so sound, and is contradicted by Vygotsky's psychological theory.

### Giddens' Psychology

The limitations imposed on social theory by the segmentation of learning into academic disciplines is on display when Giddens sets out his psychology. Giddens has never participated, so far as I know, in psychological research, so he must put together a psychology to underpin his claims for the knowledgeability and motivation of social actors by picking and choosing from what is on offer from psychologists. His chosen psychologists are Erikson ('my appropriation [is] strictly limited and qualified'), Goffman, to shed light on the motivation of everyday interactions, and Freud.

It is to Giddens' great credit that he had the insight that Sociology could not stand on its own but required the support of Psychology. He can't be blamed for not being a psychologist. The work of integrating the psychology of Vygotsky and the Activity Theorists into social theory lies ahead of us, however.

In particular, Giddens' reliance on Freud is problematic.

Giddens is to some extent aware of the problems in using Freud, which he hopes to mitigate by substituting id, ego and superego in Freud's 1924 structural model with his own categories of basic security system, practical consciousness and discursive consciousness. This model bears no relation to Freud's, but 'practical consciousness' seems to approximate Freud's concept of the pre-conscious in his 1900 topographical model of the repressed unconscious, the preconscious and the conscious. In Giddens' schema:

There is no bar between [practical and discursive consciousness], however, as there is between the unconscious and discursive consciousness. The unconscious includes those forms of cognition and impulsion which are either wholly repressed from consciousness or appear in consciousness only in distorted form.

op. cit. pp. 4-5

But Giddens still takes an indeterminate slab of Freud at face value. For example, he refers to the shameful 'back regions' where 'back-room deals' are

made (p. 128), and so on. He takes it that Freudian ideas about anal fixation are relevant to understanding these phenomena; likewise, Freudian slips may provide insight into unacknowledged motives.

This really is not good enough. If one wants to create a social theory that genuinely overcomes the dichotomy between the reproduction of agents and structures, it is not good enough to equip a sophisticated social theory with a do-it-yourself bag of borrowed and unsubstantiated psychological tools.

However, this fact – that social actors have *good reasons* for their own actions, based on past experiences, reflection and therefore relatively sound knowledge – together with the fact that actors' knowledgeability and control over the consequences of their actions is *bounded*, constitute the rational core of the theory of structuration.

### Resources

Giddens' conception of agency is also framed in terms of resources. However, whether or not a social actor is taken to be acting as an agent for some institution, they bring to the field certain resources, without necessarily having conscious awareness (more on this later) of their resources and their limits. Allocative resources are the right to deploy artefacts and natural resources as they see fit, broadly economic power. Authoritative resources is broadly power over people via organisational or political hierarchies or authority acquired by reputation or social standing.

These resources are explicit when we are considering an agent of some institution, but my central thesis is this. It is not only institutions that endow actors with resources. Actors are also agents of activities in the broader sense outlined in the chapter on development of the Will in Adulthood. Further, resources should be understood in the broader sense outlined in the chapter on Bourdieu, as allocative or authoritative.

To be an agent is to be an actor with resources, and the central issue is to grasp how these resources are acquired. But for the moment I will stay with Giddens.

### Routines

The central mechanism through which Giddens explains the reproduction of social life is the concept of *routine*.

Giddens' unit of analysis seems to be an individual agent confronting an existing, ongoing practice that the actor continuously reproduces through their participation. The underlying vision is one of individuals maintaining institutions by routinely enacting their role in the institution. These practices are taken to form a *continuous flow*, and in an infinite feedback loop, creating the conditions, motivations and reasons for their continuation. So people have their reasons for participating, but they do so under conditions already created by the existence of the practice itself and related practices. It is on the basis of this *routine* that agents' knowledgeability is deemed to be produced.

As Giddens sees it, institutions are essentially routines enacted by participants with the aid of *rules* and *resources*. It is in this concept of routine that Sociology overlaps with Psychology.

The concept of *routinisation*, as grounded in practical consciousness, is vital to the theory of structuration. Routine is integral to both the continuity of the personality of the agent, as he or she moves along the paths of daily activities, and to the institutions of society, which *are* such only through their continued reproduction. An examination of routinisation ... provides us with a master key ...

op. cit. p. 60

However, this concept of routine raises serious difficulties.

How does an agent come to know the limits of those resources other than through what is spelt out discursively? How do they learn what they can and can't do? How relevant is all this to post-Fordist production in any case?

These are problems for Giddens because *routine* is the key concept underlying his conception of agents' knowledgeability. 'Routine' is not an adequate concept with which to explain a person's knowledge of their resources, obviously outside of formal organisations, but also within formal organisations. Refer to the chapter on self-control. The actions to which Giddens is referring, Vygotsky described as 'quasi-needs' and they differ from habits because once the goal is achieved, the need is exhausted and the person does not go on repeating the action like someone with OCD. Further, before the action is relegated to unthinking routine, it passes through conscious awareness where effort is required to master the routine. Any disturbance will force the action back into conscious awareness. Routine activities are not really *un-conscious*, merely *sub-conscious*. Nevertheless, the conception of practical knowledge as *scripts* (Mandler, 1984) is a viable idea, but scripts do not imply routines.

The question is not routines, but *routinisation*, the *formation* of routines and their acquisition by the individuals who are required to sustain or modify them. But Giddens has not explained how a practice *becomes* a routine, thereafter taken for granted, or how routines are changed by the very people who apparently require them for their 'ontological security'. Giddens rejects the conception of conduct as 'an aggregate of acts' (op. cit., p. 50) each with its own motive. He thus insists that routines are essentially *continuous*, and distinguished from acts, and on this basis, he claims that routines are essentially *unmotivated*.

Giddens claims that it is a sense of 'ontological security' that a person gains from the approval of colleagues and the predictability of day-to-day life that Giddens sees as sustaining practices. It seems to me that instead of the structuralists' 'sociological dope' what we have here is a 'motivational cripple'. But more importantly, I believe that this concept of unmotivated, continuous routines is a mistake.

Giddens' conception leaves the genesis and *development* of routines a mystery, preventing the true nature of routines from being revealed. Routines are evidently multi-actor performances, and it is difficult to conceive of how they can be formed and adjust themselves to disturbances without recourse to the 'discursive consciousness' and rationality of the agents.

This does not destroy the concept of routine but it does suggest that the idea of routine being 'unmotivated' is psychologically untenable. This issue also sheds

light on the relation between what Giddens calls ‘practical consciousness’ and ‘discursive consciousness’.

It can be seen that Giddens’ category of ‘practical consciousness’ is quite inadequate to encompass the variety of forms of consciousness and their genesis relevant to acquiring, maintaining or changing routines. So long as routines are understood as unmotivated, continuous processes, it is impossible to reveal the sources of motivation and the potential for social change.

### Motivation

I do not suggest that Giddens’ sociology can simply be replaced by Activity Theory (See Blunden, 2023). Activity Theory is not a social theory in the sense of providing an account of social structures or historical formations. Rather, it offers a psychology of activity – an account of how motives are formed, how actions are organised, and how agents resolve competing demands in practice. What is lacking in Giddens is precisely such an account. Vygotsky’s Psychology and Activity Theory enter here not as substitutes for sociology, but as necessary complements to it.

I will deal here with the issue of actions with their goals, and activities with their motives only cursorily. Routines are surely composed of discrete, motivated actions, each constituting a *unit* of social action each with its own goal? Institutions are aggregates of activities that may or may not be ‘routines’, units of activity, each in turn having their own *motivation*. I dealt with Leontyev’s conception of the motivation of actors briefly in the chapter above on Functionalism.

Institutions are activities that have become ‘institutionalised’, that is, integrated into social formation such that the object or ‘motive’ of the institution has come to be taken for granted, but nonetheless, *understood* by all the participants, irrespective of whether it functions as a really effective motive for the participant. The ‘motive’ of an institution is not a psychological category as is suggested by the word. I know of no word for the motive of an activity that is completely satisfactory, but what is meant by ‘motive’ in this context is the normative state of the object of the activity, the object being the material, human or otherwise, upon which the institution works (in German, its *Arbeitsgegenstand*). In this sense, ‘motives’ are known to the relevant actors, and pertain to activities of a single individual as much as to an institution or other social practice.

The Russian drama theorist Constantin Stanislavskii (1936) expressed the opinion opposite to Giddens’ in his direction to actors performing a ‘routine’ series of actions. Action, he says, has a ‘channel’, the motivation for which flows from the plot, and it is this channel that is motivating a whole series of actions (e.g. going home). The channel is divided into separate ‘units’ (e.g. looking in a shop window, crossing the road) each of which has its particular motive. Activity Theory agrees with this three-tier structure of motivation, the conception on which its analysis of action is based.

### Practical Consciousness

The mental entity that Giddens calls ‘practical consciousness’ needs to be disaggregated, and I will draw on Activity Theory to do so.

As consciousness that is not discursive but is nonetheless implicated in activity, practical consciousness subsumes several distinct categories of consciousness distinguished by their genesis. On the one hand, practical intelligence is the first kind of intelligence acquired by an infant through their handling of their own body and artefacts. Practical intelligence continues to develop through adulthood in the acquisition of practical skills, but also underpins the development of discursive intelligence from when a child begins to master speech. Practical intelligence is indeed the kind of intelligence that is not manifested in words.

On the other hand, *operational* knowledge, exercised in *operations*, executed without conscious awareness and adapted to conditions, is genetically connected with the development of all kinds of skill, whether practical or discursive. The important category that is skated over by Giddens is *conscious awareness*. Actions/operations, whether of a practical or symbolic character, may be executed either consciously or without conscious awareness.

Operational knowledge is the kind of knowledge and skill deployed continuously in carrying out relatively complex actions. Facility in using some word, gesture or tool, or in acting appropriately in relation to some person or context, is acquired at first with conscious effort. In time, as we become used to using the action under different conditions we begin to master it, and use it without conscious control – otherwise it would be impossible to type or walk down the street or engage in a conversation without suffering from mental overload! Each such action is enacted without conscious awareness and controlled, jointly by the goal of an action of which it is a part, and by the conditions, is called an *operation* (think of learning to tie your shoelaces, and then later doing so without thinking).

Included in operational knowledge are interpersonal skills including everyday language use, the capacity to use and read facial expressions, etc., that are acquired spontaneously. Vygotsky called this kind of knowledge *potential concepts* and it is indeed a kind of knowledge shared with nonhuman creatures.

However, in addition to everyday operations acquired spontaneously, when we participate in the activity of an institution we are required to conform to normative expectations in the institution and further its effort to bring its object into conformity with an ideal. Operations are *acquired* with conscious awareness and generally with a degree of effort. Although operations are executed without conscious control, when something goes awry – you inadvertently disrespect a boss, or burn a burger – the operation leaps back into conscious awareness and is brought under control and you learn from your mistake.

Also, institutions may harbour legitimate conflicts over the proper ways to pursue the object of the institution, and conflict over these differences will be governed by institutional norms.

Such conflicts are discounted by Giddens:

Awareness of social rules, expressed first and foremost in practical consciousness, is the very core of that 'knowledgeability', which specifically characterises human agents.

Giddens, op. cit, pp. 22-23

The conception of institutions as being *rule-governed*, introduces deontology, which is inadequate to the tasks it is asked to perform.

### Conflict of motives

An important category of action that could be subsumed under Giddens' concept of 'practical consciousness' arises when people are participating in institutions. Generally, and always to some extent, a person understands and embraces the aims (motives) of the institution. But in general people have their own reasons for participating in an institution, such as earning a wage, furthering their career, organising the union or simply to enjoy the social interaction. Such an alternative agenda may or may not be explicit, may be more or less repressed according to the relevant norms, and may be subordinate to the institutional requirements or may actually be, for that individual, the leading activity that plays the determining role in consciousness.

But a multiplicity of motives is always present, and only a study of the formation of the Will can answer the problems posed here.

### Conscious awareness

Up to this point, I have considered only Giddens' agents, who are deemed to be rational actors who have knowledge, albeit bounded knowledge, of the field in which their authority and resources allow them to act. But they remain *agents*. The Will implicated in their regular actions is not 'their own' but the Will of an institution. The conception of their activity as routinised, emphasises this. If there is such a thing as 'Will' for Giddens, it is only an inhuman collective Will of one or another component of 'the system'.

However, it is implausible to suppose that the behaviour of these agents can be conceived as simply routines. If the agents are adults, then they will most likely have conscious awareness of what they are doing, at least they will if we grant Giddens' own claim that these agents are *reflexive*, and not 'sociological dopes'.

I will recall Vygotsky's definition of 'conscious awareness':

Conscious awareness consists of an act of consciousness the object of which consists in the very activity of consciousness ... to generalize one's own psychological processes.

Vygotsky, 2021a

In a modern economy, very few people work in jobs that can be done by a machine. Our work requires that we are consciously aware of what we are doing.

## Unintended Consequences and Conceptual Development

The knowledgeability of agents is finite, and there are unintended consequences for what people do.

According to Giddens:

Every research investigation in the social sciences or history is involved in relating action to structure, in tracing, explicitly or otherwise, the conjunction or disjunctions of intended and unintended consequences of activity and how these affect the fate

of individuals.

op. cit. p. 219

The *unintended consequences* of a practice form part of the conditions in which a person takes up a practice and thereby sustains it. They are also the domain of Sociology and Ethics. Neither Activity Theory nor any current of Psychology can obviate the need for social theory and the centuries of acquired wisdom that must be appropriated.

This important category of the unintended consequences of a practice form part of the conditions for agents to take up a practice (understood as an *ongoing* practice) and thereby sustain it. Giddens uses some examples such as the fallacy of composition (what is true of some parts must be true the whole) and the tragedy of the commons (individuals, acting independently and rationally in their own self-interest, will deplete a shared resource) to show how actions that are rational for each agent may have perverse effects when combined, to illustrate how the unintended consequences of rational practices may form systematic and predictable outcomes. Broadly, these are the kind of problems studied by *game theory* in which rational actors collectively produce irrational outcomes. Among such outcomes are the very conditions that sustain a practice, and make it into a kind of 'organism' that lives in the ecosystem created by the unintended consequences of other practices. Only an enquiry into Ethics can cover that irreducible part of social theory that has to deal with the unintended consequences of the activity of rational actors.

These problems basically underlie Hegel's argument for the necessity of the State, but more generally they also demonstrate the necessity for a common Will. Ethics is the domain where the responsibility of a person extends beyond the consequences of their action that they foresaw.

Where Giddens' work reaches the limits of psychology and passes over into sociology proper is when he transcends the limits of an agent's knowledgeability. While emphasising that social actors generally possess an extensive knowledge about the practices in which they are involved and their ramifications, there is a point beyond which they cannot predict or control the impact of what they do and their activity enters into the domain of unintended and unforeseeable consequences.

Specification of those bounds [on agents' knowledgeability] allows the analyst to show how unintended consequences of the activities in question derive from what the agents did intentionally.

op. cit., p. 294

This is what produces the *appearance* of functional and purely structural causation – both of which are illusory. Perverse and unintended consequences can be produced by the actions of perfectly rational individuals who are not 'sociological dopes'. And the reason that the theory of structuration, which has the knowledgeability of agents at its centre, does not descend into the fantasy of societies as intentional communities is because knowledgeability is always bounded.

Given the above considerations, a number of problems need to be addressed.

## Agency

Agency, says Giddens, is the *capacity* to make a difference, and is not limited to a person's intentions, but incorporates the unintended consequences of an agent's action.

Holding some social position, such as an office in some institution, and in general participation in some project, does not mean that the agent *has* to play some predetermined *role*, as if acting out a script dictated by structural or functional imperatives, but simply that they have certain prerogatives and obligations (resources and authority), and it is in this that a person's agency, in the sense of Free Will, resides. The owners of a company producing asbestos can decide to disinvest in it, a policeman does not *have* to arrest an unlicensed driver.

Some unintended consequences may nevertheless be *foreseeable*, and within the scope of what a person could *control*, and these are consequences for which they are *morally responsible*, irrespective of their intentions. Some consequences are both unforeseeable and beyond the control of the person who carries out an initial action. In this case the actor should *not* be seen as the agent for those consequences.

This does not settle the question of agency. Individuals make a difference only by means of collaboration with others, whether that is as an office holder in some institution or as a participant in a social movement. Entering into such collaborations is generally voluntary and done for good reason. Individuals exercise agency and bear moral responsibility for the difference they make *as part of collaborative projects*. People achieve very little on their own. It is only by the passive or active support of others that anything is achieved. It is really only the project that makes the difference, not the individual, but a project is not some remote and invisible structure. If you are part of a project or enterprise then you have the capacity to change it. An activity is an aggregate of the collaborative actions of participants, unified by a common motive.

## Institutions and Social Movements

There is no hard and fast line between an institution and a social movement. An institution is the objectification of a social movement. A movement's objectification is never permanent but always liable to disruption and reactivation of its aims. Social movements are always liable to find themselves institutionalised. At the very least, institutions form an arena in which social movements contest for dominion. It is only by making institutions continuous with social movements that the cultural and conceptual basis for an institution's existence can be grasped.

For Giddens, however:

I shall distinguish two main types of collectivity ... associations and organisations (all reproduction occurs in and through the regularised conduct of knowledgeable agents) ... [and on the other hand] social movements.

op. cit., p. 199

## Activities

The general concept of 'collectivity' is too ill-defined to comprehend this dichotomy, and yet this dichotomy is the basis for the conception of institutions as 'routines'. By comprehending both social movements *and* institutions under a single concept, as *activities*, the motivational springs of institutional life are made visible.

Following Stanislavskii, Vygotsky and the Activity Theorists, I argue that so-called routines are a series of actions each of which has its own goal and is consciously controlled by the subject, subject to conditions, towards that goal. However, the goal of an action is not the same as its motive, i.e., the reason for doing it. Conscious control is exercised over actions pursuant to the 'motive' of the entire *activity*, what Stanislavskii called 'the channel', that provides the motivation for all the component actions.

An activity is generally made up of many actions that may be carried out by many different social actors, and its object is represented by the actors as the *concept* of the activity, or institution. It is this concept that orients the actions of actors and provides them with a 'channel', and gives meaning to all their actions and regulates collaboration between agents. This concept is supported symbolically in multiple ways, both through the actions of other people, and in the case of institutions, the built environment, and all manner of 'texts'. The various actions that make up the rules and practices of an institution flow from the concept of the institution in the same way as many different word-meanings are required to constitute any concrete concept. An abstract definition is insufficient, and the meanings of any concrete concept are always subject to challenge as conditions change.

Means must be appropriate to their ends. Conflicts within an institution manifest the differing nuances and contradictions within the concept, and the ideal culture of a community is found in the constellation of these concepts, reflecting the manifold interconnection of institutions with each other, everyday life and social movements. Thus, institutions must be understood as belonging to the broader category of *activities*, marked by their relative stability and integration within the norms of a given culture.

Every corporation, government department, school or hospital, profession, social movement, musical genre, football code or whatever, can be subsumed under the category of activities. Each is more or less established and recognised by participants and others, more or less formal in character, each with its own object and ideal. Every such activity is a unit of a common Will, and exists only so long as and insofar as that Will is expressed by people in action.

Not only do people sustain and further many different ideals in their capacity as agents for various activities, these activities provide resources for their agents. When development issues arise, being a local endows an actor with authority and resources which an outsider does not have. Every soldier benefits even when out of uniform from the esteem patriotism engenders in the people around them. 'Agency' is being an agent, not just of Althusser's oppressive institutions or the broader category of institutions Giddens has in mind, but also of the vast array of projects and activities that make up the social formation of which they are a part.

### The formation of routines

This allows us to understand how routine practices are formed, how participants acquire them and learn to operate the prerogatives and obligations appropriate to their social position, and amend these over time in the light of experience and social interaction with others. The concept that a person has of an institution within or in relation to which they are active, gives them a concrete form within which their knowledgeability of the practices in which they are participating is developed.

Institutions are always 'for' something by some means. No doubt, this contributes to the appearance of functionalism in people's activity. What an institution is for is something that can be solved concretely only through understanding its history. But it not a total mystery. Institutions in general *solve some problem* or a complex or series of such problems, for *someone*, and in this sense have to be understood as the continuation of a social movement, or a number of such social movements. The pursuit of the recognition of a concept that provides the motivation for actors is quite explicit in a social movement, but this does not disappear when it achieves that crucial moment of realisation when it is institutionalised. Concepts likewise have to be understood as capturing the solution of some problem (Vygotsky, 1934, p. 126).

### Conscious awareness

The fact that people are not *consciously aware* of many of these social rules does not take away from the fact that insofar as they relate to institutional life, they are invariably learnt through some kind of instruction, whether formal or informal, and generally grasped through concepts, and as soon as any such rule is violated it springs immediately into conscious awareness.

So people understand what is required of them and are able to problem-solve when contradictions arise. This does not in itself however resolve the problem of an agent's motivation. An individual may not be wholly committed to a project and nor will a project have the same meaning for everyone. People are always committed to a number of different projects and it is the relation between the various projects that determines the nature of a person's commitment to any one of them. The classic example of this would be the wage earner whose commitment to their employer's institution is purely instrumental, and their leading activity may be raising a family, using their wages for that purpose. This is a limiting case however, and most employees have some degree of commitment to where they work or their profession. The web of commitments that motivates a person certainly cannot be adequately represented in terms of unmotivated routines serving to bolster someone's 'ontological security'.

The above reflections are intended to indicate that the psychological theory developed by Vygotsky and the Activity Theorists is well adapted to understanding the behaviour of 'agents' engaged in institutions and activities more generally, and is well grounded in many decades of psychological research. But the 'agents' as conceived of in this psychology have a *Will*, have resources that flow from their commitments, and within bounds are consciously aware of what they are doing.

According to Giddens:

Homeostatic system reproduction in human society can be regarded as involving the operation of causal loops, in which a range of unintended consequences of action feed back to reconstitute the initiating circumstances.

op. cit., p. 27

The concept of the boundedness of agents' knowledgeable ability in relation to their own activity encompasses the fact that in relation to social processes lying *outside* the sphere of their own immediate experience people may be profoundly ill-informed and misguided. Vygotsky used the term 'diffuse concept' to indicate the forms of knowledge that are constructed by extending local knowledge beyond the bounds of its validity. So even in relation to unintended consequences there is a psychological component. But also, unintended consequences belong to the domain of Ethics, and the acquisition of ethical norms is the business of Psychology.

### Conclusion

Giddens' key insights are that (1) social actors must be recognised as having significant knowledgeable ability concerning their own activity, while this knowledgeable ability is *bounded*, so that (2) social phenomena must be understood and explained in terms that include understanding the good reasons social actors have for doing what they do.

It seems to me impossible that social theory can resolve the dichotomy aptly characterised by Giddens as the dualism of structure and agency so long as sociologists continue to rely on Freud or improvised psychological theories. Vygotsky's Psychology and Activity Theory are *uniquely placed* to overcome a dichotomy that has its roots in the disciplinary structure of the academy.

Over and above his ungrounded psychological speculations, I see two specific methodological defects in Giddens' work: (1) that he makes his unit of analysis a *continuous process*, and (2) that he takes a taxonomic rather than a phylogenetic approach to analysis. These defects have prevented Giddens from achieving his goal of overcoming the dichotomy.

We are left with the domain of unforeseeable consequences as the exclusive domain of Sociology and Ethics, each drawing on the domain of the 'long view' in which events unfold over centuries. Foreseeable but unforeseen consequences remain within the domain where Psychology and Sociology overlap, where Sociologists must draw upon Activity Theory. For unforeseeable consequences, we must turn to Ethics.

To Activity Theorists, I say this: Activity Theory cannot be 'expanded' into a social theory, any more than Giddens' Sociology could be expanded into Psychology.

## 2. Alasdair MacIntyre's Virtue Ethics

Up till now, I have been concerned with *explaining* the manifestation of the Will in individual and collective actions. Now the question shifts: given your commitments (See Part III, §3), what is the *right* action to take? This is a different problem.

A person's actions follow from their commitments, but the shift from the explanation of *why* a person does something to discussing what a person *should do* requires me to go beyond the bounds of science – the unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences of every action.

If your aim is a remote ideal – such as socialist revolution or world peace – neither psychology nor sociology can determine the right course of action. Only virtue ethics, grounded in the traditions of social movements, can provide guidance.

In most instances, the aims of any action lie more or less within the domain of foreseeable consequences. Actors rely on the existing framework of law and custom to manage unforeseen consequences that result from the combination of their act with the actions of others.

However, many of us are motivated by ideals that transcend the norms of modern capitalism – *remote* ideals. For socialists, anarchists and pacifists, the problem of unforeseeable consequences is of fundamental significance.

As Hegel (See Part II, §4) and Anthony Giddens (See Part V, §1) have shown, there are unforeseen consequences to every action and some of these consequences are in principle unforeseeable. Sociology and Psychology do have some capacity to explain what people do given their situation. However, the concern of the subject is not that their action is explicable but that it be *right*. This is an ethical problem and not one that can be answered by Psychology or Sociology. The modern reflexive subject to which Giddens introduced us is also a subject acting according to ethical principles. As Marx said: 'An idea becomes a material force as soon as it has gripped the masses' (1843). The practice of an ethical principle likewise becomes a material force when a subject acts upon it.

In this chapter, I address the problem of the Will that has proved insoluble for both Sociology and Psychology – that of the unforeseeable consequences of any action. Hegel based his conception of the State on this same insight. The problem of what is to be done in the face of unforeseeable consequences can only be resolved by reference to Ethics.

As the discipline that answers the question 'what is the right action?', Ethics is an indispensable component of the science of the Will.

One strand of Ethics is uniquely equipped to meet this challenge in a way that makes sense on the basis of the theory of personality that I set out in Part III, §3. In that chapter I took the basic unit of the personality to be a commitment (*otnosheniye*) – a really-existing ongoing form of practice to which a person is committed. The virtue ethics of Alasdair MacIntyre is based on much the same concept, but he refers to it as a *practice*.

In appropriating MacIntyre's virtue ethics cannot ignore the fact that MacIntyre himself regarded modernity *in toto* as an unmitigated disaster and the conclusion he drew was a return to the Catholic Church and obedience to its tradition. However, there is no need to accept MacIntyre's analysis of the failure of the Enlightenment project. We already agree with the idea of a world made up of practices and traditions of practice sustained by virtues oriented to the furtherance of goods internal to practices. This feature of MacIntyre's virtue ethics makes it attractive for those of us engaged in radical social change activism.

## Practices

In appropriating MacIntyre's virtue ethics, I shall take MacIntyre's 'practice' to be a 'commitment' in the sense in which I used 'commitment' in my appropriation of Leontyev's theory of the personality.

MacIntyre defines a 'practice' as:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity.

1981, p. 175

He goes on to give examples: games such as chess or football, professions such as architecture, enquiries such as physics, chemistry or history, arts such as painting and music, and the creation and sustaining of households, cities and nations. All practices are oriented towards the achievement of some good.

A virtue is defined as:

an acquired human quality the possession and exercise of which tends to enable us to achieve those goods which are internal to practices.

op. cit., p. 178

Virtue is *meaningful* only in the context of the practice in which it is manifested. No human quality is *absolutely* virtuous.

Practices, as MacIntyre sees them, are components of a *tradition*. A tradition is an historically extended, socially embodied argument, and an argument precisely in part about the goods which constitute a tradition.

op. cit., p. 207

## Internal Goods

Participants in a practice are striving for some *good* that is intrinsic to that practice. However, participants may be motivated instead by *external* goods. The distinction between goods internal to a practice and goods external to the practice is crucial. The successful solution of a difficult problem in medical science is an example of an *internal* good. The Nobel Prize in Medicine, bringing with it fame and fortune, is an *external* good. In both cases, the scientists concerned experience pleasure, but only in the case of the internal good does the community as a whole receive a benefit. The enjoyment arising from the successful practice of medicine, for example, is not the end at which medicine aims. Rather this enjoyment *supervenes* upon the successful activity (1981, p. 184). This enjoyment is a by-product of pursuing the good of the practice, which is the well-being of patients.

Practices arise in response to some problem or opportunity with the formation of a concept of the problematic situation or of its resolution. The end (or 'motive' or 'intention') at which the practice aims is the normative concept that orients all actions within the practice, often giving its name to the practice. The concept of the end undergoes development as people learn by trying to realise it.

The good toward which the practice is directed is definitive of the practice even though both the practice and the concept of its aim change over time. The practice maintains a narrative unity as it undergoes historical development and changes both its ends and its means.

#### 'World-historical' practices

No action taken today will directly bring about Socialism. Any claim that a particular action is 'a step towards socialism' depends on a socio-historical theory that cannot be validated. For socialists, the question of what to do must therefore be one of ethics, not prediction. The socialist utopia is meaningful only as the concept of a social formation in which socialist ethics – the practice of the virtue of solidarity – has become universal.

I will use 'world-historical' to refer to activities, practices and traditions whose motive is the realisation of some *remote* state of the world.

National liberation, for example, is a category of practices for which MacIntyre's virtue ethics is relevant. However, the twentieth century has demonstrated that just *what kind of state* will emerge from a war of national liberation differs sharply from the ideal that motivated national liberation fighters and must also generally fall under the category of 'remote'.

I am not going to witness the overthrow of capitalism as the outcome of any action I take today, but some step in that direction would mark the success of an action. But such a judgment still depends upon some socio-historical *theory* that is generally an integral part of the relevant tradition.

A world-historical practice that is *not* aimed at taking small steps towards achieving the ideal that motivates it, may be a game or a fantasy of some kind, but it is not what I call world-historical practice. However, looking back at the history of the past two hundred years we can see that claims that any finite action is a step along the road to the socialist utopia has proved to be implausible.

For a socialist, the question of what is to be done at the present juncture must be one of socialist ethics. The conception of a socialist utopia is simply the image of a social formation in which socialist ethics is universal.

#### Institutions

MacIntyre distinguishes between institutions and practices. Institutions, he says, rely on external goods so as to sustain themselves and the practices of which they are the bearers. Good performances are rewarded, wages are paid for full-time commitment, and apprentices are given formal training by old hands. Education systems based on formal testing regimes, for example, lead to 'teaching to the test' rather than teaching to improve understanding and competency concerned. This illustrates how institutions can undermine the very virtues that they set out to sustain by the use of external rewards.

For no practices can survive for any length of time unsustained by institutions ... institutions and practices form a single causal order in which the creativity of the practice is always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution ...without the virtues ... practices

could not resist the corrupting power of institutions.  
op. cit., p. 181

I have argued above for the use of a concept of 'activities' in which institutions, social movements and ongoing social practices are all taken to be 'activities' at different stages in their lifecycle. Without external rewards and punishments of *some* kind provided from *outside* the practice itself, how are the practices to be sustained and the virtues fostered and maintained? Even informal social movements or volunteer organisations must recognise that people need benefits of *some* kind for the movement to survive. What MacIntyre says about institutions is an observation that applies to *all* practices, not just institutions.

In the early days of working class organisation, breaches of union discipline were punished with fines. Gradually, over a period of a hundred years, these sanctions faded away as the norms of unionism were internalised and new generations were raised in the necessary virtues. No one would argue that avoidance of such fines exercised a 'corrupting power', but the point is that the virtue of solidarity took a long time to become instilled in the broad mass of the working class, and fines became unnecessary.

### Virtue Ethics, Consequentialism and Deontology

There are three broad approaches to ethics: Consequentialism, Deontology and Virtue Ethics.

According to *Consequentialism*, the rightness of an act must be judged according to its consequences. There are two difficulties with this: (1) at the time of acting you do not know what the consequences of your action will be beyond the proximate outcome, and (2) how are all the myriad outcomes, good and bad, to be aggregated?

The most established version of Consequentialism, Utilitarianism, answers that the total utility (interpreted in economic terms) summed across all affected persons must be maximised. Apart from the implausibility of this calculation, it leads to perverse and unjust outcomes. It is perverse, for example, to rob many people of a small amount on the basis that the robber will get more enjoyment out of the proceeds.

However, the rejection of Consequentialism does not mean that a person should be indifferent to the consequences of their action. The reason for doing something is *always* the consequences of doing it. However, because there are always unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences to an action (and this is the crucial point), the worth of the action cannot be judged solely by its consequences.

According to *Deontology*, the rightness of an act must be judged by its conformity to a set of rules of the form 'Thou shalt ...' Foremost among these rules is the Golden Rule: 'Do unto others as you would have done unto you', and in modern communicative ethics (Habermas 1984, 1987), decisions about how to act must be made according to rules governing how *collective* decisions are made: consulting all those affected, benefiting the most disadvantaged, eschewing domineering or exclusionary speech.

The rejection of Deontology does not mean that there are no rules that people ought to consider in deciding how to act. On the contrary, rules matter. But *which* rule should one obey when two or more rules are in conflict?

Both consequences and rules will indeed inform our actions, but neither can offer comprehensive and reliable direction. Reflecting on abstract and implausible criteria while carrying out elaborate hypothetical calculations is just not how people actually make decisions.

This is not surprising because it would actually be impossible to make decisions in that way and attempts to do so invariably lead to perverse outcomes. It is when two or more rules conflict and we are called upon to decide *which* rule to prioritise or find a creative *via media* that ethics comes into play at all, and neither Consequentialism nor Deontology can help us when facing these kinds of quandaries. The richness of the vocabulary for virtues and vices – prudence, courage, self-respect, humility, intelligence, intuition, firmness, kindness, fairness, empathy, flexibility, consistency, ... versus carelessness, cowardice, hubris, insensitivity, ... – demonstrates the complexity of the process of determining one's course of action in difficult situations and the depth of personal character that is called upon to act wisely. For correct decisions we must rely upon the judgment of a person in command of the relevant virtues and in possession of all the facts. This is why we have judges and juries and we do not simply appoint a clerk to look up the legal provision relevant to the charge and read off the sentence. It always requires *judgment*, and the virtues needed to make a good judgment and carry it through can only be acquired through a moral education in the relevant tradition. Aristotle called the wisdom entailed in knowing how to act in the face of complex and conflicting imperatives *phronesis*.

In exercising *phronesis*, a judge, for example, takes into account foreseeable consequences of their decision and also attends to rules of conduct to ensure justice and fairness. Judges view the actions of those before them in the same way. Judges are (or should be) subject to a protracted education and training in the practice of the law in order to instil the appropriate virtues and develop the capacity for *phronesis*. There is no rulebook for this. But in every case, this judgment entails an indefinitely complex balancing that can never be definitively resolved by rules or a utilitarian calculus.

It is the tradition to which the practice belongs that provides the resources for the exercise of *phronesis*, the various rules of conduct, concepts and narratives that can be called upon in judging what to do. And there is no substitute – no abstract set of procedural rules or decision guidelines – that can substitute for the exercise of *phronesis* by virtuous actors, determining their action as participants in the relevant practice.

Virtue ethics offers a *realistic guide* for the exercise of *phronesis*, but does not exclude the need for deontological and consequential considerations, but on the contrary attends *realistically* to their application.

The point is that the consequences of, for example, adopting a certain organisational structure are significant in deciding whether to adopt the structure, but it takes judgment. One ought to know the proximate outcome of any decision one makes. For example, if adopting a 'horizontalist' structure for a

campaign will lead to failure of the campaign, this has to be taken into account and *weighed* alongside benefit the new structure offers. But the tradition of which one is a part and the self-concept of the practice, generally includes a body of social theory and concepts, rules and inferences to guide such a decision. Whether or not to let a campaign fail in the interests of, say, preserving relationships within the campaign and being able to learn from a failure – these are matters of judgment. To adopt virtue ethics is not to turn a blind eye to the proximate consequences of one's actions and certainly not to ignore the wisdom accumulated by the tradition over the centuries, encoded in its founding principles. It is to know how to apply them.

Making a virtue ethic the basis for an approach to social change activism means *cultivating* the capacity for ethical judgment, phronesis, among the activists and building organisations that are themselves virtuous, and not captive to rigid dogmas and procedural imperatives (deontology).

### Goals and Motives

One knows, or ought to know, the proximate outcome of one's actions. Any person or organisation bears moral responsibility for those outcomes and other unintended outcomes insofar as they were foreseeable. But a remote outcome such as socialist society (or world peace, or humanity living in harmony with Nature) is never such an outcome. By any reasonable judgment, any of these remote utopias is at least generations into the future. No course of action can be judged in consequentialist terms on the basis that its outcome will be socialist society or world peace. In the light of the experience of the twentieth century, only a fool could believe that.

An action has effects; these effects combine with the totality of conditions at the time and the responses of all the other players to produce a new configuration of conditions. One can never know the ultimate consequences of one's action. However, history is intelligible and the socialist, anarchist, feminist and environmentalist traditions have built up a body of social theory over the past two hundred years that provides rules of conduct and a capacity to analyse conditions and estimate the consequences of different conditions and events. There is always going to be room for argument about how the struggle may unfold. As Trotsky wrote in *The Revolution Betrayed* (1936): 'We can leave this question entirely to posterity, who will be more intelligent than we are'.

What Ethics can provide, however, that social theory cannot, is: guidance on how people can work together when they do not agree about this or that decision, or indeed, disagree with the whole tradition.

### Virtues and Practices

The traditional concept of 'virtue' is implicitly individuated, in that it refers to an aspect of a person's character. On the other hand, an aspect of an individual's character is only a virtue if its exercise contributes to the internal goods of the practice in which it is a participant, and what counts as the social good is determined by the social practice and the tradition of which it is a part. Further, character is shaped by participation in practices even though character is a *psychological* formation. Virtue references both a person and a practice.

This ambiguity is not unique to the concept of virtue. It would be mistaken to take knowledge, for example, as a psychological entity. What counts as knowledge depends on the practice in which it is realised, and individuals generally acquire knowledge through practical interaction with the institutions and cultural artefacts of a practice. Conversely, customs are taken to be attributes of a community, that individuals acquire through habit and conduct and enact.

I take virtue (and knowledge and custom) as in the first place *a property of a social formation*, practice or project, and *derivatively* a property of an individual. The virtues of a tradition are realised by individuals acquiring those virtues through participation in a practice that manifests that virtue. Like custom and knowledge, virtues should be understood primarily as attributes of a practice. Virtues are realised and manifested in the activities of the practice and *derivatively* as something acquired by individual human beings in and through their participation in the practice. We are all familiar with the inclusive social movement, the competitive sports club, the supportive self-help club, the solid union or the egalitarian community.

The starting point of our enquiry then is to determine those virtues that characterise anti-capitalist politics and how they are fostered by the practices that make up our tradition. This conception of *virtuous* political activities is the starting point, and it is reasonable to suppose individuals will acquire virtues by participating in virtuous political practices. Taking everything into account, the best possible outcome will result from the exercise of those virtues, if not some utopia.

This moves the discussion to the *virtues of social practices*, over and above the usual vocabulary of individuated virtues. As MacIntyre pointed out, the study of the virtues is fundamentally an *empirical* problem, not a theoretical exercise.

#### The ethics of social-change traditions

Social change practices are underpinned by the deontological maxim: *we* decide what *we* do. This is the progressive, secular version of the Golden Rule. The virtues of social change activism are developed on the basis of this maxim and the resolution of conflicts that arise from collective decision making. These virtues, in this specific sense, *prefigure* the kind of world we are fighting for, not 'in miniature' but concretely, in reality, here and now.

I have outlined the ethics of organisational practice in my book *The Origins of Collective Decision Making* (2016).

The characteristic virtue of the socialist tradition is *solidarity*. Solidarity means assisting another party under *their* direction. Solidarity is the virtue that fosters the development of Socialism, taken to be a historically extended social movement. In this sense, I say that the 'urpraxis' of Socialism is solidarity. The exercise of solidarity is the germ-cell from which Socialism can grow; Socialism is the kind of social formation in which solidarity is universal. I believe this to be true for an anarchist as much as for a Marxist.

MacIntyre does not attempt to specify what is absolutely good, and nor will I. That is a question for elsewhere. The concern here is not the ultimate justification of ends, but how an action is to be oriented in conditions where the

relevant consequences are unforeseeable. Different traditions pursue different conceptions of the good; the argument here concerns the conditions under which any conception of the good can guide action.

### Conclusion

There are three broad traditions of world-historical activism that reject the obvious existence of unforeseen and unforeseeable consequences of their actions. Instead, they substitute implausible appeals to long-view theories of history to justify otherwise unsupportable forms of activism.

First, the anarchist doctrine of 'prefigurative politics' that advises its adherents to act here and now *as if* the socialist utopia were already realised.

Second, the revolutionary socialist doctrine that the immediate task at hand is the construction of the revolutionary vanguard. This vanguard aims to lead the seizure of power and the implementation of Socialism on behalf of the working class at some future time.

I will deal with these two traditions in the following chapter.

A third route which I have not hitherto alluded to is *intentional communities*. Seeing no way of living a good life within the rotten conditions of capitalist society, some people choose to withdraw from mainstream society, build utopian communities and raise their children to be better human beings.

I will not dwell on this option, just warn anyone who is considering this road. This is one instance where it *is* possible to foresee the consequences of this action. It is possible because the withdrawal from the boundless context of everyday life into a finite community isolated from the outside world can lead only to one or all of three consequences: the community will become a cult dominated by one charismatic figure, or it will be forcibly dissolved by the state, or simply die a slow death.

## Part VI. Making a Difference

### 1. Activism and Utopia

This chapter is addressed to those who dedicate their lives to giving people a say in the lives beyond the limits currently imposed by modern capitalism. I address in particular those whom I have described as world-historical activists, that is, those whose actions are aimed at the achievement of a better world beyond the bounds of capitalism. All activists want to make the world a better place, but the world-historical activist is more ambitious; he or she wants socialist society, world peace and the abolition of capital.

I share this desire, as do millions of others. However, adherents of two important approaches to world-historical activism disregard the limits of foreseeable consequences of their actions making their aim a situation that is remote from the present. Hegel and Anthony Giddens have both drawn our attention to the danger of making this mistake.

Sometimes my criticisms may be overly sharp. This no doubt reflects my having spent about 15 years of my own life in the dead-end pursuit of the revolutionary party. By nature, I think I have more sympathy with the advocates of 'prefigurative politics', but I have also learnt that if prefigurative politics is to be taken seriously, it must also be *successful* politics.

Hegel believed that it was wrong to follow one's conscience to the point of civil disobedience, because such actions ignored the wisdom embodied in the existing norms and customs. One of the positive lessons which came out of the twentieth century however was that, on the contrary, civil disobedience proved to be one of most powerful elements of the struggle for a better world. The state does not have exclusive possession of the wisdom of the ages. Centuries of struggle for a better world has accumulated a valuable resource of wisdom embodied in the traditions of social struggle.

I will first deal with the anarchist doctrine of prefigurative politics, showing that it ignores foreseeable consequences and rests on an implausible theory of 'contamination'. I will then turn to revolutionary socialism which makes the converse error.

#### Prefigurative Politics

The anarchist doctrine of 'prefigurative politics' advises its adherents to act here and now *as if* the socialist utopia were already realised. But 'prefigurative politics' is not limited to pursuit of socialist utopias, and has deeply penetrated even grassroots local organising. It was first described by Jo Freeman in 1970 as antipathy to formal organisation of any kind, widespread in the emerging Women's Liberation Movement at the time. I will cite research that demonstrates that it is alive and well and doing damage even today in activism at the municipal level. It is the anarchists, however, who offer the most considered doctrine of prefigurative politics, so I will use Benjamin Franks as the voice of prefigurative politics.

Benjamin Franks draws extensively on Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics, which makes him particularly suitable as a protagonist. Franks proposes that:

anarchism ... and its distinguishing characteristic of adherence to *prefigurative* tactics ... is best considered as a social virtue theory compatible with the format developed by MacIntyre.

Franks, 2010, p. 156

So I have common ground with Franks.

If an action is to be judged in relation to the ideal that it 'prefigures', the action must be at least one small step towards achievement of that aim, or at least avoid a step backwards.

For the 'world-historical activist, such a judgment presupposes some *social theory* by means of which an action may be judged, *if successful*, as an 'internal good', namely, as a step towards the Socialist utopia.

I can say with certainty that we are not going to witness the triumph of Socialism as the outcome of any action taken by anyone today. However, some step in that direction would mark the success of an action, and activities are always aimed at achieving some outcome consistent with their ideal. A social change activity that is *not* aimed at taking some small step towards achieving the ideal that motivates it, may be a game or a fantasy, but it is not social change activism, whether world-historical or local.

It is the argument about what is or is not a step towards Socialism that constitutes the tradition to which anarchists and socialists belong. Franks' answer to this problem is the notion of *prefiguration*.

A virtue is a character trait that promotes the achievement of the goods that constitute the defining telos of some practice. MacIntyre does say, however, that the definition of virtues 'does not entail or imply that practices as actually carried through at particular times and places do not stand in need of moral criticism' (p. 187). Indeed, it is by means of the moral criticisms that take place through the interaction between practices within a tradition, 'as components of a shared unifying narrative', (p. 155) that practices are judged. Every practice has a telos, by definition (an aimless practice is a contradiction in terms), but a telos that is forever under revision. The virtue of a practice is guaranteed only by reference to the tradition of which it is a part, but ultimately, as Aristotle put it, on the basis that 'the good life for man is spent seeking the good life for man' (MacIntyre, p. 204).

The rejection of Consequentialism in favour of virtue ethics does not mean that a person should be indifferent to the consequences of their action. Franks seems to be suggesting this when he says, with reference to prefigurative methods: 'the employment of such methods is not justified consequentially'. On the contrary, a person is morally responsible for the foreseeable consequences of their action and, in the case of reckless action, unforeseeable consequences as well. An aimless action is not only reckless, it is a contradiction in terms.

Further, the rejection of Deontology does not mean that there are no rules to which people ought to consider in deciding how to act. On the contrary, every tradition of activism, through its experience, formulates rules that should be considered in deciding how to act. But *which* rule should one obey when two or more rules are in conflict, and mandate different actions? That is the problem.

Reflecting against abstract and implausible criteria while carrying out elaborate hypothetical calculations is not how people make decisions. This is all the more

true when the aim is the achievement of socialist society at some indefinite time in the future.

To make sound decisions, we depend on the judgment of people in command of the relevant virtues and well-informed. *There is no rulebook* for this. But participation and leadership in popular, progressive campaigns is the best possible context for acquiring such virtues. Cultivating such leaders and accumulating ‘corporate knowledge’ among all the participants is a vital part of activism, world-historical or local.

### Anarchism and Virtue Ethics

Franks repeatedly emphasises that ‘practical anarchism’ rejects Consequentialism:

Anarchist prefigurative methods are identifiable as they are the types of practices that would collectively build up to create their anti-hierarchical version of the flourishing society. However, the employment of such methods is not justified consequentially. Anarchists, for instance, employ anti-hierarchical forms of social interaction (for instance, in their formal methods of organisation) not because they will bring about their ends more quickly than centralised authoritarian political structures, but because they produce the very forms of social relationship, albeit in miniature, that they hope to achieve in the longer term.

op. cit., p. 146

The qualification ‘more quickly’ is beside the point. The argument about the merits of anarchist practices is not over how *quickly* Socialism can be attained, but how it can be attained at all. If Franks is saying anything, it is that the employment of anti-hierarchical methods can bring about Socialism and the employment of hierarchical structures and delegation *cannot*.

What is the theoretical basis for Franks’ claim?

Franks says that prefigurative practices will ‘collectively build up to create their anti-hierarchical version of the flourishing society ... albeit in miniature’. This is not an ethical argument; it is a *social theory*, namely, the theory that by creating a better world ‘in miniature’, a transformation of the entire world may eventually be achieved by ‘contamination’, to use the term coined by Maeckelbergh (2009), herself a prominent advocate of prefigurative politics. The general assembly (as in Occupy Wall Street), it seems, can ‘build up’ to a larger and larger meeting until the entire world is drawn into its anti-hierarchical structure. And all this without the use of delegates or representatives, that anarchists regard as inherently hierarchical.

Further, conceived as a social formation, Socialism is not a condition of society that can co-exist with vast differences in wealth, power and education. Actual differences in education, experience, and life-circumstances cannot be wished away by ignoring them. Socialism ‘in miniature’ is a fantasy.

Franks does not promote the use of the word ‘contamination’ but he does say that the practice of the virtues is ‘generative’, that is, that practice of the virtues promotes the further formation of virtuous character. It is more reasonable to

suppose that virtuous practices will serve to generate further such practices. This is, in general, a fair argument.

However, we have not seen evidence of this in the penetration of institutions by prefigurative politics. Prefigurative politics has proliferated through its influence among activists, but it remains marginalised, and seems likely to remain so. If this is to happen by some kind of moral education – generative or contagious – then we need a theory about why this should happen. It is not automatic.

Prefigurative politics is *not an ethical argument* at all, but a questionable social theory, the theory of *contamination*.

But let us look more closely. Franks argues that prefigurative politics is adopted *not for consequential reasons*. Suppose a non-hierarchical structure is adopted for a campaign for 'ethical reasons', and as a consequence, an important decision is not made in a timely manner, and the campaign fails. The argument would be that it was still right to adopt the non-hierarchical structure, despite it being the cause of failure, because the virtuous character of the practice will generate further experimentation with prefigurative politics. Further, in my experience, activists do *enjoy* this kind of activity in the same way as people enjoy cosplay. However, like cosplay, it has an inherently limited base. Granted though, external goods such as enjoyment are one element of organising.

There are circumstances in which it would be correct to eschew a tactic despite the fact that it may be the only way to produce the desired outcome. But in general, the process of contamination is unlikely to be effective in spreading non-hierarchical structures if they consistently lead to the failure of campaigns.

To employ a method without seeking to justify it consequentially *in order* to achieve Socialism by means of 'contamination' would be a performative contradiction, because the unstated consequence of contamination is a *hidden agenda*. To introduce a hidden agenda is *deceit*, inconsistent with the socialist objective. Unless members of the campaign have come along for cosplay it can be presumed that they joined *in order* to achieve some finite demand – to stop the demolition of a building, or the construction of a chemical dump.

The impact of prefigurative politics on grassroots activism in Manchester – a city with a proud history of socialist political struggle – has been recorded by Hooshyari (in press):

Taken together, these findings support the argument that organisational fragility in grassroots activism is not incidental but structurally produced. Specifically, fragility emerges through the interaction of: (1) horizontal organising practices that displace and obscure power rather than eliminate it; (2) weak mechanisms for transmitting organisational memory and experience; (3) limited strategic clarity and the absence of pathways for building power; (4) capacity constraints rooted in precarious and individualised conditions under neoliberalism; and (5) an affective climate of urgency, crisis and emotional strain that undermines continuity. These factors do not operate independently but reinforce one another, producing a cycle of formation, exhaustion and

dissolution that prevents the accumulation of durable organisational capacity over time.

As Jo Freeman noted 56 years ago:

As long as the women's liberation movement stays dedicated to a form of organisation which stresses small, inactive discussion groups among friends, the worst problems of unstructuredness will not be felt. But this style of organization has its limits; it is politically inefficacious, exclusive, and discriminatory against those women who are not or cannot be tied into the friendship networks. Those who do not fit into what already exists because of class, race, occupation, education, parental or marital status, personality, etc., will inevitably be discouraged from trying to participate. Those who do fit in will develop vested interests in maintaining things as they are.

Freeman, 1970

The question that confronts the activist is whether the need to achieve the proximate aim(s) of the campaign is *genuinely* in conflict with the need for a 'horizontalist' organisation. Suppose a group of workers are engaged in a campaign for a wage increase and a union delegate knows that they could convince the boss to grant the increase by spending a day on the golf course with him and making a secret deal. Such a means is corrupt and not justified by the end because of its negative impact on union organisation, loss of trust, and so on. What could be gained today would be lost tomorrow.

Consensus is not the only way of resolving differences in a campaign and protracted debates are not always the best means of resolving differences. Knowing the best way to resolve differences in a campaign requires the exercise of phronesis. A capacity that is acquired through long experience in organising and willingness to learn from experience and eschew dogma, and to know when to adopt one means of overcoming differences and when to adopt another.

The point is that the consequences of, for example, adopting a certain structure *are* significant in deciding whether to use it, but it takes judgment. One ought to know the proximate outcome of a decision one makes – for example, that the adoption of a 'horizontalist' structure for a campaign would lead to failure of the campaign, and this has to be taken into account and *weighed*. Successive failure of campaigns organised by prefigurative politics would *not* be generative of that practice, or likely any participation at all.

But the tradition of which you are a part and the self-concept of that tradition, that includes its social theory, provide the concepts, rules and inferences that will also guide you in making a decision. Deciding whether to let the campaign fail in the interests of, for example, preserving relationships within the campaign or being able to learn from a failure, is a problem that a tradition of practice has to confront. To adopt virtue ethics is not to turn a blind eye to the proximate consequences of one's actions and certainly not to ignore the wisdom accumulated by the anti-capitalist movement over the past two hundred years. The wisdom was encoded in the founding principles of the First International and the socialist and anarchist literature produced by the movement since. *It is to know how to apply it.*

Making virtue ethics the basis for an approach to social change activism means cultivating the capacity for ethical judgment, *phronesis*, among the activists and building organisations that are themselves virtuous, and not captive to rigid dogmas and procedural imperatives, including those of prefigurative politics.

Prefigurative politics usually turns out to be an outmoded deontology.

### The remote future

You ought to know the likely proximate outcome of your decisions. An organisation bears moral responsibility for those outcomes and other unintended outcomes insofar as they were foreseeable. But socialist society is never such an outcome. By any reasonable judgment, socialist society is generations into the future. No course of action can be judged in consequentialist terms on the basis that its outcome will be socialist society.

An action has effects; these effects combine with the totality of conditions at the time and the responses of all the *other actors* to produce new conditions, which in turn produce new outcomes. One can never know the ultimate consequences of one's action.

However, history is intelligible and the socialist and anarchist traditions have built up a body of social theory over the past two hundred years that provides rules of conduct and some capacity to analyse conditions and estimate the consequences of different conditions and events. There will always be room for argument about how this struggle may unfold. What Ethics can provide, however, is that which social theory cannot: guidance on how to work together when we do not agree about the efficacy of this or that decision. It is here that politics based on ethical sensibilities comes into play.

### Ethics and Utopia

If prefigurative politics is to be justified, it has to be on the basis of virtue ethics, but this does *not* imply that any given organisational structure is validated *irrespective of consequences*. 'Socialist society' – the utopian vision we share of a future world after the overthrow of capital – is not a 'consequence'. This is because it is impossible in principle to predict the arrival of such a society generations into the future, as a result of not just *our* actions, but those of *everyone else*. 'Consequences' are the *proximate and foreseeable outcomes* of decisions made and it is these for which we must take moral responsibility.

*'Socialist society' is a rendering of the ethics of socialism into utopian form.*

It is our *socialist ethics* that determine our actions along with the social theory that we have acquired through the practices of the anti-capitalist tradition. Our socialist ethics must be, as Franks argues, virtue ethics, which means we pay attention to the moral education of our activists so that they can exercise wise judgment in the struggle for justice and freedom. There are many differences in matters of social theory within our movement, despite the fact that we share a common vision of Socialism. But there is surely reason to believe that we could share an ethic.

From where does a socialist ethic arise? Not by transplanting a utopian vision of socialist society into the present, 'in miniature'. No. It is rather the other way around: the utopian vision of socialist society is a projection of our (somewhat)

shared socialist ethic on to a future world. This socialist ethic exists and develops precisely in and through the practices in which we all *collaborate* (both cooperating and conflicting). We work through our differences, make our mistakes and share our successes and failures, together. If Maeckelbergh's idea of 'reciprocal contamination' means anything it must mean the negotiation and internalisation of shared ethics in the course of collaborating in common projects. If this is the case, then it would be very helpful to elaborate this socialist ethics.

This is a very important and concrete task, because as Franks notes, there will never come a time when all conflicts have been resolved. To moderate the differences *within* the anti-capitalist movement is the most attractive way to develop the ethics of socialist society in which an even wider range of aspirations will coexist.

The posing of socialist society as an *end* is misconceived. It is not a question of bringing means and ends into conformity. Any attempt to do so can only lead to a barren utopianism by subordinating our means, today's organising practices, to a utopian world in which the socialist ethic has been universalised. In fact, when I do this, what is actually happening is that:

I begin with my ethics acquired in the here and now;

I then project them on to a future society in which everyone shares this ethos, and

I then deduce the ethics with which I actually began, but now with the illusory justification that it prefigures socialist society.

No, the socialist ethic must be justified in terms of the exigencies of organising here and now. 'Socialist society' has no determinate content other than the generalisation of the socialist ethic. But the socialist ethic is not something for the future: it is now. The means of our activity, including the consciousness of our fellow activists, are in fact elements of the capitalist society of which we are a part and which is the very object that we are trying to change. This is where the relation of means and ends is located, in the subjectivity of the social strata that are thrown into opposition by the development of capitalism itself.

Franks' definition of prefiguration as 'tactics [that] encapsulate the values desired in [our] preferred goals', comes close to what I am arguing. But virtues are not goals and why are the 'values' being introduced here? If we are introducing an axiology into MacIntyre's virtue ethics, this needs to be explained. 'Goal' is usually used to denote proximate aims, in contrast to more remote 'ends' that Franks 'hopes to achieve in the end' by means of prefiguration (p. 146). I do not find this argument coherent.

The social structures in which the socialist ethic might be universalised must remain obscure for some time. Franks claims (p. 141) that anarchism lacks 'determinate ends' and this must be true for all of us in this tradition.

Anarchists are relatively indifferent to the consequences of their actions; process is everything. The revolutionary socialist tradition takes the opposite stance. In possession of an infallible theory everything is subordinated to the achievement of an elusive but certain future. Both ignore the horizon of foreseeable consequences. In the next section, I turn to revolutionary socialism.

## The Revolutionary Party

It is widely accepted that an essential premise of Marx's theory is that Socialism must have a party as its vehicle. I do not accept this claim. To explain why, I will briefly review the historical record, beginning with Marx's engagement with 'revolutionary parties', then the present-day political terrain on the Left in my own country, Australia, and the theory and practice of party building by its contemporary advocates. I take Australia as my exemplar because it is the place I know firsthand. The political tendencies building 'the revolutionary party' in Australia are active in all the other 'liberal' capitalist countries, but the details differ from country to country.

In the next chapter, I will suggest an alternative approach in light of the present-day labour process.

### The history of the revolutionary party

Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848) for the Communist League. But there was no 'Communist Party'. In the mid-19th century, '*party* meant a political tendency, even if unorganised' (Draper, 1978). The Communist League, founded in 1847, was a small organisation whose constitution was modelled on those of 18th-century secret societies such as the Freemasons and the political *sociétés* (usually translated as 'clubs') of the French revolutionary period. Despite the threat of state repression, Marx and Engels worked to turn the League into a more suitable vehicle for a modern political movement. The 'Communist Party' of the *Manifesto*, on the other hand, was understood more in the way we understand 'the Left' today, rather than an organisation with a membership list. Marx intervened in the revolutions of 1848 by printing and distributing the *Neue Rheinische Zeitung* daily, financially supported by shareholders, with the aid of an editorial board and informal supporters acting as distributors.

In the UK, the Whigs and Tories were more like parties in the modern sense, but they oriented exclusively toward parliamentary representation, but without any active branches with internal lives. The Reform Act of 1832 had failed to extend the franchise to the overwhelming majority of the population, whose only avenue for political activity was to attend hustings and sign petitions. *The People's Charter* was published in 1838 calling for universal suffrage, and in 1840 the National Charter Association (NCA) was launched, borrowing its structure from the Methodist Church. However, its vibrant internal democratic activity was made illegal and brutally suppressed. By the time of the Communist League, the NCA was in decline. The third great petition had been rejected by Parliament and the British bourgeoisie blocked any possibility for political organisation or parliamentary participation by the working class. But Marx and Engels looked to the NCA as a model so far as possible, given the threat of state repression.

By the 1860s, the franchise was being gradually expanded in Britain. Trade unions were increasingly tolerated, now preferred by employers to employees organising secretly and open to radical influence. The International Workingmen's Association (IWMA, or First International) was founded in 1864, mainly by the London Trades Council, and was the first mass working-class organisation that Marx was part of creating. Under Marx's leadership, the

IWMA was based on the principles of solidarity and the self-emancipation of the working class, and was very loose in its attitude to membership. Organically embedded in the industrial working class of Europe, the IWMA was not involved in elections and did not foment revolutionary activity, being chiefly involved in industrial activity and education. The IWMA played next to no role in the Paris Commune and declined in the 1870s. This did not stop Marx and Engels working like Trojans: studying, writing, publishing, and occasionally lecturing.

In the decades following Marx's death in 1883, large masses of unskilled workers (i.e., workers outside the apprenticeship system) formed trade unions, and in Europe and later Britain, workers swelled the ranks of the parliamentary parties that formed the Second International. The largest, the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), originated in the Gotha Congress of 1875, when Ferdinand Lassalle's General German Workers' Association and August Bebel and Wilhelm Liebknecht's Social Democratic Workers' Party merged. Marx maintained a comradely but critical attitude to the new social democratic parties until his death in 1883.

Neither Marx nor Engels were ever a member of a revolutionary party.

In Russia in 1905, workers formed soviets, a new and distinct kind of working-class organisation. Members of the Russian Social Democratic Labour Party (RSDLP) participated alongside the politically active section of the Russian working class, while also maintaining a presence in the Duma after 1905.

Colonial and early 20th-century Australia had several small Marxist groups. The largest, the Victorian Socialist Party, founded in 1906, was active in the trade unions, founded the local branch of the IWW, worked inside the Australian Labor Party (ALP), and was popular among the working class of Melbourne. But it was still a very small group and had no aspirations to be a revolutionary vanguard.

### Working class organisation

At this point, the predominant form of political organisation in the workers' movement internationally was large formations that were organic parts of the class itself, in which various political factions participated. But the soviets and the labour and social-democratic parties existed independently of the Marxists; they were not the creation of Marxists.

Under Tsarist rule, the Bolshevik wing of the RSDLP could have no illusions in the parliamentary road, but universal suffrage was established by the February Revolution of 1917, and the Bolsheviks seized the opportunity. In the aftermath of the October Revolution, they took power on behalf of the soviets and founded the Russian Socialist Federative Soviet Republic, later the USSR. Notwithstanding the centrality of the soviets, it *was* the Bolshevik *Party* that led the Revolution at the head of the soviets, an achievement formalised by the change of name to the Russian Communist Party (Bolsheviks).

But within the particular circumstances of the Russian Revolution there is a universal element. The Soviets were founded in 1905, independently of the Bolsheviks and it was the Soviets that were the vehicle for the victory of the working class.

In South Africa, the African National Congress (ANC) was founded in 1912 as a political party. The South African Communist Party (SACP) participated as a leading element within the ANC but they never controlled it. It was the ANC that was the vehicle by which the anti-apartheid movement took state power, restoring the Republic of South Africa more or less to the model of liberal democracy. In both cases – Russia and South Africa – these Marxists were following Marx's example of participation in the IWMA.

Subsequently, the Third, or Communist, International (Comintern) set up communist parties internationally, in the image of the Russian Communist Party. But the Comintern could not will into existence the soviets that had made the Russian Revolution. The Communist Party of Australia (CPA) was founded in 1920, and the small Marxist groups that had been active before then, withered away, leaving the leadership of the workers' movement to the overlapping membership of the trade unions, the ALP, and the CPA. This formation largely remained in place, as in many other countries, until the 1960s.

### Making Revolution

Most of the parties that made revolutions during the period when the Comintern was interested in making revolutions were subordinate organs of the Comintern. What made the Chinese Revolution of 1949 was not a political party, but an *army* of peasants led by intellectuals and workers loyal to the Comintern. The leaders of the Red Army were recruited in the cities and sent to the countryside, where they were aided by the Soviet Union.

The revolution in Yugoslavia was likewise made by a partisan army, albeit in this case with unhelpful interference from the Comintern. Otherwise, all the regime changes in Eastern Europe were the result of the military conquests of the Soviet army. Subsequent revolutions in Africa and Latin America were made by guerrilla armies, not political parties, mostly with material aid from either China or the Soviet Union, as rival quasi-neocolonial powers.

The Cuban model, in part inspired by the Chinese Revolution, generated many emulators. Castro and Guevara did not trust the urban working class or the Cuban Communist Party. Instead, they went into the countryside, sustaining themselves with the support of the peasants, until marching back into Havana at the head of an army and seizing power in 1959.

Cuba is probably the best example of the road to Socialism that begins in the jungle. Daniel Ortega, leader of the Sandinistas, enjoyed for a while the adulation enjoyed by Guevara. Anastasio Somoza had ruled Nicaragua under a regime of torture until 1979 when Ortega & co. hijacked a plane with the Somoza's entire cabinet on board. The population welcomed him, but now, decades later, Ortega rules Nicaragua with a regime of torture more brutal than Somoza's.

The experience of Australia's CPA was not significantly different from that of Communist Parties in other countries in which 'liberal capitalism' ruled. At the end of the Second World War, in which the Soviet Union was an ally of Australia against Nazi Germany and bearing the brunt of the fighting, the CPA had a high profile. Its membership was estimated to be 22,000 in a population of 7.5 million, and it led a large faction in the trade unions, holding 8 of the 18 seats on the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU) General Council. It could

indeed be said that the CPA was the organic leadership of the Australian working class, even though its policies were controlled day-by-day from Moscow. But only once in its 70-year history was a member of the CPA elected to Parliament at state or federal level (Fred Paterson, member of the Queensland Legislative Assembly, 1944–50). Australian workers have been happy to have communists leading their trade unions, but not in charge of the government.

The CPA wound itself up in 1989, and launched the New Left Party that lived only long enough to wind itself up 1992. By this time, the CPA resembled a quaint association of old people.

Today, the Left in Australia somewhat resembles the Left in its condition prior to the October Revolution, differing only in the number of small Left groups that compete for the larger population of non-ALP socialists.

This is the sense in which I say that the 20th century turned out to be a mistake.

Apart from October 1917, political parties have not made revolutions. Revolutions have been made by armies of one kind or another. Political parties have been part of opinion formation and the political education of the masses, but they have not actually made a socialist revolution. Parties are governments-in-waiting. Whether the road to power lies through a parliamentary election or a military conquest or by some other route, that will determine the kind of leadership required. Parties may be a factor in opinion formation, but generally the job of opinion formation is the work of *social movements*, not parties.

Where states have been created by victorious armies, the resulting product has generally been unattractive to anyone who wanted a reasonable standard of living, a voice in political life, and social peace. Granted, many have avoided the worst features of neoliberal capitalism, but they did so at the expense of social and economic development and the normal kind of freedoms enjoyed in the capitalist world. Granted too, that the suffering of people in such ‘socialist’ regimes was in great measure imposed on them by the United States and their allies.

But I have to give something to prefigurative politics here. Jesus said (Matthew 26:52): ‘all who take up the sword will perish by the sword’. We can coin a variation on this aphorism: ‘all who liberate by the sword will rule by the sword’.

The political landscape in Australia today

If you live in a country like Australia where universal suffrage is in place and is implemented fairly, then you should know that changing government policy is not achieved by changing the government. First of all you must change the opinions of the voters, even if governments do persist in doing things that their voters hate. The general rule is: don’t try to persuade the politicians, persuade the voters.

Generally speaking, however, the class that controls civil society controls government, and this is more true than the converse, i.e., controlling government does not necessarily bring with it control of public opinion, even though governments hold many powerful levers to that end, and can still determine activity in civil society in the face of public hostility or the hostility of capital.

Capital has at its disposal vast means for the control of public opinion. Capitalists own the means of communication and largely determine the content of all public communication through ownership of industry, property, and money. They shape the 'common sense' of the working population by controlling the experiences people have in their working life as employees, and by means of the laws of economics, which are but the ideal form of the bourgeoisie and saturate the cultural atmosphere with advertisements and all kinds of diversion.

This may well be true even some time *after* the socialist revolution.

The *Manifesto of the Communist Party* states that 'the first step in the revolution by the working class is to raise the proletariat to the position of ruling class, *to win the battle of democracy*'.

This first step remains before us.

The central factor today is the nature of the modern labour process. The working class of today is no longer the serried ranks of blue-collar workers who lived in vast urban concentrations serving the Fordist factories. Solidarity was a condition of life for these people. Today's workers, especially in the private sector, are highly differentiated and individualised by the nature of their work and employment conditions. Knowledge workers form a substantial sector of the working class and manufacturing and mining make up a shrinking section of the working class in the advanced capitalist countries.

This is not simply a negative. This is a working class that *could* run the economy without the organising power of capital or its representatives. But they do not move as a mass, and they do politics differently.

We know all the advantages the bourgeoisie has in 'the battle of democracy,' but the working people also have advantages, the advantage of numbers, that the working class has always enjoyed, but now also the advantage of concrete knowledge of how to run an economy. Whatever the barriers to winning the battle of democracy, these are the same barriers that bar the way to social revolution. They are lower barriers, however, because it takes a greater commitment to actually launch a civil war than it takes to vote for a party advocating Socialism. But there is no way of bypassing public opinion.

A social revolution cannot be made without the support of the overwhelming majority of the politically active population, but nor can a 'liberal' capitalist democracy be maintained without that support.

### Building the revolutionary party

Not every socialist is concerned with changing government or government policy. Taking the long view, some socialists work to bring about socialism at some future time, and in their view governments have little to contribute to that aim. They claim that Socialism can only arrive via socialist revolution because the capitalists will only relinquish their property in the face of overwhelming force, and that can only be brought to bear under the leadership of a revolutionary party. While the government formally has the capacity to expropriate property, the enormous power of capital, in the world economy and domestically, militates against this. In the 125 years of universal suffrage in Australia, elected governments have not had the power or the will to expropriate capital.

In the wake of the Second World War, Clement Attlee's Labour government in the UK (1945–51) carried out extensive nationalisation of industry when political and economic conditions made it possible and arguably necessary. But they never took measures to expropriate capital or disarm the military, and the postwar period unfolded in the UK as in other 'liberal capitalist' countries, albeit with an exemplary National Health Service.

Revolutionary socialists argue, however, that the leadership of the revolution and the readiness of the working class for revolution must be prepared in advance. Preparation for a violent revolution has little to do with improving life here and now. Thus the dichotomy: reform or revolution.

As Marx noted in *The Civil War in France* (1871): 'the working class cannot simply lay hold of the ready-made state machinery, and wield it for its own purposes'. This is true.

Today, the preparation for a future revolution is conceived of in terms of the size and influence of a revolutionary party that grows from a presently existing embryo to ultimately seize power on behalf of the working class, having transformed itself into the organic leadership of the working class. One of the 20-odd little revolutionary parties will stand out from the crowd and lead the revolution.

As a result, the explicitly political landscape is inhabited by three types of animal: (1) political parties, or governments-in-waiting oriented towards winning elections and implementing their program through the state apparatus; (2) revolutionary groups propagating the conception of socialist revolution and preparing the general staff of a future revolutionary army; (3) social movements working at changing public opinion on specific issues with the aim of forcing governments to act on these issues by convincing the voters. Social movements are frequently active in dealing with the issue themselves, uninterested in becoming a government either by voting or by revolution. Although there are hybrids such as the trade unions – institutionalised social movements – these tasks are more or less mutually exclusive, and these organisations are generally clear about their *raison d'être*.

No one today seriously repeats the slogan 'After them, us' by which German Communists in the 1930s expressed the belief that life would be so terrible under the Nazis that people would vote for the Communist Party of Germany. Beyond this, there is such a thing as what Nancy Fraser (2003) calls 'nonreformist reforms' – that is, measures that can win widespread support on their own merit here and now, but at the same time actually improve the self-confidence, unity, and fighting capacity of the working class. The British NHS is a prime example of such a reform. The abolition of all anti-union laws and the guarantee of access to the best possible quality of education and health services improve the prospects for a successful and lasting social revolution, even though they militate against the *immediate stimulus* to endure the civil war that will ultimately be needed to defend these conditions.

It is generally the *taking away* of these benefits, rather than a long-held desire for that benefit, that stimulates people into political action. Some benefits, like a good public health system, are *extremely* difficult to take away. In any case, any advocate of Socialism, whether or not they believe that social revolution is

necessary to achieve it, is duty-bound to work for such reforms. Not all reforms have this character. For example, measures that aim to foster small business and self-employment may improve life under capitalism for some, but they complicate the road to Socialism. Even then, socialists are obliged by the duty of solidarity to support any person seeking to pull themselves up unless by the exploitation of others.

The *Slackbastard* blog (2025) enumerates 20 groups dedicated to preparing for social revolution in Australia, even before it gets to the 'see also'. The largest and evidently 'most successful' of these is the latest iteration of Tony Cliff's tendency, now known as Socialist Alternative (SAlt), that split from the now-defunct International Socialist Organisation (ISO) in 1995. SAlt makes it clear that socialist revolution is unlikely to break out in Australia:

It is much more likely that revolution will wash onto our shores only after major revolutionary waves appear in other parts of the world and global capitalism is beginning to falter, throwing our own society into turmoil – making existing problems worse, exposing new ones, while inspiring people to do something about them by following the lead of people overseas. . . . When it does, the question will not be, 'Can it happen here?' The question will be, 'How can we win?' The answer to that will depend to a large degree on how many people have already been trained as activists and know how to organise people, how many people have studied other revolutions and their dynamics and can apply the lessons learned by millions of people in previous attempts to change the world, how many people understand the ways different social classes mobilise to defend their interests. In short, it will depend on how organised our side is.

Hillier, 2022

The above verges on the self-evident. If there were a revolution originating in Australia, it would likely be crushed by international capital. A successful revolution would likely arise only as a part of an enormous social crisis originating outside Australia's borders. But this tells us nothing to justify the project of revolutionary groups who build their party on the assumption that it is *they* who are preparing the general staff for the future social revolution, and not someone else. I'll return to this, but they are right when they say, 'In short, it will depend on how organised our side is'.

This is the *raison d'être* of SAlt: to train activists and organise in preparation for the revolutionary upsurge that could follow a revolutionary crisis overseas. This is an interesting variant of the former DSP's *raison d'être*, whose aim was to lend aid to revolutions overseas.

The project of SAlt is to become a Bolshevik Party. Young people can be inspired by this project, and willingly devote themselves to the party. But SAlt are far less committed to the success of the projects in which they participate alongside other people.

SAlt originates from a group expelled from the ISO in 1995. Contrary to the ISO, whose practice consistently exhibited this lack of interest in the goals of any campaign it participated in, SAlt claims to practice 'a combination of arguing

principled socialist politics and involving ourselves wholeheartedly in the campaigns that emerged' (Armstrong, 2022). The following excerpts are taken from an authoritative reflection of the historical origins of SAlt by Mick Armstrong, originally written in 2010:

[Because of the deteriorating combativity of the workers' movement,] new recruits, if they are to remain actively involved and be confident to recruit other people, have to be politically convinced through serious discussion, political branch meetings and reading groups, combined with well thought-out interventions into whatever struggles and debates that arise. ... for a socialist group of a few hundred to operate successfully it needs to understand that it is nowhere near to being a mass party that can lead any significant layer of workers in struggle. Instead it has to be clear that it is reliant on its ideas to influence relatively small numbers of people. ... With over 100 student activists we have by far the largest base of any left group on the university campuses and at the same time we have gradually built up a layer of members who are activists in a range of trade unions ... We were even more right to resist the fantasy that in the space of a few short years a couple of hundred socialists could by an act of will and organisational quick fixes decisively break out and achieve a mass working-class following. With the ISO defunct, the challenge facing us in Socialist Alternative is to take the next step forward and begin to lay the basis for a serious current in the working class based on the politics of international socialism.

*ibid.*

Even more than in 2010, SAlt is the largest of the groups on the Left in Australia, but there is not the slightest sign of them 'breaking out' with a mass working-class following. They have some members who have retained their membership after leaving university and are now in trade unions. That is all.

Via its electoral vehicle, the Victorian Socialists, SAlt has not won a single local government position, although in 2022 it did win 4% of votes and retain its deposit in *one* region with a progressive, largely blue-collar and immigrant population. Their state-wide level of support in Victoria has been around 1% in general elections and went as high as 2% in some local government elections. The Victorian Socialists election platforms are firmly within the bounds of 'reformism', and are addressed to the present-day consciousness of the most politically active sections of the population, broadly drawn from the same menu of policies as is offered by the Australian Greens, not socialist revolution.

Judged by active membership numbers and election results, SAlt is dwarfed by the Greens, who get about 12.5% of the vote nationally and hold 33 lower house seats at state, one federal seat (although it was four before 2025), and over 100 local government seats. If SAlt gets much less support than the Greens, it is *not* because they are too radical. The programs of the two parties are very similar. It is something else. For one, the voters take the Greens' platform at face value, whereas most voters will know that the Victorian Socialists are putting forward a social-democratic program, *not* the program of their component parts, such as SAlt. Given the limited impact that SAlt has on the consciousness of the wider

population, it is fair to suppose that the vote they get is mainly a response to the word 'socialist' on the ballot paper. I do not think that the standing of the word 'socialist' in Australia has fallen to the level suggested by the vote for the Victorian Socialists however.

Nevertheless, it is not for want of eager volunteers that SAlt wins a much smaller vote than the Greens. The party that tells its members that they are Bolsheviks tends to more readily inspire sacrifice from its members than an electoral party like Greens. However, the Greens are a small part of a much larger social movement that *does* inspire dedication to the cause. This is what SAlt lacks. The significant impact of the Greens in elections results from their organic connections to a much larger social movement.

Armstrong's critique of SAlt's predecessor, the ISO, hinges mainly on the ISO's inability to take the temperature of the working class and its disorienting of the membership with hyperactivism on the basis of delusions of the approaching 'break out'. Recognising that a revolutionary crisis was not itself going to sustain the revolutionary consciousness of their members, Armstrong advises more attention to the education of members in socialist ideas, as opposed to over-ambitious and invariably disappointing activism. However, Armstrong defends the ISO against the charge that 'the idea that selling a socialist paper, arguing for socialist ways to build a campaign, and recruiting activists were sectarian 'raiding' – the classic red-baiting phrase of reformists' (*ibid.*).

I suspect that SAlt continues these practices because even in criticising the practice of the ISO, Armstrong retains the same metrics of success. Countless times in the past, I have been involved in a campaign alongside other workers when a group of young 'socialists' from the ISO or some other 'revolutionary group' turn up with copies of their paper under their arm and possibly carrying banners or placards bearing the party's logo. Workers always politely welcome the offers of support, but it is generally obvious to all that these young fishers are here to recruit, sell papers, and in one way or another increase the size and influence of their group, with little commitment to the actual aims of the campaign.

In his historical review, Armstrong repeatedly refers to membership numbers and paper sales as metrics of the success or otherwise of the group (as have I in the above comments). This is consistent with SAlt's self-conception that it is building the general staff of a future Bolshevik Party, but is at odds with the idea that the role of the group is to advance the struggle for Socialism as it is here and now – that is, the socialist ethic. For the revolutionary socialist, the idea that a person may resign the party, but nonetheless, go on to be a good fighter for socialism is a contradiction in terms.

In his historical review, Armstrong makes no single reference to a *campaign success* that SAlt can claim as its achievement. 'Participation' in campaigns is a *technique* that is subordinate to the objective of swelling the ranks of the party. The metrics of success are membership numbers, attendance at party events, and sales of party publications, not the success of the campaign.

Any businessperson or public servant should know that the company's mission statement plays little role in the behaviour of employees compared to its KPIs

and the remuneration structure attached to the KPIs. Membership numbers and paper sales take the place of KPIs and remuneration in the party.

The aim of SAlt is to build SAlt. This is literally self-serving. This commitment is a negative with respect to the campaigns and organisations in which SAlt intervenes. Armstrong writes,

Student union officers have to be won to revolutionary politics, be subject to the discipline of the organisation and publicly identify as socialists – selling *Socialist Alternative* magazine and so on.

*ibid.*

To the contrary, in 1929 Trotsky wrote:

In the trade unions, the Communists, of course, submit to the discipline of the party, no matter what posts they occupy. This does not exclude but *presupposes their submission to trade union discipline*. In other words, *the party does not impose upon them any line of conduct that contradicts the state of mind or the opinions of the majority of the members of trade unions.*

1929

So, when SAlt recruits a genuine fighter in some campaign or union, Armstrong tells us that the first task is to weaken their sensitivity to the state of mind of the people who they were formerly struggling side-by-side with, and any impulse to align with the workers, and ultimately to transform themselves into a party member dedicated to the KPIs of SAlt.

SAlt are doubtless correct that social revolution will come to Australia only as part of a worldwide crisis and that the prospects of socialism in Australia will depend, on one hand, on events beyond our control and outside our own borders, and, on the other hand, on the readiness of the working class in Australia to take state power and abolish capital. However, the very last thing the Australian working class will need at *that* crucial moment is a party that bases itself on the claim that it has inherited the right to lead the revolution and take state power ‘on behalf of the working class,’ while continuing to orient itself to measures of its own power and influence rather than of the progress in the strength and self-confidence of the workers’ movement. Whatever policy such a ‘revolutionary’ government implemented (were it to hold state power), the move from universal suffrage in a parliamentary system to rule by a small party constituting itself as the leadership of a class with which it has little actual organic connection, is socially and politically a significant regression. This would be true even if SAlt did ‘break out’ into a million-strong party.

A revolutionary party that could not win a majority in a fair election based on universal suffrage is unlikely to win the active leadership of the vast majority of the working people in a period of turbulence such as would be the likely context of a socialist revolution. Further, to make a socialist revolution requires not just the support but the *active participation* of the vast majority of the working population. The seizure of state power by one party as the leadership of just one class in society, and not the vast majority, would inevitably lead to a tyranny, as it has in the past.

A century of trying to emulate the Bolsheviks has been as fruitless as Lenin (1920) indicated in his pamphlet on the ‘infantile disorder’.

I agree, however, that a socialist revolution in Australia presupposes an enormous, worldwide social and economic crisis, a situation in which events are inclined to move very fast. It may well be that such a revolution will be in defiance of a parliamentary majority, but only because of the rapid pace of events, and *not* because the revolutionary socialists could not command a majority.

The conditions today

The working class in Australia today is no longer the industrial working class that Marx presupposed. The membership of the trade unions might at first glance seem to be a rational and objective estimate of what is meant by 'the working class', but union density is currently about 13% and the great majority of these union members are in state-funded occupations such as administration, education, and care. Sales and finance, in contrast, are very weakly unionised. Blue-collar tradespeople and operatives are numerically negligible, even though their social significance exceed their numbers. The Construction, Forestry and Maritime Employees Union and Maritime Union of Australia notwithstanding, the majority of employees in the private sector are not union members.

Given a working population with this degree of objectively manifested social solidarity, Australia is not yet ready for social revolution. We communists have a long way to go to 'win the battle of democracy', until membership of the unions (or some new formation that might overtake our unions) is much larger across both the public and private sectors. To win such a battle also presupposes large and lively social movements and political groups such that the majority of the population is *actually engaged in the political process*. Achieving the support of the vast majority for a socialist revolution is probably generations away. Speculation *beyond* this is idle.

Just as parliamentary democracy is said to be the ideal state form for capitalism, the ideal state form for fostering of an anti-capitalist revolution is a parliamentary democracy supplemented by thoroughgoing democratic intervention in every aspect of social life to an extent that would make parliament redundant. Insofar as revolutionary socialists seek to prepare for a future social revolution, the best we can do is foster participation in economic, political, and social life by the largest possible number of people, using whatever avenues are available to accustom people to take responsibility for running this or that area of public life where they live.

At the same time, it is necessary to support 'nonreformist reforms,' such as protecting and extending the Australian Broadcasting Corporation, cutting off the advertising revenue of the capitalist media, expanding education, ensuring the greatest possible level of participation in political life, breaking the stranglehold of the billionaires on social media, and so on.

It is still not possible to justify such activity on the basis that they constitute small steps towards Socialism. But the promotion of wider participation in social and political life and 'nonreformist reforms' need not be justified on this basis because this kind of activity is part of the socialist ethos itself here and now.

Everything that I have said above in connection with 'prefigurative politics' is applicable to those who justify their activity on the basis that building the

revolutionary party is the necessary step towards socialist revolution and therefore Socialism. The consequences of any action you take here and now to *build the party* is just as likely to serve the counter-revolution as to be a step towards Socialism. The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.

As I remarked above, *there is* an element of truth in the concept of prefiguration. The *party ethos* has proved to be astoundingly enduring given the slim benefits it has brought to the socialist project. Generation after generation of young people, repulsed by the abominations of capitalism and inspired by the dream of universal solidarity, join a party. But as we have seen, being a party member demands that you *distance* yourself from the concerns of the broader workers' movement and adopt the ethos of a disciple.

### Social Movements

The myriad activities that make up the modern world include one that is most important, not only for world-historical activists, but for *anyone* who craves a say in how the world works.

Social movements cannot be summoned up from nowhere. They arise only where conditions are right. Invariably, however, they begin with a *transgression* of some kind, either refusal of social mores or customs, civil disobedience, or simple acts that arise from the problems of everyday life that push someone into unwilling or unwitting conflict with the state.

The 18th and 19th centuries gave us the anti-slavery movement, the first social movements of the modern world. The 20th century gave us the Peace Movement, the great Civil Rights Movement, the unstoppable Women's Liberation Movement, and ... they are now innumerable. None of these movements overthrew a government. But they *did* change the world.

This is not the place to give advice on how to build a social movement, any more than it is the place for advice on building a party. But the great movements of the twentieth century show us that activism can achieve social change. Taking account of this must be a precondition for any – Heaven help us! – more ambitious project.

Revolutionary socialists have a word for those who advocate for activism to be oriented towards social movements rather than parties – movementism. I add to what I have already said only by saying that the builders of revolutionary parties should only *hope* that their parties transform themselves into social movements. Nothing would better mark the success of their project than that. Social movements are insufficient for a socialist revolution, but they are the *sine qua non* of any social change, revolutionary or not.

### Conclusion

There is a relative, though obvious, truth to the notion of 'prefiguration'. Doing the right thing is generative, but what the 'right thing to do' is very much depends on the conditions at the time. Practices that lead to failure and disorganisation are generative only of more failure and disorganisation.

Practices that are successful here and now are not necessarily successful or appropriate in other times and places.

I have shown that the two main paradigms of world-historical activism fail because they base their activity on remote aims beyond the horizon of what can be foreseen and judge their success by metrics that are self-serving.

In the next chapter I will outline very briefly how those of us who are motivated by world-historical ideals can realise our ideals in the here and now in a way that is genuinely generative. The chapter will be brief, because I have already said everything that can be said outside the concrete situation to which you are responding. All that remains is to outline the conditions under which a person's actions can really make a difference in the world.

Socialism has to be grasped as an *ethic*, in particular, as the ethic of solidarity. If someone is struggling, they deserve your support, and your support must be given, if at all, under *their* direction, not yours. Solidarity is good here and now, and it is generative. To determine the meaning of solidarity in any given circumstance requires phronesis. Solidarity has to be interpreted in the light of the principle that 'the good life for man is spent seeking the good life for man' and sometimes solidarity is simply out of reach.

Under what conditions will solidarity become the universal principle of social life? Hard to say at the moment.

## 2. The Social Change Agent

This chapter is addressed to fellow socialists of any stripe.

### Solidarity

By 'socialist' I mean a person or organisation that is committed to the socialist project, whose universal principle is *solidarity*. So let me reiterate what I mean by 'solidarity'.

*Solidarity* entered the English language from the French at the Chartist Convention in London in April 1848 and was popularised by Julian Harney of *The Northern Star* and Ernest Jones in *The People's Paper* – leader of the left-wing of the Chartists and supporters of the Communist League, for whom Marx and Engels wrote the *Manifesto of the Communist Party*.

The 1864 Rules of the International Workingmen's Association began with the maxim: 'the emancipation of the working classes must be conquered by the working classes themselves', and went on to say that all efforts at the emancipation of the working class had hitherto failed for want of solidarity. These two principles – self-emancipation and solidarity – together make the irreducible and inseparable foundations of the socialist movement.

The French workers had adopted the word *solidarité* on the barricades of Paris following the first working-class uprising against the bourgeoisie. The French had learnt the hard way that without solidarity the army could defeat them one barricade at a time, as they had in 1832. The anarchist, Pierre-Joseph Proudhon (1840), also called for 'universal solidarity'. By 1848, the Chartist movement, that had united the disenfranchised 5/6 of the population of Britain against the ruling bourgeois class, had also learnt their lesson the hard way. The *Northern Star* (1850) wrote: 'Communism, taken as a whole, means a reorganisation of all the elements of society, so as to create a solidarity of interest'. The *People's*

*Paper* declared: ‘the solidarity of the people would one day be realised, and if it did not secure its fruits in 1848, it was not the people's fault’ (6 November 1852). The two founding principles of socialism – self-emancipation of the working class and solidarity – are inseparable. That self-emancipation is necessary is almost self-evident. If the working-class\* is to take public political power, it can equip itself for that task only through the work of freeing itself and abolishing the conditions of its own exploitation. No one can do that on their behalf. This process of self-emancipation is how working-class self-consciousness is constructed. Without a struggle for self-emancipation, there can be no working class, only billions of individual wage workers, socially and politically controlled by their masters.

The opposite of self-emancipation is attaining freedom as the gift of another party. Such a thing is impossible. A class that is freed by the action of another class or group is only thereby subordinated to its liberators, even if the liberators are well-meaning. How, then, is a socialist group, whether a political party or a mutual aid organisation like the First International, to foster the liberation of the working class if the liberation of the working class is to be *its own* achievement. The answer to this lies in the principle of *solidarity*.

The need for solidarity arises from the fact that the working class does not come into the world ready-made as a single, homogeneous, organised stratum of society. It comes into the world divided into economic strata, trades, and national, religious, and ethnic groups, and spread across the globe in numerous cultural and linguistic communities. It can only realise its own emancipation by uniting all of these disparate sections into one movement with common aims. Along the way, the aims of different sections of the class may differ, but they retain their autonomy within the movement remains until they voluntarily submit to a shared discipline.

When one group finds itself under attack, *provided they fight back*, then other sections of the workers’ movement have a duty to come to their aid. This duty and its practice is called ‘solidarity’. The results of solidarity are three-fold. In the first place, as a result of the aid received from others (including non-proletarian forces) the struggling group may survive. Secondly, they learn who their friends are, and coming at their hour of need, they will not forget this.

But more importantly, through their struggle, whether the struggle is successful or not, their collective class-consciousness, self-determination and self-confidence are enhanced. However, this is not automatically the case; sometimes ‘helping’ someone is a violation of solidarity.

If another group comes in and rescues them, then the ‘rescued’ group may be grateful, but their working-class self-consciousness is not enhanced, but actually subsumed under that of the rescuing party. Indeed, this is often the reason for mounting a rescue mission. Philanthropic organisations may rescue people in distress in the hope of recruiting them to their own religious doctrine.

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\* I use ‘working class’ to refer to the entire class of people who depend on wages, or similar, for their living and their savings. But I interpret this category politically, depending on a person’s commitments.

But there is an even more pressing danger involved in rescuing groups in distress. Coming from outside the concrete conditions in which a group is struggling, the rescuer will be ignorant of the terrain and more often than not, in their well-meaning efforts, actually make things worse. For example, strikers often rely on social pressure within a community to deter scabbing, but when an outside group comes in and throws their weight around, they can undermine delicate relationships, which makes it easier for the scabs to force their way through, and when the outside agitators leave the strikers find themselves in a worse situation.

The principle of solidarity, that guides how different sections of the workers' movement come to each other's aid, avoids such dangers and helps ensure that the self-consciousness of both the struggling party and the party offering solidarity is enhanced in the very process of bringing them closer together. It is a simple rule:

When coming to the aid of another party, do so under *their* direction.

You do it their way, not your way. If your beliefs are such that you cannot place yourself under their direction, if you believe that they are so misguided, then solidarity action is impossible. But if they are part of the workers' movement then ensuring that they are not defeated remains important, and you will surely be able to find *some* way of supporting them according to their own practices. This may be by donating to their fighting fund or sending a message of solidarity or whatever. But if you are going to participate in the struggle of another section of the workers' movement, then the principle of solidarity demands that you do so *under their direction*. The working class is unified by voluntary association, not by conquest.

Every part of the workers' movement is obliged to offer solidarity to other parts of the workers' movement and its allies, however remote they may be. If the demands of solidarity, as outlined above, make solidarity action either impossible or undesirable, then there are other options.

If the struggling group is *not* part of the working class or one of its allies, then you may decide to intervene according to your own practices. Equally, you could simply join in their struggle on the other side.

If the other party is pursuing a *common end*, but there is no possibility of collaboration – as is frequently the case with parties sharing a common enemy but little else – then mutual 'exchange' or instrumental collaboration is in order. This means *negotiating* a public agreement to coordinate each other's actions in an agreed way that meets the objectives of both parties. This is the basis of alliance politics, which is appropriate for actions such as protests, in which the various participants have nothing in common except for being against the IMF, or such like.

In particular, all human beings share the same Earth and the environment that sustains life. Of all the forms of collaboration the ancient Greek city-states developed, the most enduring was the *amphictyony* (see Bederman, 2001), in which a number of states bound themselves and each other to maintain and defend some sacred place. The greatest of these, the one responsible for maintenance of the Oracle of Delphi, had 17 member states, and endured from

the end of the Trojan War around 1100 BCE until 191CE – more than a thousand years. Socialists should regard the Earth and its environment as a sacred place and join in solidarity with all those committed to defending and maintaining it.

Finally, you may decide self-consciously and deliberately to *take over* another's action on the basis that even with assistance, they are doomed to failure. This approach, which is the diametrical opposite of solidarity, is the method of *colonisation* or is sometimes called *philanthropy*. It could be characterised as a takeover, and within the workers' movement such a takeover would only be carried out through negotiation and mutual agreement.

To demonstrate how fundamental solidarity is to the workers' movement, it should be observed that, alongside equality, solidarity is the guiding principle of majority voting that remains the fundamental decision-making process of the workers' movement. Consensus is *always* the aim of deliberation, but when consensus fails, actions are decided upon by majority vote (on the basis of the principle of the moral equality of all persons) and thereafter, the minority is obliged to offer *solidarity* to the majority by adhering to the collective decision.

Solidarity is thus an *ethical* principle, a duty, thoroughly grounded in the history of the struggle against capitalism, and not dependent upon strategies for the achievement of a socialist utopia.

The socialist utopia can be imagined as a society in which the principle of solidarity is universal. Nothing else needs to be specified. There is no requirement for centralised economic planning or abolition of money or capital, or the abolition of national borders. All these are open questions that we can leave to posterity, who will be more intelligent than we are.

Finally, the principle of solidarity is often posed in relation to far-away struggles. The principle of solidarity is meaningful only to the extent that there is some real activity mediating the relation to the other party. Solidarity is not a mental state or a declaration in a magazine. You have to ask yourself: what is mediating my relationship to this far-away struggling group? In most cases it is the foreign policy of your own government.

So, for example, the only significant way of offering solidarity to the struggling people of Iran, oppressed by a theocracy and blockaded by the U.S., is through the foreign policy of your own government, calling upon it to respect the rights of nations to self-determination. Given that the principle of solidarity means that emancipation cannot be the gift of a foreign army, the duty of solidarity is owed only to those parties and groups in Iran opposing both US intervention and the mullahs. This significantly narrows the opportunities for solidarity.

### Socialist Revolution

I can only speculate on the path by which a socialist society will eventually be achieved. For that matter, human life on Earth may end or descend into a chaotic dystopia destroying all the gains of the Enlightenment before any socialist utopia is attained.

However, it is reasonable to suppose that somewhere along that road, if Socialism is ever to be realised, there must be a socialist revolution.

It is impossible to anticipate the conditions under which this will happen. Revolutions have been made under the banner of Socialism, but hitherto no revolution has managed any real and enduring step 'towards' Socialism. Some could be regarded, perhaps, as *experiments* in revolutionary socialism. But it is worth thinking about the necessary preconditions for Socialism insofar as they lie *within the horizon of foreseeable consequences* of actions we take today.

One condition that does *not* fall within that horizon is the preparation of a revolutionary party, acting on behalf of the working class, especially in the case of parties that are *not* organically connected to the working class. First, because the capacity of any of the parties existing today to act on behalf of the working class lies only in a hoped-for remote future, and second because a socialist revolution does not require a party acting *on its behalf*. Third, an effective revolutionary leadership of the working class, capable of leading a socialist revolution, could only arise organically, and, I would contend, through the principle of solidarity and most likely in the heat of a terminal crisis of capitalism.

### Social Change

Despite refusing to orient their actions towards the achievement of a socialist utopia in some remote and unforeseeable future, genuine socialists *are* social change advocates. As such, socialists tend to be active in all kinds of activities in politics, civil society, and economic activity. Basing themselves on the principle of solidarity, socialists will find many allies. Socialists practice alliance politics that allow people with diverse motives and ideologies to collaborate toward common ends.

The socialist 'party' is really the party of solidarity. But here I use the word 'party' in the nineteenth-century meaning of the word. In this sense, a party is not tied to membership lists, assets and office-holders, but refers to all those who practise solidarity. This does not mean, however, that socialists advocate the 'structurelessness' that Jo Freeman exposed more than 50 years ago and that Laya Hooshyari shows is rampant in grassroots activism today.

If winning just a single battle is to have a positive impact in terms of social change, 'leadership' always entails being a role model, a coach, and an educator. Local activism only becomes social-change activism to the extent that collective knowledge is passed on and accumulated, and grassroots organisation strengthened. Collective knowledge has to be embedded in the movement itself, not diverted into party-building. Granted, someone newly inspired by the socialist project, perhaps through the experience of solidarity, needs some supportive structure to learn about Socialism and practise solidarity. But we have to think carefully about the kind of organisation that can provide such support.

Social change activism is just as much about building organisational structures as is politics or business. However, social change activism rarely endows leaders and delegates with the kind of wealth, power, and prestige that political and economic hierarchies inevitably do.

Workers have been struggling against the corruption of their organisations by bureaucracy and the privileges of office since at least the sixteenth century, as evidenced by the documents of the Goldsmiths' Guild (see Blunden, 2016, p. 42).

Grassroots organising confers few privileges on its leaders and it is here that the basic work of solidarity is done.

In the context of local activism, it is only corrupt in municipal politics officials (though there are plenty of them) who may materially gain from their leadership. For socialists, serving at the municipal level is a service to the community.

Parties formed to contest elections at various levels, trade unions, and NGOs that appoint paid officials are all vulnerable to bureaucracy and corruption. Socialists have a duty to combat this tendency. Social change requires good unions that defend the interests of their members, propagate the ethic of solidarity, and reformist political parties that use their parliamentary representation to promote social change and where possible, introduce non-reformist reforms. Only a working class that has learnt how to combat bureaucracy and corruption can possibly achieve Socialism.

You can't run the country without structure.

In *Recognition or Redistribution?* (2003), Nancy Fraser cites André Gorz's (1967) concept of 'nonreformist reforms'. This refers to reforms, which, once enjoyed, prove to be very difficult to take away. Public health and public education services are prime examples of nonreformist reforms. Such reforms not only meet the needs of working people, but motivate working people into political action when these public services are threatened. They also improve the capacity of the working class and poor to run the economy, should the opportunity arise.

Fraser points to the necessity of considering the first- and second-order consequences of reforms since reforms can have perverse effects when implemented under neoliberalism. Fraser points out that reforms can inadvertently affirm existing inequalities rather than producing the transformation that may have been intended.

For example, the highly successful reform introduced by the Hawke Labor government in Australia to introduce compulsory superannuation, funded by employers, while delivering genuinely worthwhile benefits to working people, also produced perverse outcomes. It meant that women and workers in irregular employment entered retirement reliant only on welfare payments. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the majority of workers, enjoying generous superannuation, lack any incentive to defend the level of the Old Age Pension. As a result, the Old Age Pension has fallen behind the average level of superannuation. It has also made the organised working class dependent on income from capital in their old age.

Nancy Fraser concludes that the most important benefit that socialists can secure is 'parity of participation', that is, ensuring the greatest possible degree of participation of all marginalised or exploited groups in the social and political life of the country. Amartya Sen (2002), the welfare economist, addressing the persistence of all forms of subordination, concluded that the single most important reform in countries like his native India was promotion of female literacy. He argued that only such a measure could ensure that economic benefits would flow to the next generation.

The duty of solidarity encompasses legislative activity as well as opinion formation through participation in social movements and the direct challenging

of injustice in grassroots organising, trade union activity and nationwide campaigns on an indefinitely wide range of issues.

The good life for a socialist is immersion in such struggles.

The purpose and value of building explicitly socialist organisations must be assessed in the light of the above. I have already argued that the building of a revolutionary party for the purpose of preparing the leadership of a future socialist revolution is misconceived. This does not mean that one should not build socialist organisations. However, I see no reason not to refer to socialist organisations as 'parties'. If 'party' is taken in the sense of being a Bolshevik Party, then no, but if by 'party' one means an alternative government built with the aim of contesting elections, then that is fine. But with a caveat.

If running in an election is not genuinely oriented toward winning seats in government and using this position in the service of solidarity, but for some other purpose, then this is also misconceived.

If the aim is merely to have MPs in a position to conduct propaganda or if the election campaign itself is merely a vehicle for propaganda, then the question is: propaganda for what? Such propaganda risks becoming self-serving. If by 'propaganda' one really means education, then fine, but election campaigning is not an effective way of doing education unless it is largely successful.

The primary point of running an election campaign is to get good socialists elected to Parliament. If not today, then at some future time. But a campaign has to be successful at least in terms of getting someone elected eventually.

In the light of this, socialists should lend their support to parties with a program consistent with the solidaristic ethic of Socialism, and being socialists, they must do so *under the direction of that party*, as demanded by the duty of solidarity. Parties should not be based on an interpretation of history or some dogma; the basis of solidarity is agreement on programmatic goals.

#### Other forms of organisation and activity

Political parties are really only useful for running in elections. Full-time organisers or assets such as buildings and printing presses, all of which are useful political assets, do not need a party to be acquired. Depending on the use such assets are meant for, there are better ways of acquiring and maintaining them.

One of the legacies of the myriad parties built during the 1960s and 1970s has been their publishing houses. While these enterprises may have benefited in the beginning through access to the cheap labour provided by a party, the best of them still survive and flourish, Lawrence & Wishart, International Publishers, Verso, Pluto, Arena and Haymarket have all outlived the parties that established them and ensure that socialists who have something to say can get their work into bookshops and libraries. Parties now publish freely using the internet. It is now just as easy to set up a new publishing house as it is to launch a new party, and if there are writers whose work needs to be read, that is a good project for socialists, publishing magazines, journals, books, or poetry.

Maurice Blackburn, labour lawyers in Melbourne, were established to serve the union movement in 1919, and continue to represent causes. Defending the underdog or the whistle-blower in court or using the courts to fight government

policy is a worthwhile avenue for socialist activity. If you are a lawyer, you can earn your living in the service of solidarity.

Creating art – especially books and movies that contribute to the socialist cause is an excellent and timeless pursuit open to the artistically talented socialist, and art is far better practised independently of political direction.

Or you can do as many young socialists do, exercise your duty of solidarity by travelling to poorer countries and providing education, health and other services to people who are otherwise denied them. The Fred Hollows Foundation that has saved more than three million people from blindness, though few people now remember that Fred Hollows was a Communist.

As an academic or school teacher, a socialist has the opportunity to participate in educating the next generation. You can do that in a government or even a private school, or if you are a particularly inspired educator you can found your own school or run adult education programs.

Even raising your own family is an opportunity to be a socialist and a model for other parents. No matter what your social position, your conduct can inspire others.

In short, there are unlimited opportunities to promote socialism, i.e., the ethic of solidarity. But don't initiate some campaign solely as an opening for a political intervention. Only initiate a campaign if you really believe in it and you're there for the long haul.

When a socialist acts in accordance with the principle of solidarity, they do so as an *agent* of this idea. The idea and practice of solidarity are deeply embedded in modern society and widely understood. When you act in solidarity you are not acting alone, but rather as part of a widely understood and supported commitment held in common by millions of people.

Socialists share with all citizens anxiety about their capacity to make a difference, to have a voice in social and political affairs and seek structural change, not just gains that will be eradicated in the next economic or electoral cycle. In other words, what is nowadays called 'agency'.

This I will address directly in the next chapter.

### 3. Agent of What?

As I have established, Sociology borrowed the word 'agency' from legal discourse in the 1980s. Agency means having the capacity to act *on behalf of* some other actor, generally a structural or corporate actor. The significance of being an agent is that it confers specific resources and authority, but does not oblige you to carry out any specific action nor guarantee any particular outcome.

'Agency' has since migrated into everyday usage, meaning something like having a say in the affairs of the world, or at least in the conditions of one's own life: self-determination, the capacity to have some control over what people do to you, for you and around you – especially in your profession, your community, or your family – or moral responsibility for certain actions or outcomes, your own or those of others.

'Agency' has been embraced by the general public in response to an anxiety felt by people about the powerlessness they feel in the face of great social, political,

economic, and natural forces beyond their control, but witnessed daily in their living room, thanks to modern means of communication, and wreaking havoc in their lives and sowing uncertainty. At the same time, the postmodern, neoliberal ethos encourages people to believe that they are responsible for their own fate and that of their dependents. It seems that the word 'agency' was embraced simply because it was taken to be the opposite of 'structure', even though, in sociological terms, it is only thanks to its agents that structures exist. Further, it is only thanks to structure that an individual has the capacity to do anything.

The concern expressed in this anxiety has been a focus of philosophical and scientific concern since Saint Augustine's personal crisis in 386 CE, but under the heading of the Will. It seems that it was only after World War II that people largely stopped talking about 'the Will'.

'Agency' has now migrated from everyday discourse back into scientific discourse. In 2020, I identified at least seven different meanings attached to 'agency' in Education journals alone. In each case, the authors knew what they meant by 'agency', but seemed to be unaware that other writers in the same field meant something different by the term. This degree of ambiguity is unacceptable in scientific discourse. It is also very unfortunate for everyday discourse, because it mystifies the source of agency. Scientific terms often migrate into the everyday language with their meaning diluted through loss of rigour. Here, however, a term with diverse meanings has migrated from the everyday language back into science. This problem has to be addressed.

Agency is a relative term. The starting point for giving meaning to agency, whether in scientific or in everyday usage, is to ask: *agency of what?*

Agency is *not* a personal attribute, but nor is it bestowed exclusively by formal organisations such as corporations and government. It is not acquired by assertiveness or sociability, but it does require effort on the part of the subject.

I refer the reader to my explanation of the term 'commitment' (*otnosheniye*) in Part III §3:

A 'commitment' is some *really existing* project or activity to which someone is committed.

'Commitments' include, for example, the organisation that employs you or the nation of which you are a citizen. They can also include social movements like feminism or racism, solidarity or liberalism. Concepts arise only in the course of representing and resolving some problem, so the very existence of a concept in a given community is testimony to the existence of commitments, positive or negative, to the principle involved.

If you are feeling the *need* for agency, it is very likely that you are facing a threat to a *specific* commitment. The first step then is to clearly identify *which* commitment is being violated.

The context from which I first appropriated the word 'commitment' was Fedor Vasilyuk's book about 'impossible situations'. Vasilyuk was a counsellor. For his clients, the threatened commitment might have been a life partner who had died, a career that had collapsed, or they may have faced a situation forcing a choice between two equally loved projects, or were bereft of *any* viable life project. The disaster afflicting the subject's commitment made it impossible to go on, and

Vasilyuk's aim was to *reconcile* the subject to the apparently impossible situation.

The person seeking agency is not someone seeking reconciliation. But even here, Vasilyuk offers sound advice. He advised the subject to *critically examine* the commitment, the loss of which had made it impossible to go on.

This can be illustrated by the example of Rosie Batty. Batty was the victim of domestic violence. In February 2014, her 12-year-old son, Luke, was murdered by her former husband while the boy was at cricket practice. An order that Batty had obtained barring the man from contact with Luke during sporting activities had been overturned by a court six months earlier.

When the TV cameras turned up at Batty's door seeking footage of the grieving mother, from the very moment that Batty opened the door, she refused to act out this role and stepped forward as the foremost advocate demanding that the government and the courts take action to protect women and their children from domestic violence. In 2015, she was named Australian of the Year and a Royal Commission into Family Violence was convened, which recommended sweeping changes.

Rosie never got her son back. That was impossible, but she recognised that she was far from alone in her experience of family violence. What would otherwise have been a brief media exposure to display and reinforce her lack of agency, she turned around and drew on a deep public commitment to the eradication of family violence and became the agent for that commitment. For the four years that Batty spent campaigning before returning to private life, political leaders trembled before her. She used the disaster in her own life to become an agent for the struggle against family violence.

Batty did two things that are relevant to our topic here. First, she *generalised* her problem. The desperate powerlessness that she had been experiencing while failing to get adequate support from the police and courts had ended just as she had feared. By generalising this experience, and perceiving that countless women experienced the same trauma, she made her life bearable, and changed the world in the process. She had accurately read the *Zeitgeist* and understood that her situation had placed her in a position to take up the role of agent for the wider commitment to eradicate family violence.

This concept of the *Zeitgeist* is useful. The world is made up of countless commitments. 'Commitment' includes both the objective actions taken in pursuit of people's commitment and the subjective orientation to those actions. The '*Zeitgeist*' indicates the *ideal* aspect of the totality of commitments. This is not to be understood in terms of inaccessible mental states, but in terms of the material expressions of commitments – the 'texts' that people speak, write, act out, and live within.

To become an agent, you have to be sensitive to the *Zeitgeist*. You have to recognise which ideas have traction in the world and which do not.

Generalise your situation in such a way that you can identify commitments that have traction in the world, even if they are not dominant in the *Zeitgeist* at the moment. Not necessarily in the world at large, but at least in the part of the world where you live, the field in which you work, or the habitus surrounding you.

The courts established to defend the status quo can be instruments for overturning reactionary practices clothed in hypocrisy. In December 2023, Antoinette Latouff was terminated by the ABC from a casual radio position under pressure from the Zionist lobby. The Zionists had objected to a social media post by Human Rights Watch on Gaza that Latouff had shared. Latouff recognised that her commitments to free speech and to the Palestinian cause were shared by large numbers of Australians. Refusing to be silenced, she appealed to the Federal Court under the Fair Work Act and the ABC was ordered to pay her \$370,000 which included both compensation and penalty. Two senior ABC staff resigned in the wake of the case making it very unlikely that the ABC will cave in to Zionist pressure in the future.

Very often, in order to break through the dominant commitments in a society, it is not enough simply to *appeal* to your commitment, it is necessary to commit a symbolic *transgression*. Most shifts in the *Zeitgeist* begin with a transgression which galvanises support. But if properly understood, it is rarely the case that your situation is unique. The most famous exemplars of the world-changing transgression were Rosa Parks's insistence on sitting up front in a bus in Montgomery, Alabama, in December 1955, and the lunch counter sit-in by four black students at the Woolworth lunch counter in North Carolina, in February 1960. The transgression reaches out beyond the bounds of social mores to those who may follow the lead and challenge the status quo.

The trade unions were built on this principle. In a labour market where your employer can purchase your skills from many others, you don't have a lot of 'agency', to use the current idiom. But this situation is shared with all the other employees or potential employees in your field. The early nineteenth-century founders of the trade union movement recognised the power of the principle of solidarity among workers in the same trade. Back in the early nineteenth century, such solidarity was not a given. However, through decades of work, the principle was embedded in what came to be called 'the workers' movement'. This interpretation of the principle of 'solidarity' was initially limited to workers in the same trade, but by the mid-nineteenth century it had come to be universal. Regrettably, the complexity and differentiation of labour in the labour process today have seriously undermined the principle of solidarity.

Nonetheless, even where trade unions have been marginalised, commitment to solidarity exists. Even Rosie Batty relied on this principle to reach beyond the community of victims of domestic violence and gain the support of the great majority of people, male and female.

### Changing Your Profession

A fine exemplar of someone who used existing commitments to change the way things worked in her profession is given by Rhea Liang (2019). Liang is a breast and general surgeon on the Gold Coast, Australia and 'researches, advocates, and consults in breast cancer, medical education, workplace culture change, diversity and inclusion' (Johnson, 2026) and 'her efforts towards helping people in medicine to thrive are often driven by seeing them very much *not* thriving (including, sometimes, herself)' (*ibid.*).

Liang and her colleagues addressed the fact that only 11% of specialist surgeons in Australasia and the UK were female, despite evidence that 'women might be

more able applicants on entry to the training programmes' (2019). Women were leaving the profession at a higher rate than men.

In order to investigate the reasons for women leaving surgery, Liang used a 'purposive snowball sampling strategy' to recruit as subjects twelve women who had chosen to leave surgery. Her team explicitly approached the problem through the lens of feminist ideology (i.e., the feminist commitment). This included engaging the subjects in participatory research along with the authors. Feminism is the commitment that arose in response to patriarchy, and has produced an elaborate critique of patriarchy over more than a century; feminism has also objectified many of its ideals in legislation and provided innumerable means for women to combat discrimination and male violence. Feminism was also responsible for the existence of the telephone tree that made the 'snowball' strategy work.

Among the reasons for leaving surgery that the women identified were: unavailability of sickness and bereavement leave in contravention of institutional policies, poor mental health to the point of suicidality, bullying, fear of repercussions for complaint, sexual harassment during training, long working hours, lack of learning opportunities, sleep deprivation, unpredictable lifestyle, pregnancy and childbirth, and impact on relationships.

The surgical habitus was one dominated by upper class men. It was *impossible* for women to conform to the expectations of this habitus. Even demands of childcare or menstruation were regarded as 'female reasons' and inappropriate. But the women were more than capable of working in the field.

Liang and colleagues not only self-consciously drew on feminist ideology to analyse the marginalisation of women in surgery, they had turned to female networks to recruit subjects and in line with feminist theory engaged the subjects in participatory research. This not only gave depth to the insights of the research but equipped a group of female surgeons to be willing and able to tackle the problem in the profession. They then published their research in *The Lancet*, the foremost medical journal in the world, not in order to denounce their male colleagues – though the facts themselves were shocking enough – but to advise as to improvement in the training of surgeons. As a result, changes have been made in the training and supervision of surgeons in the British NHS.

Liang made herself an *agent of feminism* in order to overcome the marginalisation that she and her associates experienced in their chosen profession, recruited others to join her in this commitment, and then enlisted *The Lancet* which shared her commitment to improvement of medical training.

Liang also utilised the conceptual apparatus that Pierre Bourdieu had built in order to understand the cultural means of oppression and exclusion, albeit in a different context.

Dr. Li Wenliang was an ophthalmologist at Wuhan Central Hospital. On December 30, 2019, he saw a lab report indicating seven confirmed cases of a SARS-like coronavirus at his hospital. He sent a message to a private WeChat group of former medical school classmates to warn them so they could protect themselves. A screenshot of that message leaked and went viral.

On January 3, 2020, Wuhan police made Dr. Li sign a letter accusing him of ‘making false comments that severely disturbed public order’. Dr. Li contracted COVID-19 and died on February 7, 2020. Public outrage led to an official about-face the reprimand was revoked, and Dr. Li was posthumously named a ‘national model healthcare worker’ and an online memorial still receives thousands of messages.

Dr. Li did not live to enjoy this appreciation. A number of Australian whistleblowers, such as Witness K, lived to see the results of their sacrifice but suffered for their whistle-blowing. Witness K revealed that ASIS had bugged government offices in Dili, East Timor, to give an unfair commercial advantage to Woodside Petroleum during the negotiation of a treaty over resources under the Timor Sea.

Witness K and his lawyer, Bernard Collaery, were dragged through the courts for a decade before K was given a suspended sentence. Witness K acted as agent for a commitment by many Australians to the welfare of their ally and newest neighbour, East Timor. This commitment was strong enough that East Timor ultimately achieved a favourable result in the treaty that was signed in 2018. But not strong enough to protect Witness K.

Making use of your agency often comes at a cost.

### The Trainee Dilemma

A significant way a person can make a difference in the world is to join a profession. A profession is an *otnosheniye* – a shared commitment to a particular practice. Recognition as a member of a profession will give you a voice on important social questions, over and above gaining the capacity to make a difference in the lives of your clients.

Becoming a professional marks a critical phase in the development of the Will in young adulthood that includes the ‘trainee dilemma’ (see Anakin et al, 2026). This dilemma marks the transition from being a formally qualified professional to being an actually capable professional.

Becoming a professional entails years of university training followed by years of on-the-job training. The development of professional competence includes the development of a new professional identity shaped mainly by workplace experiences and interactions with senior colleagues. Formal education cannot fully equip trainees for the practical demands of professional life. The workplace introduces new stimuli originating in the working environment that require the merging of scientific and everyday concepts through experiential learning and social interaction.

The trainee's personality will be reshaped by *perezhivaniya* arising from challenging events and interactions. Becoming a competent, confident, and committed professional is a transformative journey that not only enhances practical skills but also aligns the trainee's professional and personal identities.

Becoming a professional is an important life stage. There is a gap between being qualified in a profession and being capable of acting as a professional. This gap is the *trainee dilemma* – qualified but not yet capable, as important and difficult as any other transitional stage of personal development.

Successfully completing formal educational tasks is a different kind of activity from diagnosing and treating a patient or teaching multiplication to a class of children. Being a professional is a different kind of activity and requires a different kind of personality. The transition requires a restructuring of the personality, so that the person responds appropriately to stimuli originating from the workplace situation rather than the formal tasks of the classroom.

Lev Vygotsky and Alexander Luria demonstrated that human beings control their future behaviour 'from outside', so to speak, by creating relevant perceptual links in advance of a situation arising. Consequently, offsite training can do only so much.

There are two interrelated aspects to becoming a professional. Firstly, a person must be able to access the formal knowledge, acquired by institutions over centuries, and draw on this knowledge appropriately in the work situation. Secondly, others must give recognition to the person that they are capable. Only when both are true can the person say, 'Yes, I'm a professional'.

Vygotsky's well-known distinction between 'scientific' and 'everyday' concepts is important here. 'Scientific' concepts are first acquired via instruction in an institutional setting, in a *formal* learning context such as by reading books or listening to lectures. 'Everyday' concepts, on the other hand, are acquired in everyday interaction with other people and the cultural artefacts of a community. Everyday concepts are constituted by *life experience*. If the scientific concept remains as it is, without merging with personal experiences, then it remains merely empty words, formal. Conversely, if the everyday concepts remain unschooled in the historically acquired institutional knowledge of the relevant culture, then they cannot rise to the demands made on an experienced professional. Scientific concepts must be merged with life experience and life experience merged with science.

Initially, the trainee's *otnosheniya* include their commitment to their ideal of their chosen profession. This conception will at first be abstract, perhaps the image of one good teacher that inspired them or a general understanding of the word 'medicine' in heroic or philanthropic terms. Later, all the little *perezhivaniya* – minor embarrassments, traumatic mistakes, exhilarating achievements, successful interventions by others – will fill out and colour the ideal the trainee has of their profession. Their concept of the profession will become a *concrete ideal*, that is, an ideal that has been enriched with nuances and connections through experience.

A qualified trainee will not automatically become a capable professional. The trainee may experience traumatic failure and become a capable professional only after experiencing humiliations, embarrassment, burnout, and possibly even causing injury to others. Failure is an integral part of professional development. Rather than avoiding failure, it should be moderated and embraced as a valuable learning opportunity. Trainees need to engage in authentic tasks that carry a risk of failure but allow them to fail safely without harming a client or themselves. Rather than fail-safe tasks, the 'safe-fail' task is one that can tolerate risk while providing opportunities for trainees to learn from their mistakes.

When undergoing formal training for a profession, a student learns rules such as ‘when I see this, then I do that’. It is through such action rules that the Will is trained so that the trainee responds automatically to stimuli with the appropriate action. This is what Vygotsky called ‘closure’ as discussed earlier. These action rules are located within a scientific conceptual structure, but concepts always have a *motive* at their heart that can be realised only insofar as the person is able to recognise the appropriate stimuli and respond with the appropriate action.

The *actual* concept that the seasoned professional has mastered merges both paths of development: the scientific and the everyday. It is this merging of everyday and scientific knowledge that is the trainee’s experience. The stimuli that have been acquired in a formal setting are not present in the work situation. The subject’s formal knowledge must be worked over, and new stimuli acquired in the only way possible; while acting in their professional capacity with real patients, real clients, or in real classrooms. In this way, a new mode of action is constructed alongside the existing formal mode of action acquired in the university setting – professional action in the workplace.

Whatever profession you choose to make a difference in the world, your profession will be a central *otnosheniye* in your personality. In acting as a professional you will be an *agent* for your profession. You can achieve very little in this world unless you can gain the solidarity of others who share your commitment.

The problem of gaining agency consists in *identifying* the commitment which is being frustrated by your situation; *generalising* the commitment so that it can encompass others; *attracting the solidarity* of others sharing your commitment; and *collaborating* with those others to overcome your shared situation.

This is not to say that oppression and marginalisation can be solved exclusively in the local domain. Commitments penetrate the whole society, but by acting as an agent for the relevant commitment, you reach out across the community.

## 4. Conclusion: Committing to make a difference

### Introduction

In the foregoing chapters, I have examined whether and how people make a difference in the world. I traced the problem of ‘making a difference’ from the first recorded moment when a writer reflected on a conflict of motives and the difficulty of acting contrary to their inclination.

Prior to the year 386, people had made a difference in the world. Ancient philosophers also pondered how to know the right thing to do. Augustine of Hippo did not invent moral reflection, but in recording his personal crisis, he invented the concept of ‘the Will’.

This capacity to act for reasons and contrary to one’s inclination is the foundation of human culture. All living creatures have a natural will – i.e., actions fully determined by the situation in conjunction with conditioned reflexes and natural instincts. I capitalise the human Will because it alone rises above natural processes and makes a difference. The Will is a concrete concept

of volition that brings together diverse aspects of self-control acquired through childhood, along with the capacity to join one's actions with those of others to achieve common ends.

Over the centuries following St. Augustine's *Confessions*, consistent thinkers, pantheists, Christians and sociologists alike, concluded that a Will could not exist. It was contrary either to the laws of God or the laws of Nature. However, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the philosopher of the French Revolution, decided that even though he could not understand how a Will could exist, it clearly *did* exist. What remained was to understand how people could form a *general will* and pursue common aims. German Idealists from Fichte to Hegel worked out speculatively how the Will could exist, but it was only with the psychology of Lev Vygotsky that the basis for a genuinely scientific explanation became possible.

The freedom of the Will is always relative, but nonetheless meaningful. Free Will at the level of psychology is a precondition for the exercise of the Will on the plane of social life, where people can think and act only within the limits set for them by the times in which they live and with the collaboration – or at least consent of others.

The Structuralists and Functionalists of the period after World War II arrived at the same conclusion as Martin Luther and Baruch Spinoza had arrived centuries earlier: after God and Nature, Ideology left no place in modern society for the human Will. People rebelled against this pessimism, however, and it has now become possible to understand how one can genuinely make a difference.

First, I briefly review the psychology of the Will, as much in this psychology echoes aspects of the Will in the domain of social action. Second, I will outline the key concepts that allow us to understand how it is possible to make a difference in the world.

### The Psychology of the Will

In law, children are not deemed morally responsible for their actions – and rightly so – because it is not until late adolescence that the Will is fully developed. During childhood, all going well, we successively acquire the following elements of the Will (see Part III, §2), that is, the voluntary control of our own actions:

- we have our own body, distinct from that of our mother, with all the necessary organs.
- we can distinguish objects from their background, able to recognise other human beings as beings like ourselves, and this recognition is reciprocated.
- we can speak the language(s) of those around us and have sufficient voluntary control of our body to master basic mobility.
- we have developed semantic perception, seeing the world around us through the lens of a culture acquired through language, and we can differentiate between our own behavioural acts and those of other people or the movement of the world around us.

- crucially, we have become able to act *contrary to our own desire* and prefer to do it on our own, without our hand being held, even defying the wishes of trusted figures in our lives, such as our parents.
- we have developed a semantic, rather than simply sensuous, memory, thereby giving us an intellect, so that our experiences are meaningful to us.
- we become consciously aware of our own motives and affects, and we gain the capacity to think over our experiences.
- we become aware of our own thinking processes and subject them to voluntary control; in general, we have by now achieved *conscious awareness* of our own thinking and behaviour.
- we become aware of the concepts by means of which we grasp the world and gain voluntary control of the conceptualisation of our experiences.
- we develop interests, including sexual interests, along with the motivation to pursue these interests voluntarily and independently.
- we have built relations with peers, independent of family and teachers, thus constructing our own social milieu, perhaps including a long-term partner, and founding our own family.
- we find some role, profession, or trade in which we become skilled and recognised by others as such.

Every adult has acquired these elements of volition since the dawn of humanity. How and when we gain these elements of self-control will depend on both the local and global conditions under which we are raised. Any person who reaches the age of majority without having gained these elements of self-control is not yet fully an adult and cannot be deemed morally responsible for their actions.

Free Will presumes a morally responsible adult human being, recognised as such by others. But being an adult human being is only the beginning of the story. The freedoms and liberties provided by a modern, social-democratic state provide an adult human being with only limited avenues for the exercise of their Will, depending on their social position. Henceforth, if a person's Will is to have progressed beyond what it was on the day they left school, they must acquire the agency of some component of the social formation.

Here I reach the limits of psychology; to go further I must introduce a concept that is both a unit of the personality and a unit of a social formation – that is, a commitment.

### Commitments

I have proposed the *commitment* as the basic unit of analysis across the entire field of human action. This unit has considerable interdisciplinary power because it is simultaneously psychological and societal, subjective and objective. The same practice can link millions of individuals through their commitments to that practice, embodying the strength and reach of that practice, and the ideals which orient it. At the same time, one individual is linked, to one degree

or another, to scores of practices through commitments that together manifest their personality.

The commitment is a unit both of a social formation and a personality.

This unit does not displace other units of analysis used by social theorists. Whether the object under examination is a nation, a social class, a habitus, a corporation, a party, a family or social movement, it can and should be seen through the lens of commitments.

To take one example: a nation is not just a stretch of territory with citizens. A nation exists only to the extent that there are citizens who take themselves to be citizens of a given nation and particular others who recognise them as citizens. If the citizen and others act in accordance with that relation – that is to say, if they are *committed* to the nation – then the nation exists. This applies both to foreigners and citizens. It is the joint commitment to the existence of the nation that makes it real and effective, and contributes to the personalities of its citizens. Conversely, commitment to a nation minimally means recognition of its reality and power, not necessarily loyalty.

There is nothing relativist about this approach; ideals and institutions exist only insofar as they are enacted by people.

Commitments are inclusive of the concept of what it is that is committed to. If you are committed to a nation, that entails recognition of its laws and institutions. Commitments are not all-or-nothing; they can be conditional and they can be more or less strong, more or less comprehensive, they can even be reluctant. Commitments are also qualitative and include expectations as to the commitment of others.

Any institution or phenomenon dealt with in social theory can be best understood with commitments as the basic unit that underlies them.

The personality is a structure of commitments – the various practices to which a person is committed and the strength of those commitments. Commitments have conditional relations to one another and are context-dependent. The personality begins manifest itself in early adolescence as the child develops interests, but it only really comes into being when they form their own peer group, take up a career of some kind, or make commitments to a partner. Over time, through experiences (*perezhivaniya*), the personality develops. It is no longer simply an instance of someone from such-and-such town or class, but someone with living commitments to what is going on in the world, a part of the world.

It is through commitments that it is possible to grasp a personality and a social structure without simply joining one to the other, because both are made of the same substance – commitments.

### The Will

The Will exists in and through commitments. The person who is committed to nothing has no Will. Such a person is someone who has never had to struggle or seen any reason to struggle, has never been moved. The Will develops only in response to some insult, some danger or even just a surprise – something that disturbs life-as-normal – a *perezhivanie*. But it turns out that such an experience can happen only thanks to having some commitment to begin with –

even if only the commitment is to staying alive. It is only when a person comes up against some challenge to a commitment that the commitment manifests itself, strengthens, and develops.

Equally, agency is meaningful only as being an agent of some practice – that is, agency arises only through a commitment, specifically a commitment shared with others. Others bring resources and authority to act according to a commitment which is under threat. ‘Agency’ arises only in and through commitments.

The Will, as an interdisciplinary concept of social and psychological theory, has become outmoded and fallen out of use. Within psychology, the concept of volition as an element of commitment does the work of the Will without suggesting an ‘organ of volition.’ The concept of agency, which has to some extent filled the vacuum left by the Will in sociology, has been shown to be lacking in theoretical rigour. However, by its use in connection with the concept of ‘commitment’, agency can be reconstructed as a scientifically useful concept. Specifically, commitment points to the source of resources and authority to make a difference.

#### The horizon of foreseeable consequences

I have appropriated what I will call the ‘horizon of foreseeable consequences’ from Anthony Giddens’ critique of Structuralism, but this concept was also central to Hegel’s theory of the state.

There are always unforeseen consequences of an action. A person may or may not be held responsible for those unforeseen consequences. But if they were *foreseeable*, then you are responsible. You cannot rely on moral luck.

If you do the wrong thing – violate custom and law – and harm results, then that is your fault and you must accept responsibility for those consequences. But if you were acting within the bounds of custom and law, then you can’t be blamed for outcomes that were not only unforeseen, but unforeseeable. Custom and law develop over centuries precisely to regulate the consequences of actions, including both foreseeable consequences and consequences that are unforeseeable for the actor at the time.

This has three implications in particular for those whom I have called ‘world-historical’ activists. First, when you step outside existing law and custom by acting according to social mores that are not (yet) realised in the world in which you live, you are responsible for any harm which results. Harm to other people may be justified, but nonetheless, you are responsible for that harm and must answer for it.

The second implication is that the state of the world in some remote future is not a consequence of your actions at all. I use the word ‘horizon’ because it is rational and normal to orient one’s actions to a future – we give up smoking, for example, because the results of not doing so are entirely predictable. Some destructive actions have long-lasting results. But the kind of actions we take to make a difference in the world always depend on the actions of others – perhaps millions of others. The socialist utopia cannot be a consequence of any action you take today. It lies ‘over the horizon’. It is not rational even to talk about

‘taking a step towards’ socialism. You cannot justify taking some action on the basis that it will hasten the achievement of the socialist utopia. If an action is to be justified on the basis of its consequences, then those consequences must lie within the horizon of what is foreseeable.

To be a socialist means to make the duty of solidarity your central commitment. The idea of a socialist utopia is nothing more than a projection of the idea of solidarity on to an imagined future society in which solidarity has become the universal duty. A socialist is not a dreamer; being a socialist has to do with how you act in this world. To act in this unjust, irrational world as if socialism already existed can only lead to foolishness.

I refuse to make any claim about how the economic and political structures of a socialist society would look. Thanks to the twentieth century, we have plenty of exemplars of how socialism will not look. But these are questions for the future.

### Virtue Ethics

The third implication is that the space beyond the horizon of foreseeable consequences must be filled by *virtue ethics*.

If you want to do the right thing, then you will judge your actions according to their foreseeable consequences, all of them, not just your intention. But there is still no rule, no sure way of knowing what is the right thing to do in any given situation. It always takes judgment. Experience, combined with self-reflection and attention to others, is productive of the ability to make good judgments. If you have a commitment, then acting rationally in pursuit of that commitment in collaboration with others will help you develop the virtues characteristic of that commitment, including good judgment - *phronesis*.

### Socialism and Solidarity

Virtues are generative. To be a socialist means to be guided by the duty of solidarity. Solidarity means acting to support another who is struggling, but supporting them according to *their* rules, not your own. Solidarity differs from philanthropy, which is helping someone according to your own way of doing things. This has the effect of undermining the other’s self-determination, colonising rather than emancipating them, even while saving them.

Solidarity is generative. The person who receives solidarity will get to know what solidarity means and may exercise this virtue themselves. The definition of Socialism, as I see it, is the practice of solidarity, and ‘socialist society’ can mean nothing other than a world in which the duty of solidarity is universal. But being a socialist cannot wait until socialist society has already been realised. It is enacted here and now. Solidarity can never do harm to the socialist project. If someone’s struggle is such that you *cannot* support them – for example, a community that is trying to exclude people on the basis of race – then you may choose to offer solidarity to the excluded party, or support the community in some way that is meaningful to them without being exclusive. You have to find a way.

The activist is always trying to make a difference in the world. Solidarity can take many forms, but it is through commitments shared with others that the opportunity to make a difference emerges. The natural world and its life-giving

ecosystems, along with public systems that provide health, education, and security for millions all provide opportunities for the practice of solidarity. Commitments that are widely shared have the best chance of surviving attempts to undo them in bad times. No people that has created a public health system will give up that gain without a fight. Solidarity can be exercised equally well as a local activist opposing the destruction of social housing, a Member of Parliament passing laws that mitigate human suffering, a writer giving voice to the oppressed, a printer or publisher providing socialist literature, a lawyer defending blowers or running class actions against a chemical company, or a trade unionist improving the conditions of workers. We come together through shared commitments. Not commitments to a remote utopia, but to solidarity here and now.

### Summary

In the foregoing chapters, I have traced the historical and philosophical roots of the concepts developed here and I have relied on them in my critique of 'prefigurative politics', revolutionary socialism, and local social change activism. My proposals are addressed to those whose interest in social theory lies in bringing about radical and progressive social change. I have not advocated any specific project for social change, but any such project would benefit from relying on the concepts outlined above.

I have referred to this theory as a theory of 'making a difference' for two reasons. First, if social action is oriented toward bringing about social change, its aim should be mainly to make some *enduring and meaningful* difference, without rationalising itself in terms of objectives that lie beyond the horizon of foreseeable consequences. Second, to be achieved, objectives need to be meaningful to other people, to make sense in terms of their commitments if they are to make the sacrifices necessary to realise them.

We all want a better world than this one – this world that is dehumanising and that threatens to destroy life on Earth. We express that desire chiefly by practising the virtue of solidarity – a virtue that is both generative and anticipates the better world for which we hope.

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## Index

- Action, 40, 46  
Hegel's theory of, 45–55  
rational, 51
- Activity, 103, 106
- Activity Theory, 6, 62, 89, 90, 95, 99,  
102, 103, 102–7, 129, 131, 134, 137,  
140, 142, 144, 193, 195
- Actuating process, 68
- Adolescent, 88
- Adulthood, 94, 96
- Agency, 5, 6, 14, 99, 102, 107, 108,  
116–18, 119, 126, 131, 132, 133, 134,  
135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 140, 141,  
142, 143, 144, 179–86, 172–87,  
188, 190
- Alexander the Great, 5
- Althusser, Louis, 5, 102, 108–19, 129,  
132, 142, 193
- Apparatus, 111
- Art, 179
- Associationism, 22
- Augustine of Hippo, 5, 8, 10–11, 12,  
13, 42, 66, 100, 102, 133, 180, 186
- Bacon, Francis, 23, 32, 34
- Behaviour, 63
- Behaviourism, 107
- Berlin, Isaiah, 44
- Body capital, 125
- Bourdieu, Pierre, 102, 119–30, 132,  
135, 183, 193
- Bühler, Karl, 64
- Capital, 119, 120
- Child development, 73–94
- Citizen, 9, 12, 45, 53, 54, 55, 56, 57,  
58, 59, 73, 93, 189
- Citizens assembled, 57
- Civil disobedience, 59–60
- Class, 123
- Closure, 68
- Commitment, 6, 7, 16, 88, 91, 92, 95,  
98, 99, 100, 101, 103, 106, 107,  
110, 143, 144, 145, 146, 164, 168,  
169, 179, 180, 181, 182, 183, 184,  
185, 186, 188–89, 186–92
- Conatus*, 15, 16, 17
- Conditioned reflex, 64
- Conflict of motives, 11, 14, 23, 42, 66,  
68, 97, 133, 139, 186
- Conscience, 54
- Conscious awareness, 47, 63, 65, 70,  
71, 87, 105, 135, 136, 138, 139, 143,  
188
- Consciousness, 38, 71
- Contradiction, 114, 115
- Cultural capital, 123
- Darwin, Charles, 107
- Descartes, René, 23
- Dogmatism vs Scepticism, 25
- Dualism, 24, 30–32
- Early childhood, 82
- Emotivism, 21
- Empiricism, 23, 24
- Engeström, Y., 102
- Ethics, 43
- Fichte, Johann Gottlob, 69
- Field, 121, 122, 123, 125, 129, 130,  
181
- Foreseeable consequences, 46, 49,  
104, 141, 149, 150, 153, 154, 158  
horizon of, 7, 27, 44, 54, 145, 148,  
153, 159, 172, 176, 190, 191, 192
- Fraser, Nancy, 128, 165, 177, 194
- Freedom, 8, 14, 18, 21, 27, 29, 34, 39,  
40, 41, 43, 44, 55, 56, 60, 66, 69,  
78, 92, 107, 163, 173, 187, 188
- French Revolution, 13, 29, 41, 187
- Functionalism, 6, 102–8, 114, 133,  
134, 131–34, 143
- Geist*, 31

General Will, 55–57  
 Germ cell, 45, 65, 72  
 German Peasants' War, 13  
 Giddens, Anthony, 6, 7, 102, 131–44, 145, 153, 190, 194  
 Goal, 46  
 Goethe, J.W., von, 15, 16, 28, 29, 59  
 Gorz, André, 177  
 Habitus, 121, 122, 123, 127, 128, 129, 130, 181, 183, 189  
 Hegel, G.W.F., 5, 6, 7, 14, 15, 18, 19, 22, 23, 28, 29, 30–61, 62, 66, 67, 69, 71, 73, 92, 95, 99, 102, 110, 140, 145, 153, 190, 194  
 Herder, Johann Gottfried, 15, 16, 20, 21, 28, 29, 39, 194  
 Heroes, 60  
 Higher Psychological Functions, 62, 70  
 Hume, David, 21, 22, 24, 25, 195  
 Hysteresis, 122  
 Idea of the True, 33, 34  
 Idealism, 33  
 Ideology, 21, 41, 94, 98, 109, 111, 112, 113, 114, 115, 116, 117, 118, 132, 133, 183, 187  
 Ilyenkov, Evald, 14, 18, 19, 20, 22, 23, 195  
 Impossible situations, 98  
 Infant, 79  
 Intellect, 38, 42  
 Intention, 46, 51, 67  
 Kant, Immanuel, 16, 26–28, 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 54, 60, 110, 111, 114, 116, 118, 195  
 Kretschmer, Ernst, 92  
 Leontyev, A.N., 95–98, 98, 99, 100, 102–7, 115, 129, 130, 137, 146, 195  
 Lewin, Kurt, 68  
*Lichnost*, 96  
 Lifeworld, 100  
 Luther, Martin, 5, 10, 13–14, 36, 39, 187  
 Marx, Karl, 8, 20, 22, 36, 43, 46, 58, 62, 67, 72, 92, 110, 112, 114, 117, 120, 130, 132, 145, 160, 161, 162, 165, 170, 172, 195  
 McCarthyism, 108  
 Means, 47, 48  
 Mediation, 32–33, 45, 57, 72  
 Merton, Robert K., 107  
 Morality, 44  
 Motive, 68, 95, 97, 105  
 Natural will, 8, 13, 15, 37, 39, 37–39, 44, 54, 63, 69, 73, 78, 93, 102, 186  
 Needs, 106  
 Newborn, 78  
 Nonreformist reforms, 165, 170, 177  
 Object, 46, 47, 105  
 Objectivism, 126  
 Operations, 104  
 Original sin, 69  
*Otnosheniye*, 97, 98, 99, 100, 101, 103, 145, 180, 184, 185, 186  
 Overdetermination, 115  
 Parity of participation, 177  
 Parsons, Talcott, 102, 107, 108  
 Party, 178  
 Pavlov, I.V., 64  
*Perezhivanie*, 78, 85, 86, 98, 99, 100, 184, 185, 189  
 Person, 45  
 Personal sense, 105  
 Personality, 95  
*Philosophy of Right*, 34, 40, 44, 41–61  
 Phronesis, 191  
 Political capital, 125  
 Political opinion, 127  
 Postwar period, 120, 123, 132, 165  
 Practical intellect, 64  
 Preschool child, 84  
 Primary-school-age child, 86  
 Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia, 24

Property, 44  
 Psyche, 37  
 Psychology, 62–101  
 Public opinion, 59  
 Publishing, 178  
 Purpose, 46, 47, 51  
     realised, 52  
 Randomness, 67  
 Reflex, 63  
     auxiliary, 62  
 Regulation Theorists, 115  
 Relativism, 125  
 Responsibility, 49, 52  
 Rewards, 17, 83, 121, 127, 129, 130, 147  
 Right, 41  
 Right of distress, 52  
 Roman Law, 8–10  
 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques, 6, 31, 39–61, 62, 71, 92, 110, 187, 196  
 Sartre, Jean-Paul, 117  
 Science, 6, 14, 21, 23, 25, 28, 31, 61, 112, 145, 146, 180, 185  
 Searle, John R., 23  
 Self-control, 62–73  
 Sen. Amartya, 177  
 Skinner, B.F., 63  
 Social capital, 125  
 Socialism, 7, 100, 104, 117, 147, 151, 152, 153, 154, 155, 156, 158, 159, 162, 164, 165, 168, 169, 170, 172, 173, 175, 176, 177, 178, 179, 191–92  
 Solidarity, 7, 125, 147, 148, 151, 161, 164, 166, 170, 171, 172–75, 176, 177, 178, 179, 180, 182, 186, 191  
 Spinoza, Baruch, 5, 14–23, 23, 24, 28, 31, 36, 39, 62, 187, 196  
 Spirit, 31, 48  
 Stalinism, 108, 109  
 Starting point, 30–32  
 State, 44, 50  
 Stimulus  
     auxiliary, 64, 66, 68  
     neutral, 65  
 Structuralism, 5, 6, 102, 108–19, 119–30  
 Subject, 27, 36, 37, 38, 44, 45, 109–11, 112, 113, 116, 118, 119, 122, 129, 130, 131  
     collective, 119, 125  
     in Logic, 33, 34  
     of history, 127, 128  
     reflexive, 145  
     subjected, 114, 116  
 Subjectless process, 112, 119, 129  
 Subordination, 119, 120, 121, 125, 126, 127, 177  
 Superstructure, 114  
 Syllogism of Action, 34, 37, 48  
 Teenager, 87  
 Teleological fallacy, 106  
 Terrible Twos, 83  
 Thesis, Antithesis, Synthesis, 32  
 Toddler, 80, 82  
 Uneven development, 115  
 Unforeseeable consequences, 140, 144, 145, 152, 176, 190  
 Unintended consequences, 50  
 Unit, 6, 39, 46, 51, 71, 72, 78, 95, 97, 99, 100, 102, 103, 104, 107, 133, 135, 137, 142, 144, 145, 188, 189  
 Utopia, 7, 44, 147, 151, 152, 153, 154, 175, 176, 190, 191, 192  
 Vasilyuk, Fedor, 94, 98, 100, 103, 180, 196  
 Volition, 72, 187, 188  
 Voluntary behaviour, 65  
 Vygotsky, Lev, 6, 11, 14, 15, 18, 22, 23, 62, 65, 66, 67, 68, 69, 70, 71, 72, 73, 74, 62–98, 99, 102, 104, 134, 136, 137, 138, 139, 142, 143, 144, 185, 186, 187, 196  
 Welfare, 53  
 Whistle-blower, 178, 184, 192

Worth, 53  
Wundt, Wilhelm, 64

Young adult, 89  
*Zeitgeist*, 31, 181, 182