

Units in Hegel's Theory of Action

Andy Blunden, January 2025

The Syllogism of Action

The syllogism of action is the final section of "The Idea of Cognition," uniting the Idea of the True with the Idea of the Good.

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, p. 821

This syllogism completes the circle of the *Logic*, returning to the indeterminate substance of Being, with which the *Logic* began, human practice. The outcome of the *Logic* is a subject's activity. The whole of the *Logic* is nothing more than the logic of human action: the determination of what is logically necessary in human activity.

A subject finds actuality either indifferent to it or evil and its immediate purpose (*Zweck*) is to seize one part of actuality, some material product of human activity, and use it as a *means* (*Mittel*) to change actuality in line with some conception or norm of the object corresponding to its end, the subject's intention (*Vorsatz*).

That is, an action is a relation to the world which is *both* immediate *and* mediated, echoing the preamble to the *Science of Logic*:

There is nothing, nothing in heaven, or in nature or in mind or anywhere else which does not equally contain both immediacy and mediation, so that these two determinations reveal themselves to be *unseparated* and inseparable

Hegel, 1816, §92

And the Introduction to the *Encyclopaedia Logic*:

We must then reject the opposition between an independent immediacy in the contents or facts of consciousness and an equally independent mediation, supposed incompatible with the former.

Hegel, 1831, §78

The Syllogism of Action makes the obvious but important point that in order to change the world according to the subject's intention, it is necessary to use as means some other part of that same actuality, some *artefact*. Such an artefact may be a tool or a sign, according to whether it acts on the external material world or on the mind, the mind of the subject itself or of some other subject. As a tool it may be an industrial product or other material object or process, or the hand or other part of the subject's own body. As a sign, it may be a spoken word, gesture or a text or any material object. Hegel does not, so far as I know, provide any description or typology of what a subject seizes upon as a means, but it is clear from the context that the means is itself part of the objective, material

reality not some thought. The means is an artefact even if only by the mere fact of being taken up by a subject and used.

As Hegel put it in the *Encyclopaedia Logic* section on the Object:

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

Hegel, 1831, §209

Note that in this passage, ”object” includes both that part of actuality seized upon as a means and may be consumed, and that part of the object which is to be changed. Note also that perception and communication are included under the syllogism of action.

In a passage by Hegel cited without comment by Marx in a footnote to Chapter 7 of *Capital*:

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

citing Hegel, 1831, §209 addition

Note that the German original of the above quotation translates “*zweckmäßige Tätigkeit*” as “purposive activity.” *Tätigkeit* is the same word Marx uses in *Theses on Feuerbach* with the qualification “*gegenständliche*” (object-oriented). Although *Tätigkeit* is often used as activity in the sense of behaviour, irrespective of intentions, the qualifications “*zweckmäßige*” and “*gegenständliche*” restrict *Tätigkeit* to object-oriented actions, usually *Handlungen*. Further, *Tätigkeit* is a countable noun with a plural (*Tätigkeiten*). So it is clear that both Hegel and Marx use *Tätigkeit* to refer to discrete activities which have a purpose.

Every *Tätigkeit* has a purpose (*Zweck*) and an intention (*Vorsatz*).

In his discussion of the labour process in *Capital*, Marx says:

The elementary factors of the labour-process are 1, the personal activity of man, i.e., work itself, 2, the subject of that work, and 3, its instruments.

Marx, 1867, Chapter 7 §1

In German, these three factors are: “*die zweckmäßige Tätigkeit, ... ihr Gegenstand und ihr Mittel,*” or literally 1. the person’s purposive activity, 2. its object and 3. its means. This makes clear that Marx’s conception of the unit of human activity has these three elements.

As stated in the syllogism of action, there are *two* simultaneous relations of the subject to the objective world — one is the immediate relation, perhaps to some object which needs to be fixed or a patient needing to be made well, or in some way fails to conform to its norm, and the other is to a tool, perhaps a spanner or a comforting word, with which the subject acts upon the object in order to achieve its end.

If an action is coerced or is a bodily reflex, then it is not an action, and logic has nothing to say about it. But otherwise, every action has an immediate goal (or purpose) and an intention (or motive).

That is, everyone does something for a reason. What a person does it not the same as their reason for doing it. Which is to say that purpose is not the same as intention. Were the intention to be the same as the purpose, then this is tantamount to saying that there is no action. It is only the difference between the purpose and the intention that constitutes the action.

I will demonstrate how this is elaborated by Hegel in the *Philosophy of Right* where his theory of action is set out in more detail. See (Blunden 2019) for a fuller treatment of this passage. Most of the issues with which Hegel is concerned here are tied up with his concern with Right which does not concern us here. Other difficulties faced are, on the one hand, Hegel's idealistic manner of expression, and on the other, the difficulties raised by translation from the German.

Purpose, Intention and Welfare

The *contradiction* between the purpose (*Vorsatz*) and the intention (*Absicht*) of an action (*Handlung*) and the contradiction between the intention and welfare (*Wohl*) is universally ignored by Hegel scholars. Nevertheless, these concepts are not merely different, or at different “levels of abstraction,” but are *contradictory*. This contradiction is at the heart of Hegel's theory of action, and is the archetype for the germ cell which may form the starting point for any science.

Michael Quante (2004) considered a number of possible interpretations of the passage on Purpose and Intention:

One such interpretation is that “the proposed (i.e. purpose) in an action can be conceptually contrasted with the *intention* with which an action is implemented.”

2004, p. 125

This significantly understates the issue, as if the difference between purpose and intention is “merely conceptual,” as in, for example, “My purpose was to take the car with the intention of stealing it,” This is indeed a tautology if it is meant as a representation of an action rather than, for example, the status of the action under law, as in *mens rea*. But “My purpose was to steal the car with the Intention of driving it to Sydney,” on the other hand, is a rational representation of the action from *any* standpoint.

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

... the action as carried out in immediate existence, shall be in principle mine, that thus the action shall be the *purpose (Zweck)* of the subjective will.

1821, §114a

Zweck can be translated into English as purpose, function or goal. Everyday German is not specific, but in its use by Hegel it refers to the immediate goal of action: “to steal or take a car” in the above example. For what reason I steal the car, that is my *intention (Vorsatz)*. *Vorsatz* which can be translated into English as intention, premeditated intent or purpose. Again, everyday German is not specific but Hegel uses it in the sense of what is intended to be achieved by an action, as opposed to the incidental, unintended or collateral effects of the action, and which therefore provides the motive for the action.

The particular aspect of the action is its inner content [a] as I am aware of it in its general character; my awareness of this general character constitutes the worth of the action and *the reason I think good to do it* – in short my *intention*.

1821, §114b α

Hegel has a third term in his analysis of action: what I hope to achieve by acting with this intention, what I hope to get out of it, my *Welfare*:

Its content is my special aim, the aim of my particular, merely individual, existence, i.e. *welfare (Wohl)*.

§114b β

Continuing the above example, welfare would be the greater job opportunities for me in Sydney. But whatever my subjective aims may be, ultimately, my welfare is secured only by means of the general *good*:

This content (as something which is inward and which yet at the same time is raised to its universality as to absolute objectivity) is the absolute end of the will, the *good. (das Gute)*

1821, §114c

Welfare and the Good do not concern us because these arise for a *theory* of action in the context of the state. Our interest at this point is only Hegel’s conception of action, for which we have just three significant concepts: purpose, means and intention.

The distinction between purpose and intention can be seen by the fact that each represents some state of the world. Continuing the example, taking the car is an immediate situation, but the intention is not in existence until I have not only stolen the car, but driven it 900 km to Sydney, during which activity any number of *other* actions must be taken before my intention is realised, including actions by other people, such a petrol station attendants.

This is expressed by Hegel when he says:

An action as an external event is a complex of connected parts which may be regarded as divided into units *ad infinitum*, and the action may be treated as having touched in the first instance only one of these units. The truth of the single, however, is the universal; ... Purpose, as issuing from a thinker, comprises more

than the mere unit; essentially it comprises that universal side of the action, i.e. the intention.

1821, §119

That is to say, each separate action is a *unit* of the activity instantiating the intention which is shared by all the component actions, each having a different purpose.

The purpose is a mere step towards achievement of the intention, which is not generally fulfilled by the purpose alone, and when the subject acts they have in mind such a chain of actions to fulfil their intention. To emphasise this the distinction is made (See Blunden 2023) between the immediate *goal* and the intended *motive*, both understood as states of the object in the subjective mind. Whereas purpose and intention have juristic connotations, goal and motive have psychological connotations, but no difference in the content of the concepts is intended.

Hegel notes that the chain of actions by means of which intention is fulfilled is not limited to actions by the subject themselves:

The achievement of my aim, therefore, implies this identity of my will with the will of others, it has a positive bearing on the will of others.

1821, §112

Equally, we could conceive of the car itself as the *means (Mittel)* for getting to Sydney, and equally we could conceive of a master key as the *means* of stealing the car. I could answer the question: “How do you intend to get to Sydney” by saying “car” or “the Hume Highway,” mentioning in each case a relevant artefacts to be used, with the manner of its use being *implicit* in the nature of the artefact. This mode of expression which connotes mechanical rather than juridical or psychological relations makes sense in terms of the expression Hegel used 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, p. 821

“Seizing on” and “directing as a means against” connotes material objects.

Units of Action

We are concerned here with Hegel’s conception of action as the one substance of a monist philosophy, so it is no cause for concern that the one concept may be interpreted across such ontologically diverse domains. From the standpoint of logic differences in connotation or context are immaterial.

In case there should be any misunderstanding, it is not my claim that Hegel *meant* that human activity was the one substance of his philosophy. Who am I to know what was in Hegel’s mind. The point is that Hegel’s *Logic* is open to such an interpretation without compromising the signbificance of the *Logic*.

The immediate concern therefore is to clarify the concept of an activity such that it is conceived of in terms of *units* and determine the *elements* of such a unit which will make analysis of the unit possible.

Unlike the German word *Tätigkeit*, the English word “activity” can be used as a mass noun, in which meaning it functions as the generalised substance of a materialistically conceived *Logic*, or a countable noun with a plural. When used as a mass noun “activity” cannot be a unit. However, when used as a countable noun, activities can be units and indeed *are* units suitable for a monist philosophy. What makes *an* activity is the single *intention*, the state of the world which the subject intends to realise and which is the motive for every action which is part of the activity..

Just as the intention is realised thanks to the subject’s purposes, an activity is realised thanks to many actions, each with their own purpose or goal, whether by the same person or others.

Thus both activities (*Tätigkeiten*) and actions (*Handlungen*) are units of human activity in a hierarchical relationship in which actions are units of activities.

Equally, as expressed in the Syllogism of Action, every action *uses* or consumes some part of reality as a means, some mediating artefact, a tool or sign, seized upon as a means by which the action is realised in the objective world.

Thus, the unit or germ cell of human activity has three elements: the means or mediating artefact, the purpose or immediate goal of the action, and the intention or motive of the activity. Each of these three elements may be in conflict with the others, each having originated from some *other* process, and every action may be characterised either by its goal, its motive or the means.

Categories and Concepts – Actions and Intentions

I will adopt for the moment the convention that by “category” I mean any of the category of the *Science of Logic* after Being and Nothing, and by “concept” I mean any of the concepts of the Nature and Spirit. The Syllogism of Action marks the transition between the concepts of the Nature and Spirit, laying aside the Absolute Idea which is simply a summary of the *Logic*.

With that proviso I claim that every *concept* is a form of activity.

This is more or less self-evident in a case like “game,” “war” or “medicine,” which explicitly reference a human activity. But any institution such as “government,” “university” or “family” is just as much reference a form of human activity.

Human beings, being born realists, have a habit of mind to identify the artefact which mediates an action or activity or which is the object of an action or activity to reference the relevant activity. For example, when we say “university” we might intend the place where the university-activity is located and when we say “chair” we may intend the object intended to be used for sitting.

Even when we move outside the domain of human activity as such to Nature, the concepts we use in reference to Nature are ultimately meaningful only insofar as the entity functions as an artefact or object of human activity. But in the current context of understanding how Hegel’s *Logic* can be used in the *social sciences*, there is no need to trouble ourselves further with these concepts which are taken to reference objects and processes beyond human activity. The *Philosophy of Right* and *Capital* are entirely made up of concepts which reference human actions and activities, inclusive of the artefacts mediating them.

The intention of an action indicates the *volition* which is behind every action and is characteristic of an entire concept and pervades and orients all the actions which are parts of the activity. This *volition* constitutes the essential content of the concept.

All concepts are forms of activity, composed of actions which are in turn characterised by the contradiction between purpose and intention. The difference between actions and activities is a relational or hierarchical one. Every activity may play the role of an action within an activity which serves a deeper intention.

An action can be elementary in the sense that the contradiction between purpose and intention is meaningless if an action is analysed into components which have no intention as such, being produced without conscious awareness, in response to conditions and the goal.

So where does this leave us with the categories?

There can be no talk of volition or artefacts when it come to the categories. The *Logic*, as I have remarked, is characterised by its lack of any content, which is ensured by its starting point, Being. The first unit from which the analysis sets forth, the One, is also without content. One can be *given* a content – one apple, one wish, etc., but the category of One in the *Logic* is abstracted from that content. Likewise, at the beginning of the Essence Logic, Identity functions in the same way as a contentless germ cell. Identity can be given a content, but in itself it has none. All the categories of the *Logic* arise from one of these two empty categories, the One and the Identity.

Thus, to recall a metaphor I used earlier, the categories of the *Logic* are to the concepts of the *Philosophy of Right* as sonata or concerto are to Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata or Rachmaninov's Concerto No. 1. The categories of the *Logic* function as archetypes for concepts which have a definite content, that is, forms of human activity.

Determination of the Unit

As I said in my *Hegel for Social Movements* (2019), each science in the *Encyclopaedia*, concludes with:

a concrete concept of the whole, and throwing up a problem, contradiction, 'loose end' or barrier, which forms the starting point for the next 'circle'.

Blunden, 2019, p. 89

I demonstrated this [above](#), the germ cell for Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* was determined by Hegel in the *Subjective Spirit* as the necessity of an "objective mind" which he interpreted as "the laws and forms of common life."

What we have read in "The Idea of the True," and what we have said above about *units* tells us what kind of an entity the germ cell will be, but only Hegel has an *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences* as a readymade source book for such problems and concepts. In lieu of an *Encyclopaedia*, the researcher has only the history of science as a guide and immanent critique as a method. But not immanent critique alone, for as Marx reminds us:

The real subject retains its autonomous existence outside the head
just as before

Marx, 1857, p. 101

The unsolved problems of Political Economy and the real history of those
problems would provide pointers to “germ cells” for *Capital*.

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