

**Arto Laitinen and Constantine Sandis, eds.**  
*Hegel on Action.*  
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Hegel's work on action has for a long time required serious attention, not least due to the feeling amongst Hegelians that, like the recent revival of interest in his social and political thought, the arguments offered and sketched could make a real contribution to contemporary debates in the philosophy of action. However, to do justice to such sentiments, an author was required who embodied both a thorough understanding of Hegel as well as a mastery of recent debates in the philosophy of action. The present volume presents us with the next best thing: two editors, one who is a Hegelian and the other who is a philosopher of action theory. In the Introduction, they set out the aims of the book: 1) to survey engagements between contemporary action theory and Hegel; and 2) to orient possible future directions of the interaction. To achieve these aims, they commissioned original articles—or, at least, eleven out of the fourteen articles are original rather than recompiled published work. Of the three re-published articles, there are welcome returns for Charles Taylor, who originally set the ball rolling, as well as Alisdair MacIntyre's not-so-veiled critique of psychologism via Hegel's own discussion of his contemporaries' scientific approaches to questions of action. (I have never met anyone who has read MacIntyre's article and not enjoyed it; which is a strange compliment for a philosophy article, especially one on Hegel!) Finally, there is also a worthy reprint of J. McDowell's controversial reading of the dialectic of recognition as between I and I-as-an-other. All three republished articles seamlessly integrate with the original contributions from a list of recognizable authors.

Before summarizing the contents of this book, it is only fair to begin with the praise that the book deserves: I heartily recommend the collection of articles first and foremost to philosophers working in field of the theory of action, because they will undoubtedly be forced to engage with Hegel's thought and, secondly, to historians of philosophy, especially those with an interest in understanding Hegel's philosophy. That the book serves such diverse audiences is testimony to the editors' fine work in preparing the articles, ordering them and successfully achieving the two aims that they set themselves. In fact, the role of the editors—over and above the sum of the contributors' pieces—should not be underestimated; they have managed to structure the book in such a way that it reflects Hegel's own dialectic of action, beginning from our simplest intuitions and engaging in a thoroughgoing philosophical conversation with our progressive understanding of full human action.

The introduction gives an overview of the themes of contemporary action theory (no doubt for the benefit of those submerged in the mire of Hegelianism) as well as an overview of how Hegelian theory relates to these themes (no doubt for the benefit of those submerged in the mire of contemporary action theory). The familiar themes form a loose framework for the articles: the ontology of action; the conceptual framework of

action (the status and metaphysics of concepts such as intention, agent, and so on); the nature of agency; and the nature of freewill, agency, and responsibility. The book is structured in pairs of articles that relate to the issues, and this structure mimics a dialectical movement present in Hegel's own systematic thought: an interpretation is offered and then challenged by the next author, only for the salient elements from both to be revisited and reconciled to form the starting point of the first of the next pair of articles. Hegel's work, it is contended, says something about all these framing themes, building up from the first to the last; and it does do in a way that challenges the central agreement about action that has dominated (and to a certain extent) created the discipline in the 20th century.

As the ordering of the articles reflects Hegel's own development of the concept of action, the best way to summarize the collection (but in no way to do justice to the nuances and disagreements involved) is to loosely follow the dialectical development as though the book were a cohesive whole (which it very nearly is; a formidable feat given the diversity of interpretation and voices on offer). The collection opens with Taylor's well-known interpretation of Hegel as proposing that the proper model for describing action is non-atomism: an action cannot be divided into the constituent parts of intention and act. Actions are not ontologically separate from their purposes but are in fact expressions of these purposes. D. Knowles continues this line of interpretation by looking more deeply at the causal status of intentions and reasons for action. The real problem, for Knowles, concerns unrealized intentions. If an intention is not ontologically separate from the action, then it would be problematic to talk about failed intentions: the tennis player who does his best to win a tennis match is surely intending to win the match even if his action is unsuccessful. Hegel apparently imposes a loose causality on actions, in that we understand agents as if they are determined by their intentions, even if the ontological status of the causality is bracketed off.

If Knowles, as he admits, finds the thesis of ontological inseparability of intention and action puzzling, then Pippin returns to the theme and develops Taylor's idea. For R. B. Pippin, the relation between agents and actions is neither a natural causal one (as compatibilists assume) nor a could-have-done-otherwise causal one (as libertarians suppose). It reflects rather the capacity to manage deliberation and that requires the social, retrospective negotiation of the agent's intention. Practical reason is not a self-relation between an inner intention and an outer action, because the agent's relation to himself is mediated by the other through the norms that make practical reason possible. Such norms are derived from a social context, and the agent's descriptions of why he did X will be only provisional until confirmed by the other.

McDowell takes umbrage at Pippin's interpretation for two reasons. First, it commits Hegel to a bad argument in that a social context cultivates a responsiveness to reasons but does not determine what are in fact good reasons (otherwise we are, as Pippin is well aware, verging on relativism). Second, it commits Hegel to a counter-intuitive position: Pippin's view that we truly have our intention only when we have acted is inconsistent with Hegel's 'right of knowledge' (and mirrors the problem with failed intentions). The agent can learn that he alerted the burglars when he switched the light

on, but he cannot feasibly admit that this was his intention all along. The concept of an intention allows us to separate deeds (what I brought about) from actions proper (what I did) and that requires granting the agent a certain privilege in the avowal of intentions. The real point of contention between Pippin and McDowell, though, concerns the former's irrealism and the latter's realism as concerns reasons for action: reasons for action, for McDowell, are not socially constituted, but participating in a good society will better allow deliberative agents to be responsive to real reasons.

The next chapter revisits Pippin's retrospectivism in an attempt to keep its advantages whilst jettisoning its counter-intuitive consequences and K. Deligiorgi also manages to bring the first four articles together in a cohesive whole. Hegel exhibits four theoretical commitments. First, he is non-cognitivist: the avowal of an intention is merely an expression of the agent's commitment to act (it does not cause the agent to act). Second, ascribable intentions are integral to the category of action, and the formal structure of intentional action is borrowed from the laws of nature (*viz.* causality). Third, Hegel proposes an 'error-theory' of agency which sidesteps the epistemic problem of actually locating the 'agent' in any causal chain (*i.e.*, was it the idea, the arm, or the finger that actually turned the light on?) Finally, ownership of an action is decided retrospectively through interpretation. A. W. Wood expands the idea of 'owning' outcomes through his subtle discussion of imputability. He argues that Hegel develops the simplistic Kantian model that assumes that the intention is everything. Hegel can seemingly differentiate between direct aims, means to direct aims, and regrettable side-effects, by separately categorizing the purpose, intention, deed and action. Kant can't. Such distinctions allow a full range of judgments about what should be imputed to an agent—double-effects, negligence, omissions and so on—by noting that some things belong to my purpose (and hence I know that I have brought them about) and some to the narrower direct aim.

The book then returns to the nature of reasons for action. T. Pinkard endeavors to show that the inner-outer relationship is not a metaphysical problem of putting self or spontaneous causation into the world. Hegel's account of freedom is compatibilist and his theory of action is consistent with but not reducible to naturalism (biological reasons). The social evaluative schemes of what we should do (the motivating reasons) and how such intentions are expressed in action pass through the practical reasoning of the agent, but both belong to the world itself. The will confers a 'stamp of approval' on reasons for action, allowing the modern agent (as opposed to the ancient agent) to justify deviation from standard models of behavior and also to demonstrate why his actions do adequately express his intention, even when the action is non-conventional or idiosyncratic. The 'stamp of approval' (or 'right of knowledge') of practical deliberation is agency, in that it identifies the loose causality between intention and action necessary for modern accounts of responsibility. The modern 'stamp of approval' is developed further in S. Houlgate's chapter, which asserts that Hegel's concept of action is not morally neutral and hence is at odds with Pinkard's compatibilism. If we consider—and we should consider—Hegel's systematic discussion of action as a product of free will, then action is necessarily subject to moral evaluation. Right is actually existing freedom that requires affirmation (Pinkard's stamp of approval) by the subject, and this stamp of approval (or right of

knowledge) is free agency. In the ancient world, permissible expressions of nobility, for example, were set in stone and agents were not able to deviate from them and still be noble, whereas the modern agent is able to deviate from standard behavior and justify his actions by offering an intention to public scrutiny.

The tension between scientific explanation and human behavior is further exploited by MacIntyre who tries to show that dispositions are not sufficient to explain action because dispositions cannot form the basis of repeatable observations and the assigning of a trait to an agent is very often the cause of changes in behavior. What we observe in nature is to be discovered, what we observe in humans in the expression of rational activity, and scientific descriptions are inappropriate. If scientific descriptions are problematic, then H-C. Schmidt am Busch offers a different concept, that of externalization or objectification, consistent with MacIntyre's own interpretation of Hegel's alternative mode of explanation. Activity is externalizing oneself, and this exhibits three characteristics: the purpose is the agent's own because he can negate it or not through his personal conviction of its rightness; self-consciousness knows that it is the activity which brings about his purpose; and he acts as a participant in social interaction and under public scrutiny.

Moving again from the conceptual framework and vocabulary of action to the nature of agency, M. Quante holds that Hegel's general strategy is to assert that being a person, a moral or an ethical agent is a normative stand sustained through inter-subjective recognition, and it consists in being treated as a human being. This finds the individual's right to be evaluated in accordance with his purposes, his intentions and the moral quality of his action, and Hegel justifies his theory of action by the intuitive self-understanding of ourselves as agents and through our social practices of ascribing responsibility. Quante's account of agency leads naturally to the nature of reasons for action, and A. Speight in then argues that reason-giving for Hegel is retrospective, socially inflected and implicitly holistic, resting upon a narrative account of agency. Action requires that normative relationships have dispositional importance for the agent and that the agent assesses what he has done retrospectively and offers a narrative justification of it. Once more, the issue of retrospectivism appears central to the theory of action, and these narrative justifications of what the agent did will have to be sensitive to how he 'fits in' to a wider context and not just reflect his own plan and projects.

The strands from Pippin and McDowell and their consequences for responsibility demand an investigation into the nature of agency and free will. F. Menegoni concentrates on Speight's last point on the relationship between me as an individual akin to the narrative self of Velleman and the inter-subjective normative structure of such selves' meanings in order to avoid non-cognitivist conclusions. The conscience is identified as the stamp of approval of modern self-consciousness, and the final offering, by D. Moyar, expands the nature of subjective and objective reasons for personal conviction by mapping it onto Nagel's agent-relative and agent-neutral reasons for action, but also by showing that Hegel's picture is perhaps more convincing than Nagel's. It seems that in ethical life the institutions do not rely on any particular individual and are thus agent-neutral reasons. However, Moyar wants to say that the value realized by them

is agent-neutral, but the reasons are agent-relative. The individual agent has reasons to do things that derive from his identity (as father, as worker and so on), but, in the modern age, particularity is incorporated into self-conceptions that can be publicly shared and recognized as valuable (autonomy, equality and so on). This opens a space between the agent-neutral value of an institution and the agent-relative reasons for adhering to it.

What emerges over the course of the book are several plateaux of tension that are inimical to a coherent and comprehensive explanation of human behavior. Human behavior is best understood as a loose causality between intention and act, because proposing an agent with a right to knowledge is the most rational way to construct social and political institutions that distribute praise and blame and embody freedom (in its full Hegelian sense). Such a picture is not ontologically true; an agent is not to be identified as an element in a causal chain but instead retrospectively as the public ‘stamp of approval’ which owns a set of outcomes directly, some indirectly and some contingently. Responsibility, then, modeled on ownership, is the most rational way to distribute blame and credit, and the social practices which support such agency—private property, modern institutions of punishment, individualism and so on—create reason-responsive beings who are able to exercise rational subjective choices that can be objectively and publicly legitimated. The tensions never truly dissipate, but the strength of this book is the suggestion that one can find the resolution of these tensions in a closer reading of Hegel’s writings, and all the contributors faithfully represent some aspect of the many diverse voices to be found in Hegel himself. The articles deserve to be revisited for this reason and such re-visitation is best done in the context of the collection as a whole.

What does Hegel’s theory of action add to our own contemporary debate? First, it offers a viable and coherent alternative to the current scientific hegemony by questioning the general reductionist paradigm and the assumption that intentions, like beliefs, can possibly be reduced to simple chemical reactions in the brain subject to the laws of physics. Second, it brings to the fore the problem of inner-outer, whereby an inner intention is magically transubstantiated into a physical action. For Hegel, the relationship between intention and action is between social event and social event, and no difference in kind occurs. However, as such, the realm of *Spirit* is possibly ruled by arbitrariness in a way that the world of nature cannot, so the law of causality is imposed on it by thinking minds in order to make the most rational social institutions (e.g., punishment, private property and so on) actual. Third, the agent is not identified by a simple self-consciousness in possession of an intention, but rather by a concept that locates the moment of practical deliberation that confers on social reasons a personal conviction that accounts for responsibility.

The greatest credit ought to be conferred on the editors of this engaging and important book. Not only have they selected a collection of excellent articles; they have presented and ordered them in a way that demands attention from a wide range of philosophical thinkers.

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