

Hegel's Expressive Metaphysics of Agency
Humboldt—FAGI *Reason* Lecture I

Some Post-Davidsonian Elements of Hegel's Theory of Agency

Bob Brandom

1. Action simply translates an initially implicit being into a being that is made explicit... Consciousness must act merely in order that what it is in itself may become explicit for it...An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action. [PG§401]
2. The deed [Tat] is the actual self, [PG§464]
3. The agent “only gets to know...his End, from the deed. [PG§401]
4. The deed does away with the inexpressibility of what is 'meant'. [PG§322]
5. Therefore, feelings of exaltation or lamentation, or repentance are altogether out of place. For all that sort of thing stems from a mind which imagines a content and an in-itself which are different from the original nature of the individual and the actual carrying-out of it in the real world. Whatever it is that the individual does, and whatever happens to him, that he has done himself, and he *is* that himself. He can have only the consciousness of the simple transference of *himself* from the night of possibility into the daylight of the present, from the *abstract in-itself* into the significance of *actual* being. [PG§404]
6. The analysis of this being into intentions and subtleties of that sort, whereby the actual man, i.e. his deed, is to be explained away again in terms of a being that is only 'meant', just as the individual himself even may create for himself special intentions concerning his actuality, all this must be left to the laziness of mere conjecture. [PG§322]
7. From what has now been said, we may learn what to think of a man who, when blamed for his shortcomings, or, it may be, his discreditable acts, appeals to the (professedly) excellent intentions and sentiments of the inner self he distinguishes therefrom. There certainly may be individual cases where the malice of outward circumstances frustrates well-meant designs, and disturbs the execution of the best-laid plans. But in general even here the essential unity between inward and outward is maintained. We are thus justified in saying that a man is what he does; and the lying vanity which consoles itself with the feeling of inward excellence may be confronted with the words of the Gospel: 'By their fruits ye shall know them.' That grand saying applies primarily in a moral and religious aspect, but it also holds good in reference to performances in art and science... if a daub of a painter, or a poetaster, soothe themselves by the conceit that their head is full of high ideals, their consolation is a poor one; and if they insist on being judged not by their actual works but by their projects, we may safely reject their pretensions as unfounded and unmeaning. [*Encyclopedia* §140]
8. There are “two aspects possessed by the practical consciousness, intention and deed (what is 'meant' or intended by the deed and the deed itself),” [PG§319]
9. It is the right of the of the will to recognize as its *action* [Handlung], and to accept *responsibility* for, only those aspects of its *deed* [Tat] which it knew to be presupposed within its end, and which were present in its *purpose* [Vorsatz]—I can be made *accountable* for a deed only if *my will was responsible* for it—the *right of knowledge*. [RP§117]
10. So far as the action comes into immediate touch with existence, my part in it is to this extent formal, that external existence is also independent of the agent. This externality can pervert his action and bring to light something else than lay in it. Now, though any alteration as such, which is set on foot by the subjects' action, is its deed [Tat], still the subject does not for that reason recognize it as its action [Handlung], but only admits as its own that existence in the deed which lay in its knowledge and will, which was its purpose. Only for that does it hold itself responsible. [*Encyclopedia* §504]
11. The *heroic* self-consciousness (as in ancient tragedies like that of Oedipus) has not yet progressed from its unalloyed simplicity to reflect on the distinction between *deed* [Tat] and *action* [Handlung],

between the external event and the purpose and knowledge of the circumstances, or to analyse the consequences minutely, but accepts responsibility for the deed in its entirety. [RP§118Z]

12. Davidson:

- 1) One and the same event can be described or specified in many ways.
- 2) One important way of identifying or singling out an event is in terms of its *causal consequences*.
- 3) Some, but not all, of the descriptions of an action may be privileged in that they are ones under which it is *intentional*.
- 4) What makes an event, performance, or process an *action*, something *done*, is that it is *intentional* under *some* description.
- 5) What distinguishes some descriptions as ones under which a performance was intentional is their role as conclusions in processes of *practical reasoning*.

13. Hegel's 'Tat' refers to the deed done, with *all* of its accorded descriptions, and that his 'Handlung' is that same deed *as* the agent's doing, that is, *as* specifiable by the restricted set of descriptions under which it is intentional.

14. Action has multiple *consequences* in so far as it is translated into external existence; for the latter, by virtue of its context in external necessity, develops in all directions. These consequences, as the *shape* whose *soul* is the *end* to which the action is directed, belong to the action as an integral part of it. But the action, as the end translated into the external world, is at the same time exposed to external forces which attach to it things quite different from what it is for itself, and impel it on into remote and alien consequences. The will thus has the right to *accept responsibility* only for the first set of consequences, since they alone were part of its *purpose* [Vorsatz]. [RP§118]

15. The *deed* posits an alteration to this given existence, and the will is entirely *responsible* [hat schuld] for it in so far as the predicate 'mine' attaches to the existence so altered...But responsibility involves only the wholly external judgment as to whether I have done something or not; and the fact that I am responsible for something does not mean that the thing can be imputed to me. [RP§115 and §115H]

16. Absicht : Vorsatz :: Tat : Handlung

17. Consciousness, therefore, through its experience in which it should have found its truth, has really become a riddle to itself: the consequences of its deed are for it not the deeds themselves. What befalls it is, for it, not the experience of what it is in itself, the transition is not a mere alteration of the form of the same content and essence, presented now as the content and essence, and again as the object or [outwardly] beheld essence of itself. [PG§365]

18. The *Sache selbst* is only opposed to these moments in so far as they are supposed to be isolated, but as an interfusion of the reality and the individuality it is essentially their unity. It is equally an action and, qua action, pure action in general, hence just as much an action of this particular individual; and this action as still his in antithesis to reality, is a purpose. Equally, it is the transition from this determinateness into the opposite, and, lastly, it is a reality which is explicitly present for consciousness. The *Sache selbst* thus expresses the spiritual essentiality in which all these moments have lost all validity of their own, and are valid therefore only as universal, and in which the certainty consciousness has of itself is an objective entity, an objective fact for it, an object born of self-consciousness as its own, without ceasing to be a free object in the proper sense. [PG§410]

19. The "distinction that action implies" is "that between what is purposed and what is accomplished in the realm of existence." [RP§114Z]

20. The simple original nature now splits up into the distinction which action implies. Action is present at first...as End, and hence opposed to a reality already given. The second moment is the movement of the End...hence the idea of the transition itself, or means. The third moment is...the object, which is no longer in the form of an End directly known by the agent to be his own, but as brought out into the light of day and having for him the form of an 'other'. [PG§400]

21. How does Hegel understand the difference between the different kinds of what I have been calling 'descriptions' or 'specifications' of the deed?

- a) It is a distinction of *social perspective*, between the agent, who acknowledges a specifically contentful responsibility, and an audience, who attributes and assesses it.

- b) That difference of social perspective is a *normative* one in a dual sense. What they are perspective on is a normative status: a question of the imputation of a specific *responsibility*. And the perspectives are defined by distinct seats of *authority* concerning the characterization of what the agent is responsible for.
- c) The ultimate determinate *identity* (unity) of the content of the action—what we should understand as common to its inner form and the outer form that translates, actualizes, and expresses it—is the product of a process of reciprocal specific *recognition*, in which the competing complementary socially distinct authorities negotiate and their claims are adjudicated and reconciled.
22. The work is, i.e. it exists for other individualities. [PG§405]
23. Actualization is...a display of what is one's own in the element of universality whereby it becomes, and should become, the affair of everyone. [PG§ 417]
24. The work produced is the reality which consciousness gives itself; it is that in which the individual is explicitly for himself what he is implicitly or in himself, and in such a manner that the consciousness for which the individual becomes explicit in the work is not the particular, but the universal, consciousness. [PG§405]
25. The Sache selbst is present as the in-itself or the reflection into itself of consciousness; the supplanting of the moments by one another finds expression there, however, in their being established in consciousness, not as they are in themselves, but only as existing for another consciousness. One of the moments of the content is exposed by it to the light of day and made manifest to others; but consciousness is at the same time reflected back from it into itself and the opposite is equally present within consciousness which retains it for itself as its own. [PG§416]
26. Consciousness experiences both sides as equally essential moments, and in doing so learns what the nature of the Sache selbst really is, viz. that it is neither merely something which stands opposed to action in general, and to individual action...Rather is its nature such that its being is the action of the single individual and of all individuals and whose action is immediately for others, or is a Sache and is such only as the action of each and everyone: the essence which is the essence of all beings, viz. spiritual essence. [PG§418]
27. The existent reality of conscience, however, is one which is a self, an existence which is conscious of itself, the spiritual element of being recognized and acknowledged. The action is thus only the translation of its individual content into the objective element, in which it is universal and recognized, and it is just the fact that it is recognized that makes the deed a reality. The deed is recognized and thereby made real because the existent reality is directly linked with conviction or knowledge; or, in other words, knowing one's purpose is directly the element of existence, is universal recognition. [PG§640]
28. ...the *distinction* and *dichotomy* that lie in action as such and so constitute a stubborn actuality confronting action. [PG§793]
29. The necessity of the action consists in the fact that purpose is related simply to actuality, and this unity is the Notion of action. [PG§408]
30. Action alters nothing and opposes nothing. It is the pure form of a transition from a state of not being seen to one of being seen, and the content which is brought out into the daylight and displayed is nothing else but what this action already is in itself. [PG§396]
31. Action simply translates an initially implicit being into a being that is made explicit....[PG§401]
32. The Notion of this sphere requires that these various aspects be grasped in such a way that the content in them remains the same without any distinction, whether between individuality and being in general,
 or between End as against individuality as an original nature,
 or between End and the given reality;
 or between the means and that reality as an absolute End,
 or between the reality brought about by the agent as against the End, or the original nature or the means. [PG§400]
- This unity is the true work. [PG§409]

33. Consciousness...in doing its work, is aware of the antithesis of doing and being...This *disparity* between Notion and reality, which lies in its essence, is learnt by consciousness from experience in its work; in work, therefore, consciousness becomes what it is in truth...this [is the] fundamental contradiction inherent in work...[PG§406-7]

34. The simple original nature now splits up into the distinction which action implies. Action is present at first...as End, and hence opposed to a reality already given. The second moment is the movement of the End...hence the idea of the transition itself, or means. The third moment is...the object, which is no longer in the form of an End directly known by the agent to be his own, but as brought out into the light of day and having for him the form of an 'other'. [PG§400]

35. Two Conceptions: The relation between the unity and the disparity that agency involves can be understood either as:

- a) Local, contingent, and disjunctive (LCD) or
- b) Global, necessary, and conjunctive (GNC).

36. ...the two aspects possessed by the practical consciousness, intention and deed. [PG§319]

37. what the subject *is*, is the series of its actions, [RP§124]

38. individuality is the cycle of its action, [PG§401]

39. an individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action. [PG§401]

40. [T]he essential nature of the work...is to be a self-expression of...individuality. [PG§403]

41. The basic elements of the story I have told here about how to reconcile the two aspects of unity and disparity that Hegelian agency essentially involves are these:

- The story is *hylomorphic*: the “distinction that action necessarily involves” is that between two forms of one content. The forms are diverse, the content is common and unitary.
- Both aspects (forms) are essential to the identity of the content, i.e., it is essential to it, and not just accidental, that the content (the *Sache selbst*) takes *both* these forms.
- The two forms are different *specifications* of the one content.
- A place to start in understanding this distinction is Davidson’s distinction between *intentional* and *consequential* specifications of a single agentive event.
- The two "forms" are generated by different social perspectives on the action: that of the agent, and that of the other community members.
- These social perspectives are different loci of *authority*. They are generated by the context of deliberation and the context of assessment. This is the first deepening of the Davidsonian distinction between intentional and consequential specifications.
- The one content *must* have these two "forms" because it must be assessable from *both* perspectives.
- They correspond to *de dicto* and *de re* specifications.
- It must be assessable from both perspectives because normative *statuses* are instituted by *reciprocal* recognitive attitudes.
- In addition to being *socially* perspectival, the recognitive process that institutes the complex normative status of **action** is *historically* perspectival. It is of its essence to be articulated into *prospective* and *retrospective* perspectives, which provide additional fine structure to Hegel’s deepening of Davidson’s distinction between intentional and consequential specifications.