

6/3/2011

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

1. Hegel offers us strong statements of two views about action that starkly contrast and stand in at least apparent tension with one another: a broadly behaviorist, externalist view, which identifies and individuates actions according to what is actually done, the performance that is produced (cf. Anscombe's: "I do what happens,"), and an intentionalist, internalist view, which identifies and individuates actions by the agent's intention or purpose in undertaking them. According to the first view, the inner can only be understood in terms of its outer expression, so that it makes no sense to think of intentions as states whose content is related only contingently to, and so can diverge radically from, that of the performances to which they give rise. "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."¹ "The deed [Tat] is the actual self,"² the agent "only gets to know...his End, from the deed."³ "The deed does away with the inexpressibility of what is 'meant'."⁴ If the content of the inner intention is settled by what is true of the actual external performance that expresses it, then it is epistemically available, even to the agent, only retrospectively.

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*

¹ *Phenomenology* §401.

² *Phenomenology* §464.

³ *Phenomenology* §401.

⁴ *Phenomenology* §322.

from the night of possibility into the daylight of the present, from the *abstract in-itself* into the significance of *actual* being.⁵

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.⁶

A final index passage expressing this perspective explicitly maintains that the point is not affected by acknowledging the possibility of vulgar failure:

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.⁷

Hegel wants to bring into view a sense in which a bad painting, poem, or novel *cannot* be understood as the botched execution of a fine aim or plan, but must be understood rather as showing *exactly* what its creator actually intended—*however* it might seem to its author.⁸ Just how we are to understand this in the light of the acknowledged possibility of such contingencies as slips of the brush remains to be seen. But the perspective Hegel seeks to put in place here is not just a casual

⁵ *Phenomenology* §404.

⁶ *Phenomenology* §322.

⁷ *Encyclopedia* §140.

⁸ Robert Pippin offers a nice discussion of this perspective in his essay "Hegel's Practical Realism: Rational Agency as Ethical Life" [ref. [presented in Münster, February 2003]].

literary flourish or a mistake we are eventually to see through. It is an absolutely central and essential feature of the model of *expression*—making the implicit explicit—that plays such a crucial role in structuring his understanding of the relations between the subjective and the objective in both action and cognition.

It is also clear, however, that it is not the whole story. There are “two aspects possessed by the practical consciousness, intention and deed (what is 'meant' or intended by the deed and the deed itself),”⁹ and each must be given its due.

It is the right 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*.¹⁰

Elsewhere¹¹ Hegel makes the same point under the heading of the “right of intention”:

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.¹²

Indeed, distinguishing within the action some elements for which the agent is responsible from others for which the agent is not responsible is one of the achievements of modernity:

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

⁹ *Phenomenology* §319.

¹⁰ *Rechtsphilosophie* §117.

¹¹ *Encyclopedia* §505. See also *Philosophy of Right* §120. For my purposes here the difference between the right of knowledge and the right of intention do not matter.

¹² *Encyclopedia* §504.

purpose and knowledge of the circumstances, or to analyse the consequences minutely, but accepts responsibility for the deed in its entirety.¹³

(By the end of the Phenomenology, Hegel will be recommending a re-achievement of this ancient conception of total responsibility--inflected through the lessons of modernity, of course. But that story is not my current topic.) The distinction between Tat and Handlung is the distinction between what is *done* as an actual event, performance, or (as we'll see is most important to Hegel) process—something that happens—and those features in virtue of which it is a *doing*—something normatively imputable to the agent. This latter is what Hegel calls “the first determinate characteristic of an action: that “in its externality it must be known to me as my action”¹⁴

What makes what is done (the deed) *mine*, that is, an *action*, rather than just something that happens, is its relation to a *purpose*. For the concept of action includes “the right that the content of the action as carried out in immediate existence shall be in principle mine, that thus the action shall be the purpose [Vorsatz] of the subjective will.”¹⁵ The passages concerning the identity of content of the outer deed and the inner state it expresses rehearsed above invoked the *intention* [Absicht] expressed, rather than the *purpose*. So corresponding (at least roughly) to the Tat/Handlung distinction in Hegel's account is an Absicht/Vorsatz distinction.¹⁶ The content of the feature of an

¹³ *Philosophy of Right* §118Z. [BB: I will later claim that this “contraction strategy” is something that is to be overcome eventually, and replaced by an “expansion strategy”, which reinstates the heroic (now edelmütig) sense of responsibility, but with an expanded subject of responsibility. That is why the discussion in the *Philosophy of Right* is explicitly flagged in §117 (and especially its Zusatz) as pertaining to *finite* action. The final story, retailed in the next chapter of ASOT, is about action conceived under the speculative category of *infinity*.]

¹⁴ *Philosophy of Right* §113.

¹⁵ *Philosophy of Right* §114.

¹⁶ The passage from *Philosophy of Right* §114 just quoted continues, laying out the general outlines of the claims that must be interpreted to make sense of the Vorsatz/Absicht distinction, connecting it with the further notions of welfare (das Wohl) and the good (das Gute):

(b) The particular aspect of the action is its inner content (α) 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. (β) Its content is my special aim, the aim of my particular, merely individual, existence, i.e. Welfare.

(c) 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—with the

action that Hegel calls its ‘purpose’ need not extend to everything the developed deed contains, while the content of the feature of an action that Hegel calls its ‘intention’ does extend to everything the developed deed expressing it contains. The distinction among features of the deed that is induced by the purpose is what determines the deed as the agent’s doing, in the *normative* sense of being something the agent is *responsible* for. *What* the agent thereby becomes responsible for (doing) is the whole deed (what is done). And that fully developed deed reveals an *intention* that extends beyond what is merely ‘meant’ or purposed.

2. What has been said up to this point is a sketch of some of the most general features of the idiom Hegel develops to talk about practical agency. It is not yet an attempt to say how we should understand these distinctions and claims and what might entitle one to talk that way. It will be best to elaborate in stages this complex view of agency as a process of expression, development, and objective actualization, in terms of which we are to understand Hegel’s distinctive notion of the content that action expressively ‘translates’ from a subjective to an objective form. At the most basic level, I think it ought to be understood as having a Davidsonian structure.¹⁷ There are five basic elements of Davidson’s theory of action that seem to me helpful in beginning to understand Hegel’s. Davidson starts by developing a way of talking about events (such as the performances that result from exercises of agency) according to which:

- 1) One and the same event can be described or specified in many ways.

Further,

- 2) One important way of identifying or singling out an event is in terms of its *causal consequences*.

opposition in the sphere of reflection, of subjective universality, which is now wickedness and now conscience.

¹⁷ [ref. from *Actions and Events*, starting with “Actions, Reasons, and Causes”]. Refer to Michael Quante’s *Hegel’s Concept of Action* and *Hegels Begriff der Handlung*.

Thus moving one's finger, flipping the switch, turning on the light, and alerting the burglar can all count as specifications of one single event. As the effects of an event unfold, each new concentric ripple surrounding it makes available new ways of specifying it by the causal contribution it made to the occurrence of *those* later events. It is simply not settled yet whether the investment I made yesterday will eventually be identifiable as "the wisest financial decision I ever made", or "the most foolish...", or (more probably), something less dramatic in between. We'll just have to await the results. Davidson calls the way the potential descriptions of an event expand with the passage of time "the accordion effect."

- 3) Some, but not all, of the descriptions of an action may be privileged in that they are ones under which it is *intentional*.

Flipping the switch and turning on the light were intentional, while alerting the burglar (of whom I was unaware) was not. Buying a bond issued by company XYZ was intentional, while buying a bond issued by a company that would go bankrupt the following week, which might be a description of the very same event, would not have been intentional.

- 4) What makes an event, performance, or process an *action*, something *done*, is that it is *intentional* under *some* description.

Alerting the burglar and buying the bond of a soon-to-be-bankrupt company are things genuinely *done*, even though they were not intentional under those descriptions. For they *were* intentional under *other* descriptions of the same event: turning on the light and buying an XYZ bond. The performance is an action under *all* its descriptions and specifications, including all the distant, unforeseeable, consequential ones that come in under the accordion principle (an extensional matter). But what *makes* it an action is that it *was* intentional under *some* such specifications (an intensional, that is, specification-relative, matter).

- 5) What distinguishes some descriptions as ones under which a performance was intentional is their role as conclusions in processes of *practical reasoning*.

Turning on the light and buying an XYZ bond were things I had *reasons* to do, provided by *ends*, *purposes*, or *goals* I endorse, *commitments* I acknowledge, or *values* I embrace. Those reasons in the form of ends, purposes, goals, commitments, or values provide *premises* for potential pieces of practical reasoning justifying the practical conclusion that I ought to bring about an event satisfying a description such as being a turning on of a light or a buying of an XYZ bond—but not being an alerting of a burglar or a buying of a bond of an incipiently bankrupt company. That securing the applicability of *those* descriptions is in this way practically justifiable is what makes them the ones under which what I go on to do is *intentional*, and hence something that counts as an *action*.

The structure of such an account is quite different from one that identifies three distinct kinds of events standing in sequential causal relations: prior internal intentions or states of intending, actions, and consequences of those actions. The place of *distinct* events or occurrences of intendings and consequences has been taken by different descriptions of the *one* thing done: intentional and consequential ways of picking out the same doing. That is why it makes no sense to talk about an intention apart from what was done intentionally.¹⁸ What qualifies an occurrence as an action—something an agent is *responsible* for—is the existence of a privileged subset of specifications. And they are privileged precisely by their *normative* relation to the agent. Specifically, they are *justified* by practical *reasons* whose normative force or validity the agent acknowledges.

¹⁸ “[W]e ought to will something great. But we must also be able to achieve it, otherwise the willing is nugatory. The laurels of mere willing are dry leaves that never were green.” [*Philosophy of Right* §124Z.]

3. My first interpretive suggestion is that 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, and hence something *done* at all. Here is a crucial passage of Hegel's that puts together a number of the Davidsonian theses:

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].¹⁹

Endorsement of the accordion principle, and so of the Davidsonian principles (1) and (2), is implicit in saying that the action's consequences, the action as an external existence developing in all directions, are an integral part of the action.²⁰ This deed is what the action is *in* itself. But what the action is *for* itself (or for the acting consciousness) is determined by the subjectively envisaged end or goal it serves, the purpose for which it is performed. In Davidsonian terms, the purpose settles the specifications under which it is intentional (principle (3), which are the ones in virtue of which the deed is recognizable as the agent's (principle (4)), in the sense that they are the ones in virtue of which the agent is responsible for what is done. (This is the "right of knowledge" distinctive of modern conceptions of agency, by contrast to those presented in ancient tragedy, adverted to in the

¹⁹ *Philosophy of Right* §118.

²⁰ Very much the same language is used at *Phenomenology* §642:

Action, in virtue of the antithesis it essentially contains, is related to a negative of consciousness, to a reality possessing intrinsic being. Contrasted with the simplicity of pure consciousness, with the absolute other or implicit manifoldness, this reality is a plurality of circumstances which breaks up and spreads out endlessly in all directions, backwards into their conditions, sideways into their connections, forwards in their consequences.

passages further above.) Thus considerations of responsibility induce a distinction within the consequential specifications of the actual performance produced. The end or purpose endorsed (principle (5)) is translated into the external world in the shape of the deed in the sense that the purpose it justifies provides descriptions of the very same deed that also has consequential descriptions under which it is *not* intentional.

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.²¹

The deed is what I do under all its descriptions. I am responsible for it in the sense that it is ‘mine’: I did it. But it is *imputed* to me only under the *intentional* descriptions: the ones appearing in a specification of my purpose, the descriptions that specify the deed as something I had reason to do.

Indeed, it is just the failure to appreciate this point about the necessary unity of action—the expression (translation) of the inner in the outer as the actualization of the purpose in that intentional specifications and unintentional consequential ones specify the *same* actual deed—that characterizes the defective forms of practical self-consciousness rehearsed in the *Reason* chapter:

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.²²

²¹ *Philosophy of Right* §115 and §115H.

²² *Phenomenology* §365.

For the consequences of the deeds to be the deeds themselves is just for the accordion principle to apply. For what befalls consciousness (the consequential specifications of its deed under which it is *not* intentional) to be *for* consciousness what practical consciousness is *in* itself is for the specifications under which the deed *is* intentional (specifications in terms of its endorsed purpose, expressing the agent's taking of responsibility for a doing) to be acknowledged as specifications of the *very same* deed that also has external consequential descriptions.

4. Hegel calls the unity that action exhibits as concept and content the "Sache selbst", which Miller translates as "the very heart of the matter".²³ The concept of action, the norm according to which it is assessed as such, when adequately conceived, is the concept of a unified content that is expressed in action, not only *in spite of* the disparity of form between the action as *implicit* in thought or intended and as *explicit* in actuality or accomplished, which is what is meant by the contingency of action, but as itself *consisting* in the relation between those disparate moments.

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. [410]

²³ For instance:

This unity is the true work; it is the Sache selbst which completely holds its own and is experienced as that which endures, independently of what is merely the contingent result of an individual action, the result of contingent circumstances, means, and reality. [*Phenomenology* §409]

The unity or identity of content in contingent action that is the *Sache selbst* is not the identity of something that is what it is independently. It is a unity forged out of moments of independence and moments of dependence. Contingency, the manifestation of the dependence of the action on the circumstances of the performance and the talents and material means available is somehow to be incorporated integrally into the unity that is the *Sache selbst*.

The “distinction that action implies” is “that between what is purposed and what is accomplished in the realm of existence.”²⁴ More specifically, when we look at the internal articulation of the process that in its unity we identify as an action:

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'.²⁵

The broadly Davidsonian understanding of this “splitting up” of the action can be exploited so as to explain how the deed, unfolding consequentially beyond the ken or compass of the purpose of the agent, can nevertheless be acknowledged by the agent as the agent’s doing—so that the agent does not in its practical activity “become a riddle to itself.”

5. How does Hegel understand the difference between the different kinds of what I have been calling ‘descriptions’ or ‘specifications’ of the deed? The short version of the answer I will offer here is, first, that it is a distinction of *social perspective*, between the agent, who acknowledges a specifically contentful responsibility, and an audience, who

²⁴ *Philosophy of Right* §114Z.

²⁵ *Phenomenology* §400.

attributes and assesses it. Second, 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. Third, the ultimate determinate *identity* (unity) of the content of the action—what we should understand as common to its inner (in the Hegelian sense of implicit, rather than the Cartesian sense of epistemically transparent) form and the outer (in the Hegelian sense of explicit, rather than the Cartesian sense of epistemically opaque) 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. These are all claims in which Hegel moves far beyond anything implicit in Davidson’s views.

The distinction that action implies is, on the Davidsonian line being pursued, a distinction between *intentional* and *consequential* characterizations of one and the same deed. We can already see in this way of setting things out the basis for Hegel’s claim that ethical theories that assess the rightness of actions exclusively on the basis of the intentions with which they were performed and ethical theories that assess the rightness of actions exclusively on the basis of the consequences to which they give rise are equally ‘one-sided’. The two sorts of assessments ought rather to be seen as two sides of one coin, at least in the sense of being reciprocally sense dependent. We are now asking after the nature of the whole that necessarily comprises these two aspects of practical activity. The essentially *social* character of that distinction shows up if we think about

who is in a normative position—who has the authority—to offer specifications of the two sorts. To say that the deed or work is actual is to say that it is *public*, available to all.

The truth of the performance, what it is in itself, is expressed in *all* of the descriptions of what is actually achieved, all the specifications of the content in terms of its consequences. These descriptions are available in principle to anyone in the community to recognize the performance under or to characterize its content. “The work is, i.e. it exists for other individualities.”²⁶ For others, who witness or hear about my action (coming to know about it in any of the various ways we come to know about actual occurrences), what my deed is can be said of it.²⁷

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.²⁸

The consequential descriptions specify what the action is for others, and for the agent qua other, that is as recognizing and assessing his own action via his empirical consciousness of it as an actuality.

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.²⁹

The universal consciousness is that of the community, as opposed to the individual agent. The other members of the community can describe what it is that I have done; they can specify what I have achieved or accomplished. Accordingly, the distinction between what I intended and what I accomplished, between what the performance is for me and what it is in itself, takes the form of the distinction between what it is for me and what it is for others.

²⁶ *Phenomenology* §405.

²⁷ Cf. *Phenomenology* §322.

²⁸ *Phenomenology* § 417.

²⁹ *Phenomenology* §405.

The actuality available to all is the explicit form of the commitment the agent has undertaken in acting. But what *makes* the commitment, and so the action, the agent's (the moment of certainty) is his acknowledgment of it as such. And for that the specifications under which the agent endorses it have special authority, not shared by those who merely observe the results of that endorsement. These are the specifications under which it is intentional. We can look at this notion in terms of its circumstances and consequences of application. What in this distinctive way privileges the association of some descriptions of the deed with the doer is that they are the ones that appear as conclusions of processes of practical reasoning endorsed by the agent. For example:

- It is dark;
- I need to see;
- Turning on the light will enable me to see;
- Flipping the switch will turn on the light;
- So I shall flip the switch.

The agent's endorsement of such practical reasoning may have been explicitly attached to its actual rehearsal as part of an antecedent process of deliberation leading up to the performance, or it may be implicit in a disposition to trot it out when challenged to give reasons for the performance. The consequences of application of the concept description under which the performance is intentional are that these specify the content of the commitment the agent takes herself to be acknowledging in producing the performance. The performance is intentional under those descriptions the agent is prepared to acknowledge herself as responsible for it under, apart from any knowledge of the descriptions that become available only with its being actualized, specifically,

descriptions of it in terms of its consequences. These are the descriptions under which the agent is petitioning the community to be specifically recognized as responsible for the performance.

6. Both of these socially distinguished cognitive elements—the descriptions under which the agent specifically recognizes or acknowledges herself as responsible, and those under which the community specifically recognizes the agent as responsible—are essential to the unity and identity of the action. Hegel discusses this sort of identity-in-difference, this socially articulated reciprocal specific cognitive achievement, under the rubric of the “*Sache selbst*.”³⁰ The concept of action being invoked is the concept of a unified content that is expressed in action, not only in spite of the disparity of form between the action as implicit in thought or intended and as explicit in actuality or accomplished, but as itself consisting in the relation between those disparate moments induced by the process of reciprocal specific recognition (acknowledgement and attribution of a determinately contentful commitment).

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

³⁰ See for instance *Phenomenology* §409: “This unity is the true work; it is the *Sache selbst*...” and *Phenomenology* §410:

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.

opposite is equally present within consciousness which retains it for itself as its own.³¹

It is doings that one is responsible for. Something must be done for it to be intentional under any description. (So: no deed, no intention, i.e. nothing intentional.) What is done is exposed to the light of day (actualized, expressed, made explicit) in the sense of existing for other consciousnesses, being made manifest to others.

The result is that the agent is specifically recognized by those other subjects. The deed is attributed to the agent under consequential descriptions as the explicit expression of a determinately contentful implicit commitment. “What the deed is can be said of it”, and the ones *for* whom it is something that can be said of it are *others*, *for* whom it is something actual and observable, like any other fact.³² The content is what is both acknowledged by the agent and attributed by the community: the product of a process of reciprocal specific recognition. The content of my action accordingly does not depend on me alone. It is not just what I take it or make it to be, but depends as well on its determinate acknowledgment by others who attribute to me responsibility for the performance specified in ways that go beyond those in terms of which I made it mine.

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.³³

³¹ *Phenomenology* §416.

³² *Phenomenology* §322.

³³ *Phenomenology* §418.

The spiritual [geistig], in Hegel's usage, is the normative substance that is socially synthesized by a process of reciprocal specific recognition (which shows up not only as 'action' and 'work', but also as 'experience'). The cognitively constituted character of the determinately contentful practical commitments whose intentional and consequential specifications (subjective and objective forms) are said to stand in relations of 'translation', 'actualization', and 'expression' is explicitly acknowledged by (and forms the principal progressive insight of) the phenomenal form of understanding of agency that Hegel discusses under the heading of 'conscience':

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*. [640]

The Sache selbst is a spiritual expression of individuality, compounded out of the moment of independence displayed by the particular deliberating self-consciousness in privileging some specifications of its responsibility as the descriptions under which the performance is *intentional*, and the corresponding moment of dependence on the universal or assessing consciousness in characterizing in *consequential* terms the achievement and so what one has actually accomplished and so is responsible for in that sense. Contingency, the manifestation of the dependence of the action on the circumstances of the performance and the talents and material means available, is to be incorporated integrally into the unity that is the Sache selbst.

7. Hegel's resituating of a generally Davidsonian approach to intentional agency by placing it in the context of a socially perspectival normative process of reciprocal recognition lets us see

how to satisfy one of the principal criteria of adequacy he articulates for such an account: bringing together into an intelligible whole two aspects of the concept of intentional action that stand in at least apparent tension with one another. These are the unity of an action, as it develops from envisaged purpose to completed performance, and “the *distinction* and *dichotomy* that lie in action as such and so constitute a stubborn actuality confronting action.”³⁴

The “unity and necessity” of an action are what constitute its identity. “The necessity of the action consists in the fact that purpose is related simply to actuality, and this unity is the Notion of action.”³⁵

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.³⁶

“Action simply translates an initially implicit being into a being that is made explicit....”³⁷

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.³⁸

“This unity is the true work.”³⁹

³⁴ *Phenomenology* §793.

³⁵ *Phenomenology* §408.

³⁶ *Phenomenology* §396.

³⁷ *Phenomenology* §401. See also *Philosophy of Right* §109, where “the will is the struggle to transcend this barrier [Schranke], i.e. it is the activity of *translating* this content in some way or other from subjectivity into objectivity. The simple identity of the will with itself in this opposition is the content which remains self-identical in both these opposites and indifferent to this formal distinction of opposition.”

³⁸ *Phenomenology* §400.

On the other hand,

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....⁴⁰

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'.⁴¹

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.⁴²

The concept [Begriff—Miller's 'Notion'] of action, as Hegel is presenting it, requires something that persists self-identically through it: what he in these passages calls its 'content' [Inhalt]. It is the content that moves from a state of not being seen to one of being seen, that is initially *implicit* and later translated into something *explicit*, that remains the same without any distinction, unaltered and unopposed, altering only in its *form*. "Action itself is a content only when, in this determination of simplicity, it is contrasted with its character as a transition and a movement."⁴³ The concept of action is also structured equally essentially by the distinction and difference between not being seen and being seen, being *implicit* as purpose and *explicit* as achievement, and of the transition or movement by which the content develops from one such state or form to the other. The moments of

³⁹ *Phenomenology* §409.

⁴⁰ *Phenomenology* §406-7.

⁴¹ *Phenomenology* §400.

⁴² *Phenomenology* §365.

⁴³ *Phenomenology* §396.

identity and *difference*, the *unity* and the *disparity* that action involve, are both crucial aspects of the concept of agency.

8. One natural way to think about the aspects of unity and disparity that action essentially involves is in terms of the distinction between success and failure. Judgment and belief essentially involve the acknowledgment of responsibility to how things actually, objectively are. Apart from their liability to normative assessment as to their correctness in the sense of truth or error, states and performances are not intelligible as *cognitively* significant. Intention exhibits the complementary direction of normative fit. For it essentially involves the assertion of authority over how things actually, objectively are to be. Apart from their liability to normative assessment as to their correctness in the sense of success or failure, states and performances are not intelligible as *practically* significant

Practically sorting performances into successful and unsuccessful doings is implicitly acknowledging the two aspects of the concept of action. The *distinction* that action implies, between purpose and achievement, is in play because these are the elements one must compare in order to assess success or failure. And the *unity* essential to the concept of action—the fact that endorsing a purpose, adopting it as one’s own is committing oneself to a norm according to which the achievement *ought* to be what one intends—is just what sets the normative standard for success.⁴⁴ *Disparity* of purpose and achievement is *failure* (in accomplishing what one intended to accomplish); *identity* of purpose and achievement is *success* (in accomplishing what one intended to accomplish). Since one cannot understand what intentional action is without understanding that such actions are essentially, and not just accidentally, subject to assessment as successful or failed,

⁴⁴ For the moment I will speak indifferently of ‘purpose’ and ‘intention’. When we later look at the details of Hegel’s approach, these will need to be distinguished, corresponding to his uses of ‘Vorsatz’ and ‘Absicht’ in the *Philosophy of Right* (beginning at §114).

it follows that one cannot grasp the concept of intentional action without implicitly acknowledging the two aspects of that concept that Hegel distinguishes.

On a familiar way of rendering these claims, the relations between the aspects of unity and difference that the concept of action involves has it that the question of whether those aspects are realized is to be answered differently for each particular performance. That is to say that the relation between the aspects is understood as *local*, *contingent*, and *disjunctive*. It is *local* in that the assessment of success or failure is made for *each* action, one by one. It exhibits *identity* of (content of) purpose and achievement in case it *succeeds*, and *difference* of (content of) purpose and achievement in case it *fails*. The *possibility* of disparity and the *ideal* of identity of content between purpose and achievement are universal, but those features are each *actualized* only in *some* actions. It is *contingent* whether any particular action succeeds or fails—for instance, whether, as I intended, the ball goes through the hoop. And the two aspects are *disjunctively* related (indeed, related by *exclusive* disjunction) because for any given action *either* the action succeeds, and so exhibits identity of content of purpose and content of achievement, *or* it fails, and so exhibits their disparity. I'll call this sort of account an “LCD” view of the identity-in-difference that structures the concept of action.

The LCD account is so commonsensical that it can be hard so much as to conceive of an alternative to it. Nonetheless, I do not believe that it is a view of this shape that Hegel is expressing. According to the post-Davidsonian way of thinking about agency I have been attributing to Hegel, the identity-in-difference that structures the concept of action is rather *global*, *necessary*, and *conjunctive*. Assessment of success or failure in the ordinary sense—what I'll tententiously call “vulgar” success or failure—is, if not completely irrelevant to understanding the unity and disparity

that action involves⁴⁵, at any rate something that comes into the story only much later. According to a GNC account, *every* action (‘globally’), *as* an action (‘necessarily’) *both* (‘conjunctively’) simply translates something inner or *implicit* into something outer or *explicit*, hence exhibiting the *unity* of action and the identity of content in two different forms, *and* necessarily involves an actual *disparity* between purpose and achievement (“the distinction that action involves”).

9. The disparity that action necessarily involves is the social-perspectival distinction of loci of authority that distinguish between *Handlung* and *Tat*: the endorsed, acknowledged *purpose* that the agent is authoritative about, in virtue of which what happens is an action at all, and the *consequential* specifications that necessarily outrun any specification of purpose available in advance of the actual doing. This is the distinction between what one intended *that* one do, and what one thereby intended *of*, that one do *that* (the distinction between *de dicto* and *de re* specifications of the doing) The unity that action necessarily involves is the unity of content that takes these two forms. “Action itself is a content only when, in this determination of simplicity, it is contrasted with its character as a transition and a movement.”⁴⁶ In intending in actual circumstances *that* one make true the claim that *p*, there is always something *of* which one *thereby* intends to do *that*. These are two normative perspectives on *one* action: the intentional and the consequential. (Cf. “the two aspects possessed by the practical consciousness, intention and deed.”⁴⁷) The content of the action can be specified either *de dicto* (‘that’), in terms of the purpose that authorized it, or *de re* (‘of’), in terms of what was thereby in fact authorized.

Understanding the concept of action requires understanding actions as unities that necessarily

⁴⁵ The word ‘Erfolg’ (success) occurs only three times in the *Phenomenology*, never in connection with the theory of action, and of its six occurrences in the *Rechtsphilosophie*, only one is an action-theoretic use (in a comment on a comment on the crucial §118), appearing under the heading “Dramatic Interest”.

⁴⁶ *Phenomenology* §396.

⁴⁷ *Phenomenology* §319

involve this distinction of perspective, and understanding those perspectives as perspectives on *one* content. The content of the *intention*, in Hegel's use of 'Absicht', is the content of the *action*. The intention that, as a norm, governs the process of achieving an end can be thought of as a universal content discernible in *all* phases of that process, from *implicit* initial subjective endorsing of the end to its *explicit* objective achievement. The purpose and the accomplished deed are then two perspectives on that content.

The deed is not, except in the most degenerate cases, a punctiform, momentary event such as a muscle twitch. (And this is not because its consequential descriptions unfold into an indefinite future; that much is so even of achievements that are all there at a single time.) Writing a book, teaching a student, building a house, putting on a dinner party..., these better, more representative, examples of actions are all *processes* with a rich temporal—indeed, more specifically historical—structure. It is the Test-Operate-Test-Exit structure of a *cycle* of action in which the plan in force at any given time (endorsed as the current expression of a practical commitment) *changes* from stage to stage. At each time-slice in the evolution of the action, the then-operative plan stands to the purpose as the concrete, worked-out, contingency-incorporating, determinately contentful practical norm for actualizing that abstractly envisaged end. The content of the intention should then be understood as standing to the whole process, in relation to the guiding purpose, as the plan adopted at any one stage is to that time-slice of the process, in relation to that same purpose. It is the concrete, worked-out, contingency-incorporating, determinately contentful practical norm for actualizing that abstractly envisaged

end, regarded as something whose content does *not* change as its instantiation in the form of plans *does* change.⁴⁸

This Vorsatz/Absicht distinction gives Hegel a theoretical way of saying what vulgar success and failure of actions consists in. An action succeeds in this sense if the consequential descriptions that are true of it include the purpose whose achievement is the endorsed end in the service of which all the other elements of the intention-plan function as means. An action fails in this sense if, although some things are done intentionally, i.e. as part of the plan, the purpose is not achieved, because the means adopted do not have the consequences envisaged.

Even an action that fully succeeds in this sense—in which the actual process unfolds through the successive realization of subsidiary ends serving as means to the realization of the final purpose exactly according to plan (i.e. as intended)—still necessarily exhibits “the disparity that action involves”. For even in such a case, there remains the distinction between *Handlung* and *Tat*: between the plan-structured instrumental constellation of realized descriptions under which what is done is *intentional* and the deed, comprising the whole panoply of *consequential* descriptions, unfolding to the infinite future, which, whether originally envisaged or not, were not elements of the intention structure, but are elements of what one *did* in realizing that intention. So at this point we can see the rationale behind the “GNC” (for global, necessary, conjunctive) reading of the structure of identity-in-difference characteristic of agency on Hegel’s

⁴⁸ 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'. 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. *Phenomenology* §400.

view: the claim that that *every* action, whether a success or a failure, in the vulgar sense that the motivating purpose or end aimed at was realized or not, exhibits *both* the unity *and* the disparity that action, by its very concept, involves. For at this point it should be clear how the combination of the Davidsonian reading of the Tat/Handlung distinction and a rendering of the distinction between success and failure in terms of the plan-structure understanding of the Vorsatz/Absicht distinction together underwrite the claim that even fully successful actions necessarily exhibit the “disparity that action involves.” Conversely, even an action that fails in the vulgar sense exhibits the socially instituted normative unity of action: the determination of a content.

Regarded *prospectively*, from the point of view of the initially endorsed purpose, the move from implicit to explicit is one of *change*. The content of the intention evolves and develops, becoming more definite and determinate under the influence of the actual circumstances in which the intention is realized, as plans are formulated, implemented, amended, or replaced. Regarded *retrospectively*, from the point of view of the finally achieved result, the move from implicit to explicit is one of *revelation* of the content of an intention that was all along present, albeit in some sense (visible only retrospectively) implicitly.

Finally, this account enables us to understand the intimate connection Hegel asserts between intentional agency and the constitution of individual *selves*. The development of an intention by the alteration of a plan involves *sacrificing* some commitments—to the rejected plan, perhaps to some of the sub-goals it endorsed—and thereby *identifying* with others. The process by which self-conscious individual selves constitute themselves (in a recognitive community) is a process of relinquishing or altering, in general sacrificing some commitments in

favor of other, incompatible ones, which one thereby counts as identifying with. We are now in a position to see that intentional action is a process that has just this *self*-constituting structure. The process of carrying through an intention is a process of *self determination* or *self-constitution*: making oneself into a (more) determinately contentful self by identifying with some commitments and rejecting others. That is why “what the subject *is*, is *the series of its actions*,”⁴⁹ “individuality is the cycle of its action,”⁵⁰ and “an individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action.”⁵¹ The very same process that is the exercise of intentional agency is at the same time the expression of self-conscious individuality. “[T]he essential nature of the work... is to be a self-expression of... individuality.”⁵² The unity of the *action* is, in the end, the unity of the *self*. It is a normative, socially and historically perspectival unity. That is what and who *we* are.

END

⁴⁹ *Philosophy of Right* §124.

⁵⁰ *Phenomenology* §308.

⁵¹ *Phenomenology* §401.

⁵² *Phenomenology* §403.