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Hegel and the Philosophy of Action

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I want to attempt in this paper to relate Hegel's thought to a set of perennial issues that have been central to the philosophy of action in modern times. The objective is twofold. Understanding Hegel's contribution to the developing modern debate on the nature of action helps us to understand the historical development of this debate; and this, I want to argue, is important for understanding the debate itself. At the same time, articulating the theory of action that is central to Hegel's philosophy helps us to see this philosophy itself in a new light.

Of course, for any highly systematic body of thought like Hegel's we can reconstruct the whole from many perspectives. Each one gives us something, though some are more illuminating than others. I believe that looking at Hegel's thought from the angle of the underlying conception of action provides one of the more interesting perspectives on the whole.

I

We can, perhaps, identify one fundamental issue that has been open in the philosophy of action in modern times. To do so, of course, requires some interpretation of the history of modern philosophy, and this, as always, can be subject to controversy. The precise question that defines this issue was not asked in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and is rather one that is central to our twentieth-century debate. But I want to claim, nevertheless, that different answers to this question were espoused earlier, as one can see from a number of related philosophical doctrines that were expressly propounded, and that depends on these answers. I hope the plausibility of this reading will emerge in the course of the whole argument.

This being said, I will baldly identify my central issue in an unashamedly contemporary terms: what is the nature of action? Or, otherwise put, what distinguishes (human) action from other kinds of events? What are the peculiar features of action?

One family of views distinguishes actions by the kind of cause that brings them about. Actions are events that are peculiar in that they are brought about by desires, or intentions, or combinations of desires and beliefs. As events, actions may be described, among other ways, as physical movements (although one would have to be generous with the term 'physical movements,' so as to include cases of nonmovement, as, for example, with the action we would describe as 'He stood still.'). In this, they resemble a host of other events that are not actions. What distinguishes them is a peculiar type of psychological cause that they are brought on by desires or intentions. Of course, to hold this is not necessarily to hold that psychological explanations are ultimate. One can also look forward to their reduction to some neurophysiological or physical theory. But in that case the burden of distinguishing action from nonaction would be taken over by antecedents differently described: perhaps some peculiar kind of firing in the cortex, that was found to be the basis for what we identify psychologically as desire.

A view of this kind seems to have been implicit in much of Donald Davidson's work (cf. Davidson, 1973). But the basic conception goes back, I believe, at least to the seventeenth century. A conception of this kind was, in a sense, even more clearly at home in the basically dualist outlook common both to Cartesian and empiricist philosophies. *Qua* bodily movements actions resembled all other events. What distinguished them was their inner, 'mental' background. Within the bounds of this outlook, there was a clear ontological separation between outer event and inner background.

Against this, there is another family of views that sees action as qualitatively different from nonaction, in that actions are what we might call intrinsically directed. Actions are in a sense inhabited by the purposes that direct them, so that action and purpose are ontologically inseparable.

The basic intuition here is not hard to grasp, but it is difficult to articulate it very clearly. What is in any case clear is that this view involves a clear negation of the first: we cannot understand action in terms of the notions of undiscriminated event and a particular kind of cause; this is to explain it in terms of other primitive concepts. But for the second view, action is itself a primitive: there is a basic qualitative distinction between action and nonaction. To the extent that action can be further

explicated in terms of a concept like 'purpose,' this turns out not to be independently understandable. For the purpose is not ontologically separable from the action and this means something like: it can only exist in animating this action; or its only articulation as a purpose is in animating the action; or perhaps, a fundamental articulation of this purpose, on which all others depend, lies in the action.

This second view thus resists the basic approach of the first. We can't understand action by first identifying it as an undifferentiated event (because it is qualitatively distinct), and then distinguishing it by some separably identifiable cause (because the only thing which could fill this function, the purpose, is not separably identifiable). One of the roots of this doctrine plainly is Aristotle's thesis of the inseparability of form and matter, and we can see that in contrast to Cartesianism and empiricism, it is plainly antidualist. This is not to say that proponents of the first view are necessarily dualist—at least not simply so; just that their conception permits of dualism, whereas the qualitative distinction thesis does not.

One of the issues that is thus bound up with that about the nature of action is the question of dualism. Another that I want briefly to mention here is the place of the subject. It is clear that the distinction between action and nonaction is one that occurs to us as agents. Indeed, one can argue plausibly that a basic, not further reducible distinction between action and what just happens is indispensable and ineradicable from our self-understanding as agents.[1] That is, it is impossible to function as an agent at all unless one marks a distinction of this kind.

In this context, we can understand part of the motivation for the first, or causal theory of action, as lying in the aspiration to go beyond the subjective standpoint of the agent, and come to an understanding of things that is objective. An objective understanding in this sense would be one that was no longer tied to a particular viewpoint, imprisoned in the categories that a certain viewpoint imposes. If agency seems to impose the qualitative conception of action, then the causal one can appear as a superior analysis, an objective portrayal of the way things really stand, of the real components of action *an sich*. This drive for objectivity, or what Bernard Williams has called 'absolute' descriptions (cf. Williams, 1978), was one of the animating motives of both Cartesianism and empiricism.

Now Hegel is clearly a proponent of the second, qualitative conception of action. And indeed he emerges out of a climate in which this conception was staging a comeback after the ascendancy of Cartesian and empiricist views. In one sense, the comeback can be seen to start

with Leibniz, but the tenor of much late eighteenth-century thought in Germany was of this stamp. The reaction against dualism, the recovery of the subject, the conception of the aesthetic object in Kant's third critique—all these pushed towards, and indeed articulated themselves through, this understanding of action. I now want to develop its ramifications to show how central it is to Hegel's thought.

II

The first important ramification of the qualitative theory is that it allows for what I shall call agent's knowledge. The notion is that we are capable of grasping our own action in a way that we cannot come to know external objects and events. In other words, there is a knowledge we are capable of, concerning our own action, that we can attain as the doers of this action; and this is different from the knowledge we may gain of objects we observe or scrutinize.

This qualitative distinction in kinds of knowledge is grounded on the qualitative view of action. Action is distinct in that it is directed, aimed to encompass ends or purposes. And this notion of directedness is part of our conception of agency: the agent is the being responsible for the direction of action, the being for whom and through whom action is directed as it is. The notion of action is normally correlative to that of an agent.

Now if we think of this agent as identical with the subject of knowledge, then we can see how there can be different kinds of knowledge. One kind is gained by making articulate what we are doing, the direction we are already imprinting on events in our action. As agents, we will already have some sense, however dim, inarticulate, or subliminal, of what we are doing; otherwise, we could not speak of directing at all. So agent's knowledge is a matter of bringing this sense to formulation, articulation or full consciousness. It is a matter of making articulate something we already have an inarticulate sense of.

This evidently contrasts with knowledge of other objects, the things we observe and deal with in the world. Here we are learning about things external to our action, which we may indeed act with or on, but that stand over against action.

Now the first, or causal view, cannot draw this contrast. To begin with, we can see why it wasn't concerned to: because the contrast is one that is evident from the agent's standpoint; agent's knowledge is available to the knower only qua agent, and thus from this standpoint. It cannot be recognized as knowledge from the absolute standpoint. Thus for the

causal view, my action is an external event like any other, only distinct in having a certain kind of cause. I cannot claim to know it in some special way.

Of course, what I can claim 'privileged access' to is my desire, or intention—the cause of my action. And here we come to the closest thing to an analogous distinction within the causal view to that between agent's and observer's knowledge. In the original formulations of Cartesianism and empiricism, I am transparently or immediately aware of the contents of my mind. It may be accorded that I intend to eat this apple. But of the consequences of this desire or intention, viz., my consuming the apple, I have knowledge like that of any other external event; I observe it.

We might then contrast the two views by noting that the causal view too recognizes two kinds of knowledge, but it draws the boundaries quite differently, between 'inner' and 'outer' reality. But we would have to add that this difference of location of the boundary goes along with a quite different view of what the knowledge consists in. The notion of immediate or incorrigible knowledge makes sense in the context of dualism, of a separate domain of inner, mental space, of which we can say at least that its *esse* entails its *percipi*. The contrast will be something like that between immediate and inferential knowledge, or the incorrigible and the revisable.

Once we draw the boundary the way the qualitative theory does, there is no question of incorrigibility. We may never be without some sense of what we are doing, but coming to have knowledge is coming to formulate that correctly, and we may only do this in a partial or distorted fashion. Nor is this knowledge ever immediate; it is, on the contrary, mediated by our efforts at formulation. We have indeed a different mode of access to what we are doing, but it is questionable whether we should tub this access 'privileged'. Neither immediacy nor incorrigibility are marks of agent's knowledge.

Now, in a sense, this idea of agent's knowledge originates in modem thought with Vico. But since his work didn't have the influence it deserved in the eighteenth century, we should perhaps see Kant as the important seminal figure. Not that Kant allowed a full-blooded notion of agent's knowledge. Indeed, he shied away from using the word 'knowledge' in this context. But he made the crucial distinction between our empirical knowledge of objects, on one hand, and the synthetic a priori truths that we can establish, on the other, about the mathematical and physical structure of things. In Kant's mind it is clear that we can only establish the latter with certainty because they are in an important sense our own doing.

Perceiving the world involved not just the reception of information, but crucially also our own conceptual activity, and we can know for certain the framework of empirical reality, because we ourselves provide it.

Moreover, in Kant's procedure of proof of these synthetic a priori truths, he shows them to be essential conditions of undeniable features of experience, such as, for example, that we mark a distinction between the objective and the subjective in experience, or that the 'I think' must be able to accompany all our representations. Later he will show the postulates of freedom, God, and immortality as essential conditions of the practice of determining our action by moral precepts. If we ask what makes these starting points allegedly undeniable, I think the answer can only be that we can be sure of them because they are what we are *doing*, when we perceive the world, or determine our action on moral grounds.[2]

Kant thus brings back into the center of modem epistemological debate the notion of activity and hence of agent's knowledge. Cartesian incorrigibility, the immediate knowledge I have of myself as a thinking substance, is set aside. In its place come the certainties that we don't have immediately, but can gain, concerning not some substance, or any object of knowledge whatever, but the structures of our own activity. What we learn by this route is only accessible by this route. It is something quite different from the knowledge of objects.

This has been an immensely influential idea in modem philosophy. One line of development from Kant lies through Schopenhauer, who distinguished our grasp of ourselves as representation and as will, and from this through Wittgenstein into modem British analytic philosophy, for example, in Miss Anscombe's notion of 'non-observational knowledge' (cf. Anscombe, 1957, pp. 13–15).

But the line that interests us here passes through Fichte. Fichte's attempt to define subject-object identity is grounded on the view that agent's knowledge is the only genuine form of knowledge. Both Fichte and Schelling take up Kant's notion of an 'intellectual intuition', which for Kant was the kind of agent's knowledge that could only be attributed to God, one through which the existence of the object itself was given (B72, *Critique of Pure Reason*) or one in which the manifold is given by the activity of self (*selbstthatig*, B68). But they make this the basis of genuine self-knowledge by the ego; and then of all genuine knowledge in so far as object and subject are shown to be identical.

The category of agent's knowledge has obviously taken on a central role, has exploded beyond the limits that Kant set for it, and is indeed, the principal instrument by which these limits are breached and the realm of inaccessible *noumena* denied. But the extension of agent's

knowledge obviously goes along with a redefinition of the subject. He is no longer simply the finite subject in general that figures in the *Critiques*, but is related in some way to a single infinite or cosmic subject.

Hegel is obviously the heir to this development. He takes up the task of demonstrating subject-object identity, and believes himself to be alone capable of demonstrating this properly. What is first seen as other is shown to be identical with the self. It is crucial to this demonstration that the self cease to understand itself as merely finite, but see itself as part of spirit.

But the recognition of identity takes the form of grasping that everything emanates from spirit's activity. To understand reality aright is to understand it as 'actuality' (translating *Wirklichkeit*), that is, as what has been actualized. We see it as not just given, but produced or 'posited' by spirit's action. This is the crucial prerequisite of the final state, which comes when we see that the agent of this activity is not foreign to us, but that we are identical to (in our nonidentity with) spirit. The highest categories of Logic, those that provide the entry into the absolute Idea, are thus those linked with agency and activity. We move from the teleology into the categories of life, and then from knowledge to the good.

The recognition thus requires that we understand reality as activity, but it requires as well that we come to understand in a fuller way what we are doing, up to the point of seeing what spirit is doing through us. Coming to this point, we see the identity of the world-activity with ours.

Thought thus culminates in a form of agent's knowledge. Only this is not just a department of what we know alongside observer's knowledge, as it is for our ordinary understanding. Rather observer's knowledge is ultimately superceded. But the distinction is none the less essential to the system, since its crucial claim is that we only rise to the higher kind of knowledge through a supersession of the lower kind.

And this higher knowledge is far from immediate. On the contrary, it is only possible as mediated through forms of expression, among which the only adequate medium is conceptual thought. And this brings us to another ramification of the qualitative view, which is also of central importance for Hegel.

III

On the qualitative view, action may be totally unreflecting; it may be something we carry out without awareness. We may then become aware of what we are doing, formulate our ends. So following on a conscious desire or intention is not an inescapable feature of action. On the

contrary, this degree of awareness in our action is something we come to achieve.

In achieving this, we also transform our activity. The quality of consciously directed activity is different from that of our unreflected, semi-conscious performance. This flows naturally from the second view on action: if action is qualitatively different from nonaction, and this difference consists in the fact that action is directed; then action is also different when this direction takes on a crucially different character. And this it does when we move from unreflecting response, where we act in much the same manner as animals do, to conscious formulation of our purposes. Our action becomes directed in a different and stronger sense. To become conscious is to be able to act in a new way.

Now the causal theory doesn't allow for this kind of qualitative shift. Indeed in its original, dualist variant, it couldn't even allow for unreflecting action. Action is essentially caused by desire or intention, and on the original Cartesian empiricist model, our desires were essentially features of inner experience. To have a desire was to feel a desire. Hence on this view, action was essentially preceded by a cause of which the agent was aware. This amounted in fact to making conscious action, where we are aware of our ends, the only kind of action. It left no place at all for totally unmonitored, unconscious activity, the kind of action animals engage in all the time, and we do much of the time.

And even when the causal theory is disengaged from its dualist or mentalist formulation, where the causes of action are seen as material, and hence quite conceivably largely unconscious, the theory still has no place for the notion that action is qualitatively transformed in becoming conscious. Awareness may allow us to intervene more effectively to control what comes about but action remains essentially an undifferentiated external event with a certain kind of cause.

Now this offshoot of the qualitative view: that action is not essentially or originally conscious, that to make it so is an achievement, and that this achievement transforms it; this also is crucial to the central doctrines of Hegel. I want to look at two of them here.

1. The first is what I have called elsewhere the 'principle of embodiment' (Taylor, 1979a, p. 18). This is the principle that the subject and all his functions, however 'spiritual' they may appear, are inescapably embodied. The embodiment is in two related dimensions: first, as a 'rational animal', that is, as a living being who thinks; and secondly, as an expressive being, that is, a being whose thinking is always and necessarily in a medium.

The basic notion here is that what passes in modem philosophy for the 'mental' is the inward reflection of what was originally external activity. Self-conscious understanding is the fruit of an interiorization of what was originally external. The seeming self-coincidence of thought in which I am apparently immediately aware of my desires, aims, and ideas, that is foundational to Cartesianism, is understood rather as an achievement, the overcoming of the externality of an unconscious, merely instinctive life. It is the fruit of a negation of what negates thought, not itself a positive datum.

This understanding of conscious self-possession as the negation of the negation is grounded on the conception of action I have just been outlining. In effect, it involves seeing our mental life fundamentally in the category of action. If we think of the constituents of mental life, our desires, feelings, ideas, as merely given, as the objects that surround us in the world are given, then it is plausible to think of our knowledge of them as privileged. They appear to be objects that we cannot but be aware of, if we are aware at all. Our awareness of them is something basic, assured from the start, since it is essentially involved in our being aware at all.

In order to understand mental life as something we have to achieve understanding of, so that self-transparency is a goal we must work towards, we have to abandon the view of it as constituted of data. We have to understand it as action, on at least one of two levels, if not both.

On one level, we have to see self-perception as something we do, something we can bring off, or fail to bring off, rather than a feature of our basic predicament. This means that we see it as the fruit of an activity of formulating how things are with us, what we desire, feel, think, etc. In this way, grasping what we desire or feel is something we can altogether fail to do, or do in a distorting or partial, or censored fashion. If we think through the consequences of this, I believe we see that it requires that we conceive self-understanding as something that is brought off in a medium, through symbols or concepts, and formulating things in this medium as one of our fundamental activities.

We can see this if we leap out of the Hegelian context and look at the quite different case of Freud. Here we have the most notorious doctrine of the non-self-transparency of the human psyche. But this is mediated through a doctrine of self-understanding through symbols, and of our (more or less distorted and screened) formulation of our desires, fears, etc. as something we do. For although these formulations occur without

our willful and conscious intent, they are nevertheless motivated. Displacements, condensations, etc., occur where we are strongly motivated to bring them off.

But on a second level, we may also see the features of ourselves that self-perception grasps not as simply givens but as themselves bound up with activity. Thus desires, feelings may not be understood as just mental givens, but as the inner reflection of the life process that we are. Our ideas may not be conceived as simple mental concepts, but as the precipitates of thinking. And so on.

Hegel understands mental life as activity on both these levels. In a sense, the first can be thought to represent the influence of Kant. It was Kant who defended the principle that there is not perception of any kind that is not constituted by our conceptual activity. Thus there is no self-awareness, as there is no awareness of anything else, without the active contribution of the 'I think'. It was the contribution of the new richer theory of meaning that arose in the wake of romanticism to see that this constitutive thought required an expressive medium. Freud is, of course, via Schopenhauer, the inheritor both of this Kantian doctrine and of the expressivist climate of thought, and hence also through Schopenhauer of the idea that our self-understanding can be very different in different media, as well as distorted in the interests of deeper impulses that we barely comprehend.

The making activity central on the second level is also the fruit of what I want to call the expressivist climate of thought, which refused the distinctions between mind and body, reason and instinct, intellect and feeling, that earlier Enlightenment thought had made central. Thought and reason were to be understood as having their seat in the single life process from which feeling also arose. Hence the new vogue for Aristotelian inseparability doctrine, of form and matter, of thought and expression, of soul and body.

Hegel's theory is built on both these streams. Our self-understanding is conceived as the inner self-reflection of a life process, which at the outset fails to grasp what it is about. We learn through a painful and slow process to formulate ourselves less and less inadequately. At the beginning, desire is unreflected, and in that condition aims simply for the incorporation of the desired object. But this is inherently unsatisfactory, because the aims of spirit are to recognize the self in the other, and not simply to abolish otherness. And so we proceed to a higher form of desire, the desire for desire, the demand for recognition. This too starts off in a barely self-conscious form, which needs to be further transformed.

In this theory, activity is made central on both levels: (a) on the second, more fundamental level, what is to be understood here, the desire, is not seen as a mere psychic given, a datum of mental life. On the contrary, it is a reflection (and at first an inadequate one) of the goals of a life process that is now embodied and in train in the world. Properly understood, this is the life process of spirit, but we are, at the outset, far from seeing that. So the active life process is primary, even in defining the object of knowledge.

Then, (b) on the first level, the achievement of more and more adequate understandings is something that comes about through our activity of formulating. This takes place for Hegel, as we shall see later, not only in concepts and symbols, but also in common institutions and practices. For example, the institution of the master–slave relationship is one 'formulation' (and still an inadequate one) of the search for recognition. Grasping things through symbols, establishing and maintaining practices are things we do, are to be understood as activities, in Hegel's theory.

And so we have two related activities. There is a fundamental activity of Spirit, which it tries to grasp through the various levels of self-formulation. These two mutually conditioning activities are at first out of phase but are destined in the end to coincide perfectly. That is because it will come clear at the end that the goal of the whole life process was that Spirit come to understand itself, and at the same time the life process itself will be entirely transparent as an embodiment of this purpose.

But this perfect coincidence comes only at the end. And it only comes through the overcoming of noncoincidence, where what the pattern of activity is differs from what this pattern says. And so the distinction between these two dimensions is essential for the Hegelian philosophy: we could call them the *effective* and the *expressive*. Each life form in history is both the effective realization of a certain pattern, and at the same time is the expression of a certain self-understanding of man, and hence also of spirit. The gap between these two is the historical contradiction that moves us on.

And so for Hegel, the principle of embodiment is central. What we focus on as the mental can only be understood in the first place as the inner reflection of an embodied life process; and this inner reflection is itself mediated by our formulations in an expressive medium. So that all spiritual life is embodied in the two dimensions just described: it is the life of a living being who thinks; and his thinking is essentially expression. This double shift from Cartesianism, from a psychology

of immediate self-transparency, to one of achieved interiority, of the negation of the negation, is obviously grounded on the qualitative understanding of action, and the central role it plays here.

The mental life has a depth that defies all immediate self-transparency, just because it is not merely self-contained, but is the reflection of a larger life process; while plumbing this depth is in turn seen as something we do, as the fruit of the activity of self-formulation.

Once again, we see that the Hegelian understanding of things involves our seeing activity as all-pervasive. But the activity concerned is as it is conceived on the qualitative view.

2. We can thus see that this offshoot of the qualitative view, which sees action as first unreflecting, and reflective understanding as an achievement, underpins what I call the principle of embodiment in Hegel's thought. But we saw above that for this conception reflective consciousness transforms action. And this aspect too is crucial to Hegel's theory.

His conception is of an activity that is at first uncertain or self-defeating because its purposes are barely understood. The search for recognition is, properly understood, a demand for reciprocal recognition within the life of a community. This is what our activity is in fact groping towards, but at first we do not understand it in this way. In a still confused and inarticulate fashion, we identify the goal as attaining one-sided recognition for ourselves from others. It follows that our practice will be confused in it purposes and self-defeating. For the essential nature of the activity is not altered by our inadequate understanding of it; the true goal of the search for recognition remains community. Our inadequacy of understanding only means that our action itself is confused, and that means that its quality as directed activity is impaired.

We can see this kind of confusion, for instance, at the stage where we seek to answer our need for recognition through an institution like that of slavery. We are already involved here with what will turn out to be the only possible solution to this quest, viz., community; because even the institution of the master–slave relation will typically be defined and mediated by law, a law that binds all parties, and that implicitly recognizes them as subjects of right. Within this framework, the relations of domination, of ownership of man by man, contradict the basic nature of law. If we think of our building and maintaining these institutions as an activity we are engaged in together, which is how Hegel sees it, then we can see that our activity itself is confused and contradictory. This is,

indeed, why it will be self-defeating, and why this institutional complex will eventually undermine and destroy itself.

A new form of society then will arise out of the ruins of this one. But the practices of this new society will only be higher than previous ones to the extent that we have learned from the previous error, and now have a more satisfactory understanding of what we are engaged in. And indeed, it is only possible to accede eventually to a practice that has fully overcome confusion and is no longer self-defeating if we finally come to an understanding that is fully adequate.

But throughout this whole development we can see the close relation that exists between the level of our understanding and the quality of our practice. On this view, our action itself can be more or less firmly guided, more or less coherent and self-consistent. And its being one or the other is related to the level of our self-understanding.

We are reminded here of a common conception of the romantics, well expressed in a story by Kleist, that fully coherent action must be either totally unreflecting or the fruit of full understanding. The birth of self-consciousness on this view disrupts our activity, and we can only compensate for this disruption by a self-awareness which is total. Hegel takes up this conception with an important difference. The crucial activity is that of Spirit, and it aims for self-recognition. As a consequence, there is no such thing as the perfection of totally unreflecting activity. The earliest phases of human life are even there phases of Spirit, and the contradiction is present between their unconsciousness and what they implicitly seek.

In sum, we can see that this ramification of the qualitative theory of action involves a basic reversal in the order of explanation from the philosophy that Cartesianism and empiricism bequeathed to us. It amounts to another one of those shifts in what is taken as primitive in explanation, similar and related to the one we mentioned at the outset.

There I pointed out that in the Cartesian-empiricist view, action was something to be further explained, compounded out of undifferentiated event and a certain kind of cause. The cause here was a desire, or intention, a 'mental' event; and these mental occurrences are taken as primitives by this kind of theory, and part of the explanatory background of action.

But the qualitative view turns out to reverse this order. The 'mental' is not a primitive datum, but is rather something achieved. But more, we explain its genesis from action as the reflective understanding we eventually attain of what we are doing. So the status of primitive and

derived in explanation is reversed. One theory explains action in terms of the supposedly more basic datum of the mental; the other accounts for the mental as a development out of our primitive capacity for action.

IV

The qualitative view also brings about another reversal, this time in the theory of meaning, which is worth examining for its own sake, as well as for its importance to Hegel.

I said above that for this view, becoming aware of ourselves, coming to self-consciousness, is something we do. We come to be able to formulate properly what we are about. But this notion of formulation refers to that of an expressive medium.

One way to trace the connection is this: if we think of self-consciousness as the fruit of action, and we think of action as first of all unreflecting bodily practice, which only later comes to be self-understood, then the activity of formulating must itself conform to this model. That is, our formulating ourselves would beat first a relatively unreflective bodily practice, and would attain only later to the self-clarity required for full self-consciousness.

But this is just what we see in the new expressive theories of meaning, which arose in the late eighteenth century, and which Hegel took over. First, the very notion of expression is that of self-revelation as a special kind of bodily practice. The Enlightenment theory of signs, born of the epistemological theories of the seventeenth century, made no fundamental distinction between expressing and any other form of self-revelation. You can see that I am afraid of a recession by the fact that I'm selling short; you can see that I'm afraid of you by the expression on my face; you can see that it's going to rain because the barometer is falling. Each of these was seen as a 'sign' which points beyond to something it designates or reveals. Enlightenment theorists marked distinctions between signs: some were by nature, some by convention. For Condillac, there were three kinds: accidental and natural signs, and signs by institution.

But the distinction they quite overlooked was the crucial one for an expressivist, that between 'signs' that allow you to infer to their 'designatum', like the barometer does to rain, and true signs, which express something. When we make something plain in expression, we reveal it in public space in a way that has no parallel in cases of inference. The barometer 'reveals' rain indirectly. This contrasts with our perceiving rain directly. But when I make plain my anger or my joy, in facial

or verbal expression, there is no such contrast. This is not a second best, the dropping of clues that enable you to infer. This is what manifesting anger or joy *is*. They are made evident not by or through the expression but in it.

The new theories of meaning, which start perhaps with Herder's critique of Condillac, involved a fundamental shift. They recognize the special nature of those human activities that reveal things in this special way. Let us call them expressive activities. These are bodily activities. They involve using signs, gestures, spoken or written words. Moreover, their first uses are relatively unreflecting. They aim to make plain in public space how we feel, or how we stand with each other, or where things stand for us. It is a long slow process that makes us able to get things in clearer focus, describe them more exactly, and above all, become more knowledgeable about ourselves.

To do this requires that we develop finer and more discriminating media. We can speak of an embodiment that reveals in this expressive way as a 'medium.' Then the struggle for deeper and more accurate reflective self-understanding can be understood as the attempt to discover or coin more adequate media. Facial expressions do much to make us present to each other in our feelings and desires, but for self-understanding, we need a refined and subtle vocabulary.

This amounts to another major reversal in theory. The Enlightenment account explained meaning in terms of the link of designation or 'signifying' between word and object. This was a link set up in thought. In Locke's theory, it was even seen as a link setup through thought, since the word strictly speaking signified the idea of the object. Meaning is explained here by thought, which once again is seen in the role of explanatory primitive. In this conception, expression is seen as just one case of the signifying relation, which is seen as constituted in thought.

But for the expressive theory, it is expression that is the primitive. Thought, that is, the clear, explicit kind of thought we need to establish new coinages, new relations of 'signifying', is itself explained from expression. Both ontogenetically and in the history of culture, our first expressions are in public space, and are the vehicles of a quite unreflective awareness. Later we both develop more refined media, in concepts and images, and become more and more capable of carrying out some part of our expressive activity monologically; that is, we become capable of formulating some things just for ourselves, and hence of thinking privately. We then develop the capacity to frame some things clearly to ourselves, and thus even to coin new expressions for our own use. But

this capacity, which the Enlightenment theory takes as a primitive, is seen here as a late achievement, a change we ultimately come to be able to ring on our expressive capacity. The latter is what is now seen as basic in the order of explanation.

In our day, a similar radical reversal was carried out in the theory of meaning by Ludwig Wittgenstein, who took as his target the theory that emerges out of modem epistemological theory, to which he himself had partly subscribed earlier. What I have called the Herderian theory is very reminiscent therefore of Wittgenstein's.

But Hegel wrote in the wake of the earlier expressive revolution. And one can see its importance for his thought by the crucial place in it of what I have called the notion of medium. The goal of Spirit is clear, self-conscious understanding. But the struggle to attain this is just the struggle to formulate it in an adequate medium.

Thus Hegel distinguishes art, religion, and philosophy as media, in ascending order of adequacy. The perception of the absolute is embodied in the work of art, it is presented there (*dargestellt*). But this is in a form that is still relatively inarticulate and unreflecting. Religious doctrine and cult bring us closer to adequacy, but are still clouded by images and 'representations' (*Vorstellungen*). The only fully adequate form is conceptual thought, which allows both transparency and full reflective awareness. But attaining our formulation in this medium is the result of a long struggle. It is an achievement; and one that builds on, and required the formulations in the other, less adequate media. Philosophy doesn't only build on its own past. For in earlier ages, the truth is more adequately presented in religion (for example, the early ages of Christianity), or art-religion (at the height of the Greek polis). In coming to its adequate form, philosophy, as it were, catches up. True speculative philosophy has to say clearly what has been there already in the images of Christian theology.

Thus for Hegel too thought is the achievement whereby our expression is made more inward and clear. The attainment of self-understanding is the fruit of an activity that itself conforms to the basic model of action, in that it is at first unreflecting bodily practice and only later attains self-clarity. This is the activity of expressing.

V

I have been looking at how the qualitative theory of action and its ramifications underlie Hegel's philosophy, for which in the end everything is to be understood in terms of the all-pervasive activity of Spirit. I have

been arguing that we can only understand the kind of activity here involved if we have in mind the qualitative view.

But there are also some important features of human historical action on Hegel's view which only make sense against this conception. I want to mention two here.

1. The first is this: all action is not, in the last analysis, action of individuals; there are irreducibly collective actions. The causal view was inherently atomist. An action was such because it was caused by desire, intention, some 'mental' state. But these mental states could only be understood as states of individuals. The mental is what is 'inner', which means within each one of us. And so action is ultimately individual. That is to say, collective actions ultimately amount to the convergent action of many individuals and nothing more. To say 'the X church did so-and-so' or 'the Y party did such and such' must amount to attributing converging action to clumps of individuals in each case. For what makes these events actions in each case is their having inner mental causes, and these have to occur or not occur discretely within individuals.

By contrast, the qualitative view does not tie action only to the individual agent. The nature of the agency becomes clear to us only when we have a clear understanding of the nature of the action. This can be individual; but it can also be the action of a community, and in a fashion that is irreducible to individual action. It can even conceivably be the action of an agent who is not simply identical with human agency.

Hegel, of course, avails himself of both of these latter possibilities. In his conception of public life, as it exists in a properly established system of objective ethics (*Sittlichkeit*), the common practices or institutions that embody this life are seen as our doing. But they constitute an activity that is genuinely common to us, it is ours in a sense that cannot be analyzed into a convergence of *mines's*.

But for Hegel, there is a crucial level of activity, which is not only more than individual, but even more than merely human. Some of what we do we can understand also and more deeply as the action of Spirit through us. In order to arrive at a proper understanding, we thus have to transcend our ordinary self-understanding; and to the extent that our common sense is atomist, we have to make two big transpositions; in the first, we come to see that some of our actions are those of communities; in the second, we see that some are the work of Spirit. It is in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* that we see these transitions being made. The first corresponds to the step from Chapter 5 to Chapter 6 (here Hegel speaks of the community action by using the term 'Spirit'). The second is made

as we move through the discussion in the third part of Chapter 6 into the chapter on religion.

2. Following what I have said in earlier sections, human action is to be understood in two dimensions, the effective and the expressive. This latter dimension makes it even clearer how action is not necessarily that of the individual. An expression in public space may turn out to be the expression essentially of a common sentiment or purpose. That is, it may be essential to this sentiment or purpose that it be shared, and the expression may be the vehicle of this sharing.

These two features together—that action can be that of a community, and that it also exists in the expressive dimension—form the crucial background to Hegel's philosophy of society and history. The *Sittlichkeit* of a given society not only is to be seen as the action of a community, or of individuals only so far as they identify themselves as members of a community (an 'I' that is 'We', and a 'We' that is 'I', *PhG* ¶177); it also embodies and gives expression to a certain understanding of the agent, his community and their relation to the divine. It is this latter that gives us the key to the fate of the society. For it is here that the basic incoherence underlying social practice will appear as contradiction, as we saw with the case of the slave-owning society above. Hegel's notion of historical development can only be properly stated if we understand social institutions in this way, as transindividual action that also has an expressive dimension. By contrast, the causal view and its accompanying atomist outlook induces us to explain institutions in purely instrumental terms. And in these terms, Hegel's theory becomes completely unformulable. We cannot even begin to state what it is all about.[3]

VI

I have been arguing that we can understand Hegel against the background of a long-standing and very basic issue in modern philosophy about the nature of action. Hegel's philosophy can be understood as firmly grounded on an option in favor of what I have been calling the qualitative view of action and against the causal view.

I have tried to follow the different ramifications of this qualitative view to show their importance to Hegel's thought. I looked first at the notion of agent's knowledge, and we saw that the system of philosophy itself can be seen as the integration of everything into a form of all-embracing agent's knowledge. I then followed another development

of the qualitative view, which shows us action as primordially unreflecting bodily practice, which later can be transformed by the agent's achievement of reflective awareness. We saw that Hegel's conceptions of subjectivity and its development are rooted in this understanding. I then argued that the expressive revolution in the theory of meaning could be seen as an offshoot of this same view of action; and that Hegel is clearly operating within the expressive conception. Finally we can see that his theory of history supposes not just the expressive dimension but also the idea of irreducibly common actions, which only the qualitative view can allow.

One part of my case is thus that Hegel's philosophy can be illuminated by making this issue explicit in all its ramifications. This is just in the way that we make any philosophy clearer by spelling out more fully some of its deepest assumptions. The illumination will be the greater the more fundamental and pervasive the assumptions in question are for the theory under study. Now my claim is that for Hegel the qualitative theory of action is very basic and all pervasive, and the above pages have attempted to show this.

Perhaps out of deference to Hegel's shade I shouldn't use the word 'assumption', since for Hegel everything is ultimately demonstrated. But my claim stands that the thesis about action I have been describing here is quite central to his philosophy.

But this is only one side of the gain that one can hope for in a study of this kind. The other, as I said at the outset, is that we should attain some greater understanding of the historical debate itself by situating Hegel in it. I think this is so as well, but I haven't got space to argue it here.

What does emerge from the above is that Hegel is one of the important and seminal figures in the long and hard-fought emergence of a counter-theory to the long-dominant epistemologically based view that the seventeenth century bequeathed us. This can help explain why he has been an influential figure in the whole countermovement where this has been the case. But what remains to be understood is why he has also often been ignored or rejected by major figures who have shared somewhat the same notions of action, starting with Schopenhauer but by no means ending there.

Perhaps what separates Hegel most obviously and most profoundly from those today who take the same side on the issue about action is their profoundly different reading of the same genetic view. For Heidegger, for example, the notion that action is first of all unreflected practice seems to rule out altogether as chimerical the goal of a fully explicit and self-authenticating understanding of what we are about. Disclosure is invariably accompanied by hiddenness; the explicit depends on the horizon of the implicit. The difference here is fundamental, but I believe that it too can be illuminated if we relate it to radically different readings of the qualitative view of action, which both espoused in opposition to the epistemological rationalism of the seventeenth century. But I cannot even attempt to show this here.

Notes

1. I have tried to do this in Taylor, 1979b.
2. I have argued this further in Taylor, 1978b.
3. I have developed this further in Taylor, 1978a.