

vindicate the patterns of relation between the different aspects of appearances. The systematic ordering of these patterns would then be a process of establishing relations between the items studied. However, both the aims and status of science remain a matter of debate.

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7

Hegel on Responsibility for Actions and Consequences

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When it comes to Hegel's philosophy, many serious errors and misleading half-truths have wide currency. Regarding moral and political philosophy, the most prevalent of these is probably still the false image of Hegel as 'conservative, reactionary, quietist.' Not far behind, however—and this is an error even more common among those who actually know something about Hegel's philosophy—is the idea that Hegel was an enemy of 'morality,' and a proponent of 'ethical life' as opposed to the 'moral' standpoint. A related error is that 'morality' for Hegel is only a nickname for Kantian ethics, so that Hegel's discussion of morality consists only in his critique of Kant. No doubt Hegel is critical of individualistic moral and social philosophies, such as Kant's, that he regards as proceeding in its abstraction from the social embodiment of individuality in modern ethical life. 'The moral standpoint' is a term that Hegel sometimes uses to refer to this philosophical one-sidedness (*PR* §§33R, 135R). But at least in the *Philosophy of Right*, 'morality' is primarily a name for that distinctively modern way of thinking about the free will in which subjective freedom is its chief characteristic. Hegel's exposition of 'morality' contains a theory of individual agency that differs significantly from Kant's. It is an alternative theory of moral action, which Hegel endorses. Morality plays a significant and positive role in the practical philosophy Hegel articulates in the *Philosophy of Right*.

1. Imputability in Kant and Hegel

The unifying theme of Hegel's presentation of the moral will may thus be regarded as the ways in which the subjective will bears *responsibility* (in several different but related senses) for states of affairs that occur in the external world. The exposition thus begins with Hegel's treatment

of the traditional topic of *imputability* (*Zurechnung*). A good point of departure for our understanding of Hegel's treatment of moral subjectivity generally, and his account of moral action more specifically, is therefore his account of the way individuals may be held responsible for their deeds and for occurrences in the external world that are regarded as the results of these deeds. And a good initial point of reference for understanding this account is Kant's treatment of the traditional topic of imputability in *The Metaphysics of Morals*.

Kant follows tradition in calling an *action* (*Handlung*) a *deed* (*Tat, factum*) insofar as it is possibly imputed to an author (*Urheber, auctor*) and made the object of a judgment under laws by a suitable authority (*iudex sive forum*) and a ground for punishment or reward (*poena, praemium*) (MS 6: 227). More specifically, what is imputed to an agent are the results or consequences of a deed. Kant proposes some very clear rules for it, based on whether the action is owed (required by a strict or perfect duty), or wrongful (contrary to duty), or meritorious (pursuant to a wide or imperfect duty). The consequences of an action that is owed—both good and bad consequences—are not to be imputed to the agent. In the case of a wrongful action, all bad consequences are imputable, but no good consequences are imputable; and in the case of a meritorious action, all good consequences are imputable, but no bad ones are imputable (MS 6: 228).

These principles play a role in Kant's well-known late essay about the right to lie, and its famous (or infamous) treatment of the example of the murderer at the door.¹ Assuming you are required to tell the truth to the murderer about his intended victim's whereabouts, and you comply with this duty, the death of the victim cannot be imputed to you. On the other hand, if you lie to the murderer (thereby doing wrong), and the victim (unbeknownst to you) has slipped away to a place where the murderer (believing your lie) encounters him and murders him, then the death can be imputed to you—as one of the bad consequences of your wrongful action (VRL 8: 427).

We may have a hard time swallowing the assumption that you are required by strict right to tell the truth to the murderer, but granted that assumption, Kant's conclusions about imputation seem reasonable ones. In general, Kant's principles of imputation give us quite reasonable results when applied to imputation under the law. Kant's principles do a very good job, for instance, of handling cases of liability to damages resulting from the deeds of agents that might affect the rights and claims of others. If my action is one that was owed (strictly required) under the law, and its omission not justified or excused in any way by

special circumstances, then I should not be held liable for its consequences, however bad—whether these consequences were foreseeable or unforeseeable. It would be a sorry system of justice indeed that second-guessed those who have done what they were required to do, making them answerable for the bad results of actions the law required of them. On the other hand, if I take it upon myself to perform a wrongful action (which is, once again, not justified or excused by any special considerations or circumstances), then it seems reasonable that I should bear the burden of all the bad consequences (whether foreseen or unforeseen), since those consequences would not have ensued if I had only done what was required of me. Others had a right to rely on my doing what I should have: by doing wrong, I am the one who opened the flood-gates to whatever bad consequences resulted, and those who suffered damages should be able to recover from me the costs to them. If it is a question of reward, then none seems due to someone who did only what was required, and still less is a reward ever due to someone who acted wrongly. Reward is due only to someone who acted meritoriously.

Kant's principles are clearly intended, however, to apply not only to issues of right but also to the appraisal of deeds (*imputatio diiudicatoria*) from a merely ethical or moral point of view (MS 6: 227). And here their results seem far more questionable in many cases. They fail to countenance judgments of imputation (both positive and negative) of which we feel fairly confident, and they are also insufficiently appreciative of situations of moral ambiguity. Here I am not thinking mainly of wrong actions that may have good results, for which the agent might hope to take credit—for it seems quite defensible that people who act immorally should not be able to take credit for the contingent good consequences of their bad behavior. More serious problems arise concerning owed or meritorious actions whose consequences are mixed or ambivalent. If I perform an action that was strictly owed, but whose consequences turn out to be very beneficial, I may choose to deflect praise by saying that 'I was only doing my duty'; but we may feel this would be false modesty. On the other hand, if I perform an action that is owed, or even meritorious, perhaps because of its consequences for one party, but which also (without losing its status as required or meritorious on that account) does some harm to another party (perhaps even a harm I foresee with regret), then I don't think we are comfortable saying that this harm was not imputable to me at all, simply on the ground that the action was owed or meritorious. We tend to think that the harm is still in some way imputable to me—perhaps that I even owe those who suffer

this harm some recompense for it, or at least an apology acknowledging my responsibility for it (even if I can also rightly say that, since the action was owed by a strict duty, I 'had no choice' but to do it). The moral ambiguity present in such cases is not properly acknowledged in Kant's account. We will find that Hegel's theory of imputation possesses a degree of subtlety in this respect that Kant's does not.

There is an even more basic difficulty with Kant's views here, however, that will exhibit an even sharper contrast with Hegel's theory of imputation. This is that, apart from specific legal provisions, dealing with liability to damages for the consequences of actions, the whole topic of imputation of consequences might seem to look like an insignificant afterthought in the context of Kantian ethics. This is because for Kant the basic moral judgment of an action is apparently independent of its consequences. Kant famously holds that the unlimited goodness of the good will is entirely independent of its good (or bad) results—so that the good will 'shines like a jewel for itself, as having its full worth in itself. Utility or fruitlessness can neither add to nor diminish its worth' (G 4: 394). Moral judgment is about the volition (good or bad) that is exhibited in the action, which is to be gauged by the agent's maxim in performing it, and not at all by its results. An action may be judged right or wrong on account of the agent's *end* in performing it (since this is often part of the maxim, and the agent's end goes to the goodness or badness of the agent's will). If the action is successful, the accomplishment of its end will be among its results. But for Kant those results matter only because they belong to the agent's maxim, or goodness of will, and not because they occur in the world as something whose imputation to the agent might make a difference independently of our judgments about the agent's will.

Further, for Kant whether an action is owed, or wrongful, or meritorious, is to be judged according to its maxim, and the imputation of its consequences is decisively shaped by this. It is difficult to see why, outside legal contexts (where civil damages or the degree of gravity of a crime might be at stake), a Kantian agent should be interested at all in the imputability of consequences. All that really seems to matter is the goodness or badness of the volition contained in the action (in its maxim). If I have a good will, then of course I *care* about the good or bad consequences (the utility or fruitlessness) of my good actions, because this caring is part of what it is to set the good ends that go with having a good will. But why should I, or anyone, be concerned about whether the fortunate or unfortunate consequences of my actions are *imputable* to me? My purely moral evaluation of myself, before the inner forum of

conscience, seems to be exhausted by the question whether my will is good. If in fact we do consider the consequences of our actions relevant to their moral evaluation, over and above the evaluation of the good or bad volition that led to them (and this alone is what a theory of imputation of consequences would be for), Kant has a hard time saying why we should.

Hegel, by contrast, regards the moral will as primarily a relation to external objectivity, and its value as a moral will depends on whether and how what happens in the world can be imputed to it. We can see this difference clearly in the differing roles played by the concepts of 'action' and 'deed' in the action theory of the two philosophers. For Kant, an *action* (*Handlung*) is an expression of volition (of a maxim); a *deed* (*Tat*) is an action insofar as its consequences fall under principles of imputability to the agent (MS 6: 227). For Hegel, by contrast, a *deed* 'posits an alteration to the given existence (*Dasein*)' (PR §115); and a deed is considered an 'action' insofar as it is imputable to the will of the agent (PR §117). In other words, for Kant, what is primary is volition, which is taken as having a reality prior to and independently of the changes it may bring about in the world; this is the basis of actions, while deeds are actions considered in a certain way—in terms of the imputability of their external consequences. For Hegel, however, there is no morally significant volition apart from deeds; *moral* volition or action is merely the way we consider deeds in relation to the agent, as a volitional moral subject. For Hegel, in fact, the moral will itself is constituted by the way deeds and consequences may be imputed to the subject.

2. Responsibility, purpose and intention

The starting point of moral action for Hegel is the *deed*—an alteration in the objective world which is brought about in some way by the moral subject. The most abstract and general relation of the subject to its deed is that of *being responsible for it* (*daran Schuld sein*). Despite the possible moral connotations of the word *Schuld* (which in German can mean either 'debt' or 'guilt'), what Hegel means by 'responsibility' in this sense is a merely causal relation, entailing that the action may have the abstract predicate 'mine' applied to it, but not implying any moral imputability whatever (PR §115). According to Hegel, the causes of a historical event, which may be manifold, most of them having no moral agency at all, are 'responsible for it' in this sense. Hegel thinks of 'responsibility' as well suited to the abstract understanding, which can

view any event in a number of different ways and treat any of a number of factors as 'its cause':

Every individual moment which is shown to have been a condition, ground or cause of some such circumstance and has thereby contributed its share to it may be regarded as being wholly or at least partly responsible for it. In the case of a complex event (such as the French Revolution), the formal understanding can therefore choose which of a countless number of circumstances it wishes to make responsible for the event.

(PR §115R)

Moral imputability for Hegel turns not on 'responsibility' (*Schuld sein daran*), but rather on the application of two other concepts, which Hegel designates by the terms 'purpose' (*Vorsatz*) and 'intention' (*Absicht*).

Responsibility for an action belongs to the subjective *will* only for 'those aspects of its *deed* which it knew to be presupposed within its end, and which were present in its *purpose*.' This Hegel calls the 'right of knowledge' (PR §117). The 'purpose' apparently encompasses everything the agent was aware would happen, and not only those aspects the agent specifically desired to bring about. But it excludes aspects the agent had no way of knowing about, and also remote consequences of the action, which might be brought about by 'external forces which attach it to things quite different from what it is for itself, and impel it to 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*' (PR §118). As an example, Hegel cites Oedipus' parricide as something not contained in his purpose, when he fought with and killed the old man he met at the crossroads. Hegel thinks it was part of the 'solidity' or 'noble simplicity' (*Gediegenheit*) of the ancient conception of action that it did not recognize this subjective 'right of knowledge' as we do in the modern world (PR §117A). This is an important aspect of the way in which 'morality' is a distinctive characteristic of modern ethical life that was lacking in ancient ethical life.

The 'purpose' of a deed, however, includes not only what the agent specifically intended or took as an end, but also what the agent knew would occur, even if it was not desired. If a pilot bombing an enemy military installation knows that the school next door is also going to be destroyed (killing many innocent children), the death of the children, and not only the destruction of the enemy installation, is part of his purpose. The purpose of my deed may include even consequences I did

not know about, if they belong to 'the nature of the action itself' (PR §118R). In general, for Hegel, the 'nature' of anything includes what we would grasp about it from rational reflection on it and its connection with other things (EL §23). In the case of a deed, these include connections with its consequences (PR §118, VPR19: 94). Consequently, the nature of an action includes all the consequences that would be known by rational reflection: 'In general it is important to think about the consequences of an action because in this way one does not stop with the immediate standpoint but goes beyond it. Through a many-sided consideration of the action, one will be led to the nature of the action' (NP 230).

Hegel's talk about the nature of an action may be recognizable as more familiar to us if we see how it relates to our judgments about people when we say that they did (or did not) *know what they were doing* (in the sense of fully *realizing* or *appreciating* what they were doing). A mature adult is responsible for knowing what will, or may, result from her actions (for instance, from starting a fire; or for a president: starting a war, authorizing torture, deregulating the banking system). Not to know this is perhaps a cognitive or intellectual defect, but it is a ground for moral criticism and a basis for holding someone responsible for the results of what they do, even when it differs from what they hoped or expected.

This is how Hegel intends to deal with the example of an arsonist who sets fire only to one house (or one stick of furniture) but ends up destroying a whole neighborhood (PR §119). Hegel holds that the fully developed consequences of the action belong to the arsonist's purpose, because it belongs to the very nature of the act of setting a fire that it may spread out of control: 'The *dolus directus* or direct purpose is, for example, setting fire to the first piece of wood, and the *dolus indirectus* contains all the further consequences. These belong to the nature of the action itself, which posits their possibility along with it. The man must know this' (VPR 4: 326, cf. EG §505). Some views might hold that the agent is to blame in this case not for the spread of the fire beyond what he directly intended, but only for being insufficiently attentive in thinking about how far the fire might spread. Those views might fault him for not knowing what he should have known, but they cannot impute to him the destruction of the entire neighborhood. Hegel, however, by including the entire nature of the action within the agent's purpose, is making the arsonist responsible directly and originally for all the possible consequences that he should have reckoned with, because these belong to the nature of his action.

The 'purpose' of an action for Hegel marks out *what* the subjective will is responsible for, or *what* objective occurrences may be imputed to it. But it does not tell us everything we need to know about the action in order to judge the agent's subjectivity from the standpoint of morality. In order to make moral judgments we must also take into account how the agent's *subjectivity* was related to these occurrences. This is comprised within what Hegel calls the agent's 'intention' (*Absicht*). The *purpose* of the bomber pilot, in the above example, includes both the destruction of the enemy installation and the death of the children in the school. But as a moral subject he is related to these two results in very different ways. The first was his direct aim, the second only a regrettable consequence of the way he had to carry it out under the circumstances.

As a subject, says Hegel, I am a thinker, and bring my actions and their consequences under a 'universal.' This is what Hegel calls the action's 'intention.' But by a 'universal' here Hegel does not mean merely some general description under which the action might fall (such as 'burning' or 'killing') but the consequences organized into a complex by the agent's thought: this is a general point for Hegel about the philosophical meaning of words like 'universal' and 'concept,' and the 'concreteness' they involve (see *EL* §§9, 160, 164, R, 176–7, R). In this case, the 'universal' under which the agent brings the action and its consequences imply a determinate act of abstraction, which Hegel connects to the etymology of *Absicht*—'looking away.' It refers to the determinate thought the agent has about a particular deed and the concrete complex of actions and consequences it involves—especially that abstract aspect of this complex that constitutes for the agent its 'subjective essence' (*PR* §121A).

In a non-Hegelian philosophical jargon, we might call the 'intention' of an action the 'desirability characterization' it would have for the agent, or the 'description under which' the agent intended to perform it.² 'The *right of intention* is that the *universal* quality of the action shall have being not only in itself, but shall be *known* by the agent and thus have been present all along in his subjective will' (*PR* §120). My action should be judged according to the universals under which I know and will it, and this judgment should take account of the descriptions under which the action and its consequences were desired by me in performing it. In morally assessing my action, different aspects of the action, belonging to its purpose, should be distinguished from one another depending on whether they were willed by me as an end, or as a means, or as a regrettable side effect. The pilot 'intends,' in this narrow sense, to destroy the enemy installation, but not to kill the children. The arsonist

'intends' to avenge himself by setting fire to his neighbor's antique chair, but not to destroy the whole neighborhood. An agent, as a moral subject, is to be held responsible for his deed only by taking into account the way he thought about it.

Notice, however, that here an 'intention' for Hegel is always *the intention of a deed*—the way the agent has thought about some actual alteration in the objective world. There are no morally significant intentions independently of, or in abstraction from, actual deeds in the world. This is one of the several meanings of Hegel's slogan-like pronouncement: 'The truth of the intention is only the deed itself' (*PhG* ¶159). Hegelian ethics, unlike Kantian ethics, does not judge 'intentions' (or 'maxims') apart from the deeds that embody them. The moral subject is always an agent in the objective world, not a subject of mere 'volitions' that are good or evil ('having their full value in themselves') irrespective of whether they may or may not have any results. This is related to the separate point that Hegelian intentions are also not subjective or mental *causes* of deeds or occurrences. Instead, an intention is the way I *think about* what I do in doing it, and morality should treat the thought and doing as mutually necessary to each other.³

3. The right of objectivity, and negligence

'To attempt to justify something in terms of its intention is to isolate an individual aspect completely and to maintain that it is the subjective essence of the action' (*PR* §119R). The attempt, however, in Hegel's view (as this quotation perhaps already implies), is not always successful, and may often involve deception (or self-deception). This point is due to what Hegel considers the essential complement to the 'right of intention,' namely 'to what we may call the *right of objectivity* of the action'—'the right of the action to assert itself as known and willed by the subject as a *thinking agent*' (*PR* §120). The right of intention, in other words, must not be seen as a right on the part of the agent to have an action judged solely on the basis of the agent's own (perhaps one-sided and self-serving) representation of it. The bomber pilot, in our earlier example, has the right to have his action judged by its aim of destroying the enemy installation, with the recognition that killing the children was something he did only with regret. But he also cannot treat the death of the children as something for which he bears no moral responsibility at all (as Oedipus, in Hegel's view, bears none for killing his father or conceiving children by his mother, which belonged to neither his intention nor his purpose). The death

of the children belongs to the bomber pilot's 'purpose,' if not to his 'intention.'

The moral agent is a thinking being, whose intentions are to be judged by objective standards of thought. This is related to the point that intention, as well as purpose, takes account of the 'nature' of the action—the 'external connections inherent in its nature . . . Hence in murder, it is not a piece of flesh which is injured, but the life itself within it' (PR §119R). If I injure a person's body in a way that rational reflection would recognize as endangering their life, I may not disclaim responsibility for their death by saying that I intended only to injure their flesh and not to take their life. Hegel realizes, of course, that there might be difficult questions here. It is often possible in fact to intend only to punch someone in the jaw, and not realize that you might actually be risking killing them: 'It is the nature of the finite deed itself to contain such separable contingencies.' Where Hegel sees such ambiguities as coming to an end is with the agent's awareness that an action is wrong according to objective standards. If an action that contributes to the agent's happiness happens also to be wrong, a thinking agent is accountable for knowing this, and his intention must be thought of as including not only 'promoting my happiness,' but also 'doing something wrong.' Accordingly, the right of intention is seen by Hegel as precluding or diminishing responsibility for wrongdoing only in the case of 'children, imbeciles, lunatics, etc' (PR §120R). The thinking agent is responsible not only for what she actually thinks is right and wrong, good and bad, but also what she *has reason to think*:

The right of the subjective will is that whatever it is to recognize as valid should be perceived by it as good, and that it should be held responsible for an action—as its aim translated into external objectivity—as right or wrong, good or evil, legal or illegal, according to its cognizance [*Kenntnis*] of the value which that action has in this objectivity.

(PR §132)

One can be *cognizant* of many things that one does not actually know or realize. If I have every reason to know that what I am doing is wrong or evil, then I can be judged *cognizant* of that. I cannot disclaim responsibility for my wrong or evil act on the ground that 'I did not know it was wrong.' I cannot demand that my act be imputed to me *only* under the intention 'that it was something *good*' (e.g. good for me, as satisfying my momentary passion for revenge). 'Just as what the arsonist sets

fire to is not the isolated area of wood an inch wide which to which he applies the flame, but the universal within it—i.e. the entire house—so too is the arsonist himself, as a subject, not just the individual aspect of *this* moment or this isolated passion for revenge' (PR §132R). On similar grounds, I think we must say of the bomber pilot that the death of the children belongs not only to his *purpose*, but also in a way to his *intention*, even if it does not belong to his *aims*, narrowly considered. It certainly belongs to his intention if we assume that it is *wrong* of him (e.g. contrary to the right of war) to kill innocent civilians, and that he is cognizant both of the fact that he is killing innocent civilians and that this is contrary to the right of war. The intention in light of which an act is morally judged, in other words, must take account of the agent's own thoughts about the action, but it will not be limited to them if they do not include everything relevant to what a thinking agent would know about the nature of the action or its value according to the objective standards of right, morality or ethics.

Because Hegel's account focuses attention chiefly on what the agent knew about the action and its consequences, and on the agent's intention in performing the action, it might be doubted that he can give an adequate account of our responsibility for consequences that result from carelessness, recklessness or negligence.⁴ But the considerations we have been examining provide us with a compelling and cogent answer to this charge. Hegel considers both the purpose and the intention of an action to include its *nature*—the complex of its consequences that would have been brought to light by rational reflection—and also the *right of objectivity*—the action's intention must include its relation to laws and ethical duties. Therefore, these aspects of the action, and these consequences, are imputable even if the agent is (negligently) unaware of them.

Perhaps one might worry instead about whether Hegel's theory can distinguish intentional wrong from negligence, since he imputes the nature and ethical objectivity of an action to the agent irrespective of whether the agent is actually aware of them.⁵ But there should be no problem here either, as long as we can take account, in each of case, of *why* a given consequence or objective ethical determination is included in the action's purpose and intention—whether it is there because it was actually known and willed by the agent, or whether it is there because it belongs to the objectivity and nature of the action, although the agent was thoughtlessly or carelessly unaware of this.

Someone might still worry that Hegel's account—by making us responsible for negligent actions through inclusion of the relevant

aspects of the action and its consequences in its purpose and intention—cannot explain the general moral fact that harm caused by negligent actions is considered less blameworthy than the same harm caused intentionally. For example, Hegel holds that someone firing a gun in to the woods, intending to hit an animal but killing a human being, is guilty of manslaughter but not of murder (VPR 2: 423, 3: 358, VPR17: 78). We might still wonder how Hegel can justify treating the negligent causing of a death as less blameworthy than the intentional causing of a death. But it seems to me that this too is a matter that he can say ought to be settled on a case-by-case basis. It is surely true in the above example that the careless hunter is less blameworthy than a deliberate murderer would be.

Perhaps what we want is a justification for some supposedly *general truth* that wrong actions done from negligence are always less culpable than wrong actions done from malice. In that case, however, I question whether this is a truth at all. For Hegel, the moral subject is a *thinker*, and moral conduct is always to be measured by diligent adherence to the standards of rational thought, and never merely by some sentimental conception of 'goodness of will' based on non-rational feelings. Nor are rational standards applicable only to the deliberate volitions of the subject, as a Kantian might suppose. Goodness or badness of will is one kind of defect in a moral subject, but so are carelessness, negligence and irresponsibility. And which defect is the more blameworthy may depend on the details of the case. Sometimes we see government officials (or academic administrators) do harm to an individual or group, and it is unclear whether they do so out of hostility to those they harm or out of mere negligence in performance of their duties. No doubt such administrators act wrongly if they treat people maliciously, but there might sometimes be mitigating conditions making their malice understandable, whereas diligence and care in the exercise of power may be even a higher requirement on them, whose absence is quite inexcusable and an even more serious moral failure than the presence of ill will. I have seen some such cases in the academic world (and I would bet you have too) where the degree of carelessness and irresponsibility required to explain some official's abuse of power would have been so extreme and outrageous that a more charitable interpretation of their behavior is that they did the harm out of ill will.

4. 'Moral luck'

One set of issues about moral responsibility for consequences arises in connection with what some philosophers call 'moral luck,' and

especially about what Thomas Nagel has called 'resultant luck'—that is, the fact that two agents, performing identical actions, may apparently incur very different degrees of praise or blame, depending on differences in the consequences of their actions that do not seem to be up to them at all, but are due to good or bad fortune (Nagel, 1993, p. 60). Hegel's views on moral responsibility have, I believe, some original insights to contribute here.

First, because Hegel's account begins not (like Kant's) with abstract, subjective 'volitions' but with actual deeds, his view challenges the facile assumption that we should ever judge two agents to have performed actions that are truly 'identical' even though they have very different consequences. This assumption, Hegel thinks, is based on the notion that one can isolate the subjectivity or 'inner' aspect of an action distinct from its 'outer' aspect, and equate two 'subjectivities' in cases where their 'outer' deeds are very different. Hegel's rejection of that notion is blunt and emphatic:

What the subject is, is the series of its actions. If these are a series of worthless productions, then the subjectivity of volition is likewise worthless; and conversely, if the series of an individual's deeds are of a substantial nature, then so is his inner will.

(PR §124)

What a human being does should be considered not in its immediacy, but only by means of his inwardness and as a manifestation of that inwardness. But with that thought we must not overlook the point that the essence and also the inward only prove themselves as such by stepping forth into appearance. On the other hand, the appeal that human beings make to inwardness as an essence distinct from the content of their deeds often has the intention of validating their mere subjectivity and in this way of escaping what is valid in and for itself.

(EL §112A, cf. EL §140)

There is no absolute point of comparison, then, between two people whose deeds have had very different consequences, that might enable us to say that they were 'inwardly the same' (hence in some sense 'morally equal') and that the different consequences of what they did were due only to factors 'external' to their moral subjectivity (and hence to 'mere luck'). The doctrine presented in the above quotations might be taken as a second distinct meaning to Hegel's slogan-like pronouncement: 'The truth of the intention is only the deed itself.'

Hegel clearly does not hold, of course, that if an action is clearly wrong—violating morality or ethics—it can ever be justified merely because it happened to have good consequences. Rather, his thesis is that the inner and outer aspects of an action must be considered together and evaluated together, according to their systematic meaning. Suppose, for instance, that the social act of providing alms to the poor through private, voluntary (e.g. 'faith-based') charity has the systematic effect of keeping the poor wretched and oppressed. This systematic result should lead us to revise (downward) our estimate of the moral value of the inner subjective disposition to voluntary religious almsgiving. On the other hand, suppose Hegel is right that true beneficence, the beneficence that truly helps those in need, is found only in 'the intelligent universal action of the state' (*PhG* ¶425). In that case, the political disposition to favor private, faith-based charity over state-run welfare would be blameworthy (even if it is thought by misguided people to be morally admirable); and the disposition to replace faith-based voluntary charitable giving with state-administered aid to the poor would be the inner disposition that is truly to be admired and esteemed from a moral standpoint. Such judgments, of course, have to be made from a systematic consideration of the social meaning of these inner dispositions, not merely on the basis of the accidental consequences of their manifestation in some individual case.

Hegel does not deny, however, that it makes sense to say of what an agent did that its consequences might have been very different from what they were, and that these differences might have been due to contingencies, perhaps unforeseen and unforeseeable, that were beyond the agent's control. Here too he has reference to his example of the arsonist:

It is certainly the case that a greater or lesser number of circumstances may intervene in the course of an action. In a case of arson, for example, the fire may not take hold, or conversely, it may spread further than the culprit intended. Nevertheless, no distinction should be made here between good and ill fortune, for in their actions, human beings are necessarily involved in externality. An old proverb rightly says: 'The stone belongs to the devil when it leaves the hand that threw it'. By acting, I expose myself to misfortune, which accordingly has a right over me and is an existence of my own volition.

(*PR* §119A)

When Hegel says here that 'no distinction should be made here between good and ill fortune,' he means that I cannot offer my ill fortune as

any *excuse* for the harm I have caused (or for the failure of my fruitless attempts to do good), by comparing the actual consequences of what I did with some different and better outcome that I claim would have occurred if only I had been luckier. In saying that when I act, I expose myself to misfortune, and that it 'has a right over me,' Hegel is using the term 'right' (as he often does) both in an everyday sense and also in his technical philosophical sense, in which 'right' means 'any existence in general which is the existence of the *free will*' (*PR* §29). In other words, he is saying that in acting, I freely choose to expose myself to misfortune, and this is what gives it a right over me, so that I am responsible for its results.

When we act in the world, we pursue various aims under conditions we did not determine, and the outcome often depends on factors we cannot control. If I am a rational agent, I know all this before I act. As a rational agent, I accept my finitude, and my exposure to contingency, as a condition of acting. In so doing, I am accepting responsibility for the results of what I do, even when these results are in some measure beyond my power. In that sense, in choosing to act I also *choose* to expose myself to good or ill fortune, and I freely posit both good and ill fortune as the existence of my free will, giving them a right over me, making myself responsible for what comes about as their result. My actions may meet with good or bad luck, but in my very choice to act I opened myself up to both possibilities, and I *chose* to incur the blame if things turn out badly, just as I stand to deserve the credit if they turn out well. This exposure to fortune is simply a general condition of our action, and so we freely posit it along with any action. An action is a *venture*: it may turn out well or badly, and by taking it we both seek a good outcome and take responsibility for a bad outcome, knowing from the start that it depends on factors beyond our control which way things will turn out. A mature and rational human being knows all this, accepts it, and therefore does not attempt to escape responsibility for bad results by drawing a distinction between good and ill fortune—claiming, for instance, that he should get as much credit when things have gone wrong as if they had gone right, or suggesting (enviously) that a more successful person deserves no more credit because his success was due only to better luck.

Not all actions equally expose themselves to good or bad fortune. An action that merely complies with a strict duty makes a minimal venture. It exposes itself to the risk that what I do to meet my obligation may misfire so that I fall short of meeting it. But beyond that, in doing what is required of me I assume very little responsibility for what may happen as a result, and I should get correspondingly little credit

for surprisingly good results and bear little burden of responsibility for disastrously bad ones. On the other hand, if my action itself is more venturesome, something not strictly required of me that seeks to achieve some good I am not strictly required to produce, or that seeks to avert some harm that it is not already my duty to prevent, then (to put it in Hegel's terms) I 'make good or ill fortune into the existence of my own free will' to a much greater extent.

Hegel's theory acknowledges moral ambiguity to a far greater extent than Kant's theory of imputability can do. Both the good and ill consequences of a required action can be imputed to the agent, if they belong to the nature of the action or if the agent has exposed himself to their possibility in choosing the action. But Hegel's theory also implies something vaguely analogous to the Kantian theory of imputability that we examined at the beginning. Actions that comply with strict duties posit less of my freedom in good or ill fortune than acts that it is morally up to me whether to perform. I am less responsible for their consequences, less to blame if these turn out badly, and less to be credited if they turn out surprisingly well. For I was only doing what I had to do, not venturing anything. Projects that seek some good, analogous to Kant's meritorious acts, leave themselves more open to good or ill fortune; I get the credit if they turn out well, but must bear the responsibility if they turn out badly. Actions that are wrong are also ventures—but ventures in evil, and through them I open myself to blame for whatever harm I cause, even if (like Hegel's arsonist) I do harm that far exceeds what I intended.⁶

Notes

1. What Kant is saying in this essay, and about this example, has been very widely, and very badly, misunderstood. People become fixated on this one (apparently outrageous) example, like a deer caught in the headlights, and what Kant is saying in the essay has totally eluded them. Kant's position may not be wholly uncontroversial, but it is quite different from what it has been commonly taken to be and far more reasonable than it has been given credit for. But this is not the place to correct those misunderstandings. See Wood, 2008, Chapter 14.
2. For an extensive and perceptive attempt to relate Hegel's theory of action in this section to more recent 'analytical' approaches to action theory and philosophy of mind, see Quante, 2004a. (This is a translation of *Hegels Begriff der Handlung* (Stuttgart: Frommann-Holzboog, 1993).) But the present article is not the place for an evaluation of Quante's project or a general assessment of the appropriateness and limits of interpreting Hegel through the lens of analytical action theory.
3. Hegel's entire treatment of the will in the *Philosophy of Right* begins with the idea that freedom belongs to will as its essence, as much as weight does to

body (PR §4, A). It treats will from the start as free agency, without asking any questions about how it might be related to the causal mechanism of nature.

There is no word in German that answers precisely to the meaning of the English word 'intention.' But Hegel's terms *Vorsatz* and *Absicht* might both be loosely translated with that English word, and I think Hegel's distinction between 'purpose' and 'intention' is quite close to a distinction that T. M. Scanlon has recently drawn between two ways in which we speak about the intention of an action. " 'Intention' is commonly used in a wider and a narrower sense. When we say that a person did something intentionally, one thing we may mean is simply that it was something that he or she was aware of doing or realized would be a consequence of his or her action. This is the sense of 'intentionally' that is opposed to 'unintentionally': to say that you did something unintentionally is to claim that it was something you did not realize you were doing. But we also use 'intention' in a narrower sense. To ask a person what her intention was in doing a certain thing is to ask her what her aim was in doing it, and what plan guided her action—how she saw the action as promoting her objective. To ask this is in part to ask what her reasons were for acting in such a way—which of the various features of what she realized she was doing were features she took to count in favor of acting in this way" (Scanlon, 2008, p. 10). Scanlon's wider sense of 'intention' corresponds to what Hegel means by *Vorsatz*; his narrower sense, to what Hegel means by *Absicht*. To say that parricide was not included in Oedipus' *Vorsatz* (in killing the querulous old man at the crossroads) is to say that he did not realize (and could not have known) that he was killing his father, so that his act under the description 'parricide' was unintentional. To identify the *Absicht* of an action, the universal under which the agent brings it in acting, is to identify the agent's reasons for doing it, or the features of the action (or its results) that counted in favor of acting that way. If there is a difference between Hegel's distinction and Scanlon's, I think it has to do with the way Hegel means us to consider (for the purpose of assessing an agent's responsibility for deeds and their consequences) some of the ways in which moral subjects are accountable for things they should have known, and should have thought of, even though they did not. Hegel's theory of morality in fact makes quite strong demands on agents in this respect.

4. This is a charge made by Karl-Heinz Ilting, who thinks Hegel's account cannot deal with negligence, or the distinction between foreseen and unforeseen consequences of actions. Ilting, *VPR17*, n. 125, pp. 303–4.
5. As I did, in Wood, 1990, pp. 143–4.
6. Some philosophers, and even more often criminally minded politicians, like to entertain the thought that a wrongful action might be justified, or at least in some way redeemed, if its consequences are good. Some of Hegel's remarks about the deeds of 'world historical individuals' might even be seen as supporting this thought. But I do not think it would be correct to try to enlist Hegel in support of this thoroughly evil thought. He is quite stubborn in resisting every attempt to provide some kind of moral justification or excuse for any form of wrongdoing. In discussing the crimes of world-historical individuals spirit has made the means of attaining a higher ethical order (VG 171/ LPW 141), Hegel is not referring to moral (or ethical) justification or responsibility at all. He is employing an 'absolute' or 'world-historical' species