Hegel on Identifying Actions through Intentions

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*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.*

*(Elements of the Philosophy of Right, § 120)*

1. Introduction

In this paper I argue against Robert Pippin’s view that for Hegel, the initial content of an agent’s intention is “provisional.” On his view, the initial content of an intention is tentative in the sense that the content is ultimately fixed by social facts about the action and consequences to which the initial intention led.¹ I argue that Pippin over-socializes Hegel’s theory of intention. Though I agree with Pippin that some features of the initial content of an intention might be provisional because of various external facts about the nature of action, it cannot be the case that the “intention in action” is the “concrete or actual intention that replaces the provisional formulation.”² This is a philosophical and interpretive critique. Hegel must, and in fact does, admit that some aspect of the initial intention is constitutive of the “intention over time” in order to, (1) distinguish between different chain of events that an intention initiates, and (2) ascribe one (or some) of these chain of events to an agent. The thought here is that if the content of an intention is ultimately fixed by external social facts, then it’s not clear how an agent can identify herself with an action or more importantly, take responsibility for an action, especially in cases where the nature of the action develops into something entirely different than what one initially

¹ Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*, p. 172
² Ibid. p. 172
intended. Thus, Pippin’s over-socialization of intention runs the risk of divorcing the agent from the world that (Pippin claims) she is so shaped by. Instead, I argue that Hegel thinks that the initial intention is constitutive of the action or the “intention over time;” as such, the initial intention is responsible for connecting the “internal” and “external” dimensions of intention, action, and consequences.

In Section 2, I briefly review some preliminary issues relevant to the topic at hand, namely, the Kantian and Pre-Kantian theories of intention that Hegel is situating his theory against; I also provide a general overview of Hegel’s theory of intention. In Section 3, I explain Pippin’s “social theory of agency,” focusing on the way in which he thinks that the content of initial intentions are provisional. In section 4, I argue against Pippin’s view, and offer my own interpretation. There, I show that in order for Hegel to individuate courses of action as well as ascribe to an agent the actions and consequences she is responsible for, he must make the initial internal intention of the agent constitutive of the action. Finally, in Section 5, I offer some concluding remarks about Hegel’s critique of the “gulf” between the inner and the outer.

2. Preliminaries: Hegel vs. Kant and the “Pre-Kantians”

2.1 Hegel on the “Period of Sensibility”

In the Philosophy of Right Hegel situates his theory of action against the Kantian and Pre-Kantian view that an agent’s intention determines whether her actions are moral,

One of the most conspicuous among the corrupt maxims of our time is that we ought to interest ourselves in the so-called moral intention behind wrong actions, and to imagine [vorzustellen] inferior [schlecte] subjects with allegedly good hearts, i.e. hearts which will their own welfare and perhaps even the welfare of others. (§126)

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According to Hegel, *intentionalist* theories of action “presuppose a gulf between the objective realm of actions and the inner, subjective realm of motives” (§ 121A); in other words, they assume that there is a private inner realm of thought that is ontologically distinct from external events. On this view, an intention to carry out a course of action is a private mental state, which is distinct from the action and the consequences that follow from it. On Hegel’s understanding of intentionalist theories, the subjective intention has primacy when praising or blaming an agent’s actions because this is the only thing she (allegedly) has control over; thus, if an agent has good intentions yet brought about evil, her virtue would be unharmed. On the flip side, if an agent had evil intentions, yet brought about good in the world, she could not be praised for those consequences.

Hegel thinks that the intentionalist has gone wrong on two counts, one metaphysical, and the other ethical. I will briefly address each, in turn.

To claim that our mental lives are distinct from the external world (and *vica versa*) neglects the ways in which society shapes our agency and how our own existence is manifested in the world. For Hegel, the idea of a private mental life that is unaffected by the world is naïve. The intentionalist assumes that we exist as mental beings distinct from the material world. Throughout the *Philosophy of Right*, Hegel challenges this view. Here, I cannot detail every objection Hegel raises, but I will indicate one of them. A challenge to Cartesianism that prominently figures in the *Philosophy of Right* is Hegel’s claim that our volition and even

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3 I am borrowing the ‘intentionalist’ label for the Kantian and Pre-Kantian view from Pippin.  
4 It’s not clear who Hegel thinks falls under the “Pre-Kantian period of sensibility” (§126). However, as I suggested in my presentation earlier this semester, I think that Descartes is a good representative of the type of theory Hegel has in mind. Consider the following passage: “There is nothing to repent of when we have done what we judged best at the time when we had to decide to act, even though later, thinking it over at our leisure, we judge that we made a mistake. There would be more ground for repentance if we had acted against our conscience, even though we realized afterwards that we done better than we thought. For we are only responsible for our thoughts, and it does not belong to human nature to be omniscient, or always to judge as well on the spur of the moment as when there is plenty of time to deliberate” (AT IV: 308/CSMK: 269; emphasis mine).
freedom achieves its first existence through the attainment of property. Thus, for Hegel, the claim that we are “social beings” is more than a description of our activities with other agents, but a claim about our metaphysical nature – our existence is in part constituted by external things. As we will see later, I show that in regard to Hegel’s theory of action Pippin exaggerates the extent of Hegel’s attack on the inner/outer distinction; but for now, let us turn to the ethical objection Hegel raises against the intentionalist.

Recall that for the intentionalist, moral agents must strive to make their intentions virtuous (what virtue amounts to depends on other considerations, of course). For example, an agent must make sure that she is always acting honestly, for the sake of duty, for God, or purely for the sake others, etc. As such, moral activity revolves around orienting one’s inner intentions in the right way, and thus moral achievement would then consist of having one’s actions emanate from the right intentions. Nevertheless, one is ultimately responsible for her intentions because we don’t, as it were, have control over our actions and their consequences. Hegel thinks that this is a shallow conception of moral achievement and excellence. As he puts it,

The higher moral viewpoint […] consists in finding satisfaction in one’s action, not in stopping short at the gulf between the self-consciousness of the human being and the objectivity of the deed. (§ 121A; emphasis mine)

For Hegel, moral agents ought to seek excellence in the outcomes of their intentions because (a) it is something that we have control over and (b) these outcomes affect who we are as persons. Hegel can lay claim to this “higher moral viewpoint” because he works within a different metaphysics of action, to which we now turn.

2.2 Hegel’s General Theory of Action

Because of his metaphysical commitments Hegel can offer a new way of understanding the relationship between intention, action, and consequence. Broadly construed, Hegel thinks that
there is a way in which actions and their consequences are constitutive of intentions. As he puts it,

Action has multiple consequences in so far as it is translated into external existence; for the latter, by virtue of its context in external necessity, develops in all directions. These consequences as the [outward] shape whose soul is the end to which the action is directed, belong to the action as an integral part of it. (§118)

Why does Hegel think that the consequences of an action are “an integral part of it”? Moreover, if consequences are constitutive of actions, what does that have to do with intention? Here, I’ll offer a fairly general sketch of Hegel’s view, so as not to presuppose my own critique of Pippin. In section three, I will offer Pippin’s take of what’s going on, and then in section 4 I will offer my take.

To understand Hegel’s general theory of action, let’s focus on an example he uses in his writings, namely, the action of murder. Hegel says that murder is not confined to the injury to the flesh of a person (perhaps the second unit in the action of murder, after the intention); rather, it consists of the totality of events that ultimately amount to murder, that is, a persons’ life being taken away (§119). According to the Kantian and Pre-Kantian view the action of murder is usually limited to the first unit in a series of events which ultimately kills a person, e.g. intentionally shooting a bullet at someone’s stomach (§126). This is because these philosophers tend to understand an action through a person’s internal or subjective intention, and so they “isolate an individual aspect completely and […] maintain that it is the subjective essence of the action” (§119). Hegel thinks that such a view is problematic because, strictly speaking, if we privilege one unit in the action of murder we run the risk of not being able to hold a person responsible for actually killing the person. For Hegel, an action such as murder has a universal essence or character that determines the type of action that it is. Murder consists of taking a person’s life away. So, if we focus just on the first unit in the series of events that leads to a
person’s murder (e.g. intentionally shooting a gun), then strictly speaking, that first unit does not capture the universal character of murder – shooting a gun or hurting someone’s stomach is not the same as taking their life away. Thus, for Hegel, an action extends through time, and it terminates when its end is achieved. The action of murder, then, begins with the intention to do some violent act, and terminates with a person being killed. In this sense, then, “the consequences are the proper and immanent shape of the action, they manifest only its nature and are nothing other than the action itself” (§118). Thus, on Hegel’s view, the intention, action, and consequences constitute one series of events.

3. Pippin on Provisional Intention

According to Robert Pippin, Hegel thinks that the initial formulation of an intention is provisional:

“What I truly intended” can always be formulated in a highly provisional, and temporally quite sensitive ways. Its content becomes determinate only in the course of an experience over time, as it unfolds in what is now called “intention in action,” and “what I intended to do” turns out to be “what I intended to do, modulo an unavoidable indeterminancy in the specification of the act’s and so the intention’s content.” This is the concrete or actual intention that replaces the provisional formulation, and which remains fully expressed in the deed.5

The thought here is that an agent can only discover what she “truly intended” upon seeing how her intention unfolds through time, i.e. through the action and its various consequences. As Pippin points out, this is of course barring intervening consequences that in no way could be attributed to an agent. For example, if I am playing basketball outdoors during the rain, and I pass a basketball to my teammate, and right at the moment my teammate gets struck by lightening and dies, I cannot be held accountable for the lightning (despite the fact that, say, my teammate wouldn’t have been in that specific spot where the lightning struck unless I had

5 Pippin, Hegel’s Practical Philosophy, p.172; last emphasis mine.
directed the ball there). In the case of provisional intentions being reformulated, Pippin does not use an example to illustrate this idea, but consider the following case. Suppose I intend to give charity to the Boys & Girls club in order to remodel their basketball court. My subjective take on this action is that I am doing something unselfish and nice for the children of my neighborhood. However, because of certain things that occur during the chain of events that my intention initiates, I learn that in fact, I was not completely altruistic: I try to impress a particular person, or I try to gain favor with a political figure, etc. Such events actually change my intention, and thus constitute it. Thus, my initial intention must be replaced by these later facts: I actually have a selfish intention, not an altruistic one. As such, Pippin thinks that we should treat our initial intentions as provisional, for we can only know what we really set out to do until the action fully “unfolds.”

It is important to note that Pippin is not claiming that intentions are not necessary for action:

Hegel is not denying that individually formulated intentions or resolutions are necessary conditions for something counting as an action, nor is he claiming that all subjective “takes” on the matter amount to is the behavior itself.

However, the above is not in tension with the Pippin’s account of provisionality of initial intention. The claim here is just that an action cannot come about unless a person intends to do something – it is in this sense that intentions are necessary for action. (Thus, Pippin is not saying that Hegel completely collapses the inner and the outer). But claiming that intentions are necessary for action does not amount to claiming that the content of the intention must necessarily be fixed in order to bring about an action. Thus, Pippin can accept the necessity of intention but deny that there is “any ex ante determinate content for such intentions.”

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6 Ibid. p. 173
7 Ibid. p. 172
8 Ibid. p. 166
9 Ibid. p. 172
4. Identify Actions Through Intentions

Pippin’s claim about the provisionality of the initial intention is too strong. In this section, I will argue that the entire content of the initial intention cannot be provisional, for if that were the case, Hegel’s theory could have the problematic consequence of allowing for an agent to be completely divorced from her action, even in cases where there aren’t any intervening contingencies. Again, this is a philosophical and interpretive claim: I do think that Hegel in fact maintains that a feature of the initial content is constitutive of an action.

For Hegel, an action consists of a “set of connections which may be regarded as infinitely divided into individual units” (§119). As indicated in Section 2, this series of events is comprised of the initial intention, the action, and the proceeding consequences. In other words, an action consists of a series of events that are inherently connected to each other (§119). In what follows, I will first explain in what sense an action consists of a series of events, and then I will explain why these events are inherently connected to each other. In doing so, I will have explained why the initial intention must be constitutive of a chain of events – an action – that can be ascribed to an agent.

Why are the series of events that constitute, for example, murder, inherently connected? Why is it that certain particular events are constitutive of murder, and others are not? Surely, the first unit in the series (that is, the initial intention) initiates countless chains of events. Hegel needs a method for distinguishing between consequences that are essential to an action, and those that are not. Hegel is aware of this worry, and to deal with it he makes a distinction between necessary and contingent consequences. Contingent consequences are events that are external to the end of an action, and necessary consequences are those that are internal to it (See § 115-118). For example, the type of coffin that a murdered person is buried in is a contingent consequence
of the action of murder, whereas, the fact that a person’s heart stopped beating is a necessary consequence of murder. Now here’s the key question: is the initial content of an intention a necessary constituent of a chain of events that makes up an agent’s action? Consider the “right of intention” passage from the end of *Morality*:

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; and conversely, what we may call the right of the objectivity of the action is the right of the action to assert itself as known and willed by the subject as a thinking agent. (§ 120)

On Pippin’s reading of this passage, Hegel is saying that an agent has the right to be attributed to her only what she truly intended, and that she is not responsible for contingent consequences of her action.\(^\text{10}\) Moreover, what she truly intends, is not limited to what her initial intentions were, but the relevant consequences that come up about later on. Thus, through my later actions I can change my initial intention. As he puts it,

Hegel freely concedes that in the execution of some plan, any number of unforeseen and genuinely unforeseeable contingencies may intervene, and what actually happen and what I intended may come apart, and Hegel clearly does not want to hold me accountable, as if this outer contingent event necessarily manifest what I truly, in fact, intended.\(^\text{11}\)

For the most part, this is correct; however, Pippin doesn’t explain why Hegel thinks that we can only be responsible for what we truly intended or, in other words, the consequences that are necessarily connected with our intention. In the right of intention passage, Hegel claims that the universal quality of the action does not just have objective existence, but it was “present all along in his subjective will” and this is why it “can be known by the agent.”

\(^{10}\) I acknowledge that Hegel does think that there are consequences of an action that we are responsible for even if we did not intend them. Here, I will not be able to develop an account to incorporate this claim, but I believe that my account is consistent with passage such as the following: “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 her 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 actin, I expose myself to misfortune, which accordingly has a right over me and is an existence of my own volition” (§ 119A).

\(^{11}\) Pippin, *Hegel’s Practical Philosophy*, p.166
What I think has gone wrong in Pippins’ account is that he has confused the epistemology and the ontology of intention. If we are to take the “right of intention” passage seriously, Hegel is claiming that the initial content of an agent’s intention is not necessarily transparent, not that the full intention was not somehow in existence. Going back to the example of my donating to the Boys & Girls club, I might not initially know that I have selfish motives (an epistemological claim); nevertheless, these (unconscious?) motives were already present in me (an ontological claim). Pippin has confused these two in claiming that I can only know my motives when they come into existence, which somehow occurs further downstream in the consequences of an action. But as Hegel claims, “the right of the objectivity of the action is the right of the action to assert itself as known and willed by the subject as a thinking agent,” which is why we are held accountable for our actions – they are external manifestations of our ends. And as Hegel goes on to say in § 121: “The subject, as reflected into itself and hence as a particular entity in relation to the particularity of the objective realm, has its own particular content in its end, and this is the soul and determinant of the action” and that “my end constitutes the determining content of the action.”

You might agree with me that Pippin over-socializes intention in the way that I have indicated, but object that maybe I have underestimated the ways in which intention is social for Hegel. That is, in claiming that there is, as Pippin puts it, an “ex ante content intention” I have sustained the “gulf” between the inner and the outer in a way that Hegel finds objectionable. But I am not denying that there is a sense in which an intention becomes instantiated through an action; rather, I am claiming that Hegel does think that our initial intention, insofar as it is a mental state, contains some of the content that ends up being instantiated through actions and the various consequences that proceed from it. Moreover, I am not claiming that the intention is
entirely transparent to the agent either. An agent can come to know her intention through the consequences that proceed from it, but the reason why she can do this is because these consequences are the external manifestations of my initial volition. Moreover, it is because these consequences are external instantiations of my intention that I am responsible for my actions. Again, I believe that Pippin’s provisional account of intention cannot account for moral responsibility (in some cases), because if intention acquires existence further downstream in a chain of events, it’s not clear why an agent should feel responsible for such consequences. Why aren’t such consequences merely intervening contingent events? On my account, the reason why an agent is responsible for the various consequences of her action is because these consequences are necessarily connected to her in virtue of being part of the initial content of her intention.

5. Conclusion

On my reading of Hegel’s theory of intention, the distinction between inner and outer intention is more epistemological than ontological in nature. There are intentions that we can formulate individually; however, this does not mean that the full content of our intention is entirely clear to us. That is, we learn about our intentions through the consequences that ensue from our actions, and the ways in which other agents regard our actions. Ontologically, my position allows that our intentions are in part conditioned by society in that we do not formulate our moral beliefs and attitudes, as it were, in a private way that makes us immune from society’s influence. The ontological claim that I am resisting, however, is that the entire content or the real content of our intentions comes into existence after the fact of our initial intention (this is Pippin’s view, as I understand it). Rather, we make our initial intention, and the consequences that follow (at least some of them – see footnote 10 for an exception) constitute instantiations of our intentions.
Works Cited

