

Hegel's Pluralism as a Comedy of Action

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Abstract

Our reception of Hegel's theory of action faces a fundamental difficulty: on the one hand, that theory is quite clearly embedded in a social theory of modern life, but on the other hand most of the features of the society that gave that embedding its specific content have become almost inscrutably strange to us (e.g., the estates and the monarchy). Thus we find ourselves in the awkward position of stressing the theory's *sociality* even as we scramble backwards to distance ourselves from the particular social institutions that gave conceptualized form to such sociality in Hegel's own opinion. My attempt in this article is to make our position less awkward by giving us at least one social-ontological leg to stand on. Specifically, I want to defend a principled and conceptual pluralism as forming the heart of Hegel's theory of action. If this view can be made out, then we will have a social-ontological structure that might be filled out in different ways in Hegel's time and our own while simultaneously giving real teeth to the notion that Hegel's theory of action is essentially social.

Our reception of Hegel's theory of action faces a fundamental difficulty: on the one hand, that theory is quite clearly embedded in a social theory of modern life, but on the other hand most of the features of the society that gave that embedding its specific content have become almost inscrutably strange to us (e.g., the estates and the monarchy). This difficulty is only heightened by the fact that the very feature of Hegel's theory of action that profiles it most dramatically against its contemporary and our own contemporary options is that social form—and thus this is the feature that we campaigners for a Hegelian theory of action want most to maintain, articulate and defend. We thus find ourselves in the awkward position of stressing the theory's *sociality* even as we scramble backwards to distance ourselves from the particular social institutions that gave conceptualized form to such sociality in Hegel's own opinion. Obviously, it is far from clear that we find ourselves in a tenable position. But we are helped in our attempts to understand our situation by Hegel himself, who continually faced similar problems simply because of his methodologically disciplined attempts to proceed stepwise from the abstract to the concrete.

My attempt in this contribution is to make our position less awkward by giving us at least one social-ontological leg to stand on. Specifically, I want to defend a principled and conceptual pluralism as forming the heart of Hegel's theory of action through a reconstruction of what the *idea* of action would be. On the view presented here, this idea consists of three parts, which are successively explored in the following sections: a pluralistic discrimination of forms of action; a humorous conception of the necessary misrecognitions of action; and a systematic account of the way these misrecognitions connect the forms of action to each other into a whole context of action. If this view can be made out, then we will have a social-ontological structure that might be filled out in different ways in Hegel's time and our own while simultaneously giving real teeth to the notion that Hegel's theory of action is essentially social.

I. Forms of action

The structural centre of Hegel's philosophy of action is the Morality section of the *Philosophy of Right*, and thus its interpretation must be guided by the orientation Hegel marked out for his political philosophy. The first substantive thing Hegel says about right is that it is based on the free will, and that the system of right is freedom actualized and concrete in a way produced by that free will itself (*PR*: §4).¹ Then the rest of the Introduction attempts to take up the structure of the free will that comes to be most fully articulated in *PR*: §§25–26, in order to make a starting point for this development. Since I have previously expounded at some length my views about this starting point and its development in the rest of the work, I will skip to the chase. The Introduction presents the essentially free will to us as composed of three different projects: self-appropriation, specification of content, and effectiveness (Yeomans 2015b).

Self-appropriation involves taking ownership of ourselves, affirming ourselves, and overcoming alienation. In *PR*: §§25–26, this is the correlation of subjectivity as self-awareness and objectivity as the vocation and concept of the will. In Hegel's conceptual terms, this is the *universal* drive of the will: our self-knowledge is mediated by general types and we thus take possession of ourselves as someone of a certain type. These types range from the very general (e.g., rational planner) to the very specific (e.g., social roles: mother, debtor, renter, opera lover, hockey fan, etc.). But whatever its level of generality, a type sets out a certain space of *possibilities* that is brought into the process of self-appropriation. That is, we take ownership of ourselves against a background of contrasts that enable and constrain the ways in which we can evaluate, justify and explain our own actions as the actions of such a type of person.

Specification of content is our drive to distinguish the signal from the noise of our lives. In *PR*: §§25–26 this is the correlation of free choice [*Willkür*] and desire as forms of subjectivity, with objectivity as immersion in the particular features of one’s experience. We act by pursuing and enjoying the objects of our desires in the face of obstacles to such satisfaction. This involves *particular* choices along a continuum of often minute or idiosyncratic differences in taste, habits, national cuisines, etc. Because of the need for such varying resources and the deep and often unconscious formation of such desires and habits, the objective target of such particular choices are *actualities*, modally speaking.

Effectiveness is the attempt to see oneself as an agent rather than a patient, to see the world as embodying one of my purposes precisely because I have made it so. In *PR*: §§25–26 this is the correlation of subjective, unaccomplished ends with objective, accomplished ends. Effectiveness requires planning and planning requires a grip on the essential features of situations, i.e., it requires the ability to act on particular desires under the guise of the general or universal character of willing beings. It is the *individual* project of the will both in the intuitive sense that here the agent makes her mark on the world and stands out in contrast to other agents, and in the technical Hegelian logical sense that it involves the relation of universality and particularity. The connection between means and ends and all of the causal processes involved generate both real forces and real constraints—this is *necessity*.

On my interpretation, Hegel thinks that when we act we are trying simultaneously to take possession of ourselves, to distinguish between what is central and what is peripheral in the events of our lives, and to make happen what we want to happen in those events. These three projects correspond to the three grounds offered for caring about free will, namely its status as a prerequisite for moral responsibility (which is the paradigmatic form of self-appropriation); our desire to be the authors of our own lives (which involves writing ourselves as the specific characters that we are); and our desire to *be somebody* in the world (who ‘shows up’ as an agent rather than a patient). But rather than considering these concerns to merely be three different grounds for caring about the same capacity, Hegel also thinks of them as delineating distinguishable projects within the capacity itself. And this picture is an idea (in Hegel’s technical sense of the term) because it connects a tripartite conception of subjectivity (the universal, particular and individual projects) with a tripartite conception of objectivity (possibilities, actualities and necessities). The modalities give you the objective structure, and the logical axes give you both subjectivity and the relation between subjectivity and objectivity (that is what makes it an *idealist* theory of agency, in Hegel’s sense of the term).

And yet, whenever we humans do more than one thing at once, one of those many things ends up functioning as our primary purpose and colouring the

way we do all the other things as well. I may be able to carry on a conversation, prepare dinner, and scan my WhatsApp chats all at once, but if the conversation is most important then I am going to have to live with the fact that the onions may get burned, and if I am not to miss my daughter's report from her ballet audition then I am going to be a fairly passive conversation partner. Thus Hegel thinks that there are three different forms of action, each of which tries to do all three things at once but with an emphasis on one of the three. These are the different rights of subjectivity (and their corresponding rights of objectivity) that one finds in the Morality section: the rights of knowledge, intention and insight into the good. These three forms of *Zurechnungsfähigkeit* or accountability are forms of agency that respectively emphasize specification, self-appropriation and effectiveness.

The right of knowledge is the right to see as truly my action only those actual features of its public shape which give form to what I wanted to do (i.e., to my purpose [*Vorsatz*]) (PR: §117-18). This is the form of action dominated by specification of content, and thus unsurprisingly it is also Hegel's version of a quite common position in modern philosophy that defines accountable action by reference to the (causal) effectiveness of the agent's beliefs and desires. Hegel attributes to this form of agency a capacity for wholeheartedness that has its affective shape in true enjoyment. In one of my favourite passages from Hegel, he says that someone living primarily through this form of agency 'relishes the enjoyment of pleasure [*den Genuß des Vergnügens genießt*]' (GW: VIII, 269).²

The right of intention, in contrast, structures a form of action dominated by self-appropriation. Its key notion is goal-directedness, such that my action consists of those features of its public shape that reflect my planning and end-setting. Here the agent aims not so much at enjoyment as at public acknowledgement of success, i.e., not so much at an object as at recognition itself. This is Hegel's version of a teleological view of agency, and already one can see the striking pluralism of Hegel's general theory. Instead of arguing for or against causal or teleological/interpretive theories, he argues that some of his contemporaries lived lives of causal action and some of goal-directed action.³ When suitably understood and socially contextualized, each is an illuminating picture of action.

The right of insight into the good is dominated by the drive to be effective, to realize a conception of the good at whatever cost and despite whatever obstacles arise. Unlike the kind of planning represented by the right of intention, this kind of agency is willing to sacrifice public recognition of the agent's character for other, more objective measures of success in the public world, particularly policy effectiveness, on the one hand, and wealth, on the other. It is itself a version of a teleological account, but one even further removed from any contemporary account. It is goal-directed, yet aims neither at public recognition

of the agent nor at enjoyment of an object. Instead it aims at the kinds of operationally defined measures of success that have become so common in modern life, from rates of return on investment to student learning outcomes and graduation rates.

That is the basic picture. What we might want to know is: Is there an argument for this pluralistic picture? Yes, in at least two flavours, logical and social.

Somewhat unhelpfully, the logical argument is really no less than the whole argument of Hegel's *Logic*: reason requires forms of explanation or account-giving, and the most successful form of such account-giving is one that illuminates the universality, particularity and individuality of the concept over against the possibility, actuality and necessity of the object. The idea is a guide to identifying those features necessary for anything to be guiding and controlling, to have explanatory power and to articulate the terms in which something is to be evaluated. In expressivist terms, the unities that are discriminated by means of seeing in them the form of the idea are unities of creation and interpretation, but this hope from the Doctrine of Essence is only made good in the Doctrine of the Concept through this sextuple structure of the idea.

Furthermore, Hegel is committed to the view that we never see the idea from nowhere in all of its glory, but only successively from the specific and partially distorting perspectives of universality, particularity and individuality (Yeomans 2015a). If such prioritizing takes on the objects of thought are necessary even at the purely logical level, one would expect to find parallel prioritizing takes at the level of social human actions as well. Even stronger, one would not think that one had comprehended action or that agents did so in ordinary life unless one could identify the way that these strongly prioritizing perspectives took shape in different ways of acting and evaluating actions. In this sense the pluralism of the idea as the most adequate form of explanation entails some pluralism in explicable action.

But even if we grant the success of the argument of the *Logic*—and perhaps no bigger ‘if’ has ever been written in a philosophy article—how far does this logical argument extend? Surely it does not directly entail anything with respect to the will beyond the need to identify elements having these six features and trace their interconnections. The possibility of a competing identification and subsequent tracing certainly remains open, and it must be admitted that Hegel never comes to a clean and consistent terminology even for these elements. Self-appropriation, specification of content, and effectiveness are my terms for a confusing jumble of notions that Hegel himself never adequately sorts out.

This ineliminable need for judgement makes the social argument important as a corollary. In terms of the visibility of action, we do not have much to go on if we remain at the purely individual level. The social argument that one

derives from Hegel's procedure is that by means of his idealist pluralism one can render visible social actors in a given historical setting. Two aspects of this are important here.

First, this is harder than it might at first appear, since it is quite difficult to know *at what level* such actors are to be discriminated. A Nietzschean or Deleuzian analysis would focus on sub-personal drives, a Marxist analysis would focus on supra-personal classes, whereas a traditional genre of historiography focuses on great men and their deeds. Second, the way to handle this difficulty is to render visible social actors whose activity renders itself visible. This sounds unhelpfully tautological, but it is not. In fact, it mitigates the first problem, because it turns out that this rendering-oneself-visible connects the different levels of analysis. Individuals render themselves visible by identifying with seemingly sub-personal drives that are simultaneously reflective principles of institutions such as families and enterprises. In Hegel's social theory, these drives are assembled by individuals into systems of resources that thereby render themselves visible and thus also the individuals who build and use and modify them. These individuals in such groups combine the creative power of economic production with the interpretive power of correlated expectations, virtues and forms of recognition.⁴

Obviously, there is even more room for differing judgements here in the social realm. Nonetheless, the logical and social arguments go together, since their combination mitigates the charge of relativism and the spectre of undecidability of competing social accounts, on the one hand, and the charge of empty formalism against the logical account, on the other.

What is this unity like, in the most schematic terms? With respect to Hegel, we can only answer this question provisionally, since it turns out that the deepest answer to this question involves failure, and then connection with other unities precisely through recognition of that failure. But putting that aside for the moment, we can say that the unity of these forms of action is an *interlocked* unity, both internally and externally, and each because of the other. What I mean by that is the following: *Internally*, each of the three sub-projects that constitute the forms of action cannot be pursued without pursuing both of the others at the same time, even if only minimally. One cannot attempt to realize one's plans in the world unless one has made plans, and one cannot make plans for completely general but only for somewhat specific goals. But we cannot do all of these things to the same degree unless that degree is quite low—the jack of all trades is master of none. As a result, we are *externally* linked with other agents who live out forms of action that prioritize the projects we have de-prioritized; our success at the projects we prioritize is parasitic on their success at the projects they prioritize. And since we are only likely to be able to make visible these sub-projects within our own form of agency by engaging with those living other forms of agency, the

external linkage is deeply connected to our experience of the internal linkage. But the argument for these linkages runs through a further claim, which is that there is a necessary element of misrecognition in all human action generated by this attempt to do three things at once.

II. Necessary misrecognition

On Hegel's view, to be a self-determining agent is essentially to be a multitasker. This deeply anti-romantic conception might induce dread or anxiety, but true to form Hegel sees the humour in it. In particular, these attempts to do too many things at once generate common, even necessary misunderstandings that dog the attempt to successfully act. Agency turns out to be a sort of bait-and-switch routine, where what is delivered never quite adds up to what was promised. Their meanings remain different, and others are only too ready to point this out. As we will see there is something rather banal in these misrecognitions, but I take it that this is part of Hegel's point: they are neither epochal nor tragic, but rather mundane and humorous.

The basic form of misrecognition that attaches to the first form is the incompatibility of the mediation required for recognition with the kind of enjoyment and immersion at which such purposes aim; or, at any rate, the incompatibility of mediation and immersion under the conditions of modernity, in which the forms of such mediation are neither stable nor uncontroversial. This is a theme that has been picked up particularly by French authors from René Girard to Michel Houellebecq. Houellebecq's novels trace the continual reduction of our motivating interests to sexual desires, in combination with our increasing inability to take joy or satisfaction in sex in the absence of mimetic, mediating structures to enable such satisfaction. In Slavoj Žižek's Lacanian reading of Hegel, this is the big Other and the way that its unreliability can render even viscerally experienced events meaningless (Žižek 2012).

Hegel's framing of this misrecognition is in an essentially Rousseauian register. On this view, we are always shifting between two notions of objectivity as it relates to action: the physical, perceptible world and the public world of social evaluation. For Rousseau this has a fundamentally sexual form: as we leave the state of nature, we move from occasional pleasure in the act itself (which preserves our natural freedom) to constant competition for sexual partners within the social hierarchy. But the general form is that once we join society the relevant objectivity becomes the opinions of others rather than perceptible nature. Given the basic modern philosophical project since Descartes, it seems as if we should be at home here. What could be better than to find objectivity in subjectivity itself? However, we are never completely at home here because it is

not *my* subjectivity but rather a general subjectivity that simultaneously asserts its pure and universal nature as grounding its right to judge me—in the *Phenomenology*, this is the spiritual animal kingdom. Notice that this is an issue often taken up in political philosophy, but Hegel builds it into his philosophy of action—not as an issue of the state of nature or even sexuality specifically, but rather as an issue of the logic of action.

If he does so, however, he does so under the condition that action is social action, and social action requires some way to avoid not just the spiritual animal kingdom but also the cycles of revenge that Locke saw as endemic to the state of nature. That is, it requires some way to justify the kind of self-constraint that mutual recognition requires, and this requires the ability of the judged to see the judgement not primarily as that of a mob over against her but as expressing a truth with which she can identify. The question here is whether those pursuing enjoyment through the satisfaction of desires can ever be respected for this form of agency, or whether they are bound to be seen by those aiming at different kinds of goals as irredeemably strange and even primitive, and thus whether they are bound to see those judging them from the perspective of other forms of action as enemies or strangers rather than fellow citizens (e.g., as ‘takers’ rather than ‘makers’).

For the second form of agency Hegel diagnoses two different constitutive forms of misrecognition. The first is that our own desires, in terms of which we most wholeheartedly feel at home in the world, come to look to us like external forces impressing themselves on the will instead of our own inner nature, a kind of animality that might in principle be a disposition to the good but requires radical discipline by the free will.⁵ Agents performing these kinds of actions look to be recognized for their success, but there is always a double temptation to misrecognition. From agents within the first form there is always a temptation to take the valet's stance with respect to Napoleon, and insist here that behind all of this discipline and end-setting are simple features of psychology derived from family and social background. (One sees this sometimes in luck egalitarian arguments in political philosophy, in which not only opportunities and resources but also discipline and diligence are attributed to forces outside the individual's control.) From agents within the third form there is a temptation to see such action as morally compromised, as essentially vain and thus deserving at best a smirk rather than applause as acknowledgment. These related temptations are grounded in the structure of this second form of agency, which appears merely to cobble together self-development and the setting of clear priorities, on the one hand, with particular circumstances and talents, on the other. (Think here of Kant's difficulties with the duty to develop our talents.) This is a pathology of agency because I aim to be recognized as an independent success, but others render me visible as a dependent outgrowth of forces beyond my control. This is

not yet the empty formalism objection (to which we will come in a moment), since the agent herself does not have any difficulty figuring out the right thing to do. Rather, this is the conceptual form of the line from Barry Switzer: that ‘some people are born on third base and go through life thinking they hit a triple’.

Here there is a related form of misrecognition connected to the second form of agency that is politically more substantial. Because of the split between a formally universal conception of end-setting and the particular content that looks natural from this perspective, agents reflecting on their interactions with others according to the right of intention vacillate between two norms: an abstract conception of property right and a notion of welfare as the totality of desire satisfaction. This vacillation has not left us, of course, and it also reflects the deep debates in Hegel’s time between physiocrat and ‘Hanoverist’ advocates of limited government aimed at protecting negative rights (e.g., Jacobi and, on some interpretations, Kant) and cameralist supporters of a more positive policy of promoting the economic and educational development of the population (e.g., Christian Garve and most other German *Aufklärer*) (Beiser 1992). But what does it mean to think of this vacillation as a pathology of agency itself?

The agency of this form is grounded in setting ends that are in accordance with relevant social types, but those types build in the normative reflection at issue here, and thus build in the vacillation. We aim at *legitimate* success, since only such success can be recognized, but that success thus has to be consistent with respect for others’ successes, or at least for their opportunities to succeed. But we have two unreconciled versions of that respect—one formal and one material—and even though we aim for the overlap between both versions, very few of us are good at seeing both; we see rather one or the other more clearly, and that makes the overlap hard to make out. The best we can do is to aim at the part we can see clearly and hope that by doing so we hit the overlap. Hegel thinks that some of us have a moral vision in which the particular needs that constitute the content of welfare stand out in relief, and some of us have a moral vision in which the formal self-ownership of the goal-directed self (i.e., abstract property right) stands out in relief. Both groups try to hit the overlap between right and welfare, but the limitations of their perceptions make it the case that at least some of the time they fail to hit their target. This disconnect has become a standing joke in modern comedies about professional killers, from *Grosse Pointe Blank* (in which John Cusak’s character is asked whether you need to do postgraduate work to join this growth industry) to *You Kill Me* (in which Ben Kingsley’s character is not sorry that he killed his victims, but that he killed them badly and is exhorted to be the best professional killer he could possibly be). The joke is an example of this pathology because our conception of abstract property rights is essentially tied to our conception of fair competition in the economy, the furthest extension of which is the willingness to kill (this is the theme of another killer-comedy, *The Matador*).

The third form of misrecognition can be more quickly described because it is so familiar from the literature on Hegel's relation to Kant: it is the phenomenon that underlies the empty formalism objection. This is not surprising, since in this context Hegel takes Fichte's ethics as an authentic expression of a Kantian tendency, and Fichte both lays the greatest emphasis on effectiveness and raises the emptiness of the moral law as a problem for the view. Here the problem is with specification of content: a form of agency that is single-mindedly dedicated to effectiveness will always have difficulty saying what exactly it wants to make effective. In such a way of acting the means justify the ends, as it were. This is why the spectre of the monetization of the good hangs over this form of agency, since money appears to provide an interpretation of such an abstract good that is nonetheless very real.

But notice something important here: once one sees that the problem of empty formalism comes to a head only in one of the three forms of agency, one can see that the resources brought in to solve the problem are essentially resources provided by the other forms of agency. This problem of specification of content is not one from which either of the first two forms of agency suffer, the first least of all. This makes the agency of those embodying this third form parasitic on those embodying the first two forms; the solution to the inadequacy of my form of agency is other agents embodying different forms. But this means that instead of seeing this lack as a conceptual failure pure and simple, we should see it as a practical impetus drawing together agents from the different forms. Put another way, this form of misrecognition and its compensations are the very movement of what in German is called *Zusammengehörigkeit*, or togetherness, once we think of that which belongs together as self-determining. This will be the topic of the next section. Before we get there, I want to stop to ask the same question I asked at the end of the previous section: is there an argument for this picture—i.e., for the necessity of misrecognition? Yes, and in the same two flavours: logical and social.

The general ground for this necessity is the tension between the three projects of self-determination. The ground for each particular misrecognition is a specific tension that attempts to show that not all of the projects can be pursued at the same time with equal success. There is a logical form to it that extends a thought developed in the previous section, which is that Hegel regards each of the aspects of the concept—universality, particularity and individuality—as limit notions, each of which presents logical space distorted by its own pull. Thus, to see the whole, we need successively to take up each one. But Hegel thinks that the most fundamental advantage of the concept over any of the forms of essence and appearance is precisely that each of the logical aspects of the concept *wears its insufficiency on its face*, and thus of its own accord leads one to take up the other aspects in turn. On this way of thinking, it would not be enough for us to

conceptualize action if we just had the form of pluralism laid out in the first section—that would only be equivalent to the recognition we have in the Logic's Doctrine of Essence, in which *we* see that appearances are just as important as essences, but there is nothing in the notion of essence, or substance, that itself implies that importance. If, in contrast, conceptualization in the distinctively Hegelian sense of that term requires that the plural aspects of what are conceptualized *of themselves* open onto and into each other, then for a pluralism of the will there must be some sort of practical mechanism by which that takes place. Again, as in the first section, there is no possibility of a direct entailment of these particular forms of misrecognition as that mechanism, but the fact that they serve that purpose lends them an interpretive necessity or rationale.

The social justification is that each form succeeds somewhat, each form succeeds where the others fail, and the misrecognition accompanying each form is at least a necessary possibility given the strategy of success. It is social or, perhaps better, inter-subjective in the sense that because each form succeeds where the others fail, there is no available perspective from which clearly to characterize any form as unsuccessful *tout court*. In a communications-theoretical sense, there is no dialogical standpoint one can take up with respect to a form of agency from which an entirely dismissive comparative judgment can be made. Or, in reverse, we could say that the strategy is double: first to argue that a particularly important possibility of failure comes along with every form of agency's strategy for success, and then to argue that no other form of agency does better, and thus that the failures must be accepted as conditions of the possibility of success. This is, of course, a rather complex form of argument, and it is thus not surprising that Hegel had tremendous difficulty getting it under control. Nonetheless, Hegel's view is that the bait-and-switches lead us not finally to a further resting place beyond all such mistakes, but rather around and around to and through each other.

III. Misrecognition as the movement of *Zusammengehörigkeit*

Although it might be easy to see the humour in any particular case, the combination of all of these partial incompatibilities and the apparent intractability of the misrecognition threatens to render our social lives visible in the way that Sartre did in *No Exit*. Or perhaps more to the point, one might worry that Hegel's pluralism might devolve into a version of Carl Schmitt's friend-enemy distinction, which he takes to be a condition of political action.

Hegel holds that philosophy became politically important due to the diremptions within his contemporary society. But paradoxically part of the key to overcoming this diremption is seeing that the situation is even *worse* than it

originally appears—that there are not just some conceptual dualisms floating around, or a single line demarcating friend and enemy, but multiple solidly grounded social perspectives coexisting in persistent misrecognition. The existence of that misrecognition gives the impetus, and the plurality of that misrecognition the resources, to actually develop an account of society as itself a unity of action. This is Hegel's alternative to the social contract fiction he so scorned. It is not quite the chaos and violence behind purportedly organic unities that Žižek's version of Hegel discovers, but it is not organic unity either. It is a unity of partial perspectives, i.e., an essentially subjective unity. Perhaps in the objective register the notion of an organism comes closest to this notion—and perhaps this is why Hegel sometimes uses it—but nonetheless it is not the same.

In fact we have to come back to the *Logic* to articulate the terms of this unity of action, which means to articulate this unity as an idea. My claim is that this movement through recognition and misrecognition is the way 'in which knowing and doing have compensated for one another [*in welcher Erkennen und Thun sich ausgeglichen hat*]' in the absolute or infinite idea, Hegel's gold standard for philosophical explanation (*GW*: XII.178, 13–14).

In many interpretations of Hegel, the move beyond unsatisfying and frustrated finite willing to the true, lasting satisfactions of infinite willing comes by way of a shift in content (whether from something natural to something rational or from something individually rational to something collectively rational). But on my view the question is not, so to speak, the content of the content but the form of the content. As Hegel characterizes the logical form of the transition from finite to infinite spirit, what matters is whether the content is *immediately* given or not (*GW*: 12.198, 12–24). What is needed is the mediation, but he immediately rejects—as logically irrelevant—the provenance of the content in nature or psychology. Rather, he moves on to discuss the logical idea of spirit and writes that within the idea, the object that faces the concept is itself '*a conceptual determination*' (*GW*: 12.199, 6). On my view, the requisite mediation is provided by this structured round of perspectives by which the content is given, and the structure of the round is the pattern of recognition and misrecognition. This means that what we have laid out before has to be connected with this feature of the idea, that the concept faces a conceptual determination as its object.

The way to work out this paradoxical notion is through the pluralism of conceptuality and thus to say the concept has conceptuality as its object, but another form of conceptuality from that presented by the subject position. The subject and object positions are then played by the three logical perspectives or limits, i.e., universality, individuality and particularity. For example, a conceptuality framed by the universal can have as its object conceptuality framed by individuality and/or particularity. But whereas the conceptual perspective is *für sich* from the subject position it is only *an sich* in the object position

(*GW*: 12.199, 9–14). That is, from the subject perspective its conceptuality is its unifying and defining feature, whereas the conceptuality of the object appears to it as something still implicit, needing to be brought out and developed rather than structuring itself accordingly. But Hegel's point is that it only appears implicit in the object because the conceptuality of the object is inflected by one of the other logical perspectives rather than that of the first perspective. So, for example, the first perspective of universality faces the object and sees in it conceptuality in the form of an implicit universality, but thereby ignores the explicit particularity or individuality that constitutes the object's conceptuality. Instead, that particularity looks like actuality and that individuality looks like necessity, i.e., the conceptuality appears to the subject in the guise of objectivity (specifically modality). The subject position is blind to this because universality looks like conceptuality as such to it, and for Hegel this is as unavoidable as is the appearance of the diminished conceptuality of the object. This is Hegelian dialectic in the Kantian sense of the term, so the question is whether we are taken in by this (necessary) conceptual illusion or we see through it. And the way we see through it is by trying to take up other subject positions, however inadequately. As in Hegel's moral theory, the only solution to this problem is a kind of forgiveness: before you rebuke your brother for the universality in his eye, take the particularity out of your own.

So, the key is to see how the round goes this way, i.e., the way in which misrecognition has this form of confusing subjectivity for objectivity and thus persons for things, but in a tractable and correctable way. Rather than looking for agreement on principles to discriminate unities of action, we should look for stable patterns of disagreement. I will discuss just one example here. Recall that from the perspective of the first form of agency, the second looks 'too big for its britches' or actually driven by perceived slights or petty ambition. This perspective looks for its own logical form (particularity) in the object and finds hidden and unacknowledged drives. These are Nietzsche's swamp psychologists, whom one finds 'always at the same task, namely of pushing the *partie honteuse* of our inner world into the foreground and of seeking that which is actually effective, leading, decisive for our development, precisely where the intellectual pride of man would least of all *wish* to find it [...]' (Nietzsche 1998, sec. I:1). It confronts the universality that the drive to self-appropriation wears on its face only in its objective guise, i.e., as a space of possibilities that must be resolved by the actual driving force of particular desires. Thus, instead of disciplined self-development, it sees opportunism, greed and cronyism. In J. D. Vance's recent memoir of the American Appalachian diaspora, *Hillbilly Elegy*, when he applies to Yale Law School, one of his fellow hillbillies scoffs and asks whether he identified himself as black or liberal on the application form. This reaction can be addressed by education in the specific form of showing others that the gap

between particular talents and interests, on the one hand, and self-ownership, on the other hand, can be bridged. But who are educators, logically speaking? In Hegel's understanding, they embody the third form of agency, i.e., those who devote themselves selflessly to the good rather than either to the satisfaction of their desires or their own personal achievement. And notice that the institutional role is not necessarily decisive here. In Vance's story of how he overcame the kind of resentment described here, the crucial roles are played by the grandmother who raises him and the Marine Corps drill sergeants who whip him into shape. But there is also a Yale Law School professor who showed him the role that social capital really does play and helped him to leverage it, which validates as not entirely unreasonable precisely the attitudes of his scoffing hillbilly friend (Vance 2016).

The *Logic* sets out the structure in the abstract, and the philosophy of objective spirit makes the rounds in actual institutions of early modernity. But even in the *Logic* Hegel introduces the idea of knowing (i.e., the twin ideas of the true and the good) by telling a story of how the soul became self-consciousness and self-consciousness became spirit as different ways of conceiving what Hegel wants to call an idea (*GW*: 12.197–99). This progression is essentially to shift from thinking of the logical object as a thing to thinking of it as a perspective to thinking of it as a system of perspectives. This infinite willing is then the way we are at home in others—*Zusammengehörigkeit*.

Hegel's view is thus neither Schmittian nor Sartrean; in fact (as Žižek has also noted) it is closer to situation comedy than absurdist tragi-comedy, and thus not really like Houellebecq either (Žižek 2017). The reason that this movement is both funny and the practical working out of belonging-together is that in each misrecognition one form of agency shows that it thinks it is smarter than the others, only to fail at something the others get right and thus to recognize its dependence on the others' successes. Or, to put it less strangely, a character's action reveals the comparative judgment of another inherent in her perspective, only then to fail in a characteristic way and thus require the assistance of the disrespected character.⁶

For Hegel, the highest comedies are those of Aristophanes:

Here we have this presentation of subjectivity in which the action dissolves its objective forms themselves [*in die sich das Handeln der objectiven Gestalten selbst auflöst*]. It is not the objective that is destroyed, but rather the action, the performance [*Vollbringen*] of the objective. Underlying this conception is the fact that infinite security of mind makes up the foundation, and that it [mind] is with sincere intention innately comforted [*daß es mit der ernsthaften Absicht von Haus aus getröstet ist*]. It is the

divine in its carelessly playing subjectivity which, in that it abandons itself, remains completely securely at home with itself [...] [Aristophanes] arranges persons just so that one can see, that thereby nothing will come of it. But nothing perishes, and what does perish is inherently nothing. (*GW*: 28,1.213–14).

This is, of course, stronger than Hegel's position on action generally. We do not fail altogether, only partially. But the genius of an Aristophanes is to allow us to accept our everyday partial failure by showing radical failure that is nonetheless compatible with being at home in our relationships to others. It is a form of relationship that philosophers naturally have a difficult time making out, even though what we call philosophy is nothing more than one sphere of such persistent disagreement. In his philosophy of action Hegel does more than simply make a virtue of necessity; he makes comedic success out of apparent failure.

If I am right about the structure of Hegel's philosophy of action, then its social form is this round of making successes out of failure. But if this round has a structure with determinate positions, then Hegel had a philosophy of action by means of which he attempted to show that autonomous individual action required this contribution from differentially situated other agents, in much the same way that in Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* the Tralfamadorians explain to Billy Pilgrim that seven sexes are actually necessary for human reproduction rather than just two. And if the differential situations of agents are grounded in a defensible theory of concepts, then it should also be possible for us today to discriminate these perspectives and describe their interaction. This will require interpretations of social forms which push beyond the usual discourse of the philosophy of action. But it also promises something of value to our current political moment beyond a weak-kneed pragmatism to a re-inclusion of the deplorables—a demonstration that the very nature of action is such that our social bonds can bend a great deal without breaking.⁷

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Notes

¹I use the following abbreviations:

GW = Hegel, *Gesammelte Werke* (Hamburg: Meiner, 1968–).

Hegel's Pluralism as Comedy

PR = Hegel, *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991)/*Philosophie des Rechts* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1970).

²This interpretation of the reference of this passage turns on the claim that, in Hegel's social theory, the agricultural estate lives this form of accountability. I attempt to substantiate this claim in Yeomans 2015b (chap. 5).

³I had not yet seen this when I wrote Yeomans 2010.

⁴This raises fundamental questions for the relation between philosophy of action and social theory that I cannot currently answer. Is individual agency entirely parasitic on such institutions and groups? If so, in what way? Must it be the case that individual lives enact exclusively or even predominantly one form of agency, or is it sufficient for theoretical purposes that individual actions can be categorized in this way? If the latter, is it nonetheless required that at least some (perhaps fictional) agents live lives either exclusively or predominantly stamped by one of the forms of agency, in order to render the distinctions between the forms of agency visible? I am thankful to Constantine Sandis for discussion of this point.

⁵Indeed, though I will not pursue the point here, the three projects are related to Kant's three predispositions towards the good. The desires and satisfaction of specification of content are a kind of animality; the drive to develop talents a kind of humanity; and the drive to realize the good a kind of personality. Then each form of agency would be an emphasis of one at the (partial) expense of the others.

⁶Another good example of this dynamic comes from Part III, Ch. 11–12 of *Anna Karenina*. In this scene Levin, a paradigm case of the second form of agency aiming above all at self-appropriation, leaves his brother (a civil servant and exerciser of the third form of agency whom Levin characterizes as lacking heart) to challenge a group of peasants who have cheated him by overstating the amount of hay delivered to him. He has to make his point concretely by having the pile of hay re-loaded onto carts, and then spends most of the rest of the day negotiating a resolution. But his anger and resentment are not reciprocated, and he falls into a reverie as he watches the peasants move on from the conflict without rancour and manage to enjoy camaraderie in work and celebration. He is moved by that enjoyment to resolve to abandon his way of life for that of the peasants, only then to catch sight of his future wife Kitty and be reminded by his love for her of his need to live as an individual with his own path and relationships distinctly his own rather than submerged in a community. Only life within the second form of agency is such a riddle.

⁷This is, of course, compatible with the view that sometimes the social bonds really do break. At that point, it is unclear that any effective comedy can be written about such a society. I am thankful to Markus Gabriel for helping me to see this point. More generally, I would like to thank audiences in Valencia and Bonn for helpful and stimulating discussion of this paper.

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