

Hegel's Concept of Action between Deflationary Approaches and The Science of Logic



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Abstract: The research in this paper attempts to outline the connection between Hegel's concept of action and the contemporary philosophy of action. Hegel's concept of action has some features in common with the ideas of analytical philosophers, and might open unexpected integration of these different philosophical traditions, which would contribute to the development of both of them. A brief overview of ways to comprehend Hegel's concept of action (from Taylor to Brandom) shows that the cause of ambiguous understandings of this concept lies in the complexity of Hegel's approach. The following article highlights the tension between "deflationary" interpretations and the complexity of Hegel's original approach. Further, by revisiting the Section "Teleology" in Hegel's Science of Logic, the article illustrates how deflationary interpretations of human action can be improved, so that they are topical for both contemporary practical philosophy and the philosophy of action, beyond the unnecessary split between analytical vs. continental philosophy. Such concepts as "purpose" and "mediation" become crucial, as they have sociological and normative extensions in Hegel's Philosophy of Right, as discussed in the last Section of this article.

Keywords: Hegel; philosophy of action; practical philosophy; deflationary Hegelianism; the concept of purpose; mediation.

I. Introduction

Significant changes in the very approaches to understanding Hegel's philosophy became apparent from the 1980s and have continued to the present day. A number of researchers published works in which they outlined the prospects of removing several elements from Hegel's philosophy: the "spirit" (or "Spirit", usually referred to as monolithic, unstructured, phantom-like), the self-developing "idea", the self-developing "concept" [*Begriff*]¹, etc., that seem irrelevant to the demands of the contemporary philosophy of action or practical philosophy, or which challenge their narrow conceptual capacities (as in Footnote 2).

1 All translations were consulted with the editors of this volume.

Still, present-day scholars have alternative ways of reapproaching Hegel's original intellectual legacy, other than its castration. For example, they may take into account (1) *all* the components (foundations, principles, concepts, e.g., these of dialectics) that are significant for the Hegelian system as a 'totality'; (2) its essentials (concepts and principles, e.g., of dialectics); (3) theoretical and conceptual tools sufficient for providing an explanation of a selected topic such as, for instance, *action*; (4) sufficient theoretical and conceptual tools which can – and even need to be – updated and complemented with contemporary scholarly achievements to analytically thematize more complex and differentiated aspects of a selected topic, such as that of action.

At the same time, not “systemic,” but, rather, the minimum *systematic* orientation of researchers focusing on Hegel's concept of action would require distinguishing between (1) reflection at the level of the historical development of human consciousness and self-consciousness [*Selbst-Bewusstsein*], (2) reflection grasping the core moments and stages of this development into synthetic conceptual patterns [*Begriffe, Syllogismen*] and, finally, (3) reflection at the level of the self-knowing ‘spirit’ [*Geist*] and ‘system’ as a highly advanced, impersonal, intelligible reality (for spirit) and epistemological-philosophical depictions of all relevant knowledges (for system) to distil and combine together Hegel's theoretical achievements. Reflection at these levels is not necessary to explain *action*, unless one is interested in reflection itself as a core activity to produce thoughts (including philosophical ones) or in thinking-about-thinking. However, ‘not necessary’ does not entitle anyone to castrate Hegelianism in order to make it suitable for the explication of action on a more analytical scale.² So doing, Hegel studies would promote “deflationary” (e.g., Lau 2016), non-metaphysical, non-foundationalistic, post-metaphysical, or even atomistic Hegelianism (for instance, Pinkard, Pippin, and nowadays Brandom with his predominantly semantic approach). Specifically, not considering *The Science of Logic* contributes to “deflationary” Hegelianism(s). “To understand the content of a determinate concept,” one only needs a “deep pragmatist semantic principle,” Brandom (2019) argues. However, deflationary Hegelianism is not limited to the Anglophone contexts. Sellars long ago (1956) put in question such selective approaches.

Further, it would be worth of recognizing that “spirit” has a *structure* and cannot be referred to just as a mysterious atmosphere hovering in the air. Within this structure Hegel distinguishes, among other things,

1. the “subjective spirit” [*subjektiver Geist*], i.e., an individual living subject with natural properties (including consciousness) common to man and animals. “Spirit (...) came into being as the truth of Nature” and then developed reflection, “free judgment” (Hegel 1892, § 388) and advanced

² According to Hegel, the analysis consists in “dissolving the concrete that is given, isolating its distinctions and bestowing the form of *abstract universality* upon them; in other words, it consists in leaving the concrete as *ground* and making a concrete universal – the genus, or force and law – stand out through abstraction from the particularities that seem to be inessential. This is the *analytical method*”; “at first, cognition is analytic; the object assumes for it the shape of something isolated” (Hegel 1991b, § 227 and Addition).

cognitive and conceptual capacities, as in science and philosophy.

2. the “practical spirit” [*der praktische Geist*] or “practical mind,” respectively (Hegel 1892, §§ 469–470) (*der praktische Geist hat nicht nur Ideen, sondern ist die lebendige Idee selbst*);

3. the “objective spirit” [*der objektive Geist*], able to think and be the author of its “own conclusions” [*sich zum denkenden Willen zu erheben*] (Hegel cf.);

4. the “real spirit” [*der wirkliche Geist*], the “self-realizing spirit as a will” [*als Wille tritt der Geist in Wirklichkeit*] (Hegel cf.), who translates his thoughts, concepts, ideas of a purpose into reality, be it (i) the objective-material reality [*Gegenständlichkeit*] or (ii) the social, economic, political, normative, cultural reality, which can be (continuously) invented, developed (even recycled) inter-subjectively: cooperatively, institutionally, with the division of labour, etc. In the real world, the practical freedom of the self-realizing spirit “presents itself under the shape of necessity” (Hegel 1892, § 385; see also Hegel 2002 and 1991a) versus natural necessities. This ‘versus’ is relevant here, as it will mediate between both ‘antinomic’ kinds of necessity, as shown in Section 3 in this paper.

5. the “self-determining spirit” [*das selbst-bestimmende Subjekt*] who pursues his own self-development, formation, education [*Bildung*] and growth.³

Using the generalised, unspecified term “spirit,” Anglophone scholars usually mean “the supreme definition of the Absolute” which has nothing common with the practical and working “spirit” they tend to replace with “mind.” However, the absolute “spirit” concludes *The Phenomenology of Spirit* and connotes nothing more than science, “spirit knowing itself as spirit” (Hegel 2018, 428–433 and 461–467); alternatively, a recollection or memorial [*Erinnerung*] (e.g., Arndt 2021, 116) of a historical chain of relevant occurrences (and processes) that have resulted due to human-social, thus, rational and free causality. Therefore, the absolute spirit cannot be the origin of any action, except a self-transparent, impersonal, “purely spiritual act” [*als reine Geistesstat*] (Arndt 2021, 116). Hegel shows what the possibility of real action in the real world consists in.

In the following, the first point of discussion will be how the shifting (and sometimes deflationary) approaches to Hegel’s intellectual legacy have affected the present-day receptions of his concept of action. Action according to Hegel is the proper

3 “For Hegel, the concept of self-determination or self-determined work is not limited to the economic or political question of the function and value of labour, but is a concept to be defined in the context of his philosophical agenda (...) This means two distinct points for the concept of labour: on the one hand, the spirit is the subject and object of labour and refers to the various domains of objects as her constituent moments. Thus, Hegel’s concept of labour encompasses more than just the labour that serves to reproduce. For Hegel, labour is also intellectual activity, labour for the intellectual-historical and individual formation of individuals, artistic creation, etc.” (Berger 2012, 18; own transl.).

topic for consideration in this paper. On the one hand, a variety of approaches focused on how Hegel defined action will be reviewed, some of which view the concept of action as not associated with Hegel's "system," while others, in turn, consider it as an integral part. "System" refers to the system of philosophy, whereas action belongs to Hegel's *practical philosophy* dedicated to the "practical spirit" [*praktischer Geist*] or reflected (and reflective) practice, as the very inventive, enterprising and efficient capacity enabling the subject to (1) self-determine by the thought of purpose (purposeful conduct) or the thought of norms, and so to achieve self-integrity in moral, ethical, and legal contexts, and (2) to realize himself in the external world.

Additionally, reference will be made to philosophical works whose authors emphasize links between action and other basic concepts in Hegel. In addition, I will show that modern philosophies of action to some extent implied the convergence of *analytical* versus *continental* understandings of Hegel's concept of action, due to their versatile approaches and hypotheses of intended action, causality, efficiency, consequences, and the like.

Furthermore, basic original ideas dedicated to action and practice will be identified in the Section "Teleology" of *The Science of Logic* in order to provide evidence that the non-deflationary approach still makes sense. It is clear that Hegel's thinking systematically approaches an active – individual and social – subjectivity which does not exist in the manner of 'world-poor' stones (to use Heidegger's words), but in the manner of agents able to act in this world and affect it according to their intentions and volitions. This subjectivity is possible, though not being omnipotent and omnipresent, and there is a peculiar causality behind it, called freedom. And yes, an entirely novel, groundbreaking, action is possible, according to an original concept of purpose which cannot be forced into a 'dialectical synthesis' with preceding actions or their effects; an act in which the causality of human freedom is joined to and carried by the causality of the actor as a psycho-physical being, acting in the external world by virtue of his own natural causality, including tools and – what is particularly important – setting a rule, a norm of work:

In the tool, the subject makes a middle between herself and the object, and this middle is the real rationality [*Vernünftigkeit*] of work [*der Arbeit*] (...) In the tool, the subjectivity of labour is raised to something universal [*zu einem Allgemeinen erhoben*]; everyone can replicate it and work in the same way; in this respect, it is the constant rule of work [*die beständige Regel der Arbeit*] (Hegel 2002, 292–292, 15),

in other words: it is the foundation of labor as a social institution (though being originally more about a technical and organizational than a normative rule). The above passage from Hegel's *System der Sittlichkeit* irrefutably proves that purposeful human action – work and practice – also have self-regulatory potential (in terms of social rules and values; for more on this topic, see Section III). For the actor here is not a 'purely' intellectual or spiritual entity, but an embodied one who has his external existence [*äusseres Dasein*, in Hegel's terms].

II. Present-Day Interpretations of Hegel's Concept of Action Revisited

II.1 Charles Taylor

Let me begin the consideration of Hegel's concept of action with a summary of the leading source of discussion, namely Charles Taylor. Taylor is supposed to be the one of the founders of the discussion on the possibilities of using Hegel's ideas in today's comprehension of free action (action and inaction, intention, free will, agency, purpose, responsibility, causality, etc.). His monograph *Hegel and the Philosophy of Action* (Taylor 2010) revived interest in Hegel's philosophy among both *continental* and *analytical* scholars (Taylor cf., 22–41), regardless of the fact that this distinction is becoming a relic today. In this work, referring to how different thinkers in the history of philosophy have interpreted free action, Taylor divides the latter into two theoretical groups. The first group “distinguishes actions by the kind of cause [causation or causality, Y.T.] that brings them about” (Taylor cf., 23). Taylor describes a number of ideas of this type with the term *causal theory of action*. According to the text of representatives of this group, the reasons for action are mostly subjective urges: for instance, “desires, or intentions, or combinations of desires and beliefs” (Taylor cf., 23). Analyzing action, theorists of this group also find in the domain of psychological phenomena the reasons why certain events can be identified as free actions. In general, despite a certain focus on the subjective component of human activity, these philosophers still approach the phenomenon of action in a comprehensive manner and as Taylor correctly points out, they strive transcending themselves, going “beyond the subjective standpoint of the agent” and coming “to an understanding of things that is objective” (Taylor cf., 24). The Canadian thinker classifies philosophers (including Hegel) with such views in the group advocating for the *qualitative theory of action*. The key difference between this group and the group advocating the *causal theory of action* is that the former does not envisage the possibility of distinguishing freely invented and performed action from its purpose or goal (not to mention the concept of purpose).

Therefore, for Taylor, action and its purpose within this theory are thought of as constituting a certain ontological unity. Thus, according to supporters of this theoretical position, action should be considered in a primitive sense, which makes impossible “decomposing” it into separate aspects, as is customary in the analytical tradition. This is not possible, as the “concept” of action precisely grasps correlations between all the necessary components or ‘moments,’ and none of the components can be meaningful when abstracted from its correlates (for Hegel such a one-sidedness and fragmentation would connote “abstraction”). Again, analytic philosophy is accustomed to dividing correlations into first factors, fragmenting wholes and inquiring into their meaning in isolation (and also at the level of language rather than concept).

According to Taylor, the concept of action, characterised in the manner mentioned above, excludes the phenomenon of inaction from the events that should be understood as

actions. In my opinion, the status of such situations is unclear: we can imagine a situation in which the subject deliberately refuses to act in pursuit of some goal, so how could this type of decision making and behavior be identified – as an action or inaction? Perhaps such phenomena are overlooked by theorists because these *negative actions (quasi-actions)* are difficult to grasp: their components remain mentalistic in nature. Noteworthy, the approach to defining action within the second group of theories allows the introduction of the concept of a specific type of knowledge – the *agent's knowledge*. The comprehension of phenomena in objective external reality differs from what the subject encounters when addressing the reality of his own self-consciousness, because only the subject has his own *actor experience*, that is, she is “the being responsible for the direction of action, the being for whom and through whom action is directed as it is” (Taylor 2010, 25).

Taylor notes that Kant's limitation of subject's cognitive capacities, the idea of *Tathandlung*⁴ and Schelling's concept of *Anschauung* (intellectual intuition) formed the foundations for Hegel's philosophy of action. Hegel

takes up the task of demonstrating subject-object identity, and believes himself to be alone capable of demonstrating this properly. What is first seen as other is shown to be identical with the self. It is crucial to this demonstration that the self- cease to understand itself as merely finite, but see itself as part of spirit (Taylor 2010, 28).

Thus, the human, according to Taylor's Hegel, is only a certain mediator through which the will of the Spirit is expressed. In the actions of the agent, as well as in the comprehension of man's own actions, the Spirit attains self-realization, and the main component of human action here is the desire of the Spirit for self-realization. Therefore, as Taylor emphasizes in his other work,

Geist is not reducible to man; he is not identical with the human spirit, since he is also the spiritual reality underlying the universe as a whole, and as a spiritual being, he purposes and he realizes ends which cannot be attributed to finite spirits qua *finite*, but which finite spirits on the contrary serve (Taylor 1979, 11).

At this point of Taylor's analysis, we need a detailed explanation of how the human and his actions may be related to the development of the spirit. The Canadian philosopher supposes that the source of such a connection consists in thinking. That is, the subject must comprehend her own actions on two levels simultaneously: at the level of correlating her actions with the norms established in society, and at the same time at the highest level, level of understanding herself as a part of the great history of the spirit. Assessing the relevance of actions is achieved through the reciprocal recognition. Therefore, the subject, even possessing his agent knowledge, does not get a true consciousness of his

⁴ Developed by Fichte in the *Grundlage der gesamten Wissenschaftslehre* (1794) according to this idea, the “I” originally posits [setzt] (i) its own being (*Seyn*), (ii) that of not-I; and if the not-I is another subjective I, (iii) they reciprocally posit one another and (iv) their relationship as well (this is the so-called “limitative synthesis”). “However, the concept of positing oneself and action (*Thätigkeit*) in general are (...) one and the same. Thus, all reality is acting [*thätig*]; and everything that acts [*alles thätige*] is reality” (Fichte, GA I,2, 293).

actions automatically, he must make an effort to achieve genuine identity with others: “action is not essentially or originally conscious, (...) to make it so is an achievement, and that this achievement transforms it” (Taylor 2010, 29).

In contemporary philosophy, Taylor's method of interpreting Hegel's concept of action as non-causal is supported by Robert Pippin (Pippin 2008). Trying to present an authentic image of Hegel's thought, this American researcher emphasizes the need to abandon any psychological interpretations of Hegel's action, because the free subject, due to his intelligence is freed from random desires, inclinations, passions – he gives them a reasonable shape (Pippin 2008, 138).

According to Pippin, Hegel argues that “the relation between inner state and outer deed is a causal one at all, whether natural causal or could-have-done-otherwise causal” (Pippin 2008, 149). On the one hand, the subject's self-realization of her actions, and her ability to identify with them, are necessary conditions for the existence of an ethical community, on the other – the subjective determination to do something is not the main component of the action. At the same time, this determination is not the basis on which the true meaning of any action could be reconstructed.

Pippin proposes understanding Hegel's spirit as “collectively achieved form of normative mindedness, the claim that spirit is nothing but ways of actively holding each other to account by the demanding and giving of reasons for beliefs and actions in a social community, that these achievements have both internal dimensions and historical manifestations that can be understood in a developmental way” (Pippin 2008, 122; compare Arndt 2021), which clearly refers to Hegel's objective spirit. Therefore, Hegel's concept of action should be considered as a complex phenomenon that consists of a subject's (or person) identification with her action, the coincidence of subjective and objective assessment of action, as well as compliance with social norms.

It is worth noting that *counterintuitive* interpretations of Hegel's concept of action, characterized by the refusal to recognize intention as a significant element of action, provoked critical reactions among researchers. Investigations of the British political philosopher Dudley Knowles could exemplify these reactions (e.g., Knowles 2010). In his work, Knowles proves that Taylor's *qualitative* interpretation of Hegel's concept of action is limited in comparison with the original assumptions and context in Hegel. Although this thinker agrees with Taylor's view that Hegel's approach to comprehending action should be considered *rational* or *hermeneutical* rather than causal, he emphasizes that intention must also be recognized as a significant element of action, and that refusing to include it in the structure of action research exposes weakness of positions of the above-mentioned interpreters (Knowles 2010, 44).

By using the works of philosophers of the analytical tradition (e.g., G. E. M. Anscombe and D. Davidson), and by contrasting the interpretation of the motivation of free action according to Hume and Kant, Knowles returns to Hegel's original writings and shows that

the concept of the ontological unity of purpose and action is not relevant to Hegel's genuine theory (Anscombe 1957; Davidson 2001a; Davidson 2001b). Knowles emphasizes that in his rationalist view of action Hegel defended the *right of intent*: the subject is able to form an intention and comprehend it before the action is performed, i.e., action comprehension is not an automatic process, nor is it a kind of "post factum procedure;" and action is not conceived through of the purpose (idea of purpose) that revived it, which is supposed to be a part of the ontological unity.

Society consists of people who are endowed with the ability to understand each other. It was not only Habermas who, in his theory of communicative action, demonstrated that people often mutually understand and recognize the purposes of their manifest actions and can even coordinate their own conduct (including means and strategies) with that of fellow agents without needing additional verbal agreement to do so. Habermas is particularly concerned with routinized actions. That is, purposes are somewhat embedded and embodied in the manifested actions of human agents. Knowles argues similarly from the perspective of an attentive and comprehending beholder:

We should further notice that whatever explanatory schema will be employed by observers (...) to the acting subject himself, since he, too, has the capacity to explain the actions explain of others in light of their intentions. As a rational observer himself, he will fully grasp how others will understand his actions, and the alarm bells should ring if he anticipates a discrepancy in the two accounts (Knowles 2010, 49).

Anscombe (1957) also argued that in most cases the actions of the agent and the observer are relevant to each other. Some studies on Anscombe's works also emphasize

the account given by the person himself and the account given by other people hold one another in check, as it were. Others can say what someone is doing by observing him. A person can say what he's doing straight off – without observing himself. This sort of non-observational knowledge is the linchpin of Anscombe's account of intentional action (Teichmann 2008, 12).

Instead, in Taylor's approach, the public space is filled with events, the grounds of which, except for the self-development of the Spirit, are not considered at all. Subjects take and perform action, whether it meets or does not meet the expectations of others, but *why* they do something remains unresolved. Therefore, a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of action should be based on the reconstruction of the requests, needs and desires of the subject of action. In addition, the rational nature of the moral subject's thinking must be considered in more detail.

The research of the American scholar Allen W. Wood emphasizes this idea: the main feature of Hegel's subjectivity is the ability to rationally comprehend the content of her consciousness (including desires and leanings) and social existence, as "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" (Wood 2010,

130). Therefore, the attempt to find out the meaning of both the concept of action and the individual action by analyzing further constitutive moments of action would be a limitation of the researcher's perspective, research methods and outcomes.

II.2 Michael Quante

A similar way of comprehending action, i.e., emphasizing the importance of intention as a component of action, is presented in the research of Michael Quante (2004). Quante provides a distinction between deed and action, considering the former to be an event provoked by the free choice of the subject, and the latter – that is, action – to be an event whose main component is the presence of a subject's intention (Quante 2004, 106). Examining in detail the development of the will at all levels presented in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, Quante shows that action can successfully be performed when there is a *subjective belief* that action can take place, while a combination of that belief with the involvement of (i) the volition and (ii) the purpose would provide sufficient basis for action, even with some socio-normatively relevant implications. He also demonstrates the connections between Hegel's concept of action and the contemporary philosophy of action. Pippin argues in a similar vein. It is worth noting that Quante also evaluates Hegel's concept of action to be non-causal in nature:

It is important, however, *not* to conceive of this involvement of the subjective will *as a causal relationship*: Hegel always speaks of the subjective will having brought about the altered situations, but he never claims that the relationship of will and action-event should itself be determined in causal concepts (Quante 2004, 120).

The reconstruction of Hegel's argument of this opinion is based on the fact that the agent of action is responsible only for those consequences of the action which she "invested" in the intention of his action. Such statements seem to be counterintuitive, in addition, they contradict jurisprudential and judicial practice, because during administrative and criminal proceedings, the investigation, although taking into account a perpetrator's incentives (motives and intentions), focuses on the act itself and its consequences. However, in this case, thinkers are interested in the very meaning of what could be considered Hegel's action, without directly comparing it with how modern legal discourse interprets action. And although Hegel's concept of action is generally set out in *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*, his approach is much more complex, especially in its situatedness in social (or socio-normative) reality, because the latter is based on the idea of free will, which moves towards full self-realization.

Interpretations mostly assume the consideration of action in ideal conditions, as if the one who captures its features is dealing with the *pure* intentions of the agents of action, and these agents are not focused on hiding their true intentions and expectations. Therefore, the pure intention embodied in the action falls into the space of interaction with other embodied intentions, and the subjective will of the agent cannot predict all the

consequences of the interaction, so the subject should be responsible only for what this will “invested” its intention in, as Quante (2004, 121–122) puts it.

Quante points out that Hegel’s distinction between intention and purpose requires additional interpretation, because in § 115–126 of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* Hegel does not offer sound criteria for differentiating these concepts (Hegel 2018; see also Hegel 1986b). One might assume that the purpose is a rational component of the action, whereas the intention indicates that the action is realized by the agent freely. In both cases, Hegel emphasizes that the subject is aware of the context (both the natural and the social) in which she acts and his own expectations about the actions’ results and efficiency (Quante 2004, 126). Quante offers an interpretation that enables understanding of the distinction between purpose and intention when he tries to explain the “transition from purpose to intention” in line with § 118 of Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*:

Purposiveness [which] encompasses “purpose” and “intention” is (i) synonymous with *intentionality*. Purposiveness (= intentionality) is understood as the *belief* of the agent with regard to his own act at the time of its completion, and should be analyzed as the cognitive moment. Both the proposed and the intention fall under this term as *known*. Second, the difference of *purpose* and *intention* is (ii) a difference within the voluntary, which concerns a difference of the form (of the conceptual structure) of these moments (Quante 2004, 127–128).

However, the aforementioned “transition” from the concept of purpose to the concept of intention suggests something very important: namely, that in a subject’s conscious and reflected intention to act there is space for reflecting on and taking fellow subjects’ purposes into account, as well as for reflecting on the relations between one’s individual purposes and these of fellow individuals. This opens up the possibility of coordinating one’s own purposes with other people’s purposes, either on the basis of an intersubjective recognition of other people’s purposes, or on the basis of societal norms and institutions that a subject takes into account when determining the purpose or strategy for her action. In short, what emerges here is the idea of a shared, socialized, or *universalized* purpose – rather than a purpose that is merely egocentric, and thus excludes others’ purposes or instrumentalizes them in favor of achieving one’s own purpose even more efficiently.

Still, in his more elementary interpretation of the concept of purpose (in particular, in *The Science of Logic*), Hegel considers purpose as highly individualized and subjectively significant. Meanwhile, according to Quante, “intentions are constituted with regard to their form such that their universality allows the agent to include the interests [purposes, Y.T.] of others” (Quante 2004, 177). In Quante’s eyes, Hegel’s concept of action was to emphasize its intellectual component, but the agent’s reflection and knowledge does not imply her privileged access to own actions, unlike as in Pippin. Rather, this concept exposes

1. self-attribution of the committed act;
2. perception of action as a result of the realization of one's own intention;
3. comprehension of action as an expression of subjective will, and
4. preservation of the subjective component "after the objectification of the internal goal" (Quante 2004, 130).

The agent of action is aware not only of the circumstances in which she acts and why, but he is able (in different interpretations for different reasons) to understand the general ethical picture of society in which he acts for the benefit of others. This view is shared by Karl-Otto Apel when he reconstructs Kant's and Hegel's discussion in absentia for the needs of his own conception of "transformation of transcendental philosophy" (Apel 2004, 49). According to Apel, there are no phenomena for the subjective mind, especially in the axiological and normative dimension, that are inaccessible to cognition. However, if subjects are not involved in the justification of their society's axiological and normative patterns, they cannot find moral incentives or grounds for their behavior and only act for external reasons or conformity with norms ("never act *morally*, but only in *external accordance with duty*" in Apel's terms):

For if obligatory moral demands are to have any meaning for human beings, then it cannot be assumed that they are in principle unrealizable, or that they are never in fact realized, that therefore everything that in fact exists could be regarded as simply neutral from the moral perspective. (...) it must be possible to clarify the linguistic sense of 'good' and 'evil,' and thus the sense involved in responding to an obligatory moral demand, by recourse to certain examples. For the meaning of *good* and *evil* here must be knowable (Apel 2004, 52–53).

At the same time, Quante does not find a direct connection between Hegel's concept of action and his moral philosophy. According to Quante's interpretation, the content of the action is not limited by the subject's will to demonstrate ethical behavior and follow normative standards. The concepts by which Hegel describes *free action* are originally unrelated to moral norms, and Quante points out the "neutrality of the concept of action for moral philosophy" (Quante 2004, 166).

In my opinion, Quante's position may underestimate some positions that Hegel articulated in the *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Firstly, Hegel repeatedly criticized individualism and selfishness, emphasizing that atomistic tendencies destroy the foundations of the ethical coexistence of agents in the community (see, for example, the criticism of the pursuit of private interests within civil society oriented toward *common goods*) (Hegel 2018; see also Hegel 1986b, 339–345). However, economic civil society is preoriginally established on the basis of mutual exchange of individuals' natural needs, as well as on the exchange of resources, products, services, etc. to satisfy needs. Individuals must reproduce at least their existence as living organisms and real beings. Secondly, Hegel's concept of moral action is presented in the section "Morality" of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Each of the concepts set out in this section should be perceived primarily as a fragment of the general normative and political system, and therefore, the

interpretation of action as morally neutral in this context (or independent of this contexts) seems quite problematic. Third, the agent's knowledge, which implies that the subject is aware of the situation in which the action is implemented (as well as the possible results and consequences of the latter), still refers to intersubjective interaction, rather than to individual acts, the implementation of which it does not concern anyone except the subject himself. As Quante puts it,

An agent who pursues intentions with his act thereby places his act in larger contexts, and can therefore also foresee the extent to which the possible activities of other subjects are conducive to, or may obstruct, his plans. When the agent also takes into account in his act the extent to which his own act touches the welfare and interests of others, he is in a position to factor into his intentions the reactions and actions of others (Quante 2004, 165).

At the same time, he reminds us that Hegel does not call for the service of others and supposes it to be the main moral principle. On the contrary, he emphasizes that the subjective will finds its true meaning in itself, returning to itself after the act of objectification of itself in an "improved" state, so the "moral action exists only because the will is autonomous and universal" (Quante 2004, 171).

It should be emphasized that not all contemporary researchers of Hegel's philosophy agree that the conception of action can be comprehended without considering its links with other fragments of Hegel's system, including ideas about how society affects the formation of the subject, as well as how this socially formed subject makes decisions and implements them.

II.3 Robert B. Brandom

The American philosopher Robert B. Brandom tends to think that the community forms the subject in the domain of social norms, so the subject in his actions is restricted by the social context in which other subjects assess the compliance of his actions with these generally accepted norms (Brandom 2019).

According to Brandom, the basis for the multifaceted and ambiguous interpretation of Hegel's concept of action (action just identical to intention or action identical to purpose) was created by the German philosopher himself:

Hegel offers us strong statements of two views about action that starkly contrast and stand in at least apparent tension with one another: a broadly behaviorist, externalist view, which identifies and individuates actions according to what is actually done, the performance that is produced, (...) and an intentionalist, internalist view, which identifies and individuates actions by the agent's intention or purpose in undertaking them (Brandom 2019, 384).

In other words, Brandom leads us to believe that Hegel does not provide sufficient grounds for a *correct* choice between seemingly alternative perspectives. Therefore, he believes that Hegelian scholars should not expect to create an unambiguous and comprehensive interpretation of this element of Hegelian philosophy.

Brandom proposes to look for a solution of this *aporia of action* in the ways of describing it, to take into account the dynamic and procedural development of action presented in Hegel's system. On the one hand, the action changes its content during the transition from the subjective to the objective dimension of reality, and on the other hand – the content of the action remains unchanged (Brandom 2019, 380). But both the agent of the action and its observer have the opportunity to evaluate the action, taking into account Hegel's call to abandon the causal explanation of the latter. Thus, using five provisions of Davidson's theory of action (which, according to Brandom, duplicate the content of some fragments of *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*), he shows that a certain type of event description – in which beliefs, responsibilities, values, etc. are considered the grounds of the emergence of intent (and if the latter ultimately corresponds to the consequences of action) – allows, firstly, to maintain the commitment of common sense to the scheme of *cause and effect*, secondly, to abandon the direct identification of action for its purpose, and thirdly – to take into consideration the significance of the (socio-)normative nature of the action (Davidson 2001; Brandom 2019, 389–390). The interpretation of the consequences of an action is also accompanied by some uncertainty (identification of the action and the consequences, the consequence as an exhaustive meaning of the action, the subject's responsibility for all or only for the expected consequences of the action, etc.), because Hegel himself emphasized that “ethical theories that assess the rightness of actions exclusively on the basis of the purposes for which they were performed and ethical theories that assess the rightness of actions exclusively on the basis of the consequences to which they give rise are equally one-sided” (Brandom 2019, 393). Therefore, Hegel developed a research perspective that made it possible to combine these views on action. According to Brandom, Hegel's concept of action presents two dimensions of impact assessment: subjective and objective. Within these dimensions, descriptions of the consequences of actions are performed taking into account both subjective goals, when the agent comprehends his own actions, and objective results of the latter, when the “universal consciousness of the community” identifies compliance with the norms of this culture: “The content [of action, Y.T.] is what is both acknowledged by the agent and attributed by the community: the product of a process of reciprocal specific recognition” (Brandom 2019, 396), but no longer the product of the mutual exchange of needs as it occurs between the members of the economic civil society.

Thus, in order to outline the ways in which Hegel's doctrine of action is reactualised in contemporary philosophical culture, we have considered a number of modern interpretations of Hegel's concept of action. We began by reviewing the interpretation of action proposed by Taylor, and then showed how this area of modern Hegelian studies has been expanded and deepened in the works of present-day scholars examining Hegel's concept of action (e.g., Quante, Knowles, Brandom, Wood, Pippin). We managed to establish an interesting historical and philosophical fact: a separate fragment of Hegel's

philosophical system has become one of those points that allow the convergence of two seemingly incompatible philosophical traditions – continental and analytical. After analyzing different interpretations of the content of Hegel’s concept of action (intention, purpose, consequence, etc.), we found that the research perspective created by Hegel has some features in common with how analytical philosophers work with relevant issues.

III. Hegel’s Teleology Revisited, or How the *Science of Logic* Introduces the Basics of Purposeful Human Action

Every interpretation of Hegel’s doctrine of action requires detailed comparison with the original sources. Reconstruction of Hegel’s concept of action demands simultaneously turning to several works. The interpretations reviewed above mainly refer to *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* and *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, whereas I focus on the section “Teleology” of *The Science of Logic*. However, the reader has to expect that even this relatively non-comprehensive Section is complex. In particular, a distinction between the (i) subjective aspect of a purposeful agency and (ii) the realized, thus, objectified aspect may confuse the reader. Moreover, the non-Kantian assumption that the freedom of the subject is not, for Hegel, the absolute ability to initiate new sequences of events in the world may initially throw the reader off the track and sow some doubt: how is it possible, after all, that the subject has no such causal power over the object in external reality, and in order to realize its practical intention articulated as the concept of a certain purpose, the subject necessarily needs a tool to accomplish it. According to Hegel, the tool already belongs to objective reality, although intelligent and free beings may also transform and instrumentalize objects that are not yet a means/tool by virtue of their technical genius (the “cunning of reason,”) and not just find them in nature as they find e.g., mushrooms.

It is primarily the tool that is adapted, handy and governed by the subject: the tool serves and increases subjects’ practical powers, the efficiency of their actions and their impact on the external world. The idea of such a purposeful *and* effective agency initially originates from the intellect and the will (or from a will that determines itself by the concept of purpose produced by reflection). It is only by means of the tool that the subject is *really* able to realize the purpose that has been conceived in her mind. For the realization of her purpose in the external world, the subject must firstly subordinate herself to the regularities and laws of nature; know them; include them in his planning and concept of purpose; and finally outsmart them. Only through his tools – not solely through his thoughts or practical decisions – is man able to possess the control and the power over the external nature, Hegel argues. It is only then that “the object has the character of being powerless and of serving it; purpose is the subjectivity or soul of the object that has in the latter its external side” (Hegel 2010, 661).

Even life itself and the body as natural phenomena are a kind of means and tools for the “spirit,” as we read in *The Science of Logic*. However, decisions and thoughts are

needed to provide her actions with guidance from the subjective and internal side. What is important here is that natural objects and objective reality have their own natural causality and man-independent laws. But they do not strive nor do they have purposes. The concept of purpose remains the very human product of “an intelligence that determines itself in accordance with purposes”; “where there is the perception of a *purposiveness*, an *intelligence* is assumed as its author; required for purpose is thus the concept's own free concrete existence”; “absolute essence of the world is (...) an intelligence that determines itself in accordance with purposes” (Hegel 2010, 651). Yet this intelligence does not do so by itself, but through individual and social agents.

According to “the *concept*, the realm of *subjectivity*, or of *freedom*” (Hegel 2010, 506), freedom itself is such a very human purpose. Man's action taken to realize this freedom has two key features: (i) it is labor, and (ii) it is connected to the use of means (or tools) (e.g., Juchniewicz 2018, 882). And it does not deprive nature of its regularities and causalities. Rather, the human agents can act parallel to these natural regularities and causalities, making them work for human purposes by virtue of their advanced concepts of purposeful actions produced by their practical rationality. A human agent can make them work for herself even while aiming at the implementation of the very social – e.g., moral, ethical, legal norms, which, of course, do not originate from nature. As I will show below, this opens up a new – that is, societal – dimension to the concept of purposeful action. In *Logic*, we are only dealing with the distinction (or even opposition) between subject-human and purposeful vs. natural (non-human), just deterministic, purpose-blind causality:

(...) mechanism and purposiveness stand opposed to each other; then by that very fact they cannot be taken as indifferent concepts, as if each were by itself a correct concept and had as much validity as the other; the only question being where the one or the other may apply (Hegel 2010, 651).

In *The Science of Logic* Hegel presented his explanation of how a rational concept of purpose and purposeful human action can utilize natural laws, regularities and causalities to enhance human agents' efficiency when realizing their own teleological purposes (and social norms which articulate how humans should or should not self-determine as moral agents) with the idea of the “cunning of reason” (Hegel 2010, 663). This was Hegel's idea of how to overcome Kant's antinomy between “causality according to the laws of nature” (also called natural necessity) (Hegel 2010, 654) and freedom in terms of causality according to the purposes and laws of human rationality; between the originally subjective causality and the objective one. Hegel “*mediates*” those two very different aspects and lets the subject (equipped by thinking and volition) utilize objectivity for his purposes. Thus,

the *self-determination* is also the determination of an *external* object not determined by the concept (...) the moment of externality is not just posited in the concept, the purpose is not just an *ought* and a *striving*, but as a concrete totality is identical with immediate objectivity. This identity is on the one hand

the simple concept, and the equally *immediate* objectivity, but, on the other hand, it is just as essentially *mediation*" (Hegel 2010, 668–669; emphasis by Y.T).

In other words, it is a dialectical identity of identity and the difference between the subject's free causation and the causation of nature (including the subject's own physical and mental forces). Purpose (and the thought of purpose) must not "determine" the object, as Hegel stresses in *Logic*, but the subject as a whole – embodied and endowed with a thinking mind, will, imagination – must be able to make it existing in the external world as really and objectively as realities already existing there, produced by laws and forces of nature or by his fellow subjects. Purpose must "*merge* with it in the unity of the concept through itself" (Hegel 2010, 669). On the other hand, human purposeful action can at some (even high) extent co-determine the objective world, e.g., give an artificial shape or functionality to a piece of natural raw material. The two descriptors: (i) mediating/mediation (self-mediation at the conceptual and dialectic level) and (ii) merging are crucial for understanding the type of causation and effect that human purposeful action can have on external reality. They specify how the purposeful action of a thinking, free willed subject, makes itself essential in the external reality, while making selected natural objects, facts, or causalities »unessential« as the subsequent reference underlines. Again, the Section "Teleology" makes it clear: human action, including its phenomenal and manifest aspects, is a much more comprehensive process than a simply (or simplistic) ontological unity of action and its purpose:

Thus the original inner externality of the concept, by virtue of which the concept is self-repelling unity, purpose and the striving of purpose towards objectivity, is the immediate positing or the presupposition of an external object; the self-determination is also the determination of an external object not determined by the concept; and conversely this determination is self-determination, that is, the sublated externality posited as inner, or the certainty of the *unessentiality* of the external object. Of the second connection, that of the determination of the object as a means, we have just shown how it is within itself the *self-mediation* of purpose in the object. Likewise the third mode of connection, mechanism, which proceeds under the dominance of purpose and sublates the object by virtue of the object, is on the one hand the sublating of the means, of the object already posited as sublated, and consequently a second sublation and immanent reflection, and on the other hand, a *first determining of the external object* (Hegel 2010, 668–669).

Conclusions

This paper aimed at revisiting and discussing a variety of approaches while seeking the interpretations most closely referring to Hegel's concept of action. Taylor, who (ex aequo with Pinkard) could be considered as a founder of the discussion on this concept, preserves the Spirit (however, without taking its original, three-dimensional shape) in a sense that is (or seems) authentic to Hegel. Pippin, who is considered to be Taylor's follower, also preserves the spirit (in a similar, non-structured way) in his study, but fills it with a slightly different meaning, proposing to interpret this figure as the "collective

thinking” that forms the boundaries of a particular subject’s thinking.

Reviewing the texts of Quante and Brandom, it was demonstrated that with a certain research strategy, such philosophical topoi as practical spirit and the concept of purpose are not historical relics; on the contrary, they can continuously stimulate scholars, as is evident from the current approaches that advocate for a multivocal sense of action. Turning to Hegel’s *Science of Logic* opens an unexpected perspective on free and purposeful activity “oriented to the material world” [*die gegenständlich bezogene Tätigkeit oder Arbeit*] (Arndt 2021, 113) in order to transform it by (i) instrumentalization and (ii) mastering, both of which are possible due to conscious and intentional causality, and not blind and mechanical determinism. This human causality paves a path for itself and a place next to natural determinisms and regularities by “cunningly” using them and acting in and on the external world to manifest and emancipate itself from causality of natural origin. In the outer realm, human causality may experience resistance, coercion, or dominion over fellow humans’ freedom (or at least their willfulness) manifesting there.

Furthermore, turning to Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right* can open skeptics’ eyes to freedom’s need – or *purpose* – for (iii) inter-individual coordination and the normative regulation of purposeful practices in the external world, beginning with the labor of a self-conscious purposive agency [*Zwecktätigkeit*] through which agents, however, also develop a new and socially dangerous ability to instrumentalize one another, or to instrumentalize the purposes of their fellow agents; and finishing with purposeful agency in terms of mutually [*Wechselbestimmung*], normatively and institutionally mediated self-determination of different kind. As a result, the “mediation” initially conceptualized in Hegel’s *Science of Logic* for human and natural causalities will receive its qualitatively new, socio-normative extension as “mediation” based on subjects’ collaborative-cooperative system of actions⁵ and their reciprocal recognition as equitable users of their external and rightful freedom, later described in Hegel’s *Elements of the Philosophy of Right*. Hegelian philosophy distinguishes a number of types of causation through human agency. Cause-and-effect action in material reality is one of them. Another type of action will be the formation of such objective entities as a work of art, scientific knowledge, or a legislation (an exemplification of a normative public institution), entire

⁵ Basically, even before that – in Hegel’s *First Philosophy of Spirit* (1802/3) – this system in terms of one of the core public institutions:

In other words *his labor, qua laboring* of a single [laborer] *for his own needs, is at the same time* a universal and ideal [factor of public life]”; a single subject’s “labor is for need [in general], it is for the abstraction of a need as universally suffered, not for his need; and the satisfaction of the totality of his needs is a labor of everyone. Between the range of needs of the single [agent], and his activity on their account, there enters the labor of the whole people, and the labor of any one in respect of *its contents, a universal labor for the needs of all*, so as to be appropriate for the satisfaction of all of his needs; in other words it has a *value*; his labor, and his possessions, are not [just] what they are for him, but what they are for everyone; the satisfaction of needs is a universal dependence of everyone upon one another; for everyone all security and certainty that his labor as a single [agent] is directly adequate to his needs disappears; as a singular complex of needs he becomes a universal (Hegel 1976, 247–248).

societies and cultures. These practices deserve to be discussed in a separate article. One might get the impression, though, that the causative nature of such remaining humanly and socially originated actions is hardly comprehensible when losing sight of that elementary causation.

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