1

Introduction: Hegel and Contemporary Philosophy of Action

Arto Laitinen and Constantine Sandis

The aim of this book is to provide an in-depth account of Hegel’s writings on human action as they relate to contemporary concerns in the hope that it will encourage fruitful dialogue between Hegel scholars and those working in the philosophy of action. During the past two decades, preliminary steps towards such a dialogue were taken, but many paths remain uncharted. The book thus serves as both a summative document of past interaction and a promissory note of things to come.

We begin this introduction with some general words regarding the philosophy of action before singling out reasons for exploring Hegel’s thought in relation to it. We next present a brief overview of studies conducted to this day, followed by a thematic appraisal of the contributions appearing in this volume.

1. Action in philosophy

The categorization of something as an action instead of a mere bodily movement involves a substantial conceptual framework which includes the contested notions of intention, voluntariness, practical reasoning, and motivation. The connection between such a framework and that required for the conceptualization of natural events (a matter of equal contention) is central to philosophical enquiry; it concerns, to use Wilfrid Sellars’ (1963, p. 1) phrase, the question of ‘how things, in the broadest possible sense of the term, hang together, in the broadest possible sense of the term.’ Appropriate investigation thereby calls for a stereoscopic account of personal, social, and scientific reality. This cannot be achieved without detailed reflection upon a range of issues from selfhood and agency to causation and explanation.
Needless to say, there is no single correct way of categorizing philosophical issues relating to action, not least because any attempt to do so requires contentious presuppositions concerning the multifarious relations between various phenomena and the concepts employed to capture them. The following, not untypical, attempt to divide topics into four thematic groups is nonetheless a prima facie intuitive one:

(i) So-called ‘action theory’ which explores conceptual and ontological questions concerning the very nature of action.

In contemporary philosophy (i) typically divides into questions concerning (a) the relation of actions to events (especially movements of the body); (b) action individuation and description; (c) the categorization of action into specific types, e.g. mental acts, speech acts, collective action, habitual actions, and negative acts; and (d) further distinctions between actions that are intentional and/or voluntary and those that are not. This all invariably leads to:

(ii) Accounts typically appeal to phenomena such as intentions, beliefs, desires, volitions, and purposes, their precise relation to action (identity, causation, expression, and so on) being a matter of great dispute.

Accounts typically appeal to highly contested roles of notions such as intention, belief, desire, volition, and purpose, whose precise relation to action (e.g. one of identity, causation, or expression) is an area of central dispute. Philosophers interested in such issues divide into causalists and anti-causalists with regard to the nature of action and/or its explanation. Debates here range over questions in the ‘theory of reasons’ (such as that of the extent, if any, to which the reasons for which we act might be termed ‘causes’ of our actions and the question of whether or not we always act under the guise of some perceived good) as well as questions relating to the nature of explanation in history and the social sciences. Philosophers divide further on the issue of whether or not there is a sui generis form of agent causation and, if so, how it relates to that of event causation. Such controversies on aggregate pave the way towards:

(iii) Philosophical accounts concerning the nature of agency.

Such accounts further explore normative and motivational issues as diverse as those of control, deliberation, strength and weakness of will, addiction and compulsion, practical reasoning, rationality, justification, identification and alienation, self-actualization, bodily awareness, selfhood and personhood, and agential knowledge.
Issues related to agency and control are closely linked with disputes concerned with:

(iv) Outlooks on free will and responsibility.

Contested areas of concern here include those of liberty, autonomy, criminal liability and culpability, *mens rea*, tragedy, fatalism, determinism, and historical inevitability.

In both his *Phenomenology of Spirit* and *Philosophy of Right*, as well as the *Encyclopaedia* and his lectures on *Aesthetics*, Hegel tackles questions relating to all four of the above areas of concern. What he has to say about action, however, cuts across them and, indeed, frequently challenges some of the intuitions which underlie some of their most popular categorizations.

### 2. Engaging with Hegel

A natural way to relate Hegel to contemporary debates is by reconstructing his take on issues that continue to vex us today. A case in point is Alasdair MacIntyre’s ‘Hegel on Faces and Skulls’ (Chapter 10) which neatly transposes Hegel’s attack on nineteenth-century physiognomy and phrenology into a critique of recent attempts to provide neuroscientific explanations of everyday human behaviour.

Less directly, we might also learn much from the refreshing—if at times counter-intuitive—stances which Hegel adopts. These appear to involve the *prima facie* counterintuitive notion of a retrospective determination of intention (see Chapters 4 and 5), as well as the unlikely conjunction of the claim that people are only responsible for what was included in their ‘purpose’ and the suggestion that they may nevertheless be held responsible for what they did not even foresee, so long as it is true that, as thinking beings, they *should* have known better (see Wood, Chapter 7).

Hegel additionally provides us with a novel set of questions accompanied by an alternate systematic way of understanding their interrelations. In his *Phenomenology of Spirit*, for example, the discussion of the nature of action, action-explanation, and agency is deeply embedded within a lengthy internal criticism of various allegedly one-sided views of a typically scientistic or individualistic persuasion. Similarly, in both the *Encyclopaedia* and the *Philosophy of Right* action is discussed in the broader context of an articulation of Hegel’s own system, whilst the more immediate context of the actualization of freedom in social and institutional reality is closely related to questions of
responsibility-attribution.³ Hegel appears to move from questions concerning freedom and responsibility (iv above) through the notion of agency (iii) to remarks concerning the nature of action (i), all the while leaving considerable space for interpretive disagreement with regard to his stance on the nature of causation and explanation (ii). It is also worth asking why certain issues left Hegel unmoved (the relation of free will to physical determinism being an obvious case in point). Conversely, the evaluation of Hegel’s thought cannot be seriously advanced without recourse to a range of recent insights and distinctions. Charles Taylor argues that the philosophy of action constitutes a particularly fruitful entry point to Hegel’s theory as a whole:

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

(Taylor, 1983, p. 1; reprinted as Chapter 2 below)

If so then Hegel scholars have the very same reason for studying contemporary philosophy of action that philosophers of action have for engaging with Hegel, namely to gain a fuller understanding of one’s primary object of study.

An interest in contemporary debates may inform radically different approaches to Hegel (for examples, see §3 below). Pari passu, interpretations must also face the common obstacle of the systematic nature of Hegel’s philosophy, it being well-nigh impossible to isolate his views on any particular issue with no discussion of his system as a whole. This is not to deny that we can reach free-standing insights into the nature of human action through a careful reading of Hegel, nonetheless we can better understand Hegel by immersing ourselves into independent explorations of action. The essays in this volume demonstrate this, in a variety of ways. Before taking a closer look at them, a brief overview of previous work is called for.

3. The action so far

Whereas so-called contintental philosophers concerned with action (including Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, Jürgen Habermas, and Paul Ricoeur) have frequently engaged with Hegel, references to
him within ‘analytic’ philosophy of action have been few and far between. Notwithstanding some positive exceptions in recent years, mutual understanding between Hegelian and ‘analytic’ traditions has been limited ever since Moore and Russell combated the likes of Bradley, Green, Bosanquet, and McTaggart.

In his Preface to his 1968 book *Action* (based on Gifford lectures he delivered in Aberdeen), the renowned Hegel translator Sir Malcolm Knox (who had been a student of Collingwood’s at Oxford) boasted that it was ‘incontestable’ that what he had written was ‘old-fashioned’, adding that ‘it belongs to the pre-Wittgensteinian era, and indeed smacks of the nineteenth century’.[4] Knox, quite rightly, did not expect the then dominating linguistic philosophers at Oxford to be impressed. The then-rising naturalist philosophers in the United States, such as Fred Dretske, were equally baffled:

> Why, or how, the nonspecialist is supposed to acquire an interest, and if so, in what, by this quaint mixture of Hegelian metaphysics and moral exhortation escapes me. Everything gets sorted out into levels or hierarchies. There are levels of action, levels of experience, and levels of goodness. Directly or indirectly, each of these levels is related to the various stages through which the mind passes while translating itself into actuality. Action is the subjective potentiality actualizing itself in and through the process of objectification (p. 104). The code is tricky but, as I understand it, action is the mind seeping out of the body.

(Dretske, 1971, p. 251)

For two traditions which had grown so far apart so quickly, what happened in the years that immediately followed the lukewarm reception of Knox’s book was nothing less than remarkable. Thanks to the work of H. S. Harris, M. Inwood, C. Taylor, and others, as well as an accompanying new range of translations, interest in Hegel was unexpectedly revived within the English-speaking world. Taylor’s *Hegel* (1975), in particular, would become instrumental in connecting Hegel to a number of ‘analytic’ concerns, paving the ground for his own ‘Hegel and the Philosophy of Action’, first published in Lawrence L. Stepelevich and David Lamb’s 1983 collection *Hegel’s Philosophy of Action* (and reprinted here as Chapter 2).[5] Taylor’s approach differs from Knox’s in seeking relevance to contemporary debates about action and avowing that Hegel’s central ambitious ontological thesis was ‘dead’ (Taylor, 1975, p. 538; cf. also Wood, 1990, p. 4).
Introduction: Hegel and Contemporary Philosophy of Action

Two independent developments during the early 1990s would eventually serve as the catalyst of a wider interest in Hegel’s Theory of action. The first was the publication of Robert Pippin’s *Hegel’s Idealism* (1989) and Terry Pinkard’s *Hegel’s Phenomenology: The Sociality of Reason* (1994) which collectively presented a more contemporary Hegelian system that was ‘non-metaphysical’ (cf. Hartmann, 1972). The second took the form of two landmark books by Pittsburgh philosophers John McDowell and Robert Brandom, each displaying important affinities with Hegel (*Mind and World* and *Making it Explicit*, both published in 1994). McDowell (1994, ix) described both their works as *prolegomena* to a reading of ‘that difficult text’, the *Phenomenology*.

During the same period came also the first monographs dedicated exclusively to Hegel’s notion of action, namely Francesca Menegoni’s *Soggetto e struttura dell’agire in Hegel* (1993) and Michael Quante’s *Hegel’s Begriff der Handlung* (1993, translated into English in 2004 as *Hegel’s Concept of Action*). The latter is the only book-length work to date relating Hegel to action theorists such as Anscombe, Davidson, and Goldman.


The movement has given us cause to think that the time was ripe for an edited volume which summarizes, continues, and extends the discussion so far. Each of the chapters that follow engages with different aspects of Hegel’s response to tensions embodied in the dual notion of human beings as being in some sense part of the natural world and in another quite distinct from it. We have divided them thematically into seven consecutive pairs, though other arrangements, highlighting different interconnections, would have been equally valid. Some of the paired papers offer conflicting viewpoints and interpretations whilst others complement one another, be it through a continuation of thought or by highlighting different aspects of the same idea. Most of the chapters present entirely new work, but we also chose to include a selection of the original pieces that inspired our project (Chapters 2, 5,
4. Expression and causation

In his seminal paper ‘Hegel and the Philosophy of Action (Chapter 2),’ Charles Taylor focuses on the nature of action, in particular on what distinguishes it from other kinds of events. He draws a contrast between the causal view of action (originally held by many classical rationalists and empiricists and later developed by Donald Davidson) and a qualitative or expressive view whose roots lie with Aristotle but which is also associated with Herder, Collingwood, Merleau-Ponty, Wittgenstein, Anscombe, and Melden. Taylor identifies Hegel as belonging to the latter camp, in ironic proximity to the Oxford linguistic philosophers of the 1950s and 60s which Hegelians such as Knox wanted to distance themselves from (see § 3 above).

Causal theories of action maintain that intentional actions are a subset of bodily movements, namely those caused in ‘an appropriate way’ by a pairing of a belief and ‘pro-attitude’ which ‘rationalize’ the action in some ‘anaemic’ sense (Davidson, 1963). By contrast, the expressive view sees action as being ‘qualitatively different from non-action… intrinsically directed… inhabited by the purposes that direct them, so that action and purpose are ontologically inseparable.’ So conceptualized, there exists an ontological difference between actions and nonactions which cannot be captured in terms of their causal origin. As a corollary, the qualitative view also denies the idea that actions are caused by intentions or other ‘mental states.’ To say that action is the bodily expression of thought and intention is to say that the body takes on a certain mental form, but not that it is caused by it.

This idea that action is the expression of thought and/or intention has since come to be the majority view amongst Hegel scholars. Many of its assumed implications are challenged by Dudley Knowles, who in his ‘Hegel on Actions, Reasons, and Causes’ (Chapter 3) defends a qualified causalist reading of Hegel. Knowles compares Hegel’s assertions to three distinct (albeit intertwined) causalist doctrines: (i) the causalist theory of action, (ii) the claim that action explanation is a species of causal explanation, and (iii) the Humean theory of motivation.

He next argues that whilst it is true that Hegel would reject the causal view of action this does not in itself exclude the possibility of a causal account of action explanation (cf. Ruben, 2003). Indeed, Knowles maintains that Hegel ‘understood action explanation as causal in that familiar understanding of it as requiring two separate independent
existences.’ Knowles’ argument for metaphysical separability turns on cases where intentions fail to be realized. He invokes ‘the obvious thought that actions may be successful or unsuccessful as manifestations of their directing purposes. “I was doing my very best to win the match”, says the tennis player, and this doesn’t tell us whether she won or lost’. Knowles adds that he consequently has ‘very great difficulty understanding how ontological inseparability can hold, win or lose.’

Contrasting Hegel to causalism, he demonstrates, is no straightforward matter.

5. Sociality, constructivism, and retrospectivism

In ‘Hegel’s Social Theory of Agency: The “Inner-Outer” Problem’ (Chapter 4), Robert Pippin endorses Taylor’s expressivism before asking further why Hegel took sociality to inform the question of agency, viz. that of specifying how actions might differ from (mere) events.

According to Pippin’s Hegel, we cannot separate actions from (other) events ‘without reference to a subject’s take on what is happening and why, without reference to an inner realm, or a self-relation ... that cannot be understood apart from social relations; my relation to myself is mediated by my relation to others.’ This is crucial for the distinction between ‘Tat’ (deed, or thing done) and ‘Handlung’ (action proper).

This is partly because practical reasoning is a norm-bound activity whose norms are not up to us but also because ‘all agency requires the assumption of some act-description and some self-ascribing of intentions, and Hegel insists that we must treat the agent’s own description and ascription as merely provisional.’

Both self-description and self-ascription are conceived of as being subject to social ‘negotiation’: a form of social mediation and responsiveness required for the indeterminate to become determinate. Hegel is thereby presented as holding a social endorsement theory of identification (what Hegelians call ‘ownership’ and Kantians ‘self-constitution’) that is in competition with those offered by Frankfurt, Korsgaard, Velleman, Fischer, Watson et al. These are all subjective in that they focus purely on the agent’s will or desires.

Such sociality motivates the idea of retrospective awareness about intentions:

Only as manifested or expressed can one (even the subject herself) retrospectively determine what must have been intended. And of course it seems a bit paradoxical to claim that we can only know what we
intended to do after we have actually acted. But there is little doubt that Hegel holds something like such a position.

In so rendering questions about agency relative to social practices and the forms of life that give rise to them Hegel once more appears as an unexpected precursor to Wittgenstein ideas. The nature of any given action, so conceived, is not determined by its physical properties and mental antecedents but, rather, only realized within some concrete social community whose rules are determined by participants past and present. It is a public deed that ‘realises and reveals’ what the agent intended. This is not to imply, however, that intentions are somehow created after the deed (through some mysterious collective act of backward causation), but only that intention-in-action should not be thought of as a mental episode at all.

John McDowell, in his paper ‘Towards a Reading of Hegel on Action in the “Reason” Chapter of the *Phenomenology*’ (Chapter 5), also defends a ‘social’ reading of Hegel’s account of action according to which ‘one cannot unilaterally, independently of participation in a communal practice, give bits of one’s behaviour the kind of meaning actions have’. He warns, however, that it does not follow from this that ‘actions are what they are by being taken to be what they are by other participants in the practice’.

McDowell opposes Pippin’s social constructivism with a realist reading of Hegel according to which the central role of sociality lies not in constructing reasons, conferring the status of a free agent, or negotiating what one’s intentions were but, rather, in ‘opening the agent’s eyes’ to such things, thus enabling them to gradually become responsive to reasons as reasons, thereby becoming free, rational, agents that share practices with others.

McDowell seeks to save Hegel from paradox by distinguishing between (a) knowledge of what one has actually done (which is routinely *a posteriori*) and (b) knowledge of what one intended to do (which, following Anscombe, he takes to be non-observational). In so doing he appeals to Hegel’s understanding of the *Oedipus* story in which the distinction between *Tat* and *Handlung* is invoked to show that it is the ‘right of subjectivity’ to deny that one’s deed (of which we can only have knowledge after the fact) was intentional: ‘Hegel’s point is not that there is “an unusual retrospective determination of intention”, but that one comes to know one’s bodily powers only in the exercise of them.’

McDowell thus also moves towards a new reading of what is going on in sections V.B and V.C.a. of *Phenomenology*. What is at stake, on
his interpretation, is not a clash between one’s own take and that of others (a clash which already presupposes the self-image as an intentional agent), but the very notion of being able to conceive of oneself as an intentional agent. He ends his essay by diagnosing Pippin’s reading as being motivated by a misguided fear of relativism, and insufficiently responsive to concern with one’s responsibility in the absence of received authorities.

6. From questions of agency to those of imputation and responsibility

Hegel’s treatment of action appears to be driven by the concern to show that actions only make sense as actions within specific social contexts. Katerina Deligiorgi’s paper ‘Doing Without Agency: Hegel’s Social Theory of Action’ (Chapter 6) explains how this concern is reflected in four aspects of action theory. The first two bear directly on our discussion so far, whilst the last pair pave the way for the chapters that follow.

Deligiorgi begins by critically exploring Pippin’s retrospective view which in its (strongest) epistemic version claims that we cannot ever fully know what our (or anybody else’s) intention is until the related action has taken place. Deligiorgi argues that this view cannot accommodate the prospective nature of intention, suggesting instead that Hegel is a non-cognitivist to the extent that he believes that ‘avowals of intentions are not descriptions of inner states, they are expressions of commitment to act,’ and so makes no claims to knowledge of any kind. To the extent that whatever is known after the deed is relevant to the evaluation of the intention (thus counting as knowledge of intention), a minimal epistemic retrospectivism may be sustained in her view.

Deligiorgi also takes a stand on the ontological separability of action and intention. She agrees (contra Knowles) with Taylor’s contention that there is a sense in which ‘action and purpose are ontologically inseparable’, but notes that this only holds for ‘actions’ and not for ‘deeds’. Deligiorgi next argues that, on Hegel’s view, ascribable and communicable intentions are integral to the category of action (as opposed to that of deed), simultaneously maintaining that this logical connection need not be understood in ontological terms (which is not to say that Hegel himself is exonerated of ontological indulgence). In addition, the explanation and evaluation of action is different from the (nomological) explanation of deeds. Indeed, the explanatory power
Arto Laitinen and Constantine Sandis 11

provided by causal stories is no better than that of magical potions, appeal to which invariably leaves us feeling cheated at the theatre.

Thirdly, Deligiorgi argues that it would be best to drop the idea of agents as separate metaphysical entities (endowed with the sorts of causal powers typically attributed to them by various agent-causationists) and to look instead to the attributions of ownership and responsibility. The ascription of action and intention to an agent thus entails no metaphysical commitments to agents as the causal origins of actions. Finally, the ownership of any given action can only be settled from within the context of a forensic examination and moral evaluation of both act and agent. Her contribution ends by outlining an account of the relation between ownership and accountability, as mediated by reason-giving practices. Deligiorgi here points out that the concepts of imputation and responsibility are central to our understanding of agency.

Allen W. Wood’s paper ‘Hegel on Responsibility for Actions and Consequences’ (Chapter 7) focuses on precisely this last point, defending the view that Hegel’s non-Kantian accounts of action (Handlung), deed (Tat), purpose (Vorsatz), and intention (Absicht) equip him with a set of resources that suffice for a nuanced account of agential responsibility for actions and their consequences.

Wood begins with the theme of imputation, exploring Hegel’s (PR §115–17) non-traditional criteria for distinguishing between ‘deed’, which ‘posits an alteration to the given existence’, and ‘action’, which a deed is only insofar as it is imputable to the will of the agent. Responsibility for an action belongs to the subject only for ‘those aspects of its deed which it knew to be presupposed within its end, and which were present in its purpose’.

This may appear to suggest that Hegel takes agents to only be responsible for specifically intended results, Wood however points out that

the ‘purpose’ of a deed however includes not only what the agent specifically intended or took as an end, but also what the agent knew would occur, even if it was not desired. If a pilot bombing an enemy military installation knows that the school next door is also going to be destroyed (killing many innocent children), the death of the children, and not only the destruction of the enemy installation, is part of his purpose. The purpose of my deed may include even consequences I did not know about, if they belong to ‘the nature of the action itself’. (PR §118R)
Wood explicates that, for Hegel, this nature can be known through rational reflection. So conceived, the purpose of the action includes foreseen as well as intended consequences, but also consequences which the agent ought to have foreseen (even if she didn’t). Hegel’s theory thereby deals with culpable ignorance (including cases of negligence, carelessness, and recklessness). By contrast, Kant’s understanding of action as the expression of a subjective volition (or maxim), limits moral evaluation to the agent’s will.

Wood demonstrates how Hegel’s account generates a more sophisticated understanding of moral luck, according to which action is a vehicle through which we make ourselves responsible for unfortunate consequences of any risks we take (in those cases where we ought to have knowledge of them). Such situations contrast with that of Oedipus, whose deeds formed no part of his purpose.

7. Freedom, right, morality, and the lifeworld

Chapters 8 and 9 relate Hegel’s views on action to its broader background. In ‘Freedom and the Lifeworld’ (Chapter 8) Terry Pinkard observes that, despite its obvious centrality, it is difficult to comprehend what Hegel’s concept of freedom amounts to. In fact, it is impossible to do so without a thorough appreciation of his dialectical outlook. Hegel’s concept of freedom instantiates the general dialectical claim that key concepts in terms of which we think contain ‘contradictions’ that can only be satisfactorily grasped by ‘reason’ as opposed to ‘understanding’. Pinkard sheds light on this dialectical move in order to clarify three different aspects of Hegel’s idea of freedom: (i) the structure of freedom as ‘being oneself in another’ as ‘independence achieved in another’, (ii) freedom’s gradual development from nature; and (iii) a view of history as the development of freedom in human societies.

The first issue to be addressed is that of the intelligibility of the very idea of dialectic. Pinkard explains that while Aristotle views logic as being solely concerned with the relation of concepts (inferential relations of judgements such as ‘cats are mammals’), Hegel takes the subsumption of particulars under concepts to also be governed by rational or logical norms. This is not only so in the sense of abstract understanding (which merely applies the abstract meaning of a concept to a concrete case) but also in a stronger (proto-Wittgensteinian) sense, according to which meaning is realized by use. What abstract understanding fails to capture is the difference that the realization of a concept makes to its otherwise ‘abstract’ meaning.
Pinkard next explores the question of why freedom is to be understood in terms of being at one with oneself in an other. Hegel rejects voluntarist perceptions of freedom as a special kind of causality in favour of the more Aristotelian notion of an ‘inner, moving principle’, transformed into a historical and social conception of freedom, actualized in ‘outer’ actions (as discussed by Pippin). The upshot of all this is that it is necessary that there be a social context, a lifeworld, for freedom to be actualized in action.

Yet it also matters to freedom what this social context or lifeworld is like, as highlighted by Hegel’s views on Antiquity and Modernity. Pinkard maintains that, for Hegel, history is not an intentional, teleological process in the sense that either individuals or some collective ‘spirit’ aim at the goals of history. There is a logic of responses and failures but it occurs blindly, behind the backs of individuals. In modern society we find a gap between social reasons and conscience—a gap that was only just opening up in Antiquity, alongside a gradual move from self-sufficiency to freedom (as revealed in tragic dilemmas such as those portrayed in Sophocles’s *Antigone*). In modernity it is always possible to ask whether socially accepted conceptions of normativity capture it correctly. Accordingly, appeals to one’s conscience have some authority and appeals to what one ‘really’ meant play a role that did not yet exist in traditional culture.

The theme of freedom is also taken up by Stephen Houlgate who in his ‘Action, Right, and Morality in Hegel’s *Philosophy of Right*’ (Chapter 9) considers Hegel’s account of the relation between human action and moral evaluation as it appears in *Philosophy of Right*.

Houlgate provides a close reading elucidating the central notions of freedom, right, person, subject, demands of right, action, and consequences, intention, welfare and good. He stresses the importance of the fact that Hegel’s theory of action in the morality section is sandwiched between his discussion of abstract right (as a *terminus quid*) and that of ethical life (as a *terminus quo*). Based on his reading of the Morality section and the passages which precede it, he argues, *pace* Quante (1993/2004), that, for Hegel, agents qua agents are characterized not by mere ‘freedom of choice’ but by a ‘consciousness of right’ and, consequently, genuine ‘free will’.

Houlgate maintains that action proper is ‘inherently subject to moral demands’, thus also entailing autonomy, true freedom, and the presence of moral attitudes in the agent. He further claims that, for Hegel, ‘morality’ is characterized by tensions: it is a one-sided viewpoint pointing towards *Ethical Life* proper. The ethical agent ‘is one whose intentions
are not just formed by the agent himself but also informed by the laws, institutions and shared habits of mind that constitute ethical freedom'. Agents as members of such ethical life nonetheless also remain individual ‘moral’ agents, ‘despite being educated into the shared habits of ethical life, we continue to face situations in which we understand ourselves to be required to do good and to be the ones who ultimately decide what specific actions the good demands of us.’ Houlgate concedes that for Hegel ‘action can be understood initially without reference to morality’, but concludes that ‘every genuine agent—that is, every truly free agent—acts in the light of moral demands’. This includes agents in the settings of an established Ethical Life (what Pinkard, in his contribution, calls ‘the modern lifeworld’).

8. Externalizing oneself

The next two chapters explore the ways in which Hegel did and did not think that agents are external things or parts of objective reality, to be understood and explained just like any other natural object, thus adopting central Hegelian theme to mediate between reductive materialism and dualism. Alasdair MacIntyre’s ‘Hegel on Faces and Skulls’ (Chapter 10) makes a forceful case for the view that current neuroscientific explanations of human nature frequently share unfounded assumptions with pseudo-sciences that enjoyed a revival in Hegel’s time, namely physiognomy and phrenology. MacIntyre notes that the physicalist mistake of taking inner mechanisms to be the sufficient causes of intentional behaviour is akin to the more ancient one of taking the human face to be an effect of character as opposed to its expression.

The pseudo-sciences that Hegel attacked purported to study ‘organs’ on the surface of the brain. Aspects of the Swiss poet and physiognomist Johann Caspar Lavater’s highly influential Physiognomische Fragmente zur Beförderung der Menschenkenntnis und Menschenliebe (1775–78) were harshly criticized by Georg Christoph Lichtenberg (in a 1778 review). Hegel’s critique of physiognomy in the Phenomenology of Spirit, like that of Kant before him (in 1796/7’s Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht) is highly indebted to that of Lichtenberg. However Hegel went further than both, extending his criticism beyond phrenology to ‘any psychological theory which claims to establish laws of the workings of individual minds’ (Acton, 1971, p. 39).

MacIntyre argues that the logic of Hegel’s arguments thereby licenses further extensions to (a) neuroscientific ‘explanations’ of action and
indeed (b) any mechanistic account of the relation between mind and bodily movement. His outlook here shares important features with that of Charles Taylor.

In ‘What Does it Mean “to Make Oneself Into an Object”?’ (Chapter 11), Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch examines what Hegel means when he characterizes human action with expressions such as ‘to externalize oneself’ (sich entäußern), ‘to make oneself into an object’ (sich zum Gegenstande machen) and ‘to make oneself into a thing’ (sich zum Dinge machen).

This question is important because the above expressions are used frequently in Hegel’s writings (most importantly the Phenomenology’s section on lordship and bondage), yet he never himself elucidates what needs to be the case in order for an actor to externalize himself or make himself into an object.

Almost no attempts have been made to clarify these notions in the secondary literature, with several questions remaining unanswered: what exactly is the notion of ‘making oneself into an object’? Which phenomena fall under the concept? Is it an intelligible concept at all? Is it a useful concept from the standpoint of either action theory or political and social philosophy?

Both the intelligibility and usefulness of Hegel’s notion have been challenged. One objection is that the very idea of making oneself into an object is unintelligible because neither the aim pursued by an individual nor the abilities he employs to realize it can become material objects. Schmidt am Busch responds by demonstrating that what is made an object is a ‘purpose’ (Zweck) to which the agent has a specific relationship—the purpose must be the agent’s own and one which he could have rejected. Other worries include the suspicion that the idea of ‘making oneself into an object’ is a romantic one that is useless for social theory and social philosophy, and that it also rests on problematic assumptions about something being ‘fully given in the mind’ of the agent, or about all of the agent’s traits and abilities being fully given beforehand.

Schmidt am Busch explains why these objections are not well justified. He does so by way of a detailed analysis of the section ‘Willen’ of the Philosophy of Spirit (1805/6). His discussion opens up the possibility of examining the relevance Hegel’s notions of exteriorizing oneself or making oneself into an object hold with respect to his theories of action and work.
9. Planning theory and narrative approaches to agency

Michael Quante's 'Hegel's Planning Theory of Agency' (Chapter 12) explicates Hegel's vision of the agent as temporally extended by drawing analogies with Michael Bratman's planning theory. On Bratman's view, intentions are to be treated as elements of partial action plans which play a role in practical reasoning that is vital to the spatio-temporal organization of our activities and to the cooperation with others. Quante points out that, for Hegel, agency cannot be limited to the selective execution of singular intentions but—at least in the case of beings that persist through longer periods of time and enact a complex structure of needs, drives and desires—also requires action plans.

According to Quante (in line with Chapters 4–8), Hegel does not simply derive this dimension of human agency from his metaphysics of subjectivity (grounded on the theory of judgement in the \textit{Science of Logic}), anchoring it instead in our practice of excusing and critiquing of actions (making it independent of his metaphysics of subjectivity).

Hegel subdivides the Morality chapter of the \textit{Philosophy of Right} in three subsections in each of which he contrasts 'a right of subjectivity' (a prerogative that sane and responsible agents have) with a 'right of objectivity' (whose demands agents are to meet as sane and responsible individuals). Quante points out that Hegel distinguishes further between three aspects or 'kinds' of sanity (particularly in the margin notes to \textit{PR}) and various strategies of exculpation.

The first subsection of 'Morality' studies the conditions under which an event is an intentional action. To settle this question, Quante argues, it is sufficient to establish that there is some description under which the event is intentional, that some 'purpose' is involved (as discussed in Chapters 2–7). Such a 'purpose' is subjectively determined, yet characterized as an isolated action. Temporally extended agency need not therefore be involved. In the case of action plans, the transition from 'purpose' to 'intention' is decisive: it is the transition from an isolated intentional action to a full-blown temporally extended action, with all the aforementioned functions. The transition to the third section is less central for action-plan theory as it marks the difference between universalized selfish goals, ('welfare'), and the proper moral dimension of agency (the 'good' and 'conscience').

Quante discusses Hegel's analysis of our practice of ascribing responsibility and accepting excuses with an eye to the kind of conception of temporally extended agents it provides. For example, various sorts of \textit{excuse} are not easily admitted because, as a responsible agent, the
human being is ‘not just the individual aspect of this moment or this isolated passion for revenge.’ Hegel points to the rationality of the humans whose nature consists in the fact that he is ‘essentially universal in character, not an abstraction of the moment and a single fragment of knowledge.’ For Hegel, exclusion from full responsibility is a serious blow to the agent’s dignity, much more so than just punishment (which remains consistent with recognition of the agent’s dignity).

The close connection between temporally extended agency and narrative is the focus of Allen Speight’s ‘Hegel, Narrative, and Agency’ (Chapter 13). Speight positions Hegel in relation to past theories of narrative agency (Arendt, Taylor, MacIntyre, Ricoeur) as well as current debates between those who see narratives as somehow inevitable (Dennett, Goldie, Velleman) and sceptics about its expansiveness (Strawson, Lamarque). His chief aim is to explore what Hegel’s philosophy might be able to contribute to these controversies, and how.

Speight asks ‘what exactly counts as a “narrative” approach to agency and how might Hegel’s account of agency involve such an approach?’ He begins by outlining (a) what makes for a narrative structure in general and (b) what would characterize an agent as having a narrative stance, distinguishing between three competing accounts of what makes a structure a narrative (rather than a description of some other kind). The causalist view (White, Carroll) holds that a narrative differs from ‘annals’ or ‘chronicles’ by including a causal connection between earlier and later events. By contrast, the emotionalist view (Velleman) and the normative view (Burwell) hold that this is too restrictive, stressing instead the emotional cadence and evaluation of events; Speight argues that Hegel would have largely agreed with them.

He suggests that the most distinctly Hegelian claim about narrativity in agency concerns the stance from which any ethical agent is able to reflect upon his actions and the justifications for them. For Hegel, this stance can be said to be narrative in the sense that it always involves retrospectivity, social inflection, and implicit holism. Speight thus demonstrating that Hegel’s account of narrative agency remains as relevant today as it ever was.

10. Conscience, ethical life, and agent-neutral reasons

The final pair of papers examines the tension between, on the one hand, agents’ convictions & agent-relative reasons and, on the other, intersubjective, institutional, and agent-neutral reasons. Francesca
Menegoni’s ‘Action Between Conviction and Recognition in Hegel’s Critique of the Moral Worldviews’ (Chapter 14) discusses the tensions between personal convictions and interpersonal recognition, focusing on the passages of the *Phenomenology* in which Hegel criticizes Kant’s and Fichte’s moral worldviews.

Menegoni first points out that according to Hegel, Kant’s and Fichte’s moral doctrines are compromised by a deep antinomy which undermines their legitimacy. They disregard the effectual reality (*Wirklichkeit*) of action, focusing solely on the purity of the will, thereby placing enormous importance on conscience (*Gewissen*). On Fichte’s view, an immediate, infallible, sentiment constitutes the formal criteria of the justness of our own convictions. By contrast Hegel—while not denying that following one’s conscience is *sometimes* the best thing to do—thinks that such an outlook could easily lead to moral aberrations. To explicate the precise role that Hegel preserves for conscience, Menegoni turns to Kant’s distinction between conviction (*Überzeugung*) and plain persuasion (*Überredung*). These have the same *content* but only the latter is a purely private *form* of individual judgements. The former, by contrast, has a communicative and public dimension that is of profound importance in Hegel’s practical philosophy. For Hegel, the value and, indeed, very existence of actions demands two conditions to be present: (i) personal conviction that determines the decision with which the agent chooses one possibility from among many, and (ii) interpersonal recognition that legitimizes individual conviction and distinguishes it from mere persuasion.

On Menegoni’s view, the interweaving of the perspective of the individual (‘I’) with the shared communal or universal perspective (‘We’) is therefore the core of Hegel’s theory of action. She thus also stresses the role of language in which the moral conscience (*Gewissen*) is expressed. It is essential that the *Gewissen* enunciates its conviction so that it is made public and is properly distinguished from mere persuasion. Since language mediates ‘between independent and acknowledged self-consciousnesses’, it is the vehicle which allows the individual to declare his convictions, and be ultimately understood or refuted in a confrontation or clash.

The volume’s closing paper, Dean Moyar’s ‘Hegel and Agent-Relative Reasons’ (Chapter 15), reconstructs Hegel’s views on this tension as they progress from the concept of freedom—through abstract right and morality—to ethical life, picking up loose threads from earlier chapters along the way.
Moyar’s aims are threefold: to unpack the basic conceptual device of Hegel’s practical philosophy viz. the free will which Hegel connects tightly to his basic methodological device of self-consciousness (‘Concept’); to render Hegel’s complex architecture of normativity in the Philosophy of Right more intelligible; and to show that Hegel has resources within his theory for resolving some of the problems with the contemporary ways of drawing the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons.

Moyar begins with Nagel’s analysis of agent-relative reasons as having a ‘free-agent variable’ or contain an ‘essential reference to the agent’. Everyone has agent-neutral reason to reduce the amount of wretchedness in the world, but there may be agent-relative (a) ‘reasons of autonomy’, that are not reasons for others unless they share those same desires, projects, or commitments; (b) ‘deontological reasons’ that prohibit certain acts (e.g. murders) even when these would maximize impersonal good and (c) reasons stemming from ‘special obligations’, namely from our relations to our family, friends, and communities.

We are presented with three difficulties in Nagel’s way of drawing the distinction between agent-neutral and agent-relative reasons, Moyar arguing that Hegel has resources the devise his own distinction without such pitfalls. The problems are (i) Nagel’s misguided demand for a general form of reasons; (ii) the elusive meaning of his notion of an ‘essential reference’; and (iii) the misjudged aim of preserving the unity of value.

Every sphere of Ethical Life (family, civil society, state), Moyar claims, is characterized by individuals acting on agent-relative reasons. In fact a central function of the institutions of Ethical Life is to ‘liberate’ the individual from the demand to aspire to agent-neutrality (the view from nowhere) in his reasons for action. One benefit of this liberation is that there no longer exists a requirement to act on reasons that can be expressed in *general form*. Inspired by Bernard Williams, Moyar holds that ‘in many cases, such as family life, making sure that one acts on a reason with general form would mean having “a thought too many”’.

The distance covered between Taylor’s opening words and Moyar’s closing remarks confirms not only that Hegel addresses the full range of themes outlined in § 1 above but, more importantly, that he does so from a challenging perspective that contemporary philosophy of action cannot ignore without loss. There remains much work to be done and we look forward to a future of mutual recognition and debate.
Introduction: Hegel and Contemporary Philosophy of Action

Notes

1. While the philosophy of action may be treated as an area of philosophical enquiry in its own right, its concerns invariably overlap with issues in ethics (especially moral psychology), the philosophy of history, philosophy of literature, philosophy of mind, metaphysics, legal philosophy (as it relates to criminal law), philosophy of science, and a certain conception of the philosophy of language. Hegel’s own writings on action cut across all of the above areas.

2. The official task of Phenomenology is to provide a ladder to the standpoint from which Hegel’s own views become intelligible and justified (what those views are, can be read from his mature system). Therefore Phenomenology consists of an extended negative argument aimed at demonstrating that none of the one-sided ‘shapes of consciousness’ discussed are adequate takes on the nature of reality as a whole. Action is discussed in various sections of PhG, mostly by way of criticism of one-sided physicalist or individualist theories: (i) the Self-Consciousness section (the discussion of desire, recognition, and work, cf. Schmidt am Busch below); (ii) in the section of Reason, both observing reason (cf. MacIntyre) and self-actualizing Reason (cf. Pippin and McDowell); and (iii) in the section of Spirit, for example the passages about Antigone, the moral view of the world, ‘Conscience’, ‘beautiful soul’, and ‘evil and its forgiveness’ (cf. Speight, Menegoni and Deligiorgi).

3. Hegel’s exploration of the nature of human action is included in his discussions of objective spirit which gets a briefer treatment in EG (see esp. EG §§503–12) and a fuller articulation in PR. There, Hegel presents his theory of action in the middle section titled ‘Morality’ ( §§105–41). In this volume, many authors focus specifically on these passages (cf. Knowles, Wood, Houlgate, Quante, Moyar). Hegel briefly touches the nature of action in various other parts of his Encyclopaedic system and in the lectures published posthumously. In Logic he investigates, for instance the logic of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’ with reference to action (EL §140) and the nature of causation and action (SL 561–2). In Philosophy of Nature he discusses organisms and animal activity or ‘practical relation to inorganic nature’ (EN §359–66) and in the Philosophy of Subjective Spirit he turns to various antecedents of action, such as desires, practical feelings, impulses, and inclinations (EG §§469–82). In his lectures on the philosophy of world history, Hegel looks at the historical significance of actions of world-historical individuals; and in his lectures on aesthetics he considers action in the context of different forms of art such as tragedies. (For Hegel’s views prior to Phenomenology, see esp. PhilG/PhilS, and Schmidt am Busch’s chapter below).

4. Knox, 1968, p. 17. The dust cover promises that ‘the wide range of the author’s argument and his numerous concrete examples present a challenge to the contemporary linguistic philosophy which he rejects’. As Knox’s book, despite its Hegelian credentials, is not really about Hegel, Hegel-scholars have so far paid little attention to it.

5. The rest of Stepelevich and Lamb’s volume chiefly approached Hegel through socio-political concerns, a trend which continues to this day; see, for example, Siep 1992; Hardimon, 1994; Honneth, 1995; Williams, 1997; Franco, 1999; Patten, 1999; Neuhouser, 2000; Rose, 2007.
6. See also Manuela Alessio’s *Azione ed eticita in Hegel* (1996). Remarkably, in the entire world of Hegel-scholarship there were only a handful of previous articles and book chapters analysing Hegel’s notion of action, such as (Derbolav, 1965; Wiehl, 1971 and Inwood 1982.)

7. Readers with highly specific interests may wish to use the index as their chief navigator.

8. There is an interesting analogy to visual perception here. Disjunctive theories claim that illusory perceptions or hallucinations differ fundamentally from ordinary perception and that, consequently, we should not seek to identify a highest common factor between successful and unsuccessful cases. Knowles’ arguments may suggest that defenders of the metaphysical inseparability thesis are forced to retreat to such a disjunctive view (for helpful comparisons between perceptual and agential disjunctivism, see Haddock and Macpherson, 2008).

9. This challenges those contemporary views which assume that the perspectives of other agents cannot play a direct constitutive role in the determination of action. It is worth mentioning, however, that Davidsonian causalist accounts are tempered by a holism of the mental which prescribes highly contextualized interpretive criteria for psychological attribution (cf. Davidson, 1970). On such a conception of ‘mental events’, social reality plays a crucially central role in the characterization of action, albeit indirectly.

10. See Knowles’s chapter for some reservations concerning this claim of ‘provisionality’.

11. This implies, among other things, that there is no Davidsonian state of pure intending to become acquainted with through either introspection (as agents) or physiognomy and phrenology (as observers). Hegel’s critique of the latter attempt is updated by MacIntyre in Chapter 10 below.