

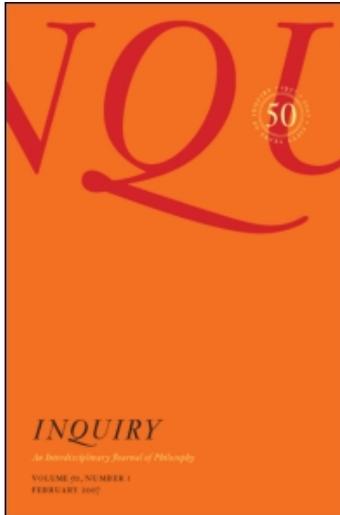
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# Pippin's Hegel on Action

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**ABSTRACT** *This essay is a commentary on and critique of the conception of human activity that Robert Pippin attributes to Hegel in his recent book, Hegel's Practical Philosophy. Two principal features of this conception are that it treats human activity as indeterminate and that it construes what someone does and why on a given occasion as depending on social contexts. Pippin suggests that these two features will sound strange to contemporary philosophers. The essay claims, by contrast, that these features will not sound strange to philosophers who advocate one of a small family of other accounts that espouse these two ideas. The essay argues, further, that certain such accounts, namely, ones inspired by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, are more promising accounts of human activity than is Hegel's. The bulk of the essay explores the indeterminacy of activity and the dependency of activity on social context as these are analyzed in Pippin's book and in Heidegger and Wittgenstein.*

In his recent, most rewarding book, *Hegel's Practical Philosophy*, Robert Pippin argues that Hegel's conception of human activity underlies that philosopher's positions on a range of issues in practical philosophy. He also suggests that Hegel's conception contravenes dominant contemporary accounts of action and will sound odd to contemporary philosophers interested in the topic. The present essay is a commentary on and critique of this conception. It focuses on those features of the conception that Pippin believes will sound oddest to philosophers of action. My principal claims are twofold. The first is that Hegel's is one of a small family of accounts that share these features, or closely related ones. As a result, Hegel's account will not seem odd to philosophers familiar with that family. My second claim is that other members of this family, in particular, accounts inspired by Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein, are more promising than Pippin's

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Hegel. From the start, I should make clear that, despite multiple tries, I have never been able to make much headway with Hegel. Consequently, I can say nothing about the excellence of Pippin's text as an interpretation of Hegel. I will simply assume its propitiousness and examine the account of action it attributes to Hegel, which I will henceforth refer to as Hegel's.

As indicated, Pippin pits Hegel's account against familiar ways of thinking. He repeatedly opposes Hegel, above all, to the currently dominant "causal account of action", according to which intentions, or belief-desire pairs, are ontologically distinct from and causally responsible for actions. At the same time, Pippin reports, although Hegel propounds a "speculative identity" claim regarding inner and outer, Hegel does not reduce the inner (for instance, intentions, beliefs, and desires) to the outer (for instance, behavior). Hegel, accordingly, also opposes behaviorism. Pippin asks, "What would it mean *not* to separate clumsily inner intention as cause and external deed as effect, and yet not wholly to absorb the former into the latter?"<sup>1</sup> Chapter Six of his book astutely lays out Hegel's answer. Many philosophers, however, have staked out positions tangential to the either-or of causal account versus behaviorism. Indeed, it's not terribly hyperbolic to claim that a good number of the twentieth-century continental thinkers who have pondered the nature of activity, and a small platoon of analytic or post-analytic thinkers, many inspired by Wittgenstein and all seeking at least to distinguish reason explanations from causal explanations, have in effect occupied a tangential location. Some of these thinkers also affirm the odd ideas, or ideas similar to these, that Pippin attributes to Hegel.

### I. The indeterminacy of action

One of the odd features of activity that Pippin credits Hegel for recognizing is what I call the indeterminacy of action. The indeterminacy of action is the idea that it is not fixed, settled, or determined prior to acting, either what a person does or what determines this. This idea, in various forms, abounds in continental thought. Perhaps the most prominent example is Henri Bergson's idea of the openness of the flow of consciousness. According to Bergson, although an action is a prolongation of the actor's past into the present, that past, even in conjunction with changing present circumstances, never settles, before she acts, what she does. In Bergson's words, "Action issues from its antecedents by an evolution *sui generis* . . ."<sup>2</sup> A similar motif reigns in Life-Philosophy, above all, in the work of Wilhelm Dilthey, Georg Simmel, and Eduard Spengler. In their hands, indeterminacy is the idea that the flow of life precedes and always outstrips whatever forms and structures it assumes. Minus the reference to life, this idea widely reappears in the second half of the twentieth-century. A prime example is the intuition that the forms and structures—mental or nonmental—that allegedly determine activity are in fact effects of it. These forms and structures do not precede activity and

shape it, but are instead laid down in and through the advance of activity itself. Wittgenstein's observations on rule-following are a prominent example of this intuition, as is his conviction that action underlies language, reason, and thought. Two other important examples are Jean-Paul Sartre's account of freedom and Jacques Derrida's and Judith Butler's idea of the performative citation of norms. There's even an anticipation of the idea in Nietzsche's dictum that life is essentially will to power.

My colleague, Dan Breazeale, says that the idea of indeterminate action originates in Fichte. I have no independent opinion on that claim, but he is a reliable source. Assuming Breazeale is right (and the difference Fichte made to Hegel makes this all the more plausible), Hegel was an early expositor of an idea that has since widely disseminated.

As this thumbnail history indicates, considerations of time are central to the idea that human action is indeterminate. Pippin recognizes this:

. . . Hegel is out to re-conceive how we should understand the *temporality* or temporal extension of actions, how to understand their beginning and their realization, how to frame properly what is relevant to the beginning and what to the end or completion of actions . . . [He] is asking that we in effect widen our focus . . . so as to include *in* the picture of agency itself a contextual and temporal field stretching out “backwards” from or prior to, one might say, the familiar resolving and acting subject, and stretching “forward”, one might also say, such that the unfolding of the deed and the reception and reaction to it are considered a *constitutive element* of the deed, of what fixes ultimately *what was done* and *what turns out to be* a subject's intention. (pp. 151–52, emphasis in original)

Both what a person is doing when acting and his intention in doing what he is doing are not fixed independently of the unfolding of the deed and its reception at the hands of compatriots. This claim implies that, prior to the deed, both the deed and the intention are not fixed. Nothing is an action that is not intended. But Hegel “is challenging the possibility of any *ex ante* determinate content for such intentions” (p. 172). The intention “comes to be what it *is* only as unfolding in a deed” (p. 173, and also as received by others; see Section II, emphasis in original). Any prior “formulation” of an intention—where “prior” means prior to the completion of the deed and “formulation of” means possession of determinate content by—is necessarily provisional and subject to change up until the deed is complete.

I do not know whether there are metaphysical grounds for this claim. I do not know Hegel well enough to guess, and his definition of action as “an expression of subjective will” (p. 189), where will is “a particular way of thinking—thinking translating itself into existence” (p. 129), does not by itself seem to require Pippin's interpretation. Unless I am mistaken, moreover,

Pippin does not offer a metaphysical argument. He instead calls on a variety of experiences as evidence, some subset of which any reader will have undergone. For instance, he reminds the reader of instances in which what one ends up doing differs from what one had intended: one had intended to compliment her, but managed to insult her instead. He also reminds the reader of cases where worldly contingencies interfere with the carrying out of an action, resulting in the actor doing something different from what he had intended. People can also simply be wrong about or misunderstand themselves: I thought I loved her and intended to let her know, but in the course of talking I came to the realization that I did not love her and ended up telling her that. And, of course, self-ascriptions of intentions can be self-delusional wish avowals: "I *will* win her heart!" (Yeah, right.) In all these cases, what one actually ends up doing and what one actually ends up intending in doing this are not fixed, lack definitive content, until the deed is complete. Of course, people often, indeed, mostly do carry out the actions they intended to perform (p. 175). The existence of successful cases, however, does not contravene the deeper truth that what one does and why are not definite until one is finished acting: in any instance, success is in the bag only once the deed is complete.

The reader might have noticed that the previous paragraph mixes metaphysical and epistemological considerations. There is a difference, of course, between action and intention not being definite until the actor has finished acted and people, including the actor, not being able to know what someone is doing and why until the deed has concluded. Pippin's discussion liberally mixes the two sets of considerations. This is not a problem, however, for two reasons. First, Hegel defends both the metaphysical and the epistemological claim. Second, the two sets of considerations entwine. They entwine because what many philosophers have thought fixes what a person does and why, namely, the person's understanding of what he is doing and why, is an epistemological state: the ontology and epistemology implicate one another. I will return to the epistemology involved below.

It is worth pointing out that the causal account of action, against which Pippin sets Hegel's account, can probably explain the experiences Pippin adduces. If a causal account either postulates indomitable prior intentions or treats causality as inexorable it is, indeed, too rigid to handle these unusual cases. Causal accounts can, however, be flexible. For instance, many of Pippin's cases can be handled by positing the existence of changing or multiple intentions: I did intend to tell her I love her, but in talking I convinced myself of the opposite and formed the new intention to enlighten her about my insight. Accounts that acknowledge complex and labile causal processes can probably handle these experiences.

At the beginning of this section, I mentioned several continental thinkers who have advocated some version of the indeterminacy of action. I now want to set out in a bit of detail a Heideggerian alternative that I have defended

elsewhere.<sup>3</sup> This alternative draws on (1) the analysis of temporality found in Heidegger's *Being and Time* and (2) the notion of the event that is foreshadowed in that book and subsequently articulated in later texts of Heidegger. According to this interpretation, human activity is an indeterminate temporal event (more fully, an indeterminate temporal-*spatial* event, though I will abstract from its spatial dimension in the following).

Heidegger drew a sharp contrast between objective time and the temporality of human life. For present purposes, objective time can be understood as the before and after ordering of events or entities (of any sort) into successions. Temporality, by contrast, is the past, present, and future dimensionality of human existence. Because I construe human existence primarily as activity, temporality is a constitutive feature of activity. The future dimension of activity is an actor coming toward a way of being or state of affairs in acting. That towards which one comes in acting is that *for the sake of* which one acts; it comprises, in more common parlance, the ends or goals one pursues. The future also comprises what one aims at in pursuing one's goals, i.e., one's purposes in performing particular actions. The future of activity is, thus, performing an action in order to achieve something for the sake of a particular way of being or state of affairs. The past of activity, meanwhile, is an actor coming, or departing, from something in acting. That from which a person departs in acting is that which motivates the action: it is that *because of* which one acts as one does. The present of activity, finally, is acting itself. The temporality of activity, accordingly, is doing so and so for the sake of such and such because of this and that: doing something for a particular end and particular purposes and in reaction to or in the light of particular events or states of affair. Temporality, in short, is a teleological-motivational phenomenon.<sup>4</sup>

Human activity, moreover, is an event. It happens. Temporality, as a constitutive feature of activity, is an aspect of an event: it too, accordingly, happens. Temporality, however, happens as a whole: the three dimensions of temporality happen together, simultaneously, as a facet of the happening of activity. When a person acts, acting, acting for the sake of something, and acting because of this or that happen together so long as activity proceeds. This is part of what it is for temporality to be a constitutive feature of activity. The simultaneity of the three dimensions of temporality is a key feature that distinguishes temporality from objective time. Events in objective time can be assigned to past, present, and future according to whether they occur prior to, simultaneous with, or after some event chosen as the present. In objective time, moreover, past events occur prior to present events, which occur prior to future ones. Not so with the three dimensions of temporality: they happen simultaneously or not at all.

The indeterminacy of action arises from the character of activity as a three-dimensional temporal event. The determination of activity lies in its future and past dimensions: one X-s *in order to* accomplish such and such

for the sake of so and so because of this and that. That is, one acts for a particular goal and purpose(s) and in reaction to or in the light of certain states of affair. Because, however, the future and past dimensions of activity happen simultaneous with acting, the determination of activity occurs “at a single stroke” with the happening of activity.<sup>5</sup> That for the sake of which, and that because of which a person acts are fixed, determinate, settled along with, but not until, the activity happens. Similarly, until the event of activity happens, it is not fixed, determinate, or settled, what a person will do. Once the person commences to act, however, both what he is doing and what determines this are definite.

This conception of activity as temporal event differs from Hegel's conception in how it fills out the idea that action is indeterminate. Perhaps the biggest difference concerns time/temporality. Both Hegel's and Heidegger's conceptions of activity highlight the temporal character of action. Hegel believes that understanding action requires broadening the stretch of objective time considered relevant to the identity of action and what determines it: what a person is doing and why are fully determinate only once the deed has fully unfolded and what the person has done and why he did it are fully—in actuality—formed. Heidegger believes that understanding action requires theorizing a type of time that is different from objective time: what a person does and that which determines it are determinate only once the actor begins to act. To the theory of human activity, Heidegger thus brings to bear a minoritarian philosophical tradition dating back to Augustine that conceives of a time of human life or soul. Bergson, too, stands in this tradition, as do various thinkers writing after Bergson and Heidegger.<sup>6</sup>

I believe that the Heideggerian account is preferable to the Hegelian one because it successfully explains the experiences that Pippin cites while also upholding features of common linguistic usage as well as *prima facie* facts about self-knowledge. For example, the Heideggerian account analyzes some cases where a person acts intending to do one thing but ends up doing something else as cases in which the actor began doing the thing originally intended, but the unfolding of this activity was such that a different event, that is, a different activity with a different end, purpose, or motivation, commenced before the first was complete: he started to compliment her but suddenly—without forethought, or indeliberately—began to insult her. On other occasions the person might carry out the action ineptly and simply fail: he got tongue-tied and the wrong words came out. Likewise, midstream changes in what a person does consequent on the intervention of worldly contingencies or the achievement of better self-understandings can likewise be understood as performances of actions that the person had not originally envisioned supplanting what the person had begun to do. In all these cases, determinate ends, purposes, and motives accompany and determine what a person does—both before and after the change. It is not necessary for a stretch of objective time to pass for ends and motives to become definitive

or determinate. Indeed, on the Heideggerian view an event cannot be an action if it is not informed by simultaneous ends or motives.<sup>7</sup> What a person ends up doing at  $t_{n+x}$  might not be what he began doing at  $t_n$ , and why he does what he does at  $t_{n+x}$  might not be why he had been doing what he had begun doing at  $t_n$ , but he began doing *something* specific at the earlier moment and, at that moment (at least in most cases), had specific reasons why. Of course, cases exist when a person begins doing something but is not *sure* why. Not only, however, are such cases infrequent, but epistemological self-opaqueness does not imply that the person wasn't *in fact* up to something specific at that moment.

Both Hegel's and Heidegger's accounts explain the above experiences. An advantage of Heidegger's account is that it also upholds appearances. Actors, for instance, almost always have a sense of what they are doing when acting. They can, I have acknowledged, be wrong about this, and on select occasions a person will sincerely reply to a query about what he is doing with the response, "I'm not sure." But most of human life is not this way: people can usually say at any moment what they are up to at that moment and be right about it. Heidegger's account does not impugn this *prima facie* self-knowledge. Hegel, by contrast, problematizes and decertifies people's knowledge of what they are doing. According to Hegel, this self-understanding is necessarily provisional, and remains so, until the deed is complete. This understanding, in other words, is not knowledge. What, then, is it? Belief? Hope?<sup>8</sup> Calling it an expression of resolve or commitment, as Hegel does, treats the self-understanding that imbues action as a kind of phenomenon that more naturally *precedes* than accompanies already ongoing acting.

Regarding intention, let me add that there are two prominent conceptions of what an intentional action is: an action that an actor means to do and an action done for a reason. The former is due to Austin, the latter to Anscombe.<sup>9</sup> Pippin appropriates Anscombe's conception, which dominates contemporary philosophy: "an action is simply the sort of event for which reasons can be asked" (p. 191; see also p. 147). It seems to me, however, that Austin's conception better crystallizes common usage than Anscombe's does. This fact is of present significance because Austin builds an actor's knowledge of what she is doing into intentional actions. As Austin understands matters, consequently, to treat this knowledge as hope or mere resolve is to undercut the surety of the performances of intentional actions as the performances happen. Of course, many philosophers who follow Anscombe on intentional action, including probably Pippin, are not very concerned to uphold common usage.

A parallel difference surfaces in Hegel's and Heidegger's accounts of self-knowledge. For Hegel, self-knowledge is necessarily retrospective. This is because what is to be known is not fully determinate until the deed is complete: "Only as manifested or expressed can one (*even* the subject herself) retrospectively determine what must have been intended" (p. 156). By contrast,

Heidegger's account affirms the idea that action self-knowledge is largely non-observational, being retrospective only in unusual cases (Pippin acknowledges that provisional self-ascriptions of intentions are non-observational—p. 151). Again, Heidegger's account better preserves the appearances. For a feature of everyday practice (the world over) is that people are presumed to know what they are up to when acting, except in unusual circumstances. Heidegger also agrees with most theorists who have affirmed Anscombe's claim that knowledge of one's own intentions is largely nonobservational in construing the knowledge involved as the accurate knowledge a person has of her intentions while she is acting on them.

Lest this focus on self-knowledge mislead, note that I am not claiming that what a person does and why is determined by his knowledge or understanding of these matters. When I claim that what a person is doing and why are determinate when the action begins, and not, as Hegel holds, only once the deed is complete, I am not averring that the determinate content is fixed by the actor's knowledge or understanding. Actors do, in the default case, know what they are doing and why, but the determinacy lies *in* the event of activity itself, in the future and past dimensions of that event. The actor's knowledge is *of* the contents of these dimensions, which are otherwise determined (see Section II). Activity is one thing, self-knowledge another. At the same time, it is a feature of social practice that people are presumed to be authoritative about their deeds, ends, and motivations—until further notice. It is this feature of social practice that Heidegger's account does a better job saving than does Hegel's.

For all these reasons, I believe that it is a mistake to take the relation between an artist and her art work as the, or a, central exemplar in understanding action (pp. 161, 189–90, footnote 16, 153). The sort of experience that Hegel's conception of this relation highlights only intermittently occurs. People do sometimes find that their ends, plans, intentions, and motivations change as they act, just as artists sometimes find that their plans, conceptions, ideas, and intentions evolve and crystallize as they set about their work (this experience, however, is hardly universal) This is especially true of people's longer-term goals, projects, and motives. But the instability of such long-term matters is something different from an alleged moment-to-moment indefiniteness of action and intention as a person proceeds. In ongoing existence, moreover, people generally have a relatively secure and accurate sense of themselves when acting. Their success in doing what they mean to do (intend) is also essential to social life and not just a contingent, perpetually uncertain (lucky?) achievement.

## II. The social context

According to Hegel, what a person does and why depends not just on considerations of time, but also on social context. As quoted, Hegel is “challenging the possibility of any *ex ante* determinate content for such intentions,

and insisting on the role of the actual deed and on some form of social dependence in ultimately fixing such a content.” (pp. 172–73). Human activity is “deep[ly] dependen[t] on the reception of the deed in society as helping to fix determinately what in fact was done” (p. 232). I agree that action and mind, more specifically, what it is people do and what mental conditions they are in, depends on social context. As in the case of the indeterminacy of action, however, there are different versions of this thesis. My own preference is for a Wittgensteinian conception of this dependence.

Hegel’s version of this dependency highlights, as the social context in which actions and reasons acquire determinacy, agreements in the attributions people make to one another: “. . . [A]ctually to *have* an intention is to struggle to express that intention in a public and publicly contestable deed, subject to great temporal fluidity and to appropriations and interpretations by others . . .” (pp. 232–33). “What was done” is “subject to contestation within some concrete social community, the participants of which must determine what sort of deed *‘that’ would be* in our practices . . .” (p. 159, emphasis added). And “[o]ne aspect of the successful execution of an intention has to involve having attributed to you by others the intention that you take yourself to have, and, given the role of the intention in the act-description, by an agreement about what it is you did” (p. 169). What a person does and why depends on agreement among others about these.

One line of argument Hegel marshals for this thesis involves denying that an actor has determining authority about her actions and reasons, and concluding from this denial that, therefore, other people must have this authority. This line of argument reflects, I believe, the subject-object motif that runs through Kantian and post-Kantian German Idealism. Pippin states, for instance, that among the various oppositions with which Hegel works is that between “a self-certain formulation of subjective intention as the essence of an action” and “the meaning and scope of responsibility assigned to one by others” (p. 234). Notice, moreover, the continuation in the following sentence: “Action must be understood as . . . a negation of the subject’s pretension to complete ownership of the nature and import of the deed, and *therewith* the sharing of such authority with others . . .” (p. 233, emphasis added). This sort of subject-object either-or underestimates the range of alternatives. The previous section sketched a conception of action according to which what a person does and why is determinate at the commencement of acting even though the determinacies do not devolve from the actor’s knowledge of these matters. The present section explains, coordinately, that the social contexts in which actions and reasons are determinate need not be, and are better not, thought of as consisting of agreements among people about what others are doing.

Wittgenstein’s texts point to an alternative account of the social context involved.<sup>10</sup> According to this alternative, (1) what actions are constituted and (2) what intentions, beliefs, desires etc. are signified by bodily actions

(and also inner episodes: sensations, images, conscious words) depends on three items: the bodily actions (or inner episodes) involved, the contexts in which they occur, and conceptual understandings of actions and mental conditions, i.e., understandings of what this and that action or mental condition is.

Consider action. What a person is doing at a given moment depends in part on what he is bodily doing. This is because almost all performances of actions consist primarily in bodily doings (performed in certain circumstances). This is obviously true vis-à-vis interventions in the world. It is also true of most mental actions. Working out a math problem in one's head, for example, often partly consists in such bodily doings as sitting in a chair, pacing in front of the class, or strolling down a country lane. What a person is doing in performing this or that bodily action depends, second, on the contexts in which this happens. Many sorts of context can be relevant. Examples are what is going on in the immediate setting of action, the actor's previous or subsequent actions, the actor's biography or state of mind, inner episodes, and on the social customs, traditions, and practices that are carried out in the actor's worlds. As Pippin notes, for instance, what someone is doing in raising her hand depends on the immediate circumstances in which she does so and the customs of hand raising alive in the worlds in which she travels. Finally, what someone is doing depends on understandings of actions since it is only given understandings of what actions A, B, C . . . are that performing a particular bodily action in such and such contexts amounts to A-ing. For instance, if someone's raising her arm in a classroom after seeing a friend walk by in the corridor is giving a signal, this is partly because of people's understanding of what it is to signal.

Social phenomena enter the determination of what people do in two ways. First, the contexts in which a person is performing a particular action in performing a particular bodily movement are often social ones or include social phenomena. What is going on in the immediate setting of action is often a social matter (the passing friend in the corridor), people often proceed in wider social circumstances that are pertinent to what it is they are doing (an earlier worked out plan), the traditions and practices as part of and by virtue of which people, in performing particular bodily actions, are performing particular actions are social affairs (the custom of raising a hand to signal). Second, understandings of what different actions are are carried in social practices.<sup>11</sup>

Hegel's account highlights agreements among people. It also, I believe, recognizes the role of conceptual understandings. Pippin writes, for instance, that the determination of a person's intention involves "the interpretive task of knowing what doing this or that would mean in our community" (p. 169). As quoted, moreover, what a person does is "subject to contestation within some concrete social community, the participants of which must determine what sort of deed *that* would be in our practices, how our rules apply" (p. 159, emphasis in original). I think it is a mistake to attribute conceptual understandings

generically to communities instead of practices. The pertinent point at present, however, is that an essential element in any interpersonal agreement about what a given person has done is concord about what it is to do this or that: shared conceptual understanding is a necessary ingredient in any agreement among community members about what individual members are doing.

Apart from their joint recognition of the role of conceptual understanding, Wittgenstein's version of the dependency of actions and reasons on society differs greatly from Hegel's. Agreements play no systematic role in Wittgenstein's account. This account does not postulate that, once deeds are complete, what has been done is determined by an agreement among others about the matter. Only in borderline cases, moreover, does it imagine that a process, possibly embracing contestation and dispute, might be needed to render actions and reasons determinate. (This is not to say that people cannot challenge a person's self-understanding and lead him to change his mind.) On Wittgenstein's account, society—in the form of perceived social affairs, wider social circumstances, and extant social practices—automatically helps secure the determinacy of what someone, who performs certain bodily actions, is doing, without the intervention of any activity, event, or process. Agreements are pertinent only in so far as they themselves are the relevant affairs or circumstances (agreements are also a general background feature of social practices).

Consider a skillful trickster. Suppose that this charlatan figures out that if he wins the confidence of a small community and its leader he can bilk them of their savings. So he goes around town praising the community, extolling its virtues to the world, praising its leader, and the like. Suppose, further, that community members eventually come to agree that his intentions are to promote the community and its well-being. In fact, however, he is setting them up for a fall.<sup>12</sup>

This is a clear case in which *de facto* agreement among people about what someone intends does not determine what in fact he intends. Nor does the successful execution of his intention require that the community attribute this intention to him—in principle he could bilk them and the crime never be discovered. It might be objected that agreement on the basis of available information is not the sort of agreement Hegel has in mind in claiming that the determinacy of actions and reasons depend on agreements. I am not sure about this objection since the agreements Pippin speaks of always seem to be actual agreements e.g., “you have not executed an intention successfully unless others attribute to you the . . . intention” (p. 173). For the sake of argument, however, let us assume that the objection is correct: what Hegel has in mind are agreements reached in the light of all relevant facts and contexts. The community, then, would never agree that the trickster is helping them. Knowing his thoughts and soliloquies, they would agree that he is out to deceive and cheat them. In this situation, however, the only agreements

that actually help determinate what the trickster does are people's shared conceptual understandings. For, in the presence of all relevant facts and contexts, what the person is up to in doing this and that is *automatically* determinate given the shared understandings. No further agreement, including community members agreeing about what the person intends, is needed for what he is up to to be determinate. Indeed, any further agreement would simply consist in each person, or the community as a group, drawing the correct conclusion about what this and that doing signifies given the facts and contexts and on the background of the shared understandings. This agreement is merely a possible inferential by-product of what is responsible for the determinacy of his intention, namely, bodily actions (and inner episodes) happening in particular contexts against shared understandings.

In Section I, I indicated that that what a person is doing and why is determinate when the person commences doing it. This determinacy, I claimed, does not derive from the actor's knowledge or understanding of these matters. I have now explained that the determinacy instead follows from bodily performances (and inner episodes), the contexts in which the performances occur, and conceptual understandings. The understandings involved are the ones carried in the social practices in which the actor concerned participates (therein lies a long story). At the same time, I insisted, the default situation in everyday life is that people know what they themselves are doing and why when acting—and not just retrospectively once deeds are complete. How can this be, one might wonder, if the determination of actions and reasons depends on contexts and shared understandings? The answer is simple: actors know the contexts in which they act and share the understandings carried in their practices. This answer, in turn, provides a novel explanation of how people can go wrong about their own actions: they can be unaware of the pertinent contexts, misunderstand which contexts are the pertinent ones, or understand concepts of action and mind differently than do others. Paths to madness can be espied in proliferations of errors and divergences of these sorts.

Another feature of Hegel's account of the social constitution of agency is the claim that being an actor, in particular, being a free actor, is a social status, in particular, a social status that is achieved through recognition. “[O]ne is an agent in being recognized as, responded to as, an agent” (pp. 198–99). More expansively, “I can succeed in being taken to be an agent, in being recognized as acting on entitlements and permissions, only if I recognize the other as such . . . or only if some mutuality of recognition is possible” (p. 201). Wittgenstein's texts, too, point toward the idea that being an agent is a socially achieved status. The specifics, however, diverge. On a Wittgensteinian account,<sup>13</sup> being an actor involves being granted presumptive authority about one's actions and reasons. Possession of this authority arises through social interaction, consequent to children ascending into the patterns of coordinated action and mutual questioning whereby they become, and

remain, intelligible and responsible to other people when acting. A person who, despite not clearly lacking requisite mental or physical abilities, cannot enter this interactional complex, is refused this authority. The authority, accordingly, is a socially achieved status, not a metaphysical property. Achieving it, however, has none of the pathos that becoming an agent does in Hegel's view. It does not require the fully self-conscious mutuality that is a component of mutual recognition in Hegel. It also lacks the element of "opposition and contention" (p. 35) that Hegel attributes to the recognitive achievement of agency. Becoming a Wittgensteinian agent is an earlier and easier achievement than is becoming a Hegelian one.

At one point Pippin suggests that Hegel's claim, that the determinacy of actions and reasons depends on the completion of the deed and its reception among others, holds only in an ideal world, that is, a world in which freedom is fully achieved.

Hegel's picture of the conditions for such *successful* execution of an intention presumes a social dependence that has objectively come to embody the right relation between such dependence and independence. That is, his account assumes such a realization of *mutually* recognitive attitudes among agents, not the continuation of some version of the Master–Slave dialectic. (pp. 160–61, emphasis in original)

I am not sure how to react to this claim. Assuming it is true, part of me wants to ask, clumsily, what, then, does Hegel have to say about human actions in actual (past and extant) worlds, which fall short of this ideal? I realize that Hegel and his commentators have much to say about the worlds involved. Perhaps my inability to comprehend Hegel is at fault, but I am unsure what the point or advantage is of talking about past and extant human activity by reference to an ideal that might very well never be realized.

To come at this issue from a different angle, I want now briefly to turn to one final aspect of Hegel's account of action.

### III. Reasons

Reasons, Pippin writes, are "dispositive about what ought to be done" (p. 128). They specify why an actor thinks he ought to act a certain way: "reasons are offered and accepted as entitlements and justification for actions . . ." (p. 194). Similarly, practical reasoning, defined as the process or structure by which people determine what to do, is an activity that aims at "the right answer about what one ought to do" (p. 149). In short, reasons and practical reasoning are normative phenomena. They are also, incidentally, dependent on social practices. Practical reasoning, for instance, is less a faculty than a "way of participating in a social practice, an internalization of what can be at a time demanded and offered by and to others as justifications for what one is doing" (p. 240).

Reasons and practical reasoning are sometimes like this. The reasons a person cites for acting as he does sometimes specify why acting thus was what he ought to do, just as some requests for reasons are requests that what was done be justified. Similarly, the reasoning through which a person picks out or chooses what to do sometimes identifies what she ought to do, as when a person seeks to do what she ought or has been trained to reason thus. But not all reasons and instances of practical reasoning are like this. The presumption that they are (see p. 128) reflects the conviction, understandable given developments in contemporary philosophy, that the “central modern dualism” in philosophy is one between the natural and the normative, or as it is sometimes put, between causality and normativity (p. 236).

Common linguistic practice does not support the idea that reasons specify what an actor thinks he ought to do. In actual ongoing social life, requests for reasons, requests that an actor account for herself, can be requests for many different things: what moved the actor to act, what he aimed at, what his goals were, what he was reacting to, that in the light of which he did what he did, that by virtue of which what he did was what he ought to do, or a combination of these. Reasons disclose the “favorable light”<sup>14</sup> in which an actor saw an action: they are dispositive, not about what the actor ought to do, but about what makes sense to him to do.<sup>15</sup> That is, in common practice reasons typically provide explanations, and explanations cite normative considerations only when (1) people act as they do at least partly because of such considerations, or (2) people are challenged to provide normative accounting. Reasons are justifications, moreover, only when the person to whom they are given, or the person offering them, is interested in the normative dimensions of an action (or the social context demands this): whether what he did was right and, if so, why. I believe that most people who have thought about the matter in relation to common linguistic practices will agree with the thrust of these observations. Back in the 1950s to 1970s, for example, when some philosophers tried to draw generalizations in light of ordinary usage or as informed by intuitions allegedly nurtured by this usage, those among them who held that reason explanations are justifications made little headway against the vast bulk of philosophers exploring this terrain who contrasted explanation to justification and argued that reasons are typically cited to achieve the former.<sup>16</sup>

Pippin, however, might happily concede this. He notes, for instance, that reasons as he construes them are not what actually motivate people or, more expansively, what they actually aim at, what they actually react to, what they are actually after, and so on. In a similar vein, when discussing Hegel's treatment of recognition in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*, Pippin notes that Hegel never “directs the reader's attention to the problem of the content of [people's] attitudinal states . . . as if the problem were one of determining the right content for such states . . .” (p. 202). That is, Hegel's treatment is designed not to capture how the world actually has been today and in the past, but instead to

specify how things ought to be. These statements suggest that Hegel's construal of reasons as justifications might reflect his interest in freedom and in a world in which freedom is fully expressed. One is free, able to "own" or "stand behind" an action, only when one has reasons, that is, justificatory reasons for doing it (cf. p. 121). If this surmise is true, then Pippin might agree that, in a world that is less than fully free, reasons might widely do something other than supply justifications. Only in a world that has never existed are reasons, as a general matter, dispositive about what one ought to do.

I don't know whether this is Pippin's Hegel's position. If it is, it raises the question with which I concluded Section II, namely, what does the state of things in an envisioned free world tell us about actual human activity up to now? Regarding reasons, Pippin suggests the beginnings of an answer (or does the implication go in the other direction, from actual history to envisioned world?). He claims that the provisionality of intention and the indeterminacy of the deed "suggest an internal and unavoidable *telos* for the successful actualization of actions, some form of an exchange of justifications consistent with the self-made and mutable forms of normative life . . ." (p. 204). I confess that I do not see how the indeterminacy of action suggests this. I generally have trouble espying intimations of *teloi* in features of the world. In this particular case, moreover, I don't see how the feature of human existence called the indeterminacy of action harbors any obvious or implicit implications about a proper or successful arrangement of human lives (though the role of a free society in the successful realization of action might not be a normative one). It does have implications for understanding human freedom, but that is a different matter.

At the same time, Pippin's claim is of a sort familiar to anyone who has studied Hegel, Marx, or the nineteenth- and twentieth-century Marxisms, critical theories, and post-Marxisms they (and other sources) inspired. These theories nurture elaborate accounts of history and its advance. However politically attractive some of these accounts of history might be, I find it hard to believe that general facts about the human condition foreshadow, however faintly, those general features of history identified by these accounts that truly characterize history. These accounts of history *are* sufficiently attractive politically, however, that I am happy to be proven wrong and to witness one day the overturning of common usage and of certain presumptions that are built into social practices.

## Notes

1. Pippin, P. (2008) *Hegel's Practical Philosophy: Rational Agency as Ethical Life* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), p. 165.
2. Bergson, H. [1896] (1988) *Matter and Memory*, trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer (New York: Zone), p. 186.
3. See Schatzki, T.R. (2006) "The Time of Activity", *Continental Philosophy Review*, 39, pp. 155–82 and, more expansively, Schatzki, T.R. (2010) *The Timespace of Human Activity*:

- Performance, Society, and History as Indeterminate Teleological Events*, (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books).
4. In saying this, I self-consciously naturalize Heidegger's conception of temporality. By "naturalizing" I mean (1) turning away from Heidegger's ontological concerns, according to which the dimensions of temporality are ultimately modes of the "primordial 'outside-of-itself' in and for itself" (ecstasies), and (2) highlighting temporality as a general feature of human life (the meaning of its being). See Heidegger, M. [1927] (1978) *Being and Time*, trans. E. Robinson and J. Macquarrie (Oxford: Blackwell), compare pp. 337 and 278.
  5. "At a single stroke" (*d'un seul coup*) is Bergson's felicitous expression. Bergson, H. [1907] (1911) *Creative Evolution*, trans. A. Mitchell (New York: Henry Holt and Company), p. 309.
  6. For discussion of some of these figures, see Hoy, D. (2009) *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press).
  7. Curiously, on this point Taylor's interpretation of Hegel's account of action seems closer to my Heideggerian conception than to Pippin's Hegel: "Actions are in a sense inhabited by the purposes that direct them, so that action and purpose are ontologically inseparable." Taylor, C. (1983) "Hegel and the Philosophy of Action", in: L. Stepelevich and D. Lamb (Eds.), *Hegel's Philosophy of Action* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities), pp. 1–18, here p. 2.
  8. This paragraph points to an obstinate methodological division between these philosophers: whereas Hegel theorizes the normal case by reference to what is revealed in the abnormal, Heidegger theorizes the abnormal case in the terms provided by an analysis of the normal.
  9. See Austin, J.L. [1961] (1970) "Three Ways of Spilling Ink", in: J.O. Urmson and G.J. Warnock (Eds.) *Philosophical Papers* (Oxford, Oxford University Press), pp. 272–88 and Anscombe, G.E.M. (1957) *Intention* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press).
  10. A thorough discussion of the following ideas is found in my book, (1996) *Social Practices. A Wittgensteinian Approach to Human Activity and the Social* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), Ch. 2–4. Since I cited Bergson in the previous section as a prominent defender of the indeterminacy of action, I might mention that I view Mead's account of action as providing an analysis of the social determination of human action conceived of à la Bergson. See Mead, G.H. [1932] (1980) *The Philosophy of the Present* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press).
  11. This claim is defended in Ch. 4 of my book mentioned in the previous footnote.
  12. The description of this example contravenes the conclusion implied by the discussion on p. 130, namely, that in a situation in which "I take myself to be undertaking A, but everyone else takes me to be doing B" everyone else's understanding trumps my own. I believe that situations encompassing such dramatic divergence are pretty rare and that most of them resemble the trickster example.
  13. See Johnston, P. (1993) *Wittgenstein: Rethinking the Inner* (London: Routledge).
  14. McDowell, J. (1982) "Reason and Action", *Philosophical Investigations* 5(4), pp. 301–05.
  15. One can, of course, call intelligibility, and also rationalization (many philosophers agree that reasons rationalize what people do), normative phenomena. To do this, however, is to loosen normativity from justification, and Pippin repeatedly highlights justification. "Actions both disclose what an agent takes herself to be doing . . . and manifest some implied normative claim to entitlement to act, all in a way that raises to prominence an interpretive question in any action, even for the agent: what was done and how could it have appeared justifiable?" (p. 152).
  16. In this regard, contrast Louch, A.R. (1966) *Explanation and Human Action* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press) and, say, Anscombe's *Intention* or Winch, P. (1958) *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul).