HEGEL’S CONCEPT OF ACTION

Hegel’s Concept of Action is an important gateway through which professional analytic philosophers and their students can come to understand the significance of Hegel’s philosophy to contemporary theory of action. As such, it will contribute to the ever-increasing erosion of the sterile barrier between the continental and analytic approaches to philosophy.

Michael Quante has written the first book to focus on what Hegel has to say about such central concepts as action, person, and will, and then to bring these views to bear on contemporary debates in analytic philosophy. Clearly and crisply written, this book thus addresses the common set of preoccupations of both analytic philosophers of mind and action and Hegel specialists.

Michael Quante is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Duisburg–Essen.
HEGEL’S CONCEPT OF ACTION

MICHAEL QUANTE
University of Duisburg-Essen

Translated by Dean Moyar
Whoever has not thought himself,
Is not free.

G. W. F. Hegel
CONTENTS

Preface to the English Edition  xi
Abbreviations Used in the Text xv

Introduction  1

PART I THE SUBJECTIVE WILL  7

1 Conceptual Presuppositions: Person and Subject  13
1.1 The Transition from Right to Morality  13
1.2 From the Person to the Subject  24
1.3 The Subjectivity of the Will  36
1.4 The Formality of the Subjective Will  44

2 Intentionality: The Form of Subjective Freedom  56
2.1 The Form of the Knowledge of Action  59
2.2 The Speculative Interpretation of Intentionality  69
2.3 Objectification and Intersubjectivity  73

3 Recapitulation  92

PART II THE ACTION  99

4 The Form of the Action  105
4.1 Actions as Events: The Causal Relation  105
4.2 Actions under Descriptions: Purpose and Intention  123
## CONTENTS

5 The Content of the Action 157
   5.1 The Contents of the Action 158
   5.2 Rational Action and Moral Attitude 166

PART III CONCLUDING REMARKS 175

References 187
Index 193
When I began outlining this book twelve years ago, there was little interest in Hegel among analytic philosophers in Germany, England, and the United States. I also quickly realized that Hegel researchers in Germany (at least the orthodox ones) were not inclined to engage in the debates and research results of analytic philosophy. Therefore, my motivating belief – that a dialogue between Hegelian and analytic philosophy would be fruitful for both sides – found little favor on either side.

In analytic circles, Hegel texts – which are admittedly difficult even for German readers – were taken to be incomprehensible, and his philosophical assumptions written off as simply obscure. This situation has fundamentally changed in the last decade. Robert Brandom and John McDowell, important representatives of contemporary analytic philosophy, have undertaken to draw productive systematic connections with Hegel’s philosophy. The publications of Brandom and McDowell up to this point admittedly contain only rather general connections to Hegel’s work; detailed analyses of, and confrontations with, Hegel’s writings are still lacking from the side of analytic philosophy. Nonetheless, these thinkers have succeeded in awakening interest in Hegel’s philosophy within analytic circles, and have weakened the a priori suspicion of meaninglessness to such an extent that a constructive dialogue between the two philosophical traditions can now be opened.¹ But such a dialogue can, in my opinion, only be meaningful and successful when

¹ On the relationship between Hegel’s metaphysics and John McDowell’s work, I have attempted in Quante 2002 to illustrate important points of contact, and also to show material differences in the basic assumptions of the two philosophical conceptions; cf. also on this point, Halbig 2002.
one engages in detailed and systematically oriented interpretations of central Hegelian texts and concepts.

The orthodox Hegelians, on the contrary, were and are in the grip of the prejudice that analytic philosophy is entirely inappropriate for a productive dialogue with Hegel's philosophy. Their misunderstanding of the situation is already evident in their criticism that analytic philosophy lacks knowledge of Hegel's thought: No distinction is made between analytic philosophy as a method of philosophy, and analytic philosophy as a set of specific philosophical dogmas, such as scientism or naturalism. If one understands analytic philosophy simply as a position with a certain content, then it is of course difficult to see how Hegel can be brought into a fruitful conversation with analytic philosophy. But such a view of analytic philosophy is, and remains, even if it does properly criticize some aspects, short-sighted.

If instead one places the focus, as I do in this book, on the methodological aspect of analytic philosophy, then one can be guided by its methodological self-understanding and ideals. With this orientation, setting Hegel's texts and the works of analytical philosophy in relation to each other can be informative for both sides. Because of the great distance between the Hegelian terminology and the conceptual framework of analytical philosophy, an interpretive “translation” of the two philosophical idioms into each other must proceed with great caution. The translation must be substantiated in detail in order to have the chance of being convincing: The mutual strangeness of the theories demands that analyses be carried out in small steps.

Because of the developments over the last ten years, the way that I approach Hegel’s work in this book has perhaps a greater chance of finding approval today. The theme I treat here deserves, now as before, an examination of its own. In researching this book, I quickly realized that there were hardly any commentators who thoroughly engaged Hegel’s concept of action. Because of the huge number of works in the Hegel literature in general, and in Hegel’s practical philosophy in particular, I found this result surprising. Not only had the connection of Hegel’s

---

2 I should note that a translation depicts a symmetrical relation. In this book, I am not out simply to measure Hegel’s insights one-sidedly by the standards of analytic action-theory. My goal is rather to allow the achievements of both conceptions to mutually enlighten each other, and to better understand the phenomenon investigated in both conceptions – namely, human action.

3 The reader must decide for himself whether my analysis of Hegel’s concept of action satisfies this demand.
action-theory to analytic action-theory not yet been discussed, a fact that ten years ago was not all that surprising. But the concept of action itself, which Hegel explicitly introduced in his philosophy of right,* had largely escaped the attention of the commentators – and this was, given its importance for Hegel’s Philosophy of Right, completely astonishing. This situation also meant that my guiding idea – that Hegel’s concept of action would be especially appropriate for rendering transparent the systematic construction of the Morality chapter – fell into an interpretive no-man’s land. Only the arguments presented in this book can show whether this thesis – the heart of my interpretation – is convincing. It remains the case that even in the last decade, very few works have appeared that engage Hegel’s concept of action. Most of them proceed not within action-theory in general (as this book does), but rather remain – following Hegel’s procedure and self-understanding – in the context of practical philosophy. These investigations either further limit themselves to an immanent reconstruction of Hegel’s texts, or they choose another contact point for the systematic translation. Therefore, the interpretive claims in this book have not been overtaken or rendered superfluous by recent scholarship.  

For this reason, I have refrained from adding remarks to the English edition that would bring the text up to date. This would have remained, first, external to the argumentation; second, there would not have been enough room to do justice to the works of the last ten years. Since I also have found through recent lectures no reason to alter my interpretive claims, the text of the German edition appears here in unaltered form.  

Special thanks goes to my teacher, Ludwig Siep. Without his open-mindedness, it certainly would have been impossible to write this book. Through his intensive and always solicitous advice, he has encouraged me, during my student days and afterward, to search for my own philosophical path to Hegel and to philosophy in general.

* Translator’s note (always indicated with an *): When “philosophy of right” appears without capitals or italics, it refers to Hegel’s social and political theory in general, rather than to the specific text whose title is abbreviated with that name.

4 The most important literature known to me in the time since this work’s first appearance are Alessio 1996; Amengual 2001; Menegoni 1993 and 1997, Peperzak 2001, chapter 6, and Schmidt am Busch 2002.

5 I would like to use this opportunity to indicate two articles in which I have thoroughly dealt with aspects that could not take center stage in this book. In Quante 1997/2003, there is a detailed analysis of the concept of the person in Hegel’s Philosophy of Right; and in Quante 1997, I have attempted to bring Hegel’s theory of the will into conversation with the contemporary analytic discussion of the concept of autonomy.
I would also like to thank Peter Rohs, who has been a constant discussion partner through all his years teaching at Münster. His critical advice has always forced me to clarify my thoughts and to bring them to expression.

In the cooperative atmosphere of the Philosophischen Seminar in Münster, one is never condemned for following one’s own philosophical project as a solitary thinking being. For the many suggestions for improvement in the development of this work, I would like to thank Gabriel Amengual, Achim Engstler, Barbara Merker, Georg Mohr, Gabriele Santel, and Marcus Willaschek. For many lively discussions about Hegel in the years between the appearance of the German and the English editions, I would like to thank Christoph Halbig and Hans-Christoph Schmidt am Busch.

I would also like to thank Robert Pippin for his energetic support of my wish to publish an English edition of this book, and for his readiness to include it in his series.

Thanks are also due to Dean Moyar for the effort of translating a German work on Hegel into English with both clarity of expression and fidelity to the original content. Special thanks to Ronald Cohen for his considerable skill in editing the manuscript and for his many suggestions that have made the book more useful to the reader.

Finally, I would like to express my gratitude to the foundation Inter Nations for its generous support in financing the translation of this work.
ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE TEXT

In this book, I quote Hegel’s texts using the following abbreviations (a complete bibliographical entry, including the translations used, is given in the references under Hegel):

- R Grundlinien der Philosophie des Rechts oder Naturrecht und Staatswissenschaft im Grundrisse
- E Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse (1830)
- HE Enzyklopädie der philosophischen Wissenschaften im Grundrisse
- L Wissenschaft der Logik
- Hom Die Philosophie des Rechts. Die Mitschrift Homeyer (Berlin 1818/1819)
- Wan Die Philosophie des Rechts. Die Mitschrift Wannenmann (Heidelberg 1817/1818)
- II Vorlesungen über Rechtsphilosophie (1818–1831)

I quote passages from the Philosophy of Right using R and the corresponding paragraph number. An “R” following the number of the paragraph...
indicates Hegel’s handwritten marginal notes, and a “Z” following the number of the paragraph indicates the spoken additions that were added to the Freundeskreisausgabe by the editors (for example, R §§96R for the marginal note to paragraph 96 of the Philosophy of Right).

Passages from the Nachschriften of Wannenmann and Homeyer are quoted according to the abbreviations and the corresponding paragraphs. The same holds for the first edition of the Encyclopedia. The third edition of the Encyclopedia is also quoted with the abbreviation and the paragraph number, and the “Z” following the number indicates the spoken additions that were added to the Freundeskreisausgabe by the editors.

The first edition of the Logic of Being is quoted with the abbreviation and the page number (for example, SL 55 for page 55), while the complete edition of the Science of Logic is quoted with the abbreviation, roman numeral for the volume, and the page number (for example, LII 325) for Science of Logic, Volume 2, page 325).

The Lectures on the Philosophy of Right are also quoted with the abbreviation, roman numeral for the volume, and page number (for example, Il IV p. 333) for Volume IV, page 333 of the Lectures).

All other texts are quoted with the name of the author and the year of the edition used. Generally, the emphases in the quotes are mine, and emphases in the original are not reproduced. Cases in which I depart from this rule are always indicated. I have also indicated grammatical adjustments. The orthography is always taken from the source that I used.

An “M” following a quote from the Science of Logic indicates the translation by Miller cited in the references. All other translations of Hegel’s texts are also given in the references, but since they share the same section numbers, the translations have not been specifically indicated in the citations.

All quotations of Hegel’s marginal notes to the Philosophy of Right have been translated by Dean Moyar, as have all quotations from German-language commentaries. It should be noted that the marginal notes are seldom written in complete sentences, so that the abbreviated style of the translations reflects the syntax of the original.