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Chapter 10

Tragedy and Agency in Hegel and Deleuze

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INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to clarify Deleuze’s thinking about agency and action in the context of the ontology of events advanced in The Logic of Sense. In order to do this, I will examine several points of convergence and divergence between Deleuze’s and Hegel’s thinking about action and agency, particularly in connection with their respective references to Sophocles’ Oedipus Rex. This is not at all to say that Deleuze’s account of action and agency in The Logic of Sense is somehow derived from Hegel. My argument is rather that both Deleuze and Hegel share a certain understanding of action and agency – namely, an expressivist one – whose general features I outline in what follows. In particular, I will show that for both Deleuze and Hegel, Oedipus brings into focus three aspects of action and agency: retrospectivity, publicness, and heroism. Retrospectivity means that we only understand what we are doing and intending after the fact. Publicness refers to the way in which our understanding of what we do and intend is inseparable from how the content of our action is made sense of in a broader social space. Finally, the heroic character of action and agency refers to an agent’s being responsible for doings which outstrip what she intends and can know. The main point of divergence between Deleuze’s and Hegel’s conceptions of agency will then be brought out with reference to the way in which the difference between the agent’s perspective on her intentions-actions and the perspective of others on these intentions-actions (the difference

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constitutive of the heroic character of action and agency) is dealt with. In Hegel, this difference is understood to be overcome within a recognition community structured by mutual ‘confession’ and ‘forgiveness’. In Deleuze, by contrast, there is no dialectically necessary overcoming and reconciliation of perspectives.

In what follows, I will first of all give an account of Hegel’s expressivist approach to action and agency, drawing on two recent studies by Allen Speight and Robert Brandom. This account will be structured around the three aspects of action and agency just mentioned: retrospectivity, publicness and heroism. I will then argue for the existence of an expressivist understanding of action and agency in Deleuze’s The Logic of Sense and explore the points of convergence and divergence between this conception and Hegel’s. Before turning to this task, however, two important qualifications should be made. Firstly, the expressivist approach to action and agency in The Logic of Sense remains largely implicit in the text and has yet to be explored in significant detail in the secondary literature. As will be demonstrated, however, it is present in this work and, moreover, follows directly from the ontology of events and sense to be found therein. Secondly, I restrict my account of Deleuze’s expressivist understanding of action and agency to The Logic of Sense and do not claim that Deleuze’s œuvre as a whole exemplifies this approach. Indeed, the discontinuities between The Logic of Sense and Deleuze’s later work with Guattari have often been noted, and it seems evident that the shift from an ontology of sense and events in The Logic of Sense to, for example, an ontology of assemblages in A Thousand Plateaus, entails a seismic shift in Deleuze’s thinking about action and agency. However, it is beyond the scope of this article to explore this shift, and a full justification of this claim must be left to a subsequent work.

DEDIPUS AND HEGEL’S ‘EXPRESSIVE METAPHYSICS OF AGENCY’

In 2001, Allen Speight published a very interesting study of Hegel’s theory of action, titled Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency, which argues that Hegel’s references in The Phenomenology of Spirit to various literary forms (tragedy, comedy and the romantic novel of the beautiful soul) are crucial in developing his account of action and agency. Speight begins by arguing that Hegel should be read as a

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post-Kantian thinker who rejects what Sellars called the ‘myth of the given’ in both theoretical and practical activity. In other words, Hegel rejects the idea that we have access to immediate and unrevisable empirical data which can function as the ground of knowledge claims. But he also rejects the ‘voluntarist’ conception of action and agency insofar as this depends on the givenness of a prior mental state such as an intention, to which an agent has unrevisable access, and which can be said to cause a given action.3

With respect to his philosophy of action, then, Hegel defends a ‘corrigibilist’ view of agency. He holds that an agent’s intentions are not incorrigibly known by the agent and, correspondingly, are not artificially separable from the action itself such as this appears in public space. In other words, on this view of agency, what an agent intends becomes clear only in the course of the action that ‘expresses’ it, and more particularly, as this action is variously interpreted by the agent and the other members of his or her recognitive community. The practical identity of the agent which is ‘expressed’ in his or her action, then, will ultimately be a product of the recognitive mediation of these different first- and third-person perspectives.4

The three crucial features of Hegel’s corrigibilist conception of action and agency are thus, following Speight, retrospectivity, theatricality and forgiveness. Retrospectivity: because what an agent does cannot be decided by the privileging of an agent’s (presumably unrevisable) prior intention, but must be determined after the fact.5 Theatricality: because an agent cannot claim epistemic access to her own intentions except through the ‘mirroring’ relation between actor and spectator implicit in her social situation, which is to say, through the various ‘masks’ in which she is recognised (and recognises herself) in her social context.6 Forgiveness: because what must be ‘confessed’, ‘forgiven’ and consequently ‘sublated’ in order to achieve a reconciliation between first- and third-person perspectives on action is both the fallibility of the agent’s perspective, and the injustice of the community who judges particular actions according to universal standards. In other words, reciprocal confession and forgiveness acknowledges and reconciles both the agent’s particular interest in an action and the community’s demand for its justification.7

5 Ibid. p. 44.
6 Ibid. p. 82.
Of interest to us in the present context is Speight’s argument that Hegel arrives at and presents these features of agency in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* through a study of the sequential emergence of a number of literary genres: Greek tragedy, comedy (paradigmatically, Diderot’s *Rameau’s Nephew*) and the romantic novel. More specifically, as Speight writes:

Tragedy, particularly ancient Greek tragedy in its presentation of fate, opens up the retrospective experience of agency; comedy is seen to involve a self-reflectiveness about the socially mediated or theatrical character of agency . . . ; and the romantic novel of the beautiful soul, in its concern with resolving the paradoxes of conscience, articulates a notion of cognitive practical identity that is most fully achieved in certain novelistic moments of forgiveness.\(^8\)

Now, we can recall that it is the contention of this chapter that, for Hegel and Deleuze, Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* brings into focus three aspects of action and agency: retrospectivity, publicness, and heroism. There is much overlap between these categories and Speight’s, particularly with respect to retrospectivity. However, what I am calling publicness is not equivalent to theatricality. For Speight, theatricality has to do with the ‘masks’ or social roles in which an agent is recognised, and through which the agent’s intentions and motivations can be comprehended. By contrast, as will be seen when we turn our attention to Brandom’s reading of Hegel, publicness has to do with the status of the action itself and its various descriptions. It concerns the way in which the determinable content of the action that is retrospectively attributed to the agent is the affair of everybody in the agent’s community. Forgiveness is also not equivalent to what I am calling ‘heroism’, although as will be seen, forgiveness is an essential element of Hegel’s ‘post-modern’ conception of heroism.

Given these divergences, I will leave to one side Speight’s discussion of the genres of comedy and the romantic novel and focus instead on his contention that Greek tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex* revealed to Hegel the retrospective character of agency, such as he presents this in *The Phenomenology of Spirit*. Moreover, while it is true that Speight devotes more attention to Hegel’s reading of *Antigone* in the *Phenomenology*, focusing on his remarks about Oedipus will allow us to connect the idea of the retrospectivity of agency with the heroic character of agency such as is discussed with reference to Oedipus in Hegel’s later work, *The

\(^8\) Ibid. pp. 7–8.
Philosophy of Right. Focusing on Oedipus will also allow us to explore and better understand Deleuze’s references to Oedipus in his discussion of action, agency and intentions in The Logic of Sense.

Now, Speight argues that for Hegel, tragedy teaches us something essential about action in general. Tragedies begin with a willed action, but this action has consequences that could not have been foreseen by the agent – consequences that radically diverge from his or her original willing, but for which the agent is nevertheless recognisable as responsible. In this respect, then, tragedies reveal with particular clarity something common to all action, namely, the potential for a discrepancy between an agent’s prior deliberations in willing an action, and what the action that the agent is responsible for turns out to be in actuality. Such a tragic moment is represented in an extreme fashion by an agent like Oedipus, ‘who does not know at all what his deeds involve, and will experience a necessity that is alien to him in his action’, recognising himself and being recognised as responsible for the crimes of parricide and incest. In other words, what Oedipus Rex demonstrates with tragic lucidity is that in order to understand an actual deed as the deed of a particular agent, it is not sufficient to simply make reference to this agent’s prior intention in its isolated simplicity. We must attend to the action itself and to what it retrospectively reveals about the agent of that action. As Speight puts it: ‘Something of what the deed is – and hence who the agent is to be taken to be – can only emerge for the agent’s knowledge in the action itself.’ In other words, what the action turns out to be retrospectively reveals or expresses something – both to the agent and to others – about the nature of the agent responsible and what can be taken to be intentional. Or again, as Hegel writes in section 469 of the Phenomenology, alluding to Oedipus:

Ethical self-consciousness now learns from its deed the developed nature of what it actually did . . . [T]he son does not recognize his father in the man who has wronged him and whom he slays, nor his mother in the woman whom he makes his wife . . . [T]he accomplished deed is the removal of the antithesis between the knowing self and the actuality confronting it. The doer cannot deny the crime or his guilt.

Of course, and as Speight rightly notes, ‘Hegel’s account of the Oedipus play [in the Phenomenology] requires understanding that there is

9 Ibid. p. 48.
10 Ibid. p. 36.
11 Ibid. p. 54.
work in the play both a standard of responsibility and intentionality that is no longer valid in modern morality. Nevertheless, that action, agency and intentions properly understood have for Hegel this retrospective character is clear. In order to appreciate this point, however, it will be useful to turn now to Robert Brandom’s account of Hegel’s ‘expressive metaphysics of agency’.

In Chapter 7 of A Spirit of Trust, Brandom’s as yet unpublished book on Hegel, Brandom notes that Hegel’s œuvre in fact offers us two contrasting views on the nature of action: 1) A pre-modern, externalist, consequentialist view, which identifies and individuates actions according to what is actually done; and 2) A modern, internalist, intentionalist view, which identifies and individuates actions by the agent’s intention or purpose in acting.

The first, pre-modern and externalist view can be found primarily in the Phenomenology of Spirit, where, for example, Hegel writes in section 401 that:

Consciousness must act merely in order that what it is in itself may become explicit for it . . . An individual cannot know what he is until he has made himself a reality through action . . . [The agent] only gets to know his original nature, which must be his End, from the deed.

The idea here is that the content of the inner intention of an agent is only determined with reference to what is true of the external action that expresses that intention ‘in actuality’. Or to put it another way, the intention only becomes epistemically available – to the agent as much as to others – retrospectively, as the action and its consequences unfold. But what is more, to say that the retrospectively attributed deed is ‘actual’ is to make reference to its publicness – to the fact that it is essentially ‘available to all’ and made sense of in a broader social space. As Hegel writes, actualisation is ‘a display of what is one’s own in the element of universality whereby it becomes, and should become, the

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33 Speight, Hegel, Literature and the Problem of Agency, p. 54, n. 25.
36 Hegel, Phenomenology of Spirit, p. 240.
affair of everyone'. Or again, as Brandom puts it in a more contemporary philosophical vocabulary:

The truth of the performance, what it is in itself, is expressed in all of the descriptions of what is actually achieved, all the specifications of the content in terms of its consequences. These descriptions are available in principle to anyone in the community to recognize the performance ... or to characterize its content.

Now, the story of Oedipus clearly exemplifies this externalist view of action. Indeed, we noted above how in section 469 of the Phenomenology, Hegel presents an externalist view of action through an implicit reference to Oedipus Rex: 'Ethical self-consciousness now learns from its deed the developed nature of what it actually did ... [T]he accomplished deed is the removal of the antithesis between the knowing self and the actuality confronting it. The doer cannot deny the crime or his guilt.' And we clearly see here in the figure of Oedipus action's retrospective and public character. Again, for action to have a retrospective character means that one only understands what one is doing and intending after the fact. For action to have a public character means that an understanding of what we do and intend is inseparable from how our actions and intentions appear or are actualised in the light of the external world and to others, as when Oedipus' crime and guilt were made manifest through his very public inquiries.

The modern, internalist view of action, by contrast, is much more prominent in Hegel's later work, the Philosophy of Right, particularly in the 'Purpose and Responsibility' section of Part 2 on 'Morality'. Here, Hegel argues that:

It is ... the right of the will to recognize as its action [Handlung], and to accept responsibility for, only those aspects of its deed [Tat] which it knew to be presupposed within its end, and which were present in its purpose [Vorsatz] - I can be made accountable for a deed only if my will was responsible for it - the right of knowledge.

Following Brandom, Hegel understands this distinction within an action between what the agent is responsible for (by virtue of his 'purpose') and what he is not responsible for to be a distinctive achievement of modernity. Prior to this, the agent assumed responsibility for, not just

17 Ibid. §417, p. 251.
18 Ibid. p. 283.
what he was initially aware of intending, but for the deed in its entirety. Such was, we’ve just seen, the case of Oedipus, whom Hegel mentions once again in the Philosophy of Right, and this time explicitly. Indeed, Oedipus regarded himself as a criminal responsible for murdering his father and marrying his mother, despite the fact that he had not originally intended to commit parricide and incest. And for Hegel, to take responsibility for an action which outstrips what is originally intended or can be known is to possess a ‘heroic self-consciousness’. As he writes in the Philosophy of Right:

The heroic self-consciousness (as in ancient tragedies like that of Oedipus) has not yet progressed from its unalloyed simplicity to reflect on the distinction between deed [Tat] and action [Handlung], between the external event and the purpose and knowledge of the circumstances, or to analyse the consequences minutely, but accepts responsibility for the deed in its entirety.20

I’ll return to this notion of heroism in connection with action and agency. For now, let us ask what the relation is between these two different views of action – the intentionalist/internalist and the externalist/consequentialist. For Brandom, the relation and, indeed, tension between these seemingly opposing views is in fact fundamental to Hegel’s ‘expressive metaphysics of agency’. He proposes that we understand Hegel as saying that an adequate conception of action must involve both views, and hence a certain ‘identity-in-difference’. Brandom proposes that we understand Hegel as saying that one and the same action can fall under different descriptions – namely, intentional and consequential descriptions – and that these different descriptions amount to a distinction between the agent’s perspective on his or her action and the community’s perspective on that action. The content of an action will then be what is both acknowledged by the agent and attributed by the community, which is to say, a product of a process of reciprocal specific recognition.

In order to explain the synthesis of two divergent perspectives on one content, Brandom appeals to Frege’s distinction between sense and reference. Following this distinction, the action ‘in-itself’, the referent, must be distinguished from its different senses or ‘modes of presentation’, that is, from what it is for the agent at different stages in the unfolding of the agent’s overall ‘plan’, as well as what it is for the community as the consequences of the action ripple outwards. The action in-itself can then be conceived as the product of the recognition of mediation of these different
perspectives, that is to say, whereby the different senses appear as cognitively presenting and semantically determining the action in-itself, but only insofar as these senses are able to form part of a story or ‘recollection’, told by both the agent and the community, in which these different senses feature as better or worse attempts to present the action in-itself.

In Chapter 8 of *A Spirit of Trust*, Brandom then argues that the concluding eleven paragraphs of the *Phenomenology*’s ‘Spirit’ chapter sketches the way in which we can understand the different perspectives on action – the agent’s and the community’s – to be mediated by reciprocal recognition. The concepts we must understand are *confession* and *forgiveness*.

*Confession*, on Brandom’s interpretation, involves acknowledging a disparity between sense and reference. In other words, both the agent and the community must confess the particularity and contingency of their attitudes, and acknowledge that what the action is *for* them, subjectively, is not what the action objectively is *in itself*, that is to say, *apart from any particular subjective perspective*. In Brandom’s terms, mutual confession means that both the agent and her community treat their intentions and beliefs as *normative statuses*, which is to say, as commitments to which they are *entitled* only insofar as these are acknowledged by one’s peers as standing in legitimate inferential relations with other accepted commitments within a shared ‘space of reasons’.

But as well as confession, what is required is *forgiveness*. On Brandom’s interpretation, forgiving overcomes the confessed disparity between sense and reference, between what the action is *for* the agent and *for* the community, and what the action is in-itself, apart from these subjective perspectives. Forgiving, then, is the ‘recollective’ labour of finding a concept for the action that is being expressed (now less, now more fully and faithfully) by the subjective conceptions endorsed by the agent and her community. In other words, the task of forgiving is to reveal the confessed disparity between sense and reference as a retrospectively necessary phase of a process of more adequately expressing what the action is in-itself. Through mutual confession and forgiveness, then, both the agent and the community acknowledge that what is recollectively determined as the action in-itself has authority over what were their merely subjective perspectives on it.

For Brandom, this new understanding of action and agency, couched in terms of confession and forgiveness, also represents a new, *post-modern* stage of the development of Spirit. Moreover, this new stage recovers an element of the older, pre-modern, *heroic* conception of action and agency which was lost to modernity with its emphasis on the subjective rights of
intention and knowledge. As we saw, the pre-modern, heroic conception of agency was most visible in tragedies such as *Oedipus Rex*. Indeed, the tragic dimension of heroic agency was precisely that the agent assumed responsibility for happenings (in the case of Oedipus, parricide and incest) which were completely alien to what they originally intended and could foresee. In the new, post-modern conception of agency, however, this tragic dimension of agency disappears, even though the heroism is maintained. The heroism is maintained insofar as, in Brandom’s words, agents still ‘identify themselves as the seats of responsibilities that outrun their own capacity to fulfil’.\(^{21}\) But the tragic dimension is lost insofar as the agent recognises, and is recognised by, a community who forgives the particularity of the agent’s subjective perspective by making it a fundamental, albeit partial, progressively expressive contribution to a larger process of determining the action in-itself.

SENSE AND ACTION-EVENTS IN DELEUZE’S *LOGIC OF SENSE*

In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze can be understood as putting forward an account of action and agency that displays the characteristics of retrospectivity, publicness and heroism. Moreover, as will be seen, this ‘expressive’ account of agency is also tied to references to Oedipus. Before coming to the argument for this thesis, however, it will be helpful to pre-empt three likely objections. Firstly, it will no doubt be said that given Deleuze’s well-known hostility to Hegel, Deleuze’s philosophy of action and agency can in no way be derived from Hegel. But this is not at all my position. I am not claiming that Deleuze was influenced by Hegel, or owes Hegel a conceptual debt in this regard. I rather wish to argue that there is an account of action and agency implicit in *The Logic of Sense* that can be explicated by showing how it instantiates in a certain way some of the structural features of action and agency that thinkers such as Speight, Brandom and Pippin have recently identified in Hegel.

Secondly, it may well be objected that a Deleuzian understanding of action and agency could not depend on those notions which form the core of the expressive account of action and agency just presented—-notions such as the will, intentions, ‘the social’, and so on. It will be said that Deleuze’s theory of action and agency rather depends on notions such as force relations, complex relations of affect, machinic assemblages of bodies, collective assemblages of enunciation, and so