

The substance of human life is activity

Hegel for Social Movements, Lecture 4

What I am going to present in this lecture is an ontology, an ontology which makes it possible to make sense of Hegel's Logic beyond metaphors and examples.

My source here is Activity Theory, a current of science which originated in the Soviet Union in the first decade after the Revolution, where it remained a minority current, but beginning in the 1970s began to spread around the world. It is currently taught in every university worthy of the name though mostly it is confined to the Education or Child Development departments. It is an applied science. It has been developed in the way any science develops, but mainly through "design experiments," that is, interventions in real life situations, rather than experimenting on subjects isolated in a laboratory. I speak of "activity", the word which is used by Activity Theorists, but "activity" does not have any meaning different from "practice."

So, the ontology I am presenting reflects an existing scientific practice with literally thousands of people engaged in researching and using the theory in solving practical human problems.

Monism

In presenting the ontology of Activity Theory I will draw extensively on Hegel, and this is facilitated by the fact that the ontology of Activity Theory is *monist*, like that of Hegel.

If you try to make a beginning from the proposition that there are *two* kinds of things in the world, then you will be forever tied up in conundrums, a fact which was proven by the history of European philosophy from Descartes to Kant. There may indeed be two kinds of stuff in the world, but you must make your beginning from a single substance, and from there you can explain how two different entities can emerge as aspects or forms of the single substance, rather than trying to join two substances together post facto.

Hegel refers to the single substance of reality as *thought* or *spirit*. As I explained last week, it doesn't matter what you called the stuff which constitutes the substance of the world as you see it, but the name you give to it does convey an attitude to reality and is suggestive of how you are going to elaborate it.

Activity as the Substance of Human Life

I am proposing that the substance of human life is *activity*, human activity. This is a normal English word so there is no need to define it. Indeed, to define it would only undermine it as the sole substance of philosophy because of the infinite regress I mentioned earlier. But what I am going to do is clarify the concept of activity by subjecting it to critique, and it is by critique of "activity" that a monist ontology can be constructed.

The thing about human activity is that everything a person does passes through their consciousness and it is impossible to understand human activity without reference to consciousness. The solution of earlier philosophers was to propose consciousness as a second substance, but this solution created insoluble problems. The first problem was that consciousness is inaccessible to observation. Even introspection cannot reveal consciousness firstly because the very act of self-observation alters the object being observed and in any case, individuals have proved to be unreliable reporters of their own consciousness. The Behaviourists responded to this situation by saying that consciousness could not be a scientific concept. But this is nonsense. No geologist has ever observed the formation of a canyon or a continent, but by careful inspection of geological formations they can *deduce* the processes of their formation.

Likewise, historians rarely have the opportunity to witness an historical event, but they piece them together from the traces left by events in documents.

So the student of human activity (which we all are) does the same: *we deduce consciousness from observation of its objective manifestations in human activity*, namely, physiology, behaviour and the cultural products of activity such as art and literature. But we can explain activity *from itself*. And consciousness is an *explanatory principle*.

This is not to deny that there are completely private experiences which never manifest themselves in physiology or behaviour. But *unless* such fantasies manifest themselves at *some* point in some *objective* phenomenon then they don't exist. That is what we mean by "exist." Dreams which are never even remembered or manifested in behaviour cannot be included in a scientific theory, and self-evidently, nothing is lost by excluding them.

What we have is activity, in which physiology and behaviour can be directly observed and consciousness can be imputed as an explanatory principle. There is no dualism here: we do not add consciousness and behaviour together to get activity; consciousness and behaviour arise as the inner and outer aspects of activity, which we *abstract* from the observation of activity.

Now the Marxists amongst us may be inclined to criticise this approach because I have made no reference to the material world. But as [Lenin](#) said: "Matter is a philosophical category denoting the objective reality which is reflected by our sensations, while existing independently of them." So even Lenin defined matter *in terms of* human activity. We do not deny, of course, the existence of a material world, but we include it in our theory only insofar as it is *included* in our activity. And of course, material objects and processes are included in every action we take. [Hegel](#) says as much in his Science of Logic. In his characteristically idealist mode of expression, he says:

"In the syllogism of action, one premise is the *immediate relation of the good end to actuality* which it seizes on, and in the second premise directs it as an external *means* against the external actuality."

In more accessible language: we realise our intentions by acting on the world by using material objects, or artefacts in our actions. That's on page 821, just three pages before Hegel sums up the Logic in his final chapter. But it is by means of *including* material objects in our actions that we are able to construct a concept of Nature, the concept of a material world existing independently of human activity. On the basis of a concrete concept of Nature constructed in this way, we are able to deduce all sorts of facts about the world before humans existed or which are beyond experience. But there is always room for error, and as the scope of human activity expands, hitherto unknown material processes get exposed by some novel human action, and we correct our error. And there is no limit to this process in which our knowledge is extended, but always and everywhere it is only from the standpoint of human activity that we can make a judgment.

So, after that little excursus, what we have is that behaviour and consciousness can be abstracted from the observation of activity, and *the material world figures in human activity through the material artefacts which mediate all our actions*.

Activity is an aggregate of Activities

But we still just have a generality. Instead "Being" – the concept with which Hegel begins the Logic – we have "activity." What Hegel tells us time again throughout the Encyclopaedia is that such generalities, such abstractions, have to be subjected to critique of the form which Hegel demonstrates in the early passages of the Logic.

Allow me to exhibit this critique by taking you through a condensed exposition of the first five concepts of the Logic.

Being means to be. But that is an empty concept, it is Nothing. So Being becomes Nothing. So now we have Becoming. But Becoming implies that *something* is becoming. Some Determinate Being. A One.

So you can see how when you start with a generality like Being or Activity or Space or Art or whatever, to make any progress on the matter, to see *what it is*, you must determine one discrete entity or being. To know what Art is you must begin from a work of art. To understand space, you must begin from a point. To build a scientific theory of Being or Activity, you must first determine a One or *an activity*.

Now English is one of those languages in which the introduction of the indefinite article produces a quite different concept. Unfortunately, a feature not shared by Russian. *An activity* is quite a different concept from “activity.” But if I can clarify what I mean by *an activity*, a unit of activity, then we can understand activity as an aggregate of many activities. Otherwise, we are stuck in generalities.

Now it may come as a surprise to some people who insist that the world is made up of *processes* not things, and if we are to form a fluid and mobile image of the world, we should make processes not discrete entities our substance. This is mistaken. In order to grasp a *process* we must first grasp *discrete moments*, and find contradictions and discrepancies between them. We then *reconstruct* a process from contradictions in or between discrete representations. And Hegel demonstrates this in the Logic. Each concept in the Logic is discrete and fixed. But within each concept he finds contradictions, like I just demonstrated in the case of Being, Nothing, Becoming, Determinate Being and One. The appearance of movement is the *discovery of contradictions* and it is contradictions which make movement from one concept to another explicable. *Activity can only be conceived of as many activities.* There can be no other meaning of “activity.”

So this raises the question: what is *an activity*?

What is *an activity*?

To answer this question I must draw your attention to a concept to which I have already been alluding — actions. “Actions” is a discrete, countable noun meaning doing something. In order to define an activity, I have to utilise the concept of actions, and I also need the concept of “motive,” but it turns out that I can only define or clarify these three concepts together, rather than one after the other, so bear with me.

I say activities are made up of actions. This is a common move which we find in all the sciences. In Marx’s *Capital*, the micro unit is a commodity and the macro unit, the unit which gives its name to the title of the book, is a unit of capital, a capitalist firm. In the organic world, there are organisms and organisms are made up of cells. In each case, the macro unit which is the subject matter of the science is *made up of* many micro units, but the macro units *control* the movement of the micro units. OK?

So, specifically, I propose that activities are made up of actions which all share the same motive. This motive is what characterises the activity — a collection of actions which are all collaboratively directed towards the realising the same motive. At the same time, I define *an action* as *a process in which the goal* — the immediate intended outcome of the action — *differs from its motive*.

For example, when we ask: why did the chicken cross the road? and answer: to get to the other side, this is funny because of course the chicken is not a rational being; it does not cross the road for a reason. A human being, on the other hand, would answer, for example, to catch a bus. And if you asked: why are you catching a bus? I might answer to get to work. And so on. Because we are rational beings, we do things for a reason, and that reason is the concept we have of some more remote situation

which will arise either through a series of actions I take myself, or as a result of the combined action of many people through a division of labour. (This is Aristotle's "for the sake of" relation). I always do things for a reason.

So we can now define what is meant by *an activity*. *An activity is an aggregate of actions, all of which are motivated by the same motive*, the motive of the activity. Each action has its own goal, contributing to the achievement of the shared motive, and each action is mediated by some artefact, an artefact being defined as the material object or process which mediates an action. Now, just to complete this set of definitions, the goal of an action is the situation which the action is evidently intended to realise, and the action is controlled by that goal. The goal on the other hand, can only be made sense of in the light of the motive of the activity, the motive which is shared by all the component actions.

OK.

Whatever your theory of the world, we are all practising Activity Theory every moment of our life. You observe people's actions and you figure out their intentions by noticing the situations that they realise and you notice their physiology and expression and can see if the outcome really was the intended goal, and you observe numbers of people collaboratively realising certain outcomes and you make a judgment on the extent to which the realised outcome corresponds to the concept which motivated the actors' actions. All perfectly objective.

Artefacts

We distinguish between the material entity which a person *uses* to realise their goal – the mediating artefact – from the object being acted on. The situation which constitutes the motive of the activity we call the *object-concept*. The object here is the material situation being acted upon and the object-concept is a generally a *normative concept* of that object. For example, the object of a hospital is the people in the community it serves, in particular the patients who are admitted to the hospital. The hospital – which is an activity – is motivated by a normative concept of a person, that is to say, a healthy person. Every action that takes place within the hospital is motivated to bring the object, the patient, into conformity with its normative concept – a healthy person.

To take a different example, I might walk into a shop to buy a burger. My actions are controlled not by the burger or the shop but my concept of how I can be satisfied by this shop. Maybe I can't read and mistake a milk bar for a Macdonald's, in which case I will be disappointed. It is the shared concept of people engaged in an activity, which determines their actions. Not the object as such. But human beings are busy all the time trying to make objects conform to their normative concepts.

Now I need to say a few things about artefacts. As [Marx](#) observed, in *Capital*, citing Hegel, even though we think *we* are using *artefacts* to realise *our* ends, it is very often the artefacts which are determining our actions and our goals. It is important to understand artefacts because it is the making and using of artefacts which defines and indeed creates us as a species. To this end I will introduce you to the basic categorisation of artefacts which activity theorists use.

Words, Tools and Signs

Firstly, we distinguish between tools and signs. Both are material objects, products of human activity, but we use tools to act on Nature and we use signs to act on the mind, both our own and the minds of others. This is a functional distinction, and in the modern world when programmers write algorithms to control behaviour and words to log into machines, this is not a simple dichotomy. One and the same object may be used as a tool or placed in a shop window as a sign.

Secondly, we distinguish between, on the one hand, spoken words with their associated gestures and expressions used spontaneously by people, and which arose in close connection with tools in the very formation of the human species, and on the other hand, signs, such as written words, maps, flags and so on, which have arisen on the back of our technical development. All human beings raised within human society acquire speech, whether spoken or signed, from childhood. On the other hand, writing has only emerged in the past few thousand years and people only acquire literacy through deliberate instruction. Words, tools and signs are developmentally distinct and each arises at a different point in the development of the species, in history and in childhood. It is important not to mix up these three kinds of artefact in Activity Theory.

That is the basic ontological picture. On the basis of this ontology, Activity Theorists have built a sophisticated psychology and have been able to understand how the personality is formed, how self-control is acquired, and elaborated a theory of child development which shows *how* culture forms human beings. Although physiological considerations are not excluded by this approach, it has to be said that physiology plays a marginal role. Overwhelmingly people are formed by their response to the situations they find themselves in and only gradually over the course of their life free themselves from determination by the immediate situation of their birth.

Nothing in Activity Theory determined that it should be a theory of psychology. It was the conditions under which it originated in Stalin's USSR, where scientific discussion of social theory was impossible, and then later in the USA where Marxism was taboo, which determined that it would take root in departments of education and child development. But it is eminently suitable for use as a social theory as well.

Activities, not groups

Activities are the basic units of the world as we see it. Activities are not aggregates of people, they are aggregates of *actions*. So in this view we do not see nations, for example, as groups of people: all those people who hold an X passport, or all those people resident in X-land, or whatever. We see nations as aggregates of actions, actions which constitute the nation thanks to a shared concept of the nation. Likewise, we see a religion like Christianity or a movement like Socialism, as aggregates of actions united by a shared concept, by a shared self-consciousness.

Sociological groups do exist, but they are only secondary, *products* of the activities which define and create groups. It is not the groups who create activities. Further, people may be more or less committed to a religion for example, or a teacher may be committed to education but only during working hours, and a Socialist may change their mind and become a Fascist. *Social entities are aggregates of actions, not people.*

This approach obviously affects how we approach the question of social classes.

But before we can utilise Activity Theory as a social theory, we need to take note of some elements of the picture which I have sketched which are somewhat over-simplified.

Conflict of Motives

In most of the activities we find in the modern world, people are participating for reasons other than realizing the motive of the activity. The motive of the owner of a typical capitalist enterprise, for example, is to expand the share of social labour he controls, capital accumulation in other words. The motive of their employees, on the other hand, is to earn a wage for the purpose of furthering projects of their own. In both cases these motives are what are called the *really effective motives*. That is to

say, they have the capacity of psychologically motivating employers and employees; “motive” is here a *psychological* category.

However, both employee and employer will only achieve satisfaction of their motives if the firm succeeds in achieving what it claims to do: producing goods for customers which meet their normative requirements, restoring patients to health, and so on. This motive of the activity is called the “merely understood” motive, sometimes called the *object* of the activity. The activity must restore the object to its normative concept, or no one will get paid. And it is this *object-concept* which determines the various goals which are realised by participants in a firm.

The realisation of the motives of capitalist and employee occurs thanks only to societal processes which lie beyond the activity itself. For the worker it depends on the value of their wage and their other social rights which flow from their work as an employee, and for the capitalist, it depends on realising the surplus labour time appropriated thanks to an effective demand for the product, and all the societal arrangements for these activities.

The really-effective motives may be complex. People’s motivation for work is never just remuneration. But the point is that almost every activity is a collaborative activity in which the motives of each action may be at odds with the motive of the whole activity. Consequently, there will be a conflict of motives. This conflict of motives is exhibited in the conflict between really-effective motives and the object-concept, and is also exhibited in mismatch between the goal of every action and the object-concept which provide the reason for the goals.

This conflict of motives runs very deep. Every action we take entails both a neutral decision mechanism which decides our response to the situation, and a closure process by means of which we implement the action. And when we observe an object we both see it exactly as it is, *and* we *interpret* it as a sign whose meaning is something other than what it is.

I draw attention to these contradictions so that we can see how the complex web of human activity unfolds through the action of numerous contradictions at the psychological and societal level.

The Development of Activities

(Now, it is important to note that activities do not come into the world fully formed. So the picture I have painted of a world made up of collaborative activities all pursuing the same shared motive is too simple. At first, an activity emerges from some social situation with no consensus about what is to be done at all. I will deal with this further much later. Obviously, emergent new activities and developing activities are of enormous importance. Once an activity has settled down and become routinised things are much simpler. After all, we are interested in a theory of social change not just a theory of social reproduction.

Secondly, some activities altogether lack a coherent and believable concept of their object. The recent anti-lockdown movements across the world are an example. Do we really have an anti-health movement here? or an absolute libertarian movement? Or do we have an emergent authoritarian movement? I will discuss this later on in the context of the development of activities.)

I will finish here. Activity Theory has a 100 year history and is being furthered by a community of many thousands of practitioners and all I have attempted to offer here is an ontology. There is much more which could be said.