

Andy Blunden. May 2026

Part VI. Making a Difference

## 4. Conclusion: A Theory of Meaningful Social Action

### Introduction

In the foregoing chapters, I have outlined a theory of meaningful social action. I traced the problem of 'making a difference' from the first recorded moment when a writer reflected on facing a conflict of motives and the difficulty of acting contrary to their natural desire.

Prior to the year 386 people had made a difference in the world. Alexander the Great had transformed a vast portion of Europe and Asia. But if Alexander ever wondered whether he was doing the right thing, he never told us about it. Saint Augustine recorded his personal crisis and invented the concept of 'the Will'.

This capacity to act for reasons and contrary to one's desire is the foundation of human culture. All living creatures have a natural will – i.e., their actions are fully determined situation in conjunction with conditioned reflexes and natural instincts. I capitalise the human Will because it is the human Will alone which rises above natural processes and makes a difference. The 'Will' is a concrete concept of volition that brings together diverse aspects of self-control that are acquired through childhood together with the capacity to join one's actions with those of others to achieve common ends.

Over the millennia following St. Augustine's *Confessions*, Atheists and Christians alike arrived at the conclusion that Free Will could not exist. It was contrary either to the laws of God or the laws of Nature. However, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, the father of the French Revolution decided that even though he could not understand how a Free Will could exist, it clearly *did* exist. What remained was to understand how people could form a *general will* and pursue common aims. German Idealists from Fichte to Hegel worked out speculatively how the Will could exist, but it was only with the Psychology of Lev Vygotsky that the basis for a genuinely scientific explanation of the Will became possible.

The freedom of the Will is always relative, but it is nonetheless meaningful. Free Will at the level of psychology is a precondition for the exercise of Will on the plane of social life where people can think and act only within the limits set for them by the times in which they live.

The Structuralists and Functionalists of the period after World War II, arrived at the same point at which Martin Luther and Baruch Spinoza had arrived centuries earlier – there was no place in modern society for the human Will. People rebelled against this pessimism, however, and it has now become possible to understand how meaningful social action is possible.

First, I will briefly review the Psychology of the Will because much in this Psychology has echoes in the problem of the Will in the domain of social action. Second, I will outline the foundations of a social theory that shows how it is possible to make a difference in the world.

## The Psychology of the Will

In law, children are not deemed to be morally responsible for their actions, and rightly so, because it is not until late adolescence that the Will is fully developed. During childhood, all going well, we successively acquire the following elements of the Will (see Part III, §2), that is, voluntary control of our own actions:

- we have our own body, distinct from that of our mother and with all the necessary organs;
- we can distinguish objects from their background and we learn to recognise other human beings as beings like ourselves, and this recognition is reciprocated;
- we can speak the language(s) of those around us and have sufficient voluntary control of our body to master basic mobility;
- we have developed semantic perception, seeing the world around us through the lens of a culture acquired through language, and we can differentiate between our own behavioural acts and those of other people or the movement of the world around us;
- crucially, we have become able to do something *contrary to our own desire*, and prefer to do it on our own, without our hand being held, even defying the wishes of trusted figures in our life, such as our parents;
- we have developed a semantic, rather than simply sensuous, memory, giving us an intellect, so that our experiences are meaningful to us;
- we become consciously aware of our own motives and affect, and the capacity to think over our experiences;
- we become aware of our own thinking processes and subject them to voluntary control. In general, we have by now achieved *conscious awareness* of our own thinking and behaviour;
- we become aware of the concepts by means of which we grasp the world and gain voluntary control of the conceptualisation of our experiences;
- we develop interests, including the sexual interest, with the motivation to pursue these interests voluntarily and independently;
- we have built relations with peers, independent of family and teachers, thus constructing our own social milieu, ideally including a long-term partner, and found our own family;

and ideally:

- we will find a profession or trade in which we become skilled and recognised by others as a member of that trade or profession.

Every adult will acquire these elements of volition, and have done since the dawn of humanity. *How* we gain these elements of self-control will depend on both the local and global conditions under which we are raised. Any person who reaches the age of majority without having gained these elements of self-control is not yet really an adult and cannot be deemed to be morally responsible for their actions.

Free Will presumes a morally responsible adult human being, recognised as such by others. But being an adult human being is only the beginning of the

story. The freedoms and liberties provided by a modern, social-democratic state will provide an adult human being with only limited avenues for the exercise of their Will, depending on their social position. Henceforth, if a person's Will is to have progressed beyond what it was on the day after they left school, they must acquire the agency of some component of the social formation.

For the rest of the story, we must turn to social theory.

### Social Theory

The basic unit of analysis which I have proposed is the *commitment*. This unit has great interdisciplinary power because it is simultaneously individual/psychological and societal. The same practice can be linked to millions of individuals through their commitments to that practice, expressing the strength and reach of that practice and the ideals which orient it, while one individual is linked to one degree or another to scores of practices through commitments which manifest their personality.

The commitment is a unit both of a social formation and a personality.

This does not displace other units of analysis used by social theorists, but whether the object under examination is a nation, a social class, a corporation or a social movement, they can and should be seen through the lens of commitments.

The Will as an interdisciplinary concept of social and psychological theory has become outmoded and fallen out of use. As to psychology, the concept of volition as an element of commitment on the psychological plane does the work of the concept of the Will without the suggestion of a 'organ of volition'. The concept of agency which has to some extent filled the vacuum left by the Will in sociology has been shown to be lacking in theoretical rigour. However, by its use in connection with the concept of 'commitment', agency becomes a scientific concept.

At the same time, I have appropriated certain insights from Sociology. In particular, from Anthony Giddens I have appropriated what I will call the *horizon of foreseeable consequences*. This concept was also central to Hegel's theory of the state.

To fill the gap left beyond that horizon it is necessary to incorporate *virtue ethics* into social theory. As Hegel demonstrated, it is not possible to draw a sharp line between ethics and social theory, just as in the age of reflexivity there can be no sharp line between the subject and object of social science.

While social class remains a useful and legitimate category, especially in connection with economics, the social categories introduced by Pierre Bourdieu – *habitus* and *field* – are more productive of insight into the dynamics of modern capitalism and the psychology of those living under this system. Bourdieu's categories also align with the interdisciplinary use of 'commitment'.

### Summary

In the foregoing chapters I have traced the historical and philosophical roots of the concepts proposed here and I have relied on them in my critique of 'prefigurative politics', revolutionary socialism and local social change activism.

My proposals are addressed to those whose interest in social theory is for the purpose of bringing about radical and progressive social change, but I have been modest with respect to any specific projects for social change. However, any such program should rely on the concepts outlined above.

I have referred to this theory as a theory of ‘meaningful social action’ for two reasons. First, if social action is oriented to bringing about social change then its aim should at least be *meaningful* change, without rationalising itself in terms of objectives which lie beyond the horizon of foreseeable consequences. Second, in order to be achieved, objectives need to be *meaningful* to the people who are to make sacrifices necessary to bring them about.

This is not an argument for ‘localism’. By all means, we all hanker after a better world than that we live in at the moment, that is dehumanising and threatens to destroy life on Earth. However, to a great extent we do so by practising the virtue of Solidarity, a virtue which is both generative and anticipates the better world we all hope for.

### References

Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinctions. A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, tr. Richard Nice, Harvard University Press.

Giddens, A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society*. The University of California Press.

Hegel, G. W. F., (1821/1952). *Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, translated with Notes by T. M. Knox, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.

Rousseau, J.-J. (1755/1911). *Emile*. Everyman Edition, pub. 1911.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1924/1997) *Collected Works Volume 3*, “The methods of reflexological and psychological investigation,” New York: Plenum Press.

Vygotsky, L.S. (1931/1997) *Collected Works Volume 4*, “The History of the Development of the Higher Mental Functions,” New York: Plenum Press.