

Agency and the Will: A Theory of Meaningful Social Change

Introduction

People are anxious about ‘agency’ because living in this modern world makes us all intensely aware of the powerful activity of state, economic and natural processes determining our lives while at the same time fostering a hyper-individualist identity. In this situation people crave assurance that the individual can *make a difference*. This anxiety has resulted in interest in the term ‘agency’. We shall see while that this term belongs to everyday discourse and is not yet a scientific term. ‘Agency’ originated from Structuralist social theory, but it was never an ‘opposite’ to structure, merely its means. ‘Agency’ is deployed with multiple different meanings in supposedly scientific literature, without any support in prior research.

For centuries before World War II, science and philosophy approached this same problem but in terms of the *Will*.

This book begins by tracing the development of the concept of the Will since fourth century. The aim is to understand how individuals can act meaningfully in a world where their actions have consequences that cannot be fully foreseen. The problem is not just to *explain* actions, but to consider how an actor can orient their actions despite the complexity and uncertainty of the modern world. Virtue ethics is found to be a necessary supplement to psychological and sociological explanation.

Since the concept of the Will was introduced into Christian theology and Roman law by Augustine of Hippo in 386 CE, social conditions have obliged thinkers to approach the problem of the Will in different terms. In the seventeenth century, both Martin Luther and Spinoza did away with the Free Will altogether but Empiricism responded with Bacon’s aphorism: ‘Nature cannot be vanquished until she is obeyed’. The secret of the Will had to begin with cultural development of the human being.

European philosophy arrived at an impasse with Kant’s Critical Philosophy. It was Johann Gottlieb Fichte who saw that a human being could become free when treated as a free being by others and obliged to exercise their freedom. The freedom of the Will thus originated not within the natural human body but in the cultural communities human beings construct. G.W.F. Hegel built on this insight by overcoming the dichotomy between thought and nature by showing that the relation between mind and nature was always both mediated and immediate.

I follow Hegel’s narrative of the Will, in three stages. Firstly, I show how Hegel resolved the conundrum of modern philosophy. The Logic built on this principle concludes with the syllogism of action demonstrating the inseparability of cognition and Will and the necessity of a subject to use an element of the external world as a

means to act upon the external world as object, and that only in this way can the Will be made objective by being manifest in an *action*. But the means, he said, is always superior to the subjective aim. However, Hegel recognised that an individual subject must reconcile themselves to the unforeseeable consequences of their action and therefore obedience to the State.

I then trace the development of volition in animals from the natural will to the human mind, and then through the Philosophy of Right, from private property to the State.

Hegel followed Jean-Jacques Rousseau by reliance on the concept of a collective Will to understand the nature of modern social life.

Here the importance of the Will both as an element of thinking and of social processes is introduced. The Will becomes objective through the construction of decision-making organisations leading up to the independent State.

Next I will deal with Vygotsky who begins an examination of the psychology of the Will with the most elementary use of an artefact to set-up neutral connections in advance of a situation requiring acting according to a decision. Meanwhile *action* itself proceeds according to natural processes.

Vygotsky traced the development of the Will from birth to adolescence by tracing the development of voluntary control of various aspects of behaviour. The final level of the development of the adolescent is the construction of a peer group. Present-day neuroscience is in agreement with Vygotsky in rejecting the concept of an organ of the Will in favour of various aspects of *volition*.

Vygotsky was not able to follow the development of the Will beyond adolescence, but his followers continued this work, central to which was A.N. Vygotsky's theory of the personality. On the basis of this theory, the development of a person's Will can be understood on the basis of their *commitment* to ongoing practices or 'activities'.

With the founding of Activity Theory, Vygotsky's followers created a basis to go beyond Psychology, but conditions in the Soviet Union made it impossible to develop these ideas into a scientific social theory. They developed instead a variety of Functionalism, similar to that of Talcott Parsons in the US.

Rather than directly moving to the problems of social theory with a critique or internal development of Activity Theory, I will begin with a critical review of the work of the Functionalists and the French Structuralists. These figures expressed in unalloyed form the conviction that structures and ideology governed social life leaving no opening for individuals or social movements to escape their grip. Louis Althusser introduced the term 'agency' in the sense of a person acting as an agent for the action of a structure – the exact opposite of the sense in which it is used today.

In his critique of Structuralism in the 1980s, Anthony Giddens pointed out that there was no structural explanation for the action of an agent. An agent is knowledgeable and rational, and although they may be strategically placed, their action can only be explained

on the basis of Psychology. Giddens, however, relied on Freud and a mixed bag of psychological theories to support his concept of agency and structure. I will endeavour to recover the concept of agency' as Giddens framed it, but in the light of the insight of Hegel's conceptions of the Will, Vygotsky's Psychology and the concept of 'commitment' introduced by the Activity Theorists.

Having moved from Vygotsky's 'learning to master one's own behaviour by internal processes' to 'learning to master one's own behaviour by social processes', we come up against the observation first made by Hegel and confirmed by Giddens that every action has unforeseeable consequences. As a result I must turn to Ethics to find a rational basis for guidance of the Will. In particular, I find that Alasdair MacIntyre's virtue ethics provides the most satisfactory foundation for social action within a finite horizon of foreseeable consequences.

I then turn to those who claim to seek radical change by building a 'revolutionary party'. By appealing to the horizon of foreseeable consequence and in particular the ethics of *solidarity* in the context of virtue ethics, I show that party-building is mistaken insofar as it is taken to be a vehicle for social transformation.

From this standpoint, the limitations of the stance of most anarchist and socialist movements becomes clear. I shall conclude with a critique of the use of the concept of 'agency' local activism and the caring professions. The aim of this critique is to give scientific meaning to the appeal for 'agency' and a conception of how agency can be acquired.

Part I. Philosophy on the Impossibility of Free Will

1. Early Roman Law and the conversion of Augustine of Hippo

To understand the Will, we must look back to before the concept was founded; Early Roman law worked ok without the Will; seems unjust in our eyes; examples; C.f., today's criminal law re driving cars; the conversion of Augustine of Hippo; no sin without the Will; the Will, which is essentially free, became essential to Christianity; later Roman law *mens rea*, etc. This created a potentially political economy for the Church; Martin Luther denounces the Church selling of indulgences and their claim to be able to absolve guilt with the cooperation of the person. Luther claims that the Will is a prisoner of its own desire.

2. Spinoza and the Negation of Free Will

Spinoza's place in the history of philosophy; The rehabilitation of Spinoza; The context; Spinoza's argument in outline; Spinoza's contributions to Science; Shortcomings of Spinoza; The Antiquity of Spinoza's philosophy; Spinoza's 'Mechanical Materialist' Legacy; cause-and-effect in lieu of free Will; the natural Will; determinism; Spinoza posed the problem, but was unable to solve it.

3. The Impasse in Western Philosophy

The Copernican Revolution; Princess Elisabeth of Bohemia; Empiricism; Dogmatism vs Scepticism; David Hume; Kant's

Answer to Scepticism; Outline of Kant's Moral Philosophy; Critique of Kant; Herder; Fichte.

Part II. An Interdisciplinary Concept of the Will

1. Introduction. Spirit and Dualism

The problem of the starting point; Immediate and mediated knowledge; The structure of the *Logic*; The *Logic* on the Will; The Syllogism of Action;

2. Hegel on the Natural Will

The Psyche ; Consciousness; The Intellect; The development of natural Will; feelings, sensations and meaning; unity of theoretical and practical Spirit; the foundation of the *Philosophy of Right*.

3. Rousseau and Hegel on the Will 'for itself'

The Will in social theory The Will in social theory; Freedom and personal autonomy; Hegel on the Free Will; Social Theory as Ethics; Rights, Morality and Ethical Life; The Will 'for itself'; Purpose, Intention and the Good; Actions; Purpose, Intention and Welfare; Purpose, Goal and Means; Responsibility; Intention; The truth of intentions; Welfare; The Good and Conscience; Conclusion.

4. Rousseau and Hegel on the Universal Will

Freedom and the Will; Rousseau on the general Will; Why Hegel opposed general elections; Hegel on Civil Disobedience; The Right of Heroes; Conclusion.

Part III. The Psychology of the Will

1. Self-control

Introduction; The Higher Psychological Functions; Behaviour; the reflex arc; the conditioned reflex; practical intellect; voluntary behaviour; Self-control; "Original Sin"; The structure of the Higher Psychological Functions; Germ Cell and Unit; Volition and the Will; from Psychology to Social Theory.

2. The development of the Will through childhood

Childhood; The six crises of childhood; social situation of development; The structure of the crisis of the Will; the definition of the periods; 'Gradual' development; Critical phases; Analysis by Units; The Six Crises; 1. The Crisis of Birth and the newborn; 2. Infancy; 3. The crisis at one; 4. The toddler, early childhood; 5. The Crisis at age 3; 6. The pre-school child (3-7); 7. The Crisis at age 7; 8. The School Age Child (7-12); 9. The Crisis at age 13; 10. Adolescence; 11. The Crisis at age 17; Summary of the crises of childhood. Conclusion.

3. The development of the Will through adulthood

Introduction; Leontyev's Theory of Personality; Vasilyuk's Theory of Personal Crises; *Otnosheniye*; *Perezhivanie*; changing reality; the trainee dilemma.

Part IV. Sociology without the Will

1. Functionalism

Introduction; Leontyev's Activity Theory as a Social Theory; Leontyev's conception of an activity; Actions and Activities; Motivation; Objects and Ideals; Objectivism; Personal Sense; Ideology; Dogmatism; Productivism; Functionalism; Functionalist Sociology

2. Althusser's Structuralism,

Relations of production, Apparatus, Ideology, and Subject; Subjects; Apparatuses; Ideology; Science; Ideology; The Subjected Subject; Contradictions and Social change; Agency; Real Issues; Conclusion.

3. Bourdieu's Structuralism.

Field and Habitus; Hysteresis; Class and Habitus; Cultural Capital and Educational Capital; Social Capital, Body Capital, Linguistic Capital, Political Capital; Cultural Relativism; Idealism; Objectivism; Political Opinion Formation; Systems of Status Subordination; Social Capital Theory; Axel Honneth's Critique of Bourdieu; Subjectivity; Conclusion.

Part V. An interdisciplinary theory of the Will

1. Anthony Giddens' critique of Structuralism

Introduction; People can be experts, too; There are no 'natural forces' in social life; Agents; The conjuncture; Giddens' critique of Functionalism; The Knowledgeability of Social Actors; Giddens' Psychology; Resources; Routines; Motivation; Conscious awareness; Practical Consciousness; Conflict of Motives; Conscious Awareness; Unintended Consequences and Conceptual Development; Agency; Institutions and Social Movements; Activities; The Formation of Routines; Conscious Awareness; Conclusion.

2. Alasdair MacIntyre's Virtue Ethics

Practices; Internal Goods; World-historical practices; Institutions; Virtue; Ethics, Consequentialism and Deontology; Goals and Motives; Virtues and Practices; The ethics of social-change traditions; Conclusion.

Part VI. Making a Difference

1 Activism and Utopia.

Prefigurative Politics; Anarchism and Virtue Ethics; The remote future; Ethics and Utopia; The history of the revolutionary party; Working class organisation; Making Revolution; The political landscape in Australia today; Building the revolutionary party; The conditions today; Social Movements; Conclusion.

2. The Social Change Agent

Solidarity; Socialist Revolution; Social Change; Other forms of organisation and activity.

3. Agent of What?

4. Conclusion. A Theory of Meaningful Social Change

Introduction; The Psychology of the Will; Social Theory; Summary.