

**ACTION**

Like PERCEPTION and LANGUAGE, action does not merely take place within the world, but rather contributes to its constitution. A phenomenological philosophy of action that wants to do justice to this central phenomenon needs to develop on different levels. First, it has to grasp the specific character of action in contrast to physical processes, biological reactions, or programmed operations, and in contrast to other forms of human conduct such as work, play, or pure wishing. Second, it has to locate action within the context of life or existence as a whole. Taking into consideration the vital infrastructure as well as the cultural framework of action, the phenomenology of action meets not only with HERMENEUTICS, but also with SOCIOLOGY, PSYCHOLOGY, and PSYCHIATRY. Finally, the phenomenology of action opens up to a comprehensive philosophy of practice. On this last level, phenomenology establishes connections not only with the practical philosophy of Aristotle or FICHTE, but also with MARX and pragmatism. Without its oscillation between a narrower and a broader concept of action, phenomenology would degenerate to merely one paradigm among others.

The views of action we find within the phenomenological movement differ considerably. Nevertheless, there are some main features that are present everywhere, and there are others that have been and remain especially fruitful. Generally speaking, phenomenologists have not so much worked on a coherent theory of action as they have done a great deal to focus on the phenomenon of action without squeezing it into ready-made forms.

It was the central theory of MEANING and INTENTIONALITY that gave access to specific forms of phenomenology of action, called *Praktik* by EDMUND HUSSERL. Thus the classical theory of will and decision was taken up in a new way by Husserl himself in the fifth of his *Logische Untersuchungen* (1900–1901), in his *Vorlesungen über Ethik und Wertlehre* [1908–14], and in *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie*

*und phänomenologischen Philosophie I* (1913); it was unfolded more extensively by ALEXANDER PFÄNDER in *Phänomenologie des Wollens* (1900) and by MAX SCHELER in *Der Formalismus in der Ethik und die materiale Wertethik* (Formalism in ethics and nonformal ethics of values, 1913/1916), and, several decades later, it was enriched by the achievements of the philosophy of existence, by PAUL RICŒUR in his thesis on *Le volontaire et l'involontaire* (1950).

In contrast to the Cartesian and empiricist traditions, action is no longer conceived as a conjunction of psychic volition and physical effect. It appears instead as “experience of transition” (*Übergangserlebnis*): willing as practical intention is fulfilled by the executive action. This transition is initiated by a creative “let it be,” a *fiat* as Husserl puts it, following WILLIAM JAMES. The counterpart of the noesis of action (*Handeln*) is the noema of act (*Handlung*). The willed as willed (*Gewolltes als Gewolltes*) turns into the done as done (*Getanes als Getanes*), into the *pragma* (Ricœur) or deed (*Tat*), which, in terms of being intended, means more than a pure fact (*Tatsache*). As Scheler in particular emphasizes, what we will do or intend appears only in what we do and is not accessible to some kind of introspection; to that extent, every private intention or action is excluded. Practical intentionality includes the possibility of doing something *other* than what we will to do, as in the case of failure. Furthermore, it means that we always want to do *more* than we do. Like perception, action has its open horizons, it is embedded in practical contexts. As the following aspects show, this dynamization of action surpasses the level of static and eidetic descriptions.

Actions that intervene in the course of events suppose the cooperation of our BODY, which roots us in the world. Action in all its forms appears as embodied action. At this point Husserl’s phenomenology of pure consciousness, which tends to found action in a consciousness of action, reaches its limits. The cooperation of the body is first shown by the fact that no action would be set in motion without the moving forces of *motives* that appeal, stimulate, or repel and deter us, turning the so-called affections into a sort of “practical affection.” Husserl’s theory of original passivity makes clear that the other side of every action is passion. Free actions are never achieved by pure decision; they are at least motivated by freedom itself,

to which we are “condemned” (JEAN-PAUL SARTRE). EM-MANUEL LEVINAS has radicalized this aspect by posing an original passivity, more original than all our own doing and undergoing. In another way, MARTIN HEIDEGGER’s notion of *Gelassenheit* points to a background of action that escapes every form of activism.

Second, the cooperation of our body depends on the fact that doing includes practical possibilities of *being able to do* (*Tunkönnen, savoir-faire*). The counterpart of being moved by motives is a moving oneself (*Sich-bewegen*) whose spontaneity surpasses the control of the agent. Our own actions may surprise us. As Husserl shows, especially in the analyses of *Ideen zu einer reinen Phänomenologie und phänomenologischen Philosophie II* (1912–15), actions are more staged than produced.

Finally, by repeating the same action we acquire habits, incorporated in our practical body and forming a practical background where practical sense becomes sedimented. MAURICE MERLEAU-PONTY was the first to emphasize the radical embodiment of action, making use of the research results of medical anthropologists such as FREDERIK J.J. BUYTENDIJK, KURT GOLDSTEIN, ERWIN W. STRAUS, and VIKTOR VON WEIZSÄCKER and — in GESTALT PSYCHOLOGY — such figures as Wolfgang Köhler (1887–1967). Thus in his early book *La structure du comportement* (1942) he integrates human action into the larger framework of a kind of non-behavioristic behavior that creates sense via self-structuring and self-organizing processes; these analyses were continued by CHARLES TAYLOR in *The Explanation of Behaviour* (1964). In his second major book, *Phénoménologie de la perception* (1945), Merleau-Ponty bases the orientation and formation of actions in the spatial motility of our body. Through this approach the phenomenology of action discovers its own margins in terms of parapraxes (*Fehlhandlungen*) whose own sense escapes them, and in terms of compensatory actions (*Ersatzhandlungen*) by which the agent’s organism adjusts to new conditions, as in the case of construing a phantom limb. Embodied actions are exposed to disturbances and at the same time are capable of productive deviations from normality. Here the phenomenology of action reaches the field of PSYCHOANALYSIS and psychiatry.

Ever since MAX WEBER, action oriented to the action of others has been called social action. Husserl adopts

the sense of this concept as used by ADOLF REINACH in the latter’s writings on “Die apriorischen Grundlagen des bürgerlichen Rechtes” (1913). Social acts such as promising or asking are conceived as intentional acts that need to be perceived, understood, and completed by others. In this way, intention and fulfillment are distributed to different interacting persons. But if we presuppose with Husserl that community is not only sustained but even created by communication, then social acts do not consist only in my own act being completed and confirmed by the Other, but it means that we are acting together, co-creating a common sense.

However, in Husserl — and especially in ALFRED SCHUTZ in his fundamental work *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1932) — the socialization of action is checked by the attempt to constitute the otherness of the Others exclusively on the ground of my own experience of the Other. This egocentric trance is broken by Merleau-Ponty. Already in *Phénoménologie de la perception* he starts off from an anonymous, pre- and postpersonal existence. In co-perception as well as in interlocution and interaction the own perspective and that of the other slide into each other in a sort of synthesis of transition. They refer to a kind of *intermonde* (interworld), a world between us that belongs neither to me nor to the Other. My own speech and action is interwoven with the speech and action of the Other, the Other acting within myself and myself acting within the Other by a sort of chiasm. Thus Husserl’s concept of intersubjectivity is explicitly redescribed in terms of common corporeity in Merleau-Ponty’s later work. The self-reference of our own body, being touched and touching at once, is extended to the body of Others *as if* we were organs of one and the same *intercorporeité* (intercorporeity). Finally, intercorporeity and interworld are enrooted in the elements of *chair* (flesh), which pervades everything and everyone. There are no individuals given in advance, there are only processes of individualization and socialization, both interconnected with each other. This view also differs from the concept of interaction in Jürgen Habermas, which consists in the mere coordination of individual actions, based on common rules, and oriented on universal validity claims.

Of special importance is the relation between action and LANGUAGE, not least of all with regard to the debate with ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY. In this context we leave

aside the general question of how to relate the language in which theorists speak about action to action itself. What remains is the specific question of the practical language in which the agent expresses his or her own action. Ricœur addresses this question under the title of *Sémantique de l'action* (1977) by distinguishing between three levels of practical speech: the level of concepts, such as intention, motive, responsibility, with which the agent describes his or her actions; the level of sentences, with which, by uttering them, the actor does something, carrying out certain speech acts; and the level of arguments, with which the agent explains or justifies the actions. Furthermore, he tries to combine phenomenological and analytic approaches by locating both on two different methodological levels, the latter starting from given expressions, the former trying to found the linguistic sense in a basic *dicibilité du vécu* (expressibility of experience).

But the relationship between language and action is not restricted to speech *about* action, to speech *of* action, and to speech *as* action, for we are further confronted with speech *within* action. Thus Karl Bühler (1879–1963), who was perhaps the first to speak of a *Sprechhandlung* in his *Sprachtheorie* (1934), considers special forms of “empractical” or “sympractical” speech where speaking and acting interpenetrate.

Finally, in opposition to *speech as action* (*Sprechhandlung*), there is the possibility of *action as speech* (*Handlungssprache*), embedded in the larger sphere of body language. We often respond to a request by doing what is requested. Such an intertwining of speaking and doing, which allows for a contradiction between words and deeds, refers to systems of signs or symbols or to discourses that encompass speaking and doing. As Merleau-Ponty stresses against Sartre in *Les aventures de la dialectique* (1955), there is no direct action immediately confronting humans and things, but rather every action is indirect, traversing an *intermonde* of cultural-historical symbols.

The different forms of embodiment, social connections, and symbolic mediations condense into a world of *praxis* or into the world as such. Here the narrow concept of action is extended to the larger concept of human praxis. But the way to this general view is paved by the use of the more modest concept of *field*, which was transferred from physics to the analysis of human behavior by Gestalt theorists like Kurt Lewin

(1890–1947). Taking up this terminology, Husserl, in his *Ideen I* and *II*, speaks of a “field of freedom” or a “field of praxis,” and he was followed here by authors such as ARON GURWITSCH and Merleau-Ponty. The concept of field has a certain affinity to the concept of milieu used by Scheler in the context of ETHICS and sociology of knowledge and further developed by Gurwitsch in his book on *Mitmenschliche Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt* [Human encounters in the milieu-world, 1933]. The “field” is defined as a limited whole, oriented to a certain standpoint, pointing to open horizons, capable of being transformed into another whole. Action that takes place in a particular field has its situations, circumstances, paths, accesses, and obstacles, spread in a “hodological space” (Lewin).

The topology of action is complemented by a *chronology* of action. Action as goal-oriented and partly planned behavior, based on preceding experiences and actions, generates a temporality of its own. The deciding *fiat* emerges from surprising or recurrent events, from acts of hesitation or precipitation. The temporality of action is articulated by Heidegger under the aspect of *Entwurf* and *Geworfenheit*, interpreted by Sartre as project and facticity. Schutz in his *Collected Papers I* (1962) defines action as “pre-conceived” conduct and distinguishes between “in-order-to” motives” referring to the future and “because” motives referring to the past.

The organization of action in terms of space and time is completed by certain systems of relevance especially investigated by Schutz and Gurwitsch. Relevance means that from everything that *could* be done here and now something is singled out that *should* be done. Using distinctions made by Gurwitsch in his book *The Field of Consciousness* (1964) drawing on Gestalt psychology, one could say that every action constitutes a thematic field, pushing certain possibilities to the margins.

The global concept of world introduces the totality of spatial, temporal, and thematic references. It is the primary ground from which every action starts, and the universal horizon toward which it moves, but this holds true not only for action. When Husserl relates the possibilities of a world and the possibility of other worlds to *Vermöglichkeiten* (abilities) of the subject, he includes every form of experience and behavior. Ultimately, theory itself, including phenomen-

ological theory, becomes a special form of “theoretical praxis” according to *Die Krisis der europäischen Wissenschaften und die transzendente Phänomenologie* (1936). Heidegger’s analysis of *DASEIN* points in the same direction. But beyond that, Heidegger hesitates to use the concept of *Handeln* because he goes back to possibilities of *Dasein* beyond activity and passivity, beyond theoretical and practical capabilities. So in *Sein und Zeit* (1927), instead of *Handeln* or *Praxis*, he speaks of *besorgende Fürsorge* (concernful solicitude) or *besorgender Umgang* (concernful dealings), which is endowed with *Umsicht* (circumspection) as a specific form of *Sicht* (sight), irreducible to theoretical *Ansicht* (view) or *Einsicht* (insight).

This indirect valorization of practice, provoking the claim in the “Brief über den Humanismus” (1947) that “thinking acts in that it thinks” (“*das Denken handelt, indem es denkt*”), brings phenomenology, to a certain extent, closer to pragmatism and Marxism. Schutz thus considers the world of working (*Wirkwelt*) as a paramount reality. On the other hand, in his *Critique de la raison dialectique* (1960), Sartre integrates the projects of the individual existence into the framework of Marxist praxis. Even the Praxis group organized in Yugoslavia in the 1960s gives Marxism a certain Heideggerian flair.

However, for a long time a certain resistance has been growing against Heidegger’s reinterpretation of action. Thus in *Mitmenschliche Begegnungen*, Gurwitsch, referring to the child’s flexible play with things, argues that the pluriformity and polyvalence of things get lost when the status of things is derived from the normal expediency of tools (*Zeug*). Finally, HANNAH ARENDT, who in her famous book on *The Human Condition* (1958) tries to renew the Aristotelian concept of praxis, opposes the widespread confusion of *praxis* and *poiësis*. The public place of common action disappears when action gets absorbed by needs-fulfilling labor and by the anonymity of technological work. Furthermore, the relation between TECHNOLOGY and praxis, explained by authors like HUBERT DREYFUS and DON IHDE, remains an open question.

Finally, the inner divergencies and the outer conflicts of phenomenology and especially of the phenomenology of action are concentrated in the central and basic problem of REASON or order of action. Unavoidably, Husserl’s “logos of the aesthetic world” resounds

in a “logos of the practical world.” As in the case of perception, we have to ask if action does not have an autochthonous character insofar as the order of practice originates in practice itself and not elsewhere. If we further assume that the order of practice is incorporated in limited fields of action, the question arises whether we are confronted with one single order or rather with orders in the plural, excluding each other and, to some extent, mutually conflicting.

Possible answers to these questions concern practicality as such, and depend on how action itself is conceived. With regard to the classical philosophy of action, we can distinguish at least three different paradigms. Action is submitted to an order of goals and values, to an order of norms and rules, or to an order of causality. The phenomenology of action, based on the assumption of practical intentions and fulfillments, certainly grants privilege to the first paradigm, without completely excluding the others. If we adhere to Husserl’s initial attempt, the intentionality of action is, on the one hand, bound to a formal VALUE THEORY and formal theory of practice, which determine the general conditions of axiological and practical reason (see *Ideen I*).

On the other hand, practical intentions are founded in the intentionality of individual and social impulses (*Triebintentionalität*) mentioned in the posthumously published writings. Actions of the subject are thus not only conditioned by trans-subjective rule-structures, they are also founded in pre-subjective impulses. To some extent, this resembles the trichotomy of ego, superego and id in Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). It should be considered an advantage of the phenomenological approach, compared to the rule-orientation of ORDINARY LANGUAGE PHILOSOPHY and COGNITIVE SCIENCE and the norm-orientation of Continental discourse ethics, that the genesis of practical sense, its corporeal initiation and habitualization, its unconscious motives, with all its openness and ambiguities, is not overshadowed by questions of *legitimacy*. Just as speaking and writing are always more than correct speaking and writing, actions are always more than right or wrong actions. Nevertheless, we have to ask if creativity of action is not underdetermined when action is based on a pre-given order of goals or, in Husserl’s term, rooted in a pervading teleology and rationality (see the *Krisis*).

Embedded in such a teleological order, action would

be nothing more than a means to an end, whereas within a normative order it would be reduced to cases of a rule, and within a causal order, to causal effects. In opposition to this, the possibility of an autochthonous order of practice, originating in practice itself, may be unfolded in two steps. First, action has to be interpreted in terms of *creativity* in its full sense, i.e., not only executing what is possible within a certain order, but making possible by introducing a new kind of order. Speaking with Alfred Schutz in *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* [1947–51], there are things that are not only new (*neu*), but of a new kind (*neuartig*). Following the investigations of Max Wertheimer (1880–1943) in *Productive Thinking* (1945), we can suppose a sort of productive acting. As Cornelius Castoriadis (1926–1984) shows in his book on *L'institution imaginaire de la société* (1975), radical creativity is not restricted to solving pre-given problems, as a certain pragmatism presumes, but rather consists in posing new questions. Just as Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between speaking speech (*parole parlante*) and spoken speech (*parole parlée*), we should similarly distinguish between productive and reproductive, innovative and repetitive acting, both ranging on a certain scale whose one pole would be gratuitous acts, the other stereotypes.

Creativity does not mean that everything is possible, it means that it is always possible to realize more than what is actually realized. With regard to the contingency of variable orders that are always selective and exclusive, we can state with Merleau-Ponty: “There is (*il y a*) sense or rationality but not *the* sense or *the* rationality” or with MICHEL FOUCAULT “There is an order of things” (*Les mots et les choses*, 1966), both statements recalling Heidegger’s remark, “There is truth” (*Es gibt Wahrheit*). But pure creativity will not do. By looking for what *can be done* in a new way we do not find out what *has to be done*, and we do not meet with what Merleau-Ponty calls *vérité à faire*. So we have to take a second step. We can attribute to action what Kurt Goldstein (*Der Aufbau des Organismus*, [The structure of the organism, 1934]) attributes to the healthy organism — namely, a certain *responsiveness*. In doing and speaking, we always respond to certain affordances (*Aufforderungscharaktere*), as Gestalt theorists stress. So we should take seriously Husserl’s attempt, which can also be found in his posthumously published writings on intersubjectivity, to reinterpret affectivity

as “practical affectivity,” as appeal (*Anruf*), concern (*Angang*), or demand (*Aufruf*), and finally as interpellation/claim (*Anspruch*), transforming all behavior into “responding behavior.” Here we meet with Levinas’s philosophy of the Other, which breaks with all totality. Radical response takes the paradoxical form of creative responding. While creating our response itself — i.e., *what* we respond — we do not at all create *what* or *whom* we respond to.

Responsive acting, which moves within a certain order while simultaneously transgressing it, lends its ear to what is extraordinary, atypical, marginal, anomalous. In this line phenomenology will on the one hand renounce the illusion of a first or last order, but on the other hand it would resist the trend of normalization that reduces all actions to ordinary actions functioning in a certain order, whatever it may be. If what has to be done is always more than what we do, our doing transgresses every given order, stimulated by what exceeds our intentions without fulfilling them.

#### FOR FURTHER STUDY

- Arendt, Hannah. *The Human Condition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958.
- Buytendijk, Frederik J. J. *Algemene theorie der menselijke houding en beweging*. Antwerp: Standaard Boekhandel, 1948; *Allgemeine Theorie der menschlichen Haltung und Bewegung* [1956]. Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1972.
- Dallmayr, Fred R. *Polis and Praxis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1948.
- Goldstein, Kurt. *Der Aufbau des Organismus*. The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1934; *The Organism*. New York: American Book, 1938; rpt. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
- Gurwitsch, Aron. *Die mitmenschlichen Begegnungen in der Milieuwelt* [1931]. Ed. Alexandre Métraux. Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1977; *Human Encounters in the Social World*. Trans. Fred Kersten. Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University, 1979.
- Ihde, Don. *Technics and Praxis*. Dordrecht: Reidel, 1979.
- Kojima, Hiroshi, ed. *Phänomenologie der Praxis im Dialog zwischen Japan und dem Westen*. Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 1989.
- Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. *La structure du comportement*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1942; *The Structure of Behavior*. Trans. Alden L. Fisher. Boston: Beacon Press, 1963.
- . *Phénoménologie de la perception*. Paris: Gallimard, 1945; *Phenomenology of Perception*. Trans. Colin Smith. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1962.
- Ricoeur, Paul. *Le volontaire et l'involontaire*. Paris: Aubier, 1950; *The Voluntary and the Involuntary*. Trans. Erazim V. Kohák. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1966.

Encyclopedia of Phenomenology

Embree, L. (Ed.)

1997, XIV, 765 p. 1 illus., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-0-7923-2956-5