

**THE HUMAN BEING IN ACTION**

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ANNA-TERESA TYMIENIECKA

# THE HUMAN BEING IN ACTION

THE IRREDUCIBLE ELEMENT IN MAN

PART II

*Investigations at the Intersection of Philosophy and Psychiatry*

*Edited by*

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Paul Ricoeur, Henri Maldinet, R. P. Marcel Régner, Emmanuel Levinas, Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka (from left to right)

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THE HUMAN BEING IN ACTION

*Phenomenology as the Ground for the Interdisciplinary Investigation of  
Man and of the Human Condition*

In our quest after the *irreducible element* in man we are led from the investigation of the SELF AND THE OTHER to that of the HUMAN BEING IN ACTION.

How does the human being reveal himself to be what and who he is? Is it through matter-of-fact observations, scientific hypothesis, our own experience of ourselves, or from our personal convictions and opinions about the world, about our fellow man and about the meaning of existence, that we are enabled to draw conclusive evidence concerning the nature of the unique individual person, or of the human being in general, envisaged in his "essential state"?

Could the phenomenological investigation, which in its classic phases aims at discovering both the objective structure of man's constitutive system and its results in their "essential state", even aim at grasping the human being; were we to take seriously Dilthey's claim emphasized in contemporary existential thought, that man is essentially an experiencing being?

Indeed, in the fullness of his experiential functioning the core of the human being eludes the rational grasp of objectifying rules and structures, categories and principles.

In our investigation of man, then, should we aim exclusively at his inward, spiritual being which in some trends of existential philosophy is made to appear as positively accessible through a specific type of dialectic, while in other trends the failure to assess it opens a human void at the heart of an elaborate theory?

By proceeding in this manner we would so narrow the expansion of the human functioning that its vital roots would be amputated, and the significance of life itself would be lost from sight.

Furthermore, in concrete life we are often awakened from the lofty visions which we have of our self or of our fellow man by sudden reactions, courses of action taken which, arising from some of ours or of his obscure

vital regions, remain at total odds with our self-image. Is this action willful or impulsive? In either estimation it destroys the network of views, opinions and explanations reached by us on rational grounds: broken and disintegrated, this network falls off like a shell that reveals itself capable only of protecting but not of accounting for the flesh of the being it disguised.

More precisely, does the primordial human factor consist in "interpretation" in which the human being bestows meaning upon the course of his passively unfolding interwordly existence, or in "action" in which he exercises initiative to forge it?

1. *The cognitive, meaning-bestowing function of man's life-course* is undoubtedly doubled by an "operational side." The constitutive cognitive apparatus has to be "activated" and entered into "operation" in order that the human being can originate within the world and unfold his existence. In fact, although the Husserlian investigation of the simultaneous structuration of the human subject and of his life-world proceeds through an analysis of the structure constitutive of both, the objects and the processes in which they are constituted, it is conceived as a processlike progress itself. The analysis draws its rational structures and their interlacing links from the maze of otherwise unobjectifiable operations left behind. Nevertheless, approaching the human being from the bias of this meaning-bestowing function, the Husserlian investigation emphasizes the cognitive side to the neglect of the operational. In fact, pursuing structure after structure, throwing connecting links between emerging fragments and piecing them together as they appear in the field of consciousness of the subject, this analysis throws a web of reason over the moving and fluctuating flux covering the streams, cross-currents, and springs of this undertaking itself. Our own approach to the human being which focuses upon *his vital bounds with the Other* rather than upon his singularized being, seems to show that man does not unfold his individuality from his subjective selfhood alone. On the contrary, his very individualization into an autonomous subject within the organic, social and spiritual world-processes by means of a differentiation from the radical Otherness of his condition. He projects himself and his life-world not from his own center alone but, on the contrary, in existential reference to the Otherness of his condition. Consequently, his progress does not consist in "passively" flowing with an inner stream working through him, but by undertaking step by step measures appropriate to the circumstances which would

promote his development. Its progress implies trial and error but also meditated decision-making, impulse but also exercise of will.

In short, the human being unfolds his course not only along the pre-delineated cognitive/constitutive lines, but also through the factor of chance and invention, through lines of continuous rational patterns as well as through the unforeseeable intrusion of the Other; through repetition of forms as well as through their *innovation*.

The Husserlian conception of the meaning-bestowing function as based on a system regulated by a priori principles universally applicable to all human beings is then rightly conceived by Husserl as a "passive synthesis" inasmuch as it is meant as a flux carrying the individual willy-nilly onward. But so conceived, it falls short of acknowledging properly the Other as the essential partner of its undertaking. In fact, although it is through interpretation, appreciation, recognition, discrimination, and construction resulting in meaning-bestowing, that the human being carries on his existential traffic with the Other, that is, through the antennae of cognition and rational order – yet it is from and through the *active thrust* and *response* that the Self and the Other advance in their appraisal of the givenness and in their proposals for forthcoming "action."

2. *Order and Undertaking* appear then as the two aspects of the human origination and advance in existence. Would they both be gifts of Nature, prefabricated and ready to throw man into existence as well as to propel him through it? Or, as we have already suggested, would the undertaking instead of unfolding passively from a precoded operational blueprint, comprise also crucial instances of lines of development freely devised by the human being? After all, as even a superficial – but unprejudiced – view of the world shows, is it not by breaking with the preposed patterns of the universally established course of things and events that man himself introduces the cornerstones of his and the world's progress?

If we ask after the *irreducible specifically human factor*, the above proposed equipoise between order and undertaking (cognition and action), as between two intertwined sides of the human mechanism, tends to balance heavier on the side of action. This shift of weight reaches its apex when we ask after the source from which the uniquely personal significance with which the human being may endow his existence flows. Is it not, indeed, forged in opposition to all the universal patterns and discoverable models with man's own inventive powers? Indeed, as we have already argued elsewhere, man's creative activity – even more than his

moral action – is *the vehicle without which the human being would not be able to endow his existence with a specifically human meaningfulness.*

Thus, following the steps of our inquiries into the *crisis of man*, we are led to revert in the present volume decidedly to the emphasis of the modern philosophy, so radically endorsed by Husserl. From the *cognito* seen as the center radiating man's projection of himself within his life-world, we turn our attention to its enacting, devising and ultimately, inventing. *From cognition – to action.*

3. *The phenomenologically-inspired vision of the human being within his world* has in turn inspired many fields of research in the middle of our century. Stimulated, these fields have been reorienting their approaches, fulfilling the original aspiration of the Husserlian enterprise to lay the philosophical foundation for the sciences. Sharing some of the basic insights, they became, as I have shown in my early work *Phenomenology and Science in Contemporary European Science*, conversant with each other, fulfilling the same aspiration of phenomenology to be a *mathesis universalis*. However, the vision in its various versions – Husserlian, Heideggerian, Merlau-Pontean . . . quickly exploited – had certainly a great cultural influence, yet faded away and with it the aspiration of phenomenology remained incompleting. Its stress upon cognitive order with ensuing subjectivism fell short to pertain to the *full expanse of the Human Condition*. Sciences themselves have in the meantime changed their criteria; and from the aim to grasp the universe, Nature and life in their “essence” moved in the Leibnizean direction of seeking *to enter into their operations*. However, in doing so, they become more differentiated and separated than before, breaking the image of man to pieces, and losing the focal point of the human being altogether. It may be ventured that the emergence of the perspective of action in the development of the phenomenological investigation-from-within encounters that of the sciences. Is phenomenological reorientation in the perspective of human action capable of what the cognitive/constitutive orientation was not, that is, of tying together the human being and *Elemental Nature*?

From my previous assessments it comes clearly to light that action – unlike a process – cannot be envisaged either as an entity, or as a clear-cut, autonomous instance of becoming in general, or even as an independent strand of human functioning. To be sure, when we speak about “action” we mean “human action”. And such action – as I have hinted at before – is the resultant of the complete array of the human functioning triggered into motion as well as it is simultaneously the instrument of its working. By

throwing up a bridge between blind operation and its meaningful end, by promoting the existential interlinks among things and beings, and by establishing the main arteries of man's partaking in the resources of Nature, action discloses itself as the vehicle of man's origination, individualization, and life-course. Therefore, to approach the human being in the perspective of action not only renders accessible the whole expanse of the Human Condition but also exposes man's specific means for extracting his unique being from other types of beings, things and from an anonymous Nature. These specifically human means are thrown open for a renewed investigation of the human being and his universe.

Thus, in the perspective of action the human being may retrieve his adequate image. He fails to recognize himself in the broken mirror of contemporary philosophy, science and literature, all three of which merely reflect various, incompatible half-truths about himself. But it might well be that these broken distorted pieces will come together transformed in this new avenue of an approach.

"Human action" is already a notion drawing upon the critical appraisal of the vast field of phenomenological inheritance. Not restricted to the human consciousness – nor to the intentional system – the investigation of the human being in action naturally draws upon research in the natural sciences, in the social and behavioral sciences, in the fine Arts, in literature and in mathematics. It spreads also to those areas concerned particularly with human conduct. Thus by encompassing the routes of will and man's self-determination, it reaches to the studies of the sacred and to religion. Would it be too hasty to anticipate that the vision of man that will emerge progressively from this unified, comprehensive research – and which brings all the major arteries of scholarly concern together – will then enter into the heart of these otherwise disparate disciplines and permeate them with its rays? Although they focus upon different sides and processes of man's self-explication in existence – while overlapping in respect of this progressively-to-grow core of common philosophical relevance to the discovery of the human image – might it not be natural for them jointly to develop channels of communication reflecting their common aim?

Indeed, we may hope that the concentration upon the human being in action may offer phenomenology its second opportunity to fulfill its original purpose of establishing the basis for a universal inquiry into all that is not foreign to man.

4. *Philosophy and psychiatry* fall directly into this schema. With the former attentive to the essential state of the universally valid human

functioning, and the latter committed to the study of those factors which seem to hinder or, on the contrary, to promote man's optimal growth, philosophy and psychiatry complement each other's respective focus while they meet in the pursuit of the basic human means and ends. Hence it is psychiatry that in the first wave of the phenomenological inspiration spreading to the sciences of man took the lead by developing with Binswanger, Boss, Minkowski, Straus and others, psychiatric lines of research bringing the elements of the phenomenological approach and of the phenomenological conception of man within his world into their otherwise empirical work. And yet through the cognitive, transcendental prism presenting man in his *life-world*, the elemental condition of the human being did not come to its rights. As I have been voicing it elsewhere, without an assessment of man's ties with *Elemental Nature*, which the conception of the *life-world* alone cannot accomplish, this first so fruitful and enlightening encounter between phenomenology and psychiatry is vanishing from the scene. However, it has been taken up again in a much more extensive form by Henri Ey and his school.

It is then again by the dialogue of philosophy and psychiatry that we may hope to initiate the phenomenological investigation of the human being in the perspective of action. In seeking for the irreducible elements in man through this bias we may find the access to them precisely at the cross section of inquiries, one focusing upon the universal human condition, the other upon circumstances which favor or hinder the human being in his availing himself of his virtualities.

Our phenomenological profile of the human action relates it essentially to the various modalities of the entire system of the human functioning. Hence we cannot but seek to circumscribe it progressively through its relationships to the major arteries of human functions, that is, to the cognitive/constitutive, evaluative, and creative functions.

This orientation, which is expressed in the present selection, documents the nature of the dialogue between those philosophers and psychiatrists who participated in our Paris Colloquium. In fact, the studies published here draw attention not only to the problems pertaining directly to the human being in action but also to the virtualities of the enacting of his existence in the human functioning, e.g. the passivity/activity of conscious life, association, evidence, regulative principles and experience as such. In spite of their vast spread, these approaches fall into a sequence. Focusing in the same direction, they partly complement each other, partly encroach upon each other – mapping in this way the new territory to be investigated.

The sequence opens by the beacon of the human action: imagination. And by imagination it comes to a closure. Breaking the narrow framework of man's bounds with Nature, *Imaginatio Creatrix* brings together his virtualities in the creative activity, the prototype of human action.

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ANNA-TERESA TYMIENIECKA