on action

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Patrick Healy

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In his recent overview of process philosophy Nicholas Rescher points up the difficulty of a common understanding for process philosophy, and for pragmatism, in making sense of what he takes as a primary disjunction between the personal and the impersonal in the realm of agency, and the problems this creates for a version of human agency in any account of action, noting that in the work of Strawson and Quine there is a form of ontological preference for the stability of the thing over and against what are seen as derivative and secondary phenomena, namely, process and change.

In his account of agency Rescher acknowledges that, whilst human agency may be only a small part of a philosophy of process, it is fundamental in that it raises difficulties for any account of agency and naturalism which does not take into view the scission between the impersonal and the agent managed in any understanding of process.

Rescher attempts to establish a series of interrogatives which allow one to approach a description of action, and which does not collapse the capacity of an account either into the problem of infinitely divisible explanation (the kind of regress taken in view for explaining the voluntary by the volitional) or the problem of polyadicity, noted by Kenny, in which a single event could be taken as causal for every other event that takes place (a version of predestination flowing from the act of God creating the world, for example, or, in a more prosaic example, Caesar crossing the Rubicon).[1]

The scission is found in the understanding of action as human agency, this being, even at the most trivial literal level, the definition of action, id est, what an agent does as opposed to what happens to an agent (or what happens inside an agent's head). We can only speak in that context of rationality and intention if we can say actions, and thus give to the issue of agency the transparency of will. The intrinsic temporal and dynamic unity of perception is the praxis of involvement, and not derivative, or consequent, from reasoning itself. For Blondel in his work on action published in 1893 this also was the Leitfrage for philosophy, a request to found a phenomenology of action in the finite praxis of human inquiry, about the very involvement in world where the question of agency could be raised, raised as a gap, between action and realisation. Blondel is the first to pose the question of action as the existential and constitutive, not of world, but of man as the constant tension of possibility and actualisation.[2] This is a break with the more scholastic view of the relation between speech and action, best characterised by Dante in his *De Monarchia* (I.13).

"In every action what is primarily intended by the doer is the disclosure of his own image. Hence it comes about that every doer, in so far as he does, takes delight in doing, and in fact everything that is desires its own being, and in

1 Nicholas Rescher; *Process Philosophy*, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000, at p. 57, and for Quine, Strawson and Kenny, pp. 34 et seq. One might also consult, the 1992 publication of Strawson (P.F.) *Analysis and Metaphysics*, C.A. Campbell article in Mind no. 60 of 1951 *"Is 'Freewill' a pseudo-problem?"*, William James; 1890 *The Principles of Psychology*, vol. II. Ch. XIX-.

2 In the same year Blondel published his *De vinculo substantiali et de substantia composita apud Leibnitium*, where in the search for knowledge of the concrete existent and the unity of the particular with the whole, he draws on the Leibnizian notion of the *vinculum substantiale*. The *vinculum substantiale* is a substantial bind, or bond, a kind of chain, by means of which the dominant monad are said to have their dominion over dominated monads. Deleuze comments on the issue of appurtenance "It is not easy to know what we own, and for what length of time. Phenomenology does not suffice. The question of Beckett's Malone is if he does not have to whom does he belong?" He needs a special hook, a sort of *vinculum* on which he can hang and sort through his different things, but he has even lost this hook. Echoing Tarde, Deleuze calls into question the unjustifiable primacy of the verb 'to be', "The true opposite of the self is not the non-self, it is the mine,…"
The substantial vinculum is a "strange linkage, a bracket, a yoke, a knot, a complex relation that comprises variable terms and one constant term. For this see, Gilles Deleuze, in his *Le pli: Leibniz et le baroque*, chapter 3.

action, since the being of the doer is intensified, delight necessarily follows. Thus nothing acts unless by acting it makes patent its latent self." From this Arendt argues that speechless action does not exist, it exists in the nexus and never achieves its purpose; the relational precludes the concept of agency as having any particular telos.[3] This admits the view that in every willing it is the person who is active, willing and acting are a fulfilment of the person, and in a necessary circularity, self-determination and freedom are manifested in the 'I will'. In action we of necessity speak of self-determination.

Returning to the problem of scission however the question of the relation of agency and actions to the realm of nature, or, as belonging strictly to the person, results in further problems. Leaving aside the question whether one can characterise certain actions as basic, or any human actions as inhuman, qua actions, the question as to what interrogatives actions may be subjected may help to raise the difficulty of the account of causality (temporal succession and causality) and freedom.

Blondel makes the following general comment "Le corps de l'action n'est pas seulement un système de mouvements manifestés par la vie organique dans le milieu des phénomènes; il est constitué par la synthèse réelle et plus ou moins harmonisée des tendances multiples où s'expriment notre nature, notre spontanéité, nos habitudes, notre caractère."[4] This invokes an understanding of the person not through thing-like essence but in action as action, the personalism of milieu (as in Arendt, the space of appearance), with the important consequence of the idea, adumbrated in the writing of Ingarden that man is an auto-creation; "In dem Bereich seiner möglichen Verwandlungen ist das Subjekt der Schöpfer seines Selbst. Es gäbe diejenige Gestalt seines Wesens nicht, die sich letzten Endes in seinem Leben realisiert, wenn es seine Taten und Verhaltensweisen in den Beziehungen zu seiner Umwelt nicht gegeben hätte."[5]

The paradox that the freedom of action and its relation to nature founds the revealing of the person creates difficulties for the descriptive taxonomy which Rescher attempts, and indeed for any projective anthropology or ethics which fails to take account of the auto-constitution of the action in the personal milieu, which is a fundamental fact of all human praxis, if only because of its restless manifestation, and the impossibility of the pragmatic requirement for negotiating a notion of some end in view for the circumspection of involvement which cannot overcome the finiteness of action.

When considering action one may then ask the following question; a question in respect of the agent, which is, who is doing the action, and further with regard to the act type, as to, what action is being done, further, a question concerning the modality of the action requiring responses to the how of the action, the manner of the action, whether it is a basic action which is not 'by', that is to say if the manner of the action, even though attributive has nevertheless the possibility of a generic distribution, for example, a non basic action of agent X is an action X performs *by* performing some other action, and so a basic action would be an action which X does not perform *by* performing some other action, or, in the issue of modality of action then, asking, not just the manner, but, the means, that is the question, by what means the action is performed: this leads also to the nexus and the context of the performed action, context

3 For Arendt, I have drawn on the version of a lecture delivered on November 10th 1964, which can be found in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, edited by Peter Baehr, Penguin Books, NY. section IV. 2000.

4 For this see M. Blondel; *L'action*, Paris, Beauchesne, 1963, II, pp 192-3.

5 R. Ingarden; *Der Streit um die Existenz der Welt*, *II*, Niemeyer, Tübingen, 1965, p 299, note 30.

as temporal, the question when, or, spatial as the question, when / where, and even circumstantial, also allowing one to ask if the action is caused, whether it has an aim, and even in one version of intentionality, what are its motives? However, without an account of the specific manner of human involvement in the world this remains a completely abstract inventory of question that needs to itself be made questionable. Human agency and praxis cannot be isolated for an individual actor, because living always means milieu. It is not an anybody who acts, but a somebody, in which potency and act conjugate each other as the possibility of self disclosure.

An agent cannot be nobody. The action of somebody also belongs to the otherness and plurality of a life that is born, the notion of being born marks a dynamism proper to the subject; although it involves a doing without choice. Something of the existential frailty and 'unknowability of action' situates it as the creative problem par excellence; in Hannah Arendt's view every deed and every new beginning falls into an already existing web, where it nevertheless will start a new process that will affect many others, even beyond those with whom the agent comes into direct contact. It is the very question of nexus and process which raises the most difficult consideration for the account of action, namely the gap noted by Blondel, that it almost never achieves its purpose. Arendt adds, that because of this non-realisation of ends, there is a fictional eruption in all manifestation; the view of agency she argues for results in a necessary scission that on one hand action is a first person somebody, thus capable of conjugating the pronominal, nevertheless the non-finito of action orchestrates an anonymous murmur where stories are told which are not properly speaking products. The state of affairs given in speech is constitutive of a meaning for life, and she adds: "Without action, without the capacity to start something new and thus articulate the new beginning that comes into the world with the birth of each human being, the life of man, spent between birth and death, would indeed be doomed beyond salvation. The life span itself, running towards death would inevitably carry everything to ruin and destruction. Action, with all its uncertainties, is like an ever-present reminder that men, though they must die, are not born to die but in order to begin something new. Initium ut esset homo creatus est - "that there be a beginning man was created," said Augustine."[6]

6 see H. Arendt, "The Modern Concept of History", *Review of Politics* 20/4, October 1958, reprinted in *The Portable Hannah Arendt*, pp. 278-310, op.cit. ut supra.

It is the determinate forms of self manifestation which release the human agent, a living restlessness that effectuates itself, it is in that sense the subjective and intersubjective immanence which answers the question of who is doing the action as that which effectuates. The self too is relation and movement in action, and subjectivity is not simply a one sided agency for making a synthesis of representation, nor can it exist as some exclusive interiority of personality, the relational too is a dynamism of agency, one might say a 'becoming world'. However, world here is not intended as a result.[7]

7 For this see Jean-Luc Nancy: *Hegel: L'inquiétude du négatif*. Hachette Littératures, 1997

The relational does not found an ethical community, in manifestation it is an upsurge and rupture, the initium of which Arendt speaks from Augustine must proceed from will, after all everything has already begun, the beginning here can only have a relation to the decision to beginning where the reality of what manifests exposes without questions. There is already a being in the world, natality does not inscribe death, it is not its opposite, the opposite is what is unborn, not of nature; it is a dynamism, in which life penetrated by life is as the verb of birthing, i.e. the birth that births as birthing. Agency is of verbs, essentialism is of nouns and things. What is to be identified for thinking is not mean-

ing as the question of essence, but the pointing towards and saying of action as tensed act, this is a manner of saying that, neither matter, body, contingency, event is separate in the 'I will', that it is inappropriate to think 'I think, I am a body, it acts'. The will effectively irrupts into the effectivity of world.

However the problem of the scission still needs to be raised, exactly because it is taken as the traditional understanding of the human act in the distinction made between man acts, that is to say that a human act is of the will, deliberative, and make the distinction of what happens to who acts as the what happens, id est, that is passive, and the who acts as the deliberative, voluntary - and we attribute to consciousness, or self consciousness, a certain function that in the structure of the person refers to the possession of oneself, a definition given crystal expression in Karol Wojtyła's work on *The Acting Person*.

"It is only man's deliberate acting that we call an "act" or "action". Nothing else is his acting, nothing that is not intended or deliberate is to be so termed."

For Wojtyła the interpretation found in Aristotle is realistic, objectivistic and metaphysical. It issues from the whole conception of being, and more directly from the conception of potentia-actus.[8] Thus the proper mode of man's acting is actus voluntarius, which is viewed as a power, that is free will. This is derived directly from the observation of Aquinas that, "Liberum arbitrum est causa sui motus: quia homo per liberum arbitrum seipsum movet ad agendum" *(Summa Theol. 83, I ad.3)* that is a power which makes man determine his own actions. It is in this very definition the scission erupts as causa sui and the requirement of intention.

8 Karol Wojtyła; *The Acting Person*, Analecta Husserliana, Vol.10. 1979, chapter I et passim.

However over all of this hovers the remorseless reflection of Nietzsche, "Action: one does not know its origins, one does not know its consequences: - therefore does action possess any value at all?"[9] Arendt wants to characterise the ancient notion of history as recounting deeds, singular events, glorious actions. The action of an individual the daily commerce of the world in speaking and doing had the relation to remembrance. Individual mortality expressed in deed and gesture as single instances was as recounted history given value because they were interruptions to the cycle of time or the immortal, eternal, of the cosmos. It is remembrance which sustains the meaning of action. Arendt follows the understanding of the dynamism proper to action as protected and sheltered by the act of memory, even in the construction of the tradition, the injunction to remember is performative and thus creates the tradition. The relation of history to nature and remembrance is changed in the modern period. Action in the new speed of time and its valorising over contemplation, labour, production, with its mimesis as externalising in technology; the replicating of memory technological storage, destroys the injunction to remember, all that is required is immediacy of linkage and multiple connection, with the issue of making returned to the technologising of nature. For Arendt human action is political, it is bound up with human plurality, "which is one of the fundamental conditions of human life insofar as it rests on the fact of natality, through which the human world is constantly invaded by strangers, newcomers whose actions and reactions cannot be foreseen by those who are already there and are going to leave in a short while." Of current acting into nature, or rather she observes, "If therefore by starting natural processes, we have begun to act into nature, we have manifestly begun to carry our own unpredictability into the realm we used to think as ruled by inexorable laws." Arendt is close in her reflections here both to the critique of subjectivity in Marcuse and the specific problem raised by Heidegger in his late work; how was it possible to still be at home

9 Nietzsche; *Wille zur Macht*, no.291.

in the age of technological world civilisation. Where in the early work there is a duality in Heidegger between the problem of meaning and nihilism, the later characterisation is about the relation between dwelling and homelessness, the latter is the constant threat to the opening of Dasein, whereas dwelling is a mode of presentation of establishing relations with the manifest moments of the conditions of existence, the actual standing to and existing of relation, that is characterised as the poetic word, which has no definition, thus the structural concept of human being in the world is elicited by the elucidation of the elements of structure described as the existential of the human. This is what Heidegger refers to as the poetic taking of measure. This is what Arendt fears as lost.

Arendt has made the issue as one of suspicion of the senses, or the doubting of Descartes as method, also the deception of an empiricism which is only a seeming vindication of the senses; "Empiricism is only seemingly a vindication of the senses, actually it rests on the assumption that only common sense arguing can give meaning to them, and it always starts with a declaration of non-confidence in the truth or reality revealing capacity of the senses. … Puritanism and empiricism in fact are only two sides of the same coin."

It is to the risk and unpredictability of action that the question of agency needs to return, and to the way in which a theory of 'complexity', where one can think the way of being without identity, can occur. It is Deleuze who raises the questions of the event for philosophy as thinking a way of being which is not simply a conjunction of potency and act but rather as a leap into the unthought, a Sprung which does not require an Ursprung. What Deleuze brings to the problematic of agency is neither the pragmatic or empirical form as outlined in Rescher, it is the return of vitalism to philosophy as experimentation (experiment derived initially from the notion of 'experience'). In one sense Deleuze has grasped the idea of the singular for which Arendt finds an exclusively Greek paradigm; the action of the multiple and the trust in the sense is the awareness not of the unity of apperception caught up in the argument of causality, but a simple acknowledgement of the primacy of the sentiendum.[10]

10 Deleuze notes the coincidence of Whitehead and Leibniz, in the understanding of what makes an event possible. The conditions are extension, where the event is an infinity of harmonics or submultiples, extensive series which have intrinsic properties, thus existent as intensions, intensities, degrees, which is the individual, the individual itself a concresence of elements. There is a prehension as subjective (emotion, feeling, affectivity) there is passage from one prehension to another, and self-enjoyment. In this latter enjoyment the question pace Deleuze for Whitehead and Bergson, in what conditions does the objective world allow for subjective production of novelty, that is of creation? See, *Le pli*, section II, 6.

Singular events are, as a series, unlike a set or organic whole. The multiple cannot be denumerate and a series composed of singularities is always en milieu. Deleuze has characterised his work as a searching for the nature of the event, refusing the theory that an adequate explanation of every event can be given in terms of casual antecedents either as psychological, physical or mechanistic determinism and most specifically any version of logical fatalism; the view that all our actions are inscribed with the necessity of the laws of logic, the idea that all future events, for example can be captured now in either / or or propositional form; "it will be the case that I go to the library tomorrow or that I do not", so in any future case it will be the case either that p or that not-p (where p is a proposition), which is to say that by the law of the excluded middle it is the case that if it is necessary that I go or that I do not, whatever happens happens necessarily, that is it was inevitable. The move may be shown to be invalid in modal logic by showing that the necessity only governs the strict disjunction, that is the whole of the either / or claim of either p or its negation, this necessity cannot be transferred to govern p by itself or just not-p by itself.

In singularity and repeatability there is a view of existence which does not require a compatabilist account, or, some version of soft determinism to make sense; that is the account in which it is claimed that human actions are both

caused and determined, and yet can be considered free in so far as they are caused or determined by human deliberation or choice, which avoids the infinite regress of the voluntary being preceded by the voluntary, or if involuntary, having to treat the voluntary as an anomaly as it needs to be explained in terms of the involuntary. For Deleuze one can think of the unfolding, of the event, as the question of existence, in a more stammering, hesitant way, so that like characters in cinema, one ceases to be determined by fixed qualities. They are tied together by many bits and blocks of logic. Difference is put into complex wholes, and in what happens and what has happened to us there is something inattributable. The question for Deleuze is how to create a logic as sense and event rather than a logic of predication and truth.

Such making sense is properly human action, because as Heidegger observed in a Logic course of 1928, in constructing a world Dasein also constructs being, in the sense of the meaningfulness of beings, this is what he contends in drawing attention to the fundamental es gibt of beings being there in so far as Dasein exists. Radical individuation demonstrates that Dasein must 'give itself' being in order for there to be meaning at all, the world is so disclosed, or, this is how beings can emerge as they are, only through the disclosive essence of Dasein. Such a primordial praxis of self understanding, the radical 'mineness' of individuation, is what Heidegger understands as 'transcendence', not that Dasein could go beyond itself but to choose itself as an individual. What is taken here is that for the es gibt, within the radical mineness of Dasein, there is a kinetic projective structure, which while already underway and having determination from the non-choosing of coming into the world, can have freedom to discover and disclose entities in the world, because world becomes accessible in the question of Dasein, which asks the question of the whole and radically individuates by the same interrogative, where the coming to be is the act of disclosive enquiry, which is temporal. There is a horizonal limitation which is the 'irrational potency' of being in the world disclosed most profoundly as the future projection of not being; action takes place as already within a horizonal unity of what is prior to all such action, and towards which all action is directed, thus a double radical of the finite, which lies at the heart of both theory and praxis.

The self revelation of existence is the fact of affectivity. Dasein being for itself is the praxis in which fabrication and theory are united. What makes the connection seeking the whole and the individuation of Dasein possible, except possibility, because the essence of time is individuation, the all encompassing breadth of being is one and the same as the challenging individualisation of time. The finite being which appropriates beings according to possibilities is the mineness that is the root of being, a ground that is itself groundless, because it understands world as involvement and inter-action, as action of the radical finitude, and as praxis discovers the meaning of what is poetic and theoretical, because temporal, Dasein is factically and finitely free; beings are available for disclosure and Dasein is disclosive, this is the event in which the praxis of existence is Dasein as projective action that is a particular kind of questioning.[11]

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11 See Catriona Hanley; *Being and God in Aristotle and Heidegger*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Oxford, 2000, section V chapter 5, b. *'From Aristotle's theory to Heidegger's practice.'*