

*The*  
CREATIVITY  
*of*  
ACTION

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*Hans*  
Joas

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## Introduction

'Action' is a key concept in philosophy and almost all the social and cultural sciences today; efforts to construct a 'theory of action' meet with especial interest in all these fields. For outsiders it must be difficult, to say the least, to understand why this should be the case. Indeed, it may be regarded as proof of a suspicion they have long since had, namely that the academic world prefers to tackle unnecessarily abstract problems of its own choosing instead of dedicating its efforts to solving the truly pressing problems of the day. The apparent absence of any link between the various debates on action theory in the different branches of the social sciences is additionally confusing and gives cause for mistrust. As once again becomes evident in this connection, each field constitutes a discourse of its own that more or less isolates itself from those in the other disciplines. This is, of course, not to say that chains of influence are non-existent – individual philosophical schools, in particular, tend to impact on specific fields in the social sciences. Yet, on the whole, little notice is taken in psychology, economics and sociology respectively of arguments put forward in debates in each of the other fields.

In economic theory, certainly since the second half of the nineteenth century if not earlier, the abstract notion of a '*homo oeconomicus*' and thus of a type of rational choice and rational action has become the fundamental point of departure of all further discussions. Admittedly, controversies on whether this point of departure is justified, in particular with regard to the precise logical status of such an abstraction, have never quite died down, but a theory of rational action nevertheless undisputedly forms the paradigmatic core of the discipline.

Things are less clear in the case of psychology. Originally, introspective research into the facts of the individual's consciousness existed alongside a more or less reductionist physiologically based psychology. From the twenties onwards behaviourism became the order of the day, although, and to a greater extent than was the case in economics, the dominance of this school of thought was always disputed. The central concept of 'behaviour' which gave the school its name may have been well able to replace the earlier guiding notions of 'consciousness' or 'organism', yet because of the behaviourists' radical claim that behaviour was entirely determined by the particular situation, the concept clearly did anything but emphasize freedom of choice or decision. This distinguished it clearly from the '*homo oeconomicus*' model. It was not until the 'cognitive' turn in psychology that behaviourism was changed sufficiently or even superseded so as to allow the conceptions of action held by the persons studied to become an object of inquiry. Increasingly, the idea is gaining currency that psychology's overall conceptual edifice must be changed: instead of centring on a notion of behaviour it must concentrate on that of action.

In sociology, the classical thinkers of the discipline in this century who have shaped mainstream theory formation – be they Max Weber or Talcott Parsons – attempted to ground not only their own studies but also the discipline as a whole in a theory of action. The same is also true of important side-currents, such as the schools of thought based on the ideas of George Herbert Mead or Alfred Schütz. Here, the specifics of each attempt to provide a foundation in a theory of action may have been open to dispute, but not the necessity of the attempt as such. Almost all of the most important contemporary theories can be characterized in terms of a specific theory of action. They range from the various theories that borrow from and adopt to a great extent the economic model of rational action, via neo-Weberian and neo-Parsonian projects, to major new theories that go beyond earlier models. The best-known and most significant of these are Habermas' theory of communicative action, Giddens' theory of (activistic) structuration and Castoriadis' new version of Aristotelian practical philosophy with its emphasis on creativity and novelty, as well as that presented by Touraine, who was influenced by Castoriadis. There are also important attempts, influenced by structuralism or systems theory, to question these conventional foundations in a theory of action in principle and to free sociological theory of any such basis.

Things are similar in philosophy. At the beginning of the seventies,

the American philosopher Richard Bernstein<sup>1</sup> boldly tried to reduce the most important schools of modern thought to a common denominator, namely their effort to define and emphasize the active character of human nature. He uncovered this trend in Marxism – at least in all those forms of Marxism which did not conceive of it as a teleological philosophy of history – as well as in existentialism. Pragmatism, the main philosophical current in the United States, also already contained the notion of the practical in its name. Finally, he demonstrated that the tradition of analytical philosophy increasingly conceptualizes human speech as action, and that authors concerned with an analytical understanding of language were focusing on microscopic attempts to clarify concepts that somehow referred opaquely to the notion of action. In the present day, when, for example, ‘post-structuralist’ authors and many philosophers influenced by a renaissance of the thought of Nietzsche and the later Heidegger are sceptical of and ambivalent towards the human ability to act, it has become more difficult to view the theme of action as a point of convergence of various philosophical efforts. Yet Bernstein’s proposition continues to hold true for the currents he studied. Moreover, the other trends mentioned can clearly also be understood in terms of their relationship to the topic of human action in that they specifically set themselves off from some activistic exaggeration of the idea of subjectivity.

Such a cursory overview as that given here of the numerous different attempts to address the topic of ‘action’ in the various academic fields serves perhaps to show how often the theme crops up. Yet it will also probably increase confusion on the reasons for this preoccupation. What also becomes clear is not only that the different disciplines rest in different ways on a foundation in action theory, but also that each of them even contains different versions of such foundations. The problem is complicated still further by the fact that debates on action theory not only represent one of many possible subjects of scholarly controversy but also comprise arguments about the direction each discipline should take and how it should mark itself off from other fields. Therefore, it is hardly to be recommended that a discussion of issues in action theory focuses on the full complexity of all these different versions of said theory. Nor, for that matter, can the sides to the problem concealed in the multiplicity of discourses and positions simply be prejudged by definitional prescriptions. I have elected to take a different tack, as this book is meant not to provide an encyclopedic overview, but instead to advance a particular approach to a theory of action. The theory proposed here will be developed primarily via a discussion of only one field and the form of action

theory that predominates there. In the process, however, I shall frequently be referring to insights and arguments arising from other disciplines. It is my perhaps overly ambitious expectation that the thoughts I am thus presenting will also be of interest outside this particular discipline.

The following discussion will, for the main, be concerned with *sociological* action theory. The reason for this is not only that I am best acquainted with this field, but also that the original wealth of problems have persisted in this discipline to a greater extent than in others, where they have been lost from the outset owing to a greater degree of abstraction. Commentators often bemoan sociology's lack of a firm paradigm. Yet the positive side to this absence is that it allows certain losses of abstraction to remain visible which, for example, are simply ignored by the model of a rational economic subject adopted in economic theory or by psychology's notion that the organism merely reacts to outside stimuli. Those economists and psychologists who are willing to reflect on the initial abstractions on which their disciplines are based will therefore find the sociological deliberations of interest. The same is also true of philosophical debates. But many of them exhibit a high degree of intrinsic differentiation as well as a proximity to empirical phenomena only when synthetically combined with sociology or psychology. By contrast analytical philosophy, which has taken a fruitful methodological path of its own, is at a disadvantage compared with sociology, for it has contributed little to defining the social character of action and the orientation of actors to one another; the reason here is that analytical philosophy takes the individual actions of an individual actor as its starting point. My choice of sociology as the main terrain for the following deliberations on a theory of action is not absolutely compelling on the basis of the above remarks, but should at least be comprehensible for those whose thought is shaped by other disciplines.

The central thesis in this book is the claim that a third model of action should be added to the two predominant models of action, namely *rational* action and *normatively oriented* action. What I have in mind is a model that emphasizes the *creative* character of human action. Beyond that, I hope to show that this third model overarches both the others. I do not wish simply to draw attention to an additional type of action relatively neglected to date, but instead to assert that there is a creative dimension to all human action, a dimension which is only inadequately expressed in the models of rational and normatively oriented action. Both these models ineluctably generate a residual category to which they then allocate the largest part of human

action. Defining human action as creative action avoids this problem. It does not engender a residual category of non-creative action, but rather is able to pinpoint the parameters for the meaningful application of the other models of action by illuminating the tacit assumptions the latter contain. I claim that only by introducing a concept of action which consistently takes account of this creative dimension can the other models of action be assigned their proper logical place. As a consequence, only in such a manner can the wealth of concepts involved in the concept of action, such as *intention*, norm, identity, role, definition of the situation, institution, routine, etc., be defined consistently and in a manner that does justice to what they are meant to express. Intellectual history already provides us with the essential basis for such a comprehensive model. However, throughout the history of action theory this model has been marginalized, for reasons that must be explained. I shall thus start in chapter 1 by ascertaining the reasons why sociological action theory has taken the shape it has and will trace the marginalization of the creative dimension to action in that theory. I shall then, in chapter 2, examine the approaches in which the creativity of action was indeed situated at the heart of a theory but where this again entailed specific distortions or false generalizations. Whereas the first chapter is aimed in particular at readers who are sociologists or economists, the second chapter is geared more towards readers with an interest in philosophy. Following these two investigations of the history of action theory, chapter 3 will focus on reconstructing three tacit assumptions that remain latent in the models of rational action and normatively oriented action: namely the teleological character of human action, corporeal control by the actor, and the autonomous individuality of the actor. The intention is then to introduce them explicitly into action theory. The overall goal of the chapter is to show how we can avoid generating residual categories in the way mentioned above. The claim that precisely these tacit assumptions are characteristic not only of action theory but of the discourse of modernity as such has ramifications that in fact go much further. In chapters 4.1 and 4.2 I shall therefore explore what consequences a theory of action revised in the manner I have suggested would have for an understanding of processes of collective action and whether it enables us to sidestep functionalist theories as a means of solving the problems involved in developing a social theory that takes adequate account of present-day phenomena. I shall bring the study to a close by drawing two possible conclusions for a diagnosis of present-day society from the restructured foundations of a theory of action. In chapter 4.3 I shall, on the one hand, address the

proposition that conflicts within the developed western and eastern societies can be interpreted in terms of conflicts about 'a democratization of the differentiation issue', whereas in chapter 4.4 I shall investigate what fate awaits creativity under present-day conditions. Both studies go at least some way towards showing that 'theories of the constitution of society' based on a theory of action can hold their own both against functionalist theories of differentiation and against postmodernist diagnoses. Notwithstanding these attempts to demonstrate the possible consequences of a revised theory of action, the main focus of my presentation will be on the competing assumptions of different theories of action. The sections dealing with intellectual history, the reconstruction of concepts and possible applications are all intended to serve one common goal: to show both the meaning and the necessity of taking the creative character of human action into consideration.