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INTRODUCTION

THEODORE R. SCHATZKI
Guest Editor

Human activity has always been central to philosophy and social thought. Although philosophers have not always claimed activity as a prime topic, because philosophy studies human life activity is ipso facto pivotal to its concerns. Philosophers have always been interested in human motivation, for example, as testified to by the historical dominance of such categorical distinctions as reason-emotion-desire and reason-passion-will. The nature and possibility of rational action has also been particularly dear to their professional hearts. Insofar, moreover, as philosophers have sought to articulate normative social and political frameworks—for instance, on issues of justice and the good society—they have eo ipso been concerned with human activity. Not just in political philosophy, but in ethics, too, activity is key. Some philosophers have argued that human action is the principal object of moral appraisal. As is today, moreover, again receiving attention in the light of new psychological findings, the integrity of the institutions of moral responsibility, moral culpability, and the law rests on the cogency of venerable conceptions of and assumptions about human action. The character and possibility of a historically and socially momentous concept—that of freedom—is linked to the fate of these conceptions and assumptions.

Activity is central to social thought, too. Legions of social thinkers have treated human action as both constitutively and causally crucial to social and historical affairs. Action, for instance, is widely construed as a core, if not *the* core ontological category in social theory: social phenomena are centrally composed of human activities. So dominant is this intuition that thinkers who promulgate additional core concepts—such as those of wholes, structures, and social facts—believe that these additional concepts partly prove themselves through the bearing of the phenomena they denote on activity. Social affairs, furthermore, are also widely thought of as arising chiefly out of—brought about chiefly by and through—human action. Once again, assessments of the cogency of ascribing powers of determination to phenomena other than activity rest in part on the implications of these ascriptions for activity. Even those contemporary theorists who grant nonhumans a prominent place in the study of social affairs do so by according such entities agency. Because of this ontological and causal prominence of activity, social theory approaches key issues such as power, conflict, migration, gender,

economic organization, and social change on the basis, or against the background, of concepts of action and its determination. It is no exaggeration to say that the key task for the social disciplines is to comprehend the activity-sociality nexus and what bears on it.

The centrality of activity is also evinced in the abundance of concepts and accounts of it in philosophy and social thought. Pervading these domains are such concepts as rational action, instrumental action, rule-governed activity, emotional action, skillful action, dramaturgical activity, expressive action, ceremonial or ritual action, interaction, social action, aggregated action, joint action, and collective action. These concepts are aligned with such action-explaining phenomena as reason, practical reason, practical understanding, goals, beliefs and desires, emotions, rules and norms, skills, roles, frames, habits and habitus, shared motivations, traditions, power, domination, coordination, culture, social structures, systems constraints, and neurophysiological processes. The vitality of these particular concepts and explanantia has ebbed and flowed through the history of modern scholarly attention to activity and social life. That combination of them that a thinker appropriates deeply informs his or her understandings of and positions on other philosophical and social theoretical issues.

One of the watchwords in contemporary humanistic thought about human activity is "practices." For some theorists (Giddens is a prime example), the term denotes entities in the world that are key to human existence and that underlie the comprehension of, inter alia, people's activities and social affairs. For other theorists (Bourdieu and Dreyfus are principal examples), the term sums up a particular approach to activity that transcends the traditional distinction between subjects and objects—a move away from reason, will, consciousness, propositional knowledge, and goals toward alternative explanantia of activity such as skills, abilities, and habitus. For most theorists, meanwhile, the term serves as a signal that such phenomena as identity, language, gender, science, and social organization, which had not been previously construed in the following way, are best thought of as rooted in or as forms of activity. Informed by these understandings of the term, a plethora of theoretical issues has been recently tackled through practices or with the idea of practices in the background. These issues include the role of reason in human life, the character of human activity, the constitution of individual and collective identity, the nature of meaning and language, embodiment, the constitution of gender and sexuality, the dynamics of scientific research and knowledge as well as the emergence of their objects, society and nature, the nature of communication and learning, space and time as dimensions of human existence and social life, the nature, structure, and organization of social order, and the explanation and understanding of actions and social affairs.

It bears emphasizing that nothing unifies these "practice" accounts other than the centrality of some notion of practice either to their understandings or to their analyses of their subject matters. Many notions of practice are involved, and accounts vary in how precise or worked out these are. This is all that is presently meant by "practice theory"—a general trend or tenor marking contemporary thought about human life that has scholars theorizing and analyzing their subject matters through or by reference to this notion.

This special issue seeks to offer examples of this trend and to give some sense of its vitality and variety. The philosopher Hubert Dreyfus kicks off the issue with a criticism

of John McDowell's version of the age-old idea that human action is rational. Generally speaking, Dreyfus argues, activity is better understood à la Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty as an involved coping that is keyed to shifting fields of attraction and repulsion, fields that are available to be reacted to only in so far as people cope with them. In the second essay, the philosopher and social theorist Stephen Turner contrasts classical with what he calls postclassical "ensemble" practice theories. He evaluates these newer approaches with regard to their implications for ethics. He also counterposes to practice theories of both sorts his own theses that practices are based in habits and formed through constrained learning. The anthropologist Wendy James argues next that dance is an appropriate metaphor for social practice. Drawing on the work of Wittgenstein and especially R.G. Collingwood, she claims that people's activities (1) are embedded in choreographed and thus ceremonial purposeful patterns and series—practices—that make up the social context of activity and (2) exhibit an artfulness that is tied to people's consciousness of this embeddedness. Examining the artful quality of both language and acts of material production, James claims that this conception of activity and practice undercuts many traditional oppositions such as those between pragmatic and symbolic and between rational and emotional activity.

In the following essay, Isabelle Peschard argues for public participation in the scientific generation of knowledge and claims that philosophers of science need to consider the epistemic dimensions of such participation. She supports her contentions by (1) showing how public participation in scientific activity constitutes new scientific practices and (2) defending the cogency of such practices against two charges: that these practices would undermine the empirical well-groundedness of scientific judgments and that citizens and scientists cannot participate in the same practices. In the next essay, the sociologist Elizabeth Shove and the economist Mika Pantzar probe certain widely presumed features of the dynamics of social practices, whose particulars and variations largely go uncognized because the features themselves are unstudied. In particular, Shove and Pantzar examine how the persistence and evolution of social practices are tied both to the "ebb and flow of recruits" and to what practitioners actually do. The authors explore these dynamic phenomena through two examples: digital/film photography and floorball. After this, the geographer Kirsten Simonsen charts the outlines of a human geography that takes seriously the ontological centrality of practices. This geography refers the creation and maintenance of such phenomena as subjectivity, identity, embodiment, spatiality, and emotion to practices, thereby revealing the sensuous side of practices and the rooting of power and the social differentiation of bodies therein.

The final pair of essays features Brandon Claycomb and Greig Mulberry's reconstruction of the stages whereby humans, individually and as a species, move(d) from simple embodied activity to complex linguistic action. This reconstruction draws on a description of human existence that combines Merleau-Ponty's analysis of embodied activity with a conception of social practices. Claycomb and Mulberry show how the type of meaningful engagement with the world found at a given stage both opens up the possibility of and develops into the way of being characteristic of the following stage. Michael Schillmeier wraps up the volume by arguing that the nature of disability cannot be grasped if it is solely treated either as a given individual impairment

or as a socially caused condition. Disability, he claims, is made visible through the sensory activities, directed toward circulating nonhuman mediators such as money, through which people participate in such social practices as buying and selling. People with organic conditions such as blindness are constituted as disabled by how, through these sensory practices, they carry on these social ones. Through money, Schillmeier thus suggests, the hegemony of capitalism is allied with the hegemony of visual practices.

University of Kentucky
Lexington, KY 40506-0027
USA
Tel.: 1-859-257-5350
Fax: 1-859-257-3286
E-mail: schatzki@uky.edu