

HUMAN ACTION

by Ludwig von Mises

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Abstract:

We learn and profit much from the series of books and papers in which, during the last sixty years, Mises stated, elaborated and strengthened his position. Each and every one of them deserves detailed discussion. Here we start presentation of his third magnum opus, which first appeared in Switzerland in a German edition in 1940, and ten years later in a rewritten English edition under the title *Human Action*. It covers a wider field than even political economy, and it is still under evaluated. Mises' contribution is very simple, yet at the same time extremely profound. He points out that the whole economy is the result of what individuals do. Individuals act, choose, cooperate, compete, and trade with one another. In this way Mises explains how complex market phenomena develop. Mises do not simply describe economic phenomena -- prices, wages, interest rates, money, monopoly and even the trade cycle -- he explains them as the outcomes of countless conscious, purposive actions, choices, and preferences of individuals, each of whom was trying as best as he or she could under the circumstances to attain various wants and ends and to avoid undesired consequences. Hence the title Mises chose for his economic treatise, *Human Action*. We shall not know the full effects of this work. But we have no doubt that, in the long run, it will prove its importance.

PART ONE

Chapter I. Acting Man

1. Purposeful Action and Animal Reaction

Human action is purposeful behavior. Or we may say: Action is will put into operation and transformed into an agency, is aiming at ends and goals, is the ego's meaningful response to stimuli and to the conditions of its environment, is a person's conscious adjustment to the state of the universe that determines his life. Such paraphrases may clarify the definition given and prevent possible misinterpretations. But the definition itself is adequate and does not need complement of commentary.

Conscious or purposeful behavior is in sharp contrast to unconscious behavior, i.e., the reflexes and the involuntary responses of the body's cells and nerves to stimuli. People are sometimes prepared to believe that the boundaries between conscious behavior and the involuntary reaction of the forces operating within man's body are more or less indefinite. This is correct only as far as it is sometimes not easy to establish whether concrete behavior is to be considered voluntary or involuntary. But the distinction between consciousness and unconsciousness is nonetheless sharp and can be clearly determined.

The unconscious behavior of the bodily organs and cells is for the acting ego no less a datum than any other fact of the external world. Acting man must take into account all that goes on within his own body as well as other data, e.g., the weather or the attitudes of his neighbors. There is, of course, a margin within which purposeful behavior has the power to neutralize the working of bodily factors. It is feasible within certain limits to get the body under control. Man can sometimes succeed through the power of his will in overcoming sickness, in compensating for the innate or acquired insufficiency of his physical constitution, or in suppressing reflexes. As far as this is possible, the field of purposeful action is extended. If a man abstains from controlling the involuntary reaction of cells and nerve centers, although he would be in a position to do so, his behavior is from our point of view purposeful.

The field of our science is human action, not the psychological events which result in an action. It is precisely this which distinguishes the general theory of human action, praxeology, from psychology. The theme of psychology is the internal events that result or can result in a definite action. The theme of praxeology is action as such. This also settles the relation of praxeology to the psychoanalytical concept of the subconscious. Psychoanalysis too is psychology and does not investigate action but the forces and factors that impel a man toward a definite action. The psychoanalytical subconscious is a psychological and not a praxeological category. Whether an action stems from clear deliberation, or from forgotten memories and suppressed desires which from submerged regions, as it were, direct the will, does not influence the nature of the action. The murderer whom a subconscious urge (the Id) drives toward his crime and the neurotic whose aberrant behavior seems to be simply meaningless to an untrained observer both act; they like anybody else are aiming at certain ends. It is the merit of psychoanalysis that it has demonstrated that even the behavior of neurotics and psychopaths is meaningful, that they too act and aim at ends, although we who consider ourselves normal and sane call the reasoning determining their choice of ends nonsensical and the means they choose for the attainment of these ends contrary to purpose.

The term "unconscious" as used by praxeology and the terms "subconscious" and "unconscious" as applied by psychoanalysis belong to two different systems of thought and research. Praxeology no less than other branches of knowledge owes much to psychoanalysis. The more necessary is it then to become aware of the line which separates praxeology from psychoanalysis.

Action is not simply giving preference. Man also shows preference in situations in which things and events are unavoidable or are believed to be so. Thus a man may prefer sunshine to rain and may wish that the sun would dispel the clouds. He who only wishes and hopes does not interfere actively with the course of events and with the shaping of his own destiny. But acting man chooses, determines, and tries to reach an end. Of two things both of which he cannot have together he selects one and gives up the other. Action therefore always involves both taking and renunciation.

To express wishes and hopes and to announce planned action may be forms of action in so far as they aim in themselves at the realization of a certain purpose. But they

must not be confused with the actions to which they refer. They are not identical with the actions they announce, recommend, or reject. Action is a real thing. What counts is a man's total behavior, and not his talk about planned but not realized acts. On the other hand action must be clearly distinguished from the application of labor. Action means the employment of means for the attainment of ends. As a rule one of the means employed is the acting man's labor. But this is not always the case. Under special conditions a word is all that is needed. He who gives orders or interdictions may act without any expenditure of labor. To talk or not to talk, to smile or to remain serious, may be action. To consume and to enjoy are no less action than to abstain from accessible consumption and enjoyment.

Praxeology consequently does not distinguish between "active" or energetic and "passive" or indolent man. The vigorous man industriously striving for the improvement of his condition acts neither more nor less than the lethargic man who sluggishly takes things as they come. For to do nothing and to be idle are also action, they too determine the course of events. Wherever the conditions for human interference are present, man acts no matter whether he interferes or refrains from interfering. He who endures what he could change acts no less than he who interferes in order to attain another result. A man who abstains from influencing the operation of physiological and instinctive factors which he could influence also acts. Action is not only doing but no less omitting to do what possibly could be done.

We may say that action is the manifestation of a man's will. But this would not add anything to our knowledge. For the term will means nothing else than man's faculty to choose between different states of affairs, to prefer one, to set aside the other, and to behave according to the decision made in aiming at the chosen state and forsaking the other.

2. The Prerequisites of Human Action

We call contentment or satisfaction that state of a human being which does not and cannot result in any action. Acting man is eager to substitute a more satisfactory state of affairs for a less satisfactory. His mind imagines conditions which suit him better, and his action aims at bringing about this desired state. The incentive that impels a

man to act is always some uneasiness¹. A man perfectly content with the state of his affairs would have no incentive to change things. He would have neither wishes nor desires; he would be perfectly happy. He would not act; he would simply live free from care.

But to make a man act, uneasiness and the image of a more satisfactory state alone are not sufficient. A third condition is required: the expectation that purposeful behavior has the power to remove or at least to alleviate the felt uneasiness. In the absence of this condition no action is feasible. Man must yield to the inevitable. He must submit to destiny.

These are the general conditions of human action. Man is the being that lives under these conditions. He is not only *homo sapiens*, but no less *homo agens*. Beings of human descent who either from birth or from acquired defects are unchangeably unfit for any action (in the strict sense of the term and not merely in the legal sense) are practically not human. Although the statutes and biology consider them to be men, they lack the essential feature of humanity. The newborn child too is not an acting being. It has not yet gone the whole way from conception to the full development of its human qualities. But at the end of this evolution it becomes an acting being.

On Happiness

In colloquial speech we call a man "happy" who has succeeded in attaining his ends. A more adequate description of his state would be that he is happier than he was before. There is however no valid objection to a usage that defines human action as the striving for happiness.

But we must avoid current misunderstandings. The ultimate goal of human action is always the satisfaction of the acting man's desire. There is no standard of greater or lesser satisfaction other than individual judgments of value, different for various people and for the same people at various times. What makes a man feel uneasy and less uneasy is established by him from the standard of his own will and judgment,

¹ Cf. Lock, *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, ed. Fraser (Oxford, 1894), I, 331-333; Leibniz, *Nouveaux essais sur l'entendement humain*, ed. Fammarion, p. 119.

from his personal and subjective valuation. Nobody is in a position to decree what should make a fellow man happier.

To establish this fact does not refer in any way to the antitheses of egoism and altruism, of materialism and idealism, of individualism and collectivism, of atheism and religion. There are people whose only aim is to improve the condition of their own ego. There are other people with whom awareness of the troubles of their fellow men causes as much uneasiness as or even more uneasiness than their own wants. There are people who desire nothing else than the satisfaction of their appetites for sexual intercourse, food, drinks, fine homes, and other material things. But other men care more for the satisfactions commonly called "higher" and "ideal." There are individuals eager to adjust their actions to the requirements of social cooperation; there are, on the other hand, refractory people who defy the rules of social life. There are people for whom the ultimate goal of the earthly pilgrimage is the preparation for a life of bliss. There are other people who do not believe in the teachings of any religion and do not allow their actions to be influenced by them.

Praxeology is indifferent to the ultimate goals of action. Its findings are valid for all kinds of action irrespective of the ends aimed at. It is a science of means, not of ends. It applies the term happiness in a purely formal sense. In the praxeological terminology the proposition: man's unique aim is to attain happiness, is tautological. It does not imply any statement about the state of affairs from which man expects happiness.

The idea that the incentive of human activity is always some uneasiness and its aim always to remove such uneasiness as far as possible, that is, to make the acting men feel happier, is the essence of the teachings of Eudaemonism and Hedonism. Epicurean *arapacia* is that state of perfect happiness and contentment at which all human activity aims without ever wholly attaining it. In the face of the grandeur of this cognition it is of little avail only that many representatives of this philosophy failed to recognize the purely formal character of the notions *pain* and *pleasure* and gave them a material and carnal meaning. The theological, mystical, and other schools of a heteronomous ethic did not shake the core of Epicureanism because they could not raise any other objection than its neglect of the "higher" and "nobler" pleasures. It is true that the writings of many earlier champions of Eudaemonism, Hedonism, and

Utilitarianism are in some points open to misinterpretation. But the language of modern philosophers and still more that of the modern economists is so precise and straightforward that no misinterpretation can possibly occur.

On Instincts and Impulses

One does not further the comprehension of the fundamental problem of human action by the methods of instinct-sociology. This school classifies the various concrete goals of human action and assigns to each class a special instinct as its motive. Man appears as a being driven by various innate instincts and dispositions. It is assumed that this explanation demolishes once for all the odious teachings of economics and utilitarian ethics. However, Feuerbach has already justly observed that every instinct is an instinct to happiness². The method of instinct-psychology and instinct-sociology consists in an arbitrary classification of the immediate goals of action and in a hypostasis of each. Whereas praxeology says that the goal of an action is to remove a certain uneasiness, instinct-psychology says it is the satisfaction of an instinctive urge.

Many champions of the instinct school are convinced that they have proved that action is not determined by reason, but stems from the profound depths of innate forces, impulses, instincts, and dispositions which are not open to any rational elucidation. They are certain they have succeeded in exposing the shallowness of rationalism and disparage economics as "a tissue of false conclusions drawn from false psychological assumptions."³ Yet rationalism, praxeology, and economics do not deal with the ultimate springs and goals of action, but with the means applied for the attainment of an end sought. However unfathomable the depths may be from which an impulse or instinct emerges, the means which man chooses for its satisfaction are determined by a rational consideration of expense and success.⁴

He who acts under an emotional impulse also acts. What distinguishes an emotional action from other actions is the valuation of input and output. Emotions disarrange valuations. Inflamed with passion, man sees the goal as more desirable and the price he has to pay for it as less burdensome than he would in cool deliberation. Men have

² Cf. Feuerbach, *Sömmliche Werke*, ed. Bolin and Jodl (Stuttgart, 1907), X, 231.

³ Cf. William McDougall, *An Introduction to Social Psychology* (14th ed. Boston, 1921), p. 11.

⁴ Cf. Mises, *Epistemological Problems of Economics*, trans. by G. Reisman (New York, 1960), pp. 52 ff.

never doubted that even in the state of emotion means and ends are pondered and that it is possible to influence the outcome of this deliberation by rendering more costly the yielding to the passionate impulse. To punish criminal offenses committed in a state of emotional excitement or intoxication more mildly than other offenses is tantamount to encouraging such excesses. The threat of severe retaliation does not fail to deter even people driven by seemingly irresistible passion.

We interpret animal behavior on the assumption that the animal yields to the impulse which prevails at the moment. As we observe that the animal feeds, cohabits, and attacks other animals or men, we speak of its instincts of nourishment, of reproduction, and of aggression. We assume that such instincts are innate and peremptorily ask for satisfaction.

But is different with man. Man is not a being who cannot help yielding to the impulse that most urgently asks for satisfaction. Man is a being capable of subduing his instincts, emotions, and impulses; he can rationalize his behavior. He renounces the satisfaction of a burning impulse in order to satisfy other desires. He is not a puppet of his appetites. A man does not ravish every female that stirs his senses; he does not devour every piece of food that entices him; he does not knock down every fellow he would like to kill. He arranges his wishes and desires into a scale, he chooses; in short, he acts. What distinguishes man from beasts is precisely that he adjusts his behavior deliberately. Man is the being that has inhibitions, that can master his impulses and desires, that has the power to suppress instinctive desires and impulses.

It may happen that an impulse emerges with such vehemence that no disadvantage which its satisfaction may cause appears great enough to prevent the individual from satisfying it. In this case too there is choosing. Man decides in favor of yielding to the desire concerned.⁵

3. Human Action as an Ultimate Given

Since time immemorial men have been eager to know the prime mover, the cause of all being and of all change, the ultimate substance from which everything stems and

⁵ In such cases a great role is played by the circumstances that the two satisfactions concerned--that expected from yielding to the impulse and that expected from the avoidance of its undesirable consequences-- are not simultaneous. Cf. below, pp. 479-490.

which is the cause of itself. Science is more modest. It is aware of the limits of the human mind and of the human search for knowledge. It aims at tracing back every phenomenon to its cause. But it realizes that these endeavors must necessarily strike against insurmountable walls. There are phenomena which cannot be analyzed and traced back to other phenomena. They are the ultimate given. The progress of scientific research may succeed in demonstrating that something previously considered as an ultimate given can be reduced to components. But there will always be some irreducible and unanalyzable phenomena, some ultimate given.

Monism teaches that there is but one ultimate substance, dualism that there are two, pluralism that there are many. There is no point quarreling about these problems. Such metaphysical disputes are interminable. The present state of our knowledge does not provide the means to solve them with an answer which every reasonable man must consider satisfactory.

Materialist monism contends that human thoughts and volitions are the product of the operation of bodily organs, the cells of the brain and the nerves. Human thought, will, and action are solely brought about by material processes which one day will be completely explained by the methods of physical and chemical inquiry. This too is a metaphysical hypothesis, although its supporters consider it as an unshakable and undeniable scientific truth.

Various doctrines have been advanced to explain the relation between mind and body. They are mere surmises without any reference to observed facts. All that can be said with certainty is that there are relations between mental and physiological processes. With regard to the nature and operation of this connection we know little if anything.

Concrete value judgments and definite human actions are not open to further analysis. We may fairly assume or believe that they are absolutely dependent upon and conditioned by their causes. But as long as we do not know how external facts--physical and physiological--produce in a human mind definite thoughts and volitions resulting in concrete acts, we have to face an insurmountable *methodological dualism*. In the present state of our knowledge the fundamental statements of positivism, monism and panphysicalism are mere metaphysical postulates devoid of any scientific foundation and both meaningless and useless for scientific research. Reason and

experience show us two separate realms: the external world of physical, chemical, and physiological phenomena and the internal world of thought, feeling, valuation, and purposeful action. No bridge connects--as far as we can see today--these two spheres. Identical external events result sometimes in different human responses, and different external events produce sometimes the same human response. We do not know why.

In the face of this state of affairs we cannot help withholding judgment on the essential statements of monism and materialism. We may or may not believe that the natural sciences will succeed one day in explaining the production of definite ideas, judgments of value, and actions in the same way in which they explain the production of a chemical compound as the necessary and unavoidable outcome of a certain combination of elements. In the meantime we are bound to acquiesce in a methodological dualism.

Human action is one of the agencies bringing about change. It is an element of cosmic activity and becoming. Therefore it is a legitimate object of scientific investigation. As--at least under present conditions--it cannot be traced back to its causes, it must be considered as an ultimate given and must be studied as such.

It is true that the changes brought about by human action are but trifling when compared with the effects of the operation of the great cosmic forces. From the point of view of eternity and the infinite universe man is an infinitesimal speck. But for man human action and its vicissitudes are the real thing. Action is the essence of his nature and existence, his means of preserving his life and raising himself above the level of animals and plants. However perishable and evanescent all human efforts may be, for man and for human science they are of primary importance.

4. Rationality and Irrationality; Subjectivism and Objectivity of Praxeological Research

Human action is necessarily always rational. The term "rational action" is therefore pleonastic and must be rejected as such. When applied to the ultimate ends of action, the terms rational and irrational are inappropriate and meaningless. The ultimate end of action is always the satisfaction of some desires of the acting man. Since nobody is in a position to substitute his own value judgments for those of the acting individual,

it is vain to pass judgment on other people's aims and volitions. No man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented. The critic either tells us what he believes he would aim at if he were in the place of his fellow; or, in dictatorial arrogance blithely disposing of his fellow's will and aspirations, declares what condition of this other man would better suit himself, the critic.

It is usual to call an action irrational if it aims, at the expense of "material" and tangible advantages, at the attainment of "ideal" or "higher" satisfactions. In this sense people say, for instance--sometimes with approval, sometimes with disapproval--that a man who sacrifices life, health, or wealth to the attainment of "higher" goods--like fidelity to his religious, philosophical, and political convictions or the freedom and flowering of his nation--is motivated by irrational considerations. However, the striving after these higher ends is neither more nor less rational or irrational than that after other human ends. It is a mistake to assume that the desire to procure the bare necessities of life and health is more rational, natural, or justified than the striving after other goods or amenities. It is true that the appetite for food and warmth is common to men and other mammals and that as a rule a man who lacks food and shelter concentrates his efforts upon the satisfaction of these urgent needs and does not care much for other things. The impulse to live, to preserve one's own life, and to take advantage of every opportunity of strengthening one's vital forces is a primal feature of life, present in every living being. However, to yield to this impulse is not--for man--an inevitable necessity.

While all other animals are unconditionally driven by the impulse to preserve their own lives and by the impulse of proliferation, man has the power to master even these impulses. He can control both his sexual desires and his will to live. He can give up his life when the conditions under which alone he could preserve it seem intolerable. Man is capable of dying for a cause or of committing suicide. To live is for man the outcome of a choice, of a judgment of value.

It is the same with the desire to live in affluence. The very existence of ascetics and of men who renounce material gains for the sake of clinging to their convictions and of preserving their dignity and self-respect is evidence that the striving after more tangible amenities is not inevitable but rather the result of a choice. Of course, the immense majority prefer life to death and wealth to poverty.

It is arbitrary to consider only the satisfaction of the body's physiological needs as "natural" and therefore "rational" and everything else as "artificial" and therefore "irrational." It is the characteristic feature of human nature that man seeks not only food, shelter, and cohabitation like all other animals, but that he aims also at other kinds of satisfaction. Man has specifically human desires and needs which we may call "higher" than those which he has in common with the other mammals⁶.

When applied to the means chosen for the attainment of ends, the terms rational and irrational imply a judgment about the expediency and adequacy of the procedure employed. The critic approves or disapproves of the method from the point of view of whether or not it is best suited to attain the end in question. It is a fact that human reason is not infallible and that man very often errs in selecting and applying means. An action unsuited to the end sought falls short of expectation. It is contrary to purpose, but it is rational, i.e., the outcome of a reasonable--although faulty--deliberation and an attempt--although an ineffectual attempt--to attain a definite goal. The doctors who a hundred years ago employed certain methods for the treatment of cancer which our contemporary doctors reject were--from the point of view of present-day pathology--badly instructed and therefore inefficient. But they did not act irrationally; they did their best. It is probable that in a hundred years more doctors will have more efficient methods at hand for the treatment of this disease. They will be more efficient but not more rational than our physicians.

The opposite of action is not *irrational behavior*, but a reactive response to stimuli on the part of the bodily organs and instincts which cannot be controlled by the volition of the person concerned. To the same stimulus man can under certain conditions respond both by reactive response and by action. If a man absorbs a poison, the organs react by setting up their forces of antidotal defense; in addition, action may interfere by applying counterpoison.

With regard to the problem involved in the antithesis, rational and irrational, there is no difference between the natural sciences and the social sciences. Science always is and must be rational. It is the endeavor to attain a mental grasp of the phenomena of the universe by a systematic arrangement of the whole body of available knowledge.

⁶ On the errors involved in the iron law of wages see below, pp. 603 f.; on the misunderstanding of the Malthusian theory see below, pp. 667-672.

However, as has been pointed out above, the analysis of objects into their constituent elements must sooner or later necessarily reach a point beyond which it cannot go. The human mind is not even capable of conceiving a kind of knowledge not limited by an ultimate given inaccessible to further analysis and reduction. The scientific method that carries the mind up to this point is entirely rational. The ultimate given may be called an irrational fact.

It is fashionable nowadays to find fault with the social sciences for being purely rational. The most popular objection raised against economics is that it neglects the irrationality of life and reality and tries to press into dry rational schemes and bloodless abstractions the infinite variety of phenomena. No censure could be more absurd. Like every branch of knowledge economics goes as far as it can be carried by rational methods. Then it stops by establishing the fact that it is faced with an ultimate given, i.e., a phenomenon which cannot--at least in the present state of our knowledge--be further analyzed⁷.

The teachings of praxeology and economics are valid for every human action without regard to its underlying motives, causes, and goals. The ultimate judgments of value and the ultimate ends of human action are given for any kind of scientific inquiry; they are not open to any further analysis. Praxeology deals with the ways and means chosen for the attainment of such ultimate ends. Its object is means, not ends.

In this sense we speak of the subjectivism of the general science of human action. It takes the ultimate ends chosen by acting man as data, it is entirely neutral with regard to them, and it refrains from passing any value judgments. The only standard which it applies is whether or not the means chosen are fit for the attainment of the ends aimed at. If Eudaemonism says happiness, if Utilitarianism and economics say utility, we must interpret these terms in a subjectivistic way as that which acting man aims at because it is desirable in his eyes. It is in this formalism that the progress of the modern meaning of Eudaemonism, Hedonism, and Utilitarianism consists as opposed to the older material meaning and the progress of the modern subjectivistic theory of value as opposed to the objectivistic theory of value as expounded by classical political economy. At the same time it is in this subjectivism that the objectivity of

⁷ We shall see later (pp. 49-58) how the empirical social sciences deal with the ultimate given.

our science lies. Because it is subjectivistic and takes the value judgments of acting man as ultimate data not open to any further critical examination, it is itself above all strife of parties and factions, it is indifferent to the conflicts of all schools of dogmatism and ethical doctrines, it is free from valuations and preconceived ideas and judgments, it is universally valid and absolutely and plainly human.

5. Causality as a Requirement of Action

Man is in a position to act because he has the ability to discover causal relations which determine change and becoming in the universe. Acting requires and presupposes the category of causality. Only a man who sees the world in the light of causality is fitted to act. In this sense we may say that causality is a category of action. The category *means and ends* presupposes the category *cause and effect*. In a world without causality and regularity of phenomena there would be no field for human reasoning and human action. Such a world would be a chaos in which man would be at a loss to find any orientation and guidance. Man is not even capable of imagining the conditions of such a chaotic universe.

Where man does not see any causal relation, he cannot act. This statement is not reversible. Even when he knows the causal relation involved, man cannot act if he is not in a position to influence the cause.

The archetype of causality research was: where and how must I interfere in order to divert the course of events from the way it would go in the absence of my interference in a direction which better suits my wishes? In this sense man raises the question: who or what is at the bottom of things? He searches for the regularity and the "law," because he wants to interfere. Only later was this search more extensively interpreted by metaphysics as a search after the ultimate cause of being and existence. Centuries were needed to bring these exaggerated and extravagant ideas back again to the more modest question of where one must interfere or should one be able to interfere in order to attain this or that end.

The treatment accorded to the problem of causality in the last decades has been, due to a confusion brought about by some eminent physicists, rather unsatisfactory. We

may hope that this unpleasant chapter in the history of philosophy will be a warning to future philosophers.

There are changes whose causes are, at least for the present time, unknown to us. Sometimes we succeed in acquiring a partial knowledge so that we are able to say: in 70 per cent of all cases *A* results in *B*, in the remaining cases in *C*, or even in *D*, *E*, *F*, and so on. In order to substitute for this fragmentary information more precise information it would be necessary to break up *A* into its elements. As long as this is not achieved, we must acquiesce in what is called a statistical law. But this does not affect the praxeological meaning of causality. Total or partial ignorance in some areas does not demolish the category of causality.

The philosophical, epistemological, and metaphysical problems of causality and of imperfect induction are beyond the scope of praxeology. We must simply establish the fact that in order to act, man must know the causal relationship between events, processes, or states of affairs. And only as far as he knows this relationship, can his action attain the ends sought. We are fully aware that in asserting this we are moving in a circle. For the evidence that we have correctly perceived a causal relation is provided only by the fact that action guided by this knowledge results in the expected outcome. But we cannot avoid this vicious circular evidence precisely because causality is a category of action. And because it is such a category, praxeology cannot help bestowing some attention on this fundamental problem of philosophy.

6. The Alter Ego

If we are prepared to take the term causality in its broadest sense, teleology can be called a variety of causal inquiry. Final causes are first of all causes. The cause of an event is seen as an action or quasi-action aiming at some end.

Both primitive man and the infant, in a naive anthropomorphic attitude, consider it quite plausible that every change and event is the outcome of the action of a being acting in the same way as they themselves do. They believe that animals, plants, mountains, rivers, and fountains, even stones and celestial bodies, are, like themselves, feeling, willing, and acting beings. Only at a later stage of cultural development does man renounce these animistic ideas and substitute the mechanistic

world view for them. Mechanicalism proves to be so satisfactory a principle of conduct that people finally believe it capable of solving all the problems of thought and scientific research. Materialism and panphysicalism proclaim mechanicalism as the essence of all knowledge and the experimental and mathematical methods of the natural sciences as the sole scientific mode of thinking.

All changes are to be comprehended as motions subject to the laws of mechanics.

The champions of mechanicalism do not bother about the still unsolved problems of the logical and epistemological basis of the principles of causality and imperfect induction. In their eyes these principles are sound because they work. The fact that experiments in the laboratory bring about the results predicted by the theories and that machines in the factories run in the way predicted by technology proves, they say, the soundness of the methods and findings of modern natural science. Granted that science cannot give us truth--and who knows what truth really means?--at any rate it is certain that it works in leading us to success.

But it is precisely when we accept this pragmatic point of view that the emptiness of the panphysicalist dogma becomes manifest. Science, as has been pointed out above, has not succeeded in solving the problems of the mind-body relations. The panphysicalists certainly cannot contend that the procedures they recommend have ever worked in the field of interhuman relations and of the social sciences. But it is beyond doubt that the principle according to which an *Ego* deals with every human being as if the other were a thinking and acting being like himself has evidenced its usefulness both in mundane life and in scientific research. It cannot be denied that it works.

It is beyond doubt that the practice of considering fellow men as beings who think and act as I, the *Ego*, do has turned out well; on the other hand the prospect seems hopeless of getting a similar pragmatic verification for the postulate requiring them to be treated in the same manner as the objects of the natural sciences. The epistemological problems raised by the comprehension of other people's behavior are no less intricate than those of causality and incomplete induction. It may be admitted that it is impossible to provide conclusive evidence for the propositions that my logic is the logic of all other people and by all means absolutely the only human logic and

that the categories of my action are the categories of all other people's action and by all means absolutely the categories of all human action. However, the pragmatist must remember that these propositions work both in practice and in science, and the positivist must not overlook the fact that in addressing his fellow men he presupposes --tacitly and implicitly-- the intersubjective validity of logic and thereby the reality of the realm of the alter Ego's thought and action, of his eminent human character⁸.

Thinking and acting are the specific human features of man. They are peculiar to all human beings. They are, beyond membership in the zoological species homo sapiens, the characteristic mark of man as man. It is not the scope of praxeology to investigate the relation of thinking and acting. For praxeology it is enough to establish the fact that there is only one logic that is intelligible to the human mind, and that there is only one mode of action which is human and comprehensible to the human mind. Whether there are or can be somewhere other beings--superhuman or subhuman--who think and act in a different way, is beyond the reach of the human mind. We must restrict our endeavors to the study of human action.

This human action which is inextricably linked with human thought is conditioned by logical necessity. It is impossible for the human mind to conceive logical relations at variance with the logical structure of our mind. It is impossible for the human mind to conceive a mode of action whose categories would differ from the categories which determine our own actions.

There are for man only two principles available for a mental grasp of reality, namely, those of teleology and causality. What cannot be brought under either of these categories is absolutely hidden to the human mind. An event not open to an interpretation by one of these two principles is for man inconceivable and mysterious. Change can be conceived as the outcome either of the operation of mechanistic causality or of purposeful behavior; for the human mind there is no third way available⁹. It is true, as has already been mentioned, that teleology can be viewed as a variety of causality. But the establishment of this fact does not annul the essential differences between the two categories.

⁸ Cf. Alfred Schütz, *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (Vienna, 1932), p. 18.

⁹ Cr. Karel Englis, *Begründung der Teleologie als Form des empirischen Erkennens* (Вгънн, 1930), pp. 15 ff.

The panmechanistic world view is committed to a methodological monism; it acknowledges only mechanistic causality because it attributes to it alone any cognitive value or at least a higher cognitive value than teleology. This is a metaphysical superstition. Both principles of cognition--causality and teleology--are, owing to the limitations of human reason, imperfect and do not convey ultimate knowledge. Causality leads to a *regressus in infinitum* which reason can never exhaust. Teleology is found wanting as soon as the question is raised of what moves the prime mover. Either method stops short at an ultimate given which cannot be analyzed and interpreted. Reasoning and scientific inquiry can never bring full ease of mind, apodictic certainty, and perfect cognition of all things. He who seeks this must apply to faith and try to quiet his conscience by embracing a creed or a metaphysical doctrine.

If we do not transcend the realm of reason and experience, we cannot help acknowledging that our fellow men act. We are not free to disregard this fact for the sake of a fashionable prepossession and an arbitrary opinion. Daily experience proves not only that the sole suitable method for studying the conditions of our nonhuman environment is provided by the category of causality; it proves no less convincingly that our fellow men are acting beings as we ourselves are. For the comprehension of action there is but one scheme of interpretation and analysis available, namely, that provided by the cognition and analysis of our own purposeful behavior.

The problem of the study and analysis of other people's action is in no way connected with the problem of the existence of a *soul* or of an *immortal soul*. As far as the objections of empiricism, behaviorism, and positivism are directed against any variety of the soul-theory, they are of no avail for our problem. The question we have to deal with is whether it is possible to grasp human action intellectually if one refuses to comprehend it as meaningful and purposeful behavior aiming at the attainment of definite ends. Behaviorism and positivism want to apply the methods of the empirical natural sciences to the reality of human action. They interpret it as a response to stimuli. But these stimuli themselves are not open to description by the methods of the natural sciences. Every attempt to describe them must refer to the meaning which acting men attach to them. We may call the offering of a commodity for sale a "stimulus." But what is essential in such an offer and distinguishes it from other offers

cannot be described without entering into the meaning which the acting parties attribute to the situation. No dialectical artifice can spirit away the fact that man is driven by the aim to attain certain ends. It is this purposeful behavior--viz., action--that is the subject matter of our science. We cannot approach our subject if we disregard the meaning which acting man attaches to the situation, i.e., the given state of affairs, and to his own behavior with regard to this situation.

It is not appropriate for the physicist to search for final causes because there is no indication that the events which are the subject matter of physics are to be interpreted as the outcome of actions of a being, aiming at ends in a human way. Nor is it appropriate for the praxeologist to disregard the operation of the acting being's volition and intention; they are undoubtedly given facts. If he were to disregard it, he would cease to study human action. Very often--but not always--the events concerned can be investigated both from the point of view of praxeology and from that of the natural sciences. But he who deals with the discharging of a firearm from the physical and chemical point of view is not a praxeologist. He neglects the very problems which the science of purposeful human behavior aims to clarify.

On the Serviceableness of Instincts

The proof of the fact that only two avenues of approach are available for human research, causality or teleology, is provided by the problems raised in reference to the serviceableness of instincts. There are types of behavior which on the one hand cannot be thoroughly interpreted with the causal methods of the natural sciences, but on the other hand cannot be considered as purposeful human action. In order to grasp such behavior we are forced to resort to a makeshift. We assign to it the character of a quasi-action; we speak of serviceable instincts.

We observe two things: first the inherent tendency of a living organism to respond to a stimulus according to a regular pattern, and second the favorable effects of this kind of behavior for the strengthening or preservation of the organism's vital forces. If we were in a position to interpret such behavior as the outcome of purposeful aiming at certain ends, we would call it action and deal with it according to the teleological methods of praxeology. But as we found no trace of a conscious mind behind this behavior, we suppose that an unknown factor--we call it *instinct*--was instrumental.

We say that the instinct directs quasi-purposeful animal behavior and unconscious but nonetheless serviceable responses of human muscles and nerves. Yet, the mere fact that we hypostatize the unexplained element of this behavior as a force and call it instinct does not enlarge our knowledge. We must never forget that this word instinct is nothing but a landmark to indicate a point beyond which we are unable, up to the present at least, to carry our scientific scrutiny.

Biology has succeeded in discovering a "natural," i.e., mechanistic, explanation for many processes which in earlier days were attributed to the operation of instincts. Nonetheless many others have remained which cannot be interpreted as mechanical or chemical responses to mechanical or chemical stimuli. Animals display attitudes which cannot be comprehended otherwise than through the assumption that a directing factor was operative.

The aim of behaviorism to study human action from without with the methods of animal psychology is illusory. As far as animal behavior goes beyond mere physiological processes like breathing and metabolism, it can only be investigated with the aid of the meaning-concepts developed by praxeology. The behaviorist approaches the object of his investigations with the human notions of purpose and success. He unwittingly applies to the subject matter of his studies the human concepts of serviceableness and perniciousness. He deceives himself in excluding all verbal reference to consciousness and aiming at ends. In fact his mind searches everywhere for ends and measures every attitude with the yardstick of a garbled notion of serviceableness. The science of human behavior--as far as it is not physiology--cannot abandon reference to meaning and purpose. It cannot learn anything from animal psychology and the observation of the unconscious reactions of newborn infants. It is, on the contrary, animal psychology and infant psychology which cannot renounce the aid afforded by the science of human action. Without praxeological categories we would be at a loss to conceive and to understand the behavior both of animals and of infants.

The observation of the instinctive behavior of animals fills man with astonishment and raises questions which nobody can answer satisfactorily. Yet the fact that animals and even plants react in a quasi-purposeful way is neither more nor less miraculous than that man thinks and acts, that in the inorganic universe those functional

correspondences prevail which physics describes, and that in the organic universe biological processes occur. All this is miraculous in the sense that it is an ultimate given for our searching mind.

Such an ultimate given is also what we call animal instinct. Like the concepts of motion, force, life, and consciousness, the concept of instinct too is merely a term to signify an ultimate given. To be sure, it neither "explains" anything nor indicates a cause or an ultimate cause.¹⁰

The Absolute End

In order to avoid any possible misinterpretation of the praxeological categories it seems expedient to emphasize a truism.

Praxeology, like the historical sciences of human action, deals with purposeful *human* action. If it mentions *ends*, what it has in view is the ends at which acting men aim. If it speaks of *meaning*, it refers to the meaning which acting men attach to their actions.

Praxeology and history are manifestations of the human mind and as such are conditioned by the intellectual abilities of mortal men. Praxeology and history do not pretend to know anything about the intentions of an absolute and objective mind, about an objective meaning inherent in the course of events and of historical evolution, and about the plans which God or Nature or Weltgeist or Manifest Destiny is trying to realize in directing the universe and human affairs. They have nothing in common with what is called philosophy of history. They do not, like the works of Hegel, Comte, Marx, and a host of other writers, claim to reveal information about the true, objective, and absolute meaning of life and history.¹¹

Vegetative Man

Some philosophies advise men to seek as the ultimate end of conduct the complete renunciation of any action. They look upon life as an absolute evil full of pain, suffering, and anguish, and apodictically deny that any purposeful human effort can

¹⁰ "La vie est une cause première qui nous échappe comme toutes les causes premières et dont la science expérimentale n'a pas à se préoccuper." Claude Bernard, *Law Science expérimentale* (Paris, 1878), p. 137.

¹¹ On the philosophy of history, cf. Mises, *Theory and History* (New Haven, 1957), pp. 159. ff.

render it tolerable. Happiness can be attained only by complete extinction of consciousness, volition, and life. The only way toward bliss and salvation is to become perfectly passive, indifferent, and inert like the plants. The sovereign good is the abandonment of thinking and acting.

Such is the essence of the teachings of various Indian philosophies, especially of Buddhism, and of Schopenhauer. Praxeology does not comment upon them. It is neutral with regard to all judgments of value and the choice of ultimate ends. Its task is not to approve or to disapprove, but to describe what is.

The subject matter of praxeology is human action. It deals with acting man, not with man transformed into a plant and reduced to a merely vegetative existence.