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Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/cps/453>

DOI: 10.4000/cps.453

ISSN: 2648-6334

Publisher

Presses universitaires de Strasbourg

Printed version

Date of publication: 30 September 2015

Number of pages: 175-193

ISBN: 978-2-86820-917-7

ISSN: 1254-5740

Electronic reference

Roberta De Monticelli, "Outline of a Theory of Embodied Rationality", *Les Cahiers philosophiques de Strasbourg* [Online], 38 | 2015, Online since 03 December 2018, [connection on 10 November 2022].

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/cps/453> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/cps.453>



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Outline of a Theory of Embodied Rationality

Roberta De Monticelli

Phenomenology is experiencing a new flourishing by its powerful contributions to the embodied/enactive approach to consciousness and cognition, which seems nowadays a leading paradigm in consciousness studies. The embodied-enactive perspective definitely puts the perceiving subject back into the world, stressing the actual dynamic reciprocity between embodied agents and the environments with which they interact. Yet there is one crucial aspect of perceptual experience that this approach tends to neglect, namely its normative dimension. Now incapability to give account of normativity was the main target of Husserl's (and Merleau-Ponty's) classical criticism of scientific naturalism of old. So, I take it to be an urgent task to provide for a phenomenological account of normativity, and one compatible with the embodied-enactive approach. Going the proposed path will end up to bridging the explanatory gap between embodied subjectivity and personhood, i.e. the nature of a rational agent.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty famously wanted to reconcile phenomenology with what he used to call the "truth of naturalism" (Merleau-Ponty 1943, p. 217). And so, I assume, do we—if such a thing exists.

Whatever it may be, "true" naturalism should allow for a theory of reality (an ontology) including at least two features that mainstream contemporary scientific naturalism does *not* provide a satisfactory account for: normativity and personhood (Baker 2013, p. xiii-xxiv). A phenomenological approach to intentionality, as opposed to a naturalized one, can provide such a theory. Or so I will argue.

The embodied-enactive phenomenological view of the mind definitely puts the perceiving subject back into the world, stressing

the actual dynamic reciprocity between embodied agents and the environments with which they interact. Yet there is one crucial aspect of perceptual and emotional experience that this approach has somehow neglected, namely its normative dimension (Cairman 2005, Zlatev 2007). Outlining an overall phenomenological account of normativity, and one compatible with the embodied-enactive approach, seems to be a widely felt need within the present day phenomenological community, given “the structure and configuration of our shared world, which is a multi-faceted normative space that allows or encourages certain behaviours and practices and disallows and discourages others”¹.

Acts and States

In spite of a very widespread interest in *enactive* views of mind², the notion of an act is really one of the subjects most neglected by contemporary philosophy. Such a notion, rightly conceived, must avoid two sorts of reductions, namely, a conceptual reduction of the notion of *act* to that of *action*, and an ontological reduction of *acts* to *states* or events.

This latter reduction seems to me to be the original sin of most contemporary philosophy of mind, insofar as it ignores the workings of the subjective pole of intentionality, namely *positionality*. A similar reproach was addressed by Husserl to the *psychological* account of consciousness; not surprisingly so, given that Brentano’s concept of an intentional state was in the end inherited by consciousness theorists close to standard cognitive science, which adopts a functional perspective also for *mental states*. Mental states are what they are in virtue of the *causal* and *functional* role they have in our mental life, independently of how this role is physically implemented (Marruffa 2008, p. 38). This is a fundamental aspect of standard cognitive science since it is the cornerstone of the project of *naturalizing* our mental life that animates this paradigm. In a nutshell, the idea is to show that mental states can

- 1 DOYON and BREYER, forthcoming: thanking the editors for allowing me to quote from the penultimate draft of their *Introduction*, on open access on Academia.edu
- 2 CLARK (1998), VARELA, THOMPSON & ROSCH, (1991), GALLAGHER (2005), GALLAGHER, ZAHAVI (2008), GALLAGHER (2012).

be properties of the *natural* world studied by natural sciences (Marraffa 2008, p. 64) and, therefore, that our mental life can be described as the *mechanistic* functioning of a mechanical device. As Fodor says, [...] thinking can be *mechanical* because Turing machines are *machines* (Fodor 2001, p. 19) (italics mine).

This suggests a way to define ontological naturalism about persons: it is (or is based on) the reduction of acts to states. Let's see what a mental life is like, given this reduction.

The notion of a state plays indeed a central role in the description of our life, whether mental or non-mental. It is common to speak of physical or mental states of a person. The notion *mental state* is the key notion for understanding that of *mental life*. In fact, according to a widely accepted thesis, mental life is a sequence of mental states (e.g. beliefs, desires, and emotions). We can therefore speak of “intentional” and “non-intentional” states (e.g. qualia or states of “phenomenal” consciousness).

The nature of a sequence of mental states is generally described either as (a) a flow or stream, having a temporal order of succession, or (b) as a succession of states each of which stands in causal relations with the states preceding and succeeding it. The latter would be a fairly standard description of mental life along the lines suggested by John Searle's so-called Classical Model of Practical Rationality (hereafter, CMPR). Consider an example:

- (1) James is thirsty and believes that this is water—James decides to drink the water.

According to CMPR, a decision is typically understood as a state (or event) which is causally determined by beliefs and desires—more generally, by preceding conative and cognitive states. So, this model incorporates a very classical form of causal determinism. Voluntary actions are determined by causes, exactly as any other event in nature: the only difference being the *kind* of cause: psychological causes, such as beliefs and desires, rather than physical or biological causes. This model thus involves a compatibilist account of free will resembling the standard empiricist line of thought going from Locke to, say, Davidson. *Prima facie*, provided that one can legitimately distinguish compulsion from deliberate choice, it would seem that there is no harm in describing free or voluntary actions as causally determined by the relevant states of belief

and desire—i.e. the sort of “psychological” or mental causes also called “motives” or “reasons”.

And yet, if it is described as a succession of states, a *personal* life does not obviously set itself apart from the sort of life characteristic of an ant—or even the “life” of a Turing Machine, which may also be defined as a causal succession of states.

In response, I offer two arguments against this description of mental life as a causally ordered succession of states, one phenomenological and one ontological.

Actions and Events

Phenomenologically, this description is not at all true to the life of persons. It fails to capture our mental life as we know it “from inside”, and it fails even worse to capture our grasp of other persons’ meaningful behaviour. Far from being a mere flow of states of consciousness (which may be a fit description of dreams), a conscious life and any span of it looks much more like a series of *acts* which are linked together, where the link is the relation of motivation.

Note here that my use of “act” includes more than what is meant by “action” in its common philosophical sense. Let’s make an example. A friend comes in. I perceive her and feel joy: this *response* is an act. This joy might motivate me to break what I’m doing, run up to her, and hug her. But surely this joy will not motivate me to do so *without my consent*. If I were to see her while in the midst of a public talk, I would not *endorse* this desire (one more act), as I would prefer not to interrupt my presentation.

To cut a long story short, many mental “states” don’t seem capable of causing the following ones without consulting the subject, as it were, or, less metaphorically, without the subject’s endorsement. This endorsement, this stance or taking up a position (either assenting to it or denying it) makes an *actual* motive out of an otherwise *merely possible* one. Without this endorsement, that motive would *not* have causal power.

Now, as we shall see in more detail, the endorsement of a mental state (assent or denial) is an instance of *positionality*, a “position” being the essential or distinctive feature of an act in a strict sense, conferring on it “act-uality.”

My second line of argument against the causal theory of personal mental life is ontological. The phenomenological one is insufficient to meet analytical standards. For, without further analysis, how can we be sure that talk of “motive” is not a merely verbal variant of “cause”, or that talk of “act” is not just a verbal variant of “state”? Or, again, how do we know that states are not causally sufficient to determine following states, and that endorsement is not an illusory phenomenon? How do we know that what appears to be so really is so, that phenomenology reveals ontology?

Therefore, we need a) not only a phenomenological, but also an ontological distinction of *motive* from *cause*, and b) likewise for *act* and *state*.

Let’s examine the first point. My argument presupposes that there is an ontological difference between *actions* and *events*. All actions are events, but not all events are actions. This claim is less contentious than the distinction between (mental) acts and (mental) states. In any case, I shall not argue for it further³. Let me simply illustrate this distinction with a seemingly clear instance of it.

Going to sleep is an action, whereas falling asleep is an event. Rather than being an action, falling asleep is something that happens to me. Suppose you accept this premise. Now suppose I am sleepy. Being sleepy is a good reason to go to bed. So, I may endorse this reason, thus consenting to my state. I am thereby determined to perform a certain action, namely, to go to bed. But this state is not a *sufficient* reason. I might have other reasons to stay up, to resist my state of being sleepy, such as finishing some work, a film, etc.

Now, surely, sooner or later I shall fall asleep. So—you might conclude—my state was after all a sufficient reason, that is a *cause* of my sleeping.

Granted, it is a cause. Yet not of an action (going to sleep), but of an event (falling asleep). As long as we consider actions, a state by itself cannot give rise to an action without my endorsement, implicit or explicit. As soon as my state works as a cause, the action is no longer there, there is an event.

Therefore, a motive is different (ontologically) from a cause, since a cause does not require anybody’s assent to operate, although motives do.

3 RUNGALDDIER (1996).

Let's consider a complementary example. Slipping on a banana skin is an event. Getting up afterward is (*inter alia*) an action. No assent, no position-taking is necessarily involved in the event of slipping. What makes an action of getting up an action is the position taken, more or less reflexively, and perhaps even without any reflection at all, about the state in which one is thrown off balance. Recovering control and balance is an endorsed motive of action, hence a reason for it (not a cause). Why should we ignore such a blatant difference? Reducing the notion of action to that of event commits one to this serious oversight.

We now go over to the second difference, that between acts and states. To begin with, we must clarify the notion of act—we cannot delay this any longer. In what immediately follows, I present a first sketch of a unified theory of acts, which should be, in my opinion, the core of an ontology of personhood.

Acts and Actions

The concept of act I propose includes a subclass of actions, although it is not reducible to that. The box below presents a synopsis of the matter.

Acts in a broad sense

ACTS as a subclass of ACTIONS	ACTS IN A STRICT SENSE
1. Punctual actions (as opposed to activities) 2. Actions manifesting attitudes or dispositions, possibly with positive or negative value (e.g., an act of friendship, an act of courage); possibly ritual acts (e.g., of worship, of faith) 3. Speech acts (doing things with words) 4. Social acts (including speech acts)	(WHAT ARE MISLEADINGLY CALLED) "MENTAL ACTS"

Let's start with the cases on the left hand side. We use the term "act" to refer to several different types of actions: namely punctual ones, as opposed to those lasting some time, or even to activities – even if the difference is one of degree more than of kind. Punctual acts include, e.g., punching somebody, shooting a gun, pointing at something, etc. We also mean by "acts" actions like those included in the second subclass of actions in the box above. The third subclass draws our attention to a very important class of actions, namely, speech acts. These are actions

performed by employing words. Speech acts may be required also to perform acts in the second subclass, such as praying. Among speech acts, we might be particularly interested in the assertoric ones. But we may also take an interest in the sort of performative acts that produce social institutions, like marriages, commissive acts that produce social effects like obligations and pretences, or directives. Most linguistic acts are also social acts, falling in the fourth subclass, which include acts with legal or political effects, etc.

But what about the right hand side of the box?

The kinds of acts remaining are called “mental” acts. This language is misleading, if what is meant is a sort of “inner” or “mental” *actions*. But this is in my opinion a very confused notion. If by “mental act” one means “mental action”, then one must face Gilbert Ryle’s compelling criticism of the very idea of mental actions.

“Nobody ever says... he has performed five quick and easy acts of the will, and two slow and difficult ones between breakfast and lunch.”⁴

We have to admit that this criticism is quite convincing if we imagine a mental act (in particular an act of the will) as a sort of inner action. We hardly know *how* to imagine it, except by the picture of a little inner agent, a “ghost” hidden inside our body.

But if we reject the idea of the inner agent, and regard a decision as the actual exercise of that ordinary disposition to make decisions called “our will”, Ryle’s sarcasm loses its bite: We *can* count decisions; we can say that some are difficult, other not, and so on.

This shows that a decision is an act, but not a *mental action*⁵. Or, if you prefer, it shows that it is possible to call a decision an act without

4 RYLE (1949), p. 64.

5 “Was andererseits die Rede von Akten anbelangt, so darf man hier and den ursprünglichen Wortsinn von *actus* natürlich nicht mehr denken, *der Gedanke der Betätigung muss schlechterdings ausgeschlossen bleiben*” (HUSSERL (1900/ 1901), Logische Untersuchungen V, Ueber intentionale Erlebnisse und ihre Inhalte, §13., HUA XIX, Bd 2, S. 393. In a footnote to this passage Husserl approvingly quotes Natorp against “mythology” of mental actions and operations: „Die „Mythologie der Tätigkeiten lehnen auch wir ab; nicht als psychische Betätigungen, sondern als Intentionale Erlebnisse definieren wir die „Akte“.“

implying that it is a strange sort of action. On the other hand, it would be absurd to deny that decisions exist *and that we “make” decisions*.

Then what is a “mental” act? My answer is that an act is the *positional* component of a lived experience, that is, of any kind of conscious experience (e.g. perceptions, emotions, judgements, decisions etc.). “Taking a position” is a part of every intentional state—it is exactly what intentionality is on its subjective side. Seen *a parte objecti*, intentionality qualifies the *mode of presence* of something, e.g., as a perceived object or state of affairs, a merely imagined one, a conceived or remembered one, a desired or projected one, a feared or hoped for one, etc. Viewed *a parte subjecti*, intentionality qualifies the *mode of responding* of somebody to the motivating power of the present object or state of affairs—a *moment of somebody’s* actual experience.

There is a basic form of positionality that belongs to the basic forms of experience, like perception and emotion. In recognition, one has a *recognition* of something being or not being *there* together with the positive or negative value it bears. *Recognition* is more than being affected by something, because it involves a *claim of validity*. That is, it is “subject to the jurisdiction of reason.” One can ask whether it is right or wrong, appropriate or inappropriate. Basic positionality is the subjective correlate of the object’s apparent existence, and of its apparent value-qualities: such as pleasantness or fearfulness. Apparent existence, apparent value qualities are characteristics that distinguish perceived and emotionally felt objects. The corresponding acts are not real actions, but basic cognitive or emotional responses: positive or negative positions taken in acknowledging the apparent existence of the perceived thing (or rejecting it as a sensory illusion), appreciating its agreeable felt character or shunning its scary one.

The move to avoid any reduction of mental acts either to mental actions or to mental states is a Husserlian move, one exceeding the philosophical resources of Brentano. Husserl’s suggestion was to use “act” as a synonym of “intentional lived experience” (*intentionales Erlebnis*), which is what Brentano, most of the time, would refer to as “mental phenomena”. Hence, in Husserl’s language, a state cannot be “intentional”, or related to an object, without being an act.

Yet *identifying* acts and intentional lived experiences is not entirely satisfactory, because no act can be reduced to the lived or conscious experience of it. Acts—even “mental” acts—can transcend

their conscious aspects. Like anything efficacious an act is partially consciousness-transcendent. There is more to it than is experienced, as I will show shortly. My suggestion goes further: Acts in a broad sense, including, for instance, punctual or ritualized or social acts (such as, perhaps, some sort of quasi- or proto-linguistic acts such as pointing at, or even basic social acts like imitating), can be performed without being “interiorized” as conscious experiences of agency. Agency precedes and “grounds” intentionality or consciousness. But even positionality can precede consciousness.

To sum up, intentionality, or relation to an object, can be the property of conscious states presenting *some object* (as Brentano held), but there is no mode of presence of an object without a corresponding position-taking on the part of the subject. Intentionality is not only directedness or aboutness, but also positionality.

Basic Acts

What is ultimately the characterizing property of acts, in the strict sense? Following Husserl, I just claimed that this essential property is *positionality*. In other words, all intentional states involve or presuppose *taking a position (yes-no) relative to an object* (in a large sense: including a value, a project, its goal, etc.). Strictly speaking, acts are positional states. Positionality is to the subject of an intentional relation what the mode of presentation is to its object. It is the way in which the subjective pole of an intentional state is constituted: i.e., *the way in which it experiences itself as such, as a subject*.

All acts—“mental” or not, narrowly or broadly conceived, hence including actions—are *responses* to the environment or surrounding world. Some responses are positions. Taking up a position, a stance, relative to a given object and a corresponding state, is a necessary feature of intentional states. Positionality is the specific property of what Husserl calls “intentional lived experiences”, along with a presentation of some object. Without positionality, we only have mental states. A state involving a position is an act. I must show this in greater detail. To do so, let me propose an outline for a *hierarchy of acts*.

The basic level of our entire personal life is comprised of what we may call *basic acts*, containing *first order positions*.

There are two classes of such basic acts, cognitive and emotional, or, to put it slightly differently, perceptions and emotions. Basic cognitive acts or perceptions are characterized by first order “doxic” positionality, while basic emotional acts feature “axiological” positionality.

What I call doxic positionality (*doxa*, Greek for “belief”) consists in recognizing a perceived thing’s existence. It is a kind of assent or denial, and it is not a reflective (or a propositional belief) but an immediate one. It’s not a “judgment”, if we mean by that the illocutionary act employing a symbolic representation of an object or a state of affairs. It’s the naïve realist or “natural” attitude toward reality. A perception *can* turn out to be a delusion. It could *not*, if there were no doxic position, like in an act of imagination or day-dreaming (where no question of truthfulness is relevant). A doxic position is the subjective counterpart *to the claim of veridicality* that distinguishes perceptions.

What I call axiological positionality (from *axios*, the Greek word for “worth” or “valuable”) acknowledges the positive or negative salience, or value, of a given thing or situation. Each emotion includes such a position. They can be appropriate. But they can also turn out to be inappropriate—imagine, e.g., suffering panic when faced with a peaceful little cat. The negative axiological position of the corresponding experience is in that case wrong.

First level positions *are not freely taken*. I cannot avoid endorsing the existence of what I see or touch. I cannot take up an opposite position than the one of negative value I in fact adopt concerning an object of fear or horror. That holds even in the instance that a thing’s existence turns out in the further course of experience to be illusory (something perceived as a living thing turns out to be a scarecrow), or in the instance that a feared object turns out not to be so bad after all. For this to happen – for the position to be modified into a “crossing off”, a modality of perceptual doubt, or, in short, a new position – there must be an antecedent position.

Positionality and Normativity

What is the role of positionality in basic experience? In other words, why should we consider acts and not states to be our basic form of experience? It should be clear by now. Only positionality is responsible for *adequacy or inadequacy* of perceptions and emotions. We may see this

better by contrasting perceptions and emotions with acts of imagination: which essentially don't have any claim of truthfulness (or not in this basic sense), don't raise any doubt about their adequacy, and which typically have a "neutralized" positionality (in Husserl's terminology).

Ordinary perceptions and emotions, on the other hand, are corrigible. A claim of validity can be cancelled by a modified position (perplexity, doubt, rejection, for instance).

Hence, if by "experience" we mean not just the causal impact of external reality on an organism, but *something we can learn from*, something which is or is not veridical or appropriate, something which can provide evidence for our judgments of fact and value, then we must take positionality into account.

In summary, the difference between acts and states is the difference between experience as evidence for (possible) *true statements (of fact or value)* and experience as causal impact of reality on an organism. But the experience through which we *explore* the world, the experience we "learn from", is of the first kind. It is always more or less *adequate*—and could not be such without positionality. As a final statement concerning this distinction between acts and states, we may say that states are merely the effects of the world's causal impact on an organism, whereas (basic) acts are *adequate or inadequate responses to reality*. Hence, positionality is the foundation of *normativity*.

A hierarchy of acts. Personhood defined

By adequacy I mean rational adequacy, in a broad, both cognitive and practical, sense. The present section presents a conception of personhood in terms of a theory of acts.

I shall first state the three claims I would like to argue for:

- (A) To live as a person is *to emerge on one's states by one's acts*.
- (S) A person is a *subject of acts*.
- (F) A certain subset of acts is a necessary condition for the emergence of a *personality*, and it is the set of *free acts*

Notice that propositions (A), (S), and (F) contain several notions, i.e., *act*, *subject of acts*, *free acts*, *emergence*, that deserve further clarification.

In the rest of this section I shall try to provide some support for (A). I shall also sketch a line of argument for the other claims. Thesis (S) and

thesis (F) are, in fact, respectively, a corollary and a specific instance of thesis (A).

Personal life as a life of reason starts with basic, pre-reflective acts. Or, we could also say that basic acts constitute the first level of the emergence of a person on her states, meaning by that that subjectivity is constituted, or first experienced as such, in the pulse of basic positionality. This is the level of pre-reflective recognition of a factually and axiologically qualified reality.

Let's now examine the first claim:

(A) To be a person is to emerge on one's states by one's acts.

A person is a subject that "emerges" from a temporal sequence of biological and mental states by virtue of the positional component of perceptions, emotions and behaviour subject to normativity (right or wrong). Such basic pre-reflective, normativity-driven experience may be contrasted with behaviour simply adaptive, or biologically driven (satisfaction of needs, etc.).

One might wonder what it is for experience to be "normativity driven". This is a crucial point for a correct understanding of our notions of *emergence* and *subject*: a flow of psychological states through which an animal – let's say, a dog, a dauphin, a chimpanzee—interacts with its natural and social environment is no sufficient condition for these states to be acts of a subject. Positionality—even and particularly pre-reflective, non propositional positionality—is taking up positions relative to factual and axiological data; subject to be modified when they are felt as *wrong*. What to do with them, what to do next: right or wrong behaviour, is what we first learn by sharing the habits and norms of the life-community we are born in.

Maybe social learning is part of the becoming adult of (some) non-human animals; what seems to be characteristic of humans, though, is cultural or norm-based learning, typically requiring coherence, organization and order in even the most basic responses to the environment, so that "meaningful" structures of behaviour can gradually emerge from pretty unorganized sequences of reactions to inner and outer stimuli. Reinforcing right responses, discouraging wrong ones, co-executing right positions: this is how the care-givers and their community provide the foundations of an emerging subjectivity. A form of collective intentionality which the human infant takes part in – as

Max Scheler first pointed out—is the condition of the infant’s emerging as a subject of a motivational chain of acts, out of a mere flow of states.

We may then specify (A) as follows:

(A’) Basic acts are the first level of persons’ emergence on states the level of (basic) recognition of a factually and axiologically qualified reality.

In fact, it is by means of basic *acts* that we get in touch with *objective* reality and do so in its factual and axiological aspects. (That is, we experience reality as objective, and not just as what *resists our drives*).

But we can do more. We can also *manage* the states in which this contact with reality puts us. In basic acts, I said, we experience reality as objective. We can get it wrong. But even if we get it right, the use we make of data is (within certain limits) up to us. It is in our power to expose ourselves more or less to reality, that is *to accept or reject data as motives of further life (experiences, actions)*.

This observation leads us to a consideration of what we may call second-level emergence involved in the management of states. We manage our states by a second class of acts, involving second level positions, that is, positions that we take up relative to the basic acts and their objective and subjective correlates (states of affairs and mental states).

These “managing acts” are, in a broad sense, free (as above, “free acts” is a shortening for the more natural “freely undertaken acts”). In fact, a first-level act of denying reality to what I perceive as real is not in my power (perception is not a free act, nor is belief), yet refusing motivational weight to a perceived fact (or salience) *is* in my power.

I can receive a piece of bad news, or learn about a very painful fact, and I can also let myself be motivated by it. But I can also “repress” it, not in a first-level position, but in a second-level act of not allowing it to motivate my further acts, e.g., my emotions, thought, decisions, or behaviour. I “neutralize” the first-level position. With this act I can manage my states by regulating my exposure to further experience.

To endorse or ignore basic inputs is to take up a *second-level position*. Second-level positions characterize free acts in a broad sense.

With the phrase “in a broad sense” I mean to emphasize a typical character of this second class of acts. They are not necessarily conscious, or entirely conscious. We *can* manage our passivity in the darkness, as it were, like in the example of repressing a grief, thereby blocking all

working-through of a bereavement—without admitting doing that, even before oneself.

As a concluding remark for this section, we can make a further specification concerning (A):

(A'') By virtue of second-level positions, acts that are free in a broad sense bring about a second level of persons' emergence upon states, i.e. the level of managing one's exposure to further experience.

The Emergence of Personal Identity

In order to see the proper character of the third and final class of acts, we might think of the just-discussed second-level emergence of acts and persons as *the management of one's passivity*. This paradoxical-sounding expression reminds us that experience is never completely "passive". Otherwise we could not even say that we "grow up" through experience. Yet the "path" that each one of us takes through the world, so to speak, by managing passive motivations and conditioning their influence on further experience need not be a series of choices, conscious or otherwise. No doubt personality and character traits express themselves in second-level acts. They can always be clarified in retrospect, and alternative possible plots can be brought to consciousness, although that is not necessary. On the other hand, by regulating our exposure to the flow of information coming through the basic acts, we undeniably exert a power of some sort, attesting an efficacy entirely absent in basic acts. We do choose whether or not to authorise the motivational force of a given experience on further experience.

Further experience, though, does not necessarily mean further *action*. By saying yes or no, as it were, to data and states as *motives in our ongoing life*, we do not necessarily engage in active behavior. Avoiding to work through bereavement, for example, is no active behavior. Fully conscious motive management concerns only a particular subclass of free acts which are in fact authorizations to proceed, or licences to *make something of the data of a given experience*. And, hence, we give ourselves licence to make something out of ourselves. Here we come to those acts which we may deem *free in the strict sense*.

Those acts in which we endorse (or ignore) a datum (or state) *as a reason for action* are acts that are free in the strict sense.

These acts are essentially commitments to one's future behavior. What characterizes this class is that with the second-level positions endorsing or repudiating data or states as reasons for action we impose on ourselves an obligation of sorts with respect to ourselves or other persons. *Decisions* are paradigmatic instances of the former, *promises* of the latter.

Acts that are free in the strict sense are what we may call *self-constitutive acts*. By endorsing a reason for action, I take a commitment toward my future self. I accept responsibility for what I shall be. In this sense we may say that decisions are paradigmatic instances of self-constitutive acts, even if we might, by further analysis, discover that the essential nature of a decision is better clarified by analyzing it as a sort of promise made to oneself. That is, a decision really engages one's future self, or, conversely, one bears responsibility for one's past decisions only in so far as one is actually responsive to other people's expectations.

We may in fact discover, as Nietzsche was the first to suggest, that personal responsibility is genealogically linked to social acts of promising before being the amazing power of self-obligation that we attribute to our (free) *will*. Yet, questions of origin, as opposed to question of essence or structure, need not bother us here.

While decisions can be mute acts, promises are paradigmatic instances not just of social acts, but also of linguistically grounded social acts. Now, most speech acts are self-committing acts, as Searle rightly observed. By making assertions I commit myself to sincerity and justification, by making directive or commissive acts I may also bind myself to bear responsibility for other people's actions or take on obligations towards other people. To enlarge our perspective beyond speech acts of the familiar varieties, consider further how by an act of faith I might commit myself to a spiritual path, or how by making a political choice I might adopt a coherent set of opinions, etc.

Further inquiry might in fact show that the very possibility of *an act of the will*, namely an explicit *decision*, presupposes a capability for all sorts of *voluntary* (or free) acts (actions), such as the just-mentioned speech acts, and more generally our everyday linguistic practice, i.e., our ordinary practice of doing things with words, like reassuring friends, instructing children, exchanging goods, and so on. There is a suggestion concealed in this hint, namely, that the old notion of *will* should be explained as the *faculty of choices* and descriptively analyzed as a higher

order capacity of managing the class of self-constitutive acts. Because it is an assessment of oneself in a more or less resolute act of endorsing or rejecting a certain course of action (“Yes, I will—yes, that’s the person I am”), a choice turns out to be an act involving a position of the third level, namely, an accepting or rejecting other acts involving second-level positions (acts that are strictly free or voluntary). There actually is a *reflective* component to any conscious choice indeed, whether or not it is deliberate—whereas a voluntary action can be habitual, or anyhow brought about without reflection.

Let’s sum up the result of the preceding analysis:

(A''') Acts that are free in a strict sense, or self-constitutive acts, constitute a third level of emergence of a person’s on her states, namely, the level of managing one’s actions. This level is a person’s peculiarly *temporal emergence* on her present state (projecting, planning).

The last clause is in need of some explanation. “Temporal emergence” refers to one’s assuming responsibility for one’s past and one’s future, precisely as the same self through time.

Let’s now recall thesis (F):

(F) There is a subset of acts needed for emergence of a *personal identity*, and it is the set of *free acts*.

Now we can be more precise:

(F') Personality emerges upon states in acts that are free in a broad sense, in this way intrinsically characterizing human persons, e.g. in terms of motivational style and the contents of experience.

(F'') Personal identity through time emerges in acts that are free in the strict sense (self-constitutive acts), which are also acts in which one becomes *actually responsible* for one’s past and present self.

My contention is therefore that a full-blown person is a being capable of self-constitutive acts. Humans are normally capable of becoming full-blown persons, when the relevant biological and social pre-conditions are fulfilled.

I shall express this point by my claim (S):

(S) A person is (essentially) a *subject of acts*

The idea is that personal subjectivity is primarily a capacity for acts of all types. Further, being a subject is a necessary condition for having a subjective point of view, i.e. a first-person perspective. In other words, self-consciousness presupposes subjectivity as the capacity of meaningful, structured or “normal” behavior. You must *be* a subject, and *live as* a subject, in order to recognize yourself as a subject, which comes about, among other things, by acquiring a (linguistically and conceptually articulated) first-person perspective.

Note that the notion of a subject is not presupposed but rather explained by the notion of an act. Human life does not reduce without remainder to being a (personal) subject. Digestion, for instance, does not, while eating and (even more so) sexuality do.

In short:

(S') Only a being capable of acts is a subject and can acquire a (robust) first-person perspective (reflective, articulated self-consciousness).

Let's now examine the relation between personhood and subjectivity in more detail. Do the different levels of acts somehow correspond to degrees of development too? It seems to me that all we can say, on the basis of the foregoing analysis, is the following:

(S'') A capacity for basic acts is a necessary (but not sufficient) condition for the emergence of a person.

(S''') A capacity for free acts is a necessary and sufficient condition for the emergence of a person.

That is, a capacity for free acts is a necessary and sufficient condition for acquiring both a (reflexive, articulated) first-person perspective and personal identity.

This perspective marks a discontinuity between what we may call a “potential person” and other animals, a discontinuity related to our capacity to acquire mastery of language. Such mastery consists not only of grammatical and semantic competence, but also of a capacity for appropriate speech acts, and, more generally, acts of symbolic expression.

Let's consider this last claim more closely. The first level of emergence—recognition of qualified reality in perception and emotion—seems to reveal itself as “having always been there” only in case language and propositional thinking or other symbolic thinking can be acquired. In fact, as we saw, perceiving reality as objective and expressive of value-qualities (rather than encountering it as something resisting our drives)

is a faculty whose importance we realize, in a way, when it provides evidence for judgments, or acts of symbolic expression (e.g., think of the marvelous Altamira's caves), even if basic acts can be there without these capacities having yet developed.

To recapitulate the main steps of my analysis, we can say that without basic *acts* one cannot learn from experience, or enjoy life *as* experience. Only by *managing* that life do we emerge from it and in a way rise above it as (active) subjects of our lives. But only self-constitutive or self-committing acts are sources of personal identity through time.

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