CHAPTER 1

Practical Philosophy’s Perspective on Action

Throughout everyday life, from economics to politics to culture etc., action occurs and develops in many aspects of human life. As the primary mode of human existence, how exactly should action itself be interpreted? What kind of meaning and significance does action have for humans and the world? The investigation action from the perspective of practical philosophy will provide an answer these questions.

1.1 “What humans are” and “What humans do”

Action can be understood from either a broad or a narrow point of view. Narrowly speaking, action is chiefly expressed as the activity or behavior of the individual. In analytic philosophy, action theory or philosophy of action is chiefly understood in terms of isolated activities or actions. However, from a broader perspective, action appears in a variety of social practices, for example, in the above-mentioned spheres of economics, politics, culture and so on. These two forms of action are not separate from one another. Individual activities or actions take place within the realm of social practice, which means that the broader perspective on action includes the narrower one within it.

The actual manifestations of practice are as manifold as the versatility of human existence itself. Starting from the mundane, the most fundamental manifestation of human existence can be seen to be composed of everyday actions. From simply eating, drinking, waking and sleeping, in one’s home and with family, to interactions with neighbors, and from routine activity, to relaxing and enjoyment, our daily actions vary widely.

For humans, the necessary resources for the production and reproduction of life and for the production and reproduction of these resources themselves, are difficult to differentiate from one another. The latter (production of necessary resources) involves labor. Daily life is mainly based on human interactions and it is not immediately directed at the transformation of material objects.

Translator’s note: The literal translation of the Chinese here would be “‘What [it] is’ and ‘What [it] does.” The subject of these phrases is human beings. This section argues that humans are what they do, and that action connects various aspects of human beings on a deep level.
whereas production and labor are. In the spheres of production and labor human action is based on cooperation and coordination (with other humans) as well as the utilization of things.

Production and labor are concrete manifestations of action. As mentioned above, they belong to the realm of social practice. Broadly speaking, action displayed in the form of social practice is expressed in many different social fields. For example, in economics action is investment, trade, administration etc., in politics or law it is connected to political or legal regulations.

In contrast to these institutions, action can also display a cultural character in the context of art and the sciences. Cultural activity, including scientific research and artistic creation, undoubtedly involve conceptual dimensions. However, they are not limited to the intellect. Science, for example, is theoretical, but it also involves communication and debate within the scientific community. Its meaning therefore transcends the individual intellect, and is displayed in actions that influence and affect others. Similarly, artistic creations appear in a variety of forms, and thereby influence society in many ways, but the process of creation is not a purely conceptual activity, and is undertaken through certain concrete actions.

Actions in the realm of science are directed towards truth and in art they are related to beauty. Connected to both enterprises is an ideal of “goodness” that is concretely expressed in moral action. Historically, both traditional Western philosophy and classical Chinese philosophy have evaluated action or practice in primarily ethical terms. One of the characteristics of moral behavior is that it is displayed as individual action, and connotes social practice. As an outward expression of one's virtuous nature, moral action is understood as an expression of one's inner character, and takes achieving one's own virtuous nature, as well as that of others, as its end. Moral actions are given their function in social situations and in the context of the norms of a community.

Humans are the subjects of actions which, as stated, compose the most fundamental mode of human existence. The questions regarding action—“What is it?” and “What does it do?”—are inseparable from the perspective of human beings. The former question is connected to the current manifestation of humankind's development and to its unique form of existence in the larger natural context. From a historical perspective, humans manifest their existence according to their different actions or practices in history. In other words, the use of tools was an advance in labor, and is a basic expression of the difference between humans and animals. This type of “action” allows humans to instigate a departure from the natural world, meaning that human existence is determined both in relation to and in opposition to nature. Different forms of labor, and other corresponding or related actions or practices, are manifestations of