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A Revised Portrait of Human Agency

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Vincent Colapietro

- ¹ Anthony Giddens, Hans Joas, Margaret Archer, Norbert Wiley, and Eugene Halton (to name but a handful of such figures) are social theorists whose philosophical importance is all too often missed (or ignored) by professional philosophers. The main reason for this is obvious: they are by training and appointment social scientists, while professional philosophy tends to be an insular discipline.¹ Disciplinary purity, like most other forms of this misplaced ideal, tends to insure insularity and vitiate vitality. The ideal of keeping philosophy pure from the taint of other disciplines remains, for the most part, in place (cf. Rorty 1982, chapter 2). A too fastidious sense of disciplinary boundaries is, however, antithetical to philosophical pragmatism² and, more generally, theoretical vitality. I am by no means advocating an ethos of facile trans-disciplinarity, much less “transgression,” only a commitment to what Richard J. Bernstein calls “engaged pluralism.”³ The inevitably overlapping practices of diversely situated actors (including those representing institutionally separated disciplines) invite a critical engagement with social practices other than those in which we are most at home. Regarding action and agency especially, professional philosophers have much to learn from the human sciences, especially from such erudite and sophisticated theorists as Giddens, Joas, Archer, Wiley, and Halton.
- ² On this occasion, I would like to call attention to Hans Joas's *The Creativity of Action* (1996). This study is a significant contribution to social theory in an inclusive sense (thus, potentially an extremely noteworthy contribution to social *philosophy*). It is, moreover, itself a creative appropriation of some of the most important insights of the pragmatic tradition. Finally, Joas's appropriation of pragmatism bears directly on our conception of our selves. Though his focus is on action, the implications of his investigation for a portrait of agency are hard to miss. Human beings are portrayed by the classical pragmatists as situated actors and, as such, as creatively responsive beings. The work of

Joas and others details this portrait beyond anything accomplished by these pragmatists themselves.

I. Creative Action and Human Agency

- 3 Hence, the revised portrait of human agency sketched mostly in broad, bold, but arresting strokes by Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead (see Colapietro 1992, also 1988) is, in the work of such contemporary theorists as Joas, Archer, Wiley, and Halton, further revised. (I omit Giddens because, unlike these theorists, he does not draw upon the pragmatists.) This portrait is revised in such a way as to make the pragmatist account of creative actors even more relevant to contemporary theorizing and (of far greater moment) the actual conditions of our historical world than the sketch originally offered by Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead. As instructive and illuminating as I find the work of Archer, Wiley, and Halton, I want on this occasion to focus exclusively on the contribution of Joas in developing some central insights of American pragmatism. I want to do so above all because such an engagement with this theorist seems especially appropriate for the inaugural issue of this newly founded journal.
- 4 In the end, however, my interest is not in this or that theorist. It is not even in this or that tradition (including the tradition of pragmatism). Rather my interest is in the question of agency. My consideration of the pragmatic perspective, as creatively appropriated by Joas in *The Creativity of Action* and, indeed, in his other writings,⁴ is prompted by the judgment that there is something not only truly novel but also theoretically fruitful in what I am disposed to identify as the revised portrait of human agency. In particular, his focus on situation, corporeality, and sociality as the most fundamental emphases of a theory of creative action (or situated creativity) can be taken to provide nothing less than a revised draft of what itself was a dramatic revision of the traditional depiction of human beings.⁵
- 5 In other words, his theory of creative action is, by implication, a portrait of creative actors. Hence, my chosen task on this auspicious occasion is to recall this theory for the purpose of portraying such actors.

II. Joas's Creative Appropriation of the Pragmatic Approach to Human Action

- 6 For the purposes of his inquiry, Joas focuses in the first instance on sociological (rather than narrowly philosophical) theories of action (1996: 4). His reason for doing so, however, should make this focus attractive to philosophical pragmatists (philosophers and indeed others who are working out of the rich tradition of American pragmatism). He states this reason succinctly:
- By contrast analytic philosophy, which has taken a fruitful methodological path of its own, is at a disadvantage compared with sociology, for it has contributed little to defining the social character of action and the orientation of actors to one another; the reason here is that analytical philosophy takes the individual actions of an individual actor as its starting point. (4)
- 7 Joas acknowledges that his methodological decision to focus on sociological theories “is not absolutely compelling,” but he trusts that it “should at least be comprehensible for those whose thought is shaped by other disciplines” (4). Whatever else human agents are,

they are not only social beings but also social actors – precisely in their role as agents, humans do not just happen to be social but sociality is woven into the very fabric of their agency. (As we will stress later, sociality and corporeality are, on Joas’s account, as integral features of human activity as is creativity.) As the title of Talcott Parsons’s book (a work to which Joas devotes considerable attention) implies, the structure of human action is the structure of social action.⁶ Any approach that does not take as its starting point the social character of human action is doomed from the outset to offer a fatally flawed account of human agency and, indeed, of much else.

- 8 This relates directly to pragmatism. “The whole originality of pragmatism, the whole point in it, is,” William James stressed, “its use of the concrete way of seeing. It begins with concreteness, and returns and ends with it” (*MT*, 281-2). It is instructive to recall here that, in the controversies regarding his pragmatism as an account of truth, James traced the root of the dispute between pragmatists and anti-pragmatists to the difference between those who are committed to concrete ways of approaching phenomena and those who are ensnared in abstractions without realizing it (i.e., those who habitually commit what A. N. Whitehead calls “the fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (cf. James, *MT*, 301, 325). Already in his *Principles of Psychology* (1890), James observed: “Life is one long struggle between conclusions based on abstract ways of conceiving cases, and opposite conclusions prompted by our instinctive perception of them as individual facts” (1266). From his perspective, the debate regarding pragmatism, as a theory of truth, quickly became one intense struggle between just these two propensities. In a tone of exasperation, James insists: “[...] when the pragmatist speaks of opinions, does he mean any such insulated and unmotivated abstractions as are here supposed [by the critics]?” He however does not allow this to stand simply as a rhetorical question, immediately adding: “Of course not, he means men’s opinions in the flesh, as they have really formed themselves, opinions surrounded by their grounds and the influences they obey and exert, and along with the whole environment of social communication in which they are a part and out of which they take their rise” (*MT*, 310-1).
- 9 What James asserts here regarding opinions might with at least equal force be said of action or activity, when conceived pragmatically. There is an irony in James’s own failure to stress sufficiently the inescapable environment of social communication in which human opinions acquire their function, force, and status (including the status or standing of some of them *as true*, i.e., as worthy of our commitment or reliance). But, in reference to action, none of the pragmatists failed to stress the inescapable environment of social life. Human action is, even in the innermost recesses of our solitary musings and reflections, a performance by a social actor whose reliance upon linguistic competencies and other shared human practices would be too obvious to note were it not for their habitual neglect by all too many theorists.⁷
- 10 For pragmatism, then, the need to make explicit the depth to which sociality penetrates the espousal of our most personal beliefs, without thereby eliminating the truly decisive role of individual agents, is matched by the need to make explicit just this depth regarding our singularly expressive actions (those deeds in which we most uniquely express and define our selves).⁸ Insofar as the dominant theories of action in analytic philosophy abstract from the social character of human action – also from the situated, corporeal, and creative dimensions of human activity – it would be, on pragmatist grounds, methodologically advantageous to turn aside from this tradition of theorizing and to turn toward those traditions in which this character is the matter of utmost

concern. This is true even if some of those traditions fall outside of philosophy. So, at least, is the decision orienting Joas's project in *The Creativity of Action*. From a pragmatist perspective, moreover, the cultivation of the sociological imagination is a theoretical exigency for philosophical inquirers no less than social scientists or, more narrowly, sociological theorists.⁹

- 11 But matters cut in the opposite direct as well. What Parsons was unable to see or unwilling to admit is what Joas himself sees clearly and grants forthrightly. "Parsons failed," Joas stresses, "to recognize that the classical thinkers of sociology [such figures as Émile Durkheim, Max Weber, Georg Simmel, and Ferdinand Tönnies] were not attempting to erect the new discipline on traditional philosophical foundations, but that sociology was itself a philosophical project" (1996: 69). This is nowhere more evident than in the attempts of these figures to articulate an adequate theory of human action. "Notions of the creativity of human action," Joas readily acknowledges, played a clearly constitutive role in the work of these authors" (69). Even so, none of them "succeeded in smoothly integrating their thoughts on a theory of creativity into the rest of their work" (69). When we turn to theorists for whom creativity occupies a pivotal role in their accounts of human activity – when we turn (as Joas does in Chapter 2 – "Metaphors of Creativity") to Johann Gottfried Herder on expression, Karl Marx on both production and revolution, or Arthur Schopenhauer and Friedrich Nietzsche on the surging force of a creative will – we encounter rich resources for understanding human creativity. At the same time, however, we are confronted with the deep-rooted tendency to mark off creative action as a separate category (in effect perpetuating the dualism between the blindly routine exertions of human actors in their everyday circumstances and the genuinely creative achievements of remarkably unique agents). What distinguishes Joas's efforts as much as anything else is his resolute refusal to posit a residual category of creative action. Following the pragmatists (especially Dewey), he makes creative activity – the improvisational responses of human beings to the concrete situations in which they are implicated (cf. *LW* 1, 67) – the most basic form of human action. Rationality, intentionality, and various other matters are to be approached in terms of the *situated creativity* of human beings, rather than such creativity being approached in terms of abstract and, hence, ahistoric conceptions of reason, intention, and a host of other traditional explanatory categories.

III. A Pragmatist Alternative to the Two Regnant Models of Human Action

- 12 Joas's intention is to provide "a fundamental restructuring of the principles underlying mainstream action theory" (1996: 144). He is not trying to add a category or set of categories to those already in place; rather he is striving to restructure at the most fundamental level our understanding of human activity.¹⁰ He takes these principles underlying our mainstream understanding to be embodied in each one of the two regnant models of human action. For his purpose, then, the various differences between the *model of rational action* and *that of normatively oriented action* are far less significant than their basic agreement regarding three critical points.¹¹ "The true alternative to taking rational action as our starting point, and thereby creating a residual category, therefore lies [...] in the *reconstructive introduction* of the concept of rational action" (147).¹² In other words,

what is needed is a category of intelligent, creative activity to *replace* the regnant model of rational action and the supplemental models of non-rational action.

- 13 The “tacit assumptions behind ideas of rational action,” as these have defined the field of inquiry, are in the first instance what most need to be identified. Above all, they are rooted in three presuppositions. All of the theories being subjected to critique by Joas “presuppose firstly that the actor is capable of purposive action, secondly that he has control over his own body, and thirdly that he is autonomous vis-à-vis his fellow human beings and environment” (147). At first blush (perhaps even after more extended consideration), these assumptions are likely to appear, to many inquirers, to be entirely innocent and, indeed, reasonable. But each one tends to suppress an adequate recognition of situated creativity as the primordial form of human action. As a consequence, Joas feels compelled to call into question these seemingly innocent and undeniable truths about the exercise of our agency. He thus offers a non-teleological interpretation of the intentionality of action (148-67), a highly suggestive account of the constitution of the body schema (167-84), and finally a more abridged yet even more compelling description of the primordial sociality of human life and, hence, human agency (184-95).¹³ While I will touch upon all three of these contributions to our understanding of action, I will focus primarily on the first one (Joas’s pragmatist critique of the traditional forms of teleological explanation). But, even before doing so, other matters require attention.
- 14 The first such matter concerns the most basic differences between the two regnant models. While the affinities are, ultimately, of importance, the differences are hardly negligible. The model of rational action, so dominant in economic theorizing, was the object of sociological critique. The tendency on the part of sociologists, in their role as theorists of action, however, was to grant legitimacy to this model and then to supplement it by identifying other categories of human exertion or engagement (e.g., in Weber’s typology of action, instrumentally rational actions [*zweckrational*] are juxtaposed to value-rational [*wertrational*], affectual, and traditional actions, whereas we witness, in Vilfredo Pareto’s work, a conscientious attempt to recognize “non-economic spheres of society” (Joas 1996: 38)). The result is, however, to assign “all those forms of action [other than rational or, in Pareto’s language, “logical” action] [...] to a negatively defined residual category (that of *non-rational* or *non-logical* actions).
- 15 As already indicated, for virtually all of the sociologists under consideration by Joas, the legitimacy of the model of rational action for explaining phenomena in the methodologically distinct domain of economic activity went either altogether unchallenged or only superficially challenged. Indeed, the critique of this highly influential model tended to leave unchallenged the most basic assumptions of this model. A sociological theory of action would need to be more encompassing than the conception (allegedly) adequate for explaining our economic activities. But, both for the narrow purpose of explaining the behavior of economic actors and the far more comprehensive one of providing the most basic terms in which to conceive rational agency, the model of rational action occupies the default position. Ironically, then, the sociological critics unwittingly espoused the assumptions of the very model of action that these critics imagined they were subjecting to radical criticism.
- 16 Taking Parsons as a (if not *the*) paradigm of a sociological theorist who tried to subject the model of rational action to a thoroughgoing critique, Joas argues: “Although we must agree with Parsons in distancing ourselves from the model of rational action, it does not follow that we must agree with his solution, namely the development of a normativist

conception of action, is really the best way to lay the foundations for an approach that goes beyond the rational model” (1996: 44). Parsons’ “alternative consists in assuming that social order is guaranteed by mutually formed values and in maintaining that the model of rational action can be overcome [only] by considering those normative orientations which are involved in the constitution of goals and the choice of means” (1996: 14). Adherents of the model of rational action must presuppose a normatively structured society in which rational agents set goals for themselves and, moreover, identify the means most effective for the realization of their aims. But these theorists have no way of accounting for society in this sense. That is, rational action on their understanding makes sense only in such a social world, but the only kind of action recognized by them cannot generate or maintain such a world.¹⁴ The structure of human action must be conceived in terms of the structure of social action and, in turn, the conception of social action being advocated by Parsons is one in which the norms constitutive of a given social order are, at the same time, definitive of social action as such (see, e.g., Joas 1996: 14). In other words, “only a normatively oriented theory of actions” – a theory in which the irreducibly normative structure of the social order provides the framework for understanding the irreducibly normative orientation of human activity – gives Parsons an adequate conceptualization of such activity (cf. Joas 1996: 24).

- 17 It is, however, far from insignificant that Parsons “completely ignored the philosophical schools, be they pragmatism or the philosophy of life, which were emerging contemporaneously with classical sociological thought and which doubtless had a major impact on the thinkers he discusses” (1996: 44). In general, he tended to isolate the figures upon whom he was drawing and those to whom he was responding (often the very same figures – e.g., Weber, Durkheim, Simmel, and Tönnies) “from their philosophical and cultural background” (Joas 1996: 66). The deeply philosophical import of the distinctive contributions of these sociological theorists is thereby erased or, at least, concealed. (Part of the value of Joas’s *The Creativity of Action* is that he relates in a detailed manner sociological theorists to their philosophical background.) Even worse, “Parsons paid a high price for the greater integrity of his normatively oriented theory of action” (1996: 34). This can be seen if we realize that his efforts at integrating what he took to be the deepest insights of his theoretical precursors resulted in a comprehensive understanding of human action, with one glaring exception. In ignoring the pragmatist as well as Nietzschean contributions to the debates regarding the forms, functions, and efficacy of human action, Parsons all too hastily overlooked “any consideration of the creative dimension of action” (Joas 1996: 34). This was the price, the extremely high price, he ended up paying for his neglect of especially the pragmatists.
- 18 The point is not to make Parsons into a whipping boy. This is certainly not Joas’s objective in his nuanced and informed treatment of this theorist; nor is it any part of my aim. Rather the point is to highlight the way in which the neglect of certain pivotal figures in late modern thought – e.g., Herder, Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, and Bergson on one side of the Atlantic Ocean, Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead on the other side – can be overlooked only at the risk of missing what is, especially at this historical juncture, most critical for our self-understanding. One of the deepest ironies regarding American pragmatism is, despite the largely inexplicable persistence of what is an altogether unjust criticism (how many times can the representatives of a tradition correct a misinterpretation of their position and still go unheeded or unheard?), the very opposite of the charge is true:

“Dewey and the other pragmatists were concerned not to interpret all action according to the model of instrumental action, but, *on the contrary*, to offer a critique of the overly narrow ‘practical’ orientation of American life” (Joas 1996: 132; emphasis added). The world is not reduced by the pragmatists to an amorphous stuff more or less amenable to the ingenious efforts of human agents to recast it in more humanly satisfying forms; rather human beings can discover and appropriate the world, from the pragmatist perspective, only through their actions. That is, “the pragmatists attempt to anchor creativity in the actions of human beings in their natural and social environment” (1996: 132). This makes of pragmatism never anything less than a “*theory of situated creativity*” (133). Such creativity is irrepressibly operative in any situation into which human actors have been historically thrown, also in any situation into which such agents deliberately insert themselves.

- 19 Let us, however, return more directly to the rival accounts of human action being evaluated by Joas in *The Creativity of Action*. The “central thesis” of this magisterial study is that “a third model of action should be added to the two predominant models of action” (i.e., to those of *rational* action and *normatively oriented* action) (cf. 1996: 6). This third model is one “that emphasizes the *creative* character of human action” (Joas 1996: 4). In Joas’s judgment, this model overarches the other two, by which I take him to encompass the model of *rational* action and *normatively oriented* action. This model is, in other words, theoretically more comprehensive than the other two; indeed, “only by introducing a concept of action which consistently takes account of this creative dimension [of human activity] can the other models of action be assigned their proper logical place” (5). The pragmatist model of situated creativity can make sense out of the range of phenomena for which the other dominant models have been designed in a manner in which these models cannot account for creativity.
- 20 In fact, Joas goes even farther than this: only by making creativity constitutive of our responses to situations (as this implies, only by envisioning actions as responses to situations whose meaning is inherent in these situation themselves), he contends, “can the wealth of concepts involved in the concept of action, such as intention, norm, identity, role, definition of the situation, institution, routine, etc., be defined consistently” (1996: 5). In addition, only by doing so can we ascertain adequately the import of these conceptions. The primary referent of intentionality is to be gathered from the improvisational responses of situated actors to the various and variable contexts in which they are called upon to act, not from antecedently fixed ends or especially from rigidly hierarchical orders (or arrangements) of such ends.¹⁵ Human agency is inseparable from human improvisation and ingenuity, thus from human creativity. Action not only unfolds in situations, but is constituted by them.¹⁶

IV. The Improvisational Responses of Situated Actors

- 21 For Joas’s purpose, then, the most important point is to articulate a nuanced understanding of human activity in which the “creative dimension to *all* human action” is shown to be a salient and, indeed, defining feature of human activity as such (4; emphasis added). Creative activity is, accordingly, not a residual category, but a ubiquitous trait of human agency. There is unquestionably a continuum: the ideal limit of this continuum is, on one side, the vast range of more or less routine responses to familiar situations, while the ideal limit is, on the other side, those paradigmatic cases or exemplary instances of

creative intelligence. The political implications of such an undertaking are, at least, as significant as the theoretical implications. The concluding chapter of this wide-ranging, deep-cutting study is, after all, entitled “Creative Democracy.” The situated creativity of human actors, as exhibited in the overlapping situations into which such agents are historically thrown and, given their historical situatedness, so often deliberately move, defines political actors no less than artists, scientists, or inventors. This is as true of ordinary citizens in their collective undertakings as it is of such notable figures as Abraham Lincoln, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and Barack Obama in their seemingly most singular decisions. As important as the political implications of Joas’s pragmatist theorizing is, however, my main concern here is with its theoretical underpinnings.

- 22 We need, Joas believes, nothing less than a comprehensive model of human activity, one in which the most important domains of human endeavor (the distinguishable yet inevitably – if only partly – overlapping contexts of such affairs as religious worship, artistic innovation, aesthetic engagement, everyday life, and scientific investigation) are not relegated to residual negative categories. “Intellectual history already provides us,” Joas claims, “with the essential basis for such a comprehensive model” of human activity. This model is none other than the one articulated and defended by Peirce, James, Mead, and Dewey. The critical part of Joas’s task is executed mainly in Chapter 1 (“The Emergence of a Theory of Action”) and Chapter 2 (“Models of Creativity”), although already in the last section of the second chapter (“Intelligence and Reconstruction”) the creative part of his project is launched. Though I have already indicated it, the creative part of his task is important enough to recall here: In Chapter 3 (“Situation – Corporeality – Sociality: The Fundamentals of a Theory of the Creativity of Action”), however, the reconstructive and, indeed, truly creative task is fully joined by Joas.
- 23 The extent to which the pragmatists reconstructed, rather than jettisoned, a teleological interpretation of human action is certainly a question worthy of careful consideration. I however cannot take up this question here in any detailed manner. But I must nonetheless touch upon the issue of the extent to which the pragmatists jettisoned a teleological interpretation of human activity.¹⁷ Of course, everything turns on the meaning ascribed to teleology. In a vague sense, each one of the classical pragmatists argued for what at least appears to be a form of teleology. The very vagueness and hence indeterminacy of the operative ends characteristically acknowledged by these pragmatists, however, might be part of what distinguishes their conception of ends from more traditional versions of teleological interpretation. In any event, James in his *Principles* famously characterized human consciousness in emphatically teleological terms: “Every actually existing consciousness seems to itself at any rate to be a *fighter for ends*, of which many, but for its presence, would not be ends at all” (1890 [1981]: 144). Or, in “The Law of Mind,” Peirce argued, “in the case of personality this teleology is more than a mere purposive pursuit of a predetermined end; it is a developmental teleology” (EP 1, 331).
- 24 None of this however touches the core of Joas’s critique of what he identifies as “teleology.” His concern is not to show that the pragmatists abandoned every notion of end (indeed, he attends insightfully to the Deweyan notion of ends-in-view as themselves means for remaking situations). His concern is rather to expose the fatal flaws in those historically influential forms of teleological understanding of human activity so deeply enshrined in both our everyday understanding and theoretical discourses. What Joas appreciates as deeply as any interpreter of Dewey is that (in Dewey’s own words) “the

'goals' of action [...] are ways of defining and deepening the meaning of activity" (MW 14, 156). "Having an end or aim is," Dewey immediately adds, "thus a characteristic of *present* activity. It is the means by which an activity becomes adapted, when otherwise it would be blind and disorderly." The conclusion drawn by Dewey and stressed by Joas is that "an end-in-view is a *means* in present action; present action is not a means to a remote end" (*ibid.*). That is, the traditional subordination of present activity to transcendent ideals or antecedent goals belies a fatally flawed understanding of the function and status of ends, also the significance and thickness of the present.

25 In various ways, the classical pragmatists contest this traditional subordination. The Peircean conception of developmental teleology might be taken as central to the pragmatist portrait of human agency. But this form of teleology marks a decisive shift from antecedently fixed goals and values to historically emerging ends and meanings (see Colapietro 2004). There are, of course, inherited goals and, as such, antecedently fixed ones; but these goals themselves have attained their status in the course of history and, moreover, they prove themselves worthy of our abiding allegiance by virtue of their efficacy to assist our situated creativity in enhancing the possible meanings in an overlapping series of continuous yet distinct situations.¹⁸ Such goals or ends are, hence, not absolutely or immutably fixed, but historically evolved and evolving.

26 Joas however does not refer to the Peircean conception of developmental teleology, but rather focuses on the form in which teleological interpretations of human action is encountered in contemporary theories, especially in the social sciences. The bias of such interpretations is to abstract agents and their goals from the situations in which they are called upon to *respond* to shifting and often conflicting demands. For the purpose of understanding the relationship between our agency and the situations in and through which our agency not only assumes its determinate form but also exercises its irrepressible creativity, Joas calls upon the insights of Dietrich Böhler, quoting him at length:

By 'situation' we – that is, 'we' as human beings who act and who know about action – understand a relationship between human beings and to objects, or between a human being and objects, which already precedes the particular action under consideration and which is therefore in each case already understood by the person or people concerned as a challenge either to do or alternatively not to do something. In colloquial speech we talk about 'getting into' situations; they 'befall' us, 'happen to' us, and we find ourselves 'confronted' by them. These are ways of expressing that a situation is something which precedes our action (or inaction) but which also provokes action because it 'affects' us, 'interests' us, or 'concerns' us. (Quoted in Joas 1996: 160)

27 Böhler uses the term "quasi-dialogical" to designate "the relationship between action and situation" (*ibid.*). This "quasi-dialogical" conception of situation is taken by Joas to provide a non-teleological conception of action. The intentionality of the situated responses of improvisational actors is one thing, the intentionality of pre-established purposes, conceived in abstraction from the histories in which these purposes have taken shape and are yet taking shape, is quite another thing.

28 So, it should not be surprising that Joas offers the Deweyan understanding of situation as an alternative to the traditional emphasis on teleology, in this restricted sense. In his own words, he is striving to offer a non-teleological interpretation of the intentionality of action. The phenomenon to be illuminated is, in this context, the intentionality of action.

- 29 Such intentionality seems to make the teleological interpretation of human action inescapable. But, in Joas's judgment, such an inference is invalid: we might account for this intentionality by means other than teleology. Stated positively, the various and shifting *situations* in which we as improvisational actors are implicated provides a genuine alternative to the teleological interpretation. As already suggested, what Joas finds objectionable about teleological interpretations of human action is (at least, in large measure) the assumption of antecedently fixed ends.
- 30 Situations are the sites in which historically authoritative ends are often discredited, at least neutralized, and ones in which humanly novel purposes are envisioned and enacted. The very identity of situations depends, in part, on the habits and (arguably) purposes of the agents entangled in these situations, but the deep-cutting implications of the revised portrait of human actors as *situated* improvisers are all too easy to miss. Because agents can so often fluently and thus effectively move from one situation to another, our understanding of situations as *external* scenes of human engagement – that is, as sites through which such agents move, but not ones in and through which human beings are constituted as creative actors – seems a faithful rendering of our trans-situational agency. It is, indeed, impossible to miss how agents move from one situation into another (e.g., one leaves the dining hall, having concluded a breakfast with several friends or acquaintances, and then briskly walks across campus to attend a meeting with colleagues, then eventually enters a class for the purpose of meeting with the students in one's seminar). But is (as just noted) all too easy to miss how situations are inherent to, thus constitutive of, agency. It is one thing for us to be teleologically oriented actors, another to be situationally implicated agents – or so Joas argues.
- 31 The means-end schema of interpreting human action might have a far more restricted scope than a meaning-situation schema. The enhancement of meaning in unfolding situations, as the very possibilities for such enhancement are taken by actors *in situ* to define and, not infrequently, emerge in the course of engagement to redefine these situations, might turn out to be a more adequate account of human activity¹⁹ than any possible variant of the teleological interpretation. Situations are inherently meaningful, even if the fuller or deeper saliences are far from manifest to the actors implicated in these situations. A confusing or baffling situation is just that – its meaning is overwhelmingly lost on us and our being implicated in a situation is properly, understandably, bafflement and confusion. To repeat, situations are inherently meaningful, though the contours and trajectories of significance defining any situation are neither fully manifest to the participants nor fully circumscribed in the present. In turn, meanings are necessarily contextual, even when the forms of significance and salience have evolved to the point where they lend themselves to an ever expanding range of trans-contextual applicability. In this context (!), what *trans-contextuality* means is not that these forms ever exist apart from any situation or context, only that their presence in one context does not preclude their presence in other situations. The presence of meaning in this or that situation hardly rules out the prolongation of this meaning in an indefinite number of other contexts is very far from being the case; rather what we discern in any situation is always “the operative presence of a *continuum* of meanings” (LW 1, 232; emphasis added). Moreover, this dynamic points toward a distinct sense of relevant context in which the forms of significance need to be located, in order to be in a position to move toward an adequate appreciation of the dynamics of significance.

- 32 The word *situation* means what it does in this discursive and polemical context because it means what it does both in English generally and in the writings of Dewey and other pragmatist more specifically. The immediate context of our particular discussion of this admittedly elusive notion needs itself to be set in an inclusive linguistic context and the narrower (but still large) philosophical context of pragmatist discourse. Of course, the relevant contexts are matters about which reasonable disagreements might take place. The politics of meaning involves the possibilities of re-contextualization, just as the meaning of politics invites re-contextualizing, at the level of theory, the play of power (e.g., seeing the personal domains of our everyday existence as ones in which the play of power is discernible). But what is most important for our purpose is that context is an elastic notion. The elasticity of this notion allows us to stretch the conception of context to include ever wider and also fundamentally different contexts than the ones to which our attention, as situated agents, is ineluctably drawn (e.g., a familial quarrel is by definition a disagreement taking place within a given set of social relationships but it is, arguably, always taking place in a more extensive and complex network of relationships; so, too, the conflicts among various ethnic groups, as such groups are identified by the conflicting actors themselves, are, arguably, inseparable from other social relationships and structures, histories and institutions).
- 33 The possibilities of meaning *inherent in* a situation are, for the advocates of the meaning-situation schema of human action in contrast to the proponents of the means-end schema (i.e., the teleological interpretation), far more salient than the opportunities provided by situations for the enactment or realization of antecedently established goals. Immediate, intrinsic, on inherent value is one thing, inherent meaning another. “Dewey’s resistance in his theory of value to any talk of ‘inherent,’ ‘intrinsic’ or ‘immediate’ values can only be understood against this background” – his rejection of those forms in idealism in effect committed to celebrating ideals in abstraction from the situations in which humans are ineluctably implicated. Dewey suspects, Joas contends (and, in my judgment, rightly contends), “in all such language a tendency to remove values from the means-ends chain [or continuum] of human action, to oppose them in particular to the realm of means, thereby devaluing them” (Joas 2000: 106). To abstract values, ideals, and meanings from this continuum inevitably slights of “the concepts of human maturity and personal wisdom we employ” (106).
- 34 The creativity of action is nowhere more apparent than the imaginative transfiguration of the actual scenes and dramas in which everyday actors are caught up. The goals or ends animating and orienting actors *in situ* are, as Dewey stresses, means – means for identifying and enhancing the possibilities of meaning inherent in some situation. The means-end continuum entails not only a radical revision of our understanding of the relationship between means and ends but also an equally radical revision of our understanding of human action as human activity, as an ongoing, creative process in which the very terms of identification and description (e.g., a basic action or a rational action) cannot be defined either in advance of the process (i.e., a priori) or apart from the process of ongoing activity. Of course, our inherited ideas regarding human action (e.g., Max Weber, Talcott Parsons, Niklas Luhmann, or Jürgen Habermas) might certainly prove themselves to be applicable to some circumscribed field of human endeavor. They however cannot provide adequate means for the illuminating articulation of emerging meanings (and, paradoxically, this extends to nothing less than such notions as emergence and activity, as they are being used here).

35 Part of the reason why this is so concerns the very nature of time, while part of it concerns more specifically the character of human action as ongoing activity. The past does not write the future, however much the past serves as prologue to whatever follows it and, to some degree, flows from it. It is, as G. H. Mead suggests, much rather the case that the present rewrites the past, making of time a ceaseless and irrepressible process of re-signification and re-narration. But, in addition to this facet of temporality, the character of activity as situated, corporeal, and social imposes the task of beginning ever anew to identify and describe the situation from within the contours of that situation itself. There is never any question of absolute novelty, though there is always a question of genuine emergent. The extent to which the present is identified, described, interpreted, and narrated in terms indifferent to its differences from the past is almost certainly a guarantee that the historical present as a dramatic site of genuine emergence and, hence, irreducible novelty will be covered over with the dominant modes of traditional understanding, rather than illuminated *on its own terms*. This concerns not primarily the general structure of temporality, but mainly the specific character of our activity. The present is the site in which the past is being re-written, thus one in which the possibilities of the future are being re-envisioned. The efficacious character of our situated creativity is nowhere more apparent than in the ongoing work of such revision and re-envisionment.

V. Body Schema and Primary Sociality, Very Briefly Noted

36 On this occasion, I will treat far more briefly the other two fundamental features of human action, as these are identified by Joas. On another occasion, however, I hope to be able to offer a fuller account of Joas's nuanced approach to our situated creativity, also a more detailed critique.²⁰

37 Joas is quick to point out, "the body does not appear explicitly in most theories of action" (Joas 1996: 167). There is, Joas suggests, "an unstable equilibrium between the body's instrumentalization [the mastery of the body as an instrument of action] and other non-instrumental relations with the body" (1996: 168-9). He eloquently makes this point when he writes: "Control of the body on the stage of life is always accompanied by the periodic relaxation of body when we go backstage" (169). The body is, for each one of us, more than an instrument of action. Moreover, the shaping of the body to serve as such an instrument needs to be understood historically, especially when severely reductivist accounts of somatic instrumentalization become the default position for understanding our embodied agency – better, our embodied being. As Joas notes, "human biological preconditions must obtain in order for action to be possible" (172). Among other preconditions, there is in the case of *Homo sapiens* a break with instinct (173). Joas supplements the pragmatist account of our embodied agency by incorporating (!) into his creative appropriation insights derived from such theorists as Arnold Gehlen, Axel Honneth, and Helmuth Plessner.²¹ If undertaken in the spirit of pragmatism, the radical reconstruction of our understanding of human activity must drive in the direction of offering a detailed account of human activity as a concretely embodied affair and, by implication, an equally detailed portrait of human agents as embodied beings. In the section of Chapter 3 ("Situation – Corporeality – Sociality") entitled "The Constitution of the Body Schema" Joas does more than anyone else thus far to offer such an account of

human action and, by implication, such a portrait of human agency. The specific ways in which the pragmatist tradition might be enriched and deepened by a critical engagement with certain psychoanalytic and phenomenological theorists (e.g., Paul Shilder and Maurice Merleau-Ponty) deserve especially to be highlighted.

- 38 The main focus of Joas's discussion of the corporeal character of human activity is on body schema. "The concepts of 'body schema' or 'body image' refer to the fact that the body is subjectively present for the actor" (1996: 175). He is quick to point out the human body is more than this; it is, indeed, "one entity among others in the world, but by virtue of being one's own body it is radically different from all other things" (*ibid.*). This is certainly true. It is however not clear – at least, to me – why the topic of corporeality is taken more or less as the equivalent of the constitution of a bodily schema. As important as the constitution of such a schema is for understanding the corporeal constitution of human action, corporeality in its bearing on action extends beyond this topic. The functional integration of the multiple facets of the human organism requisite for the exercise of situated creativity, accordingly, involves more than the constitution of our body schema. But any account of the integration of these factors must attend in detail to just this constitution. Consequently, Joas's treatment of this topic is, at the very least, an indispensable starting point for this pressing task. It is however not likely the whole of this task.
- 39 There is, in addition to our situatedness and corporeality, "a *primary sociality* which has not been generated by conscious intentionality but has preceded such, in other words [,] a structure of common action which initially consists solely of our interaction with other bodies" (184). Such a sociality needs, as much as anything else, to be explained in terms of the *natality* constitutive of our humanity (Joas 1996: 140). The primordial forms in which human beings are with one another, forms rooted in their natality, are (as much as anything else) what most deserves to be identified as their primordial sociality. Joas sheds much light on the condition and indeed fate of being with others. His account of our primary sociality is, in my judgment, even more illuminating than his treatment of body schema. But his central insight into our situated creativity is, above all, a consequence of his creative appropriation of central insights from classical pragmatism into the situated character of human activity. These insights bear upon our understanding of intentionality. In particular, they point to the need to revise our understanding of intentionality in a manner that breaks with the traditional forms of teleological interpretation. The ends by which human actors, precisely as social and embodied beings, are animated and directed are concretely specifiable only in reference to the situations to which these actors are responding.
- 40 In a more balanced treatment of Joas's creative appropriation of the pragmatist tradition than the one I am able to offer on this occasion, his highly nuanced account of corporeality and sociality would deserve as much attention as I have given to the situated character of human activity. Allow my exceedingly brief remarks about these two aspects of human agency to suffice at present. Unquestionably, an adequate account of our situated creativity demands painstaking consideration of the social matrix in which our embodied agency takes shape, also the irreducibly corporeal form of even our most private and seemingly "ethereal" acts of imagining, reflecting, and deliberating. But, on this occasion, the details pertaining to our sociality and corporeality are less important than a deepened appreciation of our situated creativity, in its broad outlines.

VI. Pressing the Question of Creativity

- 41 It might appear as though the very intelligibility of our activity is precluded by such a decided emphasis on genuine emergence and irreducible novelty (cf. Hausman). But the intelligibility of activity imposes the task, thus the activity, of confronting unique situations in their elusive uniqueness. This is far easier said than done, far easier announced than achieved. This might be especially true of the *activity* of theorizing is, especially when the overarching goal is to provide a pragmatist interpretation of human action, one in which the traits of action identified in the theory are integral to the form of activity identifiable as theorizing. This is fully in accord with Joas's own understanding: ironically, the exemplary intelligibility of Joas's approach to action might in some measure count against its ultimate adequacy as a truly pragmatic interpretation of creative action.
- 42 I want, however, to press this point for a moment. My reason is that a pragmatist approach to creative activity must take the form of a creative response to a problematic situation, though a form almost certainly in critical respects unlike anything envisaged by the classical pragmatists. The demands creativity imposes upon our forms of understanding, above all, upon the immediate intelligibility of a theoretical account, would seem to drive theorists engaged in this very undertaking to move beyond the conceptual resources to be found in traditional approaches to human activity (Hausman). It seems unlikely that past thinkers provide contemporary theorists with adequate resources for coming to terms with the irreducibly creative character of human activity. Doing justice to the creativity of action would seem to demand nothing less than the creative innovations of contemporary theorists who are driven by the very nature of their endeavor to go beyond what past authors have yet accomplished. While a creative appropriation of various parts of our intellectual inheritance is unquestionably a central part of this complex task (not only a central part, but also possibly a truly creative one), such appropriation does not appear – to me at least – to be sufficient. Perhaps more than anything else, the extent to which we do *not* know what we are doing, including the extent to which this is so even when we are immersed in the activity of theorizing (in particular, crafting a theory designed to account for human activity as a creative process), needs to be made a pivot around which virtually everything turns. The ways of thematizing and, then, theorizing the varieties of human “ignorance” (the various and often interwoven ways in which even the most conscientious agents act in – and act out of – what might be called *constitutive* ignorance) invite us to look beyond the obvious yet important situations in which agents are thrown into doubt about what they are doing in this or that situation (that is, the kinds of situation upon which Peirce, James, Dewey, and other pragmatists tend to tend, almost exclusively). In raising this set of concerns, however, I am jumping ahead of the story. First, it is imperative to examine in some detail how Hans Joas in *The Creativity of Action* and, indeed, in other writings offers an alternative account of human activity and, by implication, a revised portrait of human agency. Unquestionably obvious and, hence, deceptively simple matters inform and underwrite this account and, hence, this portrait. Above all else, these concern matters the situated, social, embodied, and creative dimensions of human activity. The most important reason for highlighting or even mentioning these features is that they are so

often ignored. Even when these features are formally or nominally taken into account, they frequently are not given their full due.

- 43 Agency seems to many inquirers to be, by definition, an exercise of control and, in its innermost core, the enactment of self-control. Thus, it is important to follow Joas in a surprising direction. “Like James’ theory of religion, Dewey’s theory of art is,” Joas suggests, “aimed at experiences in which the self is not master in its own domain” (1996: 141). It will, however, be impossible for some readers of Joas *not* to hear an echo of Sigmund Freud’s deliberate blow to our narcissistic pretensions and agential presumption: The ego or “I” is not a master even in its own house. As R. W. Emerson asserted at the conclusion of “Circles,” the way of life is, in some manner and measure, the way of abandonment (227). “The difference between talents and character is,” he stresses, “adroitness to keep the old and trodden round, and power and courage to make a new road to new and better goals. Character [in contrast to talent] makes an overpowering present, a cheerful, determined hour, which fortifies all the company by making them see that much is possible and excellent that was not thought of” (227). It is, as much as anything else, the joyous abandonment of inherited ideals of possessive mastery and, conversely, masterful possession. The capacity of the self to let go – also to let be (cf. Heidegger) – is, from what is still today the elusive perspective of a radically reconstructed pragmatism, one with the capacity to assist bringing into being, here and now, what is irreducibly novel (cf. Hausman). It is very difficult for human beings to grant to others, much less to themselves, the license to let go and to let be. There are however those rare individuals who are capable of doing just this. “They do not close,” as James with his characteristic eloquence, “their hand on their possessions. When they profess a willingness that certain persons should be free they mean it not as most of us do – with a mental reservation, as that the freedom should be well employed and other similar humbug – but in all sincerity, and calling for no guarantee against abuse which, when it happens, they accept without complaint or embitterment as part of the chances of the game. They let their bird fly with no string tied to its leg” (Perry, II: 269).
- 44 Those situations in which we are, at once, all too acquainted with the traditional modes of identification (e.g., our situation is that of being in classroom, or at home, or at work) and altogether at a loss as to how we ought to orient ourselves to just these situations – those situations, at once, all too familiar and truly “uncanny” – are ones about which the inherited lexicon of American pragmatism is hardly adequate for purposes of description, interpretation, critique, and indeed simply identification (how, after all, can we most effectively identify the situation in which we are implicated?). Part of the problem here is the presumption that we are in the position to identify the nature of the situation in which we are implicated. A Socratic willingness to confess a rather profound form of human ignorance – a willingness rooted as much as anything else in the courage to acknowledge we do *not* know what we are doing in this situation – is an integral part of anything worth of the appellation *pragmatic intelligence*. Situated creativity requires nothing less than a renewed willingness to look afresh, in the effort to see anew. This is (at least) as much a moral and political achievement as it is an intellectual or cognitive accomplishment.
- 45 Somewhat paradoxically, however, the willingness or resolve to look afresh at the situations in which we are implicated more often than not demands a deepened understanding of the historical dimensions to such a large extent constituting these very situations. Dalibor Veselý helps us to understand why this is so when he stresses:

Situations are the receptacles of experience and of those events which sediment in them a meaning not just survivals or residues but as an invitation to a sequel, the necessity of a future. Situations endow experience with durable dimensions, in relation to which a whole series of other experiences will acquire meaning. [...] The richness of situations depends on the reverberations of meaning through the depths of their history. (1983: 9)

- 46 In light of such considerations, I am inclined to propose that we need, on the one hand, to develop far more fully than anyone has yet done a detailed understanding of the experiential continuum precisely as a distinctive form of historical continuity and, on the other hand, a dramaturgical approach to the self-segmenting dynamic in any historical continuum (a dynamic nowhere more evident than in the way the continuum of experience inevitably divides itself into the more or less distinguishable scenes of an unfolding drama). Accordingly, highly abstract models and conceptions of continuity, drawn from mathematics, are likely to assist us in understanding the otherwise baffling character of the experiential continuum. Much as the notion of rhizome has proven so fruitful in one context, that of continuum might prove, once again,²² fecund in the context of our inquiry. In addition, finely elaborated models and theories of dramatic situations²³ (such as those articulated by Kenneth Burke,²⁴ Victor Turner, and Erving Goffman) provide us with the resources to do even fuller justice to our situated creativity than has been done by the author of *The Creativity of Action* or, indeed, anyone else. While the most highly abstract models of continuity might provide, in unexpected respects, resources for understanding the way qualitatively distinguishable scenes or episodes flow into one another, the most contextually determinate dramas in turn might offer opportunities to explore various aspects of the experiential continuum.
- 47 Our being with one another, our being in time, and our being individually identifiable continua intersecting with myriad forms of such continua are, in the overlapping situations of the unfolding drama of any human life, are inseparably of a piece. This makes manifest that our primordial sociality, the distinctive form of human temporality, and the temporal constitution of human individuality (cf. Dewey's "Time and Individuality") intelligible only as instances of continuity. In turn, this makes necessary the need to explore more deeply than anyone has yet done questions concerning continuity.²⁵ The continuum as an indefinitely divisible reality is, in connection to human action, extremely suggestive. The very notion of action is irreducibly vague, such that what counts as an action might itself be divided, indefinitely, into components having themselves a claim to the status of actions. The situations in which we are implicated, the ones in which we are thus called to respond (cf. Joas 1996: 160-1), are always in some respects indeterminate. Such situations are inherently and irreducibly vague, in some ways and to some degree. So, too, the multiple possibilities of characterizing any situation or episode suggest an important respect in which a situation or episode is vague or indeterminate. Of course, the specification or identification of action is not precluded, since embodied and embedded purposes help practically to define relevant contexts of responsible description (e.g., the actors are in a dangerous situation by virtue of their car spinning out of control).

VII. Conclusion

- 48 Situation, corporeality, and sociality are, as much as anything else, markers, their principal function being that of marking the most important sites for future

investigation. The task of thinking through – inseparable from that of *working through* (cf. Adorno’s illuminating exploration of “The Meaning of Working Through the Past” in *Critical Models*; also Freud) – a complex inheritance and the inevitable constraints, enabling no less than limiting, put in place by this inescapable inheritance is ineluctably a task of re-thinking. In some measure, it arguably must also be a task of unthinking – and also undoing. In his journal entry for December 31, 1837 – thus, on the threshold of a new year – H. D. Thoreau observed: “As the least drop of wine tinges the whole goblet, so the least particle of truth colors our whole life. It is never isolated, or simply added as treasure to our stock. When any real progress is made, we unlearn and learn anew what we thought we knew before” (Shepard (ed.), 3).

- 49 In a letter to Henri Bergson, dated December 14, 1902, partly sent in response to having received from the author a copy of *Matière et mémoire*, James wrote: “I saw its great originality, but found your ideas so new and vast that I could not be sure that I fully understood them, although the style, Heaven knows, was lucid enough” (Perry, II: 605). Then James revealed to Bergson, immediately after confessing that his “health is so poor now that work goes very slowly”:

I am going, if I live, to write a general system of metaphysics which, in many of its fundamental ideas, agrees closely with what you have set forth, and the agreement inspires and encourages me more than you can well imagine. It would take far too many words to attempt any detail, but some day I hope to send you the book. How good it is sometimes simply to *break away* from all old categories, deny worn-out beliefs, and restate things *ab initio*, making the lines of division fall into entirely new places! (Perry, II: 606)

- 50 Joas is too conscientious an intellectual historian and too responsible a social theorist simply to break away from our inherited categories and to try to restate *ab initio* what action at bottom is. He works self-consciously and painstakingly at the intersection of diverse traditions. Even so, there is something truly creative about his achievement. The degree and respects in which it might have even more creative, however, are worthy of speculation. For example, the metaphor of a rhizome, such as the one put forth by Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*, seems (to me, at least) to be especially creative and fecund.
- 51 Without unduly striving to be idiosyncratic or even simply innovative, the pragmatist theorist devoted to offering a compelling formulation of situated creativity would seem, by the very nature of this undertaking, to be compelled not only to reconfigure or less traditional conceptions into novel patterns but also to improvise more or less innovative conceptualizations and creative metaphors. As Dewey notes in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,”

Our life has no background of sanctified categories upon which we may fall back; we rely upon precedent as authority only to our own undoing – for with us there is such a continuously novel situation that final reliance upon precedence entails some class interest guiding us by the nose whither it will. (MW 10, 48)

- 52 But these include the categories offered by the pragmatists themselves for making sense out of our experience, hence for responding imaginatively to the situations in which we are implicated. These include, indeed, the category of experience itself (cf. Scott). It is certainly telling that Dewey near the end of his life questioned the wisdom of trying to redefine the term *experience* rather than using *culture* in its anthropological sense to designate the transactional process constituting the matrix and arena of human endeavor (LW 1, 361-4; cf. Rorty 1982, Chapter 5). Creative intelligence often demands linguistic

innovation. The projection of novel possibilities might often require the crafting of novel locutions.

- 53 This point might easily be exaggerated, but the conservative cast of academic pragmatists suggests that the risk of such exaggeration is far less than that of falling back on categories sanctified by the elders (i.e., Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead).
- 54 In *The Creativity of Action*, Hans Joas has undertaken in an exemplary manner the task of re-thinking some of the most critical parts of a complex inheritance regarding our understanding of human action. Moreover, he has in the process of doing so twisted free from the limiting conceptions and disfiguring images pertaining to human activity. Finally, his nuanced account of situated creativity is itself nothing less than a creative appropriation of a largely marginalized approach to human action. Even if Joas might have been more creative in this or that respect, his imaginative recasting of pragmatists insights cannot be gainsaid. It is truly a praiseworthy achievement.
- 55 Philosophers ought to be open to learning from sociologists about a topic to which philosophers have devoted so much attention, though often in an exceedingly myopic manner. So, too, North Americans ought to be receptive to learning from European scholars about one of the most distinctive contributions by such Americans to the ongoing task of communal inquiry – the quite singular contribution of “American” pragmatism. For the inaugural issue of this new journal, I take my own efforts as a North American philosopher who has devoted his intellectual life to the creative appropriation of classical American pragmatism – I take my own efforts as such a philosopher – to learn from, and to respond to, Joas’s innovative take on the pragmatic movement to be in keeping with both the animating impulse of pragmatism and the unique mission of this journal. The creative articulation of our situated creativity, beyond anything yet imagined by either the classical pragmatists or their most imaginative (and therein their most faithful) interpreters, among whom I count Hans Joas in the first rank, is truly “a task before us.” The task of creative democracy is the most urgent form of the task before us, but that of revising our self-understanding – of sketching in at least as bold and arresting strokes as Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead portrayed the human animal as a creative agent – is far from insignificant. Indeed, the interminable task of creative democracy is of a piece with the ever renewed undertaking of revising our self-understanding.
- 56 Pragmatism as a theory of our situated creativity²⁶ is also a celebration of our irrepressible spontaneity and an acknowledgment of our implicated agency. It is rooted in the realization that, “the knower is an actor, and co-efficient of the truth on one side, whilst on the other he registers the truth he helps to create.” There “belongs to mind,” James insists, “from its birth upward, a spontaneity, a vote. It is in the game, and not a mere looker-on” (James 1878 (1978): 21).²⁷ The figure of such an agent must be part of any portrait of agency worthy of carrying creatively forward the insights of the pragmatists. But the task of creatively articulating a detailed self-understanding in which such figure claims such centrality – the task of articulating this self-understanding – is, by its very nature, open-ended. To some extent, then, the theory of situated creativity must – or simply might – take the form of a dramaturgical approach to human activity. This however points to an episode yet to be enacted, a future possibility in an ongoing drama.

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NOTES

1. This might even be said of pragmatism today. "The renaissance of pragmatism in American philosophy," Hans Joas suggests, "has admittedly been restricted to traditional core areas of philosophy. In philosophy of science and epistemology, in aesthetics and ethics, one can discern contributions that are 'neopragmatist' in nature. By contrast, only rarely are links established to political philosophy and social philosophy. And, aside from Richard Bernstein, there is an even greater distance from discussions of sociological theory. A book such as Richard Rorty's *Contingency, Irony, and Solidarity* moves with the greatest elegance between the philosophical and literary discourses; however, a discourse in the social sciences is so conspicuously absent that one could be forgiven thinking that it does not exist at all" (1993: 2). This however could not be written today. It is not altogether accurate of the scene at the time it was written, though there is almost certainly greater truth in Joas's assessment than most academic pragmatists would be disposed to admit.

2. In his efforts to offer a detailed classification of the sciences and, as part of this endeavor, to identify the distinct disciplines of responsible inquiry, C. S. Peirce would appear to be a clear exception to my claim. To some extent, this is indeed true. But, in this very endeavor, Peirce was striving to show in detail how the different branches of investigation can fruitfully draw upon, and appeal to, one another. In the end, the interconnections among these branches is near (if not at) the center of Peirce's concern.

3. While Bernstein is arguing for the adoption of such pluralism primarily within the discipline of philosophy, I am advocating here across disciplines.

4. In this connection, *The Genesis of Values* is especially pertinent. Even when I do not explicitly refer to this book, my reading of Joas's *The Creativity of Action* is informed by it.

5. Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Paul Ricoeur and numerous other thinkers, in Europe and the Americas as well as elsewhere, have devoted themselves to just this task.

6. "No one has linked the different dimensions of the issues entailed in action theory as Talcott Parsons in *The Structure of Social Action*, which first appeared in 1937. One could term the book the little-known classic of the little known discipline. Sociology is, of course, not unknown as such and – needless to say – Parsons is well known within the bounds of the subject. However, in other subjects and among the public as a whole sociology is frequently regarded merely as a source of empirical information relating to social problems and social developments" (7). It "took until the fifties for the work [*The Structure of Social Action*] to acquire the reputation of a decisive theoretical achievement." Even then, it is doubtful the book was widely read at the time (1996: 7). Even so, Joas takes there to be "no better way of introducing the discourse on the theory of action than to study Parson's arguments and the possible objections to them" (1996: 8).

7. In a theme sounded throughout his life, John Dewey in a very late manuscript, now available as an Appendix to volume 1 of *The Later Works*, asserts: “The excuse for saying obvious things is that much now that passes for empiricism is but a dialectical elaboration of data taken from physiology” (LW 1, 368). In “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy” (1917), he stresses: “This description of experience [the one he has just offered in his own name] would be but a rhapsodic celebration of the commonplace were it not in marked contrast to orthodox philosophical accounts. The contrast indicates that traditional accounts have not been empirical, but have been deductions, from unnamed premises, of what experience *must* be. Historic empiricism has been empirical in a technical and controversial sense. It has said, Lord, Lord, Experience, Experience; but in practice it has served ideas *forced into* experience, not *gathered from* it” (MW 10: 10-1). In contrast, the features of action identified by Joas, following the suggestions of Dewey and other pragmatists, are precisely ones gathered from the practical experience of situated agents (the experience such agents enact and acquire in and through their participation in a variety of practices, including the theoretical practices of experimental inquiry).

8. As Dewey asserts in his *Ethics* and other writings, our actions simultaneously disclose who we are at the time and define who we will be. The question of “What are we to do in this situation?” is, for him, inseparable from the question, “Who are we to be?”

9. The expression sociological imagination is an allusion to C. Wright Mills, a figure who (while critical of various facets of the pragmatist movement) can more or less fairly be read as an integral part of this intellectual tradition. Cornel West is especially instructive on this point (see, e.g., 1989: 124-38).

10. Among other things, the task of restructuring this understanding entails not the addition of a new category (or set of such categories), but a transformation of the very category of rational action. In turn, this means restructuring our understanding of rationality itself. As a result of this reconstruction, rationality comes to be seen as irreducibly situational, corporeal, and social, in a manner and measure not acknowledged by virtually any theorists but the pragmatists. Other traditions of theorizing, however, have a great deal to contribute to the task of understanding each one of these three traits of rationality (Joas 1996: 147).

11. While the model of rational action is the one principally defended in economic theory, that of normatively structured action is the one arising in sociological theory. But, as we will see, the predominantly economic model of rational action has a significance and influence far beyond the borders of economics. Indeed, this model is, in certain respects, *the* model (the pivotal model) of human action, around which the supplemental models turn.

12. Joas takes the model of rational action as the main target of his critique because the advocates of the other regnant model (that of normatively structured and oriented action) have done so before him and, in doing so, have in effect grounded action theory in the presuppositions underlying the model of rational action. This might not appear to follow, but the thrust of Joas’s argument is that this critique does not displace the model of rational action; rather it simply generates residual negative categories of human activity (non-rational, no logical, or non-instrumental ones). What however is needed is a category of intelligent, creative activity, as a radical alternative to the regnant model of rational action. Accordingly, “the narrow conception of rationality” embedded in traditional theories of human action will be replaced by a more comprehensive and, indeed, more humane understanding of human reasonableness.

13. At the outset of his study, Joas goes so far as to suggest, “[...] these tacit assumptions are characteristic not only of action theory but of the discourse of modernity as such [...]” (1996: 5). His critique of these assumptions accordingly turns out to be nothing less than a critique of the discourse of modernity.

14. It however turns out that this is also true of such theorists as Parsons (i.e., advocates of the model of normatively structured and oriented action). As Joas notes, “Parsons never set out to explain the existence of social order: rather, he want to make its existence, as a fact confirmed by

experience, the starting point for reflection" (1996: 15). Though this is hardly explicit in his own approach to the topic, Joas provides us with some of the conceptions with which we might explain the emergence of various forms of social order. While the primary sociality of human life is, in a sense, a given (there is no possibility of getting behind – or underneath – the actual forms of human togetherness, of our *being with* others (Glendinning 1998)), the implicit, incipient, inchoate norms constitutive of such sociality and, then, the complex evolution of human associations suggest a broadly evolutionary explanation of any social order in which human agents are implicated.

15. The habits and ultimately the character brought by agents to situations unquestionably have a significant bearing what these situations are. In turn, these situations contribute to the functioning of these habits but, in some respects, at least potentially to their transformation. As Dewey notes in *Art as Experience*, experience in its most vital sense "is defined by those situations and episodes that we spontaneously refer to as being 'real experiences'; those things of which we say in recalling them, 'that was an experience.' It may have been something of tremendous importance – a quarrel with one who was once an intimate, a catastrophe finally averted by a hair's breadth. Or it may have been something that in comparison was slight – and which perhaps because of its very slightness illustrates all the better what it is to be an experience. There is that meal in a Paris restaurant of which one says 'that was an experience.' It stands out as an enduring memorial of what food may be" (LW 10, 43). Note that these are aesthetically demarcated situations or episodes: they have their integrity and hence their identity by virtue of a pervasive, unifying quality.

16. "Habits," Dewey stresses, "enter into the constitution of situations; they are in and of it, not [...] something outside of it. Here [...] is a unique relation of self and things, but it is unique, not in being wholly incomparable to all natural relations among events, but in the sense of being distinction, or just the relation that it is" (1911 [1977]: 105). See my "Habit, Competence, and Purpose" (forthcoming in *The Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*).

17. Of course, everything turns on the meaning ascribed to teleology. It is not clear to me whether the Peircean notion of development teleology goes far enough for Joas's purpose. In this connection, however, it is likely pertinent to call attention to the work of T. L. Short who has done more than anyone else to show how the pragmatic approach and a teleological understanding of human activity are not only compatible but also (at least, in the case of Peirce) intertwined with one another. See especially Short 2007 (but also 1981, 1983, and 2002).

18. In *Experience and Education*, Dewey stresses both the continuity of experience (or experience as a continuum) and the manner in which interactions tend to take the form of scenes or episodes.

19. It is perhaps helpful to draw a distinction between human action and human activity. Such a distinction might be drawn in terms of an identifiable deed within an unfolding drama (an action in contrast to the ongoing, open-ended activity) and the unfolding drama conceived precisely as an open-ended affair. In such a drama, the significance and importance of deeds of actions are, more often than not, fundamentally altered or transformed in the course of the activity itself. In part, this means that the later deeds and events explain (or throw light on) on earlier ones. Unquestionably, earlier events and actions illuminate and explain, in some manner and measure, later ones, but the reality of time is such that the present is a site in which the past is continually being re-drafted or re-written (cf. Mead (1959: 11); also Dewey's "Time and Individuality" (LW 14)).

20. Early in his discussion of corporeality, Joas suggests, "action theory must defend itself against the accusation that it intrinsically leans more heavily in favour of an *activistic relationship to the world*, which is evidently culture-specific, if not gender-specific, and thus does not fulfill its claim to universality" (1996: 167). Such a presumption, however, allegedly "tends to obscure or to downgrade both the cultivation of an aesthetic sensibility that is not linked to action and the

willingness to accept fate, that is, the unintended and unexpected events of life” (168). But it is, at least for me, difficult to read Dewey’s “The Reflex Arc Concept” and other writings as anything but texts in which this pragmatist emphatically asserts the irrepressible activity of the human organism. How, then, does Dewey’s own pragmatist account of human activity, with such an emphasis, avoid such an activist presumption? This is but one of a handful of other criticisms or questions that I would be inclined to voice in a fuller treatment of Joas’s nuanced account of human action.

21. It is surprising to me that the work of Pierre Bourdieu – in particular, his conception of *habitus* – is not integrated into Joas’s discussion of either corporeality or sociality. Of course, a theorist cannot treat everyone. But Bourdieu’s work seems especially relevant to the issues under consideration in *The Creativity of Action*.

22. Of course, Peirce provides us with an exemplar of how to undertake this task. But, we need, at the very least, to explore the way he himself explored continuity but also to attend to more recent developments in the investigation of this notion.

23. From the perspective being defended here, the expression *dramatic situation* is pleonastic, for situations are, as envisioned by the pragmatists, inherently dramatic. This is partly a function of their open-endedness: in the sense intended, open-endedness points (among other things) to a state of affairs in which the outcome hangs in the balance, in which the meanings to be intensified, deepened, expanded, and otherwise enhanced might play out in demeaning or trivializing ways. The fateful situation of human actors implicated in the shifting scenes of their ongoing lives (and this is the *overarching* situation of human agency) is captured by James in *Pragmatism* when he insists: “Nothing outside of the flux secures the issue of it. It can hope salvation [or even simply success] only from its own intrinsic promises and potencies” (125). To grant this is “to be willing to live on a scheme of uncertified possibilities which he [the genuine pragmatist nonetheless] trusts; willing to pay with his own person, if need be, for the idealization of the ideals which he frames” (142-3). The sensibility defined by such willingness “condemns all noble, clean-cut, fixed, eternal, rational, temple-life systems of philosophy” (*MT*, 215; cf. *Pragmatism*, 18). Such systems “contradict the dramatic temperament of nature [the emphasis is James’s own], as our dealings with nature and our habits of thinking have so far brought us to conceive them” (*MT*, 215).

24. The relevance of Burke to the creative appropriation of the central insights in the pragmatist tradition cannot, in my judgment, be gainsaid, even if it is very rarely recognized. This is nowhere more manifest than in reference to the topic – indeed, the task – at hand, the ongoing endeavor to assist the creative articulation of our situated creativity. His elaboration of what situations are in themselves and how they are inevitably related to one another is just one part of his contribution to this task, albeit an exceedingly suggestive and illuminating part.

25. In *John Dewey* (1967), Bernstein goes so far as to suggest, regarding Dewey’s metaphysics, we “are left with suggestions and hints, not carefully elaborated ideas” (179-80). In Bernstein’s judgment, the difficulties regarding Dewey’s project “can be seen in what is undoubtedly the most fundamental principle in Dewey – the principle of continuity. It is at the heart of his naturalism” (180). “We are never given,” Bernstein alleges, “a detailed, systematic analysis of ‘continuity’” (180). It is certainly high time that the followers of Dewey or, more generally, the proponents of pragmatism go farther than anyone has yet gone in providing just such an analysis of continuity. Our understanding of action and much else depends upon it.

26. Pragmatism is not reducible to such a theory, but (upon any defensible construal) it must be inclusive of nothing less than an account of human agency as situated creativity.

27. The critique of the spectator theory of knowledge might thus be construed as an implication of an even more radical critique of the traditional portrait of human agency in which situated creativity is made subordinate to preordained purposiveness. Knowing is at bottom the result of doing. As Dewey puts it, “no knowing takes place without an overt taking and employing things

on the basis of their meanings” (LW 1, 249). Situated creativity is the human face of our situated agency. Such agency is, as I (following Joas) have stressed throughout this essay, constituted by its involvements in serial and, to some extent, overlapping situations (e.g., the student met on the stairs on the way to a joint seminar, followed by the seminar itself). The manifest traits of natural existence (e.g., the hazardous character of a particular situation) are not ones projected by humans onto nature; rather they are as much traits of nature itself as identifiable features of our specifically human transactions with enviroing affairs. What Dewey in *Experience and Nature* asserts about these traits is worth recalling here: “man is not contemplatively detached from them (LW 1, 67). They involve him in his perplexities and troubles, and are the source of his joys and achievements. *The situation is not indifferent to man, because it forms him as a desiring, striving, thinking, feeling creature.* (We might add: an *acting* creature as well.) It is not egoism that leads man from contemplative registration of these traits to interest in managing them, to intelligence and purposive art. Interest, thinking, planning, striving, consummation, and frustration are a drama enacted by these forces and conditions” (LW 1, 67; emphasis added). This goes some distance toward helping us to understand why Dewey would assert: “Every case of consciousness is dramatic; drama is [in turn] an enhancement of the conditions of consciousness” (LW 1, 232). Any situation in which we are implicated as actors, thus any one in which we are called upon to respond in some way to what is taking place, provides incontestable evidence regarding “the operative presence of a *continuum of meanings*” (LW 1, 232; emphasis added). It is for this and other reasons why I have been urging a dramaturgical approach to the experiential continuum. Just as actions have their meaning only as *responses* in the situations in which they are improvised by creative actors, so these responses in their most deep-cutting and far-reaching significance are only identifiable, much less intelligible, only as episodes in unfolding dramas (or at any given time a number of simultaneously occurring dramas). Unless we envision situations as scenes in such dramas, we run the inescapable risk of fragmenting the historical continuum of human activity into fragmentary and separable stretches of time. For the task of doing so, the work of Kenneth Burke is likely at least as relevant as that of Victor Turner, Erving Goffman, and Richard Schechner.

28. As Dewey asserts in “The Need for a Recovery of Philosophy,” “the function of mind is to project new and more complex ends – to free experience from routine and caprice” (MW 10, 45). This however applies as much to our understanding of human experience and activity as to anything else: such understanding needs itself to be emancipated and, in turn, such emancipation is at least facilitated by the projection of more untraditional and complex aims than those defining today the terms of the *activity* of theorizing (i.e., the terms by which this activity is carried out).