

A METHOD FOR THE STUDY OF HUMAN LIFE

If within the borders of human life the truth is, as Vico has said, what is made, then the task of a student of human life can be and should be to find out from what human beings have made what manner of makers they are and what sorts of production their circumstance allows.

Especial attention should be given to the varying manners in which human beings live as research in such areas as anthropology, archaeology, and history, as well as clinical psychology discloses. And, as the great diversity of human activities even in similar circumstances show that human beings can and do experience many things that they don't, one should discover, too, the ways in which restrictions or controls are set upon the making of their lives as individuals and as members of historically and socially diverse communities.

Unlike the procedure of Dilthey, which involves finding again in the world the ramifications of the general psychic structure of

¹ W. Dilthey, "Entwürfe zur Kritik der historischen Vernunft", *Gesammelte Schriften*, Leipzig and Berlin, B.G. Teubner, 1927, Vol. VII, p. 101.

human beings,¹ actual human lives should be treated as “mirrors” in which the individual’s and his community’s ways of acting and experiencing in their circumstances are reflected, some of which vital relationships are to be seen in a clear, well defined manner, and others—less relevant—more dimly and distantly. The only way to comprehend a particular human life or a particular community’s life will involve their being examined through many such “mirrors”—but no matter how numerous, the resulting “images” can never be put together to make up a finished and rationally coherent structure. Human life is not representable by a universalizing formula in which every element has a logically determinable position and unchanging connection with all the others, but it must be seen in terms of diverse historical relations of past, present, and future actions and experiences with regard to a circumstance which itself may be being thereby changed.

Does this commit one to a form of relativism? This question raises a fictitious issue, for both the approach of relativism and of its inseparable correlate, absolutism, are based on an invalid extension of a legitimate abstracting attitude towards reality. They both accept the separation of the self from world which occurs only in abstraction as if it were a real distinction, along with an acceptance of a correspondence theory of truth which presupposes such a distinction. As they are based on this false premise, and so do not aid our understanding of anything at all, both of these terms and the ways of judging that they denote should be dropped from our philosophical and scientific vocabulary.

Assuming that mere arbitrariness is not methodologically acceptable, how should one determine one’s boundaries? That is, how, in studying an individual’s uses or a community’s institutions should the determination be made about what does or does not belong in one’s investigation; how, in studying events, should the determination be made about when these begin or end? What guides or rules should be applied here? Should it not be the including of ourselves in terms of our own values that brings order and limits into one’s inquiries? *De facto*, we are always guided in deciding what we need to know by what is important to us in our own circumstance. Since there is honestly no real alternative, then the determining of one’s subject’s boundaries should start with the clarifying of one’s own role as the organizer of one’s materials.

A Method for the Study of Human Life

It is widely recognized today in human studies that as one uses his own community's language and means of knowledge in order to obtain information about his subject, that is, as his own socialization is the medium by which other human beings and human communities can be studied at all, then that itself needs to be included in his studies. However, as one begins to study human beings, one's method should lead one to ask questions not only about one's way of relating to those human beings, but also about the human being who uses it, and the account which one gives must be such as also allows for others being able to give different accounts from one's own.

One may contrast this reflexive approach to the materials of the human studies with that of the followers of Husserl. The latter approach has been well expressed by Gurwitsch² who held that, since the study of each cultural situation presupposes acts of consciousness which make possible the given cultural world of a specific social-historical group as their correlate, the task of phenomenology is to find and lay bare these acts of consciousness. And in as much as, in his view, cultural worlds develop in historical continuity with each other, then this would lead to a study of the historical development of consciousness.³

But, Gurwitsch emphasized, "*from a historical point of view, there is no right to assign a privilege to any particular lifeworld*".⁴ Whatever differences there are between cultural worlds and correspondingly among the forms of conscious life of which they are correlates, all are variations, as he sees it, within an invariant framework as defined by the essential and universal structure of consciousness. What alone matters in the present context, as he again emphasized, is the "*reference to consciousness as the universal and only medium of access*".⁵

² Though the following remarks express some of the reasons why I have developed a separate approach from that of Gurwitsch as well as other Husserlians, I must own that I will always be greatly indebted to him for making me aware of the importance of—and introducing me to—Kurt Goldstein, the relevance of whose work to the present study is made clear later in this essay.

³ A. Gurwitsch, *Phenomenology and the Theory of Science*, Evanston, Ill., Northwestern University Press, 1974, p. 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 24, 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

However, it is equivocation, if not unjustifiable reductionism to understand a human being's actions and experiences in terms only of "acts of consciousness". Furthermore, the appeal of transcendental phenomenology to consciousness as a medium of access to the world presupposes that others are affairs to which one must come. But consciousness is not necessary in this sense, for the others are co-given in life with oneself. In a way, they are as close to one as oneself since one is never wholly separated from others until death.

Not "consciousness of ..." but human life is, in truth, the fundamental reality for human beings, for that can only, out of and within itself, be understood and known. If a human being is to understand himself or anything else, it must be acknowledged that his life, and this in the biographical and not the biological sense, is the primary, the basic datum. It is of first importance not because a human life is (or is not) different from that of other realities, but rather because a human life is the key for the understanding of all the rest.⁶ Everything that a human being understands is to be found in his life, as a component of it.

Life for a human being is, as Ortega said, "a matter of what we do and what happens to us", of "dealing with the world, turning to it, acting in it, being occupied with it".⁷ Human studies will investigate then the actual individual and common "doings" of human beings and their experience in the circumstance about which they are doing that. One does not study the historical development of consciousness, but rather, the historical

⁶ If an observer has before him another human being or an animal whose world he wishes to investigate, he must realize that the indications which he perceives as making up the world of this other sentient being are his own and do not originate in that other being's relation to its world, which he cannot directly know at all. He can understand the animal only by humanizing it in part. The observer's chief task consists in determining the number and character of his own indications appearing in the surrounding world of the other, and in what grouping they act as indications there, by noting those to which they react. The extent and variety of indications are fixed from the beginning by the bodily conformation of each sentient being. Cf. J. von Uexkull, *Theoretical Biology*, New York, Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1926, pp. 78-84.

⁷ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Some Lessons in Metaphysics*, New York, Norton, 1969, p. 36; *History as System*, New York, Norton, 1961, p. 14. Cf. *What is Philosophy?* New York, Norton, 1960, pp. 216-218.

succession of actions and experiences of human beings in their circumstance.

It cannot be true, either, that from a historical point of view no privilege is to be assigned to a particular life world, because for each social-historical group and each individual as well, their past has an essential priority over their present. Human beings accumulate their past, they carry it with them. They must essay a human life in the present in the light of exactly this past (from which they depart towards the future).

One's progress in this way might be likened to that which characterizes one's walking along a woodland path five miles long where one would know that one is traversing mile 4 only because one has been through miles 1, 2, and 3. Furthermore, having seen those other places earlier, the place where one is at present is viewed differently than if one's journey had started in this place, for the meaning it will have is always changed along the way through that process which is called "experience of life", the chief distinction of which lies in one's having been through those other places, having already seen them.

But if knowledge of the connection of the past with present and future is to be sought, can past events be accurately known? If it were possible—which it is not—to set aside the self-understanding by the historian of himself and his time, the answer is still no. Anachronism is inescapable; for, in one's turning back to earlier events, the later events already occurred and so the past as it was is not recapturable. One can never understand the past as it was because one knows too much—one knows what those whose lives one wished to interpret did not know, namely, what they would choose and what its outcome was, and what followed that, and thus paradoxically one's view of the past is limited for one looks only for those preselected alternatives which from one's present standpoint one can relate to that outcome.

Can past events be explained, that is, can one discover the causes of past events? No, because history is not representable as a single linear series. The search for causes in history proceeds from "effects" which were not determinable in advance of choices by the individuals involved for these "effects" were the consequences of their choices among several possible futures. One can never know enough to know why those were the choices they made for one

would then have to know also what those other possibilities were—what they could but did not do, and what the connection is of their choices and those possibilities with the consequences of previous decisions and the excluded possibilities associated with these *ad infinitum*. Further, since these actions were, as chosen from several possible futures, goal-directed, so previous actions by themselves do not determine succeeding actions. Actions which follow one another are not thereby to be taken as connected causally. Historical events are more appropriately to be described as related creatively like musical notes in an extemporarized piece such as is found, for instance, in jazz.

The study of “nature”, that is, natural science, has had a predominant influence upon all forms of research in our historical period. Natural science proceeds upon the apparently well-founded conviction that some aspects of the world of sensory affairs are uniformly regular and subject to recurrent, predictable behavior, are “nature”. The world of sensory affairs has not always been viewed as “nature”. “Nature” is our interpretation of these affairs—a solution by some human beings, beginning probably with a few Greek colonists of Ionia in the 6th century B.C., to certain problems which their actions in their circumstances set them. Natural science has proven to be of tremendous aid to us, but it can become an ideology if we take the abstraction which it studies (that is, “nature”), to be inclusive of all reality.

The approach which natural science has taken to obtain knowledge of “nature” is to “explain it”. Explanation replaces the immediate with something else which, it is claimed, is more intelligible. Scientists have sought by theorizing to find a reality behind the world of everyday experience (theorizing has thus been a type of model building). Theories are made up of concepts which are combined then in propositions or judgements about affairs and their relations to one another by which one explains the regular aspects of the world of sensory affairs. Today this usually consists of relating “effects” to “causes” in terms of “laws”. The role of “laws” in scientific research is to provide general rules for scientists’ use in obtaining specific facts, that is, they “govern” the way in which one comes to scientific knowledge of reality. These “laws” are justified by their working; they have an operational validity.

A Method for the Study of Human Life

The facts which natural science seeks are those kinds of changes of relationship whose occurrence can be accurately predicted. Furthermore, these facts, rather than being autonomous, are pre-selected by their conformity with the concepts used in scientific theory. There is no gap separating facts and theory, only the filling in or non-filling in of a theoretically generated experiential series with empirically demonstrated facts. Nevertheless, a dialectical relation is maintained between theory and empirical observations and so scientific research requires the continual openness of both to critical revision; that is, natural science has a built-in mechanism for self-correction of its theories and its facts.

Often the approach taken by social science today has been to seek for "laws" which have governed the behavior of a certain percentage of a given population over a period of time based upon statistical analysis, rather than for "laws" which make possible predictions of the outcomes of future interactions. As a way of studying community life, however, "laws" whose validity will depend upon the stability of a community cannot help us understand social change or persistence any more than appeals to "laws" of the other type.

No strictly naturalistic treatment of a given historical-social group can make intelligible the continuous dynamics by which it becomes transformed into a different one, nor account for how it could have arisen from another form of communal life in the first place. But neither can it explain the sources of strength of the usages of a group or why they persist. In a word, it obscures the historically contingent facts of its changes and of its persistence. Furthermore, these "laws" can also be appealed to ideologically for justifying resistance to historical change by that group.

In order to understand human lives, one must give up the assumption that they are something "natural" and recognize the historical character of the ordering of human life by which the possibilities of a particular circumstance come to be realized in a certain, determinate way by an actual human being or community. Whether new forms of human life come to be invented or old forms persist, it is in relation to their own history that these have to be understood.

Ortega has said that human life is what we do about what is

happening to us; thus my life is “myself and my circumstance”.⁸ In like manner⁹ Uexkull has described action and perception as correlated in the worlds of animals and human beings.¹⁰ Nevertheless, it should be clearly recognized¹¹ that it is in terms of what a human being can and does do about what happens to him that this becomes *his* circumstance which then fits well or ill with him as actor.

A human being’s action and circumstance are both determinate and indeterminate. That is, his action can be connected to his circumstance within a range of many possible relationships, and the role that each plays becomes determinate only in so far as it exists within a particular individual life as a system. In the same way that system itself becomes determinate only by the particular relationships of actions and circumstance.

Living is the permutable system of a human being’s interactions with his circumstance in which are ordered synergetically and preferentially the patterning of his actions and patterning of his circumstance. No particular order is needed by him, although it appears that he may have a few innate preferences,¹² but much disorder seems to be threatening to a human being.¹³ (If a human being’s actions or his circumstance appear to us as disorderly, we speak of their being “wild”, and a “wilderness” always remains at the fringes of a human life).

As human beings can do and can perceive vastly more than they in fact do and perceive, one must give due recognition to their

⁸ J. Ortega y Gasset, *Meditations on Quixote*, New York, Norton, 1961, p. 45.

⁹ Of course, since Ortega’s own thinking was spurred in part by Uexkull’s works, to one of which he wrote an introduction [*Obras Completas*, Madrid, Revista de Occidente, 1966, vol. VI]. Cf. also his references to Uexkull’s ideas in “El Quijote on le escuela”, *Obras Completas*, Vol. II.

¹⁰ J. von Uexkull, “World of Animals and Man”, in *Instinctive Behavior*, C.H. Schiller, ed., New York, International University Press, 1957, p. 49.

¹¹ As Ortega did not, since he seems to be of two opinions on this matter. Cf., *Origin of Philosophy*, New York, Norton, 1967, p. 39, *Man and Crisis*, New York, Norton, 1958, pp. 107-108 and *Man and People*, New York, Norton 1957, pp. 61-62.

¹² Otto Friedrich, “What do babies know?” *Time*, vol. 122, No. 7, August 15, 1983, pp. 52-59.

¹³ Cf. K. Goldstein, *The Organism*, Boston, Beacon, 1963, pp. 35-48, 42-44; also, *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology*, New York, Schocken, 1963, pp. 85-87.

A Method for the Study of Human Life

preferred patterns of acting and perceiving as Goldstein has shown.¹⁴ These preferred patterns are restrictions set upon a human being's actions and upon his circumstance that are created by him or acquired by him through his participation in the life of his particular community. It is these preferred ways of patterning their actions and experiences of human beings in their individual and communal life which should be the subject matter of the human studies.

One should search someone's or some community's past for their preferred patterns of actions and experiences; then search the present for those that have been found in the past. Where the results overlap, there is one object of the human studies: the preferred pattern which persists. Where they cease to overlap, there is another object of the human studies: the transition or changing of a preferred pattern. The latter alone does not call for understanding since persistence needs understanding also. Stability as well as change in human life should not be taken for granted, it needs to be accounted for.

Major factors affecting persistence include the role played as controls by existing artifacts, tools, institutions, and landscapes which objectify certain skills, attitudes, beliefs, values and so on. It should be noted that the study of words used by the members of a given community can be a valuable tool through which one can come to apprehend and appreciate some aspect of human life in the past, for in its language (as, likewise, in its laws) there often can be found something genuinely atavistic. However, it is also to be remembered that long after the original reasons for the appearance of a word, activity or institution have vanished, it may persist, but with an altered function or meaning, or even after it has ceased to have a meaning that is understood.

One's study of the individual and common preferred paterings by human beings of their vital relationships, of their ordering of their actions and experiences with one another and their circumstance should start, as was said above, by examining a particular individual's or particular community's life in which they will be "mirrored", but progress in the human studies depends on

¹⁴ K. Goldstein, *The Organism*, pp. 340-366; *Human Nature in the Light of Psychopathology*, pp. 174-186.

one's being capable of making generalizations out of one's cognitions of the unique. In the making of these generalizations the student of human life should proceed like a cartographer who works in an unmapped, although, perhaps, well-traveled territory, to establish its boundaries and major features, and to set up marks by which, through seeing the relationships of each to some others, other human beings later may be guided as they move into the territory to settle and develop its resources.

That is, one generalizes by taking particular preferred patternings of individual or common actions and experiences as "points of origin" in order to connect them through an integrating description or schema which, without representing the complete appearance of all these patterns of actions and experiences in their particularity, the peculiarities and exceptions that belong to them as unique, unrepeatable historical realities, nonetheless exhibits their relatability. As the schematization of these preferred patternings of actions and experiences relies upon their evident relatability as parts of the permutable system of a particular human being's life, that then plays a determining role with regard to which details are included in the schema.

Finally, by bringing together a number of schemata so that their similarities and differences can be seen, one may from the comparison of these derive more generalized topical or even "global" schemata of human beings' ways of making their individual or communal life.

It is of great importance, when one is describing schematically some type of connection between the preferred patterns in one's materials, that one should recognize whenever metaphors are being used and consider carefully the kind of metaphors they are, for these will have a decisive though often hardly acknowledged influence upon the kind of connections and distinctions which are sought. Specifically, when the system of a historically produced human life is to be described, the use of biologically derived metaphors of any sort should be avoided, even such seemingly innocent images as "growth" and "development" or "decline". One should instead use only such images as show the interactions of human beings with one another or their circumstance.

Although arrived at through a generalizing description of some aspect of some human lives, each such schema is an object

A Method for the Study of Human Life

produced by a student of human life and one must therefore constantly resist the temptation to regard what is the result of one's own work as having been already present *as such* in those human lives. A schema's validity lies in the fecundity and generalizability of each of the particular preferred patterns of action and experience one chooses to consider as a "point of origin", that is, the number and variety of additional patterns of action and experience that a schema based on these help one to bring into relation or compare to one another.

To recapitulate, the method I propose for the study of human life has the following four parts:

1. *Reflexivity*: that is, taking as one's starting materials a variety of actual human lives which one treats as "mirrors" in which the individual's and his community's ways of acting and experiencing in their circumstance are more or less clearly reflected; and also, clarifying one's own role as the organizer of these materials in as much as one will have determined what one specifically needs to know—i.e., what are one's subjects' thematic and temporal boundaries—in terms of what is important to oneself in one's own circumstance.

2. *Historicality, or recognizing the permutability of individual and communal life*: that is, taking note of the individual's or community's relations to their past, present and future, the historical succession of their actions and experiences with regard to a circumstance which itself may be being thereby changed; and also, considering the impact on them of what we call their "experience of life", the accumulating of their past by which the meaning that past, present, and future will have is changed through their having been through those preceding times.

3. *Recognizing preferentiality in patterns of human actions and experiences*: that is, investigating the preferred ways of patterning their actions and experiences by various human beings in their individual and communal life—specifically, searching their present for patterns found in the past to thus arrive at recognition of the preferred pattern which persists and of transition or changing of a preferred pattern.

4. *Schematizing, i.e., generalization of preferred patterns of human action and experience*: that is, treating individually or communally preferred patterns of actions and experiences as “points of origin” in order to connect them through an integrating description or schema that relies upon their evident (i.e., to the investigator) relatability as parts of the permutable system of a particular human life; and also, bringing together schemata so that their similarities and differences can be seen and expressed through still more general schemata. Note should be taken also of the need to vary these schemata as in the course of history some of the preferred patterns so related are changed, fall into disuse, or new ones invented.

Both the methods of natural science and of transcendental phenomenology abstract from human life, one from the history and the other from the actions of living human beings. The method I have outlined above, on the contrary, makes possible the study of actual human lives.

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