

Building a House for Reason

Bernard PERRET

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First of all, I must explain how I came to contribute to action theory. My activities are twofold : administrative and academic. As a civil servant, I am working at the Ministry of Equipment, Transport and Housing. I am in charge of developing policy and program evaluation in this administration. As a 'free lance' socio-economist, my main contributions are in the field of work mutations and the sociology of money. All these topics are somehow related to action theory.

More recently, I've been asked by a government agency to report on the development of social indicators at an international level. On this occasion, I came across the work of the American sociologist Robert Putnam about Social Capital. For a socio-economist, the Social Capital theory seems very promising, because it creates a new ground for confronting economic and sociological approaches to social development. On the one hand, the Social Capital theory appears as an advance of sociological thinking against 'pure economics', as far as it introduces classical sociological concerns about social cohesion within a theory of economic and social development. On the other hand, it can be seen as a new advance of utilitarianism in the study of society. In fact, considering the way the notion is being used by economists and technocrats there is a real danger that social networks might come to be considered as mere inputs for economic growth. Of course, in Putnam's writings, Social capital is related to various social and political issues. When he warns his fellow citizens against the risks entailed by the decline of Social Capital in the US, Putnam is mostly concerned about the future of American democracy. But, when World Bank economists seize the concept, their aim is clearly to establish a normative model of a society adapted to capitalist growth.

This utilitarian bias appears in Putnam's first definition of Social Capital : "By analogy with notions of physical capital and human capital--tools and training that enhance individual productivity--"social capital" refers to features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit"¹. Yet, for me, society is rather a

¹ "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital" *Journal of Democracy* 6:1, Jan 1995, 65-78

“patrimony” than a capital. In the sense that it has value in itself, while a capital is a resource for production. A patrimony, for example a beautiful family house, has to be preserved and transmitted integrally because of its own specific character. Is not society something like a beautiful inherited house ? By the way, as I will argue later, it may be seen as the “House of reason”, so far as it provides us with basic elements of meaning that are absolute preconditions for any kind of rationality.

I found in Hannah Arendt’s *Condition of modern man* convincing arguments about the non utilitarian value of Society. For her, the highest value of Society lies in the fact that it confers extension and durability to meaningful human realities. Our life is embedded in a Common World of meanings which existed before us and will exist after us. This World represents a kind of transcendence, in the sense that its significance surpasses the significance of our individual lives:

“Common World is what welcomes us at our birth, and what we leave behind us when we die. It transcends our life in the past as well as in the future ; it was there before us, it will survive to the short stay we make in it. It is what we have in common, not only with our contemporaries, but also with those who passed and those who will come after us”.

In Arendt’s philosophy, the highest model for human action is not Work but Action in the public sphere, political action. This kind of action represents what is specifically human in action. And the reason why this kind of action is so dignified is that it points towards the constitution and enrichment of the Common World : “During centuries (...) men came into the public domain because they wanted that something of them or something they had in common with others be more durable than their earthly life”²

The arendtian concept of human action offers a relevant counterpoint to the utilitarian one. Why do we live in society ? Of course, for economic reasons, but also because we are social beings who need to interact with others to create common meanings. The purpose of making society is not only ”coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit “, but also the creation of a Common World that has value in itself. So, what I want to do is to develop this argument in terms of an anthropological theory of action, in relation to a discussion of the notion of Rationality. My basic assumption is that individual social activity can't be adequately described as rational. It could be better understood as *reflexive*, through a dualistic model combining in a dialectic way an instrumental and a “constitutive” dimension.

Of course, this approach raises the difficulty of translating arendtian concepts in anthropological terms. One way to formulate the question is: at what level of analysis does the arendtian opposition

² *Condition de l'homme moderne*, Calmann-Lévy 1983, p. 95 et 96.

between Work and Action apply ? In a previous book about Work transformations, I warned against using arendtian concepts to describe the concrete reality of Work in sociological terms. For the same reason, the arendtian concept of Action is of little use to a sociology of political action. From the point of view of social science, the problem is that these notions are not linked to any model of rationality. Yet Arendt's views are suggestive and may help to identify some fundamental issues. They embody a strong critique of utilitarianism. Political action can't be reduced to a purely strategic activity aimed at domination : it is governed by a *sui generis* logic of active presence in the Common world. Arendt's description of human action is related to a phenomenological account of human condition. Action, as opposed to Work or any other purely instrumental activity, is a necessary response to the human situation of plurality: we coexist with others, in a common space where something meaningful must happen. Action takes place in this common space, also characterized as a "space of appearance"³, a space where anyone reveals itself through his autonomous initiatives, and through his speech. For Arendt, the sense of action does not reside in its finality, but in its own consistence. And this consistence is closely related to its capacity to confirm and give strength to the actors' discourse. In other words, only discourse, *lexis*, gives its meaning to action, *praxis*.

Arendt's thought is idealistic, equivocal and conceptually fuzzy. One never knows whether it seeks to formulate an essence of politics or an analytical account of human action. Therefore, it is not immediately relevant to the foundation of an anthropological action theory and must rather be considered a source of inspiration. What is really inspiring in Arendt's thought is the idea that the immanent meaning of human action is related to the constitution of the Common world in which this action takes place.

1. A critique of teleological rationality (the means-ends model)

As Arendt remarks in different texts, sense and finality are not one and the same thing. In the *Crisis of Culture*, she denounces the cultural consequences of this confusion. She argues that modern thinking carries an identification of the meaning of actions to their finality, which is responsible for the loss of sense of Life in modern societies. Indeed, if we assess our actions in reference to their contribution to an overarching historical achievement, most of them appear meaningless. The Hegelian philosophy is particularly targeted by this critique. This philosophical critique of teleological rationality can be confirmed and clarified by an anthropological critique, carried out from various point of views. I found in the book of Hans Joas a

³ Idem, p. 73.

remarkable set of arguments related to this question. I will limit myself to three points:

- First, teleological rationality is undermined by the indefinite character of the goals of human action. It suffers from a lack of natural finality. Animals behave in order to satisfy and reproduce themselves. Human beings are continually confronted to a multiplicity of possible aims, the value of which is not embedded in a natural order. What is good for us has many different figures, radically irreducible to one another : beauty, pleasure, joy, love, harmony, power, health, wealth, liberty, knowledge, self-esteem.
- Second, teleological rationality is undermined by the indefinite character of its time framework. Do we seek immediate, medium term or long term satisfaction? This is a very classical question in public policies evaluation. Of course, we can use a discount rate to arbitrate between present and future goods, but it is a very arbitrary solution, useful only at the collective level as an artificial criterion for arbitrating between different costly investments. At the individual level, there is no anthropological basis for fixing such an arbitrary criterion. We always have a lot of goals in mind, different time scales, and we have no objective way to arbitrate between immediate and future satisfaction.
- The most profound argument against teleological rationality is related to pragmatist philosophy, as brilliantly discussed in Hans Joas' book. In my view, the most decisive point is the following: most of the time, goal-setting does not precede action but is part of it. In other words, ordinary action is not governed by any pre-fixed objectives, but by a global and flexible account of an actor's situation. We behave according to a global feeling and understanding of situations in which we are engaged. As Hans Joas writes « human interaction with reality [usually] consists in a flexible interrelationship between global expectations and global perceptions”⁴. And this global perception of our situation usually has obvious practical implications. « In general, our perceptions of situations already incorporate a judgement on the appropriateness of certain kinds of actions ». Consequently, we don't need explicit objectives to engage in an action. When we have clear objectives in mind, they have generally not been fixed prior to any action; rather, they are the emergent result of a process of rationalization inherent to voluntary action itself.

A very similar analysis has been made by French philosopher Maurice Blondel (1861-1949). The context of Blondel's analysis is a philosophical and theological reflection about human liberty. As Blondel shows, when we think of moral liberty and 'free will', we are confronted to inescapable contradictions: we strive to consider ourselves the real authors of our acts but, at the same time, we have to

⁴ *The creativity of action*, Blackwell 1996, p. 159)

account for them in rational terms. That is to say, we must try to explain them as the result of a deterministic process. So, we know full well that our actions are not freely chosen by an arbitrary will. We know that they are mostly determined by circumstances and influences that weigh upon us. Liberty is unthinkable as mere freeing, release of all determinations, not only from a scientific point of view, but also from a commonsense point of view, because we can see (at least at some moments) our mind functioning in an objective way, as if it were somebody else's mind. Faced with this contradiction, Blondel shifts the terms of the question and shows that our feeling of being free is a stipulation of the will. According to Blondel, Will itself emerges in action as a unifying force that aims to dominate all the "fractional tendencies" present in the actor's mind. In other words, Will is an emerging force that "tends to its own unification". And this emergence process is the consequence of the reflexive character of human action. The dynamics of reflexive action inevitably brings about an aspiration to internal consistency. And consistency can be obtained only through a unified rationality. Consciously or not, the actor aims at transcending the contradictory influences present in his mind to endorse a unified rational objective. The reflexive process is a creative process that produces the transmutation of various melted "motives" into a rational and unified "purpose" that we can recognise as suitable for unifying our will. The example of conflict can illustrate this : a conflict is a global situation where a human will is confronted to another will that tend to deny or dominate it. In order to affirm his own will, the person engaged in a conflict process is led to formulate a rational goal that gives a defined meaning to his fighting and justifies it. But this goal is not logically contained in the initial parameters of the conflict situation: it brings a new meaning to the situation. Blondel thus raises a fundamental point: the purpose that unifies our will is not contained in motives experienced by the actor before the action takes place. So, we can see reflexive action as a process of creation of a new meaning, of transcendence in some sense. For Blondel, the sense of liberty reflects a real experience of transcendence. The emergence of conscious action is a process that "comes across" our consciousness (goals emerge "under the light of consciousness"). We don't master this process, but we are fully participant in it, so that we can truly recognize ourselves as the authors of our acts. What is more, we are internally constituted by this process, which changes the way we see the world, so that we can't take any distance towards it. This appropriation process is all the more effective in that it entails laborious and painful choices. One could speak of a "labour of liberty" in a sense that refers to the labour of pregnancy and nativity.

Blondel's thought takes place among various approaches of the creativity of human action. It certainly can be incorporated in a larger theory of the creativity of action including, among other aspects, a theory of the creativity of language and other aspects of human

expressiveness (see Hans Joas' book). The point is that human activity creates new meanings. New in the radical sense that they can't be anticipated and deduced from significations previously present in the world. There is something like a transmutation process going on within the human mind. Blondel's contribution addresses the moral dimension of this process: he shows that man becomes the actual author of his acts and decisions when he formulates for himself a rational motive that justifies them and unifies his will. Doing so, he becomes really accountable for his actions.

2. Rationality means readability

To go further, I will make some observations about the notion of Rationality. First, the adjective rational has an evaluative character: basically, we use it to qualify the reasoning or the action of someone we observe from outside. To say that an action is rational implies several distinct assessments: firstly, the continuity of will, secondly, the fact that will is fixed on a "real" (non-imaginary) and valuable goal. That is to say: from our point of view, this goal is well-defined and valuable. And thirdly, Rationality implies that the means employed are judged to be adequate to the goals. Assessing the rationality of an action implies that we share with the actor a certain number of beliefs concerning the world. It appears to us that action has a plausible objective and that the means implemented by the actor are coherent with our knowledge of the mechanisms operating on reality. In his writings on the sociological concept of rational action, Max Weber is very clear on this point. For him, rational means approximately: 'of which we can understand the subjective meaning in reference to commonly shared evaluations'.

It should be clear that this concept of rationality does not refer to a definite aspect of human mind's activity, but rather to a certain type of result of this activity considered from a social point of view. Weber accepts the fact that the sociological point of view on human conduct is reductive. Indeed, as he constantly declares, the mode of understanding sought by sociology differs from a psychological explanation of human behaviour. Weber explains that sociology privileges rational conducts and that these don't become more understandable through psychological considerations ("the sense of an arithmetic operation is not psychological"). On the contrary, "when one has to explain the irrationalities of action, it is undeniable that comprehensive psychology can provide important help"⁵. This is obviously a decisive epistemological option, an important self-limitation of the sociological method. How can we understand and justify it? First, let me observe that, when we act in the social sphere, we are obliged to make our conduct intelligible by other people, that

⁵ *Economie et société*, Pocket Agora, Tome 1, p. 48.

is: rational. Social pressure forces us to give our choices an *ex-post* coherence that they have generally not *ex-ante*. This rationalisation effort aims to conceal our inconsistencies and reconstruct a meaningful action scheme around our most commonly understandable objectives. Doing so, we also try to be coherent from our own point of view. What is understated by Weber is that sociology cannot bypass the immediate self-understanding of social actors. It should try to explain social reality on the basis of an individual action's account coherent with its conscious meaning, as experienced by the actors themselves.

It is interesting to connect this point to a profound observation by Simmel about economic theory: "Economy itself, and not only the study of Economy, consists in an abstraction from the vast reality of process of valuation⁶". What is meant by Simmel is that the work of Economical theory makers is nothing else than a continuation of the social evaluative process leading to the emergence of a commonsense abstract economic value, as a result of repeating confrontations of multiple concrete usage values. In a sense, if Weber's epistemological doctrine had been strictly followed, sociology would also be a second order theorisation built upon the first order abstractive operations performed by ordinary social beings when they rationalise their conduct – in the double sense of tending to act more rationally and giving an *ex-post* rational meaning to actions.

"Constitutions theory", in the sense given by Hans Joas ("theories which set out to make social processes intelligible in terms of the action of the members of society" without assuming there to be some overarching transhistorical trend or mechanisms) are not necessarily based on a rational model of individual action. A present task for social sciences is to broaden the range of individual action models they use to explain social facts. Of course, much has already been done in this perspective. That's the issue of all the attempts to expand the notion of rationality beyond instrumental rationality (included the communicative rationality of Habermas). Yet, we have to go further still. The point is that "sensible" does not necessarily mean "rational". We have to account for the fact that social actors use their reason in a sensible way that can't adequately be described by the notion of Rationality.

3. From rationality to reflexivity

An alternative concept is reflexivity. An action can be carried out under the light of reason without being rational in the sense indicated above. Reflexivity offers a more universal account of the way reason is implied in human activity. As Giddens notices, "reflexivity is inherent to human action". While rationality refers to the *ex-post*

⁶ *Philosophie de l'argent*, p.51.

coherence of an action, reflexivity refers to the role of reason in the emergence of this action. As the emergence of a new action always occurs in the course of an ongoing action, reflexivity implies that thinking and action are tightly interwoven. As Giddens writes: “thought and action are continuously refracted one through the other”. All along any action process, the actor evaluates his situation globally, through all its elements and dimensions. The practical and interpretative dimensions of mental activity remain inextricably interwoven. At any moment of his life, the reflexive actor may need to account for the meaning of what he is doing. As Giddens puts it: “The human being remains normally “in touch” with its motivations, which are part of this action”. Should the situation change, the actor’s goal may prove inadequate, and have to be shifted or reinterpreted. Of course, the circumstances of action itself are part of this changing context : goals are always interpreted within the immanent logic of the ongoing action. That’s a permanent activity of man’s reflexive mind. Reason has to assume action even when this action imposes its own logic, the actor being unable to master all its parameters - which is the most common situation in real life. We are permanently obliged to give sense not only to our actions, but also to what happens to us, to unintended events. Interpreting situations and setting goals are unavoidable dimensions of human action.

Yet, it should be noticed that not all mind activity is thinking. There are many different ways of mobilizing intelligence in the course of an action, to begin with mere space understanding needed by any corporal movement. Another interesting example is singing. When a singer interprets a song, he puts in it something very sophisticated from his own mind. The result is a new music. But this addition cannot be considered in itself, as a thought, as an intellectual input that could be separated from the action of singing. More generally, when we express ourselves in any way or circumstance, we need a lot of intelligence, but we can’t objectify this mind activity as a distinct thought. By contrast, a specific characteristic of reflexivity is that it *tends towards* a separation of thought and action. The reflexive actor seeks to isolate distinct thoughts and, then, articulate an action to them in an explicit way. When we think distinctly of what we are doing, we aspire to stabilise our evaluations and fix our mind on precisely defined goals. In other words, we try to be rational. That’s why, according to Blondel’s analysis, Rationality is an emergent and instable result of reflexivity. We tend to be rational, but we can never succeed. The instability of life situations and, more radically, the lack of natural finalities for human action, are permanent threats to rationality. We are in permanent need of a stable framework for action.

4. The role of society for stabilizing the action's framework

Providing such a framework is the basic function of culture and institutions. Social norms, values and conventions respond to the need for a stable framework for action. They are a precondition for any kind of rationality. That is the case, of course, for the rationality of collective action. A normative and cognitive framework is needed for mere coordination of the action of multiple actors. The economic "Theory of conventions" has long since underlined that economic exchange would be impossible without a set of accepted rules, conventions and routines. But, in a sense, individual action is a collective one, as far as individuals always have many different agendas opened before their eyes. We need constraints for reducing the scope of possible actions, and we need criteria to bring order to our numerous aspirations and objectives. Inner coordination is not easier than external coordination, and it requires the same type of guidelines. The first task to be performed by social structures is to constitute and reproduce a set of common meanings (political, moral, religious, esthetical...) that can provide human beings motivations and references for acting in a sensed and coherent way. Our reason needs a stable framework to create rationality. As the French anthropologist Pierre Legendre puts it «every society has to build the house of reason». And this house is, basically, a symbolic house. It has to exhibit meaningful rationales for human action. As Legendre puts it in another formula : "not only must society stand on its feet, but it must look like it does". Social organisation is largely governed by this representational requirement.

What do we need to act in a rational way? The basic parameters of a rational action are:

- Identity parameters: who am I ? What am I suppose to do here?
- Relational parameters: who are my friends and enemies ? To which communities do I belong?
- What has value? Which objects, commodities or social positions deserve to be sought?
- How does it work? What are the mechanisms operating in the real world?

Three important statements should be made about these parameters:

- they are both social and individual
- they are both given before any action and produced by action
- they are in permanent need to be stabilized

5. This framework is both given and created

Stabilizing action's parameters is a basic task of all institutions. What is an institution ? In a narrow sense, an institution is an organisation which have a permanent function in social life (army, churches, justice, school, etc.). In a broader sense, an institution is a subset of the social structure, organisational or immaterial, which have the capacity of prescribing to individuals a definite type of social conduct. In this broad sense, a language, for example, is an institution. The process at work in the creation of an institution is firstly cognitive: the first task of an institution is to reduce uncertainty in social relations through the classification of objects and actions. For example, laws define classes of reprehensible actions, crimes, offences, etc. Berger and Luckmann give a very general definition of institutionalisation processes: “Institutionalisation appears when categories of actors carry out a reciprocal categorisation (typification) of usual actions”. Because they allow one “to put oneself in automatic steering”, institutions make economies of energy possible. In short, they help normalising social activities by offering models of rational conducts.

But this utilitarian conception of institutions must be complemented by an account of their symbolic role. This thematic is given more importance by recent trends in the sociology of institutions. According to Laville⁷ they bring a phenomenological perspective into the analysis of institutions, underlying “the influence of cultural interpretations on the habitual behaviour of economic actors”⁸. Of course, what applies to economic action is even more obvious for other types of social action. Firstly, institutions frame our great ethical choices. We can't decide what is good or bad, fair or unfair, authorised or forbidden, without referring to the way institutions have fixed the meaning of these words.

In fact, not only ethical evaluations but most of all evaluations are social evaluations. The values and qualities we attribute to realities, objects or situation - and it's even true for their beauty – are established through social processes. Most of the time, we desire things because of their belonging to a common world of meaning. Let's take the example of a beautiful landscape: the pleasure and inner feelings it provokes are related to the reminiscence of beauty standards conveyed by painting, poetry, etc. If we generalise this observation, we can say that cultural backgrounds are constitutive of the subjective value of all the things we may want. As Mary Douglas puts it: “For better or worse, individuals really share their thoughts and harmonise

⁷*L'économie des services*, Eres Editions, 2005, p. 118.

⁸ Magatti, quoted by Laville, p. 118.

their preferences (...) they can take great decisions only within the framework of the institutions they build”⁹

Furthermore, institutions contribute to empowering individuals and delivering personal identities. Only an institution can tell you that you are a doctor, or a professor, and that you must behave according to this quality. We can summarize that by a global assumption: institutions provide the structure of the Common World.

6. Action constitutes the Common World

Of course, institutions don't come from the sky. They are produced by the social activity of individuals. There is no need to discuss this point. The question is to clarify the articulation between reflexive individual action and the process of institutionalisation. Two different theses can be formulated here.

First thesis: the institutionalisation process is a long term historical process that remains completely opaque for individuals, unrelated to their own social activity. For many, like Berger and Luckmann, institutionalisation constitutes society as an objective reality, which appears to the individuals as a natural and binding material reality. According to them, the norms transmitted and supported by institutions are integrated in a mostly passive way. The reason why institutions remain opaque for individual is that their true origin remains unknown, mysterious, lost in a far away past.

Of course, all this is true. But it's only half of the story. I think it more and more important to highlight the active and conscious role of individuals in institutionalisation processes, consequence of the growingly reflexive character of their social activity. Antony Giddens has eloquently underlined this aspect of late modernity. The reflexive individual adapts, interprets and, finally, reinvents the meaning of his social world on the basis of his own experience. Reflexivity is massively implied in the reproduction of his social system: “The reflexivity of modern social life is the examination and constant revision of social practices in the light of new information concerning these practices themselves. And this constitutively alters their character. All social practices are partially constituted by the knowledge acquired by the actors about them”. As an illustration, Giddens observes that the apparent attachment to traditions may mask the alteration of their meaning. In some cases, they become mere inputs for new sense configurations. When an individual participates in a social or religious ceremony, he endorses its meaning, but, at the same time, he may contribute to its reformulation, in the light of his own experience and knowledge. Most of the time, this process results in a decline of institutions and a weakening of their capacity to

⁹ Marie Douglas, *Comment pensent les institutions*, La découverte, MAUSS 1999, p. 142.

prescribe actions and structure social conducts. But it's only one part of the story. The individuals' reflexive relationship to institutions may also lead to new forms of personal commitment, more conscious and intense. I assume that all individuals are more or less conscious that their life depends on institutions and that the vitality of these institutions depends on their own commitment.

7. **Constitutive action**

I assume that we are concerned in a very global way by the constitution of the Common world. In short, the meaning of our actions depends on this constitution. This particular concern is an important, albeit unsaid, motive of human action. To use a theatrical metaphor, while playing a role, we also have to build a stage and invent a clue.

Of course, one could say that this aspiration to act in a meaningful context is not conscious, and that the Common World is merely the unintended result of our utilitarian actions. My opinion is different: I think that we happen to act deliberately in a way that reinforces the structures of our Common World.

At this point, it should be underlined that what I designate as « Common World » is in fact a vast plurality of « Common Worlds », more or less connected or fit into each other. To begin with, as studies of symbolic interaction have shown, each communicative interaction between two persons requires the creation a shared symbolic representation of the world. Jurgen Habermas' theory of communicative action is based on similar considerations. Communication activity embodies an immanent logic of decentring, of exceeding one's own subjectivity, so that each sphere of intersubjectivity is a window opened on the common world. In the words of Habermas, participants to a communication activity "aim to rise above their initial subjectivity to ascertain the unity of the objective world and of the intersubjectivity of their life context".

But our concern for the Common World is not limited to microsocial interactions and communication situations. The reflexive feedback on the action framework leads the individuals to be concerned by aspects of reality which are not immediately present in any given social situation. Above the instrumental and symbolic concerns implied by the ongoing interaction, the individual never loses sight of the wider spheres of meaning that constitute his world. In effect, they condition the subjective value of his living experience and achievements. These achievements will have so much more value for him that they are inscribed in a more universal field of meaning. From this results the fact that the creation, the enrichment, the consolidation and the extension of common worlds is a permanent and crucial requirement of human action.

Hence, we come to the notion of “constitutive action”, which I define in my book as “an action oriented (consciously or not) towards the constitution or the transformation of the framework through which human experience gains a subjective meaning”. Is constitutive action a new form of rationality? Habermas speaks of “communicative rationality”, but I don’t think that communication or other constitutive logics can be adequately described as new forms of extended rationality. The reason is that constitutive logic continuously interacts, in a mostly hidden way, with more explicit action rationales. In my opinion, it is more promising to adopt a complex notion of reflexive action encompassing instrumental and constitutive dimensions. Of course, an action may be explicitly and rationally constitutive. For example, we may act deliberately, using rational means and strategies, to sustain an institution regardless of our personal interest. But, generally speaking, the constitutive logic remains implicit and closely combined with instrumental logic.

But this implicit character does not mean that it should remain out of the scope of sociologic analysis. Indeed, in our historical situations, it is more and more necessary to highlight this aspect of human action. As social scientists, we must recognise that our concepts and descriptive frameworks are neither value-free nor context-free. The example of Weber is very instructive from this point of view. His theory of social action is closely dependent on his view of the general trend of civilisation. If we see the evolution of society as a continuous process of rationalisation, it is logical to adopt a social theory that seeks to interpret social facts as the result of individuals’ rational actions. But if it is not the case, we need another paradigm. In other words, we can't avoid a certain degree of teleonomy. By “teleonomy”, I mean that complex and evolving realities always demand to be analysed through their supposed finalities. Teleonomy is not teleology. The following assessment of the epistemologist Isabelle Stengers will make this clear. It is about biology and ethology, but it may just as easily apply to social sciences “The teleological character of life is only an appearance, so far as it would imply some 'final cause'. On the other hand, life is really 'teleonomic'. That is to say: it is from the point of view of its finality that it can be described”¹⁰. For example, if we want to describe the behaviour of an animal, the biochemical language is of little help, and scientists need to use a language that massively rely upon our intuitive understanding of living beings behaviour. Animals eat, reproduce themselves, fight for their survival in a way that we can’t capture without referring to our own experience of hungriness, sexual desire, aggressiveness, fear, etc.

In this perspective, I must recognise that the notion of constitutive action is related to my personal assessment of our major

¹⁰ Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitiques, Tome 6. La vie et l'artifice : visages de l'émergence*, La découverte 1997, p. 12.

historical challenges and, more globally, of our human condition. The problems our societies will face in the near future require new ways of founding collective action on personal motivations. The forms of collective action we need for overcoming global risks of various natures (geopolitical, ecological, sanitary...) cannot rely upon a narrowly defined individual rationality. For many reasons that I cannot develop here, there is a need to found political action on an arendtian concern for the world as such. Clarifying the anthropological basis of this ideal of human action may be a useful step towards it.