

- memory of family
- recognition of its limitations

John Russon

In a neurotic situation, what we see is a complex, interpretive, bodily machine whose subjective significance is remembered, kept and contacted through some bodily

(s)he becomes
 a person. More
 vulnerable.
 at dinner table)

- it is the
 setting, THE
 OBJECTIVE
 PLACE, that
 calls up these
 bodily competences
 as their
 appropriate
 connectors

Human Experience

Philosophy, Neurosis, and the
 Elements of Everyday Life

at table
 sit
 early on ~
 (uhos)

"the body" and "the
 place" from an
 interbody system, as
 a reflection of
 interpersonal life.

Human Experience

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Human Experience

Philosophy, Neurosis,
and the Elements of Everyday Life

JOHN RUSSON

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This work is dedicated to
Maria Talero,
a true friend
and a true philosopher.

We therefore must not recoil with childish aversion from the examination of the humbler animals. Every realm of nature is marvellous: and as Heraclitus, when the strangers who came to visit him found him warming himself at the furnace in the kitchen and hesitated to go in, is reported to have bidden them not to be afraid to enter, as even in that kitchen divinities were present, so we should venture on the study of every kind of animal without distaste; for each and all will reveal to us something natural and something beautiful. Absence of haphazard and conduciveness of everything to an end are to be found in nature's works in the highest degree, and the resultant end of her generations and combinations is a form of the beautiful.

—Aristotle, *Parts of Animals*, I.5.

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Introduction

Contemporary European Philosophy has revolutionized the way in which we think about ourselves. Over the last two hundred years, such thinkers as Martin Heidegger, Sigmund Freud, Karl Marx, and Jean-Paul Sartre have challenged all of our most cherished and traditional views about what a person is and about what the world is. They have introduced powerful and compelling alternatives that have for the first time allowed us to resolve some of our longest-standing philosophical debates and have given us rich resources for solving the personal and social problems that plague our daily lives. These insights, however, are still only beginning to transform our ways of thinking and acting, are still only beginning to have a place in the shaping of our social institutions. It is my intention to contribute to this gradual process of transformation with this attempt at articulating the understanding of the human situation that has emerged from this two-hundred-year ferment.

Much of the progress of Contemporary European Philosophy has come from a focus on four specific themes: interpretation, embodiment, time, and the experience of others. It is this last theme, the theme of our relations with others, that affords the most exciting and immediately relevant insights into the human situation. The philosophical investigation into the nature of intersubjectivity has allowed us to understand the origins, structures and significance of the intimate relations between individuals, family life, the forms of political development, the deployment of power in society, and so on. It has been especially helpful in allowing us to understand and to deal with the problems we face in these contexts.

My intention is to articulate and defend what I understand to be the central thread of this view of the human situation, and to use it to bring into focus the psychological problems individuals face in trying to sort out their personal lives. It has often been claimed that philosophy is not relevant. I want to show instead how philosophy touches us precisely at those points in our lives where we face the greatest personal difficulty and where we are most in need of help. My goal is to show how the notion of the temporal, embodied, intersubjective self can allow us to

understand the phenomena typically referred to as “mental illness.” Specifically, I want to understand what neurosis is, I want to show why neurosis is a pervasive phenomenon in human life, and I want to develop the principles for dealing with (“treating”) neurosis. What I intend to show is that mental health and the practice of philosophy are ultimately one and the same.

This is a book of philosophy as practiced in contemporary Europe, rather than a book about Contemporary European Philosophy. Its aim is the philosophical comprehension of the human situation according to the principles and teachings of the greatest thinkers of the past two hundred years. Consequently the reader will not find discussions of these thinkers in the following pages, but instead the use of their insights and investigations. Nonetheless, I want to say some orienting words about my position for the benefit of those readers who are already students of philosophy.

My study has primarily been guided by the insights of G. W. F. Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), Martin Heidegger’s *Being and Time* (1927), and Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). It is with the work of these thinkers that I am primarily trying to establish a dialogue in this book. It is my view that these thinkers are more compatible with each other than incompatible, and my writing this work is in part an expression of my view that the study of Contemporary European Philosophy can sometimes be better served by synthetic attempts to think with the great philosophers than by intricate studies that seek to establish the finest points of difference.

From Hegel I have taken the idea that forms of experience inherently involve standards for their own evaluation, and that experiences transform themselves in light of these values. Throughout the book, I have tried to be guided by this notion of the inherent tension and dynamism within the different forms of human experience, and I have especially tried to connect it with a central notion that I take from Merleau-Ponty, namely, the way the body by its nature reaches beyond itself. I have tried to unite these two thoughts in my description of what I have called the “self-transcending” character of experience. From Hegel I have also taken the focus on the forms of interpersonal and social life, and the diagnosis of the central tensions and demands of these forms in terms of the notion of interpersonal recognition (*Anerkennung*). I have endeavored to link this with Heidegger’s notion of *Mitsein*, that is, the way in which we are inherently “with” others, rather than being fundamentally “by ourselves.” Also from Heidegger I have drawn my focus on the inherent

temporality within experience, and upon the irreducibility of the “moody” character of our experience. I have tried to integrate these themes with Merleau-Ponty’s focus on the intentionality of the body, and especially his emphasis on the way in which we live out of the habitual patterns we have developed for engaging with the world. In keeping with the practice of all three of these philosophers, I have defended the phenomenological method of analysis, that is, proceeding by way of the progressively more sophisticated description of the form in which experience is lived. Basically, I understand all three of these philosophers to have been led by phenomenological method to a very similar perception of the bodily and interpersonal character of our experience, and I find their various works to emphasize different, but compatible aspects of this perception.

My work is also substantially informed by another side of Contemporary European Philosophy that is most powerfully articulated in the works of Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. Each of these figures has produced intricate and compelling analyses of the primitive motors of experience, and each has emphasized (though in different ways) the bodily foundations of the developed meanings in our lives. In many ways, it is the analyses of desire, politics, and knowledge that these thinkers have produced that have most shaped my understanding of the specifics of human reality. Indeed, my own emphasis on mental illness (and its social and political context) is primarily inspired by these thinkers. These thinkers, however, do not provide the primary philosophical matrix for this work because of an orientation that they share, and that differs from an orientation shared by Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty. Marx, Freud, and Deleuze and Guattari all develop their analyses of the primitive motors of experience in such a fashion as to undermine the claims to autonomy made on behalf of the more developed forms of human experience, whereas Hegel, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, while acknowledging the originariness of these primitive motors, also acknowledge the integrity of the emergent, “higher” forms of meaning. There is a fundamental way, in other words, that the philosophies of Marx, Freud, and Deleuze and Guattari, despite their profound insights into the dynamic and developing character of experience, are ultimately reductive in their understandings of the most definitive spheres of human experience. Therefore, while I have drawn substantially on the insights of these thinkers in this book, I also intend my argument to be a defense of the autonomy of the developed forms of human experience—of the “self,” of “truth,” and so on—and thus, in part, a challenge to what I see as the reductive tendency within this side of Contemporary European Philosophy.

I have also written this book with an eye to possible resonances with a number of other prominent figures within the history of philosophy. In particular, I have structured this work in response to Johann Gottlieb Fichte's *Fundamental Principles of the Entire Science of Knowledge* and René Descartes's *Meditations on First Philosophy*. My division of the work into three sections—"Form," "Substance," and "Process"—is intended as an allusion to Fichte's three fundamental principles (the ego positing itself, the ego opposing a not-self to itself, and the mutual limitation of finite self and finite other). In place of Fichte's self-positing ego, I propose the interpretive, temporal body as the first principle and absolute form of all meaning. My analysis of the way in which we exist as split into ourselves and our dealings with other people, and as split within ourselves in neurotic dissociation engages the domain of Fichte's second principle, the self's opposing of a not-self to itself, and identifies that with which we meaningfully contend in our lives, that is, the substance of human experience. Finally I offer the self-transformative practice of learning as the fundamental process of human experience, in place of Fichte's third principle of the mutual limitation of self and other as the dynamic ground of development and reconciliation within experience. In a similar fashion, I have written chapters 1 and 2 as a rough parallel to Descartes's first two meditations, in which he pioneered something like a phenomenological method, albeit inadequately. The substantial differences between my position and Descartes's demand that this study follow a divergent path after chapter 2, but the subsequent chapters are meant as a continuing rejoinder to Descartes, offering in comparison to his philosophy a new sense of the ego, a new sense of the body, and a new sense of rationality. In more subtle ways, I also intend the work to resonate with various works of ancient philosophy. One could think of my attempt to articulate the inherent dynamism within human life as a resurrection of something like Aristotle's notion of *phusis*, put to play, however, not within the realm of objective nature but within the realm of human experience; further, the section headings "Form," "Substance," and "Process" are intended to allude to progressively richer senses of Aristotle's notion of *ousia*, here the human *ousia*. Finally, my reference to the "elements" of everyday life is meant in loose parallel to Proclus' *Stoiceiosis Theologike*, such that this work might be thought of as, perhaps, a *Stoiceiosis Anthropologike*.

So, what will the reader find in the following pages? Part I, "The Form of Human Experience," lays out the fundamental principles for the

adequate method of analyzing human experience. Chapter 1, "Interpretation," focuses on the way in which we are active in making sense of our experience, and on the notion that the way we make sense of things fundamentally draws on patterns of memory and expectation. Because the meaningfulness of what we experience is always shaped by our personal patterns of memory and expectation, human experience can only be understood by being approached "from the inside," so speak. Accordingly, chapter 1 also introduces the idea of a descriptive method for articulating the distinctive ways we have of making sense. Chapter 2, "Embodiment," further develops this idea of the patterns of memory and expectation that shape the sense of our experience, and argues that the patterns of memory and expectation have their own terms set primarily by our bodily capacities and by the kinds of significance to which they open us. All modes of experience are thus forms of bodily engagement with the world, and this chapter especially explores the idea that the body is a self-developing reality that, through processes of habituation, allows us to enter into ever more sophisticated ways of experiencing ourselves and our world. Chapter 3, "Memory," argues that the very form in which we experience objects is shaped by our habitual, bodily schemata of interpretation, and that, in particular, the identities of objects are in fact the repositories of our memories; this is true both of specific objects, which are meaningful to us in ways that resonate with our own specific past involvements, and of the world of objects as a whole, which we experience in our different moods as resonating as a whole with the orienting tone of our history as a whole. The shift of perspective on our own experience that was begun in chapter 1 with the introduction of the phenomenological method of description is thus shown, by the end of chapter 3, to result in a substantial shift of perspective regarding the nature of the objects of experience.

Part II, "The Substance of Human Experience," turns from the analysis of the way in which the human subject engages the world to considering what the human subject finds as the primary issues of concern in that world. Chapter 4, "Others," considers how the experiencing, bodily subject-engaged-in-a-world identified in chapters 1 to 3 naturally has dealings with other persons as the central concern within its experience, and explores the different types of social interaction that define the realm of human experience. The fundamental struggle that defines the life of the person is the pursuit of self-esteem and self-understanding, and this personal struggle is always contextualized by life in a family and life in a larger human society. Chapter 4 studies the different ways in which

these different sectors of human experience—the personal, the familial, and the social—can both support and be in radical conflict with each other. Chapter 5, “Neurosis,” brings together the different materials from the earlier chapters—interpretation, embodiment, memory, mood, and other people—to show how the tensions, demands, powers, and needs of the bodily subject are lived as a personality. In particular, this chapter focuses on the disparity between the ideal of “normalcy” that our social relations project, and the dissociative, compulsive, neurotic character into which a personality naturally develops. Chapter 5 ends with what is in many ways the “point” or the climax of the book, in a discussion of the bodily roots of the developed forms of human meaningful experience, and why these are naturally neurotic situations.

Part III, “The Process of Human Experience,” addresses how the elements of human experience, identified in the preceding chapters point to the practice of conducting a human life. Chapter 6, “Philosophy,” takes the findings of chapters 4, “Others,” and 5, “Neurosis,” on the substantial themes with which a human life is concerned, and addresses the way in which our lives are geared toward addressing the tensions and struggles that inherently emerge within personal and interpersonal life. This chapter focuses especially on the motivation toward self-transformation within human life, arguing that the shift of perspective initially introduced in chapters 1 to 3 is only fulfilled in processes of personal transformation by which we overcome crippling habits of self-interpretation. The conclusion of the book is that therapy, education, and philosophy are the proper arenas of human fulfillment, and this chapter tries to show how the analyses of human experience in Parts I and II offer the materials for such therapy.

Overall, my objective is threefold. First, I intend this work to be a contribution to the study of psychological health, of value both to those who study psychological health, and to those who are concerned about the health of their own psyches. Second, I intend this work to be a contribution to the study of Contemporary European Philosophy, of interest to those who specialize in the study of this area of philosophy and also to those who want to be introduced to this realm of thinking. Finally, it has been my intention to make a presentation of sufficient clarity and simplicity as to be substantially understandable by undergraduate students and educated adult readers with little or no background in philosophy. It is by the judgment of this last group of readers that I believe the real worth of this work will be measured.

Part I

The Form of Human Experience

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Interpretation

Challenging Traditional Prejudices

What could be more obvious than that there is a world outside us and that we must make choices about how to deal with it? When we think about our place in the world, this is almost always what we imagine. Is it so obvious though? Is this the proper way to describe our situation? We can be a bit more precise.

When we reflect on ourselves, we typically start by recognizing ourselves as discrete agents facing a world about which we must make choices. The world is made up, it seems, of things with discrete identities that are present to us, right here, right now. On this familiar view, then, reality is a kind of aggregate, a bunch of distinct, separately existing things, one of which—me—faces those others and must self-consciously orchestrate her dealings with those things. These last few sentences, it seems to me, sum up the very core of almost all of our thinking experience of ourselves. Though quite simple, they nonetheless express the “theory” of reality with which we typically operate. The significance of these familiar views for our lives is immense. “And why not?” one might ask, since, “after all, those sentences describe how things really are, so they should be the foundation for everything we think.” Indeed, this view seems so compelling as to be indubitable. It is, in fact, a standard way to mock philosophers to claim that they do doubt these ideas, wondering whether chairs exist, or whether they themselves really exist: these claims, in other words, seem so obvious that one would have to be a fool to entertain doubt about them.

Whether or not the philosophers should be mocked, it remains true that this cartoon of philosophical activity does in an important way describe the real work of philosophy. Indeed, it seems to me that the history of philosophy in general, and twentieth-century thought in particular, has taught us to be wary of the vision of the world described in my first sentences. As suggested above, the significance of these views is