

*Richard J. Bernstein*



*PRAXIS*  
AND  
ACTION

CONTEMPORARY  
PHILOSOPHIES  
OF HUMAN  
ACTIVITY



*University of Pennsylvania Press*  
*Philadelphia*

1971

## PREFACE

THE TITLE OF THIS BOOK, "*Praxis* and Action," may seem redundant, but the redundancy is intentional. The Greek term "*praxis*" has an ordinary meaning that roughly corresponds to the ways in which we now commonly speak of "action" or "doing," and it is frequently translated into English as "practice." As Lobkowitz points out, "The verb 'πράσσω' [*prassō*] has a number of closely related meanings such as 'I accomplish (e.g., a journey),' 'I manage (e.g., state of affairs),' 'I do or fare (e.g., well or ill),' and, in general, 'I act, I perform some activity.'"<sup>1</sup>

While these uses are common enough in Greek, "*praxis*" takes on a distinctive and quasi-technical meaning in Aristotle. Aristotle continues to use the expression in a general way to refer to a variety of biological life activities, but he also uses "*praxis*" to designate one of the ways of life open to a free man, and to signify the sciences and arts that deal with the activities characteristic of man's ethical and political life. In this context, the contrast that Aristotle draws is between "*theoria*" and "*praxis*" where the former expression signifies those sciences and activities that are concerned with knowing for its own sake. This contrast is an ancestor of the distinction between theory and practice that has been central to almost every major Western philosopher since Aristotle.

At times, Aristotle introduces a more refined distinction between "*poesis*" and "*praxis*." The point here is to distinguish activities and disciplines which are primarily a form of making (building a house, writing a play) from *doing* proper, where the end or *telos* of the activity is not primarily the production of an artifact, but rather per-

1. Nicholas Lobkowitz, *Theory and Practice: History of a Concept from Aristotle to Marx*, p. 9. (Place and date of all books cited in the text are given in the Bibliography.) This is a good source for a more extensive discussion of the meaning and significance of the distinction between theory and practice in Aristotle and for following the vicissitudes of this distinction through history, culminating in a detailed examination of Marx's thought.

forming the particular activity in a certain way, i.e., performing the activity well: "*eupraxia*."

"*Praxis*" in this more restricted sense signifies the disciplines and activities predominant in man's ethical and political life. These disciplines, which require knowledge and practical wisdom, can be contrasted with "*theoria*" because their end is not knowing or wisdom for its own sake, but doing—living well. When we add that for Aristotle, individual ethical activity is properly a part of the study of political activity—activity in the "*polis*," we can say that "*praxis*" signifies the free activity (and the disciplines concerned with this activity) in the "*polis*."<sup>2</sup>

We must be careful not to distort the spirit of Aristotle's distinctions. Although "*theoria*," the etymological source of our word "theory," is sometimes translated as "contemplation," "contemplation" tends to suggest a receptive and passive state of mind. But for Aristotle, "*theoria*" is a form of life that involves strenuous disciplined activity. It is not entirely accurate to call "*theoria*" and "*praxis*" ways or forms of life, for according to Aristotle they emerge as two dimensions of the truly human and free life.

Already we can detect an important ambiguity revealed by the disparity between Aristotle's meaning of "*praxis*" and the English translation "practice." For "practice" and its cognate "practical" call to mind some mundane and bread-and-butter activity or character. The practical man is one who is not concerned with theory (even anti-theoretical or anti-intellectual), who knows how to get along in the rough and tumble of the world; he is interested in the "practical" or "material" things of life. Consequently, a person with this characteristically contemporary sense of "practical" in mind may be initially perplexed when he realizes that what we now call "practical" has little to do with what Aristotle intended by "*praxis*."

The ambiguity of what we might label the "high" and "low" senses of "practical" has been the source of innumerable confusions, even among philosophers. When, for example, the pragmatists emphasized the role of the "practical" in human life, they were primarily developing a category derived from the "high" sense of practical; they were close in spirit to Aristotle's "*praxis*." But many of their

2. For an ambitious attempt to articulate and revive this Aristotelian meaning of free political activity, see Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

critics—either out of ignorance or malice—have interpreted them as sanctifying the "low" sense of "practical."

It is not solely with Aristotle in mind that we have introduced the term "*praxis*" into the title of this book, even though we shall see that in modern uses of "*praxis*," it never loses the distinctive Aristotelian flavor of suggesting that form of truly human activity manifested in the life of the *polis*. In the history of philosophy, there are times when a concept catches the imagination of a group of thinkers. At such periods, the concept can have an almost magical significance, suggesting an entire way of looking at things, or a cluster of issues and problems to be confronted. In Germany among the young left Hegelians in the 1840's, "*praxis*" had this power. These thinkers had plunged deeply into the intricacies of Hegel's thought, but in their own attempts to come to grips with the problems of the time, they felt profoundly that something had gone desperately wrong with the Hegelian system. There was an urgent quest to go "beyond" Hegel. In this quest the concept of "*praxis*" arose on the horizon. Cieszkowski seems to have coined this "new" use of "*praxis*" and declared that the role of philosophy was "to become a practical philosophy or rather a philosophy of practical activity, of '*praxis*,' exercising a direct influence on social life and developing the future in the realm of concrete activity."<sup>3</sup> Among the left Hegelians, the excitement generated by talk of "*praxis*" was equaled only by the vagueness with which they used the expression. Marx was part of this movement and borrowed the idea (as he did with so many of his other key ideas) from his contemporaries. What distinguishes Marx from the other left Hegelians is that he soon grew impatient with vague talk about *praxis* and he went on to develop a thorough, systematic and comprehensive *theory* of *praxis*—a theory, which I shall argue, provides the key for understanding his basic outlook from his early speculations to his mature thought. Until recently, the concept of *praxis* has not played a fundamental role in traditional or "orthodox" interpretations of Marxism. But with the renaissance of interest in Marx since World War II, the concept has once again been revived, and revived with the idea of evoking what is taken to be most vital and basic in a Marxist orientation. The new

3. A. V. Cieszkowski, *Prolegomena zur Historiosophie*, p. 129. This passage is translated and cited by David McLellan, *The Young Hegelians and Karl Marx*, p. 10.

interest in *praxis* is indicated by the fundamental role it plays in Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* and by the appearance of the international journal, *Praxis*, published in Yugoslavia, which has become a vehicle for the revival of humanistic interpretations of Marx and Marxism.

Just as the concept of *praxis* has come to have an enormous power in suggesting a particular reading of Marx and a humanistic interpretation of Marxism, we find, in a very different context, that the concept of action has come to have the same type of evocative significance for analytic philosophers. Among philosophers trained in or sympathetic to analytic philosophy, especially the philosophy of Wittgenstein, the concept of action has become *the* focal point of post-Wittgensteinian investigations. In Part IV, I shall explore how and why this has come to be. Scarcely a month passes without the appearance of an article or a book dealing with some aspect of the concept of action. "Action" in this context has come to signify a complex web of issues in understanding "intention," "motive," "purpose," "reasons," and "teleological explanation" that has dominated analytic investigations for the past two decades. Ironically, although the meanings of "*praxis*" and "action" are very close, few philosophers have even raised the question of whether there is any relation between analytic discussions of the concept of action and the interest in *praxis* among Marxist thinkers. I do not want to suggest that at heart both movements are dealing with the same basic issues. We shall see that they are not. But I do want to claim—this is, in part, the justification for this book—that it is important and fruitful to inquire into the meaning and significance of these central concepts in both traditions.

Consequently, if we ignore the contexts of recent philosophic inquiries, "*praxis*" and "action" may seem redundant, but when we consider the role that these concepts have played in Marxist thought and analytic philosophy respectively, they appear to indicate two independent and unbridgeable intellectual concerns. The use of both these terms in the title of this work is explicitly intended to heighten this tension and to call for a *single* inquiry into these two influential movements.

If we enlarge our horizon to include other philosophic movements that have shaped our modern consciousness, we soon discover that the focus on *praxis* and action is not unique to Marxist thought and

contemporary post-Wittgensteinian philosophy, but has a much larger scope. The sentence we quoted earlier from Cieszkowski might have been written by John Dewey. Dewey, like Marx, was overwhelmed early in his intellectual career by Hegel and the Hegelians. Dewey himself called for a philosophy that would "become a practical philosophy or rather a philosophy of practical activity." It is well known that the pragmatic philosophers were preoccupied with the nature of human action and with practice, but there still is a great deal of confusion about what the pragmatists understood by "action" and precisely what role action does or ought to play in understanding human life.

The pragmatic movement has been a disinctively American movement (although recent Anglo-Saxon analytic philosophy is pervaded by pragmatic themes). There has been little appreciation or understanding in Europe of the pragmatist's contribution to philosophic inquiry.<sup>4</sup> If we turn to Europe, however, we discover that in the phenomenological movement, especially in existentialist thought, the central issue again turns out to be the nature of human action. Like Marxism, and Dewey's pragmatism, existentialism can only be properly understood as it emerges out of, and violently reacts to, Hegelianism.

The guiding principle of this study is that the investigation of the nature, status, and significance of *praxis* and action has become the dominant concern of the most influential philosophic movements that have emerged since Hegel. The essential aim of this study is to understand what each of these philosophic movements has been telling us about action, how it is to be characterized, what issues must be confronted in coming to grips with action, and what is the significance of action in the attempt to understand what man is.

The intellectual seeds for this study were planted and cultivated during the decade that I spent at Yale, first as a graduate student

4. There are some very encouraging signs that during the past decade this situation has been changing, especially in Germany. Peirce is the pragmatic philosopher who is being "discovered" by German philosophers. In addition to the translation of Peirce's writings into German, there have been a number of fine and subtle studies of Peirce's philosophy. One German philosopher should be singled out for his serious critical encounter with Peirce's philosophy, Jürgen Habermas. See his *Erkenntnis und Interesse* which has recently been translated into English as *Knowledge and Human Interests* by Beacon Press.

and then as a member of the faculty. It was John E. Smith who first opened my eyes to the richness, vitality, and variety of pragmatic philosophy. During the academic year 1953-1954, I had a chance to participate in a seminar on Hegel's *Phenomenology* given by George Schrader. My immediate philosophic interests were to take other directions, but I have never forgotten my initial traumatic and exciting encounter with Hegel. Even my interest in John Dewey was colored by the way in which I saw Dewey attempting to naturalize Hegel and make him more palatable to the contemporary thinker. Since that time, I have myself given seminars on Hegel and have come to feel more and more that all contemporary philosophy, including analytic philosophy, can best be understood as an outgrowth of, or reaction to Hegel's profoundly presumptuous claims. I had the good fortune to be introduced to analytic philosophy by Rulon Wells and Carl G. Hempel. At a later date, Wilfrid Sellars showed me—by his own example—how analytic tools could be used to deal with the perennial philosophic issues. Charles Hendel, a most humane scholar, had the rare gift of opening up new areas to his students and colleagues. He was the first to initiate me into the discovery of Marxist and existentialist thought. I find it difficult to specify what I learned from Paul Weiss—we have always disagreed about basic philosophic issues—but I know that during the years when I attended his classes, argued fiercely with him as a colleague, and learned daily from him in my capacity as assistant editor of *The Review of Metaphysics*, no one has taught me better than he has what it is to be a philosopher. He first suggested that I write this book.

While the ideas in this book were nurtured at Yale, this study only came to fruition when I joined the faculty at Haverford. Haverford is a rare and fragile institution—especially in these chaotic times—where there is still a delicate balance between intellectual excitement and tranquility that is so necessary for and conducive to scholarly research. I want to express my gratitude to my lively students and colleagues and to a most enlightened and philosophic administration. My wife neither typed this manuscript nor helped with the technical details, but she helped in more ways than I can say by being an intellectual companion. The book is dedicated to her.

Many persons have helped in writing this book. Marcel Gutwirth, Charles Kahn, and my wife, Carol have read and commented on the entire manuscript. Parts of it have been read by Shlomo Avineri,

Stephan Crites, Louis Mackey, and Richard Rorty. I have benefited enormously from their critical comments. Catherine Schweitzer, Judy Perloe, and Bjorg Miehle helped with many technical details. Adeline Taraborelli patiently typed the manuscript. Ann Taraborelli assisted with compiling the index.

Throughout this book I have followed the practice of citing available English translations where the original works have been translated. When more than one translation is available, I use what I consider to be the best or most convenient translation (for example, I quote from Walter Kaufmann's translation of the preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology* rather than Baillie's original translation). I do, however, give original source references for all works cited that have been written in German and French. The one case where I have some misgivings about this procedure is in quoting passages from Hegel. While recent translations of Hegel are adequate, some of the older translations are not. This is especially true for Baillie's translation of the *Phänomenologie des Geistes* which he translates as "*The Phenomenology of Mind*." For reasons which will become clear, I refer to this work as "*The Phenomenology of Spirit*." Baillie undertook the heroic task of translating the *Phenomenology*, and it is through this translation that this book is known to English readers, if it is known at all. By contemporary standards of scholarship, his translation leaves much to be desired in accuracy, readability, and intelligibility. I have been tempted to offer new translations of all passages quoted from the *Phenomenology*, but I have refrained for two reasons. First, because a new translation of the *Phenomenology* is now being prepared and I think it unwise to compound confusion by offering my own translations. Second, because translating Hegel requires making basic decisions about the proper English equivalents for his key concepts. To introduce new terms for some of these concepts without systematically altering the entire terminology is unsatisfactory. In a few cases, I have used the original German expression where no translation captures the richness of the original.

R. J. B.