Action Is the Way in Which Human Beings: Exist in the World

Conversation with Professor Hans Joas, Freie Universität Berlin, September 21, 1999

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C.O. Scharmer: The purpose of this conversation is to follow your journey of thoughts, so please help me to direct our conversation in the right direction. My first question is, what underlying questions does your work address, and what was the context in your own life which gave rise to these questions in the first place?

Hans Joas: The major underlying question I would say is that I try to understand human action in its creativity. I try to understand how we have to see social life and how we have to see historical development if we base our understanding of science and history on such an understanding of human action.

COS: Could you outline that a little bit further?

Hans Joas: I try to understand what human action is or, if you put it in more scientific terms, what the dominant ways to conceptualize human action are. For instance, so-called rational action dominates the discipline of economics and vast fields of political science. A normativist understanding of action dominates sociology. Why aren't these adequate ways to understand human action? Distinct from them, **I try to understand human action in its creativity and how that affects our understanding of societies. I'm a little bit hesitant to use the term society, because I mean all forms of social life**.

My main orientation is to develop this understanding of action out of the thinking of historical American pragmatism. I mean major figures of thinking who produced their work in the late 19th, early 20th century, like William James, John Dewey, George Herbert Mead, and others. They were very interdisciplinary thinkers, and I would say their thinking was deeply permeated by the spirit of democracy, which is not true for most other intellectual traditions.

COS: What was the first property that you mentioned?

Hans Joas: Interdisciplinary. They call themselves philosophers, but it's clear that they are not philosophers in the sense of later professional philosophy. They bring in empirical knowledge, or do empirical research themselves in biology or psychology or the social sciences, and that differs from person to person. In a sense it is deeply philosophical, but in a kind of interdisciplinary synthetic way of thinking, which I find rather attractive.

The second point was that I think that one can clearly show a relationship between, let's say, the spirit of democracy, particularly the spirit of American democracy, and their thinking. This was an attempt to answer the question, what is the underlying question…. Why am I so interested in American pragmatism and in developing these

insights further and applying them to contemporary problems? Obviously not because I'm American or an American pragmatist. I'm German, and it's not as simple as, say, I went to school in America, became enthusiastic about the spirit of American pragmatism, and decided this is my future orientation. The

biographical background is much more complicated and complex. Now, I have to ask you, how do we go into the background for such an intellectual orientation?

COS: We are really interested in getting some of the context of your journey. Usually I ask, where were you born?

I. Childhood: Nazism, Social Democracy, and Catholicism

Hans Joas: I would characterize the background for my intellectual development in the following, rather personal, almost idiosyncratic way. Yes, it is always a very concrete, perhaps in some ways, incomprehensible, personal situation. I grew up in Bavaria.

COS: Where in Bavaria?

Hans Joas: In Munich, on the edge of Munich.

COS: I see.

Hans Joas: I was born in 1948, so I was a postwar child. Now the shorthand way to put it would be to say I grew up with a Nazi father and a Social Democratic mother in a deeply Catholic environment.

COS: So you've got to go on.

Hans Joas: That is very important to understand what interests me and what keeps me going. My father was a Nazi during the Third Reich itself—that is not so different from many other children. But he remained a Nazi after the war in a rather outspoken manner until his death. He died when I was a child in 1959. He was much older than my mother. My mother, under the influence of the war, the destruction, the collapse of the Third Reich, and all the information about the terrible crimes perpetrated by the Nazis, immediately became in 1945 an enthusiastic Social Democrat, and has remained so until today. She's still alive at the age of about 80 now. You can almost assume from this description that my parents were not a very harmonious couple in political terms. I could say they were not a harmonious couple in other ways too. I grew up in a Catholic way. This is not easy to translate: in what is called Genossenschaft in Germany, the working-class cooperative, but not of a Social Democratic type, of a Catholic sort.

II. Nazism: Where Did It Come From? How Could It Happen?

Hans Joas: I never had a Nazi phase, or anything like that, but from early I had a very strong interest in understanding the history of Nazism. Where did it come from? How could it happen? Why can people who are not devils believe such things and do such things? I say who are not devils because, of course, I loved my own father.

That's still important even today, to try to see such movements or regimes, not only from a moral point of view. The people you find terrible can be loving fathers, husbands, or whatever. This double perspective is, for me, the authentic German perspective. It's not good if the postwar Germans act as if this older generation is simply crazy or has nothing to tell them.

I had a very difficult youth, also, because of the poverty in which I grew up. This led to my strong interest in matters of social justice, equality, social policy, the welfare state, such things. One still went to church every Sunday, and if anybody did not show up, he or she was asked by others, why didn't we see you yesterday? That's a conventional and traditional thing. Particularly after the death of my father when I was ten, religion became much more for me than just such a code of correct behavior. I really had to cope with the fact that a beloved person can disappear from one moment to the other.

Between 10 and 20, I had my "formative phase" so to speak. There was a very intense field of tension between different things: an attempt to understand the German history that led to Nazism; a very strong orientation toward social justice and social equality; and a deep Catholic Christian orientation. When I became a student there was clearly a danger that all this might lead into a very strange and eclectic orientation. What do you do with that? You're not a clear, left-wing, radical student, and in the late 1960s they laughed about Catholicism, of course. You are not a typical Catholic student, because they were not so interested in questions of social policy. It could have become, I think, a completely eclectic and not very productive situation. In that context, I encountered pragmatism as a student by reading the texts of certain American authors.

COS: When and where was that? That was when you were in college?

Hans Joas: That was in Munich. It was in '69 or '70, when I was still in Munich. I spent the first five [university] semesters in Munich.

COS: Studying sociology and philosophy, or ...

Hans Joas: No, a combination, as is usual in Germany, of different disciplines. I would say the main orientation in these years was history, not sociology. History, sociology, philosophy, German literature in that combination.

COS: What was it like in Munich in '68, '69 ?

Hans Joas: I would say it was a strange situation in the sense that the general political atmosphere in Bavaria was rather conservative, but there were always rumors about left-wing movements, mostly in Berlin and Frankfurt.

COS: There was not much going on in Munich?

Hans Joas: Some, but in terms of the left, it was always provincial. I began to study in the fall of 1968 in Munich. Before that I had contact not so much with the student movement, but with a political group connected to the then still illegal Communist Party. The major event of the year of the student movement in 1968 for me was the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia. I had learned Italian and had won a scholarship from the Italian Culture Institute in Munich, and spent the summer of 1968 in Italy. I mention that because at that time many people from Czechoslovakia were allowed to travel to the West; that was new for them. Many of them traveled to Italy and many of them understand German. So when the Soviet Union or the Warsaw Pact intervened in Czechoslovakia, I was literally sitting on a major square in Florence, translating the flyers and the extra editions of Italian newspapers to Czech tourists in Florence. I knew from that day on that something must be wrong with socialism of the Soviet type if the people from Czechoslovakia suffered so much and found this not an act of fraternal help within socialism, but a disaster for them personally. Now the first conclusion I drew from that was an interest in the leftist critiques of the Soviet Union, the writings of Trotsky, for example.

COS: So you were about to tell me about your first encounter with pragmatism in Munich.

III. My First Encounters with Pragmatism

Hans Joas: My first encounters gave me the feeling that I could achieve two goals, which I was not that clear about at the time. The first was to develop a sort of social psychology which was not psychoanalytic. The second was an understanding of democracy, which was clearly missing from all the intellectual traditions I had known before. The most important point is the second one. I felt a sort of tension between particular German ways of thinking, like Hermeneutics, my Catholicism, and let's say, Marxism. It was suddenly clear to me that all three of them share a common deficiency, not in a superficial political orientation, but in the inner construction of their philosophy, in their deeply

undemocratic or non-democratic character. They have to be reformulated, revised in certain ways to become democratic.

COS: That would also be true of historicism?

Hans Joas: Oh, yes, certainly. There was an enthusiasm about the increase of the power of the state in the foreign policy of the state. For example, during the time of the First World War, they were extremely chauvinistic, and those who lived at the time of the rise of Nazism sometimes became Nazis. One of the major figures of that tradition dedicated his book on the philosophy of history to Adolf Hitler. It wasn't Nazism all the time; maybe one should say extreme nationalism.

My orientation at this time was that Catholicism, Marxism, and let's say, these German traditions all have difficulties with democracy. There are other traditions of thought in the world. America could help me or could help us to revive these traditions, to make something new out of them, and to bring them together and so to take away the danger of eclecticism. I would say this is what still keeps me going….

COS: Yes. So that is the context for how you got into your interest and work with pragmatists, right?

Hans Joas: Right.

Creativity Has to Do with Solving Problems That We Have Not Invented

COS: How about creativity? Would that be the same story or would that add a different twist?

Hans Joas: I say in several of my writings that I consider creativity, a particular understanding of creativity, [to be] the true core of pragmatists' thinking [Joas, H.: The Creativity of Action, University of Chicago Press, 1996]. I've also focused very much on creativity from Herder in the late 18th century on. Nietzsche cannot be understood if one does not see the crucial role of creativity for his philosophy. I say that creativity is the core of the pragmatist tradition, and of large parts of this typical German tradition, but the understanding of creativity in the two traditions is very different. Americans' understanding of creativity—I think in this creativity book I called it situated creativity—

COS: Yes.

Hans Joas: I say it's not simply an ideology of or for geniuses, as very often it is in the German tradition. It's not that some people simply have some superior creative ability, and in whatever they do they execute this ability. Creativity has something to do with the solution to problems which we encounter, which we have not invented. I tried to apply that to myself when I described this biographical situation, a situation of tension. This is not something of my own making, it's simply there. I am in that situation. The question then is do you find that there are creative ways out of such a situation of tension? If the situation is stronger than you are, does it suppress your abilities and determine how you act? Or do you find your personal solution for the very particular situation in which you find yourself?…

I do not restrict creativity to this realm of extraordinary experiences. I emphasize, at least at first, the role of creativity for our everyday life. And it's democratic in this pragmatist tradition. Creativity is described as at least a potential ability of everybody. It's not like Nietzsche, which is a completely elitist manner where you have the few creative individuals, and then the historical role of all the others is to—

COS: Be the…

Hans Joas: —the servants to these few creative individuals. It's oriented to everyday life, but more situated in the sense [that] there are pre-given problems or tensions with which you have to deal in some way. I would characterize the importance of creativity in pragmatism, and the difference between the ideas of creativity and the Nietzschean—it's too difficult to speak about all the different German

figures so let's just say the Nietzschean—understanding of creativity, which is much more influential today than the pragmatists' understanding.

COS: So how did you encounter pragmatism?

Hans Joas: At first I encountered it in literature…. As a student, I went into the theories of language. **I had read an article by a German educational theorist, in which George Herbert Mead was mentioned, and his understanding of language. When I read it I fell in love with him, so to speak. As when you fall in love, you've got a rational thing to say, okay, I have to find good reason to be together with this woman. But it's clear, maybe in the first 30 seconds or so of your encounter, that that's the right person for me. So I would describe this as falling in love.**

COS: So you were just talking about another type of rationality, right? Not just a head-space rationality. When you say "I fell in love," you were talking about a larger nourishment which one could say includes the intelligence of the heart, or—

Hans Joas: I deeply believe that behind our intellectual orientation is more than just rational argument. We are obliged to give completely rational justifications for our propositions in our philosophy. I can't say I fell in love in order to prove anything, of course…. It's not conviction by rational argument, it is just a sort of self-analysis to say what happened at a certain biographical point. I don't believe anyone could describe their intellectual development completely in rational terms….It's more intuitive and holistic…

COS: But when you're in the situation you do know.

Hans Joas: You do know, exactly, but you're not able to articulate it. But you have this objective feeling that you do know.

COS: So what type of knowing or knowledge rationality is it?

Hans Joas: You're driving me in the direction of a rather explicit statement about creative processes, whereas I only wanted to give a superficial description that if one looks back on one's own intellectual development there are points where one switches from one to the other orientation. **I cannot speak for others, but for me it's often the case that I sense or have a feeling of even a whole article. But if you ask me what it is and I give you an answer, at that point I immediately realize that my answer is not satisfying at all.**

COS: It comes from the heart, this knowing—right?

Hans Joas: Exactly…. You need the process of writing to do what you felt in the first moment, to really articulate what you had understood without being fully to explain it in words at this very first moment. **But even if an idea is not fully developed you still can feel the potential that is there. I feel obliged then to articulate that, to find the language for that**.

The model of this creativity book, which I took from John Dewey, tries to describe that in one sentence—namely, that we all feel this need or the joy of being creative. He says we need criticism, self-criticism, for the release of our creativity. I used that as the motto because I think that in the German tradition nobody would have said that. In the Nietzsche tradition, self-criticism destroyed creativity. You keep the critics away from yourself and stylize yourself as this genius who doesn't need criticism, because you're always so enormously creative. Whereas in the American tradition, there's an interplay between this creative intuition and processes of criticism and self-criticism…. I try to expose my ideas to many competing intellectual traditions. Which makes them stronger.

IV. The Blind Spot of Social Thought: Creativity of Action

COS: It seems to me what you just described is the process of how something new comes into being. In sociology, or at least in mainstream sociology prior to you, we didn't really have a language that captured the process, the level you just talked about, where you have a knowing but you can't explain it rationally. That was almost a missing dimension in the way we thought and conceptualized social reality. Would you agree?

Hans Joas: Yes, of course, I agree. I can elaborate on it a little bit if you want.

COS: Yes, please.

Hans Joas: As I said very early in our conversation, I think the social sciences are dominated by two ways of understanding human action: an overly rationalist one and what I call a normativist way of thinking. Now in a very short passage of the book on creativity, I tried to show that a model of creative action is not only more encompassing than the other two, but that it's necessary even for the questions with which these two other approaches deal.

Let me give you an example. The rational action approach assumes that human action is the pursuit of clear, preset goals. We have to find the appropriate means, technically and economically, for the pursuit of such goals. Even within this framework the question is, don't we also invent certain goals in the process of the rational pursuit of interest? One has to discover such possibilities.... Rather than just choosing which one is the most appropriate, you might have to find a completely new apparatus, a strategy, and even a goal. So even within the rationalist framework one needs a dose of creativity.

How do we apply our moral orientation to a situation? In teaching I often use the following example, that a person has a very strong orientation to the Christian value "love thy neighbor." Now there is war in Bosnia or Kosovo. What does it mean to have this value and to love your neighbor? Does it mean to be a radical pacifist and to say I will not use violent means whatever the situation? Or, does it mean to say we have to send troops there to stop the killing? So between our level of moral normative orientation in general, and our action situations, there are processes of specification. The specifications are not simply deductive. I can't take the formula "love thy neighbor," and then make a logical conclusion from that, and then come to my action orientation. It is a creative specification and I have to compare my moral orientation with my empirical knowledge about a certain situation….

COS: You just said that we have to redirect our attention to this phenomenon or element of creativity, which is not only at the root of creative action but is at the root of any type of action. I really would like to follow that part, but I would rather delay that for a minute and return to the main journey which left us in Munich.

V. Berlin: I Wanted to Be Where the Action Is

Hans Joas: Okay. I decided to go to Berlin.

COS: When was that?

Hans Joas: That was in early 1971. I wasn't sure that I should go to Berlin, but I knew that I wanted to leave Munich. Today I would say also say I wanted to put a little distance between myself and my whole background. I also wanted to be where the action is, so to speak…. I was vacillating between going to Frankfurt and to Berlin, I never liked the Frankfurt School. I had the feeling at the time that I didn't want to go to a place where schools exist, because I wanted to find my own way. I didn't want to have to choose between being a follower of a school, or being an outsider. So an alternative environment is much better for me.

COS: And much better for creativity.

Hans Joas: Maybe, yes. Even today I abhor places where I have the feeling there is some intellectual homogeneity and not a plurality of orientations with exchange between them. That's the other danger, that people don't talk to each other and simply coexist in one department, for example. I went to Berlin and was very disappointed, extremely disappointed and left almost immediately.

COS: Why was that?

Hans Joas: At that time there were all sorts of political things going on, and students in Berlin were in almost violent confrontations with each other. There was not much space for intellectual exchange. They were striving for leadership in a fantasized world of the coming revolution. The reason I stayed in Berlin was mainly that one of the professors that I had in my first semester there made very flattering remarks about my contributions to the seminar.

At that time he was a well-known sociologist, but unfortunately for me, he lost interest in sociology at about that time… In any case, he was very positive about me and asked me, at the end of his first semester, whether I would be willing to write for money, a sort of long summary of the whole seminar, to prepare another seminar in the coming semester. I was poor, so I needed money. I was flattered, and I had an interest in this topic. The topic was role theory, and so I used the break between semesters in the summer to write that. It was much longer than he expected, but he said much better than he had ever assumed. I wrote a 75-page manuscript, and he immediately asked me whether I wouldn't like to use that as material for my thesis.

COS: After semester one, though ...

Hans Joas: But I had five semesters in Munich behind me. One has to have a minimum of eight semesters, so I couldn't hand it in as a diploma thesis. He said, if you do it in the near future, I'll offer you an assistant position here. That was very decisive for me. I decided to remain in Berlin, which I also found very attractive as a city. His offer also helped me switch from history, my main orientation, to sociology. I added some parts to it and so on, and it was published as a book in 1973. It sold 7,000 copies.

COS: Really? Wow!

Hans Joas: Yes. It was a success, I would say. He asked me to make a dissertation out of that and I said, no, I don't want to deal with that strange topic all the time, I want to write a completely new and different thing as a dissertation. The first plan was to write a full history criticizing Marxism because of its constant neglect of human intersubjectivity and democracy. I made a gigantic plan, it started with the early Marx and his reception of Feuerbach and his polemic exchanges with other left-Hegelian thinkers. For example, the chapter in the book I wrote with Axel Honneth, Social Action and Human Nature, is based on that work.

After a year or so, I had the feeling, oh, God, why am I doing this? In each chapter, I proved the same point. So I went to my professor at the time and said, I'm getting bored and I realize that in each chapter I say that Marx himself and all the Marxists are inferior in these two respects, to George Herbert Mead and American pragmatism. So wouldn't it be much better if I wrote about the people from whom I think I can learn something than about the people I try to criticize? Excellent idea, of course.

COS: You shifted from the reactive to the creative mode?

I Wanted to Understand Mead Better

Hans Joas: Exactly. I wanted to understand Mead better. I remember on some other occasion I went back to him and said I had read practically everything Mead had published and some secondary literature and it's fantastic. My honest conviction at that moment was [that I could not] do a good study

of that because I would have to read his unpublished materials, his letters and unpublished manuscripts and such things, [which were] in Chicago.

His reaction was, of course, no problem. You'll have to go to Chicago. I emphasize that because at that time for me going to Chicago was something like flying to the moon…. Then I got a scholarship, and I didn't only go to Chicago, but first I went to

Washington because of the Library of Congress, and to Chicago where most of the remaining papers are, and then to Austin, Texas, because there was a former student of George Herbert Mead's there who also had parts of the remaining papers…. I discovered many of Mead's writings which had never been listed in the bibliography of his writings before. For example, there is a huge bibliography of John Dewey's writings, because Dewey is a more famous figure. The two were friends, so I had the idea, why shouldn't a friend of Dewey have also published things in the same periodicals in which Dewey published?

COS: Oh, I see.

Hans Joas: These periodicals existed for ten years or so, let's say, between 1894 and 1904, and nobody had ever heard about them. I was successful. There were essays by Mead in such journals, and so I had maybe 20 or so additional items that allowed—

COS: Really? You did all of that in a couple of months?

Hans Joas: Yes, partly in Berlin, with the help of the Prussian State Library in Berlin. Then in Washington in the Library of Congress, and in Chicago. I found out with whom Mead studied when he was in Berlin. This was difficult because the archives of the old Berlin University was in East Berlin.

COS: I see.

Hans Joas: I think I followed models from this German tradition, which I admired, like Dilthey. I tried to do something similar with this American figure, and wrote a comprehensive biography of George Herbert Mead. That was the second book after this role theory book. The third book is the one written together with Dr. Honneth. That was mostly about this German anthropological tradition.

After 1978, I had to find a new job…. Over several years I did empirical research of the typical, sociological, professional kind, quantitative empirical research about labor-market problems of highly qualified people. The most visible result of that is a book I published in 1987 called Science and Careers, a study of 2,000 young German scientists and the determining factors of success or lack of success in their professional careers…. During those years I developed the main ideas behind this creativity book. I wrote the essays which were then collected as this volume Pragmatism and Social Theory, [which] shows the development of the creativity book in a certain sense. On the basis of that, I had the feeling I [could] now present my own views on human action in a rather systematic manner. I did that in the creativity book. The creativity book has a fourth part, which is the least satisfying of the four. Maybe I should have ended after the third part. Then it would have been a book about human action and maybe an acceptable book about that topic. I was afraid that if I had done that, at least in sociology, people would have classified the book as a contribution to micro-sociology. Action is micro, so to speak, and that is something I hate, you know. **My vision is to say, no, a revised understanding of action changes our understanding of macro processes, on the society level, maybe on the global level. It's not just the changed understanding of micro situations of interactions**. That's why I added the fourth part. The intention behind this fourth part is the demonstration that there is a macro theoretical potential…

COS: Dimension to it.

Hans Joas: Yes. But obviously I was not able to do that in the same constructive way as I did in the action theoretical chapters of the book. The main plan after the creativity book was to develop a macro-sociological understanding, based on that.

I was fully aware at that point that one cannot reach such a goal in a direct way. You cannot decide to be creative. You cannot say now I want to develop a macro-sociological theory, which is in harmony with this action theory, and do it. You have to find it, so to speak.

VI. Micro-Macro Link

What I do is try to take a much smaller topic and pick out ideas. I chose an understanding of wars, particularly of the First World War. The book I'm currently finishing is a book on war. The idea was [that] war is a type of historical process where it's not easy to follow the linear evolutionists' historical model [in which] everything goes on and on and becomes better or worse. Wars are clearly different from that. If you look at the First World War, the war I've studied most, you can say there were certain tendencies prior to the war, but the war itself is a sort of chaotic event which changes everything. I wrote, for example, about the creative role of the war. Now this sounds terrible, of course. But there wouldn't be Bolshevism or Fascism in the 20th century without the First World War. There would never had been a Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, maybe some revolution, but not the Lenin Revolution. I can prove very precisely that Italian fascism is a result of the war. Wars add highly contingent and highly creative processes…. A similar process that interests me is the genesis of values and the genesis of value commitments. This last published book I wrote very quickly during a year-long stay in the U.S. [The Genesis of Values, University of Chicago Press 2000].

It's a book about where value commitments come from. It is related to the creativity question in several ways. Even my book on creativity, I think, still follows the idea of "we do something when we are creative" too much. I knew that, of course. But then an important part is what happens to us.

COS: To us and through us.

Hans Joas: To us and through us, yes. So the wonderful German word, an old-fashioned word for what happens in processes of the genesis of value commitment is that something seizes us, captivates us. It's not simply that we decide to be this or that. It's more that we realize at a certain point that something attracts us. Now I do not want to take the intentional side completely out of this process, and if you read about religious conversions, there are very sophisticated attempts to describe the interplay between intentionality and being chosen in processes of conversion. You have to contribute something intentionally to make—

COS: To make yourself accessible, right?

Hans Joas: Right, very good, very good. So I think I have two elements now, namely, a rather precise understanding of the process in which value commitments arise, and a much better understanding of the processes of high contingency in wars. So this is, where I am at the moment….

I'm now pursuing two other projects. I will be very brief on them. I do not really like to speak about unfinished work. One is a book about macro-sociological processes of the 20th century called The Age of Contingency. It is a book about what techniques human beings have developed in the 20th century to build, to interpret, and to deal with increased contingency. What are the paradoxical consequences of our attempts to do so, which can produce, can in fact increase, contingencies?

The other one is a continuation of the values book. The values book is abstract in the sense that it's about all value commitment. It has the ambition to say something which is true for all value commitment. Now I try to apply that to a particular complex of values. It is a book about the origin of our belief (and I emphasize belief, I don't think it is rational argument, it is a quasi-religious belief) that every human being has fundamental rights, and every human being has dignity. The two titles are The Age of Contingency and The Sacredness of the Person. These two projects are interrelated in very complex ways, and I'll be working on them during the next two or three years. That's the long answer to the brief question.

COS: How does that relate to the creativity book? Does this extend the fourth part, the macro-sociological foundation?

Hans Joas: Yes. The Age of Contingency project tries to develop a historically well-informed, macro-sociological theory of the main social processes of the 20th century. A short way to make that understandable is if I repeat that the crucial notion for this work is this notion of contingency. Which is similar to the emphasis on creativity here. The emphasis on creativity of action has led some reviewers of the creativity book to the assumption that I think that there can be a macro subject of creativity also. You could imagine it. And that's happened, of course, in the Marxist tradition.

COS: Sure.

Hans Joas: On the basis of a creative understanding of human action, I think you can still come to a sort of totalitarian macro theory when you project the creative dimension of human action on a macro subject like the party or the nation. I'm deeply anti-totalitarian, as you may gather from what I said. So the question is, how can we accept the creativity of every actor without coming to a totalitarian conclusion? That makes it important to study the increase of contingency, because the fact that you have more options and I have more options does not lead to an increase of options on the collective level. It produces typical new problems on the collective level.

A terrific example for that is if everybody has a car, every person has more options to decide about where to go, and when to go. If there is only a railway connection between two places, you have to take this train or not go there today. If you can go by car, you can go now, or in an hour, or in two hours, in three hours, and so on. It increases individual options. But this does not necessarily produce the situation in which everybody can move to any place at any time, because there may be traffic jams. That means the interconnection of individual acts under contingent conditions with high options leads to patterns which paradoxically restrict individual options again. In order to understand the new patterns of social life in the 20th century, I think one has to introduce what I said before, the consequences of increased contingency and a complex set of ways of dealing with these consequences.

COS: Can there be a subject on the collective level?

Hans Joas: There cannot be.

COS: There cannot be?

Hans Joas: No, I said every assumption that there can be one such subject is problematic.

COS: Yes, okay. But just as a comment, that still would not rule out the fact that you have some phenomena on the collective level.

Hans Joas: Absolutely, that's democracy. That's what you call democracy. Not one macro subject with a full ability to steer all social processes, but the establishment or the institutional organization of collective agencies to deal with the consequences of individual actions and with such patterns of consequences. For example, in Germany the ministers of the individual states can come together and say, "In order to avoid traffic jams on the first day of vacation time in the summer, let's rotate among states when the time begins." That shows that you can have a decision-making process on the collective level. These are the regular consequences of the interconnection of individual actions. We evaluate them as negative. We want to avoid some of them. What we can do to avoid some of them is to regulate this or that, and then we do that. So there are reflective mechanisms, so to speak, of collective action.

VII. Luhmann's Systems Theory and Creative Action

COS: Okay. Let me step back for a second and revisit your initial question, which is that your genuine interest is about human action or social action. What I heard you saying as you described your journey is that you're interested in what you consider the blind spot of your field, that the aspect of creativity has not been really taken into account appropriately, right? And that's what the purpose of your work is about. Would that be a—

Hans Joas: A fair description. But I would have to add a few aspects…. The first is I'm also very much against an imposition of theoretical models taken from outside the social sciences and being applied to the social sciences without full reflection on the conditions of their applications. For instance, systems theory clearly comes from biology and cybernetics. I do not want to say don't apply it to the social sciences, not at all. But if you apply it you have to be aware of the specific conditions of the field to which you apply it.

COS: Which is, in that case?

Hans Joas: The creative form of action.

COS: What's the implication of that?

Hans Joas: What I had in mind is the enormous influence of Luhmann's systems theory, which does not bring systems theories into a fruitful confrontation with the character of human actions but completely demolishes the character of human action. So whenever you import or transfer a set of theories that did not originate in the social sciences to the social sciences, or to the humanities, I think one can only do that if it extends our understanding of the creative character of human action, not if one neglects this or if it leads us away from our attention on this. I think that happens in large parts of the theoretical debates in the social sciences.

The second point I wanted to add is that there is not only an enormous split between theory and empirical research, but also between the different disciplines in contemporary social sciences. This is more true for the United States than for Germany. I admire very much what most of my colleagues are doing at Wisconsin. It's a really good department. But I'm often quite disappointed when I see how far away from neighboring disciplines these people are, and see that in their own work they have no interest in philosophy, no interest in history. For example, I mentioned two disciplines that are absolutely crucial for sociology: you cannot do sociology without philosophy and history…. And political science, economics. Many people have an exclusive interest in one sub-field of the discipline, and a completely superficial relationship to the theoretical discussions which go on in their own discipline. And this is not just individual misbehavior, it's almost institutionalized—

COS: It's a collective pattern.

Hans Joas: Yeah, it is a collective pattern, particularly during the last few decades...

VIII. Creativity of Action: Three Dimensions

COS: We already talked about different pieces of it, but we didn't talk about the phenomenon as a whole. You're interested in human action, but creativity has been the blind spot, so if you conceive of human action from that point of view, what do you see? What is the nature of that phenomenon?

Hans Joas: I should answer the question by referring to the third part of my book The Creativity of Action [University of Chicago Press, 1996], where I distinguish three main dimensions of what I have in mind when I think about the creativity of action. One I call the non-teleological character of human intentionality, which means that we should not misunderstand intentional action as goal-oriented action. We have to open up our understanding of human action where we learn to switch between goal-oriented action and other phases in which we open up to wants, on the one hand, our inner impulses, and on the other hand, to features of the world which do not play a role in our plan, but which are there and which could form new points of departure, or for bridging between our impulses and the world. So—**non-**

teleological intentionality. That definitely characterizes my understanding of action. It has two immediate repercussions, namely, a changing understanding of the role of the body in human action and of human corporeality. It's implicit in what I said, when I said to open up towards one's impulses—

COS: Could you explain the word corporeality?

Hans Joas: Just the bodily nature of our actions.

COS: Embodied action, right?

Hans Joas: Actions embodied, or incarnated. In the flesh, so to speak, when it takes place.

COS: Yes, yes.

Hans Joas: Opening up towards one's impulses means towards a pre-reflective dimension in us. And [being] impulsive is, of course, only a small part of that because the pre-reflective dimension is also inherent in our construction of the world. If I see the world only in terms of my plans and strategies, then I have no chance to devise new strategies.

COS: Yeah, I have no empirical vision, right?

Hans Joas: Right, very good. So I have to have a sort of exchange with the world to be—

COS: —in dialogue with the universe, correct?

Hans Joas: Yes. To constantly bring in new dimensions of the world and of my own person. This also changes our whole understanding of the individual; namely, the rationalist model says you are there as this one being and not the other. My theory includes the assumption that we may be biological individuals, but only as kind of species, and with a certain size, a certain weight, and born on that date, and so on. The way I see myself as an individual has something to do with drawing symbolic boundaries between myself and others or myself and the world in general. And that is, I think, an extremely important point. For this productivity, you not only have to switch between the intentionality and the loosening of controls, but also between self-centeredness and a real openness towards other human beings. An opening up of the symbolic boundaries which constitute yourself.

COS: Which in fact is the same movement, isn't it?

Hans Joas: No, I wouldn't say so. I would say there are clearly situations in which the interpersonal dimension is dominant and other situations in which the intrapersonal dimension is—

COS: I meant the two things that you described, the moving back and forth between intentionality and opening up, on the one hand. This being inside yourself, or inside the organization inside your own body and moving beyond.

Hans Joas: If you try to develop a phenomenology of such types of experiences, you would have to distinguish between different intrapersonal experiences. Those like sexuality where there is a fusion with a beloved human being. Or a situation where there is no other human being, but you have an overwhelming feeling of harmony with nature. You may also be completely lonely swimming in an ocean or walking in a forest.

COS: But it's always about transcending your own boundary?

Hans Joas: Exactly. That's the common feature, but you have different cases when you experience that. So the three features which are characteristic of my understanding of creativity and of the creativity of human actions are the non-teleological orientation; a different attitude to your own pre-

reflective impulses, and pre-reflective perceptions of the worlds; and a different attitude to the symbolic boundaries.

IX. Action Is the Way in Which Human Beings Exist in the World

COS: What you're doing is broadening the reality of the phenomenon of action that we pay attention to, right? You're looking at the process, how action comes into being, rather than just at the result—

Hans Joas: Action always is a process. Action obviously is a dynamic process. It cannot be a static event. The rationalist model has tried this process as if you could conceive a strategy beforehand, so that the temporal coefficient becomes unimportant because it's simply the translation of this strategy into reality. But if you see action as a dynamic process, you have to see that you may have entered the situation with a particular strategy. In most cases you cannot simply execute this strategy because many unanticipated things happen to you, so that you constantly produce a course of action within the situation. I think my model is much more appropriate for understanding the fact that we are acting in a course of action, and not, as in analytical philosophy, with a sequence of unitary acts.

COS: Would you say that the two aspects that you described, the intentionality of the event and then the opening up—would that be something you would enact sequentially, or would you rather say in the true creative moment or process you are really in both places at the same time?

Hans Joas: Absolutely. I do not want to deny the existence of, let's say, strategic action. I'm fully aware that in some situations we tell ourselves now we will ignore other impulses, now we will ignore other parts of the world. Now we do not open toward other human beings. Now we do not change the course of action. We can do that. The proposition that we can act strategically is different from the assumption that we naturally and constantly act strategically. If we understand what [an] artificial construction strategic action is, how much it is based on context, presuppositions, it changes our understanding of strategic action, as well. I do not want to say that it's an additional type of creative action.

Let's say I'm an economist; my interest is in rational action. I leave the other types of action to others. Even then what I say should have major consequences. One of my collaborators has written a very good book where he applies many of my ideas from this creativity of action book to the more specific realm of an economic understanding of action.

COS: If you're talking about the dynamic process of action, my question is, from an experiential point of view, you're really then talking about the coming into being of action. Now where does action come from? What is the source from which action comes into being in the first place?

Hans Joas: Action in my sense is the way in which human beings exist in the world. In a sort of ironic way I would say the latent assumption behind the teleological model of action is that normally we are at rest, like a Newtonian body which is not moved by any external force. Then there is either an external or an internal force. That's how they describe motivation. That then produces in me the will to act. Now before I even start acting, when I'm still at rest, I devise a strategy for action. I have the strategy and the motive, then I combine the two. I was sitting in my chair at rest, now I act. But that's exactly not true. Even when you are sitting around, the way in which you perceive the objects in a room like this one is completely integrated by your experiences of action. If you didn't know how to open doors in this country by pressing down on this handle on the door, you wouldn't be there. You might think this is some ornament or something beautiful, not that it is there in order to open the door. In my view you are always in action.

X. Reflection on the Pre-Reflective Impulses

COS: My question was picking up your stream of thoughts. Where does action come from? If we conceive of action, if action is downstream, where does it come from?

Hans Joas: Okay. That's a different question. The first question is, so if you accept that human beings are always in an active relationship to the world, the question is not how do they decide to act, but how do they decide to act in a particular manner. Then you have to add other core elements from the pragmatists' horizon.

When you are in this constant active relationship to the world, you have all sorts of expectations about what happens. And what happens is not always what you expect to happen. That is what they call at first a problem, later a tension. I prefer the notion of tension because problem sounds too technical. Tension is more the acceptance that they've been in a complex field of expectations.

So the problem is that either what it tries to bring about does not happen or something unexpected happens. Or another actor asks me to justify why I'm doing this or why I'm doing this in a particular manner, and so on. These are situations of tension between me and the world. They are between me and myself, the different impulses I have simultaneously, expectations and reality, and so on. These situations produce a reflection on the pre-reflective impulses. I cannot realize both impulses at once. I cannot realize this impulse because it didn't work out. So in all these situations, and only momentarily, acts of reflection set in. The original state is not reflection, and then we decide on action. The original state is action, and it happens that we have to reflect on our pre-reflective impulses. I would say that's the pragmatists' idea, and we can only find a way out of this situation by creatively producing solutions

for this situation. Now the "I" in Mead's model of the personality was intended to describe situations of creativity. It is not a very happy way to put it, because it's constantly misunderstood.

COS: He meant a source of action or…

Hans Joas: An unrestricted source of spontaneity, or something like that, in the human person. Which in that can be exactly not the "I"—it is among the "I"—not part of my conscious understanding.

COS: It's not the same?

Hans Joas: It is not part of my conscious understanding. I am surprised that I am able to do this or that in a positive or negative manner. We spoke mostly about positive things. People can be surprised that I have such good ideas, but I can also be surprised and excited that I was able to treat this person so negatively. In anger I said things which I never would have expected to do. So I have to digest the fact that I can also do evil things, immoral things. So the "I" is a pre-moral, pre-reflective instance of productivity, spontaneity, in the person. The person discovers in the act of reflection that there is always something behind, that an impulse which I never anticipated can come out of me.

COS: And to the courses of action, right?

Hans Joas: Yes, of course. Reflection is the intermediate phase in the process of action. We are constantly in the processes of action when we've encountered a problem for attention; reflection is action. It's interrupted, we have no choice but to reflect, otherwise we would constantly reproduce the same problem. So it is a phase in action, it's an immediate phase in action. In this phase we discover, sometimes in surprising ways, our pre-reflective impulses, conceptions, and so on.

COS: Is there anything that you would like to go into that we haven't covered?…

XI. The Constitution of Self

Hans Joas: First, this is not immediately related to the macro-sociological. I said that an important part of my theoretical assumptions is that human beings draw boundaries around themselves, and can open these boundaries up.

COS: Who draws the boundaries?

Hans Joas: The person him or herself draws the boundaries.

COS: The person. So where is the person in the…

Hans Joas: It is the constitution [of] the self. Okay, let's go back to Mead for a moment. The idea in Mead is you have an original interplay between these impulses, the "I" and the responses, or to be more precise, your perception of the responses, which have added consequences of your expression of your impulses. There is a connection between these.

Now during a certain time, during the first six months of life, children are not really able to interact with several people, and do not take the reaction of most other people very seriously. They fix on the main caretaker. After that their perceptual abilities have developed to a point where they can confront several people simultaneously. In Mead's terms this means that you've transcended the stage where you have only one "me"—let's say, the maternal "me"—and have several "me's" at once. But you cannot have several "me's" at once separately. You cannot imagine in one and the same moment the different perspectives of several interaction partners toward yourself. He says because of this latent conflict between "me's" you have to synthesize the different "me's" into something, and this something, the result of the synthesis, is the self. So you constitute a self.

Constituting the self means you draw a certain boundary around yourself. You accept parts of others' views of yourself and exclude other parts of that. You form a core which allows you to say no to others. The child says no at a certain point, too, even to the beloved parents. He says no and negates their expectations. In that sense it has constituted its own boundaries.

COS: Who draws the boundaries?

Hans Joas: "I" draw boundaries, but not "me." I draw the boundaries. There is no person before you define yourself as a person. If you ask "how does the ability to act arise?" it doesn't make sense to say, because an act decides to become an actor, it is self-contradictory. You do not decide to become an actor, but there is a process in which a potential person retreats itself from the contradictory expectations of its environment. You can say it draws a certain motivational force for that out of the source of the "I," but not that the "I" has an intention to form the person. That would be nonsense, I would say.

It's a structural phenomenon of a situation of interaction that children are confronted with competing expectations of different persons who all want to be taken seriously. But this potential person cannot act with all of them. Clearly there are questions of developmental psychology, but if this description is correct, I say then we have established boundaries around ourselves. We are a particular person, we have a particular self-understanding. But these boundaries are not physical boundaries. They can be endangered from time to time…. Others can force new boundaries to open up against your will. Rape is such a case. We have to say it's not perhaps so much the physical harm done, which is decisive, but this opening of the symbolic boundaries of a person against the will of this person, which makes it such an enormous dramatic crime. There may be women who have been raped with no really terrible physical harm, but still it can be the most traumatic event of their life because of this forced opening up of the symbolic boundaries of their self.

XII. Common Pre-Reflective Spaces

All this brings me to your question of a fluid group, of a creative group. I think if a group wants to become creative, something has to happen on this level of symbolic boundaries around the self. It doesn't become a creative group if it's an aggregation of autonomous individuals. The problem for such a group is to bring the members to open up in that sense, and to enter into a sort of collective sphere of pre-reflective impulses.

COS: Or common space.

Hans Joas: But a common pre-reflective space. It could be common space in the sense that we come to an agreement to write the contract. But a common space with respect to our pre-reflective impulses, an actual sphere in which I can bring in my pre-reflective impulses and you can do the same. And these impulses can touch each other, so to speak.

COS: What do we know about the conditions of emergence of this common pre-reflective spaces?

Hans Joas: This is difficult to answer... maybe I don't know.

COS: This has not really been the focus of attention of any of the social sciences.

Hans Joas: I mentioned one of my collaborators before. I know that he's been reading literature from organizational psychology just for that purpose. There is some literature with which I am not familiar enough. But I shouldn't say if I don't know, nobody knows. I suspect, as you do, that there is not really much knowledge or literature which tries to come to grips with these fluid phenomena of creative group purposes. In my work I offer certain categories for a phenomenologically adequate description of the process, but not the summary of the existing empirical knowledge about actual existing processes.

COS: Thank you very much for the conversation.

XIII. Reflection

Hans Joas grew up in postwar Germany "with a Nazi father and a Social Democratic mother in a deeply Catholic environment." Accordingly, Joas began a life-long struggle with the phenomenon of Nazism: Where did it come from? How could it happen? "Why can people who are not devils believe such things and do such things?"

The blind spot of theories of action in the social sciences, he believes, is that they fail to understand that creativity not only belongs to a particular type of action, but to the common ground of all forms of human action. There are different notions of human action in social sciences. On one hand, there is the so-called rational model that dominates the discipline of economics and vast fields of political science. On the other hand there is the normativist understanding of action that dominates sociology. Both of them are insufficient because they do not embrace the phenomenon of creativity. Joas develops his creativity-based notion of human action by building on the tradition of American pragmatism. The essence of pragmatism, says Joas, is everyday creativity.

"Action in my sense," says Joas, "is the way in which human beings exist in the world." Three common features characterize the creativity of action: (1) a non-teleological orientation, (2) a different attitude toward pre-reflective impulses and perceptions, and (3) a different attitude toward symbolic boundaries. Thus, the three features of (creative) action reframe the relationship between (1) body and mind, (2) action and reflection, and (3) self and world from a non-dualistic, pragmatic point of view.

I left the interview with three main impressions: that social sciences have fallen short of grasping the creative nature of human action (by proposing normative or logical frameworks); that if we take Joas's notion of human action as starting point we need to come up with an entirely different (non-dualistic) conceptualization of all macro-social phenomena; and that maybe the biggest blind spot in the social sciences is that we know only very little, if anything, about how this deeper view of creative action applies to more complex and collective social entities such as groups, organizations, and networked relationships.

How does all of this relate to the initial key issue of Nazism. In the words of Joas: "The question is, how can we accept the creativity of every actor without coming to a totalitarian conclusion?"

XIV. Bio

Hans Joas was born in 1948 in Munich, Germany. He is Professor of Sociology at the Free University of Berlin and the University of Chicago, where he also belongs to the Committee on Social Thought. He is a member of the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Sciences. He is author of G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought (MIT Press, 1985); Pragmatism and Social Theory (University of Chicago Press, 1993); The Creativity of Action (University of Chicago Press, 1996); The Genesis of Values (University of Chicago Press, 2000).