

Study Guide to *Human Action* by Robert P. Murphy

Chapter I. Acting Man

Chapter Summary

1. Purposeful Action and Animal Reaction

Human action is purposeful behavior. The distinguishing feature of action is that the observer imputes a *goal* to the actor. Action is different from purely reflexive behavior. A man may flinch after a loud noise. This is not necessarily action in the Misesian sense.

Praxeology is the science of action as such. That is, praxeology as a field contains all results that can be deduced from the fact that people have ends (i.e., goals), and adopt means of trying to achieve them. The specific *content* of the ends, and whether the means chosen are suitable, lie outside the scope of praxeology.

Every action is a *choice*, where the actor selects one alternative that he prefers to another.

2. The Prerequisites of Human Action

In order for action to occur, the actor must be in a state of uneasiness or dissatisfaction. (If he were perfectly content, he would not act.) Along with the uneasiness, the actor must be able to imagine a more satisfactory state. Finally, the actor must believe that purposeful behavior has the power to remove or reduce the uneasiness. If this last condition were lacking, the unhappy person would not act, since he would be unable to conceive of any way to improve his situation.

On Happiness

It is acceptable to view action as man's striving for "happiness." However, such a claim is liable to misinterpretation. In praxeology, *happiness* (or *utility*, or *satisfaction*) is a purely formal term, defined entirely by the subjective goals of the individual actor.

On Instincts and Impulses

Certain schools of thought reject praxeology as "rationalistic." Instead, these critics claim that people behave on instincts, just like other animals. There are two problems with this view. First, even if the critics were correct, and humans really did act on the basis of "instincts," nonetheless praxeology would still be valid. Acting on instinct is still action, and praxeology studies action as such, regardless of its underlying causes. A second problem with the instinct argument is that, unlike lower animals, humans clearly *can* suppress their biological urges. A martyr can choose to go to the stake rather than renounce his beliefs (thus violating the instinct of survival), and cash-strapped couples can use their reason to avoid the instinct to reproduce.

3. Human Action as an Ultimate Given

By its very nature, science will never be able to explain everything. Science proceeds by pushing back the limits of ignorance, but at any point a scientific discipline must start with assumptions or "givens," and then proceed (scientifically!) from there. In the scientific study of action, the ultimate starting point is action itself. Praxeology simply takes it for granted that action exists, and traces out the implications of this fact.

All studies of human actions must rely on *methodological dualism*. The second half of this phrase—dualism—simply means that there are apparently two different realms of causality. On the one hand is the physical material world, the structure and laws of which the physicists, chemists, and so on can describe with greater and greater accuracy. On the other hand, there is always the mental or subjective world, including thoughts, emotions, desires, and so forth. The first word in the phrase—"methodological"—signifies that Mises is not taking a stand on the ultimate philosophical dispute. That is, Mises concedes that the materialists might be correct; perhaps every thought really can be directly attributed to a configuration of atoms. Nonetheless, even if this is true in some cosmic sense, Mises argues that at present the "mind-body" connection is so poorly understood that praxeologists must adopt dualism if only for pragmatic reasons. It certainly seems *as if* people have free will and can truly *choose* among alternatives.

4. Rationality and Irrationality; Subjectivism and Objectivity of Praxeological Research

It is redundant to use the phrase "rational action," because all action is necessarily rational in that the actor uses means to (attempt to) achieve an end. By the same token, there is no such thing as an irrational action. Because praxeology takes preferences as given, it does not analyze their content. Some desires, such as those for food or shelter, are more common than others, yet this doesn't make the former more "rational." It is also wrong to condemn an action as irrational simply because the means chosen were ill suited to achieve the desired end. So long as the actor truly believes the means will achieve the end, the attempt to implement this causal relation is an action.

Praxeology exhibits *subjectivism* in that it takes actors' subjective ends as they exist in the minds of each person. By refraining from passing judgment on these ends, praxeology itself is objective.

5. Causality as a Requirement of Action

Causality is necessary for action, because without understanding cause and effect an actor could never hope to alter the flow of events and thus increase his happiness. The Heisenberg uncertainty principle and other developments in modern physics do not alter this.

6. The Alter Ego

All events must fall in the realm of teleology or causality. That is, all events must be ascribed either to the intentions of an actor or to the mechanical unfolding of physical law. Many thinkers are prejudiced against teleology, but, on their own terms, the positivists must admit that the assumption of the alter ego—that is, the assumption that there are other wills just as one is aware

of his own will—is very pragmatic; it *works* better than to simply view the bodily movements of others as the complex outcome of chemical processes.

On the Serviceableness of Instincts

At first it would seem that an animal's instinctive behavior is a middle ground between teleology and causality. Yet "instinct" is simply a term to describe the motivation of which we are ignorant. Even the behaviorist unwittingly adopts the vocabulary of praxeology when analyzing animal behavior.

The Absolute End

Praxeology deals with the subjective ends of mortal men. It is irrelevant whether or not God or Manifest Destiny is moving human events toward some ultimate end.

Vegetative Man

Some philosophies, such as Buddhism, teach that happiness can be attained only when all goals are renounced. If a man were to truly achieve such a state of vegetative existence, he would cease to act and praxeology would no longer apply.

Why It Matters

Many times in *Human Action* the modern reader may be puzzled by the pains Mises takes in critiquing particular views that seem obviously fallacious, or by the lengths to which Mises defends particular views that seem obviously correct. The reader must understand that Mises is not inventing straw men or being paranoid; respected thinkers really *did* advance the views he attacks, and really *did* attack economics with weak criticisms.

Mises takes care in the very beginning (pp. 11–13) to distinguish rational action (a term he considers redundant, since action by definition is rational) from reflexive behavior. This is necessary because a very popular objection (pp. 15–16) to the enterprise of praxeology is the claim that people do not always behave "rationally," and that men often behave like other animals. To the extent that economics allegedly explains all human behavior as the product of sober deliberation, these critics think it is obviously unrealistic. By carefully limiting the scope of praxeology to human actions (rather than the more general class of all human behavior), *by definition* Mises has defused this particular criticism. (In subsequent chapters, Mises will have much more to say on the role of reason in human affairs.)

The passages concerning happiness (pp. 14–15) relate to the evolving doctrine of utilitarianism. In its original Benthamite form, the criterion for goodness was that which caused more (net) pleasure than (net) pain. Even here the utilitarians recognized that certain pleasures (such as fine art or literature) provided a longer duration of enjoyment than others (such as tobacco or wine). However, much of the literature did seem to be a sophisticated version of hedonism. Moreover, economists in the late 19th century tended to think of "utility" as a measurable quantity of psychic satisfaction. As Mises explains in this section, when he says that man acts to increase his happiness, this is a purely formal statement with no physiological assumptions. Both the bank robber and missionary act to increase their utility. What praxeology has to say about the actions of the former are just as valid for those of the latter, because praxeology concerns action as such.

Technical Notes

- (1) Mises argues that an actor must believe "that purposeful behavior has the power to remove or at least to alleviate the felt uneasiness" (p. 14). This wording is ambiguous and might be too strong a requirement. In order to act, a person must merely believe that a particular choice will *possibly* alleviate the uneasiness. For example, a skeptical man with a terminal illness might, in desperation, consult a faith healer, even though he strongly doubts it will have any effect. (Although Mises's wording is actually consistent with such cases, other Austrian expositions explicitly—and erroneously—say that an actor must believe that his action will remove uneasiness. The present note is provided to remove any confusion.)
- (2) There is some ambiguity in the discussion of ultimate givens. On the one hand, Mises clearly states that human action is an ultimate given; it is the title of section 3 (p. 17). On the other, praxeology has much to say on the necessary prerequisites for action; this is the title of section 2 (p. 13). One possible solution to this apparent contradiction is to recall that action is *not* simply the outward behavior of the actor; the action as such necessarily *includes* the subjective motivations of the actor as well. In this sense, it would be inappropriate to say that someone's value judgments "caused" an action; action is still an ultimate given and cannot be reduced to antecedent constituents. (For an imperfect analogy: the homicide is not simply *caused by* the killer's hatred of the victim; without the intention it wouldn't be murder in the first place.)
- (3) At times, Mises is not careful to distinguish limits on praxeology versus limits on reason itself. For example, Mises says that "it is vain to pass judgment on other people's aims and volitions. No man is qualified to declare what would make another man happier or less discontented" (pp. 18–19). Now it is true that praxeology as such does not analyze the content of people's values or preferences; it simply takes them as given. However, this alone doesn't mean "it is vain to pass judgment on other people's aims." Surely Mises himself disagreed passionately with, say, advocates of socialism, and one could infer that Mises did indeed condemn their aims. By the same token, parents all the time declare what would make their children happier, and surely these claims are not *always* incorrect (whatever the children might think at the time). To be on solid ground, one can say that no man can ever tell another man what his preferences are. Even so, there is nothing in praxeology that rules out a critique of another's preferences; it is simply that praxeology itself cannot fashion such a critique.

Study Questions

1. Purposeful Action and Animal Reaction

- What distinguishes praxeology from psychology?
- Why doesn't action consist merely in giving preference to something?

- What does Mises mean by, "Action is a real thing"?

2. The Prerequisites of Human Action

- What's always the incentive for a man to act?
- What are the general conditions of human action?
- Why is it a tautology to declare that a man's unique aim is to attain happiness?
- What distinguishes man's behavior from animal behavior?

3. Human Action as an Ultimate Given

Comment: "As [human action] cannot be traced back to its causes, it must be considered as an ultimate given and must be studied as such."

4. Rationality and Irrationality; Subjectivism and Objectivity of Praxeological Research

- Why is the term "rational action" be rejected as pleonastic (i.e., redundant)?
- Why does the term "irrational" imply a value judgment?
- Why can't an action that is unsuitable for attaining a certain end qualify as "irrational"?
- Why does the objectivity of our science lie in subjectivism?

5. Causality as a Requirement of Action

- In what way does causality influence human action?
- Why is it inevitable, in order to act, to know the causal relationship between events, processes or states of affairs? If a person *falsely* believes in a causal relationship, can this allow for action?

6. The Alter Ego

- How does praxeology deal with the problem of the analysis of other people's actions?
- Why are behaviorism and positivism unsuitable for the explanation of the reality of human action?
- Why are causality and teleology the only appropriate approaches in the field of human research?
- Can praxeology learn anything from animal psychology?
- In what way does praxeology deal with purposeful human action? What distinguishes praxeology from the philosophy of history?