ACTION AND TIME

My heart beating, my blood running,
The light brimming,
My mind moving, the ground turning,
My eyes blinking, the air flowing,
The clock’s quick-ticking
Time moving, time dying,
Time perpetually perishing!
Time is farewell! Time is farewell!

Delmore Schwarz - from Times Dedication

The purpose of this paper is: (1) to show the intimate relationship between human action and time; (2) to phenomenologically articulate temporal experience by means of an analysis of ordinary action; and (3) to indicate how such a phenomenological view of time can and does come to grips with some of the traditional “issues” connected with any philosophy of time.

ACTION

Jacob Bronowski in his fascinating survey of the evolution of human culture and mind (The Ascent of Man) asks himself, at one point, what it is that most distinguishes man from his near relations on the ladder of evolution. Is it the thumb? The brain? Perhaps it’s his erect posture, or a significant chemical difference? No! These are differences, of course, but for Bronowski they are not the fundamental or key differences which enable us to understand the emergence of culture, human social patterns, art, science, and the life of the human mind in general. The real distinction, he goes on to say, lies in man’s activity. Man is first and foremost the active or doing creature—homo agens. But that activity is different than the activity of other animals, for man acts consciously and purposefully. He can delay the gratification of his needs by acting toward distant (future) goals. Take a pole-vaulter, for example:

... the athlete is an adult whose behavior is not driven by his immediate environment, as animal actions are. In themselves, his actions make no
practical sense at all; they are an exercise not directed to the present. The athlete's mind is fixed ahead of him, building up his skill; and he vaults in imagination into the future.1

In his action and behavior, then, man is distinguished from other animals by his ability to anticipate, to live and act toward distant goals rather than being manipulated and controlled by his immediate surroundings. And because he can anticipate such distant goals, he can visualize and imagine a future and plan to anticipate it in his art and science. Man is a dreamer, and it is this ability to live out ahead of himself in his actions that distinguishes him in the chain of evolution and which permits him to develop mathematics, music, architecture, biology, formal education, and philosophy. For human beings, life is not so much a "something" as an "opportunity" for something.

Man's actions are pervaded by a unique sense of time, then; not in some abstract way, nor in terms of the measurement of time by clocks and calendars of various sorts (that's unique too, but a later development which presupposes the more original temporal sense we are trying to characterize here); but in the sense that human activity is a reaching out of the past and present toward anticipated goals. Action is not "in" time nearly as much as it embodies the movement of time itself!2 Putting it another way, we can no more understand an action outside the horizon of the flow and dimensions of time than we can understand breathing without oxygen and lungs. Time—the flow or movement itself—is a necessary condition of our behavior and lives.

Man exists—i.e., he acts—in an anticipatory way: that is the bone which lies at the heart of his acting. And these acts are contextually constrained. He acts "with" a past and "in" a present. The anticipation and the conditionality of his actions don't emerge from memory and conscious visualization of the future as if he existed (and acted) merely in an atomic and isolated present. Aside from other problems, that would make action meaningless by disintegrating it into discrete fragments which would never "add up" over time to the interconnected flow it necessarily is. Rather, that existing and acting temporally—that dehiscence of action, that eruption out of conditions into possibility—is the sine qua non for conscious recall of the past and explicit visualization of the future. They are because we are already aware in our ordinary and preconceptual lives and actions of what it