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Towards Integrating Realities

- Pragmatic Constructivism and Arendt's Theory of Action

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Abstract

The pragmatic constructivist approach provides us with a social science theory, the theory of reality, and its associated method, the conceptualising method. A key aspect in both the theory of reality and its associated conceptualising method is on the necessity of integrating four dimensions of reality – facts, logic, values and communication. But how? Nørreklit (2004) highlights the theoretical and methodological requirements for such integration of reality. Henriksen et al. (2004), on the other hand, describe the integration processes through a series of case stories. But a thorough conceptualisation of the process of integration is itself not analysed or conceptualised to the same substantive extent as are the other elements of the theory of reality.

The key question addressed here therefore becomes: how might we better analyse and describe this process of integration? To address this question, I identify, albeit in skeletal outline, useful social theoretical correspondences between Arendt's conceptualisation of action in *The Human Condition* (1958) and key attributes of the theory of reality, which, I claim, could possibly guide an entry into the 'how' of this elusive integration process.

1 Introduction

The pragmatic constructivist, or actor reality, (Nørreklit et al., 2010), approach provides us with a social science theory, the theory of reality, and its associated method, the conceptualising method (Henriksen et al., 2004; Nørreklit 1978, 2004, 2014). The actor reality approach, as the name suggests, places emphasis on the actors involved in any given social setting and on the realities of these actors. Reality, or world-view, composed of the four dimensions of facts, logic, values and communication - or as they are sometimes called facticity, opportunity, value, and meaning - is reasonably substantively described in Henriksen et al. (2004) and Nørreklit (1978, 2004, 2014). A key aspect in both the theory of reality and its associated conceptualising method is on the necessity of integrating these four dimensions. The question therefore is, how do actors integrate logics, facts, values and communication into a meaningful reality that is actually able to guide their actions in their everyday life? That is the processes of acting, thinking, speaking etc. that constitutes the actors individual and collective realities, their worldviews. Henriksen et al. (2004) and Nørreklit (1978, 2004) regularly note the centrality of such integration processes, but these processes of integration is not substantively conceptualised or disclosed to a sufficient degree where it is reasonably clear how such processes of integration might take place. Nørreklit (2004) highlights the theoretical and methodological requirements of integrating all four dimensions in order to achieve the status of a reality. Henriksen et al. (2004), on the other hand, describe integration processes through a series of case stories; the narratives in this particular text are capable of displaying how integration can function, but, again, conceptualisation of the process of integration is itself not analysed or conceptualised to the same substantive extent as are the four dimensions in the theory of reality (Henriksen et al, chapters 3 to 6). This is, though, paradoxical in a way, as one of the key points in pragmatic constructivism is the emphasis on concepts and conceptualisation and if central elements, like integration, is not substantially conceptualised, the theory and its associated method is not fulfilling its own goal. Therefore, this attempt to shed light onto integration.

It is, however, evident in both the theory of reality and its associated conceptualising method that dialogue between actors is of central importance for new concept development and that language, and language games, play a vital role in the integration process. Scientific methods can only partly integrate realities as they exclude certain dimensions; when scientific methods claim to be objective and value free, for example, they exclude values from their investigations, hence remaining merely abstractions (Nørreklit, 2004, p. 45). We need more. Integrating these dimensions into a workable reality is a process, it is a social process, hence the centrality of language and dialogues and, consequently, it takes place in time.

The key question addressed here now becomes: how might we better analyse and describe this process of integration, this creation process, the process by which actors create their reality? How do we provide a more substantive analysis and description of the 'how' of the integration process as demanded by the theory of reality? To address this question, I argue here for pragmatically incorporating some key insights from Hannah Arendt's (1958) approach to action, deemed always to be social, within an actor's active life, *vita activa*. I identify, albeit in skeletal outline, useful social theoretical correspondences between Arendt's conceptualisation of action in *The Human Condition* (1958) and key attributes of the theory of reality, which, I claim, could possibly guide an entry into the 'how' of this elusive integration process.

2 Towards integration

In the book 'Dimensions of Change' (Henriksen et al., 2004) the authors, time and time again emphasised the importance of the integration process. By integration here is meant that in order for a reality to function as intended, and in order for it to actually be a reality (and not just some fictitious idea or abstraction) it had to incorporate all four dimensions - facts, logic values and communication, or facticity, opportunity, value, and meaning. While the approach remains open to criticism for failing to provide a more substantive analysis of the 'how' of the integration process presented in that text in terms of both method and case story description, I now, in this text, begin to address this omission, if in part, by enhancing our understanding of this integration process through pragmatically identifying some useful correspondences between Arendt's (1958) theory of action and key aspects of the theory of reality, as both are concerned with language, conceptualisation and the processes of everyday life of actors. In particular, I note correspondences between Arendt's action characteristics of plurality, natality, freedom and language and the theory of reality's conceptualisations of the social, subjectivity, intentionality and the ability to change things through language, dialogue, communication, and conceptualisation. Firstly, Nørreklit (2004, 2009) has identified and described the requirements that we, as researchers, should strive to adhere to when researching such realities.

'Man's relation to the world has only the status of reality if it integrates the four dimensions: facticity, opportunity, value, and meaning. Methodologically, this means that all valid disclosure of reality requires an analysis of the integration of the observed facticity, the reflected logical analysis of opportunity, the hermeneutic interpretation of meaning and the subjective basis in the form of feelings and attitudes that relates the person to the world to determine the basis for values'. (Nørreklit, 2004, p. 45)

Researching, understanding and describing – disclosing - realities demands that we get out of the ivory tower and into the life worlds of actors and their realities. Nørreklit, above, refers to the dimensions of reality as facticity, opportunity, values and meaning. Facts show actors what is the case – facticities. The logical analysis of opportunity leads to possibilities, to possible outcomes of given actions, of the future. Values are directed towards our actions – we want to change things, to do something about something; without values we would be unable to change anything, we simply would not care (Henriksen, 2011). Dialogue, speech, language and communication are central to this integration process and to the hermeneutic interpretation of meaning. Finally, this process happens in time:

'The validation of a study implies not just observing the facticity empirical (whether the observation is quantitative or qualitative), to reflect the possibility logical, to assess the value subjectively, and interpret the meaning hermeneutically. It is also necessary to analyse the interpretation of the integration with respect to the temporal medium. (Nørreklit, 2004, p. 49)

It follows that the integration process, of all four dimensions, has to be studied as a process in time. Consequently, researchers need to be in some direct contact with actors and be with them in their life worlds in order to get to learn about these life worlds, their language games, their realities. We use the word 'actor' to describe the people involved: 'People are called actors because they created subjective reality. People do not encounter a natural world, but a man-made reality' (Nørreklit et al., 1986, p. 2). These actors are social; they create their realities with others and are also, as actors,

subject to other people's creations. Our actions are intentional; intent here means that our actions target something, because we have values, we care, we want something (Henriksen et al., 2011, pp. 112).

Thus far, we have identified the requirements for such a research process (Nørreklit, 2004, 2014). We have presented some case stories of actors actually integrating new realities (Henriksen et al., 2004; see also Nørsgaard, 2015). But we still lack a more thorough substantive analysis of the 'how' of the integration process itself. The key question now becomes: how does one conceptualise and describe this process of integration, this creation process? How do we provide a more substantive analysis of the 'how' of the integration process as demanded by the theory of reality? I argue here for pragmatically incorporating some key insights from Hannah Arendt's (1958) theory of action, deemed always to be social, within an actor's active life, *vita activa*. We identify useful initial correspondences between Arendt's conceptualisation of action in *The Human Condition* (1958) and key attributes of the theory of reality which, we claim, could possibly guide an entry into the 'how' of the integration process demanded by the theory of reality capable of satisfying Nørreklit's (2004) requirements on status noted above.

3 The active life

Integrating is action. Through our actions, and our actions with others, we integrate our realities – realities that in turn conduct and direct our actions. Hannah Arendt, in 'The Human Condition' (Arendt, 1958), argues for an analysis of the active human life – *vita activa* – in contrast to *vita contemplativa*, which, according to her, has occupied philosophers for so long. Arendt's analysis of action takes its point of departure in the now famous distinction between labour, work and action in *vita activa*:

'Action, the only activity that goes on directly between men without the intermediary of things or matter, corresponds to the human condition of plurality ... this plurality is specifically the condition — not only the *conditio sine qua non*, but the *conditio per quam* — of all political life' (Arendt, 1958, p. 7).

Both labour and work are deemed to concern an actor's relations to objects in the world; these are subject-to-object relations. Action, however, is characterised as being a subject-to-subject relation; for Arendt, action is always social (hence the centrality of language, communication, speech, disclosure, and narrative) and it exhibits the characteristics of plurality, natality and freedom. With respect to the 'how' of the integration process, we can now proceed to initially sketch out and identify useful correspondences between Arendt's action characteristics of plurality, natality, freedom and language and the theory of reality's conceptualisations of the social, subjectivity, intentionality and the ability to change things through language, dialogue, communication and conceptualisation. We broadly claim that these correspondences are capable of providing insight into the how of the focal process of integrating the four dimensions constituting the theory of reality.

Plurality means that all human beings are equal in the sense that we are able to understand each other, and to make plans for the future. On the other hand, we are also different; if we were not different from each other we would not need language and action as we would already know the wishes of the other. Because of this plurality we are, we need to be, social and we need language and action in order to communicate (Arendt, 1958, p. 180). Plurality therefore concerns the social. Not in the sense of a random gathering of people, but people with a common course, purpose or project.

The concept of natality means that we are born into an already existing world. Natality may perhaps be viewed as a somewhat 'friendlier' version of Heidegger's 'thrownness' (*Geworfenheit*¹). Natality also means that we are born to begin, that we are born with the ability to begin something new, to be active, to be creative. Natality then leads on to Arendt's concept of freedom, which means here that we have the freedom to begin something new, to act. If prevented from this ability to create, such as in a dictatorship or otherwise, we are not free (Schanz, 2007, p. 34).

Action is a process (Arendt, 1958, p. 230); it is also always a social process (subject-to- subject relation), and language is a constitutive element in Arendt's social process of action as it is in the theory of reality. Language, as the empirical and social theoretical point of entry, is common to both. Language makes us human. Language makes it possible for us to act with others, to communicate, that is, to act at all, and according to Arendt, to be free. Freedom here is to be viewed as precisely this ability to create something new together with others. The integration process is a process of creation. Although Arendt does not explicitly use the term 'conceptualisation' it is implicit in how she describes actions

¹ In a lecture on Heidegger, professor Søren Gosvig Olesen of Copenhagen University let us know that the German word *Geworfenheit* can actually mean 'to be born'. *Geworfemheit* contrasts with the German word for birth, *Geboren*. The implied difference here is that noble men are 'Geboren', which means they are born with privileges, while ordinary people are *Geworfen*, born without privileges.

as creating something new and how this ‘new’ requires new languages and language games, new concepts, and new ways of communicating.

Arendt further develops her conceptualisation of the action process by integrating language, disclosure and identity into her analyses. Again, as with plurality, natality and freedom, the concepts of speech, disclosure and identity only come into their full meaning when taken together. As action is a subject-to-subject relation, hence social, language and speech become the pivotal media. Through language we are able to communicate with others and through language we disclose who we are. Action, therefore, cannot be separated from language and speech. Through language and speech we disclose worlds and realities, and we also show who we are. We reveal our identities. Through labour and work we can show what we are. But only through action, a subject to subject relation, are we able to show who we are. Finally, all this is only accessible through language, in a narrative. If we are asked what we are, we can show that through labour or work, but asked to communicate who we are the only possible medium is a narrative (see also Ricoeur, 1986).

Actions are social; because actions happen in relation to other actors, who also act, the results of our actions are as unpredictable as they are irreversible. We cannot always know what other actors might do and what has already been done cannot be made undone. Due to this unpredictability and irreversibility, actions might end in chaos if there were no limits to our actions. Such limitations are physical, institutional, legal, etc., but for Arendt the most important limitations are those, which relate directly to the relations between actors. These particular limitations on our actions, according to Arendt, are promise and forgiveness; the only constraints on action not mediated by objects or institutions.

‘Here, the remedy against the irreversibility and unpredictability of the process started by acting does not arise out of another and possibly higher faculty, but is one of the potentialities of action itself. The possible redemption from the predicament of irreversibility – of being unable to undo what one has done though one did not, and could not, have known what he was doing – is the faculty of forgiving. The remedy for unpredictability, for the chaotic uncertainty of the future, is contained in the faculty to make and keep promises. The two faculties belong together in so far as one of them, forgiving, serves to undo the deeds of the past, whose “sins” hang like Damocles’ sword over every new generation; and the other, binding oneself through promises, serves to set up in the ocean of uncertainty, which is the future by definition, islands of security without which not even continuity, let alone durability of any kind, would be possible in the relationships between men.’ (Arendt 1958, p. 237)

With the ‘faculties of promise and forgiveness’ our actions are ordered in time (Schanz 2007, p. 45) in a way which avoids possible chaos resulting from actions without limits.

4 Action and the integration process

The core building blocks of Arendt’s philosophically sophisticated theory of action in *vita activa* have been introduced here, albeit in somewhat skeletal form. *Vita activa* differs from *vita contemplativa*, the latter deemed to have dominated philosophical thought through the ages. On *vita activa*, the active life, Arendt makes her well known distinction between labour, work and action. Both labour and work are deemed to be subject-to-object relations. Action is deemed to be a subject-to-subject relation and is consequently social. Language is a constitutive part of action, as subject-to-subject relations are impossible without language; further, only through narrative can we get to know about identities. Actions create the new and it is this ability to create the new which is also man’s freedom; if prevented from this process of creation we are not free. Actions are deemed to be both irreversible and unpredictable and chaos is prevented by the faculties of promise and forgiveness.

The question now is whether such a sophisticated and comprehensive description of the process of human action can inform and enhance the ‘how’ of the actor-reality approach to integration processes. The actor reality approach is concerned with the actors’ reality, how actors construct realities, and how these realities guide actors’ actions. Emphasis is placed on the four dimensions of facts, logic, values and communication or facticity, opportunity, value, and meaning. We have thus far, albeit in broad outline, pointed towards correspondences between Arendt’s concept of action and pragmatic constructivism. While Arendt describe actions through plurality, natality, freedom and language, pragmatic constructivism emphasises the social, subjectivity, intentionality and the ability to change things. Both points to the ability to create ‘new’ through language, to the importance of communication, dialogue, narrative and conceptualisation. Note that both *vita activa* and *vita contemplativa*, acting and thinking, are precisely what actors do within the everyday lives of their life worlds. Further, language and narrative, because of plurality, are constitutive parts of any human action. While Arendt restricts her presentation of the process of action to subject-to-subject relations, organisational life-worlds are also constituted by work and labour. So, we should not restrict research on actors, especially in organisational settings, solely

to the subject-to-subject form, but must also include work, labour and reflection in order to gain some understanding of the entire integration process.

Both Arendt's actions and pragmatic constructivism's integration processes (of facts, logic, values, communication) interpreted with respect to the temporal medium, are about creating something new. Language, communication, speech, disclosure, and narratives in time are intrinsic to both. Arendt's concept of natality now becomes useful in describing the integration process: note that it is this ability to create which is the reason we use the concept 'actor'. Freedom, which follows logically from natality, and identity are substantive additions in attempts to conceptualise integration, and it is worth noting at this stage that Arendt's description of identity has broad parallels with Ricoeur's idea of a narrative identity (Ricoeur, 1986). Thus far, in our thought and research on the theory of reality, we have not yet incorporated the concept of identity. Inclusion of identity, and narrative identity, allows us to explore what and who these actors are? How do we disclose what and who we are? We do so in a narrative.

Returning to the temporal medium, we see how Arendt positions actions, and the characteristics of actions, plurality, in time through promise and forgiveness. Actors have values, they have intentions, they like some things, they dislike others, and there are things they would like to change. They promise their fellow actors something. What is novel here is Arendt's emphasis on forgiveness. The concept of promise clearly has correspondences to the dimensions logic and values. Logic and values are concerned with future possibilities; without possibilities we would not be able to make, or keep, promises. Similarly with forgiveness which points to the dimensions facts and values. Without facts about past deeds we could not forgive; without values we could not forgive. By identifying and incorporating Arendt's insights we can now attempt entry, through communication, to the integration process; we can get to know how facts function, how logics operate, and how values are central to human life. Arendt also informs us of the importance of identity and the social, an actor's relation to the other, in a much more explicit manner than in the theory of reality.

5 Conclusions

In the introduction, I noted that the pragmatic constructivist, or actor reality, approach provides us with a social science theory, the theory of reality, and its associated method, the conceptualising method. We also noted that a substantive description of the actual process of integrating the four dimensions of reality remains underdeveloped. Integrating these dimensions into a workable reality is a process, it is a social process, hence the centrality of language, and it takes place in time. I have argued here for pragmatically incorporating some key insights from Hannah Arendt's (1958) approach to action, deemed always to be social, within an actor's active life, *vita activa*. We have identified, albeit capable of further development, some useful social theoretical correspondences between Arendt's conceptualisation of action in *The Human Condition* (1958) and key attributes and dimensions of the theory of reality which, we claim, could possibly guide an entry into the 'how' of this elusive integration process and which is capable of satisfying Nørreklit's (2004) requirements on status noted above. Two key concepts, however, demand some further attention, identity and the social; this is the task of future projects.

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