

Understanding the Life-world (*Lebenswelt*) as the world of Action and Common Humanity

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Abstract

The life-world is a pre-reflective everyday world. It is a pre-scientific world that is open to interpretation, meaning construction and manipulation. As a social, historical and cultural world, it is loaded with interpretations and value perspectives which provide the bases for the flow of scientific views in sustained attempts by humans to understand it. This paper argues that the primordial life-world is empty of content. It derives its content and meaning from human action. It is this human action that accords the life-world the social, political and cultural character. Within this structural frame, human beings interpret, communicate and socially engage in multiple communal spheres. This makes the life-world the world of common humanity and interpretation. Therefore, a theory of philosophic hermeneutics is essential in our understanding of the life-world.

Key Words: Life-World, Action, Humanity, Meaning, Hermeneutics

Introduction

With the coming on the scientific scene of Galileo and Newton, natural science has made remarkable development setting up the model for all scientific researches. The pursuit of knowledge in natural science stems from the conviction that its object of inquiry is the nature in objective reality. The objectivity of nature signifies that it is free from the impact of human being. This objectivity of nature belongs to the subject matter of natural sciences. The elevation of objectivity in the natural sciences against subjectivity

which is not necessarily relativity is the grounding for Husserl's question of the possibility of the science of the life-world.

The life-world (*Lebenswelt*) which means the world of common experience was overridden by the objectively true and valid universe of science which according to Western scientific thought passes for reality. Aron Gurwitsch notes that “no objective entity, objective in the sense of science is, in principle, accessible to direct and immediate experience in the proper sense of the term. The *Lebenswelt* does present itself, actually or virtually, in such experience, perceptual experience as well as its derivative forms like memory, representation, imagination etc.¹ So, *Lebenswelt* becomes the foundation upon which the universe of objective science is built. This foundation (Life-world) is the evidence of common experience, the real perceptual world which is the scene and general background of all human activities and constitutes the bases for theoretical and scientific explanations. This perceptual world (*Lebenswelt*) becomes the paramount reality where several spheres of life with distinctive characteristics take place. It is a self-evident pre-scientific world that is taken for granted. It is the spatio-temporal and intersubjective world where all human beings live and construct meaning and history through their actions including objective scientific theories. I argue in this paper that objective science is dependent on the life-world which is the paramount reality upon which all human actions rest. The life-world is a social, historical and cultural world that is loaded with various interpretations and value perspectives which provide the bases for the flow of scientific views in sustained attempts by humans to understand the world. The paramount reality, the life-world derives its content and meaning from human action. It is because of this human action within the spatio-temporal framework that the life-world is accorded the social, political,

¹. Aron Gurwitsch. *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973) Vol.II: Studies in Phenomenology and Psychology*. Edited by F. Kersten. (New York: Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2009), Pg. 470.

scientific and cultural character. I further argue that because the life-world is social and intersubjective in nature it can be referred to as the world of common humanity and also present for all humans to interpret. Therefore, a theory of philosophic hermeneutics is required in our understanding of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*).

Perspectives on the Life-World (*Lebenswelt*)

In the introduction to this work I have established that the life-world (*Lebenswelt*) is a pre-scientific world of immediate experience that is common to all of us, self-evident and taken for-granted. It is a world which provides the foundation for any scientific experience. Husserl's phenomenology of a priori life-world opposes the objective scientific view of the world which became a dominant thinking in Europe after Galileo and Newton. In opposing the objective scientific view of the world, Husserl emphasizes that the life-world is the meaning fundament that scientific thinking presupposes and the horizon in which scientific thinking takes place.

Husserl notes in the *Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology* that science is a human spiritual accomplishment which presupposes as its point of departure, both historically and for each new student, the intuitive surrounding world of life, pregiven as existing for all in common.² This world of common experience is given to us all but in different particularities. One way it is given to us is in the constitution of the world of scientific objectivity according to the theoretical interest of the scientists. To emphasize this Zelic notes that scientific inquiry conceives of and constitutes that world as the sum-total of objects that are accessible to experiential cognition and theoretical thinking, i.e, either as objects of matters of fact constituted through

² Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Science sand Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*. Edited by David Car (Evanston: north-Western University Press, 1970), Pg. 121.

the methods of the natural sciences or essences constituted through the phenomenological method of eidetic variation.”³ It then means that inquiries in objective science are simply inquiries within the realm of the life-world. Husserl rejected the objective and scientific view of the world and holds that the life-world is the meaning-fundament that scientific thinking presupposes. It is also the horizon and spring base of scientific thinking. It is a universal field of establishable facts.

Husserl is of the opinion that the life-world provides evidence for objective science and therefore, related to evidence. Husserl avers that the life-world is the realm of original self-evidences.⁴ The evidence of objective science is grounded in the evidence of the life-world. Husserl succinctly captures it in *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy* thus:

Science as the totality of predicative theory, of the system of statements meant logically as propositions in themselves, truths in themselves, and in this sense logically joined is rooted, grounded in the life-world, in the original self-evidences belonging to it. Thanks to this rootedness objective science has a constant reference of meaning to the world, in which we always live, even as scientists and also in the total community of scientists a reference, that is, to the general life-world.⁵

³. Tomislav Zelic. *On the Phenomenology of the Life-World*. <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/29522957>; (2009), 416. Accessed 23/09/2022.

⁴. Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Pg. 127.

⁵. Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Pg. 130.

It then means that we have two different realms, that is, the life-world and the objective scientific world which though related are different from each other. Even in this relatedness, they are not equi-primordial. The knowledge of the objective scientific world is grounded in the self-evidence of the life-world. The life-world is pre-given to the scientific worker or the working community as a ground⁶ according to Husserl. Supporting this view Kevin Hemberg argues “one might say science constructs whereas the life-world is the source of the materials with which science constructs, science is concerned with abstractions whereas the life-world is concrete; science interprets what is given whereas the life-world is the realm of the given”.⁷ This life-world thus, is given to us all as a prescientific world of common experience and the grounding of all human actions. This everyday surrounding world of life is the ground and horizon of all human experiences, activities and practices, including natural or objective science.

Husserl's life-worldly phenomenology seems to be occupied with a movement between the two notions of active constitution to a more passive one. The vacillation of Husserl's notions of the life-world between a pre-given reality and the intersubjective world of action was to show that the pre-given world is the foundation of everyday life itself. It then means that the pre-given life-world is the horizon or framework of all meaningful inductions.

Aron Gurwitsch developed interest in the study of the life-world through his reading of Husserl's *Lebenswelt*. Husserl had considered the life-world as pre-given reality, the foundation of all human activities including objective science of Galileo and Newton which Husserl considers as the source of the crisis of European sciences. Gurwitsch notes that “under the impact of

⁶. Edmund Husserl. *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Pg. 130.

⁷. Kevin Hemberg. *Husserl's Phenomenology, Knowledge, Objectivity and Others* (New York: Continuum Intercontinental Publishing Group, 2006), Pg. 74.

modern science as inaugurated by Galileo, the *Lebenswelt* i.e., the world of common experience has been superseded by the objectively true and valid universe of science which, in the thinking of modern Western man, passes for reality.⁸ The elevation of modern objective sciences beyond the science of the life-world constitutes a crisis as it is evident in Husserl's thoughts. Gurwitsch looks at the life-world as the fundamental stratum of all human activities and considers it a paramount reality. It is the perceptual world in which we live our existence. He notes that by perceptual world we mean that order of existence which, in pre-theoretical or atheoretical attitude of every day experience, unquestionably counts for every one of us as external reality.⁹ Human existence in general is within the context of the perceptual world, the grounding of conscious life and the fundament of the totality of human actions. Arguing for the primacy of the life-world (*Lebenswelt*), Gurwitsch observes that:

The construction of the universe of science involves, as a mental accomplishment, certain specific operations, especially that of idealization. Obviously, idealization presupposes materials to be idealized. By virtue of its intrinsic sense as a superstructure, the universe of science requires a foundation upon which it rests and upon which it is constructed. This foundation is no other than the *Lebenswelt*.¹⁰

This life-world which is the evidence of common experience is a pre-scientific reality upon which all other realities rest. Since the

^{8.} Aron Gurwitsch. *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973) Vol.II*, Pg. 470.

^{9.} Aron Gurwitsch. *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973) Vol.III, The Field of Consciousness: Theme, Thematic Field, and Marginal Consciousness*. Edited by Richard M. Zaner and Lester Embree (New York: Springer Science + Business Media B.V. 2010), Pg. 372.

^{10.} Aron Gurwitsch. *The Collected Works of Aron Gurwitsch (1901-1973) Vol.II*, Pg. 470.

life-world is the fundament, all our life histories depend on it. It is the horizon of the totality of all human actions and meaning construction. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is that of the world. Humans perceive the world in varied perspectives which amounts to seeming existence of different perceptive worlds of individuals. He is of the opinion that these private worlds are worlds only for their titulars; they are not the world. The sole world, that is, the unique world, would be a *koivos kosmos*, (common world) and our perceptions do not open upon it.¹¹ The real world is common to us all but our perception of the world depends on which visual field is clear to our vision. It means that perception itself is always incomplete because I cannot observe the perceptual object from all sides but only from my standpoint. This is always a constraint on my perception of things in the world. Laurie Spurling observes that “perception is incomplete – I can never see an object from all sides or angles at once, so that its fullness always eludes me, and hence it is subject to endless exploration.”¹² This means that I, the perceiving subject can still access the hidden horizons of the world that are potentially open to my gaze. But what is important to note here is that all objects presuppose a pre-given life-world which is the grounding of all possible objects and their interrelations.

According to Merleau-Ponty, “the world is the 'horizon of all horizons', the style of all possible styles, the field incorporating all potential fields, the indeterminacy which is the ground of all determinacy, in short 'that which guarantees for my experiences a given, not a willed, unity underlying all the disruptions of my personal and historical life.’¹³ It means that there is a world in general that is not limited by particularities. It is the background of

^{11.} Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *The Visible and the Invisible*. Edited by Claude Lefort (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), Pg. 10.

^{12.} Laurie Spurling. *Phenomenology of the Social World: The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and its relation to the Social Sciences Volume II* (USA: Routledge, 2014), Pg. 31.

^{13.} Maurice Merleau-Ponty. *Phenomenology of Perception*, translated by C. Smith (London: Heinemann, 1973), Pg. 330.

all possible experiences.

One notable impact Merleau-Ponty made in the study of the life-world is by segmentation of the world into three worlds. This according to Laurie is the pre-objective world proper, where consciousness moves freely from figure to ground or from ground to figure, without establishing permanent figures or grounds. Perception at this level is simple openness to the world, and is pre-personal. The second world is the *Lebenswelt*, where the primordial figure-ground structure is supplemented by a visual figure, the definite expectation of a figure emerging from a ground. Here perception becomes fully intersubjective, interpenetrating with language, so that my perceptions share in commonly held assumptions and expectations about the perceptual world. Finally, we arrive at the scientific world, which is in fact not a perceptual world at all, but the apprehension of fully determinate figures in isolation from their perceptual ground, and where the characteristics of figures are deduced from scientific premises.¹⁴

What is not clear in the classification of these three kinds of perceptual world is the real distinction between the pre-objective world and the *Lebenswelt*. The first two worlds appear intertwined such that they cannot actually be told apart since the *Lebenswelt* possess all the characteristics of the pre-objective world, it is in itself a pre-objective and pre-scientific world which is the foundation of objective science and all other human activities. The fact that the life-world has such a character is attested to by Husserl, Gurwitsch and Merleau-Ponty. They also agree that the life-world is the world that is common to us all, an intersubjective world of all human actions and meaning construction.

The Life-World as an Intersubjective World of Human Action

We have established the life-world as the frame within which we

^{14.} Laurie Spurling. *Phenomenology of the Social World: The Philosophy of Merleau-Ponty and its relation to the Social Sciences*, Pg. 32.

lead our human existence and the spatio-temporal environment where we encounter our fellow human beings. This life-world is that of natural attitude, taken for-granted world in which we encounter our fellowmen, being confronted by objects in the world in the similar way others do. The reality of the life-world is one of the unquestioned certainties of common experience. It is real in that it is a world of our common experience and intersubjective world. We do not just live in the same world with others, rather we live, function and operate in it together within a common life-worldly environment with a certain degree of mutuality with interlocked actions.

The life-world in Alfred Schultz's thoughts is an intersubjective world of human action and culture. It is the basis of meaning of all sciences including natural sciences and philosophy. Since the life-world is the fundament of meaning, all human actions are founded on life-worldly experience. Our encounter with the life-world in our naïve existence is already as constituted. It is there before our birth and we only intervene in the life-world by our actions. Schutz is of the view that "the life-world is an intersubjective world of action and culture from the outset. It is intersubjective because we live in it as men among other men, bound to them through common influence and work, understanding others and being an object of understanding by others. It is a world of culture because, from the outset, the life-world is a universe of significations to us i.e a framework of meaning which we have to interpret, and of interrelations of meaning which we institute only through our action in this life-world".¹⁵ When the life-world is understood as the framework of human interaction, culture, meaning constitution, action and intersubjectivity in general, it becomes also the basis of historicity. It is the grounding of historicity for the fact of its pre-given character that refers back to one's own activity and activities of others who have existed before whose actions on

^{15.} Alfred Schutz. *Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality*. Edited by Maurice Natanson (The Hague: Martinus Nishoff, 1962), Pg. 133.

the world become object of interpretation. The nature and character of man places him at the centre of this life-world. In line with this Schutz notes that I, the human being born into this world and naively living in it, I am the center of this world in the historical situation of my actual Now and Here, I am the null point toward which its constitution is oriented. That is to say that this world has significance and meaning first of all by me and for me.¹⁶ The implication of this assertion by Schutz is that the life-world itself though pre-given and primordial has no content of its own. It is just there and provides the grounding for human action and meaning constitution. It can then be argued that objective science is the product of human action on the life-world through the materials it provides. It means that objective science cannot be equi-primordial with the life-world.

This life-world is for Schutz a social and intersubjective world which he calls "the world of daily life."¹⁷ The world of daily life provides humans with the stock of knowledge at hand. This stock of knowledge according to Gloria Maria Vargas," accounts for the understanding and building of the life-world and supports deliberate organized meanings proper to the administration and implementation of day by day living... It is obviously comprehended, ordered and transmitted through language and there wise, contained in language."¹⁸ This life-world is the world of daily life which the wide-awake grown-up man who acts in it and upon it amidst his fellow-men experiences within the natural attitude as a reality.¹⁹ This world of natural attitude is a reality that provides humans with the stock of knowledge at hand which function as a scheme of reference. Schutz explicitly states that "the

^{16.} Alfred Schutz. *Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality*, Pg. 133.

^{17.} Alfred Schutz. *Collected Papers 1: The Problem of Social Reality*, Pg. 208.

^{18.} Gloria Maria Vargas. *Alfred Schutz's life-world and intersubjectivity* (Brasilia: University of Brasilia, 2020). *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 8, 417-425. doi:10.4236/jss.2020.812033.

^{19.} Schutz, *Collected papers 1. The Problem of social Reality*, Pg. 208.

World of daily life shall mean the intersubjective world which existed long before my birth, experienced and interpreted by others, our predecessors, as an organized world.²⁰ The experience and interpretation of the life-world constitutes the stock of human actions in and upon the world. These human actions are motivated behaviour aimed at meaning constitution within the social and intersubjective world. The world is social because others exist in it and also act upon it – sharing a common sector of space and time with me. So, my social acts within the life-world are oriented to the world and others. Schutz notes that my social act, then, is oriented not only to the physical existence of this alter ego but to the other's act which I expect to provoke my own action. I can therefore, say that the other's reaction is the in-order-to motive of my own act. The prototype of all social relationship is an intersubjective connection of motives.²¹ The life-world which is for Schutz a social world is an intersubjective world of actions. I live in the social world as one connected with others through manifold relations of actions and reactions. This makes the social world an object to be interpreted as meaningful. In line with this Helmut Wagner writes “from the onset, the life-world occurs to us as a public world and an intersubjective world. In it, we not only encounter others as our fellow-human beings, taking their existence for granted as much as that of the life-world in general.²² It is the spatio-temporal world of action and meaning construction for all human beings.

Concluding Remarks

In our consideration of the phenomenology of the life-world it has been uncovered that the life-world is a pre-reflective, pre-scientific world that is open to interpretation, manipulation and meaning

^{20.} Schutz, *Collected papers I. The Problem of social Reality*, Pg. 208.

^{21.} Alfred Schutz. *Collected Papers II: Studies in Social Theory*. Edited by Arvid Brodersen (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1976), Pg. 14.

^{22.} Helmut R. Wagner. *Phenomenology of Consciousness and Sociology of the Life-world: An Introductory Study* (Alberta: University of Alberta Press, 1983), Pg. 110.

construction. It is a social, historical and cultural world of intersubjective human actions loaded with various interpretations and value perspectives. The fact that the Life-world is the foundation of all human actions makes it an intersubjective and a common world. The life-world is revealed as the spatio-temporal horizon where all human beings live and act. In intersubjective human actions life-histories of all persons take place. These spatial surroundings are the spheres of all life activities where human beings communicate with each other either directly or indirectly. The life-world is therefore, the grounding of all life histories including the spatial surroundings in which all those life-histories take place.

The total gamut of the argument in this paper is to establish the life-world as the fundament of all human actions including that of objective science. As a foundation, no life-history is equi-primordial with the life-world. It precedes and underlies all human actions. However, what is of equal importance and worthy of note is that, though the life-world is the grounding of all human activities, it is in itself empty of meaning. It derives its meaning and content from human activities in and upon it. With this kind of nature, the life-world needs a theory of philosophic hermeneutics for proper conceptualization and understanding. This hermeneutics reveals the structure of the life-world as the spatio-temporal world of all humans that is pre-given, pre-theoretical, pre-scientific and the fundament of all human actions. It is the world that is from the start intersubjective and the foundation of our common humanity.

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