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Scattered Remarks on the Concept of Engagement:

A Socio-Philosophical Approach

Reflecting on the concept of engagement constitutes a paradoxical task: it requires the person undertaking this contemplative endeavour to step back from, while engaging in and with, the very process of engagement. In a socio-philosophical sense, 'engagement' can be defined as a form of active, purposive, and meaning-laden involvement in the world in general or in specific aspects of the world in particular. Engagement is so fundamental to our everyday immersion in the world that even the aim of objectifying it is achievable only by realizing it. Put differently, the act of theorizing engagement presupposes the possibility of practising engagement. Any attempt to develop a theory of engagement is inconceivable without the practice of engaging in and with engagement. We cannot *not* engage in and with engagement because, as immersive beings, we can relate to the world only insofar as we engage in and with it. Instead of getting caught up in the self-referential exercise of providing tautological definitions, however, let us consider some of the main ways in which we are able to make sense of the socio-ontological significance of engagement by grappling with its multifaceted omnipresence in human life.

I.

One may classify 'engagements' in terms of their *socio-ontological referentiality*. Three *types of engagement* that are, respectively, embedded in three *realms of existence* are of paramount importance:

(a) *Objective engagements are embedded in realms of objectivity.*

(b) *Normative engagements are embedded in realms of normativity.*

(c) *Subjective engagements are embedded in realms of subjectivity.*

In other words, human beings act upon, make sense of, and construct the world on the basis of *objective*, *normative*, and *subjective* engagements.

(a) As physical beings, we are immersed in *objectivity*. As such, we engage with different elements of the natural world. Our bodies have a finite life span, are composed of various organic constituents, and cannot be dissociated from the environment in which they are materially situated.

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(b) As social beings, we are immersed in *normativity*. As such, we engage with different elements of the cultural world. We possess species-constitutive faculties that have permitted us to build a human universe, which comprises a series of empowering resources – notably those derived from our productive, reflexive, socio-constructive, desiderative, and experiential capacities.

(c) As self-conscious beings, we are immersed in *subjectivity*. As such, we engage with different elements of our personal world. As individuals capable of developing a sense of identity, we are placed not only in an external world of objectivity and normativity but also in an inner world of subjectivity, to which we have privileged access. Both rationally and emotionally constituted processes of cognition – which are articulated in thoughts and reflections, as well as in moods and sensations – are part and parcel of what it means to be human.

In short, we are constantly immersed in spheres of (a) *objectivity*, (b) *normativity*, and (c) *subjectivity*. The existential centrality of this tripartite structure of the human being-in-the-world manifests itself on various levels, especially in relation to five anthropological foundations:

- *Labour:* As working beings, we are (a) *purposive*, (b) *cooperative*, and (c) *creative* entities.
- *Language:* As linguistic beings, we are (a) *assertive*, (b) *regulative*, and (c) *expressive* entities.
- *Culture:* As cultural beings, we are (a) *connective*, (b) *collective*, and (c) *individuative* entities.
- *Desire:* As longing beings, we are (a) *intentional*, (b) *coprojective*, and (c) *imaginative* entities.
- *Experience:* As experiential beings, we are (a) *objective*, (b) *normative*, and (c) *subjective* entities.

Irrespective of whether we engage in and with the world through labour, language, culture, desire, or experience (or through any other foundational components inherent in our species-distinctive condition), human life forms have always been, and will always remain, polycentric realms of existence that are objectively, normatively, and subjectively constituted.

II.

One may classify 'engagements' in terms of their *socio-ontological conditioning*. Three *types of engagement* that are, respectively, embedded in three *types of social conditions* are of paramount importance:

(a) *Behavioural engagements are embedded in behavioural conditions.*

(b) *Ideological engagements are embedded in ideological conditions.*

(c) *Institutional engagements are embedded in institutional conditions.*

In other words, human beings act upon, make sense of, and construct the world on the basis of *behavioural*, *ideological*, and *institutional* engagements.

(a) We engage in and with the world by virtue of different *actions*, which enable us to shape particular aspects of our existence. These actions may be categorized on several levels: individual or collective, conscious or unconscious, spontaneous or habitualized, reflexive or intuitive – to mention only a few. It is by virtue of our actions that we convert ourselves into the protagonists of our lives.

(b) We engage in and with the world by virtue of different *worldviews*, which permit us to make ideologically shaped – and, hence, perspective- and value-laden – assumptions about specific aspects of our existence. These worldviews constitute ideologies, in the sense that they reflect our interest-laden positioning in social reality, which is stratified in terms of key sociological factors – such as status, class, ethnicity, gender, age, and ability.

(c) We engage in and with the world by virtue of different *institutions*, which allow us to generate relatively solidified – and, hence, more or less predictable – patterns of social imaginaries and practices. These institutions – regardless of whether they are primarily economic, political, cultural, artistic, linguistic, sexual, educational, judicial, military, religious, scientific, or otherwise – make us relate to the world in a socially organized and symbolically codified manner.

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III.

One may classify 'engagements' in terms of their *socio-ontological situatedness*. Three *types of engagement* that are, respectively, embedded in three *types of social fields* are of paramount importance:

(a) *Foundational engagements are embedded in foundational fields.*

(b) *Contingent engagements are embedded in contingent fields.*

(c) *Ephemeral engagements are embedded in ephemeral fields.*

In other words, human beings act upon, make sense of, and construct the world on the basis of *foundational*, *contingent*, and *ephemeral* engagements.

(a) *Foundational fields* constitute civilizational ensembles of relationally structured conditions the existence of which is *necessary* for the emergence of social order. *Foundational engagements* constitute

activities that take place within, and unfold in relation to, founda-
tional fields. These engagements are equally *necessary* for the emer-
gence of social order. Unless human actors undertake foundational
engagements, social order collapses or does not come into existence
in the first place. Obvious examples of both foundational fields and
foundational engagements are those that are primarily (i) *economic*,
(ii) *political*, (iii) *cultural*, (iv) *artistic*, (v) *linguistic*, and/or (vi) *sex-
ual*. No society can exist without (i) some degree of division of labour,
(ii) small-scale and large-scale modes of value-guided action coor-
dination, (iii) various forms of habitualization, (iv) diversified realms
of aesthetic expression, (v) everyday spaces of communicative inter-
action, and (vi) subtle or overt methods of regulating sexuality.

(b) *Contingent fields* constitute societal ensembles of relationally struc-
tured conditions the existence of which is *possible* within, but not
necessary for, the emergence of social order. *Contingent engagements*
constitute activities that take place within, and unfold in relation
to, contingent fields. These engagements are equally *possible*
within, but not necessary for, the emergence of social order. By
undertaking contingent engagements, human actors may shape, as
well as experience, social order in a meaningful fashion. Yet, in
principle, the latter can exist and persist without the former. There
are abundant examples of both contingent fields and contingent
engagements, such as those that are primarily (i) *judicial*, (ii) *mili-
tary*, (iii) *religious*, (iv) *scientific*, (v) *academic*, and/or (vi) *journalistic*.
Society may be organized more or less efficiently with, but can – at
least in principle – exist without, (i) legal arrangements, (ii) armed
forces, (iii) spiritual practices and sacred institutions, (iv) systematic
forms of knowledge production, (v) disciplinary divisions of cognition,
and (vi) media industries.

(c) *Ephemeral fields* constitute interactional ensembles of relationally
structured conditions the existence of which is largely *irrelevant* to
the emergence of social order, although they tend to be far from
meaningless to the actors by whose performances they are brought
into being. *Ephemeral engagements* constitute activities that take place
within, and unfold in relation to, ephemeral fields. These engage-
ments are also largely *irrelevant* to the emergence of social order.
Granted, by undertaking ephemeral engagements, human actors may
contribute to the quotidian production and reproduction of social
order in significant ways. Yet, in principle, the latter can exist and
persist without the former. Given the diversity of everyday involve-
ments in the world, one may identify a countless number of examples
demonstrating the prevalence of both ephemeral fields and ephemeral
engagements, which are, by definition, relatively short-lived and

which, in terms of their typological specificity, are not indispensable to the reproduction, let alone to the emergence, of social order.

Summary

One may classify 'engagements' in terms of a *combination of socio-ontological variables*, notably in relation to the aforementioned dimensions. Numerous *types of engagement* that *intersect* with different *socio-ontological variables* are vital to human existence. As such, they can be constituted by an assemblage of the following – interconnected – modes of being-in-the-world:

    I. objective, normative, and/or subjective;

    II. behavioural, ideological, and/or institutional;

    III. foundational, contingent, and/or ephemeral.

More specifically, these crucial modes of being-in-the-world have significant implications for a critical understanding of human existence:

    I. Human beings act upon, make sense of, and construct the world on the basis of *objective*, *normative*, and *subjective* engagements. The domains of objectivity, normativity, and subjectivity constitute the principal spheres in and through which human actors establish a materially constituted, symbolically mediated, and personally assimilated relation to the world.

    II. Human beings act upon, make sense of, and construct the world on the basis of *behavioural*, *ideological*, and *institutional* engagements. It is by virtue of their interactional, conceptual, and organizational capacities that human creatures engage in and with the world in a performative, reflective, and coordinative manner.

    III. Human beings act upon, make sense of, and construct the world on the basis of *foundational*, *contingent*, and *ephemeral* engagements. The first type is necessary for, the second type is possible within, and the third type is irrelevant to the emergence of social order.

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As illustrated above, the task of shedding light on key forms of human engagement in and with the world is a complex affair. When navigating our way through the universe, we pursue a large variety of conceptually distinguishable, yet ontologically intertwined, forms of engagement. As immersive entities, we cannot live in the world unless we act upon, make sense of, and construct it. We cannot find our place in the world unless we engage in and with the multiple ways in which reality presents itself, and poses an existential challenge, to us on a daily basis. The challenge of engaging in and with the challenge of engagement remains, and will always remain, a challenge based on engagement.