

Action, Life, and Learning



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It is my understanding that the greatest contribution made by Ludwig von Mises to economic theory is his formulation of the study of human action, or *praxeology*, and the subsequent discovery of the *action axiom*. Paraphrased, the action axiom states that people “purposefully utilize means over a period of time in order to achieved desired ends.” Those ends, according to Mises, are always of the nature to remove “felt uneasiness.” If we act to remove felt uneasiness, then what does that say about the purpose of life, and the inevitability of learning?

Life

I don’t know that the action axiom applies to only humans (or if Mises ever said as much). All life, plants, animals, insects, and microscopic, of different degrees of complexity and intelligence, seem to “purposefully utilize means over a period of time in order to achieve” the removal of felt uneasiness. While for most other species action is instinctual, it is no less purposeful (and often more rational than actions performed by humans). Uneasiness is relative to the life experiencing it, but since life is a constant battle for survival, we could accurately say that all life feels uneasy when their needs and wants are unmet, which is what occurs without action. Therefore, all life acts to remove the felt uneasiness of death.

If the actions of all life is purposed to remove felt uneasiness, then it seems that we may conclude that the purpose of life is the prevention of death. It stands to both reason and experience that death, as something undesirable to life and fought against at every turn, is sadness. Sadness is the antithesis of happiness, as death is the antithesis of life. It seems that we would be correct to say that action is purposed to remove felt uneasiness, or to remove the prospect of death, or to remove the prospect of sadness, or in other words, to create happiness. A better conclusion then the one previously made would be that *the purpose of life is to be happy*.

Learning

As much a struggle as life is, for intelligent rational creatures like humans happiness is a close runner-up. Survival is important, and goes a long way toward happiness, but not all uneasiness felt by humans is a matter of life and death. We not only need to survive, we want to thrive. But what that means can be very different for different people. Our intelligent and rational minds can't seem to determine what happiness is. We must constantly try new things in order to experience how they make us feel. This is learning. We learn to do something that gives us temporary good feelings, but it soon fades and we must learn something else. Life, whose purpose is happiness, is a constant educational experience because what causes true happiness must be discovered by each and every person. It is more often than not a lifetime endeavor.

It has been determined by others wiser than myself, and I concur, that happiness is the only end in and of itself. Every other end doubles as a means toward the end that is happiness. Mises shows us that every end is a removal of felt uneasiness. That the ultimate end, the ultimate removal of felt uneasiness, is happiness, is instructive. If action is the "purposeful utilization of means over a period of time in order to achieve," ultimately, happiness, and happiness must be discovered individually, then action is learning. Thus, learning is inevitable to living.

Final Thoughts

All of the above fascinates me both as a proponent of economic freedom and as a parent. The idea that children need schooling in order to learn is clearly preposterous. They can't help but learn in everything they do, every experience they have. Our children, having just begun their lives, are learning greater and greater things every waking moment. My job as a parent is to facilitate the inevitable, to be an aide in their pursuit of the unknown. I, too, can't help but learn new things in everything I do. We each are in the process of discovering what happiness is. That we are doing it together as an unschooling family makes for some pretty amazing moments, if we take the time to live them.

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