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# Rethinking Social Action.

## Core Values in Practice

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### Homo Pulsator, or an Outline for a Phenomenology of Beating

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## Homo Pulsator, or an Outline for a Phenomenology of Beating

Ivan IVLAMPPIE<sup>1</sup>

### *Abstract*

*This paper aims to investigate a behaviour which, along with many others, is decisive in understanding human nature. Together with *zoon politicon*, *homo homini lupus*, *homo faber* and *homo ludens*, which describe trajectories of the human destiny, *homo pulsator* or the human being beating or bullying another human may be equally invoked as relevant in this respect. In this study, we provide a phenomenological description of this strange human behaviour; this is not a sociological perspective (which can allow us to analyse the phenomenon only as a form of anomie), nor a psychological or anthropological approach (directions that open up an interpretation starting from the decisive thesis of our aggressive nature), but a cultural perspective: beating as a cultural institution. What does this perspective mean? To understand this behaviour as one consciously set. From the perspective of Aristotelian determinism, the phenomenology of beating cannot be understood without its final causality. What is the purpose of school beating, as encouraged by the great humanist thinkers? Or of beating as a form of public punishment or as a means of torture? By asking and answering such questions, we sketch the main lines of the phenomenology of this bizarre behaviour of human beings.*

**Keywords:** homo pulsator; human behaviour; institution; education; punishment.

### 1. Introduction

The human universe is also a universe of beating. *To be, to have* and *to do* seem to be, in light of philosophy, decisive verbs in the understanding of

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human nature. *To beat, to thrash* are actions that go under the notion of *to do*, turning its abstractness into concrete. Obviously, they are not the sole actions, the series is innumerable and, in default of free space, let us give just a few examples in order to illustrate this aspect: *to sketch, to break, to eat, to think, to run, to work, to forge, to learn, to compete, to die*, etc. Which one of these verbs dares to take precedence, to break the line and become its leader? Moreover, which one of these verbs dares to raise to the heights of abstraction and confront the imperial parent *to do*? Let us further imagine that, following this confrontation, the humble element in the series can even usurp its throne.

We shall provide a single example from the history of philosophy. It is the victory of the verb *to think*. I think, therefore I am. Thus, not only has been the abstract monarch *to do* dethroned, but the arrogance of the humble verb *to think* raised it apotheotically to the celestial sphere. From these high skies, where *to think* becomes synonymous with *to be*, our humble verb, escaped from the innumerable series of verbs led forth by the imperial *to do*, has also subjected *to have*: I think, therefore I am is the first acquired evidence, the first axiom appropriated by the spirit, the first valuable possession of the act of thinking. Here is how a verb which came out from the action verbs' convoy ended up providing an image of the essence of human nature for a long period of time in the history of Europe.

## 2. Theoretical Background

What happened in the verbs' fight for supremacy is not singular in the axiological experience of man. An argument in this respect is the dialectics of hierophanies, in the understanding given to it by Mircea Eliade in *Treatise on the History of Religions*. The mechanism that the philosopher of religions identifies in the functioning of the sacred for all peoples is simple: a community chooses – for different reasons, irrelevant in this context – a hierophanic object and, after this selection, it distances from its surroundings. This mechanism triggers an ontological break in the natural series of things.

Following this pattern, we can understand that, from the series of human behaviours, not the abstract ones, such as *to be, to have* and *to do*, but from the “sensitive” human behaviours, one can detach and separate one, granting it privileged status. What would be the reason for such an ontological break? A simple speculative exercise, for the philosophic art's sake or a scholastic unrest? Not at all. The reason for this break is explanatory. What we attempt to explain is a social-historical form of human

manifestation and its cultural reflections. Also, at the philosophical level, this perspective opens the path to problematizing a cultural phenomenon that is deeply ingrained in the structure of human nature.

### 3. Argument of the paper

What would make the daily, spontaneous beating or the officialised one stand in front of many other remarkable behaviours by which poets and philosophers have tried to emphasise our qualities, either noble or unique or different from the animal world? What could this bully profile add to the general picture of man? Is it not decisive enough that man, by nature, is sociable in his aspiration towards the good and justice (Aristotle), that he is a sensible being (Descartes), that, unlike the animals, he is the only one who makes tools (Bergson), and that his entire existence is placed under the sign of the play (Huizinga)? How many aristocratic qualities! Only Plautus and, walking in his steps, Hobbes, with their *homo homini lupus*, disrupt the symphony of this picture [1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6]. Just as they hesitated to notice and describe stupidity, the great thinkers of humanity, with very small exceptions, kept silent in what *homo pulsator* was concerned. It would have been a dark spot on our noble image and not at all educational to expose it publicly, either for the present or the next generation.

### 4. Arguments to support the thesis

This study, shyness aside, attempts to open up a different perspective in understanding and explaining human nature, although it focuses on the action of beating, which the present civilisation is trying to invalidate and eliminate at any cost. How we define beating? Is it in a temporary or in an enduring, indefinite relation to man? What are its forms? – These are but a few questions we are trying to answer.

Let us try the simplest experiment. We do not need an experimental laboratory, because our imagination can prove the result with the force of mathematical evidence. And this can be explained by the fact that we once were either its protagonists or simple witnesses, or by the fact that it is inscribed in our hereditary structure, it is, as a philosopher would put it, *a priori* a fact of life. As Huizinga argues, playing is an innate act, so let us leave, in our imaginary experiment, a few children unsupervised in a room or in the park, with their toys. In the form of a Cartesian axiom, we can establish beyond any possibility of a doubt that, after a certain period of

time, when we look at those children, we will witness their play degenerating into beating, shouting, and tears.

We can anticipate an objection: it is about the reaction of children, people who have not reached maturity, who have not completed the education cycle. For answering to this objection, we must resort to the help of the wisest man on the face of the Earth, Socrates. In the homeland of philosophy, Socrates used to discuss ethical issues in stores and in the agora, and as one of his biographers states, “Oftentimes, because of his vehement arguing, people would start punching him or pulling his hair” [7 p99]. But let’s not forget that, around the same period, the King of Kings, Xerxes, punished the sea with three hundred whip lashes.

Therefore, beating is not just children’s play, but a serious action, experienced or induced by the most famous men of history. As Aristotle eternalised Socrates in his famous example of syllogism, the sophists eternalise the act of beating: “this dog is a father; this dog is yours; therefore, this dog is your father. You beat the dog, therefore you beat your father.” In India, the Brahmins even recommended that one should beat a dog when one finds one, as the dog is the reincarnation of an unworthy soul.

## 5. Arguments to argue the thesis

This is, then, yet another axiom, that man is a beating being, and we aim to demonstrate that it must earn its rights to stand near similar axioms: man is a thinking reed, the measure of all things, political animal, religious being, etc. Because of spatial constraints, as already mentioned, the following pages will only sketch a phenomenology of beating, while being aware that the topic could be approached as “a total social fact” (Marcel Mauss) [8].

We must state from the beginning that we make a distinction between beating and aggressiveness. Aggressiveness, defined as a behaviour wilfully targeted at objects, people or the self, in view of producing prejudice, harm, destruction or damage, has few shared aspects with the way in which we understand and define beating. First of all, beating does not aim at producing harm, destruction or damage as an end in itself or as an ultimate objective. It is not its primary aim, but a derivative one, or, better said, a means for a well-defined end, other than damage. Secondly, it is a behaviour targeted at animals, people or the self. Beating can target objects, but in this case, we are at the stage of primitive thinking, in which behaviour ruled by the laws of magic and animism was dominant. James Frazer provides sufficient evidence in *The Golden Bough*. We shall quote only one, purposively selected so as to illustrate the fact that, in the Europe of the

Enlightenment, magic was still very much present: “In Prussia they say that if you cannot catch a thief, the next best thing you can do is to get hold of a garment which he may have shed in his flight; for if you beat it soundly, the thief will fall sick. [...]. Some eighty or ninety years ago, in the neighbourhood of Berend, a man was detected trying to steal honey, and fled, leaving his coat behind him. When he heard that the enraged owner of the honey was mauling his lost coat, he was so alarmed that he took to his bed and died.” [9 p.48]. In this case of contagious magic, beating the object identified with beating its owner, and the intention was to compensate for the loss, through beating, and to educate through norms the entire community which was convinced of the effects of the magical percept. Children will always remain in the bewitched circle of magical thinking. The parents infer this fact and help them forget the pain induced by the object they bumped into, exemplarily punishing the chair or the corner of the table with an awful beating, so that the pain stops. But the King of Kings, how could he not lash the sea to hearten his soldiers? With this last example, we slowly slip, in the transition from magic to superstition, towards *Homo stultus*.

Aggressiveness is also defined by the emphasis laid by the aggressor: either on the act itself or on intention. Laying emphasis on the act, on the sadistic satisfaction of proving one's strength, is a primitive form of aggressiveness. Beating is fundamentally different from this form of aggressiveness. The sceptre, as a symbol of authority, evolved from the bat of the sadistic tyrants coming into power. With emphasis laid on the act itself, aggressiveness becomes beating only in the sublimated form of sport games. The display of power in sport competitions cancels all the defining traits of aggressiveness, and by this abrogation, we enter the platonic sphere of physical beating, in its pure form, separated from the interests of aggressiveness (fair play being the fundamental value which consecrates this pure form). If emphasis is exclusively laid on the aggressor's intention, then we remain in the pure form of aggressiveness, with the definitions of its varied manifestations, as provided by anthropologists, ethologists, psychologists or other scholars. It is the moment to bring forth a specification that makes a clearer distinction between aggressiveness and beating. Like aggressiveness, beating is defined as a form of behaviour directed by intention, but its capital trait is the acceptance and social acknowledgement of the intention. Society disapproves of the sadistic pleasure of publicly proving one's power with the sceptre given by the rank, but it enjoys the show offered by pugilists or athletes on stadiums.

The intention of aggressiveness directed at objects, animals or persons in view of producing damage has always caught the attention of the criminal codes, while beating, being socially accepted, has always been

exempt from sanction. Let us resort to a few particularly savage examples brought to light by the same James Frazer. In the chapters “The Burden of Royalty” and “The Killing of the Divine King” in the book already mentioned, the author provides examples of the frailty of the royal institution in its incipient phases, and of the huge responsibility of the official who happened to occupy this position. The power of the king over nature is exercised as it is over his subjects, and “if drought, famine, pestilence, or storms arise, the people attribute the misfortune to the negligence or guilt of their king, and punish him accordingly with stripes and bonds, or, if he remains obdurate, with deposition and death” [9 p155].

The primitive kingdoms are not despotic states, the people do not live for the sovereign, quite the contrary, the sovereign lives only for his people. This explains many odd customs, as is the one from Sierra Leone. Before being consecrated king, the candidate was chained and severely beaten, only after that being vested in royal garment, without having the guarantee that he will survive for too long. In Congo, there is a belief that if the pontiff dies of natural causes, the world also dies. This is the reason why when he shows signs of weakness or disease, his successor enters his house with a rope or a bludgeon, and strangles or beats him to death. This burden of royalty was nevertheless assumed by those elected kings, and the killing of the king was accepted by the entire community, including the king himself. The beating used for the king’s enthronement or killing was socially justified and it was performed in view of community survival or of ostracising, by acceding to this rank, of the members unwanted by the community. The divine kings – as Frazer shows -, “on whose life the fertility of men, of cattle, and of vegetation is believed to depend, and who are put to death, whether in single combat or otherwise, in order that their divine spirit may be transmitted to their successors in full vigour, uncontaminated by the weakness and decay of sickness or old age, because any such degeneration on the part of the king would, in the opinion of his worshippers, entail a corresponding degeneration on mankind, on cattle, and on the crops [9 p 243].

Now, we are able to define beating as a behaviour wilfully targeted at animals, at people or at the self in view of obtaining aesthetic pleasure or of producing and reinstating the order in the community or an ethical-religious order by inducing physical or spiritual pain, a socially stimulated and acknowledged behaviour. Administered to the body, the beating sets forth from the more or less verifiable principle that physical suffering is the cause for transformation in the spiritual order. It is as if we believed that *physical evil*, reaching the brain, turned into *ethical good*. On the other hand, when we harm the spirit through verbal or non-verbal language, many of the gestures and phrases we use are disapproved of, censored or banned by the society.



They are regarded as aggressive behavioural forms. Social rejection points either to their vulgar nature, or to the immoral one, which causes harm to the insulted person. This is the reason why, in many civilised states, insult and libel have entered under the provisions of the criminal code. Society leaves, nevertheless, some room for mockery. This way, the injury of the spirit makes its victorious path to culture, just the way physical beating covers itself in glory on stadiums.

In order to illustrate the corporal beating in view of its sublimation as ethical good, a few examples will be further provided.

Diogenes the Cynic is the philosopher who wanted to fix the boorish social state of his contemporaries by using the shock of hitting them with a rod. Reading *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, one does not encounter so many references to beating and to being beaten in the works of any other ancient philosopher. Having recently arrived to Athens, it did not take long for Diogenes to be initiated in cynicism by Antisthenes, with a cane. Threatening his disciple in order to be left alone, the latter replies: “Strike, for you will find no wood hard enough to keep me away from you, as long as you have something to say [7 p199]. One day, our cynic disturbed the public order by shouting “come, people!” and when people surrounded him, he started hitting them with a rod: “I called for people, not for ragtag” [7 p201]. Nevertheless, the Athenians loved the philosopher, and one day, when a young man broke his wine jar, they gave him a good hammering and offered another jar to Diogenes. When asked what animal’s bite is the worst, he replied: “Among the wild animals, the sycophant, among the home-bred animals, the flatterer” [7 p205]. And a last quote, without exhausting the references: Diogenes shouted at a courtesan’s son who was throwing stones at the people: “Mind you, you might hit your father!” [7 p207].

Perhaps no philosophical book is more remarkable in its analysis of physical suffering used for the genesis of good than Friedrich Nietzsche’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*. The quotation we provide is a concentrated formula of the substance of the entire writing in what the role of physical cruelty in the man’s formation and deformation is concerned. The author wonders how one can build a memory, or a moral conscience to the animal-man: “This age-old question was not resolved with gentle solutions and methods, as can be imagined; (...). ‘A thing must be burnt in so that it stays in the memory: only something that continues to hurt stays in the memory’ – that is a proposition from the oldest (and unfortunately the longest-lived) psychology on earth. (...) When man decided he had to make a memory for himself, it never happened without blood, torments and sacrifices: the most horrifying sacrifices and forfeits (the sacrifice of the first-born belongs here), the most disgusting mutilations (for example, castration), the cruellest rituals



of all religious cults (and all religions are, at their most fundamental, systems of cruelty) – all this has its origin in that particular instinct which discovered that pain was the most powerful aid to mnemonics. (...) The worse man's memory has been, the more dreadful his customs have appeared; in particular, the harshness of the penal law gives a measure of how much trouble it had in conquering forgetfulness" [10 p38]. Nietzsche proves that our noble virtue, that of being moral beings, is based on a long history of using the most refined and diabolical tools for torture in order to consolidate this virtue. This realistic plea emphasises the fact that human societies allowed and accepted the physical strength for the consolidation of the moral conscience of the age. In light of these analyses, beating is not a beastly, instinctual act which aims at ruining, destroying, annihilating, but a human, all too human one. We owe our humanising and humanity to beating.

The particular case of the conclusion above is our immature way of using beating in children's nurture. Education was pursued with the rod for a revoltingly long period of time. Teachers used to beat their students with the firm belief and a clear conscience that, by that corporal correction, they contributed to progress and school success. The beating was administered serenely and detachedly, as any other didactic principle. Horace, constrained through beating by his professor, Orbilius, to memorize *The Odyssey*, dubbed the latter *plagosus* (the bully). During the Middle Ages, there was even a feast day when the students would cut the sticks later used for their education. Assessing this principle and educational means, John Locke expresses his reservations: "The usual lazy and short way by chastisement and the rod, which is the only instrument of government that tutors generally know, or ever think of, is the most unfit of any to be used in education" [11 p23]. Although the observation made by the Enlightenment philosopher is forward, and although he constantly supports it with outstanding psychopedagogical arguments, he still concedes that this method is appropriate in certain situations: "Beating them, and all other sorts of slavish and corporal punishments, are not the discipline fit to be used in the education of those we would have wise, good, and ingenuous men; and therefore very rarely to be applied, and that only in great occasions, and cases of extremity [11 p24]. The parents must carefully ponder on the serious offences that should be responded to by punishment. A thought-out beating may stir sincere shame in the child, the only one that can contain and educate him. When applied too often, the corporal punishments annul the shame and its effect in child rearing. In his pedagogical thoughts, Locke uses the Aristotelian advice of taking the *via media* and avoid excesses. In present-day pedagogy, at least in

what chastisement is concerned, this means has been abolished by the total elimination of all punishments, either physical or spiritual.

A presentation of chastisement and beating in the judicial and penitentiary system would be felicitous at this point, but this would expand the discussion too much, which is why we mention only that, in addition to the fact that there is a considerable amount of literature in the field (from Beccaria to Foucault), beating in this system was socially imposed for the admission of guilt, for compensation, behavioural correction, moral reformation of the perpetrator, etc.

In what self-chastisement is concerned, self-flagellation is worth mentioning as a form of mystical experience and atonement. An outstanding case of such an experience is that of Blaise Pascal and it is rendered in the writing *The Life of Mr Pascal, with His Letters Related to the Jesuits*, authored by his sister, Mme Gilberte P erier. “Although he would engage in conversations for Christian reasons – Pascal’s sister writes – and was careful not to lose anything from what he struggled to obtain in his small room, he was always careful and fearful that self-love could turn these conversations into pleasure. The rule was that he could never get caught in the pleasure of these conversations, induced by self-conceit. On the other hand, he did not believe that he could refuse these people the help they needed. This was his struggle within. But the mortification spirit, which is the Christian spirit itself, the one which harmonises all things, came to his rescue and inspired him to gird with an iron belt full of nails every time certain gentlemen would announce their presence. He was also doing this whenever he felt any vanity or when he got caught in conversation, he hit himself with the elbows so that the stings would be more painful, and thus he was reminded of his duty” [12 p54]. Self-renunciation, freedom from pride, from the *superbe diabolique* (diabolical conceit), as Pascal terms it, is the aim of this flagellation. It is a noble use of corporal self-suffering for a man who, after Aristotle, leaves the social norm to near the godly condition.

As for the chastisement of the spirit, it may be observed as a form of human artistic manifestation. Sports and arts, physical beauty and spiritual beauty represent glorious moments of this aggressive animal that has managed to socialise the instinctual, destructive behaviour into a profoundly creative one. Writers, poets and visual artists use the strike against the spirit to educate, mend, sanction or reprimand human behaviour. Comedy, irony, humour, satire, banter, the joke, the fable, the grotesque or caricature are categories and artistic genres whose core is mockery and the more or less scathing derision. If it is possible for physical suffering to induce moral transformations, it is equally certain that the person we mock through irony, satire or caricature goes through physiologic changes – from face reddening

to the acceleration of the heart beats and intensification of the blood pressure, transformations which can further convert into animosity, hatred, anger or into shame, embarrassment, humiliation, dishonour, with their corresponding desires: of revenge or of regeneration.

We can also identify a spiritual self-beating. In its best-known and most encountered form, it is triggered by the awareness of the original sin, which determines penitence manifestations of the religious man. This form of soul suffering is present in all twinges of consciousness determined by the perpetration of antisocial acts, by the flagrant trespassing of the laws. Dostoevsky describes these states with extraordinary psychological insights in *Crime and Punishment*.

It is not possible to conclude this outline of the phenomenology of beating without describing the way in which self-beating also represents a form of non-verbal communication. Our body parts can be caressed, which induces pleasure, but can also be subjected to pressure and strikes, which induces pain and suffering. We have parts which are the most exposed to either pleasure or pain. Culturally speaking, we have managed, by moderately striking some of our body parts, to transmit information to our peers, to transform the beating of our body in a means of communication. Let us list some of these moderate gestures, leaving to the reader to interpret each one's significance: slapping yourself over the face, kicking yourself, cracking your knuckles, slapping over your forehead, striking your temple with your fingers, slapping your mouth, hitting your elbow, hitting your stomach or your buttocks, stamping your foot, etc.

## 6. Conclusions

Despite the relativism of the present-day philosophers, who insists in the belief – equally susceptible of the same authoritarian absolutism – that there is not and there cannot be claimed any human essence, we cannot hide the fact that beating is part of our daily structure, as we have otherwise stated from the very first sentence of this text. I bid the reader to be attentive and to catalogue, for a day or a week, at the most, how many times does he or she hear the word beating, how many times does he or she see this happening, how many times does he or she feel that the civilised institutions are trying to make him or her indignant of this behaviour. Freud, wonder-struck by the many revelations the dream brings to man in his self-awareness, asked us to be as attentive, at least for a short period of time, to this oneiric phenomenon that we assiduously live and that we nonchalantly disregard.

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