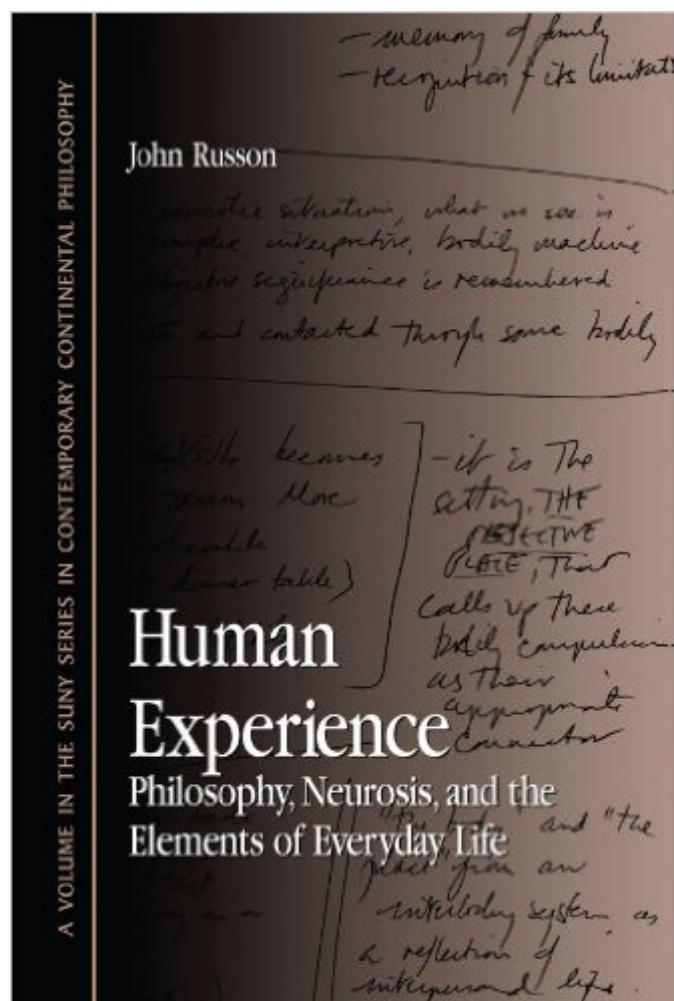


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Human Experience: Philosophy, Neurosis, And The Elements Of Everyday Life (SUNY Series In Contemporary Continental Philosophy)



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Synopsis

John Russon's Human Experience draws on central concepts of contemporary European philosophy to develop a novel analysis of the human psyche. Beginning with a study of the nature of perception, embodiment, and memory, Russon investigates the formation of personality through family and social experience. He focuses on the importance of the feedback we receive from others regarding our fundamental worth as persons, and on the way this interpersonal process embeds meaning into our most basic bodily practices: eating, sleeping, sex, and so on. Russon concludes with an original interpretation of neurosis as the habits of bodily practice developed in family interactions that have become the foundation for developed interpersonal life, and proposes a theory of psychological therapy as the development of philosophical insight that responds to these neurotic compulsions."

Book Information

Series: SUNY Series in Contemporary Continental Philosophy

Paperback: 172 pages

Publisher: State University of New York Press (August 28, 2003)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0791457540

ISBN-13: 978-0791457542

Product Dimensions: 6 x 0.4 x 9 inches

Shipping Weight: 11.2 ounces (View shipping rates and policies)

Average Customer Review: 4.7 out of 5 stars See all reviews (11 customer reviews)

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Customer Reviews

John Russon's book is now one that I have used in both my introductory courses and in my upper division course on Heidegger's *Being and Time*. In each case, students have reacted extremely well and have declared that Russon's is the most concrete and well-argued book in the course. In my introductory course, I have used Russon's book after Descartes and Kant and before Simone de Beauvoir's *Ethics of Ambiguity*. The problems of embodiment, of time, and of other people that Russon explores stand in stark contrast to Descartes' dualism and Kant's categorical imperative.

After reading Russon, students become more attuned to the way in which Descartes and Kant leave something important out of the description of human experience--namely, the experience of unity with others or mutual recognition. Having recognized this, students are then prepared to read de Beauvoir, who challenges the classical notions of ethics and knowing in phenomenological/existential ways. Ordinarily, I would be the first to argue that phenomenology is difficult to present to introductory students because so many of the primary texts are difficult for them to read. Russon's book, however, is short and it covers a great deal of ground easily through his use of some key examples. I am happy to say that I have found that even my less involved or weaker students are able to locate the critical sentences of Russon's argument, and they report that his examples assist them in explicating his argument in their own words. In my course on Heidegger's *Being and Time*, I used Russon's book first. This allowed students to come to grips with the issues of interpretation, memory, and other persons in ways that mattered to them.

John Russon's *Human Experience* is a work that offers a unique pedagogical opportunity. I have used the book in an undergraduate course on Existentialism to great advantage, and again in an Introductory course to draw together diverse threads of a year-long study of the goals and varied expressions of a philosophical education. It was, however, in my repeated references to Russon's arguments in an Ancient Philosophy course that the book's sophistication became most apparent to me. Russon is already recognized, by virtue of a series of shorter studies published in a range of journals, as a careful and persuasive reader of ancient philosophical texts. These works, however, focus primarily on working through the complexity of those texts in an explicit and focused exegetical manner. This book offers something quite different: no less than a detailed and self-determining account of the philosophical project underway in the ancient texts, a setting out of the framework within which they unfold, a reckoning with the 'why' as much as with the 'how' of the Platonic, Aristotelian and Stoic projects.

Self-help books are usually premised on the idea that we know more or less how we'd like to turn out, and just need some good advice on how to get there. We want to be rich, have people like us, get more done in less time, overcome depression, lose weight, or maximize our pleasure. Even if the practical instruction were sound (usually it just amounts to a series of platitudes like: invest and save your money, try to be more witty, buy a planner, take more time for yourself, don't eat fatty foods, tell your lover what you want....), even if these books offered advice on achieving your goals that really worked, the approach is still problematic because it fails to take into account the question

why we want just these outcomes, what is going on in our lives that has so far resisted our achievement of these outcomes, and whether these outcomes will really bring "satisfaction." Before we begin the process of self-improvement, we really have to know who we are. We need to begin the process of rigorous self-examination, that was first proposed by the ancient Greek philosopher Socrates as essential to a life worth living. In that process it would be difficult to find a better guide than John Russon, who has absorbed the pivotal insights on the question to be drawn from the history of philosophy from Plato and Aristotle through Freud and Marx to Heidegger and Sartre and Merleau Ponty, and distilled their essence into the form of a rigorous but readable treatise on the nature of human experience, and especially on what it takes to be healthy and whole in the face of diverse and contradictory demands imposed on us by ourselves, our families and our worlds.

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