Parsonian Action Theory and Dynamic Embodiment

Charles Varela

Introduction: A History Lesson

In the discussion to follow I briefly compare the human action theories advocated by Williams and Farnell with those of the sociologist Talcott Parsons. My goal is to examine critical differences between the two on the question of embodiment.

I maintain that Parsons is involved in a troublesome relationship to embodiment that appears to have gone unnoticed to date. He presents us with a theory of human action that is paradoxically both *peculiarly disembodied* and *peculiarly embodied*. This remains true even in his later work (post World War II) when he systematically incorporated his two-faced reading of Freud's theory of personality into his conception of the social system and the human actor (see Varela 1973). Parsons's reading was "two-faced" because he first criticized Freud's theory of personality as individualist and overly biologically centered without proper regard for culture and social life. Later, he explicitly reversed his reading of Freud's work (Varela 1973). The same reversal appears in Parson's attempt to formulate a total theory of the cultural, social, behavioral, and biological levels of human reality, and has continued in the more recent work of Parsonian sociologists.[1]

In contrast to Parsons, Williams and Farnell provide a theory of action I call *especially* embodied. By the 1980s, sociology and anthropology were engaged in a serious attempt to transcend their long-standing habit of generating disembodied theories. During the process, Merleau-Ponty's existential phenomenology of the "lived body" came to define embodied theorizing. Williams and Farnell acknowledge this domination, with some appreciation for Merleau-Ponty's ideas (see Farnell 1994), but they were not carried away on the professional jet stream for important theoretical reasons.

My task in this paper is twofold: 1. to identify what is special about the theory of embodied human action put forward by Williams and Farnell and 2. to illustrate what is peculiar about the troublesome theory of Parsons. The goal is to offer a valuable history lesson regarding an endemic difficulty for theorizing in the social sciences—the proper location of human agency.

Historically speaking, attempts to develop a theory of *action* for the social sciences provided no guarantee that the conception at issue would be understood as *embodied* action. In other words, one could never count on an appreciation of the idea that "action" will refer to the *action of a body, which is the body of a person*. Susanne Langer understood this perfectly.

She recognized that dancing, as a species of human movement, is a presentation of interacting forces that are driving the movement. She was quick to stress, however, that the "forces" of human movement are not the forces of the muscles, but rather those that are "convincingly created [by

human beings] for our perception, and exist only for it (Langer 1957: 5)." Langer thus presupposes the body's biology, but declares that the biological component cannot explain the action (movement). That is explained by embodied human agency. Note also that Langer implies that human agency is a kind of natural force.

The idea that human agency, if truly agentic, must be a 'force' of some kind, has proved difficult, if not impossible, for most social theorists to understand. This is because traditional notions of determinism in positivist and empiricist philosophies of science produced the odd idea that causation in the human world is agent-less and is not a force. However, human agency can only be adequately conceived as a natural force if all forms of biological determinism (in the traditional sense) are ruled out of the question—whether couched in terms of a positivist mechanicalism, old forms of instinctivism (e.g., Freudian), or the new instinctivism in Wilson's sociobiology and evolutionary psychology (Sahlins 1976, Varela 2003, Senchuck 1991, Harré 2001).

Human Action in a New Key: Dynamic Embodiment

For the purposes of this essay I provide a highly condensed statement of Williams's and Farnell's theory of human action, presented more fully elsewhere (Varela 1995, 1999, 2003). The central premise of their position is a principle that ties together the elements of practice, discourse, action, and embodiment. The principle is this: *culture co-opts biology because it is the social activity of human agents that consists of the signifying practices (action signs) of moving persons.*

The idea of 'signifying acts/practices' rests upon the foundational principle that embodied persons are causally empowered to engage in social and self-reflexive commentary using the primary resources of vocal and kinetic systems of semiosis that are cultural ways of being human. Since the human body is here conceived of philosophically in the new key of the 'signifying practices of moving persons', this theory of human agency can be called a paradigm of "dynamic embodiment" (Farnell 2000). The "new key" of human being in this theory is not just that human being is physical being—either as a thing or a felt-experience—but it is *moving* being. This is why Williams's and Farnell's theory of human action is special.

Social Theory and Embodiment: Parsons and the Social Sciences

The best way to discuss Parsons's troublesome theory of action with regard to embodiment is to situate it historically. Doing so is a reminder that Parsons's voluntaristic theory of action has its place within the broader history of the science and humanism debates—the signature problem of which is how to account for human freedom and agency in a natural world of deterministic structures. Anyone familiar with Parsonian action theory will recognize that he worked within the parameters of that problem, even though his discussion was cast in the traditional philosophical vocabulary of 'freedom' versus 'determinism'. Working deeply from within the Kantian tradition, and continuing one of its cardinal themes, Parsons strove to find a place for human subjectivity (the free activity of the subject) against the positivism of

utilitarianism (which reduces subjectivity exclusively to material interests) and against a radical positivism that eliminates it altogether (Parsons 1937: 43-86). In "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory" (1991[1935]), the prelude that framed *The Structure of Social Action* (1937), Parsons complains that

> The positivistic reaction against philosophy has, in its effect on the social sciences, manifested a strong tendency to obscure the fact that man is essentially an active, creative, evaluating creature. Any attempt to explain his behavior in terms of ends, purposes, ideals, has been under suspicion as a form of teleology which was thought to be incompatible with the methodological requirements of positive science. One must, on the contrary, explain in terms of "causes" and "conditions," not ends. (Parsons 1991[1935]: 231)

Parsons was defending freedom against theories of action in which freedom is purchased at the intolerable price of denying the relevance of natural situations of human action in the everyday world of society. That type of theory, rooted in the tradition of 19th century German Idealism, mystifies freedom by seeing it as an esoteric result of ideas or ideals alone (*Ibid.* 82). Parsons clearly understood that Kantianism was not to blame for that particular howler of German Idealism.

In the late 1970s, sociologist Anthony Giddens introduced the terms 'structure' and 'agency' which supplanted the philosophical vocabulary of 'freedom' and 'determinism'.[2] One good reason for such a terminological change was to separate the philosophical dimension of the issue of 'freedom and determinism' from various social scientific problems surrounding the issue of how to connect the social and individual—how best to conceive of social, cultural, psychological and biological structures. This was a necessary move, for it seemed that the philosophical issue had reached a dead end for social scientists. And so it had.

Under the influence of Hume's empirical philosophy in the second half of the eighteenth century, the idea that natural science was a positivistic practice was institutionalized. The resulting picture of nature that prevailed was defined by the Humean idea that the causal process rested upon purely contingent happenings composed of agent-less (thus passive) atomistic events (Manicus 1986). Hume's picture was translated by the sociologist Comte into a fake evolutionary law of human intellectual development in which humankind inevitably moves from concepts of animistic personal forces (gods, spirits, and souls) to abstract impersonal forces (powers and energy) to empirical laws of events (regularities, probabilities, correlations). In short, nature was conceived as a world without causal agency (powers and forces, production and generation). This mistake made it impossible (particularly for social scientists), to understand that nature is a world of causal agents, and human agency is a genuine causal force. The serious consequence is that our understanding of 'freedom' has been kept on the other side of science, floundering around in otherworldly allusions or in a no-man's land of sterile speculation.

Bryan Turner's *The Body and Society* (1984) exemplifies what happens when the philosophical issue of freedom and determinism is separated from social

scientific concerns with structure and agency. Turner was misled into believing that the 20th century phenomenology of Husserl and Merleau-Ponty (itself fatally, although covertly, rooted in positivist empiricism) could save human agency through a resort to the esoteric rigors of a 'pure description' of human activity (see Turner 1984: 227-251 and Varela 1999). Around the same time, Giddens provided a perfect example of the benefits that result from keeping the philosophical issue of freedom and determinism in close touch with the structure and agency problem. Right from the beginning of his shift to the new vocabulary Giddens claimed that causation must once again be considered in our rethinking of the structure and agency problem (Giddens 1979:9-48). In *The Constitution of Society* (1984) he says,

> Once more at the risk of upsetting the more philosophically minded reader, I propose simply to declare that reasons are causes, accepting that this no doubt implies a non-Humean account of causality. More properly put...the rationalization of action is causally implicated...in the continuation of day-to-day actions. The rationalization of action, in other words, is a major element of the range of causal powers that an individual, qua agent, displays (Giddens 1984: 345-346).

Turner's avoidance of the issue of determinism and the fact that he was oblivious to the question of the causal status of human agency, and Giddens's return to the issue with his assertion that (Hume notwithstanding), our agency *is* a causal power, brings us full circle to Parsons's voluntaristic conception of action.

In *The Structure of Social Action* ([1949] 1937) Parsons began the formulation of his means-end schema in true Kantian fashion with the principle of the human ego as actor or agent (Parsons 1949[1937]: 44). The word 'agent' here means the agency of the actor, the presence or absence of which (in making all the difference in any given situation), intimates that human agency is 'determinative'. Thus, for Parsons, the human actor is an *efficacy* of some kind *(Ibid.* 49).

> Within the area of control of the actor, the means employed cannot, in general, be conceived either as chosen at random or as dependent exclusively on the conditions of action, but must *in some sense* be subject to the influence of *an independent, determinate selective* factor, a knowledge of which is necessary to the understanding of the concrete course of action *(Ibid.* 44-45 - italics added).

The phrase "course of action" and its property of 'determinateness' refers to the human realization of ultimate ends; that is, ends that are not reducible to, nor explained by, the natural world of the environment—human or non-human. For Parsons, the determinateness of realization has the character of duty—the necessity of moral obligation that has nothing to do with natural or physical necessity (Parsons 1991[1935]: 237). Furthermore, the nature of this moral necessity

> cannot be derived from the empirical properties of "human nature" as revealed by scientific psychology—for this part of the same external world as the environment—the subjective point of view is that of *the ego not of the body, or even the "mind...."* Moreover, this [scientific] explanation would violate *the inner sense of freedom, which is just as ultimate a fact of human life as any other,* and its consequent moral responsibility *(Ibid.*: 237 - emphasis provided)

Kantian Idealism[3] in Parsonian action theory is found in the idea that the sense of "freedom of the ego" is not of the body or mind. The implication is that Parson's ego presumes the noumenal status that Kant ascribes to the freedom of the ego (Münch 1981: 709-739). Reminding ourselves of Parsons' philosophical roots clarifies his implication that "the inner sense of freedom" must have its determinate character fully identified with causal efficacy. Kant, in his first and second *Critiques*, identifies noumenal freedom as a "causality of freedom" and not the "causality of nature." That is, determinism in the natural world of physical objects. Note the following formulation of Kant's notion of freedom in *Opus Postumum*, one of his last works:

> Freedom of the will [*Willkühr*] is a fact which cannot be attributed to the object as a natural being; but, yet, it is a principle of causality in the world, and appears to contain effect without cause in its very concept. That which commands as a person (categorical imperative), hence as God, hence as if a person (Kant 1995: 230).

Parsons later qualified (perhaps refined?) Kant's noumenal sense of freedom with what Scott has called a "cautious naturalism"(Scott 1963: 716-735). Parsons discovered the work of the cognitive behaviorist Tolman, who demonstrated a naturalistic account of purposive behavior experimentally. Parsons saw Tolman's work as validating human freedom (viewed as purposive behavior or action) as a natural fact, but he was not fully convinced that it was a sufficient solution. Parsons's concern centered on a specific problem with Tolman's work. Even an experimental demonstration of the insightful problem-solving behavior of rats, for example, in requiring a *cognitive* explanation, begged a relevant scientific question. What is the metaphysical status of the alleged "efficacy" of cognition? (Tolman 1958: 69-76). If this question remains unanswered, the status of human agency in reference to a naturalistic account remains unclear.[4] Parsons, because of his "cautious naturalism" was moving into an understanding that the action of the ego is an efficacy that could be genuinely causal. The uncertain status of human agency prevented him from ever quite reaching it.

I have thus far suggested that in order to be appreciated (and understood) today, Parsons's theory of action must be located in the context of the structure and agency problem, specifically with reference to the issues of determinism, causality, and agency. This leaves us in a position to spell out the precise implication of Parsons's version of the structure and agency problem in its relationship to embodiment, permitting us to identify the peculiarity of Parsons's action theory.

Structure and Embodied Agency: Reification

Given that the principle of dynamic embodiment is a paradigm proposal at the forefront of social scientific thinking on the structure and agency problem, I am convinced that the concept of dynamic embodiment advances fundamental theorizing in our attempt to re-read determinism so we can understand human beings as causal agents. On this basis, we can join the key concepts of action, practice, discourse and embodiment. The structure and

agency issue is restated as a problem of *deterministic structures and embodied agency.*

We will begin by identifying three potential components of a principle of dynamic embodiment:

- **Thesis one: Sahlins**
  Since biological determinism (the idea that biology co-opts culture and includes the social) is a fallacy, culture must be the primary concept for understanding human social life.

- **Thesis two: Harré/Varela**
  Thomas's theorem that 'when people define situations as real their consequences are therefore real', is the case, because people are causal agents in a world of other kinds of natural agents (Harré). Culture is the social activity of human agents (Harré and Varela)

- **Thesis three : Williams and Farnell**
  Social activity is the cultural practice of signifying moving persons.

Together, these three theses present human life in terms of a new and philosophically sophisticated conception of freedom: culture is the *dynamically embodied* social practices of human agents. The salient point of this formulation is that it offers a resolution of the structure and agency problem. This claim requires careful exposition that can only be highly condensed because of space limitations.

A resolution of the structure and agency problem can be accomplished by eliminating the tendency to *reify* structures at the expense of agency. The problem is that standard statements of the logic of reification treat it as a literary or grammatical error: an abstraction is converted into a noun thus turned into a 'thing'. This view of reification is itself a mistake since its hidden premise is the positivist or empiricist belief that because things cannot be causes, abstractions cannot be nouns. Positivism holds that causes cannot be perceived and experienced, thus causal agents are unobservable and non-existent. The reality of causal agency is denied because causes are frequently unobservable.

The realist approach regards reification as an explanatory error: an abstraction *is* properly conceived of as a noun, so that it can be hypothesized as a causal agent. This is a plausible strategy because, for science, while causal agents are frequently unobservable and real, their effects are observable and can be manipulated. For example, subatomic particles like photons are systematically connected to their observable manifestations in the illumination of light bulbs. Likewise, genotypic DNA in families is systematically connected to their phenotypic manifestation in various intra- and inter-familial similarities and differences. Reification can therefore be redefined as an illegitimate explanatory effort because of the improper location of agency. This also applies to the four classic structures in the social sciences (social,

psychological, cultural and biological) when they are treated as casual agents apart from human beings.

This understanding of reification can be traced to a 'new realist' conception of determinism that has led to the recovery of causal agency in the physical world. It thus serves as a basis for the recovery of human agency in the human world (Varela and Harré, in progress). Since this is not an appropriate forum for displaying the systematic grounds for these claims, I will simply treat them as a givens (see Varela 1999). The brief summary of the nature of causal powers thinking that follows will further illuminate the problems with Parsons's theory of human action in relation to a theory of dynamic embodiment.

Structure and Embodied Agency: Causal Powers

In the history of the social sciences, as it has been driven by the debate between positivism and humanism, 'freedom and determinism' have been cast such that the four traditional 'structures' (social, cultural, psychological, and biological) have been seen as deterministic forces external to, and independent of, human agents governed by the promise of the reality of their own laws. Durkheim's 'social fact', and Freud's psychological unconscious or Levi-Strauss's cultural unconscious are paradigm cases of such deterministic forces.

The development of a conception of causation in physics between the 17th and mid-19th centuries demonstrates that nature is best viewed as a world of causal agents understood as complex fields of powers, forces, and liabilities (Varela and Harré, in progress). Nature is active and generative; some of it is alive, and some of the generative aspects are human, active, powerful particulars capable of generating normative forms of life. In the human realm, physical fields of dispositional powers and actual forces of interacting material agents become, cultural fields of socially interacting, moving, gesturing, signifying persons.

Today, however, we can be more accurate in specifying that such forces were conceived as inherently active because they are inherently *moving* external and independent forces; but that they were thought to act on exclusively and inherently passive and *non-moving* things. This was the traditional machine model of nature. Historically, this can best be understood as an institutionalized misreading of Newton's first and third laws—inertia and interaction, that is action and re-action, respectively. This has been the case since Hobbes, Descartes, and Rousseau initiated this mistake—one that was not made by Galileo, Newton or Kant. For a classic example of this, note in the following extract from *Emile*, how Rousseau declares his belief in freedom against inertia.

> I perceive two sorts of motions of bodies, *acquired* and *voluntary*. In the first the *cause* is external in the second it is *within*.... You ask again, how do I know that there are spontaneous movements? I tell you, "I know it because I feel them." I want to move my arm and I move it without any other immediate cause of the movement *but my own will*. In vain would anyone try to argue me out of *this feeling*, it *is*

stronger than any proofs; you might as well try to convince me that *I do not exist.* (1961: 234 - italics added)

No material creature is in itself active, and *I am active...* I have a body which is acted upon by other bodies, and it acts in turn upon them; *there is no doubt about this reciprocal action; but my will is independent of my senses...* When I yield to temptation *I surrender myself to the action of objects. When I blame myself for this weakness I listen to my own will alone....* The feeling of freedom is never effaced but when I myself do wrong, and *when I* at length *prevent the voice of the social from protesting against the authority of the body.* (Rousseau 1961: 242-243 - italics added)

In contrast to this, according to the causal powers model of natural events, nature is not a machine. Instead, the physical and the cultural are seen as fields of active, moving, transacting, powerful particulars that are of different natural kinds. Culture is therefore as natural as the physical: they are different kinds of 'particulars' that *can act upon others* (powers) and that can be *acted upon by others* (liabilities); and, that *are acting upon others* (forcing) and *are acted upon by others* (forced). Indeed, culture is as natural as anything physical precisely because it is a different kind of physical moving thing—culture *is* (assuming evolution) a field of signifying moving persons.

Culture, is not some 'thing' that is somehow, apart from persons living culturally. To locate agency improperly in culture and away from persons in their social relations would certainly be a reification. The deep reason is this: the power associated with a 'particular' (i.e. things can act upon other things whether billiard balls, persons, or vines around trees) is theorized as the power *of* a particular, because such power is grounded in its structural constitution. For example, the material composition of dynamite makes possible its explosion when ignited. The logic of the theoretical schema of the 'power of a particular' cannot be shifted to a 'power *and* particular schema' because 'power' would be treated as if it was a detached and free floating abstraction. It could then be mistakenly ascribed to anything other than actual concrete entities (persons, physical objects, animals, etc). This is what has happened with the four traditional social scientific exemplars of reification—cultural, social, psychological, and biological structures.

At this point in our identification of the 'field of causal agents' model of nature in its physical and human variety, we can come full circle back to Parsons's model of culture as a social situation, or field, of normatively grounded voluntaristic actors in action. What directly links Parsons in this regard is Kantian philosophy.

Structure and Agency: Parsons and Kant

In a paper entitled 'What is Enlightenment' (1784), Kant provided the primary principle for a paradigm of dynamic embodiment in his comment that human freedom is a "kind of free motion" (Kant 1959 [1784]: 84). This is not surprising, in view of the fact that in *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science* (1786), Kant made a major contribution to the history of physics in his development of a causal powers theory of moving things. As Harré and

Madden observe, "It is worth noticing that though Kant speaks of 'forces', both his attractive and repulsive force systems are what we now call 'fields of potentials' [that is, causal powers]" (1975: 171).

It is clear that Parsons's theory of the social structure of action was inspired, informed, and directed by Kant's theory of freedom (Münch 1981: 709-739 and 1982: 771-775). However, there is at least one crucial distinction between Parsonian voluntarism and Kantian freedom. Whereas Kant's theory of human agency as free movement is continuous with the theory of dynamic embodiment, Parsons's theory of voluntaristic actors realizing normative ends is not. Parsons's actors are not, in fact, *moving*, although they are supposed to be "men in action." So Parsonian action theory is not *logically* a theory of dynamically embodied human agents.

But, my thesis is actually stronger than that: *for special reasons internal to his theory, Parsons cannot get to human movement.* Since his theory makes no such conceptual provision for the possibility that Parsonian actors are moving when they are in action, they cannot be signifying either. And if Parsonian actors cannot be signifying because they cannot be moving, how can they be in action? After all, how is causal action possible if the agentic particulars cannot move? This is precisely to say that the 'efficacy' that makes an agent 'causal' resides in the principle that the power to be a force is *the power to be moving*: that is, to be a 'forceful particular at work'.

This is surely a simple presumption of Newton's 2nd law in its equational form of Force (f) = mass (m) multiplied by momentum (a). Otherwise, it would be as if dynamite, when ignited, explodes without any pieces flying around in any and all directions according to lawfully expected corresponding measures of force. In such an event, the power of a causal agent would certainly be a ghost in the machine. In the world that a realist science envisions, that is just not the way things are. Newton's formula (f = ma) means that force is a thing in motion. And so causal activity is nothing—absolutely nothing—if it is not forceful particulars at work. Power (thus force and movement) are together the essential trinity of theoretical physics. Social scientific theories of human action cannot violate that understanding—or if they do, the theories will be seriously wanting.

Parsonian Voluntarism: The Problem of Effort, Space and Time

How, we might now ask, is it the case that the renowned Parsonian theory of the social structure of action is wanting, in its most crucial sense, of the dynamic element of moving actors? This question unmasks the fact that Parsons has truly fashioned an impossible theory of action. What kind of metaphysics could underwrite Parsons's action theory and satisfy his voluntaristic thesis that human agency is efficacious, as well as his caution about naturalism and its deterministic thesis?

The answer we have proposed lies in Kant's theory of freedom and its explication in the terms provided by his realist metaphysics of nature. We have seen that Kantian theory, understood as a causal powers theory of natural agency in the world of nature is, in principle, the foundation for a

dynamically embodied theory of the social practice of culture. This, however, is not Parsonian metaphysics. There is a certain irony here connected to Münch's demonstration that

> Parsons's general theory of action and theory of social systems are exactly parallel, in structure and method, to Kant's critical philosophy...[Thus] Parsons's sociology cannot be understood apart from a consideration of Kant's critical project...[Indeed] we have to read *The Structure of Social Action* as the sociological equivalent of Kant's moral philosophy. Only in this way will we be able to understand how this first major work opens out into the theory of action in general and the theory of social systems in particular. Just as Kant developed his theory of action as an alternative to philosophical utilitarianism, Parsons developed his theory of action as an alternative to sociological utilitarianism. This alternative Parsons terms "voluntaristic action theory"... [The precise importance of] the term "voluntaristic"... [is that] social order need not be a completely causally determined factual order. As soon as a centralized force does not provide a factual order by causally determined compliance [Hobbesian theory], social order is only possible as long as actors voluntarily consent and bind themselves to a common normative frame of reference... [It is important to note that] a normative orientation is fundamental to the schema of action in the same sense that space is fundamental to that of the classical mechanics: in terms of the given conceptual scheme there is no such thing as action except as effort to conform with norms just as there is no such thing as motion except as change of location in space (Münch 1981: 713, 719, 722, 724).

If a question is raised about the theoretical relationship between normativism and voluntarism for Parsons, Münch takes special pains to state,

> If we do not want to miss the point of Parsons's solution to the [Hobbesian] problem of [social] order... to read him from the Kantian perspective... means first of all recognizing that Parsons's solution can be neither normative nor utilitarian. Parsons presents a voluntaristic solution to the problem of social order (*Ibid.* 722).

In propositional form, this becomes: Parsonian action theory is normative because it is voluntaristic (i.e. the actor is free to conform to norms or not). Hence, freedom from determinism is the primary solution that makes a theory of action (hence a social system), possible. Parsons's conception of action in his theory of voluntarism is certainly Kantian, but it is *not* dynamically embodied.

From the quotation above we learn that conforming with norms is only possible if human action is possible, and action is only possible if human effort is possible. Freedom, then, must be that element of 'effort' which defines what is the active factor—that is, the *act*, in the fact of '*action.*' What is this factor of the act? We were told in an earlier quotation that a social or psychological determinism violates the ultimate fact of our sense of freedom (see p. 3)? But now Parsons gets tricky, for he also said that that which is the source of the effort, the act, is an ego, which itself is neither "the body or even the mind."

Parsons's "cautious naturalism" cannot resolve this issue. That is, his later inclusion of Freudian concepts saddles him with the problem that Freud's deterministic bio-psychological unconscious is one of the traditional problems in the structure and agency debate. Likewise, his later inclusion of Tolman's conception of action as cognitive behavior requires a conception of causal

agency to secure it against regression to a behaviorist account. We cannot escape the fact that Parsons's voluntarism is up against a central and very serious contradiction. If 'effort' is to be an intelligible notion, the effort of conforming to norms must be the action of a body which is the body of a person. It is not clear, however, that Parsons's "ego" is meant to reference the embodied person. As far as I am aware, on this issue neither Münch nor any Parsonian scholar up to now can be of help.

We can now return to *The Structure of Social Action* to justify the claim that Parsons's theory of action is an implausible one. Let us carefully examine the following comments as Parsons outlines the key elements of his action theory:

> First, there is the minimum differentiation of structural elements, end, means, conditions and norms.... Second, there is implied, in the relations of these elements, a normative orientation of action, a teleological character.... As a process, action, in fact, is the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms.... *Thus conditions may be conceived at one pole, ends and normative rules at the other, means and effort as the connecting links between them.* Third, there is inherently a temporal reference. *Action is a process in time.* The correlate of the teleological reference is a time coordinate...[that is] the concept of end always implies a future reference...but will not necessarily exist without the intervention of the actor (Parsons 1949 [1937],Vol.2: 732-733 - italics added).

> On an analytical basis it is possible to see emerging out of this study as a whole a division into three great classes of theoretical systems. They may be spoken of as the systems of nature, action, and culture.... Only the first two are systems of empirical scientific theory in the usual sense; the third occupies a special status. This is because empirical science is concerned with *processes in time*. The problematical data of the theories of both the nature systems and the action systems concern such processes; those of culture systems do not. The line of distinction which may be drawn between the first two is that the nature systems involve systems in relation to space in the frame of reference, the action systems in relation to the means-end schema. Physical time is a mode of relationship of events in space, action time a mode of relation means and ends and other action elements.... Action is *non-spatial but temporal* (*Ibid.* 762-763).

> Parsons's footnote: "Of course every concrete event occurs in space, *too*. But this fact is an unproblematical datum to analytical sciences of action."

Setting aside for now Parsons's footnote and his distinction between "analytic" and "concrete" levels of reference, we can agree that action must be in time—it takes place at "some-when." But if action must be "some-when" that is surely because it must be "some-where"! *For, how can effort—if we take it to be the action of a moving body which is the moving body of a person—mediate conditions and ends in the realization of those ends, if it is non-spatial?* If a "when" is indifferently "no-where" or "any-where," then what is this creature, (this "who") that can be "some-where" while not being at (or in) any place?

The idea of non-spatiality implies that the natural place of action is in the dark, so to speak. Parsons doesn't see the body, it doesn't seem to exist. Parsons's "action" consists only of *thinking* and (perhaps) speaking. But if you cannot *see* the action how does one know that action is going on? And if there is speaking going on in the dark, is that the only talk that is (or could be),

going on? Suppose the speaking stops, could there be *any* action, apart from thinking about it before its done? Of course there could be. For example, sign-talking and gestures.

Perhaps Parsons has in mind the limiting case of a human actor who is not acting as yet, but can, and is about to, or, may or may not do so, at some point. We seem to have here Rodin's sculpture of the thinker, in particular the stereotype of the academic, i.e., thinking itself, so that visible action is not the main point. Action is thus rendered unproblematic, and so is space.

We should remember that Parsons was at this time rightfully concerned with the problem of radical positivism and (non-cognitive) behaviorism as an offshoot (Parsons 1949 [1937],Vol.1: 60-69, 79-80; Scott 1963: 716). This was a secondary issue regarding the place of mind in a theory of human being. When Parsons responded favorably to Tolman's behaviorism because cognition or mind now had its theoretical place, the issue of behaviorism and a defense of mind was no longer a relevant concern in his theory of action. So why was Parsons still cautious about his concession to what Scott has called his "programmatic (Tolmanian) behaviorism" (Scott 1963: 716, 731)? There is a resolution to Scott's puzzlement: Parsons was cautious because of the primary issue of human agency and not the issue that Scott claimed for Parsons, namely, that "voluntarism . . . was also an argument for the causal agency of valuation" *(Ibid.*: 716).

The primary issue here is the persistent and fundamental one of *human agency* as a kind of causal efficacy. This is rooted in the metaphysical problem of the possibility of agency in the physical world. But Faraday and his work on field theory (Harré and Madden 1975: 165-175) resolved this by the mid-nineteenth century. The resolution of the problem of human agency in the social world follows from this: nature is a world of causal agents, physical, biological, *and cultural*. The connection between the biological and the cultural is evolution and history.

Valuation (the normative framework of beliefs, values, and principles) or any cognitive element available and in use, is efficacious in virtue of thesis two (p. 6). That people define situations as real so that their consequences are real is the case strictly because people are causal agents in a world of other kinds of natural agents. Culture is the social activity of human agents. Since causal power can only be a causal force if it is the force of moving entities, then the thesis of the social activity of human agency requires thesis three (p. 6), i.e. social activity is the cultural practice of signifying moving persons.

Even if we, like Parsons, suspend the "concrete" reference to real human beings in real cultures that exist in time and space, restricting ourselves to the "analytic" reference to the abstractions of theory, we have just shown that *the spatiality of action is not analytically unproblematic.*

If we concede that the crucial issue for Parsons's conception of action in relationship to the question of time and space is the primary one of the causal status of human agency, then the Parsonian answer is analytically wrong. The

efficacy of human agency is the force of human signifying movement by virtue of the fact that causal power is the force of motion.

When Parsons defined action as being temporal but non-spatial he eliminated a crucial component of dynamically embodied action—the structuring of space. That, in a nutshell, is why Parson's theory of action is peculiar.

Notes:

---

[1] See the American sociologist Jeffery Alexander (1978: 177-198; 1983) and the German sociologist Richard Münch (1981: 709-740) both of whom made serious attempts to restore the intellectual prestige of the Parsonian enterprise in the late 1970s and 1980s. A contemporary assessment of Parsons's entire corpus by Donald N. Levine makes no reference to the problem of embodiment, nor to the problems of effort and non-spatiality in Parsons's theory of action. See Levine 1995: pp. 37-38;46-48.

[2] The terms 'freedom' and 'determinism' were frequently conjoined with the sociological vocabulary of the 'social and the individual' and its cognates, 'voluntarism and system' or 'the actor and the social system.'

[3] Although Kant is a German idealist, his philosophy is distinct from the philosophical idealism of Fichte, Schelling and Hegel. See Ameriks 2000.

[4] This question is absolutely in the spirit of Kant, for Tolman too was showing that a determinism of the physical world—the "causality of nature"—must give way in the biological world to a "causality of freedom" for animals. Although Kant ventured into the area of biology and the purposive behavior of animals, he could not go as far as Tolmin did to imply that all animals have some freedom. In that context, human beings would be conceived of simply another (special) case of the "causality of freedom" of the animal kingdom. See Kant's last work on the metaphysics of nature, *Opus Postumum* (1995: 58-61).

References cited:

Alexander, Jeffrey C.
   1978. Formal and Substantive Voluntarism in the Work of Talcott Parsons: A Theoretical and Ideological Reinterpretation. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 43 (April): 177-198.
   1983. *The Modern Reconstruction of Classical Thought: Talcott Parsons.* Berkeley Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Ameriks, Karl
   2000. Introduction: Interpreting German Idealism. In *The Cambridge Companion to German Idealism.* (Ed. K. Ameriks). Cambridge, U.K. Cambridge University Press, pp. 1-17.

Farnell, Brenda
   1994. Ethno-Graphics and the Moving Body. *MAN. Journal of the Royal Anthropological Society 29 (4): 929-73.*
   1999. Moving Being, Acting Selves. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 28: 341-73.
   2000. Dynamic Embodiment in Assiniboine Storytelling. *Anthropological Linguistics* 44(1): 37-64.

Giddens, Anthony
    1979. *Central Problems in Social Theory*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of
        California Press
    1984. *The Constitution of Society*. Berkeley Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Harré, Rom
    2001. *Cognitive Science. A Philosophical Introduction*. London Thousand Oaks New
        Delhi: Sage Publications.

Harré, Rom and E.H. Madden
    1975. *Causal Powers*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Kant, Immanuel
    1959 [1784]. Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals and What is Enlightenment? (Ed.
        and Trans. L.W. Buck). Indianapolis and New York: The Library of Liberal Arts,
        Bobbs-Merrill Co.
    1985 [1786]. *Metaphysical Foundations of Natural Science*. Indianapolis: Hackett
        Publishing Company.
    1995. *Opus Postumum*. (Ed. E. Förster, Trans. E. Förster and M. Rosen.) Cambridge:
        Cambridge University Press.

Langer, Suzanne K.
    1957. The Dynamic Image: Some Philosophical Reflections on the Dance. In *Problems of
        Art*. New York: Scribners, pp. 1-12.

Levine, Daniel N.
    1995. *Visons of the Sociological Tradition*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Manicus, Peter
    1986. *A History and Philosophy of the Social Sciences*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Münch, Richard
    1981. Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action. I. The Structure of the Kantian Core.
        American Journal of Sociology. Vol. 86 (4): 709-739.
    1982. Talcott Parsons and the Theory of Action. II. The Continuity of the
        Development. *American Journal of Sociology*. Vol. 87 (4): 771-826.

Parsons, Talcott
    1949 [1937]. *The Structure of Social Action*. Vol. I and II. New York and London: The Free
        Press, Collier Macmillan Publishers.
    1978. *Action Theory and The Human Condition*. New York and London: The Free Press,
        Collier and Macmillan Publishers.
    1991[1935]. *Talcott Parsons. Early Essays*. (Ed. Charles Camic). Chicago and London:
        University of Chicago Press.

Rousseau, Jean J.
    1961. *Emile*. London: J.M. Dent & Sons.

Sahlins, Marshall
    1976. *Culture and Practical Reason*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Scott, John F.
1962. The Impossible Theory of Action: Some Questions on Parsons's Prewar Classification of Action Theories. *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, 7: 51-62.
1963. The Changing Foundations of the Parsonian Action Scheme. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 28 (5): 719-731.

Senchuk, Dennis M.
1991. *Against Instinct*. Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Tolmin, E. C.
1958. *Behavior and Psychological Man*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

Turner, Bryan
1984. *The Body and Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.

Varela, Charles
1973. The Crisis of Western Sociology: The Problem of Social Interaction, the Self and Unawareness for Social Theory. Ph.D. dissertation, New York University.
1995. Cartesianism Revisited: The Ghost in the Machine and in the Lived Body. In *Human Action Signs in Cultural Context: The Visible and the Invisible in Movement and Dance*. (Ed. B. Farnell). Metuchen, N.J.: Scarecrow Press, pp. 216-293.
1999. Determinism and the Recovery of Human Agency: The Embodying of Persons. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behavior*.29: 385-402.
2003. Dynamic Embodiment: Reaching for a Paradigm. *Journal for the Anthropological Study of Human Movement*. 12 (4): 125-131.

Varela Charles and Rom Harré
(in progress). Science For Humanism: Determinism and the Problem of Structure and Agency.

Williams, Drid
1982. Semasiology: A Semantic Anthropologist's View of Human Movements. In Semantic Anthropology [ASA 22] (Ed. David Parkin). London: Academic Press, pp. 161-182.
.2003. Signifying Bodies, Signifying Acts. (Printed and distributed by the author for graduate student use. Manuscript available from JASHM).