OVERCOMING STRUCTURE AND AGENCY: TALCOTT PARSONS, LUDWIG WITTGENSTEIN AND THE THEORY OF SOCIAL ACTION

Abstract:

Since the 1960s, the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein has had a marked influence on the social sciences. As an important sub-field, the sociology of science has drawn extensively on the Wittgenstein and he has become a key reference point in debates in the philosophy of the social sciences about structure and agency. There, a number of commentators have employed Wittgenstein's 'sceptical paradox' to demonstrate that the dualistic account of social reality provided by major figures in contemporary social theory, such as Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar and Habermas, are unsustainable; they are hopelessly individualist. This paper acknowledges the importance of Wittgenstein but maintains that a critique of contemporary social theory consonant with the 'sceptical paradox' was already present in the sociological canon: in the form of Parsons' utilitarian dilemma in *The Structure of Social Action*. This paper seeks to recover the utilitarian dilemma for current debates in order to demonstrate the enduring relevance of Parsons. The paper goes on to argue that not only did Parsons provide a critique of individualism compatible with Wittgenstein's but that he actually transcended it.

Key words: utilitarian dilemma, individualism, sceptical paradox, forms of life, common values

Introduction

In the late 1970s, Anthony Giddens claimed that in the course of the twentieth century there had been a convergence of philosophy and sociology (1976). More precisely, sociology had become, especially after the linguistic turn of the 1960s, increasingly influenced by the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. Peter Winch's famous book on Wittgenstein (1977) was an important but far from isolated example of this attempt to bridge between the disciplines. Indeed, Giddens' importance lay very substantially in his connecting potentially parochial British sociology with wider currents of European social thought, including Wittgenstein. Of course, sociology had, in fact, always been closely related to and, perhaps, even indistinguishable philosophy from its earliest origins. Marx, Weber and Durkheim all actively addressed philosophical questions about the nature of social reality and drew upon Hegel, Kant and Dilthey in their work. The sociology of the Frankfurt School remained resolutely philosophical from the 1930s onwards. Rather than arguing that philosophy and sociology began to merge in the late twentieth century, it may be more sustainable to argue that a particular kind of philosophy – namely Wittgensteinian – began to have a huge and novel influence. Reflecting Wittgenstein's importance as an intellectual resource, there has been extensive exegesis which has drawn connections between Wittgenstein work – and especially his later philosophy – and other major social theorists. Thus, Kitching (1988) and Rubinstein (1981) have highlighted the parallels between Wittgenstein's later work and Marx's theory of praxis and David Bloor (1997) has similarly pointed up the close connection between Emile Durkheim's analysis of ritual and Wittgenstein's theory of rule-following as a social activity.

There have been evident benefits to this Wittgensteinian influence; the focus on situated social practice has encouraged the production of extremely fruitful lines of

research. Indeed, it might be argued that various sub-fields, not least the sociology of science and technology, would not have appeared without sociologists' growing interest in Wittgenstein. There have been other areas of research where his influence has been paramount. In the past twenty years, the theme of structure and agency has been a fundamental issue in contemporary social theory; there has been extensive ontological debate about whether social reality should be understood in dualistic terms. Wittgenstein has been a prominent, even decisive, reference point in these debates utilised by both proponents and detractors of structure and agency. Ted Schatzki, Nigel Pleasants and Stephen Turner have all drawn on Wittgenstein to criticise the major figures in this literature such as Anthony Giddens, Pierre Bourdieu, Roy Bhaskar and Jurgen Habermas.

The convergence of philosophy and especially Wittgensteinian philosophy and sociology is a fact. The discipline may be stronger for it. However, it is not clear that sociologists' current deference to and even dependence upon Wittgenstein is necessary. There may be resources within the recognised canon of sociology which would provide as equally a valid critique of the structure and agency paradigm, as Wittgenstein's later work. In particular, it may be possible to identify the kinds of arguments which commentators like Schatzki utilise from Wittgenstein in works already existing in sociology. The early work of Talcott Parsons may be decisive here. Talcott Parsons and especially his early great work, *The Structure of Social Theory*, may remain useful and relevant for overcoming current problems in contemporary social theory.

The claim that Parsons offers scholars similar intellectual tools as Wittgenstein seems unlikely. For the most part, social theorists have actively regarded the two figures as antithetical. John Heritage (1984), for instance, uses a Wittgensteinian approach to justify ethnomethodology against Parsons' structural-functionalism. Yet, a connection between the

two intellectuals has been noted albeit infrequently. Jeffrey Alexander, for instance, has emphasised the commonalities between them: 'Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, composed over roughly the same period, questions rationalistic theories from a remarkably similar point of view and proposes a conventionalised and interpretive alternative that exhibits distinctive parallels to Parsons' own' (Alexander 1988: 100) . Although deeply suggestive, Alexander has not elaborated upon the point. Given their very different personal backgrounds, intellectual styles and their apparently divergent perspectives, this failing is understandable. Indeed, it may be a more unusual and problematic project to attempt to draw a convergence between them now. Certainly, many commentators, such as John Holmwood, would regard the project as mis-guided. Nevertheless, as *The Structure of Social Action* demonstrated, the benefits of illustrating unseen parallels can be great. Roland Robertson has himself noted, 'the challenge is to do the work which Parsons began. This must mean that Parsons' work has to be critically elaborated…extended and refined analytically and used with respect to empirical and historic problems' (Robertson 1982: 283; Turner 1991: 246). The purpose of this paper is to follow Robertson's injunction and to engage with Parsons' work critically in order to highlight its connection to Wittgenstein's later writing.

However, by exploring the convergence between the work of the late Wittgenstein and the early Parsons, the purpose here is not merely of academic interest, pointing up a seldom recognised theoretical convergence. Nor is it a matter merely of ensuring that Parsons' is given his intellectual dues. Rather the argument which will be forwarded here is that in *The Structure of Social Action*, not only did Parsons propose a philosophical critique of utilitarianism which accorded with Wittgenstein's critique of rule-following but that, in sociological terms, his account was superior. Parsons provided a sociological explanation

of why humans necessarily engaged in collective rule-following in the manner which Wittgenstein described. By re-discovering classical sociology, it may be possible to establish sociology in the new millennium on the sound footing which Parsons sought in 1937, 'sixty years ahead of its time' (Gould 1991).

Contemporary Social Theory

In recent writings, a number of commentators have highlighted a consensus emerging in the social sciences over the last three decades which they have variously called 'critical social theory' (Pleasants 1999), 'contemporary social theory' (King 2004) or the 'theory of practices' (Turner 1994; Schatzki 1987, 1997). On this account, contemporary social thought (led by Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar and Habermas) has been increasingly dominated by an adherence to ontological dualism. Social reality is understood in terms of structure and agency. Society consists, in the first instance, of individuals, whose agency and consciousness, must be recognized. However, collectively, the actions of individuals produce social phenomena which are not reducible to the individual. Social reality has emergent properties; institutions, for instance, pre-exist and have determination over the individual even though these institutions could not exist without the individuals of which they are comprised. Society is, consequently, dependent upon the actions and beliefs of individuals but not finally reducible to them. One of the most important questions for social theorists, oriented to this dualistic perspective, is to explain how emergent social structures are reproduced by the individuals who comprise them. For contemporary social theorists, rules are central to the explanation of emergence and structural reproduction. In order to engage in social practices appropriate to the reproduction of institutions and the creation of emergent properties, individuals follow rules, either knowingly or instinctively, which are

drawn from or compatible with the institutions of which they are part (Sawyer 2005). Consequently, instantiating these rules, individuals regulate their own actions so that cumulatively, they reproduce existing social structures. Rules guide and direct individual action so that a multiplicity of individuals all acting independently can be united in order to produce coherent, though unintended, consequences; knowledgeable individuals effectively reproduce society unknowingly.

Ted Schatzki has highlighted the way in which Giddens' structuration theory and Bourdieu's theory of 'practice' represent two prominent examples of this approach to social theory. According to Schatzki, both theorists are concerned with explaining how the individual reproduces an emergent social system which transcends individual belief, understanding and action. In order to explain this systemic reproduction, Giddens appeals to the existence of 'structure' consisting of a 'virtual order of differences' (a set of tacit rules) which orient individual practice. Whenever individuals act, they instantiate the rules of structure, just as an English-speaker reaffirms English whenever they speak. Instantiating these unacknowledged rules, individuals in social life are therefore able to act in a coherent manner. They are able to stretch their presence over time and space through a cycle of recurrent routine. In a famous elision, Giddens maintains that this instantiation of rules affirms not only the existence of 'structure' as a set of rules but the social system as well.

> One of the main propositions of structuration theory is that the rules and resources drawn upon in the production and reproduction of social action are at the same time the means of system reproduction (duality of structure).
>
> (Giddens 1995: 19)

There is, in effect, duality of system. Structure, as virtual rules, and system, as institutions, are conveniently conflated in the acting individual, so that individuals reproduce the system (Archer 1982).

Similarly, Bourdieu advocates the concept ofthe habitus as a 'structuring structure' which informs social action often independently of individual consciousness. As a result, the individual engages predictably in the distinctive social practices which are essential to the reproduction of class hierarchies; individuals demonstrate an 'amor fati' where they are drawn inexorably along particular lines of practice in order to sustain the class structure (Bourdieu, 1984: 244). For Schatzki, Giddens's concept of structure, as a 'virtual order of differences', and Bourdieu's definition of the habitus, as a 'structuring structure', are equivalent. In both cases, individuals, as independent agents, apply rules in order to engage in regular social activity, thereby reproducing the social system. The system (as a structure) is reproduced by individuals through the mediation of rules.Stephen Turner (1994) has similarly emphasised the key role which 'practices',not as actions but as tacit rules, play in contemporary social theory.

In fact, the theoretical convergence of structure and agency extends well beyond Giddens and Bourdieu. As Pleasants has discussed (1999), Roy Bhaskar has explicitly drawn a parallel between his ownTransformational Model of Social Action and Giddens' structuration theory. Like structuration theory, TMSA conceives of social reality as consisting of structure and agency. The individuals on Bhaskar's realist model knowingly follow social rules and understandings in order to act meaningfully. Pleasants maintains that Habermas also understands society in terms of a system and autonomous individuals, who enact purposive-rational codes. Yet, even in his description of communicative action, when the distorted communication of the purposive codes is rectified, Habermas' individuals still follow rules. The work of Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar and Habermas is among the most prominent in contemporary social theory but a similar approach to individual rule-following can be detected in work as diverse as Foucault and Luhmann

(King 2004). In each case, as Schatzki, Pleasants and Turner have highlighted, social reality is now widely understood to consist of structure and agency. Individual agency is regulated through the application of rules to facilitate the reproduction of emergent social structures. Rules mediate between the social structure and the individual.

The Sceptical Paradox

'Critical social theorists', like Giddens and Bourdieu, have often drawn upon a false reading of Wittgenstein's comments on rule-following in order to forward the structure and agency paradigm. They have interpreted Wittgenstein's rule-following comments as evidence for their position. Ironically, Ludwig Wittgenstein has been a key resource for critics of this paradigm as well; Pleasants, for instance, attempts 'to show that Wittgenstein's critique of traditional philosophy can be extended – to critical social theory' (Pleasants 1999: 10). Against the interpretation of Wittgenstein's account of rule-following, which Pleasants identifies in contemporary social theory, David Bloor has been prominent in proposing an alternative reading.[1] Bloor maintains that Wittgenstein's later work is primarily motivated by a critique of 'meaning determinism' or 'rule-individualism' (Bloor 1997: 3-4; 1983: 3). According to this approach, words have a singular meaning which defines their use in any situation. Individuals learn this meaning and apply the words accordingly. The meaning acts as a rule which the individually applies in every subsequent case. The philosopher's job is to identify those rules which determine meaning in order to adjudicate on proper linguistic usage, distinguishing sense from nonsense.

For Bloor, one of the prime purposes of *Philosophical Investigations* was to illustrate the fallacy of rule-individualist philosophy. *Philosophical Investigations* focused

[1] Bloor's reading is itself deeply controversial. It is engendered much debate e.g. Lynch 1992, 1993; Kusch 2004. Indeed, Pleasants himself as developed an alternative understanding of the concept of scepticism; proposing that Wittgenstein questions any general sociologically theorising.

on the issue of language use but, according to Bloor, the work has profound significance for the philosophy of the social sciences much more generally. The rule-individualist fallacy is applicable to all forms of rule-following, not just language use; it is relevant to all forms of social practice. The point which Bloor takes as central to later Wittgenstein is that rule-following is a social institution requiring collective understanding and agreement; it cannot be conducted alone. Meaning is finite; limited by established social practice and public agreement. Individuals do not apply rules independently but rather as members of language communities in reference to each other.

In his collaboration with Barry Barnes as they developed their 'strong programme' (e.g. Barnes, Bloor and French 1996), David Bloor has applied the concept of meaning finitism to the question of scientific research to demonstrate that science cannot be characterised as the rational march of logic. Rather, at decisive points in science, researchers reach impasses when it is not clear how to go on; evidence is ambiguous and could be interpreted in a multiplicity of ways. Moreover, there are no criteria to adjudicate between competing evidence claims since the appropriate criteria of judgement are precisely the issue under dispute. At this point, scientists are not guided by the evidence but by social factors; above all, they are guided by the arbitrary (but not random or meaningless) institutional goals which they as a research community have set themselves. These shared goals, not given by natural reality, but by distributions of power and interest with the research community decide ultimately how evidence should be interpreted and indeed what should count as evidence. Science proceeds by a series of 'boot-strapped inductions', where self-referential presumptions, are central to claims about reality (Barnes 1983).

David Bloor's and Barry Barnes' work draws upon and is closely related to Saul

Kripke's celebrated interpretation of the *Philosophical Investigations* (1982). There, Kripke identified the essential argument against an individualistic account of rule-following in a famous paragraph in the *Philosophical Investigations* which has become known as the 'sceptical paradox' (Kripke 1982: 4).

> This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made out to accord with the rules. The answer was: if everything can be made out to accord with the rule, then it can also be made out to conflict with it. And so there would be neither accord nor conflict here.
>
> (Wittgenstein 1976: §201)

For Wittgenstein, the fundamental picture of individual rule-following was flawed. If an individual followed a linguistic rule alone, a myriad of practices could be developed from it. If individuals followed a rule independently, then they could theoretically invest a rule with a multitude of significances. Alternatively, for any specific practice a multitude of rules could be invoked as an explanation. Wittgenstein usefully illustrates his position in a very simple example. *The Philosophical Investigations* is organised as a Socratic dialectic with Wittgenstein engaging with an interlocutor. During the discussion of rule-following, the interlocutor gives a standard account of rule following: 'A rule stands there like a sign-post' (Wittgenstein 1976: §85). Given the existence of a rule, it is self-evident what action is implies. Individuals follow rules, just as they follow a sign-post. Wittgenstein rejects this account; 'Does the sign-post leave no doubt open about the way I have to go? Does it shew which direction I am to take when I have passed it; whether along the road or the footpath or cross-country?' (Wittgenstein 1976: §85). A sign-post has less determination about how a traveller should interpret it, than is typically supposed. The sign-post does not necessarily show the way to go on.

Kripke gives the apparently self-evident example of a mathematical equation: 68+57=125 (Kripke 1982: 8). The rules of addition seem to dictate this answer. However,

this answer does not universally hold. In the past, Kripke could have been 'quusing' rather than adding recording every answer over 57 as 5 (Kripke 1982: 9). In this case 68+57 would be recorded as equalling 5. Kripke's point is that although empirically it is utterly self-evident how to proceed (and the 'quuser' would, he admits, need to be insane or under the influence of LSD), there is always the philosophical possibility that an alternative sequence could be followed. An individual could always theoretically appeal to various contingencies to explain why a rule had been applied in a different way. Indeed, an adder can never prove to the radical sceptic that they were not quusing in the past. That theoretical possibility demonstrates a vital but consistently overlooked fact about rule-following. Individual rule-following could never in and of itself produce regular and predictable action. No matter how self-evident rule-following appears to be, an individual could always theoretically follow even the most apparently rigid rules differently. Philosophically, it is never obvious how a rule should be followed by an individual.

Commentators, like Schatzki and Pleasants, have utilised Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox to reject the rule-following model typical in contemporary social theory. Accordingly, Schatzki and Pleasants assess the central claim that regular social practices can be understood in terms of the application of rules by individuals. Drawing on Wittgenstein, they argue that it is impossible to understand social practices in terms of the application of rules by the individual. They identify two interrelated fallacies of this account.

> Knowing how to go on is a mastery of ways of speaking and acting that defies adequate representation in words, symbols, diagrams or pictures. This fact undermines the claim that practical understanding is being able to apply a formula. (Schatzki 1997: 299)

To illustrate the point, Pleasants gives the example of riding a bicycle where successful riding cannot be reduced merely to following rules by the individual. Although successful

bike-riding might be described as being in 'accordance with a rule' since the cyclist has evidently mastered the problem of balance in line with the laws of gravity, the cyclist's competence cannot be understood as the application of identifiable rules (Pleasants 1996: 247-8). Competent cycling involves a series of social practices developed from the institution of road-using; cyclists should ride of on the left, near the pavement, but should use the centre of the lane when turning right. Yet it would be inadequate to reduce the social competence of cycling to rule-following since, an individual cyclist could interpret these rules differently. The practice of cycling cannot be reduced to rule-following; at best, the concept of rule-following in this case merely re-describes the phenomenon.

Decisively, Schatzki forwards a second line of Wittgensteinian critique which is closely related to Bloor and Kripke's position.

> To begin with, Wittgenstein's discussion of what it is to follow explicit formulations, in particular, his observation that words, etc.., taken by themselves can be systematically followed in indefinitely many ways (1958 sec 86, 139-141) shows that knowing how to go on can be modelled as understanding any formula you please so long as how people apply/follow it is suitably adjusted to match what they actually do. (Schatzki 1997: 299)

However apparently specific the rule, it could always theoretically be applied in a diversity of ways to produce quite random forms of action. For Schatzki and Pleasants, this argument is directly relevant to contemporary social theory. Giddens, Bourdieu, Bhaskar and Habermas, all employ a rule-individualist model; individuals follow rules (variously embodied in structure, habitus or purposive-rational codes) in order to engage in appropriate, system-reproducing action. The model seems plausible, even self-evident. Yet, if agents followed structure, habitus and codes as individuals, the most diverse forms of social practice could follow. In theory, individuals could follow the rules in a diversity of ways. The individual rule-following model provides an inadequate explanation for the

reproduction of the system. There is no reason internal to this approach why individuals should follow rules in common with others. The sceptical paradox demonstrates that the rule-individualism which characterises central currents in contemporarysocial theory is unsustainable. It cannot explain the phenomenon,structural reproduction, for which it is invoked.

The Structure of Social Action

I. Utilitarianism

Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox has been rightly celebrated as a critical resource for theorists today. It represents a profound critique of individualism and it has been extensively drawn upon in current debates about structure and agency. His work has become the preferred reference point. However, although almost completely neglected, it may be possible to show that Wittgenstein's critique was already evident in the work of Talcott Parsons and above all, *The Structure of Social Action*. In order to demonstrate this close – but often ignored - compatibility between Wittgenstein and Parsons, it is necessary to re-consider *The Structure of Social Action* in detail and to read the book against the grain of much current exegesis. In particular, the connection between the sceptical paradox and Parsons' Utilitarian Dilemma needs to be elaborated and, in order to do this, it is vital that the central purpose of *The Structure* is established. The aim here of course is to affirm the kind of reading of *The Structure* proposed by Martindale (1971) and Schutz (1978). They see in *The Structure* the outline of an interactionist or phenomenological approach which prioritises collectively meaningful social action, upon which Parsons eventually reneged. The convergence can be achieved only if this interactionist reading of *The Structure* is

recovered.

The Structure of Social Action has two central goals, as commentators of all theoretical persuasions have noted. Firstly, it aimed to consolidate the philosophical groundings of sociology through tracing a convergence between four major theorists, Marshall, Pareto, Weber and Durkheim (Robertson and Turner 1991). Secondly, to achieve this end, *The Structure of Social Action* was primarily intended as a critique of utilitarian philosophy which Parsons believed was dominant in the social sciences at the time (Robertson and Turner 1991: 4); the work was also intended as a refutation of idealism but utilitarianism was the prime target. Parsons' identification of utilitarianism as the focus of his critique in the *Structure of Social Theory* was perhaps unfortunate and has hindered the reception of the book. Moreover, it obscures the potential connection with Wittgenstein. As Charles Camic has noted (1979), Parsons' interpretation of utilitarianism is an inaccurate account of the works of Bentham and Mill. Effectively, Parsons created a mythology in order to justify an alternative paradigm which he wanted to propound anyway (Camic 1979). Camic has himself been criticized (Gould 1989) and Parsons' strategy may not have been as purely rhetorical as Camic implies, however. Although Parsons employs the term utilitarianism, evidence suggests that, in fact, he referred not specifically to utilitarian philosophy itself but rather more broadly to individualism. Above all, he referred to the philosophical premises of economics with its rational economic actor. In places, Parsons clarified the point: 'We feel that the prominence of this 'individualistic' strain in the treatment of want satisfaction and utility is a relic of history associated with economic theory' (Parsons and Smelser 1956: 23; see Gerhardt 2005: 225). In addition, he also regarded the Darwinian evolutionism of Spencer as implicitly individualist.

> Spencer was an extreme individualist. But his extremism was only the exaggeration of a deep-rooted belief that, stated roughly, at least in the prominent economic

> phase of social life, we have been blest with an automatic, self-regulating mechanism which operated so that the pursuit by each individual of his self-interest and private ends would result in the greatest possible satisfaction of wants of all. (Parsons 1966: 4)

Individualists like Spencer falsely presume that rational individuals will necessarily converge on similar ends. This presumption was Parsons' chief target in the *The Structure*. Indeed, Parsons explicitly identifies his target as individualism in the section, 'The Utilitarian System', in Chapter II. Instructively, he does not discuss Mill or Bentham, but describes, instead, the central place of individualism in 'the Western European intellectual tradition since the Reformation' (Parsons 1966: 52). Indeed, Parsons intriguingly argues that 'probably the primary source of this individualistic cast of European thought lies in Christianity. In an ethical and religious sense, Christianity has always been deeply individualistic' (Parsons 1966: 53). Arising from this cultural heritage, the philosophy which he describes as utilitarianism involves four basic features: 'atomism, rationality, empiricism and randomness of ends will be called in the present study the utilitarian system of social theory' (Parsons 1966: 60). The work of Mill and Bentham could not be so easily characterized by reference to these four features. *The Structure* is, in fact, a critique of individualism and should be read as such.[2] Indeed, Parsons seems to be following Durkheim's critique of utilitarianism which was similarly aimed at individualism (1969). Consequently, and in opposition to Camic, its critique of 'utilitarianism' is not arbitrary, utilized merely as a rhetorical device to justify a new paradigm. The work addresses a major strand in social thought in the early twentieth century. Parsons' voluntaristic theory of action was intended to show, against the dominant individualist paradigm, that social order cannot be explained on an individualist account. Once it is recognised that Parsons

[2] If *The Structure* is read as a critique of individualism, the rejection of idealism becomes more coherent. Idealism is rejected because it represents another strand of individualist thought. On an idealist account, society is not reduced to individual choice but to individual belief. Social reality is defined by what an individual understands it to be. Parsons wanted to exorcise all individualist currents in early twentieth century thought and to focus instead on collective, social action.

rejects individualism, not philosophical utilitarianism in *The Structure*, a rapprochement with Wittgenstein begins to be possible. Like Parsons, Wittgenstein's later philosophy was similarly predicated on a rejection of individualism in relation to language usage and rule-following. The fact that the two theorists addressed a similar problem in their working is important more exegetical work is required.

II. The Unit Act

The Structure of Social Action begins with an analysis of the unit act which is central to the action frame of reference and therefore Parsons' entire theoretical enterprise.

For Parsons, the unit act consists of four elements; 'an actor', 'an end', a 'situation' and 'normative orientation' (Parsons 1966: 44). By normative orientation, Parsons referred to the means which the actor selected in order to achieve the end. Crucially for Parson, the means was a normative phenomenon because it 'must in some sense be subject to the influence of an independent, determinate selective factor' (Parsons 1966: 44). In short, the actor must choose the means on the basis of subjective judgement.

John Holmwood has been one of the most important commentators on the unit act and his interpretation of the act militates against any bridge between Parsons and Wittgenstein; he sees the two approaches as incompatible. Holmwood's perspective must be overcome if the connection between Parsons and Wittgenstein is to be achieved. Holmwood has emphasised that the unit act does not represent a concrete, empirical fact. This would be to fall into the 'fallacy of misplaced concreteness', against which Parsons warned. Rather, according to Holmwood, the unit act is purely analytic. It is a useful theoretical fiction which does not have existence in reality. Isolated units do not exist and

cannot be identified. Rather the systems of which they are part have concrete existence: 'action systems have properties that are emergent only on a certain level of complexity in the relations of unit acts to each other. These properties cannot be identified in any single unit act considered apart from its relation to others in the same system. They cannot be derived by a process of direct generalisation of the properties of the unit act" (1966: 739). The system is an organic whole out of which singular unit acts are constituted and co-ordinated; 'the very definition of an organic whole is one within which the relations determine the properties of its parts. The properties of the whole are not simply a resultant of the latter' (1966: 32). Crucially, the system is united as an organic whole through the functional interrelations of its parts. As evidence of this interpretation of *The Structure*, John Holmwood argues that: 'Explanation…consists in generalising the conceptual scheme so as to bring out the functional relations in the facts already descriptively arranged' (1966: 49). On the basis of this evidence, Holmwood claims that 'the idea of emergent properties of systems of social action is at the heart of how Parsons approached the "problem of order". Action occurs in systems and these systems have an orderly character' (Holmwood 2006a: 8; 2006b:141-2). Although common culture is identified as important, Holmwood also maintains that power and coercion are fundamental to Parsons' explanation of the social system. According to Holmwood, Parsons is a structural theorists for whom the system, sustained by power, coercion and common values, is orderly. The critical question for sociology, is how the orderly system harmonises its constituent and 'analytical' units acts into a coherent whole.

Holmwood's reading is compelling in itself and, certainly, in the final chapter of *The Structure*, Parsons does begin to describe the social system as an institutional structure, of the kind to which Holmwood alludes. Moreover, Holmwood's reading unifies Parsons'

corpus into a single logical project. Throughout his early, middle and late periods, on this reading, Parsons always prioritised the social system as an organic functional whole in which unit acts should be situated; they were dependent empirically and explanatorily on the social whole. The problem here is that on this reading of *The Structure*, Parsons is plainly incompatible with Wittgenstein. Parsons was a system theorist from the outset, always dedicated to generalising theories of the kind which the later Wittgenstein disparaged. Parsons was never really interested in collective practice, action or understanding; rather he was a dedicated structuralist from the outset. As Holmwood has repeatedly and cogently emphasised (1996), Parsons, cannot, on this reading, be seen as an antidote to the dualistic tendencies of contemporary social theory (as I currently propose) but, on the contrary, as a progenitor of precisely the flawed dualistic generalising which is now so widespread. In order to continue with the project of reconciling Parsons with Wittgenstein – and using Parsons to reject contemporary social theory - it is necessary to propose an alternate interpretation of the unit act and therefore *The Structure* itself.

The benefits of Holmwood's reading are clear but it is not necessary to read the unit act in this way. Indeed, there are evident difficulties with Holmwood's interpretation. Firstly, it is far from clear that Holmwood's interpretation of the unit act as a merely analytical fiction is correct. Parsons states that the unit act can be employed at two different levels; 'the "concrete" and the "analytical". On the concrete level by a unit act is meant a concrete, actual act and by its 'elements' are meant the concrete entities that make it up' (Parsons 1966: 48). Unit acts are concrete empirical events, potentially independent of any system; 'the "smallest" unit which can be conceived of as concretely existing by itself is the "unit act"' (Parsons 1966: 737). Indeed Parsons uses the example of a student handing in a paper to illustrate the unit act as a concrete event. Parsons defines his unit acts as

analytic rather than concrete for a number of different reasons. Firstly, he is not interested in explaining concrete historical acts; his project is to isolate the fundamental basis of all human action in order to establish sociology philosophically. Parsons wants to develop 'a theoretical system built up upon observations of fact' (Parsons 1966: 9) which will then have general relevance for all empirical analysis. The unit act takes an infinite number of forms but it is fundamental constituted by these four elements. Moreover, unlike the natural science, the 'concrete unit act' has some distinctive analytical features. It is possible to break physical material down into atoms; Parsons gives the example of a bridge which might be reduced to iron atoms (Parsons 1966: 47). The unit act has a different status. Its four elements represent a unity which cannot, in sociological terms, be divided because the conditions of action are partly defined by the normative orientation of the actor; the conditions cannot be separated from what actors take to be the conditions of action, unlike the organism and environment in biology. The unit act is analytical because it represents the smallest identifiable element of social action which sociology can recognise.

Holmwood is completely correct that the relationship between the unit act and the system was a critical question for Parsons; Parsons notes that the question of the relation between the 'particular concrete actor' and 'a total action system including a plurality of actors will be of cardinal importance' (Parsons 1966:50-51). However, it is not at all clear that the passage, which Holmwood's cites (1966: 739), demonstrates the ontological dependence of the unit act on the system, and therefore, Holmwood's claims about the act's purely analytical status. Indeed, Parsons' himself described the relationship between the unit act and the emergent system of which it is part as 'a methodological problem' (Parsons 1966: 740). This is clear in the opening chapter of the work. In initiating the work with the unit act, Parsons consciously sought to begin from a premise which he shared with

utilitarianism. Utilitarianism was also based on the unit act. The central difference between the individualism of utilitarianism and the sociology which Parsons advocated was that Parsons sought to explain how the unit acts were coordinated in order to produce a 'system of ends': the unification of a plurality of actors. *The Structure* did not presume that there was an already extant system which defined and co-ordinated unit acts, as Holmwood suggests. Rather, the work sought to demonstrate how potentially diverse unit acts are eventually unified around common goals in order to produce social order; that is, to generate and sustain a system (of ends). Indeed, although Parsons recognised that a social whole transcended its parts, he did not in *The Structure*, at least, invest this whole (the system of ends) with an ontological status distinct from the unit acts of which it was comprised. 'to one actor, non-normative means and conditions are explicable in part, at least, only in terms of the normative elements of the actions of others in the system' (Parsons 1966: 50). The system consists, in the end, of a multitude of actor and unit acts. A multiplicity of unit acts – which collectively constituted a system – was fundamentally different from a single act and once formed such an organic system influenced what kind of unit acts could be performed. Nevertheless, the system of ends was ultimately just many interrelated unit acts. The fundamental problem for sociology, so far as Parsons was concerned was explaining how this diversity of unit acts could be harmonised into a system, whose powers as a unity transcended the acts of which it was comprised. Signally, for Parsons, although utilitarianism was founded on the concept of the unit act, as was his own approach, its conception of that act vitiated any explanation of the existence of this system of ends. A unit act defined in terms of atomism, rationality, empiricism and randomness of ends could not begin to provide an explanation of social order.

III. The Utilitarian Dilemma

In the famous discussion of utilitarian philosophy, Parsons examined the first formulation of this problem of order in Hobbes' *Leviathan* and, from there, traced the various ways that modern philosophers had attempted to solve the problem of social order; that is, how they explained the co-ordination of unit acts (Parsons 1966, pp.90-125). Parsons began with the work of Hobbes not only because Hobbes was one of the first prominent modern political philosophers to grapple with the problem of grounding social order in rational, self-interested individuals but, according to Parsons, 'Hobbes' system of social theory is almost a pure case of utilitarianism' (Parsons 1966: 90). For Parsons, 'Hobbes saw the problem with a clarity which has never been surpassed and his statement of it remains valid today' (Parsons 1966: 93). The problem was that once the definition of humans as rational, self-interested and autonomous individuals was accepted, the creation of social order became inexplicable (Parsons 1966: 93). In the end, Hobbes could only explain the creation of order out of the state of nature by appealing to the concept of Leviathan, the absolute sovereign, thereby contradicting the premises of utilitarianism. The Leviathan denied individuals any autonomy whatsoever. Parsons traces the same failure to overcome the Hobbesian problem in the works of Locke (Parsons, 1966: 96-7), Malthus (Parsons 1966: 103-7), Godwin (Parsons 1966: 111-115), nineteenth century evolutionary theory and Marx (with less success) (Parsons 1966: 109-110).

Parsons brilliantly noticed that the attempt to explain social order from the premise of rational, autonomous actors led to two unacceptable theoretical positions, which he called the 'utilitarian dilemma'.

> Either the active agency of the actor in the choice of ends is an independent factor in action, and the end element must be random; or the objectionable implication of randomness is denied, but then their independence disappears and they are assimilated to the conditions of the situation, that is to elements analyzable in terms

> of non-subjective categories, principally heredity and environment, in the analytical sense of biological theory. (Parsons 1966: 64)

If individuals really were rational and free as utilitarianism claimed, then the action of diverse individuals could never be coordinated. Their choices would remain random and no regular social intercourse could take place.There is no reason why independent individuals should pursue a common notion of utility. On the contrary, independent individuals would define their interests differently; they would pursue these diverse interests autonomously in any number of alternate ways. They could not and would not be able to co-operate with each other since each had objectives quite different from the other. It would be quite irrational for independent agents to collaborate. On a utilitarian account, social order would be impossible as individuals randomly pursue their own ends.

The utilitarian dilemma is a conceptual critique of individualism. It identifies the central contradiction of individualist thought. If human society consisted of individuals who were genuinely rational and independent, then, each individual could at any moment choose an alternative course of action. Predictable and repeatable action would be impossible; there could be no social order. If individuals chose their normative orientation in the unit act independently, then they would select a diversity of ends and means. They would not unite around common ends but each, consulting their own subjective judgement, would pursue their own independent interests in their own way. There would be no system of coordinated ends but mere randomness. Parsons' does not discuss rules as such, but his 'utilitarians' (individualists) replicate the same fallacy as Wittgenstein's philosophers and his argument, therefore, accords with the sceptical paradox. For Parsons, individualism can logically lead only to randomness ofends; individuals would always choose their own ends. Individuals could not co-operate because there is no reason why independent agents

would follow pursue ends in common. Indeed, there would be significant motivations to follow their own interests and to act in ways most convenient and beneficial to them. Rational independent individuals would seek to free-ride and renege upon others and, consequently, it would be irrational to try and share ends. Co-ordinated social action would not occur; social order would be an impossibility. Similarly, for Wittgenstein, individualist premises can never produce coherent rule-following; individuals, referencing only their own practice, could apply the same rule in an infinite number of ways. For both Parsons and Wittgenstein, coherent social action cannot be explained by reference to individuals independently choosing courses of action. The first horn of Parsons' utilitarian dilemma bears a close resemblance to the sceptical paradox. In both, individualism is incapable of explaining coherent social practice.

The utilitarian dilemma has been applauded as an ingenious critique of individualism but, like the sceptical paradox, the dilemma can be equally well applied to contemporary social theory. Indeed, in the work of Giddens and Bhaskar, the problem of coordination immanent to their individualist approach is explicitly recognised. Bhaskar and Giddens expend much effort in describing the structural pressures which channel individual action. However, at certain critical points in their writing, Bhaskar and Giddens assert that in any circumstance 'the individual could have acted otherwise' (Giddens 1976: 75; Bhaskar 1979: 114); individuals are always free to choose. Giddens and Bhaskar introduce this caveat in order to counter any suggestion of structural determinism. Giddens, in particular, wants to avoid any 'derogation of the lay actor'. The emphasis on the individual usefully illustrates their position. Yet, Giddens and Bhaskar conveniently ignore the decisive theoretical implications of their individualism even though it is critical. If individuals are always free to do otherwise, then, theoretically, they can apply rules in any

way they chose. At any point, whatever the structural factors which confronted them, they could reasonably act in ways which were incompatible with social expectations. They could follow rules differently. Yet, in this case, the existing of a stable social system and its reproduction are fundamentally compromised. Ultimately, the social system is sustained by mere serendipity; individuals luckily choose to follow the rules in the same way. Giddens and Bhaskar illustrate the relevance of the utilitarian (or, more accurately, 'individualist') dilemma to contemporary social theory. They demonstrate precisely the fallacy of individualist accounts. The reproduction of the social system which these approaches presume reduces the process to individual voluntarism. On a voluntary basis, it is ultimately mere luck that individuals all choose to follow the rules in the same way.

Of course, it is not absolutely impossible that social order could develop from random and free individual choices. It is theoretical possible that individuals could follow rules in the same way independently of each other. Yet, since the reproduction of major social institutions involves a multitude of actors and acts, it is almost inconceivable that it could plausibly be explained by reference merely to independent, individual choice. In this way, as a result of their individualism, Giddens and Bhaskar impale themselves on the first horn of Parsons' utilitarian dilemma. On the presumption of individual autonomy, individuals would logically choose to follow their own ends; there is no factor inherent in this theoretical perspective that explains why individuals would co-ordinate their ends. That coherence is merely asserted and assumed. In fact, the randomness of ends follows logically from the premise of voluntarism or atomism. Like Parsons' utilitarians, contemporary social theorists, such as Giddens, cannot account for the very phenomenon of systemic reproduction of which they purport to provide an explanation.

Wittgenstein and Parsons have compatible critiques of individualism. However, at

this point, although Wittgenstein's critique of individualist accounts is far more developed philosophically, Parsons begins to transcend Wittgenstein in relation to current debates in social theory. In particular, Parsons recognizes that individualists are necessarily driven to the other horn of the utilitarian dilemma in their attempts to explain social order. In order to explain the co-ordination of ends, utilitarians (individualists) have, therefore, postulated the existence of some external factor which impresses itself upon individuals to direct their choices: 'The only alternative on a positivistic basis in the explanation of action lies in the conditions of the situation of action objectively rather than subjectively considered' (Parsons 1966: 67). In appealing to external conditions, utilitarians import a factor into their theory not originally envisaged by their premises. Typically, they appeal to the environment or heredity (biology), not originally included in utilitarian premises. More seriously, in appealing to objective factors to co-ordinate individual ends, utilitarianism is forced to contradict its premise of individual autonomy. In order for individuals to converge on shared ends, they must be determined by their biology or their environment. It is certainly true that individuals would no longer choose randomly under this external pressure; their choices would be co-ordinated to the same ends. Social order would then possible but only at the cost of individual autonomy. Utilitarianism must either assume that rational individuals are themselves determined by objective factors and, therefore, not independent or the autonomy of individuals is maintained, their choices are random and social order remains inexplicable.

Although it is rarely recognized, a similar dynamic is evident in contemporary social theory. Contemporary social theorists recognise the problem of voluntarism and, consequently, while asserting the independence of the agent, they simultaneously and contradictorily assert the dependence of the actor on prior conditions. Actors may be free to

do otherwise but they are constrained by structural conditions; institutional factors limit their actions.

Indeed, despite their appeal to voluntarism, neither Giddens nor Bhaskar presume that the social system could be a product merely of free choice as their claim, that the individual is always free to do otherwise, implies. Giddens and Bhaskar implicitly recognise the invalidity of their individual rule-following accounts. Both finally appeal to other factors which influence individual rule-following; they recognise structural constraint. Giddens, for instance, posits the internalisation of virtual orders of difference which pattern individual practice. According to Giddens, the virtual order of differences which individuals have internalised, at least partly unknowingly, patterns action independently of individual consciousness. Just as humans are able to speak without understanding linguistic structures, they are able to act appropriately without fully understanding the structures which pattern their actions. Although Giddens continually denies the implications of his approach, structuration theory involves determination at decisive points. Similarly, Bhaskar disparages Winch's interpretivism and insists that some aspects of society are not reducible to participants' understanding; 'the *conditions* for phenomena (namely social activities as conceptualized in experience) exist *intransitively* and may therefore exist independently of their appropriate conceptualization' (Bhaskar, 1979:66). Bhaskar emphasises the ontological autonomy of these intransitive aspects of society. Bhaskar claims that;

> There is more to coping with social reality than coping with other people. There is coping with a whole host of social entities, including institutions, traditions, networks of relations and the like – which are irreducible to people
>
> (Bhaskar, 1991:71)

For instance, 'being in prison or fighting in a war is not just (or even perhaps necessarily) possessing a certain idea of what one is doing' (Bhaskar, 1979:174). On a realist model,

emergent properties impose upon individuals with structural force, compelling them into certain forms of action independently of their understanding.

This oscillation is particularly obvious in the work of Bourdieu where he describes a highly deterministic social theory but then denies the implications of this determinism. For instance, when questioned by Loic Wacquant about the criticisms made about the determinism of his habitus, Bourdieu has simply denied this determinism.

> LW: You thus reject the deterministic schema sometimes attributed to you with the formula 'structures produce habitus, which determine practices, which produce structures…that is, the idea that position in structure directly determines social strategy.
>
> Circular and mechanical models of this kind are precisely what the notion of habitus is designed to help us destroy. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p.134)

Bourdieu sees the habitus as allowing room for slippage so that it mediates between structure and individual practice, heavily constraining social action but not definitively determining it. Bourdieu effectively claims that sometimes individuals are determined and sometimes they are not. Bourdieu glosses over the critical issue to slide, as it suits him, from voluntarism to determinism. He is a perfect example of precisely the individualist social theorists which Parsons rejected in 1937.

Contemporary social theorists are caught on the horns of a theoretical dilemma. Either they assert that individuals are always free to do otherwise or that structures condition them so that at least for some even a substantial part of the time, their actions are determined. As Parsons emphasised, both sides of this dilemma are equally objectionable. One on side, the existence of stable social institutions is inexplicable because individuals would randomly choose a variety of ends. On the other, human understanding is eliminated in favour of a mechanistic causal model. Contemporary social theory has not advanced

significantly beyond the individualist tradition, which Parsons rejected in the first half of the twentieth century. Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox has constituted a rich resource for critics of contemporary social theory and, certainly, this paradox ably captures the individualist fallacies of current approaches. However, in purely sociological terms, Parsons' utilitarian dilemma represents a more comprehensive critique of the current structure and agency debates. It incorporates the critique of individualism which is implicit in the sceptical paradox but also highlights the determinist route along which theorists are necessarily driven to escape the problem of voluntarism. Parsons represents a fuller critique of current problems in social theory.

Beyond Individualism

I. Forms of Life

There is a surprising convergence between Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox and Parsons's utilitarian dilemma. Significantly, the way in which Wittgenstein and Parsons overcame the contradictions of individualist philosophy are also closely compatible. Wittgenstein recognised the fact that since coherent language-use occurred, there must be some phenomenon, not recognised by analytic philosophy, which allowed a word to gain a meaning in particular contexts. Famously, Wittgenstein claimed that co-ordinated rule-following could be understood only so long as philosophy recognised the centrality of 'forms of life' to human existence: 'What has to be accepted, the given, is – so one could say – *forms of life'* (Wittgenstein 1976: 226). The 'form of life' is a critical concept in Wittgenstein's later philosophy. Thus, he describes the form of life as the point at which 'I have reached bedrock, and my spade is turned' (Wittgenstein 1976: §217) or that 'we come down to conventions' (Wittgenstein 1989: 24). Wittgenstein is less than clear about what,

precisely, he means by the form of life. Indeed, David Bloor has emphasised the fragmentariness of Wittgenstein's work; 'I cannot escape the fact that as a sociological thinker he has only left incomplete fragments. For example, he told us in the *Investigations* that to follow a rule was an institution, but he did not spell out what he took an institution to be (see Wittgenstein, 1967: 199). Here we have a profound and suggestive insight but one that was not properly worked out' (Bloor 2004: 594). Bloor here discusses rules but his comments might be equally well applied to the concept of the form of life. Given its apparent importance to Wittgenstein's later writings, it is hopelessly underdeveloped. Nevertheless, despite Wittgenstein's elipticism, many commentators have proposed an at least plausible interpretation. They have correlated the explicit comments about the form of life with Wittgenstein's invocation of 'usage' (Wittgenstein 1976: §196 and §43) to conclude that the concept of the 'form of life' refers to concrete social practices: 'for Wittgenstein 'social practices are not, as they are in structuration theory, 'mediating movement between two traditionally established dualisms in social theory. It is important to notice that Wittgenstein does not use the notion of practice as a superior kind of explanation, but rather, as a means which brings explanation to an end' (Pleasants 1996: 240). In order to engage in social practice, participants have to unify themselves around a collective understanding of what they are trying to achieve. Shared understandings become a co-ordinating point of reference for all the members of this group which allows them to go on. Participants understand their own and others' acts by reference to these established understanding and it is on the basis of the meaningfulness of an act, in relation to these collective understandings that an act is described as rule-following or not. The collective understandings of the group which generate established patterns of practice render certain

kinds of action meaningful and therefore, definable as rule-following. Crucially, the spade is turned at the point of 'conventions' or shared understandings because these understandings are self-referential. The way participants define their collective practices is actually constitutive of them.

II. Common Values

Parsons' language dissuades readers from seeing any connection between Wittgenstein's form of life and the arguments in *The Structure of Social Action*. Yet, a sociological concept, equivalent to the concept of the 'form of life' in definition and role, is evident in *The Structure*. The purpose of *The Structure of Social Action* is to show that a social theory capable of explaining the manifest fact of social order must transcend utilitarianism. At this point, Parsons invokes Kant's transcendental argument.[3] Kant argued that given the fact of experience it was possible to deduce the existence of a priori mental categories which made this experience possible. By extension, in *The Structure*, Parsons sought to identify some prior fact, ignored by utilitarianism, which made social order possible. For Parsons, social order can be explained only by reference to the existence of shared values. Common normative orientations provide the transcendental conditions for social order.

> A society can only be subject to a legitimate order, and therefore can be on a non-biological level something other than a balance of power of interests, only in so far as there are *common* value attitudes in the society. (Parsons 1966: 670; also Parsons 1966: 392)

Social order is possible only insofar as participants have common values; they share an understanding of their common interests and goals. Yet, this agreement cannot be imposed externally independently of participants' understandings; they have to recognise their goals and understand what actions they imply. Social action can occur only if it is 'voluntaristic'.

[3] Munch (1982) has done most to demonstrate Parsons' Kantianism; Rocher has emphasized the point (1974: ix).

There has been extensive debate about the meaning of the concept 'voluntaristic' and it is necessary to recognise what Parsons means by the term in order to understand the significance of the concept of common values. Joas, for instance, has argued that the term 'voluntaristic' refers to individual goal attainment in the action-frame of reference. Consequently, it is a return to precisely the utilitarian individualism which *The Structure* aimed to overcome (Joas 1996: 157-8). Yet, 'voluntaristic', here, does not have to be interpreted as meaning that individuals are free to choose any end which suits them. By voluntaristic, Parsons means not that individuals are free of all social constraint to choose to contribute to group ends or not as they please but, rather, that participants have to understand the significance of common values in order that they can commit themselves to them.

In a letter to Frank Knight as early as 23 January 1933, which Camic has described as a 'master key to Parsons's thinking' (Camic 1991: lv), Parsons was already explicit about the crucial role of understanding in any sociological explanation: 'the social sciences cannot evade as all behaviourists try to a) the problem of the "subjective";…b) the problem of the relations of ends and purposes both to the "ideal" sphere of "objective mind", hence its role in conduct. In [this] the social sciences have a claim to be dealing with realities at least as ultimate as, at least as well attested as any "physical world"' (Camic 1991: lx). The letter gives us an important insight into the concept of 'voluntaristic' in Parsons' work. Shared understandings exist independently of any particular individual to have a decisive influence over individual action. Individuals in society do not independently develop their own understanding of themselves or their goals as they please. However, neither do shared values impose on humans independently of their consciousness, therefore. Participants have to understand what the common values, which they accept, collectively enjoin. These

values are collectively meaningful to them. However, humans are born into social groups and, consequently, there are many (even a majority of) cases where individuals have no choice about the common values to which they orient themselves; the values have 'objective existence'. The group, of which they are members or want to become members, is already committed to established goals, co-ordinated by long-held common values. Yet, even then, humans must understand what those common goals are and what actions the group's values demand of them. Parsons seemed to have used the term voluntaristic rather than voluntary in order to communicate this difference between merely subjectively held opinions and collectively shared beliefs and values. Since all social action requires human understanding, Parsons calls it as voluntaristic. It requires the conscious understanding of group members about what their common values imply.

It is important to be clear about what common values are and, in particular, to avoid the common mistake of presuming that they are merely abstract norms. Many critics have made precisely this error. Wrong (1961) and Gouldner (1970) have criticised Parsons' concept of norms as referring to ungrounded moral imperatives. For these critics, individuals in Parsons' work are 'oversocialised'; they are motivated by communal values rather than individual need, consciousness and strategy. Individuals are too consensual and unrealistically self-less on this model. Cohen, Hazelrigg and Pope have famously rounded on Parsons' concept of normative orientation and have argued that his use of Weber to prioritize norms is opportunistic (Cohen *et al.* 1975: 231). Weber's sociology is not limited to values but recognises that 'factual regularities of subjectively meaningful behaviour… could result from a variety of conditions…habituation, wage, customs…self-interest' (Cohen *et al* 1975: 240); that is 'non-normative elements' (Cohen *et al.* 1975: 240). Although Parsons uses the perhapsunfortunate term 'common values', Parsons's

voluntaristic theory of action is not simply about norms, as general ethical principles. On the contrary, in *The Structure of Social Action*, common value attitudes were indivisible from action – and specifically from collective, social action, as the title of his work implies. Indeed, in his reply to Cohen *et al.*, Parsons emphasised the point. He recognised that Weber did not reduce social reality to norms. However, on his reading, normative orientations (different forms of rationality) were constitutive of the historically diverse institutions which Weber studied (Parsons 1976: 362). Decisively, Parsons described common values as 'binding commitments' for participants which are 'crucial for stable legitimate orders and institutions… and also for customs and usages' (Parsons 1976: 362) Parsons refers to precisely those activities – customs and usages - which Cohen *et al* accuse him of ignoring. This allows for a quite different reading of Parsons. In order to engage in coherent social practice, including these customs and usages from which arise major social institutions, participants need to unite themselves around a common concept of means and ends; they need to share values. Victor Lidz has affirmed the point: 'When he did treat values as important causal factors, he had in mind institutions that are structural to society, not just personal values judgments of individuals' (Lidz 1989: 571). Parsons' values are then inseparable from social action; they are constitutive of them. Indeed, even in the earliest discussion of the unit act, he emphasised this point, describing the organic role which the normative orientation played in uniting the act. Common values represent bedrock for Parsons, at which point his spade is turned, but common values are not mere ideals; they refer to the concrete social actions constituted by the shared understandings of participants. In this way, Parsons' common values and Wittgenstein's forms of life are closely compatible concepts, displacing individual rationality with collective practice.

III. Honour and Shame

Wittgenstein's pointed to the fruitful concept of the form of life but he never began to address the sociological question of why humans make such prodigious efforts to participate in collective activities or to abide by their conventions rather than choose individualistic courses of action. He never began to explore why the shared understandings which humans recognise become obliging to them, even at great inconvenience to themselves. It is here that Parsons begins to transcend Wittgenstein sociologically. He offers a sociological explanation of why individuals adhere to common values – or forms of life. Crucially, Parsons identifies the mechanisms of honour and shame which are central to human social interaction.

The significance of honour and shame emerges in Parsons' discussion of the moral obligation imposed by accepting common values. Although the establishment of common values and goals requires a conscious act of understanding, shared norms imply moral obligation; adherence to them is not an individual matter of choice (Parsons 1966: 383-4). Using Durkheim's famous discussion of Kant's concept of the categorical imperative (Durkheim 1965), Parsons describes the mutually obligatory nature of social life.

> A moral rule is not moral unless it is accepted as obligatory, unless the attitude towards it is quite different from expediency. But at the same time it is also not truly moral unless obedience to it is held to be desirable, unless the individual's happiness and self-fulfilment are bound up with it. Only the combination of these two elements gives a complete account of the nature of morality.
>
> (Parsons 1966: 387)

The members of a social group must abide by its morals, even if it is against their immediate self-interest. Distinctively, however, these rules are not imposed upon group members unwillingly. On the contrary, as Parsons notes, an 'individual's happiness and self-fulfilment' are dependent upon their abiding by these morals. In fact, Parsons' writing

is somewhat unfortunate in *The Structure* since he potentially individualises Durkheim's point, referring to Freudian processes of internalization (Parsons 1966: 388). There is a danger here than moral rules become expedient once again. He implies that individuals abide by them because their obedience made them individually happy. If individual happiness was the key criteria of morality, this is little safeguard, as Kant recognized, because it might make an individually equally or even more happy to fail to abide by a moral. For Durkheim, individuals did not abide by morals because it gratified them personally; he was in complete agreement with Kant's deontological position. Self-fulfillment was not an internal good generated independently by actors; self-fulfillment was itself a collective good dependent upon the group. For Durkheim, individuals were able to feel happy and fulfilled insofar as their conduct was approved by their fellow group members. Humans feel fulfilled in so far as they are held in esteem by their group; these 'collective sentiments' explained 'the characteristic of sacredness which is attributed to moral facts' (Durkheim 1965: 38). This desire for collective recognition then explains the curiously visceral force of moral injunctions (against Kant's abstract rationalism). People commit themselves to the shared goals of their group and are held to those goals because approbation from their fellows is a tangible good in itself, inspiring contentment and pleasure, while the disdain of colleagues is viewed with dread.

Parsons does not explore the further point sufficiently, focusing only the individual motivation to adhere to the collective goals of the group. However, the desire for honour and aversion to shame plays a fundamental role in social interaction. Critically, members of social groups gain manifest collective benefits. By co-operating with others, individuals are able to enjoy goods which would be impossible for them to create alone. Historically, groups have provided their members with food, shelter, economic opportunities,

companionship, entertainment and security which individuals could never enjoy alone. However, these collective benefits involve enforceable obligations on those who would be group members. Group members' access to the collective goods of the group is substantially a function of the esteem in which they are held by the group. Consequently, the higher the honour in which a person is held, the greater their access to the collective benefits produced by co-operation, while shame will lead to limited access and finally to exclusion; group members will not co-operate with a shamed individual. On this account, the threat of randomness of ends is obviated because participants are compelled to orient themselves to common goals. They are forced to co-operate. Certainly, they can still refuse to co-operate and pursue their own individualistic course but, in so doing, they subject themselves to serious and, perhaps, disastrous sanctions; they are excluded. At the same time, the danger of objectivism is also avoided because individuals must understand the significance of their common values and the ends to which they point. Moreover, the compulsion to co-operate does not derive from external objective factors but from the group itself whose members mutually monitor each others' activities, interpreting whether participants contribute to the collective good. Social order is dependent on participants' shared understandings of the group's collective goals. Yet, groups have powerful mechanisms of shame and honour which sustain and, indeed, enforce co-operation.

Once common values are interpreted in this way, Martindale's claim, that Parsons was a 'social behaviourist', and Schutz's argument, that Parsons failed to sustain his original commitment to subjective meaning displayed in *The Structure*, become clear. More specifically, read in this way, it becomes possible to build a bridge between the early Parsons and later Wittgenstein. Underpinning all forms of social action are the shared understandings of the participants which allows them to unite, co-operate and co-ordinate

themselves. On this account, Parsons is not an abstract systems theorist, as he would later become. On the contrary, he proposes a form of sociology compatible with the interactionist tradition, found originally in Durkheim. He is concerned with elucidating the conditions in which coherent social practice is possible. His answer is that social action is possible so long as participants develop shared understandings. Once understood in these terms, the unlikely connection between Parsons and Wittgenstein can begin to be recognised. Wittgenstein similarly rejected philosophers' 'craving for generality' in favour of the analysis of concrete language games and specific word usage. However, not only did Parsons provided an account of social reality – and the way it should be studied, commensurate with Wittgenstein, but he provided an explanation of why humans would be motivated to engage in collective enterprises. He identified the bed-rock of human social existence; a fundamental requirement and drive to co-operate with others, impelled by social mechanisms of honour and shame.

Conclusion

In current debates in social theory, Ludwig Wittgenstein has proved to be an immensely fertile intellectual resource. His later work on rule-following has informed both the widely espoused structure and agency paradigm and, interestingly, been the source for the critics of this paradigm. For commentators, like Schatzki, Pleasants and Turner, the sceptical paradox has been utilised to demonstrate that coherent social reality could not exist on the presumptions of structure and agency. Rule-following can never delimit a social practice and were individual action to be limited merely to rule-following, no coherent practice would be possible. Wittgenstein's influence has been prodigious. Yet this influence has come at a cost as other intellectual sources and traditions have been ignored. The work of

Talcott Parsons is the prime example here. The academy has been afflicted by collective 'amnesia' (Gould 1989: 649). It has forgotten Parsons. This amnesia has been deeply detrimental to sociology. Holmwood's argument (1996) might be revised to claim that, precisely because they have forgotten early Parsons, contemporary social theorists are condemned to repeat the errors of the generalising theory which typified Parsons' middle and later periods; they remain trapped within the structure and agency paradigm.

The Structure of Social Action features a critique of individualist social thought which is closely compatible with Wittgenstein's sceptical paradox. The utilitarian dilemma is less elaborated philosophically but as a tool for rejecting individualism, it follows the same argument as the paradox. Moreover, the utilitarian dilemma and the argument, which develops from it, have evident sociological advantages over Wittgenstein. Parsons recognised that individualist theories necessarily oscillated to an unsustainable determinism in order to explain social order. This oscillation is directly relevant to contemporary social theory where an often furtive, ambiguous appeal to determinism appears at convenient points in the argument. Alternatively, in some cases, contemporary theorists actively disparage individual consciousness and commit themselves to social determinism. The sociological superiority of Parsons does not stop here.

Against individualising theories, both Wittgenstein and Parsons recognise the distinctive nature of social action. In order to engage in coherent activity, humans unify themselves around shared understandings; they unite around a common definition of what they are trying to achieve. Once this common agreement in a form of life or around common values is recognised, social action can be comprehended without a retreat into individualism or the derogation of the lay actor. Decisively, and quite absent from Wittgenstein's interests, Parsons tries to explain why individuals would orient themselves

to shared understandings and be obligated to act in a way which is accordance with them. Humans require collective goods created by the groups of which they are members; access to those collective goods is monitored by other participants in terms of honour and shame. Consequently, out of fear of exclusion, humans are obligated to abide by the norms to which they agree; they are compelled to engage in coherent social practice. In *the Structure of Social Action*, Parsons declared that, 'It is hoped, in transcending the positivist-idealist dilemma, to show a way of transcending also the old individualism-society organism or, as it is often called, social nominalism-realism dilemma which has plagued social theory to so little purpose for so long' (Parsons 1966a: 74). It would be possible to replace the phrase 'individualism-society organism' with structure and agency and to claim that, with his voluntaristic theory of action, he had, in fact, achieved his goal. It has taken sociologists sixty years and the intervention of Wittgenstein to realize it.

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