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**Parsons, Behavioralism,
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Notion of Responsibility**

by

Walter B. Roettger

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Parsons, Behavioralism, and the Notion of Responsibility

by

Walter B. Roettger *

. . . it is immensely moving when a mature man. . . is aware of a responsibility for the consequences of his conduct and really feels such responsibility with heart and soul. He then acts by following an ethic of responsibility and somewhere he reaches the point where he says: 'Here I stand; I can do no other.' That is something genuinely human and moving.

— Max Weber ¹

I. INTRODUCTION.

This essay proceeds from the assumption that social theory is both a cultural product and that it has implications for political behavior within that culture. To borrow the phraseology of Alvin Gouldner

. . . all social theory is immersed in a sub-theoretical level of domain assumptions and sentiments which both liberate and constrain it. This sub-theoretical level is shaped by and shared with the larger culture and society, at least to some extent, as well as being individually organized, accented, differentiated, and charged by personal experience in the world. ²

Social theory, then, does not take place in a vacuum, but reflects an intellectual concern for features of the social fabric which have become problematic: social theory is problem-solving. But to say this is to recognize that the impact of theory cannot be restricted to the academic world but must ramify throughout the society. By defining the limits and possibilities of human conduct, by interpreting the nature of human interaction, and by identifying and conceptualizing societal problems, theory serves to shape our self-images and expectations of one another as well as of the various institutions of the social system.

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¹ "Politics as a Vocation," in H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1946), 127.

² *The Coming Crisis of Western Sociology* (New York: Avon Books, 1971), 46.

Moreover, issues do not simply "become problematic" at random. The social scientist's role in identifying "problems" must reflect his own beliefs as well as those of the culture of which he is a part. Certain issues will be transient; others will be recurring or "perennial" questions which are, along with a repertoire of responses, transmitted as part of the cultural tradition.

One such "perennial question" is the problem of order, to which the responses have been as diverse as they have been legion. In particular, one of the more recent and novel approaches within the Western cultural tradition has been to locate within the individual members of the society a certain capacity for assuming political obligations or for acknowledging and heeding various responsibilities to act in a more-or-less well defined fashion. In short, the idea of "responsibility" has served as a linguistic rubric for a set of interrelated assumptions, concepts, and theories for describing and prescribing, understanding and predicting human conduct.

In a like fashion, behavioralism, particularly as it has been explicated by Talcott Parsons, may be understood as a response to the problem of order in a volitional setting. Parsons' contributions to behavioralism have been nothing short of seminal. Gouldner, scarcely a friend of Parsonian theory, states flatly that

. . . it is Parsons who, more than any other contemporary social theorist, has influenced and captured the attention of academic sociologists, and not only in the United States but throughout the world. It is Parsons who has provided the focus of theoretical discussion for three decades now, for those opposing him no less than for his adherents.³

Here, we are concerned with Parsons' response to the problem of order, a matter which has occupied him throughout his nearly half-century of active theoretical life. Indeed, in the opinion of one sympathetic critic, ". . . his greatest single contribution has been precisely in this area of theory."⁴ Parsons' "solution" to this dilemma is to be found in the General Action System and, more narrowly, in the voluntaristic theory of action on which it is based. This latter framework conceives human contact in volitional terms, emphasizing the causal interdependence of cultural, social, psychological, and physiological factors in shaping action and construing social interaction in terms which are complex, multidimensional, and reciprocal.

As such, the General Action System and the behavioral theories to which it is related discourage the use of certain "languages" in describing human conduct while providing tacit support for others.

³ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴ William C. Mitchell, *Sociological Analysis and Politics: The Theories of Talcott Parsons* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1967), 9.

For example, "absolutist" or single-factor theories can appear within the General Action System only as "degenerate cases." In this way, behavioral theory encourages multicausal analysis and directs attention to the reciprocal aspects of social interaction while simultaneously affirming the utility of causal interpretations of individual effort. The logic and imagery of responsibility are similar. Taken together, its two "core meanings" (imputability and accountability) adumbrate the volitional and reflexive assumptions which underly its everyday usage.

Thus behavioral theory and responsibility appear to *share* a common grammar and logic. This, however, is scarcely an accident, for in constructing and elaborating his voluntaristic theory of action, Parsons was careful to provide for ". . . the inner sense of freedom of moral choice, which is just as ultimate a fact of human life as any other, and its consequent moral responsibility."⁵ Thus Parsons' point of departure is the common-sense assumption that human conduct is potentially volitional, normatively constrained, and reflexively related to both the situation from which it springs and the ultimate ends toward which it is directed. Basically, these are the same assumptions which inform the notion of responsibility.

At the same time, the parallels are neither exact nor invariably consistent. In instances, particularly regarding the role of the social scientist, Parsons seems unwilling to follow the lead of his own logic. Elsewhere, the implications of behavioral theory for individual responsibility remain largely implicit. Here, we shall follow Weber's admonition and draw the implications of the differential distribution of means and conditions for the individual responsibility.⁶

Finally, behavioral theory is conceived as a response to the question of order, assuming that men have a certain capacity for voluntary action. The order that obtains derives from a dynamic blend of coercion and cultural integration. The recognition which behavioral theory accords the originators and transmitters of culture is more than a little flattering, but the implications are a bit disturbing. If culture is to serve as the most judicious integrating factor in contemporary society, it follows that those charged with ensuring the system's survival are obliged to promote a cultural context conducive to that end. Simultaneously, the claim of the various cultural elites to a certain autonomy (irresponsibility) seems unrealistic in the light of behavioral theory. Finally, there is the matter of values themselves, for behavioralism, like its positivistic variant, has precious little to offer in this respect. In the final analysis, the "ultimate value" in the behavioralist hierarchy must be the obscure if not inexplicable notion of the survival of the system.

⁵ Talcott Parsons, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory," *International Journal of Ethics*, 45 (April, 1935), 290.

⁶ Max Weber, "The Meaning of 'Ethical Neutrality' in Sociology and Economics," in Edward A. Shils and Henry A. Finch (eds.), *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1949), 20-21.

II. THE IDEA OF RESPONSIBILITY.

Percy W. Bridgman has noted, with his customary acerbic wit, that ". . . the conjuring up of 'responsibility' is often only a device of a lazy man to get someone else to do for him something of vital concern to him which he should be doing for himself."⁷ While Bridgman's observation may be a bit sardonic, it nevertheless remains the case that the notion of responsibility in ordinary discourse belongs to the same family as "duty" and "obligation." But the matter is not so simple as this. H.L.A. Hart provides the following paragraph in illustration of the diverse uses of the notion:

As captain of the ship, X was responsible for the safety of his passengers and crew. But on his last voyage he got drunk every night and was responsible for the loss of the ship with all aboard. It was rumored that he was insane, but the doctors considered that he was responsible for his actions. Throughout the voyage he behaved quite irresponsibly, and various incidents in his career showed that he was not a responsible person. He always maintained that the exceptional winter storms were responsible for the loss of the ship, but in the legal proceeding brought against him he was found criminally responsible for his negligent conduct, and in separate civil proceedings he was held legally responsible for the loss of life and property. He is still alive and he is morally responsible for the deaths of many women and children.⁸

Apparently, responsibility is customarily used in a legal (both civil and criminal) and moral as well as a strictly causal sense. Moreover, it seems to adhere to a role, be a personal attribute (both earned and finally (though it does not appear in the paragraph), we recall that collectivities as well as individual actors may be termed responsible; to wit, cabinets are frequently said to have a "collective responsibility" ascribed), and to designate a capacity from which one may be excused. in parliamentary forms of government.

A. *Responsibility: A Genetic Perspective.*⁹ It is, perhaps, a trifle surprising to find that so common and central a notion as responsibility is of comparatively recent origin; yet, this is, indeed, the case. While its usage may be traced to the sixteenth century, the first occurrence of "responsibility" cited in Murray's *Oxford English Dictionary* is from John Jay's "Federalist 64,"¹⁰ and, as late as 1884, Levy-Bruhl

⁷ Quoted in Garrett Hardin, *Exploring New Ethics for Survival* (New York: The Viking Press, 1968), 101.

⁸ H. L. A. Hart, *Punishment and Responsibility* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1968), 211.

⁹ Much of the material in this section is taken from Richard McKeon, "The Development and the Significance of the Concept of Responsibility," *Revue Internationale de Philosophie*, 11 (1957), 3-32.

¹⁰ *The Federalist Papers* (New York: The New American Library, 1961), 395.

was of the opinion that the notion had never been adequately studied or analyzed.¹¹

Alexander Bain was apparently the first to use the term in a philosophical context when, in 1859, he equated the notion with accountability or punishability: ". . . for a man can never be said to be responsible, if you are not prepared to punish him when he cannot satisfactorily answer the charges made against him."¹² Bain's sentiment was echoed some six years later by John Stuart Mill who flatly announced that "Responsibility means punishment."¹³

But this precise and unequivocal usage could not be maintained; this, in large part, because the idea was first pressed into philosophic service in an effort to sidestep the rigid confines of the debate between idealists and determinists. Predictably, the ploy failed. In the course of the attempt, responsibility came to have two more-or-less well defined core meanings: imputability and accountability.

However, the philosophic usages diverged markedly from that of ordinary language. F. H. Bradley subjected the "vulgar [common] notion of responsibility"¹⁴ to the scrutiny of the idealist and determinist perspectives only to find that neither usage was comprehensible to the layman. In an essay both charming and penetrating, Bradley concluded that the concept, as it was commonly used, was ". . . a word altogether devoid of signification and impossible of explanation," for the ". . . 'two great schools' which divide our philosophy."¹⁵

The basic issues may be stated briefly, though they are apparently quite beyond resolution. Simply put, theories of social justice must come to grips with the questions of how men do act, how they should act, and how the community is to deal with deviations of "is" from "ought" (justification of punishment/treatment). The determinist position is deficient since it suggests that behavior could not have been otherwise. Further, it follows from determinism that we do not desire a thing because it is "good," but call a thing "good" because we desire it. This leads both quickly and certainly to the morass of relativism and the collapse of the grammar of "ought" into that of "is."

The position of the proponents of free will is not appreciably more comfortable for the philosopher or satisfying for the layman. The radical separation of the empirical and moral worlds in neo-Kantian theory leads to the familiar value noncognitivism; no guide to moral behavior can be gotten from the empirical world. Conversely, moral arguments can be made for virtually any sort of behavior. In effect, there is no relation between the grammars of "is" and "ought."¹⁶

¹¹ Quoted in McKeon, *op. cit.*, 6-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7n.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 20-21.

¹⁴ "The Vulgar Notion of Responsibility in Connection with the Theories of Free-Will and Necessity," in F. H. Bradley, *Ethical Studies* (New York: G. E. Stechert and Company, 1911), 1-52.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 37.

¹⁶ Here, I am following the general development found in McKeon, *op. cit.*, 19.

We thus confront three alternative languages: those of determinism, free-will, and ordinary discourse. In the former, the critical tension between the "is" and the "ought" has been abolished. Conversely, while idealists retain both grammars, they lack a link between them. Only the "vulgar" or common notion of responsibility seems to contain the necessary ingredients for a doctrine of social justice:

. . . it is fair to say that 'responsibility' has two primary meanings, or that what I have called the core of meaning has two facets, (a) accountability and (b) the rational and moral exercise of discretionary power (or the capacity or disposition for such exercise), and that each of these notions tends to flavor the other.¹⁷

Not only does the ordinary usage of the word assume the existence of at least a limited sphere of individual discretion, it also holds him answerable for this discretion. Thus, the common idea of responsibility is a reflexive one: ". . . the responsibility of the individual and the responsibility of the community of which he is a member are interdependent. . . ." ¹⁸ In this way, the ordinary notion of responsibility assumes that the individual actor has the capacity for rational choice and discretionary action and that he may be held accountable for his actions by the community through which they ramify. Equally, the community is thought to have certain responsibilities toward the individual actor. These three facets of responsibility we shall identify as imputability, accountability, and reflexivity.

B. *Responsibility as a Rule-Guided Conduct.* Richard Flathman has authored a persuasive explication of political obligation in terms of "rule-guided conduct" ¹⁹ which, in view of its substantive affinity to our topic commends itself to our attention. A social rule is construed to have:

. . . two aspects: (i) a description of a class of actions, possibly restricted to actions performed by a designated class of persons; and (ii) an indication whether that class of actions is required, forbidden, or allowed.²⁰

Flathman distinguishes four types of rules: instructions, principles (regularities), regulations, and precepts. ²¹ The last two categories are identified as "obligation generating;" ²² that is, they "have a prescriptive aspect to agents," as well as ". . . a descriptive aspect to external

¹⁷ J. Roland Pennock, "The Problem of Responsibility," in Carl J. Friedrich (ed.), *Nomos III: Responsibility* (New York: The Liberal Arts Press, 1960), 13.

¹⁸ McKeon, *op. cit.*, 26.

¹⁹ *Political Obligation* (New York: Atheneum, 1972).

²⁰ Max Black, *Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962), 108.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 109-115.

²² Flathman, *op. cit.*, 77-78.

observers.”²³ Precepts are said to include the “moral rules” of the society; regulations refer to the various laws and judicial decrees that issue forth from authoritative agencies.²⁴

At this point, it will be useful to differentiate between “action” and “behavior.” Here, we shall follow (as does Parsons) the example of Weber who distinguishes between these categories on the basis of subjective meaning.²⁵ That is, action refers to subjectively meaningful behavior, and behavior, to activity which is without meaning or significance for the doer. Obviously, as Weber notes, this distinction is best understood as a continuum rather than a rigid dichotomy.²⁶

In particular, “rule-following” or rule-guided conduct is to be regarded as action and not confused with habitual behavior. Flathman asserts that a person

. . . cannot be said to be following a rule unless he thinks there are good reasons for it. He may do what the rule requires because he accepts some other rule which, in the circumstances, requires the same action, because he is coerced, or for some other reason.²⁷

At the same time, and because “rule-following” is action and involves conscious adherence to social rules, there is always the possibility that the rule may be violated. “If we are to speak of rules at all, we ought to think of them as rules which everyone has a licence to violate if he can show a point in doing so.”²⁸

Equally, under specified circumstances, actors may be released from rules for various “excuses.” These, however, are (1) temporary, (2) particularized, and (3) only infrequently completely releasing. These highly particularistic features of excuses preclude generalization; thus Flathman remarks that

. . . even the best developed rules cannot be reduced to a list of conditions that are necessary and sufficient to their proper application to all the cases that might arise under them. As with linguistic rules, rules of conduct have an element of what has been called ‘open texture’ which can be ‘filled in’ only in applying them to particular cases.²⁹

The picture of responsible action which follows from the analyses of Flathman and other theorists of “ruled governed conduct” is this.

²³ Raymond D. Gumb, *Rule-Governed Linguistic Behavior* (The Hague: Mouton, 1972), 12.

²⁴ Black, *op. cit.*, 109-115.

²⁵ Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization* (New York: The Free Press, 1947), 88.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 90.

²⁷ Flathman, *op. cit.*, 290.

²⁸ Peter Strawson, *Introduction to Logical Theory* (London: Methuen and Company, 1952), 230.

²⁹ Flathman, *op. cit.*, 173-74.

Within a particular culture which includes among its notions that of responsibility, there is a fundamental precept to "be responsible." In addition, there will be a number of more-or-less explicit ethical elaborations on this theme as well as substantively explicit judicial and legal explications. Finally, there will be a range of exemptions and a number of generally agreed, though inevitably vague, excusing conditions. For example, Anglo-Saxon cultures exempt minors and persons in certain psychological states from legal responsibility. Equally, the lack of knowledge is oftentimes an excusing condition from a contract.

In a highly specialized and differentiated society, the general precept will be at some remove from everyday activity. The resulting gap will be filled by various intermediate elaborations of this precept, specifying *to* whom or what responsibility is due and *for* which classes of action. Parallel to this set of precepts, there will emerge a family of regulations (i.e., legislative and judicial decrees) which will generally overlap and support the precept-system but which may, in instances, diverge or even conflict. Both sets of rules will admit of interpretations and exemptions, acknowledge a penumbra of excusing conditions, and specify sanctions for non-compliance. Thus a society will possess a set of sundry mechanisms of control, ranging from praise and blame in the case of moral responsibility to punishment in that of legal responsibility.³⁰

Heretofore, we have treated this web of rules as roughly homogeneous. There is, in fact, no reason to assume that this is the case; in any event, it is problematic. The intermediate rules between the general precept and everyday activity may reflect divergent beliefs regarding desirable classes of behavior or may differ with respect to whom accountability is due. In both cases, the disparities may be matters of emphasis or contradiction. Indeed, it seems inevitable that a highly complex society will experience rule-conflict. Thus, the fact that we have followed Flathman and conceptualized responsible action in terms of rule-guided conduct does not exclude the possibility of conflict. The texture of society remains "open" in this sense, no matter how detailed and elaborate the rule-fabric.

Furthermore, to say that conduct is rule-guided does not exclude the possibility that these rules will work to the greater benefit of certain members or groups in the society. This may occur in several ways. The rules prescribing responsibility (imputability) may not parallel those prescribing responsibility (accountability); that is, persons may be held accountable for matters over which their control was minimal or, conversely, may be released from accountability when in fact the action

³⁰ There is an apparent asymmetry here, for in the case of legal responsibility, no positive sanctions are specified for compliance; it is simply expected. On the other hand, a person who consistently adheres to precepts may well acquire the reputation of being a "responsible" or moral person, a designation which carries positive overtones in communities in which the precept is generally shared. Similarly, in economic matters, greater responsibilities are generally thought to entail greater rewards.

was of their doing. Equally, the reward (both psychic and material) schedule of society may diverge from the ascriptions of accountability. Or, certain classes may be exempted from responsibility; for example, minors are released from ranges of criminal liability. Finally, there is the matter of excuses. Simply put, their highly particular nature virtually ensures what would be regarded as inequities from the perspective of any rational schedule of responsibility.

C. *Responsibility: A Typology.* We are now in a position to present a more systematic typology of responsibility in terms of rule-guided action. Recalling Hart's exemplar of the diverse uses of responsibility (*supra*, p. 8) we may identify four senses of the notion of responsibility: 1) capacity-responsibility, 2) causal-responsibility, 3) role-responsibility, and 4) liability-responsibility.³¹

The concept of capacity-responsibility has a social and an individual referent. In the first instance, it is implied that the social structure in which the person finds himself provides a "space" for action. That is, there must be the possibility of choice between alternative courses of conduct. Obviously, the existence of such "spaces of action" is problematic and a matter of degree; further, there is no reason to expect that they will be evenly distributed throughout the society or equally available to the various strata (indeed, this would be most remarkable). This, however, anticipates the notion of role-responsibility and illustrates the reflexive nature of the concept.

The idea of capacity-responsibility also refers to the individual, who is assumed to possess certain physical and mental potentialities. These include the abilities ". . . to understand what conduct legal rules or morality require, to deliberate and reach decisions concerning these requirements, and to conform to decisions when made."³² In the terminology of rule-guided conduct, what is at question is the capacity of the individual to comprehend the rules and to give good reasons for either adhering to or deviating from them. Obviously, a prerequisite for capacity-responsibility is the availability of the rules; they must be public. Equally, the presence or absence of these capacities is a matter of degree; as Hart notes, they may be diminished or impaired, fully present or completely absent.³³ Additionally, classes of persons are generally exempt from the expectation of responsible behavior due to their presumed incapacity.

It is one thing to say that a person has the capacity for responsible action and quite another to identify him/her as the cause of an outcome or consequence. Causal-responsibility refers to the sense in which it may be said that a person's action was a necessary and sufficient precursor of a particular outcome. Taken together, capacity-responsibility and

³¹ Hart, *op. cit.*, 212.

³² *Ibid.*, 227.

³³ *Ibid.*, 228.

causal-responsibility roughly define what may be taken to be the subjective and objective dimensions of imputability.

Role-responsibility raises the problem of jurisdiction. Social roles are surrounded by clusters of duties, among which we may distinguish a particular constellation which will be termed the responsibilities of the role:

. . . what distinguishes those duties of a role which are singled out as responsibilities is that they are duties of a relatively complex or extensive kind, defining a 'sphere of responsibility' requiring care and attention over a protracted period of time, while short-lived duties of a very simple kind, to do or not do some specific act on a particular occasion, are not termed responsibilities.³⁴

Role-responsibility may be interpreted in terms of a rule-complex. More "important" roles may be expected to have appreciably more elaborate and diffuse responsibilities requiring — and permitting — greater interpretation. In Flatham's terminology, they will possess a more open texture. Actors who are adept in interpreting these rule-complexes to the satisfaction of those to whom they are accountable will be said to be "responsible." On the other hand, those lower-level roles, whose rule-complexes are less elaborate (that is, contain appreciably more "short-lived duties" than responsibilities), will be less likely to be described as "responsible" roles and their incumbents less likely to be termed "responsible persons."

This brings us to the matter of liability which, along with the notion of role-responsibility, comprises the accountability dimension of responsibility. Whereas role-responsibility points to the range of expected activities surrounding a particular location in society, the concept of liability indicates the sanctions which are available to support the ethical imperative to act in accordance with the various rules. The more specific legal and judicial regulations stipulate punishment only; that is, obedience to the law is expected and deviance is punished. On the other hand, the moral precepts which impose an obligation to act in what is understood to be a responsible fashion are supported by positive as well as negative sanctions. "Virtue may be its own reward," or the community may distribute various symbols of its (dis) approbation: that is, blame and praise.

Rule-guided conduct implies the possibility of violating the rule; this, as we have seen, is entailed in the very notion of such conduct. The idea of disobeying a rule also evokes the notion of excuses. These will be of two types: pleas of incapacity and pleas of definition. However, both will seek to excuse by insisting on a different ("fuller") description of the situation.³⁵ The plea of incapacity refers to either

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 212.

³⁵ J. L. Austin, "A Plea for Excuses," in J. O. Urmson and G. J. Warnock (eds.), *Philosophical Papers* (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 176.

the absence of the capacity for responsible action or a diminished or impaired capacity for such conduct, generally (though not always) in the mental sense. Thus the person offering the excuse may claim unconsciousness, ignorance about or mistaken beliefs concerning the consequences of, or the lack of control over his own behavior (for example, due to coercion).

The "plea of definition" points toward the reflexive and interpretive nature of responsibility and the possibility of conflicting descriptions of the act itself. The strategy is to admit that the act was done, but to argue that, from the perspective of the actor, the deed was not in violation of the prevailing rule. That is, he/she may appeal to a second rule as the governing principle in this case, or argue that his/her interpretation of the disputed role should prevail. For instance, the actor may claim to have been compelled to choose between conflicting aspects of the same role (intrarole conflict), to have had to interpret the role in a creative fashion in the absence of adequately elaborated rules (open texture), or to have had to choose between roles in an ambiguous situation in which his/her social location was poorly defined (interrole conflict). These three possibilities all point toward the reflexive nature of responsibility as descriptive and prescriptive of the interaction of the actor and the community through the intervening rule-complex which is constitutive of a role.

D. *The Idea of Responsibility.* In our discussion of the notion of responsibility we have seen that is of comparatively recent origin and that, under examination, it has two distinguishable senses: imputability and accountability. These usages make it an attractive conscript for service in the philosophical debate between the idealists and positivists. However, we have seen that neither of the two antipodal philosophical traditions is able to give an account of responsibility which is compatible with the "vulgar" usage of everyday discourse.

We have interpreted responsibility in terms of rule-guided conduct after the example of Flathman's treatment of *Political Obligation*. The appeal of this approach lies in its congeniality with the common understanding of responsibility and in its identification of rule-guided conduct as action rather than behavior. Our analysis indicates that the notion of responsibility is a relational term assuming a human capacity for subjectively meaningful conduct or action. From this perspective, it may be understood as a decentralization of overt forms of control in the expectation that such implicit mechanisms as a shared commitment to and capacity for rule-guided conduct coupled with various social and legal sanctions will produce the forms of behavior which are deemed appropriate. At the same time, because rule-guided conduct is inherently action, and because the texture of the rule fabric is invariably too coarse to capture all aspects of social activity, responsibility seems to entail the likelihood of incremental change through creative interpretation.

Responsibility, as a notion designating a mode of social control, is attractive from the perspective of the larger system insofar as it provides a relatively unobtrusive and yet effective way of securing predictable behavior which is, at the same time, "inexpensive" since it relies on the various individual actors to both control their own conduct and to monitor that of others. At the same time, it is appealing from the vantage of the individual immersed in a cultural tradition of freedom. Responsibility implies freedom to act responsibly; thus, the notion implicitly affirms the causal efficacy of the individual and the existence of a space of action. In short, the notion of responsibility reflects the belief that an overtly decentralized set of mechanisms of social control can operate efficiently to produce socially coherent conduct in the context of a homogeneous system of moral precepts, legal rules, and learned motivations.

III. PARSONIAN BEHAVIORALISM.

A. *Parsons and the Development of Behavioralism.* The behavioral orientation emerged from the European intellectual ferment of those decades bracketing the *fin de siècle* which H. Stuart Hughes has characterized as a "revolt against positivism."³⁶ And yet, in many ways, it was more a tentative venture, prompted by disillusionment with the promises of positivism, than a vigorous revolution in the full flush of purposeful enthusiasm. The resulting synthesis ". . . constantly threatened to break down in one direction or another."³⁷ And no wonder, for it was the issue of a restless union of positivism and idealism requiring all the considerable skills of Max Weber whose artful midwifery bound together the methods of the natural sciences with those of *Verstehen* and compromised the positivist commitment to observables by insisting upon the critical import of culturally conditioned perception.

The impact of this new orientation was not immediately felt in American academic circles. Speaking of his own education, Parsons observes that he, like ". . . most Americans growing up in the social sciences since the war,"³⁸ was inculcated primarily in the ways of positivism. But Parsons continued his education abroad, first at the London School of Economics and then at Heidelberg where he took his doctorate and where Weber had taught until his death, some five years before Parsons' arrival.

In a recent autobiographical sketch, Parsons acknowledges his pre-eminent intellectual debt to Weber as well as to Durkheim and Freud.³⁹ But, to judge from Parsons' own statements, it was Weber who was most

³⁶ *Consciousness and Society: The Reorientation of European Social Thought, 1890-1930* (New York: Vintage Books, 1958), 37.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 439.

³⁸ Talcott Parsons, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory," *op. cit.*, 313.

³⁹ "On Building Social System Theory: A Personal History," *Daedalus*, 99 (Fall, 1970), 826-81.

influential during his early theoretical development and who provided the model for Parsons' own and equally ambitious syncretic efforts.⁴⁰ Ultimately, Parsons hoped to escape the confines of the positivist-idealist conflict and thereby ". . . to show a way of transcending also the old individualism-organism or, as it is often called, social nominalism-realism dilemma which has plagued social theory to little purpose for so long."⁴¹ It was to this end that he addressed himself in the voluntaristic theory of action which stressed the import of the willing (motivated) actor, suspended between a set of valued ends, constrained by a normative orientation, and limited by the means and conditions available to him.

B. *The Voluntaristic Theory of Action.*⁴² Parsons explicitly confronts the philosophical and methodological difficulties in a voluntaristic action schema in his 1935 publication, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory."⁴³ Here, he asserts that ". . . man is essentially an active, creative, evaluating creature,"⁴⁴ and that social science must necessarily come to terms with this irreducible quality. However, this reference to the "active, creative, evaluating" aspect of nature must be read in the light of Parsons' later disclaimer that the ". . . older philosophical view of the 'freedom of the will' never did constitute the primary basis of my own conception of the voluntarism which was an essential aspect of the theory of action."⁴⁵ Thus, it appears that Parsons' earlier remark must be understood as an affirmation of the human ability to perceive, formulate, and evaluate alternative ends

⁴⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 874.

⁴¹ Talcott Parsons, *The Structure of Social Action*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1968). First Published in 1937, this was Parsons' first full-length work. Hereafter cited as *Structure*.

⁴² At this point, we should note that Parsons' work will be treated as a reasonably consistent theoretical effort for which the voluntaristic theory of action forms the basis. Not all would agree. John Finley Scott charges that Parsons abandoned his initial voluntaristic thesis in favor of what amounts to normative determinism ("The Changing Foundations of the Parsonian Action Scheme," *American Sociological Review*, 28 [October, 1963], 716-35). Others taking essentially this same critical stance include: Edward Tiryakian, "Existential Phenomenology and the Sociological Tradition," *American Sociological Review*, 30 (October, 1965), 674-88; and Robert W. Friedrichs, *A Sociology of Sociology* (New York: The Free Press, 1970), 13-14).

Jonathan H. Turner and Leonard Beeghly ("Current Folklore in the Criticism of Parsonian Action Theory," *Sociological Inquiry*, 44 [1974], 47-63) defend Parsons' consistency, attributing the discontinuities which Scott and the others perceive to Parsons' program of theory building. According to this latter principle, theory is to be constructed from the most fundamental unit and proceed to the more complex. Thus, Parsons has not dissociated himself from the voluntaristic theory of action but has simply advanced his concerns from micro- to macro-analysis; that is, from the "unit act" to the General Action System.

Parsons' own position is that, to his knowledge, he has ". . . never abandoned the perspectives which were thus worked out in *The Structure of Social Action*." (Parsons, "Comment on: 'Current Folklore in the Criticism of Parsonian Action Theory,'" *Sociological Inquiry*, 44 [1974], 56.)

⁴³ *Op. cit.*

⁴⁴ Parsons argues that this essay be taken as a ". . . methodological prolegomena to such a theory, clearing the way and indicating some directions of fruitful analysis" (314), and that to do so, this ". . . paper has unavoidably entered into philosophical questions" (316). "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory," *op. cit.*

⁴⁵ "Comment on: 'Current Folklore in the Criticism of Parsonian Action Theory,'" *op. cit.*, 56.

and means to these ends and to select from amongst them, and not as the hypothecation of his ability to stand apart and to act independently of his environment.

This point is critical for the appreciation of the behavioral language and the understanding of its relation to the languages of idealism (free-will) and positivism (determinism). Neither, in Parsons' view, is adequate, but the fact that behavioralism "appears" to lie on a "spatial continuum" between these positions should not be taken to mean that, in some sense, conduct is both partially "free" and partially "determined." Here, the spatial imagery does us a disservice; these categories are disparate and a viable alternative cannot be construed by their mechanical fusion. The Parsonian alternative is that of "interdependence" which belongs to a totally different category than do the notions of independence (free-will) or dependence (determinism). Moreover, they are not, strictly speaking, "translatable" without at the same time requiring a perspectival shift.

In short, the language of interdependence is compatible with a chastened view of creativity and autonomy which posits that the expenditure of human effort will have an impact on the various aspects of the environment without, at the same time, divorcing him/her therefrom. Thus, Parsons is proposing a third language and logic complex for the analysis of human conduct. On the one hand, he rejects the determinism of the behaviorist position ". . . which involves the self-conscious denial of the legitimacy of including any reference to the subjective aspect of other human beings in any scientific explanation of their actions."⁴⁰ At the same time, he resists the blandishments of idealism which speaks the language of "free-will" and stresses the utter uniqueness of all human action and the need for ideographic analysis. In this way, Parsons' language of interdependence seeks to occupy the gap between the nomothetic and ideographic dispositions, between the language communities of scientific positivism and Kantian idealism. To do so, it is necessary to create yet a third language rather than seeking to fuse the two. The result is a grammar and logic which, to Parsons' satisfaction, does precisely this. At the same time, it is compatible with the ordinary language notion of responsibility.

Parsons' point of departure is the notion of action. Following Weber, he distinguishes between "action" and "behavior" on the basis of the presence, in the former, of subjective meaning for the actor.

There is a 'subjective' aspect of human action. It is manifested by linguistic symbols to which meaning is attached. The subjective aspect involves the reasons we ourselves assign for acting as we do. No science concerned with human action can, if it would penetrate beyond a superficial level, evade the methodological problems of the

⁴⁰ Parsons, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory," *op. cit.*, 283.

relevance of facts of this order to the scientific explanation of the other facts of human action.⁴⁷

The focus in *The Structure of Social Action* is on “. . . the ‘smallest’ unit which can be conceived concretely existing by itself . . . the ‘unit act.’”⁴⁸ But these concrete “unit acts” are to be analyzed in terms of an analytic framework, the “action frame of reference”⁴⁹ where the elements of action may be distinguished and studied. It should be noted that the action frame of reference is subjective; that is, “. . . it deals with phenomena, with things and events as they appear from the point of view of the actor whose action is being analyzed and considered.”⁵⁰

The elements in this rudimentary action schema are four: 1) the actor (ego);⁵¹ 2) the end or “. . . future state of affairs toward which the process of action is oriented;” 3) the situation, which is further divided into the conditions of action (those aspects of the environment over which the actor has no control; for example, his heredity) and the means to action (those features in the environment from which the actor may select in order to attain his ends); and finally, 4) a normative orientation between the means and ends which constrains the actor’s range of choice in selecting his means.⁵² Action, then,

. . . must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As a process, action is, in fact, the process of alternation of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms.⁵³

Parsons distinguishes two classes of “ends-orientations” complexes. The first of these includes “empirical ends” to be sought by an “intrinsic” or scientific orientation guided by the authority of the “rule of efficiency.” The orientation to action is thus “scientific”; the standard, rational efficiency. The attainment of empirical ends may be scientifically ascertained, but a substantial portion, even the majority, of human action is, from the scientific perspective, simply incomprehensible (“irrational”). Nonetheless, Parsons argues that it is end-oriented; however, the ends may be “transcendental” as well as empirical, and the

⁴⁷ Parsons, *Structure*, 26.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 737.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 43-51.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁵¹ Traditionally, critics of Parsons have faulted him for excluding actors from his system and including “disembodied egos and alters” instead. One of the early (and better) reviews of *Structure* lamented that “. . . the structure of social action is stated without the actor.” (Howard Pinney, “The Structure of Social Action,” *Ethics*, 50 [January, 1940], 185.) Parsons justifies this procedure on the basis of precision and the fact that the relation between “ego” and body is problematic and that the abilities and limits of the body may be means to and constraints on the goals of ego. Cf. *Structure*, 47.

⁵² *Structure*, 43-51.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 732.

orientation which then obtains is said to be "symbolic" rather than scientific. The authority which impels action in this instance is not rational efficiency but "moral obligation."⁵⁴

Action, then, consists in the pursuit of subjectively held ends according to either rational or moral norms of conduct. To complete the voluntaristic schema, a final element is required: will or effort. This is

. . . necessitated by the fact that norms do not realize themselves automatically but only through action, so far as they are realized at all. It is an element the analytical status of which in the theory of action is probably closely analogous to that of energy in physics.⁵⁵

With the concept of effort, we have completed our survey of the rudiments of the voluntaristic theory of action. From this conceptualization of individual action, Parsons has proceeded in a systematic fashion to the dyad, the collectivity, and finally, to synthesize a General Action System. During the course of this programmatic theory-building, he has, of course, embroidered and elaborated his original framework until it has achieved a most imposing, even intimidating, complexity. Nevertheless, the "suspensive imagery" and volitional language of the voluntaristic theory have been retained.⁵⁶

In the course of this evolution, "will" has become "motivation" and been differentiated into "physical drives" and "learned need-dispositions." These, in turn, have been structured about the notion of role. The requirement for stability and predictability within the dyadic interaction has prompted the analytic notion of role expectation; in turn, these are organized in a reciprocal or "complementary" fashion.

The demands of collective behavior impose upon the individual the requirement that he/she delay his/her desire for immediate gratification until the needs of the group have been met. As with Freud, Parsons finds the initial contact of the individual with the social system to be one of potential conflict. For Freud, the resolution lay in the internalization of society's standards in a super-ego. Parsons' approach is parallel; drawing upon Durkheim's notion of "collective representations," and combining it with Freudian psychology, he urges that a consensual cultural framework can form the integrative basis for coherent social action. Thus roles are to be regarded as organized into institutions on the basis of shared norms and ends. This institutionalized conduct then serves both to maintain the valued activity performed under its aegis and to promote the ends of the social system.

The critical juncture for the purposes of this paper is the role-personality interface through which the actor participates in society.

⁵⁴ Parsons, "The Place of Ultimate Values in Sociological Theory." The discussion of the "ends-norms" relationship is found on pp. 288-300. Reference to "moral obligation" occurs on p. 303.

⁵⁵ Parsons, *Structure*, 719.

⁵⁶ Cf., *supra*, p. 19.

The structures of society and the goals which they pursue will reflect the culture in which it is embedded. On the other hand, the actor brings to his/her role certain physical drives and learned need-dispositions which must be met or denied within the role open to him/her. From the behavioral perspective, the social system may manipulate an individual in three ways: (1) by inculcating a set of ultimate values and normative orientations which will bind him/her to the system; (2) by providing a motivational schedule which both produces the desired behavior and includes a reward schedule which the system may meet; (3) through the use of negative sanctions, essentially the converse of (2).

Two points are to be noted. First, Parsons has no illusions about the possibility of a completely consensual situation: "No social system can be completely integrated; there will, for many reasons, always be some discrepancies between role-expectations and performances of roles."⁵⁷ As a result, there will always be a dynamic balance between the order which derives from cultural consensus and that which is maintained through the use of positive and negative sanctions. However, we could expect that cultural control would be "less expensive" from the system's perspective for precisely the same reasons that make the notion of "responsible action" attractive. Namely, in a situation in which individuals are committed to the goals and methods of the society, they will control their own behavior and monitor (and, by the use of such social sanctions as praise and blame, help to control) those of others. The use of positive and negative sanctions, on the other hand, may strain the capacity of the system to respond to other threats. In short, symbol manipulation is less expensive, at least in the short-run, than the provision of rewards or the use of negative sanctions.

Action within the social system is *analytically* organized in terms of the four-function paradigm. Parsons postulates that social systems must perform four tasks or meet four "functional imperatives" if they are to survive: adaptation, goal-attainment, integration, and latent pattern-maintenance. Within the social system, the *analytical* subsystems associated with these functions are respectively: the economy, polity, societal community, and fiduciary system. The relationship between the subunits is dynamic; each is linked to the other three by generalized "media of interchange" which are "anchored" in the various subsystems. Thus, the particular medium of the polity is "power;" that of the economy, money.

Finally, the social system itself is but one subsystem of the General Action System in which the four fundamental subsystems (cultural, social, personality, and behavioral organism) are ranged in a cybernetic hierarchy of conditioning and control and linked, again, by

⁵⁷ Talcott Parsons and Edward A. Shils, "Values, Motives, and Systems Action," in Parsons and Shils (eds.), *Toward a General Theory of Action* (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), 70.

various media of interchange. At all levels of analysis, whether with respect to the actor (ego), personality, social system, or General Action System, Parsons' concern has been with the question of integration (order) in a complex, dynamic, and open system. Invariably, his recourse has been to a cybernetic hierarchy where those levels high in information (e.g., superego, fiduciary system, culture) shape the ends to which levels high in energy (e.g., id, economy, behavioral organism) are put. Conversely, the presence of adequate levels of energy conditions or facilitates the attainment of culturally (for example) prescribed goals.

Certain parallels between Parsons' behavioral theory and the notion of responsibility have become apparent during the preceding discussion. Both assume that human conduct may be causally efficacious; both underscore the reflexive nature of such conduct. But the fact that Parsons' theoretical activities have been addressed to the problem of order and based on the assumption of voluntarism suggests that further implications may be drawn.

IV. PARSONIAN BEHAVIORALISM AND THE NOTION OF RESPONSIBLE ACTION.⁵⁸

We have seen that both the notion of responsibility, as it is used in everyday discourse, and Parsonian behavioralism share a rather similar view of the bases of human conduct. The concept of responsibility has been shown to be a reflexive one, emphasizing the interaction between the individual and his social milieu while, at the same time, imputing to him a certain control over his action as well as causal efficacy. In like manner, behavioral theory utilizes a suspensivé imagery to both stress the interdependent nature of human action and the importance of will or motivation for contributing to outcomes.

At first blush, these similarities between the language of behavioralism and that of ordinary discourse might seem somewhat surprising; certainly Parsons has never been celebrated for his attention to common usage. In fact, however, his theories are, by design, closer to the commonsense apprehension of social reality than are either positivism or idealism. In retrospect, these parallels should not be unexpected, for we began from the assumption that social theory is a problem-solving activity which both reflects and shapes the underlying "domain assumptions" of the more general culture. Given the tenability of this assumption, Parsons' theoretical efforts can then be understood as an attempt to come to grips with the problem of order within the constraints

⁵⁸ At this point, a methodological note is in order, hopefully to avoid some future confusion. Parsons' discussion utilizes analytical abstractions to facilitate the study of concrete phenomena. This implies that what we ordinarily term the "political system" in everyday usage need not be synonymous with the analytical subsystem which Parsons designates "polity." In a similar way, the analytical abstraction "societal community" is not synonymous with that set of institutions and collectivities which is commonly termed "society."

of the existing values and expectations of the Western cultural tradition. Specifically, he is attempting to resolve the question of order within the context of a culture which is unwilling to forego the "luxuries" of individual freedom and dignity while, nevertheless, seeking some basis for stabilizing and routinizing human conduct in order to preserve the larger system.

Responsible action provides a possible approach to the issue. Not only does it spring from the same grammar as do freedom and dignity, but, at the same time, it can be construed in such a way as to provide the basis for the highly stable and predictable activity so essential for industrial society. Moreover, Parsonian behavioralism holds a special appeal for the social scientist, for it both provides him with an "Archimedean point" from which he may engage in social engineering while legitimizing his activities in this regard. At this point, then, we turn to a closer consideration of the implications of behavioral theory for the notion of "responsible action."

A. *Imputability: Capacity and Cause in Parsonian Theory.* We have recognized that both the common notion of responsibility and Parsonian behavioralism begin from the assumption that human conduct is in some minimal sense, at least, voluntary and efficacious. Furthermore, we have conceptualized "responsible action" in terms of rule-guided conduct. Again, we encounter a marked parallel between the Parsonian notion of "normative orientation" to action (for example, scientific, moral, aesthetic) and the idea of an "obligation-generating" rule (that is, a precept or regulation, to use our previous terminology). In this way, the question of the capacity for responsible action becomes a question of the capacity for rule-guided conduct.

In fact, both behavioral theory and customary usage suggest that this is a capacity which must be learned or acquired. In part, it is the result of the maturational process during which the cognitive, appetitive, and evaluative faculties of the person develop. But this, alone, is not enough:

. . . only when a sufficiently developed cognitive reference system and a system of expressive symbolism have been internalized can the child be said to be capable of understanding, in both the cognitive and emotional senses, the meaning of the prescriptions and prohibitions which are laid upon him. The child must mature to the point where he can begin to play a *responsible* role in the system of social interaction, where he can understand that what people feel is a function of his and their conformity with mutually held standards of conduct.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Talcott Parsons, "The Superego and the Theory of Social Systems," in Talcott Parsons, Robert F. Bales, and Edward A. Shils, *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (New York: The Free Press, 1953), 23.

Persons, then, are socialized to responsibility by internalizing and comprehending the standards of appropriate behavior which are expected of them as role incumbents. Prior to the completion of this process, they occupy roles which are exempt from the normal expectations of responsibility. It is, perhaps, unnecessary to add the obvious; socialization, from the behaviorist perspective, is critical to the stability of the entire social system. Thus, the voluminous literature on this point.

While this learned or acquired aspect of responsibility is no more than a commonplace, it is less frequently remarked that behavioral theory implies that the means and conditions which both make possible and constrain responsible action must also be considered in any discussion of capacity-responsibility. Simply put, societies are characterized by a differential distribution of both means and ends which would seem to suggest that expectations of responsibility should be similarly distributed. In fact, as we have seen, this is typically the case; certain roles are held to be inherently more "responsible" while others are thought of in terms of mundane duties.

Here, two points are to be made. Because of the differential distribution of the means to and conditions on responsible action, it would seem that the most general of social roles must, realistically, make only the most minimal of demands on their incumbents. The "citizen" role, perhaps the most diffuse political role in Western societies, provides an example. Though this role devolves upon virtually all inhabitants who attain a specified age, the means (resources) and conditions relating to the performance of this role are distributed in such a way as to ensure that only the most minimal of expectations can attach to the role if the capacity for responsible performance is to be regarded as equal.

This, in turn, directs us to the possibility of manipulating capacity in such a way as to control action. This might be done in several fashions. For example, a role can ostensibly be open to all (for example, legal barriers [conditions] may be relaxed) while the means to the performance of that role are withheld. This is not infrequently the case when citizenship rights are extended to various groups in societies. Without the capacity to perform the role, the newly enrolled citizens are deemed irresponsible when, in fact, their failings are better understood as nonresponsible. In a somewhat different vein, activity within an organization may be controlled by allocating the means and conditions so as to limit the range of probable conduct.

Similarly, the normative orientations and ultimate ends or values may be differentially distributed. Here, the example of educational tracking systems comes to mind. Through such devices, societies may seek to balance the existing means and conditions with the range of legitimate goals and methods. This, of course, is the rationale underlying the hierarchy of facilitation and control.

Finally, we should note that, within the Parsonian action schema, actors may be either single persons or collectivities. This seems to

invite the development of a notion of "collective capacity-responsibility" analogous to that of individual capacity-responsibility. This, however, would be misleading, for Parsons makes clear that the ". . . concept of *motivation* in a strict sense applies only to individual actors."⁶⁰ Since we have conceived of responsibility in terms of action or of meaningful behavior, this implies that the apparent parallels between individual and collective capacity-responsibility (and hence, all other forms of responsibility, for capacity-responsibility is a prerequisite for them all) are, from the Parsonian standpoint, specious. Rather, the appropriate terminology is that of "function." That is, individual actors may be said to possess a capacity for responsible action while institutions and "analytic subsystems" within the society and social system, respectively, are properly said to have functions with respect to these units. However, this does not preclude institutions or analytic subsystems from being evaluated in the performance of these functions and being held (at least in the cases of institutions) accountable, if not responsible.

The capacity for responsible conduct constitutes only one facet of imputability. In order to ascribe a certain action to a person, it is not only required to establish their capacity for responsible action, but also to identify their actions as causally efficacious. That is, it must be possible to say that without their particular efforts, things would have been otherwise.

Critics of behavioralism have claimed that its dogged insistence on reciprocal and multi-causal models have tended to obscure the true causal patterns prevailing in a society and, hence, have frustrated the assessment of responsibility. In particular, Gouldner charges (and with good reason⁶¹) that Parsons' approach is a "polemic" against the single factor model of social causality and that Parsons would regard each variable as both cause and effect. As a result, a ". . . basic defect of Parsons' system model is that it begs the question of whether all the variables in a system are equally influential in determining the state of the system as a whole or the condition of any of its parts."⁶²

Gouldner is undeniably correct in saying that the notions of multiple and reciprocal causality, which are basic to the Parsonian approach, exacerbate the task of assessing "causes." But in so saying, he seems to forget that "causality" is in the "eye of the beholder"; that is, it does not inhere in the interaction of persons or particles but is ascribed by actors in or observers to a social situation. The deficiency which Gouldner remarks is due, in the first instance, to Parsons' determination to construct a theoretical framework which captures both the

⁶⁰ Talcott Parsons, *et al.*, "Some Fundamental Categories of the Theory of Action: A General Statement," in Parsons and Shils (eds.), *Toward a General Theory of Action*, 4.

⁶¹ For example, Parsons flatly states that: "All such single-factor theories belong to the kindergarten stage of social science's development. Any factor is always interdependent with several others." *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966), 113.

⁶² Gouldner, *op. cit.*, 229.

subjective and objective aspects of human interaction without analytically prejudging the causal priority of the various elements of the action scheme.

Thus, in regard to any specific situation, there may be as many perceptions of the causal ordering as there are actors; each of these, in turn, may be analyzed by means of the action frame of reference. On the other hand, there is also an external perspective which Parsons would prefer to understand as an "objective" view. This is the perspective of the social scientist which Parsons would construe as being unbiased, an understanding which Gouldner would challenge. We shall return to this critical point shortly in our evaluation of Parsons' claims to social scientific objectivity.

B. *Action, Role, and Responsibility.* Having established the existence of the capacity for responsible conduct within the behavioral framework as well as a satisfactory causal imagery, it is appropriate to take up the notion of role-responsibility. The latter may be approached through the notion of action as it has been explicated by Hannah Arendt. Arendt has identified the two "outstanding characteristics" of action as its boundlessness (irreversibility) and unpredictability.⁶³ It is boundless and irreversible because it occurs in a ". . . medium where every reaction becomes a chain reaction and where every process is the cause of new processes."⁶⁴ Action is unpredictable, not simply because the entirety of its consequences may not be foreseen, but, more basically, since ". . . its full meaning can reveal itself only when it has ended."⁶⁵ Action, literally, has no ends; rather, it becomes a part of the seamless fabric of the social process which is, itself, being constantly embroidered, elaborated, and reinterpreted.

Quite obviously, the prospect of "taking responsibility" for a boundless or irreversible and unpredictable process is not an attractive one. Given the enormous implications, persons would be understandably reluctant to act. Aware of this, Arendt suggests that the actions of promising and forgiving, while they cannot undo previous action, may release the actor from responsibilities which would otherwise be intolerable. On these terms, she asserts, action becomes possible.⁶⁶

The notion of role suggests an alternative approach to the issues of boundlessness and unpredictability. It will be recalled that, from the behavioral perspective, the social system is essentially conceived as a more-or-less rationally integrated cluster of roles, each of which is defined with diverse degrees of diffuseness or specificity. From this perspective, responsible action consists in knowingly adhering to either the letter or the spirit of the constitutive rule-complex which defines

⁶³ *The Human Condition* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1958), 170-1.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 212-23.

the role. In this way, then, roles serve to regularize interaction through the development of mutual expectations. Equally, they serve to define the bounds of imputability and accountability, thereby releasing actors from the unforeseeable and irreversible consequences of their conduct. Thus, roles, by regularizing interaction and by delimiting the range of responsible action, also serve to make it tolerable and even possible.

However, two caveats are in order. First, there is no necessary reason why the range of accountability should coincide with that of imputability. An actor may well be held accountable for something with which he or she had little to do; equally, he/she may be released from accountability when his/her actions were of singular consequence. It seems possible, then, to have situations which are "overdetermined" or "underdetermined" in two senses. Because causal efficacy may not be imputed to various roles, it may prove impossible to ascertain a cause ("underdetermined"). Equally, analysis may reveal a multiplicity of "causes," any combination of which might appear to be sufficient to produce the consequence ("overdetermined"). Conceivably, similar circumstances might be encountered with respect to accountability. The situation in which inaction on the part of a great number of persons, any one of whom might have altered the outcome, provides such an example.

A second difficulty has to do with the varieties of responsibility which are conceivable within the social system. We recall that Parsons identified four functionally differentiated analytic subsystems: economy, polity, societal community, and fiduciary system. Each of these subsystems might be expected to articulate a particularized interpretation of the general cultural tradition in which the social system is embedded. It follows that the various role-defining rule-complexes which may be identified as belonging, in part or whole, to these subsystems may include different or even contradictory expectations regarding the responsible performance of a role. Thus, we should expect to find notions of economic, political, legal, and moral responsibility which will differ or even conflict in some areas. For example, an actor could well be held morally responsible even when exonerated by the legal system.

We should also note that a social system may be expected to possess what might be called "deviant roles." Some will be institutionalized within the structure of the social system and will release or exempt the incumbent from various responsibilities in return for which he surrenders, in part or whole, his claims to efficacy, capacity, or both. For example, the patient acknowledges his lack of capacity to ensure his own well-being and submits to the treatment of a doctor.⁶⁷ In another situation, creative individuals may forego claims to power in order to pursue their particular muse. This notion is developed in Price's

⁶⁷ Cf., Parsons' discussion of the medical practice in Talcott Parsons, *The Social System* (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 439-65.

"spectrum from truth to power" where the pursuit of scientific "truth" is conducted within roles which are partially exempt from accountability to the larger community. On the other hand, those roles which are concerned with the exercise of power are, or should be, it is argued, ". . . required to submit to the test of political responsibility, in the sense of submitting to the ultimate decision of the electorate."⁶⁸

Finally, a society will also possess deviant roles which are not institutionalized under the prevailing normative superstructure of the community but which reflect a different set of norms and values. Here, the archetype is the criminal. In this instance, the role incumbent is, of course, not exempt from the claims of society and its various sanctions. At times, however, the actor may resist definition in terms of the criminal role and interpret his action on political (or moral) terms, arguing by implication that his/her conduct, while legally reprehensible and hence punishable, is politically (or morally) defensible. This "plea of definition" will be the more frequent in those situations in which the prevailing values and norms are inconsistent, perhaps as a result of recent or rapid innovation.

C. *Responsibility and the Social Scientist.* Parsons' systemic approach which stresses the interrelatedness of the various roles comprising the social system as well as his reciprocal, multi-causal imagery hardly prepares the reader for his treatment of the role of the social scientist. Parsons, it would seem, must be a thoroughgoing relativist. Not only does he emphasize the dynamic interaction of the normative and the conditional within the voluntaristic theory of action, but he simultaneously subscribes to what is essentially an emotivist theory of values. How, then, can he reach his eventual position which is avowedly evolutionary and which claims to establish a sphere of objective knowledge for the social scientist?

We recall that Weber reconciled himself to a social science which was conducted within the frame work of a particular value orientation which gave significance or "relevance-to-value" (*Wertbeziehung*) to elements of the social world and thereby served to focus research. Weber's "objectivity" was, in fact, "intersubjective testability." Individuals beginning from within the same set of assumptions and the same cultural orientation could expect to establish social scientific "truths" which would be valid within these cultural and temporal bounds.

Parsons diverges from his German mentor on this point. He acknowledges that ". . . it is not a justified assumption that reality is exhausted by its congruence with the kind of ideal systems accessible to the human mind in its scientific phase, such as what we call logic."⁶⁹ Nevertheless, he argues that "actual" scientific knowledge is, in fact,

⁶⁸ Don K. Price, *The Scientific Estate* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press, 1965), 137.

⁶⁹ Parsons, *Structure*, 754.

asymptotically approaching the limiting condition of "possible" scientific knowledge.⁷⁰ Moreover, at any given instant, scientific representations of external reality stand in a "functional relation" to that reality, ". . . such that for certain scientific purposes they are adequate representations of it."⁷¹ This "functional adequacy" is pragmatically justified: the fact that ". . . scientific theory 'works,' is proof that, though limited, the propositions of human science are not completely arbitrary but are adequately relevant to significant aspects of reality."⁷²

Two further points are critical for the appreciation of the Parsonian thesis. It will be recalled that Parsons understood his "action frame of reference" as pertaining to the viewpoint of the actor. However, this subjective perspective, according to Parsons, is increasingly influenced and determined by the scientific perspective on reality. Here, Parsons is borrowing Weber's conviction that ". . . the fate of our times is characterized by rationalization and intellectualization and, above all, by the 'disenchantment of the world.'"⁷³ But Parsons gives Weber's gloomy vision an optimistic twist; this rationalization can only contribute to the adaptive capacity of the social system and enhance its capacity to manipulate and control its environment. Moreover, this perspective is frankly evolutionary; rationality ". . . occupies a logical position in respect to action systems analogous to that of entropy in physical systems."⁷⁴ As action at all levels is rationalized, that is, made more scientific, it will increasingly become amenable to scientific interpretation.

In this sense, the scientific view and the subjective perspective of the action frame of reference may be said to converge. At the same time, there is another sense in which this notion of "convergence" is critical to Parsonian theory. In constructing his system of action, Parsons began with the rather unusual step of treating the theories of selected predecessors as an empirical data-base and seeking to uncover patterns which would both provide the basis for a social scientific paradigm and show the proper direction for future theoretic activity. Examining the works of previous theorists (in particular, those of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber), Parsons felt he had found the ". . . very impressive fact of convergence, that the work of these men who started from markedly different points of view converge upon a single theory."⁷⁵ Predictably, the "single theory" in question here is Parsons' own voluntaristic theory of action. Thus Parsons concludes in *The Structure of Social Action* that, in view of the convergence which he feels has been demonstrated, ". . . the concepts of the voluntaristic theory of action must be sound theoretical concepts."⁷⁶

⁷⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 753.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 754.

⁷³ Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in Gerth and Mills (eds.), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, 155.

⁷⁴ Parsons, *Structure*, 752.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 722.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 724.

Parsons appeals to this notion of convergence to circumvent the relativism inherent in the sociologies of Weber and, later, Mannheim. Weber's position entailed the possibility of a plurality of social sciences reflecting the presence of alternative value orientations which might motivate and shape research. In a similar way, Mannheim's sociology of knowledge leads to the more extreme – and paradoxical – position that all knowledge is socially grounded. While this conclusion is inescapable, Mannheim felt that its consequences could be ameliorated by approaching the subject matter in a fashion which was deliberately socially eclectic and classless (the detached perspective⁷⁷).

Parsons, on the other hand, thought by his technique of convergence to isolate a “. . . permanent precipitate of valid empirical knowledge,”⁷⁸ from the works of his predecessors and build thereon. In effect, he is asserting that, because certain perspectives have perdured, they have proven themselves functionally adequate to the task of describing social reality. Since they converge upon his own theory, it is further implied that the voluntaristic theory of action stands in *the most* functionally adequate relation to reality and is, for this reason, to be preferred to alternative schemes.⁷⁹

This argument leads to two consequences. In the first place, it gives to the Parsonian framework a generally prescriptive flavor. Not only does Parsons commend his categories of analysis to his colleagues as the scientifically “correct” categories, but there is the implication that, through continued rationalization, society must and will come to conceptualize itself in similar terms if it is to enhance its adaptive capacity. Secondly, it denies the possibility of inter-paradigmatic disputes and enjoins social theorists to espouse the behavioral persuasion. In effect, Parsons' is a plea for a unified social scientific community under the behavioral banner which will constitute the basis of “intersubjective testability.” Ultimately, as the process of rationalization proceeds, the social scientific and general perspectives are expected to converge and the arena of “intersubjective testability” will become coterminous with the viewpoint of the larger community. In this way, the subjective and objective perspectives will fuse in the fully rationalized society.

Parsons' theory is also prescriptive for the social scientist. The latter, as scientist, is not interested “. . . in the content of his own mind,” but instead “. . . very much concerned with that of the minds of persons whose actions he studies.”⁸⁰ Despite his recognition that “. . . scientific investigation takes its place as a mode of action to be

⁷⁷ Karl Mannheim, *Ideology and Utopia* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, n.d.), 282.

⁷⁸ Parsons, *Structure*, 19.

⁷⁹ An extended criticism of the argument of convergence appeared in my “An Examination of the Ontological and Epistemological Assumptions of Behavioralism,” paper delivered at the 1975 Annual Meeting of the Southwestern Political Science Association. Here, it is argued that Parsons' appeal to convergence is untenable on both logical and empirical grounds.

⁸⁰ Parsons, *Structure*, 46.

analyzed in the same terms as any other, rather than as a class of action set apart,"⁸¹ Parsons uses the notion of convergence and the vision of a unified social scientific community to limit the responsibility of social scientists. Rather than being responsible for choice of analytic frameworks and to a variety of individuals and collectivities within the wider society, the social scientist finds himself denied the possibility of choosing his conceptual framework and responsible to a rather narrow group of colleagues. With respect to the larger society, he functions as a social engineer, promoting its further rationalization. Scientists, in short, became professionals in the service of the scientific administration of society or, in Gouldner's words, the ". . . technical cadres of national governance."⁸²

D. *Parsonian Behavioralism and the Problem of Order.* Parsons' approach to the problem of order within the academic community reflects his "solution" to that problem within the more general social system. In effect, the role occupant is pictured as confronted by a system of values and normative orientations on the one hand and constrained by the means and conditions available to him. Since the choice of alternative courses of action is dependent upon the perception of such alternatives, the matter of order is seen to revolve around the task of creating a set of goals and orientations which are internally consistent and, at the same time, compatible with the means and conditions available to the individual actors as role incumbents. This, of course, is essentially the problem as it is frequently conceptualized in administrative theory.⁸³

But the very utility of behavioral theory in the analysis of organizational behavior suggests its major deficiency in the analysis of a more heterogeneous and extended community. This is the problem of ends. Generally speaking, the behavioral analysis of organizational processes proceeds rather smoothly so long as the goals of the organization may be specified and are known and accepted by the personnel of the structure. When such consensus is absent, however, order or integration becomes problematic.

In a society as opposed to an organization, however, such dissensus is far more likely to occur; indeed, it is debatable whether a society may be said to have a "goal" in the same sense as do organizations. Behavioralism's response to this criticism lies in its belief in the rationalization of society and the concomitant generalization of values as well as with the development of an internally consistent system of values and norms. To the extent that values are generalized, they become inclusive

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 600.

⁸² Gouldner. *op. cit.*, 500.

⁸³ Parsons' influence on this subfield appears to have been considerably greater than is generally realized. For example, much of the theoretical development in Herbert Simon's *Administrative Behavior* seems to have been inspired by Parsons. Cf., Herbert Simon, *Administrative Behavior*, 2nd ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1957).

and more widely acceptable; to the extent that society is rationalized, the mixture of ends becomes more empirical and less transcendental. Emphasis shifts from future ideals to present, tangible goods (empirical ends) which are the forte of industrial society. Ultimately, the dominant value within the behavioral perspective must be the survival of the system as a guarantee that other values may be realized. But this should not obscure the ordering of these ends; the behavioral perspective is corrosive to all values save that of the survival of the system, and can tolerate alternative values only so long as they do not impede the growth of the system's adaptive capacity or threaten integration.

Within a consensual framework of internally consistent values and normative orientations, particularly one which is thoroughly rationalized (or "disenchanted," to use Weber's term), the appeal to responsible action may be used to evoke the desired — that is, "eufunctional" — forms of behavior. On the other hand, where this consensus is lacking, "responsible action" from the perspective of one role may be utterly irresponsible from that of another. In such situations, recourse must then be had to the various positive and negative sanctions available to the system.

From the behavioral perspective, then, the notion of responsibility may be understood in terms of the cybernetic hierarchy of control and conditioning whereby the various expectations of society are internalized by actors and serve as the basis for guiding their conduct into socially appropriate forms. But such forms of control are effective only where consensus prevails. Moreover, since behavioralism subscribes to an emotivist theory of value, the only end or goal for which it can argue is the preservation of the system. Responsible moral action must necessarily devolve into action devoted to the preservation of the existing social, cultural, and personality patterns. While such questions are unlikely to inspire general agreement within the context of a pluralist society, concern with such lofty notions is apt to become infrequent in a rationalized society where non-scientific orientations (for example, moral or aesthetic norms) will increasingly come to refer to the adequate performance of economic, social, and political roles which, in the absence of attenuation of value conflict, may be elaborately explicated in terms of "intrinsic" or scientific normative orientations.

V. CONCLUSION.

This essay began from the assumption that social theory is a problem-solving enterprise which both reflects and shapes the underlying "domain assumptions" of the general culture. In the course of our discussion, we have seen that behavioralism, unlike either positivism or idealism, deliberately employs a logic and grammar which hews closely to the common usage. Furthermore, we have seen that Parsonian behavioralism presumes the continued rationalization of society by virtue of which the latter will increasingly come to understand itself

in terms of such behavioral categories as role, collectivity, norm and end.

The social scientist is no passive observer to this process. Parsons, in effect, admonishes him either to adopt the behavioral categories of analysis or renounce his pretensions to the scientific label. In a thoroughly rationalized society where the subjective perspective of the actor and the "objective" view of the social scientist are congruent, this renunciation would be tantamount to withdrawal from rational action. However, Parsons' conviction that societies are, indeed, evolving in the direction of greater rationality is, like that of Weber, a faith-taken assumption, albeit one which both men felt justified by their extensive social scientific investigations. Nevertheless, Parsons' invitation to aspiring social scientists to adopt the behavioral perspective amounts to little more than the offer of a seat on yet another "train of history." To accept this offer without first evaluating the course and destination of this train is to forswear a traditional role of the intellectual: that of social critic. In fact, the significance of this role must recede in the face of the assumption that the patterns of the system are to be preserved.

The fundamental analytic categories of Parsonian behavioralism are those of role, collectivity, norm and value; its fundamental methodological assumption is that society will evolve through the continued rationalization of its features which will further its adaptive capacity *vis-a-vis* its environment. This, in fact, is a fair description of the situation of contemporary industrial society as well as a sophisticated rendition of its faith in "progress."

Moreover, the behavioral interpretation of "responsible action" seems most consistent and comprehensible when used to refer to the adequate performance of a well-specified, scientifically oriented role. Thus it would appear that behavioral theory, both in its general features and in the particular interpretation given to the notion of responsibility, reflects its origins in and function on behalf of the scientific vision of society.

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