Science and action in the work of Talcott Parsons 1928-50

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ABSTRACT

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A science of action has traditionally been associated with a range of methodological problems. Parsons' exposure to German idealism gave him an awareness of such problems. The question examined by this study is how Parsons addresses and attempts to resolve three methodological problems in a science of action; the nature of subjectivity, the relationship of normative entities and action and the place of values in knowledge. Central to the argument pursued here is that Parsons formulates and answers these problems within the interrelated framework of his analytical conception of science and his voluntaristic metaphysic.

Chapters II and III are concerned with The Structure of Social Action. In the first, Parsons' general methodology of science is outlined leading up to his understanding and reasons for 'structural analysis': the importance of systematically articulated schemes of general elements of action. In chapter III Parsons' voluntarism is analyzed before examining the three problems noted above and showing their relationship to the analytic/voluntaristic framework.

Chapters IV and V follow through these themes into Parsons' work between 1938 and 1950 when he explicitly adopts a structural functional approach. Chapter IV

returns to general methodology and Parsons' rationale for structural functionalism but notes a number of anomolies in this which lead to chapter V in which structural functionalism is considered in the light of methodological problems of a science of action. Here the close relationship between voluntarism and structural functionalism is stressed.

In conclusion alternative interpretations of voluntarism are critically assessed and a closing comment on Parsons' contribution to sociological theory is offered.

SCIENCE AND ACTION IN THE WORK OF TALCOTT PARSONS 1928-50

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Declaration

No part of this dissertation has previously been submitted for degree purposes.

I. Introduction: Establishing the Theme of Parsons' C Concern with the Methodological Problems of a Science Action.

The following pages are intended as a contribution to the history of sociological theory, specifically, my aim is to explore and elucidate what Talcott Parsons means by a science of action in his work between 1928 and 1950. A number of preliminary points arise from this intention. To begin with, a note on the writing of the history of Parsons' work is pertinent as two rather different approaches can readily be discerned. The first is marked by its attempt to locate Parsons' intellectual corpus in his society via the concept of ideology. The most conspicuous exponent of this approach is A.W. Gouldner (1971). In broad terms Gouldner interprets Parsons' work as an ideological response to the needs of American society in the mid-twentieth century. Whilst having many positive qualities Gouldner's volume has a number of weaknesses, two of which are relevant here. Firstly, the concept of ideology is a difficult one to employ as around it hang a plethora of conceptual problems. It generally implies that the body of ideas to which it is applied is a distortion of reality in accordance with the interest of some social group. Each of the terms in this statement can be regarded as problematical and requiring careful handling. Now Gouldner does develop a conceptual framework for the examination of 'the infrastructure of social theory' (1971: Chapter 2) but it can hardly be said that this is adequate to meet the problems associated with the

concept of ideology. For example, the concept of interest which an ideology serves is difficult to specify objectively and independently yet we find Gouldner using its synonym in the notion of the needs of utilitarian culture without any attempts to overcome traditional problems. In many ways then the influence of Gouldner's functionalist background which he is at such pains to attack shows through, his stage by stage model of the historical development of sociology (1971: Chapter 4) reminds one of what Jarvie calls the functionalist 'snapshot' approach to social change. (1964: 154)

The first weakness in the ideological approach to the history of Parsons' theory is then its inadequate theoretical framework. The second flaw is that by stressing the ideological functions of Parsons' work this approach is insensitive to Parsons' own more or less conscious aims and problems especially in the area of methodology. Parsons' explicit theory has its own methodological infrastructure which, when understood, throws a different light onto the theory itself. Recognition of this has led to the second type of interpretation of Parsons' work which Schwanenberg calls 'an analysis from within' (1971). A number of recent commentaries on Parsons can be placed under this heading (Bershady (1973), Mulkay (1971), Schwanenberg (1971), Turner (1974)).[1] Each of these would want to disagree strongly with Bottomore's view

that Parsons 'has not thought it necessary to give an extended account of his views or methods. It is evident that his own theoretical "goal-orientation" would have become a good deal clearer had he undertaken, at some stage, to examine the logical foundations of his theory'. (1975: 40). To these interpreters Parsons does concern himself with the logical foundations of his theory which are both distinctive and important for its understanding, a view which is shared in this present work.

Two examples of this approach require further comment, those of Bershady and Schwanenberg. Both of these attempt to link Parsons' concern with methodology to a further aspect of his thinking. In the case of Bershady Parsons is interpreted as trying to resolve a long standing and deeply grounded problem in the very idea of a social science, the problem of relativism whilst Schwanenberg links Parsons' methodology to his preoccupation with the problem of social order saying that '.... in exploring the general theory of action one should be sensitive to the discovery of moral premises as part of its construction' (1971: 571). This present work parallels these explorations into Parsons' thinking in that it places emphasis on the proper understanding of Parsons' method.(2) It further attempts to link this with other aspects of his thought but here I wish to draw together both Bershady's and Schwanenberg's foci. Like the former I wish to stress Parsons' concern with problems inherent in a science of action, in this case

problems of subjectivity, normative determinism and value[3] rather than Bershady's emphasis on relativism. Further, with Schwanenberg I wish to relate these methodological problems to Parsons' moral premises, in this case his voluntaristic metaphysic of action. Bershady is little concerned with such questions confining himself to a brief 'metaphysical interlude' (1973: Chapter 5) which consists of a number of sceptical remarks in the direction of over-simplified analyses of Parsons' metaphysics. However, he does say that he hopes that these preliminaries '....may be suggestive of a more intensive investigation' (1973: 82). It is hoped that the present work might represent a contribution to this.

Having indicated the nature of my approach it is time to say something about what is being approached. Again Bottomore (1975: 31-2) seems to be radically wrong but provocatively raises the issue. He says that Parsons' action language ('meaningful intention', 'normative orientation', 'means-end relationships', etc) would *prima facie* suggest that he would align himself with the wide range of thinkers who reject the idea of a *science* of society, examples being Marcuse, Sartre, Collingwood and Winch.

> 'But this is not the course which Parsons follows. In The Structure of Social Action his implicit argument (derived from Max Weber) seems to be that the theory of action occupies some middle ground between the positivist or natural science conception of sociology and the idealist view which emphasises the role of "intuition" in the understanding of society; ... He does not, however, explore the nature of this middle ground, and the seeker after methodological enlightenment will have to turn elsewhere for an analysis of the concept of action ...'
> (Bottomore: 1975: 32)

In fact I think Bottomore is wrong here, as I hope to show in what follows. Parsons does not adopt some undefined middle ground between positivism and idealism, he is always committed to a science of action akin to physics or theoretical biology. Further, Parsons does provide an analysis of the concept of action which addresses the same range of problems as has concerned the thinkers mentioned by Bottomore. Of course, whether this is methodologically enlightening is a different matter, indeed this is the question underlying my analysis of Parsons' science of action.

A comment on recent trends in social theory can further develop my theme. One strand of the apparently all pervasive current attack on 'positivism' in sociology has come from sociologists and others stressing the importance of 'meaning' to social action and consequently to sociology. It is an interesting irony of history that the work of Parsons should be one major recipient of anti-positivistic critiques resting on such premises. (Examples are Douglas (1971) Wilson (1971)). For, of course, Parsons first major work is marked by its own critique of positivism and parallel emphasis on the subjectivity of action. Whenever the terms positivism and anti-positivism are employed there are innumerable problems of definition yet further consideration of the situation gives rise to the suspicion that there is more to this reversal of positions than semantic differences. In The Structure of Social Action Parsons considers not only positivism but also German idealism as a tradition of social thought, as Bershady has emphasised (1973: Chapter 2). This is relevant in that it can be claimed that many of the problems and perspectives which characterize the contemporary 'phenomenological' movement in sociology are closely related to those of the German idealist tradition in the nineteenth century.(4) A few examples will suffice here.

The radical distinction between the sciences of nature and man, the German Naturwissenschaften and Geisteswissenshaften re-emerge in essays by Natanson (1963) and Winch (1958). The latter in particular is associated with the

view that the object of the social sciences is constituted by systems of meaning which must be understood rather than explained. Again as Gellner (1974) has pointed out such a view is at the centre of the classical German tradition of idealist scholarship.(5) Finally a parallel might be suggested between the present day ethnomethodologist's intensive investigation of miniscule interaction situations and the historical aspect of idealism, what Ringer (1969: Chapter 2) has called 'the principle of individuality'.

The above remarks are rather glib but their function is merely suggestive. For it is the case that the early Parsons was closely familiarwith the leading principles of the idealist tradition. Here I disagree with Butts' recent claim that Parsons was insensitive to the problems involved in the study of values and meanings on the grounds that he reasons from a positivistic and behaviouristic background (Butts: 1975: 201). A number of points can be made to support this position. Firstly, there is Parsons' short but penetrating discussion of the idealist tradition in The Structure of Social Action [1937a: 473-87]. The sources for this are listed in the book's bibliography which includes the names of Dilthey, Meinecke, Troeltsch, Windelband and Rickert but also references to Husserl and, most interestingly, Schutz's Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt. Secondly, in his most extensive auto-

biographical essay Parsons (1970) notes the influence of this tradition on him. Mentioning that as an undergraduate he took 'an intensive course in Kant's Critique of Pure Reason' (1970: 829) he goes on to say:

> 'The Heidelburg experience carried me substantially farther, particularly in studies of the issues involved with Weber's Wissenschaftslehre. Notable among these were, first, the problems centering around the German historical traditions and hence the status of generalized theoretical conceptualization in the social and cultural disciplines, and, second, those of the status of the interpretation of subjective meanings and motive in the analysis of human action, what the Germans called the problem of Verstehen. (1970: 829-30).

Mention of Parsons at Heidleburg can serve as the last point, there he was taught by Jaspers (Parsons: 1970: 876) and in a recent lecture(6) Parsons noted in passing that during his student days the works of Husserl and Heidegger were very much in vogue.

So, Parsons' own critique of positivism was partly founded on a knowledge of a tradition of thought similar to that of his own present day critics. Out of this historical conundrum emerges the leading problem of this present work. The study of human activity as 'action' has traditionally involved a number of special methodological problems such as the nature of the actor's subjectivity, the relationship between subjective phenomena and behaviour, and the significance of the value qualities of the investigating subject. Consideration of such problems has led some thinkers either to doubt that this aspect of intellectual endeavour could be scientific at all or to draw a more or less radical distinction between this form of science and others, particularly the sciences of nature. Parsons is not ignorant of the importance of these problems but he takes neither of these paths. Rather, in his work being considered here classical mechanics appears as the model for the development of the sciences of action.(7) The problem then is quite what Parsons intends by a <u>science</u> of <u>action</u>? What do these terms mean and how does Parsons <u>define</u> and <u>provide solutions</u> to the methodological problems associated with such an enterprise? Rather surprisingly perhaps during the recent revived interest in such problems little attempt has been made to explore them in Parsons' work. Bershady raises the issues in the conclusion to his book and again in his commentary on Parsons' review. In the latter he says:

> 'There has been a tension [in Parsons' work I.P.] from the outset between the statement of the explanatory goal, a "nomological explanation" of action, and the actual formulation of the categories and the substance of the theory. For a lawful explanation of action would seem to impose a "determinism" upon beings who are held to be free in their essence'. (1974: 281)

But Bershady has not followed through how Parsons understands this 'tension' or how he attempts to overcome it. This is the task of this present work.(8)

So far I have attempted to outline my approach to the history of Parsons' theory and broadly indicate the thematic problems I am addressing. I am trying to uncover and explore certain underlying problems in Parsons' thinking particularly associated with his ambition to construct a science of action. I have suggested that Parsons' background in German idealism sensitizes him to certain problems in that ambition which then leads to the question of how he understands and endeavours to overcome them. I shall now proceed to substantiate my claim that Parsons is aware of the methodological obstacles to a science of action by referring to certain aspects of the essays written by him prior to The Structure of Social Action. In these Parsons on several occasions manifests such an awareness particularly

in his attack on 'positivism' which is a recurrent theme. But, on the other hand, no definite methodological position emerges in these essays, Parsons tends to 'crucial equivocations', to borrow a phrase used by Scott (1969: 252) to describe Parsons' post-war action theory.

Parsons proclaims that 'The positivistic reaction against philosophy has, in its effects on the social sciences, manifested a strong tendency to obscure the fact that man is essentially an active, creative, evaluating creature' (1935a: 282). It is his 'vague general conviction of the importance of values' and 'the vague realization that these positivistic theories somehow, by a kind of logical jugglery rather than by empirical proof, were squeezing what I have here called the "value" - elements out of their interpretation of social life' (1935a: 313) that lead Parsons to oppose positivistic theories. So it is not directly to positivism as a <u>method</u> for the study of action that Parsons objects but rather its conception of the subject matter of study, the nature of action:

> 'The task of sociology, as of the other social sciences, I consider to be strictly scientific - the attainment of systematic theoretical understanding of empirical fact. The failure of the positivistic schools of sociology to attain such a goal I do not attribute, as so many do, to the inherent impossibility of the goal,

> but rather to their own inadequate methods of approaching it. Their inadequacy consists essentially in trying to apply both modes of thought and substantive concepts developed in the study of and suited to one kind of empirical fact - mainly that of the physical world - to quite another, human action in society. It is surely not altogether heterodox to say that the basic conceptions of a science should be developed in connection with a study of its own subject matter - not imported from other sciences' (1935a: 314-5)

So Parsons characterizes positivism in terms of its uncritical acceptance of the 'basic conceptions' and 'modes of thought and substantive concepts' of the subject matter of the natural sciences. This Parsons calls 'objectivism' (1935a: 283) by which he means the tendency to treat action not only in the same way as the physical world, as 'externally observed events' (1935a: 283) but also in the same terms, what Parsons calls the positivistic factors of heredity and environment. The corollary of this is that positivism omits the 'subjective' aspect of action.

Yet Parsons is aware that it was the belief that subjective entities were incapable of scientific study that partly led the positivist to exclude them.

> 'Any attempt to explain man's behaviour in terms of ends, purposes, ideals, has been under suspicion as a form of "teleology" which was thought to be incompatible with the methodological requirements of positive science. One must, on the contrary, explain in terms of "causes" and "conditions", not of ends'. (1935a: 282)

Again Parsons notes the 'repudiation, in the name of scientific rigor, of all evidence derived from "observation" of the "subjective" aspects of other people's minds - their ideas, desires, ends, or "internal" mental states or processes' (1934a: 512).

In the passage quoted above Parsons clearly states that he believes the goal of a science of action to be logically possible. At another point he says: 'There is a methodological core common to all empirical science, no matter what its concrete subject matter'. (1936a: 679). Yet he is aware that to some thinkers the subjective quality of action makes such a goal and common core chimerical. He also says:

> 'What is formulated in an "economic law" is not a descriptive generalization in the first instance at all, but a rational type case. It is how action

would proceed given the "wants" of the subjects and given the conditions under which they act, in so far as they act rationally. It is, given the data, a norm of rational action. Its empirical relevance rests on the circumstance that men do in fact try (not merely "tend") to "economize", to "exploit" the conditions of their lives rationally in order to satisfy their wants. This idea of a norm which men can be conceived as striving to attain by effort is something entirely foreign to the "positive" physical sciences'.

'But Robbins' attitude seems to involve a misconception of the nature of "law" as applied to the sciences of action. As already pointed out, its necessity is not descriptive, but "normative". It is not that given certain data men necessarily must act in certain ways, but that if they would achieve certain kinds of ends which we assume do serve as motives to them, the most rational way of doing so is that formulated in the law. The concrete relevance of the law

> depends on the "fact" of experience that men do <u>try</u> to attain such norms of efficiency, of course with varying degrees of success. The necessity of economic law lies in its logic, not in the "facts". There is always an "if" attached to it. There is no reason why the same should not be true of the other elements of action'. (1934a:519-20 and 539. See also 1935b:419, 1935a:286).

Now this is surely not a concept of scientific law applicable in natural science and given the centrality of the concept of law in the latter it is difficult to see how Parsons' notion of a central core common to all science can be compatible with it. Here then is a further example of Parsons' awareness of the difficulties facing a science of action and his rather unstable position prior to <u>The Structure of Social Action</u>.

In this statement on the nature of economic laws Parsons refers to norms of action. The relationship between subjective entities such as norms and actual behaviour is a further area of debate in the methodology of the social sciences particularly on the question of whether norms can properly be considered 'causes' of action. (See, for example, MacIntyre (1962:)) Again Parsons displays a degree of awareness of such difficulties. He speaks of '... the great intricacy and subtlety of the possible relationships between action and moral rules' (1935a: 300) and mentions '... the whole great question of the causal

role of ends....' adding the footnote: 'That is in one sense the question of teleology. But this slippery concept must be handled with great caution' (1936b). But Parsons is hardly clear and consistent as to the position he adopts here as is illustrated by the following passage in which mechanical causation, laws as dependent upon norms and moral exhortation form a peculiar mixture.

> 'One prominent result of the dogmatic position is to lead its exponents in the direction of a sort of mechanistic automatism, as though the human individual were as inert a link in the chain of economic causation as the atom or particle is in a mechanical system. As against this tendency Taussig asserts again and again the importance of effort, of the active participation of men in their affairs. There is nothing inevitable under any and all conditions about the level of a productive effort which we are apt to take for granted. Above all is leadership important in human affairs of all sorts, not least in the field of business and industry. Its changes and

> accomplishments cannot be accounted for in terms of any stereotyped average of ability or effort, but only of the leadership of the extra-ordinary and rare individual'. (1936c:371).

However at one point Parsons gives a fairly systematic discussion of the question of the relationship between subjective entities and behaviour. This occurs in his analysis of what Pareto means when he says that an actor's theories and overt action are 'manifestations' of the actor's 'state of mind' (1936b:259-260). The question is the meaning of the term 'manifestation'. It is used in two senses which correspond to the two components of the 'state of mind', the ultimate conditions (heredity and environment) and the ultimate value element.[9] In the former the thing manifested, heredity and environment and the manifestation, the actor's action and theories are both parts of the same physical system analogous to a thermometer and what it measures. There is a straightforward causal relationship between heat and its manifestation in the temperature reading. Parsons sees this as applying to the manifestation of hereditary and environment in action, he gives the example of '... certain mental symptoms, as financial irresponsibility, may be taken in paresis as evidence of certain syphilitic lesions of the brain' (1936b:259).

In the case of the manifestation of ultimate values in action the situation is more complicated. Here the relationships between the manifestation and the thing manifested is a symbolic one, a relation between a symbol (the actor's action or theory) and its meaning, what is symbolized. But further, Parsons uses two different senses of this relationship which is based on the distinction between logical and non-logical action. In logical action the symbol, scientific knowledge and action based on it, 'refer to or express systems of intrinsic relationships in the external world' (1936b:259). The 'meaning' symbolized is thus 'objective', logical action is the 'reflection' of external reality and hence although mediated through symbols Parsons calls this the intrinsic means-end relationship, arguing that causal explanation is just as applicable here as in the direct relation between heredity and environment above. In non-logical action, however, the symbol, non-scientific knowledge and action refers not to the 'objective' but to the 'subjective'. Non-logical action is a 'form of expression' of this subjective realm, as Parsons says there is a 'double incidence of symbolism' (1935a:305), the symbol symbolizes another symbol. Then the crucial question is, can this relationship be a causal one? Parsons notes that in this context the relation between norm and action 'is always arbitrary' but then adds an important footnote: 'Once a given symbol is accepted it of course comes to form part of

a causal system but this depends on the phenomenon of "acceptance" which is foreign to the physical systems'. (1936b:259). Here Parsons says that for causal relations to apply between subjective entities and action the former must be 'accepted' by the actor.

Now the above paragraphs in no way represent a systematic discussion of problems in the methodology of the science of action. They are meant only to demonstrate that in a number of ways Parsons displays an awareness that there are problems involved in speaking of subjective entities in science, of 'economic laws', of subjective entities 'causing' behaviour. I hope that this and the background of idealism is sufficient to establish the problem for this present work which is, if Parsons' ambition is to construct a science of action how does he tackle the problems of method which are traditionally associated with such an aim?

Having established my theme I will conclude this introduction by summarizing the overall argument of the following chapters. Chapter II will consider Parsons' understanding of the nature of science <u>in general</u> as it is developed in <u>The Structure of Social Action</u>. The central emphasis to Parsons is the <u>theoretical</u> quality of science, a quality he considers to have been grossly underestimated in the dominantly empiricist traditions of European thought. This forms one plank of Parsons' attempt to construct a science of action. In Chapter III I will still be concerned with <u>The Structure of Social Action</u> but there turn

to the methodology of the sciences of action in particular. Three methodological problems of such a science will be considered beginning with the nature of 'subjectivity'. There are of course a number of theories of 'mind' but what is relevant in the context of a science of action is the meaningful quality of action which requires a model of the actor as capable of attributing meaning to action. The nature of this capacity is much debated but here I will take a catholic view and simply say that for an actor to act meaningfully implies a purposive, self-conscious and reasoning being. These three qualities I take from Schutz, Mead and Winch. Schutz (1972) emphasises the actor's 'project', the image of the completed act which guides and co-ordinates action in progress. Mead's (1934) focus is on the actor's consciousness of self as an object to itself, the ability to reflect upon and monitor one's own behaviour and subjective processes. Finally, Winch (1958) characterizes action as rule-following, meaning being bound up with the capacity to understand the proper use of rules. I shall use this model of the actor as a foil to discuss Parsons' concept of subjectivity in order to bring out how he uses an entirely different model in which the quality of meaning is peripheral. Rather, Parsons' model of the actor gains its form from his notion of science and its content from his voluntaristic metaphysic. As I shall argue that the latter is far from the conventional sense of voluntary action this leads to a centrally important point. Parsons

can be interpreted as addressing the methodological problems of a science of action but the way he defines these problems is peculiar to him and consequently so are the solutions he offers.

This applies equally to the second such problem which I shall call the problem of normative determinism. The issue here is how normative entities such as norms, ends or values can be thought of as determinants of action. Again a foil is useful. Following the Humean sense of causation, to speak of cause and effect requires two conditions in this context. Firstly the constant conjunction of cause and effect, whenever x, then y. Secondly, the independent discrimination of cause and effect, y is in no way implicit in x, the two can be defined and experienced separately. Problems have arisen in applying Humean causality to the relations of subjective entities and actions because it has been argued that these two conditions are not met. A norm is not constantly conjoined with an action not because it is only a necessary not sufficient condition of the action but because a norm is understood by the actor who may interpret its implications for action not only differently but also creatively, this being particularly well illustrated by the use of language rules. Further, to define an action, to say, for example, that the actor is 'going for a walk' in itself imputes an intention to the actor so that the subjective entity, the actor's goal, cannot be logically and experientially separated from the action. Now Parsons wishes to talk

about subjective entities as causes of action and he also recognizes that there are problems in this. However, we will find that once again his understanding of what is problematical here is rather different to the issues above (although Parsons is not ignorant of these issues) and can be elucidated by his conception of voluntarism and science.

The third problems to be considered below is that of value, not in the sense of the practical role of the sociologist in society but the role of value in constituting the object of enquiry, what Weber calls the value-relevance of social science. (1949:71-85, 105-12, 131-63). I shall use Weber here as my point of contrast, his pertinance being that Parsons also employs Weber's ideas to a considerable degree. But I shall argue that Weber's ideas are considerably changed in Parsons' hands, again becoming welded into his own framework.

Chapter III then is concerned with The Structure of Social Action as a point of synthesis in Parsons' thinking in which problems are addressed and 'resolved', so that to him a firm foundation is laid for a science of action, a view which challenges what Turner and Beeghley (1974) call 'current folklore' in the interpretation of Parsons' work.

This folklore recurrently posits a shift in the foundation of Parsons' theory between the 1930's and his post-war work. This shift is represented in various ways, generally as between an emphasis on 'action' to one of 'system'. Such interpretations will be considered in the final chapter but prior to that I will consider Parsons' work in the period 1938-50 in which he self-consciously adopts a structural-functional mode of analysis. My claim here will be that far from representing a move from action to system Parsons' thinking in this period is (a) the extension and development of voluntarism and (b) once again an exemplification of the close links between his methodology of science and his voluntaristic metaphysic. This will take two chapters. In Chapter IV I will examine what Parsons says about methodology leading up to his account of what is involved in structural-functional analysis. This chapter will conclude by pointing out certain ambiguities particularly about the central notions of structure and process. Chapter V will take up these ambiguities after establishing the voluntaristic metaphysic once more, the key point being that the vagueries in structural-functionalism can be clarified when placed in the context of Parsons' voluntarism. This, then, will be the basis of my claim for continuity in Parsons' work once the nature of voluntarism is properly understood. Finally, in Chapter VI I will criticize a number of other interpretations of Parsons' voluntarism before drawing some general conclusions on the significance of Parsons' science of action.

II The Structure of Social Action A: Science as Theoretical

A. The Theoretical Character of Scientific Knowledge.

A cursory reading of The Structure of Social Action is enough to convince any reader that Parsons emphasises the theoretical nature of science. This is announced in the Preface and in the penultimate paragraph Parsons refers to the importance of '.... the systematic theoretical thinking which forms the basis and is the subject of this study'. [1937a:775]. But theory in science is not just Parsons' particular specialism, rather to him scientific knowledge is characterized by its theoretical nature. This is most clearly indicated by a contrast drawn between scientific knowledge and 'the practical "lore" of everyday life'.

> 'It is possible to have scattered and unintegrated bits of knowledge, and to assent to the "truth" of further scattered bits as they are called to one's attention. This type of knowledge does not, however, constitute "science" in the sense in which this study is interested in it.
> The latter is present only in so far as these bits of knowledge have become integrated with reference to fairly clear-cut theoretical systems.

> Footnote: Much empirical knowledge which is scientifically valid is thus not science in this sense because its integration involves other centres of reference than systematic theory'. [1937a:16].(1)

As this quotation implies scientific knowledge is not only theoretical, Parsons argues strongly for its empirical character as against the 'dialectical sterility' of theory without reference to empirical problems. [1937a:xxi-xxii]. The point is that science's approach to empirical problems is characterized by its theoretical nature.

> '... factual correctness is not the sole aim of science; it must be combined with thoroughgoing theoretical understanding of the facts known and correctly stated'. [1937a:97].
>
> 'The essence of science, the understanding as distinct from the mere photographic reception of concrete phenomena, is theory, and the essence of theory is analytical abstraction'. (1935c:661).(2)

This being said the questions to ask are what is 'theory' and why does science have this character? The latter question will be broached first.

B. Why is Science Theoretical?

In The Structure of Social Action there are at least three reasons why Parsons emphasises the theoretical character of scientific knowledge. These are 1. The relationship between scientific and common sense empirical knowledge, 2. Parsons' theory of the development of science and 3. His attack on empiricism in science. I shall consider each of these in turn.

1. Science and common sense:

In the quotation given above [1937a:16] it is evident that both scientific and practical common sense knowledge are concerned with empirical phenomena. As Parsons expresses it they are bodies of knowledge which 'refer to something beyond themselves' [1937a:xxi]. Further the passage above suggests that it is the presence or absence of 'theory' which differentiates the two types of knowledge. However the situation is not quite as simple as this. In the first place, as will be noted below, one important aspect of theory in science is what Parsons calls the descriptive frame of reference. Our experience of empirical phenomena is never direct but mediated by theoretical concepts. The relevant point here is that this same consideration applies to common sense knowledge.

> 'In other words, in Professor Henderson's phrase, all empirical observation is "in terms of a conceptual scheme". This is true not only of sophisticated scientific observation but of the simplest common-sense statements of fact. Conceptual schemes in this sense are inherent in the structure of language and, as anyone thoroughly familiar with more than one language knows, they differ in important respects from one language to another' [1937a:28, See also: 10].

The converse of the place of theory in common sense applies, that is, Parsons considers that scientific theory is historically rooted in common sense knowledge. This is mentioned at several points in his account of the historical development of the positivistic theory of action:

> 'The origin of the mode of thinking in terms of the action schema in general is so old and so obscure that it is fruitless to inquire into it here. It is sufficient to point out that, just like the schema of the classical physics, it is deeply rooted in the common sense experience of everyday life, and it is of a range of such experience that it may be regarded as universal to all

> human beings. Proof of this claim can be found in the fact that the basic elements of the schema are imbedded in the structure of all languages, as in the universal existence of a verb corresponding to the English verb "to do".' [1937a:51] .(3)

So the distinction between science and common sense does not rest on a radical break, it is rather a case of gradual transition, the two types of knowledge as the two poles of a continuum. Parsons says at one point:

> 'From this pole of common sense there is a very gradual transition to such conceptions at the other end of the scale as the second law of thermodynamics'. [1937a:625].

It is pertinant to note here that Parsons has several times been criticised (For example: Black (1961:278-283), Zimmerman (1967:139-140), Schrag (1952:249)) on the grounds that his schema of action is but common sense thinking about human activity. The following points may be some reply to such criticisms as Parsons is on the one hand quite explicit about this but on the other does point to differences between common sense and scientific use of the action schema. Such

criticism, however, does provoke the question of how such a difference is to be drawn, particularly, in this context, the role of theory in such a discrimination.

This question can be approached through four points. The first is whether concepts are implicit or explicit. In discussing Weber's critique of intuitionist idealism Parsons remarks:

> 'One thing Weber grants, that in our statements about human affairs the conceptual element often remains implicit, and the statements take a form suggesting immediate intuition. This Weber says, is owing to the fact that common knowledge in this field reaches so far, and above all covers so many of the aspects of interest to the social scientist, that to make them explicit would be superfluous; they are ommitted on grounds of "economy". [1937a:588] .

In common sense knowledge then the theoretical element tends to be implicit. However:

> 'When scientific observation begins to transcend common sense and becomes to a degree methodologically sophisticated, there emerge explicit schemata which may be called descriptive frames of reference'. [1937a:28].

This last passage, with its reference to transcendence and emergence suggests that science develops out of common sense knowledge. This takes us to the second point here. The distinction is not just a matter of theory being implicit in common sense, explicit in science, as well as this, science develops out of common sense, in a different direction. The second point of differentiation then is that the two types of knowledge serve different interests. As has already been noted common sense knowledge 'is integrated about practical needs and interests' [1937a:16] . This again is evident in Parsons' discussion of criteria of adequate explanation. The example employed is a husband's explanation of the hardness of potatoes served to him by his wife. The explanation is 'They were not cooked long enough'. Parsons comments:

> 'This is a perfectly adequate causal explanation for the purpose. His interest in the potato is only in its relative hardness or softness in relation to palatability. It is "generally known" that to make a potato soft it must be boiled about forty-five minutes. (Sic!) The point is that for this purpose it is not necessary to know the explanation of the complex chemical changes which go on within a potato in the process of being boiled, or the laws these follow'. [1937a:625].

Common sense knowledge then serves practical purposes and as a consequence the theoretical element of such knowledge is subservient to the practical purpose at hand. In science, however, theory is not a means to an end but the end itself, (see below) the interest of science is theoretical understanding. This brings us to the third point, quite what such theoretical understanding consists of. We can again refer to Parsons' discussion of the criteria of adequate explanation [1937a:624-26]. As has been noted, so long as common sense knowledge solves the practical problem at hand then its explanations are adequate. The transition from this to criteria of scientific adequacy is marked firstly by the increasing complexity of the data. This is evidently a matter of degree rather than a point of distinction between the two types of knowledge. Secondly, scientific explanations:

> '... transcend common sense and what is generally known and become judgements of probability involving highly technical formulation of elements, and rigorous deduction of the involved logical consequences of certain facts'. [1937a:625].

There are three aspects to this. The first two are statements in terms of probability and logical rigour.

In these cases the distinction between common sense and scientific knowledge would appear to be again a matter of degree. This is admitted in the first case, scientific explanations are probabilistic because of the increased complexity of relevant data [1937a:625-6]. Common sense knowledge is also presumably logical to some degree although lacking in explicit rigour. This leaves the third aspect, the 'highly technical formulation of elements'. This means that the elements of the explanation, the concepts employed to describe the data and analyze it in terms of explanatory variables, are technically formulated, that is, the concepts employed in science are specifically scientific, peculiar to science itself. Quite what this means will be taken up in the later discussion of types of concepts.

The final point of differentiation between common sense and scientific knowledge is the role of theoretical systems (rather than practical interests) as the means of integration of knowledge:

> 'It is quite possible to have sound and therefore useful insights in the form of relatively disconnected aphorisms, of general statements about what experience has taught men to expect. It is, however, equally possible that this level should be transcended by the development of a relatively

> integrated body of concepts which transforms knowledge from a series of wise insights and practical precepts based upon them into a system based on a rounded conceptual scheme, a "theory" in the specific scientific sense' (1936c:359).

Again the concept of system is crucial to Parsons notion of scientific theory so that as in the case of scientific concepts theory marks the differentiation of science. In sum, it is not the presence or absence of theory but i) its implicitness/explicitness, ii) whether theory is a means to an end or an end in itself, iii) the type of theoretical concept employed and iv) the presence of systematization that marks off common sense and scientific knowledge. This then is the first reason why Parsons emphasises the theoretical character of science, the second lies in his theory of scientific development.

2. The theory of the development of science.

One of the substantive themes of The Structure of Social Action is its theory of scientific development. The book opens with a section entitled 'The Problem' and the problem is the 'death' of the positivistic-utilitarian tradition of social scientific thought [1937a:3-6]. Again, Parsons

defines his study as, in part, '... an attempted empirical verification, in a particular case, of a theory of the process by which scientific thought develops...' [1937a: 697]. His theory of scientific development he puts forward as one of the 'empirically verified conclusions' of the study [1937a:725].(4)

What is relevant here is the role of theory in scientific development and how this leads Parsons to characterize science by theory. We can begin this inquiry by noting that Parsons develops his own position as a critical alternative to two others, the ideological and empiricist positions [1937a:725].(5)

In simple terms Parsons understands an ideological theory of scientific development as one which explains change in science as a 'reflection of certain basic social changes' [1937a:5]. The important factors lie outside of science itself. In Parsons' view scientific development, a term which will be specified in a moment, cannot be understood '... as only the result of elements external to science altogether such as the personal sentiments of the authors, their class position, nationality, etc.' [1937a:725]. As such one reason for the choice of the four leading thinkers discussed in the book is their different ideological positions [1937a:13-14]. Parsons' dissatisfaction with such an approach is no doubt connected with his overall

lack of sympathy with a marxian position and his general stress on the place of subjective entities (including knowledge) in society. But more specific reasons can be offered. These are that his own theory is intended as a counter to anti-intellectualistic relativism and that Parsons' theory is an attempted explanation of scientific progress rather than change. On the first, Bershady (1973) has convincingly argued that The Structure of Social Action is an attack on historical relativism. This will be taken up again later, for the moment it will suffice to note that to Parsons ideological theories of science are part of a larger trend. The death of positivism has been accompanied by the demise of its characteristic faith in science.

> 'The role of reason and the status of scientific knowledge as an element of action have been attacked again and again. We have been overwhelmed by a flood of anti-intellectualistic theories of human nature and behaviour, again of many empirical varieties' [1937a:5].

Again, referring to '... a strong current of pessimism in the thought of students of the social sciences, especially those who call themselves sociologists' Parsons speaks of the feeling that 'all is arbitrary and subjective' and this

'... encourages a dangerous irrationalism which lets go of scientific standards altogether' [1937a:774]. The rejection of anti-intellectual and irrationalistic theories of action has for Parsons the logical consequence of rejection of ideological theories of science.

But this is not to say that Parsons excludes the influence of factors external to science altogether. Here we must be more specific as to what the theory is about; scientific 'development'. Thus at one point Parsons says:

> 'But the present task is not to arrive at an account which is complete, only at one involving the limitations which have been stated. This other would be a phase of Wissenssoziologie and as such falls outside the scope of this study'. [1937a:27].

The limitation here is that Parsons' theory is developed to account for the emergence of a new theoretical system in social science, the voluntaristic theory of action [1937a:14]. Two points are of note here. Firstly, it is clear that the theory is intended for general application, it is not specific to the emergence of voluntarism. Secondly, the voluntaristic theory is not simply new but also a progressive development of its predecessors. Parsons says 'What has been traced is not merely a movement of thought

of major proportions; it is scientific progress; indeed, notable scientific progress' [1937a:775]. As a corollary then Parsons is quite willing to admit that ideological components are important to a theory of change in science in general. For example he says that '.... discussion of policy in the two closely related fields of international trade and of monetary problems formed perhaps the central breeding ground of modern economics' (1936c:359). More broadly, in his brief sketch of the historical emergence of utilitarianism [1937a:51-58] account is taken of the place of values and interests. Parsons notes that the atomism of the theoretical system has its roots in individualism and that '.... the main burden of this individualism has been ethical rather than scientific'. [1937a:52]. On the other hand, 'It is significant that the immediate practical animus of Hobbes' social thought lay in the defense of political authority on a secular basis'. [1937a:94] (See also 1935b:428-9). Again, Parsons refers to Pareto's '... realization of the concrete inadequacy of economic theory which centred above all around the interpretation of two concrete "economic" phenomena - the protectionist movement and the socialist movement'. (1935c:650). But in general Parsons is not concerned with such matters because they do not seem immediately relevant to his task, the explanation of progress in science.

From this discussion of Parsons' attitude to ideological theories of science it can be concluded that for him progress is generated within science itself. More positively his position is that progress must be accounted for '.... by an "immanent" development within the body of social theory and knowledge of empirical fact itself'. [1937a:5] . There are, then, two major components of the theory of progress in science. Firstly the significant causal factor is '.... the mutual interdependence of the structure of theoretical systems with observation and verification of fact' [1937a:725]. Secondly, progress is evolutionary, though there is an element of revolution which I will note shortly; the asymptotic [1937a:18] approach to the goal of adequate knowledge of reality [1937a:754] via the immanent unfolding of science itself. Parsons' statement that 'The thesis of this study will be that the positivistic-utilitarian tradition is the victim of the vengeance of the jealous God, Evolution, in this case the evolution of scientific theory' [1937a:3] is not to be read as entirely ironic. It is, as well, a reflection of his own approach.

Before elaborating these remarks it is as well to note the second alternative position rejected by Parsons, what he refers to as the empiricist theory of science. Whilst this position is in accord with the stress on the immanent development of science it differs from Parsons in regarding theory as a dependent variable in this development. The position is

summarized as:

> 'There is, more often implicit than explicit, a deep-rooted view that the progress of scientific knowledge consists essentially in the cumulative piling up of "discoveries" of "fact". Knowledge is held to be an entirely quantitative affair. The one important thing is to have observed what has not been observed before. Theory, according to this view, would consist only in generalization from known facts, in the sense of what general statements the known body of fact would justify. Development of theory would consist entirely in the process of modification of these general statements to take account of new discoveries of fact. Above all, the process of discovery of fact is held to be essentially independent of the existing body of "theory", to be the result of some such impulse as "idle curiosity".' [1937a:6].

Against this, Parsons' stress is on theory as a significant factor, not independent but interdependent with a body of factual knowledge. It is essentially the relationship between theory and fact which accounts for the progressive development of science.

To continue this account of Parsons' position two questions can be posed: what is 'progress' and how does such progress come about? In each case the significant point is the role of theory and fact. To Parsons, progress in science is simply more and better empirical knowledge.

> 'One of its [scientific progress's] main aspects is a clearer, sounder understanding of a broad range of the facts of human action. The whole theoretical work here reviewed is oriented to and justified by this achievement' [1937a:775].

As this indicates, progress in terms of empirical knowledge depends upon the place of theory. The key word in the above is the 'understanding' of fact. Theory facilitates this by acting as an organizational framework for factual knowledge. The role of theory in this sense is summarized when Parsons remarks:

> 'At the same time the structure of the conceptual scheme itself inevitably focuses interest on a limiting range of such empirical facts. These may be thought of as a "spot" in the vast encircling darkness, brightly illuminated as by a searchlight. The point is, what

> lies outside the spot is not really "seen" until the searchlight moves, and then only what lies within the area into which its beam is newly cast. Even though any number of facts may be "known" outside this centre, they are not scientifically important until they can be brought into relation with a theoretical system'. [1937a:16].

Here empirical knowledge without theory is pictured as a 'vast encircling darkness', a mass of ad hoc and unrelated facts. Parsons is fond of metaphors in this connection: 'Science, if it failed to map out its course, through theory, would be as lost in the uncharted sea of "fact" as a ship without a navigator'. (1932:347). The task of theory is to organize the mass of facts in a coherent way. But as such theory is selective, it is like a spotlight illuminating only part of what is known. As such theory plays a second role, as a criterion of scientific importance. Only when any given fact can be placed on the map, 'brought into relation with a theoretical system' can its <u>scientific</u> importance be judged, that is, whether it has consequences for the structure of the theory as a whole [1937a:7]. But although theory is necessary for empirical knowledge it is that empirical knowledge which is the final criterion of scientific progress.

This is again the case if an obvious impliciation of the above paragraph is taken up; the possibility of change in theoretical systems. Matters of fact can be organized and their importance evaluated by reference to different systems of theory. Indeed this is largely what The Structure of Social Action is concerned with, the change from positivistic and idealistic theories to a voluntaristic theoretical system. Now this seems to have two alternative implications. The first is that empirical knowledge is relative to the particular theoretical framework. This Parsons is willing to admit up to a point. What he is not willing to admit is that such frameworks are equal in scientific value and validity. This leaves the second alternative, that some theoretical frameworks are better than others. If this is the case then is not progress in science a function of the relative merits of theory? The answer to this is yes but only insofar as the quality of the theory is evaluated in terms of its functions for empirical knowledge. This is exemplified by the concept of 'permanently valid precipitate'. When a theoretical system declines to be replaced by a different one the 'old' empirical knowledge is not thereby lost, rather it forms a permanently valid precipitate of the former theoretical system.

> 'The original empirical insights associated with the positive categories of the original system will be restated in different forms, but unless they entirely fail to stand up to

> the combined criticism of theory and renewed empirical verification, they will not be eliminated. Indeed, as has been noted above, this is unlikely to happen. This fact is the essential basis for the justification of talk of the "progress" of science. Theoretical systems change. There is not merely a quantitative accumulation of "knowledge" of fact" but a qualitative change in the structure of theoretical systems. But in so far as verification has been valid and sound, this change leaves behind it a permanent precipitate of valid empirical knowledge. The form of statement will change but the substance will remain. The older statement will generally take the form of a "special case" of the new'. [1937a:19].

As Parsons says here the permanent precipitate of valid empirical knowledge is the basis of the progress of science. Thus when he says that 'Spencer is dead' he adds the footnote: 'Not of course, that nothing in his thought will last. It is his social theory as a total structure that is dead'. [1937a: 3]. To Parsons what will last in utilitarian thought is its empirical insight into the rationality of action.

> 'The utilitarian branch of positivistic thought has, by virtue of the structure of its theoretical system, been focussed upon a given range of definite empirical insights and related theoretical problems. The central fact - a fact beyond all question - is that in certain respects and to certain degrees, under certain conditions, human action is rational'. [1937a:19].

This is what is left after the decline of the theoretical system and in the long run this was what was scientifically important about that system.

It is this concept of permanently valid knowledge which provides the continuity necessary to Parsons' evolutionary theory of knowledge and prevents the idea of change in theoretical systems degenerating into relativism [1937a:600-01]. But this discussion of what constitutes progress in science seems to go against the main theme of this argument, that science is peculiar in that it is theoretical empirical knowledge. Certainly the above remarks confirm that scientific knowledge must be theoretical but from the point of view of scientific progress the theoretical character of knowledge is a means to an end, the criterion of progress is

knowledge of fact. This is readily admitted. However a different picture emerges when we turn to Parsons' account of how such progress comes about. Here theory in science plays the crucial role.

The theory, it will be remembered, centres on the interdependence of theory and fact. But in Parsons' account of how scientific progress is made factual knowledge and its discovery play a rather minor role. This can perhaps best be described as a catalyst function. In The Structure of Social Action Parsons is concerned with the change in social science summarized as the development of voluntarisms out of positivism and idealism. He gives the following statement of intent as his 'canon of interpretation' [1937a:16] of empirical work.

> 'In studying a man's empirical work the questions asked will not merely be, what opinions did he hold about certain concrete phenomena, nor even, what has he in general contributed to our "knowledge" of these phenomena? The primary questions will, rather, be, what theoretical reasons did he have for being interested in these particular problems rather than others, and what did the results of his investigation contribute to the solution of his theoretical problems?

> Then, in turn, what did the insights gained from these investigations contribute to the restatement of his theoretical problems and through this to the revision of his theoretical system?' [1937a:16-17].

Parsons' strategy then is to ask what are the implications of factual knowledge for theoretical systems. As he says himself his approach to Durkheim is the best example. Durkheim's 'early empirical work' [1937a:Chapter 8] is interpreted as creating problems for his initial positivistic theoretical framework. [Chapter 9] . This then is the role of fact in the theory-fact equation. Progress does not result from this discovering of fact, rather, such discovery throws up problems for theory and it is via theoretical development that progress comes about. My discussion will now turn to the process by which this occurs.

Facts as catalysts of change tend to be theoretically understood in terms of what Parsons calls 'residual categories'. These are blanket terms characterized by their negative quality.

> 'If, as is almost always the case, not all of the actually observable facts in the field, or those which have been observed, fit into the sharply defined categories, they tend to

> be given one or more blanket names which refer to categories negatively defined, that is, of facts known to exist, which are even more or less adequately described, but are defined theoretically by their failure to fit into the positively defined categories of the system. The only theoretically significant statements that can be made about these facts are negative statements - they are <u>not</u> so and so'. [1937a:17-18].

<u>The Structure of Social Action</u> is littered with such residual categories: Pareto's 'non-logical action', Weber's 'ideal-types', Ricardo's 'the habits and customs of the people' and Durkheim's 'society' are examples. Empirical investigation eventually promotes scrutiny of such concepts, this is the first step in scientific change.

> 'It follows from this that the surest symptom of impending change in a theoretical system is increasing general interest in such residual categories' [1937a:18].

What does such scrutiny consist of? It will be remembered that the residual category is a blanket term. In the first place this means that the concept contains a variety of extra-

scientific metaphysical and ideological assumptions. Parsons claims, for example, that utilitarianism as a theoretical system could only avoid its inherent instabilities, which will be discussed later, on the basis of the metaphysical device of the 'natural identity of interests' [1937a:97]. This constituted an implicit but crucial assumption which remained unanlyzed within utilitarianism. Indeed when it comes to be analyzed it proves incompatible with other constituent characteristics of utilitarianism, namely its atomism and postulation of the randomness of ends. As a residual category the natural identity of interests was a metaphysical hope which when scrutinized proved inconsistent with the positively defined conceptual components of the theory.

As a second example of the scrutiny of residual categories we can refer to Parsons' approach to Marshall. This begins with a schematic outline of Marshall's theory of activity [1937a:130-133]. It is this which constitutes the positively defined conceptual schema of Marshall's economics. However it is neither this aspect of Marshall that Parsons is concerned with nor, in his view, the whole of his general theory. 'Closely interwoven' [1937a:133] with the theory of utility is another aspect, which can be regarded as a series of residual categories, which is of significance to Parsons. It is this, what Parsons refers to as the theory of activities, which is to be 'dissect(ed) out' in his analysis. What is at issue here is quite what is dissected out in Parsons' scrutiny

of the residual categories of Marshall's thought.

In Parsons' account what is drawn out of Marshall's work is an implicit sociology in the sense that above and beyond the economic element embodied in the theory of utility he discovers a value factor.

> 'It becomes evident, then, that the real basis of Marshall's discontent with pure utility theory is something other than a conviction of the importance of the other factors in the positivistic repertoire. The fact is that his "activities" have no place there at all. They constitute rather a "value" factor' [1937a:167].

In other words Parsons claims that implicitly Marshall is saying that to explain concrete economic activities we have to make reference to economic and sociological variables. This is implicit precisely because the sociological aspect is contained in residual categories.

We will come to the explicit and positive definition of such categories in a moment. At present it is important to note that another interpretation can be put on Parsons' analysis of Marshall which is not manifest in that analysis yet can be plausibly argued to be part of the scrutiny of residual categories. What Parsons dissects out of Marshall is not an implicit theory of the importance of values to action but the implicit values in Marshall's thought.

As Pinney (1940:177) puts it: 'The chief item of importance is that Professor Parsons raises Marshall's moralising pronouncements on "activities" as a mode of expressing qualities of character which he valued on ethical grounds to the level of an embryo normative system in a theory of action'. At one point Parsons refers to '... Marshall, the strongly, moralistic middle-class Englishman' [1937a:13]. It is significant that it is precisely the values of the nineteenth century English middle class which Parsons regards as the 'value' factor in Marshall's thought. As he says Marshall had a 'deep-rooted belief' in the ethics of a capitalist economy (1932:320) summarizing this as follows:

> 'A different phase of Marshall's interest in character is of primary interest here; his belief that certain types of economic activities, pursued not for ulterior motives but mainly as ends in themselves, are the principal agents in the formation of the noblest qualities of human character and the main fields of their expression.
>
> The concrete description of what types of activities and character he had in mind is to be found principally in his picture of "free industry and enterprise", with which they are intimately associated. They

> consist in two sets of virtues; on the one hand, energy, initiative, enterprise; on the other, rationality, frugality, industry, honourable dealing. With them are contrasted, on the one side, sluggishness, idle stagnation, slavery to custom, lack of ambition; on the other, luxury, ostentation, waste, unreliability'. [1937a:135].

Just about the whole of chapter four of The Structure of Social Action can be read as a masterly drawing out of the value-presuppositions of Marshall's economics. But as has been said this is not how Parsons' defines his task. This is significant not in the sense that the two readings of what is going on are mutually exclusive but in that Parsons' treatment of Marshall is illustrative of what is involved in the theoretical criticism of residual categories. If it be granted that such categories contain metaphysical and value presupposition the task is not merely the exposure of these. Indeed this is unimportant. Rather the task is to translate such extra-scientific considerations into positively defined scientific concepts.

> 'Indeed, one kind of progress of theoretical work consists precisely in the carving out from residual categories of definite positively defined concepts and their verification in empirical investigation. The obviously unattainable but asymptotically approached

> goal of the development of scientific theory is, then, the elimination of all residual categories from science in favour of positively defined, empirically verifiable concepts' [1937a:19].

What Parsons fails to make clear, although it is exemplified in his scrutiny of residual categories, is that the elimination of such categories involves the attempted elimination of metaphysical and value presuppositions and their replacement by positively defined theory.(6) This, then, is an important sense in which science is characterized by theoretical knowledge. The contribution of theory to the progressive development of science is its replacement of metaphysics and values by specifically scientific concepts.

What has been said up to now relates to the direction of scientific progress, a further component of Parsons' position is the mechanism by which this process comes about. It is here that the revolutionary aspect of Parsons' theory plays its part. The development of theory is not a matter of the gradual accumulation of positively defined categories. It is, as has been noted above, a process characterized by more or less dramatic shifts from one (or more) theoretical system(s) to another.(7) The mechanics of such dramatic shifts can be summarised as i) over-generalization, ii) internal contradiction and iii) differentiation.

As we shall see in the discussion of empiricism below the overgeneralization of positivistic theories is an important part of Parsons' critique of positivism. That is, the first step in the breakdown of a theoretical system is when it overreaches its capacities.(8) This is brought out well in a summary statement of Parsons' position vis-a-vis positivism:

> 'This must not, however, to be taken to mean that the concepts which have been developed in connection with these theories are simply wrong and hence of no use for present or future social science. On the contrary, in general each of the main categories developed has found, subject, of course, to qualification and refinement, a permanent place in the attack on the problems of human behaviour. Criticism is here directed not against their adequacy for properly defined and restricted purposes, but against their claim to form the basis for adequate general theories of society. It would be a serious misunderstanding to suppose that, because positivistic social theories are here severely criticised for some theoretical

> purposes, it is therefore held that the concepts employed in them are invalid for any and all purposes. The attempt, rather, will be made to develop the outline of a general conceptual scheme in terms of which the important elements of validity in them may find a legitimate place and thus avoid the dangers of being lost in the general critical attack on the empirical results of their use in a positivistic context'. [1937a:125].

Here then is the permanently valid precipitate argument noted above though significant here in a different light. Positivism as a general system of theory breaks down initially because it overgeneralized out of the areas in which it was valid.

This leads to the second aspect of the process, as a theory is overgeneralized so it develops internal contradictions. The clearest example of this is Parsons' discussion of the utilitarian variant of positivism. [1937a:62-69]. This is described as '... a convenient starting point for analysis of the logical alternatives which are open within the framework of the wider system i.e. positivism '. [1937a:62]. Parsons' procedure is to take two component elements of the utilitarian theoretical system, (the randomness of ends and the norm of rationality) and to draw out the incompatibility between these and the general

characteristics of positivism. However the crux of the matter, the "utilitarian dilemma" comes when, on positivistic grounds these incompatibilities are resolved. For in Parsons' analysis when this is done an unfortunate consequence occurs, positivism, in what are called its radical variants ceases to be a theory of action at all.(9) The radical positivist explains action in terms of its non-subjective conditions, a shift has been made from an action theory to a bio-physical theory, [1937a:68]. The overextension of positivism into utilitarianism then sets up contradictions which cannot be solved within positivism without creating even more severe problems.

When the processes of overgeneralization and consequent internal contradiction become acute there occurs the reconstruction of theoretical systems. This is not a random process but is characterized by the differentiation of theoretical systems. On the one hand the limitation of a previously overgeneralized theory became recognized, on the other hand new conceptual components are developed out of residual categories. Finally the old and the new are regrouped to form a new general system marked by a greater degree of internal differentiation than the old. This can be seen if we juxtapose Parsons conception of the division of labour in science against the development of positivism, idealism and voluntarism. He claims that

'... it is possible to see emerging out of this study as a whole a division into three great classes of theoretical systems' [1937a:762]. These are called the theoretical systems of nature, action and culture. It can be suggested that this represents the differentiation of knowledge in the post-positivist/idealist age. Positivism emerged as a system of theory in the study of nature but quickly over-generalized its concepts into the study of action. As a reaction to this idealism falls foul of the same error, originating in the study of the meaningful content of cultural objects the concepts developed there were generalized to action. When the problems which stem from this overgeneralization become acute the process of reconstruction via differentiation sets in. It is recognized that both positivism and idealism as theories of action leave permanently valid precipitates but their proper fields are nature and culture.(10) The gap is filled by the independent theoretical system of action. Out of the residual categories of positivism and idealism are differentiated a new series of concepts. This is particularly evident in the section of chapter eighteen of The Structure of Social Action entitled 'Summary Outline of the Structure of Action'. Here the various writers covered in the book are each represented in terms of what elements of action they 'differentiated out' from the blanket terms of positivism and idealism, notably 'rationality' and 'values'. The following passage illustrates this well.

> 'It should be emphasised that in the respects relevant to the present context there is nothing important in the theories of Pareto which is incompatible with those of Durkheim, and vice versa. Their differences are complementary, lying in the different points at which they differentiated the elements of the structure of action. Pareto brought out, as Durkheim did act, the internal differentiation of the intermediate intrinsic sector and the ultimate-value element so far as it is not integrated into a common system. Durkheim, on the other hand, brought into clear relief the role of the institutional element in relation to the intrinsic means-end chain and carried out a much further differentiation of the structure and modes of manifestation of the ultimate-value system, which for Pareto had remained residual'. [1937a: 713-4].

Again then we have the picture of theory playing a crucial role in the progressive development of science and with this process an increasingly theoretical science: the world of science becoming more complex and requiring theoretical

understanding of the limits of any one system in terms of its relationship to other systems.

3. Anti-empiricism.

At one point Parsons refers to methodological empiricism as a "starting point" of his study. [1937a: 452]. To him empiricism is a characteristic of the methodologies of both positivism and idealism [1937a:476] and as such it takes different forms. Three types of empiricism are distinguished in The Structure of Social Action: positivistic empiricism and the particularistic and collectivistic subtypes of idealist empiricism. [1937a:476-477, 589-590, 728-730]. Both varieties of idealistic empiricism are characterised by their repudiation of general concepts and propositions in social science. The stress is on historicism in the sense of 'the concrete uniqueness and individuality of all things human' [1937a: 477]. This common theme works in two directions, the first Parsons calls particularistic empiricism which is described as: '...the doctrine that the only objective knowledge is that of the details of concrete things and events. It is impossible to establish causal relationships between them which are analyzable in terms of general concepts. They can only be observed and described, and placed in temporal sequence' [1937a:729]. The alternative path, collectivist empiricism '... permits a conceptual element in social

science, but maintains that this can be only of an individualizing character; it must formulate the unique individuality of a concrete phenomenon, such as a person or a culture complex' [1937a:729]. Somewhat less dramatically then this form of idealist empiricism rejects general concepts.

This repudiation of the general as the distinctive feature of idealistic empiricism arose historically against the characteristic feature of positivistic empiricism. Here general concepts and propositions are not repudiated but are the central feature of the methodology of science. The empiricism enters this methodology with the view that such general theory bears a direct relationship to some concrete reality, the theory 'mirrors' its particular reality. This takes us to the common core of all variants of empiricism, the question of 'the status of scientific concepts in relation to reality' [1937a:728]. In their different ways all three forms take the view that knowledge is or should attempt to be a mirror image of a particular concrete reality.

> 'The term empiricism will be used in application to a system of theory when it is claimed, explicitly or implicitly, that the categories of a given theoretical system are by themselves adequate to

> explain all the scientifically important facts about the body of concrete phenomena to which it is applied' [1937a:69-70].

In positivistic empiricism this conception of the relation of knowledge and reality has applied to the status of general theories. In rejecting such general theories the idealist variants carry over the empiricism, general theories do not give an adequate account of concrete reality, thus in order to get this (the empiricist conception of knowledge) general theory must be abandoned.

Parsons' criticism of idealistic empiricism is brief, abrupt and final. To deny the legitimacy of general theoretical knowledge of human behaviour is to him akin with irrationalism [1937a:599] and scepticism [1937a:728]. The position is irrationalist because as we shall see to Parsons the very idea of rational action depends on knowledge of intrinsic causal relationships understood in terms of general laws of cause and effect. It is sceptical because the principle that knowledge is particular to the historical individual is soon reversed, knowledge is relative to the historical individuality of its origin.

As such Parsons' attention is directed much more fully to positivistic empiricism. Here as has been noted the question is not whether general theory is legitimate in social science but the status of that theory in relation to the reality it pertains to. The empiricist position here, the identification of theory and concrete reality can be repeated:

> 'The common characteristic of empiricist positions ... is the identification of the meanings of the concrete specific propositions of a given science, theoretical or empirical, with the scientifically knowable totality of the external reality, to which they refer. They maintain, that is, that there is an immediate correspondence between concrete experienceable reality and scientific propositions, and only in so far as this exists can there be valid knowledge'. [1937a:23].

The consequences or corollaries of this core position are the following. A theoretical system either claims or aspires to give a complete account of a given concrete reality. Thus in its definition of its subject matter empiricism takes 'a field of concrete phenomena' [1937a:130], 'a concrete category of phenomena' [1937a:171], 'a concretely seperable category of the phenomena of human action, a kind or type of action' [1937a:174]. Then the empiricist attempts the 'full explanation of the concrete phenomena thus described' [1937a:173]. The best example of what Parsons is referring to here is the view that economics as a theoretical system takes as its object and attempts to explain "the economy" or "economic actions" as concrete phenomena (1935b:420). The

empiricist claim to completeness can take two more and less sophisticated forms [1937a:465-466, 728-729]. In the first the object of the science or theory in question is an actually existing phenomena. In the second the object is a hypothetically existing object, such as the economist's model of 'a regime of free competition' [1937a:729]. The point is that in both the object is concrete, free competition is a model of an economy, and the theory attempts the full explanation of that concrete phenomenon.

The second corollary of the empiricist identification of theory and reality is the movement from and confusion of the 'logical closure' of a theoretical system and 'the empirical closure of a system' [1937a:10]. As we shall see it is axiomatic to Parsons that theoretical concepts form logically articulated systems. In empiricism the logical integration of a theory is translated into empirical closure. In other words the theory becomes deterministic [1937a:476]. If a theory is logically closed then all the causally determinate relations between its component variables are known. The translation of this to empirical systems means that a similar claim is put forward, that as a concrete system its behaviour is fully controlled by determinate causes and their laws.

The third point here relates to the character of theory in empiricism.

> 'Theory, according to the empiricist view, would consist only in generalization from known facts, in the sense of what general statements the known body of fact would justify' [1937a:6].

Theoretical concepts then are limited to type-part concepts (see below) and theoretical propositions to empirical generalizations 1937a:761 . As such specifically theoretical scientific activity is minimized, theory develops by being modified 'to take account of new discoveries of fact' [1937a:6], such discoveries being the product of 'idle curiosity' rather than the stimulation of theory [1937a:6]. Finally, a point which has already been discussed, to the empiricist progress in science consists in and derives from 'the cumulative piling up of "discoveries" of "fact"' [1937a:6].

Parsons' criticism of positivistic empiricism focuses on two points; the fallacy of the identification of theory and reality and the mistaken conception of theory in empiricism. To Parsons the identification of theory with <u>concrete</u> reality is a mistake, a mistake often described by him in Whitehead's phrase 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' [1937a:476]. It is a mistake because to take this view leads to one or other of two impossible positions. The first is described by Parsons at one point as 'imperialistic'. [1937a:499]. This

is the overgeneralization of a theory to areas of reality with which it cannot cope. The best examples of this to Parsons are radically positivistic social theories. The conceptual apparatus of such theories are developed in the study of the natural world. Now on an empiricist basis such a conceptual scheme must produce a complete account of the natural world. Further it is manifestly the case that human beings are part of that natural world. Hence the conclusion follows that the conceptual scheme must be adequate to explain human behaviour. This to Parsons is the empiricist basis of the reduction of human behaviour to biological behaviour so characteristic of radical positivism.

The alternative path is to some extent the converse of imperialism. Parsons refers to it as the 'encyclopedic' view [1937a:173]. This is best discussed in terms of the example of the institutionalist[11] criticism of classical economics. To the institutionalist the theoretical system of classical economics could not explain concrete economic actions and systems which were always more than the world of homo economicus. The empiricist remedy offered was the expansion of the theoretical system of economics to include all relevant aspects of human activity. To Parsons this has the consequence that economics as a theoretical system ceases to exist, economics becomes the application of encyclopaedic knowledge of human behaviour to one concrete area of life [1937a:173].

As a counter to the empiricist identification of theory and reality Parsons insists that theory bears an abstract relationship to concrete reality. This will be a major theme of the next section but for the moment we can anticipate and note that from this it follows that no given concrete reality can be exhausted by any given theoretical system. This would be the empiricist position. As such any concrete reality can and must be understood in terms of a plurality of theoretical systems. This of course immediately complicates the question of the status of any theoretical system. It cannot be regarded as the general summation of the reality to which it refers. As a consequence the empiricist conception of theoretical activity must be changed. Such activity must play an independent not dependent role in science. If this is denied then the awareness of the abstract relation of theory to reality is lost, theoretical systems become 'reified'. The 'reification of theoretical systems' is used by Parsons as an alternative form of expression to 'the fallacy of misplaced concreteness' [1937a:728, 589, 476]. It means essentially a simplistic conception of the relation of theory to reality and the consequent denial of an independent place for theorizing in science.

This discussion can be concluded by noting again that empiricism is common to both positivism and idealism as

intellectual traditions and theoretical systems in social science. The significance of this parallel is that by adopting a non-empiricist position Parsons hopes to achieve two things. Firstly, only on the basis of non-empiricism can the opposition of positivism and idealism be resolved.

> 'What is perhaps the deepest methodological basis of this conflict has lain in the empiricism common to both great traditions of thought. As long as this persists, the two are, indeed, irreconcilable if any attempt is made to apply them to the same concrete subject matter'. [1937a:476].

Secondly, non-empiricism is the means to avoid or resolve the failings of both positivism and idealism. On an empiricist basis this cannot be done, the problem leads to the dilemma's of reification or irrationalism.

> 'From this point of view it may be said that to make this identification is the basic fallacy of all of what has here been called empiricism, common to all three of the varieties discussed above. The result is invariably a dilemma. On the one hand, the class of concrete phenomena in question may be treated by the method of an analytical science. Then the

> result is "reification", the fallacy of misplaced concreteness, with all its consequences. Or, on the other hand, it may be treated by the method of a historical science alone, in which case the result is, theoretically considered, irrationalism, the denial of the validity of general conceptualization at all. On an empiricist basis there is no escape from this dilemma'. [1937a:599].

Parsons' aims then are ambitious and the crucial means to achieve this ambition is a non-empiricist conception of science which as we have seen is a position which grants an independent role to theory as a necessary consequence of the abstract relation of theory and reality.

Scientific knowledge then is peculiarly theoretical knowledge. To Parsons this must be the case if science is to be other than refined common sense, if science is to make progress and if the 'insidious' results of empiricism are to be avoided. But as yet virtually nothing has been said as to what this amounts to, that is, what it means to say that science is theoretical. This is the task of the next section.

C. What is theory?

Parsons defines scientific theory as 'a body of logically interrelated "general concepts" of empirical reference' [1937a:6]. The task of this section will be to elaborate the three components of this definition, the 'empirical' character of theory, 'general concepts' and 'logical interrelation'. As general themes of this discussion two characteristics of theory will be paramount, the 'abstract' and 'systemic' quality of scientific theory.

1. Theory as 'of empirical reference'.

As so much of what has been said in the above remarks has stressed the theoretical character of scientific knowledge it is as well to include a few paragraphs here to stress the empirical character of that knowledge. We can begin by noting Parsons' high regard for Pareto as a methodologist.

> 'Indeed, of the four writers Pareto, in his general methodological requirements of scientific theory, came much the closest to formulating a view that can be considered acceptable for the purposes of this study' [1937a:704, see also: 469].

When these remarks are juxtaposed against what Parsons says of Pareto's methodology then the empirical character of scientific knowledge is obviously of great import:

> 'In fact, Pareto for the most part limits himself to the most general methodological considerations. To him science is best characterized by the term "logico-experimental". That is to say, there are two essential elements involved: logical reasoning and observation of "fact". Logical reasoning is by itself incapable of yielding necessary results beyond tautologies, but none the less it is an essential element. It is thought of, however, as subordinate to the other element, that of fact, experimental or observed'. [1937a:181].

Again it is pertinant to note that as well as defining The Structure of Social Action as a theoretical work Parsons also insists that the study is 'an empirical monograph' [1937a:697], the work of the writers considered constitute the facts of 'observation' for his scientific study. In its author's view,(12) then, the book accords with his statement that 'True scientific theory is not the product of idle

"speculation" of spinning out the logical implication of assumptions, but of observation, reasoning and verification, starting with the facts and continually returning to the facts' [1937a:xxii].

Attention has already been drawn to the importance of the interdependence of theory and fact to Parsons. This is emphasised throughout The Structure of Social Action in that 'the solidarity of general theory and empirical knowledge' is 'one of the principal theses of this study' [1937a:680]. So particularly in the chapters on Durkheim and Weber Parsons is at pains to draw out the relationship between the empirical problems they were attempting to solve and their development of general theory.

Having made this point we can now turn to what it means. Parsons' concept of fact draws upon the ideas of Pareto (see especially [1937a:181-4]) and L.J. Henderson (See especially [1937a:41-2]).

> 'To forestall a very common source of confusion it is as well at the outset to note the sense in which the term "fact" is to be employed. Adapting Professor Henderson's definition, in this study a fact is understood to be an "empirically verifiable statement about phenomena in terms of a conceptual scheme" '. [1937a: 41].

I will mention verifiability in a moment, what Parsons is particularly keen to stress is the distinction between fact and phenomenon which this definition includes.

> 'The distinction between a fact, which is a proposition about phenomena, and the phenomena themselves, which are concrete, really existent entities, will, if kept clearly in mind, avoid a great deal of confusion' [1937a:41].

This distinction arises out of Parsons' rejection of empiricism particularly the anti-theorists who either claim to let the facts 'speak for themselves' [1937a:10], or, in the German variant, claim 'a direct grasp of meaning without the intervention of concepts in any form' [1937a:586]. To Parsons

> 'It is fundamental that there is no empirical knowledge which is not in some sense and to some degree conceptually formed. All talk of "pure sense data", "raw experience" or the unformed stream of consciousness is not descriptive of actual experience, but a matter of methodological abstraction, legitimate and important for certain purposes but, nevertheless, abstraction' [1937a:28].

The basis of this distinction between fact and phenomena is that phenomena are concrete whilst facts are abstractions from the concrete phenomena.

> '... an experimental fact does not necessarily embody the totality of a concrete phenomenon. ..... the facts involved in the formulation of a theory are arrived at by a process of analysis and are not necessarily complete descriptions of concrete phenomena. Indeed Pareto states that "it is impossible to know a concrete phenomena in all its details" .... The facts embodied in a theory describe elements, or aspects, or proporties of concrete phenomena, not the total phenomena themselves' [1937a:183].

Parsons, then, follows Pareto in that to stress the empirical character of science '... is not to set theory over against fact, but to include the element of theoretical abstraction in his concept of fact itself' [1937a:183]. The consideration of the empirical reference of theory in science then leads us into a discussion of the abstract status of knowledge. This will be taken up explicitly in the next section. Before so doing the above conclusion can be reinforced by considering the distinction between theory and fact and the verifiability of factual propositions.

Parsons' stress on the interdependence of theory and fact has been noted above. It is pertinant here also to note that interdependence necessarily means partial independence.

> 'It is one of the commonest but most serious of fallacies to think that interdependence implies absence of independence. No two entites can be interdependent which are not at the same time independent in certain respects' [1937a:25].

Given this it would seem to be the case that if theory and fact are interdependent then we must be able to establish their independent qualities, to distinguish the two. Yet this is not immediately evident in The Structure of Social Action. On the one hand we have already noted that theory is involved in the concept of fact, a fact is a proposition cast in terms of concepts. On the other hand Parsons remarks:

> 'Indeed, if the term fact is properly interpreted it may be said that a theoretical proposition, if it has a place in science at all, is either itself a statement of fact or a statement of a mode of relation between facts' [1937a:7].

Again:

> 'All scientific theories are made up of facts and statements of relations between facts in this sense' [1937a:41].

It is not being claimed here that Parsons is confused on this, only that to distinguish between theory and fact we have to understand the different senses of abstraction of each.

In the above definition of fact as a proposition about phenomena it will be remembered that such propositions must be verifiable. Parsons insists that 'the process of verification' is 'fundamental to science' [1937a:8]. In general if a statement of fact is to be verifiable it must be cast in terms of observable phenomena. However it is important to note immediately that this does not mean that an appeal is made to some direct experience of that phenomena. This would go against the whole thread of what has been established so far. The 'direct grasp of meaning' of the particularistic branch of idealistic empiricism (also termed 'intuitionism' by Parsons) has already been mentioned. Behaviourism, in its most radical version which preoccupies Parsons, fits into the same category. It claims that all knowledge must be based on the impressions of our senses. As such it excludes what to Parsons is the prime phenomenon of interest to the student of action, the meanings of symbols. Speech or writing for example cannot

be observed as symbols, all that our senses perceive are sound wave combinations and ink marks. To Parsons this is an entirely untennable position. Again with reference to Pareto's concept of fact he remarks

> 'What is common to the two sets of data [speech and writing] is not the "sense impressions" as such in any concrete sense, but the "meaning" of the symbols. This inclusion of meanings in the realm of experimental facts or observable phenomena is perhaps the most important thing to note about Pareto's concept of fact' [1937a:182-3].

The subjection of factual propositions to the test of observation against phenomena then must take a rather more complex form.

What is essential about observation in science is that it should be controlled in two ways: the means and direction of observation. On the first Parsons follows Bridgman in stating that 'the facts should be obtained by a clearly defined "operation"' [1937a:37], the idea being that

> 'Experience is the judge because two or more scientists performing the same operation get the same result' [1937a:182].

Further such operations should be designed to fulfill the following task, what we might call the direction of observation. The empirical reference of theory is that it incorporates concepts which state propositions about phenomena. The task is to show that change or variation in the behaviour of the phenomena are adequately described in such concepts. This is done by the principle of 'independent variation' [1937a:742, 749]. That is, the task is to show that the values, or observable properties of phenomena, vary in a determinate way independently of other causal influences not incorporated in the theory in question. This is demonstrated by the comparative method which Parsons describes as 'indispensible' to analytical science. Comparison takes different forms one of which is experiment '... where the cases to be compared are produced to order under controlled conditions' [1937a:743]. This is the most desirable form of verification but is not essential, ' ... this is a matter of practical technique, not of logic' [1937a:8]. What is of particular significance here is the alternative to experiment as a technique of controlling scientific observation, it is the control of observation by theoretical analysis:

> 'For the aspects of concrete phenomena which are relevant to a particular theory are not generally given in any usable form in the raw data of experience. Indeed it is desirable to be able to observe the facts relevant to a particular theory in isolation from others. Some, though by no means all, of the natural sciences can do this through the method of experiment. But this, Pareto explicitly says, is a practical aid to science, not a logical necessity of it. The process of abstraction in the social sciences must be carried out mainly by analysis, not by experiment. But this does not make it any the less legitimate' [1937a:184].

What Parsons has in mind here is Weber's method of objective possibility:

> 'Moreover, the only way in which to arrive at a judgement of the causal significance of a factor is to ask what would have happened if the factor in question had not been present or had been altered, e.g. if the Persians had not been stopped at Marathon at all. It is clear that this is nothing, in

> principle, but the logic of experiment. Where practical difficulties make it impossible actually to produce the initial situation, and alter the fact in question, and then see what would happen, recourse must be had to a mental experiment, the construction of an objectively possible course of events' [1937a:612].

The observation of phenomena then must be checked by reference to theoretical concepts, once again the empirical character of scientific theory leads to the question of the sense in which theory is an abstraction from reality.

2. Theory as constituted by 'general concepts'

i) Epistemological foundations

It has already been established that for Parsons theory bears an abstract relation to reality. This is not at all a simple idea, the complexity of the problem lying in the plurality of senses in which the term 'abstraction' is used. Before going into the different forms of abstraction involved in different types of concepts it is as well to begin with a discussion of the epistemological foundations of his thinking.

Parsons describes his position as 'analytical realism' [1937a:730]. This involves first of all the rejection of solipsism and idealism:

> 'It is a philosophical implication of the position taken here that there is an external world of so-called empirical reality which is not the creation of the individual human mind and is not reducible to terms of an ideal order, in the philosophical sense' [1937a:753].

Parsons' realism then is not based on the view that it is through conceptual thought that one gets to the 'essence' of reality. Rather:

> '... it is maintained that at least some of the general concepts of science are not fictional but adequately "grasp" aspects of the objective external world' [1937a:730].

Parsons' realism describes the view that some of the concepts of science reproduce the real world. Now as we might expect from the above discussion of empiricism Parsons' realism is carefully qualified to avoid the corollaries and consequences of empiricism outlined above. These qualifications are threefold:(14) the presupposition of factual order, the recognition of the distinction between possible knowledge and humanly possible knowledge and the abstract nature of scientific knowledge. As a consequence

of these qualifications Parsons describes the relationship between knowledge and reality as a "functional" one [1937a:601, 753], only on the basis of these presuppositions can it be said that scientific knowledge gives an 'adequate representation' [1937a:753] of reality.

The first presupposition then is that empirical reality is a 'factual order'. This is defined in the following way:

> 'The antithesis [of factual order] is randomness or chance in the strict sense of phenomena conforming to the statistical laws of probability. Factual order, then, connotes essentially accessibility to understanding in terms of logical theory, especially of science. Chance variations are in these terms impossible to understand or to reduce to law. Chance or randomness is the name for that which is incomprehensible, not capable of intelligible analysis' [1937a: 91].

To presuppose the factual order of reality then is to assume that the empirical world is characterized in part at least by orderly regularities which are 'congruent with the order of human logic' [1937a:753].

Secondly, Parsons points out that this is human logic and that we cannot assume that reality is exhausted by the logical capacities of the human mind. Scientific theory

> '... is an ideal representation of empirical phenomena or aspects of them. It is thus subject to the limitations inherent in this fact. 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' [1937a:754].

The same qualification applies to other aspects of the ideal representation of science, it is subject, for example, to the limitations of human observation. So '... it may be inferred that human possible knowledge is not identical with that conceivably possible to a mind freed from these human limitations' [1937a:754].

The third qualification to Parsons' realism is the abstract stature of theoretical knowledge. It will be maintained here that there are different senses of abstraction which are associated with different kinds of concepts. Thus, referring to unit and element concepts (see below) Parsons

says 'What should be insisted upon is the radical logical distinction between these two kinds of concepts, ...' [1937a:34]. There are two criteria by which such types are distinguished which are indicated when Parsons refers to the distinction as a 'logical-operational' [1937a:35] one. In the first place concepts differ in their different modes of abstraction, the different ways in which they abstract from reality. So Parsons advises:

> 'It is not wise to attempt to proceed with the main task without some consideration of different types of theoretical concepts and their different kind of relation to the empirical elements of scientific knowledge' [1937a:28].

So concepts have different logical statuses. But secondly concepts are distinguished by different functions, the point being that the same ideas, so to speak, can constitute different concepts even when the same terms are applied. Thus, for example, in Parsons introductory discussion of 'Types of concepts' [1937a:27-41] we find the same terms (e.g. velocity and mass from classical mechanics) used to exemplify different kinds of concepts. The status of a concept then only becomes clear in the context of its use.

On the face of it Parsons uses a three fold typology of concepts, frame of reference, unit and element concepts [1937a:27-41, 731-753]. A theoretical system will include all three types [1937a:38], a fact which, in conjunction with the above paragraph, makes the clarification of Parsons position difficult, the status of the 'theoretical system of action' is a complex question indeed. However the task is yet more difficult for the three-fold system acts as a shorthand for a more complex discrimination. Parsons tends to operate in terms of mutually exclusive paired alternatives so that the status of any concept must be judged in terms of the following scheme of modes of abstraction and concept functions:

	Either	Or
Function of concept.	Description	Explanation
	Ordering reality	Classifying reality
	Means	End
Mode of abstraction	Primary	Secondary
	Concrete	Analytical
	Actual	Hypothetical
	Structure	Variable

All of these dichotomous possibilities are woven into The Structure of Social Action. No attempt will be made just now to elucidate them, rather each will be considered in its appropriate place in what follows. The discussion

will proceed by following Parsons three fold framework focusing on the description-explanation, concrete-analytical alternatives. Thus frame of reference concepts play descriptive functions, unit and element concepts explanatory functions. Within the explanatory function units and elements are distinguished primarily by the concrete-analytical alternative. This is the basic framework but the discussion will attempt to be alive to the complications indicated in the above.

ii) Descriptive frame of reference concepts.

As can be gathered from the above accounts of empiricism and empirical a description of the external world is not a simple matter of mirroring what is 'there'. Rather '.... description of the facts involves a conceptual scheme .... It is not merely a reproduction of external reality but a selective ordering of it' [1937a:28]. To use one of Parsons' examples if we describe an event as a man committing suicide by jumping from a bridge we have ordered the phenomena of the external world in a selective way. The same phenomena could be described in terms of falling bodies where the descriptive terms 'man', 'committing suicide' or 'jumping' are irrelevant, what is relevant is the 'mass' and 'weight' of the body, its 'velocity' etc. [1937a:29, 734-735].(15)

Parsons insists on the necessity of such descriptive concepts:

> 'Descriptive frames of reference in this sense are fundamental to all science. But by no means do they exhaust scientific conceptualization. Facts cannot be described except within such a schema. But their description within it has in the first instance, the function of defining a "phenomenon" which is to be explained. That is, of the great mass of possible empirical observations we select those which are at the same time meaningful within such a schema and "belong together". They thus serve together to characterise the essential objects of a concrete phenomenon, which then becomes the object of scientific interest. This is what Max Weber calls a "historical individual". It is particularly to be noted that this is not a simple case of reflection of external reality, but of its conceptualization in relation to a particular direction of scientific interest' [1937a:30].

We can initially note from the above that frames of reference facilitate selection and ordering of phenomena. Speaking of the selectiveness of scientific interests Parsons says that a description

> '... is precisely the statement in outline form of the aspects of the concrete situation which are of interest for explanatory purposes. If the historical individual is to be capable of causal analysis it must be oversimplified; it must be reduced to what is essential, omitting the unimportant'. [1937a:604].

Selection is accompanied by a process of conceptual ordering:

> 'The supply and demand schema is a way of arranging relevant facts for purposes of economic analysis. Footnote: It is, in the terminology of this study, a "descriptive frame of reference" ' [1937a:171].

So description involves concepts which facilitate the selection of relevant phenomena and 'preparing and organizing the concrete material for causal analysis' [1937a:604].

The failure to recognize the place of frame of reference concepts has according to Parsons been one of the bases of the 'deep-rooted errors' of empiricism [1937a:29]. As a consequence he particularly stresses the need for self-awareness and clarity of such concepts. There are three reasons why this is necessary, three methodological functions

so to speak, of frames of reference: to facilitate judgements about what phenomena are relevant to a given explanatory theory, the converse, to facilitate judgements of the capacities and limitations of a given explanatory theory, and finally, to facilitate the interrelationship of different descriptions of the same phenomena.

What is of interest to a scientific theory is not self-evident, the object to be explained must first be defined in respects which are relevant to the theory. Two examples can illustrate what Parsons has in mind here. The concept of social relationship can act as a descriptive frame of reference [1937a:744]. As such it acts as a criterion of what are relevant facts:

> 'The important thing is that insofar as the relationship schema is employed for the observation and description of the facts of human life in society it sets a standard of what are adequate observations. It is not necessary to observe <u>all</u> the acts of the parties to a relationship, or all their attitudes, etc., but only enough to establish what is for the purposes in hand the relevant "character" of the relationship' [1937a:744].

The supply-demand schema can act in the same way. From his discussion of Marshall Parsons concludes that for Marshall

'economics is especially concerned with the everyday business of life in so far as it can be brought into relation with supply and demand' [1937a:171]. The data of everyday life are only relevant to Marshall's economics if they can be located in terms of supply and demand:

> 'A fact to be relevant to [orthodox] economic theory must, in an analogous way, be capable of location in terms of supply and demand. It must be capable of interpretation as in some way qualifying a good or service for which there is a demand, and which is in some degree scarce, relatively to the demand for it' [1937a:28-29].

Parsons gives as an example a study of professional training [1937a:172]. This is relevant to economic theory only insofar as professional training can be expressed in terms of cost and related to the earnings of professional men. So here frames of reference act as criteria which facilitate judgements of what are adequate or relevant facts to a theory.

On the other hand frame of reference concepts play the opposite role, facilitating judgements of the capacities and limitations of a given explanatory theory. Here the question is at what point does a theory overreach itself and distort what it pretends to explain.

> 'The scientific function of a descriptive frame of reference is to make it possible to describe phenomena in such a way as to distinguish those facts about them which are relevant to [this is the first function above] and capable of explanation in terms of a given theoretical system from those which are not' [1937a:735].

Again we can take the example of supply and demand. Parsons emphasises that to select relevant data and arrange it in terms of the concepts supply and demand does not mean that the explanatory theory of economics can fully explain all aspects of the facts so described [1937a:29]. This is the reason for separating out these first two functions as the adequacy of facts to theory and the adequacy of theory to facts. Rather:

> 'So long as these facts are taken only as data, and the analysis confined to their implications in relation to the market mechanism, it may be argued that the explanation of phenomena is kept on an economic plane in the factor sense. The problems of economic science are then confined to a set of relations of the data of supply and demand, and are not extended to the determination of the data themselves' [1937a:172]. (See also: 1937b:379).

So some of the facts described in terms of a frame of reference are not capable of explanation by the theory.

This is elaborated on in Parsons' distinction between two classes of data selected and organized within a frame of reference: constant and variable. Constant data is relevant to the problem at hand but is not problematical from the point of view of the explanatory theory. Variable facts are those which are problematical, which the theory seeks to explain. In the suicide example mentioned above the height of a bridge and the depth of the water are relevant facts, if the bridge was only three feet high and the water one foot deep then one would want to question the 'suicide' hypothesis. But these facts are given, or constant, data, from the point of view of the explanatory theory of action one is not concerned to explain them.

> 'Thus the data of any concrete problem fall into the two classes, "constant" data and the values of variables. One of the most important functions of the frame of reference is to enable the distinction to be drawn. Constants can only be described in terms of this frame of reference; their further analysis requires a further set of terms. The description of values of variables, on the other hand, is the starting point for analysis' [1937a:736-7].

Frames of reference perform this function by making explicit the presuppositions which an explanatory theory makes about its subject matter, thus one of the presuppositions of the theory of action is that the facts can be described in terms of 'the subjective point of view of the actor'. This applies to physical and biological phenomena, within the frame of reference these are described in terms of this point of view, as means and conditions of action. Particularly relevant here is the actor's own body as a biological organism. The biological properties of the body are constants for the theory of action, they may be relevant data but are outside the explanatory capacity of the theory as is indicated by the criterion of subjectivity. The converse applies, one of the constituents of a biological frame of reference is the irrelevance of subjective categories [1937a: 753], the subjectivity of the organism as an actor is then outside the capacities of the biological sciences. The lack of awareness of the parameters of the biological and physical frames of reference and their attempts to apply the explanatory theory of those sciences to 'action' is what Parsons labels radical positivism.

By making explicit the parameters of relevant facts and the capacities of theory frame of reference concepts make possible a third task: the interrelationship of different descriptions of the same phenomena. Parsons is particularly insistent that any concrete phenomenon is capable of description in terms of different frames of reference and that

these will overlap in the sense that a given phenomena will be constant for one frame of reference but variable for another.

> 'It is above all to be emphasized that the same empirical facts may, according to the scientific purpose in view, be stated in terms of more than one such schema...' [1937a:29].

There is an initial ambiguity as to the interrelationship of such different descriptions cast in terms of different frames of reference. Parsons says that the latter '... may be of greatly varying degrees of generality of applications and perhaps differ in other respects' [1937a:28]. There are two positions here. Firstly, frames of reference can be related to each other in terms of ascending orders of generality. So one frame of reference is a 'subschemata' of a more general scheme. For example, 'Supply and demand is to be considered as a subschemata of action' [1937a:30]. But secondly Parsons says that frames of reference may 'differ in other respects' than their degree of generality so that they may be '... related to each other not only in the sense that one is a narrow, special case of another but by cutting across each other' [1937a:29-30]. Here rather than generality a different type of relationship is suggested which 'cuts across' the first. This is 'the scientific purpose in view' [1937a:30]. To exemplify this Parsons writes:

> 'It is a great service of Professor Znaniecki to have pointed out that essentially the same facts about "man in society" may be stated in any one of four different schemata of this character, which he calls "social action", "social relationships", "social groups" and "social personality"' [1937a:30].

Then the question is the relationship between these two, the degree of generality of a frame of reference and its scientific purpose. This is ambiguous as the two seem to get confused, a few pages after the passage quoted above Parsons says:

> 'The mutual relations of the four schemata mentioned above are primarily those of different levels on which "social structure" is described. Of these four, at any rate, the one of interest here, that of "action", may be regarded as the most elementary' [1937a:39].

Here Znaniecki's four frames of reference, which were initially introduced as exemplifying different scientific purposes are now related in terms of variations in their generality.

Essentially this problem seems to arise because Parsons includes a variety of descriptive concepts under the heading 'frame of reference'. These range all the way from the fundamental presuppositions of the sciences of nature, action and culture to descriptions of concrete 'historical individuals' and events. In between these are also included the frames of reference of particular sciences such as economics and the problem areas within a science such as Znaniecki's fourfold system of understanding 'man in society'. When Parsons talks about each of these the same general terms are employed: the selective ordering of reality in the direction of scientific interest. Clearly these are rather overgeneralized and distinctions must be made between them.

We can distinguish between two types of frame of reference concepts which can be called primary and secondary.(16) The primary conceptual schemes are the frames of reference of action, nature and culture. Within each of these are pluralities of secondary descriptive schemas which are both narrower in scope and developed for specific purposes within the parameters of the primary frame of reference. This distinction between primary and secondary frames of reference rests on two grounds which I will call the criterion of reducibility and the basis of scientific interest.

With respect to the first, the criterion of reducibility, the question is whether or not it is possible to reduce the aspects of phenomena relevant to a given frame of reference to a more basic frame of reference without losing just those aspects central to the original frame of reference. In the case of primary concepts this is not possible, all three have inherent characteristics which cannot be subsumed under each other. In the case of secondary frames of reference it is possible to do this, for example, the supply and demand scheme and the social relationship, social group and social personality schemes are all subschemas of the primary frame of reference of action. Their subschema status in terms of the criterion of reducibility is indicated by the following passages:

> 'That the relationship schema is secondary to that of action is proved by the following consideration: It is quite possible to isolate (conceptually) unit acts from a social relationship. But it is quite impossible to isolate even conceptually a social relationship from the actions of the parties' [1937a:745].
>
> 'At the same time in the present context the group schema is also to be regarded as secondary to the action schema. There are no group properties that are not reducible to properties of systems of

> action and there is no analytical theory of groups which is not translatable into terms of the theory of action' [1937a: 747].

So the employment of secondary frames of reference is a matter of 'scientific economy' [1937a:745].

> 'When a certain degree of complexity is reached, however, to describe the system in full in terms of the action schema, would involve a degree of elaboration of detail which would be very laborious and pedantic to work out. ... Fortunately, as certain degrees of complexity are reached, there emerge other ways of describing the facts, the employment of which constitutes a convenient "shorthand" that is adequate for a large number of scientific purposes' [1937a:743-744].

There is, however, a further point of differentiation between primary and secondary frames of reference on which in fact the criterion of reducibility ultimately rests. In the above it has been noted that frames of reference facilitate the selection and ordering of phenomena which are relevant for an explanatory theory whilst guarding against the over-generalization of a theory to facts it cannot cope with. As

such frames of reference define the parameters of relevance, competance and interest. We can now ask on what grounds can this claim be justified? To answer this question the discussion will proceed in terms of the subjective and objective sources of the content of frames of reference.

In the first case, the subjective, the content of the concept derives from the scientist, it is a 'way of looking' at the phenomena of experience which must in some way or other be distinguished from that phenomena itself. As it stands however this is too crude, we must further distinguish between what can be called the cultural and a priori content of frames of reference. The first are particular to given cultural situations, then the 'way of looking' would be specific to limited common-sense worlds and value standpoints. The second are 'ways of looking' which transcend any particular cultural perspective being generic to all human beings and hence must be counted as a priori properties of the human mind.

The question then is whether Parsons frame of reference concepts are subjective in either or both of the above senses? As has been noted in the preceeding discussion of science and common sense Parsons does suggest that frames of reference have cultural content. Another example relates

to the suicide jumping from the bridge mentioned above. Parsons comments at one point:

> 'Indeed the word bridge in everyday speech gets its primary meaning precisely from its relation to the action schema. It is a structure over a body of water or some other barrier, over which people or vehicles may go. It is defined functionally by its relation to action not physically as an aggregation or as a determinate structure of actions'. [1937a:738].

However the above discussion of science and common sense and the theory of the development of science have attempted to show that as a scientific frame of reference 'transcends' common sense and becomes 'methodologically sophisticated' [1937a:28], it is precisely this cultural content which is eliminated.

> 'The attitude of the scientist is essentially that of the observer; he is concerned with <u>given</u> phenomena. It is true that modern scientific methodology has become sufficiently sophisticated to realize that the scientist is more than a purely passive mirror of the external world, a photographic

> plate. Scientific investigation is itself a process of action; it is the pursuit, not of knowledge in the abstract, but of particular knowledge of particular things. With reference to data it is a selective process, selection being determined both, as has been seen, by the structure of theoretical systems and by extra-scientific considerations. But nevertheless the aim of science is to reduce to a minimum the elements which do not lie in the facts themselves. Its development approaches an asymptote when they are eliminated' [1937a:369].

This passage points to a major place for the objective content of frames of reference. But before considering this we must first turn to the a priori subjective content of frames of reference.

Parsons claims that there are features of the frame of reference of action which are a priori in the above sense [1937a:44-48, 732-733]. These are: (a) the concepts of end, means, conditions and norms as components of acts, (b) the temporal reference; action is a process in time, (c) the subjectivity of the above concepts: they are construed from the point of view of the actor, (d) the

possibility of error (included only in [1937a:44-48]) and (e) the teleological character of action (included only in [1937a:732-733]). Without this conceptual framework 'talk about action fails to make sense' [1937a:732], 'it is impossible even to talk about action in terms that do not involve the means-end framework with all the implications just discussed' [1937a:733].

Three points should be noted here. Firstly, the frame of reference of action is subjective in the above sense, Parsons clearly distinguishes between the constituents of the frame of reference and the "empirical world".

> 'These underlying features of the action schema which are here called the "frame of reference" do not constitute "data" of any empirical problem; they are not components of any concrete system of action .... This is not true of the components of concrete action system, or of the values of analytical elements, the specific content of ends and the like. They are of the empirical order of existence and are subject to analysis in terms of causality and concrete empirical process. The distinction between the action frame of reference and the concrete data is vital' [1937a:733].

Secondly, from what has been said it is clear that these concepts are not particular to any given cultural context, to Parsons one cannot conceive of a cultural context from which it would be possible to talk about 'action' outside of these terms. They thus transcend any cultural content. Thirdly, this is not a matter of conventional definition, it is not that Parsons is saying that the above features are necessary to talk about action because this is how action is defined. Parsons is wanting to put forward a far stronger view than this, that the action frame of reference states conceptual properties of the human mind in terms of which certain phenomena are inevitably experienced:

> 'Thus the action frame of reference may be said to have what many, following Husserl, have called a "phenomenological" status. It involves no concrete data that can be "thought away", that are subject to change. It is not a phenomenon in the empirical sense. It is the indispensible logical framework in which we describe and think about the phenomena of action' [1937a:733].

It is in this context that Parsons frequent references to classical mechanics becomes clear. The action frame of reference is a parallel to the categories of thought which

Kant's critical investigation of Newton's physics produced.[17] The features of the action frame of reference then

> '... are in this respect analogous to the space-time framework of physics. Every physical phenomenon must involve processes in time, which happen to particles which can be located in space. It is impossible to talk about physical processes in any other terms, at least so long as the conceptual scheme of the classical physics is employed' [1937a:733].

From the above remarks it can be concluded that in the ideal case at least, the subjective content of frame of reference concepts is restricted to such a priori categories. The primary and secondary distinction and the criterion of irreducibility can now be put into this context. Clearly the conceptual content of all frames of reference cannot claim an a priori status, it would be absurd to say that the concepts of supply and demand were properties of the mind, for example. So this a priori content of frames of reference must be restricted to the primary type, the most elementary concepts of nature, action and culture. It is in these terms, their subjective content, that they constitute

primary frames of reference. Further it is from this standpoint that secondary frames of reference are derivative and can be reduced to the primary concepts whilst it is impossible to reduce primary frames of reference to each other or their derivatives.

This leaves us with definite implications for the content of secondary frames of reference: it derives from the object of study. The concept summarises selected aspects of the phenomena itself. As a concept the frame of reference only states the parameters of selection, which aspects of the concrete phenomena are to be selected. So of the supply-demand schema Parsons says:

> 'But the phenomena which are described in terms of the supply and demand schedules Marshall uses are <u>concrete</u> phenomena. They are, on the one hand, the register of the concrete wants of a plurality of individuals, not ends as an analytical element in their action. On the other hand the supply schedule is a state of the concrete (in part hypothetical) relations of quantity supplied as a function of price' [1937a:171].

Again in the case of the social relationship scheme the same point applies.

> '... it has been seen that the acts and action systems of different individuals, in so far as they are mutually oriented to one another, constitute social relationships. In so far as this interaction of the action systems of individuals is continuous and regular these relationships acquire certain identifiable, relatively constant properties or descriptive aspects' [1937a:744].

So the social relationship scheme restricts attention to action in that it selectively draws out the continuous and regular interaction of action systems and arranges this data in terms of 'identifiable, relatively constant properties or descriptive aspects'. Finally a 'historical individual' such as Weber's 'modern rational bourgeois capitalism, the Indian caste system, Chinese patrimonial bureaucracy' are 'precisely the statement in outline form of the aspects of the concrete situation which are of interest for explanatory purposes. If the historical individual is to be capable of causal analysis it must be oversimplified; it must be reduced to what is essential, omitting what is unimportant' [1937a:604].

Secondary frames of reference then are classificatory concepts by means of which selection is made from the phenomena of experience. However in the above account it has been mentioned several times that frames of reference

define not only what is relevant data but also what is 'important', 'significant' and of 'interest'. Classificatory concepts do not in themselves seem to justify this. On the other hand subjective concepts with cultural content have such qualities, in Weber's terms concepts provide a link between the empirical world and our value standpoints as Parsons recognizes in his account of value relevance:

> 'Human beings, their actions and cultural achievements are the embodiments of value toward which we must, in some degree, take a value attitude. Hence our interest in them is directly determined by their relevance to the values which either the scientist himself shares or which are significant to him by agreement with his own values or conflict with them' [1937a:592].

But as we have seen Parsons wishes to eliminate the cultural content of frames of reference as 'extra-scientific considerations' [1937a:369]. What Parsons suggests then is that as this process of elimination proceeds the content of frames of reference becomes objective in the above sense and the basis of interest becomes the explanatory theory associated with the frame of reference. This can be seen in Parsons' criticism of Weber's value relevance principle.

> 'A further element seems not to have received sufficient consideration on Weber's part. It is that, whatever the motives of original interest may be, there is an inherent tendency for the theoretical structures of all science in whatever field to become logically closed systems. Then, in so far as there is an instrumental interest in the social field, the general conceptual products of this interest will tend to become integrated in the same systems as those issuing from the value aspect. Once this has happened to an appreciable degree there will exist, as has been emphasised throughout this study, a secondary basis of interest in concrete phenomena - that derived from the structure of the theoretical system itself. The interest to this extent will be directed to those aspects of concrete phenomena which are important to the theoretical system' [1937a:597].

Parsons' frequent reference to <u>scientific</u> interest (for example [1937a:30, 604, 582]) then is meant in a particular sense, interest in phenomena insofar as that phenomena is important to the explanatory theory of science.

> 'Just what order of statements and how many is a question which is relative both to the empirical character of the phenomenon being studied, and to the theoretical system in terms of which it is being analyzed. For the purposes of any conceptual scheme there is an "adequate" description, the determination of a sufficient number of <u>important</u> facts. ... What facts are important is determined by the structure of the theoretical system' [1937a:42].

We can now come back to the sense in which scientific knowledge is abstract because it necessarily involves frame of reference descriptive concepts. From the above it is clear that the meaning of abstraction differs as between primary and secondary descriptive concepts. In the case of the former the sense of abstraction is an extension of the second qualification on realism noted above. A primary frame of reference states the presuppositions of <u>human</u> knowledge about the reality it claims to study. As such Parsons seems to be saying very little for if all possible knowledge is abstract in this sense then, as common denominators primary frames of reference hardly seem important given Parsons' emphasis on the <u>partiality</u> of description and the role of frames of reference in identifying the limits of this partiality. However, there is an important point

here, for there is not one but three primary frames of reference and hence the possibility of them becoming confused and 'misapplied' is open. Examples of this are vitalism in biology in which the action scheme frames our thinking about nature and conversely positivism in social science in which the attempt is made to employ the frame of reference of nature to investigate action. Parsons wishes to avoid such 'misapplication' and provide the necessary methodological tools to achieve this.

Secondary frames of reference represent a different sense of abstraction, the selection and ordering of partial aspects of concrete phenomena. A description defines an object of study but as such it is not a complete or full account of all that could be said. The problem then lies in the criteria by which the partiality of descriptions are limited and directed. This is the necessary place of frame of reference concepts. But to Parsons an empiricist methodology does not realize that such concepts have a necessary place and hence fails to realize the selectivity and partiality of any description. One consequence of this is the empiricist tendency to carry over common sense concepts as frames of reference. Two prominent examples of this in The Structure of Social Action are Durkheim's identification of the social factor with the concrete system of relationships between individuals [1937a:337, 367] and Marshall's definition of economics. Of Marshall, Parsons says 'He consistently thought

of the subject matter of his economics as that of a field of concrete phenomena - it was "a study of mankind in the everyday business of life"' [1937a:130].

The empiricist tendency then is to define the object of study in terms of concrete categories: society and the everyday business of life. To Parsons the very fact that these are self-evident betrays the fact that they embody common-sense definitions of the subject matter: definitions which are limited by the specificity of their cultural content. This is what Parsons wishes to exclude. To him scientific frames of reference concepts must be grounded both in characteristics of the phenomena itself and in importance for explanatory theory. The upshot of this is that the object of study cannot be understood as a concrete area of life but as an aspect of the concrete. For example, the object of study of the natural sciences is not 'nature' as a concrete entity somehow distinct from 'man'. Clearly men and their actions can be just as much the object of study of natural science as any other part of nature, men just as apples, fall from apple trees.

But natural science can only be concerned with a limited aspect of human behaviour. Similarly within the sciences of action a description of an object must be cast in terms of certain aspects of its constituent characteristics which are relevant to a theory. So economics is not to be understood as the study of a particular area of life, the 'economy' say, but as the study of

any area of life insofar as it can be brought into relation with the explanatory theory of economics. In Marshall's case this is his utility theory. Then:

> 'This logically seperable utility aspect can form the basis for a logically distinct discipline, generally called economic theory, which, however, in these terms must be held to be concerned with an element or group of elements in concrete human action and not a concretely separable category of the phenomena of human action, a kind or type of action' [1937a:174].

So when Parsons, with reference to conceptual schemes as frames of reference speaks of a defined phenomena as '"meaningful" within such a scheme' or the observation of phenomena which 'belong together' in terms of a frame of reference [1937a:30] the criteria of meaningfulness and belonging together lie within the explanatory theory of science.

This takes the discussion on to explanatory concepts but before doing that one anticipatory point ought to be made. Explanation can never apply to phenomena per se, only to those aspects of phenomena captured within a frame of reference and so described. Any given phenomenon, then, will be open to explanation by a plurality of explanatory theories. A crucial question is the relationship of these theories, in particular:

how adequate an explanation is contained in any one? Given Parsons' understanding of description this question cannot be answered by empirical test alone, this would require the empiricist's direct correspondence of a theory and a particular concrete reality. So:

> 'It is quite illegitimate to require, as a test of validity, direct concrete correspondence between the expectations derived from a scientific law and the concrete course of events. This will exist only in so far as the latter is free from the influence of elements not formulated in the law in question' [1936d:141].

To say this of course only poses the question of how to evaluate the empirical adequacy of explanatory theory, a question which will be returned to in discussing the systemic qualities of theory.

iii. Explanatory concepts

The task of explanation begins with a 'historical individual' described within a frame of reference. To Parsons, to explain is largely to 'analyse' to 'break down' this object of study by the employment of explanatory concepts.(17)

> 'We start with the fact that a defined object of scientific interest is given, that it is described in terms of one or more frames of reference as stated. Theoretical explanation demands that it shall be broken down into simpler elements which shall serve as the units of one or more theoretical systems in terms of which it is to be explained' [1937a:31].

However, this explanation can proceed in two different directions, the historical and the analytical. [1937a:598-9, 760].(18) The two are differentiated on the basis of the relative status of theory and concrete phenomena as means and ends. In the historical approach the end is to achieve as complete an understanding as possible of a concrete class of phenomena, which may at the extreme include only a unique event. Then theory is a means to this end.

> 'The first group may be called the historical sciences, which concentrate their attention on particular concrete phenomena, attempting as full an understanding of their causes and consequences as possible. In doing this they seek conceptual aid wherever it may be found. Examples in the natural science field are geology and meteorology; the social field, history, above all, but also anthropology as it has generally been conceived' [1937a:598].

In the analytical approach the end is to attain a system of theory. Then 'concrete historical individuals are means, "cases" in terms of which the validity of the theoretical system may be tested by "verification"' [1937a:598]. Just as the historical approach uses theory from a number of theoretical systems so a theoretical system will be applicable to a number of concrete areas, but not of course as a full explanation of any one of these areas.

> 'The other group, the "analytical" sciences is concerned primarily with building up systems of general theory verifiable in terms of and applicable to a wide range of concrete phenomena. To them the individual phenomenon is a "case"' [1937a:598].

Parsons is concerned with the approach to explanation of the analytical sciences and I, like him, will have no more to say on the historical. To go back then to the historical individual to be explained by analysis in terms of explanatory concepts. Parsons' only explicit discussion of the prerequisites of explanation is his outline of Weber's logic of empirical proof [1937a:610-614]. Here he follows von Schelting's discrimination of six stages in such a proof. However it is only the first of these which is relevant at present.

> 'Dr. von Schelting gives a convenient summary of the logical steps involved in the procedure of causal imputation. It presupposes the construction and verification descriptively of a historical individual - the thing to be explained. Then the indispensible steps are as follows: (1) Analysis of this phenomenon (or process) in such a way that it is broken down into elements of such a character that each of them may be subsumed under a general law.' [1937a:610].

This is enough to establish that Parsons follows what has been called the deductive nomological model of explanation: to explain is to subsume under general laws. But Parsons is perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic in that his concern is not firstly with such laws as statements about the behaviour of phenomena but with what might be termed the constituents of general laws.(19) These are the general conceptual elements that the concrete case is broken down into and which laws state the relationship between.

> 'The present issue is what is meant by the elements and the general laws that are necessary to the schema of logical proof. Only one thing can be definitely gathered from Weber's treatment: they are <u>general</u> concepts or categories. .... The elements referred to must be in some sense general categories, forms of which the facts in question constitute the particular content. ... The question is, then, what, in the terminology of logic, is the universal, of which the specific facts in question constitute a particular?' [1937a:613-4].

Parsons' concern then is with the nature of the general concepts which on the one hand are the terms in which the concrete facts are analysed and on the other hand form the components of general laws.

> 'Whatever else it may be, I should think of a sociological theory as concerned with the discrimination and analysis of certain causal factors in concrete situations. It consists not merely in working out the genetic antecedents of a given phenomenon, but also of analysis of the phenomenon itself, breaking it down into the various causal elements which go to make it up. (1935d:691-2).

This emphasis arises in the first instance because Parsons insists that there are two kinds of concepts employed here which he calls units and elements. [1937a:31, 614]. He further insists that there is a 'radical logical distinction between these two kinds of concepts' [1937a:34], in particular, one is not a stage on the way to the other but each is 'abstract in a difference sense' [1937a:634].

> 'In the first place it should be repeated with emphasis that element analysis and unit analysis are not stages of scientific abstraction but two different kinds of abstraction on two different planes ... unit analysis unravels the warp of empirical reality, element analysis the worf' [1937a: 748].

A number of questions arise here, namely, what are the characteristics of unit/element concepts? What is their explanatory import? In what sense are they different kinds of abstraction? Finally, how are they related to each other? These then constitute the problem areas for the following discussion

(a) Unit analysis.

In the simplest terms unit analysis is just what the term says, breaking down the described object into its units or parts. As examples Parsons refers to the cylinders, pistons, driving rods,

as parts of a steam engine; cells, tissues and organs as the units of organisms and rational and irrational acts, religious, economic or political acts as the parts of a complex of actions. [1937a:31]. In each case the particular facts of the concrete object of study are identified as cases of general concepts which state the characteristic features of a class of objects. [1937a: 614]. In order to identify a given series of actions as 'economic', for example, they must display certain characteristics which are stated in the concept of an 'economic act'.

Parsons follows Weber in noting several different ways in which concepts of this type can be constituted. We can formulate the class of objects in terms of average traits of concrete objects, or in terms of their common characteristics. Parsons' example is the identification of an individual human being as a part of the species. In the first case average stature or weight might be used as an index, in the second case the type of brain structure, erect posture or the opposable thumb. [1937a:614]. But Parsons agrees with Weber that ideal types are the most important form of unit concepts [1937a:614]. Here the concept is defined in terms of certain pure or idealised characteristics which are perhaps never found in such a form in any particular case. In the actual case different units fuse and modify each other. An example Parsons gives is that some of the chemical elements are never found in nature uncombined with other elements [1937a:33]. Similarly in any given case an economic act will be fused with religious or political aspects. This inclusion of examples from both chemistry and sociology is indicative of the ambiguous parenthood of Parsons' idea of unit concepts. On the one hand

there is a claimed derivation from Weber's ideal types but on the other hand there are important departures from Weber's position. The idealized status of the unit has obvious parallels with Weber but for the latter this 'purifying' characteristic of ideal types was one source of their abstract nature. However for Parsons this aspect of abstraction has already been covered in the place of frame of reference concepts. The abstract nature of unit concepts does not lie in their selectivity and ordering functions. So whether or not it is actually possible to observe the pure type in reality is irrelevant to Parsons:

> 'It is to be remembered that such a unit must be a "part" of the phenomenon in the sense that it can be conceived of as concretely existing in isolation from the other parts; whether or not it is practically possible to carry out this isolation experimentally <u>in concreto</u> is not methodoligically important' [1937a:737].

Although the actual or hypothetical status of a unit is not an important distinction to Parsons the fact that units can be hypothetical poses a problem. The problem is the limit, within a given frame of reference, of legitimate analysis of the object of study into its parts. Thus, for example, within the frame of reference of biology, in breaking down an organism

into its parts the limit is the cell, to break down the cell into its nucleus, protoplasm and epiderm and treat these as parts is an illegitimate use of the principle of unit analysis. For to further reduce the phenomenon below the level of the cell involves moving to a different frame of reference. In similar fashion to treat ends, means and norms as parts (not elements) of a system of action is illegitimate. Within the frame of reference of action the act is the basic unit. How are such judgements of legitimate employment of units made? Parsons says:

> 'A part in this sense is a unit, the concrete existence of which, aside from its relation to the other parts of the same whole, is meaningful, "makes sense" ....
> The test question is always whether we can conceive such an act as existing "by itself", that it is a "pure type" without involving the other types from which it is concretely distinguished' [1937a:31].

> 'It [the unit concept] refers to an actually, or hypothetically existent concrete entity. However much the concept of the "pure type", especially in the "organic" case, may differ from anything concretely observable, the test is that thinking of it as concretely existent makes sense, that it does not involve a contradiction in terms' [1937a:33].

First of all note that the criterion of legitimacy applies to both the actual or hypothetical pure type. The type must be 'meaningful', 'conceivable', 'non-contradictory' and 'make sense'. The appeal here is to the frame of reference:

> 'Weber himself frequently lays down as a principal criterion of the correct formulation of an ideal type that the combination of features used to characterize it should be such as taken together are meaningful, make sense. What this means is clear - that they must adequately describe, in terms of a frame of reference, a potentially concrete entity, an objectively possible entity in Weber's sense' [1937a:615].

But as well as this principle of non-contradiction of the frame of reference the criterion is that within the limits of a frame of reference the concrete, independent existence of the unit, whether actual or hypothetical, is conceivable. It is the concreteness of units which is their prime characterstic.

However as we have seen this characteristic applies to both actually concrete and hypothetically concrete units and it is not the 'pure' status of the concept which gives it its abstract character. Why then are some units 'hypothetical', why do they involve abstraction?

The abstract, hypothetical character of some unit concepts derives from the organic nature of the subject matter to which they refer. At one point Parsons contrasts his analytical realism with Weber's view that concepts are 'useful fictions'. He remarks that '[t]here is, as has been shown, an element of truth in this view as applied to certain types of concepts....' [1937a:730]. These are hypothetical concrete types about which Parsons says:

> 'Only hypothetically concrete type concepts are fictional in the social field, a fact that is due to the important degree of organicism of the subject matter' [1937a:716]. (See also: [1937a:31, 738-9]).

By organicism Parsons means that the properties of units result in part from their coming together to form a larger whole. Conversely, the properties of the object of study, as a whole, are not only the sum of the properties of its units but result from their very combination as a whole.

> 'The very definition of an organic whole is as one within which the relations determine the properties of its parts. The properties of the whole are not simply a resultant of the latter' [1937a:32].

This is developed under the heading of emergent properties of action systems which will be discussed later.

For the moment the point is that to analyze an organic whole into its units or parts gives unit concepts an abstract character. For the unit gains certain of its characteristics precisely from its place as a part, with others, of a whole. To remove the part from its context, either in actual fact or conceptually, means that the analysis of the object of study into units loses just these organic properties.

> 'And in so far as this is true, the concept "part" takes on an abstract, indeed a "fictional" character. For the part of an organic whole is no longer the same, once it is separated factually or conceptually from the whole' [1937a:32].

Unit concepts then are concrete in a dual sense, what Sosensky (1964:47) calls empirical and Hegelian. Sosensky takes the empirical sense from J.S. Mill: 'A concrete name is a name which stands for a thing; an abstract name is a name which stands for an attribute of a thing'. (Quoted in Sosensky: 1964:47). Unit concepts refer to things such as economic acts rather than attributes of such things such as efficiency (say). But Parsons wants to claim that unit concepts are abstract because of a further quality of concreteness which such 'things' have: 'The Hegelian sense, in which the concrete is that which is immersed in its relations; one must consider the individual in

its milieu of relations and connections'. (Sosensky: 1964:47). To conceptualize a unit as a thing in isolation breaks down this second quality and as such is abstract to Parsons.

Turning to the explanatory import of unit concepts it has been noted that for Parsons explanation involves subsuming a particular fact under a general concept whose relation to others is expressed in a law. Here, however, the term law should be regarded with care. Parsons treats the activity of identifying some pattern of behaviour as a case of a more general class as 'the first step of scientific generalization'. [1937a:33]. For, from this classificatory exercise can be inductively built up empirical generalizations about the behaviour of units and combinations of units.

> 'Furthermore, on occasion, a great deal can be said about the behaviour of these parts under certain kinds of definable circumstances. Such judgements may yield a kind of generalization which is of high explanatory value, and, within limits, perfectly valid. General statements about the possible or probable behaviour of such concrete or hypothetically concrete "parts" of concrete phenomena, or various combinations of them, under typical circumstances will be referred to as "empirical generalizations"' [1937a:33].

Parsons' qualifications here relate to the hypothetical character of the units of action systems.

> 'Ideal type elements may, as units, be supposed to have typical modes of behaviour under given circumstances. In this case the laws in question are generalizations about these modes of behaviour. They are "empirical generalizations" in the sense of the previous discussion, qualified only by the element of fictional abstraction inherent in the ideal-type concepts' [1937a:622].

So although Parsons speaks of generaliztions about the behaviour of hypothetically concrete units as empirical he recognizes that this term must be qualified. Parsons again makes use of Weber, in this case, the idea of 'probability' [1937a:629-631]. If we are trying to explain a complex interrelationship such as the relation of the Protestant ethic to modern capitalism the object of study, western European history between the 17th and 20th Century must be analyzed into a large number of type-units such as bureaucracy, rational law, the state, science. Then

> 'Each of these must be subjected to judgements of probability as to its line of development under the relevant circumstances. These judgements rest on construction. Hence the

> predictability of a hypothetical objectively possible concrete state is naturally subject to error, in the case of the construction of each element, to say nothing of the totality of elements. Hence objective empirical certainty is out of the question; the judgement can be only one of probability' [1937a:624].

So '"Probability" here means only an expression of our failure to attain completely accurate empirical knowledge' [1937a:630]. This arises because we are at present only discussing unit analysis. In terms of this form of analysis concepts are always empirically lacking in precision and 'the gap between the concepts and the facts is bridged by the concept of probability' [1937a:631].

Now Parsons is emphatic on the importance of unit analysis in science. He says

> 'The scientific legitimacy, indeed the indispensibility of such concepts is not to be questionned. Without them there could be no science' [1937a:33].

However the last remarks above indicate one limitation on explanation in terms of unit concepts. There are others and in fact Parsons insists that explanatory theory cannot be restricted to this kind of analysis. Thus in various places Parsons criticises empiricism for its 'limitation of the development of theory to the type-part concept and its empirical generalization'

[1937a:761]. Aside from his general attack on empiricism the reasons for Parsons' unwillingness to restrict theory to unit analysis is most explicit in his criticism of Weber's position on ideal types.

Parsons construes Weber's theory as 'a systematic classification of structural ideal types of social relationship' [1937a:716], and applauds this as 'a tremendous "architectonic" panorama' [1937a:653] describing it in the following way:

> 'He proceeds to develop step by step a system of ideal types of social relationships. Starting with three elementary relations - conflict (Kampf), Vergemeinschaftung and Vergesselschaftung - he builds them up into more and more complex structures culminating in such concepts as church and state. It is almost needless to say that this is not generalized theory in the present sense at all, but is the development of the other possibility of generalizing conceptualization - that of a system of ideal-type concepts. The unit of this systematization is the social relationship. The result is a scheme, of "objectively possible" types of social structure. As such it is a monumental work, unique of its kind in its scope and refinement, and a mine for almost any kind of empirical research' [1937a:653].

In amongst the glowing terms here is the statement that Weber's 'systematic theorizing tended to run off in a direction different from that of the main present interest' [1937a:716]. In fact Parsons is severely critical of Weber's style of systematic theorizing on two main counts. These criticisms can be summarized by saying that unit analysis cannot act as a foundation either on which to build theoretical systems or in terms of which the organic unity of empirical systems can be comprehended. The importance of these criticisms will become evident as the discussion proceeds. Suffice it to say now that the logical integration of concepts to constitute a theoretical system is a prime characteristic of theory for Parsons and as has already been indicated the essentially organic nature of the empirical world is a fundamental assumption of Parsons' thinking. I will now review these criticisms in more detail (See: [1937a:607-10, 616-20]).

Parsons expresses the underlying problems of confining explanatory theory to unit analysis in terms of a dilemma. Such a position leads to:

> '...either an illegitimate reification of a single theoretical system, or a "fiction" theory of the role of concepts in science which does not really get away from the empiricist irrationalism of the objectivist and intuitionist positions' [1937a:607].

The first horn of the dilemma is Parsons' criticism of the course taken by orthodox economics, his examples being Marshall and Robbins. The criticism is that their restriction of theory to unit analysis leads to 'the illegitimate reification of a single theoretical system'. There are two necessary parts to Parsons' argument. The first point to note here is that by a theoretical system Parsons means the logical integration of a set of concepts. In terms of unit analysis then logical integration means that concepts are related as components of a unified whole. The second relevant point relates to the prime characteristic of units noted above: a unit must be concretely possible within the frame of reference. In terms of the action frame of reference the basic unit is the act which must include end, norm and situation to be concretely possible. If the attempt to build theoretical systems is to proceed in terms of relating these concepts together as units then in each case the nature of ends, norms and situation must be specified. In other words the components of the act must be related together in a definite way. If they are not then the criterion of concrete possibility is not met.

So on the one hand we have the idea of the logical integration of concepts to form a theoretical system and on the other hand the requirement that units must be concretely possible. To Parsons these two requirements represent contradictory demands.

To support this view he uses the economic concepts of the norm of economic rationality and the end of the maximizations of profit. In terms of unit analysis these must form components of a concrete type of action, indeed in Marshall's economics this is just the case, the concepts are bound together in a fixed relation. To this Parsons objects:

> 'There would be no objection to this were it true that in fact the relation in question always subsisted in concrete reality but this is not necessarily so' [1937a:617].

In Parsons' view to rigidly fix the concepts of economic rationality and maximization of profit together obscures 'possibilities of independent variation' [1937a:618]. That is, the same norm, for example, could be concretely linked to a different type of end. This suggestion is backed up by Parsons by reference to Weber's concept of traditionalism in the economic sphere [1937a:608-609, 617-620]. In this type of economic action Parsons claims that the norm of economic rationality remains but that the end changes, it is no longer the maximization of profit but the maintenance of a traditional, fixed standard of living. As a unit traditional economic action is again a definite, concretely possible type of action.

So the attempt to logically integrate important concepts of his economics by unit analysis leads Marshall to rigidify the relationships between concepts. In Parsons' analysis this has important consequences for it is precisely this rigid relationship between concepts which he sees as the logical basis of Marshall's

linear evolutionism: that all economic life evolves toward a 'free enterprise' economy. In other words this position implies that all economic life can be explained in terms of a theory founded on the basic unit of economic action defined in terms of the combination of economic rationality and the maximization of profit. So not only does the concrete type 'economic action' rigidly tie the concepts together but this leads to the assumption that this concrete type stands in a direct relationship to a concrete area of life. It is this that Parsons calls the reification of a theoretical system.

So far Parsons' argument has been based only on Marshall. However he wishes to put forward a more far reaching claim:

> 'But either this [the case of Marshall] or another theorem of corresponding rigidity is the inevitable logical outcome of the implicit methodological view that all the analytical concepts of a theoretical system must correspond to units of concrete systems the independent existence of which is conceivable' [1937a:609].

The basic criticism is that units require their conceptual characteristics to be concretely related whilst theoretical integration must allow for their indepedent variation. A way out of this problem is offered by Robbins who, rather than tying the norm of economic rationality to a particular type of end characterizes economic action solely in terms of the norm.

> 'Robbins' course is, by postulating that economic rationality is adequately descriptive of a concrete type of action, to push the value element out of the concrete system altogether; ends become random' [1937a:609].

But to Parsons this does not solve the problem at all for as a unit economic action cannot be understood only in terms of a norm, it does not meet the requirement of concreteness, it is not conceivable to have an act without an end. The randomness of ends in Robbins betrays an implicit assumption about the nature of ends, the natural identity of interests and once again 'a profound laissez-faire bias' [1937a:620]. In other words what was explicit in Marshall is implicit in Robbins, the norm of rationality rigidly tied to a definite type of end.

So analysis in terms of units is incompatible with the attempt to build a theoretical system. If a theory is logically integrated in terms of concrete units then this leads to the reification of the theoretical system.

> 'Ideal type analysis provides no means of breaking down the rigidity of these fixed relations' [1937a:617].

We can now turn to the second horn of the dilemma taken, in Parsons view, by Weber. This position is that if we confine explanatory theory to unit analysis this leads to the view that all concepts can only be 'useful fictions', a position Parsons

describes as 'irrational'. In this context the irrationalism of this view derives from the impossibility of relating units together in empirical systems.

As we have already seen unit concepts must be concretely possible and as such involve a definite fixed relation between their components. This applies to Weber's ideal types and the same accusation of rigidifying these ties is aimed at Weber as is directed against the economists. However because of his 'much greater methodological sophistication and empirical knowledge and insight' [1937a:607], Weber represents a different case. For he recognizes the dangers of attempting to build a general theoretical system on the basis of ideal type units. Parsons comments that Weber is no 'naive monist' [1937a:607]. Instead he offers what Parsons describes as a 'pluralist' alternative, rather than constructing a theoretical system which claims to be adequate to any given object of study Weber argues that any such object of study can be viewed and explained from a plurality of points of view. This diversity of perspectives leads to the position that the concepts which are necessary to any explanation have a fictional status vis-a-vis the object of study. We have seen that Parsons agrees with this in respect to unit concepts but if explanatory theory is restricted to unit analysis the following unfortunate consequence ensues.

Despite their claimed fictional status ideal types are hypostasized [1937a:607], reality is granted to the type-unit. This is partly because of Weber's failure to distinguish between his individual and general ideal types but more seriously because

in terms of unit analysis the object of study, as a whole, is conceived as a 'mosaic' of disparate ideal type atoms. 'Reality' can only lie in the units themselves. With this Parsons refuses to agree:

> 'The formulation of class concepts, including ideal types in Weber's sense, is an indispensible procedure. But it is not usually possible for scientific analysis to stop there. To do so would result in a type atomism - each type concept would be a unit of analysis by itself. But in reality these units are systematically related to one another' [1937a:618].

Now this criticism rests partly on empirical grounds. At one point Parsons relates it to Weber's empirical analysis of the origins of bourgeois capitalism.

> 'The most important point at which Weber's atomism is evident is in the rigidity of the separation, as <u>concrete</u> type-units, between rational bourgeois capitalism, on the one hand, adventurer's capitalism on the other' [1937a:631].

The claim is that 'there is almost certainly a more intimate fusion of the two in concrete fact' [1937a:631], than Weber's ideal types recognize. Further, it is just this fusion which has to be accounted for.

> 'The essential point is that modern capitalism is one socio-economic system, not two' [1937a:631].

So on empirical grounds Weber fails to cope with the object of study as an empirical system.

However this empirical criticism is underlaid by a more fundamental disagreement. Weber's 'mosaic theory of culture and society' tends 'to break up, in a sense not inherent in analysis as such, the organic unity both of concrete historical individuals and of the historic process' [1937a:607]. (See also: 1929:49). Weber's type atomism is at odds with Parsons' organicism and it is on these grounds that he labels Weber's method 'irrational'. He says of Weber's Economy and Society:

> 'It was the finest product of the historical relativism of the idealist tradition' [1937a:653].

But Parsons is unwilling to accept such a relativist position, for him both knowledge and reality are organic unities and form an organic unity.

These criticisms conclude the discussion of unit analysis. From them it can be seen that this mode of analysis must be ssupplemented in such a way that concepts can be logically integrated to form theoretical systems and empirically integrated to form empirical systems. The analysis of the object of study in terms of conceptual elements is designed to do just these tasks.

b) Element Analysis

Analysis of an object of study in terms of its elements means breaking it down into its properties, attributes or qualities. For example, within the physical frame of reference an object might be analysed in terms of its mass or velocity. Within the frame of reference of action analysis might be in terms of the rationality of a complex of action or the disinterestedness of motivation. The essential point here is that by contrast to unit analysis concepts do not have the quality of concreteness so central to unit concepts. In the examples above:

> 'We may say that such and such a body has a mass of x, but not that it is a mass. We may also say that such and such an act is rational (to a certain degree) but never that it is rationality, in the sense of a concrete thing' [1937a:34].

Elements are qualities of concrete phenomena, they themselves are not concrete. As such they bear an abstract relation to reality in a sense quite different from unit concepts.

Element concepts are employed in explanation and from this three further aspects of this form of analysis can be noted. Elements must be general, they must be positively defined by the scientist and their relationships to each other expressed in terms of general laws.

To explain a particular event in terms of its elements involves first of all identifying these elements as instances or 'values' [1937a:35] of general properties of all phenomena relevant within the frame of reference being employed. The positive definition of such general properties of all phenomena relevant within the frame of reference of action is one of the prime tasks of Parsons' study. Thus, for example, from his examination of Durkheim and Weber's studies of religion Parsons claims 'a remarkable point-for-point correspondence' [1937a:717] between them which rests on the conceptual element of ultimate values. Weber's concept of legitimate order is the 'direct equivalent' of Durkheim's 'rules possessing moral authority' and the concept of charisma 'corresponds' to Durkheim's sacredness. These are all different instances of a common element, ultimate values.

But this positive identification and definition of elements of action involves not only the generality of such elements but also the specification of their meaning as analytical elements. This is particularly important with reference to the most fundamental elements of end, norm and situation. As we have noted these concepts are employed in one instance in a descriptive way, as constituent features of the primary frame of reference of action. At the same time they can act as explanatory concepts, analytical elements. At two points Parsons notes the two different levels on which such concepts are employed [1937a:48-49, 731-732], the concrete and the analytical. What emerges from this is the necessity for the

specific definition of analytical elements by the scientist. Thus with reference to the concept of end. In its descriptive function the term is used rather loosely, a 'concrete' end is 'the total anticipated future state of affairs' [1937a:48]. But if we are to explain the action in terms of the actor's end as an analytical element this definition is too wide, as Parsons remarks, only aspects of that total anticipated future state of affairs can be attributed to the fact that the actor in question was pursuing his end. So a more specific definition of the concept end is necessary for explanatory purposes.(20)

The explanatory value of such general concepts lies in analytical laws. Such a law 'states a uniform mode of relationship between the values of two or more analytical elements' [1937a:622]. Unfortunately Parsons does little more than formally define analytical laws and his two examples [1937a:33, 751-752] are decidely unhelpful. For one thing they neither state a relationship between analytical elements being generalizations about the increase of <u>one</u>, rationality, and secondly they are distinctly tautological.(21) This is because Parsons' attention is directed toward the function of element analysis in resolving the problems of unit analysis outlined above.

Before taking up the interrelationship of unit and element analysis one further feature of the latter must be noted, what Parsons calls the 'emergent properties' of action systems.

As will become clear a little later these are particularly important to Parsons and at one point he says

> 'Indeed, by contrast with the utilitarian system, it is primarily recognition of the empirical importance of these emergent aspects of total systems which characterizes the voluntaristic theory of action. The primary interest of the preceding analysis has been in them' [1937a:734].

In its reference to utilitarianism this passage indicates that the idea of emergent properties arises in reaction against what Parsons calls 'atomistic' theories [1937a:353]. By this he means a theory which, either by implication or explicitly, holds that the properties of complex systems can be 'directly generalized' from the properties of their parts [1937a:739]. This view Parsons holds to be 'empirically inadequate' [1937a:354], for systems of action (as well as chemical and biological systems, [1937a:354, 765]) are organic systems, they have properties which are present only on a certain level of complexity of parts and which derive not from the parts but from the association of parts. The organicism of the phenomenon:

> '... is pre-eminantly true of systems of action as they have been treated in this study. It is true that in the last analysis all such systems are "composed" of unit acts.

> But it is necessary to be careful in interpreting what this means. It does not mean that the relation of the unit acts to the total system is closely analogous to that of a grain of sand to the heap of which it is a part. For it has been shown that action systems have properties that are emergent only at a certain level of complexity in the relations of unit acts to each other' [1937a:739].

Now Parsons is well aware of the difficulties in claiming that 'the whole is larger than the sum of its parts', in particular the implication that a 'whole' somehow exists concretely as an entity distinct from its component parts [1937a:354]. Parsons position is just the opposite of this, emergent properties are abstract precisely because they cannot, even hypothetically, be thought of as concrete entities.

> 'Precisely because they are emergent, to think of them as isolable in the form of another concrete entity, even a fictional one, does not make sense' [1937a:367-8].

On the contrary, they are elements in the sense we have been describing; attributes or qualities of action but in this case not '...."action as such", that is, of isolated unit acts or of

atomistic systems, but only of organic systems of action beyond a certain degree of complexity' [1937a:740]. So Parsons insists that ' t here is no mysticism whatsoever about this concept of emergence' [1937a:749], the concept of emergent property has 'a strictly empirical meaning' [1937a:749]. Emergent properties conceptualize empirical properties of phenomena and 'the concrete entity society is beyond all possible doubt in this sense on organic entity....' [1937a:354]. To deny this, to ascribe to the view that only the properties of individuals are 'real', Parsons calls 'a metaphysical atomism' [1937a:749].

Here then is an important reason for the dualism in explanatory concepts which Parsons insists on as the 'warp' and the 'worf' of explanatory theory. Unit analysis, precisely because it breaks down complex, organic systems into their parts, loses the emergent qualities of the parts in combination as systems. Element analysis is concerned, in important respects, with just these emergent properties but as such loses the concreteness of unit concepts. In a significant way then both of Parsons' types of explanatory concepts gain their 'abstract' quality from the organicism of the subject matter. Unit concepts are abstract in that they isolate parts from their context in a larger whole whilst element concepts are abstract in that they describe properties of relationships which cannot exist apart from their component units.

We can now turn to the interrelationship of units and elements, particularly how element analysis can resolve the problem of unit analysis outlined above. This is summarized when Parsons says:

> 'The only means of breaking this mosaic rigidity without recourse to scepticism is generalized theory which breaks down the particular element combinations in the ideal types, but by seeing in them a manifestation of common elements in constant modes of relationship with each other, transfers knowledge to a more flexible, yet at the same time more realistic basis' [1937a:626].

There are two central points here. First of all analytical elements dispel the fears of the 'fiction' theory of concepts. Within a frame of reference elements conceptualize general properties of the phenomena of interest. As such Parsons claims that a realistic epistemological status can be attributed to analytical elements, that is, that they 'adequately "grasp" aspects of the objective external world' [1937a:730]. To Parsons to ascribe this status to analytical elements avoids 'the objectionable implication of empiricist realism':

> 'These concepts correspond, not to concrete phenomena, but to elements in them which are analytically seperable from other elements. There is no implication that the value of any one such element, or even all those included in one logically coherent system, is completely descriptive of any particular thing or event' [1937a:730].

So analytical elements give Parsons a firm basis in reality which 'renders the resort to fictionalism unnecessary' [1937a:730]. Secondly, analytical elements provide the means to break through the problem of the rigidity of ties in concrete units. Parsons' solution to this problem is to argue that units are in fact composed of different combinations of analytical elements.

> 'From the point of view of element analysis every unit or part, concretely or conceptually isolated, constitutes a specific <u>combination</u> of the particular values of one or more analytical elements. Every "type" is a constant set of relations of these values' [1937a:748].

However these two points, whilst clearly relevant to the relation of unit and element analysis do not directly refer to the problems of theoretical and empirical systems noted above.

For this we must turn to a third form of analysis, a combination of the first two, which holds a more implicit yet quite central place in The Structure of Social Action. This is the structural analysis of systems of action.

c) Structural analysis

The question raised in the above paragraph is whether element analysis as so far described provides an adequate solution to the problems of theoretical and empirical systems inherent in unit analysis taken alone. The first problem lies in the attempt to build logically integrated theoretical systems. Essentially Parsons' point is that whilst this is impossible in terms of unit analysis it is feasible in terms of analytical elements. Because units are constructed in concretely possible ways their systematic integration is always accompanied by the possibility that the analysis falls into the trap of claiming exhaustiveness with respect to any particular area of reality. Analytical elements are by definition non-concrete and their systematic relationship involves relating together not concrete things but only aspects of such things. But an important question here is what would, in principle, the integration of elements to form a theoretical system amount to? Here we should go back to the idea of analytical law briefly noted above. An analytical law 'states a uniform mode of relationship between the values of two or more analytical elements' [1937a:622]. Analytical elements then are integrated by the formulation of laws which state their relationship to each other. Then a theoretical

system of elements would equal a system of such laws. However there are two problems here. The first is the relative 'youth' of the action sciences, Parsons is ready to admit that his theory is in the early stages of development. (See, for example [1937a:727]). As such the task is the identification of analytical elements, the components of laws and the formulation of analytical laws lies in the future. But secondly, and more seriously than the always unconvincing youth analogy, the possibility of constructing a theoretical system of laws does not solve the second problem, that of empirical systems. Here the problem is what are the processes and mechanisms by which units combine to form interdependent systems? As so far discussed element analysis seems to say little of direct relevance to this problem. Indeed it perhaps deepens it, for element analysis breaks up the concreteness of type units and relates their elements together in a formal, non-concrete way, in terms of laws.

To penetrate to how Parsons attempts to answer these problems we must first of all draw attention to a persistent ambiguity which runs throughout the book. The ambiguity is whether Parsons' theoretical scheme is composed primarily of unit or element concepts. At some points he states that his main concern is with unit concepts:

> '... studies of theoretical systems may differ in the relative emphasis they lay on these three kinds of concepts. This, like

> any other study, must involve all three, but its central focus of interest will be in one, the "part" or unit concept. Its interest will be in the units and their structural interrelations out of which concrete systems of action are made up. These concrete systems are all phenomena that are capable of description in terms of the action frame of reference. Analytical elements will be treated at various points, but no attempt will be made to work out systematically the definition and interrelations of the analytical elements involved in such concrete systems of action' [1937a:38-39].

However a cursory reading of the book is enough to give the reader the strong impression that its main concern is with the elements of action. Indeed this is explicitly stated to be its aim. Parsons says that his 'present interest is in the fundamental elements common to all human action in society' [1937a:411]. He describes 'the principal subject matter of this study' as 'the scheme of the structural elements of action' [1937a:627]. Again the most important concepts in Durkheim's sociology:

> '... are, in the context most important to the present discussion, structural elements of a total system of action, seen analytically, as a whole. If the status of the concept social reality is to be methodologically clarified it cannot be made to refer to a class of concrete things, even fictional entities like Durkheim's "individual", but only to such analytical categories' [1937a:368].

To resolve this ambiguity we must further note that Parsons makes a distinction between two kinds of analytical elements: structural elements and variables.

> 'Of possible general concepts there are three main categories, hypothetical concrete types, generalized structural categories and variable elements. Footnote: Which may, in specific content, overlap. [1937a:627] (See also: [1937a:619, 621]).

As Parsons' footnote implies this distinction rests on a basis other than the content of the concepts. We have already noted this aspect of Parsons' thinking, it is made quite explicit in a further passage in which the structural element-variable distinction is made [1937a:619]. The point is that the same concept can be treated as either a structural element or as a

variable. It is their intellectual function, their mode of use which distinguishes them. Both however are elements of action in the above sense, that is, they conceptualize general properties of action rather than concretely possible types of action. However the direction of interest in such general properties can be twofold. On the one hand the aim can be the development of a theoretical system of analytical laws which state the relationship between elements. In this case the elements form the variables of a theoretical system. On the other hand elements can be employed in the analysis of the empirical integration of units in systems, the structure of systems of action.

This distinction can be seen by referring to Parsons' contrast of his own interest in analytical elements with Pareto's. He is quite clear that Pareto's employment of element concepts is different from his own.

> 'Pareto set about this task by employing a starting point which fitted directly into the main analytical scheme of the present study, but he employed this starting point for a somewhat different purpose from that which has been the main concern here, the direct formulation of a system of analytical elements of action, rather than an outline of the structure of action systems' [1937a:455].

Further Parsons imputes to Pareto the intention of constructing a theoretical system of elements as variables:

> 'Pareto developed the conception of the residues and derivations directly as variable elements in a theoretical system without explicit reference to the problem of structure. Having defined the concepts he proceeded to classify their values, without attempting, until a much later stage, to consider concrete systems of action. The concern of this study has, on the other hand, been to work out the implications of his treatment for the structure of the systems to which Pareto's analysis of elements is applicable' [1937a:705].

So Parsons says that he is not concerned with elements as variables or with systems of variables.

> 'It has repeatedly been stated that this study has not attempted a systematic treatment of what is, in this sense, the analytical aspect of the theory of action. It has been limited, rather, to working out the structural outline of the generalized systems of action to which such an analytical theory would be applicable. The two modes of conceptualization often overlap,

> however, so there has been much talk of variables, of analytical elements. But no attempt has been made to consider the problem of setting up a system of variables. [1937a:751]. (See also [1937a:727]).

Parsons interest then in elements of action is not so much with them in themselves but in relation to what he refers to, in the above quotation, as 'the problem of structure' in 'concrete systems'. We have already noted that element analysis is an essential accompaniment of unit analysis in that elements constitute the components of units. Here, in the other direction, so to speak, is a second relationship of units and elements, elements employed with respect to the problem not of how units can be broken down but how a plurality of units combined together. This indeed gives Parsons the title of his book:

> 'The treatment of the parts or units of systems of action falls naturally under two headings, the definition and classification of the elementary units and the determination of the relevant relations of the units in systems. The latter may, for present purposes, be designated as structural

> relations. The main framework of the present study may, then, be considered an analysis of the structural aspect of systems of action, in a certain sense their "anatomy". [1937a:39].

Before going on to follow this up we can note Parsons' most explicit formulation of his conceptual intentions:

> 'The view of the proper abstraction for the social sciences here put forward is not that of a series of hypothetical concrete systems, but rather of abstract analytical systems each of which assumes as data the main outline of fundamental structure of concrete systems of action including the elements other than those immediately dealt with by the science in question' [1937a:466].

Here we have unit analysis described as 'a series of hypothetical concrete systems'. As has been noted such concepts are essential to science but in themselves inadequate. They represent the conception of theory Parsons wants to move away from not by total abandonment but by recognition of their limitations and supplementation. The way forward lies in 'analytical systems' of variable elements but an 'indispensible preliminary' [1937a:751] to this is an 'outline of the fundamental structure of concrete systems of action'.

So we now have the problem in hand, how units are combined in empirical systems, and the means Parsons proposes as a solution to the problem, the structural elements of action. The question is what do the problem and their solution amount to? It is suggested here that it involves a rather different form of theory than that already described, essentially a combination of unit and element analysis which Parsons refers to as 'structural analysis' [1937a:39, 295]. Of course Parsons entitles his study The Structure of Social Action and at one point says:

> '...whatever level of analysis is employed there is a common structure of all systems of action. It is this common structure which it has been the main task of this study to analyse' [1937a:734].

Throughout the book this phraseology of 'the structure of action' is referred to when Parsons mentions the aims of his study:

> '.... a conception of the structure of the concrete system' [1937a:38]

> '...the "morphological" analysis of the structure of action systems' [1937a:295]

'... a total social system of action seen analytically, as a whole' [1937a:368]

'... the main outline of fundamental structure of concrete systems of action' [1937a:466]

What then are the distinctive features of this structural analysis above and beyond what has been said of unit and element analysis, 'emergent', so to speak on the higher level of complexity?

The best way to answer this question is to examine an actual example of Parsons' structural analysis. Chapter 6 of The Structure of Social Action 'Vilfredo Pareto, II: Extension and Verification of the Structural Analysis' is the most suitable for this purpose. As the title states Parsons is here concerned with structural analysis although it should be noted that this is not his complete analysis of the structure of action systems. This is not important for the present purpose as the interest is in what is involved in this type of theoretical activity.(22) Parsons' procedure will be briefly described and then we will discuss what it involves.

The starting point is in the realm of unit analysis, the abstract type concept of an isolated rational unit act of an isolated individual actor. In terms of element analysis this type is composed of the minimum elements of any unit act: end, norm and situation. The distinguishing quality of the rational unit act is the character of the norm: the

actor selects means to ends by reference to the norm of intrinsic rationality, that is, in terms of the causal efficacy of means to bring about ends. As such the norm can only apply to the means-end relationship not to the selection of ends, a norm based on causal efficacy cannot establish whether an end is more desirable than another. Hence in terms of the concept the end must be assumed as given.

From this starting point the procedure is to complicate the picture by imaginatively combining such isolated rational unit acts in systems. This occurs in two stages. First of all Parsons moves from the isolated unit act to the level of a plurality of unit acts of an isolated individual actor, the individual action system. The second stage is to move from the level of the isolated actor to that of a plurality of individuals' action systems, a social system of action. In each case in respects relevant here the discussion is restricted to the rational type, that is, the above element, the norm of rationality, remains. However Parsons' question is when we complicate the unit analysis in the above way what additional elements 'emerge' at these more complex levels? His argument is that when we complicate the picture the following additional elements are required. On the first level, the individual system of action, we must include an integrated system of ultimate ends, the ultimate conditions of action, and distinguish between the norms of technological and economic rationality. Further when we move to the second level of complexity, a social system of action, we must make a further discrimination between the technological, economic and political

aspects of the norm of rationality and generalise the integrated system of ultimate ends to all the individual actors, it must be a system held in common by the participants of the action system.

Now the concern here is with the nature of Parsons' structural analysis not the substantive content of these elements. As such two questions are pertinant: on what grounds are these elements justified and in what sense are they 'structural' elements?

The most explicit rationale for the necessity of these elements in Parsons' account is that of logical consistency. The argument is: if the presuppositions of the action frame of reference in general and the characteristics of the rational unit act in particular are to be maintained then when we move to these more complicated systems of action we must add additional elements. This can be illustrated by reference to Parsons' argument for the necessity of including an element of ultimate ends and why these must be integrated to form a coherent system. In each case Parsons uses the metaphor of a linked chain of unit acts. The end of any one act is, from the point of view of the next act in the chain, a means to a further end and so on. So, if we move along the chain, Parsons argues that 'logical necessity leads sooner or later to an ultimate end' [1937a:230]. That is, we come to the terminus of the chain where the end is not a means to a further end but an end in itself. However the idea of an end in itself is not something that can be encompassed by the elements of the unit act, that is, the norm of intrinsic

rationality. This can only apply to the means-end relationship, it cannot apply to the situation where an end is desirable in itself rather than a means/cause of a further end/effect. Hence a different concept, the element of ultimate end, must be included.

A similar 'analytical logic' [1937a:231] is used to justify the argument that the ultimate ends of a plurality of chains must be integrated together to form a coherent system [1937a: 231-2]. From the frame of reference we assume that ends are a causal factor in action, this applying to ultimate ends. Parsons is concerned with the situation in which the actor is faced with a choice between two alternative ultimate ends. To make the choice the actor must refer to some criterion or standard by which the decision can be made. The argument is that this basis of choice must lie either in the means and conditions of action or in the organization of ultimate ends themselves. Parsons claims that if it lies in the former, if the actor chooses between ultimate ends on the basis of means available or conditions applying, then we violate the assumption of the frame of reference, the pursuit of an end is unimportant if ends are only chosen on the basis of whether means are available or conditions facilitate its attainment. This would 'reduce' ends to means and conditions. Thus the standard of choice must lie in the element of ultimate end itself, that is, the organization of ultimate ends in a system of priorities.

> '... either the implications of the analytical concept of logical action are accepted, including the systematic relation of ends to each other, or the assumptions are again violated' [1937a:231-2].

Again it should be remembered that we are not here concerned with whether Parsons' 'logic' is correct but to establish the point that he justifies the inclusion of elements of action by the appeal to logical necessity.

The second aspect of Parsons' discussion relevant to the problem at hand is that as well as the limitation of his argument to abstract types of rational action on certain levels of system complexity Parsons further uses the assumption of 'integration' as part of his argument. That is he employs a 'limiting type' in which the action system is 'perfectly integrated'. Of this Parsons says:

> 'Of course it is clearly understood that "integration" in this complete sense applies only to the abstract society; in this as in other respects it is a limiting case. Certainly neither Pareto nor the present author means to imply that concrete societies are in general even approximately perfectly integrated in this sense, or that their members are normally, the majority, conscious that there is any system of common ends' [1937a:247-8].

From this remark it can be seen that Parsons uses 'integration' in a twofold way. The first sense we might call the logical integration of any individual actor's ultimate-end system. When Parsons assumes this he is assuming that the actor has a 'clear, logically precise formulation of a system of ends' [1937a:254]. Hence one of the two possible types of deviation from the integrated type noted by Parsons is 'the failure of the ultimate-end systems of individuals to receive any precise formulation at all' [1937a:255].

The second sense of integration only becomes relevant in the social system of action and we can call it social integration. Integration here refers to the harmonious coherence of the action systems of the plurality of individuals who form the system. Parsons gives the Calvinists of Calvin's Geneva and their pursuit of the common end of establishing the Kingdom of God on Earth as 'a concrete example which comes relatively close to the experimental conditions of the theorem' [1937a:248]. Again the second form of deviation from the integrated case Parsons describes as conflict. [1937a:245].

So as well as limiting his argument to the rational type on specified levels of system complexity Parsons further specifies that such action systems are integrated in the above respects.

It has been necessary to make this point as it is an important precondition of the third aspect of Parsons' justification for the necessity of the elements of action. This is an argument based on the <u>functional</u> necessity of the elements.

Here the paradigmic form of Parsons' reasoning would be: if we have an action system which is (a) rational (b) of x degree of complexity in its combination of unit acts and (c) perfectly integrated, then, what functional problems does such a system face? Having located the problem and on the grounds that such a system of units is concretely possible the additional elements of action become the functionally necessary solution to these problems. Without these elements an action system of this type, degree of complexity and integration would not be possible.

This form of reasoning lies behind Parsons' distinction between the technical and economic aspects of the norm of intrinsic rationality, [1937a:233-5] which it will be remembered 'emerges' on the level of the individual's action system.

> 'But as soon as a system of action is considered a complication is introduced. The existence of a plurality of ends implies that certain means are potential means to more than one end. Then in so far as these means are scarce, relative to their potential uses, the actor is faced with a different order of problem from that of maximising technological efficiency, choosing the means "best adapted" to a single given end. This

> problem is that of the allocation of scarce means as between their various potential uses. This is what may most usefully be referred to as the specifically economic element of logical action. It must be borne in mind that in every concrete economic action a technological element is by definition involved' [1937a:233].

Note that here Parsons argues that when we complicate the picture a different functional problem arises. Not only must the actor, if he acts rationally, this is the role of logical consistency mentioned above, take account of the technical efficacy of a given means to achieve an end but also the further problem that he must take into account that this means could also be employed in attaining an alternative end. Parsons' response to this problem situation is to introduce the distinction between the technical and economic aspects of the norm of rationality as necessary elements of the individual action system.

However the most explicit example of this argument by functional necessity is when Parsons turns to the case of the social system of action [1937a:235-238]. Let us first of all note the assumptions in terms of which he is working. (a) We must first of all assume that actor's are acting rationally in two senses, firstly they are attempting to attain ends by employing the most technically and economically efficient means possible. Secondly we are assuming logical integration of

this action: that each actor's ends are clearly formulated, he has scientifically verifiable knowledge of the causal efficacy of means and an explicit organization of his priorities. (b) We are assuming that there are a plurality of such rational actors and the social system of action is perfectly integrated in the sense of social integration.

It is in terms of these assumptions that Parsons postulates that certain problems will inherently arise which, overall, can be summarized as the Hobbesian problem of order. The first of these is described as '... a problem of allocation of resources not only as between different ends of the same individual but also as between those of different individuals'. [1937a:235].

One possibility here is that such a distribution of resources is simply a function of each individual acting rationally in the above senses. In this case no further elements would be necessary. But Parsons feels that this possibility is an unreal one, for in terms of the elements so far introduced this:

> 'gives no explanation of why there should be any limitation on the means by which any one individual or group can push his claims to command over resources at the expense of other's claims. For in the absence of such limitation there is nothing to prevent the wholesale employment of a very important class of such means which may be summed up as coercive' [1937a:235].

This indeed is directly stated as the second problem arising:

> '... the resources available as seen from the point of view of any one individual include not only his own powers and the non-human environment but also the potential services of others. Thus among the means to anyone's ends are the actions of others' [1937a:235].

The consequences of these considerations are twofold. First of all this complication must be formulated as an element, a further differentiation of the norms of intrinsic rationality must be made to cover this third 'order of problems'. The actor is faced with not only problems of technological and economic rationality but also political rationality: of how to control others and prevent himself from being controlled. Now this is from the point of view of the actor. However this is largely coincidental, it arises because we have been operating in terms of the individual action system. When we move to the social system of action this becomes the perspective, the point of reference for the problems of action systems. As such a second consequence is primary in Parsons' mind. Once we introduce political rationality it becomes a deep functional problem for the social system.

> '... there must be some control over the exercise by some individuals of coercive power over others, if there is to be social order at all' [1937a:236].

Otherwise the social order becomes a continual struggle for power. It is here that Parsons postulates the further element of the integration of individual's ultimate end systems in a common system, as a solution to this functional problem [1937a:238].

Again it is important to note that the action system is the point of reference.

> '... in any society there must obviously be some mechanism by which are settled the relative claims of different individuals to command over disposable, scarce non human resources' [1937a: 235].
>
> 'For an economic process (of allocation) to take place within a society there must be some mechanisms by which a relatively stable settlement of the power relationships between individuals and groups is attained' [1937a:236].

In each case the necessity of the mechanism (which Parsons supposes to be a common ultimate end system) is from the point of view of the 'society', the system of unit acts formed by a plurality of individual's action systems.

So a logic based on functional problems of action systems is one important component of Parsons argument for the inclusion of elements in the structure of action. We can now turn to the second question: in what sense are these structural elements? From the above we can now rephrase this and ask how do the elements solve the functional problems which to an important degree justify them?

This will have to be further discussed in chapter III but certain points can be established now. The most important point is that as well as identifying elements structural analysis involves their organization into a structure of elements. Bershady has expressed this well:

> 'One way to bring the phenomenal world under rational control is to break these complex events into their elements, to seek to find, within the phenomena themselves, the components which make them up. The analysis of an event splits the event into its component parts. Once we have these parts we are then able to reproduce the event and, by so doing, reveal its structure, for not only is the event reproduced in its totality but in the ordered sequence of its elements' (1973:39).

In the example of structural analysis being considered here this is most explicitly stated when Parsons says, with reference to the technical, economic and political aspects of the norm of rationality:

> 'But while each may serve as a means to the other they stand in a kind of hierarchical relationship to each other - each with a widening of the range of conditions involved, becoming a condition of the attainment of the one before it. Thus so long as other ends are not involved technological ends are self-sufficient. But as soon as other uses begin to compete for the potential means as a technological end, their "economy" comes to be a necessary condition of the rationality of their employment for the end in question. The wider context in a sense subordinates the technological element of efficiency to the economic. Similarly "economy" in relations to other persons involves the settlement of the power relations to them. Until these are settled it is irrational to concern oneself with their potential services in an economic context alone' [1937a:240-1].

So the elements of an action system are linked together in a hierarchy of control. Control is necessary in that in order to have x (say, technological rationality) we must have y (say,

economic rationality) but then y limits and 'subordinates' the range of x. Coming back to the notion of the structural analysis of action systems we can see that although the problem is how units of action form empirical systems the structural analysis is not conducted in these terms. Rather elements of action provide the means of solving this problem. But not in terms of analytical laws, rather, in terms of a more substantive hierarchy of control between elements. It is this, the structure of a system of elements which is the structure of action. This theme will be taken up again in chapter III in the context of the concept of the subjective 'state of mind' and Parsons' treatment of the problem of social causation as the problem of control.

3. The logical interrelation of general concepts.

I have so far considered what Parsons means by theory as composed of general concepts of empirical reference. The final component of his definition of theory is that these general concepts are logically interrelated. To some degree this simply means that scientific knowledge must be governed by logical reasoning [1937a:181]. However, Parsons clearly puts a somewhat stronger interpretation on the phrase "logical interrelation". What is implied here is the <u>systemacy</u> of scientific knowledge, a key component of Parsons' thinking not only in his later work but from its inception.(23) Thus in his first publiction he says:

> 'The term "theory", however, is used in a different and more general sense than that common in economic science, to mean, not merely a system of equilibrium, but any consistent and unified system of concepts to be used in the analysis of social phenomena' (1928:643-4).

There are two contexts in which Parsons advocates the logical interrelationship of concepts. The first is the integration of concepts into a logically closed theoretical system, the second the systematic interrelationships of such theoretical systems. I will take these in turn.

To a greater or lesser degree the general concepts which make up a body of theory will form an integrated 'system' [1937a:7]. They will stand in 'mutual logical relations' so that 'any substantive change in the statement of one important proposition of the system has logical consequences for the statement of the others' [1937a:7]. All that Parsons is saying here, it seems, is that a body of concepts should be internally consistent. However as was mentioned above by logical interrelationship is meant more than just logical reasoning. For as well as concepts being mutually consistent the system they form should be/tends to be 'logically closed' [1937a:9]. Each of the implications or presuppositions of any one concept or proposition is expressed explicitly in another component of the system. Parsons' favourite example of a logically closed system is a system of simultaneous equations:

> 'Such a system is determinate, i.e., closed, when there are as many independent equations as there are independent variables. If there are four equations and only three variables, and no one of the equations is derivable from the others by algebraic manipulation then there is another variable missing' [1937a:10].

It is of note that in the above paragraph I bracketed together the phrases 'should be' and 'tends to be'. There is a distinct ambiguity in Parsons' thinking here as to whether the logical closure of a theoretical system is a normative ideal which Parsons adheres to or an empirical generalization about the development of science. Thus at one point he says '... it is in the nature of the case that theoretical systems should attempt to become "logically closed"' [1937a:9] whilst at another point 'It has been stated in the first chapter that all systems of scientific theory tend to become logically closed' [1937a:70]. Although there is ambiguity here Parsons seems to favour the latter view, logical closure is an empirical phenomenon. He speaks of 'the inherent necessity of a system to become logically closed' [1937a:17] and justifies this by asserting that this tendency is a 'special case' of 'the most general nature of reason itself' [1937a:21]. It seems to me that the very breadth and depth of this claim makes the empirical status of the idea of logical closure rather questionnable. In other words whether theoretical systems tend or not to logical closure is very much a matter of interpretation. We can instance Parsons'

analysis of the development of Durkheim's work. ([1937a: Chapter 8-11], a summary statement is given on pp.304).

As is well known the main theme of Parsons' account is that

> 'In Durkheim... there is a fundamental change, from one set of sharply formulated ideas to another' [1937a:304].

Parsons' argument hangs on this transition from a positivistic to a voluntaristic theory of action, although Durkheim died before fully elaborating the latter. In this the logical closure of the positivistic stage into a 'relatively well-integrated general system of theory' [1937a:304] plays an important part. For it is when the 'early empirical work' is systematized that the inadequacies of the positivistic theoretical base came to the fore and the process of transition begins.

However recent critics, notably Giddens (1972) and Pope (1973)[24] have challenged this interpretation arguing, for example, that elements of the 'later' position such as the voluntary constraint of an internalized rule are to be found in Durkheim's pre- Division of Labour in Society writings. Pope even goes so far as to claim that Durkheim was never a positivist in Parsons' sense, a view which I find unconvincing. A more important point is made by Giddens, namely, it is Parsons penchant for welding ideas together in a theoretical system which

necessitates the transition thesis. We might suggest that Durkheim was simply not a particularly systemic thinker in the sense of logical closure. We can find theoretical aspects of 'positivism', 'idealism' and 'voluntarism' throughout Durkheim's work which are never forged into an internally consistent system but which are adequate to facilitate the empirical work Durkheim engaged in.

From this illustration we can return to the ambiguity above and suggest that the idea of a logically closed theoretical system is to Parsons a normative ideal but one which is important to him for good reasons so that as a consequence of this it tends to be transformed into an empirical phenomenon. These good (to Parsons, that is) reasons are several but we can divide them into two groups. The first is to do with the role of logical closure in the development of science, the second with the epistemological role of logical closure.

The role of logical closure in the development of science can be subdivided into two, its place in the exposure of residual categories and of internal contradictions.(25) Parsons summarizes the first in the following way:

> 'If the explicit propositions of a system do not constitute a logically closed system in this sense it may be inferred that the arguments invoked rest for their logical cogency on one or more unstated assumptions. It is one of the prime functions of logical criticism of theoretical systems to apply

> this criterion [logical closure] and if gaps are found, to uncover the implicit assumptions' [1937a:10].

In the work of 'mediocre proponents of a theoretical system' [1937a:18] such unstated assumptions are dogmatically ignored or denied. But 'the ablest and most clear-headed proponents' [1937a:18] make them explicit as residual categories. It is by logical closure of theoretical systems that these are brought out. Further when such residual categories are translated into positive concepts the status of bodies of theory as systems is again relevant, for it has, as a component of a system, implications for the other components.

The place of logical closure in the exposure of internal contradictions is again exemplified by Parsons' analysis of the 'utilitarian dilemma'. His intention here is to locate inherent problems within a positivistic theory of action. This is done via utilitarianism as a subsystem of positivism. Parsons formulates the central concepts of utilitarianism into an internally consistent conceptual scheme summed up as 'atomism, rationality, empiricism and randomness of ends' [1937a:60]. It is when this is done, when utilitarianism is rendered into a theoretical system that the internal contradictions noted above come to light.

The second group of reasons why Parsons emphasizes the logical closure of theoretical systems are epistemological in nature, that is, they are concerned with the grounds on which it can be claimed that concepts or propositions constitute valid knowledge. It was noted above that by logical closure Parsons means that the implicit presuppositions and ramifications of any

one concept of a theoretical system are made explicit in a further component and that this applies throughout the system. Another aspect of this is that the system is determinate.

> 'That is, in a logically closed system all the propositions in the system are, on the one hand, interdependent in that each has implications for the others and, on the other, the system is determinate in that each of these implications finds its statement in another proposition in the same system' [1937a:70].

In other words the consequences of any change in the system are predictable. So in a simple economic example a theoretical model of an economy would be logically closed and determinate if we were able to trace the consequences of a change in demand for good x on the supply of that good and on the demand for and supply of other goods included in the model.

Now one test of whether a concept or proposition is valid is empirical verifiction which is, as we have seen, insisted upon by Parsons. However empirical verification cannot stand alone as a criterion of validity. This is because of the abstract nature of theoretical concepts discussed above. There it was noted that both in description and explanation knowledge stands as a partial abstraction from the totality of empirical phenomena. Further the partiality of knowledge does not lie in its limited application to specific <u>classes</u> of concrete phenomena, rather it is limited to <u>aspects</u> of concrete phenomena.

The consequence of this is indicated when Parsons says:

> 'A law is a uniformity in the facts, but since the facts are "aspects" of the concrete phenomena seen in terms of a conceptual scheme a law is not a generalization of the necessary concrete behaviour of these phenomena' [1937a:184].

A law, concept or whatever, then, does not stand in direct correspondence with empirical reality, it therefore cannot be assessed by the simple comparison of theory and reality, whether what happens in reality conforms to the theory. It is in the nature of the case that this will never occur except in the most exceptional circumstances because of the abstract nature of theory.

Parsons expresses this by insisting upon a distinction between the empirical and logical closure of a theoretical system (e.g. [1937a:10, 70, 185, 476, 757]). To say that a theoretical system is logically closed does not mean that it is empirically closed, that is, that it can describe and explain <u>all</u> the characteristics of a given empirical phenomena. This is the fallacy of empiricism. A logically closed theory can only be determinate within its conceptual limitations, descriptive and explanatory, which restrict it to aspects of concrete phenomena.

The test of empirical verification then must be put into a wider context as a criterion of validity. Such a context has two facets: the logical closure of a theoretical system itself becomes a criterion of validity and such theoretical systems must be systematically related to each other.

The epistemological role of logical closure is exemplified in Parsons' discussion of Weber's critique of the intuitionist school of idealism. Parsons says that the intuitive grasp of meaning 'is at most only <u>one</u> element in the proof of the validity of knowledge and cannot itself be trusted. It must be checked by reference to a rationally consistent system of concepts' [1937a:588]. Parsons makes it clear that this is not restricted to the understanding of meaning:

> 'This situation also is no different from that existing in the physical sciences. There immediate sense impressions cannot be trusted without theoretical, conceptual criticism. When a stick is thrust into a pool of still water there can be no doubt that the observer "sees" that the stick is bent at the water line; his sense impression is that of a "bent stick". When he judges that the impression is an optical illusion, it does not mean that he does not really <u>see</u> what he describes, but that the description is corrected by reference to a general system of theoretical knowledge' [1937a:588-589].

Here then the validity of a scientific proposition is established in part by 'reference' to 'a rationally consistent system of concepts' or 'a general system of theoretical knowledge'. The term 'reference', or 'theoretical, conceptual criticism' means that the concept or proposition must be consistent with the theory as a whole, as a more or less closed system.

> 'Thus the element of "necessity" in scientific law inheres only in its logic. As such, a law can have no exceptions. What is usually called an "exception" is really "the superposition of the effect of another law on that of the first". In that sense all scientific laws have exceptions. But this logical necessity, what has been called, above, "logical determinism" must, just on this account, not be carried over into concrete phenomena. The logically closed system of scientific theory must not arbitrarily be made an empirically closed system' [1937a:185].

So the abstract nature of scientific knowledge means that empirical verification must always be cast in terms of the confines of a theoretical system and that the systemacy, the internal consistency, of a body of theory is itself in part a criterion of validity.

From what has been said it is clear that in order to understand the relationship between even a perfectly closed system of theory and any given reality the relationship of that system to other bodies of knowledge must also be understood.

> 'The understanding of completely concrete phenomena, so far as they are accessible to science at all, would involve application of the principles of all the basic sciences' (1932:338).
>
> 'The total concrete reality is to be conceived ... as the result of the synthesis of all the different groups of forces concerned' (1934a:537).

The interrelationship of theoretical systems then becomes a primary problem.(26) This is illustrated by one of Parsons' preoccupations in his early work, the relationship of economics and sociology. The empiricist (in Parsons' sense) nature of orthodox economics (for example, Marshall, Robbins) has already been noted; the economists assumed that their theoretical models bore a more or less direct relationship to an area of concrete reality: the 'economy'. Of course the problem was the lack of fit between the theory and the concrete reality. The usual response to this was to invoke the ceteris paribus clause, then the model describes and explains concrete economic life in so far as other things remained equal, which they rarely did. It is the status of these 'other things',

particularly the ubiquitous 'social factors', which worries Parsons. To him the economist typically relegates these to 'specific empirical ad hoc qualifications on a series of particular points' (1937b:477)(27) One exception to this typical pattern is A. Löwe's book Economics and Sociology which Parsons reviewed in 1937. (1937b). Löwe recognized that 'It is necessary to place the categories of economic theory in a generalized setting of theory in order to lend them concrete relevance'. (Parsons: 1937b:477). With this Parsons heartily agrees but disagrees with Löwe's interpretation of what that setting amounts to. To Löwe economics as 'an abstract analytical system of general applicability' (Parsons: 1937b:480) must always be supplemented by 'sociological middle principles'. These are essentially the historically variable institutional settings in which economic processes work. This puts sociology in an entirely different class to economics, it has the task not of building a general theory applicable to all societies but of mapping the social features peculiar to different historical societies. With this Parsons disagrees (though he does not say why) and asks is it not possible to conceive of sociology as of the same status as economics? His claim is that this can be done if the sciences are understood as abstract in the sense that they are concerned with aspects not concrete areas of reality and if these aspects, conceptualized as analytical elements are systematically related by a system of analytical sciences [1937a:757-775].

> 'Thus the principle employed is to classify analytical sciences according to which structural element or group of elements of a generalized system of action constitutes the focus of attention of the science in question' [1937a:766].

It is unnecessary here to go into the details of this classification of the sciences. Apart from what has been said about the necessity for such a classification and its basis in analytical elements only one point is of relevance. If each science of action is a part of a system of sciences then as well as being interdependent with each other the sciences 'enjoy a degree of independence of each other' [1937a:765]. This independence is seen by Parsons to rest on the emergent properties of organic systems.

> 'The main principle is that, with increasing complexity of concrete systems, there appear successively new emerging properties which give rise to new theoretical problems not relevant to the more elementary systems' [1937a:765].

This is significant in that it is a link between the systemicy of theory and the systemicy of reality. In other words we have the beginnings of a final reason for why Parsons stresses the systemic nature of theory. It is a more ontological underpinning, the organic nature of reality. It should be immediately stressed that this does not mean that Parsons claims

that theory should be systemic because reality is systemic. However Parsons' organicist metaphysics which we have already noted with reference to the subject matter of the sciences also applies to the sciences themselves. Knowledge is organic, it is always part of and related to a larger whole. This can be seen at various levels. When briefly discussing the relation of philosophy and science Parsons remarks:

> 'The general principle is that it is in the nature of reason to strive for a rationally consistent account of all experience which comes within its range at all. In so far as both philosophical and scientific propositions are brought to the attention of the same mind, there is in the nature of the case, a tendency to bring them into relations of logical consistency with one another. It likewise follows that there are no logically watertight compartments in human experience. Rational knowledge is a single organic whole' [1937a:21].

Within science the three great groups of sciences 'all constitute parts of a consistent whole of objective knowledge' [1937a:764]. At a further stage, within the science of action, the stress on the internally consistent system of knowledge is found again.

> 'The keynote to be emphasised is perhaps given in the subtitle of the book; it is a study in social theory, not theories. Its interest is not in the seperate and discrete propositions to be found in the works of these men, but in a single body of systemic theoretical reasoning....' [1937a:xxi].

Finally the organic nature of knowledge acts as an interpretive theme for Parsons' book:

> 'Perhaps one more word with reference to interpretation may be permitted. This study is conceived to be an organic whole, concerned with ideas which are logically interrelated and permeate the whole study. The reader should keep this in mind in weighing whatever critical remarks he may be inclined to make. Particularly in a study of this character, it is legitimate to ask that a fact stated or a statement made be taken not only in its immediate intrinsic character and meaning but also in relation to the total structure of which it forms a part' [1937a:15].

These statements seem to indicate that Parsons' organicism permeates throughout his thinking and as a result is a third reason why for him theory is characterized by its systemic character.

D. Conclusion

The aim of this chapter has been to give an account of Parsons' methodology of science in general as that is developed in The Structure of Social Action. This is pertinent as several features of this are integral to his approach to methodological problems peculiar to a science of action. In particular empiricism is to Parsons a deep-seated error which has contributed to the bifurcation of science and action. A non-empiricist science, in which the abstract status of knowledge is recognized and incorporated, is one component of Parsons' attempt to overcome the problems in a science of action. Two aspects of this methodology can be summarily emphasized as a prelude to chapter III in which this attempt will be reviewed.

1. Description of the world is always conceptually shaped by a frame of reference and clarity on this leads to awareness of what are relevant facts for a theory/science and the scope and limitations thereof. The question which is left open from the above discussion is how frames of reference have this capacity to act as a criterion of relevance and judge of competance? It has been shown that in his concept of secondary frames of reference (and in his theory of the development of science) Parsons eliminates cultural values as sources of scientific significance. This will be taken up again later but for the moment it is to be noted that Parsons employs two extra-value sources of significance. Firstly, problems generated by explanatory theory 'call for' the investigation of certain facts. But such facts are not 'raw

data', they are selectively organized by primary and secondary frames of reference. In the latter, concepts are 'shorthand labels' for characteristics of the phenomena. But primary concepts do not summarize experience, they are the means by which experience is possible in the classical Kantian sense. Here then is the second source of significance, a primary frame of reference defines the parameters of a factual world and acts as a standard by which it can be said that a given explanatory theory can or cannot claim competance. But this describes the function of primary frames of reference, what of their content? Parsons never provides a justifying argument for the particular constituents of the action frame of reference, rather this 'way of thinking' is asserted as an a priori necessity, an assertion which rests on a certain metaphysic of the nature of the world of action. This metaphysic of voluntarism will be outlined in chapter III.

2. Explanation necessarily involves general concepts which fall into two classes, units and elements which are of parallel and complementary status in a theoretical system. J.S. Mill's distinction between concrete concepts as referring to things and abstract concepts which refer to attributes of things expresses the basic difference between units and elements but care must be taken here as a further Parsonian concern is involved. Unit concepts are concrete in the sense of describing things but abstract in that the thing is divorced from its organic context. Moreover, to attempt to maintain that organic system in unit terms leads inevitably to the reification of one set of relations in a potentially variable situation. To maintain the organic

quality of systems yet avoid this pitfall Parsons engages in what I have called structural analysis. This is abstract in Mill's sense, the components of such an analysis are elements of any and all action systems, yet it is concrete in what Sosensky (1964:47) calls the Hegelian sense: 'one must consider the individual element in its milieu of relations and connections'. Parsons' general theory of action is essentially of this nature, it is a structure of elements, a scheme of concepts which i) claim to be general attributes of action systems and ii) has an organized pattern or, as Parsons rather misleadingly puts it, it is 'logically articulated'. Again nothing has so far been said on the content of this general theory, in chapter III this will again be linked with Parsons' voluntaristic metaphysic.

These, then, are the major points of Parsons' general methodology by which the problems of a science of action are to be broached. These problems arise in the two major intellectual traditions of positivism and idealism. From his critical reaction to these Parsons develops his voluntaristic position. This forms the second component alongside the general methodology of science in Parsons' approach to a science of action, it provides the content of the frame of reference and structure of action. Chapter III will outline Parsons' account of positivism, idealism and voluntarism and then turn to three methodological problems of a science of action examining how Parsons engages with them and the place of his general method and voluntaristic metaphysic in that process.

III. The Structure of Social Action B:

Methodological Problems of a Science of Action.

A. Idealism, Positivism and Voluntarism

So far I have been in the main concerned with what, to Parsons, are the logical requirements of science in general. Scientific knowledge, whatever its subject matter, is characterised by its theoretical nature in one or more of the above senses. At one point [1937a:25-26] Parsons distinguishes between two contexts in which methodological questions arise. There are those questions which are concerned with the logical requirements of any science and those which arise not from the logic of science in general but from the peculiarities of a particular subject matter. Two points are relevant here. Firstly, Parsons is clear that the first group are logically prior to the second, that is, the logical characteristics of scientific knowledge hold irrespective of subject matter, any problems which arise out of the subject matter are subordinate to the requirements of science in general. Secondly, Parsons is explicit that it is the 'subjective' character of the subject matter 'which raises the central methodological problems peculiar to the sciences concerned with human action' [1937a:26].

> 'There is a "subjective aspect" of human action. It is manifested by linguistic symbols to which meaning is attached.

> This 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 relevance of facts of this order to the scientific explanation of the other facts of human action. This study will be intensively concerned with them' [1937a:26].

The methodological problems of a science of action then centre on the question of subjectivity in particular.

This becomes the central issue because in many schools of thought what Parsons defines as the constituent characteristic of science, its abstract theoretical nature, is seen as incompatible with this peculiar quality of the subject matter, its subjective nature. Of course Parsons is profoundly aware of this, indeed it is one focus of his discussion and criticism of positivism and idealism. For both of these traditions, in the last analysis at least, regard theoretical science and the subjectivity of action as incompatible. They do so in opposite ways, the positivist accepting science and rejecting subjectivity, the idealist accepting subjectivity and rejecting science.

1. Idealism.

Parsons' discussion of the methodological aspect of idealism(1) is explicit and focuses on the problem at hand here:

the relation of theoretical science and action [1937a:473-487]. To the idealist the two are fundamentally irreconcilable. In Parsons' account this position roots in the various aspects of the Kantian dualism. In his investigation of the epistemological grounds of Newton's science of nature Kant had relativized the physical system by reducing physical bodies and events to the status of 'phenomena'. The world of phenomena is governed by determinate laws but this does not exhaust the world as such. For alongside the world of phenomena is the 'noumenal' world, to which the idea of determinism is inapplicable, this being the realm of freedom. When this philosophical system is applied to the 'scientific' (in the widest sense) study of man there is a tendency to equate the phenomenal aspect of man with his status as a physical body and biological organism and the noumenal aspect with man as 'an active, purposive being, an actor' [1937a:475]. On these grounds then we have an initial opposition between nature as governed by laws and man, as actor, who is free.

This forms the basis for the view that scientific understanding in terms of general analytical theory is inapplicable to human action. But the opposition is reinforced by other factors. There is firstly the parallel tradition of historicism, the stress on 'the concrete uniqueness and individuality of all things human' [1937a:477] and the consequent Rankean injunction 'to render the past <u>wie es eigentlich gewesen ist</u>, that is, in all its concrete detail' [1937a:477]. History

then becomes 'the indispensible road to fullness of knowledge' [1937a:477]. This theme in German thought leads to 'a negation of theory in general' [1937a:477], but of course this was not the only component of idealism. A further element, the philosophy of history as in the Hegelian system, does involve 'theory' but in a different sense from Parsons'. Theory is not composed of general concepts for the analysis of historical events and periods in the manner described in section II but 'a unified conception of human life and history as a whole' [1937a:479]. The Hegelian variant, the belief in one cultural Geist being objectified in History breaks down and the emphasis turns to discrete cultural wholes but this is immaterial. What is relevant is the 'organic' nature of cultural totalities. It is this which on the one hand provides the organizing, theoretical, principle in knowledge rather than the search for laws and it is this which the idealist views as destroyed by the analytic methods of science. As Parsons notes idealist organicism is not primarily a matter of the use of organic analogies [1937a:481] but much more importantly relates to the question of causal and meaningful relationships. Science is 'mechanistic' in the sense that it relates facts together in terms of cause and effect but such relationships are inapplicable to human action. The relation of subjectively believed norms or anticipated ends to action is not causal but meaningful, an act is part of the logical unity of a larger whole.

So the idea of a science of action is doubted by the idealist tradition in that the possibility of general analytical theory is rejected. This is manifested in the division between the sciences of nature and the disciplines concerned with human action and culture, the Geisteswissenschaften. The former employing general theory, the latter a methodology centred on historical research and understanding of meaning.

Parsons' reaction to this is not to doubt that the problems raised by the idealist traditions are real but to argue that they do not necessarily lead to the conclusions drawn, that is, the impossibility of general analytical theory in the field of action. However, this has been the case in the past because of a methodological flaw in both the idealist tradition and the conception of general theory offered by the positivist tradition. This is the curse of empiricism which is common to both [1937a:476] and which makes them irreconcilable so long as it remains.

> 'What is perhaps the deepest methodological basis of this conflict has lain in the empiricism common to both great traditions of thought. As long as this persists the two are, indeed, irreconcilable if any attempt is made to apply them to the same concrete subject matter' [1937a:476].

The problems posed by idealism then are to be overcome by revising the empiricism of the positivistic conception of theory. In other words the possibility of a science of action which 'provides a bridge between the apparently irreconcilable differences between the two traditions, making it possible, in a certain sense, to 'make the best of both worlds' [1937a:486] rests on a correct view of the nature of theory in science. This has been described in section II and the view there outlined forms the first plank in Parsons' attempted reconciliation of science and action.

2. Positivism.

In the case of positivism the methodological dilemma is to some extent obscured in The Structure of Social Action for two reasons. First of all Parsons discusses positivism in substantive terms, as a conception of action, rather than as a methodology.(2) The latter, positivism as a logical account of and justification for valid scientific knowledge remains implicit. Secondly, Parsons' attention is directed toward utilitarianism as a sub-type of the positivist system. The peculiarity of utilitarianism as a variant of positivism is the strong place it gives to the subjectivity of action. This means that the incompatibility of science and action from the positivistic point of view remains latent. However in another sense Parsons' analysis of utilitarianism highlights this incompatibility for as a type of positivist theory utilitarianism is highly unstable and its instability lies precisely in the area of the subjectivity of action. As a positivist theory utilitarianism is only able to cope with subjectivity in a limited way (the norm of rationality) and on the basis of crucial assumptions (the randomness yet natural identity of ends). Once these limitations

and assumptions are questioned the problem of the subjectivity of action comes to the fore.

To the positivist the subjective aspect of action lies outside the realm of scientific discourse for two reasons. Firstly, on the grounds that subjective phenomena cannot be regarded as factual, this is what Parsons terms the behaviourist problem(3) [1937a:346, 356]. Facts must be things in the sense of material entities and their behaviour [1937a:117]. Here the problem lies on the level of description. The second problem lies on the level of explanation, the positivist doubts that subjective phenomena can be causes of action. Thus Parsons refers to

> '... the implication of a rigidly positivistic philosophy (in our sense) that "ends" cannot be real (not epiphenomenal) causal elements of action. This will be discussed at length' [1937a:22].

To the positivist subjective phenomena are 'reflections' of the real causal elements, the conditions of action:

> '... for in so far as the "conditions" ultimately form the sole determinants of action the subjective aspect becomes merely a reflection of the "facts"; it is purely epiphenomenal. Thus all positivistic rivers ultimately flow into the same sea, that of mechanistic determinism' [1937a:120-1].

It is in this sense that Parsons says that 'a positivistic position always reduces the explanation of action to natural science terms' [1937a:762]. Further from this he actually makes the strange admission that:

> 'It is a legitimate conclusion from the analysis of this study that in the sense of having independent causal importance there can in the last analysis be no such thing as a radically positivistic theory of action' [1937a:762].

This then is a clear indication that in positivistic terms a science of action is problematic.

However Parsons does not in fact confront the problems posed by positivism in direct terms. He rather negates them as <u>problems</u> by explaining them away as dogmas [1937a:294]. In Parsons' eyes the above methodological problems are themselves epiphenomenal reflections of positivistic 'objectivism' or 'materialism', the ontological assumption that all science must employ the substantive concepts of the physical sciences, what Parsons lumps together as heredity and environment as the conditions of action.

> 'Like many of his predecessors Pareto set out to make economics and sociology positive sciences on the model of the physical sciences. But he did this with a difference. A great deal of the earlier physical science contained

> as substantive doctrines those which can be roughly summed up as constituting "scientific materialism", which were held to be not merely working hypotheses or approximations but necessary truths about the concrete world. They were truths of such a basic character that no theory which did not accept them could hope to be scientific - in fact they were held to be methodologically necessary. That is, most of the earlier methodology of science, especially physical science, was radical empiricist positivism'. [1937a: 180-1].

In contradiction to 'scientific materialism' Parsons' ontological assumptions are that subjective phenomena are real and cannot be reduced to material phenomena. This then forms the second plank in Parsons' position, the ontological assertion of the reality of the subjective. To him this does not mean a reversion to idealism but rather

> 'It will not, however, do merely to say that both the positivistic and the idealistic positions have certain justifications and there is a sphere in which each should be recognized.

> It is necessary, rather, to go beyond such eclecticism, to attempt, at least in outline, an account of the specific modes of inter-relation of the two. It is in this connection that the voluntaristic theory of action assumes a place of central importance'. [1937a:486].

This raises the question of the exact meaning of the 'voluntaristic' theory of action, an inquiry which forms the next task of this discussion.

3. Voluntarism.

One of the most surprising things about The Structure of Social Action is its lack of discussion of quite what is meant by the term 'voluntarism'. This is despite the claim that it is 'only on the basis of something akin to the voluntaristic theory of action propounded here is it is possible to escape the positivist-idealist dilemma so long as the action schema is adhered to at all' [1937a:448]. The lack of any extended discussion can lead to what might be termed a common sense interpretation of what the term connotes.(4) By this is meant a theory which stresses that human behaviour is to a significant degree the resultant of the intentions of a self-conscious, reasoning being. Each of the underlined words is important. If behaviour is intentional then the course it takes is directed by a conception of a future state of affairs. Whether or not that future state of affairs is

actually realized is not in principle significant, the point is that the behaviour is directed by it. Secondly, human beings are self-conscious in the literal sense, that is, have an understanding of their existence as concrete people, something more than aggregates of bodily movements. Finally such an intentional, self-conscious being is capable of reason, which does not in the first instance signify any particular form of reason, but the capacity for rule governed thought and reflection.

This seems to be a legitimate construction of what we would prima facie expect from a theory to which the adjective 'voluntaristic' is attached. However although this is one strand in Parsons' thinking it does not seem to me to be the dominant one by any means. What follows is an alternative rendering of what Parsons means by the voluntarism of the theory of action.

This can be approached via a brief discussion of a distinction drawn by Parsons between idealistic and voluntaristic theories of action, a relevant consideration as both, in contrast to positivism, stress the role of norms and ends in action. The point of note here is that idealist theories treat action as 'emanations' of such norms and ends whilst voluntarism regards them 'in their relation' to action. The former position is summarized as: 'In an idealist theory "action" becomes a process of "emanation", of "self-expression" of ideal or normative factors. Spatiotemporal phenomena became related to action only as symbolic "modes of expression" or "embodiments" of "meanings" ' [1937a:82].

The contrast is illustrated by a remark Parsons makes about Durkheim in his last, idealist, stage: 'The effect of this idealist tendency of Durkheim's thought is to regard the aim of sociology as that of studying the systems of value ideas in themselves, whereas the position put forward above calls for a quite different study, that of these systems in their relation to action' [1937a:446].

This idealist position is rejected by Parsons, to treat values in this way is to treat them as 'eternal objects', [1937a:444] unchanging systems of meaning which persist over time embodied in cultural artefacts and historical events. Parsons' comment is: 'Such entities cannot be the object of an explanatory science at all. For an explanatory science must be concerned with events, and events do not occur in the world of eternal objects' [1937a:445].

As Parsons says then values, norms and ends must be treated 'in their relation to action'. Now there are two ways in which this phrase can be interpreted which are in fact mentioned by Parsons in a footnote to the quotation immediately above. He says: 'This does not mean that an empirical science must have a historical-genetic orientation, as opposed to the development of a generalized theoretical system' [1937a:445].

Here then the idea of norms etc., in relation to action can be interpreted either according to a 'his torical-genetic orientation'

or in terms of a 'generalized theoretical system'. Whilst Parsons does not elaborate on the former it can be construed as a position which focusses on how norms originate and develop in concrete historical processes over time. A possible concomitant of this might be a concern with how intentional, self-conscious, reasoning actors construct, interpret and change norms and values in their action. Whatever might be meant by 'historical-genetic', and these are my suggestions here, Parsons rejects this for the second. Here the idea of norms in relation to action is cast in terms of norms as <u>one element of</u> a generalized theoretical system of elements. When Parsons speaks of Durkheim as a voluntarist rather than an idealist he refers to '... the movement of his thought in the direction of a voluntaristic theory of action, involving a system of ultimate values, but studying them in their complex relation to other elements of action' [1937a:467]. Here then a voluntaristic theory seems to be one which includes the important causal variables emphasized by <u>both</u> the positivistic and idealistic traditions.

In his short 'schematic outline' of the voluntaristic theory [1937a:81-2] Parsons characterizes the theory in this way, as including the normative elements stressed by idealism and the conditional elements of positivism in interdependent relationship. Again in his 'summary outline' of the voluntaristic theory (particularly [1937a:718-719]) Parsons casts his statement in terms of elements as 'permanently valid precipitates' of positivism, utilitarianism and idealism each of which contributes

an important group of elements to the overall theoretical system.

Now by casting the matter in these terms Parsons is able to 'make the best of both worlds' but in a way which by his own standard is not convincing. For as we have noted he states that it is necessary to go beyond eclecticism, 'an account of the specific modes of interrelationship between the two' traditions is required. Yet as so far discussed this has not been done, all that has been said is that the voluntaristic theory will include component elements from both traditions and regard them as interdependent. Further to say this is to make the term 'voluntarism' something of a conumdrum. In order to inquire into Parsons' synthesis of these elements and see why this is called voluntaristic we have to cast the discussion in more metaphysical terms, for here we move into Parsons' basic philosophy of the ultimate meaning and nature of social life. This can be outlined in terms of i) the dualism of the normative and the conditional, ii) their inherent conflict iii), the necessity of 'effort'.

Parsons' discussion of action in terms of a multitude of interdependent elements can obscure the fact that underlying this is a basic dualism between two orders of such elements, the 'normative' which includes the various categories and types of ultimate ends and norms and the 'conditional' which includes the categories of heredity and environment and the two generalized means; power and wealth. For the moment my discussion will limit its concern to the conditional in so far as it is composed

of heredity and environment. The place of the generalized means will be taken up shortly as a particular problem, for the moment they will be disregarded.

At one point Parsons refers to the division between the normative and the conditional as 'the great dichotomy of this study' [1937a:464]. This phrase is used in his summary of Durkheim and again the same dualism can be found in the conclusions drawn from the analysis of the work of Pareto [1937a:243-300] and Weber [1937a:683-686]. This is exemplified by the following statement in which Parsons sums up one of the ways in which '... Weber's whole position is definitely and fundamentally a voluntaristic theory of action, and neither a positivistic nor an idealistic theory' [1937a:683].

> 'In the first place, his treatment of capitalism, of Protestantism and capitalism and more generally of the social role of religious ideas is understandable only on this basis. The role both of ideas and of the ultimate values associated with them is fundamental to Weber's thought. But equally so is the fact that these elements do not stand alone but in complex interrelations with other independent factors. Without the independence of heredity and environment, without the complex interrelations of ultimate values, ideas, attitudes, norm of different sorts with each other and with heredity and environment,

> concrete social life and action as we empirically know it, and as Weber treats it, is simply not conceivable or thinkable at all' [1937a:683].

This nicely expresses the Parsonian, if not the Weberian, (5) dualism of normative and conditional. On the one side, the normative expresses the ideals and values to which men aspire, on the other side the realistic conditions of their hereditary endowment and environmental situation.

But to Parsons the normative and the conditional forms a 'great dichotomy' because of their inevitable conflict. This forms the second aspect of the underlying metaphysic. The normative, the 'ideal norm of what action should be' [1937a:298] is always counterposed against the conditional as a 'set of resistant and divergent and other non-normative factors' [1937a: 298]. Here we see a more substantive version of the injunction to include both the normative and the conditional as 'elements in a theoretical system'.

> '.... while the norm constitutes one structural element in the concrete action it is <u>only</u> one. There are obstacles and resistances to its attainment which must be overcome and are, in fact, only partially overcome. Hence the failure of the actual course of action to correspond exactly with that prescribed by the norm is not proof that the latter is unimportant but only that it is not alone important' [1937a: 251].

Social life then is represented as an eternal struggle to achieve values in the context of a stubborn and resistant natural world.

> 'Action must always be thought of as involving a state of tension between two different orders of elements, the normative and the conditional. As process, action is, in fact, the process of alteration of the conditional elements in the direction of conformity with norms. Elimination of the normative aspect altogether eliminates the concept of action itself and leads to the radical positivistic position. Elimination of conditions, of the tension from that side, equally eliminates action and results in idealistic emanationism' [1937a:732].

As this passage indicates it is the struggle of mind and body, this faith in 'the power of man to control his own destiny apart from the conditions of his heredity and environment' [1937a:166] that forms one aspect of Parsons' synthesis of idealism and positivism. This is made explicit when Parsons writes:

> 'Just as positivism eliminates the creative, voluntaristic character of action by dispensing

> with the analytical significance of values, and the other normative elements by making them epiphenomena, so idealism has the same effect for the opposite reason - idealism eliminates the reality of the obstacles to the realization of values' [1937a:446].

However this conflict of the positivistic and idealist elements in action is only the first aspect of their synthesis, the second relates to how this conflict is resolved.

This is the final aspect of Parsons' voluntaristic meta-physic, what he calls 'effort'. At one point this is described as 'the central feature' of a voluntaristic conception of action [1937a:446] and it is in connection with this that he most often speaks of the 'active', 'creative' and 'voluntaristic' character of action. (E.g. [1937a:386, 440]). However it is essential to put these terms into the context of what has already been said. The idea of effort, Parsons says, is 'the mediating link' [1937a:253] between the normative and the conditional. It is '... a name for the relating factor between the normative and the conditional elements of action' which 'serves... to bind them together' [1937a:719]. It does this in the following way. Once again the relationship of the actor to norms is a crucial problem. For on one side of Parsons' dualism, the conditional, the influence of heredity and environment on action is non-problematical, men are <u>caused</u> to act in a given way by these elements in an automatic fashion. On the other side, however, the idea of effort '... is necessitated by the fact that norms do not realize themselves automatically....'

[1937a:719]. Parsons remarks: 'Not explicit in Pareto is the third element of the "essentials" of a voluntaristic conception of action which is logically required, an element of "effort" by virtue of which the normative structure becomes more than a mere idea or ideology without causal relevance' [1937a:298].

This question of the determination of action by norms and ends will be taken up in detail later but it is essential here to establish some relevant points. For the crucial issue here is to place this idea of the 'non-automatic' efficacy of norms in the context of the resistance of conditional factors. To Parsons the norm is not automatically realized precisely because of the conflicting character of the normative and the conditional. 'The existence of this resistance and its (even partial) overcoming implies another element, "effort", which has no place in either of the other two views i.e. positivism and idealism' [1937a:251].

To implement a norm is then a <u>struggle</u> which requires an effort of the 'will' [1937a:446] of the actor.

> 'In spite of the possibility that norms, including ethical ideals, may be treated as empirical phenomena by the observer, it must never be forgotten that they are phenomena of a very peculiar sort - that they are to the

> acting individuals norms, ideals. What is observable about them is not the state of concrete existence to which they as propositions refer, but the fact that the individuals acting look upon such a putative state of affairs as desirable and hence they can in a significant degree be thought of as striving to actualize it. But whether, and the degree in which, it is actualized is not a question the solution of which is given in the mere existence of ideal norms as such, but remains a problem. It depends upon the effort of the individuals acting as well as upon the conditions in which they act' [1937a:396].

What is problematical to Parsons about the relation of men to norms is how men are stimulated to struggle to achieve ideals in the face of an antagonistic environment which requires no stimulation.

Idealism and positivism are inadequate here. To the idealist 'the mere existence of the norm, that is its recognition by the actor as binding, implies automatic conformity with it' [1937a:251]. Here the resistence is missing. To the positivist norms are but cognitive reflections of the external forces of the conditional world. The latter Parsons is willing to admit to a degree (see below) but not when it is generalized as in Durkheim's positivistic phase. A cognitive understanding of normative elements such as ultimate ends or

non-rational norms is not enough to account for why men strive to attain such scientifically unverifiable states of affairs.

It is in this context that the following statement should be placed:

> 'A normative orientation is fundamental to the schema of action in the same sense that space is fundamental to that of the classical mechanics; in terms of the given conceptual scheme there is no such thing as action except as effort to conform with norms just as there is no such thing as motion except as change of location in space' [1937a:76-7].

The 'active', 'creative', 'voluntaristic' character of action to Parsons rests ultimately on the problem of the mechanisms which stimulate conformity with norms. At the present time this is simply labelled 'effort', a largely unanlyzed category, for example Parsons at one point compares it with 'energy' in physics [1937a:719]. Here I will leave it until the later discussion of normative determinism.

In the above discussion voluntarism has been cast in terms of an antagonistic dualism between the normative and the bio-physical world called by Parsons the conditional elements of heredity and environment. However the concept of conditions also includes a different group of elements which Parsons refers to as the generalized means or interests. The same pattern of antagonistic dualism, this time between norms and interests,

runs throughout The Structure of Social Action (e.g. [1937a: 255, 465, 661, 685]). The concept of interest here derives from Hobbes [1937a:89]. If we assume that all men are attempting to attain ends then as such they must seek control over the means to achieve ends. For Hobbes a man's power is defined as 'his present means to obtain some future apparent good' [1937a:89]. One important aspect of this is the control of other men. On this basis there are two 'generalized means' [1937a:262], force and fraud which are grounded in coercive power and wealth which is the basis of economic power. To pursue one's interest then is to seek power via the control of the generalized means, coercion and wealth.

The significant question here is why men pursue their interests. One strand in Parsons thinking suggests that this roots in 'human nature'. For example he seems to follow Durkheim in the view that without moral regulation 'human appetites and interests are inherently unlimited' [1937a:335]. This is suggested but is not in the main Parsons' proper position, in his own terms it would be a positivistic reduction. Much more important is the view that the pursuit of interest is an inherent product of action systems.

> '... it is inherent in the very existence of social relations themselves that the actions of men should be potential means to each other's ends. Hence as a proximate end it is a

> directly corollary of the postulate of rationality that all men should desire and seek power over one another' [1937a:93].

The crucial phrase here is that the pursuit of interests 'is a direct corollary of the postulate of rationality'. By the latter is meant the norm of rationality, a standard of selection of means based on the causal efficacy of means to bring about ends. It is on the basis of this norm that the pursuit of power is inherent in action systems, to control other men is an efficient cause/means of achieving an effect/end. Insofar as the actor is acting rationally in this sense 'it would always be irrational not to maximize wealth and power' [1937a:262].

Now this leads to a situation of apparent paradox. On the one hand Parsons posits an inherent conflict of norms and interests. From the point of view of a system of norms and values there is always 'the centrifugal "bombardment of interests and appetites", their tendency to escape normative controls'. [1937a:685]. When Parsons compares Weber and Durkheim he finds 'In both cases a legitimate order is contrasted with a situation of the uncontrolled play of interests' [1937a:661].

But on the other hand interests and the necessity to pursue them are a product of a type of norm.

However if we go a little further the paradox is resolved. This is achieved by distinguishing between the interested and disinterested attitude of the actor towards the norm, whether

the norm is followed for motives of personal advantage or moral obligation. [1937a:661].

> 'Thus in every society there is such a body of normative rules of action, the embodiment of ultimate common values. In one main aspect the integration of the society is to be measured in terms of the degrees to which these rules are lived up to from motives of moral obligation. But besides this there is always the motive of "interest" which, looking upon rules as essentially condition of action, acts in terms of the comparative personal advantage of obedience or disobedience and acceptance of the sanctions which will have to be suffered' [1937a:404].

The dualism then is in attitudes to rules or motives for obedience. The inherent conflict of norms and interests arises from the prospect that the normative status of a rule will be undermined, that it is regarded instrumentally as a means or condition of an end rather than a definition of how an end should be achieved. The consequence of the degeneration of norms to means and conditions is to raise the Hobbesian spectre which as we have seen is the basis for Parsons' postulation of common values, the pursuit of interest in society must always be controlled.

We can note here that the problem of power/interests is located by Parsons in the norm of rationality and actors' attitudes to norms. We can contrast this with an approach which focuses on the distribution of the sources of power, the generalized means, themselves. In this approach if it be the case that such means are differentially distributed in a population then different actors have different degrees of access to the means of control. From this groups are seen as forming around the de facto sources of power and the problem of power in society is one of the relations between groups.

Parsons approach differs from this in that the starting point is the actor's attitude to sources of power and the problem lies in how the society as a whole copes with the problem of power. The problem is a functional problem of social systems and in this sense is conditional, a universal condition which all groups must face. Social life is not a struggle between groups but the struggle of groups to overcome the functional problems of their continuing existence.

This brings us back to voluntarism as a system of theory which incorporates the main conceptual elements of positivism and idealism in their interdependent relationship. Prima facie this appears to be eclecticism despite Parsons' claims to the contrary. However the way in which he approaches conditions

as interests gives a clue to the strategy by which this eclecticism is to be overcome. As against the idealist's appeal to events as 'emanations' of cultural values and alongside the positivists' investigation of causes of action Parsons investigates the fit and correspondence between ideal values and conditions conceived as realistic imperatives on the functioning of action systems. In other words the antagonism of the duality is resolvable, a compromise can be reached between values and the realities of life, natural and social. The theoretical synthesis of positivism and idealism then takes the form of a concern with the conditions necessary for and processes by which values and functional imperatives are synthesized in concrete events.

The voluntaristic metaphysic then supplies the content of Parsons structural analysis of action in welding together the general elements of action, the 'permanently valid precipitates' of idealism and positivism. But more than this, Parsons' general theory is a structural analysis, or better, an analysis of the structure of relationships between analytical elements. The parallel with the voluntaristic metaphysic again enters in, voluntarism focuses on the problem of how, through 'effort', the antagonistic dualism of norms and conditions is routinely overcome, the mechanisms by which the elements of action are organized.

This discussion now turns to examining three long standing and recurrent problems in a science of action; the nature of subjectivity, normative determinism and the place of value.

I will be concerned with how Parsons broaches these problems in his project for a science of action and my claim will be that they are defined and resolved within the confines of Parsons' conception of science and his voluntaristic metaphysic.

B. The Concept of the Subjective Point of View of the Actor

Throughout The Structure of Social Action the subjectivity of action is a constantly recurring theme. Parsons usually expresses this in terms of the 'centrality' [1937a:67], 'decisiveness' [1937a:61] and 'indispensibility' [1937a:715] of 'the subjective point of view, i.e. that of the actor' [1937a:77].

> '... the frame of reference of the schema is subjective in a particular sense. That is, it deals with phenomena, with things and events as they appear from the point of view of the actor where action is being analyzed and considered' [1937a:46].

Less frequently Parsons refers to subjectivity via the method of Verstehen which is said to be a 'fundamentally important concept' [1937a:583], having 'the subjective aspect of action' as its object [1937a:585].

These points are initially relevant for the close links which are inferred between Parsons' conception of the subjectivity of action and Weber's ideas about the meaningfulness

of action to the participating actor. When Parsons emphasises subjectivity he intimates that he wishes to continue Weber's emphasis on the importance of the meaning attributed to the action by the actor to the scientific description and explanation of action. Indeed this is explicitly stated to be the case by Parsons. Weber's concept of action is said to be 'closely similar' [1937a:640] and 'substantially the concept dealt with through this study' [1937a:642].

This claim gives rise to a number of prima facie problems, for example, if Parsons' science of action gives a prime place to actor's meanings how is the thesis of convergence between Weber and Durkheim to be convincingly argued, for surely this is a crucial point of difference between the two? (6) Yet a cursury reading of Parsons' analysis of Durkheim's work is enough to show that he does not simply drop the stress on subjectivity there. It is not a case parallel to a recent work by Fletcher (1971 part 2) in which Weber is presented as emphasising the subjective aspect of society, Durkheim the objective, the two being complementary. Rather the subjective point of view is quite central to Parsons' discussion of Durkheims as will be made clear in a later section. It is not the intention here to discuss the convergence thesis. Instead it is proposed to inquire more closely into Parsons' notion and employment of the subjective point of view of the actor. Overall the claim will be put forward that although actor's meanings do have a part to play in Parsons' thinking it is a relatively minor part and quite secondary to a very different conception of subjectivity which is

his central idea. If this can be shown then such problems as Parsons' discussion of Durkheim and the subjective point of view might seem less of a puzzle.

It is relevant to note here that considerable disagreement exists in the secondary literature over what Parsons means by 'the subjective point of view of the actor'. By far the most common view is that Parsons continues the Weberian emphasis on the meaningfulness of action to the participant. This is nicely exemplified by Rocher (1974:28-9):

> 'Social action... is all human behaviour motivated and directed by the meanings which the actor discerns in the external world, meanings which he takes account of and to which he responds. So the essential feature of social action is the actor's sensitivity to the meanings of the people and things about him, his perception of these meanings and his reactions to the messages they convey.
>
> Since it is primarily defined by its meaningfulness, social action must be interpreted from the actor's subjective point of view'.

However Rocher also notes that in Parsons' hands the idea of social action 'allows of no precise and strict definition, often to the despair of Parsons' readers' (1974:28) notably Sorokin who castigates Parsons on the vagueness of definition of his

basic concepts (1966:411-19). On the other hand Dawe (1970:209) sees subjective meaning as an insignificant variable in Parsons' thinking because it is placed in the overall context of a systems approach to sociology focused on the problem of order. Then the subjective aspect of action is but the internalized reflection of the external and constraining central value system.

So quite what 'the subjective point of view of the actor' amounts to requires examination. I will begin by discussing Parsons' analysis of Pareto's concepts of logical and non-logical action [1937a: Chapter 5]. The question at issue will be in what sense these concepts are analysed 'from the subjective point of view of the actor'. In both cases an attempt will be made to show that the meaning of action to the actor is peripheral to Parsons' main concerns. Also from this discussion pointers will emerge which will enable the inquiry to progress into what Parsons means by the subjective point of view.

1. Subjectivity in the context of logical and non-logical action.

It is most important to note that the concept of logical action is defined solely in terms of the norm employed by the actor in selecting means to ends and the specific character of that norm. So: 'Action is according to Pareto, logical in so far as it conforms with a certain type of norm' [1937a:191]. This norm is what Parsons calls the norm of intrinsic rationality [1937a:210]. Means are selected to attain an end strictly on

the basis of the intrinsic causal connections between the means (cause) and the end (effect) [1937a:187]. So in the case of logical action scientifically verifiable knowledge of intrinsic causal relations form the basis on which the action is meaningful to the actor [1937a:61]. By scientific knowledge here is meant the actor's knowledge of matters of fact and logical reasoning [1937a:197].

Now from a number of statements it would seem that an explanation of action in terms of this concept would involve reference to the actor's scientific knowledge of the relations of means and ends as causes and effects. '...the understanding of logical reasoning is the best means of explaining action so far as it is logical....' [1937a:194].

However at one point Parsons says:

> 'Hence the theories Pareto is interested in are those which depart from the standard of logico-experimental science, for conformity with it immediately makes the theory in question a manifestation only of the logical elements' [1937a:197].

Now this is distinctly odd. For so far in Parsons' account we have been led to believe that in logical action the action is a function of the actor acting in accordance with a scientific theory. Yet here the theory is said to be a

'manifestation' of something else, labelled 'logical elements'. Here the significance of the definition of logical action solely in terms of the norm of rationality becomes evident. By definition a logical act is one in which the action conforms to the norm of intrinsic rationality, that is, the actor has verifiable knowledge of causal relationships and acts in accordance with that knowledge in employing means which will cause his end to come about. To Parsons what this means is that the actor's knowledge is 'an adequate expression of the real determinants of action' [1937a:213]. These real determinants are 'the facts of the external world to the actor' [1937a:214]. What is being said then is that the 'real forces' [1937a:214] determining the action exist in the external world, the subjective aspect is a manifestation, in this case an accurate picture, of these determinants. So the 'source' of the actor's knowledge is 'the actor's accurate observation of the facts of his external world', 'a statement of fact manifests an aspect of the external world' [1937a:215]. The actor's knowledge can be taken as a causal factor in logical action only in so far as it is such a reflection. This topic, the rationality of action, will be taken up again later, I will at the moment turn to non-logical action.

As in the case of logical action Parsons uses Pareto to construct a type model of non-logical action in terms of a means-end analysis which depends on the subjective point of view of the actor. This is somewhat tentative as the model is residual to the model of logical action. Its characteristic features are that the norm linking means and ends is non-

verifiable by scientific methods [1937a:208-11] and can act as a justification of or ultimate end of the action [1937a: 205-8], which is not the case in logical action. Furthermore the end can be a non-observable state of affairs [1937a:204-5]. The initial point to note here is that this model would seem to necessitate the observer taking account of the meaning of the action to the actor. For here rather than means standing in a causal relation to ends they are selected by reference to the norm of symbolic appropriateness. Means are selected as symbolic expressions of a meaning, the end [1937a:210-11]. Such an approach would seem to necessitate taking into account the actor's understanding of 'appropriateness' for example.

However much of what Parsons says casts doubt on this. This can be seen in two contexts. Firstly Parsons calls the reader's attention to the 'two different levels on which this schema of interpretation symbol-meaning relationship may be employed' [1937a:211]. The first is where the actor's action 'may be held to have an explicitly conscious symbolic meaning to the actor' [1937a:211]. The second: 'But at the same time it is quite possible for the symbol-meaning schema to be a convenient tool of understanding for the observer on occasions when it is not explicitly conscious to the actor' [1937a:211]. Now to say this is not incompatible in itself with an analysis in terms of subjective meaning, one task of such an analysis would be to bring out and clarify diffuse and vague intentions, rules, etc. However to be consistent it would <u>not</u> be of the sort: the actor thinks he is doing x but when I as observer analyse his action I find he is doing y. In this case the

analysis is surely not in terms of subjective meaning. Yet this is precisely what Parsons says in exemplifying the second level of employment of the symbol-meaning schema:

> 'Thus in magic the actor's subjective attitude is generally close to that of belief in the intrinsic efficacy of the operation, but to the observer it is more conveniently interpreted as an expression of his sentiments' [1937a:211] (See also [1937a:258-9, 420]).

The second source of doubt as to the relevance of subjective meaning to Parsons' discussion of non-logical action is his comments on Pareto's ABC scheme. Parsons' follows Pareto's analysis of non-logical action in terms of:

> A - a "state of mind"
>
> B - overt action
>
> C - the actor's theory of the action [1937a:193].

Two points are of note here. Firstly, the distinction between A and C. C can be called the actor's subjectively meaningful understanding of his action but this is distinguished from his 'state of mind'. Secondly, what is said of the relations of A, B and C should be noted. Although Parsons says that they stand in relations of 'mutual interdependence' this by no means implies that all three are of equal causal weight. Indeed just the opposite, Parsons stresses that it is because the causal

relationships between C and B and C and A are weak that Pareto takes C for analysis. That is the actor's theories are least important of the three.

From the above remarks it can be said that to render the concept of the subjective point of view of the actor as the subjective meaning of the action seems doubtful. We can pursue these doubts by following closely Parsons arguments on 'a range of methodological problems' [1937a:212] which the introduction of the symbol-meaning relationships brings into the construction of type models of unit acts [1937a:212-7]. These problems centre on 'the question of the observability of the meanings of symbols' [1937a:212]. This seems to be the problem of how it is possible for an observing scientist to 'understand' the meaning of action to the actor in an objective way. This is not, however, how Parsons sees the problem. Rather he assumes that this is not a problem, Pareto's empirical procedure presupposes that the meanings of symbolic expressions can be treated as verifiable facts. Parsons' interest is in the question of the meaning of symbols 'on a still deeper level' [1937a:212]. In pushing to this second level Parsons uses Pareto and I will report his argument here. To Pareto all that is necessary to 'understand' logical action is the 'understanding' of the actor's 'process of reasoning'. However the understanding of non-logical action involves the introduction of a further 'entity' besides the actor's process of reasoning, his 'state of mind'. To Parsons this poses the following problem. Does Pareto's argument imply that 'the meanings of the symbols are irrelevant to the understanding of action, that the real source of it lay in a

lay in a totally different order of element?' [1937a:213]. As Parsons says this is 'strongly suggested' by the ABC scheme. There C, the actor's symbolically represented theory is said to be the 'manifestation' of A, the 'state of mind'. To Parsons this raises the questions of the meaning of the term 'manifestation'. He approaches this by considering 'the status of the normative elements of action' [1937a:213]. If action conforms to a norm then, says Parsons, it can be said that it is determined by the norm. In logical action this is true by definition, thus an understanding of the norm is adequate to understand the action, there is no need to introduce any further entity to explain the action. It is important to remember why this is the case, to understand the theory is enough because the theory is an 'adequate expression of the real determinants of action', the 'facts of the external world'.

However non-logical action, largely because it is defined residually often displays a discrepancy between the norm and the actual course of action. Parsons asks whether this is not the reason why an understanding of the theory is inadequate to understand the action, as there is a discrepancy something else must be added. Parsons admits that this is a reason but not the critical one, for it is just as possible to construct a model of non-logical action in which the theory and the action coincide, in which the theory 'adequately expressed the real determinants of the action', as it is in the type model of logical action.

What marks the difference between logical and non-logical action is not that in the first the action conforms to the norm, in the second it does not, but the following:

> 'In this connection there is, indeed a reason for distinguishing the kind of forces which are determinant of non-logical action from those formulated in the concept of logical action, but it is a <u>different</u> reason from that applying to the situation where the predominant feature is the discrepancy of theory and practice. It is not, as it was there, a matter of the character of the relations between the symbols constituting the theory and the real forces, for these symbols are adequate expressions of the real forces. It is, rather, a difference in the character of the entities to which the symbols refer. In the logical case it was the facts of the external world to the actor. In the non-logical case it is in the first instance the actor's own sentiments. [1937a:214].

So the distinction between A and C in non-logical action is not introduced because the state of mind and the theory are different 'orders of element', A as an 'instinct' for example, but to emphasise that they are the same, both 'subjective' in <u>contradistinction</u> to the case of logical action. There the actor's theory is an expression of the 'real forces' in the sense

of a reflection of the objective world. In non-logical action the theories are an expression in the sense of the realization of the actor's subjective sentiments and underlying ultimate ends.

We can see from this what Parsons means by his second level of understanding of the meaning of symbols. It is not that he wishes to include the actor's meaning in the explanation of action, rather what is insisted upon is that non-logical action is a function of forces irreducible to the external world, which are subjective in this sense. This particular part of the discussion can be concluded by drawing attention to two distinctions which are made by Parsons in his analysis of Pareto's logical and non-logical action.

Firstly, Parsons is at pains to insist upon the distinction between what might be called objective and subjective determinants of action. At the moment these can be said to be factors which on the one hand can be located in the world external to the actor and those which are internal or constitutive of the actor. Secondly, the above remarks have detected two senses in which Parsons speaks of the subjectivity of action. On the one hand action is subjective in the sense that it is meaningful to the actor, on the other, action is subjective in that it is determined by 'forces' or factors irreducible to the actor's external world, components of the actor's 'state of mind'.

These distinctions point the way forward for this inquiry in two directions. The implications and employment of the distinction between actor's meanings and the state of mind must be followed up. This will be the next topic to be discussed and it will hopefully provide aid in pinpointing the distinction between the external world and the actor, the main problem here being what Parsons means by the concept of the actor.

2. Subjectivity and the concrete-analytical distinction.

As I have noted in the above remarks Parsons sometimes refers to the subjectivity of action in the sense of the meaning of the action to the actor but also in terms of the actor's 'state of mind'. This phrase occurs frequently in The Structure of Social Action:

> 'One of the principal features of the conceptual scheme analysed in this study, the theory of action, is that it is couched in terms of subjective categories, that is categories referring to aspects or parts of, or elements in, the "state of mind" of the actor' [1937a:82]. (See also: [1937a:42, 247, 295]).

Now it could be the case that this is a purely semantic difference but the above discussion of Pareto's concept of non-logical action casts severe doubt on this. Hence my discussion

will proceed on the assumption that the two are distinct, an assumption which will be confirmed by what follows. The question is then how are these two conceptions of subjectivity related to each other and employed by Parsons? To answer this question we can turn to his distinction between two different 'levels' on which the conceptual scheme he develops can be employed, the concrete and the analytical [1937a:48-51].

In Parsons' account the manifest difference between the concrete and analytical levels of employment of the subjective categories of the theory of action is in terms of their methodological function. The function of the action schema in its concrete sense is descriptive: 'The function of this concrete use of the action schema is primarily descriptive... But, in this context, the action schema serves only to arrange the data in a certain order, not to subject them to the analysis necessary for their explanation' [1937a:48].

What is of interest here is the meaning of the subjectivity of concepts in this concrete sense. From the examples Parsons gives it can be said that action concepts refer to the meaning of action to the actor. Thus with reference to the concept 'end' Parsons says:

> 'Thus by the concrete end is meant the total anticipated future state of affairs so far as it is relevant to the action frame of reference. For instance, a student may have as his immediate end the writing of a paper

> on a given subject. Though at the inception of a course of action he will not be in a position to visualize in detail (this is true of many concrete ends) he will have a general idea, a forecast of it in general terms. But this visualized product, perhaps being "handed in", is the concrete end' [1937a:48].

Similarly with reference to the concept of 'situation':

> 'From the point of view of a single concrete actor in a concrete situation the effects, both present and anticipated, of the action of others belong in the situation, and thus may be related to the action of the individual in question in the role of means and conditions' [1937a:50].

Here then the concept of situation is framed in terms of its significance or relevance to the concrete actor.

However as was noted above the employment of the action schema in a concrete sense is for descriptive purposes, when the purpose is to explain action the subjective concepts are employed in an analytical sense.

> 'For the purpose of explanation a further step in abstraction is generally necessary. It consists in generalizing the conceptual scheme so as to bring out the functional relations involved in the facts already descriptively arranged' [1937a:49].

By this rather opaque passage Parsons means the following. The problem is how subjective concepts such as end or norm can be employed for explanatory purposes. They can be so used by regarding such concepts as causal elements of the action. This is what Parsons means by bringing out the 'functional relations involved in the facts': what the facts are a function of. But as he notes this involves a 'further step in abstraction', the concepts must be 'generalized'. This word has two senses here. First of all the facts descriptively arranged must be regarded as cases or instances of general causes, of the elements or properties of action. Secondly, these causal elements are properties of action systems as wholes, the problem is of estimating the role of the element 'norm', for example, in a 'total system of action' [1937a:50]. This is what Parsons refers to when he says:

> '... a new logical situation arises when the attempt is made to generalize about total systems of action in terms of the functional interrelations of the facts stated about them' [1937a:50].

Quite what is involved here and what is meant by the analytical sense of subjectivity is best elucidated by using examples from Parsons' text. I will investigate the concrete and analytical senses of 'end', 'norm' and 'situation'.

i. Concrete and analytical meanings of end and norm.

As we have already noted by a concrete end Parsons intends 'the total anticipated future state of affairs' [1937a:48]. Here it is the actor who anticipates this future state of affairs. Parsons asks whether this concrete end can be regarded as causing the action? He thinks not, for certain aspects of this future state of affairs would have come about anyway, without the intervention of the actor and his pursuit of his end. 'But it is quite clear that not this total state of affairs but only certain aspects or features of it can be attributed to ... the agency of the actor' [1937a:49].

Parsons exemplifies this point by reference to the role of heredity and environment:

> 'The ... elements of heredity and environment play a part in determining the concrete ends of action. Such a concrete end is an anticipated concrete state of affairs, involving elements of the external environment and of heredity' [1937a:700].

For example, the hedonistic principle of pleasure must be regarded as a heredity element in the causation of the future state of affairs which serves as the concrete end.

> 'Pleasure as an end of action was plausible because the psychological mechanisms that produce pleasurable feelings in certain circumstances are, in fact, expected to operate in the process leading to the desired state of affairs. ... Pleasure is a feature of the organism which we know by experience we can count on to operate in certain ways....' [1937a:700].

So the psycho-organic mechanisms of pleasure play a part in bringing about the concrete end yet their causal role operates independently of the actor's anticipation of the concrete end.

As a consequence of this consideration the concept of end in its analytical sense must be differentiated from the concrete sense.

> 'An end, then, in the analytical sense must be defined as the <u>difference</u> between the anticipated future state of affairs and that which it could have been predicted would ensue from the initial situation <u>without the agency of the actor having intervened</u>' [1937a:49].

The fact that the concrete end was meaningful, a subjective anticipation on the part of the actor, then becomes irrelevant. Parsons' problem is to locate the factors which cause the state of affairs to actually come about. Some of these are organic factors such as pleasure mechanisms. Others can be attributed to the subjective element 'end'. Yet it seems clear that end in this analytical sense is something other than the actor's intention, his anticipation of the future state of affairs. Indeed in some places it seems that Parsons is saying that the actor's subjective anticipation of the concrete end is part and parcel of what the analytical concept of end is intended to explain:

> 'It is again evident how confusing is the empirical bias which identifies ends in the analytical sense with concrete ends. Of course into what people concretely want, elements of both heredity and environmental determinism enter. "Ends" as a causal element in action cannot be a concrete category' [1937a:383].

Here, 'what people concretely want', their subjectively meaningful purposes, are determined in part by organic elements and, presumably, by the subjective element of end. We can conclude then that the subjectivity of the analytical concepts of the theory of action must be understood in a sense other than the actor's meaning, ends are a component of what Parsons terms 'the state of mind'.

If we turn now to the concept of norm a similar pattern of argument emerges. Parsons gives the statement 'Soldiers should obey the orders of their commanding officers' as an example of a concrete norm [1937a:75]. The question is whether a norm in this sense can be treated as a cause of action, that is, as a cause of soldiers obeying their commanding officers? Again Parsons replies that the action, obedience, is a function of both the norm and other causal elements. He gives as an example the soldier's end, he might be obedient in order to achieve a given military objective, this would be a further subjective element. But 'On the other hand, the recognition of the concrete norm may depend in part on non-normative elements such as, for instance, as a hereditary tendency to submissions' [1937a:75]. Similarly: '... it is not to be forgotten that there may well be hereditary elements which "drive" behaviour in conformity with a rational norm....' [1937a:701].

Now to Parsons an explanation of action in terms of norms in the concrete sense does not discriminate between such complications. If a soldier obeys a concrete norm this might have nothing to do with the fact that obedience to command can 'involve a sentiment that obedience is an end in itself' [1937a:75]. Hence in their analytical sense, norms as causes of action, the concept of norm must be restricted to such a sentiment that acourse of action is desirable in itself.

Again then the movement from the concrete to the analytical level of concepts involves a move from the actor's understanding of a rule of conduct to a definition or delineation of a general property of action which is to be treated as a cause of action. To label such elements 'subjective' seems to imply something other than actors' meanings.

The distinction between the concrete and the analytical is a feature of Parsons' analysis of the 'utilitarian dilemma'. [1937a:60-9]. A discussion of this can serve to emphasise some of the points in the foregoing remarks and lead into the concrete and analytical senses of the 'situation' of action.

ii) The concrete and the analytical in the 'utilitarian dilemma'

To Parsons utilitarianism (7) as a theory of action is a sub-type of positivism. To him it is marked by its instability in that two of its defining conceptual features, the randomness of ends and the norm of rationality, are subject to prima facie problems. Parsons' thesis is that when these problems are posed within a positivistic framework the status of 'subjectivity' becomes problematic [1937a:67-8]. When utilitarianism is developed into radical positivism the necessity for the subjective aspect of action disappears. As such Parsons' argument is relevant here from the point of view of the nature of subjectivity. The question is: what precisely is it that is lost when utilitarianism breaks down into radical positivism?

To begin with we must consider what subjectivity means in terms of utilitarian positivism. Here the subjective point of view of the actor rests on 'the analogy between the scientific investigator and the actor in ordinary practical activities' [1937a:58], the actor's subjectivity is limited to the norm of rationality. This means that the actor is pictured as pursuing ends by adopting the means which in terms of his situation and available knowledge are technically most efficacious to the end. The criterion of technical efficiency is scientific verification, that means can be shown by the methods of science to be causes of the end state as effect.

In utilitarianism then subjectivity is limited to the actor's scientific knowledge of his situation and its intrinsic means/cause - end/effect relationships. Two points should be noted here. The first is that this limitation of subjectivity to the norm of rationality is Parsons' criterion of a positivistic theory of action. A theory is positivistic in so far as it limits the subjective point of view to the point of view of the 'scientist', a person who qua scientist can only meaningfully relate to the world around him in terms of empirically verifiable knowledge of cause and effect relationships. The second point is that by the subjective point of view here Parsons means the meaning of action to the concrete actor.

> 'Then, from the point of view of the actor, scientifically verifiable knowledge of the situation in which he acts becomes the only

> significant orienting medium in the action system. It is that alone which makes of his action an intelligible order rather than a response to the "meaningless" forces impinging upon him. It should be remembered that the actor is here being considered as if he were a scientific investigator. This throws the emphasis on the cognitive elements in the subjective aspect of action. The peculiarity of the point of view under consideration now is that it involves explicitly or implicitly (more often the latter) the view that positive science constitutes man's sole possible significant cognitive relation to external (non ego) reality, man as actor that is' [1937a:61].

The manifest weaknesses of utilitarianism as a conceptual scheme are twofold. Firstly, there is the postulate of the randomness of ends. Here the ends which the actor so rationally pursues are private to each act, springing from some mysterious source (such as Hobbes' 'passions' [1937a:90]) and consequently having no intelligibility in terms of scientific knowledge. The second is to account for departures from the norm of rationality, the problem of irrationality. Parsons' claim is that when these problems are faced within a positivistic framework then the subjectivity of action disappears:

> 'Thus the utilitarian dilemma is broadened into a more inclusive form. It may, in this form, be stated in the following proposition: In so far as the utilitarian position is abandoned in either of its two major tenets, 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, which for most practical purposes may be taken to mean in the factors of heredity and environment in the analytical sense of biological theory' [1937a: 67].

This claim however should be treated cautiously for throughout Parsons' discussion runs the distinction between the concrete and the analytical. For example he says:

> 'The principal reason for the common failure to see this implication of the utilitarian dilemma seems to lie in the fact that thinkers have been principally concerned with what has been called the concrete use of the action schema and have failed to carry their reasoning through systematically to a general analytical plane. In the latter terms it is inescapable [1937a:67].

This is a relevant consideration because the movement from utilitarianism to radical versions of positivism leads to a departure from subjectivity in only one sense, the analytical. The employment of the action schema with its inherent subjectivity in the concrete sense remains in radical positivism.

> 'It is true that the facts relevant to the explanation of action are always capable of statement in terms at least of the concrete action schema, actually in the rationalistic c case, potentially in the anti-intellectualistic ....' [1937a:68].

So in this discussion we must inquire what is meant by subjectivity in these two senses if we are to see quite what is lost in the move to radical positivism. In what follows it will again be proposed that by the concrete sense of subjectivity Parsons means actors' meanings. Then it will be suggested that as the move to radical positivism does not involve the abandonment of subjectivity in this sense then subjectivity in the analytical sense must be something other than the meaning of action to the actor.

The first weakness in the utilitarian system is the postulate of the randomness of ends. The positivistic response to this Parsons calls radical rationalistic positivism. From this point of view the arationality (my term) of the actor's ends is unsatisfactory, an account must be given of why the actor pursues the ends he does. However within the positivistic framework the only possible account is to extend the notion of intrinsic rationality from its status as a norm relating means to ends to a criterion the actor employs in selecting the ends he will pursue. This means

that the actor bases his ends on his knowledge of the situation in which he acts.

> 'If ends were not random, it was because it must be possible for the actor to base his choice of ends on scientific knowledge of some empirical reality. But this tenet had the inevitable logical consequence of assimilating ends to the situation of action.... For the only possible basis of empirical knowledge of a future state of affairs is prediction on the basis of knowledge of present and past states... Action becomes a process of rational adaption to these conditions. The active role of the actor is reduced to one of the understanding of his situation and forecasting of its future course of development' [1937a:63-4].

Now it can be readily granted that this is an unsatisfactory conception of subjectivity but this is not the point at issue here. The point is that the radical rationalistic positivistic framework as so far outlined is cast in terms of the meaning of the action to the actor. What we have is a model of action in which the actor's knowledge of his situation with respect to the ends he will pursue and the means to be employed is a relevant consideration in a scientific account of that action. So the question arises in what sense has subjectivity been lost?

In answering this question three points are of relevance. First of all Parsons' claim is that it is subjectivity 'in the analytical sense' which has been lost. In opening his discussion of rationalistic positivism he says:

> 'Here the distinction between ends of action in the analytical sense and the elements of action belonging to the situation is vital and essential' [1937a:63].

This is so because as we have seen the actor is still conceived as pursuing subjectively meaningful ends by the radical rationalistic positivist. What Parsons is concerned with is the loss of the 'analytical independence' [1937a:63] of ends by their being reduced to forecasts of future situational developments.

We can gain some idea of what is meant by 'analytical' here by moving to the second point. This is that Parsons equates the radical rationalistic position with the determination of action by its conditions: 'The action becomes determined entirely by its conditions....' [1937a:64]. Now this represents a perplexing jump in the argument. For in terms of what we have said the radical rationalistic positivist might be expected to explain action in terms of the actor's scientific knowledge of the conditions in which he acts. In other words we might posit a distinction between the conditions and the actor's knowledge of those conditions and suggest that an explanation of the actor's actions would be phrased in terms of the latter. However to Parsons, on the analytical level this distinction is irrelevant. The fusion of the two is indicated by the comment that: '... there is no other determinant

of his action than knowledge and the conditions through this knowledge' [1937a:64]. What this means is that the actor's meaningful knowledge is not a relevant consideration to Parsons' analytical sense of subjectivity. As in the case of Pareto's logical action above, the actor's knowledge is taken to be a reflection of the "real" determinants, the condition of action. (8) What Parsons objects to about radical rationalistic positivism is not that actor's meanings have been lost but that the determinants of these meanings and the action itself are <u>biological</u>.

This is the third point, the specification of just what the conditions of action are.

> ' The independence of ends 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' [1937a:64].

The loss of subjectivity in the analytical sense then means the explanation of action in terms of its biological conditions. From what has been said we can say that subjectivity is something other than these biological conditions. However it also appears again that subjectivity in the analytical sense is something other than actor's meanings. For subjectivity in this sense, the concrete sense, remains in radical rationalistic positivism, whatever its deficiencies.

The second departure from utilitarianism Parsons calls radical anti-intellectualistic positivism. This develops out of the problem of departure from the norm of rationality. How is it that human action does not fully conform with the positivistic model of the scientist? Within a positivistic framework this is conceived in terms of 'falling short' of the norm of rationality. The possibility of the actor acting by reference to an alternative norm to that of intrinsic rationality lies outside the positivist schema. Hence Parsons describes the positivistic approach to departures from the norm of rationality in terms of the actor's ignorance of facts relevant to his action or error in reasoning from the facts. It is not the object of this discussion to defend such a position but again it is pertinant to note that the concepts of ignorance and error refer to the meanings of action to the actor. Only in terms of the actor's knowledge being significant to his action do ignorance and error themselves have any significance. So again subjectivity in the sense of actor's meanings continues over from utilitarianism into radical anti-intellectualistic positivism. The same patterns as in the rationalistic case follows. Parsons' preoccupation is with the analytical elements by which this concrete sense of subjectivity can be explained:

> 'Since scientific knowledge is held to be man's only significant cognitive relation to external reality, then there are open only two alternatives in explaining why the actor in question was the victim of ignorance or error or both. Either this subjective fact [in the concrete sense I.P.] may be the reflection of elements in the situation which are intrinsically incapable of being understood in scientific terms ... or, on the other hand they can be explained' [1937a:66].

So ignorance and error, as concrete 'subjective facts', that is, as concepts referring to actor's meanings, are not of explanatory significance. Rather they are something to be explained. Parsons' objection to anti-intellectualist positivism is again that its explanation of ignorance and error is not in terms of an analytical concept of subjectivity.

> 'If the explanation of irrationality on a positivistic basis must lie in factors not in fact known, but intrinsically capable of being known scientifically to the actor, then these factors must be found, <u>on analytical generalization</u> [my emphasis I.P.] to lie in categories capable of non-subjective formulation, that is in the <u>conditions</u> of action' [1937a:67].

Once again these are identified as the biological concepts of heredity and environment [1937a:67]. So again in his attempt to demonstrate the biological underpinnings of positivistic theories of action Parsons makes manifest his lack of concern with subjectivity in the Weberian sense.

In the above discussion mention has been made of the situational conditions of action. Now on the face of it it might be expected that this term would be employed to describe the social conditions which face a given actor, as an environment over which he has, at any given point in time, no control. Yet as has been noted in his castigation of radical positivism for its biological explanation of action Parsons equates this with an explanation in terms of the conditions of action. This gives rise to something of a puzzle: what is meant by the concept of the situational conditions of action? Once again the distinction between concrete and analytical is of great significance to this question.

iii. Concrete and analytical concepts of the situation.

Over the years Parsons' position on the social conditions of action has worried a number of his commentators. (E.g. Cicourel (1964:239), Smith (1973:108,110-11), Whyte (1961:262-6)). Indeed this problem has stimulated a number of constructive responses to Parsons. These form two rough groupings. On the one hand are those who follow Lockwood (1967) in noting the lack of development in Parsons of a theory of the substratum of

interests which parallel systems of norms as the constituents of social structure. A further example of this response is Mayhew who claims:

> '... in a certain sense, action theory lacks a theory of social structure. It has a theory of normative structure and a theory of organization but it provides an inadequate account of the patterning of structural conditions' (1968:427-8).

On the other hand phenomenologically inclined sociologists have objected to the Parsonian tendency to play down the significance of the particular situation of action faced by the actor and its place in the creation of meaning. (See, for example, Douglas (1971:32)). All of this is nicely summarized by Goodwin's comment on an (admitted) error by Tiryakian in rewording the title of The Structure of Social Action to The Social Structure of Action. She says:

> 'Tiryakian's "error" clarified almost ten years of concern over what it was that was wrong with Parsons' argument in The Structure of Social Action. What was (is) wrong with the argument of Parsons is indicated in Tiryakian's "error": the structure underlying social action, for Parsons, is not "social" at all (as exemplified, for example, (sic) in Parsons' discussion of "conditions" vis-a-vis action in The Structure of Social Action) '. (1971:310).

None of these commentators though have looked carefully at what Parsons says about the conditions of action. This is pertinant here as it shows again the significance of the concrete/analytical distinction and poses a problem, to be taken up shortly, the solution of which furthers the inquiry in hand here; what Parsons means by the subjective point of view of the actor.

Parsons considers the status of the concept of the social conditions or environment of the actor at several points in The Structure of Social Action (For example [1937a:50, 81, 202, 364, 370, 428]). In each case he draws a radical distinction between the concrete and the analytical senses of conditions claiming that concretely the concept of social conditions is legitimate but analytically illegitimate.

Parsons is quite willing to admit that 'it cannot be doubted that the concrete actor is placed in a concrete social milieu' [1937a:81]. That is, other individuals and their actions [1937a:50, 202, 370], social rules [1937a:370] systems of ideas [1937a:428] and the 'total concrete society' [1937a:364] can be interpreted as conditions to be taken account of by any one actor. The last sentence contains a crucial ambiguity which centres on the problem of quite who is interpreting the action of others etc. If the concept of social conditions is employed,

is it the actor's definition of the situation that the concept refers to, the actor's understanding of other actors, rules and ideas as conditions of his own action? Or, does the concept embody the observer's interpretation of the realistic situation which actually faces the actor as a system of conditions which are beyond his control but must be taken account of? From the point of view of a science of action which posits the importance of the meaning of action to the actor the first employment must obviously be stressed. Yet the position is not quite so simple as this, for the two senses of social conditions are intimately related. If we approach the question in terms of the meaning of the situation to the actor it must be remembered that the actor's definition of the situation is a definition of something, it is not an imaginary fantasy which is conjured up in a vacuum. The actor's definition of the situation arises in a definite context which poses concrete problems for him, makes demands on him and limits the possibilities open to him. To forget this point leads to a position to my mind effectively destroyed by Marx, ideas, meanings, definitions must be set in the context of their origin in practical activity. So, for example, if actors define their world as a conditional one, a world beyond their control whose constraints are felt as binding this cannot be taken as the terminus of the question but as a problem to be investigated. From the above paragraph it might appear that the second sense of social conditions, as defined by the observer, is being advocated. However this view again must be qualified by the other. For objective conditions are conditions for somebody, the point being that different

people face different situations, different conditional worlds. Then an account of action in terms of the concept of social conditions must specify which 'actor's point of view' the concept refers to. It must state that this is the conditional world for this actor.

This short departure from the main inquiry is included to support the claim argued above, that the action schema employed in the concrete sense is subjective in the sense of actor's meanings. Although the above remarks are brief and fail to cope at all fully with the problems raised by the concept of social conditions in the context of a stress on the subjective meaning of action to the actor enough has been said to support the view that in a concrete sense the action schema can incorporate the concept of the social conditions of action.

We can now return to Parsons' discussion of the concept of social conditions, but now considered analytically. As has been mentioned Parsons rejects the possibility of an analytical concept of social conditions. To support this he offers a number of reasons. We can first of all note the 'vicious circle' argument:

> 'The social environment of a concretely acting individual is thought of as all the conditions relevant to his action which involve other concrete individuals... But this clearly

> cannot be generalized for theoretical purposes - the result is a vicious circle. For it would mean taking as the explanation of the action of one individual, the very thing that is to be explained in the case of the others who constitute the social environment of the one. In other words, to explain in such terms the action of any one, it is necessary to assume that the action of all the others has already been explained, which is to beg the question of a general theoretical explanation of human action altogether' [1937a:364].

Now the force of this argument is not immediately evident. What Parsons appears to be saying is that if we explain the actions of one actor A by reference to the constraints imposed upon him by other actors B and C, who constitute conditions for actor A, then we are making either or both of two mistakes. Firstly, we are involved in an infinite regress, to explain A by reference to B and C it is necessary to explain B and C by reference to A and D as conditions of B and C and then D by reference to C and E and so on ad infinitum. Yet this does not seem to be necessary at all. If the task is to explain A's actions then the question why it is that B and C stand as conditions for A, that is, an explanation of their actions, is not at issue. Of course it may become problematical but then that would then be a different explanatory problem. The second mistake is that we have to assume that B and C's actions have already been explained.

Again this does not convince, for B and C's actions are not problematical, the explanation of A's actions by reference to the conditions imposed by B and C should make no claim to be an explanation of B and C's actions.

The key to what Parsons is driving at lies in the term 'generalize' in the quotation above. His aim is to achieve 'a generalized theoretical explanation of human action' and to stand as an analytical concept social conditions must be capable of 'generali zation for theoretical purposes'. In other words the concept of social conditions must be an element of action, as a causal factor it must conceptualize a universal property of all action. But as such the vicious circle argument above is still unconvincing. For it is quite plausible to say that all actors face social conditions in their action, the relevant point being that each actor faces different conditions. The concept of social conditions can be applied to each and any actor but from each actor's point of view the content and substance of the concept could change. So the claim that the concept cannot be generalized in the sense of a universal property of action seems, at the moment, doubtful. We will return to this point in a moment. It is pertinant to note here that as such a general concept social conditions only gains significance from the different points of view of different actors. Whether or not this is the subjective point of view of the actor is, as was noted above, a debatable point but it is plausible that this subjective definition can be incorporated.

To see why Parsons feels that the concept of social conditions cannot be generalized in this way we must move on to his second argument which I shall label the 'double-counting' argument. Parsons says: 'For what are, 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' [1937a:50]. This objection to the concept of social conditions on the analytical level is then that what to one actor are conditions are to other actors (who in fact constitute those conditions) ends or norms. In other words to include social conditions as a general property of action involves double-counting, including as social conditions that which is already included as ends or norms. However to say this requires a further step in the argument and a second sense of generalization. For the significant question is what is it that elements of action are causes or properties of? Given the phrase the subjective point of view of the actor we might expect them to be properties of actor's actions. But if this is the case then to say that social conditions are, from another point of view, ends or norms, seems irrelevant. However, if elements are properties of <u>systems</u> of action as wholes then the double counting argument carries weight. Indeed this is just Parsons' position.

> 'For what are objects of knowledge on the part of one concrete actor may turn out, on the analysis of the system as a whole to be attributable to the "ends" or other subjective elements in relation to the actors taken together' [1937a:202].
>
> 'But in estimating the role of normative elements in the total system of action in which the particular actor constitutes a unit, it would obviously be illegitimate to include these elements in the situation for the system as a whole' [1937a:50].

We might add to the last passage: 'despite the fact that to the actor such normative elements are conditions'. The relevance of the vicious circle and double counting arguments now becomes clear. For Parsons' point of reference here is the concept of a system of action and its general elements. From the point of view of such a system the conditional status of actors to each other leads to a vicious circle, the fact that the conditions for one are different from the conditions for another means that the concept of social conditions cannot refer to the system as a whole. If it were it would have to be common to all the actors in the system.

What then does Parsons mean by the situational conditions of action on the analytical level? As the above remarks on radical positivism suggest these are the bio-physical constituents of human beings and their natural world, summarized by Parsons as heredity and environment (e.g. [1937a:202, 700]). These two elements are frequently referred to as 'capable of non-subjective formulation' [1937a:53]. As such it is these that form the external, objective world analytically speaking and to which the subjective elements are contrasted. As yet no attempt has been made to specify what is involved in this analytical conception of the subjective point of view of the actor other than to refer to it as a 'state of mind'. However it can be repeated that this state of mind is something other than the meaning of action to the actor. This has been reinforced by the discussion of the situational conditions of action where Parsons has been found to depart entirely from the concrete actor's point of view in favour of a concern with analytical properties of systems of action. It can be noted again that this directly involved the dichotomous contrast between what to the actor are conditions of his action and conditions in the analytical sense, the conditions of systems of action as wholes.

iv. The problematic character of the rejection of social conditions.

A further consequence of the above discussion can be taken

up which will serve eventually to lead to a more positive discussion of subjectivity as the actor's 'state of mind'. This is that in rejecting the concept of social conditions Parsons has abandoned a main theme in the classical tradition of sociology which is purportedly the main inspiration behind The Structure of Social Action. To say this, of course, presupposes some interpretation of that tradition but the theme in question is not, I think, particularly idiosyncratic to me nor difficult to establish. Indeed, as we shall see shortly, it is recognized by Parsons himself. This theme is the objectivity of social relations and their institutional fabric to the actors who participate in these relations. It is expressed as both a problem for sociological understanding and as an explanatory principle.

As a focus of interest the theme is found most poignantly in Weber's metaphor of the iron cage, most aggressively in Marx's writings on alienation. The problematic is perhaps less manifest in Durkheim yet as a self-confessed rationalist he is concerned to employ his sociology to direct people away from the blind, non-comprehending obedience to society. This underlying problematic of classical sociology becomes relevant to this discussion in that central concepts of the work of Marx, Weber and Durkheim are developed around this phenomenon and point the way to an explanation of action in social structural terms, that is, in terms of a conception of social structure which is external and constraining from

the point of view of its constituent actors. In Marx, the social relations of production, particularly the institution of private property and the social organization of labour, form the 'conditions of existence' of the classes. Weber's substantive discussion of bureaucracy is reflected formally in what to the present writer is his central sociological concept: social relationship (Weber: 1947: Chapter 1, Section 3). This, it should be noted is something more than an aggregate of social actions. As well as a plurality of actors mutually taking account of each other the concept of social relationship involves an element of regularity, of structure. To penetrate this quality of social relationships Weber directs attention to rules of conduct and the distribution of interests (1947: Chapter 1, Sections 4 and 5). Parsons argues that as Durkheim's work develops '... the problem of differentiation, or of social structure in any concrete sense, recedes more and more into the background' [1937a:320]. This view has been contested strongly, and to my mind, successfully in respects relevant here, by Giddens (1972).

By rejecting the notion of social conditions Parsons can be interpreted as directing his sociology away from the social as situational to the actor. Yet what is perplexing is that at some points in The Structure of Social Action it is precisely this which is brought out.

In his discussion of Weber's distinction between natural and social science Parsons disputes the line he sees Weber drawing

between the non-scientific motives for science. According to Parsons, Weber argues that social science does not embody a motive of control, his reply is:

> 'Indeed, with reference both to nature and to action and culture two main types of non-scientific motives of cognitive interest may be differentiated. One is the "instrumental" interest. This is manifested whenever the question arises of using elements of the situation of action as means, or adapting action to them as conditions. But surely in rational action generally the social environment looms at least as large as does the natural. Particularly in the field Weber had primarily in mind, that of political action, this seems to be the case' [1937a:595].

In political action, then, the concept of social relations as external to the actor, reflected upon and used by him, is recognized to be important. Indeed this recognition is crucial to a major argument of the book: the Hobbesian problem of order. In outlining Hobbes' rationale for the problematic status of order Parsons notes that the concept of power becomes significant only on the basis of actors regarding each other as potential means and conditions of the attainment of their ends [1937a:93].

But it is in the context of his discussion of Marx and Weber's conceptions of capitalism that his awareness of the concept of social conditions becomes most evident. Parsons characterizes Marx in terms of his polemics against Hegelian idealism and Utopian socialism [1937a:488-495]. To their stress on the Geist and the power of reason 'Marx opposed his view of "interests"'.

> 'Men acted rationally for him, even in a somewhat limited sense more suggestive of Hobbes than of Locke or Condorcet. But they acted rationally within a given concrete situation and within such a situation the rational norm itself necessitates certain lines of action, precluding others. Men, precisely because they do act rationally, will follow their "interests" as defined for them by the situations in which they are placed' [1937a:491].

To Parsons then Marx's view of interests involves two points. First of all what he characterizes as a utilitarian conception of the actor's motivation, a stress on the actor rationally adopting means to ends, that is, acting according to the criteria of technological, economic and political efficiency [1937a:493, 494]. Secondly, the actor acts rationally in a given situation and it is this which Marx emphasises. 'Marx's difference from the classical economists is merely this: ... he threw his attention from the rational process itself back to the situation which dictated its course' [1937a:493].

Now does this emphasis on the situation mean that Marx is a radical positivist emphasising the heredity and environment elements? From the discussion above we might expect so. Yet this is explicitly denied by Parsons. In stressing that 'Marxism is a social doctrine' as against radical positivism he says: 'Marx did not use the word materialism in the familier positivistic sense of reducing social phenomena causally to terms of the non-human environment, as natural resourses, or of biological heredity or of some combination of both' [1937a:490]. This is repeated when Parsons says: 'It should be emphasized again that the determinism of the theory lies not on an individual-psychological, but on a social level. It is the situation which dictates a given course of action; in a different situation all would be changed' [1937a:493]. So it is the social situation faced by any given actor which lies at the root of Marx's theory:

> 'Marx, through his doctrine of interests, elevated not only competition but the whole structure of the economic order into a great control mechanism, a compulsive system. This is the essential meaning of Marx's conception of economic determinism. It is not a matter of psychological anti-rationalism, but of the total consequences of a multitude of rational acts. On the one hand the system itself is the

> resultant of the myriad of individual acts but, on the other, it creates for each acting individual a specific situation which compels him to act in certain ways if he is not to go contrary to his interests. Thus for Marx exploitation was to be blamed on neither the unreasonableness nor the plain selfishness of the individual employer, but the employer was placed in a situation where he must act as he did, or be eliminated in the competitive struggle' [1937a:491-2].

A further point is of relevance here. This relates to Parsons' allegation that social theories which do not include a common value element fail to provide a solution to the Hobbesian problem of order. Marx does not include such a common value system for society as a whole. Yet Parsons seems to agree that Marx has an explanation of order in capitalism:

> 'The system itself would be thought of as self-acting. Once the individuals involved in it are placed in the situations that are given, their actions are "determined" so as to maintain the system as a whole, or rather to drive it forward on the evolutionary course, to end at last in its self-destruction' [1937a:492].

As we have noted Marx's explanation for the orderly but changing structure of capitalism lies in a concept of the social situation of the actor. Yet Parsons ignores this possibility of explaining order in society. In the main his attitude to the orderly structure of interests is summarized when he says:

> 'For this interlocking of interests is a brittle thing which comparatively slight alterations of conditions can shatter at vital points' [1937a:404].

However, Parsons' remarks on Marx suggest that this might be a premature judgement. Why then was it not taken up? No doubt there are many reasons for this but it might be suggested that the failure to incorporate a concept of the actor's social condition is one.

In Parsons' discussion of Weber the same strand of the importance of social conditions can be found. At one point he says:

> 'As Weber puts the position in the most general terms: it is "interests" not "ideas" that in conjunction with the conditions of the situation in which they are placed determine immediately the conduct of men' [1937a:520].

This general insight is reflected in two more specific contexts; Weber's agreement with Marx on the crucial features of capitalism [1937a:503-513] and Parsons' account of how Weber approaches the question of the role of religion in societies [1937a:571-573].

With reference to the first Parsons says:

> 'In this descriptive aspect of his treatment of capitalism Weber, allowing for the difference of "accent", is in rather close agreement with Marx. His emphasis on the "compulsive" aspect of the system implies agreement beyond mere description; it involves a thesis concerning the determination of individual action within the system, namely that the course of action is determined in the first instance by the character of the situation in which the individual is placed, in Marxian terminology, by the "conditions of production". This implication Weber recognizes quite explicitly. The system, once fully developed, is self-sustaining by virtue of its compulsive power over individuals' [1937a:510].

By contrast Parsons notes that to Weber religious ideas cannot be explained by material conditions. However in investigating 'the concrete processes by which religious ideas develop and in

the particular direction the development takes' [1937a:571-572] the role of social conditions is a crucial component of Weber's position. Parsons notes three points here. Prophecy is the characteristic mode by which systems of religious ideas first arise, but 'the emergence of prophecy itself ... is to be attributed in a large degree to social situations' [1937a:572]. Secondly, the 'problem of meaning', the metaphysical basis of religious ideas, is different for distinct social groups, the problem must be posed in terms of the kinds of problems men meet with, the social conditions they are faced with [1937a:572]. Thirdly, the chance of success of a given system of religious ideas is a function of 'the position in the social "balance of power" of the class who are its principal bearers' [1937a:572].

As well as this stress on the role of social conditions in the development of religious systems in society Parsons also notes their role in the relationship between religion and practical activity, emphasising that the latter is not merely the 'emanation' of the former:

> 'The central theoretical concept is that of religious "interests". Ideas are effective in action because they determine the direction of practical activity in which the interests can be pursued.
>
> But the very conception of interests implies another factor. Human action is subject not only to "ideal" but to real conditions' [1937a:572].

The above remarks then establish the point that Parsons is not unaware of the concept of social conditions nor of its part in classical sociology. This point has been stressed to make problematical his exclusion of the concept on the analytical level which is his main concern. This seems highly anomolous and it can be suggested that there is a powerful influence on Parsons here. It is this which is the next topic of discussion, returning the argument to the problem of 'the subjective point of view of the actor'.

3. Concepts of the actor

The conception of social conditions is strongly associated by Parsons with what he calls Durkheim's sociologistic positivism [1937a: Chapter 9]. It is this, the association with a positivistic theory of action which fundamentally accounts for Parsons' rejection of social conditions as an analytical concept. Of particular note here is that the term positivism describes not so much a set of methodological rules but a concept of human action. To Parsons a positivistic theory of action is distinguished not by its methodology but by its extension of this methodology into a conception of action. Thus a positivistic theory involves 'the employment of the schema of scientific methodology as a framework for the analysis of action from the subjective point of view' [1937a:374]. Again, the positivist attempts 'to apply the methodological schema of science to the interpretation of action from the subjective point of view' [1937a:360]. To Parsons, Durkheim 'retain(s) the subjective

point of view, and within it adopted as his basic frame of reference the schema of scientific methodology' [1937a:365]. In each of these statements positivism is described as a 'schema', 'framework', 'interpretation', 'frame of reference', that is, as a conception of action. Furthermore such a conception involves the subjective point of view. As was noted above the very idea of the subjective point of view with respect to Durkheim's work is, on the face of it, somewhat anomalous. However we find Parsons particularly emphasising that the positivistic Durkheim adopts this. He twice refers to the 'importance' of the subjective point of view to Durkheim's work and his analysis of it [1937a:349, 378].

At this point it is oppertune to include a note on the general concept of the 'actor'. Parsons says:

> 'Attention has already been called to the fact that the schema of action implies an actor. This is as fundamental to the concept of action as is the assumption of a knowing subject to that of knowledge. It is impossible even to conceive of "knowledge" except as something known by a subject. Similarly action is a series of acts of one or more actors' [1937a:745].

Despite the strength of this statement The Structure of Social Action is remarkable for the absence of any extended discussion of just what is meant by 'the actor' (9). The only point that Parsons makes explicitly is that the concept of actor is an abstraction [1937a:84]. He means this in the sense that the actor is not to be identified with 'the concrete biopsycho-social individual' [1937a:252]. Rather 'The unit of reference which we are considering as the actor is not this organism but an "ego" or "self"' [1937a:47]. Parsons particularly wishes to stress this disjunction between the individual as an organism and as an actor because to the actor his organic body is a constituent part of the external world, the situation of action [1937a:47]. Then the actor-situation distinction is not a matter of separating concrete 'things' [1937a:47] for 'There is certainly no empirical "self" known which is not an "aspect of" or "associated with" a living biological organism [1937a:45]. 'It is rather a matter of the analysis required by the categories of empirically useful theoretical systems' [1937a:47]. The human being as an organism then belongs to the biological frame of reference [1937a:47], as an actor, to the action frame of reference.

However, there is surely more to the question than this. For as well as distinguishing between actor and organism it is necessary to specify the content of the concept of actor. This Parsons does not do explicitly although this whole discussion of subjectivity is concerned with this. It will continue with one possible model of the actor which Parsons critically discusses: the positivistic model.

As was noted above the positivistic model of the actor centres on the concept of the norm of rationality, the actor understanding his world in terms of the causal relationships of means and ends. This basis however can be developed in two different directions [1937a:345]. The first is utilitarian positivism. Here the '... central principal is the explanation of conduct in terms of the rational pursuit of the wants or desires of individuals' [1937a:344]. The norm of rationality is applied to the means of achieving the actor's ends which as a consequence play a crucial role in the utilitarian system. '... only on the assumption that individuals do pursue ends and that the latter are effective factors in action does the utilitarian analysis make sense' [1937a:345]. But this crucial role is highly ambiguous for ends are random in a double sense [1937a:344]. They are spontaneous in their source, that is, outside the realm of lawful regularity, and they are private to each individual.

Parsons' reading of Durkheim is that he finds the utilitarian explanation of orderly social life inadequate and as a consequence rejects the first line of development of the norm of rationality, the direction which emphasises rationality in the pursuit of ends. To the positivist Durkheim an explanation in terms of actor's ends is tarred with the utilitarian brush. The norm of rationality then is divorced from the idea of the actor actively achieving ends [1937a;346-7].

The second line of development of the norm of rationality, which Durkheim takes partly in reaction against utilitarianism, Parsons calls radical positivism. Here the emphasis is not on the actor rationally attempting to realize ends but on the actor rationally assessing his situation. The radical positivist scheme involves '... thinking of the actor as knowing the condition of his action ...' [1937a:364]. Durkheim's peculiarity is that he attempts '... to extend the "rationalistic" schema of scientific methodology from the conditions of action involved in heredity and non-social environment to the social as well' [1937a:359]. Parsons' criticisms of this have been noted above but here it is the model of the actor which is of relevance. Parsons can be seen as asking: what does sociologistic positivism's stress on social conditions, on society as an environment to the actor, imply for its model of the actor and his action?

It means first of all that such social conditions stand as 'facts' to the actor:

> 'Now, as Durkheim himself states, the distinguishing characteristic of the empirical element is its objectivity, its independence of the subjective inclinations, sentiments or desires of the observer. A fact is a fact whether we like it or not.

> As he says it offers "resistance" to any alteration on the part of the observer. A fact is precisely distinguished by the criteria of exteriority and constraint - it is from scientific methodology that these criteria have been derived' [1937a: 348].

Secondly, it means that the social environment influences action 'through the medium of the actor's objective knowledge of it' [1937a:365]. 'Action is thought of as determined by the social factor, through the medium of men's rational, scientifically verifiable knowledge of their own milieu social, of the "social reality"' [1937a:360].

This again is the rather perplexing step in Parsons' thinking noted above in connection with Pareto and radical individualistic positivism. He seems consistently to suggest that in so far as the actor's knowledge is scientific then to say that such knowledge is a cause of action is to say that the object of that knowledge determines the action. Here the same idea occurs again in Parsons' comments on Durkheim 'collective representation'.

> 'The phenomena of the external world are "reflected" in the mind of the scientist in systems of data and concepts. These are his "representations" of the external world. Durkheim's famous category of representations is undoubtedly simply a name for the scientists

> subjective experience of the phenomena of the external world. Then according to the schema already thoroughly discussed, in so far as action is determined by a rational process, by the facts of the external world, such as those of heredity and environment, it will, as analysed from the subjective point of view, appear as determined by the actor's representations of the external world, in exactly the same sense as that in which Pareto spoke of action, so far as it is "logical" being determined by a "process of reasoning", a scientific theory' [1937a:359].

However perplexing this might be it is crucial for the next two points. For the third implication of the positivistic position is the model of the actor as solely a cognitive ego. At several points Parsons takes issue with Gehlke's attribution of a 'falsely rationalistic psychology' to Durkheim [1937a:360]. To Parsons this is not a rationalistic psychology but a manifestation of the 'cognitive bias' [1937a:360] of radical positivism.

> 'The emphasis on representations is not the result of a psychological rationalism, but is inherent in the peculiar structure of the conceptual scheme with which Durkheim is operating. For it is basically a cognitive

> scheme; what is important is the actor's knowledge of the situation of his action' [1937a:366].

The implication of this cognitive scheme is that the positivist '... thinks in terms of the passive, adaptive, receptive attitude embodied in the ideal of an empirical scientist' [1937a:397]. It is in this context that Parsons makes the following statement:

> 'The attitude of the scientist is essentialy that of the observer; he is concerned with <u>given</u> phenomena. It is true that modern scientific methodology has become sufficiently sophisticated to realize that the scientist is more than a purely passive mirror of the external world, a photographic plate. Scientific investigation is itself a process of action; it is the pursuit, not of knowledge in the abstract, but of particular knowledge of particular things. With reference to data it is a selective process, selection being determined both, as has been seen, by the structure of theoretical systems and by extra scientific considerations. But nevertheless the aim of science is to reduce to a minimum the elements which do not lie in the facts themselves. Its development approaches an

> asymptote where they are eliminated. The concept of fact, as involving constraint, resistance to everything except its own intrinsic nature, is fundamental to science. In this sense the orientation of the scientist is, in the nature of the case, passive' [1937a:369].

This is continued a step further when Parsons, referring to Durkheim's post-positivistic stage, says:

> 'No longer is the analysis of action from the subjective point of view in terms of an exclusively cognitive scheme, that of positive science, admissable. A whole new field, that of attitudes, emotions and the like is opened up. The ego is no longer merely a photographic plate, a registry of facts pertaining to the external world' [1937a:388].

Finally, if the actor is but an ego, what of his action. It consists of the actor's passive adaption to given conditions.

> 'Action becomes merely a process of adaption to a set of conditions' [1937a:369].

> 'Instead of the phenomena of the external world being capable of use as means to the realization of an end or, at worst, limitations on action, they are thought of as the direct determinants of action. Hence, particularly from the point of view of the actor, the catchword becomes "adaption"' [1937a:371].

Parsons rejection of the concept of social conditions then is based on a far more fundamental rejection of what he takes to be the model of the actor and conception of action in the positivist tradition. It has been noted that Durkheim's positivism rests on the subjective point of view. Yet in the final analysis this proves an impossible position, Durkheim breaks out of the positivist mould. From the preceding discussion it can be seen why this is so. It is impossible because of the concept of the actor as only an observer and passive adaptor to the external world. Then to Parsons if subjective categories are to be preserved it is necessary to posit the actor as a being who is more than an observer, to act is to do more than react. This is at root the meaning of Parsons' dichotomy of the subjective and objective points of view. Manifestly this is a contrast between the scientific observer's account of action and the meaning of action to the participant [1937a:46, 187]. But it is more significantly a contrast between two models of the participant, the human being as observer and as actor. Parsons' phraseology at one point departs from his norm and suggests just this, he says:

> '... the distinction between objective and subjective in the special senses of "from the point of view of an outside observer" and "from the point of view of the person thought of as acting"' [1937a:345].

It is the phrase thought of as acting which is being stressed here. For a theory to adopt the subjective point of view it must conceive of men as acting, not in the sense that men attribute meaning to their actions but that men struggle to achieve ends and norms which require will and effort not passive submission to the forces of the bio-physical world. The phrase 'the subjective point of view of the actor' is a synonym for the voluntaristic metaphysic outlined above.

4. Conclusion.

A number of points from the above discussion can now be brought together. Firstly, concepts which refer to the actor's state of mind are analytical, they are general properties of action. Secondly, such concepts must embody the voluntaristic metaphysic which has been found to lie at the heart of Parsons' stress on the point of view of the actor. Thirdly, these concepts refer to the properties of action systems and finally they are structural properties; the state of mind is an orderly organization of elements.

If we begin with the most fundamental subjective elements of action; end and norm, their very definition displays the voluntarism outlined above. Both end and norms are defined by contrast to the situation. Indeed this applies vice versa: an act '... must be initiated in a "situation" of which the trends of development differ in one or more respects from the state of affairs to which the action is oriented, the end' [1937a:44]. Conversely, as has been noted already, the end refers to a future state of affairs insofar as it differs from such a situational trend of development. 'The concept end always implies a future reference, to a state which is either not yet in existence, and which would not come into existence if something were not done about it by the actor or, if already existence, would not remain unchanged.' [1937a:45].

Similarlywith the concept of norm:

> '... in the choice of alternative means to the end, in so far as the situation allows alternatives, there is a "normative orientation" of action. Within the area of control of the actor, the means employed cannot, in general, be conceived either as chosen at random or as dependent exclusively on the conditions of action, but must in some sense be subject to the influence of an independent, determinate selective factor...' [1937a:45].

Note that the norm is a determinate factor, a causal property of actions. Further it is by definition independent of the situation. This conveys the dualism of the normative and the conditional but not their conflict, indeed Parsons says that the norm only operates as an element 'in so far as the situation allows alternatives'. But if we remember that the norm determines action in the selection of means to ends which are, as has been noted, distinct from situational trends then this aspect of voluntarism soon returns.

In the pages of The Structure of Social Action Parsons builds onthese two fundamental subjective elements in three ways. The concepts of end and norm are elaborated in the sense of being differentiated into types of end and norm. (See especially [1937a:250-64, 698-719]). The ends of action can be either immediate or ultimate and each of these is sub-divided. Wealth and power form two classes of immediate ends whilst ultimate ends can be either empirical or transcendental. The concept of norm refers to the relationship of means to ends but it can be either intrinsic, the norm of rationality, or a symbolic means-end relationship in which the means function not as a cause of the end but as an expression of the evaluative meaning of the end. The norm of rationality is further differentiated into technological, economic and political sub-elements and a similar process is suggested for the symbolic norm. Here ritual, institutional, artistic and playful expressions of values are mentioned.

Despite the fact that this elaboration of the elements of the actor's state of mind is none too explicit one main purpose of the book seems to be to identify them. In opening his concluding chapter Parsons says 'Above all, the main concern here has been with the definition of structural elements' [1937a: 727]. He continues 'This has naturally involved a great deal of reference to their mutual interrelations' [1937a:727]. Although Parsons adds that this question has not been investigated systematically it can be viewed as the second way in which Parsons develops the fundamental concepts describing the actor's state of mind. That is, the task is to investigate the organization of these elements to constitute structures of action.

Finally, the basic concepts of end and norms are properties of unit acts, the discrete act of a discrete individual actor. As was noted in chapter II the elaboration of these elements occurs in the context of considering the properties of more complex systems of action. This does not mean that the notion of a state of mind refers to a 'system' or 'group mind'. Rather it refers to the minds of actors as personalities and as members of groups. Emergent elements of action are dependent upon complexs of acts.

To conclude this section then, the subjectivity of action is continuously and frequently stressed by Parsons. It is expressed in terms of the phrase 'the subjective point of view of the actor'. This suggests an understanding of subjectivity in Weberian terms, that is, in terms of the subjective meaning of action to the actor. However, it has been suggested that this sense of subjectivity plays a relatively minor part in Parsons' thinking, on what he calls the concrete level of

application of the action schema, the purpose of which is descriptive. This is contrasted with subjectivity on the analytical, explanatory level where the phrase the subjective point of view of the actor has an entirely different meaning. This has two aspects. The term subjective connotes the state of mind of the actor, a concept developed by contrast with theories stressing objective or situational determinants of human behaviour, and understood as a structure of causal properties. The term actor is to be understood as expressing Parsons' voluntaristic metaphysic particular in polemical contrast to what he understands to be the positivistic model of man as observer. The point of view of the actor is the point of view of a theory presupposing that men are more than observers, that they actively struggle toward ends and norms.

This discussion began by setting Parsons approach to subjectivity in the context of the scepticism as to the possibility of a science of action on the part of the idealistic and positivistic traditions of thought. It was suggested that the two main planks of Parsons attempt to breach the gap between science and action with reference to the problem of subjectivity were a voluntaristic metaphysic and an anti-empiricist, analytical, conception of science. What do these planks amount to? In voluntarism we have the antagonistic unity of the idealistic mind and the positivistic body but this is incorporated into analytical elements. The point is that rather than the two sides of the dualism conceptualizing two orders of concrete reality they are

understood as properties of the same reality. Parsons attempts to break through the dichotomy of man and nature by transforming what were, in terms of his discussion, concrete things, into such analytical elements. Yet the victory is a Pyrrhic one, for in the process of bringing it into being what to the present writer is the cornerstone of a science of action, the meaningful nature of action (and indeed of science) has been lost sight of.

C. Normative Determinism:

1. Preliminaries

In what has been said above frequent reference has been made to norms, ends and knowledge as 'causes', 'determinants' or 'factors' of action. As in the case of the notion of subjectivity the question of causality is traditionally a vexed question in the methodological problems of a science of action. In what sense are norms or ends 'causes' of actions as 'effects'? This constitutes the problem for this part of the discussion, it will be referred to as the problem of "normative determinism". This will be discussed by raising a number of linked questions and investigating Parsons' reactions to them. It should be noted that these questions are taken from Parsons' text rather than being imposed by the present author. This is particularly significant for what is crucial to this discussion is the way that Parsons poses the problems of normative determinism. This gives the following pages their theme. The main claim to be

put forward is that Parsons consistently regards what can be construed as methodological problems as substantive problems which presuppose that the methodological aspect of normative determinism is non-problematical.

2. 'Natural' and 'social' causation.

As a starting point attention can be drawn to a distinction Parsons makes between what he calls 'naturalistic' and 'social' causation. This is employed in his discussion of the positivistic Durkheim where Parsons refers to '... the tendency of Durkheim at this stage to assimilate social to "naturalistic" causation' [1937a:375]. Again when speaking of Durkheim breaking through the impasse of his sociologistic positivism Parsons says 'The decisive step was the distinction of social constraint from naturalistic causation' [1937a:709]. It should be noted that discussion of this distinction cannot be taken very far, as it is not explicitly elaborated upon by Parsons. However it can serve as a useful starting point to open up the present field of inquiry.

There seems to be two bases for the distinction of natural and social causation. They can be distinguished as different types of causes, natural and social. Here by natural is meant the objective determinants of action already mentioned, the elements of heredity and environment. Conversely the term social is a synonym for subjective or normative causes. But

secondly the distinction between natural and social causation involves a further contrast which goes much further than a mere classification of different kinds of causes. The distinction rests rather on the difference in the character of the relationship between cause and effect. In the simplest terms natural causes have an 'automatic' effect on action, social a 'non-automatic' effect. However such a statement is too simple and requires immediate qualification. Firstly, whilst natural causes can act automatically they can be involved in the non-automatic relationship. This will be discussed later in the context of the place of the norm of rationality. Secondly, it is self-evident that in the above formulation social causation is defined residually, as a non-automatic relationship. Quite what it means in positive terms is problematical.

This linking up of the natural and the automatic and the social with the non-automatic has already been noted in the discussion of voluntarism. One of the ways in which Parsons distinguishes between his voluntaristic theory of action and its positivistic/idealistic antecedents is that in different ways both of the latter conceive the relation of norm and action as an automatic one. Of the positivistic case he says: '... the norm is a mere manifestation, in the index sense, of the real forces governing action, but has no causal significance at all. Action is then an automatic process' [1937a:251].

Conversely for the idealist '... the mere existence of the norm, that is, its recognition by the actor as binding, implies automatic conformity with it' [1937a:251]. This same contrast reoccurs when we come back to the case of Durkheim. Parsons remarks: 'But on a "social" level this implication of the constraint of rules as acting on the individual simply like a physical force does not seem adequate' [1937a:379]. The source of this inadequacy is specified in terms of the consequence of violation of natural and social constraints such as a rule of health and a rule of law respectively. To violate a rule of health, by refraining from eating for example, involves '"natural" consequences', 'an automatic consequence': 'Violation of a rule of health carries its own consequences automatically without human intervention' [1937a:379].

Now no attempt will be made here to inquire into the details of the term 'automatic' and its opposite. Rather this distinction is best regarded as a form of imagery which sets the direction in terms of which Parsons construes the problems of normative determinism. The relation of cause and effect in the social sciences is an <u>indirect</u> relationship, some mediating link between cause and effect must be introduced (10). This is not exactly stated by Parsons but his references to the automatic - non-automatic contrast in distinguishing natural and social causation permit this interpretation. From the earlier discussion it will be remembered that Parsons' preoccupation is with analytical elements of action, these are the causal factors

relevant to this discussion. The indirect relationship then is between such general properties of action systems and the actual actions of human beings in association with each other. The question then is what is the mediating link between causes on the analytical level and the actual behaviour that is the effect of such causes? In the context of the above discussion of Durkheim Parsons says '... it is precisely the fact that it is an expression of human will that distinguishes social from natural constraint' [1937a:380]. This will be examined further below. At the moment what is relevant is that it can be interpreted to mean that between the analytical elements which constitute the state of mind and function as causal factors in Parsons' theory and the actual action he places the actor in a concrete sense, pursuing his more or less conscious ends by reference to more or less explicit rules. So when discussing the problems of normative determinism the point of reference is the concrete actor and his relationship to meaningful norms, ends and knowledge. But, this must be put into the above context, the concrete and the meaningful as mediating links in the causation of action by analytical elements.

It should be stated that the above paragraph is largely interpretative on the present writer's part and cannot be directly confirmed by reference to Parsons' text. However it is hoped that the subsequent discussion will serve to justify this interpretation in an indirect way.

3. Causal and meaningful relationships.

So far this discussion of normative determinism has been confined to introductory suggestions to give some direction to the main body of these remarks. We can now move on to take up more specific and positive points of argument. The first such topic is whether the relationship between a norm or end and an actual course of action is a 'causal' or 'meaningful' relationship. The question which is often raised is whether the norm-action relationship is one of cause and effect. Doubt has been cast on this on such grounds as the teleological status of the norm as compared to the logical necessity of a cause being antecedent to the effect, the absence of constant contingency between norm and action which further leads to difficulties in subsuming the relationship under a universal law. On the basis of such arguments an alternative relationship, sometimes called the meaningful is said to hold between norm and action. It is pertinant to note here that this distinction lies on the methodological plane, it involves questions which relate to the logical justification underlying matters of empirical research.

Parsons recognises the distinction as a methodological question in his discussion of idealism [1937a:481-6]. In his presentation the duality of causality and meaning roots in the Kantian dualism of two 'orders of reality', the natural world of phenomena and the ideal world of noumena [1937a:481-4]. The methodological dualism grows out of this ontology: [1937a:484-5]. Parsons' remarks are summarised when he says:

> 'Positivistic thought has always directed its efforts to the uncovering of intrinsic causal relationships in the phenomena; idealistic thought to the discovery of relations of meanings of Sinnzusammenhang. With this difference has gone that of method - on the one hand, causal theoretical explanation, on the other, interpretation of meaning, Sinndentung, which has seen in the concrete facts of its field symbols, the meanings of which are to be interpreted. The order and system of social phenomena has been a meaningful, not a causal order at all' [1937a:486].

So here Parsons refers to the problem in methodological terms, is the relation of norm and action one of cause and effect or one of meaning and symbol? However, in the body of The Structure of Social Action the problem is transformed quite dramatically. The distinction between cause and effect and meaning-symbol relations is not, in the first place at least, a methodological question but a matter of two types of normative orientation employed by actors in the selection of means to ends. In other words the dualism is converted into an empirical-theoretical question. It is empirical in the sense that it refers to two types of norms employed by actors but it is theoretical in that these two types are understood by Parsons as analytical elements

of action. The latter point should be borne in mind throughout this discussion.

The principal of causality is embodied in what Parsons calls the norm of intrinsic rationality. The concept of rationality is employed solely as a norm: a standard or criterion of the selection of means to ends. Then:

> 'Action is rational insofar as it pursues ends possible within the conditions of the situation, and by means which, among those available to the actor, are intrinsically best adapted to the end for reasons understandable and verifiable by positive empirical science' [1937a:58].

To attain an end means are selected by reference to their adaptiveness or efficiency. The criterion of such efficiency is whether the means are intrinsically linked to the end in scientific terms. That is, whether to act in a given way will cause a given effect, the end to be attained: '... the means-end relationship is intrinsic, ... the means will bring about the end by processes of scientifically understandable causation' [1937a:430] (See also [1937a:211, 799]).

In many ways the meaning-symbol relationship is defined residually, at one point Parsons notes that there may well be a number of sub-types [1937a:258]. The central point here is that the norm does not embody intrinsic, causal relationships

between the course of action and the end to be attained. So at a number of points Parsons contrasts the two norms in these terms:

> 'The term, the "symbolic means-end relationship" will be used wherever the relation of means and ends can convincingly be interpreted by the observer as involving a standard of selection of means according to "symbolic appropriateness", that is, a standard of the order of symbol and meaning, not of cause and effect' [1937a:258].

The idea of meaningful relationships then becomes a second type of norm by reference to which means are selected to attain ends. In this case the relation is not between the action (the employment of means) as causing the end as effect. Rather the action symbolizes the meaning of the end to be attained. To perform a given ritual is an appropriate symbol of the religious end, worshipping God. The relationship is not one of causal efficacy, indeed it is arbitrary from this point of view, but of conventional appropriateness. [1937a:258, 416].

Here then is the clear expression of the dualism of causal and meaningful relationships but incorporated into a distinctly non-methodological context. The question is not whether the student of action should or can employ causal/meaningful relations in his account of action but whether the actor can be regarded as employing causal or meaningful standards in his action.

As such the methodological problem of whether or not norms or ends cause action seems to have been lost. However this is not just a matter of ommission, rather Parsons' attention is focused on a different methodological problem which arises out of his own analytical approach and is perhaps somewhat idiosyncratic to it.

4. Norms as 'mediating links'

To understand this we must firstly refer back to the idea of a non-automatic, indirect relationship between cause and effect which was mentioned above. This relation holds between analytical elements of action and actual actions. The norms of rationality and symbolic appropriateness are such elements of action. However Parsons appears to draw a distinction between these two norms and what he refers to as the ultimate values and conditions as causal elements of action. Then, still on the level of analytical elements, the norms of rationality and symbolic appropriateness constitute two mechanisms by which empirical and non-empirical realities, ultimate conditions and values, are related to, that is, cause, action. The methodological problem then, as Parsons sees it, is not whether norms are causally or meaningfully related to action but the role of norms in forming a 'mediating link' (my term) between ultimate empirical conditions and ultimate non-empirical values and action. This is what the next few pages seek to establish. The major sources in The Structure of Social Action of the following argument are the section of chapter six entitled 'The non-logical aspect of social systems' and the section of chapter eleven entitled 'Religious ideas'.

To begin with the relationship between the empirical conditions of action and the action itself [1937a:252-4]. As has already been mentioned the conditions of action are constituted by the bio-physical world of heredity and environment. Parsons outlines two ways in which these elements are related to action. The two are discriminated according to whether or not the actor 'takes account' of the conditional world in a <u>scientifically correct</u> manner. In the first place the actor does not fulfill this condition, he either fails entirely to take account of the conditions of his action or his understanding is deficient in scientific terms. Thus Parsons refers to this type of causal influence as '... the role of drives to which the subjective aspect of action is irrelevant or at most important as a secondary manifestation' [1937a:253]. The example given is the effects of air-pressure changes on the bodies of men working under high pressure conditions. If the change in pressure is too rapid the painful, sometimes fatal, condition known as 'the bends' will result. If this is indeed the result then it can be assumed that the bio-physical world had a direct effect on action, either the actor was ignorant of the effects of air-pressure changes on the human body or his understanding was in error. In the latter case the actor's understanding of the bio-physical world cannot constitute a medium through which <u>that world</u> influenced his action.

However if the actor takes account of his conditions in a scientifically verifiable way then this forms the second mode of influence of conditions on action. The following example is given:

> 'The first type of influence is sufficiently exemplified in the way in which a mountain climber adapts himself to the nature of the terrain he is traversing at the time. He will go at a different gait according to the grade, the more steeply it goes up, in general, the more slowly he will go; he will use different techniques and take different precautions according to whether he is on rocks or on snow and ice. It is not maintained that no other factors are involved, for instance in slowing up on a steep grade the automatic physiological effect of the greater strain put on the heart, lungs and muscles is involved, but in addition to this there is, as stated in terms of the action schema, a process of taking account of the facts of the situation' [1937a:253].

It should be remembered that we are here concerned with the causation of action by its empirical conditions. In this mode of causation, however, the norm of rationality comes into play. For this is what a scientifically verifiable taking account of the facts amounts to. Now here we have the situation which has been mentioned a number of times in the above discussion, the conditions of action and the actor's knowledge of those conditions. It might be thought that there

are two different types of causal influence but as has been noted Parsons consistently treats the two as interchangeable, amounting to one form of causation. This is despite the fact that the actor's scientific knowledge makes a difference to the course the action would have taken had the actor not had such knowledge, [1937a:254] a fact which justifies the two modes of causation by the bio-physical world. This is because of the status of the actor's knowledge in the case in hand. It stands as a correct account of the given facts of the external world, a reflection of that world.

> 'Their [heredity and environment] effects may, of course, be studied from the objective point of view, but they are also relevant to the subjective point of view. Here, however, they may, in one relation appear as "reflections" of an external reality, as "facts" of the external world in so far as the subjective aspect is considered as a "theory". To the actor they are "given", they are independent of his subjective "sentiments". This independence, on which all methodologists of positive science have laid stress, becomes, in the context of action, "resistence" to the "arbitrary" will of the actor. They are things he must take account of as necessary conditions of his action' [1937a:252].

The consequence of such knowledge for action has been discussed above under the heading of the positivistic model of the actor, the actor passively adapts to the realities of life. So rather than knowledge forming an independent causal influence the possession of scientific knowledge of the bio-physical world in itself only reinforces the causal influence of that world on action. It is in this way then that the norm of rationality constitutes a mediating link between the conditions of action and action itself.

We will now turn to the relationship between ultimate values and action. At various points Parsons refers to the idea of 'ultimate value attitudes' describing them in terms of their vagueness, indeterminacy, imprecision and breadth [1937a: 255, 458]. These terms apply to the characteristics of value attitudes but unfortunately they also apply to Parsons' concept as well. We will return to the qualities of vagueness etc., in a moment, but first the concept itself must be clarified. This can be done by referring to Parsons' discussion of Durkheim's approach to religious ideas because to Parsons 'The fundamental sociological importance of religious ideas lies in the fact that it is primarily in them that the intellectual formulation, partly determinant, part expression, of the cognitive basis of common ultimate-value attitudes is to be found' [1937a:426]. Crudely then, in society religious ideas function to intellectually formulate ultimate value attitudes, which is the task here.

The distinguishing quality of religion is that it 'has to do with sacred things' and it is the quality of sacredness which Parsons makes the focus of his discussion. Part of Durkheim's critique of alternative theories of religion rested on their failure to account for the sacred character of religious objects. These theories attempted to explain religious ideas in terms of the intrinsic properties of sacred objects. This was very much the root of their failure, for the source of sacredness lies outside the object itself. The object is to be regarded as a symbol of something else, the quality of sacredness derives from the thing symbolised. Then the problem of sacredness becomes a problem of locating 'the other term of the symbolic relationship' [1937a:416]. Durkheim's answer to this problem is, of course, that it is society which is symbolised in religious ideas. However to Parsons it is here that the crucial point of interpretation arises. Is Durkheim working in terms of a positivistic conception of action? If this is the case then if religious ideas are not merely illusions, which Durkheim insists they are not, then they must be ideas about, representations of, an <u>empirical</u> reality. As such they refer to aspects of experience capable of observation and analysis in terms of science. Whilst Parsons admits that this is one strand in Durkheim's argument he insists that this is a survival of a mode of thought which Durkheim has transcended. The alternative interpretation put forward by Parsons is that religious ideas refer to '... aspects of "reality" significant to human life and experience, yet outside the range of scientific

observation and analysis' [1937a:421]. That is, to non-empirical aspects of 'reality'.

> 'It will be noted that the "reality" which would then constitute the symbolic reference of religious ideas has been defined only negatively, as a residual category. It is non-empirical. .... All that is required positively is the proposition that the situation of man as actor is such that orientation to the non-empirical aspects of the universe, of his life and experience is significant. It cannot be laid aside as an "unknowable" and "forgotten" [1937a:422].

This then is the first characteristic of value-attitudes, they are attitudes towards, beliefs about, non-empirical entities.

The second is that they are 'active' attitudes, so that Parsons defines religious ideas as

> '... those ideas men hold relative to aspects of their life and environment which are to them unknown and thought to be unknowable by the ordinary procedures of positive science or the corresponding common-sense empiricism, and toward which they are under the necessity of taking up an active attitude' [1937a:424].

Parsons does not say much about the 'active attitude' other than describing it as 'the impulse to "do something"' [1937a: 432]. 'These active attitudes imply the necessity of "doing something" about the situation in which they occur' [1937a: 431-2]. However from these brief remarks it would seem that value attitudes constitute the source, the 'springs to action' of Parsons' voluntaristic model of man.

Finally, as was mentioned earlier value attitudes are characteristically 'vague and indeterminate'. This then forms their third feature which must be elaborated on a little. Value attitudes are vague and indeterminate because they constitute the source of pluralities of ends and norms, of different types and of different men. They form the 'nucleus' [1937a:267] of the whole complex of normative elements. As such imprecision is a constituent characteristic. But as a consequence they do not bear a direct relation to action, this would be the idealist's 'emanation' of values. Rather value attitudes are 'expressed' [1937a:260, 271] or 'manifested' [1937a:297] in the ultimate ends and norms of action. This brings the discussion back to its main thread, the role of the two norms, of rationality and symbolic appropriateness, in mediating between value attitudes and action itself.

A norm, it will be remembered, forms the link between means and ends in that it represents a standard by which alternative means to ends are evaluated and selected. In the

case of the norm of rationality this standard is the efficacy of means as causes of ends as effects. Now the end of action may be intermediate or ultimate, that is, either it may be a link in a chain of means and ends, to attain an end is to provide means to attain a further end or an end can represent the terminus of such a chain, it is not significant as a further means but as desirable in itself. However, this quality of ultimate ends, that they are desirable, cannot be derived from the empirical world of means and conditions. An ultimate end is a rationalization of value attitudes, their specification as a future state of affairs to be attained. The fact that an ultimate end stands at the terminus of a chain of means and ends linked by their intrinsic causal connections alters the whole complexity of the norm of rationality as so far discussed. The norm of rationality is still, of course, a medium between conditions and action, but now, rather than action being a passive adaption to the world it becomes the active adaption of conditions to ultimate ends. Then as Parsons neatly expresses the matter at one point '... these active attitudes are ... oriented "backwards" over the intrinsic means-end chain ...' [1937a:433]. The norm of rationality is not only a medium by which empirical conditions influence action but also an expression of active value attitudes.

For the norm of rationality to apply, however, the ultimate end must be an 'empirical' end. That is, for the relationship of means and ends to be understandable as a relationship of cause and effect the end must be an empirically observable state of affairs. But ultimate ends may be

'transcendental', that is a future state of affairs not capable of empirical observation, Parsons example is 'eternal salvation' [1937a:257]. Here as the relation of means and ends is not capable of verification in scientific terms the norm of rationality is inapplicable. The alternative is the norm of symbolic appropriateness. Means are selected to attain a transcendental end by reference to a criterion other than their causal efficacy, rather, in terms of certain conventions, the means adopted are appropriate symbols of the transcendental end. The question is the grounds for 'appropriateness' in the case of religious ritual, the source of 'sacredness'. To Parsons the transcendental ends and the norm of symbolic appropriateness are expressions of value attitudes which provide the rationale and justification for 'appropriateness'.

> 'In these terms, then, it may be said that action involving transcendental ends and ritual may be regarded for certain purposes as "expressions"... of ultimate value attitudes. That is, their relation to the causative factor is as a symbolic mode of expression....' [1937a: 259].

Note here that the ultimate value attitudes are described as 'the causative factor'. The norm of symbolic appropriateness again constitute a medium between the non-empirical world of

value-attitudes and the action itself.

The above discussion can be set in terms of the positivism-idealism dichotomy which, as was noted above, provides the context out of which Parsons raises the duality of causal and meaningful relationships. To the radical positivist the empirical, bio-physical world 'causes' action, to the radical idealist action is a symbolic 'emanation' of value attitudes. Parsons is dissatisfied with both these formulations, in essence he makes the relation of the two orders of reality to action an indirect one, mediated by norms. This then alters the methodological problem entirely. Cause and meaning form two types of mediating link between the biophysical world/the world of value attitudes and action.

> 'It has already appeared in the course of the present analysis of action that at least two modes of relation of "ideal" elements to the spatial and temporal aspects of experience are significant to action, whatever others further analysis might disclose. Normative elements may, that is, be related to action and thought, first, in an intrinsic context and, secondly as one term of a symbolic relation' [1937a:483].

To conclude this present phase of the discussion it is important to note that the two types of norms are, like ultimate values and conditions, analytical elements of action. So far then the discussion has been on the analytical level, within the structural organization of elements, we have yet to take up how such analytical concepts of norms 'cause' action.

5. The problem of 'manifestation'

The latter problem can be taken up in the context of a discussion of the term 'manifestation'. This has already been mentioned, the norms of rationality and symbolic appropriateness as manifesting ultimate conditions and values. In this sense the problem lies in the structure of the actor's state of mind or orientation system, analytically conceived. This is not the sense of manifestation which is of relevance now. Rather we are now concerned with the manifestation of analytical elements in the actor's concrete ends, norms and knowledge. It will be remembered that the latter are more or less meaningful to the actor as a purposive, reasoning, self-conscious being. The problem then is how far and in what sense norms, ends and knowledge which are meaningful to the actor can be said to be 'manifestations' of analytical, causal, elements of action. This is most explicitly discussed by Parsons on pages 269-273 of The Structure of Social Action. Here he is concerned with the relation of non-scientific theories to action [1937a:269].

Two points are clear throughout the argument. Firstly, the theories in question are the actor's theories but secondly the causal problem lies in the relationship of analytical elements, the 'real determinant forces' [1937a:270], and overt action.

This 'is a highly complex problem' on two counts. Firstly, the term manifestation has two meanings: the actor's theory can manifest a causal element either as an 'index' or as an 'adequate expression'. Secondly the causal elements involved can be either the external world of heredity and environment or the subjective state of mind of the actor.

We will begin with the cases where the actor's theory manifests causal elements in the sense of standing as an index of those elements. In the first case the elements manifested are the objective elements of heredity and environment. Here the actor's theory is an inaccurate account of the external world, it involves 'erroneous observation of fact and sophistic reasoning from the observation' [1937a:270]. The question here is what is the relevance of such theories to the causation of action? Parsons says:

> 'In so far as the non-logicality of a theory is of this character the tendency is, as has been seen, to regard its meaningful aspect as irrelevant and to interpret the theory itself as a "manifestation" in the sense of an "index" of something else. Then the "real forces" of action are not expressed in the theory, but the latter is like a veil covering them, which it is the business of the sociologist to tear away. In this sense the forces manifested in

> the theories turn out to be the "non-meaningful" categories of heredity and environment' [1937a:270].

That is, the actor's theory is irrelevant to the causation problem. In terms of a scientific investigation of the causes of action the practical result is to 'debunk' [1937a:270] the actor's theories and conclude that '... they are not in themselves important but are secondary phenomena significant only as "thermometer readings"'. [1937a:270]. The actor's theory does not itself play a part in the causation of action, it stands rather as itself an effect of the real determining forces, an index in the same way as a thermometer is an index of heat.

In the second case, the actor's theory as manifesting subjective elements in the sense of standing as an index of those elements the argument is more or less the same. Rather than the actor's theory involving ignorance and error we have '... an element of "indeterminacy" in the relation between residue and sentiment, between logically formulated and [actor's theory] and value attitude [subjective element] ' [1937a:271]. Then '... the theory is not a fully adequate expression of the real forces of action even the value factors, because of its indeterminacy. In so far as this is true it is not possible to take the theory at its face value ...' [1937a:272-3].
So again the actor's theory is of no relevance to the causal problem.

The picture changes when we turn to the second sense of manifestation, when the actor's theory is an 'adequate expression' of the real forces governing action. For this to be the case vis-a-vis the objective elements the theory must be cast in terms of statements of fact about empirically observable phenomena and state relationships between such empirical facts in terms of cause and effect. It has already been noted that such theories on the one hand adequately express the causal elements of action whilst on the other hand function as a medium via which those causal elements in fact cause action. The relevant point here is that a link is thus established between the cause of action on the analytical level and the actor's concrete knowledge, norms and ends. This point is of particular significance in the last case, the actor's theory as an adequate expression of the subjective causal elements of his action.

In this case the actor's theory cannot be stated in scientific terms. The entities involved such as ultimate transcendental ends cannot be empirically observed and their relationships cannot be stated in terms of cause and effect. However this is not a function of the irrelevance of the theory but the logico-experimental standard:

> 'But the residue, the principle, is an expression of the value attitudes underlying it. It is more than an index, it embodies in its meaning at least certain aspects of these value-attitudes. In its relation to action it stands in the normative relation of a logically formulated end or rule which in the limiting case is a completely adequate expression of the real forces' [1937a:271].

Now the pressing problem here is the basis by which Parsons can discriminate between the actor's theory as an index or an adequate expression of subjective causal elements. The criterion seems to be the degree of 'logical formulation'. Insofar as the actor's theory is a logical formulation of the subjective element then it adequately expresses that element. Insofar as it does not then there is a degree of 'indeterminacy' in the relation between the actor's theory and the causal elements which means that the former is to be treated as an index of the latter. This seems a particularly vague and unworkable position but this is not the point at issue here. Rather two emergent points should be noted.

Firstly, the distinction between the two senses of manifestation in the case of subjective elements is not a mutually exclusive dichotomy, but a continuum, a matter of degree. At one pole, or limiting case, as Parsons expresses it, the actor's

theory is an adequate expression, at the other pole an index. But most will lie in between. Secondly, in so far as an actor's theory adequately expresses the causal elements a link is established between analytical elements and the actor's norms, ends and knowledge.

> 'Insofar as these [nonlogical] theories attain the norm of rigorous logical formulation according to their own standards they may be regarded as "adequately expressing" these subjective forces, or, for practical purposes as interchangeable with them. That is, action may be regarded as determined by the theory, the "process of reasoning", in the same sense as is true of logical action' [1937a:272].

This is important in the context of the present discussion for two reasons. In the first place it means that attention can now turn to the relation between concrete norms and ends and action on the above basis, that such phenomena are to some degree adequate expressions of the 'real, determinant forces'. Secondly, the actor's concrete norms etc., form an essential link in the causal chain. In the case of action involving scientific knowledge of the bio-physical world the degree and accuracy of that knowledge makes a difference to the action. Similarly for action involving non-scientific knowledge of ends and norms, the actor's under-

standing of a norm, the manner in which he pursues ends, makes a difference to the action. The causation of action by analytical elements is mediated by the actor's concrete norms, ends and knowledge.

6. The relation of concrete actors to concrete rules: the problem of control.

How then does Parsons understand the relationship between concrete norms etc., and action? To answer this question we will turn to his discussion of 'The changing meaning of constraint' in Durkheim's sociology [1937a:378-390]. Here the explicit concern is with the relationship between rules of action and the action itself, with the sense in which rules 'cause' action.(11) To Parsons the problem lies in the 'mode of relation' [1937a:386] of the actor to such rules of conduct. Further, this is to be understood in terms of the actor's 'attitude' to such rules. Parsons works in terms of a dichotomy of two types of attitude. In the first the actor's attitude is a 'morally or emotionally neutral' one of 'calculation' [1937a:380]. This of course is the positivist model of the actor discussed above, the rule is conceived as 'a phenomenon of the external situation of the acting individual' [1937a:380]. Then rules cause action in the same way as the bio-physical world. They are given facts of the external world which must be adapted to. Parsons' rejection of such a model has already been discussed. The alternative attitude to rules is that of 'moral obligation, of a specific respect toward the rule' [1937a:386]. What is the implication of this attitude for the problem of causation? The

causation of action by rules can no longer be modelled on the influence of the biophysical world via the actor's calculation of the effects of that world on him. The causal force of rules lies in their 'normative' character.

We can note four features of this concept of normative, so ubiquitous in The Structure of Social Action. The normative character of rules has, firstly, a teleological connotation, [1937a: 49] rules refer to future states of affairs. Speaking of Durkheim's collective representations Parsons says:

> 'But this something is not a contemporaneously existent observed empirical entity, but is in part a state of affairs which will come into being or be maintained in so far as the normative elements in fact determine the actual course of action. It is not a present, but a future state of affairs in the empirical world to which they refer' [1937a:389].

Parsons insists however that the future states of affairs embodied in normative rules are not just predictions as to the more or less likely course of development of the given situation. Rather, a normative rule has this teleological character because it states an ideal in the sense of desirable, state [1937a:396]. But thirdly the desirability of the course of action embodied in the rule is of a special sort. It is desirable in itself not for

any ulterior purpose. It is this which is stressed in Parsons' definitional note 'On the concept "normative"' [1937a:75], an end or norm is normative to the extent that it has the quality of being valuable in itself. This has two implications particularly relevant here which form the two sides of the moral quality of rules. Firstly, a rule states a course of action which is felt by the actor to be binding or obligatory to him [1937a: 383-4]. Secondly, the rule has a 'disciplining, controlling' quality [1937a:385]. Finally, the normative character of rules implies what Parsons calls "effort". As future, ideal, obligatory and regulating states of affairs to follow a rule is a struggle, it requires effort to be actualized. I will come back to this in a moment.

Now these aspects of the normative quality of rules are intended as empirical characteristics of the relation of the actor to such rules. The question at issue in this discussion is the methodological problem of the 'causal' relationship of norm and action. To some extent it might be thought that the above characteristics make the idea of rules as causes and actions as effects problematical. If a rule is a statement of a future state of affairs whose efficacy depends on the actor's attitude of respect is not the constant contingency of rule and action highly unlikely? This indeed is the case for Parsons but to him, the further quality of rules, the quality of 'effort' overcomes this difficulty. Parsons says that the concept of effort '... is necessitated by the fact that norms do not realize themselves automatically but only through action, so far as they are realized at all' [1937a:719].

Norms then are of causal relevance in so far as men strive to attain them. As Martel puts it, 'the key idea is that ends having strongest commitments also have greatest causal force' (1971:201). This is a point often repeated by Parsons:

> 'It may define a norm of what action, under certain assumptions should be. Such a norm may be an ideal prescription, but it may also be relevant to the causal analysis of concrete human action. It is so relevant in so far as there is empirical evidence that men do, in fact, strive to act logically, to attain the norm' [1937a: 250].
>
> 'But whether, and the degree in which it is actualized is not a question the solution of which is given in the mere existence of ideal norms as such, but remains a problem. It depends upon the effort of the individuals acting as well as upon the conditions in which they act' [1937a:396].
>
> 'In elaborating a theory for instance, there is nothing in the conditions of his situation to prevent the theorist from making a logical error - what prevents him is, rather, his effort to conform his action to the norm of logical correctness' [1937a:483].

Now all of this seems very vague, what is this thing 'effort'. This is just the point: the problem for sociology arising out of The Structure of Social Action is to open up and analyze this 'residual category' of effort which provides the (last) causal link between norm and action. But what is central here is that the nature of the problem of social causation has changed. It is no longer a methodological problem concerning the logical justification for the concept of causality. Rather it has now become a substantive, empirical problem, the problem of how rules control or constrain action. (12) Parsons' programme for the analysis of effort points to the clarification of the psychological and social mechanism by which norms control action.

On the psychological level the task is the problem of internalization, how rules '... enter directly into the constitution of the actor's ends themselves' [1937a:382], so that 'the normal concrete individual becomes a morally disciplined personality' [1937a:385], an 'individual who is integrated with a set of social norms' [1937a:387]. But is not the Parsons of The Structure of Social Action an anti-psychological thinker? Insofar as psychology is understood in terms of radical behaviourism and the hunt for 'instincts' this is the case. However in Parsons' remarks on the place of psychology he does not exclude the subject altogether but rather calls for the revision of such radically positivistic positions. Psychology '... is concerned with those elements of human nature through which man's biological

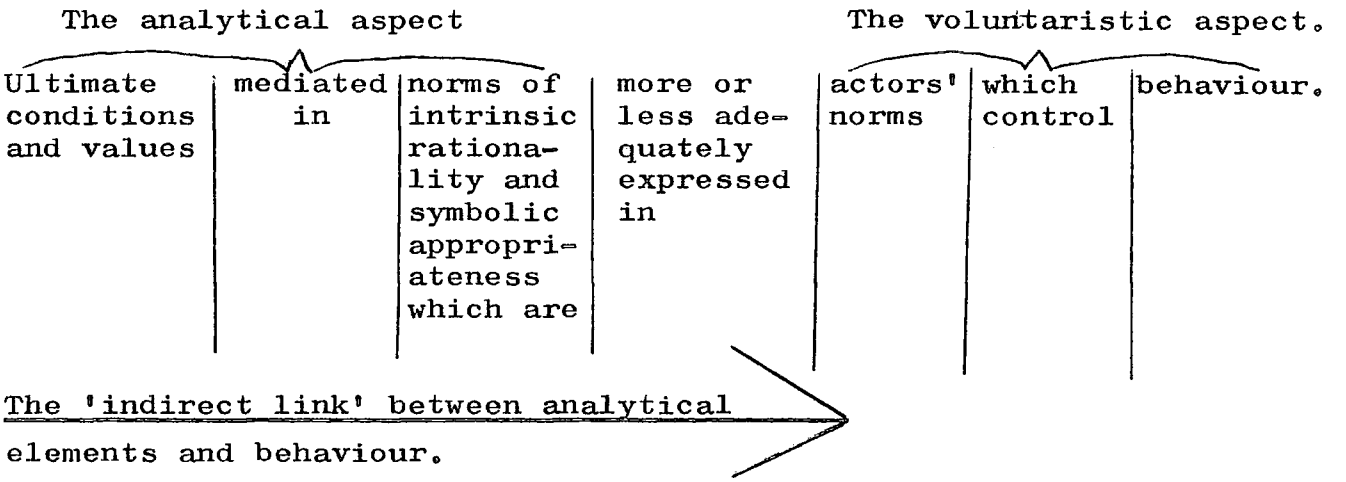
heritage is related to his purposes, ends, sentiments' [1937a: 86]. As Parsons refers to effort as 'the relating factor between the normative and the conditional elements of action [1937a: 719] psychology clearly has an important part to play. Further Parsons' comments on non-behaviouristic/instinct psychology are neither antagonistic nor inconsistent with the above. The idea of a morally disciplined personality '... means above all that the normative elements have become "internal", "subjective" to him. He becomes in a sense "identified" with them. Footnote: They are, in Freudian terminology "introjected" to form a "superego"' [1937a:386]. The thesis of convergence between Durkheim and Freud which becomes so important to Parsons' later work is clearly anticipated in The Structure of Social Action (13). To the present writer his later claim that he was largely ignorant of the Freudian approach to psychology at the time of writing this book is convincing.

Turning to the social mechanisms of effort. Again The Structure of Social Action can be seen as pointing to Parsons' work in the 1940's, in particular his functional approach. This is most evident in his discussion of Durkheim's analysis of the function of religious ritual. Parsons takes over one of Durkheim's points of reference, the consequences of ritual for the solidarity of the social group. The other point of reference of the functionalism of The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life, religion as raising the individual above his animal, organic nature, however, is somewhat changed by Parsons. The function of religious ritual for the individual is not so

much centred on the evolution of the individual as the stimulation of the individual to strive to achieve norms [1937a: 436, 440].

A summary of this discussion of the problem of normative determinism is in order here to emphasize how the problem is formulated and resolved in terms of Parsons' conception of science and voluntarism. Generally the methodological problem of causation has focused on whether the relationship of subjective entities such as norms and action can be one of causation or whether some alternative form of relationship is required, notably, a meaningful link between norm and action. Parsons is aware of this distinction but rather than treating it as a methodological problem he transforms the alternatives into two types of analytical elements, the norms of intrinsic rationality and symbolic appropriateness. This is largely because he reformulates the whole problem of normative determinism. In his thinking it has two aspects. The first has to do with the structural organization of the analytical elements. The two norms of action form a mediating link between ultimate conditions and values and the actor's actual norms. They can play this role because they are more or less manifested in the concrete actors meaningful norms of action. This is the second and voluntaristic aspect of the problem. For such a norm to have a causal influence upon actual behaviour the actor must strive to put the norm into practice. The mechanisms which determine the degree to which this is the case are unexplored in The Structure of Social Action but as such they remain to be analyzed,

a task which preoccupies Parsons in the years subsequent to the book's publication. Perhaps Parsons' understanding of the problem of normative determinism can be expressed diagramatically:



On further point can be made in conclusion. Parsons' preoccupation with conformity to social norms has often been noted, for example, in criticisms alleging his 'oversocialized conception of man'. (Wrong (1961) Coleman (1971)). The source of this preoccupation is usually ascribed to either his conservatism or his concern with the problem of social order or both. I do not want to doubt this (14) but to suggest that there is a further source of the importance of conformity in Parsons' sociology. This is the role of conformity with norms in Parsons' methodology. By refocusing the problem of normative determinism onto the substantive problem of <u>control</u> Parsons makes conformity with norms an essential requirement of a science of action. His resolution of the problem as he defines it depends upon actor's exerting effort to conform to norms.

D. The Problem of Value

My discussion of this third problem in the science of action will be brief as, since the publication of Bershady's (1973) study, it is clear that the problem of the relativity of social knowledge is crucial to Parsons' thinking. In this section I will take up an aspect of this problem not fully explored by Bershady, the place of values in knowledge and the subsequent possibility that knowledge may be relative to value. The conclusion I shall reach is essentially the same as Bershady's, the centrality of Parsons' conception of science as analytical, grounding in a scheme of universally applicable concepts, the elements of all systems of action.

The relationship of scientific knowledge and values which roots in the fact that 'man is never exclusively Homo sapiens' [1937a:743] is most explicitly discussed by Parsons in the context of Weber's principle of value relevance. As such it is, as we might expect, an epistemological discussion - Parsons notes that Weber, in his critiques of the collectivist and particularist branches of idealism, shares his rejection of empiricism. Knowledge involves the employment of general concepts. But underlying such concepts are criteria of selection which for Weber are what Parsons terms the 'subjective direction of interest of the scientist' [1937a:591]. Parsons' view is that Weber posits two directions of interest based on two selective criteria which then constitute the distinction between natural and social science. This position is rejected by Parsons [1937a:595-601]

but he does take over important aspects of Weber's ideas on the understanding that they apply to all science and on the grounds that by comparison with 'all empiricist views' they introduce an element of relativity into scientific methodology [1937a:601]. It is this which then introduces the problem of science and values in epistemological terms. The element of relativity 'raises in acute form the question of the sciences' claim to objectivity. Does it not reduce their structures of so-called knowledge to mere "manifestations of sentiments"?' [1937a:593]. The problem of relativity is raised then by Parsons accepting Weber's view that non-scientific subjective values play a selective, organizing role in science.

What are Parsons' answers to the questions of relativity he himself raises? We can note first of all that the idea of value relevance is employed on two quite distinct levels. On the first level we are concerned not with an epistemological question but with matters of research desiegn. The values of the scientist become involved in science in the process of selection of what is of interest to the scientist, what he defines as problematical. So Parsons speaks of the subjective direction of interest of the scientist as 'involving a choice of variables' [1937a:585]. Again:

> 'This is possible first because even though in describing a concrete phenomenon what is made the subject of scientific analysis is not the full totality of experienceable facts about it, but a selection, the facts

> included in the historical individual as it is constructed are objective, verifiable facts' [1937a:594].

On this level it can be said that the problem of relativism simply does not arise. Values are not involved in knowledge itself but in why a given scientist or scientific community is interested in this particular knowledge. So Parsons speaks of values directing and limiting the range of scientific interest. [1937a:756].

But on the second level values are involved within knowledge itself, within conceptual schemes and thus within understandings of 'facts'. As such an element of partiality or one-sidedness is introduced and on this level the charge of relativism must be answered. This Parsons attempts to do in a way which goes well beyond Weber. The defense begins with Weber's postulation of an immutable and universal schema of proof [1937a:600], so long as scientific description or explanation meets the requirements of such proof then it can be regarded as valid even though as value perspectives change it might be thought irrelevant.

> 'But to counterbalance this relativism, once the direction of interest is given and the relevant historical individuals constructed and correctly described, the system of propositions is, so far as it meets the requirements of the logical schema of proof, verifiable and

> objective. It follows that even though values change and with them the direction of scientific interest, in so far as past investigation has yielded valid knowledge, it remains valid, a permanently valid precipitate of the process' [1937a:600].

In the present author's understanding this is more or less where Weber leaves the matter but Parsons claims that Weber takes the defense against relativism much further. This I find most doubtful (15) but what is clear is that these further steps are Parsons' own position even if their parentage is dubious.

The next step Parsons takes is to argue that however different conceptual schemes are in terms of their underlying value standpoints they must be 'translatable' into each other [1937a:601]. There is a suggestion here of the influence of Mannheim's doctrine of 'synthesis', the fusion of a plurality of particular perspectives into a larger one. But if this step is necessary at all, and Parsons claims that it is [1937a:601], does it refute the charge of relativism? If knowledge is relative to value standpoints is it not immaterial how 'wide' the perspective? Knowledge is still relative to value. This, it seems to me, was Weber's position when he argued against the possibility of a <u>general</u> social science. The construction of a general system of theory is, claims Weber, a futile end, for that theory rests on a limited value-relevant perspective.

The 'translation' argument does not seem to materially alter this argument, only to broaden the value base.

However Parsons takes a further step:

> 'Furthermore, it is one of Weber's basic theorems that while there is a plurality of possible ultimate value systems, their number is, in fact, limited. From this it follows that on Weber's own principles there is a limited number of possible constructions of historical individuals from the same concrete objects of experience, on the one hand, and of systems of theoretical concepts, on the other. From this it follows further that there is in principle a finite totality of humanly possible scientific knowledge' [1937a:601].

Again:

> 'In so far as the range of empirical interest has, in fact, been limited by these factors [value systems] it may be inferred that the humanly possible approaches to empirical phenomena have not been exhausted. But as the possible range of human values is actually approached, the scientific range is also broadened. It has been noted that if this

> element of relativism in science is not to lead to sceptical consequences, it is necessary to postulate that in this sense the possible points of view are of a limited number. With the accumulation of value experience the totality of knowledge approaches the asymptote.' [1937a: 756].

These passages are quoted here at length and repetitiously as it seems to the present author that Parsons' claim to be incorporating Weber's principle of value relevance is now positively unconvincing. Far from the finiteness of value standpoints being a "basic theorem" it is surely the case that the infinity of possible value positions lies at the heart of Weber's theory of values and is consequently the basis of his claim that the cultural sciences are granted 'eternal youth'. (16) However this aside this third step in the defense against relativism obviously puts the second into a different light, the translatability of value-systems does not just broaden the value basis, it means that as the value basis widens a point is progressively approached where the differential influence of values ceases to be operative. The relevance of values then is progressively excluded as science develops.

Now in the above discussion of Parsons theory of scientific development we have already found this to be the case, the scrutiny of residual categories involves the elimination of

values and their replacement by theoretical concepts. We find the same idea in the context of the present discussion, for Parsons takes a final step beyond the three outlined above. As the situation stands even though the range of value standpoints is finite and the knowledge produced from any one is translatable into the others it still seems necessary to take account of the value standpoint of any particular knowledge. It's place in the spectrum of values is one criterion by which its claims must be assessed. Parsons' final step effectively removes this requirement.

In summarising his chapter's on Weber's methodology and systematic theory Parsons comes again to the relativity of scientific knowledge introduced by the principle of value relevance [1937a:637-8]. Here, however, a further idea is introduced, 'the solidarity of science and action' [1937a:637] (See also [1937a:683]). This solidarity rests on the essential place of the norm of rationality in both action and science. From the side of science we must return to the first point above, the universality of the logic of proof. This represents a value standpoint necessary to <u>all</u> science, the value of the norm of rationality. Science is committed to the discovery of intrinsic causal connections, as such 'The very conception of science itself implies action' [1937a:683], the scientist orients his action to the norm of rationality. However from the other side, the side of action, we have seen that it is Parsons' claim that the norm of rationality is a universal property (or

analytical element) of action.

Parsons insists on this parallel.

> 'If then, there is to be science at all there must be action. And if there is to be a science of action it must involve the norm of intrinsic rationality in this sense; it must, in fact, revolve about this as a pivotal point. Denial of this fundamental relationship from either side inevitably leads sooner or later to subjectivism or scepticism which undermine both science and responsible action' [1937a:683-4].

Two things are involved here, firstly Parsons claims to have found a 'pivotal point', a universal standpoint but secondly the nature of that standpoint has changed, it is no longer a value standpoint, rather this has become a theoretical concept: the norm of rationality as an analytical element of action. Again then we have the elimination of value by its conversion its theoretical concepts. Further Parsons suggests that this can be broadened from the base of the norm of rationality to apply to a whole conceptual scheme of elements of action:

> 'Now does not the solidarity of scientific knowledge with rational action imply the existence of a formal schema of elements of action which is in a sense exempt from the relativity of concrete knowledge?' [1937a:638].

The conclusion of this then is that at the level on which Parsons operates, the analysis of the elements of action, the place of values in knowledge is not a relevant consideration. In Parsons' scheme theory is developed at a level which, he claims, integrates common elements of all value positions.

The plausibility of this claim can only be doubted in terms of the present interpretation of Parsons' work. For whilst his conception of analytical science is again central to his response to the problem of relativity to value no mention has been made in this section of the voluntaristic metaphysic. Yet I have attempted to show that the latter is intertwined with the content of the scheme of analytical elements. Further, voluntarism is a metaphysic, a Weltanschauung as to the nature of human activity which is not in principle subject to verification or falsification on empirical grounds. Values, then, are not eliminated from Parsons' theoretical scheme which seems an excellent example of Weber's claim that concepts embody particular value systems.

E. Conclusion.

In the last two chapters I have attempted to explain how Parsons tries to overcome methodological obstacles to a science of action by pursuing two interrelated lines of attack. Chapter II outlined the first of these, a non-empiricist, analytical conception of science. This present chapter has been concerned

first to analyze the second arrow in Parsons' bow, the voluntaristic metaphysic of the nature of action. The formal method and the metaphysical content have then been shown to be crucial to Parsons' formulation and resolution of three long standing problems in the methodology of the science of action.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing in conclusion the peculiarity of Parsons' sense of 'voluntarism'. This is because it is so often interpreted (17) in terms of the conventional sense of the phrase voluntary action, to connote freedom of choice on the part of actors who are postulated to be purposive, self-conscious and reasoning beings. My conclusion is that this sense of voluntarism has little to do with Parsons, voluntarism to him means that action is a struggle to achieve normative values, ends and rules of conduct in the face of the stubborn facts of a conditional world, a struggle which involves people exerting effort to resolve the tension, to bring the antagonism of the dualism into some form of balance between the ideal and the real orders. If this analysis has been convincing then the argument so far should have cast doubt upon claims that in the development of his theory over time Parsons moves from a voluntaristic to a non-voluntaristic position. That is, he shifts from an emphasis upon the actor and the freely chosen, meaningful character of action to one which emphasizes the social system as external, constraining and ultimately determinant of actor's action. Parsons was never a voluntarist in the conventional sense. However, the thesis that Parsons shifted the foundations of his

theory can be approached in another way, by examining the large number of essays written by him in the thirteen years subsequent to the publication of The Structure of Social Action. Here Parsons explicitly adopts a methodology which emphasizes the structure and functioning of social systems. Chapters IV and V will be concerned with this and their claim will be a continuation of the thesis put forward so far. Far from structural-functionalism being a move away from voluntarism the latter is bound up with Parsons' general methodology, a combination which can be illuminated by viewing Parsons' thinking from the perspective of problems in the methodology of a science of action.