Analyse & Kritik 24/2002 (© Lucius & Lucius, Stuttgart) p. 145–162

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# Some Philosophical Prerequisites for a Sociological Theory of Action

*Abstract:* Drawing on the work of three prominent sociological theorists, the paper elaborates on outstanding flaws in sociological theories of action and agency. These concern a penchant for according social determinants considerably more import than intra-personal factors in explanations of action etiology. Such overly-deterministic perspectives on action, it is argued, can carry little weight in moots over moral and legal responsibility. Analytical philosophy is consulted for guidance on the task of constructing sociological theories of action properly mindful of the internal, psychological realities involved in the production of actions and in the practices of responsibility attribution.

## 1. Introduction

The concepts of "agency" and "action" are seen frequently in sociological writing on action. Micro/macro (alternatively, agency/structure) causality, considered a central problem, or "unresolved core enigmat[um]" of sociological theory (Fuchs 2001, 24) has occasioned the most dedicated meditations in sociology on these cornerstones of theory. The nature of micro/macro, or agency/structure, interactions bears on "how the purposeful actions of the actors combine to bring about system-level behavior, and how these purposive actions are in turn shaped by constraints that result from behavior of the system" (Coleman 1986, 1312). Pursuit by sociologists of analytical frameworks grounded in theories of action and agency finds support in this paper. All the same, sociological theory has brought no appreciable depth of understanding to the ontology of action and agency, leaving unanswered a need for explanations of how social life begins and ends with the acting individual.

Microsociology supplies the destination of choice for an inquiry into the sociological literature on agency and (individual) action. Indeed, the concepts of "agency" and "action" are heard from often in this field. But false trails lie ahead of any such undertaking unless distinctions, unavailable in sociology, serve as guideposts. At the micro/macro nexus conventionally, theories of *upward social causation* and *downward social causation* operate, often conjointly. Writers set their sights on structurally emergent features of interpersonal actions (social interactions)—on the derivation of organizations, coalitions and other social forms from coordinated actions of individuals—when the goal is upward social causal theory construction. The individual actor holds no intrinsic interest in

theories of this kind, that take as the primary unit of analysis the social aggregate. To be sure, the actor looms somewhat larger in a theory of downward causal processes, which tracks the social determinants of individual actions. Regardless, all downward causal roads do not converge on the heart of individual action and agency. Reaching these sites may depend on whether the direction set off in leads to an *agent regarding* or *actor subsuming* theory of downward causal influence.

As implied by their name, social theories of an agency-regarding stamp fix partly on internal, agential features of individuals and, relatedly, want order brought into the anatomical and etiological analysis of individual actions. Agent regard, it could be said, signifies concern about the construction of an actor from the interior and exterior of her mind. It gives the social system a life in a mind and the mind a place in arrangements of the system, and accords both equal prominence. Actor-subsuming theory reaches for a middle ground between agency-regarding and upward social causal tenets.

Arguably, actor-subsuming and agent-regarding social causal models both find something explanatorily critical in the makeup of the individual. But there the similarities end. Consider what the theories make of agency. In an actor-subsuming theory, usually, agency reveals itself in name only. An actor, thus conceived, exists as a workplace for the play of generic motive forces—desires and needs, primarily—that in direction and strength vary with contingent features of the social situation. Actors formed from this procrustean psychological mold lack minds of their own, so display little in the way of agential self-governance. Agency-regarding and actor-subsuming social causal theories part company in one other respect. An actor-subsuming social causal theory cannot be bothered with the explication of individual behavior. It takes an instrumental interest *only* in the individual actor, intent on examining conduct the subject induces in others, and vice versa, meanwhile treading lightly on or ignoring conduct the actor induces in himself and the deliberations on his actions he undertakes.

This paper embarks on *three interwoven tasks.* It calls into doubt an opinion about sociological action theories entrenched in many quarters of the discipline, to the effect they engage the concepts of agency and action substantively. The lie given here to this supposition will hinge on a critique put up against three of the most recognized theories of action brought onto the sociological scene. On close examination, it will be shown, the downward causal components of *Jonathan Turner's* composite theory of action, *Randall Collins's* ritual interaction paradigm, and *Margaret Archer's* morphogenetic theory of agency might be better classified as actor-subsuming theories of social influence, which look out on the social system rather than into the actor/agent. If the theories presently evaluated speak for sociology as a whole, there is a sobering conclusion to be drawn. Agency-regarding processes of social causation elude the grasp of sociologists because the discipline commands no grounded conceptions of (individual) action and agency. Around this finding hovers a worry that sociology may be unequal to the job of reconciling social causation with the concept of responsibility (see Campbell 1996 for a similar suggestion). A second task calls for an articulation of this concern.

Among his many qualities, an agent is someone correctly adjudged capable of accepting responsibility for his actions and their upshots. Usually, accountability-holding norms take into consideration constraints on freedoms to refrain from moral and legal wrongdoing. Subject to standard qualifications,[1] excessive constraint sometimes excuses or justifies otherwise prohibited acts. In that opportunity or capacity-constraining role, cast 'social determinants' and contemplate the possibility of (downward) social causal influences raising a special question about responsibility. An actor who shifts the onus for a harm she has caused (or experienced)[2] onto society in the hope of unburdening herself of responsibility for her wrongful act sets store by an agency-regarding social causal theory.

A robust agency-regarding social causal theory ought to render such deterministic assertions scientifically intelligible and sift plausible from baseless "society made me do that or become this" claims of heteronomy. Space will permit one example of a heteronomous action tailor-made for agency-regarding causal theorizing. The example sets our critique of sociological action theory in an empirical context, making way in the meantime for a third task addressed. We look to analytical philosophy for guidance, nowhere forthcoming from sociology, on what an agent-regarding sociological theory of action might encompass. A sociology fitted out with a theory that can fill this bill should have a 'leg up' on issues of moral and legal responsibility attribution.

## 2. The Three Theories

### 2.1 Margaret Archer's Morphogenetic Theory

Occupancy of a structural position (say, as a role or status) in a group or social system *ipso facto* confers agential powers on actors, according to Archer (1995; 1998). From the point where Archer sits, agency constitutes a capacity to maintain or effect ('morphogenetic') changes in a group or social system. One can exhibit powers of agency without doing anything or via an unintended consequence of some action she performs. Archer's writing leaves one groping for didactically useful examples of agency content and function, so we conjure an illustration of what she might have in mind. Sam, suppose, belongs to a seniors advocacy group fresh off a successful campaign lobbying a committee of national political leaders for reforms in health care and social security policies affecting elderly citizens. The strength of the group resides partly in its numbers. Free-rider Sam prefers that projects of the group be left to others. But that does

[1] For instance, the 'doctrine of prior fault' embedded in criminal law and recognized in philosophical treatises on moral responsibility nullifies excessive constraint as an excusing condition if the offender brought the constraints adduced upon himself and could have kept from doing so. Worth adding, utilitarian theories of culpability and punishment, which allocate responsibility in accordance with the harms an action causes, make the issue of excessive constraint entirely moot.

[2] Unfortunately, discussion of a fascinating social arena of responsibility assessment has to be set aside for another occasion. It is encountered in policy fora and legal proceedings involving a demand for compensation by an actor whose self-inflicted harms are laid to the door of a social practice (such as smoking), or the actions of a group or institution.

not keep him from inheriting a (passive) agential role in the political reforms enacted, in virtue of his contribution, albeit minute, to the basis of the clout his group can wield. Or, simply having something happen as an unintended consequence of an intentionally executed plan of action confers the power of agency. On the say of Margaret Archer, evidently, agency does not presuppose action.

Properties of roles and other structural positions are affected by the distribution of scarce resources. The projects and plans available to an actor depend on the size and quality of his resource holdings. Goal-seeking behavior in face-to-face social interactions is all about resource acquisition. One's vested (best) interests, defined by objective criteria, will steer her toward doable projects that promise the comparatively biggest resource payoffs. By unspecified mechanisms, the holders of structural positions (agents) can accurately calculate cost/benefit ratios for each project their option menu presents. Fresh constraints and opportunities affecting existing options for action may accompany a changing situation, prompting adjustments in resource-maximizing strategies of interaction. By way of illustration, Judi takes a cut in wages when her company has to downsize. She inventories her resource holdings (skills, savings, assets, friendships and so forth) before deciding it objectively prudent to join the ranks of her coworkers on strike at the plant. Thereupon, the 'situational logic' determined by her bundle of interests switches from a mode of cooperative association with management to a stance marked by militant confrontation. Management soon relents, the strike ends, and Judi's vested interests encourage the resumption of a cooperative *modus vivendi* with her bosses.

Archer will not concede herself soft on determinism. A situationally mediated structural constraint on action "forces no one: it operates not as a hydraulic pressure but as a material reason which favors one response over another" (1995, 209). Even so, "though [s]ociety forces nothing," there is a "structural conditioning of decision-making" dictated by the stratified distribution of opportunity costs that "condition[s] which projects are entertained" by occupants of statuses. (1995, 207, 208). On the matter of individual autonomy, Archer will remain enigmatic until her notion of structural conditioning is thought through. An actor can do as she pleases, freely, in contravention of her vested interests, but on pain of grave deprivation. The question is, how much freedom or constraint do those options present. Archer's noticeable silence in terms of how typically people act irrationally by defying their vested interests may shield her from accusations of purveying deterministic sympathies. Regardless, her writing gives off a strong whiff of determinism, going by the salience of rational choice motifs it parades, the extra-personal nature of the options (and their preference rankings) her actors are dealt, and her reticence about autonomous choice and action.

### 2.2 Jonathan Turner's Composite Theory

The basic unit of sociological analysis, asserts Turner (1985; 1987; 1988; 1989), is "not action, but *inter*action" (1988, 3) undertaken through 'negotiation' or 'exchange'. As the frame of reference glides from individual action to interpersonal behavior then transitions to social organization, it becomes "increasingly rele-

vant to sociological inquiry ..." (1985, 82). Tellingly, the arrow drawn by Turner to trace the path of this trajectory in one of his diagrams (1989, 2) never circles back in the opposite direction from organizations to individual actors. Moreover, we partake of social reality only in "concrete social settings and contexts" (1989, 2) and process it without much cause to reflect on our" 'internalized' values, beliefs and norms ..." (1985, 78).

Actors initiate social contact for one overriding purpose, namely satisfying unmet needs. No way exists to satisfy a basic need for social intercourse outside the orbit of negotiated interactions. Needs left unintended create a sense of deprivation followed by anxiety and frustration and the release of a drive: "any theory of motivation must recognize that the avoidance of anxiety is a basic need-state which mobilizes a great deal of human behavior because, when people experience anxiety, they feel deprived and are mobilized 'to do something' about it" (1989, 21) by "organiz[ing] behavioral responses in interaction" (1987, 22). Fear of anxiety over states of deprivation itself triggers drives for interaction. Interpersonal actions stem from predominantly unconscious drives aimed at satisfying a need for: 1) group inclusion, or solidarity; 2) trust; 3) ontological security; 4) avoidance or elimination of diffuse anxiety; 5) symbolic and material gratification; 6) confirmation or affirmation of self; and 7) facticity.

Group inclusion, trust, ontological security, self-identity maintenance, and facticity constitute primary needs. Roughly, with 'facticity' and 'ontological security' comes cognizance of exchange partners' intentions and capabilities and awareness of a social situation's normative requirements. Stirrings of unease over faring poorly in a transaction or failing in the game of life arouse diffuse anxiety. Drive states mutually reinforce or suppress one another. For instance, diffuse anxiety can diminish ontological security, group inclusion, and self-confirmation, which can in turn escalate diffuse anxiety. Heightened anxiety induces self-doubt, subsequently lowering perceived facticity, and so on. Deficit symbolic and material gratification can set-off drives for group inclusion, therby intensifying needs for facticity and self-confirmation. Need arousal follows on from situational cues. To cope with a need for symbolic and material gratification or anxiety alleviation in a 'situation of authority', for example, one would issue orders or demand deference. Friendship-nurturing situations "would involve symbols of mutual approval" and possibly exchanges of gifts (1988, 63). Sketchily posited defense mechanisms, such as withdrawal and apathy, can repress a drive or a constellation of mutually reinforcing drives.

The propensity to inaugurate, maintain, terminate, and renew an interaction is an additive function of the extent to which an actor meets his innate needs for social contact. Drives generated by needs will ebb and flow but never cease: "People will try to sustain and repeat those relations that meet basic needs, but there is ... always a fear of not having them met, which keeps their energy up." (1988, 68) In summary, socially meaningful actions spring from forces that impel an actor toward gratification-enhancing interactions and relations and drive him away from stress-producing contacts with others.

### 2.3 Randall Collin's Interaction Ritual Theory

Pressing Durkheim and Goffman into service, Collins (1981; 1987; 1993; 1998) predicates his theory of interaction on an argument that a basic need in humans for identification with a social group, and for meaningful involvement in group life, is the driving force behind human social interaction. Socially-structured actions take place through negotiations, as actors seek shares of resources in the form of 'cultural capital', 'emotional energy', and 'social reputation'. When a negotiation over resources goes as one had planned, it elevates or solidifies his standing in a group, expands the range or number of groups to which he belongs, and/or enlarges his opportunities for participation in activities of the group or coalition. Sociologically, ritually interactive (routinized) conversations matter less for their content than for the resource exchanges they facilitate. Actors have their basic need for group affiliation and social acceptance satisfied by exchanging resources.

Cultural capital, consisting of symbols, elicits conversation and emotional energy. Symbols indicative of cultural capital stand for properties of groups to which their members attach value. Words and other symbolic forms can represent the pedigree, size, and political might of a group, signify gradations of rank, and betoken the nature of an actor's affiliation with a particular group. Emotional energy variously denotes attitudes, feelings, and degrees of emotional intensity. It materializes in the form of self-confidence, a 'tone' of positive or negative 'sentiment' towards a ritual interaction partner, or enthusiasm (or apathy and depression) and fluctuates in sync with the gains and losses racked up in social encounters. Social-psychologically realistic examples might have helped the reader discern what negotiating advantage in the currency of cultural symbols entails. Somehow, profitable conversations foster social inclusion, reputation enhancement, and material wealth accumulation. They elevate levels of emotional energy, subsequently boost self-confidence, and increase drive arousal for larger increments of social acceptance, power, or esteem through social contact.

Collins is quite open about his behaviorist/utilitarian leanings. Social interactants immerse themselves in utility-maximizing calculations of power, solidarity costs and benefits, and energy returns on investment in response to a counterpart's strategic moves. Actors need not "calculate the value of their various cultural resources ... in each situation [as] [t]hese resources have an automatic effect upon conversational interaction, and the outcomes are automatically transformed into increments or decrements of emotional energy." (1981, 1005) "When EE [emotional energy] is strong", it follows, "[actors] see immediately what they want to do."(1993, 223) Should an actor pause to mull over her options and plans for an encounter, her subconscious mind will run the numbers, as it were, and compute the alternative highest in emotional energy and solidarity payoffs, then prime it for action. That alternative always "appears overwhelmingly right and it feels unnecessary to consider the others."(1993, 224) But if the options given are on par, valence-wise, actors remain "immobilized" "until the flow of IR [interaction ritual] energy combinations with other actors motivates them to leave that routine."(1981, 1005)

A Collins actor is not one to dither over his moves before he *inter*acts. Actors throw themselves into routines of interaction just "because they feel natural and appropriate," (1981, 997), giving scant thought to the schema of the social world they "carry in their heads" (1981, 995). Interactants monitor one another's intentions and attitudes "by feeling the amount of confidence and enthusiasm" abroad and by "contagious" transmissions of emotional energy (which presumably include gossip) (1981, 994). One selects transaction mates and keeps a mental scorecard on their transaction profits and losses in comparison with one's own by sensing in some fashion the direction and levels of positive and negative emotional energy in circulation. Actors gravitate instinctively "toward the strongest available source of emotional energy" (1993, 223) and "do not have to reflect consciously" on the sundry twists and turns characteristic of a negotiated exchange; "the conversation will run off by a force of its own, will be a success or a perfunctory failure, will be one-sided, and so forth, depending on the balance of resources brought [by each interactant] to the situation" (1987, 200).

## 3. Critique of the Three Theories

Whatever else they may have going for them, analyses of action undertaken by sociologists settle for meager conceptions of 'agency' and 'action' if the theories canvassed faithfully mirror the current state of relevant sociological knowledge, and provided that philosophical categories and arguments be anointed reference sources for technical definitions of these terms. Volitional controls, intentional states and other hallmark devices by which a reasoning mind perceives, represents, stores, and responds, self-referentially, to social-environmental cues go largely unintended in the studies discussed. Nothing approximating a self motivated by reasons *of its own* ensconced in goals, values, and beliefs assimilated within its discernible boundaries finds pride of place in the writing examined.[3] Quite the contrary: Situational controls that elicit reactions programmed by some seemingly inborn social transaction logic loom everywhere. In a phrase, sociological theories of action go after the relational aspects of agency, giving other, intrinsic, aspects short shrift. All things considered, sociological theories of action qualify poorly for the job of: 1) mapping out the molecular structure of actions by individuating action elements and types; 2) exposing mechanisms of mental causation; 3) *a fortiori*, postulating relations of cause and effect between relations of mental causation and social causation; 4) supporting inferences from social causal premises to conclusions about freedom of action and agency. These claims merit discussion.

*Action Versus Interaction and Social Versus Personal Domains of Agency*

Saying the three frameworks examined wax thin on metatheory smacks of understatement. "Agency", "action", and other reference-fixing terms come with minimal definitions in this writing, and concepts acquire properties (drive or

[3] The 'self' concept darts across the pages of Turner's cited books and essays without any explication or a significant analytical role to play.

anxiety-generating functions of needs, for example) by sheer fiat or indirectly, by implication, in most instances. Specifically, distinctions we want laid out with edifying rationales between personal and social experience and individual actions and social interactions do not get made. The casual tenor of argument construction prevailing lets in some baffling claims. For instance, interactions conducted directly between at least two individuals, or, more restrictively, two or more conversationally engaged persons, supplies the *sine qua non*, supposedly, of a socially situated, or socially meaningful, individual action. But any such suggestion strains credulity. From moorings in social reality, improbably, that idea would cut adrift knowledge of significant others we never meet and relationships we participate in vicariously, pursue at a distance, or manage through third-party liaisons. And in the absence of a componential analysis of action sequences, we have cause to wonder if this writing intends it that each and every facet of a social transaction automatically counts as social. If, on these construals, interactions are necessarily social in all respects, a difficult question comes forward: How to differentiate the social and non-social (purely personal?) properties of interactions?

A social causal theory aligned closely with the agency concept would not abide fuzzy boundaries between agency and society, or for that matter, action and interaction. Ontologically interdependent or mutually inclusive things cannot form causal relationships. Unfortunately, individual actions become entangled with individual interactions, and agency merges with its social surrounds in these specimens of action sociology. As a linchpin of an agency-regarding causal theory dwindles into insignificance, the opportunity to lay track between this genre of theory and the concept of personal responsibility fades away.

*Actions Versus Activities*

No last word is out as to whether the subjects of action sociology are partaking of actions or activities. Certainly, a conversation, qua *sine qua non* of social intercourse, wears the look of an activity. A prototypical activity, such as a ball game, brackets innumerable discrete action sequences executed by a multiplicity of actors. Add to that the fact that some activities are spatially and/or temporally non-localized. As importantly, accurate identifications of an activity do not have to rely on intentionalist descriptions by the participants of what transpired. In contrast, paradigmatic actions occur at specific times and places, feature one performer, and will take on the prototypically reason-structured descriptions given by the latter. That said, a proper social causal theory of action underwrites an expedition into the workings of a mind, implicating agency deeply. The same cannot be said for activity analyses.

*Situational Determinism*

Allowing actors limited room for manouver in the face of the situational controls that impinge incessantly on what they may be a point in Archer's favor. Actors given places on the stage set by Archer can weigh the options put before them prior to exercising a pro- or anti-interest-promoting option. Actually, Archer pays this libertarian capacity lip service. It does negligible analytical work for

her and bows down before the directive force of positional and resource constraints imposed by the exigencies of situations. Of the trio of theories assayed, Collins's projects the strongest overtones of determinism. In the manner of some heliotrope-like organism drawn instinctively to the strongest source of available light, Collins's actors head themselves reflexively for an equally or better-off resource holder, and avoid, if they can, engaging lesser-off members of a group. As well, the occupants of Turner's needs-dominated scheme of things come off as automated products of situational pushes and pulls.

Actors who are scripted by these theories will impress us as inveterately heteronomous. We think them in captivity of externally ordained reasons, incapable of forming goals and making autonomous choices. As a result of closing spaces off between actor and context, these sociocentric depictions of social reality treat heteronomy as a given, not a possibility, and turn a blind eye to degrees and categories of heteronomous behavior and trails of character. In a world this impoverished of personal autonomy, can antisocial action be laid to anyone's charge? Or, to the extent that heteronomy can vary among persons and actions, in what degree or shape should it figure into attributions of moral and legal responsibility? These questions overwhelm the sociological action theorist's resources.

*Objective Rationality Modularity*

Subjects of the theories under discussion may not be paragons of introspection or operate with minds of their own to any appreciable extent. But one thing they know is what is good for them, objectively speaking. From where this savvy derives goes unremarked, but we would not go far wrong by surmising a type of rationality module wired into structures of the mind tasked for orienting the individual, in the mode of a gyroscope, to his or her objective best interests. Surprisingly, a number of writers enamored of this *homo economicus* look-alike are the same critics disposed to revile rational choice theory faddism in sociology. Familiar criticism of rational-choice type modeling carries over to this sociological creation, namely claims of paternalism (experts sounding off about their subjects' best interests), the salience of subjective preference orderings in actual situations of choice, and experiences of bad judgement and akrasia bedeviling real-life exercises of choice. No doubt, objective rationality modularity is of a piece with the wholesale elision of subjectivity from these sociocentrically-tilted theories of action.

*Basic (Social) Needs*

Basic needs are met through social intercourse says Turner. Needs do not get talked up by Archer, but the vested interests she invokes presuppose the concept of need. One arguably has a vested interest in obtaining that for which she has a need (Wiggins 1987, 17). On this subject, Collins's theory also offers quarter to basic needs, as the drive states he adduces perform needs-exciting and needs-satisfying functions. Although the needs concept has legitimate applications, use of it for understanding social behavior can make for tricky business (see Braybrooke 1987; Thompson 1987; Plant 1991). We find little to recom-

mend the presumption that the language of needs belongs in action and agency discourse- but some preliminaries first. For one thing, claims of (basic) need appeal to objective and impersonal considerations. Basic needs are decidedly not psychological states. One may be unaware of all of her needs or hold mistaken beliefs about the objects of her needs.

Secondly, we go without what we need at risk of incurring serious harms, leaving ourselves little practical or rational alternative but to seek the things we need. Braybrooke and Thompson note another differentia apropos needs and desires. Some desires we can repress, even shed, but we cannot, just like that, dispose of a need short of changing something fundamental about our constitutions. Third, needing is not an activity, and, to reiterate, turning need into a motivational concept courts confusion, *pace* writers such as Collins want to conflate needs and drives. Common knowledge teaches that we do not always seek what we need, but sometimes crave what we have no need of or need to forego. Lastly, while we cannot do much about having a basic need, we can control how we satisfy our needs. All in all, needs satisfaction, versus (basic) needs acquisition and manifestation, implicates agency.

The preceeding observations cut against the most explicitly needs-skewed approach considered here—Jonathan Turner's. One place where Turner goes wrong is his mixing up of rubrics: He commits the error of mislabeling 'desires' 'needs'. On that score, Turner may have a hard time convincing a political liberal critic of the communitarian party line (see especially Waldron 1996) of the wisdom of rating social solidarity, for example, an ineliminable ingredient of individual well-being and personal identity across cultures. If, more probably, Turner-styled 'needs' countenance interpersonal and cross- societal variations, would that not argue for filing them under the heading of 'desires' or 'preferences'? But were Turner amenable to that move, he would buy himself a subjective propositional attitude absent an agency template with which to assimilate it to a theory of individual action.

Turner's conception of needs satisfaction rests on shaky ground. Unmet needs for social engagement activate drives, he holds, by elevating anxiety above threshold levels. But trouble brews for a conception of needs so vastly out of touch with individual behavior. A Turner-fashioned actor, who, incidentally, would do the Skinnerian diehard proud, bears scant likeness to actual people blessed with the (agential) capacity to resist the motivational force of their garden variety desires by forming intentions to shed or overcome them, if they so choose. Courtesy of these desire-mastering faculties of practical reasoning and volitional control, an umet need or desire is no certain precursor of anxiety and action generation. (Turner's surprising presumption about anxiety-generated drive states furnishing the basic dynamo for human social intercourse invites a more detailed rebuttal than can be assembled here).

## 4. A Case Study of Social Heteronomy

An anti-social action blamed on cult indoctrination methods will acquaint us with the type of issues tailor-made for agency-regarding social causal theorizing, and contextualize the points brought out in the preceding critique. Behavior modified by the indoctrination schemes of religious cults supplies instances *par excellence* of agent-regarding social causal influence, or by another name we see more of presently, *social heteronomy.* The figure described momentarily embodies the consummate socially heteronomous actor. From Robert Jay Lifton's (1999) recent study of Aum Sharikio's techniques of thought manipulation and its deployment of biological and chemical toxins against the populace of Japan pursuant to a scheme steeped in apocalyptic prophesies of a world purged of evil by true disciples of the Lord, I construct a modal acolyte, Yoshiro. Yoshiro was typical of Aum Sharikio novices. Most, in their 20s and 30s, saw the teachings of the cult and its millenarian outlook as a panacea for spiritual deprivation and a redoubt against restrictive parental authority and paternalistic corporate cultural constraints.

Over a two-year period of indoctrination leading up to a deadly serin gas attack on a subway line in downtown Tokoyo he helped orchestrate, Yoshiro abandoned himself to a system of regimented asceticism adapted for exacting compliance with the cult's authoritarian system of regulations and for inculcating beliefs in the deistic powers of its guru, Shoko Asahara. Mandatory celebacy, fasting, prolonged meditation, onerous work assignments, and exposure, day in and day out, to pronouncements of the master recorded on tape in his very own words made up part of the drill. Woe betide 'doubting Thomases' caught betraying even glimmerings of apostasy. Manifest wavering could spell: an extended term of solitary confinement in a hot and dingy cell; rounds of insults, threats, and accusations from angry cult officials; upside-down suspension from a ceiling for painful hours; and repeated sequences of immersion in scolding or frigid water, or more. By the same token, gestures of devotion, could reap coveted rewards like an audience with the guru himself, access to ecstasy-inducing drugs, better rations, and promotion up through the ranks of Aum's hierarchy of offices and titles.

Yoshiro had weathered his share of trials of devotion and obedience, overcoming initial changes of heart and spurts of ambivalence before the culmination of his metamorphosis into an apostle of Aum's sinister end game of global genocide. Was this gentle, introspective, albeit confused soul who set foot in the Aum Sharikio compound two years before the selfsame zealot on the scene that fateful morning of March, 1995 when the cult brought hundreds of commuters into contact with the deadly serin nerve gas? The authorities captured Yoshiro at the crime scene, indicted him on homicide charges, and brought him to trial. To hear Yoshiro tell it when he had recovered his former identity, he was a hapless dupe of a malevolent regime, brainwashed into disserving the humanitarian precepts by which he once stood. If Yoshiro is to be believed, do we release him from responsibility for committing a nihilistic act of deadly terror? More on point, can sociological theories of action, as we know them, fashion a story

of social heteronomy enriched sufficiently to underwrite a thoroughgoing evaluation of the grounds of Yoshiro-like 'culture made me do it' disavowals of moral and legal responsibility? By all indications, the sociology of action measures up inadequately to this task. What it might take for sociologists of action to rise to the challenge posed is considered next.

## 5. Toward a Theory of Social Heteronomy

The sociology of action can make constructive use of the analytical philosophy of agency and action on the backing of certain assumptions. For one thing, an agency-regarding theory of downward causation is a theory of heteronomy—to wit a theory of social heteronomy, so named because a locus of control of choice and action emanates from social forms and processes. It should also be borne in mind that heteronomy does not perforce equate with determinism. Socially heteronomous agents are free to do otherwise (having freedom of action) and free to form their own, personal, reasons for acting (having freedom of agency). By that provision, social heteronomy entails agency and admits of degrees correspondent with the avoidability or resistibility of constraints on actions and choices created by social forms and processes. Further, constraint-based claims of social heteronomy, involving 'society made me do it' expressions of disavowal, compel considerations of responsibility.

Finally, action sociology can take home lessons on the ontology of agency and action from philosophy. That claim may bother some readers. The hub of inquiry in the philosophies of mind, morality, law, and action is, after all, the autonomous agent. Barring special cases,[4] philosophers spare narry a thought for the (socially) heteronomous agent and indeed treat the possibility of socially heteronomous agency with skepticism (but see, for example, Kane 1995; Haji 1998). Were that not enough, action sociologists who hold forth on the analytical philosopher's place under the sociological sun look upon the tools and projects of these thinkers with the wariest of eyes or decree them beyond the ken of sociology.[5]

The solicitude for philosophical expertise expressed here does have its limits.

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[4] Children and adult criminal offenders brought up in poverty or in situations of domestic violence are invoked as a matter of course in moral philosophical discussions of social heteronomy. Such cases receive cursory consideration and serve as a foil to the favored autonomy thesis being propounded.

[5] Take for example Giddens's (1976) remarks: "As treated by Anglo-American authors, the 'philosophy of action' mostly shares the limitations of post-Wittgensteinian philosophy as a whole ...: in particular, a lack of concern with social structures, with institutional development and change." (ibid. 70) Furthermore, "this gap is more than one that legitimately expresses a division of labor between philosophers and social scientists: it is a weakness that rifts deep into philosophical analysis of the character of human agency." (ibid. 70) Campbell's (1996) barbs are no less pointed: "sociologists of action would have been better advised to pay more attention to psychologists and less attention to philosophers. It is odd, in this respect, that they have been so ready to accept the arguments of philosophers on matters relating to action [a claim left unsubstantiated] when their 'data' typically consist of fictional examples, whilst at the same time ignoring the empirical findings on human conduct gathered by psychologists." (ibid. 146)

Apart from the joint action models constructed by Gilbert (1989) and Toumela (1995), among others, the paradigms of action favored by analytical philosophers usually fall silent on the *externalities of social heteronomy.* Rather, sociologists of action stand to benefit from philosophical writing conceived with an eye on the *internalities of social heteronomy.* A serviceable theory of social heteronomy will marshal tests of internality and externality, meaning, tests of internal and external causal efficacy. Where the input source is the actor/agent (S) and the outputs are an action (A-ing) performed by S, the causality tests deployed are internal. Internality testing picks up on the differences made by an A-ing of S to states and events in the world.

Conducting tests of externality aids in the discovery of states and events in the world that motivated S's A-ing. An externality test of social heteronomy thus views the group or social system as the input source of an A-ing, while placing S and her A-ing in the space of output parameters. No mean feat it is that a theorist of agent-regarding social causation connects systematically what happened to S and what S made happen. There is progress to be gained by that achievement in the direction of understanding how workings of the world coexist with workings of S's mind-how, so to speak, the socially and mentally causal influences productive of S's A-ing interact. But more on the articulation of internal and external causality auditing shortly.

Heteronomy *per se* is of negligible sociological interest. A scenario wherein Yoshiro's heteronomy was owed to a disease of mind or trait of character having rendered him inordinately susceptible to mental manipulation would sink below the horizons of sociology. But give the group or social system (in the shape of the cult, for example) a central causal role in S's (perhaps Yoshiro's) A-ing (committing an act of homicide) and behold a sociologically compelling story of *social* heteronomy ripe for the telling.

The discussion of internality testing leans heavily on a diverse philosophical literature to which these pages can give only the most cursory treatment. Demands of brevity preclude the delineation of specific arguments, schools of thought, and controversies in fields, duly consulted, ranging from legal philosophy to free-will metaphysics, and rule out extensive literature citations. Persuasive evidence that an A-ing was the work of a specific S passes the test of internality. Had S no part to play in a result ascribed to him, as in the event he lost control of his car, injuring a pedestrian, when a gale force wind forced it off the road, the issue of heteronomous action vis-a-vis S would evaporate because his agency would not be a factor in the incident. Heteronomy of action presupposes heteronomy of agency; where agency is absent, a question of heteronomy does not arise. In terms of tests of internality, two dominate the philosophical landscape. Tests of *authorship* (or authenticity) and of *participation* (or contribution) address the paramount question at hand: Had S A-ed of his own accord, and, had he so acted, to what extent was said action up to him?

Various conceptions of authorship issue from philosophical writing. The Frankfurtian notion of wholehearted identification with an action-animating volition (Frankfurt 1988; 1999), character models of action premised on an A-ing being genuinely S's had it been in character (e.g. Brandt 1992; Sher 1998),

and Fischer's (2002) proposal resting the contingency of S's warranted blame or credit for an A-ing with the indispensability of her contribution to the production of that action reflect the diversity of relevant conceptions on tap. Additionally, the partibility of authorship features in philosophical accounts. Say the Aum authorities had allowed Yoshiro the leeway of releasing anthrax bacillus, botulinus toxin, or serin gas into a crowded public space, but stifled his options to do anything else. Our S had thereby A-ed of his own accord in one respect, and yet was under the ultimate control of his sundry handlers, who had implanted in him the undergirding intention of mounting an attack with a weapon of mass destruction. He had the discretion of choosing how to kill but forfeited the discretion of choosing whether to kill (for an analogous case and parallel analysis see Kane 1995). Once we can link an A-ing to a particular S, it becomes a short step to ascertain S's contribution to that action. "What portion of S's A-ing was of his doing?" is, for philosophers of action, law, and moral canon, a question about control, or, if preferred, freedom.

Control tests abound. A fined-grained test parses segments of complex action sequences, including intention formation, intention guidance and maintenance, and action execution (see for example Hornsby 1980; Mele 1992; Brandl/David/Stubenberg 2001). Tests of *rationality control* deal with capacities for instrumental rationality and moral reasoning (from moral premises to action consequences). Irrational behavior bespeaks diminished agential capacity on standard conceptions of agency, that set as a cardinal condition of agency an ability to act for reasons coordinated with epistemically intelligible ends. Rationality control marries with *motivational* and *volitional* control over action. An actor with knowledge of what is rationally in her best interest and aware of that interest being a preponderant reason for acting, but who cannot bring herself to inhibit a burning desire she understands will put that interest in jeopardy if acted upon, will manifest an akratic lapse of rationality control (Mele 1987).

Tests of volitional control span an array of applications. The ultimate, benchmark case of inability used to check for moral and psychological involuntariness-physical inability to pursue a warranted course of action—of itself arouses scant philosophical interest because, again, wholesale involuntariness, illustrated earlier by the driver whose car lost control, negates agency. More often than not, investigations of psychological and moral voluntariness call forth situations of coerced choice, and major arguments in legal theory and the philosophy of law (Morse 1986; Feinberg 1989; Wertheimer 1989) fasten on the weight each type of volitional control failure deserves in these contexts of coerced choice. Psychological tests check for involuntariness in terms of subjective pressures experienced by a coerced or otherwise choice-constrained actor.

Objective costs connected with choices and actions also figure into voluntariness evaluations. Purely objective 'balance of evil' tests seen in Anglo-American criminal law and moral theory pronounce on 'moral involuntariness', to use a term of art, on, that is, the willingness to act from moral obligation. Calculations of the voluntariness of a coerced choice involve balancing the harm S lets others suffer against the harm he averts by putting his own well-being above theirs. S's (psychologically involuntary) pathological fear of bodily injury notwithstanding,

he would, by dint of this criterion, have acted *voluntarily* had he acceded to a coercer's demand and poisoned the municipal water supply rather than endure a minor beating at the latter's hands. By most accounts in law and philosophy, he could have and should have sacrificed his interests, as any reasonable person would be expected to do in his place. Finally, volitional tests extended to traits of character implicate standing dispositions in moral and legal assessments of wrongdoing. Debate surrounds the mutability of such traits, on which turn assessments of the trait-holder's responsibility for failing to suppress or expunge the noxious trait in question.

A test of externality sets a gauge on the levels of control wielded by a group/system over a subject and registers the types of control it imposes. A gesture at the parameters of control possibly in force will lay some preliminary groundwork. Tests of *exposure, avoidability, direction, and incentive* constitute standard indicators of the efficacy of techniques of socialization. Continuous exposure extended over periods of time to direct and unavoidable instruments of indoctrination fortified by 'powerful' rewards and schemes of punishment mark conditions of living in control-dominant social environments (e.g. Delgado 1978; Zablocki/Robbins 2001). Control-intensive groups and systems would score high on social heteronomy measures, presumably. A robust social causal theory should lay bare the social forms and processes regulative of exposure, avoidability, direction, and incentive parameters in an action context. The considerable practical difficulties of conducting empirical research along these lines does not gainsay the need in evidence for these tests.

Obviously, no test of external efficacy will satisfy the idealist's quest for conclusive proof of a given social stimulus acting as necessary and sufficient condition for a given response. While we do not conceive of a social input as an irresistible force, we can postulate social causal-mental effect associations good enough, perhaps, to support tenable claims of social heteronomy. Against the backdrop of externality indicators discussed above, it is important to have answers to key questions. Was the A-ing by S consistent with group/system expectations and demands *and* with S's conduct and dispositions preceding his passage into the group/system? Did S's A-ing accord with actions by other members of the group/system significantly like himself and exposed to the same devices of conditioning? Sid S possess exercisable options to do otherwise? Were persons from all represented backgrounds and of different personality classifications equally affected by the regimen of controls instituted? Did the A-ing by S comport with the actions of persons from other groups/systems subjected to the same or comparable techniques? And did the 'mindset' and behavior tendencies acquired in the control environment of the group/system persist for 'some' appreciable time after S separated herself from the group, despite her best efforts at unyoking herself from those subsequently unwanted influences?

## 6. Discussion

Much more is in need of saying about the internality-externality interface. How the social milieu of an actor is entwined with her mental life and how the union of those influences becomes a precondition for socially heteronomous actions may be the least explored basic problem in the firmament of sociology and its sister social sciences. It may in these respects compare to the problem of mental causation (from mental inputs to neuro-motor outputs) wrestled with by cognitive psychologists and philosophers of action and mind.[6] To any such quest for insights, the concepts of agency and action will be pivotal. Proof of the bindingness of a collectivity's norm and value lies in the effect they give to peoples' reasons for acting. Obviously, groups and social systems that cannot successfully translate their norms into actions by inducing compliant behavior will face almost certain extinction.

The notion of social heteronomy clearly implicates the micro-macro, society-individual problem in sociology, at the same time making contact with the concept of responsibility. Social forces, assume, enter into the production of an A-ing to a very substantial degree. That being the case, on what tenable grounds would the act performed be considered an A-ing done by S, of her own accord, and for which, thereby, we can hold her responsible? The absorption of S's person into the fabric of a group or social system, in terms of its thoroughness, and the blameworthiness of wrongful actions she commits in this condition of assimilation to the group or system, evokes questions about agency.

By the sound of its advertisements, action sociology would presumably have made more headway than neighboring disciplines towards fathoming the diagnostic features of agency and action and bringing the analysis of these constructs into the fold of social science research. The preceding investigation argued otherwise. On the view taken here, the concentration of sociological industry on these concepts has yielded scant results. Closer to the truth, sociological analyses give out long before they approach the real complexities of these cornerstone concepts.

A plea was entered for sociological scrutiny of philosophy discourse on agency and action in the expectation of seeing such inquiries secure the discipline of sociology a foothold on the internality dimension of social heteronomy. This step, at minimum, promises to raise the consciousness of social action sociologists regarding how society represents itself inside the individual mind by: 1) molding beliefs and desires; 2) forging pro-attitudes into intentions to A; 3) sustaining intentions and suppressing formation of rival intentions; 4) priming the intentions formed for action. Philosophy's rich lexicon of concepts for desires, beliefs, intentions, constraints, and willings will not give an agency-regarding social causal theory

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[6] Mele's (1992) observation is apposite: "a fully detailed answer to the question how, in a particular human being, the acquisition of a particular proximal intention triggers a particular set of actional mechanisms capable of issuing in overt action will probably be cast (at least partly) in the language of neurophysiology (or perhaps physics). I do not know how to construct such an answer in detail; nor does anyone else." (ibid. 178)

all the resources it will require, but might help it get its bearings and assure it a place in policy and academic fora dedicated to the issue of responsibility.

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