



Postgraduate/Distance Learning Assignment Coversheet & Feedback Form

For completion by the student:

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Assignment title: On the Duality of Action in Society

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Self and Society
CSPH7041

Assignment 2
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On the Duality of Action in Society

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On the Duality of Action in Society

The function of sociology, as of every science, is to reveal that which is hidden.

– Pierre Bourdieu¹

I find myself standing at a set of traffic lights in the central business district, waiting for the ‘walking man’ to turn green before I cross. Reflecting on my present situation, I’m struck with impression that I have complete control over my own actions². I could do anything I choose. Nothing stops me from deciding to go somewhere else, talking to the person waiting next to me, listening to music or just waiting in silence. I could even choose run across the road as soon as I spot a large enough gap in the traffic, ignoring the lights completely. Whatever it is that I choose to do, the choice is mine alone to make.

Nevertheless, I probably won’t choose to cross before the light turns green. Here, in Australia, we call that jaywalking; it’s against the traffic regulations. I don’t fancy getting a ticket for that this morning, it would almost certainly make me late for work, and right outside my office building, what would my colleagues think if they saw?

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. by Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998), p. 17.

² Putting aside any question of free will and liberty.

If I'm honest with myself, though, I think that there is a deeper justification for waiting. It might only be a minor traffic violation, but jaywalking is illegal and breaking the law is something I generally try to avoid. Not out of fear of being caught (though I'm sure that's part of it) but because obeying the law is something I value.

I'm not sure that I could state the origin of my valuing of the law, or any of my other values, with certainty. Even so, they are no doubt, the result of a process of continuous development, refinement and reinforcement commencing at some point in my formative years under the influence of my parents, teachers, friends, cultural heritage, socio-economic position and a raft of other social factors. I'm compelled to ask if the choice to refrain from jaywalking is an individual action reflective of my personal values or a socially determined learned behaviour.

The dual nature of action is made even more evident when considering why I'm crossing the street in the first place. Work is something that I must do in order to survive. Whilst I undoubtedly have some freedom to choose the type of work I engage in, the space from which I can make a choice is largely given to me from the context in which I am situated. I can only fulfil my desire to become an engineer if I live in a society that provides access to appropriate education and jobs for the gender, culture, race etc. that I happen to possess.

Had I been born into substantially different circumstances, not only would I be unable to fulfil my desires, it's unimaginable that I could even possess the same desires. It seems absurd to imagine an ancient Egyptian desiring to be a programmer millennia before the advent of the computer. The context in which our ancient Egyptian resides undoubtedly has some part to play in the development of his desires. I needn't evoke such starkly contrasting circumstances, though, to imagine the influence of society on my desires. Would I, for example, keep my current desires if I had been born into the same society as a female, a different race or a different socio-economic class?

In something as mundane as crossing the road on the way to work we see that I act in accordance with the individual desires I have developed under a

larger societal framework. Thus action is both individual and social, but how is this relationship to be understood?

I The Nature of Action

Almost anything a person does is a form of action in ordinary language. Walking, eating breakfast, talking with a neighbour, taking part in democratic processes; all examples of action of one type or another. A common feature of actions in this sense is that they involve movement through and interaction with the material world. However, we often find ourselves talking of collective groups, such as states or companies, acting in this or that way. How can this be so if action requires interaction with the material world?

Weber provides a definition for the term ‘action’ as “human behaviour that is linked to a subjective meaning on the part of the actor”³. For Weber, there is a distinction to be made between meaningful action and merely reactionary action, where the latter is action that is not associated with subjectively intended meaning. Heath roughly outlines this distinction as “coughing is behaviour, apologizing afterwards is action”⁴.

Weberian action, then, is performed by a conscious person under their own autonomy and in accordance with their will. If someone were to move my arm for me, or otherwise force me to act in a particular way, I cannot be said to have acted, since the acts were not supported by one of my will or autonomy.

For the purposes of this work, action is assumed to refer to Weberian action unless otherwise stated.

³ Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, ed. & trans. by Keith Tribe (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 78.

⁴ Joseph Heath, ‘Methodological Individualism’, *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015.

II Individual and Social Action

Weberian action is, by definition, individual, since it is only individual humans who can act with intentionality. Lacking intentionality of their own, social collectivities act only through their constituent individuals. In this view, it is the individual's intentions that is the true object of study for social theorists. This perspective is embodied in Weber's methodological individualism, the doctrine "that social phenomena must be explained by showing how they result from individual actions, which in turn must be explained through reference to the intentional states that motivate the individual actors."⁵

Though if action is individual, how is that we observe general patterns of similar behaviour between individuals? If individuals act according to their own desires, surely all action would be different. Weber explains the emergence of patterns in individual action through what he calls social action, action that is oriented to the anticipated action of others⁶.

For Weber, there are similarities in our expectations of how others will respond to our actions, which creates a mechanism by which patterns in individual behaviour can develop. Whilst action is both social and individual, according to Weber the former is to be understood in terms of the latter. Individual action is prior to social action and forms the fundamental basis of social phenomena. Durkheim, however, arrives at a very different conclusion in studying the same social phenomena.

For Durkheim, it is not the individual but the social that is the primary focus. Society exists *sui generis*, as an object in its own right persisting over time independent of its constituent individuals⁷. Social phenomena can only be explained in terms of the structure of society itself, they are not reducible to individual actions. Thus, the true object of study for social theorists are social facts.

⁵ Heath.

⁶ Weber, p. 99.

⁷ Emile Durkheim, 'Individual and Collective Representations', in *Sociology and Philosophy*, trans. by D. F. Pocock (New York: Routledge, 2010), pp. 1–15.

For Durkheim, patterns of similar individual behaviour emerge because we are born into and taught the same social facts.

Although Marx's macro-theory is quite distinct from Durkheim, he places similar emphasis on the social. In Marxist thought, human behaviour is ultimately determined by membership of a social class within a particular productive mode. Society is necessarily divided into classes along the lines of ownership of the means of production. Competing interests doom one class to be dominated by the other until sufficient changes in the means of production usher in a new mode of production and overthrow the existing class structure. Marx refers to this process of historical evolution as the materialist conception of history.

Marx⁸ does not go as far as to deny the individual *in toto*, indeed one of the driving forces behind Marxist philosophy is the retention of individual freedoms, even if understood collectively, thought to be lost under a capitalist mode of production. Rather, it is the significance of the role of the individual in historical progression that Marx denies⁹. Although it is the individual who acts, the sum of which form history, their acts are merely a response to their given social context. It is the nature of social forces that another would act had one individual not, resulting in a similar, though perhaps not identical, history.

Both Durkheim and Marx assert, in their own ways, the logical primacy of the social in determining human behaviour. It would be naïve, however, to conclude that both deny individual autonomy, and with it, the possibility of individual action at all. Rather, the social structure forms the space in which an individual acts. It places restrictions on certain actions and guides them towards others, but at the end of the day, it is the individual who chooses their acts.

⁸ Much is owed to Engels for his exegesis of the Marx's materialist conception of history. For the sake of Brevity, I don't distinguish between Engels and Marx in this work.

⁹ Thomas Sowell, 'Karl Marx and the Freedom of the Individual', *Ethics*, 73.2 (1963), 119–25.

Thus, Weber Durkheim and Marx all agree that action is individual and social. Their disagreement is limited to how these components are to be understood in relation to each other.

III Towards a Universal Theory

Weber understands the relationship of individual to social action as bottom up whilst Durkheim and Marx posit that it is top down. It's tempting to think that disagreements between these theories could be resolved through the synthesis of some universal theory. I imagine that such a theory might posit something along the lines of society as an emergent property of individuals that supervenes on them such that human behaviour both influences and is influenced by social facts.

The synthesis of such a universal theory presupposes that there is a single description of social dynamics to be found. It is an open question of social ontology as to whether social theories get at society as a real object or whether they are merely useful abstractions with limited predictive power in some frame of reference. Even if there are objective descriptions of society available, it remains to be seen whether they are accessible from within society itself.

Any social theory developed from inside society is done so under the influence of particular social facts that necessarily must shape the form of that theory. It's not clear how one may extricate themselves from the influence of social facts to construct a completely objective theory, should one be possible. Thus, it's not currently possible, and potentially not possible in principle, to synthesise a universal theory of society.

IV Conclusion

Action is clearly individual in the sense that it is an individual who performs acts. The individual acts in accordance with their desires whilst positioned in some relation to social facts. The performance of acts reinforces the social facts in which others act, creating a mechanism by which actions can both

influence and be influenced them. Actions are therefore both individual and social.

There is no single theory that adequately describes the relationship between the individual and the social. Weber's methodological individualism indicates that we should describe the social in terms of the individual while some macrosociological theories suggest that it is only the social that is important to explain social phenomena.

Although we have some ability to gauge a theory's usefulness from its explanatory power, contradictions between various social theories like these are likely to be inherently unresolvable, either because there is no possible resolution or because we can't access it from within society.

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