PLURALISM IN THEORY AND PRACTICE
Contents

Preface vii

Philosophy and the History of Philosophy Richard Popkin 1

McKeon: The Unity of His Thought Walter Watson 10

Between Pragmatism and Realism: Richard McKeon's Philosophic Semantics David J. Depew 29

Theory and Practice Revisited: Reflections on the Philosophies of Richard McKeon and Talcott Parsons Donald N. Levine 54

One Mind in the Truth: Richard McKeon, a Philosopher of Education Dennis O'Brien 77

Memoirs of a Pluralist Charles W. Wegener 92

Pluralism and the Virtues of Philosophy Eugene Garver x

The Ecology of Culture: Pluralism and Circumstantial Metaphysics Richard Buchanan 110

McKeon’s Contributions to the Philosophy of Science Walter Watson 135

From Semantics to Praxis: Some Old Tricks for the New Pluralism Thomas Farrell 163

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Richard McKeon is a pivotal but neglected figure in twentieth-century American philosophy. In a career that spanned seven decades, he published more than 150 articles and eleven books; inspired generations of students, many of whom went on to distinguished careers in a wide variety of fields; and received most of the honors possible for an American philosopher, including an invitation to deliver the Paul Carus Lectures in 1964. He was an important educator, instrumental in developing the General Education program of the University of Chicago in the era of Robert Maynard Hutchins and in developing the cultural and philosophical projects of UNESCO in the early years of that organization, including the preliminary studies for the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. He was a pioneer in the study of medieval philosophy and the history of science when those disciplines did not yet exist in the United States, and he was a central figure in the resurgence of rhetoric as an intellectual art and in the development of the so-called “Chicago School” of literary critics. Yet, McKeon’s philosophic position appears isolated among his contemporaries, and in the decade following his death in 1985, his work was neglected among philosophers. Despite his many accomplishments and a well-deserved reputation for scholarly brilliance, McKeon’s philosophic position is seldom explored in depth, his wide-ranging contributions to philosophy and the humanities are not fully known, and his lasting influence remains difficult to determine.

There are three reasons for this situation. First is the inaccessibility of his work. Until the recent publication of several anthologies of some of his most important essays, McKeon’s works were scattered among so many journals and conference publications in the United States and abroad that the full range and scope of his thought was known to very few individuals. A reader who appreciated one side of his thought was frequently unaware of its extension in other directions or of its connection to a consistently developed body of work that expressed a broad vision of the nature of the philosophic enterprise. Second, McKeon wrote in an idiom so different from that of other major twentieth-century American philosophers that just reprinting his articles addresses only part of the problem of coming to understand his approach to philosophy. His work is characterized by a mixture of philosophy and scholarship, expressed in a style of writing that consistently challenges the casual reader with unusual ideas and juxtaposed views. Third, and perhaps most important, is the nature of the problems McKeon investigated, which
THEORY AND PRACTICE REVISITED

REFLECTIONS ON THE PHILOSOPHIES OF RICHARD McKEON AND TALCOTT PARSONS

Donald N. Levine

Richard McKeon and Talcott Parsons were two of the most powerful voices of the academic world in the twentieth century.1 In themselves, their oeuvres remain continuously generative; considered together, they stand to offer a fresh approach to certain vexing problems of contemporary thought. Although intellectual biographies of the two men reveal striking parallels, the philosophies which they created bring notably different slants to the interpretation of culture. If those different philosophies are brought together in a complementary way, I shall argue, they can throw new light on the perennially problematic character of the relationship between theoria and praxis.

Why McKeon and Parsons?

Like Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, Richard McKeon and Talcott Parsons were contemporaries whose works were mutually relevant yet who took no documented notice of one another. McKeon lived from 1900 to 1985, Parsons from 1902 to 1979. Both men received their undergraduate education on the East Coast—at Columbia University and Amherst College, respectively—and proceeded to pursue a critical portion of their graduate studies in Europe, McKeon at the University of Paris for three years (1922–25), Parsons for a year each at the Universities of London and Heidelberg (1924–26). The early careers of both men were marked by strife and ambiguities of status. Such loud objections were raised when President Hutchins proposed the appointment of McKeon to the Department of Philosophy at the University of Chicago in 1930, that for some time McKeon refused to let himself be considered further there. When he did finally come to Chicago in 1934, it was through appointments in the departments of history and classics. Although Parsons received his doctorate in economics and began to teach at Harvard in the Department of Economics, his intellectual inclinations led him to affiliate with Harvard's controversial new Department of Sociology in 1930. His appointment was backed by the chairman, Pitirim Sorokin, but the initiative was turned down by President Lowell, a decision reversed only after energetic intervention by supporters of the young Parsons. However, as Parsons’s work developed in ways that Sorokin did not appreciate, the chairman came to turn against him, first by keeping him at the rank of instructor after an initial three-year appointment, later by opposing his promotion to tenure—which again was saved only through friendly colleagues outside the department.

After these turbulent beginnings, both men established themselves solidly by the late 1930s at the institutions where each would spend the rest of his life as a prominent scholar, a powerful teacher, and a devoted citizen. In addition, both came to play significant roles as administrators, roles in which they would gain renown for instituting rare and innovative multidisciplinary programs. As dean of the Humanities Division, McKeon established four interdisciplinary committees, including the Committees on the History of Culture and on the Analysis of Ideas and the Study of Methods; Parsons established and long presided over Harvard’s famed Interdisciplinary Committee on Social Relations. Despite their predilection for interdisciplinary work, moreover, both men received the highest awards within their home disciplines. McKeon served as president of the American Philosophical Association, Western Division, in 1952, and later as the APA Paul Carus Lecturer; Parsons was honored as president of the American Sociological Association in 1949.

The intellectual biographies of McKeon and Parsons also exhibit striking parallels. The early works of both men concentrated on recoveries and fresh interpretations of significant classical figures—medieval philosophers, Spinoza and, in particular, Aristotle for McKeon; for Parsons, Werner Sombart, Alfred Marshall, Vilfredo Pareto, Durkheim, and, in particular, Max Weber. From early on, the work of both men
included a mission to do battle against naive positivist assumptions about science—this in the 1930s, long before it became fashionable to do so. Both also strongly objected to economistic theories of action by arguing for the interpenetration of cultural ideals with economic motives.

Perhaps most remarkable is the fact that each developed a succession of categorical schemes for organizing the universe of Western culture, initially in the form of dichotomies, then in trichotomies, and finally in quadrupartite schemes that evolved in ever more involuted and exponential ways. McKeon began with an opposition between holoscopic and meroscopic methods in the late 1930s; proceeded to develop a semantic schema anchored in the tripartite distinction among logical, dialectic, and problematic methods in the postwar years; then developed through the 1950s toward the complex four-by-four matrix illustrated in Figure 1. Parsons similarly began with a presenting dichotomy, between what he called positivistic and idealistic theories of action in the 1930s; shifted to an analytic framework anchored in the three-part distinction among cognitive, cathetic, and evaluative orientations in the postwar years; and thence, through the 1950s and beyond, moved toward the complex four-by-four matrices illustrated in Figure 2. Indeed, while the scholarly credibility of both men stemmed from their pioneering work on classic authors, like Aristotle and Weber, and their analyses of substantive problems, like the bases of literary criticism or the meanings of freedom and history for McKeon, and for Parsons, the physician-patient relationship or the origins of fascism, many of their students remember them chiefly for their later four-fold schemas for organizing the universe. For McKeon, this included four commonplaces (things, thoughts, words, and deeds); four semantic variables (principles, methods, selections, and interpretations); four universal arts (interpretation, discovery, presentation, and systematization); and four modes of thought (assimilation, discrimination, construction, and resolution). For Parsons, this included the four subsystems of action (behavioral organization, personality system, social system, and cultural system); the four functions of all action systems (adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance); and the four media of interchange (money, power, influence, and activation of commitments).

Introducing a volume of essays on Parsons that appeared in 1991, the editors conclude: "Parsons is one of the few genuinely modern and global minds of the twentieth century." That is surely true, and Richard McKeon is just as surely one of the few others. Although several other twentieth-century thinkers could be described as quintessentially modern, I can think of none who have been so resolutely global as these two. They were global in four senses. First, they were Catholic in their intellectual sweep: McKeon ranged widely as well as deeply across all branches of philosophy, from metaphysics, philosophy of

Figure 2
Quadripartite Schemata in Parsons*


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**Figure 2 (continued)**
Quadripartite Schemata in Parsons*

referring to what he called radical new insights and fundamental breakthroughs in this theory.

The Semantic Project and the Voluntaristic Project

Behind the comprehensive philosophical schemas that McKeon elaborated, Watson has identified a core generative idea: “the idea of pluralism, that the truth, though one, has no single expression,” and that philosophers “can be unified in communication and co-operation without the need of consensus in a common ideology.” Like McKeon, Parsons strove to develop comprehensive schemas for analyzing the diversities of human experience. And beneath Parsons’s theoretical edifices, one can also identify a core generative idea: the notion that human action is doubly animated, by dispositions to pursue goals through instrumentally rational adaptations and by dispositions to follow moral guidelines that ultimately express symbolic ideals.

These contrasting generative ideas are issued in philosophies of culture in which notably different conceptions of culture were embodied. For McKeon, the central axis of cultural variation was cognitive. Whichever categories he used to analyze culture, and in whatever direction his analysis turned, McKeon’s take on culture turned mainly on the various cognitive forms through which philosophers and others apprehend the world. He anchored the sources of values in the truths and hypotheses about the world found in the “framework and conclusions of the natural sciences, the social sciences and the human sciences.”

Nearly every time that McKeon broached a discussion of some moral or political value, he treated the topic by examining differing cognitive representations of the value in question. Thus, in his luminous discussions of the concept of freedom, he analyzed the different meanings it assumed when treated by the dialectical method, the problematic method, or the logistical method, and showed how an initially ambiguous definition of freedom could be made unambiguous through semantic analysis of the principles, methods, and interpretations through which it is configured.

Such analyses typically concluded by arguing that persons or communities can agree on common courses of action while yet holding different beliefs about the world.

What social scientists who study culture may find neglected in McKeon’s work is a systematic analysis of the ways in which different value-orientations animate culture. And what McKeon omitted constitutes precisely the dimension that Parsons made the linchpin of his philosophy of culture. In an early essay, Parsons wrote: “The positivistic reaction against philosophy has, in its effect on the social sciences, manifested a strong tendency to obscure the fact that man is essentially...
an active, creative, evaluating creature." This formulation displays Parsons's proclivity to equate human agency with a commitment to normative orientations. Thus, when analyzing the great systems of culture Parsons concentrated on the types of value-orientations embodied in various societies, such as the particularistic-achievement value pattern of traditional China or the value system of contemporary United States, which he described as "instrumental activism." The same was true when he analyzed microstructures, such as the roles of the physician, the parent, or the businessman.

In following his proclivity to emphasize value-orientations, some critics have argued Parsons did not pay the cognitive dimension its due. Thus, despite the array of meanings Max Weber associated with the concept of rationality, when Parsons discussed rationality he limited it solely to its technological and economic usages, that is, to the form of instrumental rationality. This is not to say that Parsons did not make significant contributions to understanding the cognitive cultural institutions; simply consider his pioneering analyses of science, ideology, and philosophy in The Social System or the analysis of what he called the cognitive complex in The American University. Nor is it to say that McKeon failed to illuminate the role of normative symbols in promoting cohesion within communities or the rich diversity of meanings of terms like justice and freedom. The point here is that although both thinkers appear to be presenting comprehensive philosophies of culture, they end up treating culture in a somewhat one-sided manner; with McKeon making the cognitive dimension foundational to all else at the expense of the normative, and Parsons doing the reverse.

This tendency to reduce the cognitive or the normative dimension of culture to the other leads to a peculiarity that both philosophies have in common. McKeon, for all his celebration of human reason, offers us no criteria for evaluating the cognitive forms he so brilliantly analyzes; and Parsons, for all his celebration of human agency, gives us a philosophically impoverished conception of practice and the ways it can be informed by reason. For both of them, the domain of rational choice, understood not in the circumscribed sense employed by economists but in the classical sense of choice informed by reason, appears to be neglected. The central task of this paper is to suggest ways to remedy that neglect by pooling resources supplied by the two of them, with results that point to hitherto unexplored terrain.

**Practice and the Theory of Action**

Two of the announced goals of *The Structure of Social Action*, the grand synthesis which climaxed the early work of Parsons and propelled his subsequent work, were to rekindle belief in the efficacy of human reason and to restore appreciation for the role of ideals and norms in directing human conduct. The irony is that Parsons never linked these two objectives by explicitly discussing the relationship between reason and moral choice. The closest he came to attending to the question of the use of reason in directing action was when he analyzed the problems of the sociological profession, where he identified a need to separate the pure discipline of sociology, with its distinctive theoretical and research tradition, from sociological "practice" (his quotation marks). Such practice consists of the application of the discipline's findings to activities like helping disturbed people or enhancing industrial productivity. Parsons advocated the institutionalization of a role wherein professionals could work full-time as applied sociologists. Accordingly, he urged the profession to set up special structures to mediate the applied functions in order to protect the integrity of the pure discipline while maintaining high standards for its applications. Parsons presented his position on this matter without engaging in explicit philosophical argument; he simply presumed the importance of preserving the integrity of pure theoretical work and that the practical contribution of sociology would take the form of its "application."

This conception assumes a radical division within sociology between pure theoretical work and applied practical work, and it assumes that in this division the theoretical work is cognitively superior to the practical and should be completed prior to its application. The model for this conception is that of physiology as a pure theoretic discipline in relation to medicine as its applied form, or between physics as a pure discipline and engineering as its applied form. One of the few voices within sociology to question this conception was that of Morris Janowitz, who glossed this view of the relation between sociology and practice as one that embodies an "engineering model." Over the past century this outlook has come to be accepted by the majority of professional sociologists, so in his remarks on the profession Parsons was simply giving voice to a widely shared point of view.

Anyone schooled in the thoughtways of Richard McKeon would know better than to accept such an assumption uncritically. Although Janowitz was not so schooled, he had been influenced by McKeon's one-time mentor John Dewey. From Deweyan pragmatism, Janowitz derived an alternative he called the "enlightenment model," which blurs the distinction between pure and applied sociology and sees the sociologist not as an outside expert, but as part of the social process. Had Janowitz delved more deeply into Dewey's arguments, he might have been led to maintain that the notion of a cognitively privileged and antecedently secured body of theory was a superstitious relic, an obstructive vestige of the quest for certainty pursued by Western philosophy since Hellenic
Donald N. Levine

times. Had Janowitz, not to mention Dewey, enjoyed access to the distinctions available from McKeon’s semantic analyses of philosophic systems, he might have broached a still more differentiating critique. But even the limited degree of dissent which Janowitz expressed in his espousal of an enlightenment model was little heeded by the sociological profession. The engineering model probably remains the dominant orientation among professional sociologists to this day. I turn now to consider what a portrayal of the relation between theory and practice that departs from the work of Richard McKeon might look like.

Six Views of the Theory-Practice Nexus

What is the right way to conceive of the relation between theory and practice? The import of McKeon’s philosophy is that such a question must be asked, but it is absurd to expect there can be only one valid answer for it. Both terms are multiply ambiguous, and both their meanings and their proper relationship depend on certain generative assumptions that possess some inexpungible degree of arbitrariness. What is more, when carrying out some inquiry about them, it is best not to restrict their meanings by imposing some rigorous definition in advance but to let their varying meanings unfold in the course of using them and seeing how they are used in different ways.

So instructed, I direct my inquiry to recovering the fundamental alternative ways of conceptualizing practical knowledge in relation to theoretic knowledge. And I find that relationship to take three distinct forms. Theory can be construed as foundational for practice, as disjunctive from practice, or as inseparable from practice. Each of these forms exhibits two primary variants. In examining these six views of the theory-practice nexus, let us begin with what is closest to us, the conception articulated by Parsons which is so widely shared that I call it the SPS position: the position of standard professional sociology.

The SPS position holds that theoretical knowledge is required to provide a rational foundation for practice in that it supplies scientifically warranted means to employ in pursuit of stipulated goals. Its classic formulation in modern philosophy is Kant’s notion of the hypothetical imperatives: if you want x, then you must do y. Max Weber’s essays on objectivity and ethical neutrality contain the classic exposition of this position for modern sociology. Weber argued that although the goals of action could not be set by reason, pure science was needed for rational action by virtue of its capacity to provide not an authoritative selection of the best means toward one’s goals but an analysis of the costs and benefits of various alternative means. This use of reason—as a calculus of optimal means—was what Parsons referred to as instrumental rationality, and in his own theory of action it proved to be the only type of rationality he seriously considered.

There exists, however, another mode of using reason in which theoretical knowledge figures as foundational for practice. This mode might be designated as diagnostic rationality. In the mode of diagnostic rationality, theoretic reason provides ends for action by establishing standards of well-being for persons or collectivities. Here the analogy with physiology/medicine is taken, not just to indicate the best means for attaining a goal, such as repairing a broken bone or relieving an aching back, but as a model for establishing criteria of a healthy organism. Theoretical science establishes limits within which an organism can survive and/or function adequately, such as normal temperatures and blood-pressure levels for various species and its subtypes, by age and gender, and the practical application of this knowledge works to diagnose given specimens of the species to determine their level of health.

Within the social sciences, diagnostic rationality was pioneered by Auguste Comte. Comte insisted on regarding society as a natural being and so advocated basing directives to action on prior theoretical knowledge about society’s natural course of development. Armed with that knowledge, statesmen could assist society in reaching its normal state with the least pain and disruption. A century ago, Freud and Durkheim both attempted to generate diagnostic criteria for directing therapeutic interventions with personalities and with societies, respectively. Both Freud and Durkheim used the medical model to legitimate a quest for scientifically grounded knowledge of normal and pathological conditions in human conduct. Through studying social systems of a certain type, Durkheim argued, one could arrive at formulations regarding what conditions were normal to its existence and essential to its functioning.

In contrast to these views that would base rational practice on a previously secured foundation in theoretical knowledge, there stands a quartet of positions which challenges that view of the theory-practice nexus and which in fact holds that efforts to reduce practical knowledge to a process of applied theory are misguided at best. Philosophers who articulate these four positions are Aristotle, Kant, Marx, and Dewey. Two of them see theory as separate and distinct but not as an appropriate guide for practice; while the other two regard a disjunction between theory and practice as illegitimate.

The great architect of the disjunctive conception of theory and practice was Aristotle. McKeon helped generations of scholars grasp the several respects in which Aristotle worked to distinguish the theoretical sciences (epistemai theoretikai) from the sciences of human action (epistemai praktikai)—of ethics, economics, and politics. Those distinctions need to be made, Aristotle said, because every science needs to limit its
attention to a certain class of things in order to demonstrate their essential attributes.

With respect to their subject matters: insofar as they deal with substances, the theoretical sciences contend with things that exist by nature, while the practical sciences work with a different class of things—ta prakta (things done). Actions do not occur by nature, they are made by humans (as are ta poiestai [things produced], which form the subject matter of yet another group of disciplines, the productive sciences [epistemai poietikai]). Things existing by nature differ from human actions in two fundamental respects. Natural substances have an internal principle of change, whereas in actions the principle of change is external to them—in the will of the actor. What is more, the properties of natural substances are irrevocable, whereas human actions result from deliberate choice and so are variable.

The sciences of action differ from the sciences of natural substances in their methods as well as in their subject matters. The methods employed in studying natural substances include the establishment of true generalizations by means of induction and the demonstration of valid consequences by means of deduction. The propositions of natural science take the form of necessary universals because the essential characteristics of natural substances are irrevocable. For several reasons, the form taken by inquiry in the practical sciences diverges from that taken in physics. Since human actions are based on choice, not on natural necessity, their properties cannot be so securely grasped. What is more, because people differ so radically about what they consider good, inquiry into the nature of good action has to take into account the variety of opinions people hold. Finally, since the circumstances of action differ from situation to situation, knowing the best thing to do demands, above all knowledge of particulars: what counts in practice is not general rules but knowing what to do to the right person at the right time to the right extent and in the right manner.11

Methods geared to demonstrating universal propositions are therefore out of place in the practical sciences. The method suited for determining the right course of action is what Aristotle called deliberation (boulêsis). Inquiry proceeds by examining the diverse opinions people hold about an issue, and its successful resolution depends on traits of good character possessed by the deliberating parties. Deliberative excellence involves the selection of worthy ends and the determination of suitable means by means of sound reasoning in a moderate amount of time. The conclusions of deliberative inquiry cannot be expected to reach the precision and certainty attainable by the natural sciences, and it is the mark of an educated person to realize this.

Another difference between the two kinds of sciences concerns the faculties needed to prosecute them. The generalizations of natural science come from exercising the faculty Aristotle called intuitive reason (nous). Showing the logical consequences of those generalizations involves what he called scientific knowledge (episteme). On the other hand, deliberations about the good life involve a different sort of mental ability designated as phronesis, which may be translated as practical wisdom or prudence. In deliberating about laws and policies, a special variant of this, which he termed political wisdom (politikes), is needed. In contrast to the states of mind that generate theoretical knowledge, phronesis is concerned with the “ultimate particular fact.” Perhaps we can refer to the kind of reason Aristotle claimed for practice as deliberative rationality.

Finally, the ends, or purposes, for which the two kinds of science are pursued also differ radically. The motivation for studying natural substances is to understand the world, for the sheer aesthetic pleasure and for the relief from ignorance such understanding affords. By contrast, the reason one studies human actions is for the sake of learning how to live well and how to cultivate the dispositions that promote good action, which is to say how to pursue the aretai, or excellences.

Kant also holds to a principled separation between the domains of theoretical and practical philosophy, but he does so for reasons that in many respects are the reverse of Aristotle’s. For Kant, too, theoretical and practical knowledge differ in their subject matters, forms, ends, and methods, but Kant fills these distinctions with radically different contents. Where Aristotle found the subject of practical science to be variable human actions, Kant finds it to be a kind of law—laws of freedom. Where Aristotle faulted theory as a guide to practical decision making because of its universality and because the essence of practical wisdom is to understand particulars, Kant faults knowledge of human conduct from a theoretical perspective as a guide to practice because merely theoretic knowledge of what humans in different societies actually do cannot be universal enough to provide categorial imperatives for action. Where Aristotle found the method of practical philosophy to be a necessarily imprecise form of deliberation about variable things, Kant finds it to involve a kind of reasoning that can yield apodictic certainty. Where Aristotle considered the end of practical philosophy to be the pursuit of happiness, or at least eudaimonia, Kant considers it to be knowledge of how to live in accord with duty. Kant’s practical reason can thus be glossed as a kind of deontological rationality.

Although Aristotle and Kant took pains to distinguish the knowledge involved in rational practice from theoretical knowledge, both of them deemed it important to preserve theory as an independent and dignified domain. Aristotle lauded the pursuit of theoretic contemplation as the highest form of human excellence, and Kant celebrated the theoretical domain which Copernicus revolutionized and Sir Isaac Newton
championed. In the views of authors like Marx and Dewey, however, to protect a separate, distinct, and privileged domain of theory is to promote obfuscation and mystification.

Although Marx acknowledged the historical existence of a distinct domain of theoretical knowledge separate from practical concerns, he considered that domain detrimental to human well-being. The division of labor is the great source of human alienation, and the division of labor really takes on this alienating form only at the point when mental work gets separated from physical labor. From that moment onward, intellect flatters itself that it has hold of something supremely important. Theoretical work becomes the activity of an elite group that is exploitative in several ways: by deriving support from the exploited labor of working class people, by detracting mental energies from attention to the economic and social miseries of the populace, and by buttressing the position of an exploitative upper class.

For Marx, then, the disjunctive conception of theory/practice contributes to human self-alienation. Since true consciousness can only be consciousness of existing practice, there can be no legitimate basis for a principled separation between theory and practice. Rational practice begins with an acknowledgment of true human needs—for eating and drinking, clothing and housing, but also for expressing oneself creatively in work—and any intellectual activity that does not minister to the satisfaction of these needs represents false consciousness of some sort. One might refer to the use of reason implicit in Marx’s philosophy as sensuous rationality. Abstract theories of society are useless, distracting, or manipulative mystifications. “Social life is essentially practical, [and] all mysteries which mislead theory into mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice.”

Like Marx, John Dewey interprets the idea of a separate domain of pure theory as the residue of an elitist social structure. He, too, believes that the mysteries of pure theory find their resolution in human practice. But Dewey regards the effort to establish a list of absolute human needs as itself a kind of alienation, just another byproduct of the age-old, all-too-human wish for certainty. Dewey eschews any and all efforts to secure entitative foundations, including those lodged in a refined conception of practice or in antecedently established notions of history and societal structure.

In his view, theory is simply a name for a special kind of practice, so the quest for a theoretical knowledge either prior to or segregated from practice must be rejected as a reflection of human fears and uncertainties. Accordingly, Dewey aspired to develop a logic of inquiry that reveals the underlying unity of theory and practice. In science as in daily life, action proceeds from undertakings that transform a problematic situation into a resolved one. In daily life as in science, action gets initiated in situations marked by indeterminacy or conflict, in which felt difficulties prompt efforts to formulate problems, suggest hypotheses, and carry out activities designed to test those hypotheses.

What Dewey finds harmful about disjunctive and foundational notions of the theory-practice nexus is not so much their ideological functions in upholding privilege but their effect in preventing the great resources of scientific intelligence from being harnessed for improving human experience. Against the notion of mind as a spectator beholding the world from without in a joyous act of self-sufficing contemplation, and against the notion that theory can disclose the characteristics of antecedent existence and essences, and therewith determine authoritative standards for conduct, Dewey propounds the view that reality itself possesses practical character and that this character is most efficaciously expressed in the function of intelligence. This notion of reason in practice is one he would call pragmatic rationality. Figure 3 summarizes the types of relationship between theory and practice just presented.

Playing with Pluralism

Inscribed by the spirit of McKeon’s approach to historical semantics, if not employing the terms of his schemas, the foregoing reflections challenge the hegemonic view of standard professional sociology as represented by Parsons. They subject the notion that pure sociology should inform practice through the logic of instrumental rationality to a five-fold critique.

From the viewpoint of diagnostic rationality, the SPS conception of the theory-practice nexus can be faulted for failing to provide norms about normal or healthy states. For example, it might lead one to apply propositions about group process to eliminating the authority of leaders, without considering whether or not authoritative leaders comprise a normal and healthy part of group functioning. From the viewpoint of deliberative rationality, that conception can be faulted for neglecting the importance of particulars in action and the imprecise nature of practical decisions—for example, looking for universally valid processes to heighten morale in organizations without considering the nuances of local life and the difficulties of verbalizing certain aspects of interpersonal rapport. From the viewpoint of deontological rationality, it can be faulted for shortchanging the ability of reason to provide normative injunctions independent of empirical circumstances—using instrumental calculations to optimize the elimination of allegedly inferior peoples without considering whether there is not a rationally prescribed duty to resist such objectives. From the viewpoint of sensuous rationality, it can be faulted for deflecting attention from urgent social needs, spending millions to do research on poverty instead of on programs to alleviate
Figure 3  
Conceptions of the Theory-Praxis Nexus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>THEORY-PRACTICE RELATION</th>
<th>EXEMPLARY AUTHOR</th>
<th>TYPE OF PRACTICAL RATIONALITY</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>FOUNDATIONAL</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory provides lawful regularities to be applied in practice</td>
<td>Weber, Parsons, SPS</td>
<td>Instrumental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory provides standards of health or normality</td>
<td>Durkheim, Freud</td>
<td>Diagnostic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DISJUNCTIVE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory concerns necessary universals; practice involves variable particulars</td>
<td>Aristotle</td>
<td>Deliberative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory concerns laws of nature; practice concerns laws of freedom</td>
<td>Kant</td>
<td>Deontological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INSEPARABLE</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separate theory reflects alienation from sensuous needs</td>
<td>Marx</td>
<td>Sensuous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Antecedent theory fractures unity of experience</td>
<td>Dewey</td>
<td>Pragmatic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

poverty through job training and job creation. From the viewpoint of pragmatic rationality, it can be faulted for deriving its problems, concepts, and methods from antecedently formulated theories, when appropriate concepts and methods can only be identified as plausible responses to problems that emerge in indeterminate or conflictual situations—as when one brings a set of standard procedures demonstrated to enhance communication among staff members when the chief presenting problem in their office is a lack of time to deal with crises in their families.

This kind of work—identifying shortcomings in a position by appeal to the insights of plausible alternative positions—can be construed as a first-level engagement with pluralism. We could just as readily confront any of the others with critical arguments from the remaining five. Yet this is not the only way in which McKeon’s work can be utilized, for it opens up at least two more advanced ways to employ a pluralistic vision. In these other modes, the point is not to engage alternative perspectives or principles in order to open up new ways of looking at a commonplace issue, but to see how those different positions relate among themselves. As George Kimball Plochmann has observed, “essay after essay of [McKeon’s] begins with some variation on the theme that there are great discrepancies in the traditional philosophies, and it is important to lay them out in order to resolve them.”

“First I shall call them, first, the mode of cyclical history, and second, following Watson’s usage in The Architecture of Meaning, the mode of reciprocal priority.

McKeon exhibited the cyclical mode chiefly when representing the broad historic shifts of attention to different subject matters in Western cultural history. Originally shown in the opening pages of Freedom and History, 23 he traced a series of epochal changes, starting in the Hellenic period when philosophers debated about being—when the atoms of Democritus, the Ideas of Plato, and the substances of Aristotle were considered existent things which provided principles for science and had some bearing on morals and politics. In the succeeding Hellenistic epoch, philosophers tired of the inconclusive debates about being and shifted their concern to the nature of thought. Stoics, Epicureans, Academics, and Skeptics sought their basic principles in the criteria of knowledge, criteria by which truth or probability might be achieved. Under the spreading Roman rule, philosophers found epistemological debates as unfruitful as their predecessors had found metaphysical disputes and turned to examine how people talk and how people act. At the same time, Sextus Empiricus proceeded to analyze the signs used in various sciences, and Cicero appealed to consequences in practical action. The coming of Christianity reawakened interest in doctrines about being, a concern codified by St. Augustine. Then Boethius shifted attention to the problem of knowledge, after which Cassiodorus and Isidore
of Seville engineered the linguistic turn, and the court of Charlemagne revived interest in philosophy by attending to problems of practical action. This cycle of shifts in subject matter, from being to thought to words and deeds, took place five times in the history of the West—most recently in the cycle beginning in the seventeenth century, when modern science began with a new interest in the nature of things, after which Kant reoriented philosophy to the problem of knowledge, leading to our century with its interest both in the nature of symbols and the patterns of action and experience.

The cyclical mode offers an ideal type for a conjectural history of shifts of attention and emphasis. The operative principle is the notion that a certain approach gets cultivated until its fruitfulness is exhausted and its omissions become too glaring. How might one adapt such a conjectural grid to the vicissitudes of approach to the theory-practice mode in sociology during the past century? It began with some strong statements of diagnostic rationality—Durkheim's about normal and pathological states, Thorstein Veblen's about stage-appropriate conditions, Pareto's about optimal equilibria. This was replaced by a concern for using social science to organize publics and inform public opinion, as the statements in the 1920s by Dewey and Park show. During the 1940s and 1950s, sociologists attained an unprecedented level of professional respectability and shifted to an appeal to instrumental rationality based on their specialized expertise. The 1960s saw a good deal of revolt against this engineering model and a renewed appeal to Marxist doctrines against alienated instrumentality. The shortcomings of directly sensuous rationality became apparent in the 1970s and 1980s, as writers like Jürgen Habermas came to emphasize deliberative rationality and others, insisting that the horrors of Nazi genocide be confronted, invoked the need for deontological rationality.

In addition to relating different approaches in terms of this model of cyclical manifestations, McKeon offered a model by which any given perspective, deeply pursued, could find some kind of place for the main thrust of the others. This kind of mutualized accommodation has been represented aptly by Watson's felicitous phrase, reciprocal priority.

In the mode of reciprocal priority, one position is taken as central, and the others are confronted, redefined, and assimilated in accord with its perspective. So if we were to take the position represented by what I have called instrumental rationality, we could in principle find some way of accommodating each of the other five. Thus, from the viewpoint of instrumental rationality, diagnostic rationality might be criticized as purporting to advance scientific grounds for what are in fact conventionally based norms, but the norms it suggests could be used as goals for directing the analysis of means. Deliberative rationality would be criticized for leaving too much to opinion, since rigorous scientific methods are now available to assess various outcomes. However, this does not mean that the precision of physics can be expected in measuring human affairs, so their results must be stated in probabilistic terms; and there is no reason why those results cannot be discussed by an informed public in open democratic process. Deontological rationality would be criticized for ignoring immoral consequences in its quest for rationally grounded motives for action, but its efficacy in setting the normative ground rules for honest inquiry and open discussion would be acknowledged. Sensuous rationality would be faulted for failing to appreciate the complexities of action situations and human dispositions, but its caution about getting lost in alienated procedures could be appreciated. Pragmatic rationality would be hailed as a close ally and perhaps faulted only for failing to appreciate that to tie optimal actions so closely to the particularities of situations is to undermine the quest for generalizations about factors that structure the contexts of action.

Confronted with a plurality of positions about the relationship between theory and action—or anything else—then, the philosophy of Richard McKeon opens up the three options we have just considered: to use the other positions to generate criticisms of the one chosen, to see them in a cyclical progression as giving rise one to another, and to use a chosen position to translate others so as to assimilate their congenial features while rejecting their incompatible ones.

The work involved in pursuing these options can demand a great deal in maturity of mind and strength of intellect. But there is some sense in which one responds to this work with amusement, regarding it as some sort of game—which is why I have called this section of my paper "Playing with Pluralism." There remains something ultimately unsatisfactory about it, namely, its apparent difficulty in providing any rational ground for choosing one position rather than another. McKeon's philosophy seems to be excellent for clarifying the cognitive alternatives in our culture, and certainly consistent with the criticism of degraded versions of those alternatives, but provides no criteria for selecting one alternative over another.

Selecting a Mode of Thought

Indeed, that does seem to be the prime weakness for which this philosophy has been faulted. The only advice McKeon ever gave about which approach to select was his reported comment that one picked an approach "that feels most comfortable." His indifference in this regard parallels Max Weber's advice regarding ultimate values: only hearken to your inner demon. But what if you have no clear demon, or what if two demons are warring in your breast, or what if you suspect that your
don't demon is inappropriate due to changing circumstances, or what if new prophets appear, or when forgotten truths are recovered; what then?

McKeon's failure to specify criteria for selecting a cognitive approach may be connected with his relative inattention to the normative dimension of culture. This can be made clear by considering some features of Parsons's theory of action. In an earlier phase of work on culture, Parsons analyzed cultures with respect to the general value-orientations they embodied, values to which he gave such names as universalistic-scription and particularistic-achievement patterns. In later work, he came to focus on the generic needs of boundary-maintaining systems of action, needs which he came to refer to in terms of the functions of adaptation, goal attainment, integration, and pattern maintenance. Different value-orientations, then, came to be viewed as differentially relevant to one or another of these generic system functions.

Through the same logic that relates the selection of values to the functions of action systems, one can also find criteria with which to assess the differential relevance of diverse cognitive approaches. Let us return to the authors whose views we sketched above and encapsulate their respective approaches to the theory-practice question by referring to the different meanings they ascribe to practice.

For Aristotle, practice refers to a human process involving choice, and the choices are made with respect to some end or purpose. Since all human activities aim at some good and the higher or more general good directs the lower or more particular goods, the chief task of practical philosophy is to articulate the ideal ends of human action. In *Ethics*, this turns out to be the cultivation of the *aretai*, or human excellences; in *Politics*, the establishment of laws which will promote justice as well as the cultivation of excellence. Durkheim sees a similar agenda for sociology. Although he differs from Aristotle in rejecting the notions of common opinion as a point of departure for discourse about the good, he aspires to use his social science in practice by establishing conceptions of the normal and the pathological that will provide the reasonable ideals toward which human decisions should be oriented.

For Kant, practice also refers to human action that is subject to choice, but Kant's emphasis is on the subjectivity of those choices to imperatives that guarantee freedom—of the inner exercise of will in ethics; of the external exercise of will in jurisprudence. The task of a philosophy of practice, accordingly, is to ground the principles which generate ethical and juridical norms.

The meaning of practice changes considerably in Marx. For Marx, practice refers to the satisfaction of human sensuous needs, so the task of a philosophy of practice is to show how those needs are historically met and frustrated and what must be done to overcome those obstacles to their complete satisfaction. Dewey also connects practice with the satisfaction of human needs, but what Dewey understands by practice differs from what Marx meant by the term. Practice for Dewey consists of efforts to cope with anything that impedes the enjoyment of experience, whether it be of a material or an intellectual character. Dewey's formula for practice is couched not as the satisfaction of needs, but the solving of problems. That formula would also cover the kind of practice entailed in Max Weber's notion of instrumental rationality.

The question now before us is whether it is possible to determine if one of these meanings and its attendant agenda is superior to another. I have argued that it is not possible to do so without departing from the limits of McKeon's philosophy, but that such a determination could be derived from the conceptual resources of Parsons's theory of action. An immediately transparent way to do so would be to make reference to familiar Freudian schema for analyzing the parts of the personality. The part of personality that presents bundles of imperious needs that clamor for satisfaction Freud called *das Ego* (the id). Another part deals with the solution of problems posed by the relations among the different parts of the personality and its relations with the reality outside the individual, *das Ich* (the ego). Yet another part confronts the individual with duties and norms that are to be obeyed, *das Über-Ich* (the superego). Finally, what he sometimes designated as a part distinct from the superego provided general ideals for the person to follow, the ego-ideal.

While Parsons accepts this schema for the analysis of psychic structure, he interprets it as a refraction at the level of the personality system of the four-function schema that pertains to all systems of action. The ego deals with the function of adapting to reality in order to attain goals. The id provides general motivational resources available to energize action. The superego is concerned with normative integration, and the ego-ideal with pattern maintenance (see Figure 2, bottom right). What Parsons offers to a philosophy of culture, then, is a way of connecting different dimensions and systems of cultures with the satisfaction of different kinds of systemic needs. At the global level of culture, he connects the functions of adaptation with science, of goal attainment with art, of integration with ethics and law, and of pattern maintenance with religion.

Returning to the construal of meaning at the personality level, we could say that Aristotle's concern with excellence and Durkheim's with standards of health and normality represent alternate approaches to the specification of ego ideals, which afford alternate ways to fulfill the function of pattern maintenance. Kant's concern with the specification of norms corresponds to the superego of the individual, fulfilling what Parsons calls the function of normative integration. Marx's identification
of practice with the satisfaction of needs corresponds to one ego-id interface, that involving the function of goal attainment; while Dewey's identification of practice with problem solving and the SPS position correspond to another ego-id interface, the identification of resources within the personality and the more general system function of adaptation.

Parsons's schema thus suggests one rational way to select one of the cognitive modalities so brilliantly typologized by McKeon. It would take a form something like that represented in Figure 4. If the system problem concerns adaptation or resource generation, use instrumental or pragmatic rationality, for that is the kind of reasoning that specifies the costs and benefits of alternate means. If the problem has to do with goal attainment, use sensuous rationality, for that is the kind of reasoning that applies to whether or not resources have been effectively mobilized to satisfy needs. If the problem concerns integration, use deontological rationality, for that is the type of reasoning related to compliance with obligatory norms. If it has to do with pattern maintenance, use deliberative or diagnostic rationality, for that type of reasoning clarifies the ultimate values which govern the system's orientation.

It should be clear that the above suggestions are offered in an illustrative and exploratory mode. Whatever the status of these particular suggestions, I hope the way of thinking they configure indicates what might be gained by connecting the analyses of values Parsons found embodied in action systems with the diversity of cognitive orientations McKeon identified in philosophical outlooks.

Mark Backman properly comments that Richard McKeon was "edifying." "Awesome" or "terrifying" would have been my personal reaction, but Backman is being technical. He cites Richard Rorty. The mainstream of philosophy has been "systematic." Philosophers in the mainstream lay out systems, refuting rivals, and constructing powerful proofs of their own views. In contrast to the majority there are edifying philosophers on the periphery who have kept alive the historicist sense that this century's "superstition" was the last century's triumph of reason, as well as the relativist sense that the latest vocabulary... may be just another of the potential infinity of vocabularies in which the world can be described. McKeon as "edifying" in sensu Rortiano helped explain to me the fascination and frustration which I (and many of my contemporaries) felt in our studies at Chicago during the 1950s. Personal history may help to set the philosophical issues I wish to raise in this essay.

The University of Chicago has traditionally had a more open-door policy toward graduate students than many other great graduate centers.

ONE MIND IN THE TRUTH

RICHARD McKEON, A PHILOSOPHER OF EDUCATION

Dennis O'Brien

"... to be of one mind is not to be of one opinion."
RICHARD McKEON, "COMMUNICATION, TRUTH, AND SOCIETY," 99