

Practical Action

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*Wittgenstein, Pragmatism
and Sociology*

By

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INTRODUCTION

A BLUEPRINT FOR A THEORY OF PRACTICAL ACTION

This book intends to delineate a pluralist and dynamic model of practical action which would thoughtfully take into account the reflexive conception of agency that is by and large prevailing in current social sciences research. Making such a model available might help challenging the one the cognitive sciences have rather successfully imposed on our understanding of the relationship between knowledge and action. In order to give a brief idea of what an integrated theory of practical action grounded on a fully contextual conception of human individual and collective behaviour may look like, this book will tentatively compare Wittgenstein's theses on knowing with the pragmatist outlook on inquiry and the analysis of action in common promoted by interactionist sociology.

The correspondence between the perspectives on action offered by ordinary language philosophy, pragmatism and sociology will be studied through an investigation into the key notions of forms of life, inquiry and situation which will be related to the theory of knowledge each of these three ways of reasoning advocates. The relevance of such a rapprochement has already been evoked by Stephen Toulmin in the introduction he wrote to Dewey's *The Quest for Certainty*:

“Whereas Dewey spoke in rather broad terms of knowledge as rooted in “action,” and did not give us a technique for analysing action in any systematic way [...] Goffman's dramaturgical model for the analysis of human conduct gives us a way of dissecting out and describing the individual “forms of life” which enter into human social life and learning. In all these areas of research (we may say) John Dewey's insistence on the active character of human knowledge is now bearing fruit, and the combined heritage of Dewey and Wittgenstein is giving us a new command over psychology and social theory.” (Toulmin, 1984: xiii-xiv)

The affinity between Dewey and Wittgenstein has been finely highlighted by Christiane Chauviré (2012) who, in her commentary on Dewey's

Experience and Nature, has suggested that Wittgenstein must have been, without admitting it, a fervent reader of Dewey. I will therefore go along the path traced by Toulmin and Chauviré in order to demonstrate that the notions of “forms of life”, “inquiry” and “situation” account, each in its appropriate way, for the very fact that practical knowledge bears within itself the conditions of its objectivity (i.e. the fact that it is immediately shared by others even if only approximately). This introduction will briefly outline the kind of analytical framework which may allow to contend that knowing is a social activity through and through and not a purely cognitive mechanism.

Forms of life

Wittgenstein’s notion of forms of life (in the plural) is directly linked to his conception of understanding based on his famous adage: “meaning is use” (denying thereby the soundness of defining an object in terms of necessary and sufficient conditions). Use only amounts, according to him, to the way anyone employs the words of a given language—whether natural or vernacular—to denote something while one acts or speaks. In such a view, the intelligibility of what is done or said entirely depends on the context in which an action in common takes place and the function that the words play within an uttered proposition. In short, use is the very material of what Wittgenstein calls “grammar”. But that is not it according to him. In order to account for the use of such ordinary grammar, it is necessary, says Wittgenstein, to refer each one of them to the “language game” within which it occurs, that is to say, the lexicon and the syntax proper to a specific kind of practical activity. These language games have two features: they exist prior to the involvement of individuals in an action in common and set limits to the acceptability of what may be done or said in it.

One has to take a step further though. For Wittgenstein (1958), each of these language games is part of a “form of life”, that is to say, a set of ordered practices that are structurally interrelated and convey a rough idea of the sequences of an action in common which should regularly proceed in a given circumstance. On this account, forms of life constitute the background on which coordination of action does relentlessly emerge. Wittgenstein adds: “it is in language [and not by means of language] that men agree. This agreement is not a consensus of opinion, but in forms of life” (*ibid.*:§241). Accordingly, the sheer possibility of mutual understanding lies in the fact that partners in interaction know at once that they act within the same form of life—a kind of knowledge individuals cannot but be

familiar with. Says Wittgenstein: “What must be accepted, the given—it could be said—are forms of life” (*ibid.*: 316). And this given is what he refers to as “the natural history of human beings.”

I thus contend that the notion of forms of life cannot be conceived of outside the inextricable “epistemic compound” which binds together uses, language games, forms of life, agreement in language and the natural history of human beings. This compound constitutes what may be called the “ordinary logic of intelligibility” which allows for coordination of action in a given practical activity to prevail. Now one has to account for the nature and function of this compound. To do so, referring to Peirce’s experimental theory of meaning (Deledalle, 1979) may prove useful.

We know that, dismissing all essentialism and attentive to the particular role of language in our relationship to reality, Peirce argued that “reality is what signifies something real,” adding that the attribution of this meaning is always accomplished in the context of a given ongoing action. Hence the famous 1878’s pragmatist maxim: “Consider what practical effects we think can be produced by the object of our conception. The design of all these effects is the complete design of the object.” Here, knowledge is not exclusively contemplated in the purity of its relation to truth, but is apprehended through its actualization as it is realized in the many ways it happens to give birth to (in common sense as well as in scientific activity).

The key element of Peirce’s standpoint is the primacy he assigns to doubt as the origin of the movement of thought, which leads him to contend that “it is not the particular that is the most natural, but the vague, the general these two forms of the real and irreducible undetermination.” In other words, knowledge should never be indexed to truth, but to what is predictable or acceptable in such or such context. This leads Peirce to assert that since the grasp we get of things is irremediably doomed to be vague and incomplete, and as it always serves a practical aim, knowing only consists in fixing satisfactory beliefs—i.e. beliefs which temporarily fulfil the conditions required for the activity in which an individual is engaged in to be properly accomplished. Fixing such a belief is at the heart of what Peirce calls “inquiry”, which he thus presents as a procedure aiming at putting a provisional end to doubt. It must of course be remembered that Peirce holds belief to be a “habit of action,” neither a disposition nor an instinctive reaction but an “active rule in us”. Which raises a new question: who is the subject of an inquiry?

An element of answer can be found in the way Peirce reformulated his maxim twenty years later. Chauviré (1995) has shown that, in its new version, the maxim stipulates that “a proposition is endowed with meaning

if, and only if, it has conceivable practical effects and, among these effects, a conceivable scope for the conduct to adopt.” According to her, this reformulation gives the maxim “a pragmatic twist; it is no longer a matter of content of propositions alone, but has to do with the statements formulated by a speaker who conveys intentions toward the listener and is responsible for what he says before a community of interpretation.” This raises three general questions about knowing as practical action: where do the intentions of the speaker proceed from; how does she assess the responsibility of her partners; and how does a “community of interpretation” exercise its control on a speaker?

It seems that, for Peirce, these three questions are encapsulated in the third. According to Chauviré, Peirce’s approach is “driven by a double-faced, ontological and logical thesis (the irreducibly triadic character of the sign-relation), and by the thesis of radical indeterminacy of the meaning implied by the indefinite opening of the semiotic process.” These two theses highlight the practical and dynamic nature of the inquiry people undertake to carry out in order to solve, while acting together, the problems arising from triadicity and interpretation. To delve deeper into this phenomenon one may turn to Dewey’s theory of inquiry.

Inquiry

Dewey (1989) anchors Peirce’s logic in the practices that constitute human action. In his theory of inquiry he takes up the idea that knowledge is an activity that takes place within a natural setting and only serves practical purposes. We know that Dewey’s naturalism is unbounded. According to him, the environment covers the entire universe in which human beings evolve and which they confront by using the faculties that their constitution allows them to mobilize to act in common and ensure the survival of the species. Two of these faculties are essential: language and reasoning, which both lead individuals to conceive of a series of external constraints in terms of “problematical situations” and to engage in an inquiry in order to find a solution to them.

Dewey’s model of inquiry unfolds in three stages: 1) an undeterminate situation is “had”; 2) a problem is created, i.e. relevant elements are selected, endowed with specific attributes and ordered for their use in and for action; and (3) a solution to the problem is elicited that is collectively seen as satisfying. The entire procedure is carried out by implementing an experimental form of reasoning, through testing the robustness of the outcomes resulting from the provisional steps taken during the accomplishment of the process. Any inquiry therefore obeys its own logic

and has two dimensions to which the people involved must constantly pay attention: the first one is applying the rules of the experimental method; the second one is ensuring the continuity and fluidity of gestures, words and the sequence of events that constitute the action in common which aims at achieving the expected determination. Knowing is thus an activity which can be thought of as accomplished simultaneously on these two fronts, allowing for the emergence of a collective intelligence prone to take in account the fallibility of the transient solution elaborated and implemented to cope with the problematic situation.

One has to notice that the social sciences have some difficulty in endorsing such an open conception of inquiry. Most generally, inquiry is seen as a rational investigation aiming at solving a problem posed by a clearly identified state of uncertainty and which is led by individuals who possess the necessary “skills” to find the most appropriate solution to it. When endorsing such a conception, the researcher may feel her task is to define by herself the problem people took up and describe how it has been solved according to the best foreseeable outcome.

This way of conceiving of inquiry is doubly reductive in relation to the spirit of pragmatism. On the one hand, because the latter pays little attention to the nature and effectiveness of actor’s skills, but gives a prevailing place to the context—may it be a system, an experience or the environment—within which a belief is fixed or a situation determined. On the other hand, because the end result of inquiry—the one collective intelligence eventually reaches—is less important for pragmatism than the process through which it has been reached, namely the practices people have made use of to carry out an inquiry at each of its stages. In short, for pragmatism, analysing the process of “determination of the situation” serves less to demonstrate the success of such an endeavour than to pay attention to the way in which the “radical indeterminacy” of knowledge is temporarily overcome. It is at this point that the analogy between the notions of forms of life and situation proves to be instructive.

Situation

In *On Certainty*, Wittgenstein (1969) clarifies his conception of mutual understanding, which he affirms to be totally confused with the fact of behaving adequately in a given circumstance of social life, without the need for the mediation of any representation. In other words, there is a “direct relationship” between being engrossed in a “form of life” (and handling the “language game” that goes with it) and acting appropriately. Wittgenstein does not admit that an individual can doubt whether he is

doing what he is actually doing or proclaim publicly that she does. Thus, in his style of grammatical demonstration, he points out that a person who would say “I know that I am giving a lecture” while pronouncing it, or “I know that I am sitting under a tree” when being there would have every chance to raise questions about her mental health.

For Wittgenstein, forms of life appear to fulfil a function: to be the reservoir of a particular system of “direct relations” which systematically links knowledge to action within a given framework of practical action. A countless number of such systems exist each of them serving as guide for individual action and allowing for coordination with others. This leads us to Goffman’s conception of the notion of situation.

For him, it must be seen as a “membrane”¹ that isolates a fragment of the social world and operates like a filter that selects from among all the obligations that weigh on individuals engaging in interaction those that are relevant to the here and now of an ongoing action in common (Ogien, 1999). In other words, a situation defines the social organisation of a form of practical activity bestowing on it a pre-given intelligibility. Examples of situations are crossing a crossroads, attending a ceremony, consulting a doctor, having a meal with friends, or joining a street demonstration. Only the number and complexity of the constraints a type of situation requires actors to comply with distinguish them. Such “acceptability constraints” inhere in the material and conceptual properties specific to a particular form of practical activity. And since there is every reason to believe that the members of a same social grouping have to deal with a multitude of similar practical activities, it can be assumed that they share, even if only very roughly, a mutual knowledge about a wide range of situations. One can then conjecture that they are sufficiently aware of the constraints each of these situations imposes on their individual action to secure the adequacy of the moves and statements they express in order to foster their coordination.

To sum up, for Goffman, the notion of situation names a typical and stabilized kind of environment *a priori* providing public and impersonal criteria according to which intention and responsibility attribution is framed. To be sure, all the rules of correctness which apply to a given situation are not entirely codified: behaving appropriately in a situation remains an individual’s concern and has to be accomplished in the very

¹ The first occurrence of this notion can be found in one of his early articles: “I have argued in this paper that any social encounter, any focused gathering, is to be understood, in the first instance, in terms of the functioning of the “membrane” that encloses it, cutting it from a field of properties that could be given weight”. (Goffman, 1961: 79/81)

sequentiality of actual exchanges. But the situation is constantly drawn on to make sense of the moves made and the words spoken. So if someone acts inaccurately, she might be able to figure it out by merely considering others' reactions and find a way to repair her misconduct right away, as long as she does not want to pass for an impostor or worse. In short, just like forms of life, situations are loaded with instructions allowing for coordination of action in common.

Thus, in Goffman's perspective, which is the one I call "realistic interactionism", any individual conduct must necessarily express itself in correspondence with a pre-given set of expectations that each of the partners engaged in a particular undertaking has to meet. Where does the mastery of situations that people demonstrate in their daily activities stem from? Does it purely and simply derive from the native belonging to a singular social world? Both Wittgenstein and Goffman contend that such mastery should be conceived of as a practical knowledge acquired in the sheer familiarity with the countless "forms of life" or "situations" in which individuals are regularly engrossed. One can then assume that most people "naturally" know how to appropriately make use of the criteria which allow for the adjustment of their conduct to the circumstances in which they happen to find themselves.

Knowledge as action

A working hypothesis underlies the six chapters of this book, namely that there is a *de facto* convergence between the standpoints of Wittgenstein, pragmatism and realistic interactionism since all three hold that a theory of knowledge cannot be divorced from a theory of action. Hence, this book aims at substantiating a claim: knowing should be apprehended as a practical activity people have to accomplish for they are compelled to elicit mutual intelligibility about "what is going on" in order to secure the smooth flow of the course of action they are involved in. Accordingly, I will try to expound three methodological tenets on which the analysis of knowing as practical activity should rest: *radical indeterminacy* (i.e. admitting the essential incompleteness of action and the ceaseless reframing of meanings); *the contextual nature of experience* (i.e. considering that any social activity is totally and unavoidably part of its environment); *the emergence of the "facticity" of objects and events* during the sequential accomplishment of an action in common (i.e. giving up the *a priori* cause/effect distinction).

Though sticking to these three tenets is no small challenge for analysis, I surmise that it would help preventing social scientists from drifting

toward essentialism, foundationalism or determinism and firmly endorse an open, dynamic and pluralistic perspective when considering the relationship between knowledge and action.

In that sense, this book sends out an invitation to social scientists and philosophers to keep on working jointly in devising an articulate model of practical action.

CHAPTER ONE

PRAGMATISM'S LEGACY TO SOCIOLOGY RE-SPECIFIED

Although referring to Pragmatism has become a common practice in the social sciences over the last decade, it has developed somewhat confusingly. One of the reasons for this state of affairs is that, rather than being a clearly defined doctrine the principles of which one might adhere to, Pragmatism is first and foremost an *attitude* and a *method*. On the one hand, Pragmatism refers to a typical American predilection for adventure and the discovery of uncharted territories, a particular fondness for risk-taking, an awareness of the sway of contingency and uncertainty on individual behaviour (Wahl, 2005). The pragmatist attitude invites one to acknowledge the infinite openness of the world we live in and the fact that human beings are integral parts of their physical and material environment. It commands to be mindful of the “creativity of action” (Joas, 1997). In the social sciences, this attitude translates into the priority of action over thought and a specific sensitivity to the incapacitated state in which science finds itself when it tries to explain what occurs when people act together.

On the other hand, Pragmatism is “a method for the practical evaluation of ideas, concepts, and philosophies, not from the point of view of their internal coherence or rationality, but from the point of view of their “practical consequences”” (Lapoujade, 1997: 10). Pinkard (2007) has singled out two determining aspects of this method. The first is that knowledge (construed as the fixation of beliefs) should be conceived of as an aspect of the evolutionary process whereby life (and the human species at large) subsists and grows. The second concerns normativity. From a pragmatist perspective, individuals select the norms to which they confer authority and decide to abide by or not (which means that individuals are capable of subjecting norms to criticism) in view of the satisfaction of their practical needs².

² One should remember that the pragmatist conception of satisfaction is not utilitarian but directly linked to what is required for the appropriate accomplishment of an action in a given circumstance.

The spirit of this brand of philosophy is conveyed by both this attitude and this method. One of the problems the reception of Pragmatism in the social sciences is confronted with is that one tends to confuse its spirit with its letter – that is a reputed finite corpus of theoretical propositions. This confusion is all the more complicated than the label Pragmatism in its academic uses accommodates at least five different strands of thought:

1. First the original – and already deeply divided – Pragmatism of the four founding fathers: Peirce (philosophy of logic and mathematics and theory of signs); James (radical empiricism); Dewey (theory of inquiry and experience); and Mead (social behaviourism).
2. “Analytical pragmatism”, formulated in connection with Vienna Circle’s logical empiricists, especially Carnap.
3. “Democratic pragmatism”, which appeared when C.W. Mills, following Dewey, endorsed the social critique developed by the Frankfurt School proponents who emigrated to the US in the 1940’s (Adorno, Horkheimer, Neuman, Marcuse) (Horowitz, 1966).
4. In the mid 1970s, Apel’s interpretation of Peirce and Mead alongside Habermas’ theory of communicative action gave birth to an inter-subjective version of pragmatics that, strangely enough, became annexed to Pragmatism (Kreplak & Lavergne, 2008).
5. Eventually, a revival of Pragmatism occurred under the lead of contemporary American philosophers (Putnam, Rorty, Brandom) who have rediscovered its unique legacy on the two opposing sides of community and democracy.

Thus, looking for a canonical definition of the letter of Pragmatism and striving to adhere to it seems to be a misleading endeavour. The best contemporary sociologists should do, I would argue, is retrieving a series of basic methodological orientations by browsing through the pragmatist literature and ascertaining how they might eventually be made use of by the social sciences. Bernstein has mapped out a path to proceed:

“For all their differences, there are common themes running through the works of the “classical” pragmatists. There is a persistent questioning of the very idea that philosophy (or any form of inquiry) rests upon secure, fixed foundations which can be known with certainty. More radically, the pragmatists challenge the tacit presupposition of much modern philosophy that the rationality and legitimacy of knowledge require necessary foundations. Inquiry neither has or needs any such foundations. The pragmatists did not think that abandoning all foundational claims and

metaphors leads to skepticism (or relativism). They stressed the fallibility of all inquiry. Every knowledge claim is open to potential criticism. It is precisely because of this intrinsic fallibility that, beginning with Peirce, the pragmatists focused their attention on the community of inquirers to test and criticize all validity claims [...] The classical pragmatists shared a cosmological vision of an open universe in which there is irreducible novelty, chance, and contingency. They rejected doctrines of mechanical determinism which were so popular in the late nineteenth century.” (Bernstein, 1992: 814-815)

Following this lead, this chapter aims at demonstrating that, rather than its letter, it is the spirit of Pragmatism which justifies claiming its affinity with analytical philosophy and realistic interactionism. To do so, I will rely on Putnam's qualification of this spirit, which he has defined by four main features: a) antiskepticism, that is, doubt must be seen as the origin of knowledge and as a positive factor since it calls for inquiry; b) fallibilism, that is no metaphysical guarantee exists which immunizes any belief against revision; c) a rejection of the fact/value dichotomy (objective facts cannot be thought of as totally separated from the value which people immediately attribute to them); and d) the primacy of practice over theory (action is the irremediable setting in which ordinary lives unfold) (Putnam, 1994: 152). According to Putnam, the key idea Pragmatism has brought to theoretical reasoning—philosophical or social—is that fallibilism does not necessarily lead to scepticism. Or, in other words, that doubt does not compel renouncing the quest for truth or denying the possibility of a valid description of reality. Jacques Bouveresse has given, unwillingly, a good illustration of the use the social sciences might make of such blending of fallibilism with antiskepticism. “What we should try to understand is precisely how the use of language can be, in certain respects, so systematic and expected and at the same time, in a different way, so unpredictable and innovative” (Bouveresse, 1987: 14). The same idea has been endorsed by realistic interactionists who analyse action in common by taking into account the fact that social behaviour is *by and large foreseeable* (our expectations and the forms of practical action in which they make sense are well-known to us) and, at the same time, *absolutely unpredictable* (no one knows what might exactly happen in the course of an interaction). In a certain way, the method of Pragmatism as defined by Putnam enables the social sciences to serenely accept that as ordinary people regularly “do things together”³ they are able to adequately deal with two principles which seem to be contradictory, that is *a priori* determination (having a view of what can be expected from

³ To quote the title of one of H. Becker's books (1986).

others in a host of situations) and its opposite (facing the versatility of their partners' reactions in changing circumstances).

Nowadays, social sciences scholars are prone to admit the notions of uncertainty, plurality of worlds, and meaning-dependence on context. Many are attentive to the changing details of the circumstances in which practical activities ordinarily unfold, reject any separation between knowledge and action, and seriously take into account the forms of reasoning which inform and guide individual action. Such an analytical stance can be viewed as part of the legacy of Pragmatism to the social sciences. Yet the nature of this legacy is still disputed and can be traced in many different directions. It is thus important to review the nature and relevance of some presumptive sociological heirs of Pragmatism.

Goffman's definition of the situation

Doubt and indeterminacy are two major mainstays of the pragmatist standpoint. Taking these essential properties of human life into account is compelling since it calls for acknowledging that people have to ceaselessly and ingeniously overcome the innumerable uncertainties social interactions are rife with. Endorsing such a standpoint definitely rules out any attempt to explain action in common by reducing it to a mere mechanism. Hence one can contend that the causalist, culturalist and cognitivist twists given to pragmatism by Gross (2009) are totally at odds with the pragmatist attitude (which favours anti-foundationalism, anti-theoreticism, anti-mentalism, pluralism and holism). His claim is founded on an analysis of the key notion of habit which portrays it as a culturally stabilized way of behaving which is stored in the brain and guides individual action in an automatic mode. It surprisingly ignores the basic assumptions which define the pragmatist method: infinite openness of inquiry, duality of habit, experimentalism, indeterminacy, uncertainty. A more genuine—yet challenging—use which has been made of the legacy of Pragmatism is, or so do I claim, the one offered by Goffman's sociological stance.

When one ponders over the current relationship between Pragmatism and sociology, four notions come immediately to mind: definition of the situation; taking the place of the other; plurality of worlds; and the Self. In *Frame Analysis*, Goffman (1974) has straightforwardly dispensed with some of them. Let us first consider his qualification of the first notion:

“There is a venerable tradition in philosophy that argues that what the reader assumes to be real is but a shadow [...] A current example of this tradition can be found in the W.I. Thomas dictum: "If men define

situations as real, they are real in their consequences". This statement is true as it reads but false as it is taken. Defining situations as real certainly has consequences, but these may contribute very marginally to the events in progress, in some cases only a slight embarrassment flits across the scene in mild concern for those who tried to define the situation wrongly [...] Presumably, a "definition of the situation" is almost always to be found, but those who are in the situation ordinarily do not create this definition, even though their society often can be said to do so; ordinarily, all they do is to assess correctly what the situation ought to be for them and then act accordingly." (Goffman, 1974: 1-2)

Furthermore Goffman's conception is connected to a pluralistic outlook on society as he contends that:

"one finds, in modern societies at least, is a nonexclusive linkage-a "loose coupling"-between interactional practices and social structures, a collapsing of strata and structures into broader categories, the categories themselves not corresponding one-to-one to anything in the structural world, a gearing as it were of various structures into interactional cogs." (Goffman, 1983a: 11)

For Goffman, the strength of this loose coupling is constantly put to a test in the ceaseless flow of action in common in everyday life. He is then led to endow individuals with an epistemic capacity to make an operative use of two kinds of frames: primary and secondary. Primary frames turn:

"what would otherwise be a meaningless aspect of the scene into something that is meaningful [...] each primary framework allows its user to locate, perceive, identify, and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete occurrences defined in its terms. He is likely to be unaware of such organized features as the framework has and unable to describe the framework with any completeness if asked, yet these handicaps are no bar to his easily and fully applying it." (Goffman, 1974: 21)

Once primary frames have been projected (an "operating fiction temporarily accepted" says Goffman), "transformations" take place to monitor the adjustments individuals have to make to suit the constant changes occurring in the unpredictable course of interactions. Goffman asserts that:

"in many cases, the individual in our society is effective in his use of particular frameworks. The elements and processes he assumes in his reading of the activity often *are* ones that the activity itself manifests - and why not, since social life itself is often organized as something that individuals will be able to understand and deal with. A correspondence or

isomorphism is thus claimed between perception and the organization of what is perceived, in spite of the fact that there are likely to be many valid principles of organization that could but don't inform perception." (*ibid.*: 26)

Such permanent ordering and reordering of social reality during interaction occurs according to the multiple and unpredictable ways individuals are able to associate primary and secondary frameworks. These frameworks afford impersonal (they apply to all) and binding (their use is compelling, as far as one wants to make one's action intelligible to others) criteria of judgement that all those who are engaged in a situation should employ. This phenomenon is empirically substantiated and it is seen as demonstrating that everyone knows how to adequately make use of these criteria since they are fixed in ordinary language and are inherent to each normative order appropriate to a given practical activity. Hence Goffman surmises that:

"whenever we come into contact with another through the mails, over the telephone, in face-to-face talk, or even under merely through immediate co-presence, we find ourselves with one central obligation : to render our behaviour understandably relevant to what the other can come to perceive is going on. Whatever else, our activity must be addressed to the other's mind, that is, to the other's capacity to read our words and actions for evidence of our feelings, thoughts and intent. This confines what we say and do, but it also allows us to bring to bear all of the world to which the other can catch allusions." (Goffman, 1983b: 51)

Goffman denies that a mutual agreement reached through rational deliberation is required for action in common to take place in a smooth and coordinated way since, generally, the appearance of coordination is enough for people to guess that it is actually working. That is why Goffman claims that defining a situation must be conceived of as a never-ending endeavour which requires uninterrupted involvement by all those who take part in an interaction:

"the process of mutually sustaining a definition of the situation in face-to-face interaction is socially organized through rules of relevance and irrelevance. These rules for the management of engrossment appear to be an insubstantial element of social life, a matter of courtesy, manners, and etiquette. But it is to these flimsy rules, and not to the unshaking character of the external world that we owe our unshaking sense of realities." (Goffman, 1961: 81)

Goffman has later revised his too optimistic statement about our “unshaking sense of realities” insisting next on the vulnerability of social reality—a vulnerability that unavoidably affects even the natural or corporeal features of human life.

“By definition, we can participate in social situations only if we bring our bodies and their accoutrements along with us, and this equipment is vulnerable by virtue of the instrumentalities that others bring along with their bodies. We become vulnerable to physical assault, sexual molestation, kidnapping, robbery and obstruction of movement, whether through the unnegotiated application of force or, more commonly, “coercive exchange” [...] Similarly, in the presence of others we become vulnerable through their words and gesticulation to the penetration of our psychic preserves, and to the breaching of the expressive order we expect will be maintained in our presence.” (Goffman, 1983a: 4)

To sum up, to a construal of the notion of definition of the situation which acknowledges that acting together requires reaching an explicit agreement on “what is going on”, Goffman substitutes the view that social reality is irremediably submitted to vulnerability. He therefore recommends that sociological attention be directed “on what it is about our sense of what is going on that makes it so vulnerable to the need for these various re-readings [...] I am not addressing the structure of social life but the structure of experience individuals have at any moment of their social lives.” (*ibid.*: 13)

The second mainstay of Pragmatism that Goffman objects to is Mead's foundational notion of “conversation of gestures” (Mead, 1922) which, according to him, begs the social nature of “naturalness”. Considering the bearing of the mere presence of bodies on interaction, Goffman contends that:

“Mead's distinction between “significant” and “nonsignificant” gestures is not entirely satisfactory here. Body idioms involve something more than a nonsignificant “conversation of gestures” because this idiom tends to evoke the same meaning for the actor as for the witness, and tends to be employed by the actor because of its meaning for the witness. Something less than significant symbolism seems to be involved, however: an extended exchange of meaningful acts is not characteristic; an impression must be maintained that a margin of uncalculating spontaneous involvement has been retained in the act; the actor will usually be in a position to deny the meaning of his act if he is challenged for performing it.” (Goffman, 1963: 34, note 2)

In a certain way, one could argue that Goffman is more committed to the pragmatist notions of doubt and indeterminacy than Mead. Whereas the latter asserts that an act can be complete whenever the appropriate response of the other has been picked out among those which the environment makes available, the former suspects that individuals may at all times wonder whether the given response is satisfying or not. For Goffman, uncertainty always prevails and has constantly to be done away with. To do so, individuals rely first on the situation in which they find themselves. According to his definition, a situation is a typical and stabilized fragment of the social world which controls beforehand individual action that comes to be engaged in it at any given point in time. As situations pre-exist encounters and survive their termination, they operate as an institution which provides individuals with impersonal criteria to ascertain “what is going on” and “what to do next” in current interactions. In Goffman’s words, situations socially organize experience, i.e. the immediate apprehension of social reality.

Now what about the notion of “taking the place of the other” that Pragmatism has bequeathed to sociology? The notion derives from Mead’s naturalistic account of the primitive order commanding the exchanges between “organisms” (among them human beings) which are set up to react in an adjusted way. Contrary to the use Blumer has made of Mead’s notion of “conversation of gestures” by emphasizing the interpretative process involved in social intercourse and overvaluing the notion of Self, Goffman focuses upon the situational rather than the “symbolic” nature of interaction (Denzin and Keller, 1981). He states:

“I assume that when individuals attend to any current situation, they face the question: “What is it that’s going on here ?” Whether asked explicitly, as in times of confusion and doubt, or tacitly, during occasions of usual certitude, the question is put and the answer to it is presumed by the way the individuals then proceed to get on with the affairs at hand.” (Goffman, 1974: 8)

The difference between Mead and Goffman in this regard is easy to explain. Goffman substitutes the notion of “role” to the notion of “place of the other”. Whereas the latter is socially undifferentiated, the former refers to a socially defined position in an organized form of practical activity. “Taking the role of the other” implies being able to endorse the perspective of the partner in interaction while “taking the place of the other” only requires opting for the right response. What is crucial here is the importance both Mead and Goffman attribute to the Second Person as key condition for coordination of action to be accomplished (in Goffman’s

perspective), or for an act to be completed (in Mead's perspective). Also of note is that behind Goffman's role theory lies a sociological model of practice (i.e. situated action in common) which denies, just as Dewey (1984) did, any separation between knowledge and action. This model combines three features:

- 1) everyone has prior knowledge of the approximate practical meaning attached to objects that populate the environment and to unpredictable events that may arise in a situation;
- 2) everyone presumably assumes that such a knowledge is also the one their partners in an interaction possess; and consequently
- 3) everyone aligns their action on the particular "normative order" which allegedly sets what kind of judgements others might elicit according to the situation they find themselves in.

This model is based upon the assumption that each situation specifies a series of roles individuals have to play according to the position they hold in it, that is expectations that one had better to abide by in a given interaction provided that others exercise immediate and constant control over one's performance. The model extends to all social life. Since individuals experience many situations and endorse a multitude of different roles, one can assume that they share, even if approximately, a common knowledge about a huge array of such role obligations and get a satisfactory enough sense of the correctness of the moves they can make in each situation they are engrossed in. This leads to the third sociological amendment to Pragmatism.

Pluralism in a sociological perspective

A crucial aspect of the spirit of Pragmatism is pluralism. The question then turns out to be: pluralism of what? In the analysis they offer, Talisse and Aikin draw a distinction between

"two general styles of pursuing [its] meliorist aim. According to what we called inquiry pragmatism, conflicts are to be resolved by the thoroughgoing application of proper methods of inquiry; this would require not only processes of ongoing experimentation but also efforts to maintain the conditions under which inquiry could continue. According to what we called meaning pragmatism, conflicts are to be dissolved by a pragmatic reconstruction of the terms in which the conflict is cast; this means that, when confronted with apparently interminable disputes, we ought to revise our vocabularies in ways that, as William James advised,

"bring in peace".” (Talisse and Akin, 2005: 145)

Talisse and Aikin do contend that pragmatist pluralism amounts to “a *principled* commitment to admirable habits of openness, inclusion, tolerance, anti-hegemony, and experimentalism in all aspects of moral, political, and intellectual life.” (*ibid.*) They decry the irresoluteness of such a principled commitment as it fails to engage the so-called *modus vivendi* version of pluralism—i.e. the relativist stance according to which any justification of an action can be taken as valid. Mysak has elaborated upon Talisse and Aikin’s distinction by differentiating “meaning pluralism” from “inquiry pluralism” (Mysak, 2005) on more conceptual grounds. According to Mysak, whereas meaning pluralism has to do with the notion of truth (as personified by Peirce), inquiry pluralism is just a matter of standpoints adopted to solve ethical conflicts (as personified by James, Dewey, and Rorty). Mysak’s differentiation aptly disentangles two strands of pluralism: moral and methodological. The latter is what sociology is concerned with⁴.

Goffman, Durkheim, and Garfinkel have devised a sociological version of pluralism which acknowledges the existence of a plurality of normative orders—meaning that individuals regularly make use of as many situated normative orders as needed to sequentially adjust their involvement in the situated action in which they take part (Ogien, 2018). From the perspective of what Mysak calls “inquiry pragmatism”, pluralism concerns the relation to truth. Sociologists would rather consider that it affects normativity and the regulatory function it fulfils in coordination of action in common. To get the difference, let us consider first the way Goffman disallows James’ view on pluralism:

“I try to follow a tradition established by William James in his famous chapter “The Perception of Reality”, first published as an article in *Mind* in 1869. Instead of asking what reality is, he gave matters a subversive phenomenological twist, italicizing the following question: *Under what circumstances do we think things are real?* The important thing about reality, he implied, is our sense of its realness in contrast to our feeling that some things lack this quality. In his answer, James [...] made a stab at differentiating the several different worlds that our attention and interest can make real for us, the possible subuniverses, the “orders of existence” (to use Aron Gurwitsch’s phrase), in each of which an object or a given kind can have its proper being: the world of the senses, the world of

⁴ According to Weber, methodological pluralism is perfectly appropriated to the social sciences, since social phenomena are not reducible to one causal factor only and have to be tackled from as many perspectives as necessary.

scientific objects, the world of abstract philosophical truths, the world of myth and supernatural beliefs, the madman's world, etc. Each of these subworlds, according to James, has "its own special and separate style of existence" and "each world, whilst it is attended to, is real after its own fashion; only the reality lapses with the attention". Then after taking this radical stand, James copped out: he allowed that the world of the senses has a special status, being the one we judge to be the realest reality, the one that retains our liveliest belief, the one before which the other worlds must give way [...] James' crucial device, of course, was a rather scandalous play on the word "world" (or reality). What he meant was not the world but a particular person's current world – and in fact as will be argued not even that. There was no good reason to use such billowy words. James opened a door; it let in wind as well as light." (Goffman, 1974: 99)

Goffman, Schütz and Garfinkel acknowledged that all the "provinces of meaning" are on a par. The sociological approach to pluralism they advocate rests upon two facts. First, the world in which we live is fragmented and each organized practical activity is a social world in itself. Second, people know how to shift from one social world to another in their everyday life involvements without any major problem. Sociologists have focused upon this capacity to permanently adjust to the changing circumstances of situated action in common and demonstrated that individuals master a multitude of normative orders since observation shows that they regularly succeed in acting appropriately in most of their commitments. Some pragmatists share the same concern when they refer to Dewey's notion of "valuation" (Dewey, 1939) in order to account for the fact that people discover what they care about in the course of achieving the "ends-in-view" they collectively aim at in a given context of action (Frega, 2014).

Endorsing the perspective of normative pluralism has led sociologists and pragmatists to share the view that individuals may select the norms which they provisionally reckon valuable and decide to abide by or not according to the unfolding circumstances of each action in common. Hence, these sociologists and pragmatists agree to confer two features upon norms. First, they are known to individuals-i.e. they do not operate as purely external constraints as traditional sociology pretends they do. Second, they supply a host of ready-made justifications to explain what is happening here and now and what exactly people are doing. In a certain way then, one could claim that the notion of plurality of normative orders offers a sociological version of one of the provisions of Pragmatism that Putnam advanced: the collapse of the fact/value dichotomy.

Convergence

The general propositions that exemplify the spirit of Pragmatism are theoretical constructs which, according to Mustafa Emirbayer and Douglas Maynard (2011), lack empirical verification. They argue that three of its basic elements are shared by the sociological approach they champion, namely ethnomethodology:

- 1) the necessity to get back to the practices themselves to account for what the experience of the social world is made of;
- 2) the idea that problematic situations compel people to engage in a practical activity aimed at their resolution and prompting the constitution of a collective intelligence; and
- 3) the conception of language use as an order of practices by which the naturalness of social life is accomplished.

On these grounds, Emirbayer and Maynard contend that the sequential analysis of practical activities promoted by Garfinkel and Sacks (1970) has empirically substantiated the pragmatist outlook. This way of doing sociology pays critical attention to the practical dimensions of action in common in order to produce detailed accounts of the sequentiality of ongoing interactions to demonstrate how action in common step by step takes the shape it eventually displays. One could then argue that such a sociological analysis amounts to offering an empirical description of what an inquiry is made of and how it proceeds in time.

Accordingly, endorsing this analytical approach leads sociologists to follow three methodological rules which can be traced to Pragmatism: 1) never explain what is happening by using the abstract categories of a theoretical model; 2) forget the separation between external and internal factors, and postulate that external factors always inhere in the way people act together and do not determinate it from outside; and 3) renounce the fact/value dichotomy. For some theorists (such as Latour or Rorty), these rules justify the preference given to the singular over the general. This is a position which is sometimes complemented by a petition of principle to the effect that there is no science but of the particular, that is, no generalization is ever possible. From this controversial perspective, order always appears to emerge from scratch—as if it were a contextual and circumstantial production created in a social vacuum. For others, following these rules allow endorsing a holistic approach according to which the ways individuals apprehend the social world, talk about it, and act together in it are irremediably and completely informed by the

countless situations they are involved in and by the relationships they sustain with the relevant others they happen to act with in everyday life circumstances.

A further qualification is needed. Realistic interactionism is divided into two brands. Whereas Goffman sees the social world as an endless succession of contingent states brought about in a ceaseless stream of experience (hence the focus he places upon framing procedures), Garfinkel holds that, while acting together, individuals have to invariably produce a mutually acknowledged order to get along. Hence his programme which consists in identifying and describing the "ordinary methods" people make use of to constitute and maintain an operative order allowing for the accomplishment of coordination of action. But if we put this difference aside, we can pretend that Goffman's and Garfinkel's realistic approach which somehow calls to mind the spirit of Pragmatism might fruitfully be extended to sociology at large. Three steps should be taken to move forward in this direction.

The first is to offer a methodological critique aiming at adding to the toolbox of sociological ethnography sound and appropriate techniques to analyse the data which are usually collected during fieldwork (interviews, observations, informal conversations, records, documents, files, etc.). A current instruction should be reiterated: always relate the collected data to their proper context of emergence (i.e. taking indexicality into account) and in direct relation to the dynamics of the action in common in which they have been collected (i.e. paying attention to the reflexivity of action). Proceeding in this way should avoid two pitfalls: endorsing a kind of hyper-constructivism on the one hand, and stalling analysis in endless or tautological narratives about what happened on the other hand.

The second consists in turning the sociologist's conceptual apparatus into an object of sociological investigation by applying the notion of reflexivity to its own forms of reasoning (Pollner, 1991). This approach usually develops, at best, as a devastating refutation of sociology's claims that it is a scientific discipline and, at worst, as a quite inconsistent self-absorption of sociologists in their own work (Woolgar, 1988).

The third way a realistic twist would upgrade sociology derives from its anti-mentalist vein. It consists in turning the detailed description of the methods individuals necessarily make use of when they mutually accomplish an action in common into an analysis of the ways practical reason materially operates. Coulter (1989) has given the name "epistemic sociology" to this kind of fieldwork, assigning to it the task of analysing what he calls the "grammars of conventional conceptualization". Such a methodological framework leads him to admit that "knowing what people

are doing (including oneself) is knowing how to identify what they are doing in the categories of a natural language, which requires knowing how to use those categories in discursive contexts, which in turn includes knowing when to utter them.” (Coulter, 1989: 16) Another formulation of this statement can be found in Lynch’s proposal to investigate what he defines as “the primitive structures of accountability that make up the intractable reproducibility of social actions.” (Lynch, 1997: 299) The kind of fieldwork he recommends to engage in aims at analysing what he names “epistopics”, a neologism he has forged to account for practical activities like observing, measuring, or representing that are locally accomplished in the daily work in laboratories. Lynch claims that such epistopics frame all forms of practical reasoning, whether in scientific practice or in ordinary action.

This realistic stance opens up a new domain of empirical inquiry, that is, the ways epistemic operations are implemented to give practical contents to the concepts and principles individuals make use of in and for action in common. Those who are ready to engage in such a domain should endorse a postulate: the natural mastery of ordinary language endows individuals with a vernacular language which is matched to a particular type of action, and such mastery signals an acquaintance with acceptable ways of behaving in the circumstances of an ongoing action in common (provided one has experienced it once). We can thus suppose that individuals acting in common in a familiar context already know what they are supposed to do together (even if this knowledge is incomplete or defective), how each role specifies the expectations one can have about the way others might behave (even if these specifications, and the role endorsed, can change during the course of interaction), and what kind of anticipation should guide one’s action (even if this anticipation is ceaselessly revised in the sequentiality of exchanges).

On this account, one can assume that mutual intelligibility is a contextual phenomenon that fires up (in a quasi-physical sense) in and for the accomplishment of an activity and comes to a halt once the activity ceases. In other words, acting is not a matter of cultural transmission, interiorization of social norms, learning, or information computing. It is a social phenomenon through and through. Practical reasoning stems, as Durkheim claimed a century ago, from the natural fact that human beings are bound to live and be raised in groups. Subsequently, they can be taken to share a prior and unstated agreement about what the requirements of coordination imply in a vast number of current circumstances of action. Here is how sociology would empirically demonstrate the social nature of the activity of knowing while avoiding any drift towards psychologism

and mentalism. This is, or so do I claim, the decisive contribution realistic interactionism offers to a renewed sociological theory of knowledge.

One last upshot of connecting Pragmatism to sociology is a renewed conception of the background, i.e. of the grounds upon which humans rely when they engage in an action in common. There are several ways to figure this background: generalized trust, collective representations, internalized value systems, habit, common sense knowledge, practical knowledge, forms of practical reasoning, frames, formal structures of practical actions, certainty, or direct perception. Behind each of these notions stands a way of looking at the relationship between knowledge and action and a conception of human agency as pre-set or as dynamic.

The notion of inquiry offered by Pragmatism belongs to the second of these two perspectives as it focuses upon the way doubt and indeterminacy are dealt with in the course of an investigation process. Yet this approach raises a compelling question: would resorting to the notion of inquiry lead the analyst to favour an inter-subjective and rationally agreed upon view of action, or should inquiry be studied as a practical activity which unfolds within the limits of given social frames? This question echoes a controversy between Putnam and Rorty. According to the former, the gist of inquiry lies in the implementation of an experimental method by a "community of inquirers" which find themselves able to solve problems by relying upon pre-given shared criteria of "rational acceptability". For the latter, "there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones, no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow-inquirers. This way of characterizing pragmatism focuses on a fundamental choice which confronts the reflective mind, that between accepting the contingent character of starting-points, and attempting to evade this contingency." (Rorty, 1982: 165-166)

The social sciences are at pains to fully endorse the fallibilistic stance advocated by the pragmatist conception of inquiry. This is evidenced when one considers the way the notion of inquiry is quickly reduced by social scientists to its substantial content and viewed as analogous to a procedural investigation that aims at devising a solution to a practical problem. Inquiry remains largely conceived of as carried out by individuals who are endowed with qualified competences enabling them to master the proper "skills" to discover the right answer to a technical or political issue. Such an outlook usually leads the researchers to frame their own definition of the "problematic situation" a community of inquirers is supposed to solve without worrying about what enables them to do so as they are not practically engaged in what is happening.

This empirical approach to inquiry is doubly reductive. First, because it generally gives precedence to the framework-system of norms, power relationships, individual experience, environmental pressures-within which individuals construe a problematic situation. Second, because it ignores the issue of emergence and pays little attention to the efforts deployed by a community of inquirers to sequentially manage and complete their task together.

A pragmatist-oriented sociology should consider the openness and contingency of inquiry as topics that need to be empirically investigated since they are essential aspects of any action in common. Research in this area would aim at demonstrating how individuals acting together mutually solve problems which their common endeavour unrelentingly raises. Such a standpoint is pragmatist in spirit as it takes doubt to be the onset of inquiry. Moreover these problems should be apprehended as only provisionally solved since any development might re-open inquiry at any time. When endorsing a fallibilist perspective, sociologists should pay particular attention to the ingenious ways in which three features of action in common are overcome in practical activities: *indeterminacy* (descriptions are never complete and individuals have constantly to make sense by themselves of the unavoidable shortcomings of communication); *contextuality* (renouncing any kind of essentialism and adhering to Wittgenstein's ordinary grammar perspective according to which the meaning of a word is its use); and *emergentism* (apprehending action in common holding that it irremediably unfolds sequentially and that no pre-assigned ending can be attributed to it before it has been accomplished).

These three features must be seen as analytical guidelines the accuracy of which has to be empirically substantiated by data collected in fieldwork. Sociologists who profess their proximity to Pragmatism should keep in mind that its spirit conveys the idea that uncertainty is seldom completely wiped out and that indeterminacy, contextuality and emergentism irremediably call for correction. Hence studying the ways doubt is dealt with in everyday practices looks like being an essential contribution to the development of a sociological theory of knowledge. This should ultimately be the best part of the re-specified legacy of pragmatism to sociology.