The American Sociologist (2021) 52:107–130
https://doi.org/10.1007/s12108-020-09466-w

Talcott Parsons and the Sociology of Morality

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Accepted: 5 October 2020 / Published online: 14 October 2020

Abstract

In this article, we propose a brief reconstruction of Talcott Parsons' writings − from his first major book, *The Structure of Social Action*, to his later writing on the 1960s and 1970s − in order to clarify his main contributions to a sociological discussion of morality. In so doing, we hope to place Talcott Parsons as one of the forerunners of the sociology of morality conceived as an emerging area of research in the social sciences. Throughout this reconstruction, we also try to situate Parsons in terms of his intellectual lineage pointing out that his formulations reveal important affinities with the theoretical perspective of morality that began with Émile Durkheim. Based on these assumptions, we aim to show, albeit on a preliminary basis, how this dialogue contributes to a more precise delineation of a research program in the field.

Keywords Talcott Parsons · Sociology of morality · Émile Durkheim · Morality · Immanuel Kant

As a theme, morality was given a privileged status by the founders of sociology, particularly in the works of Max Weber and Émile Durkheim. Although they rebelled against the social philosophy of their time, by committing themselves to establishing the parameters of a scientific analysis of social reality, Weber and Durkheim also proved to be heirs of this long tradition, which covers all the questions of what is considered to be 'practical philosophy,' in other words, the formulation of answers to the question 'how should we live?'

Their intention was not to replace philosophy in its quest for answers, but to understand how values − in the case of Weber − and moral rules and ideals − in the case of Durkheim − are socially constituted and what their role is in shaping social life.

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Despite the centrality of this theme in classical sociology, and although some of Durkheim's most direct disciples − such as Lucien Levy-Bruhl and Célestin Bouglé − devoted great attention to the subject, for decades morality did not become a field of study within sociology.

This scenario has been transformed only in the last few years, with a series of initiatives that seek to constitute the field of "sociology of morality"(Cf. Abend 2008; Hitlin and Vaisey 2010) in different countries and from distinct perspectives, or even to establish a "moral sociology", understood not just as a new branch within sociology, but as a general perspective – crossing along the various sociological fields – that allows us to highlight the moral content of social life (Vandenberghe 2016). In France, Luc Boltanski, together with Michael Pollak and Laurent Thévenot founded, in the 1980's, the *Groupe de sociologie politique et morale,* at the École des hautes études en sciences sociales; in 1995 researchers gathered to found the *Centre de Recherche, Sens, Étique, Societé,* at the University Paris V. Nowadays, some of the most prolific authors in that country are Luc Boltanski and his associates (Boltanski and Thévenot 1991), Patrick Pharo (2014) and the various researchers gathered around the *Mouvement Anti-Utilitariste dans les Sciences Sociales (M.A.U.S.S.),* head by Alain Caillé (1989, 1994, 2005) and articulated around the journal *Revue du Mauss*. In 2011, the *American Sociological Association* welcomed for the first time the section "Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity", not to mention the pioneering initiative gathered around the *Handbook of Sociology of Morality* organized by Steven Vaisey and Stephen Hitlin (2010), and *The Palgrave Handbook of Altruism, Morality and Social Solidarity: Formulating a Field of Study,* organized by Vincent Jeffries (2014). In Germany, the researches carried by Hans Joas on the issue of values (1997, 2011) are of crucial relevance to thinking about how we can grasp morality from a sociological perspective. In Brazil, since 2011 the *Associação Nacional de Pós-Graduação e Pesquisa em Ciências Sociais (ANPOCS),* the main organization in the field in our country, hosted for the first time the research group "Sociology and Anthropology of Morality". Apart from small conferences dedicated to the field, we can highlight books and journal dossiers dedicated to consolidating the field of sociology of morality in the country (Brito 2013; Werneck and Oliveira 2014; Rosati and Weiss 2015a).

Taking these issues under consideration, we would like to place this article in the more general framework of the collective efforts that we are undertaking in our research group,[1] with the aim of consolidating a research program in sociology of morality inserted in the more general context of the Durkheimian tradition (Weiss and Peres 2014; Rosati and Weiss 2015b). In general terms, this research program is aligned with the more general theoretical premises of cultural sociology proposed by Jeffrey Alexander (Cf. Alexander 1988, 2003; Weiss 2019), in that it places special emphasis on the later work of Durkheim and conceives the symbolic dimension as primarily constitutive of social life. In our perspective, however, morality is taken as a privileged phenomenon of the production of meaning and is very much an element that both explains collective life and must be explained by it, since it is a constant two-way relationship. It is, therefore, both a moral sociology and a sociology of morality. Starting from the recognition of a structural homology between moral phenomena and religious

[1] The research group is part of the Brazilian Center for Durkheimian Studies, and gather Faculty Members and students from various Brazilian universities: http://dgp.cnpq.br/dgp/espelhogrupo/38313

phenomena, the concept of sacred, resulting from the processes of collective effervescence, is taken as a central characteristic, present in the two constitutive elements of morality, namely, duty (morality as an obligation) and good (morality as an ideal).

In our effort to update the Durkheimian project, we propose to examine our contemporary pluralistic societies as a more or less articulated set of moral collectivities, each one guided by its own "ultimate sacred principles" (Shils 1975) and propose a set of analytical categories that can be useful to investigate them in terms of: (a) the nature and types of its validity sources; (b) its validity extension; (c) its individualistic-collectivist orientation; (d) the kind of ego-attitude required; (e) the kind of moral action expected (Rosati and Weiss 2015b). In so doing, we believe that the moral ideals and the dynamics underlying moral actions of these different groups can be rendered, in Durkheimian terms, more "transparent" (Miller 1996), the tensions inside and outside of them can reach new levels of understanding and their solidarity patterns can be reorganized in more reflexive terms. From this point of view, then, sociology of morality could be also understood as a kind of social psychoanalysis (Bellah 1990; Alexander 2013).

Although such a theoretical approach does not rely on any strong notion of system, the Parsonian commitment to analyzing the multiple dimensions of social life in an interrelated way is, among other aspects, of fundamental importance here since it can bring greater density to this project, whose main aim is to understand how morality is produced in pluralistic contemporary societies and, above all, how it helps to explain the challenges and complexities involved in the many diverse forms of life.

Despite Parsons's alleged centrality to the history of the discipline, many aspects of his work are still misunderstood and a significant part of his contributions remain largely unnoticed. To a considerable extent, this also seems to be the case when one turns to the question of (the sociology of) morality where more subtle and dynamic aspects of his approach to are yet to be analyzed in full detail. This is strange since Parsons was one of the few sociologists during the interstice that extended between the founding period of sociology and the more recent era− together with Pitirim Sorokin, Edward Shils and Robert Bellah − to dedicate an important part of his work to the theme of morality.

In this article, therefore, we propose a brief critical reconstruction of Talcott Parsons' writings in order to decant his main considerations on morality, with the underlying concern of pointing out theoretical premises and arguments that allow us to situate him in the general context of the Durkheimian tradition. In so doing, we also hope to provide justifications to mobilize Parsons' work as an important contribution to a research program in sociology of morality aligned with the fundamental assumptions of Durkheimian sociology.

Metatheoretical Background and the Normative Basis of Parsons' Project

One of the possible ways to situate Parsons in the Durkheimian lineage, at least as far as the subject of morality is concerned, is through the identification of a common 'ancestor,' namely Immanuel Kant, whose moral philosophy constitutes the main starting point of Durkheimian moral theory, albeit from important inversions. Kant is recognized by Parsons himself as one of the pillars of his own theory:

> "(...) Kant's ´[position] is clearly of central importance to the general theory of action. We hold that it is the locus of the most fundamental underlying premises or assumptions of *social* ordering at the human level. It should explicitly be defined not as the *data* of moral problems but as the *transcendental normative conditions of the ordering of such data.* This Kantian philosophical position clearly underlies both Durkheim's and Weber's treatment of the moral component of societies, especially modern societies." (Parsons 1978a: 370–1)

The acknowledgment of this main influence opens the way for a series of in-depth (re)considerations of Parsons' work at different levels of theoretical interpretation.[2]

At the *metatheoretical* level, it means that Parsons' social theory might be thought of as permeated by a transcendental logic according to which (social) empirical phenomena should be not just analytically divided into intellectual categories but also investigated in terms of their 'conditions of possibility' − a concern also deeply rooted in the Durkheimian account of social facts, and in particular moral facts. According to this perspective, experience itself − which represents both the touchstone of the empirical science and the constitutive matter of practical and adjudicative problems faced by ethics and aesthetics − is possible as an object of valid scientific knowledge, valid moral action, and valid aesthetic judgment only if it is ordered and penetrated by a prior intellectual (and normative) framework. Through this strategic move, which can be traced back to Kant's attempt to reach a comprehensive and overcoming synthesis of rationalism and empiricism in philosophy, Parsons is able to articulate his initial project of attaining a positive theoretical synthesis between positivism and idealism in sociological thought.

In terms of its *normative* basis, it is important to recognize both the specificity and the (potential for) universality presented by this kind of project. This philosophical discourse thematizing the transcendental aspects of valid empirical knowledge − as well as those concerning the moral action and so on − is itself a product of specific social conditions, whose particularism, instead of undermining its universalist aspirations, articulates the conditions to potentialize it. Making use of Parsonian vocabulary, Richard Munch points out the historical relevance of the process of social 'interpenetration' − which took place in Western Europe during the fifteenth, sixteenth, and seventeenth centuries − of distinct subsystems of action that were previously dedicated either to theoretical or practical activities (Münch 1987: 10). What is at stake here is that historical process analyzed in great detail by Max Weber's sociology of religion where the fields of (religious) theoretical speculation and (economic) practical interest became embedded, giving rise to a rationalization process in western societies. It is

[2] In this regard, it is worth noting that some of the most sophisticated Parsonian scholars have insisted on this Kantian background: Harold Bershady (1973) pointed out the analogy between Parsons's analytical categories of the action frame of reference and Kant's categories of understanding − both of them occupying a transcendental position *vis a vis* their fields of validity (respectively sociology and physics); Richard Munch (1981; 1982; 1987), in a more radical and comprehensive effort of interpretive reconstruction, has persuasively insisted on the existence of a 'Kantian core' underlying the whole development of Parsons's theory of action. In emphasizing the importance of Kant we do not pretend to suggest that he was the only philosophical influence underlying Parsons' social thought. The importance of authors like Henderson and especially Whitehead to Parsons's metatheory as well as his methodology is noteworthy. (cf. Fararo 2001; Lidz and Bershady 2006). If properly understood, however, this broad Kantian core is coherent with those other influences. This seems to be also the position of Parsons himself (cf. Parsons 1978b:1353–4; 1979)

through this large social process of interpenetration between theory and practice, logic and experience − so characteristic of modern science and morality − that we can understand both the historical emergence and the normative basis of Parsons' project.

This aspect resonates with Durkheim's argument that both rationalism and universalism are 'social creations' (Durkheim 1898, 1906, 1925) and, together with the respect for the human person, are the most suitable values for modern societies. This concern remains a key feature of Parsonian theory, since from its very beginnings his sociology was attached to the idea of modernity and some of its fundamental value patterns, especially those underlying the possibility of modern science and humanistic ethics.[3]

In what concerns his general sociological discourse, this engagement with modernity value patterns takes the form of an inquiry into the (transcendental) conditions that make possible both autonomous social action and voluntaristic social order. These two inquiries are of fundamental and strategic relevance since they condense and articulate, at the same time, the fundamental questions in 'theoretical logic' (Alexander 1982) and the main ethical concerns in the sociological discourse. As we shall see, Parsons' first book (1937) was written to provide an answer to both of these questions.

Parsons' First Phase: Morality as an irreducible dimension of social life

In its almost 800 pages, *The Structure of Social Action* (hereafter *SSA*) provides a testimonial of the great variety of topics permeating Parsons's mind. At the heart of all these questions, though, Parsons believes he has found a very limited core of presuppositional problems whose solution they depend on. Encompassing both the theoretical antinomies of Western social thought and the main practical problems of modernity are the problems of *social action* and the problem of the *social order*. Then Parsons draws up his first book in order to explain, through an analytic-comprehensive scheme, what constitutes social action − and, at a higher level, a social order − and how this could ultimately be possible. The traditional Kantian procedure − which bypasses representations of phenomena to seek their respective 'conditions of possibility' − becomes clear, for example, when he addresses the issue as follows:

> "(...) the units of action systems also have certain basic properties without which it is not possible to conceive of the unit as "existing." (...) There must be a minimum number of descriptive terms applied to it, a minimum number of facts

[3] The Parsonian engagement with 'modernity' has been analyzed from a wide variety of perspectives. His most radical critics – such as Mills (1959) or Gouldner (1970) − tended to portray this relationship as characterized by some kind of naive optimism or even a distorted ideological defense of the *status quo*. Conversely, more sympathetic interpreters – such as Alexander (1978, 2001), Bourricaud (1977), Mayhew (1984), Münch (1987), Robertson and Turner (1991), Lechner (1991), Gerhardt (2002, 2011), Best (2015) − have emphasized, though in different ways, the more sound and fruitful aspects of Parsons' modernism: on one hand, he is praised for his theoretical and normative commitments to the central values of contemporary societies − e.g. his strong support for liberal democracies, his defense of individual liberties, and his insistence on the fundamental role of social solidarity −; on the other hand, he is celebrated as a great interpreter of modernity who thematized its central aspects and developed a sophisticated analysis to deal with its main problems.

> ascertainable about it, before it can be spoken of at all as a unit in a system". (Parsons 1937: 44–45)

When Parsons says that [from an analytical-systematic perspective] action must present "certain basic properties without which it is not possible to conceive of unity as existing," he intends to justify (on a transcendental level) the need for an analytical scheme in which the necessary "properties" cannot be reduced to one another because otherwise the action could not even be conceived as such.

This leads directly to what scholars such as Williams (1961), Alexander (1978, 1983), Adriaansens (1979), Münch (1987), and many others, have identified as the 'synthetic,' 'comprehensive,' or even 'multidimensional' character of the Parsonian project. It means that the distinct elements or dimensions supposed by a general theory of action (and its systematic patterns) should not be conceived or valued in such a way that they could, in the end, be subsumed one by another. It is important to note, however, that these formal and analytical requirements are also closely connected with a (transcendental) content underlying what could be considered as valid representations of action and order. On the one hance, Parsons is concerned with action as retaining a possibility for subjective *autonomy* – otherwise, one would speak in terms of behavior, imitation, or ritualism without being able to address a truly general theory of 'action.' On the other hand, he is concerned with the possibility of a *voluntaristic* social order, i.e., an order that preserves the possibility of individual autonomy without being limited to the figures of atomism, mechanical determinism, religious traditionalism, or even cultural idealism.

The purpose of the analytical reconstruction of the history of social thought carried out by Parsons is to demonstrate the need for a general theory capable of analyzing the fundamental units of social life (action) and their patterns of coordination (order) without ending in reductionist solutions of all sorts. Following Parsons' reconstruction, we realize how the various attempts made by positivists and idealists to explain or understand social action (and order) have ended up in inescapable antinomies when ignoring the truly multidimensional aspect of these problems. Throughout the convergent reconstruction of the works of Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim, and Weber, it becomes clear that positivists and idealists can only meet the intellectual conditions to overcome their theoretical dead ends when transcending their original framework of analysis and engaging in a 'voluntaristic theory of action.' In this sense, the conceptualization of the 'unit act' may be considered, following Mark Gould, as "(...) the conceptual tools allowing Parsons to categorize the various types of action theory" whose utility "(...) is to be judged in terms of its capacity to discriminate between 'good' and 'bad' theory" (Gould 1991: 87).

What characterizes Parsonian theory then is the sharp understanding that autonomy and voluntarism are only possible when the distinct analytical dimensions of action – i.e. 'conditions,' 'means,' 'ends' and 'normative orientation' – interact with and interpenetrate each other. (cf. Parsons 1937: 77–82). If these dimensions subsume or alienate each other then 'action' gives way to a whole series of heteronomous figures of behavior (mechanic adaptation, traditionalism, ritualism, and so on). The same applies to the question of a voluntaristic order: it depends on the interplay of *individual* interests and *collective* standards (and structures) capable of regulating them from a normative point of view. Without this embeddedness, the social arrangement is faced

with a fundamental dilemma: on the one hand, the instability inherent to the unlimited attempts to maximize self-interest (Hobbesian problem) and the danger of radicalization toward material determinism (Darwinism, orthodox Marxism); on the other hand, an unrealistic idealism of sheer individualistic free-will and the danger of radicalization toward a cultural determinism or 'emanationism' (variants of German Idealism). (cf. 1937: Chapters 3 and 13).

But what does all this have to do with morality? In general terms, it seems noteworthy that in pursuing a general theory capable of conceptualizing action as retaining an inescapable subjective-voluntarist dimension − as well as normative and symbolic elements − Parsons is echoing, in more sociological terms, the concerns of the main moral philosophies of modernity. From utilitarianism to Kantianism, the defense of this internal dimension of action has been the common ground for all moral reflection. In this sense, we can fully agree with Donald Levine's statement that: "Of the motives that promoted young Talcott Parsons to publish his first major opus, (...) a dominant inspiration was patently the wish to demonstrate the crucial constitutive role of moral considerations in human action" (Levine 2010: 58). Indeed, one of the great achievements of the voluntaristic theory of action lies in the fact that it demonstrates through an exhaustive and meticulous reconstruction of social thought that there can be no good sociology if the internal dimension of values and norms is not taken as a constitutive and inescapable part of analyses of social action.

In more substantive terms, however, Parsons is also interested in analyzing the conditions under which higher levels of voluntarism can be attained and sustained in modern societies. When faced with this kind of question, he came to realize that not all kinds of normative standards, even if subjectively motivated, would be enough to sustain a voluntarist order in social life when generalized. If there is to be a voluntaristic order, Parsons states, the very content of norms of orientation underlying means-ends relation should be such that it could not be entirely subsumed under (rational) efficiency standards. As Alexander points out, the solution found by Parsons was "(...) defining some of action's normative constraints in a noninstrumental fashion." (Alexander 1983:25). In analyzing the same point, Munch insists, in a very Kantian vein, that these kinds of normative standards of selection enabling the emergence of a stable social order should be then understood, at least in some special cases, in terms of categorical duty rather than of a hypothetical orientation toward utility (Münch 1987:18–20).

The inquiry about this normative order characterized by the form of voluntary duty led Parsons to conceive the existence of a shared framework of (moral) values to which actors systematically commit themselves as the only consistent solution to the problem of order. In so doing, this framework integrates in a somehow stable manner the distinct action paths. Then, in the last chapter of *SSA*, Parsons comes to define sociology as "(...) the science which attempts to develop an analytical theory of social action systems in so far as these systems can be understood in terms of the property of common value integration." (Parsons 1937: 768). As we shall see, this is a rather ingenious way to cope with a key Durkheimian puzzle: how to enable individual autonomy without undermining social bonds. In other words, for both Durkheim and Parsons, the big question was: how can social values also be individual values? The problem of how these common values behind the normative orientations become, in more concrete terms, an object of the actor's moral (and affective) commitment will turn to be then one of the main subjects of Parsons' sociology.

Parsons' Middle Period: Investigating the structural-functional conditions of morality

After the publication of *SSA*, Parsons became more and more interested in the process of the institutionalization of social values.[4] In the essays published in the following years, 'action systems' began to be analyzed in terms of sets of institutional patterns structuring both the environment and the motives of action. The previous theoretical defense of social norms as an irreducible dimension of social life was then carried out through the empirical analysis of normative patterns underlying institutions such as professions, business occupation, government, religion, family and kinship. (Parsons 1949). But what Parsons came to realize was that his initial theoretical framework needed to be enlarged and specified. On one hand, it became clear to him that classical sociological theory would be enriched if properly combined with the recent developments in anthropology, psychoanalysis, and even behavioral sciences. On the other, Parsons started to realize that this articulation had to be formalized in terms of a systematic language emphasizing the structural and functional aspects of social phenomena. (Parsons 1945, 1950).

These new theoretical formulations were developed in detail in two great works, both of them published in 1951: *The Social System*, maybe the most famous of the Parsons's books, and *Toward a General Theory of Action*, a collective volume edited by Parsons and Edward Shils. The metatheoretical ambitions and the main achievements of the 'voluntaristic' theory of action were then transformed into a 'general theory of action.' Though the general definition of action − as "(...) behavior oriented to the attainment of ends in situations, by means of the normatively regulated expenditure of energy" (Parsons et al. 1951: 53) − still follows the categories of *SSA*, there are, however, at least three main developments worth noting, not only because of their theoretical relevance but, in this case, because of their close connections with the question of morality.

(1) The first main development is that the old action frame of reference underlying the 'unit act' − i.e. the situation (subdivided into conditions and means), ends and norms − is now reformulated in terms of the actor's *situation* and *orientation*. According to this new scheme, the 'actor' can be conceived either individually or collectively.

[4] In an interesting biographical account which grasps this movement, Bernard Barber remembers a two-semester course taught by Parsons on Comparative Social Institutions which he took during the academic year of 1937–1938: "Parsons (...) was assisted by a set of specialist Harvard colleagues whom he invited to lecture on various major social institutions in such very different societies around the world as China, India, the *ancien régime* in France, Navaho Indians in the United States, Antonine Rome, the Ottoman Empire, Victorian England, ancient Greece, and medieval Europe. Parsons's purpose in inviting these lectures was to provide expert demonstrations of both the constants and the great historical and societal variability in such social institutions as kinship, stratification, religion, law, education and politics. For it was 'social institutions', he said explicitly in his opening theoretical statement, that was the central concept necessary for the analysis of societal structure and variation. (Barber 1998: 78). Aditional information about the course and its broad context as well as the list of collaborators − coming from ares like philology, fine arts, architecture, anthropology, economics, history, theology and so − during 1930s can be found on Lawrence Nichols (2019). We express our gratitude to Victor Lidz, for sharing with us the information that Parsons kept this same course during the next decades. Lidz, who took the course at the beginning of 1960s, told us that at that time Parson used to teach by himself, assigning readings by other scholars and drawing on notes he had made from their lectures, but also framing them according to his own formulations (which would latter become his evolutionary theory).

The 'situation,' in turn, is not taken primarily in terms of physical and organic objects of orientation, but also comprehends, in a more positive way, both social and cultural objects. In this case, the other actors (alters), the symbolic codes underlying interaction, and even the traits of actor's (ego) personality might then be thought as part of the 'situation' in which action takes place. The 'orientation,' previously equated to 'ends' and 'norms,' is now subdivided into motivational and value dimensions which, in turn, are broken down into three subdimensions each. In the motivational dimension of an actor's orientation, Parsons identifies cognitive, cathexis (affective), and evaluative moments through which actor is able to: (a) identify and discriminate objects; (b) to engage (emotionally) with or even desire some of them; (c) evaluate these objects as well as the open courses of orientation (and their consequences in the long-run) in terms of his or her goals and satisfactions. The value dimension of an actor's orientation matches the same kind of distinction: it comprises (a') the cognitive process of mapping the objects of the situation; (b') the appreciative process of judging these objects according to aesthetic and value standards; (c') a moral evaluation in which previous aspects of both objects and courses of action are brought together and integrated under normative standards in line with a general system of values. (Parsons et al. 1951: 53–76).

For our purposes, it seems relevant to note that in this new scheme the moral dimension of action, object of a keen theoretical defense in *SSA*, is now analytically specified in its integrative-systematic function.

> Moral value standards are the most comprehensive integrative standards for assessing and regulating the entire system of action under consideration, whether it be a personality or a society or a subsystem of either. They are the 'court of last appeal' in any largescale integrative problem within the system. (Parsons et al. 1951: 73–74)

Parsons had already insisted that the normative dimension of action should not be thought of as just an ideal counterpart of material or motivational interests but taken instead as a constitutive (regulative) part of them in so far as they communicate with and 'interpenetrate' each other. But what we see in more detail now are both the analytical categories (i.e. cognitive, appreciative, evaluative) and the kind of relations (i.e. systematic-integrative) operating under this regulative activity. Indeed, moral orientation requires the ability to evaluate (and be responsible for) the consequences of choosing between distinctive paths of selection grounded on certain cognitive, aesthetic, and value patterns (of validity, appropriateness, and correction) to which actor somehow is committed to in the light of general selective principles (values) capable of producing, in turn, integrative (or disruptive) consequences for either an actor's personality or their social group.

(2) The second theoretical development is the formalization of 'pattern-variables,' which express and synthesize some fundamental questions underlying the frame of reference of the situation-orientation. At the core of Parsons' scheme are ultimately two distinctions: a) between the subject and the object of orientation, i.e. the differentiation of the evaluative beings and evaluated beings; b) the distinction between the form/scope and the underlying content/motif of evaluation. From this, it follows that all

empirical action faces certain dilemmas whose answer is required if the orientation is to present a subjective meaning. According to Parsons, the subject's orientation can take place in terms of a *particularistic* or *universalistic* cognitive frame while its engagement can be more *affective* or *neutral*. The objects of orientation, on the other hand, might be understood in more a *diffuse* or more *specific* scope while their value or interest would due to either inner *ascriptive* qualities or instrumental *achievements*.[5] (Parsons et al. 1951, 76–91; cf. Parsons 1960a)

It seems important to note that in each of these pairs while the first term is more restrictive and 'elementary' from the point of view of normative regulation, the second opens the scope for ordered action in different areas of social life (Münch 1987: 41–45). In this sense, 'pattern variables' might be taken, for our purposes, not only as a fundamental tool for analyzing the meaning of action, but also as a way of mapping and classifying the normative and moral value patterns underlying different action systems and subsystems:

- The *particularism* in social orientation usually means that the norms underlying action have their validity associated with a specific context or group morality, while *universalism* points to the possibility of a wide scope of validity where these norms and the moral solidarity in which it is grounded are not restricted to in-group values.
- The *affective* orientation of actor (ego) to the objects (alters) may give rise to strong binding morality under the limited scope of the close community, but these affective ties tend not to be enough to bind actor to outside groups; it is only when he/she learns to order his/her action according to more *affective-neutral* patterns that the ordered moral action can be extended to a wide range of spaces in the social system.
- When the object is taken in *diffuse* normative terms, like in family and friendship groups − in which responsibilities are not organized in terms of strict clear boundaries and objects (alters) are taken as a whole (integral personalities) − the scope of moral regulation is circumscribed. The spread of the normative codes through multiple action subsystems, on the other hand, tends to require *specification* of roles, expectations, and moral responsibilities in order to maintain the integrity of their value-patterns.
- When the objects are taken in terms of their *ascriptive* qualities (like in-born properties or membership), the moral solidarity tends to be conceived, once again, as in terms of traditional ties and circumscribed groups. Understanding the object in terms of its *achievements* and voluntarily acquired attributes, on the other hand, open the possibility to normatively regulated interaction on a more generalized basis.

With the help of the pattern variable, then, the distinct subsystems of action can be classified and compared in terms of their normative patterns of orientation. Some of them may express a more universalist or particularist morality, grounded in strong

[5] There is a fifth pattern variable, concerning the dilemma between *individualistic* and *collectivistic* orientation. Throughout the development of Parsons' thought, especially after the formulation of the four-function paradigm in 1953, this fifth pattern loses its systematic role while the others are more directly assimillated in the new developments.

affective feelings of solidarity or sober (affective-neutral) standards of orientation, and so on. Moreover, Parsons was also interested, as we have mentioned, in the question of how normative order could be sustained if action is to retain autonomy. Among its many analytical gains, the pattern variables help us to understand the general direction value-patterns must take if voluntaristic social order is to be achieved. Parsons, however, was not only concerned with taxonomies and category analyses. As mentioned before, he was also interested in the social conditions under which these possibilities toward voluntarism could be accomplished. His answer to this kind of question is, once again, the 'interpenetration' of subsystems of action, which lead us to our third and last point.

(3) The third development of this period is that the previous distinction between normative and instrumental dimensions of the action system found in *SSA* becomes equated with a threefold model of personality, social, and culture systems[6] – to which Parsons will later add the behavioral system as a fourth dimension. The action system is then understood in terms of (degrees of) the interpenetration of these distinct subsystems and their corresponding elements or units – personality *need-dispositions*, social *role-expectations*, and cultural *value-standards* – whose patterns are supposed to be taken as independent factors in the explanation of action. According to this model, the achievement of voluntaristic ordered action depends on at least two homologous but distinct social processes of interpenetration: the *institutionalization* of cultural values in the social systems through their specification in distinct social norms and the *internalization* of these values (and norms) in an actor's personality during the process of socialization, (Parsons et al. 1951: 146–158; 176–183).

In *The Social System*, it became clear why the sheer existence of shared value patterns is not enough to organize social action systems. According to Parsons, every social system is faced with some structural problems, such as allocation and integration, whose solution depends on the concrete articulation of sets of social roles – through which people, resources, and rewards are distributed and which regulate social expectations during concrete interaction (cf. Parsons 1951: ch.4). In order to be effective, the latent value patterns of the cultural system must be flexible enough – while maintaining their general consistency – to be fleshed out and institutionalized in distinct sets of norms underlying social interaction and the role-expectations of actors. It is only by their specification that social action systems can be organized, regulated, and integrated.

However, voluntarist order requires not just (moral) 'order,' but also 'voluntarism' and autonomous action. This is precisely where the personality system becomes central to the discussion about interpenetration. Throughout his studies, especially his readings of Freud, Parsons came to realize that autonomous ordered action could only be achieved if value patterns were internalized by the actor as a constitutive and integrative part of the personality system during socialization – a central idea later explored in detail in *Family, Socialization, and Interaction Process* (Parsons and Bales 1955). As the process is carried out in differentiated social spheres and institutional roles, the primarily affective ties binding actors to their family (and to the specific instantiation of cultural values in family roles) are expanded in other directions where value patterns are institutionalized in distinct ways. The more they internalize normative patterns from

[6] Parsons was certainly not the only one to work out this sort of distinction at that time. Despite the distinct theoretical and ideological orientations it is important to note that Parsons's older college at Harvard, Pitirin Sorokin, also extensively dealt with the relations between of culture, society and personality a few years earlier (Sorokin 1947).

other social groups, such as peer groups, school classes, churches, professional groups, political parties, and so on, the more they transcend the particularities of social norms from each group. On one hand, the actors become more attached to general value patterns of culture and, in this sense, more integrated with other parts of society which sustain these same patterns in their own way; on the other hand, they also become more autonomous from the tyranny of social groups since the internalized general values are precisely what enables them to interpret and criticize their (false, inappropriate or unfair) specification in concrete institutions.

Once again we are confronted with the Parsonian attempt to deal with a classic Durkheimian question, formulated in the *Division of Labor*: how to explain that the more we become socially interdependent, the more the individual can flourish and be freed from social forces. We see then how Parsons develops his famous argument about 'institutionalized individualism' − explored in detail by authors such as Bourricaud (1977) − where individual autonomy is, after all, not a retreat from every social constraint but the very product of a differentiated institutional complex: "an institutionalized order in which individuals are expected to assume great responsibility and strive for high achievement, and in which they are rewarded through socially organized sanctions of such behavior [...]" (Parsons 1960b: 146). At the same time, both authors, Durkheim and Parsons, developed their own answers to an underlying concern, which is: how to guarantee that this new social creation, individualism, would not be the same as the self-interested one of the Utilitarian tradition.

Bearing this in mind, Parsons can address in better terms the question about the social conditions under which voluntarism is fully achieved. It is important to stress that he did not imply voluntarism is a characteristic exclusive of modern societies as, at least in some level, it is a necessary requirement of every action, insofar as it implies a decision made by the actor. The question, for Parsons, is how we can expand it, allowing patterns of selective orientation (presupposed, to some degree, in every action) to turn into autonomous activity. From the simplest to the most complex social system, a certain degree of specification and institutionalization is always necessary for attaining moral integration and solidarity building vis-à-vis the necessary allocations of scarce material and symbolic resources. But the scope of ordered moral action is widened − through increasing of universality, neutrality, specification, and achievement value patterns − and the space for voluntarism in action is increased only when the allocative and integrative functions of the group are fulfilled in a context of improved structural differentiation. It is through the positive interpenetration of differentiated subsystems of action that an actor is required to assume an autonomous engagement with values that, in turn, enable the transcendence of both the egoism of sheer utilitarian motivations and the historical limitations of social institutions that surround him/her. 'Differentiation' and 'Interpenetration' are, for Parsons, the general conditions which make it possible to enhance voluntarism and establish a kind of morality grounded in autonomy.

By putting things that way, of course, Parsons also opens the way for the sociological analysis of the conditions under which voluntarism does not fully occur, either because differentiation has not reached a level where the individual personality can emerge in its own terms or because the tensions of differentiation were not properly balanced by a process of interpenetration. Bearing this in mind, Parsons begins to try to understand the dynamics underlying the processes of differentiation and interpenetration in social life. This leads us directly into the discussion of the 'four-function paradigm' and the 'generalized symbolic media of interchange.'

Parsons' Later Work: Structural conditions and the dynamics of Morality

The interest in grasping the dynamics of differentiation and interpenetration of the distinct subsystems of action led Parsons to refine his model in a more elegant and comprehensive way. The next step in this direction is taken in *Working Papers in the Theory of Action* (1953), where some important insights from the study of interaction dynamics in task-oriented small groups, carried out by Robert F. Bales, are combined with a slightly new articulation of Parsons' and Shil's patterns variables. Resulting from this was the formulation of the famous four-function paradigm (or A-G-I-L scheme), which became the cornerstone of Parsons' subsequent intellectual development. (Parsons et al. 1953: 63–109; 163–269).

According to this new model every action system − from the smallest (between ego and alter) to the largest (whole society) − is always faced by functional problems resulting from its relationship with the environment and in terms of which its structures and process might be exhaustively analyzed: the problem of *adaptation* (A) of the action system vis-à-vis the conditions of its environment, which usually involve the process of acquiring and distributing its resources; the problem of *goal-attainment* (G), concerning the process through which the action system formulates its goals and the ways it mobilizes its resources in order to achieve them; the problem of *integration* (I), referring to the internal coordination of the distinct parts of the system of action in such a way that their interaction does not lead to disruption; finally, the problem of *latent pattern maintenance* (L), which deals with the internal process by which the symbolic patterns informing the system can be consistently sustained.[7]

Through this new theoretical framework, the three system model is reformulated, expanded and enhanced in its analytical ambition and social 'order,' in turn, finally receives an analytical treatment similar to that applied to social 'action' in *SSA*. In his first book, Parsons had claimed that voluntary and autonomous action would only be possible once the distinct analytical dimensions of unit-act (situation, means, ends, and norms) communicate and interpenetrate each other. What he points out now is that an ordered system of actions would only be in a position to transcend the sheer determinism of its environments − and then reach the conditions of voluntarism − through combined efforts of differentiated analytical subsystems dedicated to adaptation, goal-attainment, integration and pattern maintenance. As Alexander puts it: "the four functional dimensions (...) represent increasing degrees of autonomy vis-a-vis the determinacy of external material conditions. (Alexander 1983: 81).

Still, the four-function scheme is important in another significant respect. It not only presents a specific model for solving those dilemmas that haunted the main traditions of sociological thought – such as materialism-idealism and realism-nominalism − but also helps to clarify the misunderstandings that opposed micro and macro sociology. That is because the scheme is supposed to transverse all levels of analysis of social action. In Chapter 3 of the *Working Papers*, where the four-function model appears for the first time, Parsons and Bales assert that:

[7] It is important to note, following Adriaansens, that while still talking about 'functions,' Parsons' use of the term "(...) becomes less specific and lacks the typical structural-functional connotations of equilibrium and homeostasis. It could almost be equated with the term aspect." (Adriaansens 1979: 17)

> The scheme (...) is in its fundamentals applicable all the way from the phenomena of 'behavior psychology' on pre-symbolic animal and infantile levels, to the analyses of largest scale social systems. The main key to this scope of applicability lies in the fact that it is possible to treat what, on one level is a system, on the next 'higher' level as a point of reference, that is as 'particle' or system-unit in a larger system. (Parsons et al. 1953: 106-7).

This flexibility opens the way for a wide range of uses. In the last chapter of *Working Papers*, Parsons and his colleagues suggest that the four-function model might be used in the analysis of structural differentiated parts of society, such as occupational groups, the family and so on. When applied to the social system over the following years, this model led Parsons to formulate a comprehensive approach where the four functions were conceived as the main focus of subsystems of the economy (function-A), the polity (function-G), the societal community (function-I), and the socio-cultural or fiduciary subsystem (function-L) − each of which containing, in principle, another four subsystems and so on. With this new model, it is possible to see through which paths and in which direction the structural differentiation − required as a condition for autonomous moral action − are supposed to follow if the problems posed by the environment are to be solved in the context of increasing autonomous order.

As sheer structural differentiation is not enough to accomplish this kind of task, it requires a respective movement of interpenetration between dynamizing and regulative aspects of systems (or subsystems) and their environments. Following Parsons's reasoning, this process may happen only when the system's answer to the environmental pressures taking place in its margins leads to the emergence of a border subsystem, through which the communication between them is enhanced, yet without dissolving either the environment or the system identity. Munch (1987, esp.: 65–77), who dedicated a significant effort to detailing this dialectic between differentiation and interpenetration, argues that there are always some special conditions for the emergence of these borders.[8] Once they are fulfilled, however, they may lead to a special kind of interaction where both the system and its environment may flourish in their potentials,

[8] "The generation of marginal zones has a number of particular preconditions in the system's relationship to the respective dimensions of the environment. If we take society as the system, then in terms of the relationship to the material environment, it is *trial-and-error learning processes* which promote the development of the *instrumental*, *economic subsystem*. Quite different preconditions are required when it comes to the relationship between society and the goal-setting and power of other individual and collective actors. The more heterogeneous the goal, and the greater the tendency for the various individuals and collectives to have power at their disposal, the more the making and implementation of decisions by society requires a *monopolization of legitimate power* by the societal collective and the transfer of decision-making authority to particular councils and decision-making bodies. In this way a *political subsystem* develops, as an intermediary between the societal collective and the goal-setting of individuals and collectives. Yet another set of preconditions is called for by the interpenetration of the societal collective with the multiplicity of particularized collectives and individuals, so that society maintains its solidarity. In this case it is the *universalization of affective bond*, as supported by rites and symbols, which encourages the development of a societal *community system*, bringing together the particular groups in an all-encompassing community. Finally, the societal collective's interpenetration with the transcendental conditions for meaningful human existence poses its own special requirements: in this case *discursive processes* are the appropriate preconditions which help bring the *social-cultural (fiduciary)* subsystem into being, mediating between society and the transcendental conditions for the constitution of the meaning. Societal action is thus rooted in a further frame of reference concerned with the meaning of life." (Münch 1987: 67–9).

seeing their scope of influence expanded to new areas by finer chains and becoming somehow 'stronger' than before.

But how exactly does this communication operate? By which mechanisms does the interpenetration take place? The answer to these questions appears in more detail in Parsons' next work, *Economy and Society* (1956), co-authored with Neil Smelser, where the thorough application of the four-function paradigm to the analysis of the economic action led to a new understanding of some of the mechanisms operating during the process of interpenetration. In that book, the relation between systems and their environments started to be conceived, for the first time, as a series of interchanges mediated by symbolic media − this is of central importance because although the mere interchange does not imply interpenetration, the latter may take place through the former. During the analysis of the economic subsystem carried out by Parsons and Smelser, the main factors of production in the economy (capital, organization, labor) are taken in terms of the interchange: between the *outputs* coming from surrounding polity, societal community, and fiduciary subsystems − e.g., control over funds, entrepreneurial services, and labor services − and *inputs* returned to them by the economic subsystem − e.g., the right to intervene, profits, and wages. (Parsons and Smelser 1956: 70–84). Broadly speaking, what we see, in the end, is that *money* − under forms of credit, profit, wages and so on − appears as a generalized symbolic media capable of being traded for proper *power* (determining opportunities for the effectiveness of capital flux), *norms* (organizing entrepreneurial activities), and *value-patterns* (underling labor commitment and worker skills).

In the following years, it became clear for Parsons that the political, societal, and, fiduciary subsystemes also needed some sort of generalized media of interchange with analogous properties to those found in money, following the same dynamics of 'inflation' and 'deflation.' Parsons came to identify 'power,' 'influence,' and 'value-commitment' as symbolic media of interchange endowed with such analogous qualities (Parsons 1963a, b, 1968). Furthermore, the economic analogy opened the way for the media coming from non-economic subsystems to be freed from the straitjacket represented by the analysis under zero-sum conditions. In other words, Parsons claims that the increase of the amount of certain media − money, power, influence, or commitment − in the hands of an actor would not necessarily lead to the decrease of its availability to others: the subsystems in question could also increase, by its own means, the general productivity of the values (utility, effectiveness, solidarity, integrity) symbolized by generalized media.

This new understanding concerning the dynamics of system interchange and their symbolic media turned out to be the main axis of subsequent Parsonian developments. It underlies his analysis of the political system in *Politics and Social Structure* (1969), the genesis of the modern societal system in *The System of Modern Society* (1971), and of important aspects of the fiduciary system in *The American University* (1973). In this last book, the model also came to be applied to the higher level of the theory of action, where the interchange between systems of behavior, personality, society, and culture is operated by symbolic media under the 'cognitive complex': intelligence, affect, collective affect, and collective representations.[9] This movement finally reached its

[9] We follow here the categories resulting from Parsons's reformulation during the mid-1970s, when he taught seminars on symbolic media in Chicago and Pennsylvania with help of Lidz (1981). Two decades later, Lidz came to update and partially reframe the theory of symbolic media using 'language' instead of 'money' as an appropriate model to deal with some central questions of the theory of action (Lidz 2001).

highest point in Parsons' final work, *Theory of Action and the Human Condition* (1978a), in which the theory extrapolates the general level of action toward the analysis of the interchange taking place between the ultimate physical and metaphysical environments of the 'human condition': the physicochemical, organic, action, and telic systems.

It is important to insist, however, that far from falling back into some kind of economicist reduction of social life, as some seem to believe, the interchange model specifies in an elegant manner the multidimensional ambitions expressed by Parsons since *SSA*. It points to the fact that every concrete institution in social life could be thought, at least from a theoretical point of view, as the outcome of symbolic interchanges between systems with distinct degrees of normative and instrumental pressures. Social causality, in other words, could not be reducible to any kind of one-dimensional explanation. Moreover, Parsons could enrich the understanding of how those apparent contradictory orientations toward integrative order and individual freedom − two conditions for moral autonomy − might be improved at the same time under certain social arrangements: he demonstrates during his analysis that the increase of one does not imply the reduction of the other.

For our purposes, it is also important to realize that in detailing the mechanisms operating during the processes of system differentiation and interpenetration Parsons's model helps us to clarify the structural conditions under which we can find both the autonomous and the heteronomous forms of morality in modernity. It shows us not only the positive requirements for moral autonomy but a whole series of reasons why it may not take place in empirical cases: malintegration or disruption of the value system; its one-sided domination by economy, politics, family, religion, and so on; cultural (or social) determinism over the personality; the dedifferentiation between the value system and others systems of action; strong 'inflation' or 'deflation' of value-commitments during system interchange followed by withdrawal or even alienation from commitments, and so on.

Among the many possible paths opened by Parsons − some of which were barely mentioned here − it seems important to note that the four-function paradigm and the symbolic media enhance the understanding of those two processes previously mentioned as being central to all sociological investigation of morality: the *institutionalization* of moral values in social roles and the *internalization* of moral value-patterns in personality structure.

First, these new formulations point to the centrality of the fiduciary system (comprising family, school, church, university, and all institutions primarily concerned with social articulations of symbolic patterns) and their value-commitments, understood as the "(...) generalized capacity and credible promises to effect the implementation of values" (Parsons 1968: 148). On the one hand, the fiduciary system is responsible for mediating the interchange between values coming from the cultural system and the other subsystems of society, like economy, politics, and community. Of central importance here is the interchange with the societal community by means of value commitments which refer to collective solidarity and the societal support of these moral value-patterns. Through this double interchange, the community is also in a better position to give political support for binding collective decisions and regulating market order through laws. On the other hand, the fiduciary subsystem is also responsible for significant phases of socialization. In this case, it points to the interchange between

value-patterns, especially integrative moral values, and affective engagements that circulate inside the personality subsystems operating in social and cultural frontiers (super-ego and ego-identity).

Another significant development in a sociological study of morality may be found in Parsons's analyses of value commitments (cf. Parsons 1968). Of central importance in this regard is the relationship between social structure and the distinct dynamic processes – such as inflation, deflation, investment, banking, and so on − to which value commitments are submitted. In a highly differentiated social system, for instance, an actor may be submitted to a great variety of requirements of value-commitments coming from different subsystems which put him/her in a very difficult situation. If the actor overcommits to them, s/he has a great chance of ending in a situation where it is impossible to 'honor' all of them, which then becomes inflated and leads to an actor's loss of credibility. On the other hand, if an actor has been submitted to a socialization process in which many structurally different subsystems have been opened, his/her value-commitments may be more easily detached from specific institutional norms. If properly balanced by the selection of an interpretative orientation toward the value-patterns (and their respective commitments), this deflationary process may lead, as mentioned before, to an increase of moral autonomy. When radicalized toward requirements of sheer subjective authenticity (and their expressive value-patterns) this process can lead though to some extreme forms of what, according to Parsons, Durkheim has called the "cult of the individual" (1968: 154). In this regard, it seems important to point out, however, the conceptual difference established by Durkheim between the 'cult of the individual' as a fundamental value of respect for human dignity and what the author called 'selfish individualism'. The fundamentalism in moral matters may also result from a social process of dedifferentiation − or when one subsystem dominates the others. Where cultural values and social groups overlap, for instance, the actor tends to intensify their commitments to specific value-commitments without acknowledging the legitimacy of other specifications or interpretations.

According to Parsons, however, the intensification of commitments to moral values does not depend solely on social dedifferentiation − which implies a relatively decreasing space for individual personality. The abandonment of zero-sum analyses of value-commitments also leads Parsons to investigate the conditions under which moral engagement can be produced in absolute rather than relative terms. According to him, it may happen when charismatic figures and moral leaders − actors known for their integrity who become 'commitment bankers' − are able not just to impose compliance to their value innovation (taken then as a kind of moral duty) but also to articulate a solid institutionalization, especially when these new forms do not destroy the foundations of the previous one. If this process happens, as during the Protestant Reformation of the Catholic church, then the social group may experience both the general increase of commitments and some increment in structural differentiation. In fact, Parsons came to elaborate a typology of moral innovation in which the most promising one in terms of increasing commitments and social differentiation is the type of innovation in which new commitments diverge from the old ones on the level of normative interpretation, but can also be integrated in terms of a more abstract symbolic pattern (1968: 157–159).

Morality, Modernity, and Politics

In the previous sections, we have attempted to make explicit the existence of a crucial element for contemporary discussions on morality running through the various phases of Parsons's work: the concern with the *conditions of the voluntary order and autonomous action*. Departing from this we are now able to indicate, albeit briefly, to what extent these main concerns are relevant to the understanding of his sociological approach regarding politics and power relations in modernity. They allows us to resignify the systemic-functional character of his discussion, which in this case appears not so much as a homeostatic concern, important in itself, but as an idea to be evaluated from the point of view of his concern with the viability of transcending utilitarian, instinctual and even authoritarian premises in the theory of action.

Regarding these main concerns, once again, Parsons clearly moves closer to Durkheim, who was tackling the same kind of problems in search of a way out of the pathological forms of individualist egoism and authoritarian forms of collectivism in modern societies. The search for the structural conditions of a social order capable of retaining an element of freedom, for instance, is exactly what motivates Durkheim's discussion concerning the interplay of forces between the state and the different intermediate groups in *Lessons in Sociology* (Durkheim 1950). At the same time, we can also establish a straight dialogue between Parsonian concern with autonomy and Durkheim's idea, formulated in detail in *Moral Education* (Durkheim 1925), that in modern societies it would no longer be enough to impose morality on individuals by means of sheer authority. Modernity, according to Durkheim, instated the principle of rationality, that is, the need to state the reason for things, so that moral values could only be considered legitimate if they could be freely accepted by subjects, as implied in his concept of "spirit of autonomy".

In fact, at least since the SSA, Parsons's theory of action was formulated as an attempt to solve this kind of dilemma − that is also a political one − between utilitarian and authoritarian approaches to social action and social order. At that time, the dissatisfaction with political alternatives of the day − the 'laissez-faire' version of liberalism, on one hand, and the authoritarianism paths taken by Fascism and Stalinism, on the other − was of central importance to him and clearly permeates all the discussion concerning the 'utilitarian dilemma' and the 'problem of order'. (cf. Gomes Neto 2019). Despite Parsons's claims of having found a theoretical and epistemological way of transcending this dilemma at that time, the full specification of this position would have to wait until his later developments. Throughout all this process, though, the "formal voluntarism" − whose main premises goes back to SSA − is matched by a "substantive voluntarism" centered on the defense of concrete human persons. As Alexander puts it:

> Although Parsons has discarded the individualistic position as a formal framework, his theory of differentiation accepts it as providing the basic parameters within which any theory of substantive freedom must be rooted. In contrast to his formal theory, Parsons's [...] substantive theory does, in fact, take the concrete person as the point of reference. Parsons accepts, in this case, the classical liberal emphasis on the autonomy of the concrete individual, although this autonomy is,

> once again, a multidimensional one. Substantive voluntarism obtains to the extent that the concrete person exercises autonomy vis-à-vis both the normative and conditional aspects of his situation. (Alexander 1978: 184).

From the voluntaristic point of view, then, the human individual is − and, according to the author, should be defended as − characterized by a non-reducibility that could be translated, theoretically, into the work of articulation of all the other categories within the frame of reference of the action, something to which Parsons refers, in his first work, by using the category of "effort". One cannot fail to notice here the humanist dimension of Parsons' reflection. Going further, it is possible to say that the author seems to echoes a kind of Durkheimian individualism (cf. Durkheim 1898), that is, one that points to the social consecration of the human person, taken as an object of rituals and interdictions in modern societies. This irreducible character of the person − expressed initially in the multidimensionality of the Parsonian scheme − can be well understood as reconfigured into a kind of modern sacred which, by the way, Parsons seems to have embraced through all his life.[10]

Apart from the epistemic and normative orientations that Parsonian theory can provide to all of those interested in the main moral and political issues of modernity, it is also important to note, in a more theoretical-substantive level, the connections between his approach to morality and his contributions to the sociological understanding of modernity and politics. In this context, the articulation of and "institutionalized individualism" appears as a sort of evolutionary achievement of modern societies (Bortolini 2016). Parsons emphasized that if the integrative process was to retain and enhance voluntarism and freedom while balancing the tensions resulting from complex differentiation it would demand, on the one hand, a set of general inclusive values centered on the individual − e.g., human dignity, individual freedom, social recognition and so on − articulated under an abstract legal order and, on the other, an intensifying process of inclusion of all societal groups and individuals under a sort of 'full' citizenship (cf. Nielsen 2001; Lidz 2009; Sciortino 2010).

In articulating these arguments, Parsons also raises one of the most pressing issues of the current debate in the field of social theory, especially in its more propositional side. We are referring to the question of cultural and societal pluralism, taken as a constitutive trait of modern societies. According to Sciortino:

> Contrary to most scholarly perspectives and much textbook lore, in his analysis of contemporary citizenship Parsons is first and above all a *Meistersinger* of contemporary social pluralism, offering an account of this feature of contemporary society that contrasts sharply with both the nostalgic vision of conservative thought and the jeremiads of critical theory. Where others see the breakdown of a common culture into fragments of highly specialized, narrowly developed tastes, Parsons stresses the development of a sophisticated normative order, in which the

[10] In fact, the discussion about Parsons's defense of modern individualism can be connected both with his sentivity to the new forms of religion in modernity − including the possibility of a truly "civil religion" − and his particular (and critical) understanding of the secularization thesis. Although Parsons sociology of religion has not received much attention, a contemporary approach of these topics can be found in Turner (2005) and Vanderstraeten (2012).

> requirements of common membership are distinguished from the pressures to conformity exercised by particularistic traditions. Where others identify in the existence of segmental loyalties a danger to the unity of the 'national' societal community, Parsons stresses how such networks – once embedded in universalistic individual rights – represent a source of strength and flexibility in a democratic society. Where others lament the 'end of the common good', Parsons identifies the highly institutionalized premises of the freedom from ascription and from compulsory allegiance. Where others see the eventual corruption of the moral order, Parsons sees the emergence of a pluralist societal community existing in relation with, but analytically independent from, economic control, political power and cultural imposition. (Sciortino 2010: 246)

We see that there is, in Parsons, a concern to understand the complexity of societal relationships and their implications for collective life that is always guided by a normative position of commitment to the viability of modernity and its fundamental principles. In fact, as we have tried to point out, Parsons's concern is not so much with what are the particular norms, beliefs, and identities in society but, above all, how they operate, that is, what standards they follow and how they are produced and circulate in the different social levels, either in the relationship between groups or in the relationship of groups with individuals.

This is at stake when Parsons, in his last phase, draws attention to the different forms that commitment to values can assume, and their impacts on individuals and even on the collectivity. In his view, the demand for a very intense commitment to certain values − associated with certain groups − tends to be too totalizing, reducing the possibilities of autonomy and engendering conflicts with other groups, whose solution is impossible. As we indicate in the former section, the author even formulates the two main factors that can lead to forms of fundamentalism: dedifferentiation, when one subsystem tends to impose itself on the others, and the incentive to a dogmatic moral engagement, facilitated by the emergence of certain types of charismatic leadership.

In short, as we enter the Parsonian work through the door of his theory on the moral dimension of action, we end up perceiving nuances of his political theory that are of fundamental importance for contemporary debate. By addressing fundamental issues such as differentiation, interpenetration, and pluralism − of values, but also of systems, and institutional roles − Parsons places himself as one of the great thinkers of modernity, concerned not only with its understanding, but also in indicating ways to avoid "pathologies" that remain constant threats to the project of modernity, that is, forms of fundamentalism and totalitarianism, on the one hand, and forms of egoism and anomie, on the other.

Conclusions

After having visited the main works of Parsons in search of his major discussions on morality, we have enough elements to indicate the relevance of this theme in his work. In this concluding section, we must point out what might be thought of as some of the most effective contributions of Parsons' legacy to the development and consolidation of the sociology of morality as a field of investigation.

Parsons's first fundamental contribution to the field consists in *making explicit that morality is a symbolic fact and therefore a constitutive part of the cultural system*, justifying bringing it to the center of sociological concerns and giving it an intermediary place between social system and personality system. This intermediary place also means that it plays a mediating role between these systems and that it is a fact that has twofold status: it is a phenomenon at one time objective and subjective. In more specific terms, this means that, for Parsons, morality is not only a social construct to be explained from certain external characteristics, but it is also a special kind of *action*. By incorporating Weberian tradition in its analysis, Parsons legitimizes moral action as an object of sociology, opening a range of analytical possibilities. Parsons makes explicit something that in Durkheimian work was placed too latently (Cf. Rosati and Weiss 2015b, p. 125–129), which is that morality is not only a phenomenon produced intersubjectively and that it enjoys an objective character, but that it is also a constitutive part of the very individuals. In this sense, Parsons's theory discloses how what is socially constructed has an effect on the lives of individuals and, in so doing, impacts the destinies of their action and, therefore, the very forms of social configuration. Understanding morality is the key to accessing the complex imbrication between these two mutually constitutive universes.

By enlightening this multidimensional character of morality, Parsons provides a second contribution: he *legitimizes the pursuit of an interdisciplinary approach and points out some of the paths that can be followed.* We consider particularly relevant the approximation between sociology and psychoanalysis. After all, one of the most poignant questions of contemporary sociology of morality is the comprehension of the forms of subjectivation enabled by different moral systems. This is an important aspect both because of its explanatory possibilities and because of its normative implications.

The third contribution of Parsonian theory refers to how it advances in a new attempt to address the dilemma between shared adherence to a normative order (a basic requirement for the social order) and the modern presupposition of freedom as autonomy (an idea that underlies a voluntarist conception of action). The theoretical gain found in Parsons, which can also be unfolded in dimensions of analysis of investigation on morality, lies in the *introduction of the concept of pattern-variables and in the subsequent thesis that the voluntarist character depends on social differentiation and on the interpenetration of systems*. This is a complex relationship that supposes to find a fair degree between the underlying patterns amongst the different systems and subsystems. Furthermore, the theorization of the pattern-variables typical of the different kinds of action has fundamental value for the operationalization of a research program in sociology of morality. After all, the " kind " of orientation of morality in each system is decisive for the type of bond that can be constituted and is important as a moral horizon available to the individuals.

Finally, as a fourth contribution, Parsons brings interesting *arguments to think about the dynamics of the different forms of solidarity and attachment to the group in contemporary society*. The author stresses that the voluntarist character of the action is something to be conquered and broadened, as it is never fully guaranteed. After all, he indicates how a value-commitment can also, eventually, imply a loss of autonomy. This characteristic stresses the great importance of looking carefully at the process of socialization, not only considering which values are being transmitted, but also the

forms of transmission and the ways of commitment to these values. In other words, it points to the fact that even very fair and reasonable values can spawn forms of totalitarianism, depending on the nature of the commitment engendered.

We hope to have emphasized in the course of this article that morality is present in all phases of Parsons's work, gaining increasing space as an explanatory dimension of social reality. This aspect in itself is enough to place Talcott Parsons as one of the forerunners of the sociology of morality, conceived as an emerging area of research in the social sciences. Moreover, as we have tried to point out at various moments in the text, his formulations reveal important affinities with the theoretical perspective of morality that began with Émile Durkheim, allowing us to situate him as part of this broad lineage. Based on these assumptions, we aimed to show, albeit on a preliminary basis, how this dialogue may contribute to a more precise delineation of a research program in the sociology of morality. In fact, the possibilities opened by Parsons' work are countless. Although many of his arguments are stuck in systemic assumptions, with too much emphasis on issues such as the need for functional integration, Talcott Parsons still offers fundamental insights for understanding the theoretical and practical challenges of the present time. Certainly, morality is among the most complex and relevant.

Acknowledgements We are thankful to Frédéric Vandenberghe for his precious comments on the first draft of this paper, and also to Helmut Staubmann and Victor Lidz for their importants remarks. We also express our gratitude to our Graduate Program (PPGS-UFRGS) and PROEX-CAPES for their granting.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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