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A Positive Reply to Constructive Criticism

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A Positive Reply to Constructive Criticism

Erkki Kilpinen

*This is my music, this is my self:
Free should the scholar be, free and brave.*

Emerson

It was only quite recently that I read in *The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* that William James's old metaphor about habit as "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent" is widely appreciated as one of the aptest of its kind, a saying "most of us would hesitate to try improving," as the editors of the *Encyclopedia* put it (Sills and Merton 1991, p. xv). Thus, my choice of title for my dissertation book *The Enormous Fly-Wheel of Society* (2000) turns out to be happier than I could anticipate at the time of choosing it. It seems that William James originally appreciated habit just because it was a "conservative agent." In this respect I do not follow him. What fascinates me with this concept is that it refers to the transformation of instantaneous action into ongoing process action (see J. Terry Gates' excellent elucidation in his first endnote) – and also back from process to instant, as C. S. Peirce has taught us.

In general, I find it both amusing and delighting that *The Enormous Fly-Wheel of Society* is discussed in *Action, Criticism & Theory for Music Education*. Amusing, because my personal experience in musicianship – very limited as it is, as an amateur singer, – has indeed sustained my early conviction that human action is not quite what philosophy and sociology usually depict it to be. And it delights me to see that professional experts like Terry Gates and Scott Goble find it worthwhile to ponder the possible relevance of ideas like mine for music education. Although this theme may be of most interest for this journal's readers, I remind myself of my amateur status and let these parts of the reviews pass without comment.

Before I pause to consider the intellectual feedback that the review-discussions bring to me, I take the opportunity to thank my reviewers, Gates, Goble, and Pentti

Määttänen, for taking a detailed look at my text, and the journal editor, Wayne Bowman, for collecting those discussions into a review-symposium and patiently waiting for my reply. I find all reviews constructive and fair, and appreciate very much that the authors have taken pains to consider things from my viewpoint. Constructive criticism is always welcome, in this case doubly so, because I have plans about producing a shortened version of *The Enormous Fly-Wheel* for commercial publication.

As the reviewers have noticed, the book attempts to make two points simultaneously, and it may be that this makes its argument harder to follow. Thus, I plead guilty as Goble (p. 9) refers to my "circuitous manner of exposition." What I wanted to bring out, in the first place, is that thorough knowledge about pragmatist philosophy is a *conditio sine qua non* for the right appreciation of what is the enduring part of early American sociology. This is the leading idea that I have followed from early on, while working on the book, but it took some time before it crystallized into its present form: that it is precisely the *pragmatist theory of action* that offers the key to the correct sociological interpretation. Furthermore—and this is the second thesis of the book—the pragmatist interpretation of human action is not just one option among many for scholars to choose from. My considered opinion is that it is just about the most viable that we have at our disposal at the moment.

As regards the first thesis above, the one about the sociological relevance of pragmatism, it has turned out that my interpretation was not idiosyncratic. Although Geoffrey Hodgson (2004) discusses mainly economics rather than sociology, his conclusions in many respects overlap mine, as does his view that "Talcott Parsons helped to turn sociology into a science of society where the psychological and biological aspects of human agency were neglected" (Hodgson 2004, p. 307). Hodgson also agrees with me in thinking that the enduring part of early U. S. social science was the part that founded its notion of action on the pragmatist interpretation, and that a modernised version of this interpretation is what we need today.

Accordingly, what do we mean when we talk about the pragmatist notion of action? I already mentioned that action, descriptively speaking, means *continuous*

activity, according to its pragmatist interpretation. Another point to be emphasized is that in pragmatism the question of action comes *before* questions of knowledge, moral valuation, etc.—not after them as is the traditional interpretation (Pape 2002; Joas and Kilpinen forthcoming). I do not have to point this out to my reviewers, but this idea is still something that wider intellectual readership is not accustomed to take for granted.

As I said, I find the reviews fair and constructive. For example, I welcome Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* and the idea of its applicability to my problems, as Määttänen (p. 9) suggests to me. By being a "thoughtful application of general principles" the *phronesis*-concept elucidates just those ideas that I was not always able to articulate in the *Fly-Wheel* text, and it is fascinating to see how much Aristotle already had to say on these "modern" issues. When it comes to the actual shortcomings that the reviewers point out, I of course plead guilty when Määttänen (p. 10) observes the insufficiency of my discussion of the ethical dimension. I plead guilty even though Goble's opinion in this respect is more positive, quoting me to the effect that "pragmatism has all the time been sensitive to the moral dimension in social life" (Goble p. 8). A discussion of moral issues is essential in a work that claims to treat social theory. If a defence is needed, I might refer to the moral theorist Alasdair Macintyre (1981), according to whom ethical discussion *presupposes*, explicitly or implicitly, a notion of psychology and sociology. The order of things thus runs from the descriptive to the normative, and it is the former discussion to which I have tried to contribute. The same point is to be made in view of Gates' remark that 'democracy is a central theme in Dewey's educational, social and political works' (Gates p. 9). It surely is, and I am aware of this. Dewey, however, did not just preach about democracy in the ordinary sense. His point was that a new understanding of democracy, a normative ideal as he conceived it, presupposes also a new understanding of human agency. I come back to these questions in a moment.

Before that, I pause to note how the reviewers occasionally contradict each other. Goble (p. 10) says that it is "unfortunate" that I did not introduce more directly Peirce's semiotic, "which provides a heuristic conception of human cognition that is now being used by some social scientists in their societal and cultural studies." Gates

(p. 8), on the other hand, suggests that Dewey's semiotics is essentially Peircian, and that "there is little to say about it here beyond what Kilpinen has so thoroughly analysed." Goble is right that I do not actually introduce Peirce's semiotics in *The Enormous Fly-Wheel*, and that I presuppose some familiarity with it from the reader. An introduction to semiotics would have made the narrative even more "circuitous" (to use Goble's word) than it is. I had to concentrate on making the somewhat novel point that Peirce (e.g., EP 2: 418) calls habit the *logical* interpretant of a sign, in other words manages to mix fire with water, joining together terms that traditionally have been taken as opposites: habituality and logicity.

Furthermore, when my semiotic discussion occasionally treats Peirce and G. H. Mead simultaneously, this is not just "to demonstrate a philosophical kinship" between the two, as Goble (p. 9) says. Since finishing *The Enormous Fly-Wheel* (2000), I have published a semiotic article 'A Neglected Classic Vindicated' (2002). The neglected classic in question is Mead, and one of the points that I make in that paper is that Peirce's "extensive taxonomy of sign relationships" (Goble p. 10) is not to be approached with unnecessary awe. Its taxonomic nature, on the contrary, diverts a scholar's attention from what is more important: the *ongoing process of semiosis*, of universal sign-interpretation, which may either be articulated (i.e., be human interpretation) or not (i.e., be animal interpretation). I also say in that article explicitly that a parallel view on Peirce's and Mead's respective conceptions enables one to notice the above point more clearly. And it is precisely these ideas to which other semioticians have reacted positively in their comments on the article.

For further discussion, let me concentrate on Terry Gates' review, because he suggests explicitly that my theoretical framework might be re-framed and that familiarity with John Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925) would be of particular value. As he says, this book is well worth bringing into my argument.

I readily grant that familiarity with this classic work would enhance my erudition, and I admit that I today know it only by second hand. However, as I take a look at those particular themes that Gates brings to my attention, I must say that I am not thoroughly impressed. Gates suggests that I would benefit from Dewey's theory of

communication, which is *the* social phenomenon *par excellence*, according to his reading of Dewey. For another thing, if I understand him correctly, he seems to have a softer spot for the sociobiology of Edward O. Wilson than I have in *The Enormous Fly-Wheel*. Gates finds "anthropocentric narrowness" (p. 4) in my treatment of action, and thinks that I "join others in dismissing such fields as socio-biology" (p. 4). Let me discuss these points by taking up the sociobiology question first.

In truth, my position on the naturalistic interpretation of human life and human action is just the opposite of the anthropocentric view that Gates ascribes to me. And I stick to my guns in contending that Wilson does not have much to teach us here.¹

Listening to usual discussions about sociobiology I am often reminded of the reputed exchange between Mahatma Gandhi and his interviewer: "Mr. Gandhi, what do you think about the Western civilization?" – "I think that would be a great idea!" I think that sociobiology would be a great idea, but so far we have not seen much of it.

"Sociobiology" is a misnomer for what is usually offered under that rubric. Its right name would rather be *cohort analysis*. Those who like "socio-biology" seem to be oblivious to the truth that Peirce (CP 1.11) expressed concisely: "Man is essentially a social animal, but to be social is one thing, to be gregarious is another."

Sociobiologists, as a rule, conflate sociality with gregariousness. At least Wilson does so, as he puts human societies side by side with coral reefs and other such things, as the "pinnacles of social evolution" (1975, pp. 379ff.). And I admit being downright irritated by his claim that sociology is "in the natural history stage of its development" (1975, p. 574). At that time Wilson prognosticated for sociology a merger with cultural anthropology, social psychology, and economics (*ibid.*), but the elapsed thirty years have not seen such a development. Although Wilson conflates gregariousness and sociality, there are other scientists and scholars who are aware of their differences; but I cannot take up the work of Damasio (1995; 1997), Bogdan (1997; 2000), or Gärdenfors (2003) at this juncture.

¹ I do not wish to leave the impression that I disagree with everything that Wilson says. His *The Future of Life* (2002) has my warm sympathy

The research and scholarship just mentioned relates also to the other suggestion that Gates makes for my *Enormous Fly-Wheel*. He maintains that Dewey's *Experience and Nature* (1925) would teach me to appreciate of the role of *communication* as "the essential, life-giving engine of human society" (p. 7).

However, as I look at Gates' account of communication, I get a *déjà vu* feeling, the feeling that we have already heard much of this from Jürgen Habermas's *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984-87; originally 1981). My point is not that we shouldn't appreciate communication, but is rather about the sense *in which* it should be appreciated. I agree with Hans Joas (1992/1996a) to the effect that communication theory, an empirically important social phenomenon though it is, is not able to act as a *constitutive principle* in the sense that its adherents ascribe to it. Communication theory takes as given something it should explain: How is it that human beings are able to communicate? The theory of communication does not answer this question. However, other sources are able to do so: It is the naturally endowed *human intersubjectivity* that enables us, among other things, to communicate (Joas 1992/1996a; Kilpinen 2002; Joas and Kilpinen, forthcoming).² And it is interesting that Joas originally reached this conclusion precisely by drawing on Dewey's philosophy (Mead's also) to overcome the distinction between instrumental and communicative action that Habermas (1981) thought to be un-surmountable. Joas named his own proposal for the general theory of action "the creativity of action," and that name is apt, so long as we do not take it with too many artistic connotations.

In brief, intersubjectivity is a precondition for human communication, not its outcome, as communication theory sometimes seems to think. Having said this, I am ready to agree with Gates that communication is important, indispensably important, as an empirical sociological phenomenon. Only, I would not make it a principle of social ontology.

Oh yes, one more item. Gates wishes to enhance my erudition also by the sociological theory of W. G. Sumner. Of course this classical thinker does have his

² The more empirically founded research by Damasio, Bogdan and Gärdenfors, mentioned above, supports the conclusions that Joas and I offer.

merits, which I am ready to recognize; however, they hardly are pragmatist merits. The following exchange is reported to have taken place between Sumner and his interlocutors:

... when I was a member of the Faculty, I was sitting directly behind Sumner, when the calling of a new professor of philosophy was the subject under discussion. (...) The Faculty would not agree, so the discussion was resumed. The professor who was making the report on the candidate said he was not sure of the new man's position on Pragmatism. While he was talking, I observed that the back of Sumner's neck was becoming a fiery red, sure indication of a coming explosion. He turned around, looked at the speaker and barked, "What's that you say?" "Pragmatism," was the reply. Sumner gave a derisive snort – "Pragmatism!" (...) [and] grunted, "Huh, I feel as I were in Sunday School!" (Phelps 1940, p. *xi-xii*).

As philosophy in general and pragmatism in particular in Sumner's estimate belonged in Sunday School, we perhaps do not need to take him into account in a discussion about pragmatist social theory. Of course, it may be that the above anecdote does not settle the issue once and for all, so that Sumner may still be "a pragmatist against his own will," as Joas (1996b) has noted about Charles Taylor in our day. Gates (p. 8) seems to hint this as he finds Dewey critical of Sumner's results but not his approach. As for further discussion of this question, however, I think I'd better paraphrase Kipling and say that it might make a topic for another story.

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