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## **Electronic Article**

### **The Rationality of Action: Pragmatism's Habit Concept**

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## The Rationality of Action: Pragmatism's Habit Concept

Wayne Bowman, Associate Editor

Three Essay Reviews of  
Erkki Kilpinen's *The Enormous Fly-wheel of Society: Pragmatism's Habitual Conception of Action and Social Theory*.  
(Research Report No. 235: Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki, 2000)

*[M]y 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.*

Erkki Kilpinen

*Those who wish a monopoly of social power find desirable the separation of habit and thought, action and soul, so characteristic of history. For the dualism enables them to do the thinking and planning, while others remain the docile, even if awkward, instruments of execution. Until this scheme is changed, democracy is bound to be perverted in realization.*

John Dewey



### Mixing fire with water: the reflexivity of habit and intelligence<sup>1</sup>



With Dewey's bold statement (above) as background, Erkki Kilpinen undertakes to explore classical pragmatism's<sup>2</sup> "habitual" conception of action, and to demonstrate its significance for social theory. Although habituality without rationality is blind, he argues,



"rationality without habituality is empty" (Kilpinen 2000, 27)<sup>3</sup>. This idea of the inextricable linkage between rationality and habituality (in recent music education literature, the words "reflection" and "practice" may be more familiar), writes Kilpinen, is pragmatism's "most radical . . . idea" (98).<sup>4</sup>



Habit, William James wrote, "dooms us all to fight out the battle of life upon the lines of our nurture or our early choice, and to make the best of a pursuit that disagrees, because there is no other for which we are fitted, and it is too late to begin again." Habit is, James continues, "the enormous fly-wheel of society, its most precious conservative agent" (13). This idea of habit as a conservative agent, observes Kilpinen, has rich implications for the processes of class struggle, social stratification, and institutionalization. The routinization of human behavior—habit—is the potent force behind socialization. And indeed, the word "habit" is widely used in precisely this sense: as a kind of automatic, unreflective undertaking that is rationality's diametrical opposite. To function habitually, then, is to function unthinkingly, irrationally.

Only, what of James's little adjective, "precious"? Why precious rather than insidious? And what of Kilpinen's contention that rationality without habituality is empty? Clearly, this dualistic opposition between habit and reason must be missing something important. Human action may have indisputably inertial tendencies, but even the most resolute conservative aspires, as Kilpinen observes, to more than mere automaticity: an aspiration that entails the *transcendence of routine*.<sup>5</sup> Besides a tendency to repeat what they have grown accustomed to, then, people have the capacity to take up *new habits*, to break with the old when it gets in the way of desired trajectories of action or anticipated consequences. And *this* kind of habit—the *habit of changing habits*—is at least as important as repetitive behavior, if not more so. We call people who develop this habit of changing habits creative, intellectually innovative. They routinely throw aside old ideas or ways of acting as they encounter circumstances that warrant it. They are learners *par excellence*.

But to learn, on this view, is not to rid ourselves of habit. Rather, it is to modify and refine existing habit, replacing it with new habit. To progress is to renounce formerly useful habits for newer, more promising ones. "There is no habit more useful than this habit of easily taking up and easily throwing off mental habits" (Peirce, quoted 65).

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This distinctive, "double-barreled" habit concept, in which habit and reflection are indissolubly linked in human action, lies at the heart of classical philosophical pragmatism (most explicitly in the work of Peirce and Dewey). Much sociological theory, on the other hand, has tended, and continues, unfortunately to treat habit as "a residual category of action" (15): as mere, non-rational "behavior."<sup>6</sup> Kilpinen's general purposes in the book being reviewed here are (1) to bring to the fore pragmatism's ideal of social life as the creation of agents acutely aware of the implications of their actions—whose actions are intentional and intelligent; and (2) to explore social theory's and social theorists' assumptions from the distinctive perspective provided by pragmatism's concept of what Kilpinen aptly calls "reflexive habituality."

At the root of this distinctive habit concept is Peirce's triadic and relational account of meaning, in which (a) sign and (b) signified are related by (c) sign-user: a user for whom the sign relationship implicates an indispensable and open-ended interpretive function.<sup>7</sup> On this view, human thought is an "endless semiotic process of sign interpretation" (56)—and thus, a mode of action. Meanings are habitual, consensual, intersubjectively-constructed<sup>8</sup> and -validated affairs: things that are stable to the extent they prove useful, yet yield to creative revision as new or changing circumstances<sup>9</sup> warrant. The centrality of this *creative* element posits a pivotal role in human affairs for individual and collective agency—for actions that are intentional: guided by anticipated and desired consequences. Thus, in contrast to the common conception of action as habitual pattern punctuated periodically, almost incidentally, by doubt, the pragmatist conception of action insists that reflection is itself dependent upon habituality—that reflection and habit are enmeshed, and are mutually supportive aspects of action.

In short, the basis for human rationality is habitual action: not some mechanical, syllogistic, cerebral calculation (logical truth "has nothing at all with how we may be inclined to think," asserts Peirce); not static deliberation; not self-reflective

consciousness; and not "cognition" as music educators have come to think of it.<sup>10</sup> Nor is thought, the oft-supposed opposite of habit, rooted essentially in doubt. Habitual action is the normal human condition, to which doubt is exceptional. Thus, thought for Peirce is always in motion, ever active, a process without beginning or end. It is an active process guided by beliefs—rules for action—that emerge naturally from successful experience. The revision of these beliefs (rules for action, habits) in light of ongoing experience is what lies at the heart of intelligence. This process of generating new hypotheses to account for unanticipated consequences of habitual (belief-based) action is the fundamentally creative capacity Peirce calls abduction.

Here, at the nexus between reflection and action, is where theory and practice—those perennial concerns of music educators—come together. Mead writes, "A laborer with acquired skill for which he has no theory, approaches the condition of the purely instinctive animal," becoming "helpless the moment he is out of the environment to which his habits are adapted" (67). Kilpinen summarizes it this way: "An accomplished doer, according to the pragmatists, is a master of his or her habits, not their slave . . . Moreover, an accomplished doer masters not only his or her hand, but also his or her mind. She is no mere possessor of skills or dexterity, but is able to reflect upon them, perhaps develop more appropriate ways and rules for doing the thing in question" (67). An accomplished doer (practitioner), then, is one whose doings are expertly monitored by theory: "theory" being, in Mead's words, "consciousness of the way in which one adjusts his [*sic*] habits of working to meet new situations" (98).<sup>11</sup>

### And the point is...?

It is easy to gloss over words and ideas like these: easy because of what our linguistic and conceptual habits lead us to think they mean, as opposed to what they truly mean from classical pragmatist perspective.<sup>12</sup> We music educators need to recognize the

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limitations and impediments created by our habitual ways of thinking and speaking about music and music education—so that we can get on with the important business of creating better, more useful ways of thinking, speaking, and in particular, engaging in our musical and educational practices.

On the view advanced here (and in strong contrast to many of our understandings of music as a species of 'cognition'), musical rationality—or, if you prefer, the dispositions and propensities of the musically educated—does not consist in the exercise of some mental faculty or static "intelligence." Rather, its core is the capacity for learning; for growing alongside changing circumstances; for acquiring new, more useful habits; for *acting* in ways that are congruent with desired and emerging ends. Musical and educational action are rational to the extent they are habitual; only, "habitual" here designates the opposite of the ordinary conception of habit as routine and automatic. Habits are successful and useful to the extent they are general. In fact, habit *is* generalization. Only, because the relation between the acting individual and surrounding reality is fluid, unstable, undergoing continuous change, we recurrently encounter disappointing or doubt-inducing situations—challenges to the presumed general utility of our actions. In such situations, we must decide to act in one way rather than another, in light of consequences deemed likely to follow. Given the ubiquity of change and the concrete particularity of individual situations, we must ever seek newer, more promising ways of habitual action.<sup>13</sup>



Such decisions in the midst of action lie at the heart of musical and educational praxis. The practicality of theory; the reciprocity of doing and reflecting, of adjusting and accommodating; the necessity of attending simultaneously to means and ends; the capacity to choose among competing goods: these are but a few of the important matters that attend pragmatism's habitual theory of rationality—or, if you prefer, pragmatism's rational theory of habituality.

Since the conditions of action change irrespective of what we do, habits must change. Tempting though it may be to focus on the challenges obviously entailed by such indeterminacy, there is a corollary here that is even more important: that is the essentially creative dimension of action so construed (see Hans Joas, *The Creativity of Action*<sup>14</sup>).

The inescapability of change and the concrete particularity of each situation we encounter mean not just that habits must change; they imply also that intelligent action must be fundamentally creative, a feature closely linked again to Peirce's theory of abduction—the process of generating hypotheses to account for surprising occurrences.<sup>15</sup>

What is the upshot of these points for those of us in music education who are interested in understanding music and music education as praxis, or as practices? This is hardly the place to attempt a definitive answer. But clearly, the pragmatist claims to the rationality and creativity of action provide abundant fuel for future deliberations.

Additional to these are the primacy of habituality over conscious deliberation; the primacy of agency over thoughtfulness; the processual, dynamic character of action-based intelligence; the continuity between animal and human knowledge on a system so derived;<sup>16</sup> and the fundamentally intersubjective (socially constructed) nature of knowledge.

Kilpinen's book is, as several of the reviewers note here, not the easiest of reads; nor, given its intended readership (social theorists, primarily?) are its implications for music and music education directly apparent. However, what is very clear is that Kilpinen is illuminating an orientation to rationality rich in its potential to transform how we look both at our field and its professional aims. And to these latter, it seems clear to me, the centrality of action adds an important political dimension: one that challenges those who seek a "monopoly of social power" within the profession by "doing the thinking and planning, while others remain the docile, even if awkward, instruments of execution."<sup>17</sup>

### The review essays in this issue

Because Kilpinen casts his net extraordinarily broadly and engages in such close analysis, it is hardly surprising that the three reviewers here focus on very different aspects of his work.

Scott Goble approaches Kilpinen's book from a Peircian pragmatic perspective, but begins by offering a helpful overview of pragmatism's historical presence in music education scholarship, suggesting as well that Kilpinen's project may be a useful resource for current theorists in the profession. Since Kilpinen's *Flywheel* admittedly assumes familiarity with a body of literature that has been somewhat neglected by music education, Goble undertakes the very useful task of explaining the basic tenets of Peirce's philosophy. Peirce's philosophy, Goble relates, is primarily a philosophy of *mind*. However, social scientists are increasingly finding his *pragmatism* and his *semiotic* (his science of signs) "flexible and difficult-to-assail," and his "subtle conceptual vocabulary useful for analysis of cultural differences." Goble offers several useful examples of the way pragmatism's habit concept may relate to music education, and concludes by urging attention to the "complex 'habits of mind' from which different forms of musical action and their uses stem, as well as their social and political effects."

Pentti Määttänen approaches Kilpinen from a philosophical perspective, one extensively informed by Peirce and Dewey, but also by the Aristotelian notions of praxis and phronesis. Määttänen begins by contrasting Peirce's habitual conception of rationality with Rorty's "neopragmatist" views—views on which habit stands seemingly opposed to mind and rationality, whereas Peirce's view (foundational to much of Kilpinen's exposition) is that habits are beliefs, and essential to rationality. Following an insightful critique of cognitive theory from the perspective of pragmatism's habit concept, Määttänen goes on to build an interesting and useful bridge between that concept and





*phronesis*:<sup>18</sup> the Aristotelian ethic that is the gyroscope guiding and stabilizing practical action.

Terry Gates brings to the task an extensive background in John Dewey's pragmatism and a keen interest in social theory. Gates suggests that an examination of Dewey's naturalism through *Experience and Nature* would strengthen the bridges Kilpinen wants to construct between pragmatism and social theory, and would also enhance the impact of his arguments by taking in "more of what makes human life possible." He also suggests that a consideration of Dewey's metaphysics would help compensate for some of what Gates perceives as Kilpinen's "anthropocentric narrowness" (a characterization Kilpinen rejects). Gates then reformulates the three questions with which he believes Kilpinen is primarily concerned, and responds to each from the perspective of Dewey's *Experience and Nature*. John Dewey's "great flywheel," writes Gates—human society's life-giving engine, the "the beating heart of human social affairs"—is *communication*. It is experience, he asserts, that provides "the fuel and the energy that keep the great flywheel spinning in human life." Gates' essay concludes by formulating an intriguing sketch of a *naturalist rationale for music education*—further evidence, if such were needed, of the potential fruitfulness of discussions like these for the music education profession.

Finally, Erkki Kilpinen writes a gracious and thoughtful reply to his "critics"—to Goble, Määttänen, and Gates—taking advantage of the opportunity to rearticulate and clarify key concerns. Among his many observations, one in particular warrants the emphasis of repetition here: "The pragmatist interpretation of human action," writes Kilpinen, "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."

Both Kilpinen's book (which is, he indicates, currently being prepared for publication in more concise form) and his essay-response make available to music



educators thinking from social theory/sociology rarely encountered in our field.<sup>19</sup> We are grateful for his participation in this project.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> "Mixing fire with water" is Kilpinen's characterization. See his essay response in this issue.

<sup>2</sup> Although it probably goes without saying for readers of this journal, permit me to emphasize that the idea of pragmatism explored here bears no relationship whatsoever to what might best be called *vulgar* pragmatism: ruthless, no-holds-barred pursuit of economic or political advantage.

<sup>3</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all page references in this essay are to Kilpinen's *Fly-wheel*.

<sup>4</sup> Among Kilpinen's more succinct statements of this idea: "The theoretical core of all genuine pragmatistic thought is the conception of action as a cyclical doubt/belief process, cohering around the actor's [or the agent's – WB] habituality" (37).

<sup>5</sup> Dewey says it thus: "The past can be maintained only by being used, and that means readjustment. Left to itself, it decays . . ." (quoted in Kilpinen, 127).

<sup>6</sup> "Peirce's unique and important understanding," writes Kilpinen, "is that saying 'yes' to habit does not necessarily imply saying 'no' to consciousness and rationality" (55).

<sup>7</sup> This constitutes a much-needed (indeed, an indispensable) corrective to theories on which sign and signified are presumed to account exhaustively for semiosis. Put differently, Peirce's triadic account, by positing an indispensable and open-ended role for interpretation, requires that interpretation supercede representation in semiosis—establishing it as a creative or constructive event. "All intelligent relations, Kilpinen aptly observes, "are triadic *sui generis*" (135). Note, too, that my use of the term "event" above is necessitated (I believe) by the processual nature of semiosis.

<sup>8</sup> As Kilpinen observes, however, "reconstruction" may be more apt than "construction," since reflexive habituality never begins out of nothing, or nowhere. The point of intersubjectivity is arguably the dimension Gates wants to highlight through the Deweyan concept of communication. Kilpinen's response to this latter point warrants careful consideration.

<sup>9</sup> Or novel, newly-detected "variables" within familiar circumstances.

<sup>10</sup> The interesting parallels to Bourdieu's account of *habitus* are highlighted by Kilpinen. Consider the following passage from Bourdieu's *In Other Words* (1990): "And I mean agents, not subjects. Action is not the mere carrying out of a rule, or obedience to a rule.

Social agents . . . are not automata regulated like clocks, in accordance with laws which they do not understand. . . . they put into action the incorporated principles of a generative habitus: [a] system of dispositions *acquired through experience*, thus variable from place to place and time to time" (quoted 326).

<sup>11</sup> Mead also writes (67), "What is wanted in an ideal machine shop, where the tools are made to do certain work, is that the man who uses the tools should be able to criticize the tools...".

<sup>12</sup> This, I take it, is one of Pentti Määttänen's points.

<sup>13</sup> Dewey famously describes this orientation as "experimentalism." Its relevance to the idea of scientific progress (or as Thomas Kuhn would have it, scientific revolutions?) is acknowledged by Kilpinen. Thomas Regelski puts it this way: "This is, of course, the exact role that anomaly plays in scientific theorizing: faced with an anomaly that an otherwise previously successful theory could explain or predict, the scientist goes in search of the new or improved theory that will account for that anomaly, thus producing so-called scientific 'progress'—until the next anomaly (which always occurs), thus continuing the cycle and demonstrating that science, as with any form of knowledge, is never final, and that we always build on what came before" (personal correspondence, 26 January 2005).

<sup>14</sup> 1996, Chicago University Press. See also Joas' remarkable interview with Claus Otto Scharmer entitled "Action Is the Way in Which Human Beings Exist in the World," posted by permission on the Mayday Group web site (<http://www.maydaygroup.org>). This essay, highly relevant to current discussions, is accessible from the Maydaygroup home page, through resources/papers/theoretical papers; or directly, through the link <http://www.maydaygroup.org/maydaygroup/papers/joas.htm>.

<sup>15</sup> Peirce contrasted abduction to both deduction and induction, and compared it to the familiar process of guessing. This is the source of discovery and novelty; the kind of knowledge Michael Polanyi described as "tacit." Peirce writes, "Not even the smallest advance can be made in knowledge beyond the stage of vacant staring, without making an abduction at every step" (85). The relevance of abduction to music and to music education is as important as it should be self-evident.

<sup>16</sup> To elaborate briefly on this intriguing and important (if here tangential) point: the centrality of habituality and action to knowledge establishes continuity between processes of mind that are often characterized as radically divergent. This paves the way for an emergent, evolutionary account of human rationality, one that is continuous with (yet distinctive from) the ways animals "reason."

<sup>17</sup> These words are taken from the Dewey quote used as an epigram for this essay.

<sup>18</sup> Phronesis defined here as "thoughtful application of general principles (habitual conceptions) in changing practical situations."

<sup>19</sup> Social theory is all too often ignored in the preparation of music teachers and, even more regrettably, in published music education research—a state of affairs that is among those *ACT* may help change. See, for instance, *Action, Criticism, and Theory for Music Education* 3:3 (December 2004), which presents the proceedings of the Third Symposium on a Sociology of Music Education (accessible through <http://act.maydaygroup.org>).