The Theoretical Quandary of Subjectivity: An Intellectual

Historical Note on the Action Theories of

Talcott Parsons and Alfred Schutz

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Abstract

The quandary of subjectivity — how to square the irreducible qualities of the subjectivity category with the need for objective accessibility and scientific universality — was raised by Max Weber in his action theory. Talcott Parsons and Alfred Schutz, the most prominent action theorists after Weber, are said to have dealt with the quandary in very different ways. This intellectual historical note investigates the two theorists in terms of how they dealt with the subjectivity quandary. I will show that because of their different intellectual backgrounds, they mobilized different intellectual tools in the face of the quandary. But their differences are not as significant as assumed. Additionally, their difference cannot be adequately summarized as that of a phenomenological subjectivist solution (Schutz) versus a scientistic objectivist one (Parsons). I will show that the theoretical weaknesses and outcomes of their theories are in effect not very different. I find that both Schutz and Parsons were limited by a philosophy of consciousness paradigm. Under the paradigm, both tried to deal with the subjectivity quandary by insisting on the primacy of an irreducible subjective category on the one hand and subtly re-molding that subjective category into something accessible to the objective observer on the other. In this theorizing process, Schutz was actually pressured to weaken the subjective category almost as much as Parson did. Both ended up failing to square the irreducible qualities of the subjectivity category with the need for objective accessibility and scientific universality.

Keywords: Action theory, Talcott Parsons, Alfred Schutz, Jürgen Habermas, Max Weber, Subjectivity

1. Introduction

Max Weber thinks that "sociology is a science concerning itself with the interpretive understanding of social action" and wish to establish sociological knowledge on the grounds of an action theory (Weber, 1987: 4) (Note 1). If action is the object of sociological inquiry, sociology cannot avoid investigating the creator of that object, the human actor. In Weber's definition, an actor's behavior becomes an action insofar as the actor attaches a subjective meaning to her behavior (Weber, 1987: 4). Therefore sociology has to deal with a dimension of knowledge that is not problematized in the natural sciences: subjectivity.

In order to gain knowledge of an actor's subjective meanings, social scientists cannot rely on observation alone as natural scientists do, but also on *Verstehen*. At the same time, as a science, sociology should also produce explanations which are objectively verifiable and adopt research methods that are objectively reproducible. In the attempt to reconcile scientific objectivity with the subjective qualities of action, Weber develops the concept 'ideal type' and two corresponding postulates of adequacy. However, he has neglected to deal with the problem of possible discrepancy between the subjective meanings that an actor thinks she holds and the objective meanings imputed to the actor by

scientific observers. This neglect is most salient in his treatment of the concept 'motive,' where he does not theoretical differentiate between the subjective and objective meanings.

A motive is a complex of subjective meaning which seems *to the actor himself or to the observer* an adequate ground for the conduct in question (Weber, 1987: 11) [italics mine].

This unresolved quandary of subjectivity was left to subsequent theorists of action. Among those who emerged immediately after Weber's generation, the two most prominent action theorists were Alfred Schutz and Talcott Parsons. Both centered on the quandary of subjectivity since in their respective early careers. Schutz, in his first major work, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, explicitly calls for a thorough analysis of Weber's concept of subjective meaning (Schutz, 1967: xxxi). In his early major work, *The Structure of Social Action*, Parsons emphasizes throughout the book that the action schema is inherently subjective (Parsons, 1968: 733).

Given the common interest of Parsons and Schutz in action theory and its subjectivity problematic, it is surprising that they appear to develop very different theories and methodologies. Schutz and Parsons had a series of debates in 1941. Schutz accuses Parsons of being not sufficiently radical in asserting the subjective point of view of the actor in a voluntaristic action frame of reference, while Parsons charged Schutz of going outside the valid confines of science in examining the "ontological reality [of] what a concrete real actor 'really' experiences" (Parsons and Schutz, 1978: 88). While it is generally agreed that their antagonism is partly caused by their misunderstanding of each other's theory (especially on Parson's part), contemporary commentators on Schutz and Parsons still usually stress their differences rather than commonalities (Coser, 1979; Natanson, 1978).

These commentaries do not acknowledge the theoretical commonalities between the two figures, commonalities that would become apparent once they are contrasted with action theories launched from a different philosophical paradigm, such as that of Jürgen Habermas. They do not explain why the two diverged from each other despite their fundamental endorsement of Weber's action theory. This intellectual historical note investigates how the two theorists faced and dealt with the theoretical quandary of subjectivity. I will show that because of their different intellectual backgrounds, they mobilized different intellectual tools in the face of the quandary. But their differences cannot be adequately summarized as that of a phenomenological subjectivist solution (Schutz) versus a scientistic objectivist one (Parsons). In contrary to other commentators, I will show that the theoretical weaknesses and outcomes of their theories are in effect not very different. Both Schutz and Parsons were limited by a philosophy of consciousness paradigm. Under the paradigm, both tried to deal with the subjectivity quandary by insisting on the primacy of an irreducible subjective category on the one hand and subtly re-molding that subjective category into something accessible to the objective observer on the other. In this theorizing process, Schutz was actually pressured to weaken the subjective category almost as much as Parson did. Both ended up failing to square the irreducible qualities of the subjectivity category with the need for objective accessibility and scientific universality.

2. The subjectivity quandary: Parsons and Schutz approaching it under different intellectual contexts

The two theorists' different views on the subjectivity quandary can be partly traced to the disparate intellectual circumstances under which they conceive the problematic. I will first examine the background in which Parsons is compelled to take up these problems. Parsons' voluntaristic action theory strives to be a convergence of utilitarian, positivist, and idealist traditions. Parsons specifically wants to avoid the pitfalls of utilitarianism and idealism. Parsons is discontent with the tendency toward emanationism in idealism — although idealism is sound in suggesting the subjective point view's indispensability, its focus on the self expression of the ideal "practically eliminates the condition of action and replaces everything with the subjective category" (Parsons, 1968: 715). But Parsons main critique is reserved for utilitarianism.

The utilitarian dilemma is that either the active agency of the actor in the choice of ends is an independent factor in action, and the end element must be random; or their independence disappears and they are assimilated to the conditions of the situation, that is to elements analyzable in terms of non-subjective categories, principally heredity and environment (Parsons, 1968: 64).

To avoid the dilemma, Parsons on the one hand needs to introduce into his action scheme a subjective category so that human action is not exclusively determined by its situation and normative patterns. On the other hand, Parsons has to

tackle the problem of randomness of ends. Parsons tries to solve it by introducing another element into his action scheme: the normative pattern. However, the presence of a normative pattern can in potential conflict with the autonomy of the subjective category. The antagonism is exacerbated by Parsons' tendency to conceive of normative patterns as an objectively accessible and readily observable element (in order to reinforce the objectivity of his action scheme). In this way, his methodological need for a subjective category is intertwined with the theoretical design of an intersubjectively given normative pattern that in turn is also inextricably linked to scientific objectivity. The theoretical tension between subjectivity and scientific objectivity is very apparent. Yet because Parsons major concern is to construct "a general system of scientific theory, not methodology and epistemology," he tends to emphasize the objectivity side of his action scheme (Parsons and Schutz, 1978: 65).

In contrary to Parsons, Schutz wishes to establish a "philosophically founded theory of method [that] can exorcise the pseudo-problems of sociology" (Schutz, 1967: xxxii). He explores the intricate epistemological and methodological aspects of action theory through clarifying the ambivalent points regarding subjectivity in Weber's methodology. His foremost concern is to demarcate the subjective category and its operations from the observer and her objectively acquired knowledge of the subject. While he acknowledges the fundamental distinction between subjective and objective meanings and that between the natural and scientific attitudes, Schutz also recognizes the need to develop a universal basis on which scientific objectivity is possible. He thinks that Weber's postulates of adequacy alone are not sufficient. He therefore introduces a pregiven intersubjective base for meaning — the social stock of knowledge. In his last book, *The Structure of the Life World*, Schutz pays much more attention to the social stock of knowledge, its relationship with the subjective stock of knowledge, and the pregiveness of typification and relevance. But these concepts are potentially incongruent with an emphasis on the autonomy of the subjective category. Consequently, there is a serious tension between subjectivity and scientific objectivity in Schutz as well.

3. Alfred Schutz's action theory

Schutz's first theoretical step in constructing his action theory is to develop a theory of the ontological structure of the subjective category. He was originally inspired by Bergson's philosophy of durée and lter on he adopted Husserl's transcendental phenomenology to work out his theory of the transcendental solitary ego. According to Schutz, an actor has a unique internal time consciousness which defies the objective conception of time. The most basic form of existence is the stream of consciousness.

In my stream of consciousness [...] my whole consciousness remains temporally uni-directional and irreversible. I am unaware either of my own growing older or of any difference between present and past (Schutz, 1967: 47).

The ego can, however, uplift itself from the stream and scrutinize the stream from a distance. The act of reflection enables the ego to perceive a section of its past experience stream and at the same time to assigns a meaning to it. This important function of meaning-endowing is explicated by Husserl in terms of 'spontaneous activities' and 'secondary modifications' such as 'retention' and 'reproduction.' These terms refer to the various processes through which the ego emerges from an experience stream, spreads out a cone-like ray of attention, and illuminates from a specific 'here and now' status to a specific part of the undifferentiated stream of experience.

Given the particular characteristics of Schutz and Husserl's transcendental ego, the meanings it constitutes through attentional modifications are variable and ephemeral.

The meaning of a lived experience undergoes modifications depending on the particular kind of attention the Ego gives to that lived experience [...] The meaning [...] is different depending on the moment from which the Ego is observing it (Schutz, 1967: 73-4).

Apart from the attentional ray and the particular 'here and now', schemes of experience are also a crucial determinant of the substance of subjective meaning. These schemes are "meaning contexts which is a configuration of past experiences" of an actor. They are the interpretative tools "essential to the ego as it explicated what it has already lived through" because in fixing a specific meaning to experience, the ego must always "refer back to the schemes on hand" (Schutz, 1967: 82-3). Within an actor's subjective stock of knowledge, however, there are still a variety of different schemes to choose from. The degree of attention an ego bestows upon these schemes affects the choice. Certainly these three factors are interdependent. Their combined outcome is that the scientific observer, from an objective point of view

and without having identical lived experiences, cannot absolutely accurately know an actor's subjective meaning. Schutz tries to provide a concrete answer to the question that Weber asked in his earliest formulation of the *Verstehen* thesis.

Consider the 'meaning' which we could dogmatically or prescriptively ascribe to a process of [action]. Was it also the 'meaning' which each of the actual participants in this process consciously ascribe to it (Weber, 1977: 112)?

Schutz attempts to bridge the gap between subjective and objective meanings through several theoretical manoeuvers. The first of them is the presupposition of the alter ego. The alter can be used to circumvent the intersubjective impasse in Husserl's transcendental phenomenology. If, according to Husserl, all reality is constituted by the solitary ego through intentional acts, the other actors in the social world cannot possibly be known to the solitary ego as an alter. The solitary ego has no means to assess the existence of another parallel entity, which is the subjective category of another being. Schutz recognizes that action theory is basically incongruent with transcendental phenomenology in this aspect. Schutz argues that when Weber insists on *Verstehen* as the method of obtaining social scientific knowledge from an actor, Weber must already be implicitly "presupposing the meaning existence of the other self" and that the actor "does mean something and that [one] can find out what it is just as [one] can find out what the meaning of [one's] own behavior is" (Schutz, 1967: 19-20). Schutz accuses Weber of failing to render these important assumptions explicit. Schutz's presupposition of the parallel alter indeed avoid Weber's problem, but not in a very satisfactory way. It is because the presupposition is incongruent with Schutz phenomenological grounding. He has to emphatically state that the intersubjectivity is a sociological matter rather than a philosophical one in order to hide the atheoretical, abrupt nature of his shift from a solitary subjective basis to an intersubjective analysis.

Nevertheless, the presupposition of the alter is significant in that it allows Schutz to refine his theory of intersubjective understanding processes. Schutz utilizes a theory of appresentation to explicate the processes. He first draws up two subjective categories, the ego and the alter. Then he assigns a field of expression to each of them in which they express signs, symbols, and indications. The alter, knowing that one cannot reach a completely accurate assessment of the meaning behind those expressions, must make two idealizations of the situation in order to proceed with the interpretation. Firstly, the alter has to assume that their standpoints are interchangeable, that is, she was here where I am now and she would experience things from the same perspective (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:60). Secondly, the alter must also presuppose that their relevance structures are congruent with each other, "as if we had experienced in an identical way, and had explicated the Objects in our reach" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973:60). Together, the two idealizations form what Schutz calls 'the general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives.'

Schutz's second theoretical device of dealing with the subjectivity quandary is the ideal type. He does not merely reaffirm Weber's original formulation; he refines the concept. The 'course-of-action type' and the 'personal ideal type' are differentiated from the overall concept 'ideal type of human behavior.'

The course-of-action type can be considered quite independently as a purely objective context of meaning [...]. [For the personal ideal type], I imagine the corresponding subjective meaning context which would be in his [the actor's] mind, the subjective contexts that would have to be adequate to the objective context already defined (Schutz, 1967: 187-8).

The personal ideal type is thus derived from the course-of-action type. The ideal type constructed in this way mitigates meaning's dependence on a particular here and now, since "these types 'lives' in a never-never temporal dimension" and are "absolutely anonymous" (Schutz, 1967: 191).

Schutz's aim here is to design an ideal type which can act as a 'puppet' for the concrete actor. The subjective meaning of this puppet is exactly the one assigned objectively by the observer. Consequently, the question of discrepant subjective and objective meaning becomes the problem of choice of ideal types. Schutz then sets out to refine Weber's two postulates of adequacy for ideal type construction. He contends that causal adequacy and adequacy on the level of incoming are just two sides of the same coin. As Schutz push the analysis a further step back, each of the two postulates is satisfied if and only if the observer's construction of type is congruent with her own subjective stock of knowledge. It is because adequacy on the ideal of meaning is, after all, based merely on the observer's objective approximation of the subjective meaning of the actor. Causal adequacy, on the other hand, is the observer's knowledge of "that objective context of meaning which is social science itself" (Schutz, 1967: 230). Schutz's postulate hence becomes: "the type must be sufficient to explain the action without contradicting previous experience" (Schutz, 1967: 236).

The third theoretical manoeuver through which Schutz deals with the subjectivity quandary is the concept 'social stock of knowledge.' This is an original contribution of Schutz. Meanings will be more universally recognized, communication will be more accurate, and interpretation of expressions will reach the intended meaning more closely if subjective stocks of knowledge — both among the observers themselves and between the actor and observer — can be related more closely to one another substantively. In an initial formulation, Schutz introduces a pregiven and intersubjective basis for such a purpose.

There is only one external world, the public world, and it is given equally to all of us. Therefore, every act of mine refers back to the same meaning-endowing act of yours with respect to the same world (Schutz, 1967: 32).

In the *Collected Papers*, Schutz explains the degree of sharing and the commonality of knowledge to all actors in any social world.

Only a very small part of any knowledge of the world originates within my personal experience. The greater part is socially derived (Schutz, 1962: 13).

The fullest account of the social character of subjective stocks of knowledge is given in *Structures of the Life World* (Note 2). Schutz first clarifies that "no element of knowledge can be traced to any sort of primordial experience," but one "always encounters prior experience in which an already determined […] stock of knowledge must be conjoined" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973: 119). He explains that 'types,' which make up the main body of a stock of knowledge, are not an independent subjective construct. It is because "every type is a meaning context 'established' in lifeworldly experiences [and] sedimented in prior experiences" (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973: 230). Even the types that one creates anew must always be based on pregiven types. The relevance structures at the base of a stock by knowledge are equally intersubjective.

From the beginning, the subjective structures of relevances are developed in situations which are intersubjective [...] [;]the sedimentation of specific elements in the subjective stock of knowledge is socially conditioned (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973: 243).

In regard to the methodologically crucial element of autonomous subjectivity, Schutz becomes quite ambivalent. Although he repeatedly maintains that it exists, he also thinks that

The independently acquired elements of knowledge are also embedded in the whole context of an extensively 'socialized' subjective stock of knowledge [...] Consequently, one cannot actually speak of absolutely 'independent' elements in the [subjective] stock of knowledge (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973: 262).

When this assumption of intersubjectivity is juxtaposed with Schutz's analysis of the solitary ego, the tension between objectivity and subjectivity is even clearer. In the analysis, the solitary ego is an absolutely independent entity which produces an "attending ray [that] is not separate from the Ego itself" (Schutz, 1967: 73). But in his analysis of the intersubjective, Schutz introduces a pregiven social stock of knowledge. Its boundary limits the direction and depth of the kind of attention an ego can possibly make. Firstly, it is because the availability of interpretive schemes, which are so essential to the mechanism of attentional modification, is limited by social stocks of knowledge. An actor cannot interpret her experience in a way that social stocks of knowledge do not endorse or supply types with. Secondly, the whole process of attention an ego gives to experience and knowledge depends preponderantly on relevance structures.

[Relevance structures] can make an experience problematic, [...] determine the direction of the process of explication, [...] cause the conclusion on discontinuance of the process, [...] bring about application of the sedimented element of knowledge in mastery of new actually present situations, [...] [and] are prominent in consciousness' reflective grip on an already constituted element of knowledge (Schutz and Luckmann, 1973: 228).

Hence, the only completely socially independent element left is the specific 'here and now.' If the subjective category still retains this unpredictable element, Schutz's demarcation between the objective meaning and the transient and that between variable and inaccessible subjective meaning still stand. However, the social stock of knowledge has encroached upon the ego to such an extent that the ego has become a nominal and strictly transcendental entity without any substance. This seriously undermines Schutz's original intention (which is shown in the citation below) to assign to the subjective category a very active and dynamic role in the social world.

We no longer naively accept the social world [...] as ready-made and meaningful beyond all doubt, but undertake to study the process of idealizing and formalizing [and] the genesis of meaning (Schutz, 1978: 52).

4. Talcott Parsons' action theory

Parsons' initial formulation of the subjective category resembles the final and devitalized version of Schutz's transcendental ego resemble. Parsons stresses that the unit act is subjective in the particular sense that "it refers to events as they appear from the point of view of the actor whose action is being analyzed" (Parsons, 1968: 46). The subjective category contains elements that are completely independent of knowledge.

The basic tenet of the voluntaristic [action theory] is that neither positively nor negatively does the methodological scheme of scientific knowledge exhausts the significant subjective elements of action (Parsons, 1968: 81).

He describes the nature of the subjective category as a 'state of mind.' However, the concept 'state of mind' is operational in the sense that it refers to a subjective entity "considerably broader than that of consciousness in common sense terms" (Parsons, 1938: 7). Beyond that, "it is not necessary to make any further ontological assumptions as to the ultimate nature of this entity" (Parsons, 1938: 7). Parsons is content with the subjective category being an inert entity that "is simply the unitary referent of certain possible statements of fact" (Parsons and Schutz, 1978: 88). It merely represents a point of view to which action can be imputed — for it is methodologically required that action must have a subject-actor as its origin, in the same way that the movement of a mass in classical mechanics must have a Cartesian origin as a point of reference. Although Parsons considers the subjective category significant, his theory still only gives it a formal and nominal existence. The quality of the subjective category can be further examined in his general formula of the voluntaristic unit act.

$$A = S(T, t, i, r) + E(T, t, i, i2, r) + N(T, t, i, i2, r) \text{ (Parsons, 1968: 82).}$$

Action A is composed of the situation S, the end E and the standard relating the situation and the end, N. Parsons explains that all three elements of action exist and are viewed subjectively in the actor's terms. T and t represent the actor's scientific knowledge and knowledge which is fallacious respectively; i and i2 refer to the normative elements existing in the actor's terms and in symbolic expression respectively. Without the presence of a subjective category, all these variables and the three functions which they make up are inconceivable. The crucial part is the variable r. It represents the element varying at random relative to those formulated as T and t. However, it leads a very ambivalent presence in the formula. On the one hand, Parsons recognizes that the subjective category necessarily contains an objectively unpredictable and incomprehensible element, and that the end, situation, and normative patterns are partly dependent on this element, as the r in the S, E and N functions shows. On this point, Parsons converges with Schutz's notion of the inaccessible subjective meaning of action. On the other hand, Parsons has professed to avoid the randomness of ends and normative patterns. Since Parsons is not very concerned with the ontology and capability of the subjective category in the first place, the theoretical tension led Parsons to play down the unpredictability of the subjective point of view and to further affirm the passiveness of the subjective category.

Schutz's transcendental ego varying with respect to a here and now corresponds to Parsons' random 'state of mind.' Schutz's subjective and social stocks of knowledge also find their functional counterpart in Parsons' 'normative pattern.' Parsons explains that a normative element must "be held to manifest or otherwise involve a sentiment attributable to one or more actors that something is an end itself" (Parsons, 1968: 75). However, normative elements are by definition external to the subjective category. It is only a maxim that prescribes the end of the actor; it has no absolute binding force. The actor has to contribute her effort to achieve the normative end. This element of effort breathes a bit of initiative and substance into the subjective category. Parsons also stresses its importance when he regards effort (or 'orientation' in his later terminology) as the crucial and single "relating factor between the normative and the conditional element of action" (Parsons, 1968: 719). However, similar to the fate of Schutz's subjective category, Parsons' originally subjective notion of effort is subsequently made to be dependent on pregiven and intersubjective normative elements due to the requirement of scientific objectivity.

That the issue of normative elements is crucial to scientific objectivity can be clarified by referring to the general formula again. Normative elements i and i2 are present in the functions of all three basic elements of action. Parsons assumes that the variables T and t are by definition judgable from an absolute, universal and objective standard (because

they are related to scientific knowledge). The actor and the observer should have an identical point of view when dealing with these variables. Hence, if it can be proved that normative elements are similar from the perspectives of the actor and observer, the objectivity of the meaning is established. Similar to Schutz's connecting of the subjective to social stocks of knowledge, Parsons also brings external normative elements into the actor: the process of internalization.

Parsons adopts the Freudian perspective that morals, rules, and norms of a culture constitute and are assimilated to the superego of an individual's consciousness. He also supplements this perspective with George Herbert Mead's symbolic interactionist approach. To Mead, socialization is the process of learning to take and make appropriate roles; these roles are in turn prescribed by the situation, tradition, and other actors in the social world. Parsons in his subsequent works introduces his four pattern variables to assess the actor's normative pattern. In playing a certain role, the actor always strives to act according to the specific values of pattern variables that culture has preordained.

However, Parsons does not rigidly take objective cultural norms as the equivalent of internalized norms. He allows room for a certain degree of randomness which he promises in his general formula. As Jeffrey Alexander rightly points out that for Parsons,

first, in any given situation an "ordered pattern" is not all of one piece, but represents, rather variation within an acceptable image, [...] second, even when personalities "have been exposed to the same experience as other persons", individual idiosyncrasies and accident of birth will create "influential sources of variation" (Alexander, 1983: 42).

Nevertheless, the number of roles, normative elements, and moral imperatives are still limited and they are not easily created anew. It may be valid for Parsons to claim on the basis of this limited variation that an actor "does not merely react to its stimuli" of the situation and normative pattern (Parsons, 1938: 9). But it does not substantiate Parsons' claim that the actor in an action actively "take advantage of the situation to further this [...] normative tendencies" (Parsons, 1938: 9). Variation seems to be merely a de facto phenomena rather than subjective effort. The actor's choice of normative pattern is still determined, if not by the stock available in a culture, then by personal idiosyncrasies and personally unique conditions of socialization. But they are precisely the non-subjective categories of heredity and environment that Parsons wants to de-emphasize. 'Effort' in this scheme lacks a basis for operation; it becomes less of a subjective motivation than intersubjective channeling.

Beside normative patterns, another theoretical device that Parsons adopts to install scientific objectivity is a universal conceptual scheme. He argues that both the observer and the actor utilize the same tools to interpret an action.

[The actor and the observer] act as well as think in "terms of a conceptual scheme" [...]. They also appraise or evaluate in terms of a conceptual scheme in the retrospective understanding of their own and other's action, [...] in terms of the same set of categories in the Kantian sense (Parsons, 1978: 123).

The ineffectiveness of this argument can be shown in a comparison with Schutz. Schutz could actually accept Parsons' absolute and universal 'conceptual scheme' concept without altering any part of his own theory. Husserl originally hopes to comprehend the essence of consciousness through the epoché. When Schutz adopts Husserl's transcendental phenomenology, Schutz avows that sociological inquiry should not deal with philosophical problems and even reverses the epoché to render the natural attitude a subject of investigation. It does not matter to Schutz whether the universal elements of consciousness are Kantian categories or not. Schutz can rely on additional tools for interpretation, including the ideal type, the meaning context, and the stock of knowledge. Apart from Kantian categories, Parsons does not seem to regard any additional conceptual tools as necessary. It is rightly pointed out that

Parsons was not conversant with phenomenological psychology, [...] [but] pitted his Neo-Kantian position against Schutz, denying that there is any access to human experiences except by mediation of a conceptual scheme (Wagner, Smith, and Smith, 1979: 686).

As Parsons himself has noted, the epistemological basis of his action theory is not as meticulously constructed as its theoretical basis. This lack of meticulousness has led to a fundamental difference between him and Schutz — Parsons' under-theorization of motivational *Verstehen* and the ideal type. This under-theorization in turn leads to a less skeptical treatment of scientific objectivity.

5. Identifying the substantive differences between the two theorists' action theories

Schutz criticizes Weber's distinction between actual and motivational *Verstehen*. In both kinds of *Verstehen*, the knowledge the observer has on the actor is derived from prior meaning the observer attaches to the actor, and from not the subjective meaning of the actor herself. The real distinction lies in the epistemological basis of the two kinds of *Verstehen*. Actual *Verstehen* is the direct understanding that takes place where "the lived experiences of the other are occurring simultaneously with my own objective interpretations of his words and gestures" (Schutz, 1967: 173). Motivational *Verstehen* is "not tied to the world of directly experienced social reality but starts out on the basis of an established objective meaning as an indication of the existence of a subjective meaning" (Schutz, 1967: 30-1). It cannot work on the basis of observation alone, but requires a certain amount of knowledge of the actor's past and future. The more accurate and abundant this knowledge is, "a higher degree of scientific clarity and exactitude is attainable in motivational understanding" (Schutz, 1967: 31). In short, motivational *Verstehen* is analytically distinct from actual *Verstehen* because it involves a hermeneutical process.

Parsons also sees Weber's distinction of the two types of *Verstehen* problematic. He regards Weber's distinction as a 'pragmatic' one, because he thinks that

We understand things *aktuell* insofar as, in terms of everyday experience, they are evident from the mere fact of being observed [...]. *Motivationsmassiges Verstehen* is the understanding of the element of motivation that is not evident in the particular concrete observation but remains problematical (Parsons, 1968: 636).

Parsons thinks that Weber misses the more important demarcation: the demarcation between motivations as processes in time and those as atemporal meaning complexes. In the former, "meanings cannot be divorced from the intrinsic relationship of ends, means and conditions" (Parsons, 1968: 636). Investigation of this kind of motivation requires hermeneutics because means, ends, and conditions are from the subjective point of view. Parsons tends to circumvent this type of motivation by that of the interpretation of atemporal meaning complexes, which demands observation much more than hermeneutical interpretation.

The real things or events that may be observed may be significant only as symbols with no intrinsic significance of their concrete properties. In this case, *Verstehen* is necessarily limited to the meanings of the symbols as such without reference to any intrinsic relationship in the real world (Parsons, 1968: 637).

Parsons claims that this type of *Verstehen*, which is in abstraction from motivation, "plays an important part in Weber's own empirical research" (Parsons, 1968: 637). However, Weber had never intended to give up motivational *Verstehen*. Parsons is in effect shifting Weber's emphasis from the interpretation of what the actor means to what culture and normative patterns mean. This shift is especially salient in Parsons later works, as Roy Fitzhenry (1986: 156-7) have also noticed.

Parsons began with a partial version of [...] *Verstehen*, [...] about 1950, a strong preference for the casual role of external symbolic system of action emerged, with the consequent redefinition of motivation-processual *Verstehen* as a necessary but secondary investigation [...] The practical consequence of this was that Parsons never subsequently refined the concept of motivational *Verstehen* .

Besides the jettison of motivational *Verstehen*, Parsons' abandonment of the ideal type contributes just as much to his inability to account for the discrepancy between objective and subjective points of views, and hence also his unsatisfactory treatment of the quandary of subjectivity. In fact, the concepts of ideal type and motivational *Verstehen* are so closely related theoretically that giving up one easily leads to abandoning the other. Parsons advocates analytical realism and ambitiously attempts to build a generalized theory of action which is able to describe any possible variants and permutations of social action. He is against historicist 'fictionalism,' which he takes as epitomized by Weber's use of ideal types. One of Parsons' critiques to the ideal type is convincing.

The ideal type, being a universal, does not involve a combination of specific values, but it does involve a fixed set of relations between the values of the analytical elements. They are, however, often independently variable beyond the range permitted by the definition of types. Hence, [there is] an element of rigidity (Parsons, 1968: 621).

Schutz's concession to this critique can be seen in a subtle reformulation of his theory. He states in reaction to Parsons that action can be reduced to a typical unit act, with the actor's "typical motive, including the reference to typical

situation, typical ends, typical means, etc" (Schutz, 1978: 52). Nonetheless, apart from this tenable critique of the ideal type, Parsons' analytical and realistic orientation is exactly what Weber had intentionally avoided. Weber had strongly argued against it in a debate between him as the representative of the Historical School tradition and Carl Menger of the Marginal Utility School. Menger distinguishes sharply between 'realistic theory,' which he characterizes as a deductive theory based upon mental constructs such as ideal types, and 'exact theory,' which he characterizes as an inductive theory based on historical data. Weber refuted such a demarcation and his three supporting arguments can be partly directed against Parsons.

Firstly, Weber contends that the social world, the subject of social science, is meaningful to the scientific observer in a way in which the natural world, the subject of natural science, is not. This difference is most clearly elaborated by Anthony Giddens.

The natural world [...] is not 'meaningful'; the meanings it has are introduced by men as a consequence of their endeavors to understand it. [...] Social life-- of which these endeavors are a part-- is produced by its component actors precisely in terms of their active constitution and reconstitution of frames of meaning whereby they organize their experience (Giddens, 1976: 79).

Due to this difference, natural scientific investigation involves only one level of hermeneutical-interpretive understanding. But the process of social scientific investigation has two layers of interpretation. Due to this 'double hermeneutics,' the historical data with which exact theory starts cannot be but ideal typical constructs formed by mental conceptualization. Weber argues that "the only exact form of knowledge — the formulation of immediately and intuitively *evident* laws — is however at the same time the only one which offers access to events which have not been observed" (Weber, 1949: 87). Since Parsons himself has also emphasized the hermeneutical nature of social science, he should not have abandoned the ideal type in such a cavalier way.

Weber's second objection to Menger is that theoretical systems cannot capture the totality of reality and history. Equipped with Alfred N. Whitehead's philosophy of science, Parsons has a more sophisticated philosophical background compared to Menger, but he is similar to Menger in the attempt to construct a comprehensive general theory. Parsons leaves his theory empirically open and logically closed, but Weber would have argued that a theory should be open in both aspects. It is because Weber recognizes

the methodological impossibility of supplanting the historical knowledge of reality by the formulation of laws or, vice versa, of constructing 'laws,' [...] through the mere juxtaposition of historical observations (Weber, 1949: 87).

Weber's ideal types are designed historical specifically to explain the era of Western capitalism. He contends that if theory is capable of capturing history, it will hence be meaningless to investigate into any individual historical case once the general theory is built. Social science would then be equal to the study of history.

Weber's third contention is that both exact theories and realistic ones are inductive in nature. Menger has not considered that the construction of ideal type, prior to deduction, already involves inductive reasoning. The observer also has to gather enough data to satisfy the postulates of adequacy before she can construct a valid ideal type. To Weber, both exact social sciences and realistic ones are not exact. Knowledge is based on a one-sided assessment of reality on the scientific observer's part. Failure to acknowledge this 'inexact' nature of social science results in the tendency towards reification of theoretical knowledge (the objective meaning of the observer) into concrete reality (the subjective meaning of the actor). This tendency is also present in the heir to the Marginal Utility School, modern economics. Although Parsons repeatedly stresses the importance of distinguishing the concrete from the analytic, his abandonment of the ideal type leaves his theory vulnerable to the accusation of reification.

Parsons gives up the ideal type without attempting to refute the Weber's three arguments. He also abandons motivational *Verstehen*. Without these two important tools for social scientific interpretation, what he takes as the close connection between the subjective and objective points of view is not as fully explicated as in Schutz. On the whole, Parsons has tried to assert scientific objectivity more than to meticulously build a theoretical basis for it. This problem of Parsons' stems ultimately from his shift of scholarly interest from social integration to functional integration, that is, from action theory to cybernetics and systems theory.

Although Schutz was more meticulous in building a theoretical base for scientific objectivity, he under-emphasized and under-theorized the issue of consensus as much as Parsons did. Giddens points out that "for Schutz's social world, like that of Parsons, is largely a consensual one" and concludes that they "depart in a substantial way from Max Weber" (Giddens, 1979: 685). Schutz regards intersubjective meaning and social stocks of knowledge in the lifeworld as "taken for granted until further notice." Parsons takes normative elements and patterns as pregivens in culture and then designates them as the subject matter of anthropology. Both theorists do not acknowledge the need to directly investigate the realm of pre-existing intersubjective meanings. Weber explains that "an order may be established in one of two ways: by voluntary argument or by being imposed and acquiesced" (Weber, 1978: 50). Both Parsons and Schutz conceive of an imposed, preordained order rather than a voluntaristic one in the social world. They do not envision a lifeworld bound by intersubjectively constructed consensus, a step that Habermas subsequently took in his action theory.

In regard to the subjectivity side of the quandary, Parsons is actually more theoretically comprehensive than Schutz in some aspects. Before going into that, it is essential to emphasize that Parsons is not much less mindful of the subjective category than Schutz. Both persistently adhere to the concept. Some critics of Parsons have mistakenly accuses him of giving up the subjective category in the later works.

Contrary to the view held by the author in *The Structure of Social Action*, it now appears that [the study of action from the point of view of actor] is not essential to the frame of reference of actor in its most elementary form. It is, however, necessarily involved at the level of elaboration of system of action at which culture, that is shared symbolic patterns, becomes involved (Parsons, 1951: 543, quoted in Fitzhenry, 1986: 154).

Parsons does not treat the subjective category the same way he treats motivational *Verstehen*. What Parsons means by the most elementary form is that it is possible only when the scientist "keeps the elaboration of the theory of action to pre-symbolic, precultural levels, [which] is essentially what Professor B.F. Skinner does" (Parsons, 1951: 544).

Parsons' treatment of the subjective category as a mere point of reference has paradoxically given him some advantages over Schutz's subjective category as a transcendental ego. Schutz maintains a strict distinction between action and behavior — in the sense that action is conscious, with which the ego must consciously create a project of the act before the action, and in the sense that behavior is not conscious, with which the ego could stay immersed in the stream of consciousness without any attempt of reflection. However, Weber's formulation of action includes affectual action, which is "determined by the actor's specific affects and feeling states," and traditional action, which is "determined by ingrained habituation" (Weber, 1978: 25). Schutz's scheme of action inevitably excludes these two types of action.

Strictly traditional behavior [...] lies very close to the borderline of what can justifiably be called meaningfully oriented action, and indeed often on the other side [...]. Purely affectual behavior also [...] often goes over the line (Weber, 1978: 25).

While Schutz criticizes the vagueness of Weber's notions of action and behavior, he admits that rational action is not the only type of action which needs to be investigated. But his action theory is not capable of accounting for the two types of non-rational action. He is ambivalent about how non-rational action is carried out under the auspices of the transcendental ego and whether it involves an act of attentional modification.

For Parsons, however, the subjective category is only a point of reference. The notion of effort, unlike attentional acts of reflection, does not discriminate traditional and affectual actions from other action types because affectual actions also necessarily involve normative patterns. Normative patterns are by Parsons' definition traditionally given. Parsons also adopts Freud's later argument that even the id has a social dimension. A rational action requires effort in the same way that non-rational action does

Only a certain aspect of the concrete relations of the organism-actor [...] [is] of interest to the theory of action; this is the aspect we call 'action' or 'behavior' (Parsons, 1951: 541).

Parsons' definition of action does not need to differentiate between kinds of action through criteria such as consciousness and rationality. Weber's equivocation concerning non-rational action hence turns into an insignificant problem in Parsons' voluntaristic frame of reference.

The action theories of Parsons and Schutz have their own strengths and weaknesses. But in both theories, the subjective category is eventually reduced to a nominal existence. Unfortunately, despite their weakening of the subjective category, their attempt to establish scientific objectivity is still unsuccessful. A main reason that Parsons failed is his neglect of hermeneutical interpretation. By positing an unbridgeable gap between subjective and objective meanings and then adopting the ideal type as a theoretical compromise, Schutz in effect supports a relativistic view of social science as strongly as scientific objectivity.

6. An alternative philosophical paradigm as a solution to the quandary: Jürgen Habermas' action theory

An important attempt to solve the subjectivity quandary is to shift the philosophical starting point of action theory from the philosophy of consciousness to linguistic philosophy. Schutz begins his analysis of action with the transcendental solitary ego of Husserl's phenomenology. Parsons initiates his action scheme on the 'state of mind' of the actor. For them, the subjective point of view and its meaning compose the social reality that science aims to decipher. Habermas considers the consciousness paradigm problematic.

Analytical theory treats the venerable problems of the preKantian philosophy of consciousness in a new constructive, without pushing through to the basic action of a sociological theory of action [...] from a sociological point of view, it makes sense to begin with communicative action (Habermas, 1984: 274).

With a linguistic philosophical paradigm, the question of the subjective category is sidelined. The relationship of interest is that between a speaker and the hearer rather than that between a subject and the observer. The action theory of Parsons and Schutz first presupposes an isolated subjective category. Then the observer comes into the scene and tries to interpret the meaning of the subject's action. However, the meanings that the actor uses in carrying out and giving meaning to his action are itself intersubjectively shared and derived. This is why the assumption of an isolated category is problematical in the first place. Habermas' action theory starts with the speech act, which itself is the meaning to be interpreted. Meaning and action is at any point of the analysis is intersubjective. The tension between the subjective category and the intersubjective ground can hence be circumvented.

7. Conclusion

The previous analysis has showed that both Parsons and Schutz encountered the quandary of having to reconcile the subjective category with scientific objectivity, and that they have chosen different means to solve the problem. Despite their fundamentally different treatments of the hermeneutical nature of *Verstehen*, the ideal type, and non-rational actions, their efforts are similar in many aspects. Lewis A. Coser (1979: 681) thinks that it is "their differences on the status of subjectivity in the analysis of social action" that have "prevent[ed] any true meeting of minds." But actually both theorists ended up not granting subjectivity a robust status in their systems: while both emphasized the subjective category initially, they were eventually forced in different ways to strip away its substance and to render it nominal. It is more accurate to interpret their miscommunication in terms of their very different intellectual backgrounds than their not-very-different solutions to the quandary of subjectivity.

Maurice Natanson's contrast between Parsons and Schutz is also problematic. He characterizes the two sociologists' differences in terms of four issues: their different responses to the "Weberian suggestion [of] giving sociology a solid foundation by starting from how methodology could grasp [the] texture of social action," their different solutions to the "Cartesian dilemma [of] constructing an objective social science in starting from subjective experience structures," their different treatment of the "Kantian problem" of using a Kantian schemata of understanding to conceptualize an actor's actions, and the 'Schutz-Parsons divide' of relating between the everyday lifeworld and the scientist's world (Natanson 1978: xx-xxi). The previous analysis has shown that Schutz can actually accommodate Parsons' Kantian categories in his scheme without any difficulty. As regards Natason's 'Schutz-Parsons divide,' although Schutz demarcate the everyday lifeworld of actors from the observer much more sharply than Parsons does, both ended up privileging the external observer. Neither does the 'Cartesian dilemma' polarize their theories. Even though Parsons is less concerned with the genesis of objective meaning structure from the actor-subject than Schutz, both of them subsequently strip away all independent substances from the subjective category and presuppose an intersubjectively pregiven structure of meaning that facilitates consensus. As Habermas' action theory shows, the subjectivity quandary cannot be avoided unless one abandons the philosophy of consciousness paradigm.

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Notes

Note 1. I would like to thank the anonymous reviewer for her very valuable comments.

Note 2. The most elaborate discussion of social stock of knowledge is found in Chapter Four of the book, which was not in Schutz's original draft. Thomas Luckmann felt that this topic needs to be elaborated and added the chapter by himself. Although it is Luckmann's extension, the framework, the main ideas and the tendency were already present in Schutz draft.