

**Please cite the Published Version**

Hutchinson, Phil (2019) Systems of Sociological Refraction. *Ethnographic Studies*, 16. pp. 225-249. ISSN 1366-4964

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3459345>

**Publisher:** ZHB Luzern

**Version:** Published Version

**Downloaded from:** <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/624070/>

**Usage rights:**  [Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/)

**Additional Information:** This is an Open Access article published in *Ethnographic Studies*, published by ZHB Luzern, copyright The Author(s).

**Enquiries:**

If you have questions about this document, contact [openresearch@mmu.ac.uk](mailto:openresearch@mmu.ac.uk). Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

# Systems of sociological refraction

Phil Hutchinson

*Manchester Metropolitan University*

## *Abstract*

Throughout his career, Wes Sharrock has, following in the footsteps of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Winch and Harold Garfinkel, sought to argue against accounts of the identity of an action which are the products of a social theory, a specific methodology or what Garfinkel termed *formal analysis*. In contrast, much of contemporary social science and social theory is grounded in a belief that ordinary or competent members of societies are unreliable authorities on the identity of their own and others' actions because they are subject to *systems of sociological refraction*. The idea being that ordinary members of society are systematically misled as to the identity of their actions and those of their peers because they—or their perceptions of actions—are subject to the refractive properties of (for example) ideology, or folk theories of action, and so on. In this paper, I subject to analysis this core commitment of much social science and social theory.

## SYSTEMS OF SOCIOLOGICAL REFRACTION

The implication of Winch's contribution to the philosophy of social science was relativism. Winch followed Wittgenstein with the notion that reality is structured by language, a position that entailed relativism since linguistic rule systems were seen as specific to concrete forms of life. As with Gadamer, his conception of social science was rooted in a conservative view of the interpretive capacity of social science, which was for ever context bound. (Delanty 1997: 55)

I shall be travelling in what follows a somewhat winding road, and so here is my central thesis. If there is no truth, there is no injustice. Stated less simplistically, if truth is wholly relativized or internalized to particular discourses or language games or social practices, there is no injustice. The victims and protesters of any putative injustice are deprived of their last and often best weapon, that of telling what really happened. They can only tell their story, which is something else. Morally and politically, therefore, anything goes. (Geras 1995: 110)

## INTRODUCTION

Spanning a fifty year career, Wes Sharrock has, following and building upon the work of Ludwig Wittgenstein, Peter Winch and Harold Garfinkel, sought to argue against the widespread assumption that social studies requires special methods of analysis or theories of society. While the formal analyses conducted by many working in the social sciences assume two worlds of action, where on the one hand we have lay understandings of the social world and on the other hand we have the real world as disclosed to us by social theory or a specific methodology, Wes Sharrock, along with various co-authors, has sought to remind us that if we are to talk of the social world we must begin by correctly identifying the actions that constitute that world. Doing this is not a critical endeavour but a matter of correctly discerning what it is people are doing, and describing this in a way which resists the temptation to introduce, in and through the description, concepts unavailable to the participants. In doing so Wes has drawn upon Garfinkel on the endogenous co-production of order and on post-Wittgensteinian considerations regarding the radical contextualist nature of meaning, where the meaning of an act, just as the meaning of language, is argued to be a radically contextual phenomenon.

Such considerations elicit some push-back from those who are committed to the two-world view of action. In this paper, I seek to explore the two-world view in more detail so as to understand more clearly what motivates allegiance to it. For some, allegiance seems to be based in a commitment to the thought that science deals with objective truths, and theory and method are what bring us access to such truths. This is then bolstered by concerns such as those expressed by Geras and Delanty (quoted above). Such concerns focus in on worry about moral judgement. We might state this as something like the following: If we forgo a claim to realism and objectivity about the identity of action, then we surrender appeals to justice. For, in order that we can say of an act that it is either just or unjust, right or wrong, the identity of the action must not be relative to a culture, a language-game or a social order: it must be possible to establish the true identity of any particular action and that identity must not be relative to the context, perceiver, culture, ideology and so on. The thought is that non-cognitivism regarding the identity of an action leads to the possibility of a plurality of equally-valid identity claims for any piece of behaviour. If pluralism holds in questions as to the identity of an action then justice, the thought has it, is unattainable.

For, consider cases such as the Rodney King (police brutality) trials of the early 1990s, or the many more recent cases where video testimony of actions is the locus of moral, political and legal disagreement (See e.g. Watson 2018). In these cases, moral judgement (and legal judgement also) rested on the identity of the actions

in question. In these cases, we might say it boiled down to the question: ‘what were those policemen doing?’<sup>1</sup>

Following Geras, we might then say that it really is not enough to say that the police had their story while Rodney King and the viewers of the video tape of the beating had theirs. It is not enough because adjudication as to the moral status of the actions involving the four policemen and King becomes impossible if we hold that it is true that the police were effecting a pre-emptive strike against a man whom their training had showed them was about to become very dangerous, while also being true that they were involved in a brutal, unprovoked racially motivated beating.

Now, taken as stated here, one might find little about which to object in the complaint expressed by Delanty and Geras. However, I want to argue that such stance would be mistaken. Geras is wrong, but assumes he is right because he assumes the two-world view is the only way we can resist a slide into identity pluralism. The point is that the identity of an action being a contextual affair does not entail a plurality of equally valid competing accounts of the same action, yet this is what the concerns of those such as Geras assume.

The thoughts expressed by Delanty and Geras invoke something along the following lines: the sociologist or social theorist must explain what people are *really* doing as opposed to what they are *apparently* doing. The task for the social scientist or social theorist is to expose the apparent actions and disclose real actions. For, like the refractive properties of water give life to the bent appearance of the submerged stick (which is *really* straight), what gives life to the *mistaking* of the action as something other than it really is, are the refractive properties of [choose one of the following]:

- ideologies; or,
- folk theories of action (or society, or human nature, and so on); or,
- the trace of logically possible alternative identities of any particular action; or,
- the intensional renderings or dressing-up of the physical properties of behaviour.

---

<sup>1</sup> In March 1991, four Los Angeles police officers pulled over a car (ostensibly) for a speeding offence. The driver, Rodney King, was asked to step out of the car, and on doing so was subjected to a severe beating with batons by the four police officers. A member of the public filmed the beating and this footage was central to the two subsequent trials of the police officers involved. The first (California state) trial acquitted all four police officers of criminal ‘excessive force’ charges, a judgement which sparked the 1992 Los Angeles riots. The subsequent civil trial in a Federal court found two of the police officers guilty of violating King’s civil rights. Both trials centred on the question as to the correct interpretation of their actions as viewed in the video footage: Were they defending themselves from a dangerous man; effecting a pre-emptive strike against a man whom their training showed them was about to become very dangerous; or were they involved in a brutal, unprovoked racially motivated beating.

The argument from moral judgement, expressed by Geras, might, therefore, be seen to form a pair with the two-worlds theory of action, where the requirements of moral judgement invoke an account of the identity of action which differentiates between appearance (apparent action) and reality (action identified via social theory, social scientific method or formal analysis). The sociologist's or social theorist's task, therefore, is to make manifest the cause of the sociological refraction and thus uncover what people are really doing, where hitherto we had been potentially misled by the refracted appearances.

#### REFRACTING ACTION: SYSTEMATICALLY AND SIMPLY MISTAKEN PERCEPTIONS OF ACTION

People can do things and be simply mistaken about or unaware of the identity of that which they are doing; how they see their own actions and those of their peers is refracted through 'X'—and here you can insert in the place of 'X' your favourite *model of sociological refraction*, which explains the refraction and shows how that refraction is systematic.

Consider what we've just said: When you do something, what it is you are doing might be something that you are mistaken about, should you be asked for and offer an answer to the question, 'what are you doing?'

Try to think about how one might be misled, mistaken or simply unaware of what it is we or others are really doing. Try to think about it, free of thoughts about philosophy, methodology, theory, social science and the like. It's not too difficult to grasp. Many of us are familiar with the experience of having undergone a shift in our values, which subsequently issue in a shift in our reading of our prior actions and this would seem to imply that we can be wrong about what we identified ourselves as doing, when we look back on what we did.

Consider an example which will be familiar to those who have seen a famous scene from the fourth film in the original (Blake Edwards-Peter Sellers) *Pink Panther* series. For those unfamiliar with this somewhat silly series of films made in the 1960s and 1970s, they centred on a hapless clown of a police inspector: Inspector Clouseau of the Sûreté, played with a deliberately daft comedy French accent by the English comedy actor and former Goon Peter Sellers. The scene that serves as our example here is from the film *The Pink Panther Strikes Back*.

Inspector Clouseau enters the lobby of an alpine hotel and immediately after checking in—undercover, of course—he observes a dog, laying down on the lobby floor. Intending to greet the dog with a pat but being wary of a strange dog, Clouseau asks the desk attendant 'Monsieur, does your dog bite?' and in response the attendant says, 'no Monsieur, my dog does not bite.' Clouseau then proceeds to pat the dog which in turn proceeds to viciously bite his hand. After struggling to free himself from the dog's grip, Clouseau, in a somewhat pained and reproachful manner, says to the attendant, 'Monsieur, I thought you said your dog did not

bite', to which the attendant responds implacably, 'I did, Monsieur; *that* is not my dog'.

Here, Clouseau took himself to be patting the attendant's non-biting dog. Only later, on having his hand bitten and his second question answered by the attendant, Clouseau realizes that he was in fact doing something else: patting a strange biting dog. The joke works (if it does for you), because we, the viewer, also take Clouseau to be patting the attendant's dog, until we, at the same time as Clouseau, are informed of, and thus *realise*, the truth.

This is a case of a shift in our identification of Clouseau's action and Clouseau's own identification of his action. The shift is from (something like) 'Clouseau pats attendant's non-biting dog' to 'Clouseau pats strange biting dog'. One might be tempted to say the difference here does not amount to something which impacts significantly upon our discussion about an action's identity. For, one might argue, we could simply say 'Clouseau pats a dog'. This answer fails. For in moving to simply 'Clouseau pats a dog' we are doing one of two things: we are either:

1. moving to a level of abstraction whereby we fail to adequately specify a particular action, but rather denote a class of actions, which contains both the act-tokens or specific acts 'Clouseau pats attendant's non-biting dog' and 'Clouseau pats strange biting dog'; or
2. describing one of the act-tokens, one of the specific acts, in a way which fatally under-determines that action to which we are intending to refer. Of course, context generally fills in the 'gaps' (completes the determination), so to speak. We don't always need to completely—linguistically or semantically, as it were—specify the act-token in a manner that makes no appeal to context or occasion of utterance. But in this case, given the purpose, saying 'Clouseau pats a dog' *is* misleading.

This example is, therefore, a case of a shift from the action's apparent identity to its true identity. Is it an example of the sort of thing our social scientists and social theorists have in mind when they invoke the apparent / real dictum in criticising people such as Garfinkel, Wittgenstein and Winch? Well, not quite. What we have here is a simple mistake: Clouseau mistakenly took the attendant to be referring to the same dog as was he. Similarly, we the viewer also assumed the attendant to be referring to the dog to which Clouseau refers. A simple mistake based on an error of reference such as this is not what we're after. We are after shifts from apparent identities to true or real identities of actions, where our being misled into taking the action to be what it appeared to us to be (as opposed to what it really is) was *not* the result of a simple mistake, like that of Clouseau, but the result of a systematic distortion of our perception of what it is we and our fellow social actors are doing.

The sociologist and social theorist are not concerned with correcting the simple mistakes made by individuals. We might say, for example, Jurgen Habermas is not concerned with providing a theory which serves the purpose of telling Jane that she is in fact repairing John's bicycle, not Richard's, as she had mistakenly thought because both bikes are red, have a punctured rear tyre and are usually stored in the shed in the back garden. Sociologists and social theorists are in the business not of correcting simple errors of reference such as Jane's or Clouseau's, but are, rather, in the business of claiming there is a systematic refraction and then providing the conceptual tools for adjusting for or offsetting the (alleged) mistakes (mistakings), which stem from the refraction.

Recall the analogy I drew at the outset with the well-known stick-in-water illusion. It's not the case that the stick looks bent because we have misunderstood *how* straight the stick in question should be for it to count for us as a straight stick. Nor is it a case of a mistake of reference: we do not mistakenly believe the stick to be bent because we're looking at the wrong stick. Rather, the stick appears to us as bent, because of the refractive properties of water, in which it is submerged. This is an example of systematic refraction and it is this that social scientists and social theorists set out to expose. With this in mind, consider two further scenarios, that might help us gain some clarity:

Malika asks Richard if there is any coffee on the table. Richard reports back that there is. Malika enters the room to fill her cup with coffee, only to find that Richard had misunderstood her question. In answering yes, he was referring to a pool of all-but-dried spilt coffee on the table. There was, in fact, no jug of coffee—no potable, much less drinkable, coffee. A simple mistake, possibly owing to the indeterminacy in the proposition: there is coffee on the table when the context has failed to fix the referent.

Let's run through a superficially-similar scenario:

Malika pages her PA Richard, and asks if there is any coffee on the table. Richard looks through to the table, from where he sits at his desk and answers 'yes'. Malika then leaves her own desk and enters the room from a different door to the one Richard had looked through. Malika observes that there is no coffee on the table. Richard and Malika spend some time together trying to understand how it came to be that there appeared to Richard that there was coffee on the table, when they now both agree that there was in fact none. They rule out simple misunderstandings regarding that to which each of them had intended to refer when talking of 'coffee on the table' (they agree the criteria for 'coffee' and 'table') and they rule out coffee being there and then being moved, before Malika entered the room. Finally, they realise that from Richard's perspective, sitting at his desk, there is a trick of the light, which makes it appear, on occasion, that there is a jug of coffee on the table. Anyone

sitting in Richard's chair, unless they knew about the trick the light can play, would more than likely believe there to be a jug of coffee on the table, when in reality there is no coffee on the table.

The second of these two Malika and Richard scenarios is closer to what we're after with regards to the systematic distortions social scientists and social theorists take us to be subject to. However, while this example serves to bring to the fore the distinction between error based in misunderstanding and mistakes arising from systematic distortion, it is not an example of an action having been so distorted. So, we need an example which is an instance of a *shift* from identifying an action with how it appears (the equivalent of identifying the submerged stick as a bent stick), to identifying the same action as it *really* is (the equivalent of acknowledging that the appearance of the stick as bent is misleading owing the refractive properties of water and understanding that the stick is *really* straight). The example must be one whereby the apparent identity of the action is *systematically* conferred.

The problem we face in our search for an apposite example is that the sort of examples we are looking for here depend upon us having accepted a theory of systematic sociological refraction in the first place; if you like, such examples clearly stated are so as functions of a theory which first establishes that there is a system of sociological refraction in place. We can, however, get some idea by considering an example that takes place over time. The once common belief in the existence of witches might be proposed as one such example. For, if we no longer believe in witchcraft then we no longer believe that action 'X' was an act of (or a token of the type of action we class as) spell-casting. Or, a better example might be, we no longer believe that action 'Y' is an example of an action which gains its identity through our seeing it as the action of a person under the influence of a spell, or, someone who has been bewitched.

If we no longer take those we might refer to as witches to be those possessing the power of magic (for we no longer believe in magic), we no longer recognise their power (power in virtue of their status as a witch) over others, such that we do not take a person acting as if they've been bewitched to (truly) be so bewitched. We might instead take them to have been hypnotised, or be engaging in a disclaimed action. Now, had you been living in a culture (say northern Europe in the Middle Ages) where the belief in witches was natural, part of our second nature or our *Bildung*, we might say, then you too might have identified certain actions as actions of the bewitched (whether your own or those of your bewitched peers). Whatever the details, whatever the particular identity you gave to that action, identifying it within the basic framework of, or class of, bewitched actions, is something that you can see from the perspective of your—our—present culture as systematically mistaken. They (we) weren't *really* bewitched.



The *mistake* here was not a simple mistake based on misunderstanding the meaning of someone's utterance, in the manner that Clouseau's was. The mistake here is one which is facilitated by sociological refraction, which led people to believe in the power of magic.

Acts which were identified as one kind of act come to be reidentified as another. They change identity, from what they were apparently to what they are really. The change is not based on correcting a simple mistake of reference, but on wider changes in world view. Our social theorist and social scientist work with something like this model. The social theorist or social scientist wishes to provide us with a theory or methodology which shows us that our ordinary understandings of our actions are based on mere appearance and that their theory or methodology shows us this.

However, it is instructive, crucial even, to note the similarities and the differences: our example is systematic, and in this regard similar to what the social theorist and social scientist are seeking to achieve; on the other hand, where in our example the revision in the identity of the actions was brought about through the initial conception of the actions not fitting with the wider, experienced and lived lifeworld as we our worldview changed over centuries, in the case of our social theorist and social scientist the revision in the identity of the action is brought about by the social theorist or social scientist claiming their theory or methodology show us the real world. This difference is important. The first, as presented in the example, is about bringing the identity of our action in line with the way the lifeworld is now; the second, as argued for by our social theorist and social scientist, is about bringing the identity of our action into line with their theory of the world or the world they claim their methodology discloses to us, in exposing the ideological distortions, the folk-theory, and so on.

The thought is that in order to be able to both criticise and avoid reifying the status quo, we need to identify what the action *really* is. Identifying action as that which competent actors identify it as is like (to invoke a similar sentiment expressed in a different context by the philosopher of science Paul Griffiths (Griffiths 1997)) calling whales fish because folk once thought them to be such. We need to go beyond such understanding. We need to go beyond mere appearances.

*This is the 'two worlds' theory of action.*

1. There is the world of apparent actions. These appear to exist only in virtue of a system of sociological refraction being in place that serves to systematically distort our (members of society's) perceptions of our actions. This is the world in which folk live. This is also the world, so their detractors would have it, that Ethnomethodologists and Wittgensteinians, such as Peter Winch reify: transform from apparent to 'real' (fake-real).

and

2. There is the world of real actions, which can be discerned by employing tools which neutralise the refractions, or get underneath the appearances. This is the world promised by social scientists and social theorists. Access to this world brings liberation from the tyranny of the world of the apparent.

It is this ‘two worlds’ theory of action that is my concern. In what follows, I will examine four prominent accounts of systematic sociological refraction and their attendant accounts of action.

## SYSTEMS OF SOCIOLOGICAL REFRACTION AND IDENTIFYING ACTION

So, how might we adjudicate as to what the true identity of the action is? Well let’s begin with what can seem a natural assumption, that every action involves some piece of physical behaviour. If we begin here, with this natural assumption, then we might be able to establish our account of action that will enable us to adjudicate between apparent and real identities of actions. The problem is that this perfectly natural assumption, that all action involves some piece of physical behaviour, can and has led in two seemingly diametrically opposed directions:

1. post-structuralist scepticism about the possibility of identifying action, and
2. extensional rendering so as to ‘clearly’ identify the action.

I’ll say a little more about each of these in turn with reference to the notion of methods of sociological refraction I introduced above.

### *1. The refractive properties of ... the trace of logically possible alternative identities of any particular action*

Let us say that someone agrees that the questions ‘what are you doing?’ and ‘what do you take yourself to be doing?’ are not synonymous, but while doing so that person takes us to be subject to a system of sociological refraction that goes all the way down, as it were. They therefore agree that the two questions are distinct but reject the thought that this implies that there is such a thing as an action’s specific, true or real identity. Here our interlocutor might insist on a plurality of competing *interpretations* of an action. On this account, what an action *is* is taken to be a matter of *interpretation*, and we might even go so far as to insist that the idea of *the* identity of an action is always beyond reach, deferred, we might say. The idea is that all interpretations are renderings of some sort, and for some—

possibly unconscious—reason. All our attempts to identify the action are interpretations which are disrupted and distorted, and thus their meaning is deferred, by the trace of previous or possible future interpretations of similar actions, which involve the same bodily movement.

So, for example, our (attempt at an) identification of an action as altruistic, will always be disrupted by the trace of previous occasions and possible future occasions in which a similar piece of physical behaviour might have been interpreted as a self-interested action. Here the physical components of the action are assumed equivalent to written components of a word—marks on the page. The reading of the physical components is equivalent to the reading of the word. The meaning of the action, what it is on this particular occasion, is disrupted by the trace of previous or possible future events of interpreting actions in the way that the meaning of a word, what it is on this particular occasion, will always be deferred by the trace of previous and possible future events of language involving this word.

The argument underpinning such a view is as follows: for marks to be meaningful, to have the possibility of meaning something, they must be iterable. That is to say, marks must be reproducible on other occasions and in the absence of the author, intended recipient and similar context. So, a meaningful mark must—according to the structural logic of writing—always be an *iterable* mark. Put another way, it is internal to the structural logic of meaningful marks that it is possible that there have been previous events of communication involving those same marks or that it is possible that there will be future occasions when those marks are employed in further communicative events. In case we're still unclear, we can put it yet another way: for a mark on a page (or black/white board, computer screen, and so on) to have the possibility of meaning anything, of being used to communicate or express a thought, it must be (logically) possible for the same type of mark to be used in the future or to have been used in the past (hence, in a different context), in the absence of the current author of the mark and in the absence of the current intended recipient of the mark. Now, the upshot of this is that all events of communication involve iterable marks, and thus—for we are told this follows from the structural logic of iterability—the trace of those previous iterations of those same marks and the trace of the possible future iterations of those same marks disrupts and distorts any attempt to fix, once and for all, the meaning of the current event of communication that involves said mark.

Now, take a piece of physical movement as an iterable mark, and the meaning of action is open to the same analysis as was the meaning of the written word. The identity of the action is deferred owing to the logic of iterability: the trace of previous or possible future events involving the same (iterable) movement disrupts any attempt at identifying the meaning of the current action. The true identity of an action is always just beyond reach. The structural logic of iterability defies any attempt to fix the meaning and thus the identity of the present action.

Here we have then a general scepticism about the identity of action, derived from—and on some accounts, intrinsic to—a post-structuralist deconstruction of traditional theories of meaning. How does this impact upon our discussion of the ‘two worlds’ theory of action? Well here the system of sociological refraction is the *structural logic of iterability*. It is in the very fact that actions have meaning that their full meaning on an occasion is refracted. What is distinctive about this model of refraction is that it pretends to offer no insight into the world of real actions—one of the two worlds is always deferred. It merely contents itself with exposing refractions, by deconstructing them. All actions are interpretations and thus subject to the distorting power of the trace.

2. *The refractive properties of  
... intensional renderings of the physical properties of behaviour*

An interlocutor of an altogether different sort might similarly agree that there is a distinction between the questions ‘what are you doing?’ and ‘what do you take yourself to be doing?’ However, they do not move from such agreement to a general scepticism about meaning, which in turn entails or involves a scepticism about the very idea of an action having a unique identity. Such philosophers might instead allow their focus to dwell upon what our first group took to be the iterable component of the action—the physical movement of the body involved. In this way, our philosophers respond to our identification of the possibility of competing identities or meanings of actions, such as between what the bearer took his action to be and what an observer took the action to be by saying ‘a plague on both your houses’. Here the thought is that one can have many competing intensional descriptions of an action but only one extensional description, which identifies the action purely in terms of the physical movement of bodies, through time and space.

The idea is that intensional descriptions involve—and thus we might say are tainted by—people’s thoughts: judgements, beliefs, construals and so on about the action being described. Extensional descriptions, in contrast, are descriptions of the ‘action’ which are shorn of all but their physical components. Here the ‘two worlds’ theory is clearly brought out. The world of apparent actions is the world of intensional descriptions of actions. The world of real actions, what the actions really are, is accessed by extensionally describing actions: describing the actions purely in terms of physical movement through time and space. The system of refraction is here thought to be people’s (folk) beliefs about actions—where those beliefs are stated in a manner which involves psychological predicates such as desires, hopes and the like.

A prominent exponent of such an approach, Hillel Steiner, puts the matter thus:

An act-token is fully identified, then, by an extensional description of the action in question: a description indicating the physical components of that action. There cannot be more than one act-token (of a particular act-type) answering to the same extensional description, i.e. having the same set of physical components. Purely intensional descriptions of actions, by contrast, do cover more than one act-token. Such descriptions are couched in terms of the purpose or meaning attached by the actor (or others) to what he does: my attending Richard III, my running for a bus, my throwing a ball and so on. It's true of each of these descriptions that there are many events that would answer to it. (Steiner 1994: 36)

Here, action and movement are collapsed together, and this is the (specific) action 'fully identified'. There seems a certain irony—not to mention equivocation on the word 'action'—in writing, as does Steiner, that the action fully identified is a description of the physical components of the action in question. But maybe this is a little unfair on Steiner. His context is strictly one of disputes about distributive justice, and specifically when it is right to say of one person that they are unfree to  $\phi$  (where  $\phi$  is an act-token involving a particular spatial location at a particular time and perhaps also involving some particular object).

In a similar manner to our discussion of the post-structuralist approach, above, we can illustrate Steiner's approach by reference to the more standard context for such ways of talking, found in the philosophy of language: in this case, natural kind semantics.

Here a natural kind term is split into four components: Syntactic marker, semantic marker, stereotype and extension. It is the latter two components that are of interest to us, and to Steiner. The stereotype of a natural kind term corresponds to what competent speakers of the language believe about the kind. The extension of the term corresponds to what the best current science tells us about the kind. An example of these classifications for the term 'whale' might be as follows: syntactic marker: 'noun'; semantic marker: 'mammal'; stereotype: (something like) 'large, migratory, sea-faring mammal'; extension: what the best current science tells us a whale 'really is', which would most likely involve its genetic code and its biological classification in the evolutionary tree (genera, phylum, species).

How does this translate into identification of action? Well, the focus here is on intension and extension. An action might be intensionally understood to be a number of things: we might take (or believe, judge, construe) my 'punching' Reuben (my clenched fist striking Reuben's face at speed)

1. as a 'cry for help',
2. as an 'act of aggression',
3. as an 'attempt to teach Reuben a valuable lesson in life',
4. as an 'attempt to teach Reuben how and why to defend against an up-percut',

5. as an ‘attempt to demonstrate to Reuben today that his endorsement yesterday of Anthony Kenny’s (1989) claim that “‘the self’” is a piece of philosopher’s nonsense consisting in a misunderstanding of the reflexive pronoun”,<sup>2</sup> doesn’t hold-true in any practical sense, or at least in any sense Reuben now wishes to defend’, or
6. as a ‘a rather badly performed and rather rash act of field cranial osteopathy’.

All of these qualify as potentially valid—though varying somewhat on the plausibility scale—intensional descriptions of something I did, involving me, Reuben, my fist and his face. It might be so intensionally understood, because these are the things we can justifiably *believe* this piece of behaviour to be (or construe this piece of behaviour as; or judge this piece of behaviour to be). On Steiner’s account, we overcome the problem of competing intensional descriptions of an action by appealing to the extensional description. Here, the description is generated from that which the current best empirical science tells us about the *movement* observed (and only that). My punching of Reuben is rendered as descriptions of the movements of the physical components through space and time. Steiner (1994: 36, n.42) writes:

*Complete* extensional descriptions of actions (i.e. act-tokens) don’t generally figure in ordinary conversation, due to the normal superfluity and tedium of their detailed specificity. They have, however, long been employed in certain fields of activity—notably athletics, industrial work processes and, latterly, certain areas of medicine—where fine-grained analyses of actions (often assisted by decelerated films and computerised charting of the movements involved) can facilitate improved performance; cf. Marey, *Movement*, and Shaw, *The Purpose and Practice of Motion Study*, esp. chs. 4–7. Modern motion study techniques were pioneered by Frank and Lillian Gilbreth, nicely portrayed in the 1950 Hollywood film ‘Cheaper by the Dozen’. On the underlying biomechanical analysis and metrication, see Fung, *Biomechanics*, ch. 1, and Pennycuik, *Newton Rules Biology*.

One might be tempted to respond, as am I, that they ‘don’t generally figure in ordinary conversation’ not because of the ‘normal superfluity and tedium of their detailed specificity’ (though one would not be so rash as to rule that out as a significant factor, on occasion) but because they don’t capture the action: they don’t identify it. If we are able to specify the movement that an action involves, we do so because we have *begun* with the action itself. We don’t begin with the movement and then layer-on the intension, as it were, building up to what Steiner

---

<sup>2</sup> Cf. P. F. Strawson’s (2002) criticism of Kenny.

calls the intensional description of an action. Therefore, to say that this movement ‘is the action fully identified’ is problematic, to say the least.

Consider the action I am calling ‘my punching of Reuben’. Now, there is a sense in which this can be described as ‘my hand, formed in a clenched fist, moving rapidly in the direction of and terminating at Reuben’s chin’. However, it might also be described as ‘my hand, formed in a clenched fist, moving rapidly in the direction of Beijing, and terminating at Manchester Oxford Road station (North West, UK).’ If Reuben happens to be standing in the appropriate place (somewhere that can legitimately be referred to as Manchester Oxford Road Station, and on a straight line that can be drawn from me to Beijing and passing through him), then both descriptions, while we might see them to be qualifying as extensional, might be considered equally valid.

Steiner will respond that there is a more fundamental description. This is the *truly* extensional description, as discussed in the quotation above. But here one is inclined to think that one enters an infinite regress. Because surely it is legitimate to ask at what stage are we happy to say that we are dealing in—have reached the level of—a purely extensional description? For even at the level of purely biomechanical descriptions, considerations of agency and purpose play a role. And we might ask, why stop at *biomechanical* description? What about description at the atomic level, for example? However, here is the real kicker, as it were: If we can arrive at a description which satisfies us as being liberated of all intension, it then seems to be a description that has been abstracted from that which ties it to the very thing we are hoping (in Steiner’s case at least) to adjudicate on (distributive justice). For anything that might be truly counted as a purely extensional description is not a description of what someone (some person) is *doing* but a description of the movement of some piece of matter. Those two things might be coextensive, but describing the former in terms of the latter is to radically under determine the former (the doings (actions) of people).

### *Movement as the essence of action*

Both post-structuralist scepticism about identity of action and extensional rendering share the underlying assumption that physical movement is an *essential* component of action. While in the latter case the essence is distilled out of what we normally take the action to be—the action intensionally described—in an attempt to fully specify the action, in the former case this component is treated with suspicion, being said to disrupt attempts to fix the identity of any particular action. Despite, therefore, moving in opposite directions, both these approaches to the identity of action begin with the same assumption, and this might be shown to be less straightforward than one is inclined to think.

In his paper ‘Where the Action is’, Frank Ebersole (2001) works through eleven candidates for the particular sort of movement that might be assumed to be the

essence of action. I shan't reproduce in full Ebersole's taxonomy of examples here (please look up Ebersole's paper), I'll merely comment that the eleven candidates might be said to fall in to one of three classes:

1. Those pieces of behaviour that we refer to as movement which, on further reflection, we see are actions that we, for one reason or another, might on occasion see fit to refer to as movements (cf. Ebersole's example of the country girl who arriving in the city and answering a job advertisement for a dancer, is asked to watch a demonstration of the sort of dance she will be expected to perform. When she sees the dance, she responds: 'I simply cannot perform *those* bodily movements!').
2. Involuntary movements, such as tics, twitches, externally forced movements, and so on. While these are more clearly movement (rather than actions described as movement (as in the previous class 1) they are not the sort of movement we have in mind when we think of that which is essential to actions. For, if at source my 'punching' of Reuben is a tic or twitch or Reuben forcing my fist on to his face at speed and against my will, it disqualifies it from being an action of the sort represented in the various intensional descriptions above (indeed, in the case of Reuben forcing my fist, it disqualifies it from being correctly described as a punch).
3. The movements of a creature's appendage, where we are simply unclear as to whether it is correct, in the case of this creature (or 'thing'), to call that movement action. For example, robots, coral, alien lifeforms in science fiction (e.g. the black sludge creature that *kills* Lieutenant Tasha Yar in season one of *Star Trek: The Next Generation*) or animated though dismembered limbs in horror stories and so on. Here we might hesitate to talk of action and instead talk of the creature's appendage moving.

None of these three classes of those things we call movements seem to be what we're after when we think of the movement essential to an action. We seem to have something approaching a paradox: either the movement is really an action (class 1), in which case we cannot say that it is essential to the action. Or, the movement is not the sort of thing to which we intend to appeal to when we talk of the movement essential to action (classes 2 and 3). We might note here, that it was something similar to this paradox that Steiner faced: either his extensional description was still contaminated by intension and thus was not what he claimed of it; or, it became so far removed from action as to radically underdetermine that action, and thus could not plausibly be referred to as 'the action (act-token) fully identified'.

We might deepen the criticism offered by Ebersole by way of drawing certain parallels between it and Wittgenstein's critical reflections on the commonplace



appeal to mental processes in attempts to explain thinking and understanding (found in his *Philosophical Investigations* (1953); also see Hutchinson, (2010)).

Briefly stated: The issue is not that Ebersole rejects physical movement's role in action *tout court*. This would surely be implausible. Rather, Ebersole wants to facilitate our realisation that when we talk of 'movements' as essential to action we are less than clear about what it is we're talking about. And gaining clarity is helpful. For, if we take our employment of the term 'movement' in the claim that 'movement is the essence of action' to be continuous with our employment of the term in other domains (the three classes listed above) we still have some work to do, for it seems we are faced with a paradox.

We might put the point as follows: in communicating with our interlocutor who is committed to the idea that movement is the essence of action, we might say to her that talking of movement as essential or necessary to all action is fine, so long as you either:

1. acknowledge that you are employing the word 'movement' in a new way, a way which does not necessarily imply continuity with or draw upon your employment of that word in other domains; or
2. you furnish us with a justification for and defence of your claim (contra Ebersole's observations) that the notion of 'movement' you invoke in the phrase 'movement is the essence of action' *is* continuous with previous employments of the word movement in other domains (such as the three classes listed above).

What we should want to do in engaging in this way with our action theorist is bring to consciousness her hitherto unacknowledged *assumption* that the notion of movement to which she appeals is akin to, or is modelled on the sorts of movement we talk about in other contexts and about which we already have understanding. Of course, the upshot of this strategy is that while we have not denied our interlocutor her recourse to the invocation of movement as the essence of action—for we have not policed her language use—we have problematised the move she makes. For in making her aware that her use of the term 'movement' still leaves many questions unanswered, because it departs from previous uses of that term, we are inviting her to provide us with the rules according to which she now employs the term—we are asking her to commit to a grammar for her use of the term 'movement' when she talks of movement being the essence of action.

What Ebersole shows is that the appeal to movement by those who wish to assume movement to be the essence of action is an appeal to something which is not continuous with standard uses of the term 'movement'. The 'movement' invoked as the trace, therefore, and the 'movement' said to be extensionally described need more in the way of exposition. However, when we engage in such exposition we will likely find that what we hope to appeal to as the movement-as-

essence-of-action is rather better thought of as an artefact of our way of approaching the subject. That the physical aspects of an action are not separable, are not discrete components of action which are most clearly represented as ‘movement-as-essence-of-action’, much less extensionally described.

This then suggests that it is not altogether clear how (what we can now put in scare quotes) ‘movement’ can leave a trace or can be said to be the action fully identified. For, the sort of movement we are talking of when we talk of ‘movement-as-the-essence-of-action’ is something which is *parasitic* on the action, it is inferred from the action (intensionally described). When we commence describing any piece of movement that we take to be the essence of an action, we do so having first observed and identified the action.

### *Ideology critique and sociobiology*

If we accept a critique of the two approaches so far discussed, based on the underlying picture they assume holds true, we are still left with approaches which subscribe to the two-worlds view and warrant consideration. Two prominent examples of which are what we might call the ideology critique approach (rooted in Marxist and Marxian social theory) and the biological reductionist approach (as found in Sociobiology and Evolutionary Psychology).

### *3. Refractive properties of ... ideology*

Ideology critique suggests that actors are systematically misled as to what they are doing by the dominant ideology (system of ideas that frame—form the horizons of—and structure—determine what is rational—thought) of the culture/society within which they live. Here, while my act might be taken by me and my fellow citizens to have one identity, it is only the *apparent* identity. For, when we are availed of the methodological tools we see the action for what it really is.

In a similar manner, the reductionist approach claims that actors might be systematically misled as to what they are doing because they make sense of their actions by invoking folk theories, and these folk theories of their behaviour are to be dispensed with once we understand our true nature as organisms. Thus, I am systematically misled by folk theories of action which identify actions according to what members of a society think about them. For example, I take myself to be acting altruistically but I’m *really* merely a vessel for gene replication and acting in this way is really nothing other than an invoking of the kinship principle (cf. E.O. Wilson) which explains how apparently altruistic behaviour is really a manifestation of genetically endowed selfish behaviour at the genetic level (cf. Richard Dawkins).

Despite points of contact with the approaches that we've already discussed, these latter two approaches spring from neither a scepticism about the *meaningfulness* of any action, which stems from the trace left by—conferred by—that action's iterable physical components; nor from attempting to identify the action extensionally, which stems from a desire to transcend competing conceptions of the action's identity. What I am here calling the 'ideology critique' approach and the 'sociobiology' approach are not best understood as being held in thrall by a picture of action as having an undefined but necessary physical component, or as being essentially physical behaviour. (It should be noted that talking of a thing's essence is not *merely* to talk of an always-present or even an extensionally-necessary component, but to accord explanatory significance to that component. 'Explanatory significance' is irreducibly normative.) Rather, what seems to be distinctive about these two approaches is that they approach the question of an action's identity as if it were a question for which one needed a particular theoretical framework or methodology to answer it correctly. The thought (one we should be familiar with by now) is that in the absence of such a framework, we merely answer in accordance with the dominant ideology or we answer in accordance with the prevalent folk theory.

Here the social scientist's methodology and the social theorist's theory are assumed to work in a manner similar to the telescope in the hands of the astronomer and the electron microscope in the hands of the particle physicist: they enable the investigator to see something that otherwise cannot be seen. In the case of the social theorist, their theory, and in the case of the social scientist, their methodology, are claimed to enable one to see the—*real*—action.

It is not right to say of our ideology critic or reductionist social theorist, therefore, that they are constrained by the same underlying picture as were our post-structuralist and our extensionalist. They are not constrained by the thought that action is essentially physical movement. Instead, our social scientist and social theorist are concerned to discern the real meaning of the action, its identity, through the employment of specially designed tools. While in the case of the astronomer and the particle physicist the tools are material artefacts, designed and constructed for specific practical purposes,<sup>3</sup> in the case of our social scientist and social theorist they are, we might say, conceptual tools designed for a sociological purpose: tools which enable us to see the logic of human societies.

So, we can draw a distinction between the tools employed by social scientists and social theorists on the one hand and those employed by astronomers and particle physicists, on the other—the former being conceptual for logic-discerning purposes and the latter being material artefacts for practical purposes. The

---

<sup>3</sup> There is an interesting body of literature on how such artefacts come to be accepted as doing the job the investigators that first used them claimed for them. See Paul Feyerabend's (2010) *Against Method* for discussion of the emergence of the telescope from this perspective.

distinction between conceptual ‘tools’ and material artefacts is easily grasped. What about the distinction between logic-discerning purpose and practically oriented purpose? Well, what I mean by this *might* be thought to be the following: the telescope and the microscope enable their users to do something—to see something that unaided they cannot see, for the human eye is not capable of seeing things that are so small and/or far away. In this sense the telescope and the electron microscope have a genuine practical role: in a sense they extend the visual capabilities of the investigator.

What of the conceptual tools? The ‘seeing’ afforded to the social theorist by the conceptual tools can only be said to extend the capacities of the theorist in so much as one already accepts the truth of the theorist’s claim. Now, while there is something right about this way of drawing the distinction, it will be objected that this assumes too strong a distinction between the two domains of inquiry. For in the former (astronomy and particle physics) if we cannot see unaided that which our tools, once introduced, enable us to see, then accepting that which those tools enable us to see as visual objects is not as straightforward as we might have been tempted to assume. Again, it seems that even in these two areas of the natural sciences, accepting the tools as extending the natural capabilities of the investigator means having already accepted the results gained through employment of those tools as results of those same (artefactually-)extended (visual) capabilities.

What is it that I am appealing to, therefore, when invoking practical purposes in contrast to logic-discerning purposes? It is the following: we can put those results to practical use; we can map the surface of and plot a course to the Moon and to Mars (initially seen through the telescope); once there, we see that our maps are accurate. We can observe the activity of sub-atomic particles (electrons) and having done so, we can harness that activity in the construction of microprocessors. The examples are legion.

Are there similar practical purposes to which we can put the ‘results’ discerned through the employment of our social scientist’s and social theorist’s conceptual tools—their methodology or theory? Again, I suggest, not without having already accepted their putative results as *results*.

We seem, in the case of our social scientists and social theorists, to be caught in a vicious circle. For, while in the case of our two examples from natural science, we can see how the circle is broken by activities: travel to the moon, checking the surface viewed from orbit and viewed from the surface against that seen through telescopes. In the case of social science there seems no comparable way of breaking the circle: no amount of observation from whatever vantage point will enable one to confirm or reject the claim that action X is an altruistic act.

4. *Refractive properties of ... folk theory of mind and society—the case of sociobiology, evolutionary psychology and homeostatic mechanisms*

To further illustrate, consider the following example. Homeostatic mechanisms are familiar to many working in the sciences, particularly the biological sciences. They serve explanatory roles that are uncontroversial and philosophically unproblematic. Their structure is as follows: X and Y are connected, such that when Z fluctuates outside certain parameters, X receives this information via a receptor, determines the action required and communicates this to the effector Y. Y acts to re-establish equilibrium (as instructed by X) by bringing Z back within the set parameters of the system. Thus, *once we have observed the mechanism and established the laws by which it operates*, we need only observe either X or Y or Z in future, and from those (partial observations) we can simply deduce the behaviour of the other elements of the homeostatic mechanism according to the homeostatic laws by which such mechanisms operate. What, for example, Y is doing at any point, can be deduced from our observation of the behaviour of X or of Z and our application of the laws of the mechanism.

In the context of the social sciences what tends to happen is something akin to the following: we *theoretically postulate a homeostatic mechanism and thus theoretically postulate the laws by which it ‘operates’*. When we observe X we deduce according to the theoretically postulated laws of the theoretically postulated mechanism the behaviour of the theoretically postulated ‘Y’ (which is *theoretically* homeostatically related to X). We then explain the behaviour of X in terms of the theoretically postulated behaviour of (theoretically postulated) Y. Theoretically-postulated-Y and the theoretically-postulated-laws by which it operates now serve as mechanisms for the identification of the action of X.

What is different in the two cases is that in the latter case the identity of the actions of X rest on nothing but the theoretical framework which the theorist constructed around X. In the former case, a case of a homeostatic mechanism in the context of the biological sciences, the identity of the actions of X arise from the laws derived from observing the existence of a (*not* theoretically postulated) homeostatic mechanism and the laws by which it operates: when the insulin levels drop below level ‘c’, X  $\phi$ s.

To illustrate more concretely: in healthy mammals, blood glucose levels are regulated. This is done by there being in place a homeostatic mechanism. When blood glucose levels move outside set parameters, a receptor sends this information to the control centre (brain), which in turn determines the level of response and communicates this to the effector (pancreas), which if functioning correctly resets the equilibrium through the release of the hormones insulin and/or glucagon. So, the blood glucose levels = Z, in our initial discussion of homeostatic mechanisms. The pancreas = Y and the brain = X. Biologists have observed this

mechanism in full and at work. When it breaks down, as in those who have diabetes, it needs replacing—which at present is done by the diabetic monitoring their own blood glucose levels externally, and administering insulin when necessary to re-establish or maintain equilibrium: in short, the mechanism is externalised through the person's employment of litmus paper and charts to monitor their blood-glucose levels (X) and insulin administered by hand with the aid of a syringe (Y) to stabilise these levels within the safe parameters (Z).

In the context of social science, individuals take the role of X in the homeostatic mechanism, and while they and their behaviour is observable, crucially the identity of their actions are thought to be in question. The social scientist or social theorist thus theorises a mechanism which theoretically confers meaning on to the behaviour—it identifies the action (or establishes what the action is not). So, for the sociobiologist, the other side of the theoretically postulated mechanism (Y) is said to be the selfish gene. Theoretically postulating the person as merely one part of a theoretically postulated homeostatic mechanism (X) which includes selfish genes (Y), serves to characterise the person as a vessel for gene replication. This then serves to provide a functional explanation of the person's actions, given certain social conditions (Z). When Z is threatening to the abilities of the genes to replicate, then the genes (Y) instruct the person (X) such that the person adjusts their behaviour so that maximum replicative possibilities are maximised. What the person is doing—the identity of their action—at time  $t-1$  can be read off the behaviour of the person viewed through the sociobiological theory. For the theory explains what a person is doing by theoretically postulating a homeostatic mechanism of which the person is but the observable part. And, what we observe it *as* is dependent on the theoretically postulated mechanism.

So, here we can see how the sociobiologist's theory is supposed to work in a manner akin to the artefacts employed in the natural sciences, and as we discussed above. Of course, if one puts the stress on the biology part of the term *sociobiology*, then the account just outlined might *seem* to make perfect sense. But surely this is to be misled by nothing more than a name: a little like thinking that because one calls something a science it must be scientific (think: *creation science*), or because a policy of an evidence-based approach to public health is announced we should simply accept, without further scrutiny, that evidence is the basis of the policy.

The point is that for such explanations to get off the ground they must have a basis in more than mere naming ceremonies (whatever form those ceremonies might take: large books containing sophisticated arguments can be but one version of such). To talk more specifically about the sociobiologist's explanation, the point is that those explanations are akin to 'just-so' stories. The sociobiologist's explanation of action, in terms of selfish genes regulating their vessels for replication (persons) so as to maximise replicative possibilities given environmental conditions can only be shown true or false by observance of the behaviour of the vessel

(the person), but it is the identity of this that is in question and in need of explanation and thus this cannot also serve as evidence. The same thing—‘X’—cannot serve as both evidence for the truth of the putative explanation of X while also being that which is in need of explanation.

More concretely: Let us reflect on a scene from Terrence Malick’s film *The Thin Red Line*. The scene takes place in the US trenches at Guadalcanal, where a US soldier, Sgt. Keck, played by Woody Harrelson, reaches to pull a grenade from his webbing belt; in a fateful error, he fails to pull the grenade from his belt and instead pulls the pin from the grenade. Sgt. Keck now has a live and soon-to-explode grenade attached to him. Now, he *might* have time to remove the live grenade and cast it away from him, such that it reduces the likelihood of serious harm or death to him. However, doing so would put his fellow soldiers at greater risk. He decides to fall against the side of the trench so that much of the explosive power of the grenade is absorbed by his body and the trench wall, thus minimising the damage to his fellow soldiers and to the trench but maximising his chances of death.

While it is interesting to discuss the identity of Sgt. Keck’s action (and similar actions found in history) what I’m interested in here is how sociobiology or evolutionary psychology explains his action. Here we would find something akin to the homeostatic mechanism, discussed above, being invoked. Sgt. Keck’s action, while most-likely appearing to many (ordinary folk or the folk theorist) as an altruistic act, would be explained as congruent with the explanatory schema offered by the sociobiologist through invocation of the kinship principle. Here, high-risk actions such as joining the army and going to war or a suicidal action (like that of Sgt. Keck) of one individual can be explained as promoting the greater replicative possibilities at the level of the genes, because the action serves to promote a better environment for the kin and their genes to replicate. Now, this explanation might well be plausible. It might well make perfect sense. Equally, it might not. However, the problem with it as an explanation is that it does no more than offer a rationale for a particular way of interpreting the action of Sgt. Keck, and there are other rationales for proffering other interpretations.

To approach this from a different perspective, consider again the brief summary of the homeostatic mechanism involved in the regulation of blood-glucose. Here, when we say of the pancreas that it releases more or less insulin we do so because we can measure it doing so. When we say the pancreas releases insulin into the blood to restore the blood’s glucose levels it is because we can observe and measure the drop in blood-glucose levels, and the rise of the same, subsequent to the release of the insulin. In short, our explanation of the pancreas’s role in the homeostatic mechanism can be arrived at inductively: through observation of the behaviour of the pancreas with regards to its release of insulin in to the blood stream, relative to blood-glucose levels. We can predict what the pancreas will do given the relevant conditions (i.e. blood-glucose levels) on the basis of our past

observations of functioning homeostatic systems of blood-glucose regulation in members of the same species.

The case of Sgt. Keck is not analogous. It is tempting to think that the reason for the dis-analogy is that however many times we (have the misfortune to) observe people in Sgt. Keck's unenviable situation we are never sure how someone finding themselves in a position like the one Keck finds himself in will act. But this is not what I want to get at here. The dis-analogy I want to draw attention to is the following: when we observe Sgt. Keck we do not simply observe the physical movement of matter through space and time, we observe a person taking the decision to throw themselves on to an exploding grenade, and to do so in the knowledge that this is the course of action most likely to result in their own death. In the case of the pancreas we want to know why it releases insulin under certain conditions. In the case of Sgt. Keck we want to know why he throws himself on his soon-to-explode grenade: what the identity of his action is. In the case of the pancreas we observe its behaviour under certain conditions and arrive at an explanation of that behaviour.

Put another way, the dis-analogy is founded in the difference between the explanandum in each case: i.e. the dis-analogy between the phenomena in need of explanation in each case. If we want to know whether an action is correctly characterised as selfish or altruistic, answering that question by saying all actions are selfish because people are merely vessels for the replication of selfish genes, however these actions might superficially appear to us (because of a system of sociological refraction), is to engage in 'just-so' story-telling. This would be akin to explaining the behaviour of the pancreas by reference only to a theory about what pancreases always do and (crucially) without having, or appealing to, evidence for them always doing this. For in the case of the identity of action, the question as to what (and we can stay with Sgt. Keck here) Sgt. Keck is doing is not an empirical question.

We are led astray, if we are so, into thinking that the explananda in both cases are the same in relevant ways, because both can be stated as 'why' questions: 'why does the pancreas release that amount of insulin at that time?' and 'why does Sgt. Keck throw himself on his soon-to-explode grenade?' However, the former is a straightforwardly empirical question, which can be answered by identification of the causal laws, established through empirical investigation. The latter is what we might call a conceptual question; it is a question about the meaning of Sgt. Keck's action.

For the sociobiologist, while folk might believe that Sgt. Keck's action is altruistic, it isn't really because human beings only appear to act altruistically, when really they are merely vessels for the replication of selfish genes. The sociobiologist has, I submit, mistaken the sort of question being asked and offered a general causal explanation, which simply fails as explanans: it fails as an answer to the question (aside from the problems one might identify with the explanation in its



own terms, as I have noted above). The sociobiologist is a more sophisticated version of the man who mistakenly assumes it is enough to point out medium-sized white goods in response to the global sceptic, as a way of demonstrating that there is a world outside the sceptic's mind. Only, in the absence of empirical data to point at, the sociobiologist constructs a theory which they assume underpins and explains all behaviour in general terms. For when they fail to find a mechanism that will serve the role played by the biological homeostatic mechanism, our sociobiologist succumbs to the temptation to posit a theoretically-postulated quasi-hypothetical '*mechanism*'.

Homeostatic mechanism	Regulation of blood glucose	Regulation of blood glucose for a type 1 diabetic person	Regulation of gene-replicative behaviour in social environment	Sociobiological explanation of Sgt. Keck
<i>Control Centre: X</i>	Brain	Person employing charts and litmus paper	Selfish Genes (Genes acting according to a maximisation principle)	Selfish Genes (Genes acting according to a maximisation principle and invoking the kinship principle)
<i>Effector: Y</i>	Pancreas	Person exogenously administering synthetic insulin with a syringe/EpiPen	Person (vessel for gene replication)	Sgt. Keck (one organism among a kinship group of a number of organisms which operate as vessels for gene replication)
<i>Homeostatic environment: Z</i>	Blood (-glucose levels)	Blood (-glucose levels)	Social environment	Specific social setting, within wider social environment.

*Table 1: Homeostatic mechanisms*

## THE CRAVING FOR GENERALITY

The two worlds view of action, where there is the world of appearance and the world of real action, rests on a view of action where there must be something general to be said, some general explanatory component or tool. The social theorist and social scientist set out to provide us with a general account of our subjection to sociological refraction and a method to see through the refracted appearances of actions, to the true identity of actions. Why assume such? Why assume that there are systems of sociological refraction in place? Why not assume, until there is evidence to believe otherwise, that mistakes about the identity of any particular action might be taken alone as simple, or local, mistakes. We might then rather see the identity of action as being context and occasion sensitive: If we accept such a suggestion then our search for general explanatory components of action or general explanatory tools serves only to lead us to abstract from that which actually confers the action's identity—its purpose and social setting.

## REFERENCES

- Delanty, Gerard. 1997. *Social Science: Beyond Constructivism and Realism*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.
- Ebersole, Frank B. 2001. 'Where the Action Is'. In *Things We Know: Fifteen Essays in the Problem of Knowledge*. 2nd ed. Bloomington, IN: Xlibris.
- Feyerabend, Paul. 2010. *Against Method*. 4th ed. New York: Verso.
- Geras, Norman. 1995. *Solidarity in the Conversation of Humankind: The Ungroundable Liberalism of Richard Rorty*. New York: Verso.
- Griffiths, Paul E. 1997. *What Emotions Really Are : The Problem of Psychological Categories. Science and Its Conceptual Foundations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Hutchinson, Phil. 2010. 'Thinking and Understanding'. In *Wittgenstein: Key Concepts*, edited by Kelly Dean Jolley, 92–108. London: Routledge.
- Kenny, Anthony. 1989. *The Metaphysics of Mind*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Steiner, Hillel. 1994. *An Essay on Rights*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Strawson, P. F. 1992. *Analysis and Metaphysics: An Introduction to Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Watson, Patrick G. 2018. 'The Documentary Method of [Video] Interpretation: A Paradoxical Verdict in a Police-Involved Shooting and Its Consequences for Understanding Crime on Camera'. *Human Studies* 41: 121–135.
- Wittgenstein, Ludwig. 1953. *Philosophical Investigations*. Oxford: Blackwell.