

Functionalism – general aspects

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Abstract: *In this article I would like to render a definition of Functionalism, to observe general aspects of the applicability of the term and functionalist philosophy. We propose an observation of both the mental and practical sides applied in sociological studies and projections. We also intend to look at the arguments but also the counterarguments that make the study of theories work.*

Key-words: *Functionalism; Education; Sociology; Psycho-Functionalism; Analytical Functionalism; Conceptual Functionalism; Systemic Functionalism;*

1. Introduction

Functionalism is ... Functionalism does not seem to have a concrete definition, which I find ironic, precisely because in probably all the incarnations of Functionalism appear as inherent elements: stability, solidarity and unity. Functionalism analyses, theorizes and characterizes the mental state as a result, basically disregarding who or what determines the incipient impulse or generates this state. A certain analogy seems to appear most often in online sources² to illustrate the Functionalist concept – mousetraps can be of countless shapes or colours, or built from as many materials. The first to come to mind are wooden traps with a metal lever and a trigger system. But there are also bucket traps from which the mouse can no longer get out or those that use strong adhesives or poisons. What matters is that the trap does its job, which is to catch mice. We continue to take as a comparison element, contrasting the trap for mice, the diamond, appreciated for its hardness, optical effects and its rarity in nature. But not every hard, transparent and rare crystal is a diamond, for example, perhaps the most infamous of crystals, zirconium. The diamond is a crystal with a unique molecular carbon structure that gives it the physical attributes mentioned.

On the other hand, zirconium is not as hard, nor does it have the clarity of the diamond, hence its significantly low value. And even if it were as rough and clear, zirconium would therefore not be a diamond. These examples are often used to define the central idea of Functionalism, namely that Functionalism is the basis for the theory that mental states are more in a way like the mousetrap than diamonds. Namely that what defines a mental state is more of a matter of what it does and not what it is made of.

2. Concepts and general aspects

Functionalism seems to have as many “parents” as the variety of materials and forms of a mousetrap. One thing is certain, the British political scientist and sociologist of Romanian origin David Mitran³ published in 1943 the work “A working space system” considered by many the basis of Functionalism. In this aspect Mitran's Functionalism arose from the ideas, concepts and currents that followed the First World War and was intended to be a means of

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² Thomas W Polger. no date. *Functionalism*, University of Cincinnati U. S. A. Retrieved April 26, 2019, from <https://www.iep.utm.edu/functionism/>.

³ David Mitran (1888 - 1975) Romanian-born, naturalized British scholar, historian and political theorist

theorizing and implementation of conditions that would have resulted in the definitive elimination of political conflicts.

Ideas and concepts that come in response to those raised by Kant⁴ and Woodrow Wilson⁵ which had as common elements the principle that peace and prosperity are not natural and cannot exist without supervision by supra-national organizations that regulate inter-state relations. David Mytrani proposed a philosophy of cooperation that rejected the principles of federalization, which seemed to be a parallel direction towards peace, because it raised legal and constitutional issues for many states. Following the failure of the League of Nations and other principles and directions, Mytrani proposed a solution based on cooperation. He argued the need for a functional system that promotes peace based on an approach that encourages all forms of cooperation, which will gradually reduce the capacity of states to act.

Cooperation must start by dealing with specific transnational issues, where specialised technical knowledge can be applied. The success of functional cooperation will lead to the desire to repeat the experience in other areas. For this cooperation to begin, governments must realize that in isolation they cannot ensure maximum welfare for citizens and transfer functional responsibilities to international agencies mandated to deal with these issues. Over time, this must lead to the establishment of the principle of territorial and legal sovereignty. This was the method by which Mitrany believed that a “working peace system” could be created from the existing interstate system. In principle, the role of functionalism in this example was the implementation of a technocratic society to the detriment of political interests and principles as also stated by Gina Gușilov⁶ in *Sfera Politicii Magazine*⁷.

Returning to the mental side of functionalism we note the interaction with the principles of Alan Turing⁸ -Turing Machine⁹, a hypothetical machine based on mathematical computations whose behavior is dictated by a random series of instructions from an infinite band also generated by this machine. It also stipulates that by generating an infinite number of symbols and acting accordingly, Turing's Machine can mimic the thought process or human behavior. The question here arises whether, given the nature of Functionalism where we appreciate what a certain thing does and not what it is made of, we can distinguish between machine and man.

Another aspect of Functionalism is Psycho-Functionalism with an antithetical role of Behaviorist theories.

This side of Functionalism derives from reflections on the goals, theories and methodology of cognitive psychology. In opposition to the conception of The Behaviorists, namely that the laws of psychology apply only to behavioral provisions, - followers of cognitive psychology argue that the best empirical theories on behavior arise as a result of complex mental processes and states, presented and individualized as a result of their role in producing the behavior that will be explained.

⁴ Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804) influential German philosopher in the Age of Enlightenment, considered one of the greatest philosophers of all time

⁵ Thomas Woodrow Wilson (1856 - 1924) American politician, lawyer, and academic, also the president of the United States from 1913 to 1921.

⁶ Gina Gușilov, absolvent al Facultății de Litere, Departamentul Relații Internaționale, Studii Europene, Universitate București

⁷ Gina Gusilov. 2005. “Neofuncționalismul European”. In *Revista Sfera Politicii* nr. 116 – 117, pp.39 - 45.

⁸ Alan Mathison Turing (1912 – 1954) English mathematician, computer scientist, logician, cryptanalyst, philosopher, and theoretical biologist. Turing was highly influential in the development of theoretical computer science, providing a formalization of the concepts of algorithm and computation.

⁹ A Turing Machine is a mathematical model of computation that defines an abstract machine, which manipulates symbols on a strip of tape according to a table of rules. Despite the model's simplicity, given any computer algorithm, a Turing machine capable of simulating that algorithm's logic can be constructed.

For example, Jerry Allan Fodor¹⁰ in his book *Psychological Explanation* argued that a psychologist can lay the foundation for the theory of a memory based on the idea of the existence of a decaying “trace of memory”, a process whose presence or absence is responsible for the effect of memory retention or loss and which is influenced by stress and feelings in certain and distinct ways.

„On a theory of this sort, what makes some neural process an instance of memory trace decay is a matter of how it functions, or the role it plays, in a cognitive system; its neural or chemical properties are relevant only insofar as they enable that process to do what trace decay is hypothesized to do. And similarly for all mental states and processes invoked by cognitive psychological theories.”¹¹

3. Systemic Functionalism - Talcott Parsons¹²:

Internalization of object systems; autonomy and interpenetration between the social system and the personality system. The double Durkheimian¹³ principle of dissociation and identity between social fact and individual fact is repeated by T. Parsons in formulating and solving the social paradox: composed of autonomous individuals, society is, however, more than an aggregate, a sum of them. The solution is formulated in terms close to Mead's¹⁴ (and inspired by Mead), affirming the existence of an internal organization of the individual (personality) that reproduces the organization of society and the indissociable nature of the processes of production of the social self (internalization) and those of institutionalization. Although, in the last works, one can see an opening to the comparative-historical method used by Durkheim, the method that the American sociologist privileges in social analysis is the functionalist-systemic one. Parsonsian construction can be interpreted as a theory of hierarchical systems, organized around the concept of the system of action.

Parsons is commonly labelled as the main representative of structural functionalism, the theory developed by him being one of social order. The more recent exegeses observe, however, that such a label cannot be applied to the entire work of the American sociologist, since it does not contain a conception that retains the same characteristics from the first to the last sentences, but one that is continuously constructed. As Jean-Pierre Durand¹⁵ highlighted in *Sociologie contemporaine* the evolution of Parsonian thinking has evolved on three stages:

I) before 1937, the year in which he publishes *The Structure of Social Action* and in which he is assigned as a professor at Harvard University, the influences of Durkheim, Weber¹⁶, Pareto¹⁷, Marshall¹⁸, as well as those of the structural-functionalist ethnology,

¹⁰ Jerry Alan Fodor (1935 – 2017) was an American philosopher and cognitive scientist. He held the position of Professor of Philosophy, Emeritus, at Rutgers University and was the author of many works in the fields of philosophy of mind and cognitive science, in which he laid the groundwork for the modularity of mind and the language of thought hypotheses.

¹¹ Janet Levin, 2018. “Functionalism”. In *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall on-line Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.)

¹² Talcott Parsons (1902 – 1979) was an American sociologist of the classical tradition, best known for his social action theory and structural functionalism. Parsons is considered one of the most influential figures in sociology in the 20th century.

¹³ David Émile Durkheim (1858 – 1917) French sociologist. He formally established the academic discipline of sociology and is commonly cited as the principal architect of modern social science. His first major sociological work was *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893). In 1895, he published *The Rules of Sociological Method* and set up the first European department of sociology, becoming France's first professor of sociology.

¹⁴ George Herbert Mead (1863 – 1931) was an American philosopher, sociologist and psychologist, primarily affiliated with the University of Chicago, where he was one of several distinguished pragmatists. He is regarded as one of the founders of symbolic interactionism and of what has come to be referred to as the Chicago sociological tradition.

¹⁵ Jean-Pierre Durand, French sociologist. Professor of sociology at the University of Evry, director of the Pierre-Naville Centre

¹⁶ Maximilian Karl Emil Weber (1864 – 1920) German sociologist, philosopher, jurist, and political economist, who is regarded today as one of the most important theorists on the development of modern Western society. As his ideas would profoundly influence social theory and social research.

especially of Radcliffe-Brown¹⁹, are strongly felt; is the stage at which Parsons frequently uses the structural-functionalism formula;

II) the period to which follows, until the early 1950s, is marked by the construction of the general theory of action presented in *The Social System*²⁰ [1951], in *The Working Papers in the Theory of Action*²¹ [1953], but especially in *The Toward of The General Theory of Action*²² [1951]; Parsons gradually abandons the notion of structure in favour of the system and abandons the expression “structural-functionalism”; commentators consider that from this period its conception has the characteristics of a systemic functionalism;

III) from the 1950s, the sociological theory of the social system opens up to other socio-human sciences (psychology, economics, political sciences) and to the problems of social evolution; are now published *Family, Socialization and Interaction Process*²³ [Parsons, Bales, Olds, Zelditch and Slater, 1955], *Economy and Society*²⁴ [Parsons and Smelser, 1956], *Theory and Society*²⁵ [Parsons, Shils, Naegle and Pitts, 1961], *Social Structure and Personality*²⁶ [Parsons, 1964], *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*²⁷ [Parsons, 1966], *The System of Modern Societies*²⁸ [Parsons, 1971] notează Elisabeta Stănculescu²⁹ în *Teorii Sociologice ale Educației*³⁰.

4. Analytical Functionalism

Analytical Functionalism or Conceptual Functionalism is based on the theoretical terms implicitly defined by the theories in which formulations occur and not by the intrinsic properties of the phenomena they compose. A good way to understand why the followers of the concept of Analytical Functionalism believe that functional characterizations produce superior analyses, is to revisit the debates that took place at the beginning of the Theory of Psychic-Physical Identity and to name the hypothesis that each type of mental state can be identified by one type or another of brain condition or neural activity. For example, the pioneers of identity theory like J.J.C. Smart³¹ argued that it is perfectly reasonable (and may well be true) to identify pain by stimulating neuro-receptors of type C. the terms “pain” and “type C neuro-receptor” that they have chosen do not have the same meaning, but regardless of this fact they can designate the same state; they also argued that the fact that identity is not

¹⁷ Wilfried Fritz Pareto; (1848 – 1923) was an Italian engineer, sociologist, economist, political scientist, and philosopher. He made several important contributions to economics, particularly in the study of income distribution and in the analysis of individuals' choices. He was also responsible for popularizing the use of the term “elite” in social analysis.

¹⁸ Alfred Marshall (1842 – 1924), Fellow of the British Academy, was one of the most influential economists of his time.

¹⁹ Alfred Reginald Radcliffe-Brown, FBA (1881 – 1955) was an English social anthropologist who developed the theory of structural functionalism and coadaptation.

²⁰ Talcott Parsons. 1951. *The Social System*. Glencoe, III: Free Press.

²¹ Talcott Parsons, Freed Bales Robert, Shils Edward. 1953. *The Working Papers in the Theory of Action*. Free Press.

²² Talcott Parsons. Freed Bales Robert, 1951. Shils Edward *The Toward of The General Theory of Action*. Harvard University Press.

²³ Talcott Parsons and Bales Robert F. 1955. with the collaboration of James Olds, Philip Slater, and Morris Zelditch, Jr. Glencoe, *Socialization and Interaction Process*. Illinois: The Free Press.

²⁴ Talcott Parsons and Smelser Neil J. 1956. *Economy and Society*. Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

²⁵ Talcott Parsons. 1961. Shils Edward Naegele Kaspar D. (Editor), Pitts Jesse R. *Theory and Society*, Free Press of Glecoe,

²⁶ Talcott Parsons. 1964. *Social Structure and Personality*. New York: The Free Press of Glencoe.

²⁷ Talcott Parsons. 1966. *Societies: Evolutionary and Comparative Perspectives*. Prentice Hall.

²⁸ Talcott Parsons. 1971. *The System of Modern Societies*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.

²⁹ Elisabeta Stănculescu, University Professor works in the fields of: General Sociology; Sociology of Education; Qualitative Methods of Research in Social Sciences; Theoretical and Epistemological Issues of Research; Childhood Studies and Children's Rights; Improving Teachers' Relationships with Pupils and Families.

³⁰ Elisabeta Stănculescu. 1996. *Teorii Sociologice ale Educației*. Iași: Polirom, pp.43 - 45.

³¹ John Jamieson Carswell “Jack” Smart (1920 – 2012) was an Australian philosopher and academic, and was appointed as an Emeritus Professor by the Australian National University. He worked in the fields of metaphysics, philosophy of science, philosophy of mind, philosophy of religion, and political philosophy. He wrote multiple entries for the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy.

established apriorically does not mean that it is not true. Hence the fact that one doesn't have to consult an MRI when one says that one feels pain doesn't mean that the pain one is stating isn't a neural state that could basically be detected by a brain scanner.

5. Counter-argument

An important and long-standing counter-argument presented by Max Black³², published by J.J.C. Smart in 1959³³. Black argued, following Gottlob Frege's³⁴ 1892 paper, "On Sense and Reference", that the only way in which terms with different meanings can denote the same state is to express different properties, or "modes of presentation" of that state. But this implies, he argued, that if terms such as "pain," "thought" and "desire" are not equal in meaning in any physical description, they can denote physical states only by expressing irreducible mental properties in themselves.

Furthermore, Janet Levin in her article "Functionalism" published in *The Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* notes: "Thus, even if 'pain' and 'stimulation of neuro-receptor C' define a single neural status, this status must have two types of physical and mental properties by which this identification procedure can be done. This argument has come to be known as the 'Distinct Property Argument', and is used by supporters as a undermining of the radical-materialistic theory of the mind."

6. Conclusions

Of course, there are many variants that come from the Functionalism theory, but the ones mentioned above represent the main directions and concepts. We can also say that functionalism is widely accepted as the defining principle of the theory of the nature of mental states adopted by contemporary socio-theorists.

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³² Max Black (1909 - 1988) British-American philosopher, who was a leading figure in analytic philosophy. He made contributions to the philosophy of language, the philosophy of mathematics and science, and the philosophy of art.

³³ John Jamieson Carswell. 1959. *Smart Sensations and brain processes*. In *Philosophical Review* 68 (April), pp.141 - 156.

³⁴ Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob Frege (1848 –1925) German philosopher, logician, and mathematician. He worked as a mathematics professor at the University of Jena, and is understood by many to be the father of analytic philosophy, concentrating on the philosophy of language, logic, and mathematics.

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