

ESSAY

Writing Essays as Part of our Social Responsibilities ¹

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I would like to outline a hypothesis I formulated recently which might assist students as they try to identify the way in which sociology's theorists have been motivated to make their contributions to social science. It relates to a discovery I made a few years back as I composed an essay on the "analytical realism" of Talcott Parsons (1902-1979) for the *Routledge International Handbook of Talcott Parsons Studies* (Wearne 2022). In brief, by analytical realism Parsons affirms the view that abstract concepts are truly part of reality. The discovery is a simple one that anyone can confirm by perusing any list of publications by Parsons, who regularly explained that analytical realism had framed all his work. Yet among the dozens and dozens of essays outlining his theory of social action, there is not one essay devoted to how analytical realism relates to the social theory essay itself in Parsons' theory of social action.

Forty years ago, Jurgen Habermas accorded Parsons the very highest status among scholars who formed sociology in the 20th century. He wrote that "[A]ny theoretical work in sociology today that failed to take account of Talcott Parsons could not be taken seriously" (Habermas 1981:174). What is still received within sociology as Parsons' theory of social action is expressed in his many essays written over a long career as a student of sociology, first as an undergraduate at Amherst College in 1922, then as a University of Heidelberg D.Phil. candidate from 1925-1929, and thereafter as a tutor in economics and lecturer and professor of sociology at Harvard University.

I have been intensively reading and writing essays about Parsons' social theory since 1974. He openly and without hesitation referred to himself as an "incurable theorist."² But

¹ I am grateful to the JSC reviewer of this article for their perceptive advice and suggestions that have greatly improved its content, and to Dennis Hiebert, JSC Editor, whose meticulous eye has made many further suggestions to improve its readability. Many thanks also to Greg Smith and members of the online 50th anniversary celebration of the Ilkley Group of Christians in Sociology 2021 when the first draft of this paper was presented, and also to Michael Wagenman and Lauren Mulford of the Kirby Laing Centre for convening the on-line seminar "Christian Scholarship: A Multi-Disciplinary Event for Student Academic Formation" 2024. Thanks also to my two colleagues in New Zealand, Chris Gousmett and Alan Cameron, for their feedback on this piece.

² Parsons' Dedication in *The Social System* (1951) was "To Helen, whose healthy and practical empiricism has long been an indispensable balance-wheel for an incurable theorist."

the question I am asking in this essay concerns the fact that an analysis of the social theory essay itself is not prominently featured among Parsons' writings. At least it is not to be found in the published list of Parsons' essays in social theory. Yet I must be careful here. It is not as if Parsons never discussed the reality of his theory coming to expression in written form, that is, in essays. What I am saying is that, curiously, among all his essays—dozens and dozens of them—there is not one devoted to an explicit analysis of the social theory essay itself.

We might explain this by suggesting that the essay, as an artefact of academic life, was so self-evident in his endeavor that it may never have occurred to him that an essay or journal article exploring this in social action theory terms might be needed. Might he have considered such an exercise to be explicating the obvious, and therefore perhaps trivial? Indeed he may have, but he and all his colleagues in sociology and across the social sciences were well aware of the importance of the essay in academic pursuits (Barber 1998). If it is so self-evidently present as a part of theory construction, why then is it not the focus for a sociological analysis? University students, particularly those in the humanities and social sciences, are aware that essay writing is a necessary part of academic life and study. And that, to me, is why it is noteworthy that a list of publications of this prominent social theorist who had written so many social theory essays does not include an essay devoted to the function of essay-writing for theory formulation.

My point is not that such an essay would have provided a “silver bullet” interpretation that could dissolve the complexities of Parsons' social action theory for those working their way through its formulation. After all, it too would have had to be read and interpreted. Words on a page do not interpret themselves. Nor am I suggesting that such an item would have necessarily assisted sociology students to better understand Parsons' theory. Once again, such an article would have had to be read and interpreted. Such an analysis would seem to be valid and worthy of an essay in its own right, simply because Parsons' social action theory presupposed, as he himself confirmed, its formulation in his social theory essays. Essays are an ongoing part of the extant social and historical reality by which the insights of sociological theory and scholarship more generally are transmitted from one generation to the next.

Parsons was clearly aware that his social experience could be clarified as he wrote about it. And it is also evident that he put pen to paper and wrote about the process by which his scholarly involvement was clarified. On one notable occasion in 1949, he explained why he had written the book that had initially been published in 1937, after it had taken a decade to complete: “It is a good thing to know what you are doing” (Parsons 1949:A-B). He then explained that that essay of 817 pages was also, in effect, his social science equivalent of a laboratory report. He had been formulating an account of what he had been “doing” and “discovering” as he read and interpreted various social action

theories of the previous generation. Then he committed his analysis to writing and *The Structure of Social Action* (1949) was the result, a written report of what he had been doing to discover his theory of social action. A few years later, he concluded a second major work, *The Social System*, by calling that work “an essay” (1951:536).³

So, what am I suggesting? It is this: quite apart from what else he was doing in constructing his theory of the social system, he had also committed himself to write. And having set out to do so he sought to clarify to himself what it was he was doing when he was constructing his social theory.

We may note the absence of an article devoted exclusively to the function of the sociological theory essay in Parsons’ bibliography, and make of that what we will. But for Parsons, the prominent 20th-century sociological theorist, essay-writing in social theory was integral to his self-conscious understanding of what he was doing *in* his scientific vocation. That should be kept in mind and not played off against this absence from his list of publications as we consider his theoretical work, precisely because this absence is not without significance.

Looking again at his 1949 retrospective comment, we might suggest that he saw his essay in social theory as a means to the end or goal of producing his own social theory. With such an emphasis, we might suggest that the “essay as means” has somehow been eclipsed, the distinction blurred in some way between the written account of the theory and the abstract conceptualization committed to paper. In Parsons’ writing, the end and goal was so very important. Is it not indicative of his theoretical goal, functioning as an end in itself?

Such a critical question arising from the “absence” of such an essay must be answered by argument referring to the actual analysis set forth by the author. In my critique of the development of Parsons’ theory and scholarship over his long career, I referred to “Parsons the writer of statements and author of theory” (Wearne 1989:82-88), and concluded by describing the culminating formulation of his social action theory as also a “personal record work of an analytical odyssey” (Wearne 1989:184). Parsons was self-consciously “the writer of social theory” (Wearne 1989:185).

I began this essay by noting my surprise at a bibliographical fact, a notable absence. Of course, it is quite possible that this absence in bibliographical terms could still be overcome should an essay dealing with this topic be found among his extensive papers in the Harvard Archives, and then brought to publication. Why shouldn’t there be such an essay? After all, social theory writing is also in certain respects social action, and Parsons’

³ The paperback edition was subtitled “The Major Exposition of the Author’s Conceptual Scheme for the Analysis of the Dynamics of the Social System.”

theory did aim to subject social action to analysis in the abstract terms of his theory's basic concepts.

But pointing out the absence of a publication fully devoted to the social theory essay is not to avoid any immanent critique of Parsons' social action theory, which still needs to be developed by examination of the actual details of the theory itself (Wearne 1989). Parsons' emphasis was indeed upon theory, and what he wrote could very readily be applied to the action required for writing a social theory essay. He certainly did not see the label "theorist" as a put-down, however, one wonders why the theory essay itself somehow did not warrant an essay concerned with itself.

Therefore, what I have tentatively suggested here might well serve as a worthwhile hypothesis to develop further contributions to Parsons studies. But much more can also be derived from this reflection. Might it not be worthwhile to explore how the activity of writing theory functions in the writings of other prominent social theorists? And would not identifying the attitude of a theorist toward their essay writing help in identifying their underlying worldview which produces often radically divergent contributions to the discipline, and to scholarship in general? Because, notably, established scholars and the students who consider their work share in the activity of writing essays. In social science courses, the essay is not only a cultural artefact to be analyzed by students, but also an exercise by which the student engages in the cultural task itself. Writing an essay thus takes on great significance. For students enrolled in mathematics, physics, chemistry, or biology, the essay will not function as it does in the more literary-oriented social science disciplines.

For natural science students, the laboratory experiment may require a lab report. But even in those courses, there may be requirements pertaining to the history of science. No doubt all students will be encouraged to reflect upon the impact of scientific and technological developments on the physical environment and human relationships, and sometimes this will require essays. But by contrast, essays in the social sciences, as inherent in our academic traditions, have been and continue to be an integral and unavoidable part of such courses, and are necessary for evaluating how students in these disciplines have learned to think. As part of scholarly vocation, writing essays presupposes that we are literate, and act with language. When we take up a scholarly vocation, we become further involved in developing our literary skills.

The Christian student is a member of the school of Jesus Christ, and Jesus' disciples serve in God's Kingdom, embedded within this creation as part of God's purposes for what He has made and redeemed. In its complex diversity, creation invites our study to deepen our understanding, and to benefit from how it holds together. The essay should then be received thankfully as an important part of our effort to deepen that understanding.

Thus, for the Christian student, the writing of essays is an opportunity to confirm our utter dependence upon the gifts bestowed upon us by the work of our Creator-Redeemer in our lives. To discover our God-given vocation for scholarly work in sociology, for instance, means that by writing essays, we will be demonstrating our utter dependence upon the gifts God has given. It is these that will come to expression in our work. And sociology as a discursive discipline is indeed an invitation to employ language and literary skills as we explore the many responsibilities we share in our social domain. Hence our sociological essay-writing will not only give expression to our social life, but here, in our written exercises, we find ourselves at the intersection of our thinking and our social life, in analysis which, when written down, can then continue to spur us on to meet the challenges we face in our social responsibilities. The essay as an artefact to be formed and developed will manifest in its own way our response as stewards of these gifts.

And an essay is no mere transcription of words onto a page. An essay may be mandated in an academic course, but the inner character of essay-writing calls for a normative response, as one seeks to deepen theoretical understanding. This is violated by merely copying what someone else has written and passing it off as one's own, or even trying to get away with a transcript produced by an AI robot.

And when the prescribed essay in an academic course requires an immanent critique of a particular social theorist, the response, via an essay, will then have to consider the theorist's essay(s). The response to an essay will be made in an essay, an evaluation of what the theorist has first written down. So, this too will deal with the way the social theory writer has also understood the essay-writing task, either implicitly or explicitly. By the reader discerning how the theorist understands his/her vocation in the process of essay-writing, the reader will gain insight into what has pre-scientifically motivated the analysis, before the theorist committed words to paper.

The discovery of the deeply religious character of our scientific involvement not only means a fresh view and respect for the theorists we may examine as students, but also of the college or university student role itself. Might it also spur us on to deeper reflection about the impact of what we have already been taught in primary and secondary schooling? Will it help us to reconfigure our understanding of academic success, which is so often defined in pragmatic, utilitarian, and materialistic ways in our educational contexts? Is it not too easy to view a university degree as a job ticket, a means to gain entrance to the "good life?" What then is to become of Jesus' clear teaching: "You cannot serve God and wealth" (Matt. 6:24)? And this teaching also applies to writing our essays, which are no mere means for getting through the course.

Of course, scholarship is not the only thing scholars do. Nor should all students enrolled in university courses see themselves as potential professional essay-writing academics, let alone on the road to a career in *belles-lettres*. But Christian scholarly work,

whatever the discipline, is fully and utterly vocational, *coram Deo*, part of our human calling to take every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Cor 10:5). Our scholarly work is not self-sufficient, it is not even an end in itself, but as human activity, it makes sense under the rule of Jesus Christ the Redeemer. Within His rule we will give the essay its due respect.

My undergraduate university had as its motto, *Ancora Imparo*, said to have been the last words of the Renaissance genius Michelangelo: I am still learning. The student vocation is ongoing, and in my own case it means ongoing learning, the further refinement of literary skills, and the development of skills for service. But as I discovered with the Routledge essay mentioned at the outset of this essay, there is always more that can be learned, and in this case more about something with which I had been working for half a century, that is, how our own essay writing is integral to our scholarly service.

Service, as the Bible teaches, is to be done in wholehearted soul, mind, and strength love for God above all as we walk in His ways to love our neighbor who is just like us, needing loving care and respect. Essays are also a way of giving glory to God, and particularly in sociology, they relate, sooner or later, explicitly or implicitly, to how we receive God's gifts, and how we are thereby also living within social structures in which we are called to serve our neighbor.

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