



# Cognition, Practice, and Learning in the Discourse of the Human Sciences **30**

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## 30.1 Introduction

Perhaps something in the history of the concept of “cognition” can be called an event. The statement itself is difficult to follow without knowing where to appropriately situate cognition or even what to understand by it. This is for good reason after all, because the event in question obscures what cognition is and what it is not.

In the *Critique of Pure Reason*, Kant makes knowledge, morality, esthetics, and practical action into various modes of cognition. He fixes them here, giving them each a cognitive presence, removing any need to speculate about them in a metaphysical vein. There is no longer a need for metaphysics because, for Kant, their presence is cognitive. To know these things we only need to know their transcendental possibility, one that we create and discover as our own, giving them a presence. Kant aligns himself with Copernicus in finding cognition in such various modes, just like finding the heliocentric universe and its *gestalt shift*. “Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects . . . [In fact] the objects must confirm to *our* cognition . . . This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus . . . This would agree better with the requested

possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them” (Kant 1998[1781]: 110).

It would be easy to assume that even “cognition” is of recent memory but with a very old reference. Kant, however, fixes cognition to *pure* cognition and gives it a pure presence, which makes cognition in this guise only as recent as his own proposal. “No cognition in us precedes experience, and with experience every cognition begins. . . But although all our cognition commences with experience, yet it does not on that account all arise from experience” (1998 [1781]: 136). Cognition is not a product of the world because it is *logically* implied by our experience. Kant frames his critical project according to the presence of two cognitions: *pure* cognition (of universal presence) and *empirical* cognition (of which little more is said).<sup>1</sup>

The purpose of this chapter is to describe just how fateful the distinction has proven to be in social theory, and to seek a reversal of terms in a classical framework: from structure, sign, and

<sup>1</sup> Hegel himself questioned Kant on this very distinction, claiming that anything like “pure cognition” begged a significant question of know-how versus know-that: “And a further claim is made when it is said that we must know the faculty of knowledge before we can know. For to investigate the faculties of knowledge means to know them; but how are we to know without knowing, how are we to apprehend the truth before the truth, it is impossible to say. It is the old story of the *σχολαστικὸς* [scholastic] who would not go into the water until he could swim” (Hegel 1896: 428).

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play to cognition, practice, and learning as new keywords given appeal in the human sciences for which pure cognition has become a cult of technique and fixes the desire for gestalt shift in a limited form. Kant does not anticipate structure, sign, and play in his phrasing of pure cognition. Yet he first performs the dualistic rupture that makes it possible to make cognition central to our understanding of the world, and yet also paradoxically split off on its own from the world, with a *pure* rather than empirical presence.

Hence, cognition comes to us now as both logical *and* psychological, transcendent *and* generated by experience, prior to action *and* beginning with action. Pure cognition makes transcendental arguments—finding that which is *implied* by that which is—and relies on logical validity: cognition has priority over action. Empirical cognition makes generative arguments—finding the presence of cognition in the source of its products—that rely on empirical soundness: cognition and action are simultaneous. Pure cognition has presence in a variety of unassuming labels in the history of social theory (“meaning,” “signification,” “interpretation”) that stand at the center of arguably ever significant theoretical school developed in the human sciences over the last half century. By contrast, empirical cognition, as a minor tradition, has little presence in the human sciences, as it is more often split off (as marginal) into a naturalized form as *persona non grata*. More consistently, however, empirical cognition is present in a circling back, away from the scene and generally after pure cognition has done its work, as an incorporation of folk attributions, folk theories, and folk psychology that become essential when pure presence must be put into action.

Cognition, practice, and learning, I propose, can therefore be a minor language with which human science can criticize (and subvert) itself today, break with obstacles of the Kantian rupture, and find renewed enthusiasm (lost since psychoanalysis) for making infra-individual claims that are not reductionistic and not folk-reliant. Cognition is not a redundancy because it tries to exorcize the pure presence of cognition that no longer retains the letter of Kant but retains

the spirit of an “island of understanding.” The paradoxical effect of this, as I argue below, is to marginalize cognition while making more human-scientific claims assert and revolve around some form of cognitive presence (as belief, desire, intention, want, interest, etc). Practice carries the same symmetry as sign does for pure presence by establishing what I argue is the universality of generative process just as sign does the universality of semiotic process. Learning becomes play in the system. Unlike play with signs, however, learning carries a social and historical trace that serves as a source of cognitive content.

To find this, however, requires removing the de facto *methodological* distinction between meaning and agency that, as I argue by referencing a more recent history of social theory, is a holdover from Kant's original rupture. Praxeology refers to agency and meaning as indistinguishable phenomenon that, instead, vary by cognition's empirical presence (especially learning). Any durable capacity can enable speech or action, this suggests; what matters is the mode of acquisition in which learning takes place and the practice it enables. Thus, all recordable instances of speech and action are *ipso facto* a manifestation of learned capabilities as more declarative or non-declarative in a varied and compositionally pluralist cognitive profile, observable in paradox, hypocrisy, pretension, and “saying versus doing.” This serves as a critique of a uniform (e.g. “pure”) presence that imposes on both speech and action pre-defined rules that generally come from highly rationalized spaces that remain distinctly outside of and distant from the empirical spaces with which actors are most familiar.<sup>2</sup>

Cognition, practice, and learning are not unfamiliar themes in a classical sociological framework. Marx, Weber, and Durkheim all find cognition in a non-pure presence and consider its implications for human science. With some exceptions, they are rarely read together as demonstrations of this minor tradition, but doing so provides a way of exorcizing pure

<sup>2</sup> For example, “we know more than we can say” and “we can say more than we know.”

cognition that has more recently come into social theory under different names and in different appropriations across time. To retrace the influence of the Kantian rupture, then, is to recover empirical cognition for the human sciences. In a larger sense, this offers an alternative classical trajectory for contemporary social theory.

## 30.2 A Genealogy of Pure Cognition

### 30.2.1 Kant's Rupture, or Discovering the Island

In Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, a vivid statement summarizes what Kant considered as the essence of his "Copernican Turn" and the gestalt shift effect of finding a pure cognitive presence as equivalent to a heliocentric realization and its shifting standpoints. The "land of understanding" as Kant puts it

is an island, and enclosed in unalterable boundaries by nature itself. It is the land of truth (a charming name), surrounded by a broad and stormy ocean, the true seat of illusion, where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands and, ceaselessly deceiving with empty hopes the voyager looking around for new discoveries, entwine him in adventures from which he can never escape and yet also never bring to an end (1998[1781]: 338–39).

We must be "satisfied with what [the island] contains out of necessity" because outside is a plane of uncertainty and randomness. Rather than "being instructed by nature like a pupil," cognition here acts as "an appointed judge, who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them." Instead of being the disempowered citizenry of a vulgar empiricism that simply mirrors every object that it comes across cognition is the source of rule and law in the very organization of *meaning*: "Reason has insight only into that which it produces after a plan of its own . . . It must not allow itself to be kept, as it were, in nature's lead strings, but must itself show the way" (109).

What would happen without such a preemptive meaning-giving force? The question itself might be suspect because strictly speaking this

is an impossible scenario from Kant's view on the island. However, he does ask himself this unsettling question in the *Critique of Practical Reason* when he tries to envision an encounter with things (*Dang an sich*) without cognition's pure presence:

. . . instead of the conflict which now the moral disposition has to wage with inclinations and in which, after some defeats, moral strength of mind may be gradually won, God and eternity in their awful majesty would stand unceasingly before our eyes . . . Thus most actions conforming to the law would be done from fear, few would be done from hope, none from duty. The moral worth of actions, on which alone the worth of the person and even of the world depends in the eyes of supreme wisdom, would not exist at all. The conduct of man, so long as his nature remained as it is now, would be changed into mere mechanism, where, as in a puppet show, everything would gesticulate well but no life would be found in the figures (2015 [1788]: 108).

This fantastic scenario implies that only on the island of understanding does experience not assume the dull appearance of a puppet show, with hidden strings moving the pieces behind the scenes, things appearing, robotically moving, then vanishing, but without any comprehension of what or why.

For Kant, cognition is not generated by any direct engagement with the environment. If it *could* be then freedom and moral worth (e.g. the very *idea* of them) would be permanently muddled outside of metaphysics. We are not actually free, and moral worth is not actually possible, *if* cognition is not prior to action, if action does not find its specific contingency on pure presence, and if cognition is therefore not accessible to speech as disclosing who the speaker in what they are doing. Moral worth *needs* cognition in pure presence because it needs a signal for action as fragile affirmation and responsibility instead of nature or an omnipotent God that, in Kant's dark vision, would otherwise pull the strings of a human puppetry. Cognition cannot be naturalistic or generated, neither can it vary in its basic functioning; it must be centered on rules and only provide for variation within them.

Kant himself would remain a recluse on the island so he could encounter gestalt shift in pure

cognition, again and again. A similar orientation to a separate space finds different iterations in later social thought: Dilthey's "objective spirit," Cassirer's "symbolic order," Geertz's "webs of meaning." What comes under the label "cognition," then, has a primary function of referring to what is synonymous with thought or meaning; but this extends an ancillary function: finding the island where pure rules can work and pure presence is confirmed. It does this only if the island of understanding is truly an "island"—split off from any other relation to the world. Cognition becomes representation and responsibility, as a recuperation of the island in the rule-based manipulation of symbols that must mediate action and perception. Morality and freedom disclose subjectivity but need semantic access to "thought" for them to obtain any significance at all, lest they be metaphysics, which Nietzsche noticed in claiming that it was really just grammar at stake.

### 30.2.2 Islanders: Parsons, Husserl, Schutz, Levi-Strauss

The argument so far tries to make clear the extended meanings/entanglements of cognition's presence and its paradoxical effect of simultaneous expansion and marginalization. On these terms, culture, action, experience, and meaning find their appeal as *present* but in a pure, paradoxical form as non-cognitive (or cognitively neutral). And yet any attempt to theorize them necessarily makes cognitive commitments (particularly if, otherwise, they should be considered metaphysical commitments). The discussion that follows briefly traces pure cognition in different modes to show how the Kantian rupture redoubles itself in more recent social theory.

#### 30.2.2.1 The Cultural Appropriation

Parsons is an important figure for demonstrating how to appropriate Kant's rupture in disguised language and borrowed clothing, and remake cognition in pure presence. He had spent a formative year at Heidelberg in 1925–26 and undertook a close reading of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*

under the supervision of Karl Jaspers. This would have a lasting effect. Parsons' last published work finds a lucid summary of Kant and includes a generative scheme for reading texts:

Kant clearly thought in terms of *dual levels*: the categories of understanding and the sense data of empirical knowledge; the "categorical imperative" and the "problems" of practical ethics; the canons of judgment and esthetic "experience." There seems to be a striking parallel between his version of duality and the linguist's "deep structures" and "surface structures," the biologist's "genotypes" and "phenotypes," the cyberneticist's "high on information" and "high on energy," and indeed the sociologist's "values," or institutional patterns, and "interests." We therefore suggest that the first term in each of these pairs be used to designate a metastructure, which is not as such a property of the phenomena (also Kant's term) under consideration but is rather an *a priori set of conditions* without which the phenomena in question could not be conceived in an orderly manner (1978: 355–56).

Later in this same essay, Parsons returns to his first impressionable readings (e.g. Parsons 1937) of Durkheim and Weber to restate the connection between a Kantian philosophical position and the theory of action:

This position of Kant's is clearly of central importance to the general theory of action. We hold that it is the locus of the most fundamental underlying premises or assumptions of social ordering at the human level. It should explicitly be defined not as the data of moral problems but as the *transcendental normative conditions* of the ordering of such data. This Kantian philosophical position clearly underlies both Durkheim's and Weber's treatment of the moral component of societies, especially modern societies (Parsons 1978: 370–71).

In the *Structure of Social Action* (1937) Parsons not only defines a theory of action as an *a priori* "metastructure" but also salvages a space for ethical action in the determinist (positivist) universe of natural science. In Parsons' larger action scheme, there is room for cognition alongside other elements in a complex interrelation. "The cognitive element is certainly an indispensable independent element," Parsons argues, "It is a function of true, not purely imaginary aspects of reality" (671). But even less so, he continues, "in the case of scientific ideas is it *wholly* this. As Weber shows, in the direction of interest and in the ways of putting the problems of the meaning

of the world, a subjective element is involved. In working this out a concept of *Wertbeziehung* [value-relevance] became involved. Indeed, this is the starting point for a *Wissenssoziologie* of metaphysical and religious ideas, as the concept of *Wertbeziehung* is his scientific methodology was for one of scientific ideas” (672).

Weber is more important than Durkheim, according to Parsons, because “collective representation” veers too close to equivocation between cognition and “objective knowledge” while Weber’s value-relevance does not. Parsons wants to diminish the cognitive as a way of making firm the distinction between scientific knowledge and actor belief. Conflating the two was the very definition of positivism. “[It] seems quite apparent that the cognitive constitute [*sic*] only one group of elements in the value complex. Knowing, or believing, is not, as such, doing. In addition an element of effort of some sort is needed. The actor does not take toward his ideas the emotionally neutral attitude of the scientist” (Parsons 1937: 537–38).

As this suggests, there is *no sense* in “doing” without other concepts that work backward from the basic fact that actors *believe* and scientists *know*. The “element of effort” is an attribution that makes perfect logical sense when actors chase beliefs on the island of understanding, in which they could be motivated in no other way. Having “attitudes toward ideas” has an even greater reach, as an empirical attribution, but it is only *logically* defensible. Parsons determines that “religious ideas are to be regarded as partly determinant of, partly determined by, men’s ultimate-value attitudes” (1937: 424). Religious ideas are pure presence in this statement, laminating the world with meaning; while ultimate-value attitudes concern the “subjective element” that motivates belief independent of the scientist. “Analytically regarded the reference of religious ideas cannot be to any empirical reality at all, if they are to be held to represent the principal existential cognitive element of the ultimate value complex” (421). Parsons admits a distinction between the normative and the cognitive, which he agrees is scientific

(“psychological”) but, on the island, is always subsidiary to the “ultimate value complex.”

### 30.2.2.2 The Phenomenological Appropriation

Parsons’ technique remains consequential for the redouble in the trajectory of recent sociological thought, particularly its focus on culture. But it is not the only technique. The phenomenological track fills the void in a different way. For Edmund Husserl (1970[1936]), phenomenology serves as pure technique to decipher the structure of experience prior to scientific investigation. In fact this was its explicit purpose. Husserl remains a tireless skeptic of scientific knowledge as it constitutes a “radical life crisis” that brings undeniable successes but at the cost of “[losing] meaning for life.”

Husserl claims to get behind science with a pure philosophy; but then he too circles back and starts creating strange empirical things. For instance, he needs to *a priori* posit what he calls the “lifeworld” while also attempting to (non-empirically) explicate it. This leads to Husserl’s (1960[1929]: 33–37) *Cartesian Meditations* in which, as the “ego split,” he tries to demonstrate a phenomenologist who is able to stand both inside and outside of her own experience simultaneously. She can do this because she finds the background to consist of “representations” that generate consciousness, even *her* consciousness at the time she recognizes this. Husserl circles back and becomes hypothetical at this point, rather than pure and eidetic. He leaves the island. The background, he suspects, might not *be* “representations.” Cognition’s pure presence becomes vulnerable to experimental discovery. It finds no priority from being treated as a scientific object.

What is the relevance of this technique for the human sciences? Husserl is the prelude for the influential Alfred Schutz (1970) for whom the lifeworld finds pure presence on the grounds of “subjective interpretation.” We cannot say this with total assurance, however, for the same reasons Husserl could not with “representations.” It would only be *fortuitous* should subjective interpretation be a statement of fact, at best it is

metaphysics; but then Schutz and Husserl break with metaphysics for the adaption of pure cognition. For Schutz this generates consciousness as pure cognition. He can talk about social types (strangers, homecomers) as tokens of pure experience you might very well encounter in your lifeworld from time to time. But this is in bad faith: like effort, “attitude toward ideas,” and representation, subjective interpretation circles back. It gives cognition pure presence then *takes it back*, steps off the island, and guesses at the “foggy bank” of the world, making it what it (logically) needs it to be. Schutz tries to avoid bad faith as much as Husserl. Yet pure presence for him still hinges on empirical presence of a certain (and very peculiar) sort.

### 30.2.2.3 The Structuralist Appropriation

If we examine the argument of Levi-Strauss, we find another attempt to give a constant presence to pure cognition, one that now brings it into relation with the persistent theme of structure. Levi-Strauss also redoubles and circles back. In *The Savage Mind*, he draws attention to a function rather than a fixed locus: “there is always a mediator between praxis and practice, namely the *conceptual scheme* by the operation of which matter and form . . . are realized as structures, that is as entities which are both empirical and intelligible” (1966: 130). The “conceptual scheme” consists of an “elaborate system which plays the part of *synthesizing operator* between ideas and facts, thereby turning the latter into signs.” The conceptual scheme is “superstructure [that] allows the mind to pass from empirical diversity to conceptual simplicity and then from conceptual simplicity to meaningful synthesis” (131).

Levi-Strauss finds more than systems of differences, then, at least as he moves past an early emphasis on pure method. He recuperates empirical presence as the conceptual scheme, a synthesizing operation that allows for the information-efficient form, say, of a myth. Meaningful synthesis is not, then, a product of systems of differences *sui generis*. Rather, it is first that and *then* (when it needs to be) it becomes an empirical function. The relevant contrast is, in fact, to Saussure (2011[1916]) who does *not*

make a doubling move between empirical and pure cognition, because he does not first argue that language is pure cognition. “Language is concrete,” Saussure claims, “linguistic signs, though basically psychological, are not abstractions; associations which bear that stamp of collective approval—and which added together constitute language—are realities that have their seat in the brain” (2011[1916]: 15). This gives empirical presence to what remains an *ex post* assertion of pure presence. *Langue* as “structure” should not infer toward meaning if it is not concrete. Saussure suggests that to be concrete, meaning, as exemplified by *linguistic meaning*, is a matter of “active use [that has] a potential existence in [the] brain, or more specifically, the brains of a group of individuals” (13–14).

Levi-Strauss’ technique thus replaces cognition with structure, switches learned practice for sign, and removes learning itself as relevant for the presumed capabilities for sign-meaning and sign-play. This is a similar move as we can see among those who also follow the trajectory of the Kantian rupture. Removed from the world of direct exposure and sensuous engagement, the island of understanding makes non-positivism, “meaning for life,” lifeworld, structure, even moral worth and freedom all contingent on the same. A social theory that redoubles the empirical versus pure distinction, however, will inevitably circle back and look beyond the island—to something that precedes it, probably as its condition of possibility. Cognition’s pure presence makes this thinkable yet not explicit (and most like a *guess*), a black box with its own domain (and, from a certain point of view, strange empirical things), exposing here and there its limits but never entirely its source.

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## 30.3 Psychology Versus Logic in Classical Theory

In searching for cognition as pure presence, Kant introduces significant stakes: we must follow an ethic of presence as pure presence lest we have metaphysics outside the domain of reason (that

can only, ultimately, take the form of an assertion). In following this difference, social theory finds itself bound to a doubling effect that always produces its opposite: both needing to assert pure presence but needing to circle back and make empirical guesses as a counterpart, in what is essentially a move of bad faith. The argument now shifts toward praxeology which does not tend toward metaphysics, though, in making cognitive claims, it does not doubleback. Cognition's presence is consistently empirical; practice is the demonstration of capabilities; and capabilities are learned, socially situated, and historical. The Kantian ambition to avoid metaphysics by being cognitive and capitalizing on gestalt shift can be satisfied without the same well-applied conventions and techniques. Yet this requires more from cognition's empirical presence than spontaneous references to experience, perception, consciousness, sensibility, and folk psychology, especially should such references come only after having first visited the protected space reserved for meaning, symbolic systems, worldview, "logic" and culture.

I argue that the doubling effort in the more recent history of social theory deviates from a classical trajectory that, by contrast, shows the fundamentals of a praxeology. What we find in this classical trajectory, including Weber, Durkheim and Marx, are clearly stated differences between logic and psychology and specified varieties of empirical cognition. As I have argued, the splitting off of pure presence both expands and marginalizes cognition. A different classical trajectory shows how we can retain this prevailing social-theoretical concern with cognitive presence, but without the paradox, by making that presence (and specifically its *content*) empirical rather than pure (and more often assumed). We can also do this without the fear of positivist or naturalist reduction that so haunted those like Parsons and still leaves its trace.

### 30.3.1 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic* and *Habitus*

Weber provides an explicit logical/psychological distinction of this sort in his claim that "empirical-

historical events occurring in men's minds must be understood as primarily *psychologically* and not logically conditioned" (1949[1903–1917]: 96). The example he provides is quite telling in this respect: "It is relatively simple in cases in which one or a few easily formulated theoretical main principles as for instance Calvin's doctrine of predestination or clearly definable ethical postulates govern human conduct and produce historical effects, so that we can analyze the 'idea' into a hierarchy of ideas which can be logically derived from those theses" (96). But "historically effective ideas," as Weber puts it, cannot be accounted for by capturing their meaning through any sort of logical form. It is only as a "synthesis" that ideas are historically effective, a point that Weber makes by arguing that this "synthesis is an 'idea' which *we* have created . . . those fundamental main principles have either only very imperfectly or not at all been raised to the level of explicit consciousness or at least have not taken the form of explicitly elaborated complexes of ideas" (97).

When Weber uses "habitus," which he does with some frequency, he appeals to a difference between habitus and action motivated by ideas. The main referent of habitus for Weber appears to be the relative permanence of "disposition" over self-transparent meaning that can take a semantic form. Weber (2002[1904–05]: 86) explains why German Pietism was not a conduit for the spirit of capitalism in the same way as English Puritanism, arguing that the Pietist theologian Francke Zizendorf "opposed the effort to acquire certainty of salvation for the next life through rational work and an organization of their present lives." That was the Puritan way. Zizendorf instead favored "the experience of salvation through feeling." In a footnote highlighting the difference, Weber elaborates as follows: "the Puritan is also of course really striving for a present, this-worldly disposition (*Habitus*). Yet this disposition, which he interprets to be the *certitudo salutis* [certainty of salvation], involves a feeling of being an active instrument of God's will" (2002[1904–05]: 216n166).

The Puritans (self-transparently) sought a "certainty of salvation" through work in a calling. They could deduce this certainty from the ideas

available in Protestant theology and know they were saved. But “logically” generated belief of this sort was not enough because it depended on a *priori* disposition. Weber uses “habitus” to refer to a different kind of salvation, which consists of a state of being that cannot be produced by “logical logic” in the same way. Not only that, this habitus is not individually present in this sense, which means that we render the Puritan habitus meaningless by making it a token of *subjective* meaning. For Weber, a believing habitus cannot be conveyed through systematic relations among ideas.

The skewed reading can also be contradicted by Weber’s (1978[1910]) response to the historian Felix Rachfahl’s criticism that Weber’s Protestant Ethic thesis, first, ignored obvious precedents to the capitalist spirit found in the Renaissance and late-medieval periods (particularly the pre-Reformation German merchant Jakob Fugger), and second that Protestantism simply allowed an already-existing capitalism to develop without the same resistance as observed among Catholics. Weber responded by claiming that while a figure like Jakob Fugger is a type “economic superman” whose “whole type of person” is characteristic of “big financiers . . . known throughout history” (68–69), the “habitus” he and they demonstrate is completely distinct from “the development of the habitus I christened the ‘capitalist spirit’ (ad hoc and just for my own purposes)” (66). The key distinction is between a similar habitus widely held and generated in shared social conditions versus its random appearance in isolated cases like Fugger. This is assuming of course (as Rachfahl does) that the Puritan habitus and Fugger’s are the same, which, as Weber is wont to emphasize, they are not.

To rebut Rachfahl’s contrary emphasis on the “absence of restraints on capitalism” to explain the Protestant affinity with it, Weber reaffirms that the Protestant ethic constituted “a new ‘spirit,’ at least within the worldly sphere. From their religious lives, their religiously conditioned family traditions and religiously influenced life-style and surrounding world, these people developed a habitus that made them uniquely suited to meet the demands of early modern capitalism” (Weber 2002[1904–05]: 116). Most importantly,

this demonstrates how the habitus exercises a non-transparent effect that is different from declarative beliefs and desires. Calvinism, for instance, did not simply articulate ideas. It generated “‘habitus’ among individuals which prepared them in specific ways to live up to the specific demands of early modern capitalism” (1978[1921–22]: 1124).

All of these arguments are compatible with points Weber makes in his study of world religions that are otherwise obscure to a skewed reading that commits preemptively to pure cognition, and which would focus on autonomous ideas without learning. His emphasis on the “life-conduct of those social *strata* which have most strongly influenced the practical ethic of their respective religions . . . stamped the most characteristic features upon practical ethics.” Weber continues that “as a rule one may determine the strata whose styles of life have been at least predominantly decisive for certain religions” (1991[1920]: 268). This is the context for affinities between Confucianism and “prebendaries . . . men with literary educations who were characterized by a secular rationalism,” Hinduism and “a hereditary caste of cultured literati,” Christianity and “itinerant artisan journeyman” to name just three (268–69). This removes emphasis from autonomous ideas and replaces it with life-conduct and practical ethics; this in turn dictates a more or less declarative status in acquired religion.

Thus, Weber finds a connection between different types of salvation and different social strata or the affinity between salvation religion and particular social strata as the social location for religious belief. Here we can retrieve statements like “as a rule, the class of warrior nobles . . . have not readily become the carriers of a rational religious ethic. The life pattern of a warrior has very little affinity with the systematic ethical demands of a transcendental god” (1991[1920]: 85). Weber makes a rationalization argument using similar terms: “As the process of rationalization went forward, the goal of methodically planned religious sanctification increasingly transformed the acute intoxication induced by orgy into a milder but more permanent *habitus*” (158). Affinity, habitus, life pattern, and conduct: none of these are

compatible with the reading that finds in Weber a strict preserve of ideas and values, with their own “charisma” without learning, and with belief only as stated belief, thus preserving the contours of cognitive presence on pure grounds.

Weber (1978[1921–22]: 1116) himself alludes to the relevant distinction behind this in an apparently cryptic statement, but the point of which he seems to affirm again and again: “‘ideas’ have *the same psychological roots* whether they are religious, artistic, ethical, scientific or whatever else; this also applies to ideas about social and political organization. It is a time-bound subjective value-judgment which would like to attribute some of these to ‘reason’ and others to intuition (or whatever other distinctions may be used).” Weber mentions this as part of a broader discussion of charisma. Contrary to Parsons’ interpretation of the very same passage (1937: 653), ideational content for Weber is *not* the primary source for the “charisma” that drives belief. That charisma (e.g. the compellingness of ideas) has “psychological roots” in something *not* available to a fixed deciphering of signified meaning outside of conditions of learning.

### 30.3.2 Durkheim, the Tacit Dimension and the Source of Categories

Weber is not alone in making arguments that find the empirical presence of cognition and use a distinction of psychology and logic to emphasize this. In *Primitive Classification* Durkheim and Mauss find the logical aspect to classification—“groups,” “classes,” “co-ordinated or subordinate to the other,” “some of which are dominant”—but argue that “all these logical notions have an *extra-logical origin*” (1963[1903]: 8). As they continue, “the scheme of classification is not the spontaneous product of abstract understanding, but results from a process into which all sorts of foreign elements enter.” The foreign elements in this case are “extra-logical” and so whatever classification does logically, it cannot do this on its own. “We must on the contrary ask ourselves what could have led them to arrange their ideas in this

way and where they could have found the plan of this remarkable disposition” (9). The rudimentary logic of classification, then, must be explained extra-logically by finding *empirical* origins as the learned source of a cognitive capacity to be logical.

In his analysis of ritual practice in the *Elementary Forms*, Durkheim clearly spells out an empirical link running from practice to the content of cognition. As Durkheim writes, “a *collective sentiment cannot express itself* collectively except on the condition of observing a certain order permitting cooperation and *movements in unison*” (1995 [1912]: 247). As he continues, in order “to become conscious of itself [as a created unity], the group does not need to perform certain acts in preference to all others. The necessary thing is that it partakes of *the same thought and the same action*” (1995 [1912]: 432). Group cohesion seems to depend principally on representations in common, but this is misleading according to Durkheim: “When this homogeneity is once established and these movements have once taken a stereotyped form, they serve to symbolize the corresponding representations. But they symbolize them only because *they have aided in forming them*” (1995 [1912]: 263). If movements in common have aided in forming representation of the group, then collective representations

. . . presuppose that minds act and react upon one another; they are the product of these actions and reactions which are themselves possible only through material intermediaries. These latter do not confine themselves to revealing the mental state with which they are associated; *they aid in creating it*. Individual minds cannot come in contact and communicate with each other except by coming out of themselves; but they cannot do this except by movements. So it is the *homogeneity of these movements* that gives the group consciousness of itself and consequently makes it exist (1995 [1912]: 263; emphases added to all)

There is much ambiguity and debate over what Durkheim means by these phrases, and whether they refer to an epistemology, a set of beliefs, or whether they refer simply to the enactment of practices. That they refer to an epistemology *and* an enactment of practices becomes clear in a seldom recognized claim in the *Division of*

*Labor* where Durkheim gives a “soul” to each science, and which lives in the “conscience of scholars. . . . The formulas that express it . . . are easily translated. But such is not the case with this other part of science which no symbol translates without [*sic*]. . . . [We] can know it only if we ourselves have practiced. . . .” (1949[1903/1912]: 362).

This is an epistemological claim, but one that recognizes a generative source for science in certain learned dispositions that, in comparison to published scientific research, or even observable epistemic practices, remain *tacit* and yet available for empirical inspection. Durkheim reiterates the same point in more vivid terms:

[Modern science] does not entirely consist of some propositions which have been definitively proved. Alongside of this actual, realized science, there is another, *concrete and living*, which is in part ignorant of itself, and yet seeks itself; *besides acquired results, there are hopes, habits, instincts, needs, presentiments so obscure that they cannot be expressed in words*, yet so powerful that they sometimes dominate the whole life of the scholar (362).<sup>3</sup>

Durkheim’s epistemology (even the “early” Durkheim) would repay study, then, with more careful attention to his attempt to avoid a purely cognitive account of a delimited field (like science) by making the field less a body of explicit knowledge and more an enacted cognitive demarcation with an empirical presence.

### 30.3.3 Marx and The Practical Question

Marx provides what is arguably the clearest demonstration of finding the cognitive limits of logical validity by purposefully avoiding this approach to critical knowledge or meaning in his early resistance to Hegel and his brazen

young epigones. It was through his dismissal of “criticism” as a dissection of the logic of ideas that Marx (1978[1844–45]: 144) would define practice as the “objective truth of human thinking.” His attempt was not to “explain practice from the idea but . . . the formation of ideas from material practice” (Marx and Engels 1978 [1844–45]: 153), which implies a psychological rather than logical criterion for cognition and finds a generative source. Marx refers to “consciousness” as having content in a form not accessible to logical analysis, but acquired instead from practical activity in relation to both the sensuous environment and “the necessity of associating with [other] individuals” (158). A Hegelian critique can dissolve an idea on strictly logical terms by transforming it into religion (e.g. a signified excess, dialectically unfolding); but this lacks an objective truth because it not only presupposes such criticism as a practical activity that would allow one to *learn* this, but the content of this activity is more attributable to *other* practical activity than it is to logical meaning.

Marx (1973[1846–47]: 95) remains consistent on this point in his critique of “categories” in bourgeois political economy (and Proudhon) that are uncritically (e.g. logically) used because they seem subjectively necessary. What seems subjectively necessary only carries any *objective* truth through the “unceasing sensuous labor and creation” that generates everything that appears spontaneously given, certain, and unquestionable, and *without* which it would *not* appear as such or at all. In their critique of Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx and Engels (1978[1844–5]: 44–5) demonstrate how each object that obtains an unremarkable “sensuous certainty” for Feuerbach—a cherry tree, “man”, “overworked consumptive starvelings,” even Feuerbach himself, a philosopher who, in relative comfort, looks out of a window and *contemplates* nature—finds historically-specific generative conditions in “living sensuous activity.”

Feuerbach’s thought is a form of cognitive presence, then, but we do not understand it by applying a well-defined convention as any logical analysis would do. We understand it by understanding it as a practical activity locatable in

<sup>3</sup> Durkheim anticipates what the philosopher and chemist Michael Polanyi (1966) would later call the “tacit dimension” of knowledge, and which for him explained the supposed anomaly that scientific discoveries are “made” in advance of a participant in a field being able to explicitly articulate the discovery.

social relations, the historically specific conditions for which give insight into what allowed the sort of learning demonstrated there to have taken place. In Marx we also find pure cognition recognized and transformed into practical activity. In his account, practical activity runs ahead (historically) of pure cognition and creates the (seemingly discoverable or intuited) content that it will later use in order to build its grand edifice: “the *senses* have become *theoreticians* in their immediate praxis. They relate to the thing for its own sake, but the thing itself is an objective human relation . . .” (Marx 1974[1844]: 132).

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### 30.4 Varieties of Empirical Cognition

If the above discussion shows how a distinction between the logical and the psychological did not go unrecognized by Weber, Durkheim or Marx, we can also find demonstrations in their voluminous writing of how empirical cognition can be relevant for a human science not surreptitiously indebted to Kant’s rapture. I will now examine in more detail at least three *classical* ways to locate cognition’s empirical presence: in practical cognition, in social differentiation, and in autonomous symbols.

#### 30.4.1 Practical Cognition

Belief as pure cognition can only include “belief about,” the content of which must be representational and semantic. In empirical cognition, “belief” has content that derives from practical activity and does not require a representational or semantically-accessible form, though it *could* be more or less declarative (and accessible to language) depending on how it is learned/acquired. For Durkheim and Marx, “belief” in this definition applies to ideal states or solutions (like social justice or “communist society”) in which the content is not principles or values but found in the details of practical activity and the cognitive content *this* carries as empirical presence. Weber, meanwhile, makes a proposal

about “collective entities” that is conventionally read (following Parsons) as depending on concepts, but which (as part of “societization”) actually implies something more directly about “the real process of action” as generative for collective concepts and, more specifically, for making possible declarative references to things *as* collective.

Durkheim’s argument is better known and more extensively spelled out, so we can start there. Collective sentiment is a cognitive content, according to Durkheim, but it requires participation in a certain order permitting cooperation and movements in unison, which is to say, a very detailed *practice*. Belief or mythology are a speech-based and symbolically-mediated content that requires a “collective conscience” *first* as generated by movements in unison. But this is not limited to Durkheim’s (1995[1912]) account of the “elemental” forms of religions; in fact, such a generative model is found in his first work on the division of labor, and it applies to his recommendation for difference and diversity as moral order.

One clue appears in the last paragraph of the *Division of Labor* where Durkheim makes a normative claim but bases it on practical cognition, or more specifically cognition’s empirical presence *in practice*. The solution to anomie in highly differentiated social contexts cannot “resuscitate traditions” or rely on symbolically-mediated beliefs. The problem, as Durkheim puts it, is to “discover the means for making [those] wasting themselves in discordant movements harmoniously concur by introducing more justice into their relations” (Durkheim 1949[1893/1902]: 409). The obscure phrasing aside, the focus here is significant: social justice applies as a cognitive content to specific “movements.”

If social justice is an ideal in contexts of increasing differentiation and diversity, then as Durkheim suggests, it is a cognitive effect of practices with certain specific details. And it is these details that must be followed, which means that social justice is not a matter of drafting a symbolic ideal the cognitive presence of which will always be in pure principles and specific conditions of (necessarily exclusive) acquisition,

that action can only *then* follow. As Durkheim puts it, “[E]very general proposition lets a part of the material it tries to master escape. It is impossible to establish the concrete characters and distinctive properties of things in the same impersonal and homogenous formula” (Durkheim 1949[1893/1902]: 363). Social justice, instead, will only exist in empirical cognition; though when its conditions have been “purified” in some way, this stands very peculiarly apart as the practice that contains it. That practice can only involve *applying* “ideas” to a context as if what that context lacked was cognition, when in fact it already has it, just in a different and, by comparison, *minor* form.

For Marx and Engels, “self-activity” conveys a similar point by giving cognition an empirical presence, this time in historicized senses. In *The German Ideology* they similarly trace a historical dissolution of social bonds that are not distinct or differentiated from individuality: “a nobleman is always a nobleman, a commoner is always a commoner, apart from his other relationships, [this is] a quality inseparable from his individuality” (1978[1844–45]: 199). A division appears between “the personal and the class individual” as a consequence of the generalized presence of “competition” and “big industry” or the genesis of capital from local and natural to being accumulated, industrial and global.

This is not simply a structural transformation, however, because more fundamentally it involves a change in “self-activity.” This is important for a specific reason, Marx and Engels claim, because self-activity carries a cognitive content in its detail as a practical activity, a content (in other words) not attributable to anything with priority to activity itself. “Accidental,” for example, is a cognitive content generated by self-activity in the precise sociohistorical context of capitalist society and its systematic irresponsibility for economic life from an individual point of view. Among other things, it expresses the impossibility to contest outcomes within the rules. When capital arranges material life, this corresponds to conditions of life that “seem accidental . . . the condition of their existence, labour, and with all the conditions of existence governing modern

society, have become something accidental . . . This accidental character is only engendered and developed by competition and the struggle of individuals against themselves” (1978 [1844–45]: 199). Self-activity under these conditions revolves around the reproduction of material life, which now requires the “[appropriation of] the existing totality of productive forces.” Because these forces include large-scale industry and competition (“developed to a totality and which only exist in universal intercourse”) labor becomes the primary form of self-activity, with all other forms now secondary to self-expansion and growing surplus.

This has an important twofold effect. First, the reproduction of material life involves “the struggle of individuals against themselves.” This is the principal source of particular conditions of life that seem accidental because they are decided by the “fortuity and chance” of market exposure that subjects individuals to cumulative decision and distinct social necessity. However, this kind of *social* consciousness does not constitute the entire cognitive profile of the individual. Secondly, and importantly, self-activity still carries a cognitive content independent from this. If the individual alone “has no chance of arriving at the conditions which would place him in the other class” (1978[1844–45]: 200), then wage-labor provides for cognition that contradicts with “accident” from a different cognitive source because it demonstrates the immediate control and collectivity of labor.

The contradiction between the “individuality of each separate proletarian and labor” must involve a contradiction in the composition of two cognitive sources, then, one that arises from self-activity and “corresponds with material life,” the other as the product of competitive organization “as separate individuals.” As Marx and Engels continue, “communist society” consists of such specific details of self-activity and its cognitive effect that the “intercourse of individuals as such” is not conditioned by fortuity and chance in which there is no way, within these activities themselves, to contest the terms of sale. Rather than the revolutionary potential of an organizing ideal that is slowly liberated

(e.g. “purely” as rights, justice, freedom), cognition is liberatory, instead, as a form of self-activity that stands in contradiction to cognition that is otherwise drawn out from the same self-activity and, using professional mental labor, sponsored by the powers that be as “facts of the matter” (192).

Thus, Marx and Engels recover an ideal cognitive content as an *empirical* claim that is not fundamentally different from what Durkheim means by difference and diversity as moral order. Both accounts concentrate on a generative link between practice and cognition that does not precede action but follows from it. In fact, both arguments focus on practical cognition as a kind of *summa* of social transformation, with certain means (e.g. material redistribution, equal opportunity, inclusiveness) going toward the end of ensuring the practice or self-activity that will *allow* for an ideal cognitive content not as a grand design or organizing ideal finally achieved and implemented but as an empirical presence that never takes primary form as a “theory” or “principle”. The limits of language for forming *a priori* definitions of social justice suggests the need to examine ideal or non-ideal cognitive content from generative conditions instead, with a history and social location, rooted in practical activity.<sup>4</sup>

While Weber does not make a similar appeal to transformative practice, he provides a tantalizing glimpse at what the priority of action means for “overestimating [the] cognitive value” of referring to collective entities while not also acknowledging their cognitive source in activity:

These *concepts of collective entities* [at state, nation, corporation, family] which are found both in common-sense and in juristic and other technical forms of thought, have a meaning in the minds of individual persons, partly as of something actually existing, partly as something with normative authority. This is true not only of judges and officials, but of ordinary private individuals as well. Actors thus in part orient their action to them, and in this role *such ideas have a powerful,*

*often a decisive, causal influence* on the course of action of real individuals ... Though extremely pedantic and cumbersome, it would be possible, if the purposes of sociological terminology alone were involved, to eliminate such terms entirely, and substitute newly coined words. This would be possible even though the word “state” is used ordinarily not only to designate a legal concepts but also *the real process of action* (Weber 1978 [1921–22]: 14; emphasis added).

Starting from the *concept* of a collective entity, Weber argues further for the “probability of action” that allows a collective entity like the state to exist (1978[1921–22]: 27). The “pedantic and cumbersome” task he mentions would involve a detailed retrieval of the “real process of action” (focused, in particular, on *orientation* to what is only ever *probable*) that generates and maintains the “state-idea” as a declarative form that can be meaningfully referenced, but not as a representation that *constructs* its object. This is not dissimilar from how Weber defines a social relationship as “the *behavior* of a plurality of actors insofar as, *in its meaningful content*, the action of each takes account of that of the others and is oriented in these terms” (26; emphasis added). Weber does not define the concept of social relationship with priority over the action that sustains its meaningful content. The two are, rather, entangled. This appeals to a psychological rather than logical criteria of meaning, which in this case means attention to detailed practice.

If there is an advantage to Marx’s practical cognition, it is that he does not make one practical activity the *only* cognitive source or only means of acquisition and learning. Competition of individual versus individual is a cognitive source with a lasting effect, is past-oriented, and contradicts with present and continuous self-activity as, in Marx’s terms, the contradiction between collective control and abstract domination. Without having this dual source of cognition and lack of coherence of acquired dispositions, social change is impossible on Marx’s account, and this begs the question of the differences between two practical sources of cognitive content. In Marx’s case, the difference suggests the episodic nature of one practical activity and the continuity of the other. If competition makes one’s particular condition

<sup>4</sup> Consider Durkheim’s argument: “[P]hilosophy is the collective conscience of science, and here as elsewhere, the role of collective conscience becomes smaller as labor is divided” (Durkheim 1949 [1893/1902]: 364).

seem “accidental,” then this refers to a long-term effect that does not happen continuously, but carries enough significance (in its detail) to make it cognitively durable. Marx uses this to refer to the accidental nature of one’s class position relative to others, though the competition is not fair because it is impossible to “win” by moving to another class.

The ritual moments closely described by Durkheim (1995[1912]: 330–354) in the *Elementary Forms* are similarly modes of acquisition with durability. Durkheim draws a contrast to metaphysics with the durability cognition’s empirical presence, making the duality of “soul and body” a dualism of “collective consciousness” and “individual consciousness” as two different generative sources of varied presence: specifically, “public festivals, ceremonies and rites” and “personal existence . . . everyday personal preoccupations” (Durkheim 2005[1912]: 43, 1995[1912]: 217–18). There is a heightened emotional intensity to the collective moments that leave one cognitive source and content distinct from the other.

Marx, meanwhile, furthers a compositional pluralism that rests more on contradiction than duality. The sphere of circulation that supplies the “free trader vulgaris with his views, his concepts and the standard by which he judges the society of capital and wage-labor.” A presumptive labor exchange is the “exclusive realm of Freedom, Equality, Property and Bentham.” Yet, the very physiognomy of capital and labor changes after this moment such that they are no longer a moral *dramatis personae* (Marx 1976 [1867]: 280). This is the detail to which Marx alludes in order to capture the lingering effect of this “exchange of commodities” as contradictory with a different practical activity as a different mode of cognitive acquisition. In addition to rituals, this practical activity becomes a generative source of dispositions. They are situations that correspond to a learned content and its lasting historical trace.

### 30.4.2 Social Differentiation and Cognitive Differentiation

If practical cognition is one classical way of finding empirical cognition, then we can identify another way in the connection often made by classical theorists between differentiation (as a social process) and changes to “states of consciousness,” “the presence of symbolism,” or the relative strength of “social consciousness,” all of which can be categorized as cognitive on empirical grounds. This appeals to a link between social differentiation and cognitive differentiation, social breaks recapitulated as cognitive breaks, and a process like *learning* that takes precedence over the *a priori* imputation of basic cognitive capacities.

Marx (1977[1843]), for one, describes consciousness as first “merely consciousness concerning the immediate sensuous environment” that is totally undifferentiated. The only external force perceived in this situation is nature, reflected in what Marx calls a natural religion and restricted cosmos based on highly “restricted relations” between individuals and with nature. Yet the “consciousness of associating with other individuals” is the beginning of consciousness as *always* linked to “living in a society.” Marx makes an animal analogy at this point: the “herd-consciousness” that applies to a condition of minimal social differentiation is different from pure instinct because it is conscious. Its social presence makes the consciousness of instinct always relative to an association with other individuals.

In this genealogy, the primary source of social differentiation is the “division of labor” as it passes through distinct iterations and transforms its configuration. Originally the division of sexual labor, it secondarily appears as a division of labor based on “natural predisposition” and the difference of embodied traits. Both of these precede the most consequential differentiation of all as the division between *material and mental labor*.

From this moment onwards consciousness *can* really flatter itself that it is something other than consciousness of existing practice, that it really represents something without representing something real; from now on consciousness is in a position to emancipate itself from the world (Marx and Engels 1978[1844–45]: 166).

The division of labor signals differences in practice, but this becomes obscured when that division produces a type of “sensuous human activity” that is differentiated as “mental.” If mental labor happens to devolve upon certain individuals and not others, a highly *differentiated* consciousness presupposes social differentiation as a historical precondition for holding an immediate practical situation in consciousness but the situation to a semantically accessible “concept” based on a differentiation that has allowed for specific learning. Social differentiation is thus a signal for differences in practical activity that dictates the *historicity* of cognition. Marx appropriates an insight central to idealism and resolves categorical oppositions into a common form, as dichotomies become historically developed capacities. Practical activity makes them cognitive as a mode of acquisition. Because that is differentiated, rather than a banal integrated event, embodiment (“historicized senses”) itself assumes a contradictory form: specifically, declarative capabilities come to mismatch with non-declarative capabilities.

But Marx is not alone in linking a process of social differentiation to differences in practical activity and differentiated cognition. Consider this argument from Weber.

Feudal socialization leads . . . to a permeation of the most important life relationships with strictly personal bonds, which characteristically means that the chivalric feeling of dignity resides in precisely the cult of the personal. This feeling thus constitutes the most extreme antithesis of all objective-business relationships, which therefore must be, and always have been, valued by the feudal ethic as coarse and lacking in dignity.

It is the capacity of “play” that distinguishes the education and way of life of the specifically feudal system, as exemplified by a knighted army and the “individual perfection in the personal art of weaponry” which was the goal of military

education. This had a distinct cognitive effect in Weber’s view. Play remains undifferentiated and does not produce basic categorical distinctions because the mode of acquisition for cognitive capacities is *not* a specialized activity (specialized activity being the antithesis of play).

Under these social conditions, it is no more a mere ‘pastime’ than in organic life, but it is rather the naturally developed form in which the psychophysical powers of the organism are kept lively and supple. It is a form of ‘exercise’ which, in its unforced and unbroken animality and instinctiveness, still stands beyond any division of ‘intellectual’ and ‘material,’ of ‘body’ and ‘soul,’ no matter how much it may be sublimated through convention (1978[1921–22]: 1105)

Weber describes the traits of practical activity mirrored in the consequences of embodied traits. The opposition between “feudal ethic” and “objective-business” is the opposition of cognitive capacities that reflect different modes of acquisition: on the one hand, the non-differentiated play that mixes all capacities together in one lively expression; on the other hand, the differentiated specialization characteristic of a disciplinary arrangement that allows for only a rationalized expression. Similarly, this historicizes distinct categories (mental and physical) and cognitive capabilities by locating them in practical activity and tracing this historically to social differentiation.

Durkheim, meanwhile, provides an elaborate connection between social differentiation and cognitive differentiation on a more general scale:

So long as societies do not attain a certain size or a certain level of concentration, *the sole psychological life that is really developed is one in common* to all the members of the group, one that is identical in each individual. But as societies grow larger and above all more densely populated, a psychological life of a new kind makes its appearance. Individual differences, at first lost, mixed up in the mass of social similarities, begin to emerge, take shape and multiply. *A host of things that remained outside of individual consciousness because they did not affect the collective become the object of representations.* Whereas individuals acted only because they were urged on by one another, except in cases where their behavior was determined by physical needs, each one of them becomes a

spontaneous source of activity. Individual personalities are formed and become conscious of themselves. Yet this *growth in the psychological life of the individual* does not weaken that of society, but merely transforms it. It becomes freer and more extensive, and since in the end it has no other substrata than the consciousnesses of individuals, these latter grow, becoming more complex and incidentally more flexible (1949[1903/1912]: 285; emphasis added).

Earlier in the *Division of Labor*, Durkheim argues that the “effacement of the individual has its origin in [the] complete absence of any centralization. It is the product of a state of homogeneity . . . If the individual is not distinct from the group, it is because the individual consciousness is almost indistinct from the collective consciousness” (144). It would be naive to argue that a state of homogeneity automatically signals a *lack* of differentiation, but Durkheim’s point is that the consciousness of an individual self consists of *that which persists* across qualitatively different situations, which are generally not found when one encounters the same individuals, particularly in the same space and setting, again and again. Becoming a “spontaneous source of agency” is cognitively generated from the experience of a base-level mismatch that cannot be put into words and which draws action back toward an effortful accommodation of dispositions acquired in the past. It will (relatively) disappear with slower learning in a specific and differentiated space of activity. With enough time, however, this can also lead to a declining consciousness of self without moving out of this increasingly familiarized setting (and people) and into different ones that again call upon an effortful accommodation.

Social differentiation appears in less-hidden form as a proxy for conditions (institutional boundaries, common objects, repeated activity) necessary for slow learning and dispositions that are shared but not symbolically mediated. The less historicized (and more naturalistic) version of Durkheim differs from Weber’s close detail-orientation and Marx’s diagnosis of practical activity. In all cases, however, cognition’s empirical presence reflects specific conditions of learning and acquisition as being historically

present.<sup>5</sup> Cognitive differentiation corresponds to social differentiation, in a classical sense, including both declarative and non-declarative forms of presence, degrees of durability, compositional pluralism, cognitive dualism and contradiction.

### 30.4.3 On the Social Possibility of Autonomous Symbols

As a third and final way of locating empirical cognition, we find classical theorists focusing on autonomous symbols (of all sorts) and trying to tell a social story about their very possibility, even though this infringes on the sacred space otherwise reserved for religion, morality and philosophy. Here we can return to a basic point that draws our attention away from the (pure) cognitive content we might otherwise find in the accounts given by mental laborers in each of these areas and toward something far more empirical. A praxeology, or practice symmetry will argue that any recordable process that we might make valid for *logical* reasons can only be defended for psychological (empirical) reasons and given a generative source. This involves an analytic of learning and enablement focused on acquired dispositions and capabilities. In the case of autonomous symbols retrievable from language, the classical tradition provides an argument that appeals to social differentiation and cognitive differentiation but focuses additionally

<sup>5</sup> Durkheim provides a remarkably attentive historical treatment of the appearance of dispositions in *The Evolution of Educational Thought*. Consider his discussion of what is *scholastic*: “It seems then, in a general way, that in the sixteenth century, at least throughout that part of cultivated society whose ideas and sentiments have come down to us from literature . . . a *style of life* was thought to be realizable and to be in the process of being realized which would be liberated from all preoccupation, unencumbered by any constraint and servitude, a *kind of activity* which would not be forced to submit itself to narrowly utilitarian ends, to canalize itself, to regulate itself so that it could adapt to reality . . . the immediate necessities of life, as well as the urgent need to prepare the child in advance to confront them, seemed to have been lost sight of” (Durkheim 1977[1904]: 218-19; emphasis added).

on the practical activity that *allows* for autonomous symbols rather than attending to them *a priori*.

In Marx's (1977[1843]) early *Kritik* of Hegel, he concentrates on the differentiation of previously conjoined spheres of social activity that he refers to generally as particular interests and general interests. The "modern phenomenon" in Marx's view is the separation of the world of work and material needs from its prior entanglement that prevented any clear recognition of the general and the particular and meant that the political remained general but also indefinite (32). The appearance of the "general interest" thus requires a prior objective dissociation within a field of action. Alongside "the real life of the people," a distinct sphere emerges of *seemingly* general interests, that will, however, dictate what the "general" means and contest what its "interest" is.

What is particularly intriguing is how Marx develops these points to refer to what is essentially a cognitive difference. The differentiation of activity as economic and political mean that certain things have a particular or private significance that find no grounds for political appeal but only individualized retribution. This differentiated consciousness, which Hegel recognized, can be explained by tracing the differentiation of practical activity from a prior condition of "substantive unity" (Marx 1977[1843]: 104).

Such a link between practical activity and consciousness is not far-fetched once we recognize that cognitive differentiation can lead to a cognitive profile of various dispositions and what for Marx appear as "saying versus doing" paradoxes. For Marx's criticism of the idea of "the general interest," he addresses the position of those whose practical activity is "particular" while the general interest exists for them only through symbolic mediation and the mental labor of others. This poses the evidence of the senses against a purely semantic reference to "the general interest" or something like it. That this duality is historical means that self-consciousness of this sort requires a social and cognitive splitting off from materially-oriented activity, which itself splits

off into a specific form as wage-labor that mutes the discursive capability to change social relations (Marx 1974[1844]: 276–77). For instance, a "justice of the high, the middle and the low," which we might call "feudal," did not call itself that because this presupposes a social differentiation necessary for this self-consciousness, in which the whole could seem "designed for knowledge" (see Marx 1977[1843]: 57ff).

This implies two things: first, that practical activity ("self-activity") provides its own cognitive content. Second, that differentiation in the form of mental labor adds to self-consciousness but can also perform in the role of mystification as an empirical cognitive presence. Mental labor is its *own* specialized practical activity, the detail of which enables symbolic products to be autonomous from, rival or even dominate practical cognition in a contradiction that often appears in paradox and hypocrisy. This invites a genetic question about social locations as sources of cognitive content, and how autonomous symbols are not different from practical activity but imply their *own* practical activity.

For Weber, this finds echoes in the transformation of myth to religion, and how this could not have occurred without the development of a specialized corps of religious producers and social differentiation as a division of religious labor. Weber provides a vivid portrait of this specialized corps in the *Sociology of Religion* when he describes the "process of abstraction" that produces belief in "beings concealed 'behind' and responsible for the activity of the charismatically endowed natural objects, artifacts, animals, and persons. This is the belief in spirits."

[Like] all abstraction [this] is most advanced in those societies within which persons possess charismatic magical powers that inhere *only in those with special qualifications* ... [This] *proliferation of symbolic acts* ... will have far-reaching consequences ... [Actions] that address themselves to a spirit or soul, hence done by instrumentalities that 'mean' something, i.e. symbols. Thereafter naturalism may be swept away by a flood of symbolic actions. The occurrence of this displacement of naturalism depends upon the success with which the *professional masters of the symbolic* use their status of power within the community to impart

vigor and intellectual elaboration to their beliefs (Weber 1991[1920]: 6–7; emphasis added).

This describes the proliferation of symbolic acts in a manner that resembles the proliferation of meaning construction as potentially declarative that maintains a dual relationship to action. Symbolism of this sort could appeal to an ideological rendering of the world in the same manner as Marx, leveraging the emptiness of speech against action as the “truth of human thinking.” However, professional symbol producers themselves possess non-symbolic practical competences that are possible only because of the differentiation of practical activity, and it matters in this case that the religious producers appeal to “specifically religious interests” among those outside of their differentiated space. Religious interests, however, must have *nothing* to do with a religious content attributable to them without this differentiation. Rather, the splitting off of symbol production becomes “religious” in relation to dispositions for which certain symbols provide this sort of evocative access, which means it would otherwise *lack* a religious content. Pre-existing dispositions (highly segmented) will constitute specifically religious interests from the relation between religious symbol producers and forms of life among religious believers.

This is a cognitive relation of symbols, then, that unlock and arrange a pre-existing mental content, but it does not do this as a coherent worldview or belief system. As an argument for empirical cognition, a similar relation can be found in Durkheim’s argument for the twofold source of the meaning of symbols, between an immanent feeling or tacit mental content and external symbols that allow us to “conceive of it with any clarity at all” (Durkheim 1995[1912]: 213–214). For the totem to be a symbol, it must be an “outward and visible form” of what otherwise has a “hold over consciousness” but cannot be expressed without a symbolic vehicle (208–209). Belief or meaning does not assume the form of representation but appears as a matching relation between pre-existing cognitive content and the external form or symbol that imperfectly alludes to it.

This extends even further, as Durkheim connects logical thought to an initial sense, “at least confusedly, that there is a truth distinct from sense appearance.” As he continues, “even if it was only . . . the idea expressed in philosophical formulas, it necessarily existed *before* . . . as a vague awareness. Philosophers sought to clarify this awareness, they did not create it.” The generative source for this pre-existing content is “collective experience” and its practical content as sense transcendence (Durkheim 1995[1912]: 438). Durkheim applies a similar argument to morality, with the moralist replacing the philosopher as the source of articulation: “every moral system, whatever it may be, has an ideal . . . [The moral ideal] lives, evolves and is transformed ceaselessly.” As these “various currents flow through society, attracting adherents, [they] achieve self-awareness and deliberate expression through [the moralist]” (Durkheim 1978[1920]: 193). Both morality and logic are forceful expressions based on symbolic affirmation. For Durkheim, they have a clear generative source: a combination of pre-existing cognitive content that derives from collective experience with evocative symbols supplied by symbol producers.

Marx, Weber, and Durkheim all identify the social differentiation of those who produce symbols as important empirically for what resembles a cognitive theory of cultural meaning more than the priority autonomous symbols or ideas known only according to rules of pure cognition. Empirical cognition identifies an inchoate and pre-existing cognitive content instead and links the autonomy of symbols to a social relation with symbol producers in their own arena of practice as the occasion for a particular symbolic system rather than its having a fundamental mechanism assigned *a priori*.

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## 30.5 Conclusion

Practical cognition, social differentiation, and autonomous symbols are not outside the realm of discussion of classical theory, but neither are they impervious to empirical cognition. They could very well carry meaning only in relation

to pure cognition and that would give them a very different significance. The purpose here has been to establish a different reading as true to the letter of classical theory and also as a preliminary illustration of new keywords like cognition, practice, and learning that remain of minor significance by comparison to structure, sign and play. By re-reading a classical tradition in this manner, the chapter seeks to make a step toward the clarity and consequences of finding the general presuppositions and “criteria of evaluation” that prevail in human science about cognition, and what it would mean to switch from a *de facto* pure cognition to empirical cognition.

Pure cognition connotes the island and its protected sphere, as I have argued, that is enacted through methods and techniques that establish this protection and its distance, maintained by specific rules and laws. This is ultimately irreconcilable with empirical presence in a form that does not fill in the blank retroactively. Rather than an excess of signified beyond a referent that needs to be interpreted with the application of form, there are conditions of possibility that need to be socially found and historically located because they have cognitive content. This follows when cognition is empirical and includes forms of cognitive presence conventionally approached only from a stance of purity, like “meaning.”

A praxeology, or practice symmetry, implies its own dualisms and differences, but of acquired dispositions that enable different forms of cognitive presence, more specifically of a compositional pluralism of saying and doing, speech and action, declarative and non-declarative. As classical theory suggests in contrast to more recent theoretical interventions, this requires methods that do not separate agency and meaning but instead can treat both using the same framework and as extensions of a shared generative process, namely as practices that might not “mean” anything but that still work nevertheless (and whose working we need not guess at, lest we reestablish a kind of transcendence). A *learned* capacity can take form as either speech or action; the same acquisition can be saying for some and doing for others. This fixes our attention on little

understood modes of acquisition that enable this relative efficacy and composition and helps bring cognition into the center of the human sciences without, at the same, marginalizing it.

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