3 Adaptation
Talcott Parsons

For several decades, received sociological wisdom has been that Talcott Parsons's structural functionalism offers a vision of the human being that is straightforwardly passive and role conforming. This assessment, which usually centres on a critical reading of Parsons's (1970 [1951]) *The Social System*, is based on the claim that consensually established cultural values frame the pool of acceptable responses for individuals within any given social setting. Through processes of internalisation, institutionalisation and socialisation, members of society would all from a young age learn what is expected of them; in turn, society's mechanisms for punishments and rewards would be institutionalised through an equally consensual and consistent pattern.[1]

One problem of this line of critique is that, at best, it is only a partial representation of Parsons's position; not least as he effectively disowned the central tenets of this intermediate theoretical framework soon after publication (1953). Yet the fact that his definitive theoretical model of the four functions – the so-called AGIL – still has no apparent place for the active powers of agency does not help the case of Parsons's defence. From a strictly *sociological* perspective, Parsons's concept of the modern individual is little more than a residual category within his explicit project of conceptualising social relations as an emergent and autonomous domain, and modern societies as an evolutionary accomplishment of the human species as a whole (1971). While modern *individualism* became a salient ideological and cultural force in modernity as early as the seventeenth century (Macpherson 1964), for most of Parsons's career ideas of the individual and the human are little more than a black box: they were expected to provide all the necessary elements, though inconsistently put

[1] Canonically, this critique is available in Alvin Gouldner (1973), C. W. Mills (1961) and Ralf Dahrendorf's discussion of *homo sociologicus* (see Introduction). The 'definitive' formulation of this critique belongs to Dennis Wrong (1977: 31–54) and his idea of the 'oversocialised concept of man'. It is worthy of note, however, that Wrong himself grew increasingly dissatisfied with the exaggerated way in which this criticism was being misused. See also Menzies (1977) and Owens (2010).

together, of an implicit anthropology. Parsons did have the tendency to exaggerate normative integration in society and he did pay particular attention to the internalisation of norms and the ability to conform to institutional behaviour. We do know, moreover, that this is connected to his early critique of neoclassical economics and the *homo oeconomicus*: Parsons pushed for the institutionalisation of sociology as a social science on the grounds that it made visible the normative structures that made possible instrumental and strategic action (Camic 1991). Considerations about the autonomy of the individual were systematically undervalued as part of the effort of delimiting a strictly *social* world that was to become sociology's specific cognitive domain.

But for the project of a philosophical sociology, the idea of an 'oversocialised concept of man' remains insufficient as an account of Parsons's idea of the human. It shall be my contention that, while it *is* possibly to interpret Parsons's conception of the human as role-adaptive behaviour, this is the case only in relation to his narrow disciplinary interest in sociology – not least in relation to the centrality of the idea of society as the paradigmatic social system.[2] But my starting point in this book has been that, in order to fully grasp underlying conceptions of the human, no single disciplinary position is enough. Parsons did make it clear, moreover, that while his immediate interest was in sociology, the ultimate goal of his theoretical project was the development of a general theory for the human sciences that was to focus on the idea of *action* (1977). Sociology remained central throughout his career, of course: first, because AGIL itself emerged out of a sociological perspective and was thus formulated always as a *social* understanding of science; second, because sociology was the particular science that concentrates on the symbolic and interpretative character of human action. But we will see that Parsons fully realised that sociology was insufficient for the study of human action *as a whole* – not least because human action could not be reduced to its symbolic aspects. Indeed, there is a permanent tension in his writing between engaging and developing theoretical arguments for a unified science of sociology and the broader, even more ambitious project of a general theory of human action. It is then hardly a coincidence that one of his last published papers is explicitly devoted to how can AGIL contribute to the development of 'the paradigm of the human condition' (Parsons 1978). As we explore this general argument on the human condition, rather than the derivative conception of modern man that comes out of his sociology, a more nuanced picture emerges, one that becomes useful for the project of

[2] This is, in effect, the strongest influence Parsons exercised on the most salient representative of the next generation of sociological functionalism – Niklas Luhmann. See, above all, Luhmann (1977). On Parsons's threefold definition of society as social system, modern society and nation-state, see Chernilo (2007a: 85–93).

a philosophical sociology. Parsons explicitly makes the link that I have argued is central for my project: the intimate connection between conceptions of social relations and anthropological assumptions about our shared human attributes. Theorising the human condition, he says, illuminates the fundamental 'assumptions of *social* ordering at the human level' (Parsons 1978: 371).

I

Organised around the mature formulation of his AGIL model, and first published at the time when his influence was already at its peak, Parsons's (1964a) piece 'Evolutionary universals in society' offers an excellent introduction to the most general propositions of Parsons's thinking: the relationships between the nature and culture, the challenges of reflecting on long-term evolutionary trends, and the role and location of normative ideas in the social world. Here, Parsons systematically applies AGIL to the organic, human and sociocultural domains and, crucially for us, he opens with an explicit criticism of previous approaches in anthropology and sociology because they are 'conspicuously anthropocentric' (1964a: 339). Parsons's rejection of an anthropocentric perspective here is based on two grounds. First, the epistemic status of AGIL was always justified as the development of an abstract theoretical model that did not rely on the 'internal' or 'subjective' perspectives of participants. Based as it was on Alfred N. Whitehead's (1997) analytical realism, the *systemic* character of AGIL is underpinned by an understanding of natural reality that is itself emergent, autonomous and self-organising (Parsons 1961). Whitehead's view, which Parsons followed, was that the natural and physical worlds are not organised for the purposes of human life, so from a scientific point of view an anthropocentric perspective is fundamentally flawed. Second, and this refers directly to the substantive issues Parsons raises in this article, he sought to emphasise the ways in which the humanity of human beings is, in its organic dimension, 'in direct continuity with the sub-human' (1964a: 339). An understanding of those aspects that are universally present across human societies requires us to pay simultaneous attention to what unites and what separates humans from other living species. Parsons is expressing here one of his deepest convictions that, unsurprisingly perhaps, has not been picked up in the sociological literature: the need to engage with the biological side of human life – if not with biology as such.[3] But in Parsons's account this

[3] For instance, in the piece on the human condition, Parsons formulates this argument thus: 'less harm has been done by social scientists "biologizing" action phenomena directly than

Table 3.1 *The human condition, the action system and the modern social system*

	Human condition	Action system	Modern social system
A – Adaptation	Physico-chemical system	Behavioural system[1]	Economy
G – Goal attainment	Human organic system	Personality	Politics
I – Integration	Action system	Society	Societal community
L – Latency	Telic system	Culture	Fiduciary institutions

[1] Here there is a change in terminology in relation to earlier formulations. Parsons had originally included the idea of 'organism' in this cell (Parsons and Platt 1973: 436), but later on he commented that, given Freud's argument on the organic dimension of the human personality, it made more sense to locate the organic, under G, as part of the system of the human condition (1978: 353).

engagement with general biology does not represent a surrender of the *autonomy* of social and cultural factors vis-à-vis their organic foundations. Rather the opposite, and in open contradiction to any form of biological reductionism, a strong idea of the biological is offered precisely as a way of certifying society and culture's own autonomy. The idea of unified science that underpins Parsons work is organised around a multilayered conception of reality that is the exact opposite of *any* form of reductionism.[4] A full discussion of Parsons's AGIL would make this chapter even longer and there is abundant literature that has done this extremely well.[5] Their main terms are summarised in Table 3.1.

Evolutionary universals are then defined as a 'complex of structures or associated processes' whose developments favour 'the long-run adaptive capacity of living systems' (1964a: 340). Throughout this paper, Parsons offers a relatively long and not altogether consistent list of such evolutionary universals at various levels. Most saliently, he mentions: the

by their failure to attempt the requisite theoretical understanding of the organic level' (1978: 354). Steve Fuller (2011: 7–68) has explored this constitutive neglect of biology by early sociology and his contention is that, because they construe limits to what can be socially construed, biology and theology are the two major counterpoints of the early sociological imagination.

[4] Parsons systematically rejects a narrow (i.e. biologicist) interpretations of Freud (Parsons 1978: 82–8) and, as we will discuss extensively below, he is equally against a purely normativist or idealist interpretation of Kant, and against a sociological reductionism that equates the social to the symbolic.

[5] Parsons (1961, 1966, 1971) did this himself several times, and one of the clearest expositions can be found in Toby (1977). Among the secondary literature, see Alexander (1987), Mouzelis (1995, 1999), Münch (1987).

Table 3.2 *Evolutionary universals at the organic, human, sociocultural levels*

Function	Organic evolutionary universals	Human evolutionary universals	Sociocultural evolutionary universals (as expressed in modernity)
A – Adaptation	Vision	Technology	Market (capitalism)
G – Goal attainment	Hand	Kinship and stratification	Bureaucracy (political democracy)
I – Integration	Oral communication	Language	Law (equality before the law)
L – Latency	Brain	Religion	Legitimacy traditions (cultural universalism)

human brain, vision and hand, technology, language, kinship, religion and cultural legitimisation, money and markets, class stratification, universalistic norms and democratic associations.[6] Table 3.2 organises Parsons's findings of three types of evolutionary universals – organic, human and sociocultural – for each of the four general subsystems of the AGIL model.

One of Parsons's key arguments here is that the evolutionary universals around which human life has developed are related to both the physical adaptation of humans to the natural world and the development of those 'higher' features that make cultural, social and indeed moral life of humans unique vis-à-vis other living species. To that extent, Parsons's argument here belongs in the tradition of philosophical anthropology that sees human nature (a term, admittedly, that is alien to Parsons's vocabulary) as intrinsically dual: it is exclusively *human* at a sociocultural level but, organically, it equally belongs to the realm of nature. He takes this duality seriously and uses it as the basis on which to build analogies between the cultural and the organic domains. For instance, he defines the human brain, which in his view is *less* uniquely human than the human hand, as 'the organic foundation of culture' (1964a: 340), and he then moves on to contend that 'gene' and 'symbol' are the foundational aspects of organic and sociocultural

[6] Parsons closes the piece with the proviso that the general approach (i.e. the *idea* of evolutionary universals) is more important at this stage of his thinking than the actual list (1964a: 356–7). For a methodological reflection on this way of constructing general theoretical arguments, which Parsons used in various other contexts, see also Baum (1977) and Münch (1987: 220n).

evolution, respectively (1964a: 341).[7] The major observable *discontinuity* between organic and cultural adaptation is of course the fact that the latter lends itself to diffusion in a way that the former does not. Because humans are living beings, adaptation is as central to them as it is for all living creatures; at the same time, our specificity as humans means that questions of adaptation can no longer be treated exclusively at an organic level; they need also to include sociocultural developments. A theme that will also reappear below, this duality explains what makes the relationships between the functions (A), of organic adaptation, and (I), of sociocultural integration, of critical theoretical importance for the conceptualisation of the human condition.

As he turns his attention to the normative foundations of collective life, Parsons argues that all forms of cultural legitimisation emerge out of the human need to create some sense of belonging. The general proposition he offers is that the delimitation of a 'we' is key for the definition of the normative: 'we-ness' is always to be 'asserted in a normative context' (1964a: 345). With this reference to a normative context, Parsons emphasises that all cultural traditions, to the extent that they *are* oriented to questions of legitimisation, are also and simultaneously trading in *transcendental* arguments. Religion is not treated as an evolutionary universal because of its institutional importance – nor, indeed, because a particular conception of the divinity is to be preferred – but on the grounds that the organisation of human life requires some transcendental vanishing point. Constructions of the 'we' may then be oriented by a universalistic outlook that focuses on commonalities and inclusivity, or else they may take a more particularistic route and concentrate on uniqueness and specificity. Parsons fully realises the different implications that ensue from taking either option: '[i]f the others are clearly recognized to be others ... they are regarded as not "really human"'; in these cases, they are 'strange in the sense that their relation to "us" is not comprehensible' (1964a: 345). But to the extent that most forms of sociocultural legitimisation do include some universalistic orientation (e.g. equality before the law), Parsons also contends that restrictions of this human status are bound to remain temporary. If we then include the self-legislating dimension that is built into all forms of democratic legitimisation, Parsons's claim on the universalistic underpinnings of normative institutions is now offered as an empirical trend as much as a normative one. Sociocultural differences *between* peoples are the grounds on which a sense of 'we-ness'

[7] In this sense, Parsons's use of organic analogies is more theoretically consequential than Durkheim's (1992: 30, 50–1) much looser use of such organic metaphors as the state being 'the social brain'.

is of course construed, but they are however underpinned by our similar status as human beings. Modern times become a unique occurrence in human history because the emancipatory potential of its inclusive universalistic orientation has the potential to be realised institutionally: '[i]f a single keynote of the main trend of the development of modern civilization could be selected, I think it would be the trend toward cultural universalism ... *universability is one of the central conditions of freedom*' (1978: 345, my italics).[8]

If we now turn our attention to his piece on the human condition, the essay is significant because it is the one piece in which he fully articulated the anthropological presuppositions of his thinking. Crucially, Parsons will turn his back on the anti-anthropocentric perspective that had been a fundamental trademark of his work. An anthropocentric standpoint was now needed because studying the human condition can only be done from the perspective of humans themselves. Parsons then commences this article with the admission he is working on the 'hunch' that AGIL, which had already proved useful in various partial fields, may also prove of relevance in relation 'to the *other* features of the world with which humans necessarily have occasion to deal with' (1978: 326). If we then include the eassy 'Death in the Western world' that immediately precedes the piece on the human condition, this is far more than a mere hunch; there are well over one hundred pages whose arguments are formulated with the help of Parsons's highly technical terms: they were indeed the culmination of three decades of theoretical writing. For AGIL to become *the* major theoretical framework Parsons wanted it to be, so the argument goes, it now also had to prove 'successful' in what was arguably the most vexing of intellectual domains: the conceptualisation of 'the human'. Parsons organises the discussion of the human condition following AGIL, and for each of the four systems he selects canonical writers in modern science and philosophy that in his view have made the greatest contribution to our understanding of these domains:

[8] The salience of 'cultural universalism' as the most important normative innovation of modern times is a long-standing insight of Parsons's work. This arguably transpires most clearly in his political writings; for instance, in his essays on Nazism and Nazi Germany in the late 1930s and 1940s, he systematically contends that its major threat was that the Nasiz sought to *destroy* all forms of normative universalism (Gerhardt 1993). Later on, more or less at the same time as this publication on evolutionary universals, Parsons wrote a piece on the blatant incongruities of the second-class status of 'the American Negro' in the context of the universalistic underpinnings of US political and legal institutions (1967b: 422–65). And he also argued for the need that US involvement in international affairs be based on an international rule of law (1967c, 1969a). I have discussed these aspects of Parsons's political sociology in Chernilo (2007a: 77–85 and 2009). See also Buxton (1985) and Gerhardt (2002).

- The function of *adaptation* (A) has the 'physico-chemical system' as its locus and its main task is to conceptualise the human organism's exchanges with the natural world. This subsystem responds to the requirement of getting all the resources that are needed for the material continuation of life (1978: 362). Here, Parsons uses Lawrence Henderson's work in biology, whom alongside Norbert Wiener he describes as 'amongst the most intellectually respectable "meta-scientists" of the present century' (1978: 387). Parsons also draws on Albert Einstein in relation to our new understandings of how the laws of causality work in the physical world (1978: 357–60).
- The function of *goal attainment* (G) centres on the 'organic system'. Parsons adopts Ernst Mayr's notion of 'teleonomy', which he defines as the goal orientation that is part of all living systems (one, however, that does not need to include the rationalistic bias that is present in utilitarian positions).[9] Parsons draws also from Norbert Wiener's cybernetic insights about organisms being 'information processing system(s)' (1978: 376) and from Sigmund Freud's notions of ego, id, libido and cathexis as definitive contributions to our understanding of psychological life (1978: 368–9).[10]
- The function of *integration* (I) is where the action system itself is located. This is of central importance because it becomes 'the point of view of the observer', that is, the location from which the whole attempt at studying the human condition is being made. This is the integrative experience of trying to make sense of human experiences of the various worlds into 'some kind of meaningful whole' (1978: 362). Here Parsons draws above all on Max Weber's notions on the symbolic, interpretative and indeed creative aspects of human understanding of sociality: symbolisation is always subjective and remains an exclusively human property (1978: 372, 389–90).
- The function of *latency* (L), finally, is located at the top of the cybernetic hierarchy in terms of information – this is the realm where ultimate questions and values are raised. He defines it in terms of the ability for

[9] Health is thus defined as the *teleonomic* capacity to 'maintain a favourable, self-regulated state that is a prerequisite of the effective performance of an indefinitely wide range of functions both within the system and in relation to its environments' (1978: 69).

[10] Parsons's relationship with cybernetics is ambivalent here, however. On the one hand, he makes extensive use of the idea of cybernetic hierarchies of information and energy. On the other, however, Parsons's new emphasis on the anthropocentric perspective that is needed for theorising the human condition goes against Wiener's (1954) general argument that cybernetics offers a general theory of communication, of which human communication is only a specific instance. Rather the opposite, in the case of the human condition Parsons has to argue that this is a unique property or ability of humans. See also Chapters 4 and 5.

> 'tension management' that is required in so far as such telic problems as 'suffering and evil . . . arouse strong emotions in human beings' (1978: 363). Here Parsons draws on Kant, from whom he takes the idea of a non-empirical reality, the need for a transcendental enquiry into the conditions that make rational knowledge possible and, last but not least, the categorical imperative of morality as the ultimate representation of human self-transcendence (1978: 393).

An explicit 'existential' sensibility is alien to Parsons's self-conception as a scientist who is interested in developing a general conceptual framework. This is made unequivocally clear in the essay on the human condition, which was 'meant to be primarily a *theoretical* attempt rather than an addition to the voluminous philosophical and in the humanistic sense critical literature' (1978: 352).[11] Rather than a substantive definition of human nature, Parsons favours a multilayered approach to the human condition that is built on the four subsystems of AGIL. The operation with symbolic meanings (Integration) and a sense of the transcendental (Latency) are its first two constitutive elements: 'only man among known living systems has telic problems . . . they are problems of an order that do not arise *unless* the capacity to learn and use symbols and their meanings *already* exists' (1978: 364, my italics). But humans are not purely ideal or cultural beings, so the human condition has also a physical environment, the so-called organic (Goal attainment) and physicochemical (Adaptation) systems: '[t]o say that the individual of reference "is human" is thus not only to characterize a unique organism but also to place that *organism* in a larger *biological* context' (Parsons 1978: 383, my italics). Parsons's definition of the human organism then sees it, simultaneously, as a living and a sociocultural entity. Because it operates with symbols (though not *only* with symbols, as we will see below), the personality is thus emergent vis-à-vis the adaptive side of the behavioural organism. A human being is both and simultaneously organic and sociocultural and the locus of our human experiences is located in three separate environments: the physical world of matter, the organic world of life, and the non-empirical world of ideas (1978: 327, 331–2, 338–40). A human being 'constitutes a unique symbiotic synthesis of two main components: a living organism and a living personality' (1978: 346). This multidimensional character of Parsons's principle of humanity is an insight that we ought to retain; for Parsons, the emergence of telic problems (i.e. questions about the meaning of life) is intrinsically connected to our organic constitution that is of course pre-social: they exist *together*

[11] This scientific sensibility explains Parsons's explicit disassociation with Arendt's previous usage of the expression 'the human condition' (1978: 326).

as part of our general anthropological features. The human condition is then defined as the way in which

> whatever universe may in some sense be knowable and which is quite specifically and self-consciously formulated and organised *from the perspective of its significance to human beings* and indeed relatively contemporary ones. From this point of view, *it is the system of action that constitutes the necessary reference base for such an enterprise* . . . The action system is, in our opinion, the most sophisticated cognitive framework within which this perspective has yet been formulated . . . We therefore write and speak as human actors within that framework and *attempt to relate ourselves to the rest of the human condition on the assumption that in the relevant sense this is "what we are"*. (Parsons 1978: 382–3, my italics)

A first thing to note in this definition is that the human condition is an inescapable human world whose primary inhabitants are human beings themselves and whose very understanding *is only available to human beings*. Comprehending the human condition is only a problem to and for human beings because they and they alone are concerned with the world they inhabit: '[o]ur question is, in what does this "world" consist from a human perspective?' (1978: 383). Trying to come to terms with the human condition is itself a key aspect of what makes human life specifically human, and what is specific about *modern* humans is that they now can attempt this through scientific means – which for Parsons was undoubtedly *the* most rational form of knowledge.

Let us remember at this point that, at the opening of his article on evolutionary universals, Parsons had argued that an anthropocentric perspective was effectively detrimental to scientific advancement. Indeed, such an anthropocentric perspective was problematic for the development of AGIL as a general theoretical framework because the best possible understanding of the world as it actually is does not have to coincide with what humans feel, want, need, or expect from the world. In the essay on the human condition, Parsons remains committed to AGIL as a general framework for the scientific study of *any* form of reality and, to that extent, from the standpoint of AGIL the conceptualisation of the human condition is *merely* 'a special case of the more general four-function paradigm' (1978: 363). This argument we have encountered before: the modern scientific imagination, of which AGIL is an expression, was nor developed in order to theorise the human condition, nor did it have as a primary preoccupation the humanity of human beings. Instead, the very possibility of developing the kind of sophisticated understanding of science that, for instance, underpins modern technology requires an anti-anthropocentric view of the world. Arguably the most intriguing aspect of Parsons's piece on the human condition is the fact that he almost obsessively repeats the idea that, for his current purpose,

the argument must now work from an anthropocentric point of view. He repeatedly makes the claim that, as a human attempt to understand what makes a life human, such an attempt is *only possible from* an 'anthropocentric point of view' (Parsons 1978: 361).[12]

The fact that AGIL is now being applied to the human condition is related to two different questions. First, and this is Parsons's explicit argument, because in order to prove its scientific completeness, AGIL must prove itself against all kinds of phenomena. But the second reason only remains implicit in Parsons's argument: humans pose existential questions about who they are and what is their position in the larger cosmos, and AGIL must now *also* prove itself at this level. Humans are beings who reflect about themselves, the world and their own position in the world. As a scientific approach, it must help humans to make sense of their own experiences in the world: humans are beings who do philosophical anthropology.[13] This dual predicament, the scientific side of AGIL and the 'existential' side of human life itself, places Parsons under the difficult position of having to disown his previous rejection of anthropocentrism. In order to conceptualise the human condition faithfully, AGIL must also be able to work from an anthropocentric point of view. The transition we have witnessed from an evolutionary argument that is anti-anthropocentric to the one currently being put forward that must remain anthropocentric is fundamentally connected to the newly discovered side of his 'philosophical' interests. Parsons elaborates on the duality of the human condition as something that cannot be conceived without specifying an anthropocentric standpoint but which, simultaneously, cannot be reduced to it. In Parsons's own words:

> in what does this "world" consist from a human perspective? Entering on the consideration of this question, then, an initial point of reference must be that "I," that is, any human actor, am at the same time an actor in our analytical sense *and* a living organism of the species *Homo sapiens*. As organism, my identity is not specified by being human alone, but within that rubric I belong (anatomically) to one of two sex categories and have a fairly definite place in a structure of age and succession of generations. At higher levels of aggregation, I may be identified as belonging to an ethnic group, a territorial-residential group, and various others.
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> To say that the individual of reference "is human" is thus not only to characterize a unique organism but also to place that organism in a larger biological

[12] I counted at least nine times in which Parsons makes this point in the essay but not once does he attempt to explain why this is actively needed, or how does it relate to his previous position that anthropocentrism acts as an epistemological obstacle (1978: 361, 372, 391, 399, 405, 408, 412, 414, 415).

[13] Parsons carries his own 'performative contradiction' in this regard because, as we will see, he eventually has to accept that a purely scientific account of problems and questions that are primarily existential rather than scientific is unsatisfactory for human beings themselves.

context. To say that organically "I am human" is to assert membership in a particular organic species that most notably is characterized by a highly specific genetic heritage. (1978: 383)

Parsons needs to square a difficult circle here. His various references to the organic side of human life point to the fact that adaptation is of primordial importance for any serious attempt at studying human properties. Indeed, given the multilayered nature of his argument, Parsons's idea of *human* adaptation surely has its emphasis on material and biological adaptation but cannot be reduced to it. The anthropocentric requirement of his argument – the fact that the paradigm must prove *meaningful* for humans themselves – needs to be reconciled with the anti-anthropocentric requirement of the 'objectivity' of both the natural world and of our organic constitution as members of the species *Homo sapiens*: the use of AGIL in the study of the human condition must meet both demands at the same time. The anthropocentric perspective Parsons is trying to develop emerges in a dual process of differentiation: on the one hand, the scientific context within which AGIL is construed does not privilege a human standpoint; on the other hand, the subjective perspective of an individual, and even the general perspective of the species as a whole, in which AGIL must now also help humans make sense of the world: '[s]ince we are engaged in constructing scientific theory, the paradigm itself must be judged in terms of its *cognitive* meanings as a "contribution to knowledge" put forward by one set of human beings for consideration and evaluation by others who may be interested in it' (1978: 362). In Parsons's technical language, this tension is expressed in the fact that, in the paradigm of the human condition, the function of integration works also as the point of observation for the whole model: for all versions of AGIL, the point of observation is always the function 'I' (1978: 362). But the delimitation of the anthropocentric perspective takes place primarily with regard to questions of *adaptation* – as said, in both its external reference point vis-à-vis the natural world and its internal differentiation vis-à-vis a plurality of possible meaning. As we mentioned above, then, the most important relationship among the four subsystems is that between integration and adaptation (I–A).

Yet a certain irony that seems to be lost on Parsons: while the scientific standpoint of AGIL may or even must detach itself from the anthropocentric perspective in order to gain the level of abstraction that we demand from scientific theories, the kind of concerns that are being raised in the piece on the human condition is bound to remain existential or normative rather than purely cognitive. Differently put, the very interest of trying to make *scientific* sense of the question of the human condition is something that Parsons the scientist can only partly account for: the human

motivation for the development of science is not itself scientific. Against Parsons's own self-understanding, my claim is that what makes this proposal particularly challenging is not whether it eventually succeeds in scientifically illuminating one or another aspect of the human condition. Its relevance has to do with its anthropocentric quest for locating science in general, and the social sciences in particular, within wider normative, existential, interests. However sophisticated scientifically, the *significance* of asking about the human condition is not primarily scientific: it is rather to do with the meaning of life as experienced by human beings themselves.

II

The argument on our shared anthropological properties that we have reviewed so far bears little resemblance to any notion of oversocialised, role-conforming behaviour. Indeed, after having spent nearly three decades developing a strictly *sociological* theory of *social systems*, Parsons is now much more interested in the definitions of the action system and the human condition itself. The idea of system has been dramatically downplayed to the status of a methodology, while references to *the social* increasingly fade into the background. In fact, the argument can be made that *a strictly sociological perspective is absent from his argument on the human condition*: the anthropological emphasis seems to have taken over the strictly social one. To be sure, the social has not disappeared altogether and finds its location within the action system of the human condition: questions of meaning and symbolisation are indeed fundamentally social. But it is worthy it attention that, when looking at the human condition, Parsons goes from the position of the individual as a unique organism to the general reference of human species as a whole: the strictly *social* dimension of human life is not theorised with a similar degree of detail.

The argument can of course be made that, as sociality (i.e. the social system) has been displaced to the position of an internal environment of the system of action, this in fact demonstrates that, *at the level of theory construction*, society remains emergent vis-à-vis human action. But the move also has a more problematic side because the symbolic dimensions of action had *already* been defined as fundamentally social. Parsons runs into trouble because he cannot really explain where does action end and society begin; it looks as though that Parsons has effectively conflated the two. As he now speaks more consistently of 'action theory' and 'the system of action', reality *as such* needs to include explicitly the world as seen and experienced by human beings. The cybernetic modulation of his argument moves between information (L – the cultural system) and

energy (A – the physical environment). In Parsons's idea of human action, the *human* dimension refers precisely to the cybernetics limits of (A) and (L), while its *action* component refers to the organic side of the personality (G) and the symbolic aspect of the social (I).

This renewed interest in action may be interpreted as a partial return to his own earlier insights on the importance of the subjective point of view as discussed in *Structure of Social Action*. First published in 1937, *Structure* makes for an interesting comparison in relation to the later volumes on action theory (1977, 1978). Crucially, there are no explicit ideas of system or function in *Structure*, so there can be no straightforward 'return' to the subjectivist standpoint of his early work. The question now for Parsons is rather to explicitly justify why such a return is needed given that AGIL had already proved scientifically successful; he will have to find a way of going back to 'action' without undermining the abstraction and generality that has been gained thanks to a systemic point of view. We have said that this is indeed the point: the development of a *scientific* perspective – this is what it means that AGIL is *not* construed from an anthropocentric point of view – that allows for a completely new understanding of the problem of the human condition. But this, in order to be consistent, must be both scientifically meaningful and able to make sense from the 'internal' standpoint of humans themselves.

Comparing Parsons's late work with *Structure* is also instructive in terms of style. Although the interest in systematic theory building is present throughout his oeuvre, 80 percent of *Structure*'s nearly 900 pages are devoted to a detailed *interpretative* reconstruction of works by Marshall, Pareto, Durkheim and Weber. Even as *Structure* can be criticised for a certain lack of hermeneutical acuity – there is something rather naive in the way in which Parsons claims to be reading these texts *correctly* (1937: 12–15) – the interpretative sensibility of this early work is alien to Parsons's later writings. These are of course full of canonical references but textual support for his interpretation of particular writers is almost non-existent. Parsons consistently adopted an approach to scientific knowledge and theory construction that centred on ideas of a unified conceptual framework that builds through accumulation.[14] He clearly sees his own work as belonging within this fantastic pantheon of Western science and philosophy that includes the names that we mentioned above – from Kant to Freud and Einstein. And he makes this proposition in two

[14] For all his sustained criticism of positivism as a form of reductionism, Parsons's own approach to the advancement of science finds here its own positivist bent. But because positivism argues that 'facts' alone drive scientific knowledge forward, and it therefore fundamentally undervalues the role of theoretical work, Parsons remains ultimately a critic of positivism (1978: 354).

different capacities. As a sociologist, first, he is to sit alongside Weber in having made the idea of action central to our understanding of social life; second, and more generally, he is also to share a pride of place with Kant as the one who was able to *generalise* action theory and turn it into the paradigm that is able to include in an integrated way the advancements of all scientific disciplines. This we may see as Parsons's 'Comtean' view of the contribution of sociology to scientific development: the physical sciences were at the intellectual forefront during the seventeenth century, the biological sciences took up the baton in the eighteenth century, but now in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the turn has now arrived for *action* sciences:

> All students of human action have long been aware of the importance to human beings of the physical world, the organic world, and, though its status has been more controversial, the "transempirical" (telic) world, besides that of action itself in our technical sense. *What is new in the present venture is the attempt to put their relations to action and to each other into a more systematic framework*. (1978: 361, my italics)[15]

Interpreting Kant is a thread that runs through several chapters of this book, so it may be worth considering in greater detail Parsons's rendition of Kant. Parsons contends that to Kant we owe our more refined insights into how to conceptualise the duality of human nature (1978: 334–5). As he was interested *both* in our empirical impulses and psychological motivations *and* in our transcendental sense of moral duty, Kant sought to offer a definitive break from both physical and metaphysical dogmatism – a philosophical rejection of any kind of reductionism. Parsons's argument on the interrelations between the physical (A) and the telic (L) is explicitly built on Kant's own differentiation between the empirical and the transcendental, so for him it is wrong to read Kant as having taken sides in the debate between idealism and materialism. The two realms of reality remain symmetrical in Kant, he argues, and Parsons translates this insight into the cybernetic idea of having to conceptualise their interrelationships. As mentioned above, the physico-chemical system is superior to the non-empirical one with regard to adaptation and energy, but the opposite is the case as values and transcendental ideas possess infinitely higher information content: all components of the human condition ought to be included within this cybernetic hierarchy (1978: 326–7).

[15] See also (1978: 346). It is worth noting here that, with regard to religion and the difficulties of defining the 'transempirical', Parsons contends that 'with full recognition of the philosophical difficulties of defining the nature of that reality [i.e. religion] we wish to affirm our sharing the age old belief in its existence' (1978: 356). Parsons's methodological atheism is however more successful than Jonas's (Chapter 4) or Taylor's (Chapter 6).

Parsons describes Kant's epistemological position as 'skepticism' (1978: 342) – he even speaks of 'Kant's relativism' (1978: 340) – and justifies this in terms of Kant's clear sense about the *limits* of what human knowledge can achieve. Kant's rejection of the possibility of a rational metaphysics is central to this characterisation: absolute knowledge is impossible for human beings because we have no access to any definitive 'conception like that of the ontological essence of nature, the idea of God, or the notion of the eternal life of the human soul', they are just not 'demonstrable by rational cognitive procedures' (1978: 347). Kant was then right in affirming the *transcendental* character of the categories of nature, god and the soul with which humans organise their knowledge of these three realms. This Kantian influence justifies Parsons's claim that the 'human orientation' that is central to the paradigm of the human condition cannot be 'treated as dogmatically fixed in the nature of things' (1978: 347). But this is only half of the story, because Kant serves Parsons above all to emphasise 'the continuing subjection of human life to the constraints of the transcendental aspects of the human condition' (1978: 347). What mattered to Kant, Parsons contends, is that telic or normative problems do not exist in isolation from our organic adaptation to the world. Transcendental questions are independent from but do not exist above or beyond our material and organic existence. It was above all in *Critique of Judgment*, says Parsons, where Kant made the claim on the mediating role '*from the human point of view*, between the *necessities* of the empirical world and the *freedom* of the world of morality' (1978: 339, my italics). Human life properly called always and necessarily takes place within this tension between the freedom of not being determined by the exterior nature of things in the world and the constraints of human beings' internal transcendence.[16]

In relation to the self-reflective project of humans achieving *definitive* knowledge about the human condition itself, we have mentioned that Kant postulated the ultimate impossibility of philosophical anthropology as rational metaphysics. This is different, however, from giving up on the possibility of rational knowledge of human affairs. Rather the opposite, Kant connected it firmly to the procedural core that underpins the categorical imperative of morality (1978: 344). But Parsons's rendition of Kant is vexed by the same difficulties that had troubled Kant himself: while their cognitive projects pushed them to use the more neutral tone of systematic formulations, the existential impulse behind the very raising of these questions

[16] I have elsewhere argued that this tension between the empirical and the transcendental, the particular and the universal, is central to Kant's theory of morality as apparent, for instance, in his notion of unsocial sociability. See Chernilo (2012a, 2013a : 121–31).

ends up imposing itself as they are applied to the human condition: humans do philosophical anthropology because, in the organic adaptation to the world, they have the natural tendency to *speculate* on the meaning of life.

This more existential dimension of Parsons's work is not always easy to find. But in his essay on *Death in the Western World*, Parsons does offer some hints; for instance, as he describes human life as 'a challenging undertaking that in some respects may be treated as an adventure' (1978: 345). Not only that, he also contends that 'the meaning of death for individual human beings must be approached in the framework of the human condition as a whole' (1978: 346). While this can and maybe have to be understood as a perfectly legitimate formulation in the context of Parsons's scientific approach, it seems equally clear that the reasons why these arguments *resonate* more generally have also to do with their wider implications: the quest for the meaning of death lies in the interconnections between the individual and subjective, between the general and collective, between the transcendental and the organic, and between the continuities and discontinuities of historical time. It is as though Parsons is trying hard to make his scientific rationalism work also as a way of giving shape to the existential uncertainties that are built into our most fundamental human experiences: 'the positive acceptance of being human, with all its uncertainties and limitations, is not in the least incompatible with acceptance of both cognitive and attitudinal openness, which in one aspect is uncertainty, about many of the most essential features of the state of being human' (1978: 345).[17]

It is therefore no accident that questions dealing with life and above all death become *normatively* crucial for the sociologist: 'birth and death have constituted primary foci for every known human religion. Such problems seem to be *at the very centre of the ethical problem of the human condition*' (1978: 67, my italics). In the contemporary context, moreover, Parsons explicitly raises questions of abortion and brain death as among the most challenging ones to be faced by societies from a normative standpoint. He rejects essentialist positions that reduce human life to either its organic base or its spiritual content and instead takes seriously the dynamic duality of human beings that underpins AGIL. Fundamentalist claims that deny any legitimacy to abortion will become increasingly untenable, he says, because they reduce human life to one side alone. And the same

[17] Philosophically speaking, this tension between scientific and existential concerns seems to contaminate all forms of neo-Kantianism as apparent, paradigmatically, in Ernst Cassirer's work: while science *is* the most advanced way of achieving knowledge about everything in the world, the difficulty that remains is that, to the extent that the original *human* motivation to carry out science is existential and not in itself scientific, then science's highest position in the human spirit becomes something science itself cannot explain. See Cassirer (1972: 389–472; 2000) and also the discussion in Chapter 4.

applies to brain death because, if 'an organism that continues to "live" at *only* the metabolic level [, it] may be said to be dead *as a person*' (1978: 349, my italics). In other words, while the organic death of a living creature is not altogether unproblematic, '[t]he fate of the personality is, philosophically and theologically, far more problematical' (1978: 326). Scientific rulings over the organic continuation of life, however 'definitive' from their point of view, say little about its wider philosophical, normative or existential implications. Moreover, given the systematic expansion of life expectancy that we witness in modern societies for the first time in human history 'a greatly increased proportion of modern humans live out a full life course' (1978: 348). Again in this case, this matters both from the subjective perspective of individuals themselves and, in terms of evolutionary and demographic implications, from the standpoint of the species as a whole (1978: 346, 332).[18]

III

The concern with death and the general problem of the physical adaptation of the human organism to the natural environments lead us to what is arguably the field of empirical study to which Parsons devoted most consistent attention throughout his career. In an autobiographical essay that was first published in the early 1970s, Parsons comments that when, in the 1940s, he first decided to explore empirically questions of medicine, health and illness, this seemed to him the somewhat natural continuation of his early university studies in biology (1977: 33–40). He mentions Freud as a major discovery that then helped him in his subsequent conceptualisation of the psychological and organic aspects of human action. From a strictly sociological standpoint, it was the study of the work of health professionals, and what eventually became known as 'the sick role', that gave him the opportunity of gaining a deeper understanding of modern professions and bureaucratic institutions as a major dimension in the overall organisation of modern societies. In their functional specificity vis-à-vis other societal domains, in the particular kind of trust and normative commitments that are built into their professional roles, and also in the fact that their work is carried out within large and increasingly complex institutional settings, modern medicine offered itself as an ideal sociological laboratory for the study of modern societies (1964b). As he looked back on these early studies, Parsons's reflections

[18] We will come back to abortion in Chapter 8, while in Chapter 4 we will also discuss how questions of intergenerational justice are vexatious because of the need to include an anthropocentric perspective at the same time that we have to move beyond it in order to accommodate those, possibly human, beings who have not yet been born.

come ever closer to our interests in this book. He contends that health and illness are strongly connected to our definitions of human action; they are indeed 'paramount concerns at the action level' (1978: 72). He thus speaks of the *vis medicatrix* as that property of all living systems by virtue of which they 'have the capacity to cope, often without intervention, with disturbances to health or cases of illness' (1978: 66–7). What is unique about human beings is, therefore, the collective construction of roles and institutions that are directly oriented towards the adaptive handling of health and illnesses.

Sociologically, illness is defined as an institutionalised role that is characterised by three main properties: (1) being sick is not the patient's fault; (2) the sick are exempt from the duties of normal, everyday life; (3) collective measures ought to be taken for the sick to recover (1978: 21). On the one hand, this model is built upon the normative consensus that health is universally valued as positive, whereas illness is, equally universally, valued as negative: the patient and medical professionals are similarly interested in the ill getting back to a healthy state (1978: 74). On the other hand, the social roles thus constituted are built on the asymmetric power differentials between the sick person and health professionals (1978: 23–7).[19] In these roles, moreover, doctor and patient are clearly distinguished from the other functions these individuals perform in other settings (1978: 75). Indeed, Parsons argues that looking at questions of health and illness underlies, again, the theoretical importance of the general relationships between integration and adaptation: for the case of humans, being alive is always and necessarily a dual natural and sociocultural challenge (1978: 20). Questions of health and illness have particular significance because they always and necessarily keep connected to both the organic and the normative aspects of social life:

> The "dialectic," if one uses this term, of the relation between health and illness is, of course, bracketed within the still deeper set of dilemmas of the human condition concerning life, coming to the individual through human organic birth, and that channel alone, and the inevitable, though in timing and circumstances very uncertain, fate of individual death ... Health concerns the underlying conditions of the organic life of human beings, their biological births, their ultimate deaths, and the levels of functioning in between, but at the same time it concerns the problem of the meaning of this life and its vicissitudes. To squeeze out either aspect would be to vitiate the significance of the concept as a whole. (1978: 79, 81)[20]

[19] This continues to be a contentious argument in the literature. See, for instance, Bissell *et al.* (2002), Burnham (2014), Frank (2013), Schilling (2002), Timmermans and Haas (2008), Varul (2010) and Williams (2005). For a historical account of the sociology of health and illness, and the role of Parsons's arguments in that development, see Gerhardt (1989).

[20] One consistently disappointing feature of Parsons's writing is the little understanding that he showed of the work of Marx (as apparent in the use of inverted commas in dialectic at

The commitment to cooperation between the sick and health professionals is to be necessarily matched by the presumption of functional competence of the part of the latter with regards to prevention, care, mitigation and cure. But arguably more salient for us here is the fact that the particular fiduciary responsibility of health professionals is placed overtly and directly on concerns over life and death (1978: 25–6): *the most basic of all adaptive requirements, the very continuation of life, is fundamentally connected to a set of normative expectations that in modernity have become fully institutionalised*. The normative relationships thus constituted are not the moral attribute of a particular individual but something that occurs within a social context: this fiduciary responsibility is a fundamentally social property that emerges out of the highly regulated interactions that take place, within institutions, between the sick and health professionals. But however important this social side ultimately is, Parsons does not lose sight of the obvious here: illness, pain and suffering do have an 'organic reference' even if the organic *cannot* be automatically equated with the physical (1978: 68). Quite crucially, the organic includes the personality as well: '[j]ust as man himself is both living organism and human actor, who is a personality and social and cultural being at the same time, so health and illness are conceived, as human phenomena, to be both organic and socio-cultural' (1978: 81). The theoretical challenge is that of conceptualising health and illness as a social relation – they are roles that take place within specific institutional settings – while simultaneously allowing for the inclusion of their fundamentally organic dimensions. The theoretical solution to this challenge Parsons found it in what is arguably his most salient contribution to theoretical sociology *sensu stricto*: the theory of generalised symbolic media.[21]

Parsons's original idea for the theory of media comes from his early collaboration with Neil Smelser as they studied the relationships between society and the economy (Parsons and Smelser 1956). There, Parsons and Smelser developed a model of mutual interchanges between these systems that, a decade or so later, was developed in more systematic fashion. In several monographic papers that were first published in the 1960s, Parsons

the opening of this quotation). It is as though the ideological context of mid-twentieth century US sociology got the better of him, as he systematically refused to accept any insight from Marx. Apart from a single article, which is equally critical, Parsons mostly offered passing negative remarks on Marx's work (1967a). Yet the centrality of adaptation in his work, and indeed the special status he gave to the relationships between Adaptation and Integration, are in fact rather close to Marx's notion of the need of human beings to remain alive for society to exist.

[21] See Chernilo (2002). The next few paragraphs on the four media of the social system draw heavily on this article.

(1967d, 1967e, 1969b) elaborated further on both the general framework of the theory of generalised symbolic media and the first definitions of each of the media *for the case of the social system*: money for the economy, power for politics, influence for the societal community and value commitments for the fiduciary system. It is worth remembering here that the theory of media has two sources: it draws, first, from the role of money in economic processes and, secondly, from the symbolic properties of human language. Although Parsons himself says that the theory was mostly developed as a generalisation from the properties of money (1977: 198–208), it is also the case that its wider applicability to the social system as a whole depends arguably to a greater extent on the properties of language. Indeed, the very name of the theory shows this basic tension: the idea of interchange refers to money; the ideas of generalisation and symbolisation are related to language. Let us briefly look at each media in the social system.

A. The function of adaptation belongs to the economic system, whose operations are ruled by the medium 'money'. This was the first modern subsystem to differentiate because the economy was historically first to achieve a high level of structural and institutional autonomy in relation to the other subsystems of society. As a generalised symbolic media, therefore, money is the standard that establishes the values that are assigned to all goods and services. The major institutions that ground monetarised economies are property, labour and contract. The value principle on which money operates is utility, that is, the specific rationality of the economic subsystem (1977: 188–9).

G. The function of goal attainment is fulfilled primarily by the political system, whose medium is 'political power'. Institutionalised authority is to politics what property is to the economy, and the value principle of power is effectivity, which refers to the amount of power that collectivities have at their disposal. The Parsonian concept of political power also includes 'legitimacy' as the binding character of the decisions done by power holders, but the conceptualisation of power as a medium presents the problem that there is not a clear measure with which to quantify the amount of power involved in any interaction. Physical force is the extreme case of use of power (1961: 53–4; 1977: 190).

I. The function of integration has its locus on the societal community and its medium is defined as 'influence'. Influence encourages the development of intersubjectively shared norms, and the production and renewal of social solidarity. Parsons says explicitly that the communicative strategy of influence is, unlike money, of a *non-instrumental nature*. Prestige and trust (say, in an opinion leader or the mass media) are the bases for social interactions mediated by influence and they are not necessarily subject to systematic rational justification (1977: 199).

Table 3.3 *Generalised media for the human condition, the action system and the social system*

Function	Media in the human condition	Media in the action system	Media in the social system
A	Empirical ordering (for the physico-chemical system)	Intelligence (for the behavioural system)	Money (for the economy)
G	Health (for the human organic system)	Performance-capacity (for the personality system)	Power (for politics)
I	Symbolic meaning (for the action system)	Affect (for the social system)	Influence (for the societal community)
L	Transcendental ordering (for the telic system)	Definition of the situation (for the cultural system)	Value-commitments (for fiduciary institutions)

Influence, then, should be anchored in feelings, values and traditions that are widespread among members of a group.[22]

L. The function of latency, finally, resides in the fiduciary system. Its medium of 'value-commitments' concentrates on the specification of values that can function as normative standards in different contexts of interaction within the system. Parsons talks of value-commitments, in plural, because there are different values that can be expressed in society, and the medium helps to give priority to some values over others. Value-commitments provide legitimacy to the functions of the remaining media of the social system (1969b: 456). Table 3.3 summarises the key media for each of Parsons's major levels of analysis: the human condition, the action system and the social system.

In relation to the theoretical evolution of the theory of media, Niklas Luhmann is usually credited with having made an explicit argument on the need to conceptualise not only their symbolic but also their symbiotic dimension. Because Ego and Alter share a physical world, Luhmann contends that at least part of the evolutionary success of some media, that is, their thorough institutionalisation, depends on the compatibility between the symbolic and the organic dimension of each media: the higher the capacity of utilisation of the symbiotic mechanism, the better the performance of the subsystem (Luhmann 1977, 1995: 244–54). Thus,

[22] In this sense, the medium influence can be seen as a partial instantiation of the kind of communicative rationality that is necessary in a democratic public sphere and civil society. See Cohen and Arato (1992: 118–42), and Habermas (1987: 179–97, 256–82; 1996: 329–87). See also Chapter 5.

for instance, physical force is the symbiotic mechanism that underpins politics, the satisfaction of basic material needs offers the organic basis for the economy, visual perception operates as the basis of science and sexual desire underpins the differentiation of family life and the private sphere. One of Luhmann's key contributions is therefore that of having paid explicit attention to those particular mechanisms that are neither strictly social nor exclusively organic; rather, they have the ability to connect the two in the human body.

To Luhmann, the inclusion of symbiotic mechanisms not only safeguards but actually reinforces his key contention that only communications belong in the social system: his theory of media is one of *communicative* media. But what is interesting for us here is that Parsons argues in precisely the opposite way. In his writings on both medicine and the human condition, Parsons states that health and illness cannot be seen as exclusively *social* media; on the contrary, they are to be treated as media because they are not purely symbolic (1978: 328–9). It is precisely because they are both social *and* organic that health and illness are defined as a generalised media of 'interchange' (1978: 71). Health and illness are directly and simultaneously connected to the physical, organic, psychological and sociocultural worlds (1978: 69). Even more relevant from a theoretical point of view, the claim is now put forward that it is the *absence* of a symbolic dimension that allows for their translation into the various codes of the different subsystems. Parsons presents his argument thus:

> health may be conceived as circulating, within the organism, within the personality, and between the personality and the organism. From this point of view, good health is an "endowment" of the individual that can be used to mobilize and acquire essential resources for satisfactory functioning as organism and personality. Health, in this meaning, would function only if it is "used" and not "hoarded."
>
> When conceived as such a medium, health stands midway between the action level media such as money, power, and language and the intra-organic media such as hormones and enzymes. (1978: 80)

As he moved forward in the development of an explicit 'philosophical anthropology', Parsons became increasingly aware that three critical dimensions of his 'sociology' were in need of revision. These are also the key contributions that we take from him for the project of a philosophical sociology:

- However sophisticated or comprehensive, a purely scientific approach is inadequate for the purposes of understanding the human condition, which requires also that we pay attention to the more normative or

existential motivations that lead human beings to raise these questions at all.

- The anthropocentric perspective that had been systematically described as an obstacle for the development of the modern scientific imagination is now treated as condition of possibility for the successful conceptualisation of the human condition itself.
- While the symbolic aspect of social relations remain a fundamental dimension of the human condition, any adequate understanding of it requires the explicit inclusion of the physical and organic dimensions of human life.

Methodologically, the main challenge for Parsons was to develop an approach for the study of the human condition that was able, simultaneously, to retain the level of abstraction of AGIL and look at it from an anthropocentric point of view. The need for this dual external and internal accreditation is a unique challenge in the study of the human predicament: we inhabit a world that we have not created, but we can only attempt to make sense of it from the inside out.

Parson's idea of adaptation matters to the project of a philosophical sociology because, while it focuses on the relationships between our organic constitution and the natural environment, it does not do so from a reductionist point of view. This is precisely what medicine, and his concomitant conceptualisations of health and illness, offered Parsons: a way of looking at the various ways in which our bodily constitution works as a focal point for the complex web of personal, social and cultural domains that constitute our human existence. Parson's multi-layered idea of adaptation works because it systematically includes all those domains.