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Functionalism

The term *functionalism* has been used in at least three different senses in the social sciences. In the philosophy of mind, functionalism is a view about the nature of mental states. In sociology and anthropology, functionalism is an approach to understanding social processes in terms of their contribution to the operation of a social system. In psychology, functionalism was an approach to mental phenomena which emphasized mental processes as opposed to static mental structures.

Functionalism in the Philosophy of Mind

Functionalism in the philosophy of mind was first systematically developed in the 1960s as a view about the nature of mental states such as sensations, beliefs, desires, and emotions. It arose in response to questions about the relation between mind and body, in the context of a debate between opposed views known as *dualism* and *materialism*. Dualism was defended by the seventeenth-century philosopher René Descartes, who held that minds were nonphysical substances which were not located in space and indeed had no physical properties at all. A major difficulty for dualists has been to explain how mental states, if they have no physical properties, can cause or be caused by physical states of a person's body. Materialists, by contrast, have held that there are no nonphysical substances, and that mental states are nothing more than physical states.

The best-known materialist views in the 1950s were *behaviorism* and the *identity theory*. Behaviorism as a theory of the nature of mental states is sometimes called *logical behaviorism* to distinguish it from behaviorism as a methodological view in psychology. According to behaviorism, mental states were simply tendencies to behave in certain ways under certain circumstances. Behaviorists thus rejected not only dualism, but also the common-sense view that mental states are internal states that are causes of behavior. Identity theorists, on the other hand, held that mental states were identical with states of the central nervous system. The identity theory appeared to rule out by definition the possibility that mental states could be present in any being that did not have a human central nervous system.

Functionalism was intended to be a theory that was compatible with materialism, while avoiding the difficulties of behaviorism and the identity theory. It was motivated in part by the thought that the relation between mind and body is analogous to the relation between software and hardware in a computer. Computational states are defined, not in terms of specific hardware configurations, but in terms of their relations to inputs, outputs, and other computational states. Computational states are *multiply realizable*; that is, they can be realized or implemented by a wide range of different kinds of hardware. Functionalists held that a similar approach could be taken to mental states, i.e. that mental states could be defined as relations between perceptual inputs, behavioral outputs, and other functional states. For example, the beginnings of a functionalist analysis of pain might point out that it is a state which is produced by potentially harmful sensory inputs, leads to avoidance behaviors, and tends to produce such other mental states as a dislike

for whatever caused the pain. According to the functionalist, it is relationships such as these, not a specific physical implementation, that are essential to pain.

Functionalism seems to avoid the difficulties of the other main approaches to the nature of mental states. Because mental states, like computational states, must be implemented in a physical medium, functionalism seems to make it less mysterious than dualism how mental states can stand in causal relations with physical states of the body. Unlike behaviorism, functionalism is compatible with the view that mental states are internal causes of behavior. And unlike the identity theory, functionalism leaves open the possibility that beings very unlike humans could nevertheless have mental states.

Different versions of functionalism have been developed by different writers. The view described above most closely resembles the “machine functionalism” defended by Hilary Putnam in a number of papers reprinted in his *Mind, Language, and Reality* (1975). Somewhat different versions were defended by other writers; David Braddon-Mitchell and Frank Jackson offer a useful survey in their *Philosophy of Mind and Cognition* (1996), and a number of the original papers are reprinted in Ned Block, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Psychology*, vol. 2 (1980).

The most serious difficulty for functionalism is the problem of accounting for conscious experiences, which philosophers call *qualia*. One thought experiment which illustrates the problem involves the apparent possibility of “inverted qualia.” It seems possible in principle that two people could be functionally identical even though their experiences were inverted, so that when one person saw something green, that person had an experience that felt to him or her the way an experience of something red felt to the other. If this is a real possibility, it follows that functionalism cannot be a complete

account of the nature of all mental states, since if two people with identical functional properties could nevertheless have different qualia, then qualia cannot be functional states.

Functionalism in Sociology and Anthropology

In sociology, functionalism was a theoretical perspective that emphasized that the parts of a social system are interrelated in such a way that none of them can be fully understood except in terms of its effects on the others. The relationships between the parts of a social system constitute the structures of that system, and these structures are to be explained in terms of their functions, i.e. their contributions to the continued stable existence of the system. The social systems to which functional analysis was applied ranged from units as small as the family to those as large as international organizations; the structures to which functions were imputed included social roles, social norms, devices for social control, and many others.

Functionalism originated in the late nineteenth century in the work of such thinkers as Herbert Spencer and Emile Durkheim; it was developed in the early twentieth century as an approach to anthropology by A. R. Radcliffe-Brown and Bronislaw Malinowski; and in the middle decades of the twentieth century, as elaborated by Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton, it became the dominant perspective in American sociology.

Some functionalist writers were influenced by an analogy between societies and biological organisms, and their concept of social function was explicitly modeled on that of biological function. Radcliffe-Brown, for instance, in “Structure and Function in Primitive Society” (1935, reprinted in Coser and Rosenberg, *Sociological Theory*, 1976),

distinguishes between three sets of sociological problems: “social morphology,” which will identify social structures just as biological morphology identifies organic structures; “social physiology,” which identifies the functions of these structures; and “development,” which will study how new social structures arise, much as evolutionary theory explains the development of new kinds of organisms.

Functionalists have typically thought of the function of a social activity as its contribution to the needs of the society, especially to a social equilibrium which tends to right itself if disturbed. Durkheim, in the first systematic development of a functionalist approach, distinguished between the cause of an activity such as the punishment of crime, on the one hand, and its function, on the other. The practice of punishment may initially be caused by an intention to deter crime or achieve justice, but its function, according to Durkheim, is to maintain our intense emotional disapproval of crime. Although a particular practice or activity may not initially be caused by a recognition of the function it will serve, Durkheim holds that its serving a useful function is nevertheless part of the explanation of the continued survival of that practice.

The sociologists most closely associated with functionalism in the mid-twentieth century were Talcott Parsons and Robert Merton. Parsons identified four functions which any social system needs in order to achieve and maintain equilibrium. These were adaptation, or the acquisition and distribution of resources from the environment; goal attainment, which involves determining which goals of the system have priority and determining how to achieve them; integration, which involves coordinating relationships between various social actors to enable them to function smoothly together; and “latent pattern maintenance-tension management,” which involves transmitting values which

will keep actors motivated to act in ways that are necessary for the continued functioning of the system.

Merton's contributions included his distinction between *manifest functions*, which are consequences that agents in the system recognize and intend to produce, and *latent functions*, which are not intended or recognized. Whereas Parsons had tended to emphasize manifest functions, Merton stressed that many important functions are latent. Merton also introduced the concept of *dysfunctions*, which are consequences of an activity that have negative effect on the stability of the system.

By the 1980s, functionalism was no longer the dominant paradigm in sociology, in part because of the perceived conservatism of its emphasis on equilibrium, and its consequent lack of attention to social conflict and change, and in part because it was seen more as a set of abstract categories than as a testable empirical theory.

Functionalism in Psychology

In psychology, the term *functionalism* refers to an American school of psychology that was influential at the turn of the nineteenth century. Functionalism developed in response to the earlier structuralist view advanced by Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) and Edward B. Titchener (1867–1927). Structuralist psychology used an introspectionist methodology to attempt to identify basic elements of conscious experience into which more complex experiences, or structures, could be analyzed. Functionalism, by contrast, emphasized psychological processes rather than static psychological structures. Functionalism also stressed the role of the mind as a mediator between the environment and the needs of the organism; like the pragmatist philosophy that influenced it, functionalism held that

psychological processes should be understood in terms of their effects. The most influential contributors to this school were the pragmatist philosophers William James (1842–1910) and John Dewey (1859–1952), and the University of Chicago psychologist James Rowland Angell (1869–1949). Although functionalism influenced later approaches to psychology, as a distinct school it faded from view in the early decades of the twentieth century, as behaviorism rose to prominence.

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