Parsons and friends, of the newly-formed Social Relations Department at Harvard, attempt to formulate a loose framework to understand how an actor chooses to orient toward an object and act in a certain way in any given situation. They develop a complex and rather esoteric categorical system in which they seem to want to catalog every aspect of human action, and it is easy to become entangled in a theoretical muddle. Our first task, as Jackson may say, is to “figure out just what the hell this guy is talking about,” and next we shall discuss the limitations this framework presents to us.

Let’s first begin with some key concepts. Action is an orientation guided by meaning that an actor attaches to objects and situations according to her goals. There are three configurations in which we can think of action occurring: 1) Personality systems, regulated according to the actor’s need dispositions; 2) Social systems, regulated according to actors’ role-expectations; and 3) Culture systems, regulated by value standards from normative patterns.

The objects of the orientation of the actor afford alternative possibilities and impose limitations on the ways of gratifying the needs and achieving the goals of the actor. Orientation of action toward these objects is made up of orientations of action where the actor sees the situation in terms of what she wants (her goals), what she perceives, and how she intends to get from the object she sees the thing she wants. All of this entails selection. Actors, objects and modes of orientation are the basic conceptual material of personality, culture and social systems (42).

The theory of action seeks to explain the organization of the actor’s orientations to a situation. A system of action must employ categories of motivational orientation, and this is broken into three modes: 1) the cognitive mode, when the actor knows about the objects; 2) the cathectic mode, when the actor has a positive or negative attachment to the object; and 3) the evaluative mode, when the actor selects among different objects based on value standards.

Actors have interactions with social and non-social objects. Social-relational needs arise from interactions with alters, which are other actors with their own systems of action, consisting of needs that they want to gratify and expectations. The alter’s needs interact with the needs of the ego...
(actor), and that interaction has the capability of modifying their available alternatives for gratifying their needs and their selection of actions and objects. This is suggestive of Mead’s idea of constitutive relations. Parsons points out that communication between the two could not exist without stability of meaning, “which can only be assured by ‘conventions’ observed by both parties” (16). This also seems to recall Mead, with his emphasis on the necessity of social interaction, language and the need for shared meanings in order for personalities and societies to develop.

As the actor is faced with an object in a given situation, she must sort out five “dilemmas” before she can act. These are Parson’s pattern variables, an “exhaustive” system of five dichotomies that the actor selects before an action occurs. They are: 1) Affectivity-Affective-neutrality (whether evaluation happens); 2) Self-orientation-Collectivity-orientation (whether moral standards are employed); 3) Universalism-Particularism (whether the actor uses cognitive or cathectic standards); 4) Ascription-Achievement (whether objects are seen in terms of qualities or performances); and 5) Specificity-Diffuseness (scope of significance of the object). Personality, social and cultural systems are structured upon these pattern variables. Basically this frame of reference of the theory of action is outlined in a neat diagram in Fig. 2. The big point to take away from this is that an actor must make these five selections before she acts. As opposed to biological theories of action which proclaim that behavior is organized according to instinct, Parsons maintains that in fact, the organizing principle lies within the evaluative mode of motivational orientation. The evaluative mode allows choice between alternative ways of orienting ourselves, and that clears the way for value standards to govern our behavior (71).

Parsons also speaks of control mechanisms which keep actions within narrowly defined limits. The personality system mobilizes itself to solve psychological challenges through the adoption of relevant mechanisms. He outlined the mechanisms of learning, allocation, integration, and adjustment. All of these are designed to resolve any personality problems in the individual that may inhibit a successful engagement of the society and its social systems. While there is a range of freedom which allows actors with different personalities to fulfill the expectations associated with their roles, there are limits to the freedom which prevent undue strain on the system. He says, “It is quite clear that there must be a fundamental correspondence between the actor’s own self-categorization or ‘self-image’ and the place he occupies in the category system of society” (147). Like Mead, Parsons and Shils speak of the institutionalization of actions, which occurs where the
actor expects certain actions in response to certain situations and there are cultural sanctions opposing non-conformity.

"A social system, then, is a system of interaction of a plurality of actors, in which actions are oriented by rules, which are complexes of complementary expectations concerning roles and sanctions" (195). The key concept for organization of social system is that of a role and accompanying role expectations. A role is the point of contact between an individual and a social system. Through role expectations interaction is organized between different actors, what they expect to get and how they respond to expectations of their counterparts in the system. In order for actors to fulfill certain role expectations they contain certain motivational patterns that reduce the strain between the role requirements and their execution. A developed social system is called collectivity and it is characterized by shared collective goals and boundaries defined by "incumbency in the roles constituting the system" (192). It stands in contrast to category of persons and plurality of persons by distinguishing quality of possessing solidarity, which is defined as institutionalization of shared value-orientations. In the analysis of a particular social system solidarity can be accounted through the fifth pattern variable, which is that of self-orientation versus collective orientation. This would tell us what is the extent of the obligations of an individual towards collectivity and the degree or areas of permissiveness by collectivity left open to pursuit of private goals.

Objects are scarce and must therefore have an acceptable allocation of resources in order to prevent a Hobbesian "each against all." Socialization takes care that some people want this rather than that and less rather than more so they can get along better and the social system functions properly. To put it in different words, socialization "focuses need-dispositions in such a way that the degree of incompatibility of the active aspirations and claims for social and non-social is reduced" to an acceptable degree (197). In this sense, certain human capacities are allocated to perform certain role requirements and the rewards keep the motivation level appropriately high.

Allocation is actually one of the ways we can differentiate structures of societies. Structures can be differentiated whether their allocation is based on ascription or achievement. Ascription-based systems could be connected with those of Weber's paternalistic and achievement to that of bureaucratic organization of authority in the society. Another way of differentiating social systems by their structures is that "with respect to the content and organization of roles" (208). There are three sets of problems connected to roles: "(1) problems of instrumental interaction, (2) problems of expressive interaction, and (3) integrative problems" (209). The first two can be considered as
exchange problems, dealing with the problems of uncertainties of exchange process. Different role contents are supposed to solve this problem and "social systems should be susceptible to classification with respect to the functional importance and frequency in different parts of the system of the above enumerated ... types of role" (217). We have already mentioned the problem of integration when we talked about solidarity.

Lastly, Parsons touches upon social change. Since he does so briefly, so will we. Basically people do not act the same as required by role expectations, because although they all have been socialized, the values are quite general and allow plenty of room for individualism. Action itself shouldn't be considered in isolation of situational opportunities. For example, does the opportunity make a thief? The idea of limitations on actions and responses made us think of both Mead and Durkheim, each of whom spoke of society making room for deviance within a limited range of responses. Durkheim considers a deviant to be an agent of social change, while in Parsons’ framework, all the roles seem to be contributing to social stability. Otherwise the author believes that his static model accounts for change with the same concepts describing the social structure if there occurs some sort of strain.

Having attempted to decipher this theory, we should first keep in mind Parsons’ own caveat before proceeding with our discussion of its limitations. Parsons admits right away that this is not a complete theory, it is but a framework, a categorical system, and just the beginning of several steps towards the creation of a full-fledged theory which involves statements of logical relationships. The theory of action as they present it is for describing the state of a system at a given time, not a dynamic analysis describing changes over time. Yet, “It should not be forgotten, however, that applicability to the study of the real behavior of human beings is the ultimate test of any theoretical scheme” (105). We wonder, then, how would one try to test this framework and apply it to actual human behavior.

One problem we can imagine with such a testing involves these five pattern variables. How do we know they are exhaustive? The proof lies in their apparent ability to cover all the problems one can think of regarding action. We personally cannot think of a new set of variables to contest, but that does not mean these five patterns are all there is to select from when orienting to act one way. By what scientific process did Parsons derive these variables; that is, where did they come from? Furthermore, why must they be strict dichotomies? It seems odd that action must be based on either ascriptive or achievement traits. A continuum seems more appropriate for the actor who
responds favorably to a person both because she has certain desirable qualities and because she has some stellar performances. Perhaps some concrete examples would help us understand the applicability of the pattern variables a little better. Or perhaps he’s being intentionally vague. This *is* Harvard.

The goal of the theory of action is to be able to generalize about motivations for action, with the underlying idea that adults act to modify and maintain the social system, value patterns, and the personalities of their descendants. One issue that this raises is the functionality of the social system. In other words, do people make the choices they do because of the existing social structure. For example, do marriages end because divorce is available?

Finally, we conclude that Parsons and friends have tried to weave together different branches of the social sciences to explain human action as a framework of personality, social, and cultural systems. A given action is not set by instinct, nor is it determined only by the object or the situation. Rather, Parsons has tried to prove that action involves selection (from some very complicated categories.)