Embodied Collective Reflexivity: Peircean Performatives

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The nature of agency, always a key issue in critical realism, has received heightened attention in recent years. In the early 1990s Roy Bhaskar described it using phrases like 'embodied intentional causal agency', 'intentional embodied causally efficacious agency', and most compactly, 'intentional embodied agency'.[1] He also observed that 'The capacity for a reflexive self-monitoring of one's own causal interventions in the world, to be aware of one's own states of awareness during one's activity (to monitor the monitoring of one's activity), is intimately connected to our possession of a language'.[2] As that sentence suggests, attention has mainly gone to intentionality and reflexivity in forms that are wholly linguistic. That said, more recently Margaret S. Archer, who has examined agency and reflexivity extensively, stated that 'Our human reflexivity is closely akin to our human embodiment', arguing for the body's position as the fulcrum of the self/other distinction, its experiences of (and ability to navigate) the natural environment, its accumulation of skills and habits, its role in emotion, and similar functions.[3] However, embodiment pervades cognition (both conscious and unconscious) far more deeply than she recognizes. So embodiment's place within agents' reflexivity needs to be further fleshed out, so to speak.

Just as considerations of embodiment have centred on individual identity, analyses of agency and reflexivity have largely concerned the individual, intentionally so in Archer's

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[1]Bhaskar [1993] 2008, 47, 144, 146, 153, 164, 185, 258.

[2]Bhaskar 1998, 81-82.

[3]Archer 2007, 1; and see Archer 2000, 111-15, 124-53, 159-66.

examinations; study of collective agency and reflexivity has been less focal. Archer does consider collective agents' reflexivity in some of her writings, but her discussion only covers collective reflexivity conducted through language.[4] Embodied communication, both within and distinct from language, is left untouched. Yet communication—a social practice—is a core part of how agents make their way in the world, and requires us to look beyond the individual.

In short, much less work has been done on collective reflexivity than individual reflexivity, and the discussions of reflexivity have treated only reflexivity exercised through intentionality as conducted through discourse, not through the agent's *entire* ontology. But if agents have three major aspects—intentionality, causal efficacy, and embodiment—we cannot assume reflexivity can occur via only one of the three; and if agents are fundamentally social, we cannot treat collective reflexivity as marginal or derivative. This is the issue I will be considering: the conjunction of collectivity, reflexivity, and embodiment—in other words, collective reflexivity conducted not just by saying, but also by doing.

Recursion, Reflexivity and Embodiment

An individual's reflexivity is her deliberation on her own thoughts and activities in relation to the context in which they occur, her circumstances, and perhaps her options for future actions. Its structure is recursive. The latter refers to the application of a process or structure upon itself. One of its outcomes is self-similarity, in which a part is similar to the whole, and so it often embeds other instances of itself (e.g., a sentence can contain another sentence). In

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[4]Archer 2013.

mathematics recursion is essential to numerous concepts and formulas. Since the 1970s there has been particular interest in applying recursion topologically, where it results in fractals—shapes that are self-similar at every level of scale—partly because fractals accurately model various natural phenomena, such as the growth patterns of certain algae and the branching patterns of fern leaves and various trees. But people have been intrigued by recursion for centuries and even millennia, expressed especially in images of self-containment (such as microcosms, the *matryoshka* doll, and the *mise en abyme*), and also in spirals and other geometrical designs.

Recursivity occurs not only in human thought, but in numerous areas of individual social activity, and well beyond. The *Dictionary of Critical Realism* identifies recursivity as 'a cardinal property of the human social world as such', and it describes emergence itself as a form of nested embeddedness (i.e., self-containment).[5] One can go further: under the transformational model of social activity, each moment of agential action occurs on the basis of pre-given structural enablements and constraints, and subsequently establishes the structural enablements and constraints for the next moment of activity, in a potentially endless cycle of social reproduction and/or transformation. This too is a mode of recursion. In principle (and in mathematics), recursion can be infinite; in practice it meets with some boundary. In fractal art the boundary is simply the current technological limit for image resolution (in printing or on screen); in biology the limits of, say, branching lie more in the confluence of the requirements for capillary action, resistance against wind and other forces, etc.; and similarly for other natural phenomena.

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[5]Hartwig 2007, 405.

Reflexivity is a special type of recursion due to its emergent character, both caused and (potentially) causing. On the one hand, it is *motivated*, arising from uncertainty and/or underdetermination. As Archer puts it, 'people are necessarily reflexive about their "context" or "circumstances" when they ask themselves quotidian questions (in internal or external conversation) such as: "What shall we have for dinner?", "Do I need to visit the dentist?", or "Can one of us get back from work in time to pick the kids up from school?"'.[6] In short, the motivations for reflexivity are *questions*. Asking a question about one's answers or method of answering generates a new recursion of reflexivity. The nature of each question can differ, which is the source of the different content of each reflexive turn: so, for example, asking oneself whether there'll be time tomorrow to write a report and asking what would be the quickest way to compete it (which could lead to re-evaluating the time necessary) lead to different sorts of answers.

On the other hand, an agent's reflexivity is *self-targeted*: the agent herself is the object of reference and/or action. Where most recursion elaborates a product, reflexivity enfolds the producer. This is the specific recursion that makes thought or activity reflexive. Other aspects of reflexivity may be recursive but non-reflexive—for instance, sentences may incorporate other sentences, a structural recursion that has nothing to do with reflexivity *per se*. Archer, discussing reflexivity in the discursive register, calls reflexivity an 'internal conversation', involving dialogic interchanges between the 'I' who is presently deliberating and (metaphorically speaking) the 'me' representing the sedimented self who has arrived at the present point of deliberation, and also (or alternatively) between the 'I' and the 'you' representing the self who is

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[6]Archer 2013, 145.

coming into existence and might undertake one action or another.[7] Thus there is a dialectic in which one plays in turn both speaker and audience. The recursion involved in reflexivity wouldn't be well described as a type of nested embeddedness; a more suitable image is the spiral—open and potentially ever-expanding, with each turn of the spiral motivated by a question.

However, agents do not simply consist of their intentionality and their power of reflexivity in internal conversation: agency is also necessarily embodied and capable of taking action. It is clear enough that reflexivity about intentions depends on language, and consists of discursive (semiosic) activities. But *contra* mind/body dualism, we are not brains in vats, nor are we computers: we're whole beings, who emerged from natural processes. Thus the questions before us are, is it possible for agents to be reflexive through their entire body—and if so, what would such reflexivity involve?

I will take the latter question first: one should have some concept of what would count as embodied reflexivity before determining whether it actually exists. As I observed, reflexivity is motivated, and it is self-targeted. First, when considering that agents achieve causal efficacy by discursive and/or physical means, we should note that their motives in general are to bring about changes in the world, be it to get dinner on the table, secure social connections through gossip, or whatnot. Speech itself is a type of action or way to do things. More precisely, as J. L. Austin argued, all utterances are speech acts, from the obvious like declarations that a meeting is

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[7]Archer 2003, 74-78, 95-116. I will emphasize that Archer's 'internal conversation' is (1) a metaphor for reflexivity, not for any kind of thought; and (2) possibly more analytical than phenomenological.

adjourned, to the more subtle like logical proofs and truth claims: they accomplish things. Austin's term for speech acts is *performatives*.[8]

I would like to generalize Austin's concept still further. The very fact that agents incorporate self-awareness and embodiment into their causal efficacy means that their embodied intentional activities (and often their unintentional activities) bear meaning. My point is deeper than the adage, 'Actions speak louder than words': more, they can in effect be utterances, sometimes via conventions, but also intrinsically. This is essential to the concept of embodiment I am forwarding. One can glimpse this understanding from a moment in the film *Vanilla Sky*, when a character asserts that 'when you sleep with someone, your body makes a promise whether you do or not'. The comprehensibility of this statement (whether or not one agrees with the sentiment) lies in an understanding of embodiment's meaningfulness. But that meaningfulness is not (or not just) semiotic; it is also experiential, emotive and social. It infuses a person's habits, their gestures and physical styles, whether and how they touch others, the quality of their voice, their sense of timing, and many more aspects of comportment. It is also sedimented in the way they inhabit their body and inhabit the space around them—the way, for example, some people 'own' a space as soon as they enter it while others seem to make themselves disappear. Consequently I expand the concept of performatives to embrace not only speech acts, but also acts that speak.

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[8]Austin is often taken as proposing performatives as one of two classes of utterance; but this view ignores his final lecture on speech acts, which is to explode that distinction. See Austin 1975. Archer two holds that 'words are quite literally deeds' (2000, 21; see also 155-59), but she doesn't seem to be aware of Austin's work. Derrida's critique of Austin does not bear on the issue of causal efficacy.

The recursive structure of embodied reflexivity must be different from an 'inner conversation' because there is a fundamental difference between the 'spiral' of discourse, in which the only causal power undergoing recursion is semiosis (language and other cognitive systems), and the recursion of agentiality, in which multiple causal powers are involved and are intrinsically interrelated—but do not necessarily recurse in the same way. 'Intentional embodied causally efficacious agency' describes a stratified structure that arose through natural and historical emergence. At its base is mere physical existence, a feature we share with stones and water, which provides the matrix of possibility for all else. From simple materiality emerged entities with the power to act upon the environment, a power all biological forms possess and which transforms the living being's physical materiality into its body. Through their embodiment lifeforms obtain food, protect themselves from danger, and reproduce. Humans, of course, do many other things, but this emergent ability to act upon the environment is the causal efficacy necessary for agency. Finally, the emergent power of intentionality and semiosis arose within humans; but intentionality would be nothing without the ability to act, which in turn depends on embodiment. All three aspects of agency must be involved in the recursion required for embodied reflexivity.

However, 'acts that speak'—embodied performatives—require not only the recursion of all three layers of embodied intentional agency, but a recursive method that is governed by the relationship between them. This problem has been addressed by philosopher Charles S. Peirce, whose relevance for critical realism is by now well-established.[9] Peirce developed a

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[9] E.g., for the concept of the 'internal conversation', see Archer 2000, 228-29; 2003, 64-78. The similarity between Bhaskar's concept of the sign and Peirce's is striking; see Bhaskar [1993] 2008, 222-23. I have shown that Peirce's semiotics is largely consistent with critical

methodology for trifold recursion in the context of his semiotics, in the face of issues closely

related to the ones we are considering here. He distinguished between three basic types of signs:

icons, indexes and symbols. Icons involve a relationship of similarity or analogy to their object,

in whatever manner that similarity is expressed: for instance, in the form of a visual image such

as a drawing of the moon, a mathematical formula such as one in fluid mechanics that models

electron flow, a metaphor that tells us 'Juliet is the sun', and so forth. Next, indexes involve

action. There are two main types: indexes that are the effect of some cause, whether that

connection is direct (as chirping is a sign of birds) or indirect (such as the numbers on a

thermometer that indicate temperature); and indexes that designate, point to, or refer to some

other entity (such as arrows and pronouns). Symbols, finally, are conventional signs; all words

are conventional, and so they are the most prominent example of symbols in Peirce's sense.

Signs in Peirce's theory are not coterminous with individual words and images; they can be of

any scale and complexity, be it a single letter or the entirety of Proust's *In Search of Lost Time*.

This is but the most basic of Peirce's classifications of signs. He developed two other

major taxonomies; one identified ten different types of signs, the other (never fully elaborated)

had 66. One reason for these more complex taxonomies is that signs are frequently 'mixed': for

instance, the pronoun 'you' is both a conventional sign and an index. In addition, however,

'mixture' occurs at the most fundamental level: in Peirce's analysis, every index contains an

iconic element, and every symbol contains both an indexical and an iconic element.[10] This theory

of an iconic element in every sign has been ratified by modern cognitive science, which has

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realism in Nellhaus 1998.

[10]Peirce 1992, 1998, II: 274-75.

demonstrated that abstract thought, indeed much thought of all kinds, has embedded within it various unconscious metaphors derived from our embodied activities in the everyday world. For example, in the previous sentence I used the word 'embedded', which is a metaphor of containment that not only makes the analysis clearer, but actually structures the analysis itself. Critical realism itself is rich with metaphors, such as 'structure', 'mechanism', 'constellational containment', 'closed/open system', 'level', and 'domain'. All of these have their source in our interactions with the natural and artifactual worlds. Far from being problematic, metaphors are intrinsic and vital to thought. Of course, like theories, specific metaphors may be faulty; for instance, the notion that the brain is like a computer has been proven incorrect and misleading. The key point for the argument here is the presence of embodiment throughout both consciousness and the unconscious.[11]

However, the elements of signs can be further subdivided to reveal their own iconic and indexical elements. The theory behind this analysis is rooted in Peirce's concepts of Firstness,

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[11]See, e.g., Lakoff and Johnson 1980; and Lakoff and Johnson 1999. For a fuller discussion from a critical realist viewpoint, see Nellhaus 2004, 103-32. I disagree with Archer that myths, mysteries, symbolism and the like 'are all matters of inter-personal influence' and exist 'beyond or outside of the canons of logic' (Archer 1995, 180), a view which flies in the face of the science, and betrays a lingering Cartesian concept of the mind and body (indeed, her concept of culture is rather rationalist). Peirce argues for a deeply semiosic nature of the self, and he views the self as a sign—specifically, a symbol, which therefore has iconic elements. Although Archer has adopted Peirce's concept of the internal conversation, she does not appear to have taken on board his view of the self as semiosic. Indeed, his theory of semiosis poses some challenges to her effort to preserve the privacy of the self. She attempts to dodge the problem by emphasizing how language is a tool for elaborating the inner world (2003, 70, 72), but however true that is, language remains socially constructed and thus deeply permeated by public discourses and forces. The very notion of an internal *conversation* indicates the deeply social character of the self as Peirce conceptualizes it. Peirce by no means reduces the self to society, but I believe Archer overstates her case. In sum, then, she underestimates both the depth of embodiment in consciousness, and its permeability.

Secondness, and Thirdness—roughly speaking, qualities and possibilities; exercised force and actual being; and relationship and semiosis. Methodologically these three concepts produce Peirce's system of trichotomies, that is, threefold recursive subdivisions in which each of the primary elements undergoes recursion in a different manner. From a mathematical standpoint, the recursive subdivisions could proceed endlessly, but for Peirce the taxonomy of signs has natural stop points ('natural' as in natural kinds). The rules of trichotomous recursion are depicted in Figure 1. Firstness iterates as itself; Secondness iterates as both itself and its contained Firstness; and Thirdness iterates as itself, and its contained Secondness and Firstness. The same rules are then applied to the sub-elements, creating a complex branching structure, as we will see.

1 = Firstness: quality, possibility, feeling, likeness
2 = Secondness: actuality, force, causation, reference
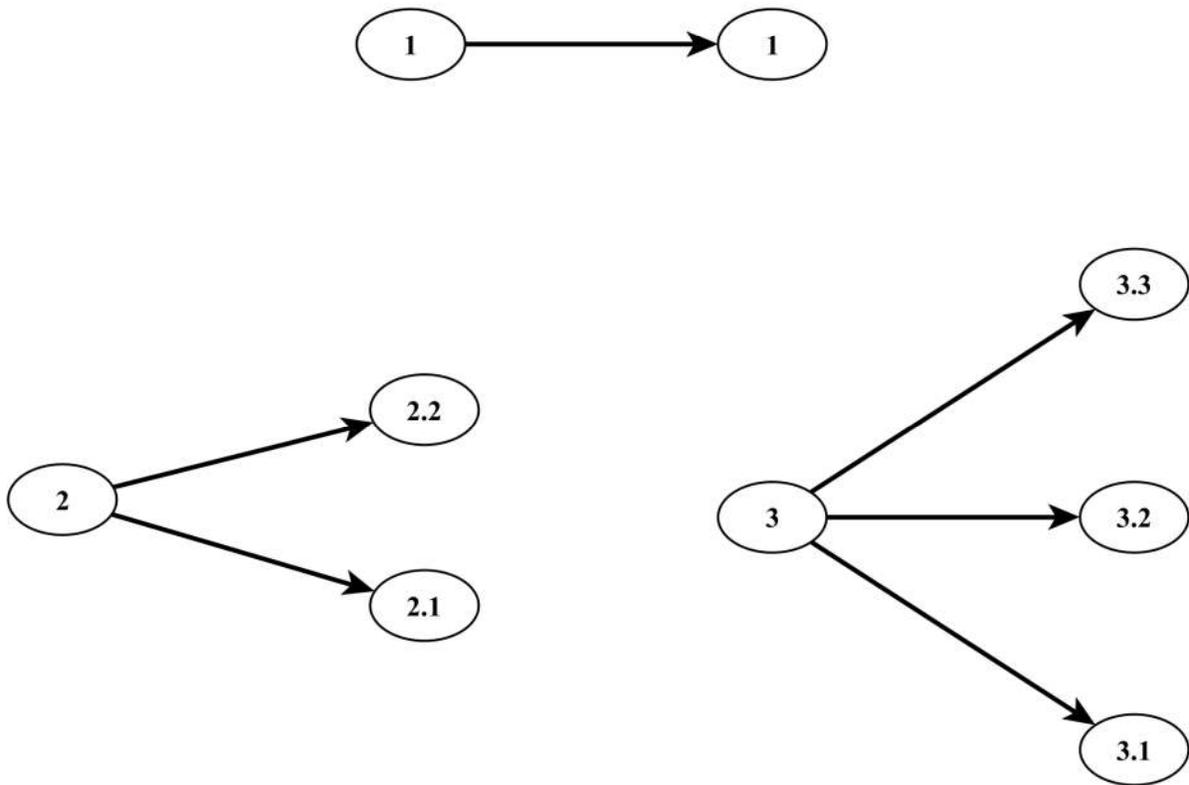3 = Thirdness: relation, mediation, signs, thought

Figure 1: The Rules of Trichotomous Recursion

Peirce's ideas of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness are highly congruent with Bhaskar's domains of the real, the actual, and the subjective.[12] However, as I have argued elsewhere, the last would be better conceptualized as the semiosic domain.[13] Most importantly for the present discussion, there are significant similarities between Peirce's triad of ideas and the three aspects of agency, not only in the parallel between Firstness as embodiment, Secondness as causal efficacy, and Thirdness as intentionality, but also in their internal relationship. Since causal efficacy is emergent from material being (as a realm of potentiality), it both depends on materiality and contains it as an aspect of itself; likewise, intentionality is emergent from causal efficacy and therefore is dependent on and contains both it and material being. The recursion of any one level can only involve whatever layers it already possesses. For that reason, Peirce's system of trichotomous recursion can be utilized in order to specify the structure of embodied performatives. The first level, embodiment, iterates simply as embodiment. The level of action (causal efficacy) iterates with two branches: action and the embodiment from it which it emerged. And finally, semiosis iterates with three branches, those of semiosis, action, and embodiment. The same process applies at each further iteration. Embodied performatives have a Peircean structure.

Figure 2 depicts the most important levels of embodied performatives. It begins with the basic breakdown between embodiment (E), causal efficacy as action (A), and intentionality as

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[12]Originally the third domain was the empirical, but in *Dialectic* Bhaskar ([1993] 2008) broadened the domain to the subjective.

[13]Nellhaus 1998.

semiosis (S), and two recursions.[14] The dots between letters demarcate the results of each recursion (described below). The recursions are of course potentially infinite, but understanding the first recursion by itself is sufficient for many purposes, and I will discuss the second recursion in order to produce more detailed knowledge of the first. However, analysis of the subsequent recursions, while necessary in other contexts, is not needed here.

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[14]The second recursion produces ten nodes that parallel Peirce's ten signs. The initial state and the two recursions form a trichotomy.
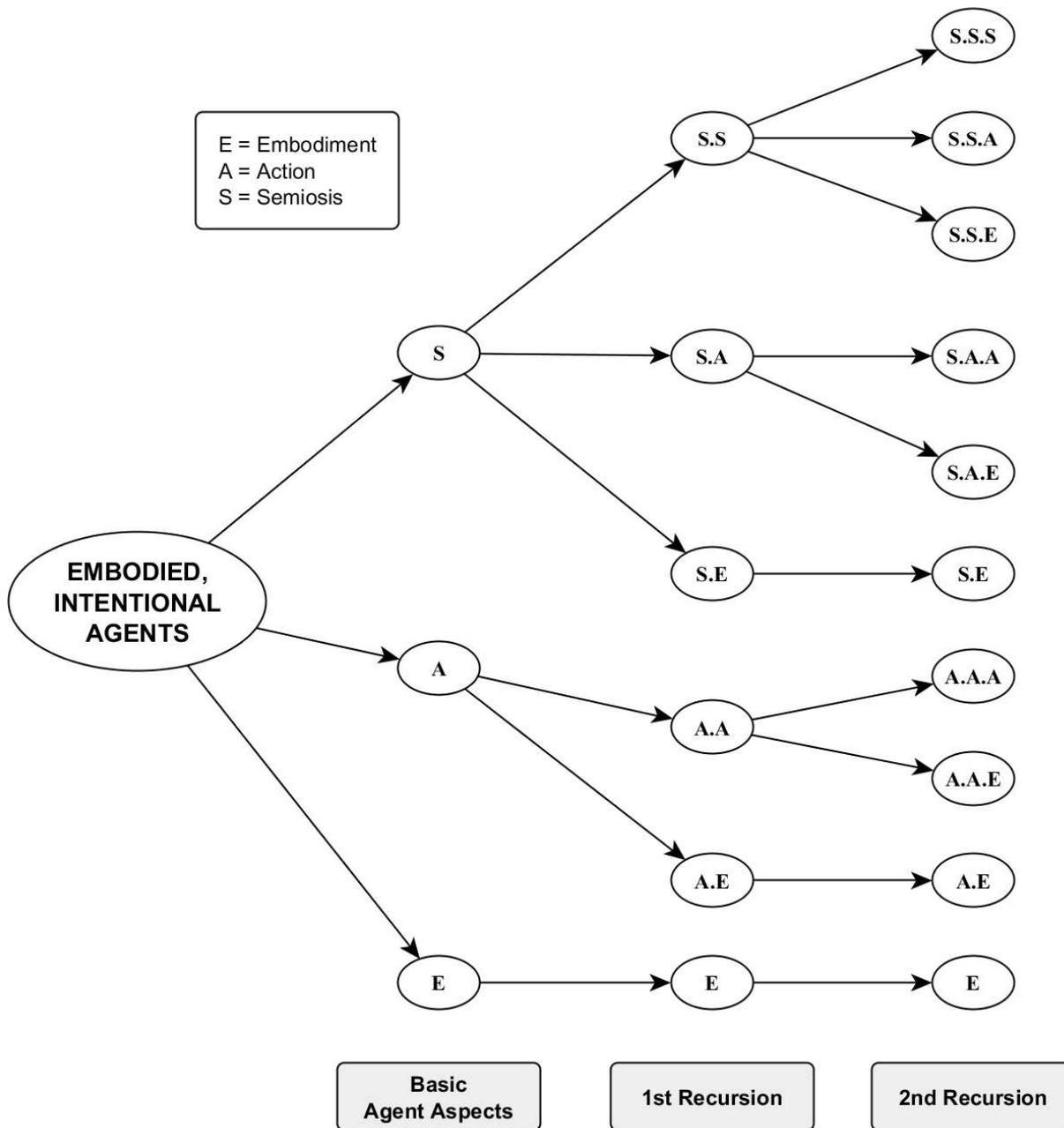
Figure 2: The recursive structure of embodied performatives comprising all three aspects of agency.

Each node covers a variety of instances and components—consider the numerous and complex aspects of embodiment alone—so they shouldn't be taken as representing a single thing, but rather as a particular type of distinction, difference, category, or relationship. The recursion of embodiment, as noted above, is simply embodiment; although over time the body changes with age, nutrition, injury, etc., at any particular moment of reflexivity one has the body and embodied experience one has, providing the grounds of possibility for the rest. The recursion of activity involves two different aspects, one being the agent's embodied power to act and susceptibility to being acted upon (A-E), the other the independent object that one could act on or might act on oneself (A-A). This is the distinction between self and world—the alterity within agential action. In general, whenever an action-type node (as indicated by an A as the final element) undergoes recursion, it involves some form of alterity, cause and effect, producer and product, reference and referent, or similar binary, although the exact nature of that binary varies. In the present case, the independent object in turn has two aspects of its own: its material or social qualities, characteristics or powers *in potentia* (A-A-E), and its actual activity (A-A-A). For example, 'Uh-oh, that's a lion. Oh good, it's sleeping', or 'My department chair often takes my suggestions'.

Likewise, the recursion of semiosis includes intentionality and language. Node S-E, the most bodily aspect of semiosis, consists of the feelings, affects or emotional states behind whatever one might express. They are not precisely driving forces, because whether one actually pursues the impulses is contingent. For example one might desire a friend's partner, but say and do nothing about it because of the risk of damaging the friendship, the violation of one's ethics, or some other reason. Reflexivity is often motivated by these emotive states—the possibilities or

narrative powers that impel one's thoughts, but may or may not drive one's concrete actions. The underlying feeling need not be a strong emotion such as a want or fear; it may be something lower-level, such as impatience, curiosity, indifference, or the desire to be understood. At node S-A is the activity of semiosis *per se*, that is, the process of generating particular speech acts or activities. S-A-E and S-A-A distinguish between and connect the identity of the speaker (the meaningfulness of who is speaking) and the structure or movement of her speaking—we do know the dancer from the dance, even though they are unified in performance (S-A).

Finally, there are signs themselves (S-S). The signs at node S-S-E are icons, pertaining not only to the images we find or make materially, but also those in thought. Node S-S-A encompasses indexes, which as I have noted can either be the effect of some cause, or refer to some other entity. Both types perform referential detachment—one might even call this node the act of referential detachment itself. At S-S-S, we have symbols: arbitrary, conventional signs, particularly linguistic signs, but also visual symbols like the octagonal shape of a stop sign. Again, both indexes and symbols have a necessary iconic element, such as the metaphors within thought, as a cognitive substrate derived from our embodied engagement with the world.

Collective Reflexivity

So far I have presented an ontology of embodied performatives, the recursive structure upon which embodied reflexivity occurs. Most models of reflexivity concern individuals thinking about their own thoughts and actions. The model of embodied reflexivity I am

developing primarily concerns group or collective reflexivity. In a discussion of collective reflexivity, Archer uses an example of department meetings, in which the means of communication is primarily discourse (and she discusses no other means).[15] But I want to start with more basic situations. Agents are always within society and many of their thoughts concern their social interactions with the people around them. However, a particular problem within any social interaction is discerning others' intentions, emotions and perspectives. When people are able to see each other, they (fallibly) infer those mental states not only by listening to others' words, but also by noting (often subconsciously) their expressions, vocal tone, gestures, and other non-linguistic elements, within whatever context seems appropriate. This skill is so important for our social interactions that, like the capacity for language, it is part of human brain development.[16]

Necessarily, then, the recursive structure of embodied performatives is the framework through which we experience others. To put the matter in terms of the nodes presented above, the question is the relationship between A-E and A-A, which concerns the alterity between self and world. When there are two or more agents, that distinction obtains a particular significance: it is the difference and relationship between the observer and the observed. We pay attention to others' speech, movements, expressions, gestures, tone of voice, etc. (all of which are included at node A-A-A); and their personal characteristics (node A-A-E), such as bodily qualities (size,

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[15]Archer 2013, 145–61.

[16]This ability is called theory of mind. It appears to occur in a number of other species as well. Evidently mirror neurons developed in order to assist in theory of mind and related matters. We even apply theory of mind to things that aren't human or even alive, as demonstrated by our frequent and often unintentional (sic!) anthropomorphizations. Theory of mind's physiological basis is further evidence that mind and body are indivisible. In more ways than one, our thoughts are grounded in our embodiment.

gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), clothing, accessories, and social position (as far as that can be determined).

The problem of inferring intentions highlights the distinction between and A-A-E and A-A-A (the materiality and actions of the other) on the one hand, and S-A-E and S-A-A (the semiotic mode of the other's image and speech, respectively) on the other. The former concerns people directly (the agents and their activities), whereas the latter pertains to how we perceive or frame them—the agents and activities as signs or representations. For example, consider the difference between a person eating scrambled eggs for lunch who you happen to know is a dancer, versus the dancer you watch that evening who you happen to know ate scrambled eggs for lunch. These are different frames for perceiving the same person.

Obviously, we ourselves have characteristics and produce words and behaviours which others observe in order to make inferences about our mental states. But it is possible to consciously shape one's own behaviour to some extent in order to utilize the fact that others interpret it, in the hope of achieving a particular impact. The fact that both self and other conduct this bodily communication suggests the possibility of fully embodied collective reflexivity, in which all three levels of agency are involved. In other words, social reflexivity would involve observation and interpretation not only *of* others' embodiment, but also *through* embodiment (both the others' and one's own). Such a mode of collective reflexivity would be as significant as individual reflexivity, because it would be a means through which a society could develop, maintain, and transform its self-image and social projects.

The recursive structure I've described represents the system or order of possibility, the matrix on which practical action may take place. It is basically an abstract model. But the order of praxis is highly dynamic because practice is transformative, and in the case of group reflexivity it is necessarily embedded within collective structures. Therefore the order of praxis can involve complex interactions among the 'nodes' described above, and might even produce a node outside that structure. Moreover, the content of each node within the order of praxis differs somewhat from the character it possesses within the order of possibility.

With these points in mind, we can identify three related criteria that a practice of embodied collective reflexivity would have to meet:

1) *Collective* activity is not simply actions and by a group of individuals, or even cooperating to achieve some goal for their personal benefit. The participants have to view themselves as members of a larger unit that has value in its own right; their activities are meant to achieve something valued by the whole, even if an individual accepts certain constraints on their own options in order to maintain that good (e.g., an instructor may agree to teach a not very attractive class because it's important for the curriculum).[17] So, two people maybe flirting—aware of the other's behaviour and consciously moulding their own to stimulate the attraction, each of them perhaps having the same goal—but that does not make them a couple. That requires the formation of a unity distinct from their existence as individuals. Collective activity can occur on the fly, particularly if it only involves a few people, but because it has a particular purpose it is more likely to happen via some kind of occasion so more people can participate. In this case embodied

[17]Archer 2013, 152-56.

collective reflexivity would require the pre-arrangement of either a common space into which people might come and go over some lengthy period; a common time during which people at a distance from each other might meet by using some means of telecommunication; or (most likely) both a common space and a limited time. In other words, generally speaking the practice has to be at least minimally *organized*, and if it's to be a more or less frequent practice, it would need regular and enduring organization.

2) *Embodied* reflexivity is not simply reflexivity about or referring to the body (although it might do so). Thinking 'Hmm, I'm hungry, I could do with a snack' is an instance of discursive reflexivity about the body. In contrast, embodied reflexivity is conducted *through* the body, that is, with the body as the means of expression, intention, even cognition. It must be causally efficacious and transformative, but in order to meet the criterion of reflexivity the activity must be explicitly meaningful as well. Thus embodied collective reflexivity is *performative*, in Austin's sense. There are no limitations in principle to the aspects of embodied experience that may gather meaning and thereby become part of the communicative interaction, although needs, circumstances and other contingencies may exclude some of them in any particular instance. They include phonetic, paralinguistic, kinesic, proxemic, vestiary, graphic, acoustic, spatial, temporal, olfactory, tactile, and possibly even gustatory and other percepts. They may be determined by social convention (such as the conventions of a handshake or a kiss on each cheek), but equally they may work by direct effect (for example, the pulsations of loud drumming) and by iconic and associative characteristics (e.g., looking downward upon someone conveys superiority).

3)   *Reflexivity* is motivated by a question, be it a problem to be solved, the meaning of
something, or whatever else. For other types of reflexivity the problem or question could
be the achievement of virtually any goal. But in this case the reflexivity has to be
conducted bodily, and therefore to some extent the issue must concern embodiment itself.
For this reason, in addition to whatever other matters it might focus on, an important crux
will be the encounter between self and other—our activity of inferring others' mental
states and intentions based on their outward behaviours and characteristics. Conversely, it
will involve some level (even if minimal) of awareness of one's own behaviours and
characteristics. In other words, to a greater or lesser degree, embodied collective
reflexivity fosters self- and other-awareness, and thus their alterity. That returns us to the
basic point: embodied reflexivity would be reflexivity that engages all three aspects of
agency: embodiment, efficacy, and intentionality. Consequently it must have the Peircean
recursive structure outlined above, or something very close to it. Moreover, this
reflexivity structurally centres on agents' circumstances, characteristics, and actions; it
consists of some sort of representation of, comment upon, reflection on, or self-reference
toward agency. That is to say, *agency itself* must be focal in a practice of embodied
collective reflexivity.

Performatives, Writ Large

What activities might meet these criteria? Obviously it's impossible to walk through all possible collective practices, but we can consider some possibilities. One candidate is religion, which on the one hand often involves discourses on people's activities and congregants' relations with others, and on the other, generally involve physical activities such as standing, kneeling, prostration, davening, singing, or approaching the pulpit, as well as ritual clothing or objects (vestments, kippot, etc.). The agents at A-E and A-A are the congregation or participants and the leader of the worship service or the ritual. Notably, however, the degree to which the congregation observes the service leader's embodiment and activities in order to surmise intentionality is quite limited, particularly because most of the leader's actions and clothing are predetermined. Moreover, the reflexivity about agency is normally conducted through discourse alone: actions like kneeling, for instance, may signify things about the sort of agents people should be, but they do not signify, comment upon, or question that process of signification—they are not recursive or self-referential. For these reasons religion doesn't meet the criteria for embodied collective reflexivity.

Legislatures, as deliberative bodies debating questions of social policy, budgeting and the like are certainly examples of collective reflexivity, although through little more embodiment than one finds at a department meeting. Or so it is in the present: in times past, instruction in oratory included training in gesture, vocal tone, pacing, and even props. Occasionally political candidates today receive similar schooling as well, although usually just for events such as televised debates. The embodied activity seeks to persuade audiences through demonstrative effect, mental engagement, and/or emotional impact. However, it does not involve reflexivity about embodied activity itself, that is, the full dimensionality of agents' ontology.

Storytelling before an audience is certainly a form of collective reflexivity. The role of embodiment is limited, although in many cultures storytelling is accompanied by music, such as in the performance of the ancient bard and the modern griot. Nevertheless, the activity of inferring other agents' intentionality by observing their words and deeds is only marginally addressed in this genre, if at all, because stories are told in the third person: although storytellers may use their body to demonstrate the behaviour of one of their characters, they rarely use their embodied activity to draw attention to or reflect upon their own embodiment.

One type of social activity (really, a family of social activities) does meet all the criteria for embodied collective reflexivity: dramatic performance. I use this phrase to encompass theatre, film, TV, DVDs, online streaming media, and any other medium (other than print, which is not performance). This is no minor matter: in the industrialized countries dramatic performance occupies a substantial portion of people's daily lives. For example, according to the US Bureau of Labor Statistics' very conservative estimate, in 2014 Americans on average watched 2.8 hours per day of television, more than half of all leisure time; other sources put the figure closer to 5.5 hours per day.[18] Add to these figures the amount of time going to movie theatres. The figures in other industrialized countries are also quite high.[19] The sociological implications, although not the subject of this article, are clearly massive.

To consider the ways in which dramatic performance meets the criteria of embodied collective reflexivity in detail, I will take theatrical performance as paradigmatic, not least

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[18]Bureau of Labor Statistics 2015. The Nielsen Company puts the figure at over five hours per day (Hinckley 2014); eMarketer (2015) estimates 5.5 hours.

[19]For the UK, see e.g., Ofcom (2015) for a figure of nearly 3.7 hours.

because it's the oldest. The analysis must begin with theatre as an organized activity: for theatrical performance to occur, a group of people needs to organize the event (even in the unusual case of spontaneous performance), obtain any needed resources, and so forth. Buildings, formal organizational structures, and the like aren't necessary or necessarily desirable. Embodied social reflexivity lies solely in theatrical performance as an activity—but even so, the performance event does need to be organized.

Organizations can be viewed from two perspectives. From one perspective, they are emergent entities based on and existing within society's larger conditions and resources. They possess or have access to material resources. In the case of theatre, the only absolutely essential resources are the cadre of performers and the (potential) audience, but nowadays they usually also include directors, plays old and new, office staff, sets and props, and buildings. The material resources constitute a set of possibilities that exist both before and after a performance, while the theatre is dark, so to speak. Since theatres require material resources, they have structural emergent properties, in Archer's terminology. They also have cultural emergent properties. For most organizations these include such things as their purpose (sometimes articulated in a mission statement), corporate culture, public presentation, and so forth; for theatre, cultural emergent properties encompass the concepts guiding their artistic choices, audience appeal, training programs, their inner culture, and so forth. Finally, an organization's constituents have personal emergent properties, which in theatre include people's skills at acting, directing, design, etc., their appearance, their tastes, and so forth. As a result, theatre companies have the same three ontological levels—structures, agents, and culture—that Archer identified as constituting society. However, unlike society, organizations also undertake actions. This brings us to the

other viewpoint: since organizations are purposive entities created by and principally composed of agents, they might also be described as agents themselves, because they possess intentionality, causal efficacy, and embodiment (in the form of material properties), even though they possess them as a collectivity.[20] Organizations, then, are bi-directionally emergent: inwardly from society as a whole and outwardly from individual agents. They are homologous with both, but identical to neither. The homologies might be described as nested replications, a type of recursion: organizations are simultaneously microcosms of society and macrocosms of agents—macro/microcosms.

Organized groups can of course be reflexive: in Archer's example of department meetings, faculty discuss curricula, budgeting, special events, and so forth. This type of reflexivity, however, is conducted wholly discursively, and so the reflexivity proceeds with the same spiralling recursions as individual discursive reflexivity. But theatrical performance is different: because its reflexivity involves embodiment and immediate causal efficacy as well as discourse, its recursion builds upon the trichotomous structure described above. Its form follows its function. The recursive structure of theatrical performance is illustrated by Figure 3 (which should be compared to Figure 2). It depicts, first, the theatrical organization as simultaneously emergent from society microcosmically, and emergent from agents macrocosmically. It is a recursion of social ontology. But in this regard it is no different from any other organized practice, as a macro/microcosm.

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[20]Archer distinguishes between 'primary agents' and 'corporate agents', but defines both in relation to collective interests and abilities to pursue those interests. My distinction is more simply between individuals and groups, using intentionality, causal efficacy, and material resources as the prime criteria (criteria that seem more consonant with Bhaskar). Cf. Archer, 1995, 257-65; Bhaskar [1993] 2008, 276-79.
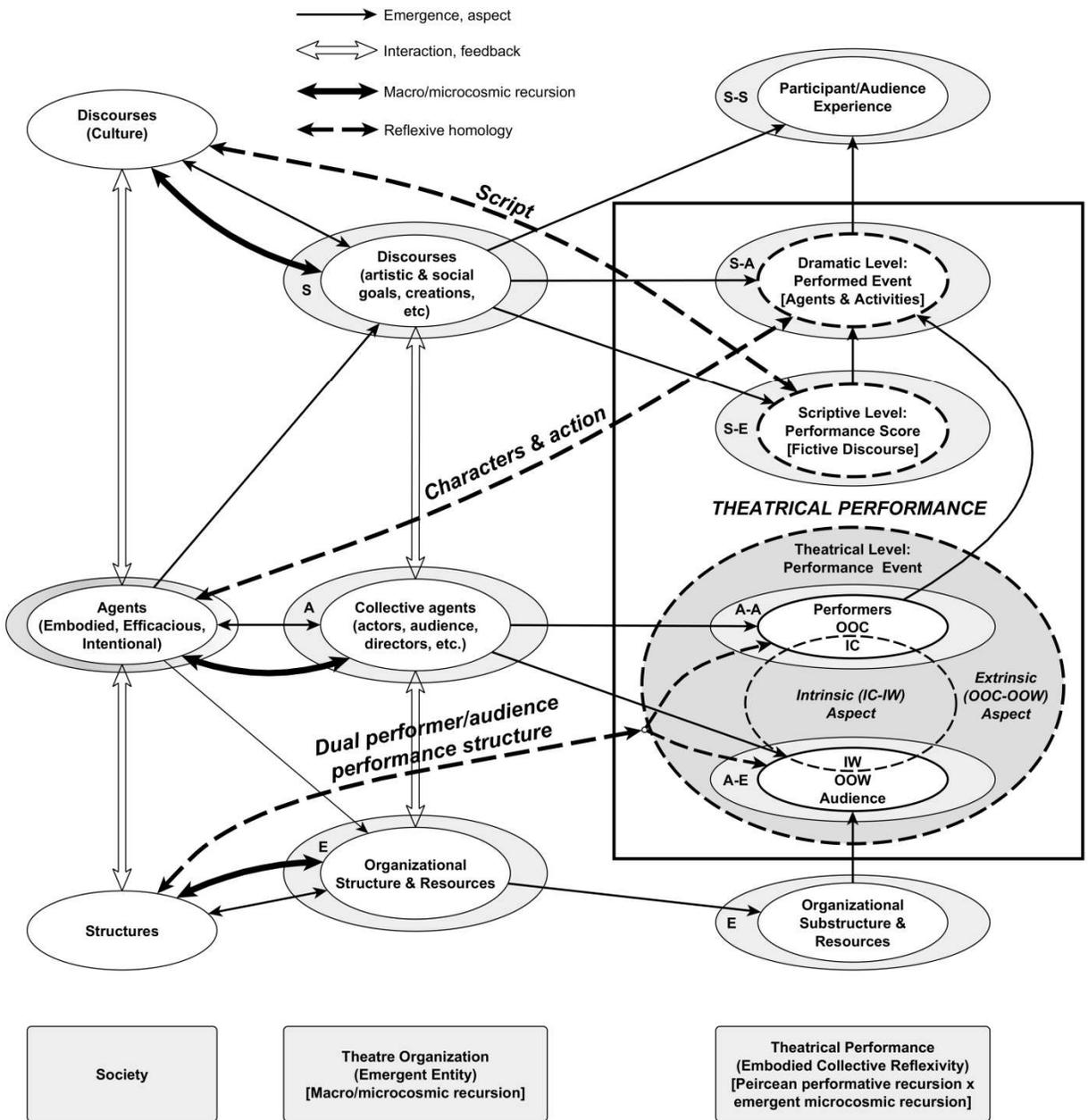
Figure 3: Embodied collective reflexivity in theatre

The next recursion, theatrical performance itself, is the actual moment of reflexivity in which something arises quite unlike other types of organized practices because the reflexivity is conducted through all three aspects of agency. The underlying level of the theatre organization and its material and human resources continues, of course. But for the performance per se, the base is the theatrical level, which we can also call the performance event. Its nature is complex and fundamental to theatrical performance as embodied in collective reflexivity. In embodied performatives, as we saw, the nodes A-E and A-A demarcate the alterity of Self and Other. But when we introduce reflexivity, the fact that the activity is organized transforms their alterity into duality within a whole: it becomes a new totality, whose inwardized form is reflexivity.[21] This totality is a social structure in its own right, involving not only people but also material resources. Performance is deeply shaped by the physical environment. For example, the experience of watching a play in a massive auditorium where the stage is behind a frame differs considerably from the same play performed in a small theatre where the stage juts into the audience area. The same goes for variations in lighting, sound, the actors' bodies, and so forth. The social relationship between the actors and the audience is likewise crucial to the performance event: performance involves a distinction between performing and watching, observer and observed—but not necessarily separation. The so-called 'fourth wall' sealing off the actors from the audience is a mid-nineteenth century European convention with limited historical and geographical purchase; interplay between the two has been quite common. For instance, actors (in role) may enter the playing space walking through the spectators, addressing

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[21]Bhaskar [1993] 2008, 272-73.

them as they go. Similarly, people can rapidly switch between being a performer and being a spectator, so that everyone participates. These differences lead to very different kinds of performance events.

But the theatrical level does not just consist of the performer/observer relation: it is compounded by another dualism. For reasons I will address further on, each individual—performer and audience member both—maintains two cognitive or epistemological states. Actors never truly disappear into their characters: they continue to have their own consciousness, so that they can for example figure out how to access a misplaced prop. Thus they are simultaneously 'out of character' and 'in character'. But this is also true of the audience: spectators as such are always out of character, but they watch people who they accept as characters—the audience is cognitively 'in world'. One can describe the status of being 'in character' (IC) and 'in world' (IW) as the *intrinsic* aspect of the theatrical level: the fictional world which it creates. The theatrical level's *extrinsic* aspect—'out of character' (OOC) and 'out of world' (OOW) —is the one in which the actors gauge their activities out of character, making sure they cross the stage correctly during a scene or adjusting pace in response to audience reactions, and in which spectators shift in their seats, suppress a sneeze, and in other ways continue to be aware and active in the literal universe.[22] Although the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects are cognitively different, one can mistake the two (as when an actor gets injured but the audience thinks it's part of the show). Some productions attempt to blur the line, as though the spectators are to be confronted by the actors themselves; the most famous example is Peter Handke's *Offending the Audience*, in which the performers alternately insult and flatter the

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[22]On 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' aspects, see Hartwig 2007, 265-67.

audience, and don't create characters in a traditional sense at all. But both errors and effacements involve (intentional or unintentional) category mistakes: the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of performance are distinct.

The theatrical level establishes the foundation for the two other elements that constitute theatrical performance: the scriptive level and the dramatic level. All theatrical performance is guided by a script of some sort. However, the script isn't necessarily a dramatic text. A scenario, set of stage directions, or merely a rudimentary character trait and goal, even if it arises less than a second before the performer acts on it, is sufficient to constitute the 'scriptive' level of theatrical performance. In life, people are guided by their intentions, always within the context of the social, material, and discursive conditions that partly shape it. But fictional characters can't actually have intentions: the performance score substitutes for those intentions. Thus, *Offending the Audience*, despite its lack of characters in the usual sense, nevertheless cannot avoid making actors perform fictional beings.

Since people unfamiliar with the actor's craft sometimes believe they simply recite a text, I need to clarify what they are actually doing. One can consider the script a 'performance score', similar to a musical score—just the starting point for its performance. The nearest analogy is to song treatments in popular music, like Eric Clapton's three versions of 'Layla': same melody, same lyrics, yet radically different. Likewise, in theatre the performance score indicates only some of what might actually happen on stage. In addition to educing themes, people must make decisions about casting, sets, costumes, props, movement, emphasis, vocal tone and inflection, facial expressions, pacing, sound effects, lighting, and all other aspects of staging. But unlike

musical scores, theatre artists usually have leeway to cut, add, or otherwise alter what's in a dramatic text. The directors and actors essentially use the script as one of the raw materials entering the production.

The final element and end product of theatrical performance is the dramatic level, also called the performed event—the embodiment of the possibilities within the scriptive and theatrical levels, and the audience experiences the reflexive activity, particularly through the characters and action—as though agents (intentional, embodied, and causally efficacious) were conducting their activities. Note that content and style are not at issue. The non-narrative play *Offending the Audience* and the most acutely minimalist of Samuel Beckett's scripts are as much examples of embodied collective reflexivity as the highly realistic *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry; the same can be said of *Downton Abbey*, *Star Wars* and *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and of plays 2500 years old such as Aeschylus's *Oresteia*. The notions of a 'slice of life' or 'holding a mirror up to reality' are irrelevant for understanding embodied social reflexivity, even pernicious given those mimetic ideas' actualism and empirical realism: the ontology of dramatic performance is what is at stake, not what it displays. The question is less what theatrical performance shows than how it functions.

Embodied Reflexivity and Fictionality

Yet this seems a strange claim—'hold a mirror up to nature' sounds like what embodied reflexivity *should* do. My criticism however is of the empiricism and idealism behind the notion of mimesis. Even at its most improbable, abstract, fantastical or bizarre, theatrical performance

has to communicate *something* about reality. That is intrinsic to reflexivity. But the problem is more fundamental. Tall tales about gullible spectators aside, normally audiences do not take dramatic performance for reality—it is roundly understood as pretence. The duality between the intrinsic (IC/IW) and the extrinsic (OOC) aspects is essential to the structure of dramatic performance as a mode of reflexivity. Discursive forms of collective reflexivity do not have this cast. A couple actually plans the weekend housecleaning; they don't pretend to plan it. A congregation doesn't pretend-pray, it prays (although a non-believer might pretend to pray, for the sake of courtesy or self-protection). Similarly with legislating, shopping, and so forth.

Why is fictionality an intrinsic part of embodied social reflexivity, in the form of dramatic performance? The well-known theory of a 'willing suspension of disbelief' has highly limited explanatory value. The notion gives no clear idea of what the audience is choosing to do instead; but spectators don't walk into a theatre intending to be dupes for two or three hours. Most crucially, the 'willing suspension of disbelief' explains nothing of *why* 'disbelief' is crucial for theatrical performance, why participants are willing to adopt that attitude, and what good it does them.

Archer's analysis of collective intentionality illuminates the 'willingness'. She develops her argument with a dyad in mind (more or less for convenience), but a dyadic analysis is useful for understanding dramatic performance insofar as the latter paradigmatically consists of two groups, the actors and the audience, who face each other as Self and Other, or in her terms, Ego and Alter. She argues that 'Ego and Alter both *orientate themselves* not directly to one another but to the emergent relational goods they generate'; thus, 'dyadic relations are really triadic, but

the 'third component' . . . is not a person or a thing but rather the product of persons'.[23] In the case of dramatic performance, the 'relational good'—that is, the valued goal guiding the agents' activities—is the performance of a fiction and the pleasures that result.

But if a pursuit of a 'good' is what motivates the audience's 'willing suspension of disbelief'—which would now be better described as an intention or desire to entertain a fiction—the question remains about why the 'good' should take the form of a fiction. As I noted above, the dialectic of Self and Other is a fundamental part of embodied social reflexivity. But in most forms of collective intentionality, such as the university department meeting, the encounter between Self and Other is at what I've described as the organizational level, that of the department members themselves. But in dramatic performance, the key encounter—the moment of actual reflexivity—instead occurs in the next recursion. An intrinsic part of reflexivity is that it places previous or future thoughts or activities at a cognitive or epistemological remove so they can be contemplated, critiqued, appreciated, and/or changed. The fundamental operation of reflexivity is to ask a question, such as: Could/should this be different? What kind of person are others? What kind do I want to be? How can I contribute to the formation or continuity of this collectivity? Such questions open up the possibility of possibilities—a social 'good' to which the parties commit. The encounter between Self and Other in dramatic performance also incorporates this cognitive relocation.

However, while in most forms of reflexivity such recursive questioning is undertaken within language alone and action is subsequent, an *embodied* form of reflexivity must operate not just through language, but more importantly through the body itself. In fact it might operate

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[23]Archer 2013, 157 (Archer's emphasis).

without speech at all, as in dance. It must be a collective practice in which agents conduct reflexivity through surmising other agents' intentionality or experience by observing their speech and bodily actions, as they must in any encounter between Self and Other. Thus physical bodies, not just discourse, must open the possibility of possibilities. But *bodies* can only ask questions by being (seen as) symbolic, indexical, metaphoric. They become other than themselves, creating a distance from their own world, the world as it is. Put differently, performative reflexivity toward performatives creates a split in discursive levels which becomes formulated as the duality between 'out of character' and 'in character', the literal and the figural. Thus bodies on stage are never either fully present or fully absent, which they achieve through speech acts and especially acts that speak. They displace the real world and produce in its place an imagined world. In short, comprehensively agential reflexivity (reflexivity that is simultaneously semiotic, social, and material, and incorporates the dialectic between Self and Other) can only be undertaken through *a recursion in which agents performatively create/observe a fictional world*.

That is why the key encounter between Self and Other in embodied collective reflexivity occurs not at the organizational level, but at a recursive level generated along a Peircean trichotomy. Dramatic performance *is* that recursion. And the performance's function as a mode of reflexivity explains why participants are willing to 'suspend disbelief', or rather, disengage from the world-as-it-is in order to engage the free play of another, imagined world in which the possibilities of agency can be explored.[24]

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[24]This assertion obviously raises a number of questions, especially because theatre did not arise in all societies, and some societies have banned theatre. These historical questions exceed the scope of this article. I am also setting aside issues regarding the ontology of fiction itself, such as the relationship between fiction and 'possible worlds' (modal) theory.

Dramatic Performance as Homology

Key to understanding the nature of embodied collective reflexivity through theatrical performance is recognizing that homologies of all three of society's ontological levels—structures, agents and discourses—are put into play (in all senses of the word). The ontological structure of dramatic performance is in fact homologous with society's ontology at two stages. It is homologous simply by being an organized practice; in this regard, as a macro/microcosm, is like any other organized activity. But its reflexivity establishes a second homology with social ontology, albeit with a twist. First, the theatrical level is a structure, characterized by two dualities: performers and spectators, and intrinsic and extrinsic aspects. The scriptive level is discursive; however, it presents a range of possibilities, some of which are realized in performance and in many cases are unique to the particular production or even the particular performance. Finally, the dramatic level is where we find (fictional) agents and their activities.

However, in Peircean terms, the positions of the scriptive and dramatic levels are 'reversed' compared to their position in social ontology (see Figure 3). This is correct because a script is a set of ideas and images offering (in effect and often in concrete terms) a material basis—raw materials—for producing the performance. At the same time, in creating its parallelism with social ontology, the ontology of theatrical performance produces another kind of 'shift', as the figure illustrates: the theatrical level only exists while real agents participate in it, that is, agents (actors, spectators, etc.) produce a structure; and the scriptive and dramatic levels reside at two different semiotic registers, i.e., discourse generates two levels of semiosis,

one of them the representation of characters and their activities. In all, this means that above and beyond the recursion that generates the organizational macro/microcosm, the ontology of theatrical performance involves a *double recursion*: one consists of the Peircean structure of embodied performatives; the other, overlaying it, is the performance itself, which creates the microcosm of broader social ontology (its tripartite character), not just in being an organized activity, but in the ontological structure of the activity itself. The fact that this ontology's function is to establish a fictional world underscores the point. Thus even though dramatic performances involve a limited number of people, and even though the characters, plot and staging may be thoroughly unrealistic or outright bizarre, *due to its ontological homology with society, dramatic performance consists not merely of collective reflexivity, but more fundamentally, societal reflexivity*. Moreover, this homology means that dramatic performance—outside any consideration of what it presents or represents before the audience—is *a model of social agency*, that is, of agents' embeddedness within structures and discourses.[25] It is a model in its very structure.

At its dramatic level, performance can have additional forms of reflection, particularly in how the fictional agents are characterized and undertake actions. For example, psychological depth in modern drama, and 'flat' and often figural in medieval drama, depict different concepts of selfhood. In a more or less realistic play, the delineation of characters (as 'virtual' agents) implicitly and sometimes explicitly points to the fictional world's own structures and discourses. For example, *A Raisin in the Sun* portrays an African-American family struggling with poverty

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[25]This argument revises the ontology of theatrical performance that I developed in Nellhaus 2010, 149-62.

and navigating the ideologies of racism, assimilation, and black pride. But *Raisin* is somewhat unusual, because it is a social critique. A more typical modern play (say, *Proof*, about a math genius who fears she'll be afflicted by mental illness like her father) obscures social depth in favour of 'psychological realism' and the spectator may need to infer the relevant structures and discourses for herself.

However, reflection is essentially one-way mirroring, giving the spectator a mimetic 'picture of life'; I have already alluded to some of the problems of mimeticism. More significant in the present discussion is nested recursion—specifically, the play-within-the-play. A play-within introduces an additional, compounded series of reflexive recursions. Two well-known examples are the play performed by the 'rude mechanicals' in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and 'The Murder of Gonzago' in *Hamlet*. Frequently the play-within is lower in quality or in an older style than the main play (although there are exceptions). Historically playwrights have most often employed this device during periods of profound social change, particularly changes in communication practices. Because of the close connection between agency and discourse, especially through discourse's central role in reflexivity, changes in communication put old concepts of agency into doubt and contribute to developing new ones. Thus the play-within-the-play asks metareflexive questions about agency, and (in many cases) intimates that the newer concept of agency is superior to the previous one.[26]

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[26]The play-within-a-play is a particular type of metatheatricality. However, most types of metatheatricality, such as simple references to playgoing within the dialogue, don't involve nested recursion. For a fuller discussion of the ontology and historiography of the play-within-a-play, see Nellhaus 2010, 143-81.

Although it is most clearly manifested in theatre, the ontology of embodied collective reflexivity characterizes dramatic performance in all media. A key difference between live performance and all its recorded derivatives lies in the alterity and duality between the performer and audience at the theatrical level: in principle highly porous, malleable, dynamic, and dialogic in theatre (even if direct interactivity is highly limited in some genres); rigid, static, and monologic in film, television, and the other media. Nevertheless, in the age of not just mechanical but also electrical and electronic reproduction, film, television, online video and so forth also function as forms of embodied collective reflexivity, reaching a far larger number of people, but lacking the interactive aspect of theatre entirely, only indirectly social as people can (and today, often do) watch individually, and to some extent also limited in their embodiment. Underlying this difference is another: theatre engages social presence, the sense of sharing a meaningful space and (potentially) interacting with another person; electronically mediated performance generally does not, although arguably the virtual world offers exceptions.

Dramatic performance's functioning as a mode of embodied collective reflexivity is exceptional, but it may or may not be unique. The answer may depend on the scope of 'drama'. For example, there is probably a good argument that dance (both presentational and recreational) can be encompassed within it. But there may be non-dramatic activities genres as well. And certainly within the range of way people can be reflexive—individually and collectively, through discourse alone in through fully embodied activities, and with aesthetic intent or not—there is nothing to suggest that dramatic performance is 'better' than any other mode of reflexivity.[27] My

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[27]I should note that the recognition of the depth of embodiment within consciousness suggests good reason to question, or at least qualify, the discourse/embodiment contrast. If it collapsed or lost strength, which I think likely, then Archer's failure to explicitly contend with

key point however is that the ontology of dramatic performance makes it of particular value in understanding agency and reflexivity, and thus the importance of its numerous venues is unmistakable. Cultural practices perform work that is essential to society itself, and analyses of them can contribute in a significant way to our knowledge of social ontology, social activity, and social transformation.

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Peirce's concept of the self as a symbol would be further problematize, and undercut much of the individual privacy she is eager to protect (see note 11). But there is no space to argue this here.

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