

Embodied Collective Reflexivity: Peircean Performatives

TOBIN NELLHAUS

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Abstract

Most work on reflexivity has focused on individuals exercising their reflexivity through discourse. However, agents have three major aspects (intentionality, causal efficacy, and embodiment) and they are fundamentally social. This article examines the possibility of collective reflexivity conducted not just by saying, but also by doing—that is, through their embodiment. By expanding the concept of “performatives” to encompass not just speech acts but also acts that speak (i.e., embodied activities as socially meaningful) and applying the work of Charles S. Peirce in order to develop an ontology of embodied reflexivity, it becomes possible to determine several criteria defining embodied collective reflexivity. Assessing possibilities such as legislative debate, political demonstrations, religious ritual, and dramatic performance reveals that a certain set of practices does in fact meet those criteria and discloses additional aspects of what constitutes embodied collective reflexivity.

KEYWORDS agency, Charles S. Peirce, collective reflexivity, embodiment, performatives, social ontology

The nature of agency and the place of reflexivity have long been key issues in critical realism. In the early 1990s Roy Bhaskar described agency’s primary ontological constituents using phrases like ‘embodied intentional causal agency’, ‘intentional embodied causally efficacious agency’, and most compactly, ‘intentional embodied agency’—a

conceptualization central to this article (Bhaskar [1993] 2008, 47, 144, 146, 153, 164, 185, 258). Some years earlier 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’ (Bhaskar 1989, 81). As that sentence suggests, attention has mainly gone to intentionality and reflexivity in terms that are wholly linguistic. That said, more recently Margaret S. Archer, who has examined agency and reflexivity extensively, emphasized that ‘Our human reflexivity is closely akin to our human embodiment’ (2007, 1), 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. This is a crucial matter—but as I will explain, embodiment pervades cognition (both conscious and unconscious) far more deeply than she evidently realizes. Thus within critical realism’s theory of agency, embodiment’s role in reflexivity needs to be further fleshed out, so to speak.

Moreover, analyses of agents’ reflexivity have largely concerned the individual; study of collective (or group) agency and reflexivity has been less focal. Archer (2013) considers collective agents’ reflexivity in some of her writings, but her argument only covers collective reflexivity conducted through language. Communication through gesture, facial expressions and other physical movements, proximity, clothing, hairstyle and the like, alone or together with speech—that is, embodied communication—is left untouched. Yet communication between people in all its forms is a core part of how agents make their way in the world, and requires us to look beyond individuals and their internal cogitations.

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

discourse, not through the agent's *entire* ontology. But if, as we saw in Bhaskar's definition, 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 assume collective reflexivity is marginal or simply derivative from individual reflexivity. 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. As I will show, embodied collective reflexivity is a prominent part of many people's lives and so must figure in our understanding of how society operates.

Reflexivity and Recursion

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. That generates complexities for conceptualizing embodied reflexivity, so further detail is warranted. Recursion 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 mathematics recursion is essential to numerous concepts and formulas. In geometry recursion produces fractals—shapes that are self-similar at every level of scale—which have garnered considerable attention since the 1970s partly because they accurately model various natural phenomena, such as the growth patterns of certain algae and the branching patterns of fern leaves and various trees. Simple branching rules apply to every branch in the same way: for instance, 'each branch generates two new branches'; but notably, a recursive method could also be 'the right-hand branch generates two branches, but the left only generates one'. 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 print 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. Recursions in other natural phenomena likewise face material limits.

In human culture, recursion has figured 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 designs. However, recursion occurs not only in reflexivity and imagery, but also in numerous areas of social activity. The *Dictionary of Critical Realism* identifies recursion as ‘a cardinal property of the human social world as such’, and describes emergence itself as a form of nested embeddedness (i.e., self-containment) (Hartwig 2007, 405). 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 helical cycle of social reproduction and/or transformation. This too is a mode of recursion.

Reflexivity in consciousness is a special type of recursion due to its emergent character, both caused and (potentially) causing. On the one hand, it is *motivated*, often arising from uncertainty and/or under-determination. 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?”’ (2013, 145). 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.

On the other hand, unlike other forms of discourse and intentionality, 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. Archer calls a person's reflexivity an 'internal conversation', involving dialogic interchanges between the 'I' who is presently deliberating and a metaphorical '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 coming into existence and might undertake one action or another (Archer 2003, 74-78, 95-116).¹ Thus there is a dialectic in which one plays in turn both speaker and audience. The recursion involved in individual 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.

It is clear enough that reflexivity about intentions depends on language, and consists of discursive (semiotic) activities. 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. We're whole beings, who emerged from natural processes. What, then, would reflexivity through entire bodies involve? What would count as embodied reflexivity?

Performatives

When agents seek causal efficacy, usually their motives 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 (including texts) 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 adjourned, to the more subtle like logical proofs and truth claims: they accomplish or enact things. Austin's term for speech acts is *performatives*.²

However, 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. An everyday example is a hug, which (depending on the context) can communicate caring feelings like 'I'm happy to see you', 'I love you', or 'I'm sorry you feel bad'. At a more complex level, one can glimpse this understanding of embodiment 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, the way they touch or don't 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 area around them—for example, some people 'own' a space as soon as they enter it while others seem to make themselves disappear.³ The meaningfulness of embodied activity can thus both express agency and influence its conduct, partly because embodiment is one of the conditions of possibility for agential action, and partly because like any system of meaning it has aspects that are constructed socially. Consequently I expand the concept of performatives to embrace not only speech acts, but also *acts that speak*.

The recursive structure of embodied reflexivity must be different from the speech acts of an ‘internal conversation’ because there is a fundamental difference between the ‘spiral’ of discourse, in which the only causal power undergoing recursion is semiosis (principally language), versus the recursion of full 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 composition into its body. Through their embodiment life-forms obtain food, protect themselves from danger, and reproduce. Humans, do many other things, of course, but this emergent ability to act upon the environment is the causal efficacy necessary for agency. Finally, the emergent powers 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. Due to the line of dependency and the different natures of these three characteristics, 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, namely stratification and emergence.

Semiotics and Embodiment

The problem of tripartite recursion has been addressed by philosopher Charles S. Peirce, whose relevance for critical realism is well-established. In two areas his work has been

directly influential: the concepts of retroduction and abduction as types of explanatory inference derive from Peirce's theory of logic (Danermark et al 2002, 89-92); and Archer adopted the concept of the 'internal conversation' from his analysis of thought processes (2000, 228-29; 2003, 64-78). In other areas there are notable similarities between Peirce's philosophical analyses and critical realism, enough that his work can inform and enrich the latter. Bhaskar's concept of the sign (2008, 208-09) is strikingly similar to Peirce's, such that Peirce's semiotics—the field for which he is best known—can fruitfully extend critical realist theory beyond the skeletal ideas Bhaskar developed. This is partly because Peirce developed a form of realist metaphysics that, despite certain unusual aspects, is at many key points compatible with critical realist ontology.⁴ His concept of the internal conversion, his semiotics, and his metaphysics all inform my discussion of embodied reflexivity, so a sketch of his theories is necessary.

Peirce 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. Most if not all icons represent either material objects, imagined material objects (such as centaurs), or material relationships (such as love). Next, indexes involve action. There are two main types: indexes that are the effect of some cause, whether that connection is direct (as chirping points to the presence 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, but there are other types of conventional

symbols, such as stop signs, and there are also conventional indexes (e.g., arrows as directional pointers) and conventional icons (like the smiley face ☺). 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 (Peirce 1992, 1998, vol. 2: 274-75).

Peirce's theory that an iconic element resides in every sign has to a significant extent been ratified by modern cognitive science, which has demonstrated that abstract thought, indeed much thought of all kinds, often 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 is rich with metaphors, such as 'structure', 'mechanism', 'constellational containment', 'closed/open system', 'level', and 'domain'. All of these ultimately derive from our interactions with the natural and artifactual worlds. Far from being problematic, metaphors are intrinsic and vital to thought, starting at the unconscious. 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.⁵

This point also marks a difference between Archer's concept of embodiment and my own—a difference that is highly consequential for a theory of embodied reflexivity. She does not consider the possibility that metaphors deriving from embodiment unconsciously structure the thought process itself: she perceives metaphor as existing solely at the level of consciousness. She acknowledges the emotional power of myths, mysteries, symbolism and the like, but she asserts that 'they are all matters of inter-personal influence whether we are talking at one extreme of hermeneutic understanding . . . or the manipulative assault and battery of ideas used ideologically' (1995, 180). Although she recognizes the important connection between metaphor and our embodied interactions with the practical world, nevertheless she considers their use as a 'resort' taken in order to describe those interactions propositionally (2000, 156, 160, 179, 189). But even without Peirce, this view flies in the face of the science, and betrays a lingering Cartesian dualism between the mind and body (indeed, her concept of culture as a whole is rather rationalist, as we will see). Seeing the mind as always deeply embodied supports my extension of 'performatives' from speech acts to acts that speak, which is central to a theory of embodied reflexivity.

Peirce's Categories and Critical Realism

Behind Peirce's theory that indexes contain icons, and symbols contain both indexes and icons, lies his categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness. Roughly speaking, these are respectively (1) qualities and possibilities; (2) action/reaction and actual being; and (3) relationship, mediation and rule-boundedness. The categories' precise content depends on the context (much as absence figures differently at each stage of Bhaskar's dialectics). Four contexts are central here: semiotics, ontology, agency, and society. Semiotically, Firstness concerns the representation of qualities, and thus consists of images, likenesses, models—

icons. Indexes involve Secondness because they represent real connections: thus, effects are indexes that indicate causes, pronouns indicate the persons referred to, and so forth. Symbols are the semiotic form of Thirdness because conventional signs involve the application of a general rule, not bound to a particular; for instance, the word ‘book’ is a conventional sign that applies to any book.

Considered ontologically, Firstness concerns possibilities, as established by tendential qualities. Peirce gives this example: ‘a piece of iron has a quality in it . . . which *consists* in the steadily continuing *possibility* of its being attracted by a magnet’ (1998, 269, original emphasis). Secondness is the realm of fact or actuality, that is, the outcome of objects’ interactions. Finally, Thirdness in his ontology is semiosis itself, as signs create a relationship in which a sign represents some thing to some interpreter. As a way of conceptualizing ontology, Peirce’s three categories are highly congruent with Bhaskar’s three domains. Firstness corresponds to the domain of the real—transfactual generative mechanisms and powers—which Mervyn Hartwig describes as the ‘domain of unactualised possibility’ (in Bhaskar [1993] 2008, xix). Secondness corresponds to the domain of the actual, that is, events as the result of interactions between generative mechanisms.⁶ The domain of the empirical is that of conscious experience, which is a set of signs (Thirdness).⁷

Peirce’s categories map onto ‘embodied intentional causal agency’ as well: agency’s Firstness consists of embodiment (the agent’s physical capacities and resources), its Secondness is causal efficacy in the world, and its Thirdness is intentionality. This is straightforward enough when considered in terms of individuals, but collective agency has analogous characteristics. By ‘collective agency’ I have in mind not just more-or-less formalized organizations, but organized activity in general, including informal and ad hoc collective activity.⁸ Collective agents possess or have access to material resources which

provide various capacities and are fundamental to their operation. The most basic of these resources are human bodies themselves, but they may also include things such as tools, buildings, and land (see Elder-Vass 2010, 157). Notably, however, collective agency necessarily incorporates an internal social structure, partly to manage and utilize its material resources—a point that will figure below. The collective activity has causal efficacy upon the world, which of course it achieves through its individual members, each with their roles and abilities, but nonetheless is an effect of the group as a whole. Finally, a collective agent acts upon various ideas and aims—in particular its purpose, but in formalized organizations it can also encompass their corporate culture, public image, and so forth (Archer 1995, 185-86, 258-65; Vandenberghe 2007). (Sometimes modern organizations articulate this purpose in a mission statement.) Thus collective agencies, whether formal or not, possess intentionality, causal efficacy, and embodiment (in the form of physical resources), even though they do so as a collectivity.

Lastly, I want to discuss Peirce's categories in relation to social theory. In the course of two books, Archer discusses the relationship and interactions between social structures and agency, and between agents and culture (Archer 1995; Archer 1996). This gives us a tripartite social ontology consisting of structures, agents, and culture, each of which is irreducible to the others and possesses its own particular set of emergent properties. 'A structural emergent property,' she writes, is distinguished by 'its primary dependence upon material resources, both physical and human.' She describes agents in terms of people's emergent properties, consisting primarily of their ability to affect each other's relationships, groupings and activities, and their ability to affect each other's capacities, ideas, and affinities. Cultural emergent properties, in her view, consist of a propositional 'register', a world of ideas, in which all items stand in some logical relationship (including independence)

(1995, 175, 179-80, 184). Unfortunately Archer's concept of culture is problematic: on the one hand, the term 'culture' has a complex set of meanings, some of them contradictory; on the other, defining this realm in terms of propositions doesn't adequately account for music, certain aspects of visual art, bodily demeanour, and other non-propositional semioses. For that reason, borrowing Foucault's expansive term 'discourses' to encompass all such activities, I redefine this level of society as discourses (both verbal and non-verbal), resulting in a social ontology that consists of structures, agents, and discourses.⁹ Archer's ontology requires yet further qualification because actually structures, agents, and discourses each have material, sociological, and semiotic aspects. For example, owning, renting, and squatting are all possible relationships with the same residential building, but involve different concepts and inter-human relationships. The importance of these aspects varies at each level of social ontology (Nellhaus 2010, 44-49).

As with the agential ontology of embodiment, causal efficacy, and intentionality, Peirce's categories of Firstness, Secondness, and Thirdness correlate with this trifold social ontology of structures, agents, and discourses. The similarities between these two ontologies arise because any social entity that emerges through agents' interactions will have to possess agents' own features in one form or another. Consequently, agential and social ontologies are *homologous*. Collective agents stand in a particularly interesting position. On the one hand, they are emergent entities composed of, by, and beyond individual agents, formed for agential purposes; Dave Elder-Vass calls them 'macro-actors' (2010, 179-80). On the other hand, they are emergent entities based on and existing within society's larger conditions, structural relationships, and resources. Thus they are, one might say, bi-directionally emergent: outwardly from individual agents and inwardly from society as a whole. These relationships might be described as nested replications, a type of recursion: collective agents

are simultaneously macrocosms of individual agents and microcosms of society—
macro/microcosms.¹⁰

Trichotomies and Embodied Recursion

We can now begin to approach the question of how agents can conduct embodied reflexivity. Applied methodologically, the three categories produce Peirce's system of trichotomies—recursive analytical expansions in which each element recurses in accordance with the three categories themselves. 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. (Recall the argument that indexes contain icons, and symbols contain both indexes and icons.) The same rules are then applied to the sub-elements, creating a complex branching structure, as we will see.

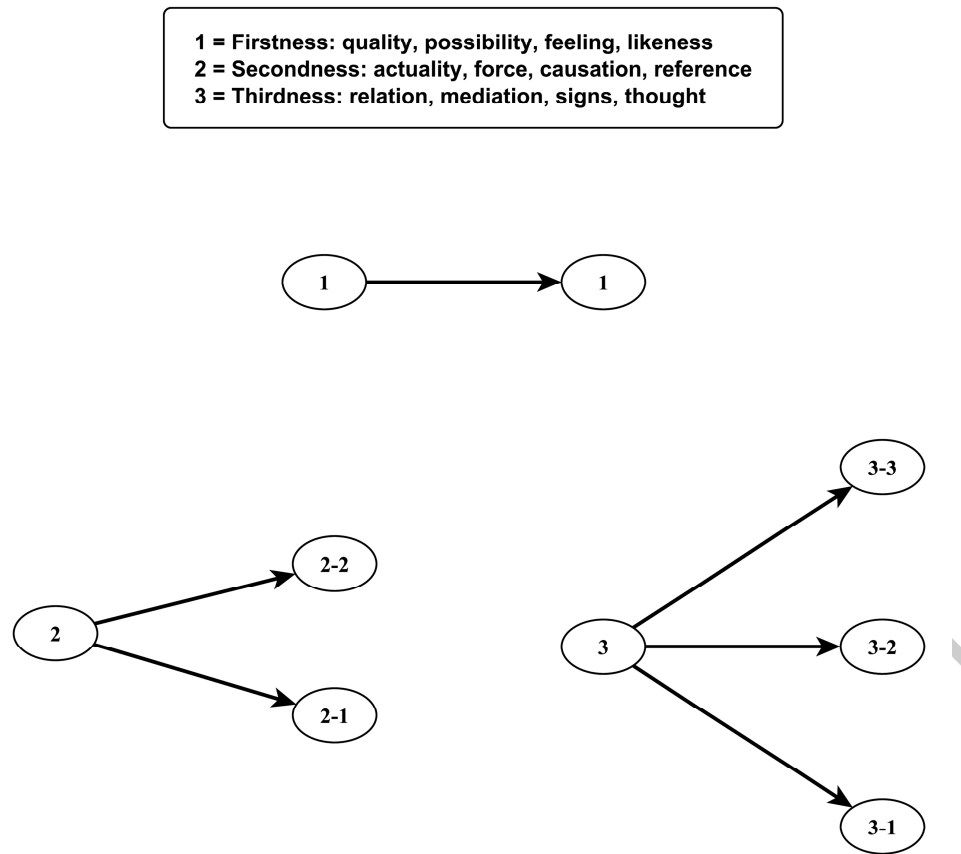


Figure 1: The rules of trichotomous recursion

Since individual agents always possess embodiment, causal efficacy, and intentionality, their performatives—speech acts and acts that speak—possess a trichotomous character.

Moreover, as we saw, the three aspects of agency are connected to each other through emergence: because a causal effect 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 a host of causal effects and therefore is dependent on and contains both it and material being. This emergence-based relationship must govern the ontology of embodied agential recursion. Hence from both a critical realist and a Peircean perspective, the recursive structure of embodied, causally efficacious, intention agency will

result in trichotomies; Peirce, however, allows us to avoid reinventing the wheel and to see how the recursion's numerous trifurcations are systematically related. Thus the first level, embodiment, iterates simply as embodiment. The level of causal efficacy iterates with two branches: action and the embodiment from which it emerged. And finally, semiosis iterates with three branches, those of semiosis, action, and embodiment. The same process applies at each further iteration. This is the structure of agents' embodied performatives, which embodied reflexivity must build upon.

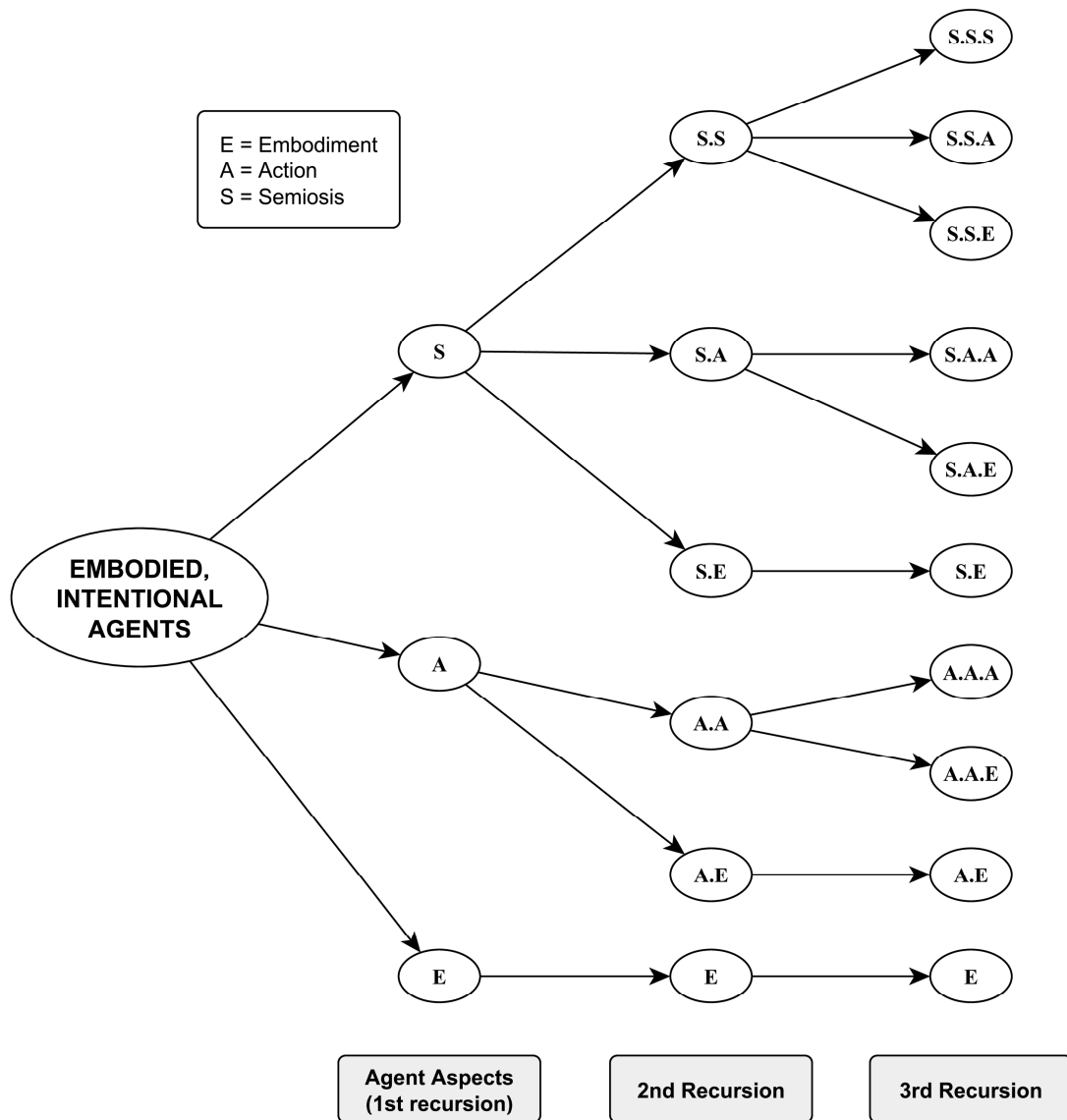


Figure 2. The recursive structure of embodied performatives

Figure 2 depicts the most important recursions in embodied performatives. It begins with the basic breakdown between embodiment (E), causal efficacy as action (A), and intentionality as semiosis (S), and two subsequent recursions. The recursions are potentially infinite, which

would produce a fractal, but for Peirce there are analytical stop points, one of them being the third recursion. Discussion of further recursions is unnecessary here.

Each node covers a variety of instances and components—consider the numerous and complex aspects of embodiment alone—so they should be taken as representing particular types of distinction, difference, category, or relationship. The dashes between letters within each node demarcate the results of each recursion. The recursion of embodiment (E), as noted above, is simply embodiment; although over time one's 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. The independent object in turn has two aspects of its own: its 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, surprisingly, often takes my suggestions'.

Likewise, the recursion of semiosis includes intentionality and language. Node S-E, the most material aspect of semiosis, consists of sign entities ('sign vehicles'), including writing, visual images, sounds, physical objects, body parts, and many other objects—objects also in the sense of things we work upon to produce meaning. They are not simply physical objects, but meaningful ones: one can fling a book, but here our interest is which particular book is flung (a novel? a Bible? Hume?). Under this rubric as well are the words, images, etc., as stored in our memories. At node S-A is the activity of semiosis *per se*, that is, the process of generating particular speech acts or acts that speak. S-A-E and S-A-A distinguish

between 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 indexicality the act of referential detachment itself. At S-S-S, we have symbols: arbitrary, conventional signs, particularly linguistic signs, but also visual symbols like 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.

One can apply this trichotomous analysis to a moment of activity. For example, while at a conference getting coffee, person X (a social agent, always possessing E, A and S) sees person Y (A-E and A-A for the encounter between self and other, respectively), casually dressed and somewhat older (A-A-E), also getting coffee (A-A-A), who looks familiar (S-A-E). She decides to approach person Y (node E), saying “Hi, I think we've met before, I'm X” (S-E for the use of speech sounds; S-A for the speech act; S-A-E for being the speaker; S-A-A for constructing a sentence; S-S for the generation of signs; S-S-S for the sentence as language, which in a speech act is primary; S-S-A for the indexical pronouns; S-S-E for the iconicity of “met”), and extends her hand (E for its primary embodiment; S-E for the hand as a bearer of meaning; S-A for an act that speaks, with its subsidiaries as above; S-S and its subsidiaries as above). Person Y turns, an expression of partial recognition crosses her face, she replies, ‘Yes, I think we have’, and shakes X’s hand (as an encounter between agents, to herself Y is A-E, but to X she is A-A; all the other elements as above.) The scene

exemplifies the trichotomous nature of performatives. Most performative occasions have this structure, with some variations or shifts in balance, such as for the mode of communication, whether one is speaker or audience, etc. The major difference between speech acts and acts that speak lies in the primacy of language versus embodiment. That has consequences for individual versus collective reflexivity, in part because it is easier for individuals to hear and respond to their own verbal discourse—particularly in the form of thought, when each person is the only possible listener—than watch their own bodies (although the latter does happen at times), whereas a group can see each person’s image as well as hear their speech, but it can’t have direct access to their thoughts.

Collective Reflexivity

Having formulated the recursive structure of embodied performatives, the next question is how it applies to embodied collective reflexivity. In a discussion of collective reflexivity, Archer (2013, 145–61) uses the model of department meetings, in which the faculty primarily use language to discuss curricula, budgeting, special events, and so forth. But I want to start with the most basic social situation. Agents are always within society and many of their thoughts concern their interactions with the people around them. However, during interpersonal interactions the agent must discern others’ mental states—that is, their intentions, emotions and perspectives. This observational skill is so important for our social interactions that, like the capacity for language, it is part of human brain development.¹¹

The recursive structure presented above is the framework through which we experience others. To put the matter in terms of its nodes, the foundation 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 is the difference and relationship between the observer

and the observed, or self and other. People (fallibly) infer others' mental states within whatever context seems appropriate not only by listening to their words, but also by noting (often subconsciously) their expressions, vocal tone, gestures, and other non-linguistic elements (all of which are included at node A-A-A); and their personal characteristics (node A-A-E), such as bodily qualities (size, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.), clothing, accessories, and social position (as far as that can be determined). Naturally, we ourselves have characteristics and produce words and behaviours that others observe in order to make inferences about our mental states. But it is possible to consciously shape one's own behaviour in order to utilize the fact that others interpret it, in the hope of achieving a particular impact.¹² The fact that in their interactions people necessarily observe each other provides the reason for considering the possibility that collective reflexivity could be conducted not just through discourse, but also through embodiment, so that 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* their embodiment, as individuals semi- or unconsciously draw upon their own bodily experience as a key structuring element of understanding. Collective reflexivity would be as significant as individual reflexivity, because it would be a means through which a society could develop, maintain, question, and change its self-image and social projects.

The recursive structure of embodied performatives portrayed above represents the system or structure of possibility, the matrix on which expression and perception may take place. It is in fact a generative mechanism. But when put into actual practice in order to conduct collective reflexivity, it becomes highly dynamic and transformative, especially because it is necessarily embedded within larger collective structures. Therefore its praxis can involve complex interactions among the nodes described. Moreover, the content of each

node within collective reflexivity differs somewhat from the character it possesses as a non-reflexive structure of possibility.

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

- 1) *Collective* activity is not simply actions by multiple individuals, or even individuals cooperating to achieve some goal for their personal benefit. The participants have to consciously or semi-consciously view themselves as members of a larger unit that has an existence and value in its own right; their activities are meant to achieve something valued by the whole, even if an individual accepts certain constraints on her own options in order to maintain that good (e.g., an instructor may agree to teach an unappealing class because it's important for the curriculum) (Archer 2013, 152-56).¹³ So, two people may be discussing how to achieve a shared objective, but that does not make them a team. 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 during some kind of social occasion or meeting so more people can participate. In this case embodied collective reflexivity would require the pre-arrangement of either a common space where people can participate but perhaps come and go, 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 time for a continuous in-person gathering. In short, generally speaking the practice has to be at least minimally organized in order to form a collective agency, and if it's to be a more or less frequent practice, it would need regular and enduring organization.

- 2) *Embodied* reflexivity is not mere reflexivity referring to the body. Saying ‘Hmm, I’m hungry, I could do with a snack’ is an instance of discursive reflexivity *about* the body. In contrast, embodied reflexivity is (also) conducted *through* the body, that is, through acts that speak to their observers, so that the body is an essential means of expression, intention, even cognition. Hence embodied collective reflexivity is *performative*, typically involving both speech acts and acts that speak. 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 in any particular instance, needs, circumstances and other contingencies may exclude some of them. They include phonetic, paralinguistic, kinesic, proxemic, vestimentary, 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, speculation on how something might occur, or whatever else. For discursive reflexivity the problem or question could be the achievement of virtually any goal. But because embodied reflexivity has to be conducted bodily, to some extent the issue must concern embodiment itself, including our understanding of each other’s acts that speak. 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. In other words, *agency itself* must be focal in a practice of embodied collective reflexivity.

Performatives, Writ Large

What activities might meet these criteria, or bear tendencies that approach them? I've already discussed how meetings are reflexive, but do not pursue reflexivity in the embodied manner in question here. Nevertheless the political arena would seem to be a natural location. For example, legislatures, as deliberative bodies contending over questions of social policy, budgeting and the like are certainly examples of collective reflexivity. But it involves 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 the use of props. Occasionally political candidates today receive similar schooling as well, although usually just for events such as rallies and televised debates. The embodied activity seeks to persuade audiences through demonstrative effect, mental engagement, and/or emotional impact. However, it's a marginal element that does not exercise reflexivity about

embodied activity itself; like meetings, legislatures remain a genre of discursive reflexivity to determine future collective action.

Political demonstrations and rallies, on the other hand, are collective activities that emphasize the presence of human bodies. The number of participants is usually foremost—but costumes, makeup and the like draw attention to certain people and provide additional means of discourse. Demonstrations and rallies also involve reflexivity, typically about either particular social agents, such as candidates, or the direction of the society as a whole (say, civil rights and anti-war protests). However, although demonstrations and rallies have reflexivity in the background as the participants' motivations, goals, and strategies, after they occur they are not conducted as interactive reflexivity among the demonstrators themselves. The reflexivity at that point occurs within civil society, and insofar as others hear about demonstrations and rallies in the news, that wider audience seldom considers itself a participant in the reflexive action. In fact the primary purpose of demonstrations and rallies is to exercise the agency of a particular collective within the body politic. It is an action to promote some sort of political or societal change. Consequently demonstrations and rallies are better seen as direct efforts toward agential efficacy than as reflexive activities in themselves.

However, demonstrations' use of speeches and often clothing and other imagery as means of public involvement suggests another avenue altogether: culture, in the sense of a society or community's way of life. A possibility in that realm is religious ritual, which on the one hand often involves discourses on people's activities and congregants' relations with others, and on the other, generally includes 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. Ceremonies such as weddings are similar. However, the attention to the service leader's embodiment and activities is quite limited. 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 and their relationship to (say) a deity, but the embodied activities not signify, reflect upon, or question that process of signification—they are not recursive (although a participant not following the behavioural norms may face scrutiny or sanctions). For these reasons religious ritual and other ceremonies don't meet the criteria for embodied collective reflexivity.

But one activity (really, a family of activities) does meet all the criteria presented above for embodied collective reflexivity: dramatic performance. I use this phrase to encompass theatre, film, TV, DVDs, online streaming media, and any other medium for drama (other than the script, which is not performance). Sociologically this is a highly significant activity: in the industrialized countries dramatic performance occupies a substantial portion of people's daily lives. According to one conservative estimate, in 2014 Americans on average watched 2.8 hours per day of television, a huge portion of their leisure time, most of which would be prime-time drama; other sources put the figure at or above five hours per day.¹⁴ Add to these amounts the time spent at movie theatres. The figures in other industrialized countries are also quite high.¹⁵ The sociological implications, although not the subject of this article, are clearly massive. At the same time, some features of dramatic performance—most notably, its fictional element—raise new questions about the structure and conduct of collective embodied reflexivity.

As is perhaps already clear, my approach contrasts radically from that of Erving Goffman. In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1956), he adopts theatre as a model for understanding various interpersonal social interactions. But where he theorizes a single

ontological plane of agential behaviours, I analyse multi-tiered ontologies and practices. He only marginally addresses embodiment and collective reflexivity. And while he applies theatre as a metaphor (distorting it in the process), my focus to the contrary is on dramatic performance itself, pursuing an argument that among other things will intimate why theatre can be a tempting and sometimes edifying or evocative sociological metaphor in the first place.¹⁶

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 because it has existed for some 2500 years. The analysis requires several steps, and must begin with theatre as an organized collective activity: for theatrical performance to occur, a group of people needs to determine the event's time and place (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 in theatrical performance as an activity, not as an enduring organization—but even so, the performance event does need to be organized.

As I discussed above, collective agents must have structures, agents, and intentionality (as articulated through and among discourses), in a manner that is homologous with both the three aspects of agency and society's three ontological planes. Structural emergent properties, as Archer argues, are social relationships involving material resources. For theatre, the only absolutely essential material resources are the cadre of performers and their audience (as physical, bodily beings) and space (or some analogue, e.g., a projection), but they typically include sets, props, a raised stage. Theatres also involve intentions and discursive resources; these encompass the concepts guiding their artistic choices, audience appeal, training programs, their inner culture, and so forth. Finally, theatre's efficacy resides

in people's emergent properties, in this case residing in the performers' skills at acting, directing, design, and so forth, and the audience's attention and ability to understand what sort of event is occurring (even if one doesn't, say, know the language).

As an organized activity, the ontology of performance has a recursive structure, diagrammed in Figure 3. The first recursion of social ontology concerns theatre as a collective agent, simultaneously emergent from society microcosmically and from individual agents macrocosmically. Both within society and within theatre, structures, agents and discourses interact, as indicated by the outline arrows. The narrow lines indicate emergence: from one direction within society as a whole, from the other direction as a product of agential activity. The heavy, curved arrows indicate the homology between society and theatre at this recursion. To help align this diagram with Figure 2, I have encircled each node within theatrical practice with an ellipse that indicates its connection to embodiment, agential efficacy, and semiosis. Since nothing happens in society unless agents undertake action, the pre-existing social structures and discourses they then interact with are left without surrounding ellipses.

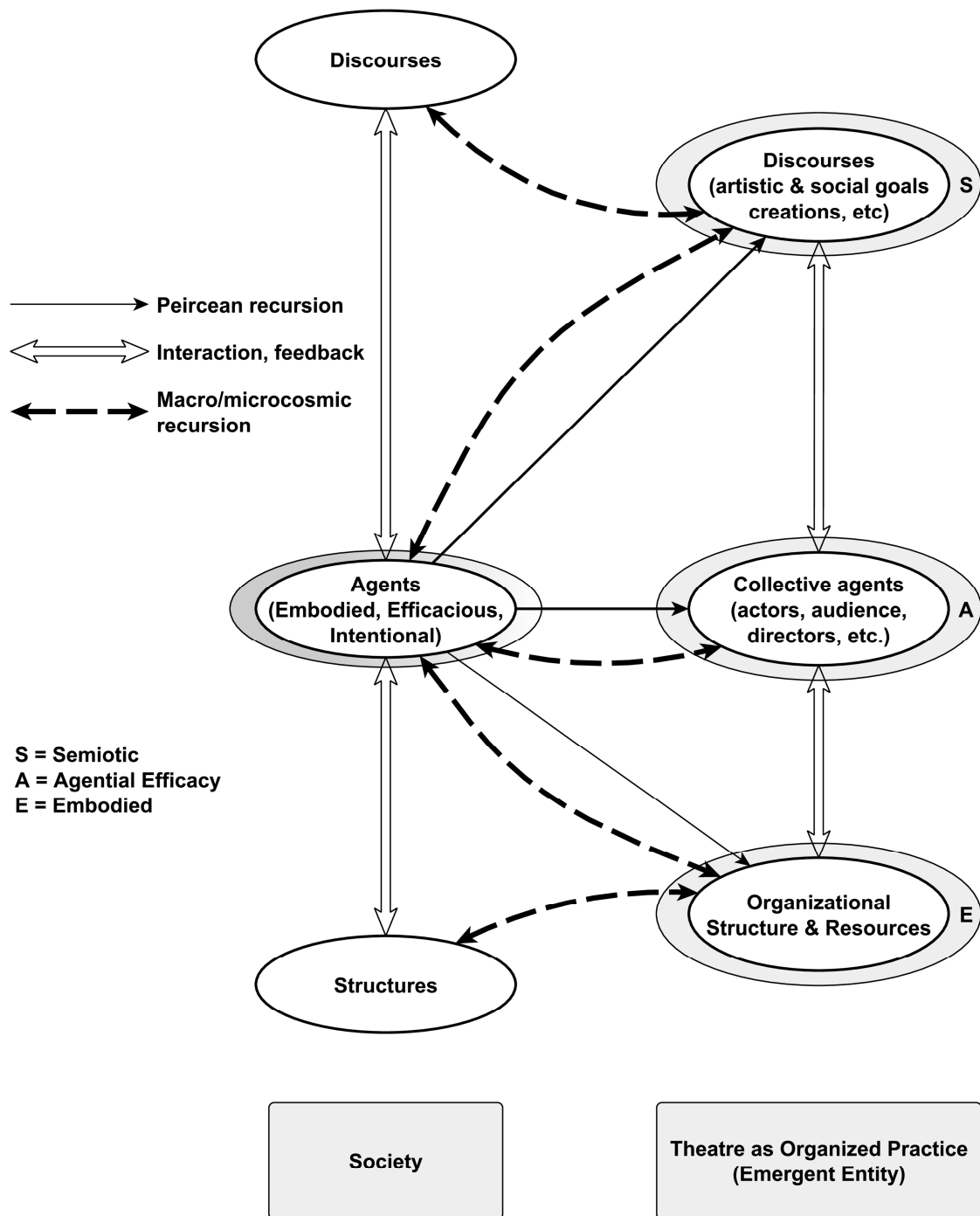


Figure 3. Theatre as an emergent organized practice

As a collective practice, theatre's homology with society is no different from any other collective practice. However, for reasons I will explain further on, for the group to conduct reflexivity through embodiment, the core of its activity must occur at another recursion. In it, something arises quite unlike other types of organized practices. Compounding its homology with social ontology as a collective practice, dramatic performance—this particular collective practice—*also* possesses it, as depicted in Figure 4. The *performance event* (i.e., the theatrical level) consists of the main social relationships governing theatre, in particular the actor/audience relation, shaped partly by the space (which may or may not include an imaginary fourth wall). The *performed event* (the dramatic level) is, paradigmatically, the play in performance, consisting of the characters as (fictional) agents, acting within their (fictional) world. Finally, all dramatic performance is guided by a script of some sort, although not necessarily a dramatic text. A scenario, a set of stage directions, or just rudimentary ideas of a character and intention are sufficient to constitute the *performance score* (the scriptive level). Since dramatic characters can't actually have intentions, the performance score substitutes for those intentions—that is, it enables us to infer each character's 'intentions' from what they do, say, wear, etc. Again we find a social ontology consisting of structures, agents, and discourses, making dramatic performance ontologically homologous with society in general.¹⁷

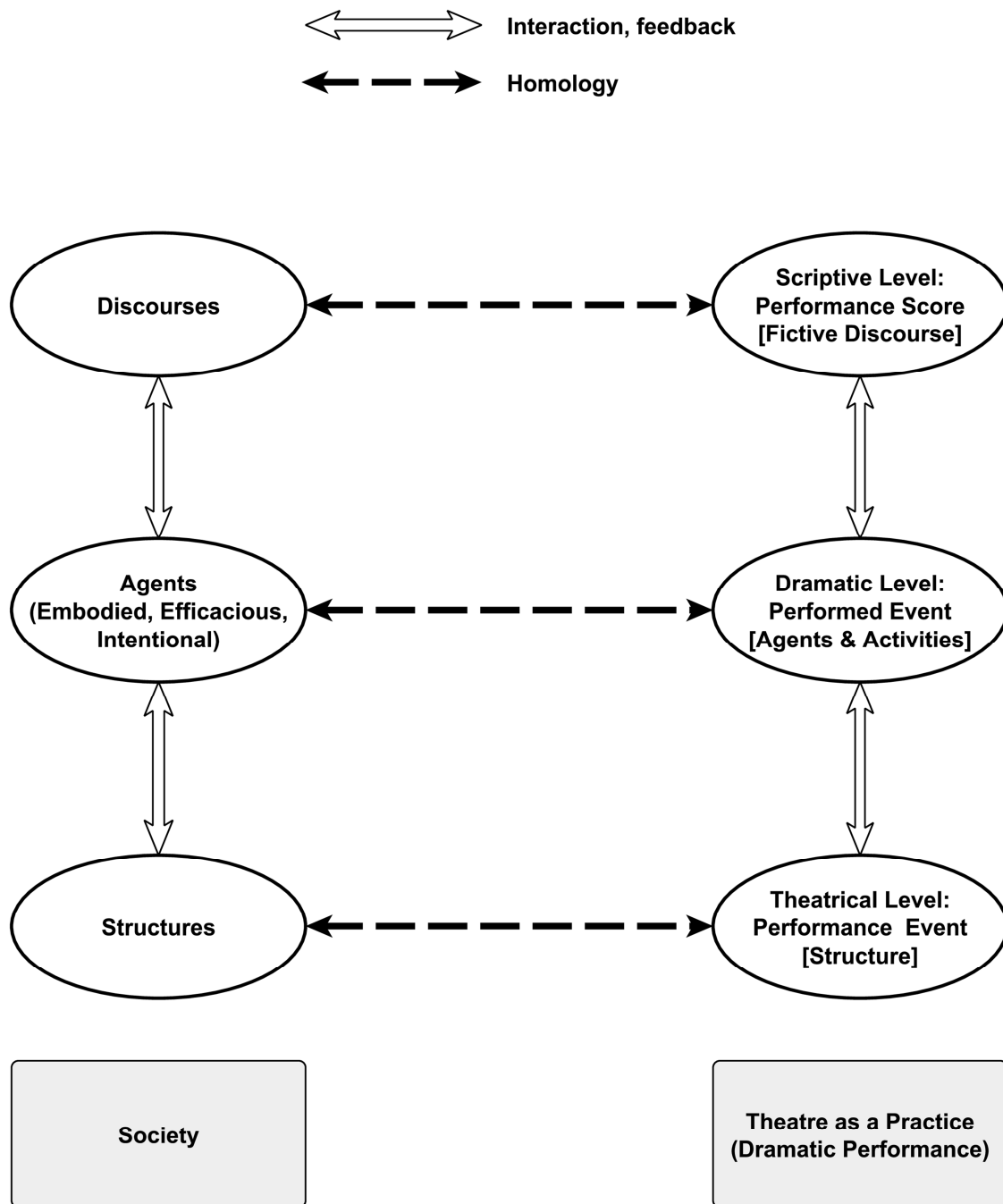


Figure 4. Homology between ontologies of society and theatre

However, the performance event is internally structured by two dualities (illustrated in Figure 5). One is the performer/spectator contrast. It does not necessarily designate different groups of people: it is a cognitive polarity (observer versus observed, based on the alterity of self and other; see nodes A-A and A-E in Figure 2). In principle, everyone can be an observer, and everyone observed. This pairing itself constitutes a new totality—a totality that is a social structure in its own right, involving not only people but also material elements (cf. Bhaskar 2008, 254-55). The latter include not only the performance venue (particularly its seating arrangement and design), but also the set, props, stage movement, sound, lighting, and so forth.

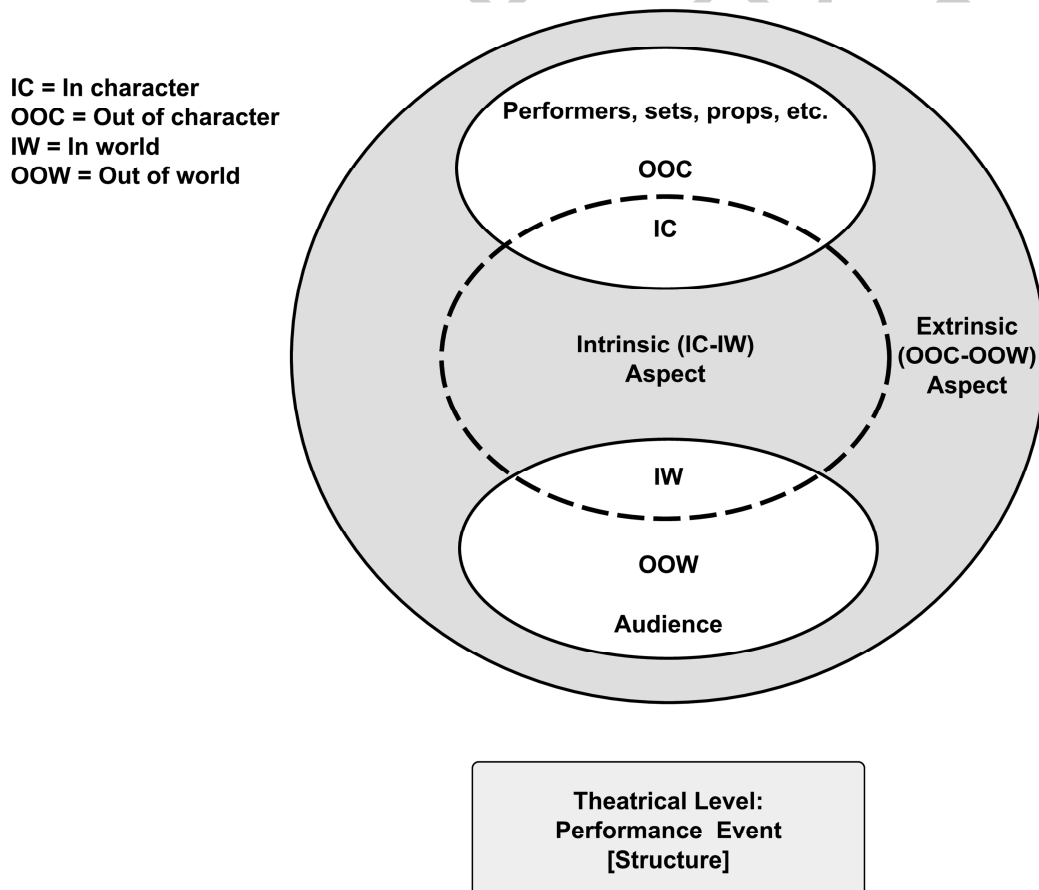


Figure 5. Internal structure of the performance event

But the theatrical level does not just consist of the performer/observer relation: it is traversed by another dualism. As I will explain later, 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 ‘in character’ and ‘out of 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 fictions—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 performance event: the fictional universe that it creates. The performance event’s *extrinsic* aspect—‘out of character’ (OOC) and ‘out of world’ (OOW)—is the factual one in which the actors gauge their activities, such as 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.¹⁸ 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). Also, some productions attempt to blur the line, as though the spectators are being confronted by the actors themselves. But both errors and effacements involve (intentional or unintentional) category mistakes: the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects of performance are distinct. Together, these two aspects—or perhaps better, the cognitive distinction between the fictional and nonfictional realms—forms the conceptual component of the theatrical level as a structure of social relationships (just as owning, renting, and squatting define social relationships to a building).

The performance event establishes the foundation for the scriptive level and the dramatic level, and the three together constitute the theatrical performance per se. When we

combine all the pieces of embodied reflexivity (as illustrated in Figures 3, 4, and 5), and add the participants' resulting experience of the theatrical performance, we find that starting from the agent embedded within social structures and discourses, performance's overall ontological structure is trichotomously recursive, as illustrated by Figure 6 (which should be compared to Figure 2).

The first column depicts the three basic ontological levels of society; but out of agents' activities, all else develops—the others are preconditions and resources. The next column shows theatrical organization as simultaneously emergent from society microcosmically, and emergent from agents macrocosmically. The following recursion—which incorporates theatrical performance itself—is the moment of collective reflexivity in which something arises quite unlike other types of organized practices, because the reflexivity is conducted through all three aspects of agency. (The nodes at this recursion have complex interactions, not shown.) The theatrical level now appears in its Peircean context. As we saw in the outline of embodied reflexivity, nodes A-E and A-A demarcate the alterity of self and other. But organized activity transforms their alterity into a duality within a whole: they form a new totality, which requires the presence of both self and other in order to exist, and is marked by the cognitive distinction between the literal and the fictional worlds. This totality is a social structure in its own right, involving not only people but also material resources. It is, in short, the performance event, with its watchable human bodies, stage architecture, set design, lighting, costumes, music, etc., along with the social relationships between performers and audience, including the effects of the physical space and the existence or absence of an imaginary fourth wall.

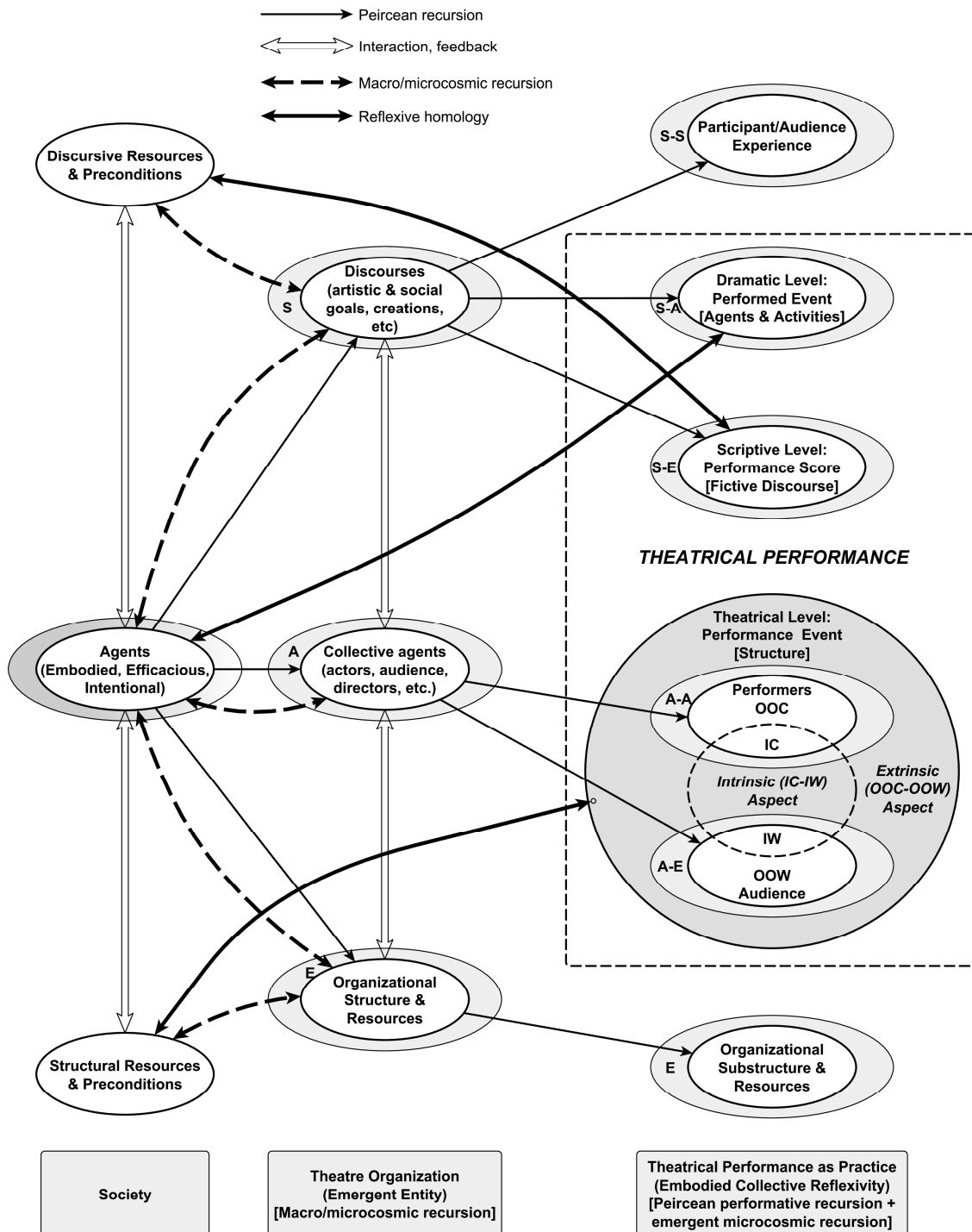


Figure 6. Embodied collective reflexivity in theatre

The diagram shows the positions of the scriptive and dramatic levels ‘reversed’ compared to their position in social ontology. 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, one of them the ‘score’ for the performance, and the other the representation of fictional characters and their activities. The terms ‘levels’ and ‘planes’ shouldn’t be taken literally: they are metaphorical, serving analytical purposes only. The relevant issue is how the ontological elements of social activity interrelate and interact, including changes in their role; hence the Peircean analysis takes primacy.

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 works 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 dramatic performance as 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. Certainly, even at its most improbable, abstract, fantastical or bizarre, theatrical performance has to communicate *something* about human reality. That is intrinsic to reflexivity. Mimetic theory, however, is strongly rooted in idealism and empiricism, beginning with Plato and Aristotle (Beistegui 2012, 1-28). But there is a more fundamental problem. 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/OOW) 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 collective reflexivity, in the form of dramatic performance? The well-known idea of a ‘willing suspension of disbelief’ has highly limited explanatory value. Spectators don’t walk into a theatre intending to be dupes for two or three hours, but what are they choosing to do instead? 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 theory 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. They ‘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' (Archer 2013, 157, original emphasis). 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 willingness to suspend disbelief—which would now be better described as an intention or desire to entertain a fiction—the problem remains about why the 'good' should take the form of a fiction. The answer lies in reflexivity's fundamental operation: asking a question. We saw several everyday examples earlier, such as 'What shall we have for dinner?'; of course the questions can delve into deeper matters such as how a group can best continue, or the character of each member and their contributions. The questions open up the possibility of possibilities—a social 'good' to which the parties commit. Thus 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, mourned and/or changed.

The point affects the dialectic of self and other in embodied collective reflexivity. In most forms of collective reflexivity, such as the department meeting, the encounter between self and other is at the organizational recursion, among the department members themselves. Moreover, in most forms of reflexivity (both collective and individual), recursive questioning is undertaken primarily or solely within language (speech acts), and action is subsequent. In contrast, in an *embodied* form of collective reflexivity the agents must conduct reflexivity by observing other agents' speech and bodily actions, through which they infer the others' intentions, emotions and other states, as they must in any encounter between self and other. It must operate not just through language, but more importantly through the body itself. In

fact it might operate without speech at all, as in dance. Thus *bodies* must ask the questions.

Physical bodies, not just discourse, must open the possibility of possibilities.

Bodies can ask questions, creating the necessary cognitive relocation, in just one way: by becoming other than themselves, thereby opening a distance from their own world, the world as it is. Bodies must be (seen as) symbolic, indexical, metaphoric. They become figural constructs. For that reason, in dramatic performance, the key encounter—the moment of actual reflexivity—occurs in the next recursion, where the encounter between self and other can incorporate cognitive relocation. Put differently, performative reflexivity toward performatives creates a split in discursive levels formulated as the duality between ‘out of character’ and ‘in character’, the literal and the non-literal, which establish the structure’s extrinsic and intrinsic aspects.¹⁹ Thus bodies on stage 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 universe*.

Thus although the ontology of embodied collective reflexivity is built upon the Peircean trichotomous structure of performatives illustrated in Figure 2, it has some special characteristics, and not simply because one must place agents in the context of social structures and discourses. Embodied collective reflexivity (as distinct from discursive reflexivity) generates both a homology between social ontology and the ontology of dramatic performance, and the intrinsic and extrinsic aspects at the theatrical level.

It bears emphasizing, however, that the Peircean trichotomous structure of ordinary (non-reflexive) performatives shown in Figure 2 applies to *all* performatives—not just acts that speak, but also speech acts. For example, the alterity between self and other, found in

theatre as performer and audience, arises in individual reflexivity as the 'I/me' or 'I/you' of the 'internal conversation'. The underlying trichotomous structure is present even if the embodied element of speech acts is subordinated, appearing only in supplementary gestures and facial expressions, and in underlying metaphors within discourse. Despite the subordination, mind/body dualism cannot be maintained, even in the 'internal conversation'. In practice, however, performatives' common ontological structure can be actualized in two distinctive ways, because there are two primary ways for agents to have causal efficacy: through words and deeds. The subordination of embodiment in speech acts has consequences, especially when one exercises reflexivity collectively, because asking questions through speech acts and asking them through acts that speak invoke different sets of agential ontological elements: principally (or solely) the discursive on the one hand; all three on the other. The latter requires bodies to ask questions, generating the literal/fiction duality.

In sum, the process of asking questions (opening the possibility of possibilities) proceeds differently for discursive versus embodied reflexivity. Discursive reflexivity can be conducted at the agential recursion, whether the agent is individual or collective. In contrast, embodied reflexivity—which is necessarily collective—must be pursued at the following recursion. Dramatic performance *is* that recursion. And the performance's function as a mode of reflexivity necessitating a cognitive relocation 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. This function also explains why theatre's structural level seems to break from the Peircean trichotomy by having not one but two sorts of dualities—between performers and spectators, and between the literal and fictional. As I mentioned earlier, although structural emergent

properties place primacy on material resources, as a totality it has material, sociological and semiotic aspects (as do the agential and discursive levels). The fissure between the literal and the fictional is one of the ideational elements that define the performance event as the sort of structure it is. Thus although this node of the trichotomy is altered, it is not actually violated: instead, it becomes a totality now characterized by two binaries striding a single material basis.²⁰

Conclusion: Dramatic Performance as a Model of Social Agency

Embodied collective reflexivity through dramatic performance is a social practice in which 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 homologous with society's ontology at two different recursions. It is homologous simply by being an organized practice; in this regard, as a macro/microcosm, it is like any other organized activity. But the act of embodied reflexivity establishes a second homology with social ontology. First, the theatrical level (the performance event) is a structure, characterized by two dualities: performers and spectators, and extrinsic and intrinsic aspects (the literal and the fictional). The scriptive level is discursive; however, it presents a range of possibilities, some of which are realized in performance, thereby making that particular production or even the particular performance unique. Finally, the dramatic level is where we find fictional agents and their activities.

There are further implications from the fact that homology with social ontology occurs both in performance's being an organized activity, and in the ontological structure of the activity itself. First, 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 *as a whole*, dramatic performance consists not merely of collective reflexivity, but more fundamentally, *societal reflexivity*. Second, the homology between dramatic performance and society makes performance a model—an ontological microcosm—of society, which is another type of recursion; hence, embodied reflexivity involves a double recursion. Finally, the 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. That opens dramatic performance to being used as an analogue for social interaction (à la Goffman), even if such usage misconstrues its source.

Even if no one on stage ever discusses society and agency (or uses language at all), the structure of dramatic performance makes it societally reflexive through acts that speak. Nevertheless, performances often conduct societal reflexivity through discursive means, but indirectly, in for example its construction of characters: thus the positioning of humans in relation to the gods or divine fate in classical Greek drama, allegorical and theologically typological characters in medieval European drama, and psychological depth in modern drama all bespeak different social conceptions of agency. Societal reflexivity can also occur through the plot structure, dialogue, staging, or in other ways. Even deracination of characters from any social context is a discourse on society. But such representations are (so to speak) extensions of dramatic performance's power as a social structure for societal reflexivity, which generates a tendency toward representation that is not necessarily actualized; actualization and its form are both contingent on other socio-historical factors.

Although it is most clearly manifest in theatre, the ontology of embodied collective reflexivity also characterizes dramatic performance in film, television and other media. While there are significant differences between live performance and its mediatized

neighbours, these other performance genres still function as forms of embodied collective reflexivity—ones that reach a far larger number of people than theatre, but lack its interactive aspect, being only indirectly social as people can (and today, often do) watch individually, and to some extent also limited in their embodiment, among other differences.

It is possible that some non-dramatic activity also functions as a mode of embodied collective reflexivity. But dramatic performance serves that function strikingly. In one form or another it is ubiquitous in most if not all modern societies; that fact alone should signal its importance for social analysis. The ontology of dramatic performance also accords it particular value in understanding agency and reflexivity. Indeed, critical realist analyses of all types of cultural practices can contribute significantly to our understanding of social ontology, social activity, and social transformation.

Notes

- 1 I must emphasize that ‘internal conversation’ is a metaphor for reflexivity, not for thought *in toto*, and possibly more analytical than phenomenological. Erkki Kilpinen (2010, 89-90) points out that the ‘I/me’ and ‘I/you’ theory is extremely early Peirce, who soon dropped the idea. However, this does not negate its usefulness or validity. But there is another problem: Archer ignores Peirce’s view of the self as semiotic—a theory that undermines her effort to preserve the non-social aspects of the self (cf. Kilpinen 2010, 90). Her argument that language is a tool for elaborating the inner world (Archer 2003, 70, 72) overlooks the fact that language is socially constructed. The very notion of an internal *conversation* indicates the deeply social character of the self.
- 2 Austin (1975) is often taken as proposing performatives as one of two classes of utterance; but this view ignores his final lecture on speech acts, which explodes that distinction. Archer too holds

that ‘words are quite literally deeds’ (2000, 21; see also 155-59); however, she doesn’t seem to be aware of Austin’s work.

- 3 Pierre Bourdieu develops a similar point in terms of *habitus* (see, e.g., 1990, 52-79). As Frederic Vandenberghe (2007, 306) writes, ‘pitching is a bodily symbol that directly performs membership [in a baseball game] *in actu*’.
- 4 I show that Peirce’s semiotics is largely consistent with critical realism in Nellhaus 1998.
- 5 For a discussion of embodied metaphors, see for example Lakoff and Johnson 1980, and Lakoff and Johnson 1999. For a fuller discussion from a critical realist viewpoint, see Nellhaus 2004, 103-32.
- 6 Note Bhaskar’s statement that ‘To say that a thing has a power to do something is . . . to ascribe a natural possibility to the thing, whose actualization will depend upon the flux of conditions’ (1978, 88). Peirce’s ideas align with this depiction of the first two domains.
- 7 Bhaskar originally designated the third domain as the empirical, but in *Dialectic* ([1993] 2008, 10) he broadened it to the subjective. I have argued elsewhere that the domain would be better conceptualized as the semiotic; the empirical and the subjective are subdomains (see Nellhaus 1998). I am reverting to ‘empirical’ here simply for familiarity’s sake.
- 8 My focus is not what makes collective agents cohere (e.g., norms, communication, leadership, etc.), but rather, given coherence, the requirements for exercising agency. The size of collective agents is not limited.
- 9 Archer’s concept of culture again has a rationalist quality. See the discussion of ‘culture’ in Williams 1976, 76-82; and my analysis of structures, agents and discourses in Nellhaus 1998. Regarding discourses, Foucault writes of ‘the latent discourse of the painter . . . [embodied] even in the very gesture of the painter’ (1972, 193-94). *Habitus* can be understood as part of this broadly conceived realm of discourse.
- 10 Although (to my knowledge) not phrased in these terms, the idea of bi-directional emergence can be inferred from various analyses in the critical realist literature. Much attention has been paid to

what I call ‘outward’ emergence, especially society and social structures as emergent from past and present agential activity, with its intended and unintended outcomes (see, e.g., Bhaskar 1989, 33-36; Archer 1995, 167-68). Collective agencies are among the intended outcomes (see, e.g., Elder-Vass 2010, 144-68). But the converse is that society as a whole shapes and transforms social agents (see, e.g., Lawson 2012, 351-52). The power of society to configure its parts must apply to collective as well as individual agents, and in fact overarching social dynamics may motivate the creation of new collective agents, like the IMF. As parts, then, organisations are emergent ‘inwardly’ from society. The homologies I identified between the ontologies of individuals, collective agencies, and society help concretize the idea of ‘macro’ and ‘micro’ entities.

- 11 This ability is called theory of mind. It apparently occurs in a number of other species as well. Evidently mirror neurons developed in order to assist in theory of mind and related capacities. 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. The absence of bodily cues, such as in email, can easily lead to interpretive mistakes. 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.
- 12 See for example the discussion in Goffman 1956.
- 13 I accept Archer’s critiques of the theories of collective reflexivity proposed by John Searle and Margaret Gilbert (Archer 2013, 147-50).
- 14 Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015) for the low figure. The Nielsen Company clocks the time at over five hours per day (Hinckley 2014); eMarketer (2015) estimates 5.5 hours.
- 15 For the UK, see e.g., Ofcom (2015) for a figure of nearly 3.7 hours of TV daily.
- 16 Wilshire (1982) extensively critiques many uses of theatre as a metaphor, including Goffman’s (274-81).

17 Cf. Nellhaus 2010, 152-62. The analysis I develop here sustains the main ideas of the earlier theory but revises certain aspects.

18 On intrinsic and extrinsic aspects, see Hartwig 2007, 265-67.

19 Something similar does in fact occur in reflexivity conducted through language when it involves subjunctive thought.

20 The argument above raises some historical questions, and issues regarding the ontology of fiction; however, these matters exceed the scope of this article.

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Notes on contributor

Tobin Nellhaus is an independent scholar based in New Haven. He taught at the Ohio State University, the University of Washington, and Tufts University; was a Fulbright Fellow at the University of Helsinki; and was Librarian for Performing Arts, Media and Philosophy at Yale University. He writes mainly on the relationship between theatre and communication practices, and on critical realist theory in theatre studies. His articles have appeared in various theatre journals and in *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* and *Journal of Critical Realism*. He is the author of *Theatre, Communication, Critical Realism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).