Functionalism: Several Antecedents in Ancient Philosophy and Early Theories

The first view that one can possible argue to be a pioneer of functionalism is Aristotle's Theory of the Soul. (350 BCE) (Levin (2018) para.2) Aristotle thought that the soul is to be identified for whichever powers and capacities allow for an organized human body to complete its function. So, Aristotle argues, the soul is inseparable from the body, and holds all capacities which are required for a body to live, perceive, reason, and act. (Levin (2018) para.2)

Durkheim, in the 19th century, claimed that society was like building blocks. (Knox (2007) pg. 8) We all work together and fill our proper roles to create a stable and peaceful society, and if even one thing is misplaced, then society will fall into chaos and won't work well. (Lacewing (2016) pg.3) Emile Durkheim and Herbert Spencer, during the 1870s-1880s formed their theoretical opinions to further develop the idea of functionalism. After their deaths, two individuals Wallace and Wolf, traced the functionalism development back to them. The functional approach was developed from the 1930s through the 1960s in the United States, and established the theory using Spencer's and Durkheim's concepts. (Soc.250 (1999) pg. 17)

Functionalism essentially states that every single part of society serves a purpose, and that each part working together creates stability. (Thompson (2016) para.1) Functionalism interprets each societal part and breaks down how it works to contribute to form and maintain the stability of a society. Rather than being a sum of all parts being put together, society is much more than that. Rather, each one of society's components are crucial and functional for the stability of the whole. (Thompson (2016) para.2)

Emile Durkheim, one of the most prominent pioneers within functionalism, actually interpreted society to be an organism. He believed that just like within an organism, each part of society always plays a very necessary and pertinent part, but none have the ability to function alone, and if one part of that organism experiences failure, or falls out of order, other parts must quickly adapt in order to close the void in whatever way possible, otherwise there is instability. (Thompson (2016) para.3)

Within the theory of functionalism, the different parts of society are made up of social institutions, each of which are made to fill and are suited to various and differing requirements, and each of which has specific outcomes and possibly consequences, and are responsible for the stability, and form of society. (Thompson (2016) para. 4) Each societal part all depend upon one another. There are six main pillars of institutions that are crucial to functionalism and running society, and are important for understanding this theory; This includes family, government, economy, media, education, and religion. (Thompson (2016) para.5)

These institutions only exists because it serves a role in the society's functions. If it is no longer able to serve a role, the institution will fade away. However, that would leave a massive void in the society's structure, so if one institution were to fall, the institutions should either evolve, or new institutions must emerge and be created in order to fill the void and avoid chaos. (Thompson (2016) para.5)

Functionalism places emphasis upon the order that exists in society, specifically focusing on social stability and shared public values. From this point of view, disorganization within the societal system, (such as divergent behaviour), leads to negative change because societal components must adjust and work together to achieve stability. When one part of the system is not working or is dysfunctional, it affects all other parts and creates social problems. (Levin (2018) para. 18)

There are 3 main strains of functionalism - machine functionalism, psycho-functionalism, and analytic functionalism. (Levin (2018) para. 5) Machine functionalism - Machine functionalism states that the workings of the brain are similar to the information processing of a computer. A computer conducts a task by going through a sequence of steps, abiding by a set of rules or algorithms. (Phelan (2019) pg.1) Machine functionalism is also the view that anyone with a mind is able to be understood as a Turing machine, and states of mind can be understood as machine states. (Phelan (2019) pg.4)

 As functionalism developed, the idea that states of mind are akin to machine states of a Turing machine was left behind, in order to support the simpler idea that they are states defined by their intended role, and due to lack of credibility and evidence. (Soc.250 (1999) pg. 6) There are also a number of flaws regarding machine functionalism. Not only are machines inaccurate models for states of the brain, but also consciousness, which are not able to be generated through means which are mechanical. (Walker (2019) para. 13) Psycho-functionalism is based upon the rejection of theories proposed by behaviourists. (Lacewing (2016) pg.12)

The idea of psycho-functionalism is that psychology is an irreducibly complex science, and that the terms that one uses to describe the components of the mind in one's theories cannot be redefined in simple dispositions, and would not be achievable. (Lacewing (2016) pg.12) According to analytic functionalism, a belief, intention, emotion, pain or any other mental state is a state of mind because it contains a certain function or plays a specific role within the cognitive system. (Phelan (2019) pg. 16) It follows this statement: "M is the state that is preconceived by P and causes Q." (Phelan (2019) pg.17) For example, the mental state of pain is brought on by sitting upon a tack, and causes a reaction which contains crying, and the mental states of anger and resentment, which are directed at the individual who left a tack lying upon a seat carelessly. (Phelan (2019) pg.18)

In most societies, the government provides schooling for the youth of the family, which leads to them paying taxes, on which the province would depend upon in order to run. The family relies on education to help youth grow up to have good jobs, so that they can raise, support, and provide for their own families. Within this process, the children become citizens who follows laws, pays taxes, and supports the country and the province they live in. If all goes well, the parts of society produce order, stability, and peace. If all does not go well and even one component of the order were to stray, the parts of society then must change to merge new forms of order, peace, and productivity, otherwise chaos would ensue. (Thompson (2016) para.7)