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MEAD AND THE INEFFABLE*

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Recent phenomenologically influenced sociology addresses, in part, the role of language in human activity and calls into question the capacity of language to fully objectify social processes. In this retrospective light the relation of language and experience presented in George Herbert Mead's Mind, Self and Society *becomes increasingly problematic. In addition Mead's reference to meaning as an* objective *phenomenon and his conception of the "generalized other" bear re-examination.*

This paper has a rather limited and circumscribed goal—to render explicit Mead's treatment of language and meaning in *Mind, Self and Society* and to briefly discuss some of the difficulties inherent in this aspect of his work. Of particular concern is the possibility that Mead may have understressed the precategorical dimension[1] of human behavior and, consequently, despite some reference to unconsciously generated actions of human beings, placed a perhaps excessive emphasis upon rational and conscious activity.

This discussion, however, does not take place in a vacuum apart from recent sociological concerns. Currently, for instance, ethnomethodology has explicitly focused on the taken-for-granted "background expectancies" or "interpretive procedures" which underlie and make possible a sense of social order. Central to this perspective is the idea that the fit between social norms ("surface rules") and situational action is "managed" through tacit reliance on interpretive procedures ("basic" or "deep structure" rules). As a consequence the relationship of widely shared norms and values

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to concrete settings becomes problematic. Likewise the notion of meaning shared by a linguistic community gives way to a focus upon context-dependent and ineluctably "indexical" meaning.

> A prime interest of ethnomethodology in exploring the commonsense world is in natural language. . . . If language is basic to the social process of meaning-constitution then new ways of exploring the acquisition of language, and through it a sense of social structure, and situated language use must be developed. Unlike the linguist the sociologist does not posit some kind of "ideal speaker-hearer" whose language use is context-free, but rather focuses on the context-bound contingencies of actual language (Phillipson, 1972:140-1).

Ultimately, however, from this vantage point certain of Mead's statements in *Mind, Self and Society* with respect to meaning and language stand out in a newly problematic light. In particular Mead's conception of language as significant symbols which call out the *same* meaning for an *entire* social group, is particularly conspicuous.

Language is, of course, central to Mead's "symbolic interactionism."[2] It is the use of significant symbols which primarily marks the distinction between animals and human beings. Moreover, it is the capacity of language to evoke shared aspects of experience which forms the very ground of "Mind" and "Self." In effect, Mind does not exist apart from symbolically indexed meanings and likewise Self is substantially constituted through the objectifying properties of language.

Nevertheless, Mead at times goes to great length to stress that "meaning" is an *objective* phenomenon rooted in a social process existing prior to and apart from consciousness: "Awareness or consciousness is not necessary to the presence of meaning in the process of social experience" (Mead, 1934:77). Thus social processes and social action are a precondition of consciousness rather than the other way around. The fact, moreover, that the behavior of non-human animals is seen, by Mead, to be meaningful is further evidence of the initial separation of meaning from consciousness or verbalization: " . . . the chick's response to the

cluck of the mother hen is a response to the meaning of the cluck; the cluck refers to danger or to food, as the case may be, and has this meaning or connotation for the chick" (1934:77).

Along these same lines, Mead at times refers to meaning as existing apart from explicit human awareness during the course of a given activity. It is, consequently, often only in retrospect that we can pick out and identify the meaning our actions hold. Remember, for example, Mead's anecdotal account of the absent-minded college professor who intended to dress for dinner but ended up in pajamas in bed: "A certain process of undressing was started and carried out mechanically; he did not recognize the meaning of what he was doing" (1934:72). Similarly, at points throughout *Mind, Self and Society* Mead calls attention to human activity which takes place almost automatically in the course of everyday life:

> We are more or less unconsciously seeing ourselves as others see us. We are unconsciously addressing ourselves as others address us; in the same way as the sparrow takes up the note of the canary we pick up the dialects about us. . . . We are unconsciously putting ourselves in the place of others and acting as others act (1934:68-9).

> . . . there is something involved in our statement of the meaning of an object which is more than mere response, however complex that may be. We may respond to a musical phrase and there may be nothing in the experience beyond the response; we may not be able to say why we respond or what it is we respond to. . . . Most of our processes of recognition do not involve this identification of the characters which enable us to identify the objects (1934:91).

In short, George Herbert Mead by no means overlooks the existence of a preverbal dimension of human activity. Nonetheless, this is an area of concern to which Mead did not give primacy. In part the reason for this lies with Mead's thoroughgoing project to distinguish between "animal" and "human being." Mead's critique of Watson's behaviorism, for example, rests substantially on the grounds that human activity is qualitatively different from animal behavior. Whereas in some sense one may locate the causes of animal behavior in the environment, the well springs of human

activity are selected (not merely reactive) responses originating in the individual organization of the act. Thus, while animal behavior may be studied apart from consciousness, human behavior by and large cannot. In essence, then, *for Mead to stress the tacit, unconscious aspect of human activity would undermine the fundamental distinction between animal and human behavior upon which he builds.*[3]

Specifically, the use of significant symbols marks *the* definitive separation, for Mead, between animal and human being. The existence of language as a partially autonomous entity thus allows the capacity to control, direct and to evoke behavioral responses:

> It is, of course, the great value, or one of the great values of language that it does give us control over the organization of the act . . . but it is important to recognize that that to which the word refers is something that can lie in the experience of the individual without the use of language itself. Language does pick out and organize this content in experience (1934:13).

The central difference, for Mead, between "gestures" and "significant symbols" is that gestures trigger a response in animals but do not call out a substantially similar response as does language in human beings. The existence, therefore, of significant symbols which call out the same meaning not only for interacting individuals but for an entire linguistic community allows an extended human capacity to control social interaction (1934:46).

In all of this two of Mead's points are vitally important for the purposes of this discussion. The first is that words within a given community of discourse come to stand for the same specific response: ". . . every gesture comes within a given social group or community to stand for a particular act or response . . . and this particular act or response for which it stands is its meaning as a significant symbol" (1934:47). Secondly, moreover, language has the facility to pick out the objective meaning in experience: "Meaning can be described, accounted for, or stated in terms of symbols or language . . . but language simply lifts out of the social process a situation which is logically or implicitly there already"

(1934:79). Mead thus attributes to language considerable capacity to capture and objectify the underpinnings of human activity. In this vein Mead highlights the ability of human beings to explicitly verbalize (and thereby control) factors underlying unconsciously operative practices. For example, again drawing on the comparative distinction between animals and human beings, ". . . the intelligence of the detective over against the intelligence of the bloodhound lies in this capacity to indicate what the particular characters are which will call out his response of taking the man" (1934:93). In other words, the subtle, cued responses and the tacit skills which underlie human abilities can be made explicit. Human beings can thereby consciously direct future activity and are not at the mercy of animal-like preverbal capacities.

The latter point is integral to Mead's philosophy but serves to distinguish him in some measure from those today who, in a phenomenological or ethonmethodological idiom, give emphasis to the fundamental importance of unspoken, tacit abilities and background assumptions. This is a difference of degree and should not be overdrawn. Nonetheless a strong underlying tenet of recent social phenomenology is that *we know more than we can say*: "We know more than we can tell and we can tell nothing without relying on our awareness of things we may not be able to tell" (Polanyi, 1964:x).[4] Embedded in this notion is the idea that we may not be able to exhaustively capture and make explicit the general premises or situationally response features of our behavior.

In some forms this stress upon an ineffable[5] aspect of human behavior has strongly irrationalist connotations in so far as it calls into question the capacity to rationally and consciously direct the course of behavior. But certainly this conception renders problematic the capacity of language to simply represent the "meaning" of human activity[6]—a meaning which in Mead's vision is objective and can be shared by an entire community of discourse. At issue here is the extent to which the meaning of terms or explicit rules is inevitably dependent on their interpreted and negotiated use *in concrete situations.* In ethnomethodological parlance such concerns are associated with the "indexical" nature of expression and with the "essential incompleteness" of explicit

rules. As Mehan and Wood unequivocally assert: ". . . *all* symbolic forms (rules, linguistic utterances, gestures, actions) carry a fringe of incompleteness that may be filled in and filled in differently everytime they occur" (1975:90).

Again the difference is relative and not absolute but Mead clearly places more emphasis not only on the universality of meaning but on the capacity of language to circumscribe and objectify that meaning. Mead was, of course, well aware that language is invariably rooted in the practice and conventions of a given social group—but how extensive a social group? Mead does at times seem to trace widely-shared meaning from its initial mutual recognition by interacting individuals, yet he clearly indicates that our capacity for "taking the attitude of the other" eventually crystallizes in an attitude shared by the entire community—i.e., the "generalized other." *The key question which remains, however, is the extent to which language is, in fact, irrevocably embedded in micro- (not society-wide) group practice and thus has strictly limited scope.*

Surely human beings qua human beings living and acting in the same physical world do share a fundamental physiological commonality upon which the possibility of intersubjective understanding rests. Nonetheless, there are certainly setting-specific and esoteric "meanings" which cannot be evoked and represented without having shared highly specific experiences. Language, in this sense, does not enable an exhaustive access to experience; it can only and primarily serve as a heuristic guide to that which is already understood or which comes to be tacitly implied in the use of words in a given context and in light of specific practices:

> Maxims are rules, the correct application of which is part of the art they govern. The true maxims of golfing or of poetry increase our insight into golfing or poetry and may even give valuable guidance to golfers and poets; but these maxims would instantly condemn themselves to absurdity if they tried to replace the golfer's skill or the poet's art. Maxims cannot be understood, still less applied by anyone not already possessing a good practical knowledge of the art. They derive their interest from our appreciation of the art and cannot themselves either replace or establish that appreciation. Another person may use scientific maxims for the guidance of his inductive inference and yet come to quite different conclusions (Polanyi, 1964:31).

The point is that we can verbalize rules applicable to a given circumstance and practice but nevertheless be unable to effectively use those explicit rules to successfully accomplish the practice; the converse is not true, for one can know the practice and not be able to verbalize the explicit rules. In fact it may be said that "the aim of a skillful performance is achieved by the observation of a set of rules which are not known as such to the person following them" (Polanyi, 1964:49). Again, words or explicit rules have a restricted ability to evoke a shared or appropriate response if those words are not already rooted in practice and if the specific sense of the words has not been built up over time.

With respect to any art, technical ability or discipline, verbalization plays a central role in singling out certain aspects of reality as both significant and real. But language itself is rooted in practice and invariably carries with it a preverbal "fringe" which cannot be fully and effectively specified. In short, practice is indexed by language but cannot be fully represented by reference to concepts or explicit rules. Kuhn, for example, in his discussion of paradigms suggest that doing the same exemplary problems imparts a tacit ability to see the world in the same way as other specialists working under the auspices of the same paradigm and having worked through the same concrete puzzle solutions. Thus ". . . doing problems is learning the language of a theory and acquiring the knowledge of nature embedded in that language" (1970:272). The point is, however, that a particular conception of nature is not intrinsically given in language but is rather embedded in the relationship between language and practice. A sublinguistic gestalt is thus implied by a specific use language but may only be shared by those who have learned to attach reality to particular verbalizations in concrete ways.

Language, then, may be seen as a quasi-autonomous realm which can, in some measure, control, direct and evoke shared aspects of experience. But language and verbalization rest upon

and cannot exhaust a tacit, preverbal ability to see and deal with the world. Consequently this primacy of the unspoken must lead us to re-examine the relationship of language to experience and practice in general. One possibility (albeit extreme) is that verbal formulation bears little relation to practice which such verbalization allegedly directs: "A scientist can accept, therefore, the most inadequate and misleading formulation of his own scientific principles without ever realizing what is being said, because he automatically supplements it by his tacit knowledge of what science really is, and thus makes the formulation ring true" (Polanyi, 1964:169).

Mead certainly makes some room for a tacit, taken-for-granted world. Yet he surely casts his lot with the capacity of language to effectively reconstruct and facilitate rational control of human endeavors on the basis of objective experiences accessible to human beings generally (or at least within the confines of one society). An admirable vision perhaps, it is nonetheless a conviction which bears critical inspection. The richness of Mead's thought lies in his willingness to recognize and take into account the complex grounds of human activity. One aspect of this is his treatment of the relation between conscious and unconscious, articulate and tacit domains. But the role of partially autonomous language and the issue of the conscious control of activity facilitated by language rest on a questionable notion of the relation of language to experience. Consequently, it is incumbent to ask how interrelated language and practice actually are. How much ability to control, direct and objectify activity does language in fact afford? What capacity does language have to create intersubjective agreement through taking the attitude of the other apart from quite specific common experience?

Surely these are not readily answerable questions but they nonetheless raise issues of vital significance for contemporary sociological inquiry. In part the tasks of sociology would be far simpler if we did indeed inhabit a Meadian world where the objective meaning of social phenomena was not only widely accessible but readily and non-problematically transcribable. The questionable relation of language to experience, however,

concommitantly raises the possibility that we cannot take for granted the consistent use of sociological terms and concepts apart from the specific occasion of their employment:

> Ethnomethodology, through its concern with language, also draws attention to the limitations that the problematic character of language itself imposes on the kinds of interpretations or accounts sociology can offer of the social world. The 'objectivity' of sociological accounts becomes problematic when the implications of couching theory in language are examined. A theory or interpretation based upon empirical investigation is always a negotiated theory . . . (Phillipson, 1972:141).

In summary, then, the re-examination of the relation between language and experience in *Mind, Self and Society* in light of the core concerns of ethnomethodology raises some thorny questions. It is not by any means claimed here that the issues are resolvable by wholesale adoption of an ethnomethodological program. Nor is it the intention of this paper to generate, strictly speaking, a comparison of Meadian philosophy with ethnomethods.[7] The root issue is the objectifying property attributed to language in *Mind, Self and Society* alone. It is somewhat inevitable, however, that such discussion implicitly broaches other questions and casts a shadow on other Meadian conceptions. In particular Mead's concept of the "generalized other" inextricably and heavily rests on the idea of meaning as objective and widely sharable via the medium of language. The notion of "taking the attitude of the other" through the aid of significant symbols is not by any means *necessarily* incompatible with the notion of situated meaning. Nonetheless the idea of a generalized other or ". . . the attainment of a universal human society . . . such that all social meanings would each be similarly reflected in . . . respective individual consciousnesses . . . "(1934-310) seems, in current sociological context, considerably less tenable.

The impact of the ethnomethodological concern with context-sensitive and indexical meaning almost inevitably transforms societal order into a setting-specific order. Moreover, if

we cannot adequately through words represent concrete experience or practice but must, to grasp the sense of those words, undergo a highly similar experience not only are the limits of language manifest but the notion of community *based on shared meaning* likewise becomes palpably problematic. Ultimately, not only is the Meadian relation of language and experience questionable but the feasibility of the "generalized other" and Mead's vision of an ideal human community also bear rethinking.

NOTES

1. I use "precategorical dimension" (and in other places "preverbal") to refer to that unconscious or preconscious domain of human abilities, activity, skills and practices which is ordinarily taken-for-granted (not made explicit) and which is in some measure ineffable (not fully specifiable in words).

2. Mead did not, of course, refer to his work as "symbolic interaction" as is common today following Herbert Blumer. "Social Behaviorism" probably more closely represents Mead's own self understanding. Nonetheless, given that the bulk of Mead's published work (including *Mind, Self and Society*) is an edited transcription of lecture notes even that reference may be questionable. Natanson (1973:1-4), for example, suggests that Charles Morris as the editor of much of *Mind, Self and Society* is largely responsible for Mead being termed a "social behaviorist."

3. This raises interesting problems for those purists who would wish to sharply distinguish behaviorist from phenomenological concerns, for there is at least some convergence between the tacit, precategorical dimension on the one hand, and instinctive and conditioned behavior, on the other.

4. This idea, is, I would argue, integral to an understanding of ethnomethodology and related approaches. One finds it most explicitly stated in Cicourel (1974) in the essay "Ethnomethodology." A sense

that a version of this premise pervades ethnomethodology generally can be gleaned from a reading of Mehan and Wood (1975) especially Chapter Four "Reality as a Rules System." For the purposes of my discussion I rely heavily on Michael Polanyi's *Personal Knowledge* believing that he articulates clearly and forcefully what much ethnomethodology leaves less than fully explicit.

5. "Ineffable," as I use it, refers generally to the intrinsic nontranscribability of certain tacit skills, practices and experience into language. While there are likely purely individual private experiences which do not lend themselves to verbalization, a central premise of this paper is that there also exist tacit practices and skills which are nevertheless, in some sense, held in common–i.e., by individuals acting upon and interpreting the world in ways which render (for all practical purposes) the same results. One instance of this might be natural scientists working under the auspices of the same paradigm. While their common endeavor may be indexed by words and symbols there are unspoken understandings and presuppositions which remain unarticulated and embedded in the practice of *doing* science.

6. Compare Mead's position, for example, with Cicourel's discussion of "indefinite triangulation" (1974:124) and with the essay on cross-modal communication where, for instance, Cicourel notes that "oral descriptions . . . of visual-kinesic information always presuppose unstated assumptions and meaning that cannot be clearly objectified for someone who has not experienced the setting" (1974:158).

7. Many ethnomethodologists do point to certain similarities with Mead. For example the "I" (as opposed to the "Mc") coincides in large measure with the interpretationist emphasis of ethnomethods (see Cicourel, 1974:13-4) as does Blumer's strongly interpretationist rendering of Mead. It is interesting to note that on occasion when ethnomethodology/phenomenology draws on Mead it is the "late" Mead of *The Philosophy of the Present* which is salient. McHugh (1968), for example, adapts Mead's treatment of "emergence" and "relativity." In a related vein Natanson (1973), who attempts to document Mead's intellectual journey away from "behaviorism," sees Mead's approach to phenomenology as culminating in *The Philosophy of the Present*. For a

brief synopsis of ethnomethodological differences with Mead see Zimmerman and Pollner (1970:101-2).

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AN EXAMINATION OF THE CONCEPT "SOCIAL SOLIDARITY"

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Although Durkheim's original definition of social solidarity included both beliefs and practices, modern sociologists have empirically operationalized the concept in terms of only beliefs or only practices. It is suggested that the modern conceptualization of social solidarity is invalid because it does not allow the researcher to get close to empirical reality.

INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the concept "social solidarity." This writer feels that social solidarity has been misused by many sociologists and cast into a framework unfamiliar to Durkheim's definition. It is further proposed that this concept is useless when defined and put into operation.

For example, one must be very careful to note that the term does not imply the same meaning for micro and macro sociologists. Combining this with the fact that micro and macro sociologists often disagree about their own definitions of social solidarity seems to make this concept more complex. Thus, before any more empirical studies are done in this area, it seems reasonable to clarify this concept. In the pages that follow, an attempt is made to define social solidarity as used by Durkheim, to examine how sociologists used the concept and to suggest that there is a need to recast our definitions in terms which include both belief and practice.