

The Consciousness of Consciousness.

This paper arises from a dissatisfaction with both behavioural psychology and with the present reliance upon structure for our analysis of social phenomena. As long as social anthropologists rely upon structure their work will be determined by that structure. Because of this dependence it is claimed that structuralism provides an essentially impoverished picture of society. The problem with which I am concerned is the exploration of a post-structural field of discourse which allows for the reintroduction of rich personal experience into the arid products of formal structural studies. The solution which I offer to this problem is akin to much of the work undertaken by the philosopher of phenomenology, Husserl; and Sartre, the existentialist.

My concern is with natural language. By this I mean a language of the sort that each one of us learns at infancy; rather than the formal, artificial languages, which might e.g. be used in computer programming. Let us suggest that we are able to claim that natural languages are concerned with a communication process between the producer of an utterance and the receiver of the same utterance. In such an event an utterance is to be regarded as a sensory signal. What can be said about this sensory signal? In the case of natural languages it can be said that it must conform to a rule of well-formedness, i.e. it must be grammatical. If an utterance of a natural language is to be regarded simply as a carrier of information then this model will suffice.

I suggest that the producer of an utterance attempts to objectivise his subjective experience in that utterance. It may be said that subjective experience does not consist of such discrete, well-formed, 'chunks'. Any representation of subjective experience as a discrete, well-formed, 'chunk' must therefore be seen as some form of selective rationalisation of that experience. Rational, in that by producing a statement, verbally or otherwise, regarding this unit it takes on a degree of 'grammaticality' not inherent in that experience. Such a statement may be analysed, communicated, and thought about, in a way in which the primary experience cannot. This last point is of tremendous importance. The ability to select and rationalise from our experience allows us to construct areas of non-behaviouristic knowledge.

Behavioural psychology is concerned only with the experience of an environment, an individual's experience of his environment comprising elements which act as stimuli. On receipt of this element of environmental stimulus the individual might produce the corresponding word as response. For the behavioural psychologists any distinction between the world and the individual's experience of it can be collapsed. Thus it can be seen that it is not regarded as essential that the individual be conscious of his experience of the world. An experience of the bio-physical world is to be credited to each and every occupant of that world. This experience does not, however, pre-suppose a consciousness of this experience. An oak tree experiences leaf-fall each autumn, yet it can hardly be said that the tree is conscious of this experience.

Each one of us is in countless bio-physical relationships with his environment at any given time. It is this set of relationships which I now refer to as the individual's experience of the world. It is obviously impossible for an individual to be conscious of all these relationships concurrently. Only a limited number may be brought to consciousness at any one time. Now I am proposing that before we are able to consider, to think, or to communicate fully, we must be conscious of our experience. I have

already suggested above that any representation of subjective experience must be regarded as some form of selective rationalisation.

In his Discourse on Method Descartes subjected the possibility of objective enquiry to a severe analysis. At the end of this analysis he was led to propose that there were but two things which could be claimed with certainty. They were that we exist and that we are conscious of this existence. Beyond these a priori truths any understanding is the result of the projection of the rational intellect. Husserl suggested, much later, an important implication of this claim by Descartes. If the empirical world is a projection of the intellect, then science, in investigating this world, is to be seen as investigating the human intellect which constructs this world. I suggested, above, how the behavioural psychologists have devised a schema which will not admit to a consciousness 'outside' of causal relationships. Structuralists, as present day representatives of the rational philosophical tradition (which includes Descartes and Husserl) have manufactured for themselves an analogous closed and self-perpetuating system which will not allow for a post-structural subversion.

It was suggested that consciousness depends upon a selective rationalism. By employing such a faculty we are able to construct interpretative frameworks which allow us to gain an 'understanding' of the environment. Either these frameworks themselves, or a more fundamental aptitude of the human intellect which they are said to represent, have been referred to as structures. In either case the result is the same: consciousness is entirely dependent upon structure. However, in my initial paragraph I declared my dissatisfaction with the results of such a procedural claim. This dissatisfaction is due to the inability of structural studies to provide any account of the individual's rich personal experience. In recognising this inability I claim a privileged status for this rich personal experience. Such a recognition evinces a consciousness which is not dependent upon any structure. It is rather a consciousness which recognises the limitations of a structure-dependent consciousness. We are now able to distinguish between a consciousness of experience, and a consciousness of consciousness of experience. I suggest further that this secondary non-structure-dependent consciousness become an essential ingredient of our personal experience. In as much as it is possible to regard the individual's consciousness of his experience as comprising an objective consciousness, the newly proposed consciousness of consciousness is necessarily subjective. Moreover, this subjective consciousness becomes an essential feature in the individual's experience and so any previous claim to an objective experience, or consciousness of experience, must now be forfeited.

It is suggested that the previously mentioned sensory signal might represent part of an individual's subjective experience. Such a selective rationalisation can be taken as an impoverishment of the subjective experience, if only quantitatively. Qualitatively it may be said to enrich that part of experience which is selected, because by objectivising the experience it becomes possible to communicate, to discuss, and to compare alternative individual experiences. As I pointed out, by insisting upon a consciousness of consciousness of one's experiences this secondary, or meta-consciousness may be taken as constituting part of one's experience. Experience is no longer to be regarded as limited to the sensory data of the world, as the consciousness of consciousness is included in the individual's experience. This secondary consciousness allows for the consideration of the consciousness of experience and of that experience. This, in turn, undermines the projected 'concretisation' of the subject of experience. Upon recognising this new consciousness of consciousness we allow for humanity to rise like a phoenix from the ashes to which structuralism has striven to reduce society.

To return to the discussion of natural languages. In order to accommodate the new consciousness of consciousness, I propose a second level of discourse. The first level, or level of structure, is a level of discourse at which the contributors to the discourse accept a common universe of experience. The utterances which comprise such a discourse are to be seen as referential i.e. they refer to some aspect of the accepted universe of experience. By limiting discourse to this level there is no necessity to become conscious of one's consciousness of experience. As a result I am able to suggest that the discourse level of structure is little more than crude behaviourism.

For the second level of discourse, however, such a consciousness of consciousness is an essential prerequisite. We might even concede to the behaviourists that a consciousness of experience has, in itself, some objective basis; the consciousness of consciousness is, however, unquestionably subjective and personal. I can never be conscious of another's experience. By admitting this consciousness of consciousness as part of the individual's experience we allow for the re-introduction of the subjective and personal, as a subvertive agent, into the consciousness of experience.

In terms of the methodology of structuralism, it can be seen that understanding is entirely dependent upon a structure of interpretation. Progress, in structuralist terms, can only be made by discarding the exhausted structures and replacing them with new structures with a greater generative capacity. There is no opportunity to undermine the dependence upon structure. By recognizing the consciousness of consciousness we catch sight of a vantage point 'outside' structure. On gaining this vantage point outside structure we objectivise our consciousness of experience. Having stepped outside our apparently structure-dependent consciousness of experience a position is attained from which this 'object' becomes available for criticism. Such criticism allows for the undermining and subverting of the structure dependency of consciousness. The aspect of criticism which will subvert structure is that element of essential individuality.

A temptation to claim that this discussion is taking place on the second, post-structural, level of discourse must be resisted. The discussion which led to the possibility of making the step to the metaphorical 'vantage point' might well be an example of such a second level discourse. However, once the step is made and we gain a definite 'object' of discourse the discussion reverts to the first, i.e. structural, level. Even so, there is one important difference. The relationship between the consciousness of consciousness and structure differs entirely from that between consciousness of experience and structure. In the latter the consciousness is structure-dependent. Consciousness of experience presupposes structure and is thus determined by it. Being conscious of consciousness makes possible the discarding of structures and their replacement.

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