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UNDERSTANDING (AND) CULTURE: WORKING OUT SACKS'S APHORISM

Abstract

This essay is a batch of reflections on and extensions of a short passage from notes made by Harvey Sacks in preparation for a lecture presented in the Fall term 1965 at UCLA. It concerns questions of understanding and culture as fundamental topics for doing sociology.

Keywords: Harvey Sacks, Gilbert Ryle, understanding, culture, recognizability, reflexivity, phenomenology

Harvey Sacks said and wrote a lot of important things. For the most part, being a particularist (a "splitter") rather than a generalist (a "lumper"), he took his time over saying and writing them. (The long paper introducing the analysis of membership categorization [1972] is a particular case in point.) But occasionally in his oeuvre, you can find an aphoristic gem that may spur you on to broader kinds of thinking. One such is the following:

> A culture is an apparatus for generating *recognizable* actions; if the same procedures are used for generating as for detecting, that is perhaps as simple a solution to the problem of recognizability as is formulatable [Sacks 1992: 226; his italics].

Below are some of the things I am wondering whether it might be possible to think about these statements. What I have to say may not be particularly weighty but, I hope, not entirely worthless.

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1.

Sacks's published papers and lectures are replete with apparatuses of various kinds: the commentary machine, the inference-making machine, categorization devices, a simplest systematics, and probably some other mechanisms I have forgotten about. Does this mean we can conclude that he holds to a mechanistic model of society or of culture? David Silverman [1993] at least suggests as much when he invokes a "machinery of interaction" in his review of the *Lectures*. Against this, we might refer again to our target quotation and argue that, by "apparatus", Sacks means no more than a bundle of related *procedures* for getting cultural stuff (for example, conversations or, in this case, kids' stories) done. We might think of them as collections of practical knowledge (of "knowing how" à la Ryle), socio-logics or *modi operandi* for which the collecting terms "apparatus", "machinery", "device" etc. are no more than a convenient metaphor. One advantage of the metaphor of the machine (again, à la Ryle) is that, as we shall see, it can be purged of any remnant ghosts – of the spectres of psycho-phenomenology.

2.

To take this a (possibly somewhat promiscuous) notch further: I might suggest that there may be no great loss, and possibly some value added, by construing Sacks's term "culture(s)" as partially equivalent to Wittgenstein's [1958] "form(s) of life" (*Lebensform*(*en*)) – zoö-botanical misinterpretations thereof notwithstanding – and "apparatus(es)" as partially equivalent to his "language-game(s)" (*Sprachspiel*(*e*)), thereby obviating any undue charges of mechanism on Sacks's part. Whether this suggestion can be sustained I do not know. Would there be analytic troubles afoot if, for example, we spoke of the language-games of membership categorization, inference-making and the rest?

3.

What Sacks has to say about recognizability has some obvious affinities with Garfinkel's (sort-of) concept of accountability – so we might say that for a social object or fact such as a queue (to mention just one kind of sequential organization) to *be* a queue is that it is accountably produced as such a thing *or* that it is recognizable as a queue. If so, then what Sacks has to say about the *identicality* of "generating" and "detecting" has corresponding affinities with Garfinkel's (sort-of) concept of reflexivity (aka "incarnateness"), according to which:

> ... the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs are *identical* with members' procedures for making those settings "account-able" [Garfinkel 1967: 1; my italics].

In this way, we might summarize Sacks's insight into the reflexivity of account-ability/recognizability as telling us that the procedures or methods for a range of pairs be taken as identical where, *inter* (no small number of) *alia*, those pairs could be called, say:

- generating & detecting
- saying & understanding
- speaking & hearing
- production & reception
- creation & enjoyment
- writing & reading

And, from purely idiosyncratic interest, I would want to include:

- puzzle-setting & puzzle-solving

Of course, I am guilty of generalizing further from Sacks's already general remarks, but what I think this affords us is a significant basis for going about doing some sociology. I want to say that these are at least *among* the important mutually-constitutive elements that make up a culture. Any culture.

4.

Although Gilbert Ryle was loath to embrace cultural matters – see, for example, his remarks on the term "usage" as meaning "custom, practice, fashion or vogue" [1971: 308] and therefore of interest only to philologists and not to philosophers – I think it is fair to say that he had ideas, which I find interestingly akin to those of Sacks, about the reciprocity of techniques for performing certain social practices (here: playing games, speaking a language, reasoning) and techniques for understanding those social practices:

> ... a spectator who cannot play chess cannot follow the play of others; a person who cannot read or speak Swedish cannot understand what is spoken or written in Swedish; and a person whose reasoning powers are weak is bad at following and retaining the arguments of others. Understanding is a part of knowing *how*. The knowledge that is required for understanding intelligent performances of a specific kind is some degree of competence in performances of that kind ... Roughly, execution and understanding are merely different exercises of the knowledge of the tricks of the same trade [Ryle 1949: 54–55].

Here, we have, I think, a concise statement – and in plain English – with appro-priate and analytically suggestive examples, of the ethnomethodological (sort-of) concept of reflexivity *avant la lettre*.

5.

Another term for this might be: the Ryle-Sacks understanding of the concept of understanding. (You could call it a "theory" if you liked, but that would make no appreciable difference.) An instance of that understanding and some of its consequences might look as follows.

When the two Bridges boys (Jeff and Beau) are playing the fabulous Baker boys (Jack and Frank) in the eponymous film [*The fabulous Baker Boys* 1989], they need to be recognizably seen to be playing pianos. That is, not seen as merely *acting* piano-playing. No doubt, the extent to which they bring this off has much to do with their music coaches and equally as much to do with the viewer's own skills at the piano. I play the piano very badly and very seldom, so I am easy to convince in this instance. But another case that always has me perplexed is smoking, as opposed to *acting* as a smoker. As a very competent smoker, I can always spot an actor who is not. Michelle Pfeiffer (Susie Diamond), in the same film, is a case in point. The moment she puts a cigarette in her mouth, I (and you?) can spot her recognizably acting, as opposed to recognizably smoking.

((If only for this reason, though somewhat incidentally, so-called dramaturgical theories of culture and society are what Thomas Pynchon [1973: 683] calls "ass backwards". In the case of ordinary cultural practices, acting is the last thing we are actually engaged in. Everyday life, to be sure, may have its factitious moments, but by no means *all* the socio-cultural world is a stage.))

6.

If the Ryle-Sacks position holds water, then one thing that interests me is that it stands in stark contrast to what Jeff Coulter [1979] has called the "mentalistic" view of understanding. In the English philosophical tradition, the classical take on this mentalistic view of understanding is that of John Locke in the *Essay concerning human understanding*:

> Besides articulate sounds, therefore, it was further necessary that [a man] should be able to use those sounds as signs of internal conceptions; and to make these stand as marks for the ideas within his own mind, whereby they might be made known to others, and the thoughts of men's minds be conveyed from one to another.
> [Locke 1979: Book III, chapter 1, §1–2; see Coulter's valuable commentary, Coulter 1979: 171–2].

The contemporary inheritor of the Lockean concept of understanding is phenomenology and, by extension, phenomenological sociology. Here it should be remembered that the central phenomenological concept of *Vorstellung* is Brentano's

almost direct translation of Locke's "having an idea" [see Ryle 1971: 198]. According to such a picture, anything approximating a culture could only be possible by some kind of miraculous harmonization of individual ideational contents; an instance of which would be Schutz's [1962: 11] "reciprocity of perspectives" whereby bundles of egological "thought objects" become somehow *inter*subjective.

Since, at root, whatever else *Vorstellungen* may be, they must be pre-linguistic, pre-social and pre-cultural, then the very possibility of a phenomenological *sociology* must be in serious jeopardy.

What Sacks's aphorism reminds us, by contrast, is that any *talk* of Lockean "internal conceptions" and its psycho-phenomenological variants, any actual use, that is, of what Ryle calls "mental predicates", is anything but a quasi-philosophical reference to the private interiors of individuals. JFM Hunter [1973: 43ff] provides one example of a case in point: that of the utterance-opening "imagine that ...". (And I find this particularly poignant since "imaging", "imagining" and "imagination" are among the words that Wittgenstein's translators use for his *Vorstellung* and its cognates.) Hunter shows how utterances beginning "imagine that ..." routinely act as invitations (or suggestions, instructions, requests, etc.) to draw inferences from counterfactuals. (One of his examples: "Imagine that Charlie Chaplin was the Prime Minister".) Along with their close relatives, the "suppose that ..." openings, they carry the weight of conditionals – "if [counterfactual] p were true, *then* what?" As he puts it: we go on from there. To put this in more Sacksian terms, "imagine that p" acts as a first pair-part and it derives its sense from what follows (as seconds, thirds, fourths ...) in some actual course of talk. Similarly, Wittgenstein routinely asks us to consider the use any given expression has in its situated language-game but, at least in this case – and, I suspect, in no small range of others – we should notice that being a pair-part *is* a role in a language-game, even if Wittgenstein does not claim as much. A part is a part in the (praxio-)logical grammar of actual ordinary language. In this respect, Sacks – and with particular consistency in the *Aspects* manuscript [1970] – furnishes us with an answer to Wittgenstein's perennial question: "What does it mean to say something?" [Rhees 2003: 6]. In this case, what "imagine that ..." means turns on, and *only* on, how we can go on from it, on what happens next on some actual occasion of its use. Whether or not it happens to be accompanied by one or another kind of ideation (for example, pictures "in the mind's eye") is irrelevant to its meaning as such. It is an invitation to continue in a certain way

and it is not an invitation to any kind of mental-imaging process, event or state. Or, we might say: it cannot be *understood* that way.

Even if I did have some kind of characteristic "internal conception" or other phenomenological occurrence prior to or concurrently with saying a particular thing – and even if, on every occasion of saying that same thing, I had or supposed myself to have exactly the same "internal conception" (and how could I check that?) – what I said would not be the *expression* of that conception. No mental content could be the meaning of what I said and it could by no means be the locus of your (or indeed my own) understanding of it.

7.

Briefly back to Wittgenstein then. Much of what I am trying to say in the previous section he instantiates in this one short remark:

> ... if someone did not know what a leopard looked like, still he could *say* and *understand* "That place is dangerous, there are leopards there".
> [Wittgenstein 1967: §618; my italics]

No pardine ideation required! And then we move on to *genuine* questions about saying and understanding.

8.

It is probably fair to say that none of the holy quaternity of the founding fathers of sociology were particularly kind to the concept of culture as such, with the just-barely-possible exception of Weber. Please allow me, then, a biographical recollection that I take as symptomatic of this state of affairs at a particular juncture. By the time I came to enroll in SOC302, Sociology of Arts and Culture, just shortly before Sacks's sad demise, the course had come to be dominated by Marx-ish aesthetics (and in particular the aesthetics of Lukács and Goldmann) and, to a lesser extent, Sartre's critique thereof. Accordingly, what passed as culture was (as the title of the course indicates): the fine arts, literature and music – with some acknowledgement of film and television for we were just then on the cusp of the Great Cultural Studies Outbreak. The concept of culture itself required no problematization: it was taken as given, as the topic-object of distinctly political-economic theories. Had I known of Sacks's aphorism then – if only to alert me to the fact that there *is* a problem of recognizability and why his proposed solution to it is sociologically critical – I would not have made a lot of silly mistakes then ... and, indeed, during the five decades since. Just for starters: I would not have spent so much time in a fruitless search for an answer to the question of what a culture is and, instead, asked what a culture can do.

9.

Finally, then, why is the aphorism important? Perhaps because it succinctly captures one of the foundational field propositions – as I've called them elsewhere [2015] – if not *the* foundational field proposition, of ethnomethodological sociology as such, and particularly in its conjunction with linguistic philosophy that Jeff Coulter [1979: 157–158] once called a "semiotics".

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ROZUMIENIE I KULTURA, ROZUMIENIE KULTURY:
OPRACOWUJĄC AFORYZM SACKSA

Streszczenie

Prezentowany esej jest serią refleksji i dodatkowych uwag dotyczących krótkiego fragmentu notatek Harveya Sacksa stanowiących przygotowanie wykładu wygłoszonego w semestrze zimowym na Uniwersytecie Kalifornijskim w Los Angeles. Fragment ten dotyczy kwestii rozumienia i kultury jako tematów podstawowych dla uprawiania socjologii.

Słowa kluczowe: Harvey Sacks, Gilbert Ryle, rozumienie, kultura, rozpoznawalność, zwrotność, fenomenologia