Agent, person, subject, self

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Abstract

Building on ideas developed in 'The semiotic stance' (2005), this essay outlines a social and semiotic theory of four seemingly human-specific and individual-centric capacities that, while essential for understanding modern social processes, are often confused and conflated. Loosely speaking, agency is a causal capacity: say, the relatively flexible wielding of means towards ends. Subjectivity is a representational capacity: say, the holding of intentional states such as belief and desire. Selfhood is a reflexive capacity: say, being the means and ends of one's own actions, or being the object of one's own beliefs and desires. And personhood is a sociopolitical capacity: say, rights and responsibilities attendant on being an agent, subject or self.

1. Why do we care?

Take the words in the title of these essays: *agent*, *person*, *subject*, *self*. What do they mean? Why do they belong together? Why do we need to theorize them? And what are the stakes involved in choosing one theory over another? The short answer to all these questions is this: each of us should care deeply about the meaning of such words precisely because they attempt to capture why we care so deeply about meaning.

More generally, to theorize these words is to reflexively theorize the key terms in the above questions: *care*, *depth*, *choice*, *stakes*, *meaning*, *belonging*, *aboutness*, and *us*. That is, with this reflexive turn we are not only trying to characterize the features of some object viewed through some frame — an object which is just the viewer at one degree of remove — but also the features of the frame through which the object is being viewed.

How then to begin articulating that entity — ourselves — which is simultaneously viewer of object, object viewed, and frame of view? Or, shifting from vision to meaning, from a perceptual metaphor to a semiotic

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idiom, how to capture that human-specific, group-relative, and individual-centric *facility* which is simultaneously interpretant, object, and sign?

Another way to understand the motivation for these essays is that they attempt to provide a theory of the individual that is as empirically tractable as it is metaphysically satisfying, and hence a theory that avoids both the reductionist and enlivenist tendencies of much twentieth-century theorizing: neither a decision-making apparatus nor an insatiable desirer, neither a simpleminded habitus nor a psychodynamic homunculus, neither an effect of discourse nor a will to power, neither a subject position nor a soul, neither fragmented nor whole.

More precisely, these essays are respectfully critical of theories that focus on the relationship between 'meaning' and 'subjectivity' (in the widest sense of these words), that have theoretically superceded, empirically ungrounded, rashly deconstructive, implausibly psychoanalytic, blankly slatist, overly symbolic, or analytically obfuscating tendencies.

We cannot avoid folk-theories of meaning and mind — indeed, we must treat them with deep seriousness, for our self-understanding is partially constitutive of our selfhood — but we can criticize faux-theories of meaning and mind: folk-theories of western scholars that parade as general theory. In short, while it is productive to argue that meaning underlies culture and subjectivity, it is debilitating to think that we cannot provide a naturalistic and objective theory of meaning.

2. Overview of essays

To answer these questions, and undertake these critiques, these essays fracture into three parts. Part one, entitled 'The semiotic stance,' provides a theory of meaning, and a metalanguage for describing meaningful processes, suited to both the non-initiate and the professional scholar. Unlike most theories of meaning which are grounded in a two-term relation (e.g., signifier and signified), this theory is grounded in a relation between three terms: signs (whatever stands for something else); objects (whatever is stood for by a sign); and interpretants (whatever is created by a sign so far as it stands for an object).

This complex relation is used to undergird a naturalistic theory of meaning, one which is general enough to account for embodied, embedded, and embrained processes — not just speech acts and mental states, but also interjections and facial expressions; not just the ethical value someone holds and the economic value something has, but also the instruments humans wield and the affordances animals heed. This theory of meaning is also used both to reframe the distinction between social

constructions and natural kinds, and to bridge the divide between public practices and private representations. Finally, this theory is deployed in subsequent essays to account for putatively individual and psychological faculties in terms of social and semiotic facilities.

Part two uses this theory of meaning to account for both residence in the world and representation of the world. By *representation of the world* is meant modes of meaningful behavior that turn on signs which have relatively explicit and/or propositional contents: believing and asserting, intending and promising, remembering and recounting, and so forth. And by *residence in the world* is meant modes of meaningful behavior that turn on signs which have relatively implicit and/or non-propositional contents: heeding affordances, wielding instruments, undertaking actions, performing roles, and filling identities.

While the distinction between residence and representation seems to rest in a distinction between body and mind, from a social and semiotic perspective both modes of meaningfulness are relatively embodied, embedded, and embrained. Their differences, rather, are determined by the nature of their objects: propositions are inferentially articulated in terms of other propositions (through logical relations such as deduction); they may be true and false (à la beliefs) or satisfied and unsatisfied (à la intentions); and one may offer a reason for them, or use them as a reason. In short, residence and representation are ways of breaking the pretheoretical notion of 'subjectivity' into two analytically distinguishable parts — themselves irreducibly interrelated in any given interaction as being-in-the-world.

And part three uses this account of being-in-the-world to construct a theory of agency and selfhood. Loosely speaking, *agency* will be understood as the relative leeway one has over the residential and representational modes of meaning that constitute one's environment, and the conditions for this leeway. Leeway may be understood in two ways. First, as a kind of engaged agency (or mode of control), leeway is the degree to which one may determine, or influence, the signs, objects, and interpretants that constitute residential and representational modes of meaning. And second, as a kind of disengaged agency (or mode of consciousness), leeway turns on the degree to which one may be aware of, or have knowledge about, residential and representational modes of meaning.

Selfhood will be understood as the way in which certain modes of residential and representational meaning belong to one, and how this reflexive belonging affects meaning. For example, one sense of selfhood is the ensemble of residential and representational modes of meaning that belong to one: one's beliefs, intentions, memories, perceptions, and plans; one's affordances, instruments, actions, roles, and identities. And another

related sense of selfhood is the degree to which one may have relatively engaged or disengaged agency over one's belongings — being able to control them or be conscious of them.

Finally, *personhood* may be loosely understood as culture-specific understandings of what is human-general; or, relatedly, as sociopolitical rights and responsibilities attendant upon being a subject, agent, and/or self. Acting, then, as a kind of historical warning signal to any meta-theory of the individual, personhood necessarily arises as reflexive-critique in almost every section of these essays.

This skeletal outline will be analytically fleshed out in what follows.

3. The semiotic stance

Is there a unified theory that can capture these diverse perspectives with more fundamental principles? The idea behind this question is not to postulate some more basic appendage or biological capacity; rather, it is to understand *meaningfully ordered complexity*: to ground human being in social ergon, not psychological organ; in semiotic facility, not biological faculty.

But this eschewing of mind should not be understood as a rejection of brain; this attention to 'culture' should not come with an elision of 'nature.' The behavior of human primates — for let's call us what we are — is governed by processes occurring on phylogenetic, historical, and ontogenetic timescales; and must thereby make reference to properties that may uniquely belong to species, cultures, and individuals.

The point, then, is not to reject nature for culture, it is to provide a naturalistic theory of meaning — a theory that is able to account for iconic, indexical, and symbolic meaning, or embodied, embedded, and embrained processes; a theory that is able to account for complex meanings without mono-causality (more closely allied with sciences like ecology), that weaves social constructions together with natural kinds; a theory that can account for private representations and public practices, the insights of cognitive psychology and linguistic anthropology; a theory that can account for iterability and contingency, flexibility and reflexivity, emergence and stability.

Such a naturalistic theory of meaning may be called a *semiotic stance* — a theory of meaning rather than mentality, of signs rather than mind. As treated in depth in the opening essay of this collection, its most basic principles are as follows.

First, this essay provides a theory of meaning that is resolutely grounded in a three-term relation (sign-object-interpretant), rather than a

two-term relation (e.g., signifier and signified, word and concept, or representation and state of affairs). Thus, in contrast to the usual understanding of meaning (i.e. 'a sign stands for its object'), this essay begins with the following definition: a sign stands for an object on the one hand, and an interpretant on the other, in such a way as to make the interpretant stand in relation to the object in a way that corresponds with how the sign stands in relation to the object.

The most transparent example of this *relation between relations* is an ability human primates develop when they are around nine months of age, joint-attention: a child turning to observe what her parent is observing involves an interpretant (the child's change in attention), an object (what the parent is attending to), and a sign (the parent's direction of attention). It should be emphasized that such an ability is essentially absent in nonhuman primates, and tragically impaired in children diagnosed with profound autism.

What is at issue in meaningfulness, then, is not one relation between a sign and an object (qua 'standing for'), but rather a relation between two such relations (qua 'correspondence'): the child comes to stand in relation to the object in a way that corresponds with the parent's relation to the object. This strategic shift from a simple relation of 'standing for' to a complex relation of 'correspondence' between two relations of 'standing for' is shown in figure 1.

Second, while interpretation is usually understood as a relatively 'mental' or 'subjective' process, and while objects are usually understood as relatively 'physical' or 'objective' things, interpretants will be seen to be as empirically tractable as signs (indeed, most interpretants are themselves signs that can be subsequently interpreted), and objects will be seen to be intersubjective: an interpreter comes to stand in relation to an object in a way that corresponds with how the signer stands in relation to the object. An object, then, is whatever a signer and interpreter can correspondingly stand in relation to — it need not be continuously present to the senses, taking up volume in space, detachable from context, or 'objective' in any other sense of the word.

Indeed, the typical focus on sign-object relations (or 'signifiers' and 'signifieds'), at the expense of sign-interpretant relations, and this concomitant understanding of objects as 'objective' and interpretants as 'subjective' — and hence the assimilation of meaning to mind, rather than grounding mind in meaning — is one of the most fatal flaws of twentieth-century semiotics.

Third, this theory of meaning bridges the chasm between those analysts who focus on public practices (e.g., linguistic anthropologists and conversational analysts), and those who focus on private representations (e.g.,

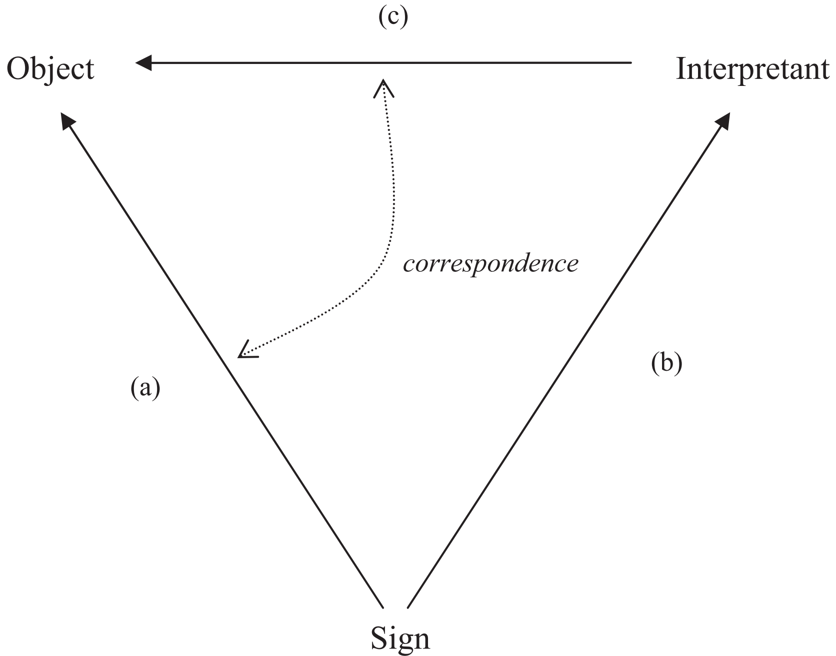

Figure 1. *Semiotic process, or third, formally defined. A sign stands for its object on the one hand (a), and its interpretant on the other (b), in such a way as to bring the latter into a relation to the former (c) corresponding to its own relation to the former (a).*

cognitive linguists and psychologists). Indeed, this schism was portended in Hume and Wittgenstein's respective skepticisms, and the subsequent answers given to rectify them. In particular, as Hume questioned our ability to link tokens to types and causes to effects, Wittgenstein questioned our ability to link signs to objects and motivations to actions. While Hume grounded this ability in habit, Kant would later ground it in transcendental forms. And while Wittgenstein grounded this ability in language games, psychologists would later ground it in cognitive representations.

In contrast, it will be argued that those who focus on private representations (Kant and cognitive psychologists) are just focusing on sign-object relations; whereas those who focus on public practices (Hume, Wittgenstein, and conversational analysts) are just focusing on sign-interpretant relations. In short, the antagonisms between two distinct camps are rectified in the present essays by understanding them as focusing on different sides of the same triangle, or different pieces of the same puzzle.

Fourth, these essays take into account the most important ideas of Peirce and Heidegger: a (prescient) critique of modern theories of meaning and mind insofar as they privilege symbolic processes over iconic and indexical ones; or insofar as they privilege 'mindful' processes over embodied and embedded ones. Thus, these essays explicate and theorize residence in the world (i.e., non-propositional and/or non-conceptual modes of meaning — the 'meaning' of a hammer or plumber) as carefully as they do representations of the world (i.e., propositional and/or conceptual modes of meaning — the 'meaning' of a word or sentence).

In this way, a theory of meaning is presented that is wide enough to account for processes as seemingly dissimilar as the economic value something has and the existential value someone holds, the concept underlying a word and the function served by an instrument, the status enacted in a social role and the purchase provided by an affordance, the appropriateness and effectiveness of speech acts and the propositional contents and satisfaction conditions of mental states. And, in this way, a theory of meaning is presented that treats social constructions in the same idiom as it treats natural kinds, that is as respectful of the contribution of 'culture' to human behavior as 'nature.'

Fifth, these twin sources of inspiration not withstanding, theory-specific jargon will be minimized in these essays. In particular, from Peirce, only a dozen or so terms, all defined and explicated, will be used. And from Heidegger, almost no terms will be used; rather, points of contact will be noted, and ideas from his most lucid and careful interpreters will be reviewed and deployed. Moreover, it will be argued that Peirce and Heidegger may be profitably used in conjunction with one another.

In particular, while Heidegger had a singular understanding of the importance of meaning, and a prescient critique of mind from the standpoint of meaning, he did not have an adequate theory of meaning. And while Peirce had an adequate theory of meaning, one which superceded Saussure and made most of post-structuralism superfluous, it was designed for explicating logical relations. These essays bring Peirce's understanding of meaning to bear on Heidegger's critique of mind, thereby articulating being-in-the-world in terms of semiosis. Here, then, mind as embodied, embedded, and embrained is related to meaning as iconic, indexical, and symbolic.

Sixth, this focus on sign-object-interpretant relations in contrast to a focus on sign-object relations, and this understanding of interpretants as objective signs and objects as intersubjective, opens the door for a more general move: from representation to inference and indexicality. To rephrase those points in the current idiom, whereas representation is usually understood as a sign-object relation (e.g., an utterance represents a state

of affairs), here it is understood as a sign-object-interpretant relation: utterances are inferentially articulated with other utterances and indexically implicated in states of affairs. That is, inferential relations between signs and interpretants (qua logical relations), and indexical relations between objects and signs (qua causal relations), will take the place of representational relations between mental states and states of affairs.

Seventh, moving now from language to mind, the notion of an intentional status is put forth to replace the notion of a mental state. In particular, a social or intentional status is just a set of commitments and entitlements to signify and interpret in particular ways: normative ways of speaking and acting attendant upon being a certain sort of person — a mother or lawyer, a believer that the earth is flat, or a lover of dogs. A role is just any enactment of that status: actually putting one or more of those commitments and entitlements into effect; or speaking and acting in a way that conforms with one's social and intentional statuses. And an attitude is just another's interpretant of one's status by way of having seen one's roles: I know you are a mother (or are afraid of dogs), as a social (or intentional) status, insofar as I have seen you act like a mother (or someone afraid of dogs); and as a function of this knowledge (of your status through your role), I come to expect you to act in certain ways — and perhaps sanction your behavior as a function of those expectations. In this way, intentional statuses are treated in the same way as social statuses; and the relation between roles, statuses, and attitudes is mapped onto the relation between signs, objects, and interpretants.

4. Subjectivity

Subjectivity means different things to different people. There are subjects in the sovereign political sense, which most directly relates to agency: that which is simultaneously 'subjective' (say, capable of decision) and 'subjected' (say, pliable with coercion). Relatedly, there are subjects that relate to selves: the speaking subject, as that which can say 'I,' and hence be both speaker and topic; and the interpellated subject, as that which can be called 'You,' and hence be both topic and addressee.

In a more circumscribed fashion, subjects are often contrasted with objects, as those entities that have mental representations instead of spatial extension. How then to account for this perceiving, intending, believing, wishing, and remembering subject? And how to relate this mentally representing subject to the discursively representing subject — the one who can promise, recount, assert, command, question, and opt? More generally, how to account for signs with relatively propositional and/or explicit contents

— that is, signs that are inferentially articulated, and hence able to be true and false (à la beliefs and assertions) or satisfied and frustrated (à la intentions and promises), able to stand as a reason or in need of a reason?

As will be seen, there are pitched battled fought over these issues: for example, are the propositional contents of mental states (e.g., believing that it is raining) prior to the propositional contents of speech acts (e.g., asserting that it is raining); and hence should we ground mind in language or language in mind? More importantly, before one can even account for beliefs and assertions, or promises and intentions, one needs a theory of relatively non-propositional meanings: how we interpret the status organizing a social role (e.g., being a plumber) or the value guiding an identity (e.g., being a Christian), the function served by an instrument (e.g., wielding a hammer) or the purchase provided by an affordance (e.g., heeding a patch of ice).

For these reasons, the pre-theoretical notion of 'subjectivity' (and 'mind' more generally) is distributed across two essays. The essay entitled 'Residence in the world' treats non-propositional modes of meaning: heeding affordances, wielding instruments, undertaking actions, performing roles, and filling identities. As its name suggests, and as the definitions offered below will show, residence in the world is fundamentally governed by *holism*: the interpretation of any meaningful unit is enabled and constrained by its relation to other such meaningful units — though processes such as incorporation, realization, contextualization, and representation. While non-propositional modes of meaning are typically taken to belong to an unmarked category, having no intrinsic structure outside of not being propositional, and hence constituting a kind of garbage bin of meaning (sometimes called the 'hurly-burly,' the 'background,' 'givenness,' 'context,' 'what cannot be said,' and so forth), the account offered here takes them to be finite, structured, intuitive, and articulatable.

In particular, an *affordance* is a meaningful unit (or semiotic process) whose sign is a natural feature, whose object is a purchase, and whose key interpretant is an action that heeds that feature, or an instrument that incorporates that feature (so far as the feature 'provides purchase'). For example, walking carefully over a frozen pond (as an action) is an interpretant of the purchase provided by ice (as an affordance), insofar as such a form of movement heeds the slipperiness of ice.

An *instrument* is a meaningful unit whose sign is an artificed entity, whose object is a function, and whose key interpretant is another instrument that incorporates that entity, or an action that wields that entity (so far as it 'serves a function'). For example, a knife (as an instrument) is an interpretant of the purchase provided by steel (as another instrument), insofar as such a tool incorporates the hardness and sharpness of steel.

An *action* is a meaningful unit whose sign is a controlled behavior, whose object is a purpose, and whose key interpretant is another action that reacts to that behavior (qua interaction), an instrument that is realized by that behavior, or a subsequent action (by the same actor) that incorporates that behavior. For example, a pie (as an instrument) provides an interpretant of the purpose of baking (as an action), insofar as such a dessert is the realization (or 'objectification') of the purpose of baking.

A *role* is a meaningful unit whose object is a status (i.e., a set of commitments and entitlements to behave in certain ways), whose sign is an enactment of that status (i.e., putting those commitments and entitlements into effect — usually by acting on them), and whose key interpretant is another's attitude towards that status (where this attitude is itself a role), or another role that is contextualized by this role. For example, being a husband (as a role) is an interpretant of being a wife (as another role), insofar as the status of a husband (i.e., the rights and responsibilities attendant upon inhabiting such a social position) contextualizes, or only makes sense in terms of, the status of a wife.

And an *identity* is a meaningful unit whose object is a value (or set of values), whose sign is an enactment of that value (typically by way of an action that is oriented towards that value), and whose key interpretant is another's attitude towards that identity (where this attitude is itself an identity), an instrument realized by that identity, or another identity that contextualizes that identity. For example, being Christian is an interpretant of being Jewish, insofar as the former incorporates the latter. And a scholarly treatise (as an instrument) is an interpretant of being a philosopher, insofar as the former is a realization of the values of the latter.

In short, while the objects of signs are usually taken to be relatively 'objective' (à la Saussure's oxen and trees), the objects of residential modes of meaning are quite abstract: purchases, functions, purposes, statuses, and values. Moreover, while the interpretants of signs are usually taken to be relatively 'subjective' (for example, thoughts in the mind of an addressee), the key interpretants of residential modes of meaning are usually just other embodied or embedded modes of meaning — i.e., other affordances, instruments, actions, roles, and identities.

Building on this understanding of residence in the world, the essay entitled 'Representations of the world' treats propositional modes of meaning: beliefs, intentions, perceptions, plans, memories, and wishes. Part of the burden of this essay is to treat seemingly individual and psychological phenomena as social and semiotic — to show how we are really minding language when we talk about 'mind.' In this regard, a number of critical interventions will be introduced.

First, as mentioned above, the propositional contents of mental states and speech acts will be treated in terms of *inference and indexicality* rather than representation. That is, the ways in which propositions represent states of affairs will be treated in terms of their inferential articulation with other propositions, and their causal connection to the states of affairs they represent.

Second, as mentioned above, putative mental states will be treated as *normative statuses*. That is, just as the social status of *being a father* may be understood as a collection of commitments and entitlements to speak and act in certain ways, the intentional status of *believing it will rain* may be understood as an inferentially articulated set of commitments and entitlements to signify and interpret in certain ways. The focus then is on how various *intentional roles* (as enactments of intentional statuses) allow us to infer others' intentional statuses (as inferentially articulated sets of commitments and entitlements to signify and interpret in particular ways), and thereby come to expect, and/or hold them accountable for, certain patterns of behavior (as evinced in our attitudes towards them).

Building on this, a typology of intentional roles will be theorized: signs that express our intentional statuses, more or less explicitly and unambiguously: from facial expressions and directions of movement to interjections (e.g., *yuck!*) and speech acts (e.g., *that disgusts me*).

Next, various ways of 'representing representations' will be treated in terms of *metalinguistic practices*: how words like 'believe,' 'perceive,' and 'intend' allow speakers both to predicate intentional statuses of people (e.g., 'John believes she'll go') and to predicate properties of intentional statuses (e.g., 'belief is a weak form of knowledge').

Finally, it will be theorized how intentional statuses become implicated in *epistemic formations* — thereby becoming the subject-matter of empirical investigations (what we observe), theoretical representations (how we theorize what we observe), and practical interventions (how we act on what we observe as a function of our theories). Here is where intentional statuses get caught up in discursive practices and disciplinary regimes that treat them as 'mental states.' Such practices and regimes are legion: from psychoanalysis to the DSM IV's attempts to standardize the diagnostic criteria for mental illnesses, from self-help guides to parental wisdom concerning how to soothe the feelings of a distraught child.

5. Agency

Agency might initially be understood as the relatively flexible wielding of means towards ends. For example, one can use a range of tools to achieve

a specific goal, or one can use a specific tool to achieve a range of goals. And to say one entity has more agency than another entity, is to say it has more flexibility — relatively more means and ends (within some given environment, or under some given conditions). For example, in contrast to other animals, humans seem to have a much wider arrange of both means and ends — where these may be alternately framed as beliefs and desires, tools and goals, or knowledge and values. Indeed, to put this point in a semiotic perspective, just as humans may offer many different signs of the same object, they may offer many different interpretants of the same sign.

Another closely related sense of agency is couched in terms of choice rather than flexibility: one may choose among a range of means, or choose among a range of ends. Agency in this sense is not so much about having lots of options open, as having a say in which particular option will be acted on. In either case, the key feature of agency is usually accountability: the more agency one has over some process, the more one can be held accountable for its outcome — for example, be subject to praise or blame, reward or punishment, pride or shame.

Finally, in all of these ways, agency links up to a long critical-humanist tradition, whose basic insights may be summarized as follows: we make ourselves, just not under conditions of our own choosing; this self-creating capacity is human-specific (and grounded in some putative faculty like 'language' or 'imagination'); and there is an ethical injunction not to let this capacity lie dormant — and hence to seize control over the mediating conditions under which we self-create.

The above issues are resolved into two sets of three dimensions, each variable by degree. In particular, *residential agency* is theorized to have three dimensions. First, there is the degree to which one can control the expression of a sign (e.g., determine where and when it may be expressed). Second, there is the degree to which one can compose the relation between a sign and object (e.g., determine what a sign stands for and how it stands for it). And third, there is the degree to which one can commit to the interpretant of a sign-object relation (e.g., determine what effect the sign-object relation will have when expressed). Residential agency, then, as a kind of engaged agency, is a social and semiotic way of characterizing notions like 'control.'

Representational agency is also theorized to have three dimensions. First, there is the degree to which one can thematize a meaningful entity (e.g., be able to represent it). Second, there is the degree to which one can characterize a feature of this entity (e.g., be able to represent it in a certain way). And third, there is the degree to which one can reason with this theme-character relation (e.g., be able to use this representation as a

reason, or be able to provide a reason for this representation). Representational agency, then, as a kind of disengaged agency, is a social and semiotic way of characterizing notions like 'consciousness.'

As may be argued, degrees of residential and representational agency depend on semiotic properties of signs, social properties of semiotic communities, and cognitive properties of signers. Accountability for any meaningful process, then, will scale with degrees of control, composition and commitment, on the one hand; and degrees of thematization, characterization and reasoning, on the other. Moreover, various processes may be examined — such as crises and enclosures, epistemic formations and commoditization — that constrain or enable the agency of those implicated in them. And finally, agency may be shown not to necessarily (or even usually) adhere in specific people: the 'one' in question can be distributed over time (now and then), space (here and there), unit (super-individual and sub-individual), number (one and several), entity (human and nonhuman), and individual (Tom and Jane).

6. Selfhood

Selfhood is usually understood as some kind of reflexive capability, a capability that is maximally implicated in one's agency and subjectivity. For example, selfhood might involve being the means and ends of one's own actions (e.g., being auto-technic and auto-telic); being the object of one's own beliefs, perceptions, and intentions (e.g., being self-conscious); or being the subject matter of one's own utterances (e.g., speaking about oneself). Indeed, in a more Machiavellian idiom, a self might just be that which can seize control of its appearance: internalize others' interpretations of it, and hence act — if not dissemble — for the sake of those interpretations.

But there are other ways of rendering the self, ways that turn on its unitization. For example, it might be understood as a center of experience and instigator of action, as continuous in time and cohesive in space. It might be understood as a relatively stable ensemble of social relatedness — say, simultaneously being a mother, daughter, wife, professor, American, democrat, and Morman. Or it might be understood as one's most important or all encompassing social role — say, one's 'identity,' itself understood as organized by a particular set of values, a standard that allows one to make decisions by weighing the relative merits of different courses of action. In this last sense, and metaphorically speaking, if agency turns on a species-specific ability to weigh, selfhood turns on individual- or group-specific units of weight.

Finally, with respect to any one of these characteristics, questions may be asked such as who or what is understood within some community as having a self: humans versus nonhumans, adults versus children, citizens versus slaves, dogs versus turtles, and so forth. In short, and risking diffusion by being too general, one might characterize selfhood as a role-enabled and role-enabling nexus of value-directed reflexive capabilities — often, but not always, embodied in an individual person.

It may be argued that, rather than provide a single theory of the self, it is much more useful to provide a set of theoretical frames through which selfhood may be viewed — such that any mode of behavior is simultaneously viewable through several frames.

In particular, selfhood as *inalienable constituents* are those meaningful units of the residential and representational whole which belong to one: one's affordances, instruments, actions, roles, and identities; one's beliefs, perceptions, memories, wishes, plans, and intentions.

Selfhood as *temporality of semiosis* is the temporal unfolding of meaning-making seen from the signer's point of view: the temporal unfolding — involving creation, maintenance, and loss — of one's social and intentional statuses; or, equivalently, one's commitments and entitlements to signify and interpret at any moment in one's life and across all moments of one's life.

Selfhood as *unit of accountability* is a site of normative and causal sanctioning: both as that which can be sanctioned by members of some institution for adhering (or not) to its commitments and entitlements (as a function of what others take its social and intentional statuses to be), and as that which may internalize the attitudes of others (towards its statuses) and thereby self-sanction.

There is selfhood as *reflexive agency*: the one who controls, composes, and commits to its own inalienable constituents; or the one who thematizes, characterizes, and reasons with its own inalienable constituents. Here, then, residential and representational modes of agency are combined with the self as inalienable constituents.

There is selfhood as *reflexive semiosis*: the self as simultaneously signer, objecter, and interpreter — when, for example, the one speaking is the same as the actor spoken about and/or the addressee spoken to; or when the one performing is the same as the character performed and/or the audience performed for.

And there is selfhood as *identity*: that constituent of the residential whole whose object is a value and whose sign is an enactment of that value — where value may be likened to an orienting principle in a space of social and intentional statuses, a mode of self-guidance through a normative space of commitments and entitlements.

Finally, by way of these six theoretical frames, it will be seen that selfhood, just like agency, doesn't necessary adhere in an individual human — but can itself be distributed across space, time, unit, entity, number, and individual.

7. Personhood

Personhood is probably the least marked of the four terms in this essay's title, often being used to describe processes discussed above under other headings. Using it in a more marked sense in the present context, it might loosely be understood as sociopolitical rights and responsibilities attendant upon being an agent, subject, or self. For example, who is allowed to vote and who must fight in wars, who may be executed and who must be educated.

Such rights and responsibilities, then, and the degrees of accountability that come with them, necessarily turn on local understandings of what counts as an agent, subject, or self: not just criteria like one's ability to promise and forgive, declare and decide, agonize and act, plan and remember; but also criteria like one's ability to sublimate and suffer, go to heaven or speak Italian, have white skin or own certain possessions, hold sacred a certain book or partake of a particular history.

In other words, depending on the sociopolitical community at issue, not all Homo sapiens are persons, and not all persons are Homo sapiens — pets and deities might be included, while mentally retarded humans and serfs might be excluded. Indeed, as is well known, it is one of the great tragedies of the modern era, and one of the paradoxes of human rights, that only citizens of nation-states are every really given enforceable rights as persons.

Personhood, then, plays two key roles in these essays. First, it shows that notions like agency, selfhood, and subjectivity cannot be theorized apart from local understandings of agency, selfhood, and subjectivity. That is, personhood requires not just a cross-cultural theory of what is human-specific, but theorizing culture-specific ways of rendering humanness.

Second, it shows that personhood is bound up in politics, whether grounded in a nation state or founded in a moiety, be it embodied in a kingdom or distributed across chiefdoms. In other words, that which patrols the boundary between the human and the nonhuman is not determined by all humans — and hence is very often inhumane.

Unlike agency and selfhood, then, which each deserve an essay of their own, and unlike subjectivity, which is divided into two essays (residence

and representation), personhood has no essay of its own. In part, this is because the political nature of sociality and semiosis is always present. And in part this is because every essay — and any theory more generally — must weave together a community-general account of agency, subjectivity, and selfhood (i.e., a theory that can account for the range of dimensions at issue across all cases) and community-specific accounts of agency, subjectivity, and selfhood (i.e., local understandings regarding which dimensions are most salient).

8. Interdisciplinary interlocutors and systematic theorization

The study of agents, persons, subjects, and selves exists at the interstices of disciplines: anthropology should have much to say about them as linguistics, psychology as much as philosophy, literature as much as sociology, and so forth. And insofar as no single discipline has a monopoly over these topics, theorists would be well advised to draw from as many sources as they can. Thus, in making these arguments, these essays bring disparate disciplines and theories together.

First, there is a linkage of Peirce and Heidegger. Here semiotics meets ontology, pragmatics joins up with phenomenology. There is a rapprochement between analytic and continental philosophy through American pragmatism. Scholars such as Peirce, James, Dewey, and Mead bump elbows with Frege and Husserl, Wittgenstein and Heidegger, Austin and Arendt, Hacking and Haugeland, Brandom and Taylor. There is a linkage of cognitive and ecological psychology. Here Vygotsky, Gibson, Neisser, Bruner, Norman, Hutchens, and Tomasello will be discussed in tandem with scholars like Rosch, Keil, Fodor, and Sperber. There is a linkage of critical theory and philosophy of language and mind. Here Anscombe, Austin, Grice, Searle, Davidson, Sellars, Brandom, and Putnam are deployed alongside Marx and Weber, Lukács and Gramsci, Arendt and Foucault. And finally, there is a linkage of linguistic and cultural anthropology with cognitive and functional linguistics. Here scholars such as Boas, Sapir, Whorf, Benveniste, Jakobson, Greenberg, Goffman, and Talmy intersect with scholars such as Malinowski, Linton, Mauss, Bourdieu, Berger and Luckmann, Geertz, and Sahlins.

These essays therefore constitute a cross-disciplinary work in that the distinctions they make, and the phenomena they encompass, are informed by and relevant to scholars working in a wide variety of traditions. Of these scholars, and the works they have inspired, this essay is incorporating rather than critical. Nonetheless, while bringing these disparate

literatures together, the goal is neither to espouse nor expound the theorists at issue, but rather to use their key insights — in conjunction with one another — to build up a systematic theory. Thus, this is a rigorous set of essays in that it defines and motivates a basic set of analytic distinctions that are then used to theorize and interrelate more and more complex phenomena.

In short, in relation to these above theorists, these essays are synthesizing (bringing such disparate disciplines together), extending (bringing ideas in any one domain to inform analysis of another domain), explicating (providing a lucid analysis of previously vague ideas), and crystallizing (introducing a single metalanguage in which diverse ideas can be articulated).

9. Reconstructing the individual in social theory

To understand why we care so much about meaning, then, requires that we take great care in our account of meaning. The great strength of many reductionist and enlivenist theories of the individual is that they attempt to delineate the stakes at issue. And hence, while we may eschew their answers to such questions, we should not eschew the stakes of their questioning. For this reason, many of the key concerns of such theories are articulated here in terms of social and semiotic concepts.

For example, in the categories used here, one sense of the *unconscious* is that swatch of one's inalienable constituents over which one has little residential or representational agency: one is unable to control, compose or commit to the components of such constituents; and/or one is unable to thematize, characterize, and reason about such constituents.

One sense of the *fetish* is the degree to which one treats another as having more agency than they do: more control, composition, and commitment; and/or more thematization, characterization, and reasoning.

One sense of the *commodity* is a meaningful unit whose sign is a use value, whose object is a value, and whose interpretant is an exchange value. Here, then, semiotic meaning and economic value are brought together.

And one sense of *power* and *knowledge* is the degree to which one has residential and/or representational agency over the inalienable constituents of another: being able to control, compose, or commit to them; or being able to thematize, characterize, or reason about them.

In short, as Aristotle noted long ago, any adequate account of politics requires a complex understanding of the 'soul' (*anima*). The stakes, then, are not small.

Reference

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