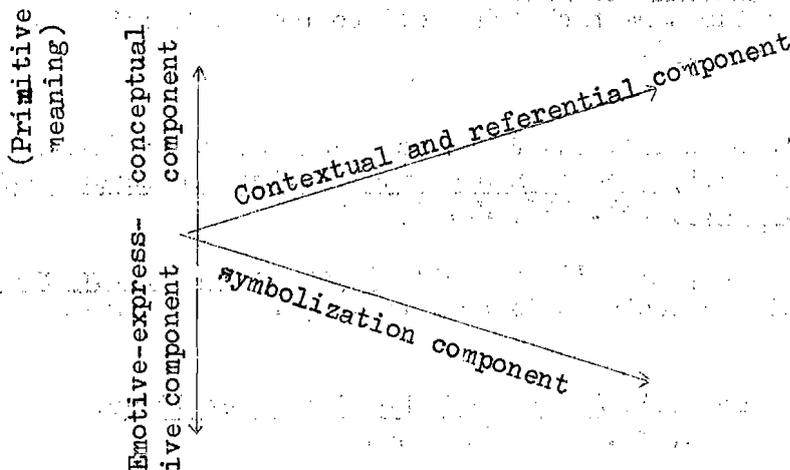


Social Meaning and the Conditions for its possibility.

My purpose in this paper¹ is to give a general account of social meaning and of the conceptually necessary conditions for its possibility. Because of the time available, I have not been able to argue in a comprehensive fashion for the numerous claims made herein, but have concentrated by attention on the most central theses.

In order to give direction to our enquiries. I shall propose a scheme which I shall employ in the analysis of any meaning phenomena. These can be thought of as three components of the meaning act, that is, any act involving the expression, ascription or comprehension of meaning. The empirical basis for this distinction lies in the three senses of the term "meaning" which we distinguish in communication. We speak of (1) the meaning of sentence S (2) the meaning of the sentence S when uttered in a particular context and (3) what the speaker meant by uttering S. Thus we have meaning characterized as (i) independent of a particular person or context (ii) as dependent on context (iii) as dependent on the particular person. Any adequate theory of meaning must account for these three senses of the term.

My procedure will be to introduce four components of the meaning act and to argue for this categorization partly directly and partly indirectly by relying on its usefulness in explanation. My claim is that everything to which we ascribe meaning can be encompassed in this scheme:



(1) The Conceptual component is the primary psychological counterpart of the meaning - it is therefore an essential component of any ascription of meaning, whether this be to "public" phenomena such as utterances or actions or to "private" phenomena such as beliefs. (The cognitive processes which underlie the conceptual component are clearly important but beyond the scope

of this paper. For the moment, we suppose this conceptual component to be basic.) Conception is conceived here as intertwined with the psychological process of thinking. The emotive-expressive component becomes important when discussing meaning in such symbols as artistic works or ritual acts. Here, to understand the meaning may involve having certain emotions. Notice that in most cases, we have a conceptual component as well as emotive component when we speak of the meaning of such symbols. I believe that the purely emotive case - if it existed - would not constitute a meaning act. A purely emotional experience to which no conceptual content is ascribed, would not be meaningful.

(2) The symbolization component is the set of symbols which are used to express the conceptual component, that is, the specific thought or judgment. These symbols can be said to signify the conceptual component. I shall argue that the symbol chosen may be individual or social. Note that the symbolization act(s) may also reflect the emotional component of the meaning. This may be done by the use of a particular symbol or by the way that symbol is uttered.

(3) A contextual or referential component: one may understand the meaning of a sentence without thereby understanding what is said - for this may depend on the reference of the demonstratives, both within the context of the account and the objective context of communication. The sentence "The old lady is not very easily fooled" may have different truth conditions according to, for example, the pointing gestures in the communication (i.e. whether the speaker points to herself or someone else) or according to its relations to other sentences in an account, as in a fictional story.

Note that the conceptual and emotional components exist within the person and hence are dependent for their existence on the existence of persons. Thus in the communication situation, the primitive meaning accrues to the speaker and is induced in the hearer, via the mediation of social signs. In other words, the thought or belief in the speaker, after the use of signs, excites a similar conceptual pattern in the hearer.

My claim is that all meaning acts involve the conceptual component and therefore this is the primitive component of meaning. However, I do not consider it to be logically necessary, though it may be an empirical fact, that all meaning involves symbolization. The schema, as presented above, is not complete until we have differentiated between types of symbols. Now, various thinkers in this century have argued against the view that meaning is limited to language and have claimed that it extends to a vast array of phenomena. Thus Cassirer says in Symbolic Forms -

"When the physical sound, distinguished as such only by pitch and intensity and quality, is formed into a word, it becomes an expression of the finest intellectual and emotional distinctions. What it immediately is, is thrust into the background by what it accomplishes with its mediation, by what it "means". No work of art can be understood as the simple scene of these elements, for in it a definite law, a specific principle of aesthetic formation are at work. The synthesis by which the consciousness combines a series of tones into the unity of a melody, would seem to be

totally different from the synthesis by which a number of syllables is articulated into the unity of a "sentence". But they have one thing in common, that in both cases the sensory particulars do not stand by themselves; they are articulated into a conscious whole, from which they take their qualitative meaning".

Similarly, Saussure in linguistics, Piaget in child psychology, Lévi-Strauss in anthropology, Harré and Secord in social psychology (The Explanation of Social Behaviour: 1972) have pointed to disparate phenomena to which meaning extends. Piaget argues in Structuralism -

"since Saussure and many others, we know that verbal signs exhibit only one aspect of the semiotic function and that linguistics is only a limited though especially important segment of that more inclusive discipline which Saussure wanted to establish under the name of "general semiology". The symbolic or semiotic function comprises, besides language, all forms of imitation: mimicking, symbolic play, mental imaging, and so on ... How otherwise could we explain that deaf-mute children (those, that is, whose brain has not been damaged) play at make believe, invent symbolic games and a language of gestures?"

It has also been generally recognised that the tokens we use in expressing meaning also originate from various sources. Some are conventional signs, having meaning for any member of the linguistic community. Others are totally subjective, signifying meaning only to the individual employing them. Still other tokens have meaning only within a small community of initiates.

Saussure develops three categories of tokens - (i) the index, which is causally connected to that which it signifies. (There is the same ontological priority here as is found in Grice's category of natural meaning.) (ii) the symbol which is individually motivated e.g. as in dream symbolism, and both these are differentiated from (iii) the sign which is arbitrary and conventional. As against this, Piaget offers a distinction between signs (which "depend upon implicit or explicit agreements based on custom") and symbols ("which may be of individual origin as in symbolic play or dreams"). But for Piaget these two are not distinct categories but "the two poles, individual and social of the same elaboration of meanings". I shall take up this suggestion that we think of the plethora of meanings in terms of a continuum.

However, I believe Piaget's characterization to be inadequate. For, we may ask, where does what Saussure calls the index fit into his dimension of meanings. A more serious problem is that at his individual pole he has lumped together two distinct forms of symbolization, namely, (i) the case where a person chooses an individual symbol to represent his meaning and (ii) the case where a person unconsciously selects a symbol, as in dreams. The difference between the unconscious symbolization and the conscious choosing of a symbol by the individual is surely critical. Dream symbolization is mysterious precisely because there are questions of interpretation by the dreamer himself. On the other hand, it is generally the case that the symbolic artist is aware of that which he is symbolizing and of choosing the specific symbols he uses.

This suggests a four-fold distinction which can be represented in terms of a continuum of symbolization thus -

| | | | |
|--|---|--|--|
| objective sign (causally connected to that which is signified) | socially chosen sign (e.g. language) | individually chosen symbol e.g. aspects of symbolism in art | unconsciously selected symbol e.g. dreams |
|--|---|--|--|

We can characterize the above continuum in terms of the extent to which it depends on a particular individual for its meaning. Thus the meaning of the objective sign is determined by its objective cause. It is common to many cultures and depends on recognizing the relevant causal conditions. The socially chosen sign depends for its meaning on more than one individual and is, by definition, possible only in a social situation. The individually chosen symbol is consciously selected by the individual, and only has the meaning ascribed to it by that individual. However the conceptual content which the person signifies by use of that symbol may be dependent on other persons in that the individual would not have gained these concepts without other persons. Thus, when an artist uses aspects of nature to represent his thoughts on the social situation, his symbol is individual but the existence of the conceptual content signified depends on the fact that there are other persons. The unconscious symbol has its meaning dependent entirely on the individual. This may also be true of the symbolic play found in young children.

In postulating this categorization, I have not begged the question against such thinkers as Lévi-Strauss and Jung who respectively see a social and objective meaning in unconscious symbolism. For I have not rejected the possibility that unconscious symbolism may reflect aspects of conscious symbolism or even some form of innate symbolism. What is important is that the immediate basis of the meaning of the symbol is the unconscious mind, whatever the ultimate source of the symbolism may be. My characterization does, however, seem to rule out Jung's claims regarding the existence of the so-called collective unconscious. In fact, it only rules out the extreme interpretation of this as a suprapersonal entity - and even if this latter claim were to be substantiated, the schema could easily be amended to accommodate this fact.

Notice that the above four are different poles in the continuum - any use of symbols need not fall solely into one of these types but may be at an intermediate point in the continuum. Thus we can have a symbol which is used by a small group of persons and conveys meaning only to them. This would fall at an intermediate point (say P) on the spectrum. The four poles (and intermediate points) along the continuum of symbolization can be represented in terms of our earlier schema. Consider, first, the case of the individually chosen meaning. Here, we have the individual's primitive meaning being symbolized by the use of an individually chosen symbol - one that is not conventionally used to signify that meaning in society. In fact, the symbols used need not, though they may, have meaning for anyone but the individual employing them.

The case of the socially chosen symbol can be represented within the schema. But, in this case, the signs have a meaning which is independent of the individual; this is not to say that their meaning is independent of all persons. On this view, social meaning arises from the use of conventionally agreed signs to represent primitive meaning. Thus we can say: A set of signs has a social meaning only in the case when it is consistently used by a group of persons to signify the same conceptual content (or specific primitive meaning).

We can now give an account of how communication takes place. We can think of this in terms of a series of steps -

- (i) the speaker formulates his primitive meaning i.e. a particular thought or conceptual pattern.
- (ii) the speaker intends to convey that meaning by uttering the social signs which he believes represent that primitive meaning.
- (iii) the relevant set of signs is uttered.
- (iv) the hearer apprehends the uttered signs.
- (v) these signs evoke the primitive meaning patterns with which they are associated.

Notice: (a) I am pursuing the principle that whatever is in the speaker which allows him to formulate his meaning must have a counterpart in the hearer which allows him to understand the meaning; (b) it is not a necessary consequence that the same specific meaning of the speaker will be induced in the hearer. This will occur in cases of perfect communication. But the system is liable to break down in at least two places - both involving a disparity between the primitive meaning and the meaning of the uttered signs. These are the case where there is a difference between the speaker's meaning and the meaning of the signs he uses to convey that meaning and the case where there is a difference between the actual social meaning of the signs and the primitive meaning they evoke in that particular hearer. In cases where there is misinterpretation of signs in this way, an appeal to other persons in order to establish the actual social meaning of the signs is likely.

The full meaning of the speech act is given by taking all three components of it into account. In communication, we are all aware of the possibility of what is called misinterpretation. The frequency of clarifications in communication illustrates the importance of making distinctions such as those in our schema. Thus in giving the full meaning of a socially meaningful utterance we must (a) give the conventional meaning of the signs, (b) admit the possibility that the speaker's meaning may differ from the meaning of the uttered signs and take account of this and (c) take account of the role of the context of utterance.

I shall not be able to present arguments for the thesis I shall now propose, but the case - as one similar to it - has been argued by Kant and to a lesser degree by Strawson. It is a necessary condition for the level of conception, which allows a being to think propositionally and to link such propositions.

together in thought, to be achieved that that being be self-conscious and hence, in my terms, a person. I am not arguing that self-consciousness is a precondition of all conception, only of the level described above. This level of conception is significant because it is a necessary condition of language. There are two defining characteristics which I use for self-conscious being: (i) the being must be capable of ascribing all of its experiences to itself as its experiences (following Kant and Strawson) and (ii) the being must be capable of some action at will (following Hampshire and Shoemaker). It is a necessary condition for self-consciousness as defined that the person's experience represent an objective world and himself as being in that world. This requires that he must consider himself as embodied in those particulars which allow him to act in the world.

We must now turn to the conditions for the possibility of social meaning. I shall say that we have a social meaning situation where we have a set of symbols S being employed by several persons provided that all persons use the same element of S to express similar or the same conceptual content and the adherence to this rule is due, in the most part, to interaction between those persons. We must justify the introduction of the provided that clause above. My argument here is that the two possible ways in which system S can arise and be used as above could not conceivably count as social meaning.

These two cases are (a) Suppose that the whole system S were provided innately or in some pre-programmed way. Further suppose that each individual is programmed so that he always uses the same elements of S to express his meaning. Our schema can accommodate this case as social meaning; but it cannot allow the case where we have the above conditions plus the proviso that the adherence to the above rules for expressing meaning is never due to personal interaction. To see why this would not be social meaning, consider the case where one member of this society is wrongly programmed so that he associates elements of S with meaning content other than its social meaning. In this case, the person is using a private symbolization and he has to be corrected if his utterances are to have social meaning. But in the case where personal interaction has no role in the perpetuation of the system, it would not be possible to correct him and hence he would be using a system of private symbolism. Even if it were never the case that the person needed correction, it would still be dependent on the social situation to ensure that he did not.

Case (b) is where the objective world is such that, as a causal consequence of our apprehension of it, we all come to use the same system of symbols and to employ that system in the same way to represent the same conception. But again here the perpetuation of the system must be due to social interaction - for it must be conceivable that one can be corrected. Otherwise it would not be a system of social meaning at all. All this so far has been concordant with the views of Wittgenstein - except that he wishes to make all meaning, social meaning - a thesis we must now consider.

For it would be a radical objection to our whole procedure that we have denied the private language argument and we must meet it. There are various formulations of the argument; the one which affects us most is that version which claims that no meaning and no symbolization is possible without there being a society of persons. An argument of the following kind could be applied: It is a

necessary condition for the coherent use of symbols that the person be using that symbol in the same way on different occasions. In order for the person to actually be using the symbol correctly, it is necessary that there be other persons who perform the task of correcting his mistakes. To this it might be replied that a person could (i) rely on his memory (ii) have innate cognitive faculties which ensure that he applies the rule correctly. Wittgenstein could of course maintain that the person's memory is unreliable or that the cognitive structures may change. But the availability of other persons does not ensure continuity - for all the persons in the group could have memory or cognitive failures. What the group does is to make it more probable that mistakes will be corrected - but it does not ensure that they will be. All this is not to deny that the availability of other persons speeds up cognitive development - but this is a far cry from demonstrating that meaning and symbolism would be impossible without other persons.

The first condition for social meaning is that each person represent himself as being in a social meaning situation. It is a minimum prerequisite for this that the person uses a set of symbols S such that each particular element of S is ascribed a specific primitive meaning and his continued ascription of that meaning to that element of S is conceived by him as being due to some entity or entities - themselves capable of the ascription of meaning - other than himself. For this to be so, the experience of a person X must be such as to represent entities which evoke a system of symbols in certain regulated ways such that X conceives of these entities as themselves capable of thought and symbolization. This follows from the above statement. In addition to this the person must conceive of those entities from which the symbols emanate as persons, as self-conscious beings capable of intentional activity. In order to do this, he must represent the spatio-temporal (or analogous) particulars from which the symbols emanate as part of the body of the person.

Notice that it does not necessarily follow that the entities represented as evoking the symbols be in fact an entity capable of the ascription of meaning, but only that the person (X) represent him as such. To illustrate this case, consider the situation of a person who finds himself in a world of robots. These robots are controlled from a distance by a super-scientist who never appears on the scene. The robots utter the system of symbols and proceed to correct the person when he makes mistakes. The person comes to ascribe to the robots the relevant cognitive ability. Yet he is wrong in so doing, for the ability lies in one distant person.

If this first condition is necessary, then, in the human case, a child would not be a member of the social meaning community until he recognizes that his ascription of particular meanings to such symbols as linguistic signs is due, at least in part, to the intentions of other persons that he should adhere to this course. I am not supposing that this recognition involves the entertaining of some highly complex proposition, but I am suggesting that a considerable level of cognitive development is required.

But now a form of scepticism arises. Can we ever establish that the social meaning situation really exists, for it could be

the case that I merely represent it as existing? This is obviously a fundamental metaphysical question of the kind: Are there other persons or merely my experience of other persons? I do not pretend to give an answer here or even that an absolute answer is possible. What is clear, however, is that for purposes of communication and the achievement of ends, we must all ascribe an objectivity to persons; we must hold that they exist. Some philosophers, like Kant, have argued that we must ascribe as much existence to others as we do to ourselves. However, all we require here is that for purposes of understanding and acting in the world in which we live, we must ascribe to it an objective existence. If that world is represented as containing other persons, we must ascribe existence to them also.

Given then that an objective world with persons in interaction is a basic condition for social meaning, can we establish any further conditions or is the above sufficient? To explore this question, we require to consider the different categories of social symbolism. The three intuitively basic distinctions are (i) language (ii) action and (iii) art and other representational symbolism. These areas are different in the human case because they involve different symbols. But is this difference incidental or does it reflect a difference in function? Further, even if these are genuine categories, is it the case that any, or more than one, is necessary for social meaning to be possible?

To cope with these problems, let us consider the situation where we have a group of persons who have not yet employed any system of signs in a coordinated way. Since it is necessary that each person act in the world, we can divide his activities, at the non-personal interaction level, into two categories.

(1) Those acts A which X conceives of as causally efficacious in achieving a particular end, provided that the achievement of this end does not require that other people understand that end. In fact, X can achieve this end without there being other persons available to understand it. For example, cutting a piece of wood using an axe or even constructing an axe. Notice that what we have here is a rule which X applies in achieving a particular end. The act is specified in terms of the meaning ascribed to it by X - not in terms of the actual goal achieved. I shall call such acts basic actions.

(2) Those acts A' which X employs primarily for communicating his meaning to others and for the interpretation of their meaning, provided that these acts are not conceived as causally efficacious unless they are understood by those others and responded to accordingly. I entitle these "specific communication acts".

Now we must consider what is required for these two types of act to have social meaning. In the communication case, social meaning is only possible when we have X and Y using the same system of symbols in their communication acts and when each symbol has the same, or very similar, primitive meaning for both. The symbols here are specific acts, e.g. the evoking of a specific sound or the use of parts of the body in a particular way. I shall call these communication acts. But how does social meaning arise with regard to basic actions, where there is no requirement of communication.

It is clear that a basic action A has social meaning if and only if it is a rule in the particular society in which A is performed that each person perform A only when that person is attempting to achieve what within that society is conceived as a particular end and this rule is adhered to by the majority of persons in that society. We ascribe the same social meaning to a person's basic action when we suppose that he is following the rule of using that action to achieve the same end as other persons who use it provided that this end is not the communication of meaning. Because these basic actions have a social meaning, they are social symbols and I shall refer to them as "social action symbols".

We have thus explained the conceptual difference between communication symbols and social action symbols. These acts do not correspond exactly to the basic human categories of linguistic act and non-linguistic action. For some non-linguistic activities are purely communicative and therefore have the same function as linguistic acts, for example, in Britain the use by two fingers pointed in a V-sign.

The important question now is whether both these types of social meaning are necessary, or whether we can have one without the other. We can consider two cases -

(1) The hypothetical case in which we have basic action with social meaning but no communicative acts. For instance, where persons adopt a similar mode of action in achieving the same end, as when mushroom pickers adopt the rule of side-stepping to prevent one colliding with the other. Let us suppose that we have a wide range of such rules and even rules in which the participation of other persons in achieving the desired end is essential. The question is: Can we have these rules without a single act of communication being required?

Let us consider the most extraordinary case - the one in which the participation of other persons is not required in performing basic actions. Each person acts according to what he conceives to be the rule for achieving that end and he perceives that others seem to do the same. It may in fact be the case that the others do perform the same action. But can he ever know that the other persons are carrying out the same action in order to achieve the same goal. He can suppose that they are - but without communication he cannot know that they ascribe that meaning to their action. This lack of knowledge is clearly a serious matter - in fact it undermines the claim that he has social meaning. For he would have to be satisfied that their actions were attempts to achieve the same end as the end he is trying to achieve when he performs that action and he would have no way of establishing this. Yet until this is established, the actions cannot be said to have social meaning. He could be projecting his own meaning into them. This claim is reinforced when we consider that the above conditions could be satisfied by entities which were not themselves capable of ascription of meaning. In fact if all attempts to communicate were to break down, he could come to the conclusion that they were not capable of monitoring meaning.

Without communication, then, it seems that the person would have no reason to believe that all persons ascribe the same meaning to the action. It could be objected here that he could gain the

conception that he was following a rule which had been determined by the society if they corrected his misapplication of that rule. Perhaps he performs A_1 and is stopped and the other person performs A_2 and punishes him until he also performs A_2 . But even in this primitive situation, he has to differentiate cases where he has received approval from those when there is no approval, cases where an act means "this is the right way" and another meaning "this is the wrong way". But these are communication acts. Notice that even if we admit these kinds of communication acts, we could not establish that there was social meaning until the language learnt was rich enough to allow us to articulate at least basic differences in intention.

What all this shows is that communication acts are necessary conditions for the possibility of social meaning. Further, if our last argument is right, a considerable complexity in the system of communicating symbols is necessary to establish the social meaning of basic actions beyond doubt.

But while communication is a necessary condition for social meaning, is it sufficient? This brings us to the second case - in which we have a group of persons employing the same symbols in conveying meaning but not in achieving any goal to which the same end can be ascribed. The case, as stated, does not ring true - for a very important reason. This reason is that each communication act can be considered, from one point of view, as a basic action. Every act of communication which has social meaning requires not merely the intention of the person to convey a particular meaning, but also the intention of the person to adhere to the rule which prescribes the use of those specific symbols whenever one wishes to convey that meaning. For it is theoretically possible for the person to use a different set of symbols from that which has the social meaning in attempting to communicate his meaning. The individual's adherence to this rule in achieving communication of meaning is an act which itself has meaning. My utterance of the words "the war has ended" is at the same time a communicative symbol and an adherence to the rule that I should use that communicative symbol, instead of some other symbol in communicating my meaning. Thus we can see that each individual communication act is an action having social meaning as well as a communicative symbol to which is ascribed a particular meaning. Hence the communication act is extremely important - for it requires both types of social meaning.

But, now, could it be the case that we have only one social action rule - to employ the required set of symbols when intending to communicate meaning? There are two cases here (1) The case where persons can act in the world of their experience, but yet do not conceive of themselves as acting with others, or ascribing the same meaning to their acts as others, except in the achievement of communication, and (2) the case where persons cannot act in the world as experienced except in the communication context. The latter case can be excluded at the outset - for the person must be capable of changing his point of view at will. Thus he must be capable of some non-communicative actions. Case (1) is important - for it seems that we cannot establish its necessity without considering other necessary features of persons. In fact, if it were the case that these could be a society of persons in which no

conflict arose no matter which course of action one took in attempting to achieve one's end, and in which cooperation was not relevant in achieving one's ends, then perhaps no non-communicative actions would be necessary. But notice that we have already presupposed a certain cooperation in achieving the social meaning of communication symbols. Each person follows the rule of using the specific symbol in conveying a specific meaning. In the light of this, my claim is that the modes of social interaction which are necessary for social meaning in communication are the same as are required for other forms of basic social action.

To establish this, I shall reconsider our condition of social meaning that there be several persons in interaction. Given our characterization of persons, can we say anything a priori about the modes of interaction of these persons? I have said that each person must be able to act, to express his will in the world. We can conceive of three types of limitations to the modes of action available to him in expressing his will:

(i) Limitations due to the nature of the objective world in which he finds himself and to the ways in which he can use his body. In our world, basic physical limitations.

(ii) Limitations due to his psychological powers and states. Thus he may be incapable of conceiving any alternative ways of achieving the required end. Or he may have to postpone or forego the pursuit of that end because he has other basic desires which are more urgent.

(iii) Limitations on his available courses of action which are due to the fact that there are other persons or based on his interaction with those persons. In this plurality of cases, he adjusts his modes of achieving certain ends to accommodate the fact of other persons or their demands on him.

It is this third case that we shall consider in some detail, for it is this that is central to the possibility of social meaning. I shall now introduce a conceptual framework for understanding this third case. We have supposed that each person has his own will which he is free to determine in various ways. Now it is a necessary condition for social meaning that most individuals determine their will so as to conform to a universal rule in that particular group.

I shall divide the ways in which this determination of the person's will (so as to follow the universal rule) into two basic categories, which in turn sub-divide:

(i) Self-determination, where the individual's decision to follow that universal rule is not based on the influence of other persons. There are two cases here (a) the individual decides to follow that rule because he establishes that the course prescribed is morally right or good and (b) the person decides to follow the rule because he has determined, without the influence of others, that this is the best and most appropriate way of achieving the desired ends.

(ii) Other-determination where the individual decides to follow the universal rule because he has been determined by the activities of other persons. I shall divide these into two groups, (a) positive other-determination and (b) negative other-determination.

Case (i) is the moral determination of the will. Some philosophers, like Kant, have argued that all moral decisions involve the determination of the will according to a universal rule. Thus he says in the Critique of Practical Reason: "Practical Principles are propositions which contain a general determination of the will having under it several practical rules". For Kant, these universal rules are prescribed by reason and not by other persons or external desires. Notwithstanding whether all moral decisions involve such universal rules, it is clear that moral decisions are likely to be an important determinant in choosing to follow some universal rules.

Case (ii) in which the individual pursues the universal rule because he has been determined by other persons to pursue that goal involves the exercise of power, in its broadest social sense. This importance of the concept of power has been stressed by many; for example, Bertrand Russell in his book Power says: "I shall be concerned to prove that the fundamental concept in social science is power, in the same sense in which energy is the fundamental concept of physics". I shall define power thus: "An actor A has power over B insofar as A can determine the will of B to carry out an action set down by A, provided that B would not have performed that action at that time and place if A had not determined that he should". This characterization, which applies to groups as well as individuals, is similar to, or encompasses features of, many definitions of power in the literature. Power can be divided into many forms, depending on the means employed or on the level of personal interaction. For my purposes here, I shall divide into persuasive power and coercive power forms, corresponding to positive and negative other-determination. Notice that not all exercises of power over the individual are aimed at determining him to conform to a prevalent universal rule - on the contrary the exercise of power may determine him to break such a rule - e.g. when a gangster forces a bank clerk to hand over money.

The individual can differentiate these cases of other-determination which require him to follow prevalent or newly determined universal rules and those which require him to pursue a different, possibly ad-hoc course. I shall call the group which determine what these rules are, and/or that they continue to apply, the basic power groups of the society. An individual may be a permanent member of some basic power group and hence play a part in determining the universal rules and their perpetuation, or he may be wholly excluded from such groups or he may play some part in the determination of some of the rules.

Given this conceptual framework, can we say anything a priori about which of the above conditions must hold if social meaning is to be possible, that is to say, do we need all four modes of the determination of the universal rule for there to be a social meaning, or do we need only one of these? Various philosophers

such as Rousseau and Hegel have argued that both morality and the exercise of power are necessary. But their argument is not at the same level of generality as our own, in that they are talking about human beings with a particular history whereas I am considering the case of persons in general.

Let us therefore consider the three cases at our level of generality. The first society would be one in which everyone adhered to a set of communication rules and basic action rules not because they had been coerced or persuaded to do so but merely because they felt a moral obligation to pursue those rules. This would be tantamount to a society of angels. Notice that each individual could conceive of alternative courses of action but would never pursue them. Conflicts of interest would either never arise or they would be automatically settled. Can we rule out such a case?

We need to develop it further - we must explain the origin of the rules which are here adhered to. If their origin is not in society, then the case collapses as a case of social meaning - for we require some role for personal interaction. Perhaps then they learn the rules from society and agree to adhere to each and every one because they recognize its moral worth. Further no one ever proposes a rule which is not considered as morally right. This case comes close to certain philosophers conception of utopia e.g. Hegel. What is crucial from our point of view is whether they would feel duty bound to correct someone who had departed from the path, not necessarily coerce him but persuade him to change his mind. Now it is clear that they must feel duty bound to do this; otherwise the situation cannot be said to be a social meaning one in which the social meaning rules are sustained by the participation of others. But if we admit that they would feel bound to correct such a person, then, irrespective as to whether this possibility is actualized, the universal rules can still be said to be sustained by the exercise of power - for it is exercisable in the case where the moral incentive breaks down. Thus either we must suppose that the members of the society would not act to sustain the rules - in which case the system is not a social meaning system - or they would act to exert influence on someone who broke the rules and this requires the exercise of power.

The second case is where we have only other-determination and no self-determination involved. Everyone acts because he has been either persuaded or coerced by others into following the universal rule. But persuasion can only occur when there is an appeal to morality or when there is an appeal to his interests whether these be immediate and practical or long-term and metaphysical. Coercion, on the other hand, presupposes the existence of some agreeable state which he does not wish to forfeit e.g. his life, or some disagreeable state which he does not desire, and that the other person has the ability to revoke or invoke this state. In both cases, it seems that we require either some form of morality or a series of states of affairs in which the person has an interest. If the person were not moral or had no interests at all which the other persons could affect, then it would be impossible for them to exercise power over him and to ensure that

he accords with the universal rules. In fact, it is a necessary condition of social meaning that all persons have an interest or a moral commitment to the perpetuation of communication and hence a commitment to follow the rule of using the same symbols to convey the same meaning content. Thus I wish to argue that it is a necessary condition for social meaning that there be other-determination by various persons in society and that there be either some moral commitment to at least some of the universal rules or some common self-interest factor which underlies their perpetuation.

If our account of the necessity for power relations in the maintenance of the communication system is correct, then we would expect that the set of symbols used in human linguistic communication varies more according to changes in power and prestige in society and is not entirely determined in some innate fashion. This thesis is maintained by several linguists, including Dr. Seuren in Oxford.

Finally is it a necessary condition for social meaning that the society have a history? Let us suppose that there is a series of individuals who are drawn from different English speaking societies and placed together in a geographical group. Is this not a society which has a common language and which yet has no history? The whole of this case rests on the force of the term "society" here. I do not wish to define a society as a group of individuals sharing the same system of communication. Let us call any such group a "linguistic community". Now, it is clear that we could never absolutely determine the limits of such a community, by using the system of communication as the only criterion. For it is always possible that in some other part of the universe there exists persons who use an identical system of symbolization and they would have to be included in the group. Of course, we could determine that a society is all persons in a particular spatial location who use the same system of communication. Such a definition would allow that the "society" could have no history - as in case above. But notice that even in this case it is necessary that each person recognize that the communication system they are employing has a common origin - otherwise they could not be sure that they were employing symbols in the same way and the society would require to develop a history to establish this.

Now, it is partly an arbitrary matter as to what criteria we use in determining what is or is not a society. The social group suggested above does not seem to me to be adequate - for it is possible for such a group to exist quite arbitrarily and for very short periods of time. Thus the people taking a three hour plane journey would form a society in that sense. The reason why I reject the claim that a group of persons whose only mode of interaction was communication is that such a group would be without culture. For culture requires basic social actions in the sense prescribed above. A group of persons who merely communicated but did not interact in other ways would not have the common practices which go to constitute a society. Nor could it be established beyond doubt that they shared the same system of beliefs - metaphysical, moral, political or otherwise if they did not carry out actions which other members of society would interpret

as a consequence of being said to genuinely hold those beliefs. What this suggests is that the meanings ascribed to social action are interwoven with the conceptual framework of beliefs which persons in that society possess. I think we can define a society as a group of persons who have a set of basic social actions in common and who ascribe the same meaning to such social actions. What this set of social actions is is an empirical question - which will be determined in part by the contingent characteristics of the human being. What is not contingent, however, is that a society so defined must have a history in which the social action forms have evolved and gained their meaning.

A final word on anthropology and sociology. It is clear that the study of the meaning of the action symbols is, on our account, crucial. But what happens when an anthropologist cannot accept the reason provided by the persons in that society for pursuing that particular act? There are two schools of thought here -

- (1) the extreme structuralist who maintains that there is a hidden meaning to these acts but who supposes that that meaning must always be found within the conceptual framework of the society involved.
- (2) the extreme functionalist who maintains that these acts have a latent function of which the people are not aware and which may not even have a role in their system of concepts.

Both views seem to me dogmatic. It is possible that there are common functions in human societies but that these functions are achieved through complex series of symbolic actions. In that case the social scientist would need to know both the universal functions and the complex system of symbolism before he can give a full explanation.

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1. This is a slightly revised version of a paper read at Rom Harré's Tuesday seminar during Trinity Term 1972.