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NOTES ON SOCIAL MAN, LANGUAGE AND HABIT

In the book he recently edited, *For a Science of Social Man* (1954), John Gillin proposes that terminology could be more effectively used for the advancement of knowledge in the Science of Social Man if there were a sort of clearing house, a "Bulletin of Scientific Terminology and Concepts in the Social Studies", to which all interested parties could refer both in offering concepts that are new and in using old ones in original, previously unestablished ways. This suggestion which I take as my departure, reminds me of a point that the late Ruth Benedict used to stress in her course on the history of ethnological theory: In science conceptual schemes can indeed be fruitful in organizing the panorama contemplated by scientists in any field of knowledge, but also it is the misleading conceptual schemes that create the big problem in science by *defining the situations* dealt with in traditional dogmatic ways, failing therefore, to stimulate the treading over unexplored territories, or making difficult the

task of redifining old problems in novel, unestablished ways, through the bold use of concepts.

Speaking on social-man-as-a-scientist, Edward Sapir once said: "The 'real world' is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the *language habits* of the group" (Sapir, 1949: 162, emphasis mine). He added: "To a far greater extent than the philosopher has realized, he is likely to become the dupe of his speech forms, which is equivalent to saying that the mould of his thought, which is typically a linguistic mould, is apt to be projected into his conception of the world. Thus innocent linguistic categories may take on the formidable appearance of cosmic absolutes" (Sapir, 1949: 157). And finally: "Psychologists have perhaps too narrowly concerned themselves with the simple psycho-physical bases of speech and have not penetrated very deeply into the study of its symbolic nature. This is probably due to the fact that psychologists in general are as yet too little aware of the fundamental importance of symbolism in behavior. It is not unlikely that it is precisely in the field of symbolism that linguistic forms and processes will contribute most to the enrichment of psychology" (Sapir, 1949: 157).

It is with the above thoughts in mind that I offer now the following reflections on the theme. Anthropologists are well aware that culture is basically learned behavior. Language, the human tool *par excellence*, is a vehicle for communication and for socially pooling the individual experiences of discrete human beings. Language "is" culture, which is to say, language is socially learned. But yet the proposition holds that: although culture is learned behavior, not all learned behavior is cultural. Culture is a special kind of learned behavior: socially shared and socially patterned human behavior. Furthermore and preeminently it is *symbol* mediated behavior. It is through the use of a symbol-system (language) that human beings are able to transmit to other members of their species their individually learned experiences. Other higher animals, individually learn from experience, but they cannot share by the use of symbolic media of communication, their individually learned experiences.

Thus, animal experiences can be transmitted to other animals by imitation on a sensory-reflex level, but they cannot be transmitted and thus socially pooled, by precept on a symbol or verbally mediated level. A dog that repeatedly runs after a moving car gets hurt several times until perhaps he learns that it does not pay to keep on doing so. But what he learns, his experience, is not communicable; not convertible into socially pooled experience. What he learns remains individual, discrete, non-social experience. His learning functions, historically, therefore, as untrascendental knowledge. Not so with man. What a human being learns is experience capable of being transmitted to other members of the species. Since human experience is transmissible by precept or verbally mediated systems, it becomes culture.

A large part of what is transmitted by man to other human beings, through the use of symbol systems, are particular *definitions of situations*. These definitions of situations that are verbally communicated by human beings can be of two types: a) those that have or purport to have empirical referents: facts (quantitative or qualitative) or relations between facts; and b) those that refer to values (worthy purposes posited for human conduct to follow). The first type of definition, referring to facts or to relations between facts, can be scientific (i. e., rational), or pre-scientific (i. e., pre-rational). It is scientific, and therefore a definition of the situation that communicates *knowledge* of the situation and thus power over reality (rather than delusions as in the case of pre-rational definitions) if it describes objectively the natural properties, both quantitative and qualitative, of the fact in hand; or, in dealing with relational knowledge (necessary relations, co-relations, or accidental *ad-hoc* relations) when the proposition positing the definition is such that the necessary and sufficient causes holding for that specific relation are accounted for. The second type of cultural definition of a situation, that of positing values or "worthy ends" for human conduct to pursue, involves man's capacity to select freely between possible alternatives, i.e., man can use the same wealth or the same knowledge for his own *personal ends* irrespective of social consequences or he can use them taking into

account *social needs*. Since man's conduct is part of the social situation in which he acts, he is morally free to choose between possible alternatives, and thus to make history according to the possibilities of his natural and cultural milieu and of his own free moral nature.

The foregoing are some of the logical implications of the conceptualization which the science of social man (cf. Gillin) creates if we learn to view man as largely "habituated body and mind" within a *symbolic* milieu.

We have already pointed to the fact that language is learned, symbolic behavior. What then is the qualitative difference between this type of learned behavior and that of other higher animals? *I submit that the essential difference is a structural difference in habit functioning: man unites motor, affective and conceptual habits in linguistic behavior*, something that no other animal can accomplish. Let me explain briefly.

Man like all mammals can learn by the process of implantation of habits through conditioning. The basic mechanism of all habit learning is the mammalian capacity for abstracting by selectively leaving out non-essentials in *motor*, *affective* or *conceptual* behavior; that is to say, habit behavior is based upon the generalizing faculty of the complex nervous system of higher animals.

A dog learns to walk, after repeated unsuccessful trials, by walking. That is, he repeatedly attempts to perform determined motor actions until by continued repetition he acquires the apposite *motor habits* that will permit him to move voluntarily and consciously. At first, if we observe a newly born dog, his movements will be clumsy and un-organized, but repetition gradually builds into his nervous system the necessary motor habits that will make it possible for him to move in a deliberate and organized fashion. When this is accomplished, he has learned to walk or trot or run as the case may be and his movements will be regular and organized (patterned); not clumsy and unorganized as before. This self-conditioning process then is what

goes on in learning motor habits. Man also learns to walk in a similar way; he also develops by repetition or self-conditioning the apposite motor habits which, once established, will largely function automatically or subconsciously.

Going one step further, man learns to write or talk, that is to say, to move his hands or his vocal organs in a determinate, habitual, pattern-wise fashion. Talking involves the same process of motor-habit implantation, by repeated attempts to produce articulate sounds, as walking does. The child will clumsily repeat, after his parents or peers, determined sound clusters: ma-a-ma, or pa-a-pa. After many unsuccessful attempts to distinctly articulate these sounds he finally arrives at a stage where he is capable of producing them distinctly without conscious effort or concentration. What is it that has happened? A cluster of motor habits which enable him, deliberately and at will, to produce such sounds has been implanted by the previous conditioning. Eventually and gradually he thus becomes capable of articulating sounds. But still, what has been accomplished is not yet language, for language involves much more than the mechanics of vocal articulation. The mechanics of motor habit implantation through conditioning which we have so far described, however, helps us to explain why a person, who has learned his vernacular tongue, finds it difficult to produce the variant sound patterns (phonemes) of a foreign language.

That the mechanics of sound pattern articulation is not language becomes evident if we think of the parrot's talk. A parrot can articulate "names" and words rather distinctly and yet we would be rash to call the parrot's sounds language. The articulate sound clusters that vocal motor habits make possible are generally uttered by humans within a social context. Thus, a child will hear the word *ma-a-ma* uttered in contexts that generally will be pleasing for him: breast feeding time, or removal of physical uncomfortableness, etcetera. The sound cluster *ma-a-ma* becomes therefore tainted with a congenial feeling tone. His affective consciousness is conditioned so that words acquire special emotional connotations. The social process of condition-

ing to sound clusters, which language learning involves, repeatedly elicits affective responses or feeling tones. These feeling tones when implanted function so automatically that we may properly call them *affective habits*. Psychologists tell us that the autonomic nervous system has to do with emotions and in consequence with affective habit implantation, yet we know that the central nervous system is primarily involved in motor behavior and in conceptual thought processes.

Up to now, we have posited that verbal behavior —articulate sound production— involves the implantation of motor and affective habits through conditioning. It would not be amiss to note here in passing that superior animals can also learn these habits sub-verbally, for these are behavioral functions well within the scope of their animal nature.

Human beings, however, learn to communicate through language behavior, not only articulated sounds and feeling tones, but also abstract images and concepts. What, psychologically speaking, is a concept or an idea? Basically, they are mental representations involving images, while images are primarily sensory experiences. Thus there are sound images, taste images, smell images, tactile images, and visual images. When, for instance, we think of the idea *house*, we mentally represent to ourselves a form and color image, that is, primarily, a visual image. But the mental representation of a house is not just any form or any set of colors. Out of innumerable visual excitations or stimuli, human beings learn by categorizing them logically or conventionally to discriminate, between different forms and different colors. As Sapir so aptly stated: "Language forms predetermine for us certain modes of observation". Thus in Indo-European languages a range of tonal color experience is called green, another blue, or red or orange, etcetera. These experiences so categorized are largely conventional, that is to say, socially learned or habitual, and as such they form part of a culture. In every linguistic tradition, the discrete (visual, tactile, taste, etcetera) experience of human beings are categorized in conceptual forms which are verbally expressed in words and

socially shared in language. The concepts that languages express are therefore socially learned, shared and habitual, and we are therefore justified in speaking of *conceptual habits* as part of the psychological and cultural basis of linguistic behavior.

Superior animals can within limits, also learn to categorize determinate sensory experiences (thus they can learn to distinguish between colors), but they cannot socially share the categorization of sensory experience that they make as individuals. Why? Basically because they lack the anatomical and physiological mechanisms (brains) for articulating sound clusters that will become meaningful symbols. Man, as a result of very special and long processes of organic evolution, acquired the anatomo-physiological endowment which enabled him to integrate the necessary, learned-motor, affective and conceptual habit functions in the creation of a special, conventional, symbol system or language.

Through the practical use of language in pristine archaic human communities, we may surmise, man created a categorization of the elements of his world, and thus a pre-scientific *weltanschauung* which gradually through culture history is evolving into a scientific *weltanschauung*. However, even if the sciences can provide us, more and more, with knowledge of the natural, inorganic and organic worlds, or of the cultural or super-organic world, it still remains true that knowledge, which is *power*, for good or evil, does not provide humans with purposes or value systems to live by. Man is morally free to do right or wrong. As a free and responsible creature, he must therefore educate himself not only to knowledge, but also morally. Education for "*social freedom*", which is the only conceivable human freedom —the freedom of social man—, involves not only knowledge of the inorganic, organic and super-organic worlds, or levels of reality, but also mental maturity and wisdom, which means enlightened self-restraint and moral responsibility toward fellow men. This mental maturity is a relative, historically conditioned goal, of the culture-building animal that man is.

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