Review Article

The Study of Anger: System and Cases

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Abstract

This note proposes that social/behavioral studies and the humanities develop a closer relationship. Perhaps system and intuition are equally needed if our knowledge of the human world is to advance, as Pascal suggested more than 300 years. Since modern psychology, particularly, is dominated by a rigid adherence to system, in my view it has come to a virtual standstill in finding new knowledge. One area of little or no advance is described: "aggression catharsis." Drawing on the work of Virginia Woolf and G. H. Mead, suggestions are made as to how both intuitive and new systematic paths might bring rigor and relevance to this field.

Keywords: Anger; Cases

Introduction

Human beings live to a great extent in what has been called an assumptive world. Many of the things we take for granted may be untrue or only partially true. One example is the belief that the earth was flat, which thrived for thousands of years. The philosopher William Quine [1-4] called such assumptions "tropes."

There seems to be two assumptive worlds for academics, not only the general one but also the special beliefs and dogmas of particular societies, disciplines, locations, and persons. The history of science and scholarship reveals many examples of obstructive tropes. Tycho Brahe, the Danish astronomer, spent his life trying to determine the orbit of Venus. He made extraordinarily accurate observations of the position of the planet during his lifetime, but he assumed, like everyone else at the time, that planets revolve around the earth, a trope.

Johannes Kepler, Brahe's assistant, inherited the data after Brahe died. For years he made no progress. In his exasperation, Kepler built what might be called a case study, a physical model of the orbits. In his play he unthinkingly put the sun, rather than the earth, at the center. Although Kepler's scientific skills were far inferior to Brahe's, Kepler's case study solved the problem for him.

Scientific and other methods, no matter how scrupulously applied, are helpless in the face of misleading tropes. Social/behavioral and humanities studies are often based on tropes and dogmas, rather than precise definitions. My own field, emotions, is particularly trope ridden. The experts use vernacular words like anger, grief, fear, shame, pride, love and so on as if they have clear meanings, so we are getting nowhere fast. But most fields have similar, if somewhat less confusion.

Blaise Pascal was an early [5-7] scientist who also wrote about scientific method. He had several important inventions to his credit, the best known of which is the barometer. In his writing he seems to have foretold what may be the central difficulty in modern psychology and the quantitative parts of the other social/behavioral studies, the complete focus on systematic methods. He proposed that a second method that he called "finesse," (intuition) was equally necessary. This latter is idolized in the humanities, immobilizing it to a large degree in the opposite way.

As dictionaries propose, intuition is knowledge that does not require "rational" thought. Of course intuited guesses are often erroneous. However, in regard to tropes, they have an advantage over rational thought, since they may not include taken for granted assumptions.

Intuition is usually needed to evade assumptions that have been always taken for granted. System is needed to test the validity of new hypotheses and refine them if they are valid. If this is true, academic psychology and other quantitative approaches need to make a fundamental change in their approaches.

"Aggression Catharsis"

For many years generations of psychologists have been conducting experiments that show that venting anger doesn't work. This is an advance in knowledge, an extremely important finding because the public thinks that venting is a good idea, that it gets anger "off your chest." However, the researchers have made what might be an error in evaluating the meaning of what they found: they think that they have refuted the idea of catharsis. Being scientistic allows them to ignore the large literature in the humanities that has developed a more complex model of catharsis. According to this model, venting is not a form of catharsis. Arousing anger in a theatre audience is meant to let them feel suppressed emotions safely, not cause a riot. The poet Wordsworth's phrase "strong emotions recollected in tranquility" points toward the central idea of catharsis.

The drama theory of catharsis proposes that it occurs at "aesthetic" distance, between overdistanced (no emotional reaction) and underdistanced, a mere reliving, rather than a resolution of a backlog of emotional experiences. In this view, venting anger is usually underdistanced, and therefore not a form of catharsis. One of the aspects of catharsis that needs to be demonstrated is what has been called "pendulation," the way in which persons at aesthetic distance both feel hitherto hidden emotions and at virtually the same time, watch themselves feeling them. This back and forth motion apparently gives one a feeling of safety: if the pain is too great, the observing self can stop the process.

Studies will be somewhat difficult, since pendulation probably is extremely rapid. For that reason, most people become so proficient as children that they quickly forget they are doing it. As the sociologist Charles H. Cooley noted over a hundred years ago, "We live in the minds of others without knowing it" [8-11].Studies are needed of second by second role-playing inside the self. Literature provides many extraordinary examples, such as in the novels of Virginia Woolf, but no one has examined such activities systematically.

G. H. Mead's Social Psychology of Consciousness

Although Mead [12-14] did not use the term multipersonal, his theory of the social construction of the self involves multipersonal and multiperspectival dialogue in consciousness, indeed, as constituting consciousness itself. For Mead, the self is a process that is initially formed by external dialogues, but as a child matures, internal dialogue comes to be the basic content of the self. Mead is only one of a tradition of pragmatist social psychologists which includes William James and Charles Cooley. This group all proposed that inner dialogue makes up the content of consciousness. The Russian philologist Bakhtin [15-19] also emphasized the dialogic nature of consciousness, but did not develop an actual theory that explains the multiplicity of voices in detail. Like Cohen's study of inner narrative [18], his interest seems to be primarily classificatory.

For Mead, the basic process which produces the social construction of the self was what he called "taking the role of the other." That is, a competent individual must be able to put herself into the perspective of the other, seeing the world, momentarily, as the other person sees it, or at least as she imagines the other person sees it. This is the fundamental process that allows humans to cooperate with each other, when role taking is sufficiently accurate. It is also the process that allows humans to understand each other, when they do. Finally, he argued, it is role-playing, taking the roles of others, and the ensuing dialogues between self and roles, and between roles and roles, that constitutes both the content and structure of consciousness.

True to his training as a philosopher, Mead never illustrated his theory concretely, using textual data. For this reason, the meaning of the theory has remained somewhat ambiguous, and its application unclear. Mead does offer occasional examples for his ideas, but the examples are quite brief and hypothetical, rather than being based on textual analysis. One instance is his comparison of a dog and a person reacting to pointing with one's finger. The human, he says, will take the role of the person pointing, imagining self in that person's position, sighting along the line established by the arm and finger, to locate whatever is being pointed at. But it is difficult to train a dog to take the role of the pointing person; more likely, Mead said, the dog will want to sniff the pointing finger. The extensive portrayal of concrete inner dialogue by novelists like Woolf offers both a corrective to and an elaboration of Mead's theory.

Stages of Role-taking

Mead proposed that the child goes through three stages in learning role taking. The first stage he called imitation. In this stage, the child does not grasp the situation from the viewpoint of the other, but merely imitates her outer appearance. The child acts out the appearance and behavior of the farmer or ballerina without seeing the world from their point of view. The child playing the role of Mommy or Daddy does not grasp situations in the way that the real Mommy or Daddy would, but merely acts out their behavior and gestures.

In the game stage, the child learns to take the point of view of the other, but only in settings which are rigidly scripted. In a stage play, for example, the competent actor may learn not only her own part, but also at least aspects of the parts of other characters. In order to play baseball competently, for example, the batter must be able to take the roles of the other players, quickly imagining the reactions of the shortstop and pitcher to the groundball she has hit between them, the reaction of base runner, and so on. By watching players in the other positions, each player learns to imagine their behavior, from their point of view. But the imagined responses are limited to situations that the child has actually observed.

The third and final stage in the learning of role taking is what Mead called the generalized other. Having learned to take the role of the other in scripted situations, the child grasps this process so well that she is able to take the role of imagined others, seeing self from points of view that do not yet exist, or may never exist. In this way, the capacity for cooperative improvisation arises, since each player can imagine the role of the others in situations that have never arisen before. One can imagine responses such as those of posterity, or by all of humanity. According to Mead, it is this stage which gives rise to the distinctive intelligence, creativity, and flexibility that characterizes human beings at their best.

Mead proposed that it is by taking the role of others, real or imagined, that one is able to approach objectivity toward self and to be creative. To the extent that one can accurately imagine other points of view than one's own, to that extent one can approach objectivity. And to the extent than one can imagine new points of view, once can try out new vantage points in one's imagination rapidly and efficiently, possibly leading to new approaches to the world.

Since Mead's primary interest in role taking was in the origins of human flexibility and intelligence, he did not note that role taking of the kind he envisioned can also lead to delusion and irrationality. Paranoia, for example, is constituted by a process of role taking, but one that systematically distorts, rather than reflects the points of view of others. This source of irrationality does not necessarily lie in instinctual impulses, of the kind that Freud called primary process, but in the ability developed in socialization, the ability to take imaginary points of view.

Mead's view of consciousness was behavioral. He believed that consciousness arises only when an instinctive or learned action sequence is first triggered, but not allowed completion. Such blockage occurs accidentally in early childhood. When a baby reaches out to grasp an object, but is unable to reach it, the failure to complete the grasping sequence gives rise to an involuntary conscious image. Later, especially during the early part of the game stage, the child is able to voluntarily elicit conscious images by triggering, then blocking an action sequence. Images in consciousness are blocked actions.

Most reflective thought, according to Mead, occurs in verbal form. One talks to one's self. How is self-talk generated by blocked actions? Mead thought that a word appears in consciousness when one triggers the action of speaking it, but blocks the action pattern,

i.e. the activation of the vocal cords.

The most interesting aspect of Mead's behavioral theory of consciousness is its application to the puzzle of emotions. According to Mead, feelings arise in consciousness when an emotional response pattern is activated but blocked before it can be consummated. For example, sexual feelings arise in consciousness during foreplay, because the bodily response sequence which leads to orgasm is elicited, but blocked from completion. The same idea might be extended to the problem of understanding how consciousness of emotions is generated, although Mead himself did not do so.

Suppose that the emotion of grief is an action pattern that is completed by crying or weeping. If one wept completely the instant that one realizes a loss, one would feel little or no grief. But if the bodily response to loss is activated without allowing completion, then one would feel grief. I will apply this idea to a segment of self-talk below.

The Voices in Mrs. Ramsay's Monologues

The first monologue appears not to be multipersonal. That is, there is only one person represented in it: Mrs. Ramsay, thinking to herself. Although various personages appear in the monologue, such as her son Andrew and the Swiss maid, Mrs. Ramsay doesn't take their point of view, she only remembers and repeats what they said.

But in the second monologue, two identified and one unidentified points of view appear. The first identified point of view is that of "people." That is, in section # 3, Mrs. Ramsay appears to take the role of "people" in asking the question: But was it nothing but looks? "People" also raise several other questions, some of which not clearly located in time and space. Mrs. Ramsay appears to start answering the questions that she attributed to "people", beginning with the sentence: "For easily though she might have said -- how she too had known or felt or been through it herself, she never spoke." Mrs. Ramsay is imagining questions that "people" might ask about her, first from their point of view, and then responding to the questions, from her own point of view. She is not engaging in an inner dialogue, however. She allows the voice of "people" to raise several questions about her, but her response is not part of a dialogue with the people who raise the questions. She simply thinks to herself how she has never responded to such questions.

Similarly with the unidentified voice I have numbered as 2. ". Never did anybody look so sad." Who is speaking? It appears that Mrs. Ramsay is visualizing herself as she might be seen by another person or persons, perhaps by "people" as she labels this viewpoint in the paragraph immediately following. But in the case of the assertion #2, Mrs. Ramsay doesn't label the speaker or viewpoint. Why not? We need to remember that these thoughts are occurring with great rapidity, since she has many, many thoughts within a space of time that could be only a few seconds. In this hasty process, there may be no need or time to actually label every voice or viewpoint, since she is only talking to herself. The process of inner thought is associational, each thought or feeling giving rise to one associated with it, but the associations are not necessarily logical or conventional. (For a detailed description of associational processes in the consciousness of characters in fiction, see Humphrey 1958).

Note that many of the associations within this segment go unlabelled. Who is the person, real or imagined, who might have died the week before they were married? Could it be an earlier suitor of Mrs. Ramsay's? Woolf's treatment suggests that inner speech is different than outer speech in many ways. Since it occurs so rapidly, many of the associations would be difficult for anyone other than Mrs. Ramsay to follow, because they depend on non-logical associations, and/or unlabeled references. Again, as in section 3, Mrs. Ramsay doesn't talk back to the point of view that is observing her sadness; there is no dialogue.

The cadenza that is Section 4 is a dialogue, or at least it begins with what seems to be an actual dialogue, a phone conversation between herself and William Bankes. But the phone conversation seems to be taking place not from Mrs. Ramsay's point of view, but from Bankes's. This difference of point of view may be heralded by the fact that Woolf has enclosed the whole section within parentheses.

The section starts with a compliment that Banks pays to Mrs. Ramsay, that "Nature has but little clay like that of which she molded you." But within this quotation a feeling of Bankes's is noted, that he has moved by her voice. The section goes to comment on how he sees her as Greek, and so on, and his feeling that it was incongruous to be phoning her, that her face had been assembled by the Graces. Then, following the series of compliments, both external and internal, Bankes states, either to Mrs. Ramsay or to himself, that yes, he would catch the 10:30 train, which is what the phone call is ostensibly about.

The point of view is obviously not Mrs. Ramsay's, but Bankes's. How could this be? What Woolf seems to be doing is showing that Mrs. Ramsay imagined a sequence of events beginning with an actual compliment to herself, but then going on to carry through the compliment to a sequence of thoughts and activities as they might have occurred to Bankes.

Mrs. Ramsay knew that Bankes was an admirer of hers, and she also knew his habits quite well. Into the cadenza she has put her knowledge of him (for example, his habit of watching workingmen at a construction site when gathering his thoughts). She is thinking of the problem of Mrs. Ramsay and her beauty from the point of view of an admirer of hers.

She is imagining herself from Mr. Bankes' point of view, just as Woolf, in the two monologues, is imagining the world from Mrs. Ramsay's point of view, a world within a world. Just as Mrs. Ramsay was able to plausibly construct the world from Mr. Bankes's point of view, because she knew him well, so Virginia Woolf was able to plausibly construct the world from Mrs. Ramsay's point of view, since she knew so well the model (her own mother, Julia Stephen) on whom Mrs. Ramsay was based. When Woolf's sister Vanessa read To the Lighthouse, she wrote to Virginia "...you have given a portrait of mother which is more like her than anything I could ever have conceived possible. It is almost painful to have her so raised from the dead. ...as far as portrait painting goes you seem to me to be a supreme artist..." [20].

Note that Mrs. Ramsay's interior monologues do not approach objectivity toward herself, since the contents are virtually all either complimentary or neutral. Mead's theory should be understood to explain how objectivity toward self might be possible; but it shouldn't

be taken to mean that people are usually objective toward self.

However, it should be noted that there is one negative element in the monologue. It comes at the end of the segment that I have designated as .3, when Mrs. Ramsay is considering how "people" might see her. This segment, until the last word, is in the interrogative mode, but is also uniformly positive, to the point of being worshipful. "People" seem to be puzzling over Mrs. Ramsay, who she really is, what she is like inside, but in doing so, comment on "her beauty, her splendor" and many other of her wonders. The commentary goes on in this adoring vein until the end of the last sentence: "Her singleness of mind made her drop plumb like a stone, alight exact as a bird, gave her, naturally, this swoop and fall of the spirit upon truth which delighted, eased, sustained—falsely perhaps." I have italicized the last two words because of the sudden reversal to a negative note. After perhaps twenty or thirty highly complementary comments on herself, "people" insert a negative one, that Mrs. Ramsay's ability to delight, ease and sustain might be false. If objectivity can be measured by the degree it contains both negative and positive views of the self, the one negative element suggests that Mrs. Ramsay's thoughts about herself are not completely subjective.

Multipersonal Voices

Why is the second monologue much more multipersonal than the first, more self-referential, and the associations looser and the points of view undefined? One possibility is that two emotional events occurred at the end of the first monologue: Mrs. Ramsay repeated what the Swiss maid said, which was associated with her father dying of cancer, and Mrs. Ramsay spoke sharply to her son James.

The content of the first paragraph (2.) in the second monologue suggests grief (sadness, tears), the emotion that accompanies loss. Perhaps the Swiss maid's coming loss of her father had an emotional impact on Mrs. Ramsay, arousing her grief. Her speaking sharply to her son may have also affected her emotionally, giving rise to shame or guilt. In any case, the difference between the two monologues would follow if strong emotion, especially strong emotion that is not expressed directly, might causes changes in the self process in the direction of looser associations, less clear references, and more self-reference.

Mead's behavioral theory of consciousness, in this case of feeling, suggests a way of exploring this particular issue. If the bodily response of grief is aroused but not completed in consciousness, then the emotion will show up in consciousness as a feeling of sadness. In this case, the excerpts above suggest elements of sadness expressed only indirectly. Perhaps the loosening of the narrative and its increasing complexity and opacity suggest that the less direct the expression of emotion, the more fluster is created. In this way, Mead's theory might lead toward psychoanalytic ideas about damage caused by failing to express emotions.

At first glance, it would appear that in these monologues, Woolf might be slyly making fun of Mrs. Ramsay, that is, her own mother. The headlong torrent of thoughts and associations, the carelessness about identification, the ambiguity of reference, and above all, the self-referential content would seem to portray Mrs. Ramsay as both slipshod in her thinking, and egotistical or even narcissistic. The Banks cadenza particularly might be cited as evidence in regard to this

latter judgment, since Woolf has imagined her mother imagining, in a lengthy excursion, an admirer's wholehearted, if puzzled adoration of herself.

On the other hand, it seems more likely that no such judgment of the mother was intended by Woolf. Rather, as implied at the end of Auerbach's chapter, perhaps what Woolf was seeking was to portray the quality of consciousness that is universal among all people. This quality, Woolf's treatment of Mrs. Ramsay's monologues seems to imply, is that our rapid and private inner dialogues are rife with ambiguity and self-reference.

In her diary, Woolf seemed to imply that she was consciously attempting to describe inner reality, as much as a scientist as an artist. Here is a note she wrote when working on her first novel, 19 years before writing To the Lighthouse. This note refers not only to the objective description of consciousness, but also to the kind of part/whole reasoning I will mention at the end of this article:

I ... achieve symmetry by means of infinite discords, showing all the traces of the mind's passage through the world; achieve at the end, some kind of whole made of shivering fragments; to me this seems a natural process; the flight of the mind [21].

How might Woolf have discovered the kind of inner dialogue that she portrayed in To the Lighthouse? Although I don't know that this point is ever made is her extensive writings about her work, it is likely that Woolf made her discovery of inner worlds by examining her own trains of thought. All of us sometime realize that we have jumped from one topic to another without any obvious connection between them. Or our partner in conversation may point out such a jump to us.

What Woolf might have done is to patiently investigate the route by which she got from topic A to topic B, perhaps in many different instances. Although Woolf never was psychoanalyzed, this is also one of the methods of psychoanalysis. With enough time, skill, patience and persistence, it might be possible to trace at least some components one's own interior monologues in this manner.

In a way, the writing of To the Lighthouse seems to have served as a self-analysis for Woolf. Many years after writing the book, in her "Sketch of the Past", she noted:

It is perfectly true that she [her mother] obsessed me, in spite of the fact that she died when I was thirteen, until I was forty-four [i.e. the year that she wrote To the Lighthouse]. ... I wrote the book very quickly; and when it was written, I ceased to be obsessed by my mother. I no longer hear her voice; I no longer see her [22].

Following Auerbach's hint about the universality of the lightening fast inner monologue, perhaps Woolf was not ridiculing her mother, but only portraying herself, her mother, and all other humans, in their inner life. As Cooley [23] put it, we live in the minds of others without knowing it:

Many people of balanced mind and congenial activity scarcely know that they care what others think of them, and will deny, perhaps with indignation, that such care is an important factor in what they are and do. But this is illusion. If failure or disgrace arrives, if one suddenly finds that the faces of men show coldness or contempt instead of the kindliness and deference that he is used to, he will

perceive from the shock, the fear, the sense of being outcast and helpless, that he was living in the minds of others without knowing it, just as we daily walk the solid ground without thinking how it bears us up.

But neither Cooley, Mead, nor James ever gave concrete examples of what it is like to live in the minds of others. Woolf's treatment of inner monologue, since it is so concrete and elaborate, supplies an image of role-taking that is absent in the theoretical work of Mead and other theorists of self-talk. By illustrating their ideas concretely with dialogue, as I have done here, it might be possible to better understand the relationship between the smallest parts of human experience, the words and gestures in dialogue, and the greatest wholes, in this case, general theories of human behavior, such as the one by Mead.

Conclusion

As indicated, Pascal [17] long ago implied that all research requires both system and intuition. The issue is important far beyond the universities. Unlike other species of creatures, humans have become capable of destroying other humans en masse, even ALL other humans. Ironically, this capability is a function of the huge advances of knowledge in the physical sciences. We are very near, or may have arrived at the point where only a small group is capable of mass destruction.

In these dangerous times, perhaps one theme would be to find out what leads to the kind of autism-like syndrome that severs all empathy for other humans. Empathic connectedness with other members of the species is hardwired into humans just as it is in other mammals [2]. What are the social, psychological, emotional, economic and political mechanisms that lead to disconnection and complete alienation from others both at the interpersonal and intergroup levels? We need to know this kind of knowledge now, much more than most of the topics that are now being studied.

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