

NEW PARADIGM OR METAPHYSICS OF CONSENSUS? A RESPONSE TO HARRÉ

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There is so much that is true and incisive about Harré's criticism of the (unfortunately still) prevailing paradigm that one's first impulse is to cheer. Though necessarily presented in an extremely summarized form here, his critical analysis of the presuppositions of much psychological research (e.g. Harré & Secord, 1972; Harré, 1979) is an indispensable aid to an enlightened reappraisal of the discipline. Not only has he functioned as an accurate diagnostician of the ills that beset so much of what we now know as scientific psychology, he has also given valuable hints as to the general direction from which therapeutic change is to be expected. I certainly agree that psychology could only benefit if it paid considerably more attention to semantic relations, collective processes, and the context of moral orders.

However, there is a world of difference between these very general prescriptions for the outline of an alternative psychology and the very specific shapes with which Harré fills in this outline. To wave the flag of semantic analysis, moral orders, and such like, does not get us much further. One must also, as Harré certainly does not shrink from doing, indicate what one means by these enticing labels. However, once that happens, differences are bound to arise, and not merely about details but about matters that are just as fundamental as the ones that separate Harré from traditional causal analysis in psychology. In developing his alternative paradigm, Harré has inevitably been limited by certain implicit metaphysical assumptions of his own. These assumptions certainly do not constitute the only alternative to the traditional ones. Because I believe some of them to be indefensible, I shall make them the subject of these comments.

Harré's first prescription involves a redirection of interest from causal to semantic relations. Methodologically, this is said to call for "a preliminary stage of ordinary language analysis" along lines made familiar by a certain school of modern philosophy. Although the importance of "socio-linguistics" is emphasized, this seems to be a peculiarly emasculated kind of sociolinguistics which I suspect will turn out to be rather less useful to psychologists than to philosophers. Real sociolinguistics has been very much concerned with questions of divergent codes related to social stratification, group competition, and conflict. By contrast, the kind of sociolinguistics favored by Harré is virtually limited to matters of common cultural definition. What is "social" about this kind of analysis is reducible to the category of consensus. Because human consensus

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seems to vary with time and place there are historical and cultural differences in psychological meaning.

Now, while the existence of historical and cultural differences in the use of terms describing psychological processes certainly needs emphasizing, it is by no means clear what implications this has for psychological theory. One implication it clearly does *not* have is the bestowal of privileged status on the analysis of one particular semantic system, not even the one which philosophers so ingenuously call "ordinary" language. In the domain of psychology, the ordinary language terms of today frequently turn out to be the technical terms of yesterday, and the derided "scientific" language of today turns out to be just ordinary language dressed up in fancy jargon. A study of "rules of use" would indeed throw much light on these interesting interrelationships but, if taken seriously, such a study would take us into questions of competition among professional groups, differential access to cognitive resources, social influence, and the relationship between experts and their lay publics — in short, questions involving social interests. Precisely because the definition of socially and psychologically important terms is a matter of establishing their rules of use, such definitions ultimately cannot be separated from questions of social status and social power.

If we find only the faintest echoes of this in the kind of semantic analysis favored by Harré, it is because by "rules of use" he really means "conditions of intelligibility." Now that is a meaning which is perfectly appropriate when one is trying to solve certain problems that arise within a particular school of philosophy. But when applied to problems of psychological interest semantic analysis in this restricted sense turns out to be a far less useful instrument.

It has been used as a means of studying the conditions of intelligibility of psychologically relevant formulations among specific human groups. This kind of work is certainly to be welcomed, but its general significance will remain in doubt as long as it remains limited by two serious restrictions. The one is the restriction of locality which makes generalization difficult; the other is the more subtle and more insidious restriction of approach which treats all questions of language use as though they were questions of consensus. While many philosophically interesting questions may be reducible to questions of consensus establishing intelligibility, it is an unfortunate fact of life that the psychologically interesting questions tend to arise in conditions where consensus has either broken down or has never existed in the first place. Harré illustrates his general approach by means of examples taken from the field of emotion. But once we descend from the general question of what people can mean when they use emotion words to particular questions about the emotional context of specific inter-individual or inter-group relations, an analysis in terms of consensual conventions of use is likely to be in trouble. At best, it will simply be irrelevant, and at worst it will amount to an interpretation and selection of the facts in terms of a highly tendentious social theory that elevates convention and consensus to the status of incontrovertible metaphysical principles.

Harré proposes that the method of explanation by linguistic convention be extended from the meaning that psychological terms have *in principle* to the meaning of specific terms under specific circumstances. But this is not just an

innocent logical generalization, for it carries strong implications about the fundamental nature of the human situations subjected to this analysis. As Harré would be the last to deny, the application of a particular methodology to a specific subject matter involves assumptions about the nature of that subject matter. Thus, when one advocates the application of a methodology, which hinges on the importance of linguistic conventions, to actual human situations, one cannot but imply that conventions are the crucial feature of these situations. In other words, the emphasis on the potential explanatory power of a certain kind of semantic analysis cannot be divorced from the advocacy of a certain kind of social theory, and I do not believe that Harré would wish to claim otherwise.

But what are the premises on which the social theory that goes with this methodology is based? Let me single out two fundamental ones that I find particularly hard to accept. One of these is socio-psychological in nature and the other is psychological.

The socio-psychological premise involves the kinds of relationships that are presumed to exist between the individual and the social level. Harré pleads for a turn from psychology's inveterate individualism to some form of collectivism. Certainly, a correction of this kind seems overdue, but "collectivism" is a pretty vague term, and Harré's version of it may need a little inspection before we decide to buy. According to the model that has been presented, the individual necessarily functions as part of a "local moral order." But precisely because these are "local" orders, every individual, especially in our kind of society, must be simultaneously embedded in more than one such order. How then are we to explain his behavior, or even his particular combination of beliefs? It will not be sufficient to point to this or that social order which may happen to be dominant for a given individual at a given time, for we would have given no explanation at all if we were unable to give reasons for this dominance.

There seem to be three broad possibilities at this point. We could simply adopt the individualist perspective and say that the individual selects the beliefs and prescriptions for action which suit him or her. Plainly, Harré rejects this alternative. Alternatively, we could say that the individual is a locus of conflict whose outcome will be decided by a particular constellation of social and intra-individual tensions. Such an interpretation, however, would be incompatible with Harré's version of collectivism which is based on a consensus and not a conflict model of social life.

The kind of explanation which he does seem to favor appears to be based on the assumption that the world has been so arranged that exposure to a multiplicity of moral orders presents no fundamental problems for the individual nor for his relation to them. I am inclined to call this the assumption of *pre-established harmony*. It is only on this basis that Harré's treatment of the topic of emotion seems to make sense. If one is convinced that the social order is like an organism with harmoniously interlocking parts, and that individuals smoothly slide into the slots which this grand machine provides for them, then indeed it follows that "remembering, reasoning and expressing emotions are part of the life of institutions, of structured, self regulating groups" (Harré *et al.* 1985, p. 6). On such a view, there can be no break between individual feelings

and institutional language. Emotions can never be truly inappropriate or genuinely disruptive of the social order because they are themselves expressions of social order. Appearances to the contrary, there is an underlying harmony that keeps society and individuals in tune with each other.

This appears to be the theme which governs Harré's deployment of many of his fundamental concepts. The way in which he refers to cultures as though they were explanatory entities seems to carry little more meaning than a belief in a psychological harmony that has been pre-established among members of certain groups. Even his image of conversation as the fundamental social category — an idea which he develops more fully elsewhere (Harré, 1984) — seems to give expression to the theme of pre-established harmony. These are not the kinds of conversations — all too familiar to practicing psychologists — in which individuals express their inability or unwillingness to understand each other, but rather polite affairs among reasonable people well aware of the proprieties. Of course, Harré is also well aware that social orders have to be constructed by negotiation among individuals. But more recently he seems to have chosen not to emphasize this aspect. The way out of the cul-de-sac of individualism vs collectivism rhetoric would seem to lead through a more sophisticated analysis of the duality of social orders that are as much constructed as they are given (see, e.g. Giddens, 1979).

It remains to give a little further consideration to the more directly psychological foundations on which Harré's approach is based. As he indicates, conversation is to be regarded as the fundamental human activity and this obviously involves certain psychological processes. Now this is not the first time in the history of social psychology that such a view has been proposed. One thinks immediately of G. H. Mead's "language of gestures" and the social construction of the self for which it formed the basis. But Mead's concept of gesture was in turn influenced by ideas which had been developed by Wundt in his *Völkerpsychologie* (Farr, 1981). That had been a monumental early attempt at working out a collectivistic social psychology. But for Wundt the primary human relationship that formed the basis for the construction of the symbolic order was fundamentally affective in nature (see Danziger, 1983). This was consistent with his view that feeling was a basic aspect of all experience and that affective processes provided the ground out of which the more specifically cognitive functions developed (Wundt, 1900).

I think it is instructive to remind ourselves of this alternative route to a non-individualist psychology because it helps to highlight some of the special features of Harré's version. Contrary to some of his collectivistic predecessors, he is more concerned to establish that "emotions and feeling states are not admissible as courses of action" (Harré, 1979, p. 274). They are only considered to have a role in human social behavior after some heavy intellectual work has been performed on them. Even then, they are not to be thought of as affects or "passions" but as "intended actions." What people share originally are not the feeling qualities of their experience, nor the reciprocal link between affect and expression, but their use of verbal symbols. The conversation that establishes social life is not based on a language of emotional expression but on talk. It is not merely that speech is not

regarded as an expression of affect but that affect seems to be regarded as an expression of speech. Wundt had a name for this kind of psychology; he called it *intellectualism*.

It does indeed seem to be a rather intellectualistic prejudice to start with the assumption that feelings would have to be inconsequential, inchoate private events until rescued by speech. Among other things, this approach entails the danger that semantic analysis will deteriorate into a form of nominal realism where the linguistic label is taken for the thing itself. Then one ends up analysing human affect as though it involved distinct entities corresponding to the labels which the language provides.

A more interesting question might be to inquire into the meaning of the category of emotion for psychological discourse as a whole. In the form in which we know it, this category only entered psychological discourse in the 19th century. It was intentionally deployed to replace the older category of passion, but this was really part of a general restructuring of psychological discourse. If the new paradigm were to drop its preoccupation with entities and components and turn to a study of semantic fields it may be able to throw new light on some very fundamental questions. Of course, this would also have to include a considerable extension of its semantic horizon to encompass the adjectival and adverbial forms which are the real warp and woof of our affect language. The Gestalt tradition contains some useful hints in this direction (see, e.g. Arnheim, 1974, ch. 10).

I think the voyage on which Harré invites us to join him is worth making. But I would feel a lot more confident of the outcome if he would leave some of his metaphysical baggage behind.

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