

Self Theory and the Wrangle

Over the Image of Man

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Introduction

Recent reviews (Boshier 1970; Wylie 1961, 1968) of theories dealing with the notions of 'self' and "self-constructs" have pointed to a remarkable resurgence of interest in these two concepts after their demise in the behaviorist graveyard. While the research literature regarding the "self-concept" (i.e., self as object) has been skillfully reviewed by Ruth Wylie (1961), the present author (Shuraydi 1973) has attempted to complement Wylie's work with a critical survey and evaluation of the second principal meaning of the "self" (self as subject or inner agent).

This examination has led to the conclusion that the recent restoration of the "self" in social-psychological theories such as humanistic psychology and symbolic interactionism has fundamentally concentrated on the second dominant meaning of "self;" (i.e., self as subject) which is rooted in the question "Who Am I;"

The Wrangle Over Man's Basic Nature

The restoration of the subjecthood or agency of "self" is also linked with the crucial controversy in the social sciences pertaining to the subjective-objective view of perceiving "social reality." It exemplifies the perennial wrangle over man's basic nature and is represented by the question : Is man closer to a God or a dog; Thus, while some schools or social theorists are demanding a termination of the idolization of the individual's attributes of freedom and dignity, plus other "higher qualities," (e.g., Skinner 1971; Berkowitz 1964, 1969), other theorists, with a humanistic bent, (e.g., Bergin 1964; Bugental 1964; Cardno 1966; Giorgi 1970; Glass 1972; Hardison 1972; Kelly 1969; Maslow 1966, 1968; Proggoff 1970) are pleading for an immediate reformation of the social sciences that would restore these same attributes and insisting on the primacy of inner experiences rather than behavioral or observable phenomena. The

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popularity of certain emerging perspectives or humanistic paradigms such as symbolic interactionism, third force psychology, ethnomethodology and phenomenology is attributed to "a growing concern over the status in social science theory of the person as agent." (Stanley, 1973 : 395). The issue is conflictive in nature : "Beyond freedom and dignity" versus "Back to freedom and dignity."

This issue seems to be the central problem with which the disciplines of psychology and sociology are confronted in the present era. It does not seem uncustomary nowadays, as it did few decades ago, to witness a debate among a group of sociologists over whether we should "heed Skinner's call" and strive "towards the development of a social technology," (Tarter, 1973), or whether we should perceive a real threat in the potential impact of Skinnerianism upon the discipline of sociology (Morris and Hesslink, 1974). The basic question that concerns us is this : What are the implications of this conflict ;

The answer to this question will be handled on two levels :

a) The level of "self" and "self-constructs" with reference to their scientific utility and potential applicability.

b) The level of the social sciences with attention to the intriguing question of whether the emerging "new science of the subjective" is in actuality a "new thrust" or merely an "old wine in new wineskins."

With reference to the "self" as an internal agency, it is apparent that "the Cartesian problem of the knower" is still with us. Its ancestry could be traced not only to the Platonic essential tradition, but also the "psyche" of the fifth century B. C. It is maintained that the problem is basically philosophical and that the postulation of the subjecthood of the "self" has been fruitless at an empirical level. In other terms "homunculism" characterizes the literature on the "self" as an agent. The "I" or "self" as knower" remains as mystical as it was to David Hume (Hume 1874; Chisholm 1969). The best description of this situation could be borrowed from the answer of a working man to a social scientist whose curiosity impelled him to ask a group of laymen about the meaning of the "I". (Curtis 1915 : 73). This layman's answer described the "I" as a "coun-drum." (1) Such an answer, we uphold, is utterly unacceptable to the humanistic theorists among whom we include the symbolic interactionists. Its acceptance would not only leave their theoretical formulations

on shaky grounds, but would also shatter their utopian aspirations. This conclusion brings us to the central question of the necessity of the "self" as an agent in social-psychological theorizing.

The Self as Agent

It seems that the advantages anticipated from restoring the "self" as an agent in socio-psychological theories are less than clear. Our criterion of evaluation is the "scientific" utility of the concept. In terms of this criterion, we suggest that the "self" in humanistic psychology and symbolic interactionism is conceptualized as a single, independent entity which is the locus of causality; or, at least, a system of determinacy and indeterminacy simultaneously. This conceptualization leaves the internal agency of "self" an omnibus term to which any unexplainable experiential or behavioral phenomenon can be ascribed. We, therefore, advance the thesis that the resurgence of the "self" constitutes a way out of the prevailing crisis of values in contemporary western society. In other words, the restoration of the "self" as an agent has a moral justification, but not a scientific one.

This moral justification pertains to modern western man's craving for a "spiritual rebirth," which appears to be sought by intellectuals as well as laymen. The best illustration of this situation is the incredible appeal of Richard Bach's most recent book, JONATHAN LIVINGSTON SEAGULL (1970). This book "emphasizes the self over all else" and glorifies its mystical powers (TIME, November 13, 1972). The message in the book has an intimate similarity to the humanistic theorists' romanticization of the "self."

"Jonathan is that brilliant little fire that burns within all of us, that lives only for those moments when we reach perfection."

In opposition to the foregoing stress on the inspirational efficacies of the "self", research evidence (Shuraydi - 1973) corroborates Wylie's (1961) conclusion that only self-referential constructs with specifiable attributes have potential investigatory value. On the basis of this conclusion, we can qualify Allport's (1955) call for the usage of "self" or "ego" only in 'compound forms.' This conclusion is also substantiated by recent empirical research, particularly the research activities of scholars adhering to the

Iowa School of symbolic interactionism." (Kando, 1977 : 158,163) Furthermore, we caution that the self-constructs themselves can assume an extreme generality and become "umbrella terms" having weak explanatory power. Examples of such self-constructs are provided by Wylie.

"... such characteristics as self-actualization, self-differentiation, and self-consistency have not led to enlightening research ... By contrast, constructs such as self-esteem, especially when referring to specified attributes, have yielded more manageable and fruitful research" (Wylie, 1961 : 319).

Wylie's conclusion has been complemented by our demonstration (Shuraydi 1973) that grand theories or global theoretical formulations about the integrative agency of "self" continue to be conjectural. They represent over-generalized statements that encompass a great variety of cognitive, motivational, poetic, prosaic and philosophical categories, all lacking in empirical verification. For instance, the meaning of "self" in the writings of almost all humanistic psychologists and sociologists is assumed as given or is ambiguously stated. In certain writings of these theorists, the meaning of "self" is identified with the entirety of that which is subjective.

As for the symbolic interactionists, we should point to their dilemma of fostering a conception of a "pluralism of selves" while simultaneously postulating a unified sense of "self". Only the "Me" aspect of the "self" appears to be amenable to empirical investigation, regardless of the crudeness of its measurement.

The resurgence of "self" in both the humanistic and interactionist perspectives emphasizes a holistic-dynamic conception of the "self". This emphasis raises the suspicion that any attempt to segment the "wholeness," or, one might suggest, the holiness, of the "self" distorts the original intentions of the expounders of these orientations. In different terminology, we maintain that the emerging emphasis on the operationalization of the "self", particularly in symbolic interactionism, would eventually lead to the same dilemma of segmenting the functioning and experience of a whole human being against which the humanistic theorists and the symbolic interactionists are revolting. The best illustration of this point is found in Kuhn and McPartland's (1954) operationalization of the "self" in terms of responses to a twenty-statement questionnaire on "Who Am I?" The answers given to this questionnaire seem to represent nothing

but "disparate responses" (Blumer's term 1969); rotating around the social-psychological variables of role, status, and value-orientation. These are the same concepts whose inadequacy for an analysis of human behavior has been discredited by the symbolic interactionists. In sum, the problem is whether our fidelity to man should dictate our methodology, or whether our commitment to a special scientific conception should define our image of man. (Giorgi, 1970; Meltzer and Petras, 1972).

Kuhn's study, lest we forget, is one of the first pioneering explorations to directly employ the "self" of the symbolic interactionist perspective in "empirical research." Tucker (1966) demonstrates two methodological shortcomings in Kuhn's technique. These two methodological drawbacks deal with the effects of the testing situation and the content analysis procedures. They show that the prospect for empirical verification of the basic assertions about the "self" in symbolic interactionism is slim, even with respect to the "Me" or "self-as-object" aspect.

Tucker reports several examples of the theoretical formulations of the "self" in symbolic interactionism that are directly contradicted in research operations. We need cite only one of these illustrations.

"It was mentioned that the Twenty Statement Test does not violate any of these assumptions or assertions (of the symbolic interaction theory). But when it comes to the analysis of these statements from the Twenty Statement Test, the analyst imposes the meaning on each of them from his own perspective. In many theories this procedure would be appropriate. That is, they do not assume that the perspective or viewpoint of the respondent (actor) is the focus of the study ... But ... in self-theory the experiences of the respondent are the focus of the study. Therefore, the procedures employed in content analysis seem to contradict the assumptions and assertions of the theory" (Tucker 1966 : 356-357).

Aside from the methodological flaws in symbolic interactionism, we recognize that the reduction of the question "Who Am I?" to an operational level mangles the humanistic theorists' and symbolic interactionists' concern about man as a valuing human being possessed of "autonomy, dignity and worth."

The point is well made by Mumford (1965) in criticism of Maslow's "highly specialized private vocabulary," that includes "neologisms, ver-

bal short-cuts, and abstract tags." Their usage, Mumford remarks, renders "Maslow's vocabulary false to his essential philosophy" which is struggling to restore into the social sciences the "full gamut of human experience including religion."

The Existential Nature of the Question : Who Am I?

The question "Who Am I?" is essentially an existential question with epistemological connotations. In Bahm's opinion, "What Am I? Is there a self and what is its nature?" are the most important questions in the history of philosophy, Western and Eastern (Bahm 1968). To reduce these questions to an analysis of fragmentary responses on a "self-attitude" questionnaire is, therefore, in direct opposition to what the humanistic movement deplors about the existing models of man in the social sciences. Above all, it should be noted that the question, "Who Am I?" has a profound relation to the ideal nature of man which is at the heart of the romantic glorification of the individual in humanistic psychology and symbolic interactionism.

If we agree with Bugental (1967) that "man, by his very being, provides a fundamental challenge to any pretense to or system of knowledge which man may erect," then we should derive the logical conclusion of this assumption and hold that man is not only a challenge to the behavioristic and psychoanalytic methodologies, but he is also a challenge to the proposed "humanistic methodology."

Although both the humanistic and interactionist perspective have indulged in the search for an answer to the question "Who Am I?", the question continues to be as enigmatic as it has always been in the history of man's social thought. In our judgement, nothing seems to be more "enlightening" in this context than Buddha's manifesto about man's "greed for views" that terminates in disappointment or unhappiness and draws man, in his metaphysical quests, "farther and farther into a maze of unanswerable questions. (Bahm 1968 : 137).

This implication has bearing on the humanistic theorist's allegation about "shifting the bases of human values" (Harman, 1969) from the realm of the "philosophical" to the "empirical." The allegation is entrenched in the major conflict with which the humanistic theorists and the symbolic interactionists are caught : their desire to be scientists and humanists simultaneously.

It is evident that, while the humanist-interactionist persuasions have succeeded in incorporating certain humanistic considerations at the conceptual-flexibility level, they have increased the methodological lag by abandoning certain primary desiderata that allow us to draw a distinction between scientific and philosophic enterprises.

The abandonment, by both perspectives, of the scientific canons as understood in the physical sciences is based on a dogmatic commitment to an idealized image of man. This image implies a regression to the existentially captivating and philosophically controversial pre-Khaldunic question of how man ought to live. The regression signifies a utopian dissatisfaction with the descriptive-empirical approach to the study of man and a plea for a normative-prescriptive approach. The plea, we suggest, is still grounded in a bewitching attachment to the label of "science" and reflects an embarrassment on the part of the humanistic theorists and the symbolic interactionists in confessing the kinship of the proposed "humanistic science" to "social philosophy." This seems more probable as the cloak of "science" is removed from the body of humanistic concern. We, therefore, contend that the so-called "new science of the subjective" is an integral part of ancient philosophical controversies disguised under the label of science. Wylie's (1968) characterization of the "self-theorists" as wanting to have their cake and eat it too seems substantiated.(2)

Summary and Conclusion

We should be aware of a major implication of desiring to have one's cake and eat it too. The social sciences cannot save us, in the sense of supplying us with the answer to every question about the social-psychological phenomena that preoccupies man's thinking. This is a utopian aspiration that the humanistic movement is pursuing. Such fundamental questions are philosophical in nature (Wertheimer 1972). Our answers to these questions, like those of our intellectual predecessors, the Greeks, are tentative. Nevertheless, the engagement in the search for answers gives us some kind of ravishment and influences our outlook on man's existence. The "meaningful" answers that provide us with "therapy" today might turn out to be the ridiculed symptoms of tomorrow. Perhaps, contemporary sociologists and psychologists championing the recent humanistic movements in social science should be reminded of Schaar's (1961) insightful observation pertaining to the transportation of the notion of

self, which generated a pre-Humean crisis in philosophy, into the social sciences. One interesting question emerges : Would one anticipate a similar crisis in the social sciences a few decades from now?

The social sciences, in their short history, have not succeeded in healing our "philosophical discomforts." One doubts if they ever will. The present state of uncertainty concerning their success obliges us to appreciate, with some qualification, Nettler's (1972) statement that, "Our curiosity is an intellectual itch that we will scratch in any way that gives us satisfaction. The scratching becomes its own satisfaction and we shall not desist because, from some Jovian height, it all appears futile."

The qualification we would like to inject into Nettler's conclusion is this : Some of us are more "optimistic" than others. This "optimism" makes futility more meaningful to some of us. After all, the "humanistic movement" in the social sciences is modeling itself after the existentialist outlook that ventures to create "meaning" out of absurdity.

FOOTNOTES

(1)Castell (1968) surveyed a number of books and articles with the intention of finding out what the authors' reactions to the question, "Who Am I?" were. Some of the typical answers were :

"I do not know what you are. I do not know what an 'I' is. You must either stop asking the question or be satisfied to remain in ignorance."

"You are a bundle of perceptions."

"You are a thought. Your thoughts do not require you to think them. They think themselves without you."

"You are a group of cognia."

"You are a set of relations among your thoughts, and between your thoughts and your body."

"You are a grammatical fiction."

"You are a grammatical mistake."

"You are what you do."

"You are like the smoke given off by a locomotive or the clank given off by a chain."

"You are the exercizings of a set of capacities."

Castell comments that "these answers are by no means all, but they are typical. The thing that stands out about them is that they are odd, antecedently improbable, and obscure" (Castell 1968 : 74).

(2)Wylie makes reference to the non-scientific or personal considerations that have strongly influenced the self theorists :

"Thus, although these theorists sometimes laud science and claim that they themselves are working toward scientific theories, their feelings about the scientific method and its implications seem to be markedly ambivalent. Furthermore, their concepts are sometimes inconsistent with scientific assumptions. The assumption of determinism stressed by Freud and modern behaviorists is interpreted by self theorists as robbing man of dignity and creativity, and as inadequate to the understanding of man . . . However, no conclusive arguments rational or empirical against positivism and determinism are presented, nor can they be ... It seems that these theorists want to have their cake and eat it too. They want to have the advantages of being scientific. At the same time, they want to reintroduce assumptions which are inappropriate to the scientific method, and to bring into psychology concepts that operate in a nondeterministic way and are indescribable by scientific operations" (Wylie, 1968 : 733 - 734).

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« نظرية النفس والمشاحنة على مفهوم الانسان »

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تبحث هذه الدراسة نظرية الذات أو النفس كعامل داخلي مستقل وتعطى النظريات الاجتماعية النفسانية الحديثة وعلى وجه التحديد نظريتي التفاعل الرمزي في علم الاجتماع ونظرية القوة الثالثة في علم النفس . وتفحص هذه الدراسة أيضا القيمة العلمية والتطبيقات العملية المستقبلية لنظرية الذات وخاصة احتمال ايجاد علم انساني له قواعده الخاصة والمختلفة عن قواعد العلوم الطبيعية والمستمدة من ظاهرة الانسان كائن له جوهره المختلف عن جوهر الظواهر الفيزيائية . وقد اثبتت هذه الدراسة ان مشكلة الذات كعامل داخلي مستقل لا تزال في المكان الاول مسألة فلسفية لم تتخط الحدود التقليدية المعروفة التي عالجها الفيلسوف الفرنسي ديكارت والخارجة عن المدلولات العلمية الحديثة ، ولذلك يجب الاستنتاج ان نظرية استقلالية النفس غير مثمرة علميا اذا نظرنا اليها من الناحية الامبريقية البحتة ذلك ان الفائدة العلمية هي فقط في المفاهيم أو التركيبات المختصة بالنفس كمفعول به أو الذات المقررة اجتماعيا اي كقوة محتمة تقررهما عوامل بيئية خارجية .

والاستنتاج السابق يؤكد ان ارجاع نظرية الذات كعامل داخلي مستقل له علاقة بالكارثة الاخلاقية التي تعاني منها الحضارة الغربية وان مسألة اعادتها الى النظريات الاجتماعية النفسانية الحديثة هي محاولة للخروج من المأزق الاخلاقي والقيمية المسيطرة في الحضارة الغربية كوجود بديل للديانات التقليدية وكذلك لمفهوم الروح ، وهذا يعني ان اعادة مفهوم النفس كفاعل داخلي مستقل له تعليقات معنوية واخلاقية وليست اثباتات علمية موضوعية ، وهذا يتضمن الاعتراض ان هناك مسائل فلسفية ليس بإمكان العلوم الاجتماعية الاجابة عليها لانه ليس من مؤهلات العلم ان يكون قادرا على الاجابة على كل سؤال يخطر ببال الانسان — وهذا له علاقة بمضمون رئيسي الا وهو ان العلوم الاجتماعية لم تنجح في اشباع رغباتنا أو تسكين أوجاعنا الفلسفية ، وهناك شك أنها ستقدر على انجاز هذا المطلب ، ولكن بالرغم من ادراك هذه الحقيقة فاننا سنظل نحك قدراتنا الفكرية لان الانسان بطبيعته محب للاستطلاع .