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RESCUING SCHUTZ FROM THE ROLE THEORISTS

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Abstract

This paper seeks to demonstrate that the sociological implications of the work of Alfred Schutz have been largely misunderstood. The argument is substantiated by a detailed examination of one instance of a common view of Schutz's philosophy, namely Philip Pettit's 'The Life World and Role Theory', in which it is suggested that what Schutz has to say about social life is consonant with some version of role theory. This interpretation is rejected as inadequate (a) because it fails to specify precisely what is meant by role theory, and (b) because both of the more general usages of 'role' in sociological theorising are not isomorphic with a Schutzian analysis of social interaction. Both versions of role theory search for a decontextualised account of social life, whereas Schutz's view is predicated upon 'structures of relevance' which root it in the examination of contexts. In conclusion, a sketch of some of the ways that the sociological investigation of structures of relevance might proceed is given.

Introduction

In this paper¹ I wish to discuss several related matters. The most important of these is the way that the work of Alfred Schutz has been uncereemoniously incorporated into a conglomerate pattern of analysis in sociology generally known as "role theory". It is my contention that the annexation of Schutz to role theory can only proceed on the basis of a fundamental misapprehension of the implications of his work. To substantiate this claim I shall address myself to one example, a paper by Philip Pettit (Pettit: 1975) which not only claims that Schutz has a "role thesis" but also indicates in a footnote (p.259)² that this thesis can be seen as the formative factor in a "new social science" associated with the works of Goffman, Garfinkel, Berger and Luckmann, Harré and Secord. The point of dealing with Pettit's paper in some depth is not because it has been influential in the literature, for it has not, but because as an example of the style of treatment of Schutz's work which I wish to discuss, it has at least two major advantages. First, it is extremely clear in detailing precisely what it wants to say about Schutz's work. Second, unlike many other discussions, Pettit's paper deals with specific elements of Schutz's thought which are examined at some length. My purpose here is not to set out a detailed exegesis and exposition of what is, and what is not, essential to any valid reading of Schutz. Rather, by dealing in depth with one more

1. I would like to thank Wes Sharrock and Peter Halfpenny for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

2. All otherwise unacknowledged references and quotations are from Pettit's paper.

or less systematic example of a particular view of Schutz's work, I want to make it clear that if sociology is ever to build anything substantial upon the analyses that Schutz was engaged in, then, we have to be very aware of what he was not saying. It is my view that the sociological application of Schutz's ideas would be utterly different in form to any kind of "role theory" even though there might well be several points of contiguity; points at which Schutz seems to be saying things that are consonant with the views of different kinds of role theorists. It is in order to ground this assertion that I have chosen to deal with only one example, the major arguments of which I will now set out.

Pettit's proposal of the "role thesis"

Pettit's whole case is organised around one unarguable point. For Schutz the explication of how intersubjective understanding was possible, ought to be the major topic of a properly grounded social science. A second theme which, as Pettit correctly points out, was dominant in Schutz's own work, would be the examination of the relationship between scientific idealisations and those of everyday life. As such, Schutz was simply extending Husserl's work on the same issues. The difficulties start when Pettit goes on to propose that for Schutz the explication of how intersubjective understanding is possible is, in essence, a "role thesis"³. Schutz's conception of intersubjective understanding is held to rely upon his notion of typification. The latter is felt to be so closely akin to the usage given

3. Although I have used this term several times, I have not, as yet, defined it. This is because I am not sure what Pettit means by it. Cf my comments below.

to the term "role" in social science that they are indistinguishable. Both are types or versions of "standardised descriptions".

"We may take the term "roles" to describe the constructs in terms of which Schutz thinks we see our own behaviour and that of others."
(p.288)

This general view is expanded into a view which asserts that the very idea of intersubjective understanding requires a role thesis of the kind Schutz is said to be propagating. If this is the case, and Pettit is sure that it is, then the role thesis Schutz is said to be proposing would be undeniably true.

Pettit begins by suggesting that:

"To understand another person may mean to understand his behaviour in a general sense, or it may mean to understand the specific part of his behaviour consisting in his beliefs - or, more properly, the profession of his beliefs."
(p.259)

Understanding other people, then, is felt to be the resolution of problems concerning behaviour or beliefs. Pettit continues by suggesting that such problems are, in fact, threefold:

- either (a) problems of interpretability
- or (b) problems of explicability of causal relations
- or (c) problems of justifiability.

All three sets apply equally to behaviour and beliefs. As Pettit presents it, understanding is no more than the resolution of one of the six possible problem areas. The "role thesis" provides that propositions satisfying the requirements of interpretability, explicability and justifiability are contained in the "standardised descriptions". Pettit differentiates three components to match the

propositional foci: the intention of the actor; the grounds of his action; and the dispositions that lead him to act in such a way. The intention is that which the actor wishes to accomplish. The grounds are those factors, of which he is aware, which prompt him to take certain courses of action. The dispositions are those factors which make him take those grounds into account. The categories of motivational relevance (what Schutz calls the "because" and "in-order-to" motives) are said to cover these three. The former is held to correspond with intention and the latter with disposition and grounds.

Roles, or typifications, are said to provide standardised descriptions of intentions, grounds and dispositions. Consequently, when an actor wishes to make his actions intelligible (that is, when he wishes to accomplish intersubjective understanding) he must make sure that his actions are consonant with some set of typifications since it will be by means of such typifications that others will seek to understand him. But, because if an individual is to be seen as acting at all, some interpretation in terms of a role or typification is necessary, the proposition concerning interpretability has a different status to the other two. Interpretation precedes explication and justification. Pettit concludes, therefore, that interpretation is universal to understanding, and hence, that the "role thesis" must be true.

So much for the general outline of Pettit's case. What I wish to do now is to examine the claims that are made. But before doing that two preliminary caveats are necessary. To begin with Schutz is largely, although not exclusively,

interested in action and not in behaviour. The distinctions between these two, as well as between them and act or conduct, he spent some little time analysing (1970:6 fn 9; 1972; 1962). Consequently, he was not much exercised by problems of causal accounting procedures and their grounding. Indeed the argument that Pettit makes for the centrality of the "role thesis" is predicated upon a view of action that Schutz shared. For Schutz it is the motivated character of human action that is criterial⁴. Certainly he admits that other kinds of accounting schemas can be provided, they do not interest him because they attempt to account for the facts of human action by yet more facts, those of physiology, chemistry, psychology and the like. The central feature of the life-world is intersubjectivity (one of its presuppositions is that it is populated with beings such as ourselves), consequently Schutz always starts his analyses in that subjectivity, with consciousness, with meaning and, therefore, with the interpretation of action. It should be of little surprise, then, that Pettit, arguing from what are ostensibly Schutzian positions, should find that propositions concerning intentionality are of a different order to those of causality or justifiability.

A second marginal note that should be made here concerns the fact that Schutz does not consider the nature of beliefs and their relationship to understanding in anything like a systematic manner. Beliefs are treated simply as one of

4. It is important to note that Schutz reserves the term "intentional" (which Pettit uses to describe action) for consciousness. In this he follows the phenomenological tradition.

the determinants of the stock of knowledge at hand.
 (Schutz and Luckmann 1974:158). In effect, Pettit recognises this in his comment that the role thesis does not have too much to say about beliefs (p.260).

Assessment of Pettit's Case

As I have set it out, the major line of argument in Pettit's paper concerns the centrality of the "role thesis" for a Schutzian view of understanding. There is a second theme which also merits some attention. This suggests that Schutz was well aware of the correspondence of his views with the tenets of some of the versions of "role theory" (p.258). The implication is that since Schutz recognises that he and those people who are investigating the concept of role are studying the same problems, it must be that they are saying much the same things. In assessing Pettit's case, and thus in determining whether Schutz has a "role thesis" in any useful sociological sense, I shall deal with these two arguments. But before that, it will be necessary to specify precisely what "role theory" is to be treated as, for in very large measure the problems faced in discussion the "role thesis" claim stem from the vagueness of its character. This point is an important one. Because the notion of "role" is used in such a facile and generalised manner, Pettit has little difficulty in presenting Schutz's views as a species of "role theory". In fact, the demonstration of a convergence of theorists and theories only has a point when some proposition can be made to turn on it. Relative to what are Schutz and "role theory" similar? And for what reasons and in what theoretical terms? It is always

possible to find that two species of theorising have elements in common. But without a theoretical justification, such argument degenerates into sheer scholasticism. Both Concorde and my alarm clock are machines. But saying that tells us absolutely nothing about Concorde or my clock, nor does it tell us very much about the nature of machines either. One reason which might be offered for seeking to conjoin Schutz and some or other species of "role theory" would be to demonstrate that his progeny, the proponents of the "new social science", are not after all saying anything so new. In Gidlow's (1972) immortal misrepresentation, they offer new names for old practices. In that case, capturing Schutz for role theory would amount to very little more than a re-assertion of what might be called the fiction of closed ranks in sociology. Yet surely it is the differences between Schutz and the role theorists which are of interest, since such differences might very well have practical implications for the way in which sociologists proceed with investigations? The focus of attention should be turned away from the detailed examination of writings to their applications to sociological problems. For example, Garfinkel, in a discussion of cross fertilisation between phenomenology and sociology, rejects what he terms a "pedagogic interest" in writers:

"By pedagogic interests I understand a way of working that is directed to formulating some body of professional work as a mystery, and then, after settling upon some authoritative writings, and entirely by reading and writing texts, solving the mystery. I am convinced that this way of working distracts our studies of daily life and wastes time."

(Garfinkel 1977:12)

If we accept this prescription to "follow the animal", then it is the differences between Schutz and the various kinds of role theory that matter - and differences there certainly are. Even within the "new social science" the variations, although perhaps small to the eyes of assimilators, become crucial to the setting out of how, for example, Goffman's work differs from Garfinkel's and both from Berger and Luckmann. Even though all three may cite Schutz as an important influence, the implications they derive for the elaboration of a sociology of the life-world are remarkably at odds⁵.

The plain fact is that to claim that Schutz can be seen as "a certain sort" of role theorist will not do unless it is made clear what sort of "role theory" is being invoked. Pettit simply says:

"To social thinkers like Schutz people only make themselves intelligible to one another by taking on established "roles"; this view I take to be the main thesis of a certain sort of "role theory"."

(p.252)

But which kind? Leaving the discussion at this level means that the observation is vacuous. Parsons, Linton, Mead, Goffman, Merton might all count as role theorists despite the manifest differences in their orientations and programmes. On this very point it is of interest to note that Anselm Strauss (1964: xiii) has suggested that the attention paid to Mead by other sociologists has often been highly selective and limited, leading to the appearance of undue similarity.

5. This kind of discussion is widespread in the literature, e.g. Psathas (1973), Dallmayr (1973), Bernstein (1976).

So, unless there is some clarity as to what precisely "role theory" is taken to be, no progress can be made. This, of course, is exactly what Pettit fails to provide. Pettit might just as easily have called Schutz a cognitive theorist or a theorist of perception⁶. It will not be necessary to set out a complete statement of the genesis and subsequent development of the many different types of "role theory". All that is needed is a broad sketch of the alternatives so that we can examine Schutz in relation to them and so assess Pettit's claims. It is to this that I now turn.

Role theory or role theories?

Obviously the concept of role is derived from the theatre. In talking about social roles, the implication is that social action can be examined through the use of a metaphor: social roles are like theatrical roles; social actors like theatrical ones. Although all role theorists begin with the adoption of this metaphor, they differ in the ways that they have sought to elaborate it. In very general terms we can distinguish two traditions. One deals with roles, actors and action as pure theoretical types. Its interests lie in the institutionalisation of roles and the norms which govern them. Roles are conceived of as socially determined (or, if you like, the script is laid down in advance). This approach is usually associated with Linton, Merton, Parsons etc. The second tradition uses the metaphor

6. He would have had just as much justification for this since Schutz expressly acknowledged that he and Gurwitsch (who was a theorist of perception) were, so to speak, tunnelling into a mountain from opposite sides. Although he fully expected them to meet, he doubted if the bores they were digging would match.
(cf Embree 1972: xxv)

to establish a connection between roles, actors and performances (the so-called dramaturgical approach of Mead, Goffman and the Symbolic Interactionists). Here the interest lies not in the ways that the individual conforms to, or takes, his role but in the ways that he plays it. The crucial distinction between these two approaches is one of organisational focus and analytic level. A distinction which was set out by Linton himself.

"Societies are groups of individuals who live and work together, their co-operative existence being made possible by mutual adaptations in various members' attitudes and behaviour. Social systems consist in mutually adjusted ideal patterns according to which the attitudes and behaviour of a society's members are organised. A society is an organisation of individuals; a social system is an organisation of ideas."
(1936:253)

Since the first tradition treats the actor-in-a-role as the basic unit of analysis, its major concern is always the relations between roles and positions, or in Linton's terminology, roles and statuses. (It is this approach, I take it, that Pettit is referring to when he speaks of "established roles".) Under this view, role is the enactment of status by the putting of rights, obligations and duties into effect. The purpose of this kind of analysis is the specification of the functionality of role patterns.

"The more perfectly the members of any society are adjusted to their statuses and roles the more smoothly the society will function."
(Linton 1936:115)

A more sophisticated version of essentially the same view can be found in Parsons' work.

"In a completely "free" orientation relationship ego is free to "define" alter as an object any way he sees fit, within the limits of what "makes sense". But here we are talking about social structures. It is taken for granted that social structure through

institutionalisation places limits on the range of legitimated orientation in a given status of ego. By exactly the same token it places limits on the ranges within which he may legitimately define alter as an object. In other words, alter as object is institutionally "categorised". Only certain of the intrinsically possible meanings permitted of alter as an object are to be acted upon in this particular social system or the relevant part of it."

(Parsons 1951:139 emphasis in original)

It is not to be supposed that the second tradition is merely seeking to lay out the behavioural actualities that are discussed in abstract terms by Linton and Parsons. McCall and Simmons, explicitly adopting the dramaturgical approach have this to say about the work of Parsons et al.

"In our opinion, this sort of mechanistic conformity to a role script is observed only in unusual circumstances, as in fairly tightly structured organisations in which roles in this sense are formally defined. Even then the utility of this model is highly limited.. .. We submit that individuals involved must somehow improvise their roles within very broad limits."

(McCall and Simmons 1966:7 emphasis in original)

In order to drive a wedge between their view and that of functional theorists of role, McCall and Simmons utilise the work of Mead, Goffman and other symbolic interactionists to make a distinction between social roles and interactive roles or processes of role taking and role making. While the functionalists are concerned with institutionalised frameworks, this second tradition is interested in the idiosyncratic, improvised role performances of actors in social situations. Rather than norms, values and functionality, it talks of negotiation, identity and self presentation.

So much, then, for the general nature of "role theory". I shall now return to the case that Pettit presents, to see if Schutz's views are compatible with either of those set out above.

The awareness of the correspondence of views

Acceptance of the fact that Schutz comments that his work is similar in places to that of some of the role theorists does not amount to a demonstration that Schutz accepts that his work is in the same mould as "role theory". Simply because he says that others have also studied the "definition of the situation", it does not follow that they conceived of it in the same way that he does, or even that he thinks that they do. Without the exemplification of essential similarities, we have to accept that Schutz is merely cross-referencing. Indeed, in a discussion of the nature of theorising about social action within the social sciences, Schutz explicitly rejects the kinds of theorising that merge subjective and objective elements (as both traditions in "role theory" tend to do) by means of a technique which:

"consists in replacing the human beings which social scientists observe as actors on the social stage by puppets created by himself, in other words, in constructing ideal types of actors and as the type is constructed in such a way that it performs exclusively typical acts the objective and subjective elements in the formulation of the unit-acts coincide."
(Schutz 1964:18)

Such a coincidence, Schutz asserts earlier in the same piece, is responsible for most of the fallacies in social science. For Pettit to have as a major plank in his argument that Schutz refers to the work of sociologists associated with "role theory" is, then, of little consequence. It merely reflects Pettit's own failure to say what he means by "role theory".

In fact, a detailed analysis of the "overlaps" between Schutz and the different types of "role theory" would reveal

clear and fundamental differences. Pettit can only assimilate Schutz to "role theory" by ignoring the way in which the structures of relevance are treated. This is in spite of the fact that in order to offer any coherent account of action, he is forced to invoke them under the heading of dispositions. We will return to this point later. I have suggested that in talking of "established roles" Pettit is invoking the functional or system theory of role. This theory sets out from the presupposition that actors possess standardised expectations of what is permissible in particular situations. The problem then is to account for the matching sets and their outcomes.

"The internalised object is the role complement of the corresponding situational object. Alter is perceived in a role in relation to ego, and ego learns a patterned system of complementary actions towards alter. The pattern aspect which is internalised, then, is the reciprocal pattern, the matched or complementary expectations "if alter this ego that""
(Parsons 1955:57 emphasis in original)

This kind of "role theory" resolves the problems it provides for itself by accepting that the sets do match. The isomorphism is viewed as a product of socialisation and social control. Thus the whole edifice is predicated on a thesis about the contents of actors' minds - that they are similar. Schutz has no such thesis. He has nothing to say about the congruency or complementarity of the contents of typifications. On the contrary, the thrust of his argument is that structures of relevances, personal biographies and so forth, make configurations of stocks of knowledge thoroughly different, thereby setting up what he refers to as "problematic possibilities" (Schutz and Luckmann 1974:303 et seq.). I can quite easily buy articles from a shop

without sharing the same or complementary sets of typifications about shops, customers and the like that the shop assistant has. Indeed, by the very nature of the specialised knowledge that the shop assistant possesses, our typifications will be asymmetrical. This type of role theory has tended to suppose that only one definition of a social object is permissible or possible at any one time (a position rather like that of the gestaltists in psychology whom Schutz also firmly rejects (1970:23)). Schutz starts out from the acceptance of a myriad of possible alternatives. Furthermore, for him typifications do not prescribe actions, unlike in functionalist "role theory" where roles are held to be governed by norms located in a shared value system. Rather, actions are seen as following some rule and categorised according to a typificatory structure. These typifications are associated with two kinds of ideal types, the personal and the course-of-action types. (Schutz 1972:187). The personal type is seen as derivative of the course-of-action type, the latter being described thus:

"I cannot, for instance, define the ideal type of a postal clerk without having first had in mind a definition of his job. The latter is a course of action type"

(Schutz 1972:187)

At first sight this might look like some kind of "role thesis", as Pettit claims, but closer inspection will show that it is not. In systemic "role theory", norms are held to constitute action, that is to say, action is determined by an overarching normative system. For Schutz, however, the selection of a particular course-of-action type proceeds from the structures of relevance. Typificatory accounts, then, look to the motivational structures that are provided

by the individual's relevances. Consequently, accounts in terms of typifications are likely to focus on the particularities of context, a line of investigation that leads to the study of:

"members' use of properties of interpretive procedures to clarify and make routine sense of their own environments"

so that:

"sociologists view such activities and their work as practical methods for constructing and sustaining social order."

(Cicourel 1974:149)

A line that is hardly compatible with structural functionalist views of social order! It is by eliding differences such as these that Pettit, and those like him, who seek to claim Schutz for "role theory" miss what is distinctive about his work. This is no less than a proposal of one way of solving a central problem that structural functionalist sociology faces, namely, the provision of a means of accounting for social action which avoids the necessity of coming face to face with an impasse wherein culturally defined sets of rules (i.e. norms) have to be turned into uniform sets of individual motivations. It is to circumvent this impasse that sociologists have to reconstruct the life-world by presupposing the matching sets of expectations in the manner I described above. It is only by completely ignoring the fact that Schutz has reformulated the task that Pettit can treat him as a role theorist; and to do that not only violates Schutz's work but effectively reduces it to the banal.

On understanding

I want now to turn to the second element in Pettit's argument, the notion of understanding being predicated on a

"role thesis". By examining this argument I hope to show the differences between Schutz and the second tradition I have identified within "role theory". Pettit summarises his position thus:

"As a condition of being mutually interpretable people must fit their actions to standardised descriptions."

(p.264)

It will be remembered that typifications are held to be one way of viewing such descriptions. Another is role. But if people are always playing roles, does this mean that there is always a problem of interpretability raised in interaction? Must these standardised descriptions always be invoked before interaction can occur? Certainly Schutz does not appear to think so. The whole of the first part of any Schutzian analysis is of the "vivid present", what, borrowing a term from Bergson, he calls the "duree"⁷, the flux of experience examined by the eidetic reduction of consciousness. Schutz only then moves to the examination of the co-presence of the Other. Typifications emerge in interaction out of the sedimentation of experience of similar cases as a means by which the "world within restorable reach" becomes the "world within actual reach". Typifications are, therefore, introduced into the analysis during discussion of stocks of knowledge as one means of providing how the unknown becomes the known. They are not in any sense presuppositions of analysis.

Furthermore, for interpretation to take place at all,

7. Some appreciation of the differences between Mead and Schutz can be gained by comparison of their attitudes to Bergson: cf Strauss (1964:308) and Schutz and Luckmann (1974:52).

something within the field of consciousness has to be treated as problematic. Only at that point does Schutz refer to it as "thematically relevant". Using Husserl's terminology, Schutz often speaks of turning our "attentional ray" toward a particular object or problem. Certainly he does argue that in seeking to interpret or understand problematic objects, persons or events, individuals use typificatory schemas. But the routine world of everyday action is not treated as problematic in this sense. According to Schutz's analysis, only when its presuppositions of "and so forth" and "again and again" are suspended does the routine world become problematic. Features of the routine world:

"...as long as they are unhampered in fulfilling their specific functions....are not conceived of a being within the thematic field; they are no longer experienced as topics in themselves, and we may say that they have lost their topical relevance.... They are more than typified, they are standardised and automatised."

(Schutz 1970:144)

So that the very thing that Pettit wants the "role thesis" for, the interpretation of others in the routine world of everyday life, is not treated as analysable in that way by Schutz. Pettit argues that if action is to be intelligible, intersubjective understanding must be constantly accomplished. Schutz, on the other hand, is saying that interpretation and understanding are taken for granted in the routine world. It is because problems of interpretation do not arise for social actors that the routine world is routine and taken for granted. When questions of interpretation do arise we are no longer in the world of the routine. Some feature of that world has been rendered problematic for us. Let us

be clear here. I am not suggesting that there is nothing of importance in everyday life for sociologists to analyse. What I am saying is that the routine world does not require actors to reflect upon it or engage in interpreting it. What is interesting is that this part of Pettit's argument bears close resemblance to some of the elements within the second tradition of role theorising that I set out above. Within that tradition, understanding and interpretability are constant problems which have to be resolved by actors.

"When people encounter one another, they pose problems for one another all around.....Literally, we do not know what to do with another person until we have established his meanings for us and our meanings for him."

(McCall and Simmons 1966:126)

Any resolution of these problems must inherently be tentative.

"...we are really acting towards our images rather than towards the metaphysical realities that somehow lie behind them. We impute to the real him, all those characteristics, goals and motives that constitute our image of him. And then we act towards him in terms of those imputed features."

(ibid:122)

For Schutz these kinds of issues do not arise, or at least, are not formulated in this way. For him interaction is not constantly under threat from such contingencies. Instead, problems of interpretation and understanding are held to develop only in specific contexts and on specific occasions. It is this distinction that must be kept clearly in mind in discussion of the "role thesis", for it casts severe doubt on any proposition that Schutz adopted or propagated any version of "role theory". If the second version of "role theory" that I have set out, insists that actors are engaged permanently in trying to bring off perfect understanding

and are always somehow failing because of the inadequacy of their methods of self presentation, interpretation or role taking, then it is my contention that this view of interaction is severely at variance with that of Schutz. Further, I would argue that this disagreement is so fundamental, that the suggestion that Schutz shares some version of a "role theory" with them is unsupportable.

Thus far I have been wholly concerned with the allegation that Schutz may be considered to have a "role thesis" and have argued that this gravely misrepresents Schutz's position as well as minimises the distinctiveness of his contribution to sociology. I have chosen to do this by examining one example to see what such an allegation might be seriously taken to mean. What I want to do now is to turn to the root of this misapprehension, namely, the failure by Pettit, and others like him, to deal in any depth with the implications for sociology of Schutz's discussion of the structures of relevance.

The importance of the structures of relevance

Within the natural attitude there is no such thing as empty consciousness or pure experience. Consciousness, as I have noted, is intentional. What is to be the object of attention is provided by context, situation and the nature of the object under review. These define the "thematic kernel" which in turn provides for what is to be central and what horisontal in our perception. The features that are taken as thematic are given by the structures of relevance.

"Further investigation will show that ... the theory concerning the mind's selective activity is simply the title for a set of problems more complicated than those of field, theme and horizon - namely, a title for the basic phenomenon we suggest calling relevance."

(Schutz 1970:13)

Typifications are the organisation of my stock of knowledge of objects in my field of consciousness. Since they provide the schemas to which I turn when problems of understanding arise, then typifications themselves are provided by the systems of relevance. In general, Schutz distinguishes four different types of relevance.

- (1) Thematic relevance: since consciousness must be selective because clearly not everything can be treated as problematic at the same time, only a few elements provide the relevance of certain sets of typifications. Thus, in the Corneades story which is the central example in all of Schutz's discussions of this topic, that an object might be either a snake or a coil of rope means that typifications with regard to donkeys, sports cars or Aldermen's wives are not relevant. Some thematic possibilities are ruled out by the givenness of the context. That the object is either a rope or a snake (and not a donkey, a sports car or an Alderman's wife) is not itself investigated. The givenness of any particular context is determined by:
 - (a) the ontological limitations of the world.
 - (b) the biography of the individual.
 - (c) the direct interests that the individual has in making the definition. These are what Schutz deals with under the term motivational relevances.

- (2) Motivational relevances: these provide why some particular object is taken as problematic. My wanting to sleep in the room provides the "in-order-to" motive for defining the object as a rope or a snake. My fear of snakes is the "because" motive.
- (3) Hypothetical relevances: once some elements of a context have been identified by (1) and (2), other features may be expectable. Such features are held to be tied by a "hypothetical chain" to the elements discerned under (1) and (2). For example, if I were to hit the object with a stick, I would expect a snake to move but a rope to remain inert.
- (4) Interpretational relevances: these give the routine coincidences of theme and structures of knowledge which are held to be applicable. As I have already argued, Schutz took choices of typifications to be unproblematic in the everyday world. When difficulties in determining precisely which typifications apply are encountered, then reference is made to different relevance structures and their plausibility. Consequently, following Schutz's argument, cases of ambiguity of interpretation (that is where understanding is at issue) are resolved by turning to thematic and motivational relevances.

It seems obvious, therefore, that in those cases where Schutz might be said to be addressing the problem that the "role thesis" has been concocted for (i.e. the possibilities of mutual understanding when action is potentially ambiguous), on his account, choice between the alternatives and the resolution of the ambiguities, can only be made by reference

to the systems of relevance. Interpretation and understanding are provided by contextualities and, in particular, the structures of relevance for individual actors.

If, therefore, we wish to examine understanding or interpretation, we have to look to actual occasions of their occurrence. This is where the importance for sociology of Schutz's work is to be found, for it indicates in what areas the sociological investigation of understanding must be located. To echo the quotation from Cicourel given above, it requires the study of "interpretive procedures" as "practical methods for constructing and sustaining social order". The grasping of this requirement will demand more than simply the accommodation of Schutz's work within some pre-given body of sociological analysis such as "role theory". Any attempt to apply Schutz's work within sociology is likely to lead to wholly new endeavours. Once viewed in this light, all of the work of Harold Garfinkel (1967), for example, appears less obscure, baffling and bizarre. It can be seen as a relatively straightforward application of Schutz's insights to problems such as that of ambiguity in understandings.

"Our task is to learn what it takes to produce for members of a group that has stable features perceived environments of events that are "specifically senseless". This term, borrowed from Max Weber, refers to events which are perceived by group members as atypical, causally indeterminate, and arbitrary in occurrence, without a relevant history or future, means character, or moral necessity."

(1962:189)

Garfinkel's 'experiments' are simply attempts to find out what a sociological study of understanding (as that is conceived in Schutz's work) might be like. Only in the broadest sense is he addressing the same problems that Pettit suggests the

role theorists are concerned with, and his mode of developing them is hardly compatible with either of the versions of "role theory" that have been set out. The whole tenor of his work is that relevances must be studied and not dismissed out of hand. His investigations of the methods that individuals use on the relatively rare occasions when they seek to interpret another's actions, can only be built upon the examination of the ways that the selectivity of perception is given by the structures of relevance, and by the ways that there are socially and culturally engendered. Schutz himself pointed out that such investigations are the task of the social sciences for

"a theory of projected action in the lifeworld requires analysis of the underlying systems of relevancy. Without such a theory no foundation of a science of human action is possible. A theory of relevancies is, therefore, of fundamental importance for a theory of the social sciences."

(Schutz 1962:196)

It is unfortunate for those commentators, such as Pettit, who seek to ensnare Schutz in "role theory" that the thrust of sociological conceptualising about role has been in precisely the opposite direction. "Role theory" in all its forms has been largely a massive, and so far fruitless, attempt to compose an explicitly decontextualised account of social interaction.

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