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Action, Communication, and Creativity

A contribution from a Meadean perspective

Introduction

This paper focuses on some theoretical aspects of action and communication processes which are relevant for conceptualising self-organisation of social systems. There are three questions I shall deal with:

- What is the relation between action processes and communication processes?
- How is understanding between human actors possible?
- What is the basis of creativity in human acting and communicating?

If we describe social systems in accordance with the principles of action and communication and if we do not want to fall back into dualism, we have to show that both processes are not disparate. We need to show that both kinds of processes follow from one and the same principle, work with the same contents, have the same structure and differ only in the form of their way they are carried out. The same principle is the condition for actors to close up actions and communication processes and to co-ordinate their interactions by the use of symbols; it is as well the condition for social structures to do both: exist in and through acting and be based on communication processes. If there is a transition from action to communication and vice versa these two kinds of processes need to have common contents and structures.

If we presume that communication is uncertain and unsteady the question arises how understanding can be achieved, however partial and temporary it may be. It is a matter of how the actors constitute common meanings of symbols or modify existing meanings so that what one says is interpreted in the same sense by all involved, including the speaker.

The self-organisation of social systems involves the production and change of social structures and of the environment, and is so characterised by creativity on both levels: the level of action and the level of communication. On the level of communication creativity consists in attributing meaning to members of society and to the physical objects and in

modifying attributed meanings. On the level of actions creativity consists in reflecting and restructuring the sequences of action impulses and in making new fields accessible for activity. The question arises which characteristics of human action and communication are conditioning this capacity of reflection and creativity.

I shall deal with these problems on the basis of the social theory of George Herbert Mead¹. Mead has drawn up the outlines of a social theory which aims to overcome the dualisms of traditional social science: the dualism of mind and body and the dualism of individual and society. He pays special attention to the problem of creativity of human action and communication.

Gestures as basis of communication

In his attempt to overcome the dualism of mind and body, Mead decides to choose a materialistic way for solving the problem: Mind is not an immaterial substance separated from the organism transforming the physiological processes of perception into conscious experiences and giving meaning and purpose to human acting, rather mind is a characteristic or capacity of the human organism which has emerged in the process of phylogenetic evolution and continues to develop in the process of ontogenesis. Mead tries to explain the genesis of consciousness along with the development of communication: starting from the animal form of the “conversation of gestures” on the human form of communication mediated by symbols. In his discussions Mead refers on several occasions critically to Charles Darwin and Wilhelm Wundt.

The model of the conversation of gestures puts Mead beyond the dualism of individual and society and allows him a consequently inter-subjective approach. The basic category of his theoretical considerations is formed by social actions; he does not conceive animals as socially independent individuals who are separated from each other and only then start having contact with each other. He holds the opinion that animals are social beings and are endowed with certain abilities which mediate and structure their social behaviour. These social abilities are what we call instincts and impulses. In social actions the individuals are objects for each other. Examples are wooing and sexual behaviour, nourishment and various forms of child care, formation of habitats, mutual grooming, common plays, attack and defence. In other

words, social actions are actions in which several animals (at least two) participate and where the activities of the animals are stimuli to responses. Social actions are initiated and mediated by gestures. A gesture is the (frequently stylised) beginning of a certain act and affects the other animals to certain responses. What follows is a "conversation of gestures" which we can imagine more or less as follows: animal A starts acting with animal B; B already responds to the beginning of A's act, that is his gesture, and interrupts A's act; A responds, in turn, to B's gesture, and so on. By such conversation of gestures, animals are able to adjust their mutual behaviour or modify to each other.

Animals interpret the gestures of other animals by responding to them. The gesture of the one individual has an information value for the other individual by indicating him what the individual making the gesture is going to do. We do not assume that this interpretation is conscious, rather it is an instinctive interpretation carried out in terms of behaviour. The interpretation would only be conscious if the responding animal presented to himself the act which follows upon the gesture before reacting to it. And we do not assume that the animal making a gesture knows which action it indicates to the other individual.

Once the individual becomes aware of the information value the gesture gets a meaning. Mead speaks of significant gestures or symbols if the meaning is the same for both the individual making the gesture and the individual being addressed. The conversation of gestures has, according to Mead, already the structure of meaning although it is not conscious to animals. Meaning consists of a triadic relation: between the gesture of one animal and the response of another animal, between the gesture and the act which is initiated by that gesture, and between the response and the act which is initiated by that gesture. In the case of the conversation of gestures, the meaning-components are distributed to different individuals as the value of the gesture is different for the individuals involved: The making and interpreting of signs is attached to different individuals and each gesture has a different value for the individuals involved because they initiate different acts. If, for example, animal A starts an attack through its gesture and animal B responds by turning to fleeing then the gestures have different values for the individuals involved. There is no common meaning because none of the individuals is able to present to himself the relation from gestures to the acts.

¹ For better readability, I abstain from giving detailed references of Mead's work within the text. Confer the literature at the end of this paper.

Symbols as initiated and inhibited actions

In Mead's concept of conversation of gestures, a gesture forms a part of an action: it is the beginning of the act and it is part of the attitude which an individual assumes when starting the act; the meaning of a gesture is the action mediated by the response of the other individual. Thus, gesture, response, and meaning make up a complete action which, however, is not carried out, but only initiated. The contents of the conversation of gestures are of the same kind as those of actions. Conversation of gestures is social acting and is the predecessor of conscious communication. Conscious communication is characterised by the fact that the signs have the same meaning to all individuals: to those who make the signs and to those who are addressed.

How can gestures get significant and how can meaning get conscious? - In the conversation of gestures, it is the response which gives an information value to the gesture, as explained. Consequently, it is a precondition for an individual to understand his own gesture that he responds to his own gesture in the same way as other individuals do. Mead considers this condition fulfilled if individuals make use of gestures which they can perceive themselves: vocal gestures or gestures involving hands and arms. If individuals can perceive their own gestures they can respond to them like other individuals belonging to the same species. Using a vocal gesture an individual stimulates himself and arouses an impulse in himself which is the same one he arouses in other members of the same species addressed by the same gesture. The individual responds only implicitly to its own gesture, that is, the response is not carried out, only his central nervous system has been activated. On the other hand the individual addressed by the gesture responds in an explicit manner. This procedure enables the individual making the gesture to participate in the other's response. The consequence is that the individual assumes the same attitude towards his own gesture as other individuals do.

The mechanism of taking the attitude of the other towards his own gestures is the core of Mead's approach to explain the appearing of meaning and significant symbols. However, this mechanism cannot completely solve the problem of the genesis of consciousness and significant symbols. Additional conditions have to be met:

- The individuals need to relate the gestures and the responses with the initiated social action, and

- each individual needs to know that the other individuals involved give the same meaning to the gestures as he does; they need to have a procedure to clear up their meanings to another.

Mead did not develop a systematic concept concerning the genesis of consciousness and significant symbols; what he offers is the mechanism of internalisation. The idea of this particular mechanism is that the structure of the conversation of gestures taking place among individuals in an external process is imported into the individuals, into their organism, and eventually turns into an internal process. The basis of internalisation processes is the mechanism of taking the attitude of the other: An individual which participates in the others' responses to its own gestures has already taken the first step to internalise them. The second step would be to respond to its own gestures independent from the others' reactions. A precondition of this step, however, is that the individual is a social object to himself. This problem was called by Mead the problem of the genesis of the self (see below).

However, there is another problem regarding the genesis of consciousness: According to the assumption of the conversation of gestures an individual is not conscious of the interpretation it makes when responding to a gesture; the same is the case if an individual responds its own gesture: this fact does not render the information value conscious. The difficulty regarding the issue of consciousness of meaning is that individuals have to establish a link between the gesture and the action which is not present at the moment of perceiving the gesture but will (perhaps) appear in the future. This difficulty could be the reason why Mead reduced his concept of meaning to a behaviourist concept in exactly that moment when he starts explaining how meaning becomes conscious. As mentioned, the initial formulation of the meaning problem by Mead is triadic: as a relation between the gesture, the social act initiated by the gesture and the response to the gesture. However, when the solution of the meaning problem is to be presented, meaning is restricted to a relation of gesture and response. The consequence is that the common social act has disappeared which is relevant for the development of the significance of symbols, for acting purposively and for a conscious co-ordination of acts.

We can get closer to a solution of the problem of consciousness problem if we use Mead's concept of imagery. According to Mead, the central nervous system is able to store experiences; in recent actions experiences are recalled in the form of images, they enter into

and complement in the same time the processes of perception - imagery is built up from past experiences and accompanies current acting and helps the individual to pick out appropriate stimuli from the environment; if already initiated acts are inhibited then the contents of imagery and perception do not match each other and the imagery gets separated from the content of perception. In the conversation of gestures the individuals inhibit their acts mutually by responding to the gestures of each other. On the basis of these assumptions, it would be plausible that gestures and their responses can create images of those social actions they belong to. This is the way, how the meaning of gestures are internalised².

The constitution of meanings is, according to Mead, not an individual but a social process arising in processes of communication and social actions. A test whether other persons connect the same meaning with a verbal expression can only be carried out within communication: via their responses and via fulfilment or lack of fulfilment of their expectations concerning actions. Misunderstandings and incomprehensible expressions are unexpected answers or acts. Understanding, if at all, becomes possible only by communication processes in the context of social actions.

Self-consciousness

According to the concept of communication as developed up to now, the vocal gesture initiates an image in the individual who made the gesture. Making the gesture is, however, fixed to the presence of another individual who stimulates the gesture and to whom the gesture is directed. This means that the individual is not able to indicate something to itself outside of a direct communication process with other individuals. An individual at this stage of development has not yet internalised the complete structure of the conversation of gestures; it is not able to differentiate between the other and itself and, therefore, to communicate with itself.

Mead develops an elaborate theory of the development of self-consciousness. This theory is again based on the mechanism of taking the attitude of the other. Children experience the responses of their parents and other adults in the processes of social actions and communication. According to the mechanism of taking the attitude of the other they learn to

² I do not discuss the problem of the reductiveness of Mead's concept of consciousness. I think imagery alone does not suffice to describe what kind of experience consciousness is. My objection is that imagining a content instead of perceiving it does not render it conscious. It is necessary to relate images to possible perceptions.

participate in the responses of the adults and to develop their own images of these responses. They tend to reproduce the responses of their parents in situations where they want to turn to their parents. This behaviour is developed further into a play in which they take the role of their parents and other adults and enter into communication with themselves: they speak to their parents and answer themselves as parents, they perceive their own verbal expressions as those of themselves and those of their parents. In this way, they learn to distinguish between themselves and other persons and become a social object for themselves. The action and communication processes they are involved in, give meaning to others and themselves.

Mead distinguishes plays from games. A play means the taking of another person's role whilst "game" describes the situation of a group where the act of one member calls out a larger number of responses: not only towards the one who acted first but also among the other members of the group. Team games in sport and dramatic games are examples. Thus, the typical contents of games are not dyadic relations but rules which are followed in social relations. Games enable children to build up their own self in confrontation with social structures.

According to Mead it should be stressed that, in contrast to individualist social theories, self and self-consciousness are completely social creations: they arise through social actions and communication processes by participating in the others' responses to our acts. Therefore at least to some extent, our selves bear the meaning which we have to others.

Reflexivity and creativity

Inhibition of acting is one of the conditions for emergence of consciousness of meaning. Inhibition takes place in the social process through the responding gesture of one individual towards the gesture of another. The process of internalisation and creating a self enables us to inhibit our own acts. Communication is an inhibited form of acting: communication happens in form of attitudes, that is, in form of initiated actions which have not been carried out.

The inhibition of acting and its moving into the sphere of imagery is the basis of the development of reflexivity and creativity. Self-conscious individuals are able to indicate their own behaviour to themselves via language before acting. Stepping out of the sphere of direct acting and entering the sphere of symbolic acting allow us to analyse the situation in which

the action takes place: to identify different characteristics of the situation, to break down the action in parts, to remember past experiences and to test all that for its practicability, and furthermore to restructure the components "in the mind" for creating new acts and meanings. At the stage of consciousness, the mechanism of trial and error is substituted by thinking.

Mead holds that thinking arises from the communication process and follows its pattern: it is a kind of talking to oneself. Thinking without symbols is not possible. This is the reason why thinking can turn into communication with others. Thinking and communication are not disparate processes but have the same structure and deal with the same contents.

Reflexivity and creativity belong together. In reflexive processes an individual activates his past experiences and transforms them into conscious experiences by indicating to himself his behaviour towards the perceived characteristics of the situation. Creativity is oriented towards the invention of new characteristics in the environment and adequate responses to them: creativity is problem solving. It is inherent to Mead's theory that acting is always spontaneous, as it is a secondary process which renders action impulses conscious – however, they do not become conscious in all cases but only if they have been involved in communication processes and are transformed in symbols. We are not conscious of all of our behaviour, and a great deal of it is made of habits and is carried out automatically. Problematic situations which impede our actions are the precondition for the process of giving conscious meaning to actions and objects.

Conclusion

Mead's social theory allows to conceptualise self-organisation and the structure of social systems in accordance with both principles, action and communication, without falling back into dualism. Following Mead, communication is only another form of action: Phylogenetically, communication has emerged from social acting by separating the phases which initiate acts from the carrying out of the action process and by constituting these phases as gestures. Thus, the contents of communication are attitudes, that is, initiated and potential acts.

The transition to gestures which can be perceived by the individuals making them is a precondition for the evolution of conscious communication and acting: individuals can

respond to their own gestures and take the same attitude towards them as other individuals of their species. In this way they get information about their own behaviour. The internalisation of the conversation of gestures and the emergence of imagery are additional mechanisms for developing consciousness of meaning and self-consciousness. Self-consciousness permits the individuals to communicate with themselves, that is, to reflect their own acts.

Thus, actions, communication and thinking share the same structure and relate to the same contents. This allows individuals to change between acting, communicating and thinking, to co-ordinate their acts via communication and to prepare acts and communication via thinking processes.

Understanding between human actors is possible because of social acts which constitute the meaning of symbols and objects. The individuals gain experience about their own behaviour via the reactions of other individuals to their behaviour. Thus, behaviour and verbal expressions of other individuals inform us not only about them but also about ourselves. And this is the common foundation on which understanding can develop.

Human creativity is based on the temporary suspension of acting through communication and thought. Suspension of acting provides room to analyse and restructure objects and situations, to invent and test new combinations of acts.

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