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## Chapter 2

### If Persons Are Texts

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For those concerned with problems of human understanding, the metaphor of persons as texts has become widely heralded in recent years. For the psychological sciences it has been a particularly welcome addition to our implements of understanding. From roughly the 1930s to the 1960s, mainstream psychology was enamored with the possibility of viewing humans as somewhat more complex forms of the laboratory animal. Work with rats, dogs, and pigeons was simply a preliminary exercise to gaining stimulus control over human action.<sup>1</sup> The image of the laboratory animal, constrained and predictable, largely guided the construction of laboratories for research on human behavior. This metaphor of the laboratory animal later gave way to that of the machine. The mind operates like a complex machine, it was (and is) believed, responding in systematic ways to environmental inputs much as an engine will respond to inputs of gasoline, oil, and water. It is this metaphor of mind as machine that is played out today in the cognitive sciences. The mind has become a form of computer—not even a particularly good one at that—and it is the scientist's task to understand both its hard and software functions. Cognitive theories of human deficit (depression, stress, and the like) owe much of their rhetorical power to the pervading metaphor of mind as computer.

Within this context the newly emerging metaphor of the person as text stands in marked and refreshing contrast. The metaphor seems

to restore a dignity to the human being that is largely lost when considered merely animal- or machine-like. Texts are, after all, human artifacts, aesthetically rendered, standing at the apex of human development. And the vision of the text suggests that beneath the human exterior lies a richly elaborated, subtly patterned, and fundamentally passionate set of impulses. The study of human action thus holds the promise of a fascinating odyssey into a foreign land, where surprises are possible at every turn and from whence one may return edified not only about the subject in question, but about oneself, if not the whole of humankind. If persons are texts, inquiry into human action becomes an honorable and intriguing quest into the unknown.

The concept of persons as texts has also enabled those in the clinical domain to link their pursuits with developments in the philosophy of social science more generally and to hermeneutic study in particular. Since the 19th-century attempt to separate the Geisteswissenschaften from the Naturwissenschaften, thinkers have sought means of differentiating the methods of understanding human action from those of understanding natural events. Dilthey's method of *Verstehen* was perhaps the most compelling candidate of the early era. However, the viability of the concept suffered under the combined weight of empiricist philosophy of science and the behavioral movement in psychology. The further development of psychological testing and the appearance of such works as Meehl's *Actuarial versus clinical prediction* further suggested that the clinical attempt to probe the depths of human experience would soon give way to technology. Attempts to explicate a unique process of understanding human action became largely moribund.

Within recent years, however, both empiricist metatheory and the behavioral orientation have withered.<sup>2</sup> Many philosophers of social science have returned to the task of understanding human understanding. From this work the widely accepted conclusion has been reached that human action cannot be understood without reference to its underlying intentions. Regardless of the accuracy and sophistication of one's measures, the observations are without meaning or interest until they are linked to the actor's intention (Peters, 1958). Such conclusions made it apparent that the lynchpin of the social sciences was the process of interpretation (Taylor, 1971). Until intentions were rendered accessible, human activity remained opaque. At the same time, the one significant and relevant tradition of scholarship that had not succumbed to the empiricist rise to power

was that of hermeneutics. This tradition, concerned with the interpretation of texts—biblical, literary, judicial, and otherwise—offered a rich repository of thought on the task of interpreting human intention. For those in the clinical domains, there were now new and sophisticated allies. With person as text, the problem of clinical interpretation could be revisited. It is to this union that we largely owe the contemporary renaissance in the exploration of the clinical relationship.

I myself have been much intrigued with extending the intellectual and practical implications of the metaphor of persons as texts. I have been absorbed with the possibility that people's lives are constructed around pervading literary figures or tropes. In the same way that scientific theories are typically guided by or derived from root metaphors, so may people's lives be dominated by views of themselves as the archetypal hero, Earth Mother, or knave. And in the same way that theories of human development are dependent on narrative forms deeply embedded in our literary traditions, so are the stories we tell about ourselves—to others and to ourselves—with important ramifications (Gergen & Gergen, 1986).

Yet, as the metaphor of person as text has played itself out, I have also come to find substantial limitations. I have been moved to serious reconsideration of both intellectual and moral moment. It is to these limitations that this chapter will initially be addressed. This does not mean that I wish to see a return to the empiricist view of knowledge and a behavioral orientation to clinical understanding. On the contrary. As we lay out the problems inherent in the metaphor of person as text, we can begin to glimpse the possibility for a significant alternative to understanding human meaning. It is this relational orientation to understanding that will be outlined in the closing section of the paper.

### THE IMPASSE OF INNER KNOWLEDGE

The contemporary concept of the text is at least as old as the hermeneutic tradition itself. It is essentially a dualistic conception, making a significant distinction between a primary domain of intentionality or meaning, and a secondary domain of the intentions as publicly manifest—meaning within the inner realm of the mind and its expression within the objective text. For the early 16th-century

scholar, the biblical knowledge of the text *qua* text was only a means to a much nobler end—namely, knowledge of God's will. Biblical texts were the emanations of an agent far removed—akin to the messages delivered by Hermes, the messenger of the gods. Hermes himself is but a low and insignificant figure in comparison to the profound powers he represented. It is this dualistic conception of the text—with an insignificant surface and a profound depth—that continues to inform our contemporary undertakings. We read poetry to ascertain its deeper insights into human nature; we discuss novels and plays not in themselves but in terms of the deeper truths they may reveal; we make fundamental distinctions between the manifest and the latent content, the symptom and the unconscious source, the signifiant and the signifiee, the surface and the deep structure, and so on. Human understanding is achieved, we believe, when we successfully penetrate the surface and ascertain its source.

Yet, if we do embrace this dualistic conception of the text, precisely how is the process of human understanding to proceed? How are we to grasp the essential leanings or to gain intimacy with another? What possibilities are there for human knowledge on the level of daily life, within the therapeutic encounter, or within the halls of science? Let us explore a single incident and work our way toward more general conclusions. The incident is one I have used previously for a different audience, but it has a certain saccharine charm that recommends its repetition in the present context.

We may begin with a simple dilemma: If I see my good friends Ross and Laura approach each other at a social gathering, and Ross reaches out and momentarily touches Laura's hair, precisely what have I observed? What action has occurred before me? How am I to interpret it? What does the action suggest about their relationship and the manner in which I should regard it if I wish to retain their friendship? Such dilemmas of interpretation are frequent; one might even conjecture that they are as numerous as there are discriminable social actions. And such dilemmas must be solved, it would appear, in order for us to carry on effective interpersonal relations. How then, do we normally solve the essential problem of behavioral interpretation?

The problem is an especially vexing one, for it would appear that the action in itself can tell us little. We know only that Ross has engaged in a series of actions that might be described as "touching Laura's hair." Yet this level of description is virtually uninformative. What does it mean to engage in such an action? Of what interpersonal

or theoretical significance is the behavior? This information is not contained in the action itself. Perhaps the most compelling solution to this dilemma lies in the employment of contextual indicators. We may locate the meaning of a given action by placing it within the *context of its antecedents and its consequences—its past and future* within the relationship itself and the culture more generally. Let us first consider in this case the *retrospective context*, those events believed to define the action but occurring prior to it. For example, if Ross informed me the week before that he was madly in love with Laura, this information would solve my dilemma. I could confidently view his action as a signal of affection or attraction. If in later interaction with Ross I were to treat it as such, and not as a signal of derision, Ross and I would presumably continue to maintain a smooth and unproblematic friendship.

We must expand the retrospective context. Ross's announcement of the previous week may not be the only contextual constituent. Suppose I also learned from Laura several days ago that she told Ross she didn't really believe he was a warm and affectionate sort of person. At this point we may doubt the initial conclusion that the act was a signal of affection. Rather, we might consider the possibility that it was an attempt on Ross's part to demonstrate that he is an affectionate person after all. In effect, the action is not quite so much an affectionate one as an act of self-presentation, or personal identification. Yet, consider the nasty bit of gossip to which I was just exposed: a mutual friend indicates that the lovers have recently had a serious quarrel in which Laura accused Ross of being a prime egotist who believes he can have any woman he likes. Laura has told him she wants nothing more to do with him; he is vulgar, insensitive, and aggressive. With this new information, we may wish to interpret the action. Perhaps it was an act of derision on Ross's part after all. Perhaps he was saying with this action that in fact he could have any woman he wanted, and that Laura would soon be his in spite of her abuse. Thus, to relate effectively with Ross at this point, it would be appropriate to treat the act as one of derision as opposed to attraction or self-presentation.

Yet, can one be so certain, after all, that derision is the proper interpretation of the action? Perhaps Ross was badly hurt by Laura's words and was making one last attempt to express his affection or to demonstrate finally that he was a most affectionate kind of person. More information is necessary before Ross's behavior can be interpreted with confidence. So far we have attended only to information

based on the retrospective context. For additional information we must turn to the *emergent context*, that is, to relevant, defining events that follow the action in question. For example, we immediately observe Laura smile and take Ross's hand. This reaction now relieves our doubts. Laura had clearly been touched by Ross's gesture and feels contrite over the scolding she has administered. The stroking of the hair was a profound expression of affection after all. Or was it? Several minutes later, when we see Ross talking briefly with a friend, we notice that his posture and facial expressions are those of a man who is very proud of himself. Perhaps the gesture was, after all, not so affectionate in itself, but his attempt at successful self-presentation. He is now quite pleased with himself because he has apparently succeeded in convincing Laura of his open expressiveness. But the evidence is not yet complete. The following day we learn that Laura subsequently asked Ross if she could borrow his car to run an errand, and once the car was in her possession, she scraped its entire right hand side against a stone wall and thereupon abandoned the vehicle. At last, the mystery is solved. Laura saw that the stroking action was one of derision, yet treated it as an effective gesture in winning her love. This she did in order to gain Ross's *confidence, whereupon she borrowed the car in order to damage it and thus avenge the callous action.*

A month later Ross and Laura are spied walking arm in arm. . . .

Let us now collect several major propositions that may be derived from this turgid saga.

1. The interpretation of any given action is subject to infinite revision. As we are exposed to events from both retrospective and emergent contexts, our manner of interpreting the present action is continuously modified. Theoretically, this process is without limit. First, the range of past indicators is without evident bounds, for we must be prepared to account not only for all events in the lives of the individuals in question but also for all those events within the cultural history that shape current meanings. For example, in the case of Ross's life, if we learned that his feelings of affection were often fleeting, we might have been less inclined to view the action in question as one of affection. With respect to the culture more generally, if we learned that public touching between opposite sex pairs was a culturally sanctioned signal of ownership or possession, we might hesitate in accepting the event as proof of affection.

It is also apparent that the relevance of one's life events or events within the cultural history may wax or wane according to our present

manner of determining intelligibility. For example, events in Ross's early childhood may be viewed by the psychoanalytic theorist as relevant to the proper identification of the action in question (e.g., it could be a reaction formation growing from the Oedipal period and expressing the opposite from the apparent emotion). However, the same early childhood events might not be viewed as relevant by one who is unschooled in this particular system of intelligibility.

The emergent context is similarly without anchor point. The present action is subject to continuous redefinition as further events take place. As we saw, the final action cited (that of the couple walking happily together) appeared to throw the "ultimate definition" once again into jeopardy. Yet, this latter event itself should scarcely be considered final. *Nor are the future actions relevant to the interpretation only those uniting the two individuals.* Any further action on the part of any person may, if one possesses an appropriate system of intelligibility, be employed to reconstruct the meaning of the act in question. For example, if in the light of later social history we learned that this historical period was one of great superficiality in emotional expression, we might retrospectively discount the sincerity of Ross's action: perhaps it was simply a matter of artificial stylistics. We see, then, that the interpretation of any given action is effectively open-ended.

2. The anchor point for any given interpretation is not fundamentally empirical, but relies on a network of interdependent and continuously modifiable interpretations. This second proposition amplifies the first. As we see, there is no obvious way in which one can satisfactorily interpret any given action in itself. The action in question does not furnish any empirical touchstone for proper interpretation. One is thus forced to consider the context of events both preceding and following the action. Yet, to extend the analysis, we find that these events are also in need of interpretation, and one must search the ever-unfolding context of events in order to determine their meaning as well. For example, we were moved to interpret the stroking of Laura's hair as an expression of affection when we took into account Ross's previous declaration of love. Yet, the declaration itself is in need of interpretation. We must be certain that it is a declaration of affection rather than an attempt on his part to convince us of her ardor, for example, rather than an attempt at self-conviction, a whimsical gesture, an act of self-deception, or any number of other reasonable competitors. In order to determine which of the interpretations is valid, we are again driven outward to

consider the ever-unfolding context of events within which his declaration is embedded.

Of course, events within these contexts are equally subject to the interpretative dilemma. Thus, we find that the single, critical interpretation is not fundamentally tied to any single set of observables; rather, the interpretation rests on a potentially immense array of interdependent interpretations. Further, any given interpretation is continuously subject to modification in light of a continuously altering context, and any event occurring within the array may wax and wane in its relevance as intelligibility systems evolve over time. Thus the contextual array cannot be viewed as static but as in continuous and reverberating motion.

3. Any given action may be subject to multiple interpretations, no one of which is objectively superior. Our third proposition extends the logic implied in our arguments thus far. In the initial example, we took the perspective of a single observer of a given action. However, this perspective is hardly sacrosanct and could be replaced by a wide number of competitors. Each competitor might differ in (1) what counts as or constitutes an event, (2) the range of events to which he or she is exposed, and (3) the system of intelligibility used to make sense of the present action. Given the ultimate lack of an empirical touchstone on which to rest any given interpretation, one cannot easily argue for the superior validity of one conclusion as opposed to another.

One may contest this view on two grounds. First, it could be countered that an explanation based on multiple contextual inputs is superior to one that rests only upon a few. Yet, on closer inspection this view fails to be convincing. At the outset, as the number of events believed relevant to a given interpretation increases in number, one does not move unproblematically toward clarity of account. Rather, it would appear, one might anticipate increasing doubt in any given account. As increasing numbers of events are considered, their contexts of interpretation appraised, and multiple interpretations are encountered in the behavioral reports of others, so confidence in any given interpretation might well be eroded. Thus, the most informed account of any given action might be no account at all. Although silence is philosophically defensible in this case, it does not enable us to solve the essential dilemma of interpretation. A second problem in seeking salvation through multiple indicators resides in the earlier argument that the number and range of events considered relevant to any interpretation may vary from one individual to another: events

that one observer views as particularly relevant to a given act, a second observer may see as insignificant. For example, many people would dispute the relevance of early childhood events to the proper definition of their adult actions. One person's attempt to increase the number of contextual inputs may be another person's exercise in inanity. Finally, since any given event may be subject to multiple interpretations, it should be possible for an observer to justify any given interpretation by reference to virtually any earlier contextual event. Once one has fixed on a given interpretation, increasing the number of events lends no additional strength to the interpretation. It merely demonstrates the conceptual agility of the observer in generating a veneer of consistency among interpretations.

The most powerful challenge to the argument for equivalency of interpretation might be based on the claim that the actor's position is superior to any other. The actor, it can be argued, knows more about his or her own life history and about the internal state (intentions, motives, needs) giving rise to his or her actions. Actors essentially know what they are about, and if asked for a candid account in the present case, Ross could furnish the correct interpretation. Yet, when more fully considered, this rebuttal too is found to be unwarranted. First we find that it cannot be sustained on grounds that the actor knows more about his or her life history than does another. This would be to argue that the actor's account of his or her action benefits from taking into account a wider context of relevant events. Yet, as we have just seen, increasing the range of events bearing on a given interpretation in no way increases its validity. In effect, as Ross considered more carefully the full complexity of his preceding life experiences, his cultural, historical, and genetic heritage, and so on, *his attempt to identify his motives might only be rendered the more problematic.*

More fundamental, however, is the problem of identifying internal states such as intentions, motives, and dispositions. Our analysis thus far has not revealed a means of objectively anchoring the interpretation of overt action. The problem is exacerbated manifoldly as we move to the covert level. In particular, we find ourselves without an intelligible explanation of how it is one might determine the accuracy of his or her identification of a psychological state. Several momentous problems confront the aspirant in this case. Three of these may be briefly considered.

1. Process in search of itself. We commonly speak of our intentions, emotions, needs, and so on as if they were readily accessible to

experience. Yet, if we examine the supposition that we may experience internal states it is found that we rapidly approach the border of incredulity. Such a conclusion would entail a concept of mind in which psychological process would be capable of turning reflexively upon itself and identifying its own states. Rather than a single stream of consciousness, one would be forced into a mental dualism in which one level of consciousness acted as a sensing and/or recording device and a second process furnished the stuff to be sensed and recorded. Yet how are we to extricate the subject from the object, or the sensing agent from the object of experience? How is it that consciousness can be aware of itself? Such a dualism is sufficiently awkward that one is invited to consider how such a peculiar construction might have acquired such broad credibility. It seems most plausible in this case that the assumption of "internal perception" is a reconstructed form of the traditional metaphor for "external perception." The latter view is based on a subject-object dichotomy: A subject apprehending the character of the external object. The present model of internal perception appears to represent a projection of this view into the covert world. We implicitly presume the functioning of an "inner eye." Yet, unlike the case of external perception we are unable to identify the sensing device and to differentiate it from the object of perception. Until an intelligible account can be rendered of internal perception, it seems unwise to rely on this assumption to rescue us from the shoals of relativity in interpretation.

2. Internal perception as self-biased. If one can perform the theoretical circumlocution necessary to justify an internal dualism, one faces a second problem of no lesser magnitude. Specifically, if both the sensing process and the sensed data are constituents of the same psychological structure, what safeguards (if any) can be placed over misperception? How can we be certain that no other psychological influences act so as to occlude the object of perception? In particular, could the entities one hoped to identify not themselves hinder or distort the very task of identification itself? Freudian theory indeed posits just the kind of psychological processes that would obscure those entities (states, drives, intentions) one hoped to ascertain. On what grounds can one argue that internal processes do not operate in this way? If one's consciousness is controlled in such a manner, the attempt to answer the interpretive question by self-observation would be futile.

3. The constructed properties of psychological states. A third difficulty emerges when one inquires into the properties of mental

states that would enable them to be identified. What is the size, shape, color, sound, or smell, for example, of an intention, a thought, a motive, a desire, a need, or a hope? Even the question seems ill conceived. Given the paucity in the existing language for describing or characterizing internal states, one begins to confront the possibility that the language of the mind is less a mirror of mental states than it is product of the broader conceptual systems of the culture. Mental state terms appear to be derivatives of cultural conventions of intelligibility rather than characterization of a separate ontological realm. Such a conclusion is supported by much anthropological inquiry into mental concepts within other cultures and historical climes (Heelas & Locke, 1981; Kessen, 1979; Shweder & Bourne, 1982). Such study reveals markedly different "ontologies of mind" as one moves from one cultural or historical sphere to another. Charles Taylor's contribution to the present volume represents an additional contribution to such understanding. If the vocabulary of mental states was determined or constrained by the natural characteristics of such states themselves, such variations would scarcely be anticipated.

Over the years there have been numerous attempts to surmount the problem of relativity in interpretation. As we saw, there was Dilthey's attempt in the late 19th century to develop the method of *Verstehen*, through which one might project oneself into the experiences of another. Although severely criticized as a method of acquiring knowledge, something approximating the method was later to be advocated by the historical theorist, R. G. Collingwood (1946). As he proposed, knowledge of earlier historical periods was to be achieved by projecting oneself into the early context. Without penetrating the intentional systems of the past, indeed, history could not be properly written. However, neither Dilthey nor Collingwood could furnish an account of how one could determine whether accuracy of mental projection had been achieved. There have since been the attempts of Emilio Betti (1962) to develop formal canons of interpretation, and by Hirsch (1967) to develop an empirical means of testing hypotheses about the "object directedness" of the speaker. Both of these attempts have come under attack and have largely been abandoned by contemporary hermeneuticists. Not only has it been difficult to realize in practice their formalisms of hermeneutic interpretation, indeed the formalisms resist the sort of interpretation that would enable one to determine whether or not their intention was being fulfilled.

Gadamer's *Truth and method* contains promises of the potential

for valid intersubjectivity. Yet, perhaps the major concept to emerge from Gadamer's analysis is that of the horizon of understanding. This concept, to which we shall return shortly, lends itself rather forcefully to relativist and historicist conclusions. Gadamer's "failure" to furnish standards of valid interpretation hardly escaped Habermas's attention in his critique of Gadamer (Habermas, 1970). Tentatively, and with complex alterations in certitude, Paul Ricoeur (1976) has argued that it is possible for the interpreter to distance him- or herself from the biasing foreconceptions of understanding. Yet, he is unable to demonstrate how the processes of determining the text's underlying structure can proceed without such bias. Within recent years perhaps the strongest voice for transparency in interpretation has been that of Habermas (1979). Habermas attempts to lay out a set of ideal speech conditions (such as the absence of domination in relations) that will enable undistorted communication to occur. Yet the grounds upon which validity in understanding rests in this case remains unclear. Further, Habermas inadvertently favors in his analysis the possessor of the greatest rhetorical skills. Such individuals (presumably well educated) would inevitably win out in the attempt to reach rational consensus in a democratic community.

These comments are, of course, appallingly brief and volumes could be (and have been) written to explicate the problems inherent in these analyses (Bleicher, 1980; Palmer, 1969). The main point is that standing in the present era, we find ourselves with no viable account of validity in interpretation. We stand without a compelling promise that knowledge of the other is possible. And, if the logic of my preceding example is correct, there is little reason to suppose that such an account will be forthcoming. Richard Bernstein (chapter 4, this volume) does maintain that we can transcend relativism in interpretation. Yet, he eschews the possibility of formalized rules of procedure and rests his case on a "hard and messy sorting out of issues." A more elaborate rationale seems to be required to secure the case. And why should we anticipate the emergence of such an elaborated rationale? After all, we have at our disposal only a domain of public discourse. We imagine there is a domain of private discourse to which this must be attached. Yet, we possess access neither to the private discourse itself nor to the rules by which it is translated into the public domain. It follows that any attempt to translate (or understand) must be based on an analytic as opposed to a synthetic procedure. That is, readings or translations can only be rendered true by definition—by virtue of circularity rather than verification.

We would face a similar problem if we assumed that all cloud formations were symbols of God's thoughts. Such thoughts could be read if we could but crack the code of how God's thoughts were transformed into nimbus as opposed to cirrus clouds, to thunderstorms and tornadoes. If such presumptions were made what hope would we have of discovering through our observations the impulses of God? All readings would inevitably be the result first, of an imaginary vernacular of the Holy One (e.g., God is a being who "wishes," "desires," "wills"), and second, an imaginary set of translation rules (e.g., when God is angry the sky is dark). Once developed, such vehicles would indeed render God's thoughts transparent. However they would do so only by virtue of the imaginary system of definitions constructed to carry out the task. If there is no inner voice to which one can gain access, then all attempts to interpret the "inner" by virtue of the "outer" must be inherently circular.

#### THE ORIGINS OF THE "GHOST IN THE TEXT"

One is moved at this juncture to ask why the dualistic conception of the text is so compelling. Why is it so easy to believe in a meaning behind the words, impulses behind action? What gives rise to the virtually immutable belief in underlying intentions? Let me propose a possible answer to the riddle. One of the major uses of language in social interchange is that of signaling. Linguistic terms can be rapidly and effectively deployed as a means of designating the presence or absence of various objects, entities, or states of affairs. To be told that "it is raining," "your socks are mismatched," or "your house is on fire" is to be signaled of conditions that may require readjustment in one's action. Such utterances refer to events external to or independent of the language itself, and their utility as signals depends importantly on the human capacity to master the relationship between the arrangement of sounds and an array of other events. It may be ventured that the flexibility and discriminative capacity of the language make it an ideal medium for signaling within the sphere of ongoing relations and that this process makes an essential contribution to the survival of the species.

In human affairs one of the most prominent candidates for discursive signaling is human action itself. It is frequently useful to make

verbal reference to the kinds of activity (e.g., fighting, helping, loving, eating) in which people are engaged. Yet, in spite of the utility of the process it is beset with profound difficulty. As described more fully elsewhere (Gergen, 1982), words as arrangements of discrete sounds may optimally be associated with (or used to signal) events with stable, spatiotemporal patterning. If the patterns to be signaled are in continuous, nonrepeatable motion the signaling process is subverted. Not only is the spatiotemporal boundary of the indexed event highly ambiguous, but since the event itself is nonrecurring it would be difficult to acquire knowledge over time of its relationship to any particular word. Knowledge would essentially be momentary and disposable. To illustrate, there is an extensive and reliable vocabulary for signaling or talking about kinds of chairs (e.g., stuffed, rocker, Ames, director's). The vocabulary is useful and seldom is one mistaken, as the classes of objects denoted by the terms are stable across time and space. Yet, we have a relatively impoverished vocabulary for speaking of ocean waves and candle flames. In the latter cases it is difficult at the outset to discern where one event is terminated and another begins. In addition, such a vocabulary would have limited utility, as the recurrence of any particular wave or candle form would seldom occur.

There is good reason to believe that with respect to the process of signaling, human action is more like ocean waves and candle flames than chairs. The body is in continuous, multiplex motion, and seldom is the precise pattern repeated over time. As a result there are relatively few terms in the language that refer to the spatiotemporal configuration of the body itself. We can speak of the body as erect or prone, in motion or motionless. However, we can scarcely speak of the velocity and direction of the combined array of moving bodily parts. In effect, such linguistic characterizations of the body in motion are rendered problematic by the arduous nature of the task. An overwhelming effort would be required to develop such a vocabulary, and its utility would be severely delimited.

How, then, is the pragmatic problem of reference to be solved in the case of human action? It would appear that a solution is reached in two steps. First, words are employed to signal not the spatiotemporal particulars of bodily movements themselves, but the accomplishments or endpoints that the movements are achieving (have achieved, will achieve). For example, when we say that a person has helped another, we essentially refer to what the action accomplished.

The descriptive term tells us virtually nothing of the overt movements of the actor's body. If the same movements were to bring pain to another, we might say of the actor that he or she was hurting another. Yet, to use the endpoint of movement as the basis for one's signaling does not fully solve the problem of accounting for the actor's conduct. It is not specifically the achievement or result of action that is at issue. The problem is to index what the actor is doing, not what is accomplished by the actions. It is not the state of being helped or hurt that one is attempting to signal in the present case, but the conduct of the actor. To solve this problem, the language of person description reinstates the result of action as its aim. What is achieved is said to be the aim, attempt, tendency, disposition, or intention of the person. It is the person who intends to help or harm. In this sense person descriptors essentially index not the concrete behavior of actors but their dispositional states (Taylor, 1964).

For present purposes the most important result of this solution to the pragmatic problem of referring to or signaling about human action is the establishment of an inventory of internal dispositions. In order to account for human action we must speak as if people possess motives, needs, drives, intentions, wants, preferences, attitudes, dispositions, and the like—all terms that reinstate at the internal level what persons appear to accomplish in their behavior. Such dispositional terms may designate an immense range of endpoints; one may be motivated to achieve pleasure, approval, wealth, peace, and so on. The list of possibilities may be extended indefinitely. And, as we speak of people's motives for these ends, such dispositional terms are objectified. That is, they fall into the same position *vis-à-vis* the language as do real world events. In the same way one speaks of chairs or salt shakers, one speaks of intentions to help or hinder. In the same way we assume that the former words index a world independent of the words themselves, we also come to presume a world of mental dispositions. The result is a reified language of psychological events.

To summarize, in the attempt to solve the pragmatic problem of referring to or signaling about human activity in the sphere of daily relations, a language of psychological dispositions (intentionality) is born. Such a language seems to be necessitated by the human incapacity to cement linguistic integers to the proteanlike activity of the human body. As this language of dispositions is expanded and reified, the inner realm of psychology becomes an accepted reality, part of the common sense world of daily relations.

## THE IMPASSE OF READER CONSTRUCTION

Thus far we have seen that the metaphor of the text places us in a position from which neither reading, intimacy, nor self-knowledge is possible. If persons are texts they must be viewed as isolated social atoms who can neither know nor understand each other. Further, they cannot comprehend their own actions; such actions lie beyond the boundary of objective interpretation. Such conclusions are not only *dolorous*, but *unfortunate in their implications for social life*. They hold little promise for intimacy, for genuine contact, for authenticity—or indeed for any profound form of human relatedness. Before exploring an alternative perspective, a second aspect of the textual metaphor must be touched upon. Specifically, it may be asked, if persons are texts then who are the readers? The metaphor itself is all inclusive on this account; it suggests that all persons are embodied texts manifesting symbolic indications of an intentional world. Yet, if people are only texts, then we have no account of the critical task of reading. People must then be more than texts; the metaphor is fundamentally incomplete.

It is the reader who, within the past decade of literary theory, has almost fully displaced the text as the center of concern. This shift in concern is not unrelated to the problematics of truth standards in interpretation; if texts themselves place no powerful constraints over the range of interpretations to be made of them, then one is invited to turn to alternative sources of interpretation. The reader stands as the most obvious alternative. Gadamer (1976) was well aware of this possibility, as captured in his concept of horizons of understanding. As Gadamer proposed (following Heidegger), we approach each text with an historically situated array of foreconceptions. Understanding cannot proceed except in its terms. However, because of their overarching concern with criteria of validity it is not the hermeneuticists who have brought Gadamer's argument to the conclusion it invites. Rather, this move is left to literary theorists in general and to deconstructionists in particular.

Consider first a series of influential essays by Stanley Fish (1980). As Fish proposes in literary interpretation, the "interpreting entity [or agent], endowed with purposes and concerns, is by virtue of its very operation, determining what counts as the facts to be observed" (p. 8). Concern with "reader effects," as they are often called (see Suleiman & Crosman, 1980), reaches its epitome in deconstructionist writings. In the hands of Derrida, deMan, and



other deconstructionists, the rendering of the literary critic (reader, philosopher, therapist, or scientist, by analogy) is guided by all-consuming literary devices, figures, or tropes. Such figures dominate interpretation to the exclusion of the text itself. Text and author are thereby deconstructed. Often, as well, the critic or philosopher manages unwittingly to deconstruct his or her own rendering in the very process. And to speak of this process is itself an autonomous literary effort and deserving of its own demolition.

To demonstrate, the psychoanalyst who purports to develop an understanding of a patient typically commits him- or herself to a particular metaphor of the mind—namely, one dominated by conflicting forces. This commitment precedes the confrontation of the particular case to be considered. When the analysand is subsequently confronted, he or she simply acts as a trigger for the analyst's exercising of the rules for elaborating the metaphor. The analysand is simply an excuse for the analyst to engage in a particular literary form, and the analysand is thereby deconstructed as an entity to be understood. Possibly the analyst will also employ a second order metaphor, one that will serve to reveal his or her artifice and thereby deconstruct the rendering as well.<sup>3</sup>

We now find ourselves at yet another unhappy juncture. The view that persons are texts left us with a seeming impasse with regard to either communication or genuine relatedness. When we extend the metaphor to include the reader, we again find that human understanding is impossible. In the process of reading, both the text and its author are obliterated. The individual again falls back into isolation, unable to know, and unable to communicate. Not only do we find ourselves to be social atoms, but each is hermetically sealed from the other. We are invited by such an analysis to each pursue our own individual ends; for after all, others cannot know us nor we, them. There is little left but privatized self-seeking.

#### TOWARD MEANING AS RELATIONAL FORM

At this point, both for intellectual and moral reasons, one is inclined to abandon the metaphor of person as text; required is an alternative means of understanding the process of human interpretation and the character of human understanding and knowledge more generally. Clarity and confidence in such an alternative can scarcely be gener-

ated at this juncture. However, I do think there are significant precursors for such an account and a slowly emerging consciousness of its major contours. The seeds were planted in the writings of Wittgenstein and J. L. Austin. Intimations may be found in some of Bateson's later writings and in the works of those who shared his wholistic perspective. Strands are contained as well in some of Harry Stack Sullivan's writings and, in certain respects, are being amplified in contemporary theories of family therapy and organizational theory. Let me attempt, for present purposes, to bring several critical assumptions into clearer perspective, particularly as they relate to the problem of human interpretation.

First, while accepting the fact that accounts of individual action must be premised on intentional or dispositional language, let us not be tempted to reify the terms of intention themselves. We have been too quick to assume that the language of person description represents the process of human understanding. Thus, let us consider abandoning the assumption that understanding is achieved when we penetrate the veil of the exterior. Rather, let us confront each others' actions directly. Let us consider the possibility that human actions are what they are and not an array of cryptic indicators of yet some other ontological realm. It further seems permissible to admit that others' words (and their performance more generally) are of significant consequence to our actions. That is, we are not self-contained monads, as implied by an extension of the deconstructionist account. Rather, when others speak of their happiness, their sorrow, their anger, and so on, and when their arms are clasped about themselves rather than about us, it makes a difference to our subsequent actions.

Now, let us extend the implications of our first two propositions—that forms of action are what they are; not symbols or emanations, and that people are responsive to others' words and actions. Specifically, we can shift from an emphasis on the text and its reader, or the single action and reaction, to more extended patterns of interdependence. Each of my actions is not only a reply to yours, but is simultaneously an action to which you will reply. In this sense my conduct is neither a response nor a stimulus, but an integer in an extended pattern of which both of us are a part. Or to put it another way, the two of us (and the numbers could be expanded) together achieve a pattern of relationship. The jointly achieved pattern is not decomposable into the fragmentary units that make it up any more than a Jackson Pollock painting could be reduced to the variety of colors by which it is constituted.

Given these three moves, what is to be said about the so-called meaning of words, gestures, and other actions, and the cognate problem of human interpretation? First, we find that the meaning of a word is not to be found in its underlying intention or locked deeply within the unconscious. Rather, the meanings of words, gestures, or actions are realized within the unfolding patterns of relationship. The problem is thus not to look inward to an interior region for the meaning of a word or action, but outward into the continuously expanding horizon of the relationship. Let me attempt the case in a more concrete form.

We speak of persons as having aggressive motives, altruistic inclinations, playful intentions, and so on, as if these were properties of individual selves. However, if my arm is raised above my head there is little that may be said about me as an individual. I am merely a spatiotemporal configuration locked in an otherwise meaningless pose. In contrast, if another person were before me, crouching and grimacing, suddenly it is possible to speak of me as aggressive, oppressive, or ruthless. If the other were a child standing on tiptoes, arms outstretched, his ball lodged in a tree above my head, it would be possible to characterize my pose as helpful or paternal. Additional configurations of the other might yield the conclusion that I was playful, obedient, protective, or proud. Note that my action is the same in all circumstances; yet, there is little that may be said of me—to characterize myself—until the relational context is articulated. Similarly, the other person's movements have little bearing on our language of understanding until they are seen within the context of my own. In effect, what we acquire as individualized characteristics—our aggressiveness, playfulness, altruism, and the like—are primarily products of the joint configuration. They are derivatives of more wholistic units. Intelligibility is thus an outcome of ongoing relational pattern.

What are we to make of human understanding or knowledge from the relational perspective? Here we are again invited to abandon the traditional view of the reader, who works alone and isolated to achieve understanding. Rather, understanding from the present perspective is essentially a social achievement—a derivative of persons in an ongoing relationship. When two persons successfully coordinate their actions to bring off a romantic relationship, a conversation, or even the mutual bidding of goodbye, it may be said that understanding has occurred. The same might also apply to combat and domination. When participants coordinate their actions in such a

way that a culturally intelligible pattern is achieved, we may speak of the emergence of understanding along with Ryle (1949)—knowledge is a “knowing how” rather than a “knowing that”—only in this case the knowing how is a collective achievement. In this context the question of accuracy is obviated. One is not attempting to determine the correspondence between intention and interpretation. Rather, we may view the spoken word (in this case) much as an invitation to dance. If the dancers succeed in coordinating their actions, understanding has been achieved. Understanding is not contained within me, or within you, but is that which we generate together in our form of relatedness.

Let me illustrate this relational orientation to human understanding with a report of preliminary inquiry into the nature of mental predicates. We have just seen that the simple movement of my hand raised above my head is itself meaningless and acquires significance only in terms of another's actions. In the same way, the announcement “I am angry” is the utterance of an idiot until it is understood within an unfolding context of relationship. It cannot be said to just anyone at random; the utterance must be embedded in an historical sequence of events—both preceding and following—in order to be rendered sensible. Given these two moves, the first, which exteriorizes so-called mental events such as emotion, and the second, which places such performances into relational context, we are prepared for the third. This is to recenter our attention on the unfolding pattern of which the single emotional performance is a part. That is, we may bring into the center of our theoretical interest the relational pattern of which the performance of a given individual is merely a component.

Consider the concept of depression. Normally depression is thought to be a private, neurologically-based event. If one announces that he or she is depressed, we treat the communication as if it were a report on the status of a strange, exotic land. Yet, if we presume that expressions of depression are first, public, and second, constitutive of relationships, we need not ask whether the person is giving an accurate portrayal of his or her inner realm or whether we are interpreting the words correctly and can begin to ask about the nature of the relationships in which they figure. For example, we have confronted research participants with vignettes in which a friend tells them that he or she is depressed. We then ask the participants about their probable replies to such an expression. As it happens, one cannot respond to such announcements of depression in just any

random fashion. You can't easily say, "Oh, that's nice," or, "It is a lovely day at that," without risking rebuff. Rather, as our participants showed us, there are only a limited set of discursive moves that may be made. Primarily, one is limited to some form of sympathy, inquiry, indifference, or irritation. Now we begin to see the possibility for four different units of relationship, each beginning with a particular emotional performance on the part of person A followed by an appropriate reply by person B.

However, these are only the beginning of what may be termed *relational scenarios*, that is, sets of interdependent moves that make up given relational units. We now ask our research participants how person A would reply if he or she expressed depression, and person B replied with one of the four different reactions. Each of these combinations yields a still further array of reactions. Rather than examining the full range of possible scenarios produced by this iteration and several iterations following, let me simply summarize one of the major scenarios that is revealed as one continues to carry the exercise forward. This particular scenario may be called *relation affirming*. It is composed of A's expression of depression, B's reply of sympathy, A's further elaboration of the reason for the depression, B's further sympathy, A's further elaboration, B's advice or encouragement, and finally A's expression of gratitude. At this point the relational unit is generally considered terminated. That is, one is free at this point to select an alternative scenario—talking about plans for the weekend, secret dreams, and so on. As it seems, the entire scenario has been generally affirming of a friendship between the two participants.

Elucidating a number of these major scenarios is only the first important step of our present research. We are also attempting to locate these scenarios within broader sequences of relationship—viewing them as components of still larger units. For example, the relation-affirming scenario just described may typically be located within a larger scenario of a friendship relation. Without this subscenario that affirms the relation, one could not in modern society be said to be properly carrying out a friendship. In contrast, the depression as relation-affirming scenario would not typically be a subpart of a more general competitive or hostile relationship. We are also attempting to explore not only the embedding of scenarios, but the relationship of such scenario forms to each other. If A and B are involved in a certain range of relational scenarios, what are the

implications for the kinds of relational patterns they are permitted with C? These are among the many questions we are now attempting to ask—not only with terms of emotion but other mental predicates (such as memory and thought) as well.

Briefly, what do such findings say about the therapeutic relationship? It seems to me that they invite an approach radically different from that embodied in depth analysis. Rather than exploring the unknown world of the interior, one moves to the level of client-therapist relationship. Recent inquiry in this domain has insightfully centered on the mutual construction of reality within such encounters (Cronen, Pearce, & Tomm, 1985; Spence, 1982). However, the present analysis invites an enhancement of such sensitivity. When a client reports depression, for example, what form of "dance" is the therapist being invited to join? Are the achieved patterns the client has developed in other relationships likely to be manifest? Can the therapist help to develop new dances or relational forms that are more beneficial to the client? In this sense the therapist is not attempting to "get to the bottom" of the case or to "plumb the inner depths," but to make manifest the patterns of interchange that are invited by the client's actions, to explore their viability, and to develop means of altering or expanding the repertoire of potentials.

In conclusion, the present paper places under critical consideration the metaphor of person as text. It is this metaphor from which the major questions of traditional hermeneutic analysis have been drawn. It is such inquiry—largely concerned with the process and validity of interpretation—that also informs much recent thinking within the clinical domain. However, as the present analysis attempts to demonstrate, the metaphor of person as text draws the analyst into two *conceptual impasses from which escape seems doubtful*. No viable account can be given as to how valid inference from external manifestation to the inner region of intent or motive can occur, and there is little means of demonstrating how texts can resist absorption into the reader's forestructure of understanding. Thus, the metaphor of person as text favors the conclusion that valid communication, correct interpretation, and genuine intimacy are all beyond human reach. A preliminary sketch is then furnished of an alternative means of understanding the interpretive process. This relational account views the interpretive process not as the act of the single individual attempting to locate the inner region of the other, but as a process of mutual collaboration. The metaphor of the dance or the game

replaces that of the text. Questions of validity are replaced by queries into the forms of relatedness into which our verbal expressions (among others) fall, and into their implications and alternatives.

## NOTES

1. For a more extended treatment of metaphor in psychological theory, see Gergen (in press).
2. An account of this interdependent determination of theory and metatheory is contained in Gergen (1985).
3. Spence's important work, *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth*, parallels these analyses in its attempt to demonstrate that the truth generated in the psychoanalytic encounter is essentially a product of aesthetic and linguistic demands rather than a reflection of historical actuality. As Sass and Woolfolk (in press) discern, however, there is an implicit commitment in the work to the empiricist assumption that there are indeed "uncontaminated" experiences to which the narrative reconstruction could be compared. This latter assumption is also apparent in Spence's contribution to the present volume.

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