

CHAPTER VI

ON SYMBOLISM

Philosophers have worried themselves about remote consequences, and the inductive formulations of science. They should confine attention to the rush of immediate transition. Their explanations would then be seen in their native absurdity. (578)

A. N. WHITEHEAD

It is often said experiments must be made without a preconceived idea. That is impossible. Not only would it make all experiment barren, but that would be attempted which could not be done. Every one carries in his mind his own conception of the world, of which he can not so easily rid himself. We must, for instance, use language; and our language is made up only of preconceived ideas and can not be otherwise. Only these are unconscious preconceived ideas, a thousand times more dangerous than the others. (417)

H. POINCARÉ

. . . the patriotic archbishop of Canterbury, found it advisable—’ ”
“Found *what* ?” said the Duck.
“Found *it*,” the Mouse replied, rather crossly: “of course you know what ‘it’ means.”
“I know what ‘it’ means well enough, when I find a thing,” said the Duck: “it’s generally a frog, or a worm.”*

LEWIS CAROLL

. . . psychiatry works specifically on the social organ of man itself—the person’s assets and behavior, that which we must adjust before we can expect the individual to make proper use of most of our help.**

ADOLF MEYER

Perhaps, as has often been said, the trouble with people is not so much with their ignorance as it is with their knowing so many things that are not so.... So that it is always important to find out about these fears, and if they are based upon the knowledge of something that is not so, they may perhaps be corrected. (568)

WILLIAM A. WHITE

The affairs of man are conducted by our own, man-made rules and according to man-made theories. Man’s achievements rest upon the use of symbols. For this reason, we must consider ourselves as a symbolic, semantic class of life, and those who rule the symbols, rule us. Now, the term ‘symbol’ applies to a variety of things, words and money included. A piece of paper, called a dollar or a pound, has very little value if the other fellow refuses to take it; so we see that money must be considered as a symbol for human agreement, as well as deeds to property, stocks, bonds, . The *reality* behind the money-symbol is doctrinal, ‘mental’, and one of the most precious characteristics of mankind. But it must be used properly; that is, with the proper understanding of

* *Alice in Wonderland*

** Historical Sketch and Outlook of Psychiatric Social Work. *Hosp. Soc. Serv.* V, 1922, 221.

its structure and ways of functioning. It constitutes a grave danger when misused.

When we say 'our rulers', we mean those who are engaged in the manipulation of symbols. There is no escape from the fact that they do, and that they always will, rule mankind, because we constitute a symbolic class of life, and we cannot cease from being so, except by regressing to the animal level.

The hope for the future consists in the understanding of this fact; namely, that we shall always be ruled by those who rule symbols, which will lead to scientific researches in the field of symbolism and *s.r.* We would then *demand* that our rulers should be *enlightened* and *carefully selected*. Paradoxical as it may seem, such researches as the present work attempts, will ultimately do more for the stabilization of human affairs than legions of policemen with machine guns, and bombs, and jails, and asylums for the maladjusted.

A complete list of our rulers is difficult to give; yet, a few classes of them are quite obvious. Bankers, priests, lawyers and politicians constitute one class and work together. They do not *produce* any values, but manipulate values produced by others, and often pass signs for no values at all. Scientists and teachers also comprise a ruling class. They produce the main values mankind has, but, at present, they do not realize this. They are, in the main, themselves ruled by the cunning methods of the first class.

In this analysis the 'philosophers' have been omitted. This is because they require a special treatment. As an historical fact, many 'philosophers' have played an important and, to be frank, sinister role in history. At the bottom of any historical trend, we find a certain 'philosophy', a structural implication cleverly formulated by some 'philosopher'. The reader of this work will later find that most 'philosophers' gamble on multiordinal and *el* terms, which have *no definite single (one-valued) meaning*, and so, by cleverness in twisting, can be made to appear to mean anything desired. It is now no mystery that some quite influential 'philosophers' were 'mentally' ill. Some 'mentally' ill persons are tremendously clever in the manipulation of words and can sometimes deceive even trained specialists. Among the clever concoctions which appear in history as 'philosophic' systems, we can find flatly opposing doctrines. Therefore, it has not been difficult at any period for the rulers to select a cleverly constructed doctrine perfectly fitting the ends they desired.

One of the main characteristics of such 'philosophers' is found in the delusion of grandeur, the 'Jehovah complex'. Their problems have

appeared to them to be above criticism or assistance by other human beings, and the correct procedure known only to super-men like themselves. So quite naturally they have usually refused to make enquiries. They have refused even to be informed about scientific researches carried on outside the realms of their 'philosophy'. Because of this ignorance, they have, in the main, not even suspected the importance of the problems of structure.

In all fairness, it must be said that not all so-called 'philosophy' represents an episode of semantic illness, and that a few 'philosophers' really do important work. This applies to the so-called 'critical philosophy' and to the *theory of knowledge or epistemology*. This class of workers I call epistemologists, to avoid the disagreeable implications of the term 'philosopher'. Unfortunately, epistemological researches are most difficult, owing mainly to the lack of scientific psychologies, general semantics, and investigations of structure and *s.r.* We find only a very few men doing this work, which, in the main, is still little known and unapplied. It must be granted that their works do not make easy reading. They do not command headlines; nor are they aided and stimulated by public interest and help.

It must be emphasized again that as long as we remain humans (which means a symbolic class of life), the rulers of symbols will rule us, and that no amount of revolution will ever change this. But what mankind has a right to ask—and the sooner the better—is that our rulers should not be so shamelessly ignorant and, therefore, pathological in their reactions. If a psychiatric and scientific enquiry were to be made upon our rulers, mankind would be appalled at the disclosures.

We have been speaking about 'symbols', but we have not yet discovered any general theory concerning symbols and symbolism. Usually, we take terms lightly and never 'think' what kind of implication and *s.r.* one single important term may involve. 'Symbol' is one of those important terms, weighty in meanings. If we use the term 'food', for instance, the presupposition is that we take for granted the existence of living beings able to eat; and, similarly, the term 'symbol' implies the existence of intelligent beings. The solution of the problem of symbolism, therefore, presupposes the solution of the problem of 'intelligence' and structure. So, we see that the issues are not only serious and difficult, but, also, that we must investigate a semantic field in which very little has been done.

In the rough, a symbol is defined as a sign which stands for something. Any sign is not necessarily a symbol. If it stands for something, it becomes a symbol for this something. If it does not stand for some-

thing, then it becomes not a symbol but a *meaningless* sign. This applies to words just as it does to bank cheques. If one has a zero balance in the bank, but still has a cheque-book and issues a cheque, he issues a sign but not a symbol, because it does not stand for anything. The penalty for such use of these particular signs as symbols is usually jailing. This analogy applies to the oral noises we make, which occasionally become symbols and at other times do not; as yet, no penalty is exacted for such a fraud.

Before a noise, ., may become a symbol, something must exist for the symbol to symbolize. So the first problem of symbolism should be to investigate the problem of 'existence'. To define 'existence', we have to state the standards by which we judge existence. At present, the use of this term is not uniform and is largely a matter of convenience. Of late, mathematicians have discovered a great deal about this term. For our present purposes, we may accept two kinds of existence: (1) the physical existence, roughly connected with our 'senses' and persistence, and (2) 'logical' existence. The new researches in the foundations of mathematics, originated by Brouwer and Weyl, seem to lead to a curtailment of the meaning of 'logical' existence in quite a sound direction; but we may provisionally accept the most general meaning, as introduced by Poincaré. He defines 'logical' existence as a statement free from self-contradictions. Thus, we may say that a 'thought' to be a 'thought' must not be self-contradictory. A self-contradictory statement is meaningless; we can argue either way without reaching any valid results. We say, then, that a self-contradictory statement has no 'logical' existence. As an example, let us take a statement about a square circle. This is called a contradiction in terms, a non-sense, a meaningless statement, which has no 'logical' existence. Let us label this 'word salad' by a special noise—let us say, 'blah-blah'. Will such a noise become a word, a symbol? Obviously not—it stands for nothing; it remains a mere noise, ., no matter if volumes should be written about it.

It is extremely important, semantically, to notice that not all the noises, ., we humans make should be considered as symbols or valid words. Such empty noises, ., can occur not only in direct 'statements', but also in 'questions'. Quite obviously, 'questions' which employ noises, ., instead of words, are not significant questions. They ask nothing, and cannot be answered. They are, perhaps, best treated by 'mental' pathologists as symptoms of delusions, illusions, or hallucinations. In asylums the noises, ., patients make are predominantly meaningless, as far as the external world is concerned, but *become symbols in the illness of the patient*.

A complicated and difficult problem is found in connection with those symbols which have meaning in one context and have no meaning in another context. Here we approach the question of the application of 'correct symbolism to facts'. We will not now enlarge upon this subject, but will only give, in a different wording, an illustration borrowed from Einstein. Let us take anything; for example, a pencil. Let us assume that this physical object has a temperature of 60 degrees. Then the 'question' may be asked: 'What is the temperature of an "electron" which goes to make up this pencil?' Different people, many scientists and mathematicians included, would say: '60 degrees'; or any other number. And, finally, some would say: 'I do not know'. All these answers have one common characteristic; namely, that they are senseless; for they try to answer a meaningless question. Even the answer, 'I do not know', does not escape this classification, as there *is nothing to know about a meaningless question*. The only correct answer is to explain that the 'question' has no meaning. This is an example of a symbol which has no application to an 'electron'. Temperature by *definition* is the vibration of molecules (atoms are considered as mon-atomic molecules), so to have temperature at all, we must have at least two molecules. Thus, when we take one molecule and split it into atoms and electrons, the term 'temperature' does not apply by definition to an electron at all. Although the term 'temperature' represents a perfectly good symbol in one context, it becomes a meaningless noise in another. The reader should not miss the plausibility of such gambling on words, for there is a very real semantic danger in it.

In the study of symbolism, it is unwise to disregard the knowledge we gather from psychiatry. The so-called 'mentally' ill have often a very obvious and well-known semantic mechanism of projection. They project their own feelings, moods, and other structural implications on the outside world, and so build up delusions, illusions, and hallucinations, believing that what is going on in them is going on *outside* of them. Usually, it is impossible to convince the patient of this error, for his whole illness is found in the semantic disturbance which leads to such projections.

In daily life we find endless examples of such semantic projections, of differing affective intensity, which projections invariably lead to consequences more or less grave. The structure of such affective projections will be dealt with extensively later on. Here we need only point out that the problems of 'existence' are serious, and that any one who claims that something 'exists' outside of his skin must show it. Otherwise, the 'existence' is found only inside of his skin—a psycho-logical state of

affairs which becomes pathological the moment he projects it on the outside- world. If one should claim that the term 'unicorn' is a symbol, he must state what this symbol stands for. It might be said that 'unicorn', as a symbol, stands for a *fanciful* animal in heraldry, a statement which happens to be true. In such a sense the term 'unicorn' becomes a symbol for a fancy, and rightly belongs to psycho-logics, which deals with human fancies, but does not belong to zoology, which deals with actual animals. But if one should believe firmly and intensely that the 'unicorn' represents an actual animal which has an external existence, he would be either mistaken or ignorant, and could be convinced or enlightened; or, if not, he would be seriously ill. We see that in this case, as in many others, all depends to what 'ology' our semantic impulses assign some 'existence'. If we assign the 'unicorn' to psycho-logics, or to heraldry, such an assignment is correct, and no semantic harm is done; but if we assign a 'unicorn' to zoology; that is to say, if we believe that a 'unicorn' has an objective and not a fictitious existence, this *s.r* might be either a mistake, or ignorance, and, in such a case, it could be corrected; otherwise, it becomes a semantic illness. If, in spite of all contrary evidence, or of the lack of all positive evidence, we hold persistently to the belief, then the affective components of our *s.r* are so strong that they are beyond normal control. Usually a person holding such affective beliefs is seriously ill, and, therefore, no amount of evidence can convince him.

We see, then, that it is not a matter of indifference to what 'ology' we assign terms, and some assignments may be of a pathological character, if they identify psycho-logical entities with the outside world. Life is full of such dramatic identifications, and it would be a great step forward in semantic hygiene if some 'ologies'—e.g., demonologies of different brands, should be abolished as such, and their subject-matter transferred to another 'ology'; namely, to psycho-logics, where it belongs.

The projection mechanism is one fraught with serious dangers, and it is very dangerous to develop it. The danger is greatest in childhood, when silly teachings help to develop this semantic mechanism, and so to affect, in a pathological way, the physically undeveloped nervous system of the human child. Here we meet an important fact which will become prominent later—that ignorance, identification, and pathological delusions, illusions, and hallucinations, are dangerously akin, and differentiated *only* by the 'emotional' background or intensity.

An important aspect of the problem of existence can be made clear by some examples. Let us recall that a noise or written sign, to become a symbol, must stand for *something*. Let us imagine that you, my

reader, and myself are engaged in an argument. Before us, on the table, lies something which we usually call a box of matches: you argue that there are matches in this box; I say that there are no matches in it. Our argument can be settled. We open the box and look, and both become convinced. It must be noticed that in our argument we used *words*, because they stood for something; so when we began to argue, the argument could be solved to our mutual satisfaction, since there was a *third* factor, the object, which corresponded to the symbol used, and this settled the dispute. A third factor was present, and agreement became possible. Let us take another example. Let us try to settle the problem: 'Is blah-blah a case of tra-tra?' Let us assume that you say 'yes', and that I say 'no'. Can we reach any agreement? It is a real tragedy, of which life is full, that such an argument cannot be solved at all. We used noises, not words. There was *no third* factor for which these noises stood as symbols, and so we could argue endlessly without any possibility of agreement. That the noises may have stood for some *semantic disturbance* is quite a different problem, and in such a case a psycho-pathologist should be consulted, but arguments should stop. The reader will have no difficulty in gathering from daily life other examples, many of them of highly tragic character.

We see that we can reach, even here, an important conclusion; namely, that, first of all, we must distinguish between words, symbols which symbolize something, and noises, not symbols, which have no meaning (unless with a pathological meaning for the physician); and, second, that if we use words (symbols for something), all disputes can be solved sooner or later. But, in cases in which we use noises as if they were words, such disputes can *never* be settled. Arguments about the 'truth' or 'falsehood' of statements containing noises are useless, as the terms 'truth' or 'falsehood' do not apply to them. There is one characteristic about noises which is very hopeful. If we use words, symbols, not-noises, the problems may be complicated and difficult; we may have to wait for a long time for a solution; but we know that a solution will be forthcoming. In cases where we make noises, and treat them as words, and this fact is exposed, then the 'problems' are correctly recognized at once as 'no-problems', and such solutions remain valid. Thus, we see that one of the obvious origins of human disagreement lies in the use of noises for words, and so, after all, this important root of human dissension might be abolished by proper education of *s.r* within a single generation. Indeed, researches in symbolism and *s.r* hold great possibilities. We should not be surprised that we find meaningless noises in the foundation of many old 'philosophies', and that from them arise

most of the old ‘philosophical’ fights and arguments. Bitterness and tragedies follow, because many ‘problems’ become ‘no-problems’, and the discussion leads nowhere. But, as material for psychiatric studies, these old debates may be scientifically considered, to the great benefit of our understanding.

We have already mentioned the analogy between the noises we make when these noises do not symbolize anything which exists, and the worthless ‘cheques’ we give when our bank balance is zero. This analogy could be enlarged and compared with the sale of gold bricks, or any other commercial deal in which we try to make the other fellow accept something by a representation which is contrary to fact. But we do not realize that when we make noises which are not words, because they are not symbols, and give them to the other fellow as if they were to be considered as words or symbols, we commit a similar kind of action. In the concise *Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, there is a word, ‘fraud’, the definition of which it will be useful for us to consider. Its standard definition reads: ‘Fraud, n. Deceitfulness (rare), criminal deception, *use of false representations*. (in Law, . . .); dishonest artifice or trick (*pious* fraud, deception intended to benefit deceived, and especially to strengthen religious belief); person or thing not fulfilling expectation or description.’* Commercialism has taken good care to prevent one kind of symbolic fraud, as in the instances of spurious cheques and selling gold bricks or passing counterfeit money. But, as yet, we have not become intelligent enough to realize that another most important and similar kind of fraud is continually going on. So, up to the present, we have done nothing about it.

No reflecting reader can deny that the passing off, on an unsuspecting listener, of noises for words, or symbols, must be classified as a fraud, or that we pass to the other fellow contagious semantic disturbances. This brief remark shows, at once, what serious ethical and social results would follow from investigation of correct symbolism.

On one side, as we have already seen, and as will become increasingly evident as we proceed, our *sanity* is connected with correct symbolism. And, naturally, with the increase of sanity, our ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ standards would rise. It seems useless to preach metaphysical ‘ethics’ and ‘morals’ if we have no standards for sanity. A fundamentally *un-sound* person cannot, in spite of any amount of preaching, be either ‘moral’ or ‘ethical’. It is well known that even the most good-natured person becomes grouchy or irritable when ill, and his other

* The first italics are mine.—A. K.

semantic characteristics change in a similar way. The abuse of symbolism is like the abuse of food or drink: it makes people ill, and so their reactions become deranged.

But, besides the moral and ethical gains to be obtained from the use of correct symbolism, our economic system, which is based on symbolism and which, with ignorant commercialism ruling, has mostly degenerated into an abuse of symbolism (secrecy, conspiracy, advertisements, bluff, 'live-wire agents'. .), would also gain enormously and become stable. Such an application of correct symbolism would conserve a tremendous amount of nervous energy now wasted in worries, uncertainties. , which we are all the time piling upon ourselves, as if bent upon testing our endurance. We ought not to wonder that we break down individually and socially. Indeed, if we do not become more intelligent in this field, we shall inevitably break down racially.

The semantic problems of correct symbolism underlie *all human* life. Incorrect symbolism, similarly, has also tremendous semantic ramifications and is bound to undermine any possibility of our building a structurally *human* civilization. Bridges cannot be built and be expected to endure if the cubic masses of their anchorages and abutments are built according to formulae applying to *surfaces*. These formulae are structurally different, and their confusion with the formulae of volumes must lead to disasters. Similarly, we cannot apply generalizations taken from cows, dogs, and other animals to man, and expect the resultant social structures to endure.

Of late, the problems of meaninglessness are beginning to intrigue a number of writers, who, however, treat the subject without the realization of the multiordinal, ∞ -valued, and *non-el* character of meanings. They assume that 'meaningless' has or may have a definite general content or unique, one-valued 'meaning'. What has been already said on *non-el* meanings, and the example of the unicorn given above, establish a most important semantic issue; namely, that what is 'meaningless' in a given context on one level of analysis, may become full of sinister meanings on another level when it becomes a symbol for a *semantic disturbance*. This realization, in itself, is a most fundamental semantic factor of our reactions, without which the solution of the problems of sanity becomes extremely difficult, if at all possible.