The Ethical Ramifications of Mediation Theory

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Both the social and cognitive sciences have come to look upon human behavior as locked into a network of representation — a conceptual structure about the world being in a certain way — that is designed to mediate the way actions are to be interpreted and to satisfy the fulfillment of certain organizational needs. What this paper will argue is that such an interpretive framework has serious ethical implications which have often been ignored; that to make a structure independent of the individuals who compose it, where the processes involved are empowered with capacities superior to those of its members, makes it difficult to see how any human individual has power enough to be held responsible for his or her behavior.

It would seem that whereas traditional science has placed the emphasis on the singularity of the element, and its spatial or temporal contiguity with other elements, advancements in cybernetics (assisted no doubt by the non-substantive nature of particle physics) have spawned a new model of inquiry which de-emphasizes external descriptions to attend to the underlying medium by which the ordering of elements takes place (e.g., chemical bonding, molecular structures). By going beyond surface manifestations to propose a system of organization for the events under investigation, such a mode of inquiry strives to narrow the range of permutation between elements so as to determine the causal mechanism which will decide what the next case will be — that is, in order to define the underlying form representative of future instances (MacKinnon, 1982; McMullin, 1978).

Although the social and cognitive sciences have often claimed to be different from other sciences in the nature of the phenomena they attempt to explain (namely the patterns of human behavior), that they have not been unaffected by this cybernetic drift is confirmed by the fact that whether it be encoded inscriptions inside the brain or occupational codes of conduct, mediational structures have apparently come to be seen as the vital heartbeat of any human affair (in the social sciences, see Bernstein, 1973, Giddens, 1976; Gluckman, 1987; in the cognitive sciences, see Abelson, 1973; Bobrow, 1974; Rosch, 1975). This is not to say that social and cognitive scientists perceive their enterprises as being one and the same. The fact that one is interested in how institutions and organizations impose constraints on social interaction, while the other looks to

how we obtain, order and use information within the mind, makes any relationship between these disciplines more complementary than identical. Where they seem to share the same kidney is that both have come to look upon human behavior as locked into a network of representation—a conceptual structure about the world being in a certain way—that is designed to mediate the way actions are to be interpreted and to satisfy the fulfillment of certain organizational needs.

Now explanations of how things come to be as they are and predictions of what may take place are surely important to any task where human behavior is at issue; the acquisition of a general knowledge of human behavior facilitates our understanding of the respect in which people are like or unlike each other (or like or unlike other kinds). But I would assume that as the sources of how we come to know something do not explain what we know, the sources of how we come to do something do not explain what we do. It is one thing to make a contingency claim about those factors that influence our behavior and it is quite another thing to arrive at a correct causal explanation as to how and why a person comes to act. In offering a causal explanation of events it is appropriate to take into account not only the kind of thing involved but what strands in an extensive causal net are most important. What I will argue in this paper is that the current orthodoxy that prevails in sociology and psychology today constructs meshes so big that it allows the individual to slip through while holding on to a network of causal relations that places each person in what seems to be a more rule-conforming (rather than rule-obeying) setting.[1] I will further contend that such an interpretive framework has serious ethical implications which have often been ignored; that to make a structure independent of the individuals who compose it, where the processes involved are empowered with capacities superior to those of its member, makes it difficult to see how the individual per se has power enough to be held responsible for his or her behavior.

The Individual in Mediation Theory

There is little doubt that in the past the mediated side of human behavior was seriously ignored. The problem with traditional explanation was that social and cognitive structures were regarded as purely extraneous in character and found in terms of the individual's relation with other individuals, or with his or her own awareness, rather than residing in the world in some way or form. Invaria-

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[1]An orthodoxy, I might add, that has been championed by many philosophers (especially philosophers steeped in the analytical tradition). Certainly,the recognition (1) that psychological and sociological elements enter into all theories; (2) that the contingency of the association between external physical theory and internal experiences preclude a phenomenalist reduction or unmediated representation; and (3) that all phenomena share their semantic feature by virtue of the role they play in a structure of related concepts and beliefs, has given philosophers an opportunity to provide a conceptual underpinning for mediation theory in the social and cognitive sciences.

bly such an approach reduced social and cognitive structures to summaries or extrapolations of human experience leaving the individual as the ultimate authority in the arrangement. More often than not elegant theories of agency — theories of a rational person with an unlimited capacity to establish and carry through his/her beliefs — were purported to explain human conduct, holding those too weak or dishonest to resist the temptation inherent in life, morally accountable for what they did.

Such oversimplified theories worked well in splendid abstraction, but had little credibility in a realistic setting where it became apparent that affective forces rendered the individual less free as an agent than was previously thought. Individuals, of course, are not as free as they appear to be or think they are; everyone acts as they do because they are acted upon by a confluence of forces independent of their control. A considerable mass of studies in both fields — studies on discrimination in social intercourse and the nature of memory storage (Anderson, 1976; Merton, 1979) — have strongly indicated that it might be more explanatory and accurate to say that the order of the relation affects and limits the actions of the individual, rather than the other way around. Moreover, such studies have generally maintained that there is an ontological significance — a generative source of power — to these encoded relationships, whether the properties of the relationship are identified by human experience or not (on social structures see Bhasker, 1975; Blau, 1974; Blau and Schoenherr, 1971; on cognitive structures see Newell, 1973; Wason and Johnson-Laird, 1972).

For the purpose at hand what is important is that the recent vintage of social and psychological explanation seems to imply some variation on the theme of an epistemic subject, i.e., a subject's relation to other subjects in a symbolic field or knowledge structure which is common to all. Since epistemic systems are generally regarded as shared propositions (and not propositions which the subject can alter, or necessarily has attitudes towards) it would appear that such an interpretive framework tends to withdraw attention from the individual by reducing inquiry to discourse about the causal processes which logically construct, organize, transform and utilize meaning. Whereas human consciousness was traditionally regarded as direct and unerring, the postulation of underdetermining conceptual structures (e.g., the inaccessible representations lodged in long-term memory) has no doubt greatly impacted on how we perceive ourselves by leaving the reliability, if not the reality, of primitive feelings, intentional references, existential continuity — any hidden homunculi that has to do with the uniqueness and privileged awareness of the individual — considerably in doubt. In that individuals have no direct access to the content within them, it has become apparent that belief systems need not be defined by what it is like to have them; which is to say that representational systems may have become a better idiom of human behavior than any form of sentient interpretation.

It is important to realize that what is at issue here is not whether structural factors are contributory causes to human conduct (this I acknowledge is more

than likely the case), but whether the current fettle of explanation that lines the social and cognitive sciences is predisposed towards arrogating too much? Does the fact that traditional accounts of human capacity have been unwarrantedly extended entirely negate the validity of an individualistic explanation of behavior? Although the association of causality with determinism is highly suspect, especially with the logically uncertain status of natural laws, there is a thread that runs through mediational accounts, as it does through any application of this species of thinking, that I believe severely limits and misrepresents the nature of human conduct.[2] Recent literature has been inclined to look upon human behavior as the product of a network of meaning with problem solving strategies and goal states of its own. What is characteristic of these conceptual structures is that the behavior of individuals depends upon a pre-existing system of categories and beliefs that is beyond their intentions; which is to say, that mediational accounts appeal to a notion of content that has no interesting connection with the conscious manipulation of symbols. As one social scientist has put it:

> The fact that social structures pre-exist for individuals explains their coercive power over individuals. Since they exist as legacies of previous structurations, they are "outside" the individual, external facticities. (Manicas, 1979, p. 67)

And as Fodor has observed in reference to cognitive structures:

> . . . certain kinds of very central patterns of psychological explanation presuppose the availability, to the behaving organism, of some sort of representational system.
>   . . . For, according to the model, deciding is a computational process; the act the agent performs is the consequence of computations defined over representations of possible actions. (Fodor, 1975, pp. 31-32)

Certainly one of the outgrowths of this line of thinking is that since most operational codes and representational mediums are sequences over which the subject has little or no control (in that the transmission, reception and generation of information does not require an interpretation), any willful response on the part of individuals tends to be viewed as a short-term store with no

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[2]Because of their constructivist learning, i.e., because recent thought neglects the "given" and the traditional idea that science is clearly based on objective observational and language independent procedures, there is a tendency among some mediation theorists to look at the issue of determinism/free will as an arbitrary preference of one mode of speech over another; which is to say, that since the significance of any phenomena is derived from its role in a system of related concepts and beliefs, the epistemological status of any human event does not present a barrier to either determinism or free will. It should be obvious that although there is merit to this line of thinking, such egalitarianism is misleading. Even though we can discuss free will, and even though psychologically tainted expressions like "will" or "pain" are not co-extensive with any physical state, I doubt if many would contend that non-physical states play any causal role in the production of human behavior. Although physical interaction does not necessarily imply free will or determinism, determinism is the only one of the two that seems to carry any possible value.

generative function; that is, as a temporary activation of information which is cognitively external to them. Although there is not space enough to traverse all that is involved here (not the least of which is whether the notion of "will" is meaningful at all), it would be remiss not to point out that there lies within this account a restricted conception of the human capacity to act. Talking about "will" or "intention" is usually talking about whether persons are able to bring about what they can avoid bringing about, not whether they are directed by goal-oriented, belief-producing processes to do what they did. I take it as conspicuous that a person may have strong beliefs and desires towards a particular course of action and still refrain from doing it. Willful action holds independently of the antecedent conditions which give rise to it. Mediational accounts tend to perceive action systems as functionally equal, whether in artificial or natural systems, and thereby fail to see that the role of the human will is not to represent the world, but to make it consonant to what the agent wants.

What I am saying is that even though mediational theories of human behavior are crucial for empirically tracking down social and cognitive processes, and have contributed greatly to explaining the long range predisposition to act in a certain way, they are deficient in the sense that they seem incapable of dealing with the intrinsic side of the human agent. What is morally relevant here is that the character of persons—the combination of qualities and life-history that distinguishes one individual from others—is really left under the heel of the character of the act (an altruistic act, I assume, is not the same as acting out of altruism since it is not inconsistent to say that one can commit an altruistic act with dishonorable or recreant motives). Insofar as mediational explanation works backwards to how things are implemented, it tends to discount the unity and uniqueness of the self (since the self is not known directly) by making the character of persons, like their knowledge base, something derivative— something that merely happens to them. Although there is some merit to this line of thinking, in that as Aristotle foresaw what we are is shaped and sustained by our social and psychological (and no doubt biological) past, it is also true that an individual's probity or perfidy becomes rather shallow-rooted when viewed as a borrowed token of an underlying process. Since traditionally we have a moral agent only if the behavior in question is individually determined, i.e., if we credit the person with some sort of self-centered causal role, by making the character of the individual totally dependent upon action regularities and antecedent causal conditions, mediational accounts seem to strip individuals of anything that would make them the basis of what they are.

The view of the person as an active conative entity is depreciated here in deference to a network of causal relations which places each individual in a more passive role setting. What follows from this is the supposition that the events that take place can be defined and considered without reference to the individual; that the individual subject is no longer the cause of what comes to

pass but simply an ephemeral stage in the course of the events development (i.e., a conduit through which we channel information). Since to be responsible is to be in a causal relation with the outcome, it would appear that mediational accounts leave individuals enervated by alienating them from the roots of activity. I find it not in the least bit cavilling to wonder how an interpretive framework that represents individuals as having no direct access to the content within themselves, nor any ascendancy over the nature of their character, nor any significant affect on the outcome that ensues, can really expect such individuals to carry much moral baggage.

The Ethical Status of Current Thinking

There is no doubt that a strong case can be made for a mediational account of human activity. The fact that a good deal of human motivation, references and values are the result of inescapable conceptual structures which the individual has little or no control over makes any Socratic or existential confidence in human freedom somewhat of a misplaced idealization. We often underestimate the pervasive power of forces working on us while overestimating our power to resist. If the norms of reference groups can bring about a concept of a generalized self, and if cognitive schema can greatly affect our learning capacity, then it is not unreasonable to expect that highly content-sensitive representational formations are capable of generating the beliefs for participation in any kind of act—even acts of an illicit nature (Needleman and Needleman, 1979; Sagarin, 1975).

But beliefs, like related desires, are not in principle, and often in practice, outside the sphere of a person's power or responsibility. Although it is apparent that intentionality is inadequate for explaining human actions, furthermore that intentionality seems redundant once we explain our actions in terms of desires and belief, the power of the individual to affect what takes place, is, I suggest, less limited than recent speculation might intimate. Individuals may no longer be the origin of information, but the power to interpret meaning and to initiate action seems to be still theirs (whether they use this power or not). It certainly challenges intuitive insight into human behavior to assert that individuals who can focus, select and concentrate on things to form a personal and purposeful view of the world; who can consciously enter into conflict with beliefs to the point of withholding assent; and who can represent their actions to themselves in a future tense, nevertheless did not have the power to be the source and explanation of what occurs.[3] Individuals may not be in a privileged

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[3]Admittedly it is not an uncommon practice in judicial circles to look upon certain mediational structures as if they were persons. In regulating corporate activities, courts and legislatures have generally treated corporations as though they were entities that existed apart from their members and thereby entitled to special privileges and rights. Certainly game theorists like Arrow (1951) have shown us that market and judicial systems often do have an internal representational structure—a map of

position when it comes to the question of whether their judgements are a reliable indicator of their beliefs, but they do appear to be in a position, since judgements come one at a time, to arrive at outcomes that are the object of their decision or preference. I see nothing in a mediational theory of human behavior that forces us to accept the conclusion that individuals who succumb to the authority inherent in representational systems were necessarily more coerced, rather than say weak-willed, in their behavior. Representational systems are semantic matters, like logical relations, and cannot by themselves initiate actions.

The crippling flow of recent explanation is not that it appeals to mediational factors, but that it focuses on these factors disproportionately; that instead of maintaining a ceteris paribus condition that applies when everything else is equal, it takes the symbolic factor too much to heart and offers a causal explanation of human behavior that makes the relation of element to element to whole so overridingly important that the individual can only be distinguished at the cost of triviality or misrepresentation (indeed persons may know how to do something, and even be able to describe what they did, yet their behavior could still be viewed here as accidental). Mediation theory may not need ghosts to make it go, but without a sharper distinction between the agent who engages the structure and the structure itself, without more sensitivity to the more complexed characterizations of conscious and intentional activity, such a perspective cannot reconstruct a situation as it might have been grasped by the individual. Nor can it assess the power of persons qua persons to act and affect themselves or others. Although such an interpretive framework does present a serious challenge to a theory of rational choice, to the unity and autonomy of the person, and contra Kant and Reid, to the independent status of moral philosophy, it has woven within its fabric an inherent tendency to turn higher-level explanation into downward causal patterns that siphon power from particular entities and transfer it to the codes or mediums that run in them. Like the pure consciousness of Eastern mysticism, or Parfit's classical account of the self,[4] the individual entity in this explanation does not possess any force or

interdependent and dependent relationships — which reduces and combines the intentions and acts of various persons into a collective-type will. But such a concession to *structuration* in no way implies that such structures are closed systems of inherent organization with no structure beyond themselves. Conceptual structures of any type are not systems of intrinsic reference that are functionally divorced from the beliefs, interpretations and behaviors of their subjects. Although supra-individualist factors (genetic and social formations) unquestionably influence the acquisition of a system of beliefs and expectations, individuals do not appear to be totally annexed by any mediational system but retain a constant medium of reflexive rationality which is relative to, but by no means identical with, the system of which they are a part. In fact, it has been shown that people's understanding of how much control they can exert over events in their lives affects, either positively or negatively, how they behave. The distinctness of the person may be less deep than we naively suppose, but the individual is, at one and the same time, both part of and apart from such relationships (a view not unlike Giddens, 1977; Winch, 1972).

[4]Parfit's point (1971) is that what matters in the question of personal identity is mental continuity and connectedness and this seems to be nothing more than the connection and continuity between events in the life of a person.

properties of its own (viz., any non-sharable qualities, or "thisness," which can conserve the system by closing it off to other systems). Indeed, one can seriously question whether a manner of explanation that finds the human element indispensable for theory construction, but yet replaces the beliefs and associations of the subject with representations of other sorts (especially with representations which are not accessible to introspection), is really as deep as it is heralded to be or truly at variance with reductionist ambitions.

By dealing with the medium by which the ordering of elements takes place, the current bon ton of explanation provides science in general with a unified field theory of thinking that can translate back and forth across disciplinary boundaries. But even though this mode of thought gives consideration to the signs and symbols of any pattern of relation, it seems incapable of descending to the depths in which practices have their roots to commune as it were with the power and complexity of any ordinary particular (human or otherwise). The advantage of this explanatory model may in truth be its principal handicap. Mediational accounts have shown us that simple empirical determinants are not sufficient for explaining the signifiers which they yield; that since no world is apart from us, some form of prior information or epistemic consideration must be provided to explain the relationship between the elements involved. But when these relationships come to seem necessary and inner-directed, because there is a recognition of competence or fit (or because they cannot be falsified), then the question surfaces as to whether this form of explanation is not preying upon itself by giving encoded relationships more of a causal role than the references that comprise them. Like quantum theory, this new model of inquiry has no isolated building blocks; no classical concept of elementary things as being real or even significant. Instead, it has a logical-mechanistic tendency to transform ongoing processes, be they in social institutions or subroutines, into general descriptions that view the interconnection of elements as the ruling reality.[5] I find it difficult to see how individuals can ever contribute to, correct, refute, or in any way control, conceptual structures that are independent of their intentions. Theories of mediation, as a top-down strategy, may tend to explain what makes certain relationships meaningful and manageable (i.e., how they work in the conceptual arrangement at hand), but they fall far short in explaining what makes these relationships what they are: their non-relational, non-epistemic

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[5]Perhaps it is the fact that nominalism has been associated with traditional empiricism, or because blurring the distinction between the context of discovery and the context of justification tends to enfeeble any account of truth or reality (in that no world interpretation appears to be more representative of nature than another), that has induced many mediation theorists to reify these conceptual structures and give them a life of their own. Since representational systems represent whatever they represent on account of their internal properties (i.e., those features of themselves that they take to have content), mediational theory often involves (or evolves to) the acceptance of the deep structure being postulated. Although what the context of these structures are is a hotly debated issue, whatever the medium is it still appears to become in such explanations the reality behind what is being explained.

properties. Indeed how a relational property can make a sensation a twinge rather than a tickle is not easy to digest.[6]

Without a thicker and richer base (a more adequate theory of reference), it seems apparent that such a style of thinking can neither exhaust nor accurately reflect all that needs to be said on human behavior. This is not to say that recent efforts in the social and cognitive sciences have been pointless enterprises. This would be patently false. Certainly mediational explanations have shown us (1) that discovering the constraints the world puts on representation is important, and (2) that what seems direct and facile turns out, under closer scrutiny, to involve many complex and underlying processes. But insofar as representational systems are unable to do justice to the depth and meaning of human experiences, that is, insofar as they treat human experiences as simply surface and superficial manifestations, they are as constraining to an explanation of such behavior as the suppositions of alchemy were to the explanation of chemical behavior.[7]

At the present stage of theorizing, where some might feel that there is good reason to suppose that more advanced representational systems are so by virtue of the fact that they are representative to a higher degree of our human achievement, the threat of mediational explanation to our autonomy and ethical status might not seem imminent. I am very sympathetic to this response — the common sense intuition that we are more sophisticated, self-directing systems should not be taken lightly. What I am at a loss to see is how a theory of behavior that seems to depreciate the view of humanity as an active entity, that seems to make the individual subordinate (like dimwitted homunculi) to a web of encoded relations, and that seems to divest individuals of anything that would distinguish them from others, can be compatible with what we ordinarily consider to be a morally accountable person. What I have argued is that if the social and cognitive sciences continue along on their present path they can only contribute to further enervating the status of individuals by leaving them without the capacity to generate meaning and without the nucleus to be the source of what occurs. Whether this leaves them factored out without the power to carry any moral baggage is something that in my own thoughts I am not prone to admit, but I have serious doubts as to whether many social and cognitive theorists could say the same. For sure, it is quite possible that some would not

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[6] I am perfectly willing to admit that we need our conceptual spectacles on to understand the lie of things, but it does not follow from this that everything we do has to be indirect or mediated. The thesis that language functions as mediating cue which renders originally indistinguishable stimuli distinctive has been entertained and tested by many psychologists and has been found to be wanting. Codes might facilitate memory, but discrimination does not appear to be limited to codability.

[7] What is needed is a wider range of approaches that can deal more extensively with human behavior (e.g., non-representational structures, non-propositional representation, phenomenological structures, etc.). Theories of functional representation, for example, are designed to obtain a general knowledge about the world independent of higher-level knowledge. Although I hasten to add, as it has been said so often before, that any hope of reaching the marrow of behavior, through any combination of strategies, is at best distal.

deny this and say, "So much the worse for moral judgements!" If this indeed be true then they should be bold enough to state so and suggest the important ramifications for ethical theory and, on a more concrete level, for ethical policies that the adoption of such a position may entail.

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