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Book Review: Bogen on Social Theory, Rules, and Order

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BOOK REVIEW: BOGEN ON SOCIAL THEORY, RULES, AND ORDER

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Social science at the beginning of the new millennium is nothing if not constantly expanding its substantive foci, in effect problematizing certain fundamental areas of reality and suggesting that these areas represent central or core objects of study. The idea of "central concept" has become so widespread now that the traditional way of parsing up areas of study by discipline (economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, political science, history, etc.) has fallen into disrepair.

Some of these central concepts are gender, race, culture, the self, control, power, systems, personality, social space or distance, birth, death, chemicals or hormones, communication, and with regard to the latter more specifically, *talk.* It is this last concept, talk, that takes center stage in David Bogen's *Order Without Rules: Critical Theory and the Logic of Conversation.*

Bogen's book is somewhat deceiving, for although small in size (188 pages) its analytical ambitions are huge. Bogen is dealing simultaneously with speech act theory; ethnomethodology; the problems of foundationalism, meaning, and order; conversation analysis; Wittgenstein; Habermas, and critical theory. Before I even get to an explanation of what it is he is up to, I first want to state that, although there are some rough spots, Bogen has done a good job of taking a group of disparate and even antagonistic theoretical and methodological programs and weaving them into a coherent problematic.

Bogen's Problematic

I refer to Bogen's narrative as a "problematic" insofar as various key players or ideas are introduced to bring into relief other thinkers who, although working in the same substantive area — talk or communicative interaction — hold vastly different conceptions of how best to make sense of this elusive

concept. Bogen chooses to analyze the battle over talk that a number of disparate analysts and practitioners have waged as paradigmatic of an even more fundamental disagreement over (social) scientific visions and practices of logic, rules, and order. The starting point is Winch's (1958) commentary on Weber's notion that the natural sciences are fundamentally different than the social sciences insofar as the former are concerned with causal explanations of relationships between physical phenomena while the latter are concerned with the reasons – that is, the motives and intentions – lying behind why individual or collective actors engage in certain forms of social behavior. This is the *Verstehen* tradition in German sociology, associated strongly with Weber's dictum that in order to explain social phenomena sociologists ought to work at the level of meaning of the actors involved in order to *understand* the reasons the actors acted the way they did. Since science is concerned with developing general knowledge, Weber's problematic was closing the gap between what objectively is observed and why subjectively it was done. In other words, Weber's focus was on developing a methodology by which the subjective states of a multitude of actors could be discerned in some systematic, "rational" way.

Winch goes on to point out Weber's error: the meaning of social action is not dependent on the "inner" mental life of individual actors. Here Winch is heavily influenced by a reading (problematic in its own right) of Wittgenstein's notion of "language game." The way we understand our own actions is the same way we understand others' actions, insofar as there exists a number of publicly organized and ratified social conventions – "talk" being one of the most important – by which shared forms of life are created and sustained. Since, according to Winch, Wittgenstein has shown how language is organized by social convention – and so in this nontranscendental, normative sense is rule-governed – the meaning of our actions can be traced back to language itself as an externally visible and available resource. With language and the practical contexts within which it occurs being seen as the proper basis of meaning and rationality, one need not invoke the hoary notion of "mind" or "subjective states" when dealing with social phenomena. Most importantly, as Bogen notes, Winch (1990, p. 52) argues that "all behavior which is meaningful (therefore all specifically human behavior) is *ipso facto* rule governed."[1]

Rules, Rules, Rules

In rejecting Weber's *Verstehende* sociology, Winch is attempting to follow Wittgenstein's (1958) notion of language games, as previously noted. One of the standard implications of this position is that, since language has a set of rules (of syntax, phonetics, prosody, etc.) by which competent speakers are

able to communicate, so too must there be a set of rules available to actors by which everyday life is made meaningful and intelligible. This "rules argument" approach is not only Winch's, but is shared by a number of scholarly traditions ranging from Austinian speech act theory to structuralism to Chomskian grammar.[2] These various proponents of the "linguistic turn" suggest that "social practices could be analyzed like games, where a game is constituted by a set of socially agreed conventions, and intelligible play consists in applying those rules in any particular case" (Bogen, 1999, p. 9).

Bogen notes, however, that one of the glaring problems of this rules argument approach is that the notion of "rule" is accepted as a relatively unproblematic concept that is viewed (by these theorists) as actually guiding the behavior of real flesh-and-blood human beings in their everyday lives. Utilizing "rules" in this way simply elides the problem of interpretation Wittgenstein (1958) opened up with his famous paradox of 201, the implication of which is the indeterminacy of rules (Bogen, 1999, p. 132). Wittgenstein's paradox begs the question: What is the ultimate basis of normative assertion? (Bramdon, 1994; Turner, 1998).

Further, speaking of a language game as a set of rules that competent speakers follow implies that each set of social practices and traditions associated with the various language games (or societies) are more or less self-contained and isolated from one another. As Overing (1985, p. 1) notes, Winch's interpretation of Wittgenstein suggests that

> our sense of reality is a social construction based on the conventional discourse of our society, the corollary of which is that unrelated language communities may well have incommensurable worldviews and rationalities.

The complication here is that, if Winch is correct, there are no universal laws available by which to explain the varying norms, folkways, and ways of life that characterize various cultures. There are only discrete "language games" that make sense only within the context of each discrete culture or social system.

This fragmentation – which has shown up most forcefully in the social sciences in Lyotard's (1984) postmodernist "loss of certitude" and rejection of the "grand metanarratives" of Enlightenment philosophy – runs counter to the Enlightenment ethos of deductive-nomothetic explanation which seeks to uncover the laws of the social universe. This is also where Jurgen Habermas's (1984, 1987) program of formal pragmatics and theory of communicative action steps into the fray. Other researchers and research traditions seem content to work in specific, narrowly circumscribed areas of empirical inquiry – such as the many programs oriented to the study of actual talk in concrete social settings, most notably ethnomethodology, discourse or conversation analysis (CA), and even some versions of speech act theory (see Geis, 1995).

Habermas, however, is attempting to go beyond the empirical analysis of talk or the categorization of types of speech via his Enlightenment program of general knowledge which seeks first and foremost to uncover the universal features of logic, order, and reason underlying all forms of talk.[3]

Order Without Rules?

Habermas cannot accept postmodernism's notion of the futility of the search for the foundations of knowledge, logic, and reason, for without this foundation there would be no basis upon which to build a critical theory which aims at ameliorating or eliminating objectively oppressive social arrangements. Bogen favors, in spirit at least, Habermas's attempt at grounding critical theory in the normative foundations of everyday speech. But Bogen also believes the critical, ameliorative promise of Habermas's theory of communicative action will never be fully realized unless or until Habermas incorporates into his theory important insights from the various practice-based or empirical studies of talk and understanding, whether Garfinkel's ethnomethodology, Goffman's dramaturgy, CA's program of talk-in-interaction, or even speech act theory.[4]

This brings us to the crux of Bogen's problematic, which as I suggested earlier is basically another take on the question, What is the ultimate basis of normative assertion? If indeed we cannot recover universal standards for the validity of everyday speech—which seems to be implied in Winch's and others' reading of the later Wittgenstein—there would seem to be no reasonable basis upon which to assess the intelligibility and cogency of statements. This, as we have seen, opens up social theory to the postmodernist loss of certitude about the Enlightenment quest for causal explanation and general theory. Indeed, if meaning is "endlessly deferred," how can there exist formally valid rules of discursive engagement; indeed, how is social order even possible?

On the matter of reason, logic, and social order, Bogen argues for a middle ground between the analytical and empirical realms or approaches. Habermas's noble attempt to rescue the Enlightenment program by grounding reason in the universal validity claims inherent in all speech has not proven effective as a practical guideline for solving the problem of distorted (or coerced) communication in modern society (see Chriss, 1995). However, the failure of Habermas's analytical program of talk and communication does not mean we should join the postmodernists in proclaiming the "death of the subject" or accepting the futility of general understandings of discursive and social orders. This is because a few of the practice-based (empirical) programs have successfully illustrated that there are

> relatively stable, conventional methods by which utterances and actions are understood, arguments are assessed, facts are constituted, and disputes

are resolved, and that the practical methods for reasoning and acting provide adequate grounds for persons' conduct irrespective of appeals to universal standards of validity or rules of conduct. (Bogen, 1999, p. 2)

Bogen dedicates chapter 4 to an analysis of the "talk-in-interaction" program of Emanuel Schegloff, the well-known and influential sociologist and conversation analyst. Whereas some complain that general theorists (such as Parsons and Habermas) operate at such high levels of abstraction that they oftentimes are unable to inform empirical research or practical application, others complain that the practice-based programs of talk (specifically, CA) are too narrowly focused on the minutia of talk and communication and hence often fail to connect their empirical insights to important "macro" phenomena of abiding interest to sociologists such as social class, stratification, power, and social structure more generally (see Hutchby, 1999). In contrast to Habermas's formal (or universal) pragmatics, CA is concerned with explicating how "lived" speech is organized. The program of capturing the minute details of strips of talk has led to fairly well established conventions for presenting and representing conversation between real human beings as it actually occurs in concrete social settings. It is argued by Schegloff and others in CA that by faithfully recording and representing talk-in-interaction, the fundamental aspects of this particular human activity can be uncovered or discovered. No *a priori* sense of "rules" or "rule-drivenness" is imposed on the analysis, and hence CA stays closer to an inductivist strategy rather than taking the deductive-nomothetic approach of most traditional causal analyses.

Although Bogen agrees that CA has indeed made progress in explicating certain obdurate features of everyday talk and sense-making (see Heritage, 1999 for a summary of these accomplishments), he maintains that Schegloff and others in CA overstate the extent to which they have avoided imposing their own *a priori* sense of orderliness or rules on their data. Indeed, Schegloff's "discourse of the mundane" strategy, namely, the concentration on and the reporting of the routine, mundane features of everyday talk, becomes itself an analytical device for making sense of the multitude of instances of actual talk to which conversation analysts turn their attention. I would go even further than Bogen and claim that, in an important sense, the transcription devices for recording talk that CA researchers have developed actually "produce," as well as simply "report on," the orderliness discernible in talk. Bogen (1999, p. 91) is correct in pointing out that these transcription conventions function as a rhetorical device for setting a realist mood, much in the same fashion as the rhetorical device of the ancient epic narrative. It is similar to the positivists' "sober" search for the "facts." Like the technical intelligentsia of the New Class, CA has "painted God gray" in its prosaic, matter-of-fact attitude toward its subject matter (Gouldner, 1976, p. 262).

Conclusion

Even with the limitations outlined above (these paralleling the limitations of any program of "recovery," as Gouldner argued; see note 3), the empirical-based programs have nonetheless illustrated the ways in which orderly courses of social interaction are produced and recognized *in situ* by social actors. These local, practical accomplishments of talk and social order – which are in effect ethnomethodology's objects of inquiry – provide to the analyst or theorist explanations of logic, order, and reason that need not be grounded in a more general, abstract, or universal sense of "rules." This is Bogen's "order without rules" thesis, detailed at length in chapter 5.

Bogen returns to Wittgenstein for closure of his complex and multi-faceted argument. The confusion over rules that has plagued social theory for ages, but most acutely since Wittgenstein, has to do with the assumption that if certain objective practices are discernible to the researcher, this must mean *ipso facto* that the social actors engaged in any observable practice have some sense or understanding of the "rules" which makes these practices intelligible and accomplishable in the first place. But Bogen asks us to think of the chess player who knows all the rules of the game, who knows how to move the pieces, but who is not very "good" in the sense that he or she loses much of the time. As Bogen (1999, p. 139) suggests, "playing the game badly may have nothing to do with needing to learn some further rules, but instead may be explained by a lack of experience, practice, or aptitude."

The murkiness of any "rules argument" approach, then, is simply this: in seeking to explain the reproducibility and intelligibility of social practices, most theorists are looking not simply for the conditions necessary and sufficient for playing the game *poorly*, but for those features of practice that are related to its *mastery* – of being able to do something well or seemingly effortlessly, observed as a relatively unproblematic accomplishment of, in, and for the moment. Presumably, if something is being done "poorly" there would be so much variance associated with the actual practice that no distinguishing set of patterned activities could be made out by the researcher to even warrant turning attention to the thing as an interesting or important activity in the first place. Indeed, how could the researcher even make the assessment that some practice was being enacted "poorly" without some prior knowledge of a set of competent practices that mark the activity as being of a certain type or kind?

As Bogen (and Gouldner) show, even practice-based inquiries often employ, at some primitive level, a conception of what "competent" practice means and what it entails, that is, what it looks like. This is why "the classical conception of 'rules' is ill-suited to the demands of explicating the endogenous logic(s) of practical social life" (Bogen, 1999, p. 140). But this is, in the end, what we are stuck with: it generally is easier to go from *a priori* conceptions of

"competent" practice (and the rules assumed to be entailed therein) to the empirical social world, rather than from the messy, empirical social world – with its slapdash of competent and incompetent actors and their attending social practices – to the discovery of some set of rules underlying, energizing, and informing these practices. In the end, Bogen has perhaps unwittingly illustrated once again the "conservative" nature of the problem of social order, in that it favors "masterful" or "competent" performance in some area of social life rather than seeking out or explaining "incompetent" or "poor" performance. The latter is the hallmark of the dispossessed and downtrodden; in sum, of those persons or groups who in some sense are seen as "failures" in the grand scheme of things.

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Notes

1. As O'Neill (1995, p. 132) notes, by claiming that to understand language and society is virtually the same thing, Winch's position is close to that of the "double hermeneutic" (see Giddens, 1976).

2. For example, Alvin Gouldner's (1974, 1979) notions of the "culture of critical discourse" and the "generative grammar" of socialism were heavily influenced by the rules argument explicit in structuralism and Chomskian grammar. Speakers who follow the rules of their speech community are considered to be competent speakers, in that they choose or are able to conform to these rules. A generative grammar acts as a kind of simulation program in that following the rules as prescribed allows one, within the context of a community of speakers sharing the same grammar, to complete or produce what one wishes. The generative grammar is a deep (Gouldner preferred the term "latent") structure that de-randomizes human conduct (Chriss, 1999). Presumably, then, all empirical instances of social phenomena can be traced back to some relatively small set of generative grammars (sets of rules) that make these phenomena (whether talk, socialism, a chess game, etc.) meaningful and intelligible.

3. This distinction between Habermas's inclination toward general theory and the empirically based programs of actual talk is the same distinction Gouldner (1985) made between the doctrines of *holism* and *recovery*, respectively. That is, on the one hand there are researchers working away feverishly in one small corner of the social world to the exclusion of being able, or even wanting, to grasp the whole (recovery). On the other hand there are researchers creating grand, epic visions of the social whole which, in effect, leads to a sort of social paralysis insofar as there are no ready guidelines for establishing which substantive topics are worthy of further empirical analysis (holism) (Chriss, 1999, p. 175).

4. Bogen rightfully notes that, for the most part, proponents of CA are critical of speech act theory. CA views speech act theory as providing only a limited or partial view of talk

and meaning insofar as it tends to focus on the analysis of individual sentences and utterances in isolation from the social contexts within which they occur. By contrast, CA emphasizes the systematic organization of sequences of talk – turn-taking being seen as "foundational" in this sense – in their concrete interactional settings (Goodwin, 1996; Psathas, 1990). Levinson (1992) attempts to mediate this dispute somewhat by arguing that Wittgenstein's paradox leads to two distinctive yet interconnected features of talk and interaction, namely *speech acts* and *speech activities*. CA is concerned of course primarily with the latter.

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