

## Fictitious Beings in Sociological Definitions

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I should like to refer in these remarks to Bentham's "Theory of Fictions" and his sound recommendation to eliminate fictitious beings from our scientific language, or at least, if we cannot get rid of them, to be aware of their fictitious character.

In the field in which I am particularly interested, viz. the theory of value a number of definitions are to be found where fictitious beings are introduced both in the *definiendum* and in the *definiens*. Bentham who treated the definition *per genus proximum* and *differentiam specificam* as the main way of defining terms, considered the impossibility of finding a superior *genus* for the *definiendum* as a proof that the name defined was the name of a fictitious entity. A name of this kind could be defined only by what he called paraphrasis i.e. used in a phrase for which another phrase could be found as equivalent, the latter containing only names for real entities. Thus we cannot — according to him — define in isolation words like "right", "power", or "obligation", but treating them as incomplete symbols, we can give their definition, including them in a whole phrase.<sup>1</sup>

Let us follow Bentham's advice, starting by a definition of the terms "interest" and "need" which have been so frequently used in definitions of value.

In the first chapter of his "Introduction to the Principles of Morals and Legislation" Bentham added in the footnote the following remark: "Interest is one of these words, which not having any superior genus, cannot in the ordinary way be defined". In spite of this opinion, which suggested that we have to do with an incomplete symbol, a sham name of a fictitious being, many authors have tried to define the word "interest" with the form of the Aristotelian classic definition. Thus we read e.g. in the book by H. D. Lasswell and A. Kaplan:<sup>2</sup> "Df. An interest is a pattern of demands and its supporting expectations".

The notion of interest is ambiguous, sometimes being psychological and sometimes not. When referring to a well-known principle: "Divide et impera", we affirm that it is in the interest of rulers of a conquered land to take advantage of the discords of the ruled, we can have in mind either the fact that rulers usually aim at provoking conflicts, or that they ought to do so in order to be successful, independently of their personal desires. Analogously, when we affirm that it is everybody's interest to be able to read and write, we may think either that nobody

<sup>1</sup> An analogous line of thought has been, quite independently of Bentham, advocated by a contemporary Polish logician — Tadeusz Kotarbiński.

<sup>2</sup> H. D. Lasswell, A. Kaplan, "Power and Society", New Haven 1957, p. 23.

wants to be illiterate, or that people ought to have some education even though, not knowing the privileges of education, they obstinately refuse to learn the alphabet.

The use of terms like "demands" and "expectations" suggest that in the definition of interest, quoted above, the *definiendum* is taken in its psychological sense, although the word "pattern" in the *definiens* is of a rather indefinite ontological category. As an interest is always somebody's interest I should propose a paraphrasis of the form: "X is interested (or has an interest) in the realization of the state of affairs S when and only when his state of mind in connection with S is so and so". In a non-psychological definition of "interest", the state of mind of X would be irrelevant and "X is — according to Y — interested (or has an interest) in the realization of S" would be equivalent to the statement that, according to Y (Y being an individuum, who can be identical with X, or a smaller or larger group), the realization of S represents something valuable for X. The last paraphrasis makes explicit the necessity of engaging the notion of value in the definition of the word "interest" in its non-psychological sense, thus showing the danger of a *circulus vitiosus* in any attempt at a definition of value by the aid of the term "interest" in its non-psychological interpretation.

The same is true with the definition of the term "need" which can be quoted as a second example of an incomplete symbol, often used in definitions of value. Take e.g. the definition given by B. Malinowski in his book "A Scientific Theory of Culture",<sup>3</sup> which runs as follows:

By need I understand the system of conditions in the human organism, in the cultural setting, and the relation of both to the natural environment, which are sufficient and necessary for the survival of group or organism. A need, therefore, is the limiting set of facts [...]

The term "need" like the term "interest" can be psychological or not. According to the first possibility, X needs an object only when he desires it, feels an uneasiness (Locke) when deprived of it etc. Malinowski quite obviously defines the notion of need without referring to anybody's state of mind. "X needs" means here "X ought to have, if he has to survive". Thus X needs food, although he may have no appetite, food being a necessary condition of his survival, X needs a rest, although, in spite of all the warnings of his physician, he works much too hard. "Needs" as equivalent to "ought to have" is always a "need" in reference to some values tacitly assumed. We usually speak of "basic needs" when the value of survival is taken into account. I have in mind here only personal survival, as the survival of a group is much more complicated, sometimes being a biological survival, sometimes the survival of a group as a politically independent unit or the survival of a group as a cultural unit.

Several objections can be raised to Malinowski's definition, but the main one connected with our subject, is that again it contains fictitious beings like systems of conditions or limiting set of facts. A paraphrasis

<sup>3</sup> B. Malinowski, "A Scientific Theory of Culture", Chapel Hill 1944, p. 90.

defining not the term "need" *tout court*, but the term "need" in a whole phrase would certainly help to make things more clear.

Let us now quote some definitions of value chosen at random.

A value may be defined in psychological terms as that aspect of motivation which is determined by codes and standards as opposed to immediate situation. [...] <sup>4</sup>

A value is a conception, explicit or implicit, distinctive of an individual or characteristic of a group of the desirable which influences the selection from available modes, means and ends of action. [...] <sup>5</sup>

A value is the relationship between an individual or group and an event [...] such that the individual or group strives to achieve, maintain or avoid that event. [...] <sup>6</sup>

The lack of agreement in the search for *genus proximum* for the *definiendum*, manifested in the quoted definitions, would probably suggest to Bentham that there is something wrong in the endeavour to treat the term "value" as a complete symbol. Admitting however that by "value" we mean a valued object and that a value is always somebody's value, we can directly define the term "value" by a description of the attitude of the valuing person, without the aid of beings like: aspects of motivation, conceptions, relationships, and the like. It would only be advisable not to use the term "desirable" in the *definiens* as its use implies a hierarchy of values and thus leads to an *idem per idem*.

Although I have been concerned here with the form of the quoted definitions rather than with their content, I cannot abstain from the objection that Parsons' and Shils' definition seems too narrow as compared with the common usage of the word. Certainly our valuations are in a large measure determined by the codes and standards of a given society, but they can also be provoked by immediate situations. When delighted by the beautiful scent of a lilac tree in bloom I stretch out my hand to pick a bunch, the lilac represents a positive value for me, although my motivation may be determined in the given case by the immediate situation, and not by any association with lilac in poetry or by social conventions. The immediate situation as a determinant is still more obvious in the case of the negative value of physical pain, e. g. the pain of a toothache.

The number of definitions in which every respectable substantive is considered as a complete symbol could be easily increased. In his interesting book on "The Philosophy of Value". D. H. Parker characterizes custom as "a tissue of expectations and desires on the social level".<sup>7</sup> It is not a formula put forth explicitly as a definition. I quote it however as a formula which would certainly gain by the elimination of a fictitious being such as "a tissue of expectations". In order to eliminate it, it seems again advisable to explain rather what we mean by saying that somebody acts in conformity or in disaccord with the custom of his group. Thus

<sup>4</sup> Parsons and Shils (eds.), "Toward a General Theory of Action", Cambridge, Mass. 1952, p. 416.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 395.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., p. 422.

<sup>7</sup> D. H. Parker, "The Philosophy of Value", Ann Arbor 1957, p. 58.

I should proceed by defining a whole phrase like: "X acts in conformity with the custom C of his group when he acts in a given situation in a way expected and approved of by the majority of people belonging to the group." An analogous paraphrasis would be needed for terms like "role", and many others. To define "role" e. g. as "the sum of culture patterns associated with a particular status" is to introduce in the *definiens* entities to which — using Bentham's expression — "though by the grammatical form of the discourse employed in speaking of it, existence be ascribed, yet in truth and reality existence is not meant to be ascribed".<sup>8</sup> Advocating in this case, as I have done before, a definition of a man in a role and not of role *tout court*, I am not defending any kind of personalism, my proposals are only manifestation of a tendency to stick to the concrete instead of moving among abstractions.

<sup>8</sup> C. K. Ogden, "Bentham's Theory of Fictions", Littlefield, Adams and Co, 1959, p. 12.