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The Personal and the Social

Our initial theme is the role of the personal in social structure. There some key distinctions that need to be made. First, the personal has a role in social structure. This suggests that there is a non-personal, a-personal, or universal element to social structure. Examples are the operations of technologies, be they material or methodological. Second, it is the role of the personal, not the person. Though the bulk of our way of life may be in the context of an aggregate of social wholes, we do not find all of ourselves in any one of these. We may have roles in social structures that are not personal, though they require our personal participation. Performing manufacturing tasks that could as easily be done via automation is a case in point. But if the personal has a role in social structures, that implies that social structures require some set of personal operations as constitutive of them. Lonergan has the notion of constitutive meaning where meaning is a component of social structure. There is a personal element corresponding to constitutive meaning in its origin as understood and implemented. That personal element does not necessarily survive in the social structure. The personal element on which I am focusing are personal operations that are required, as personal, to constitute the structure itself. While constitutive meaning is required in institutions, there also are acts of meaning done on behalf of institutions that constitute the word, action, structure of that institution. Thus, decision making is rigorously defined and controlled in bureaucracies and businesses. Who you are does not necessarily make a difference. What you are in terms of your corporate role, which is constituted by meaning, and what you can do within the definition of that role is what is significant. So in this sense the universal trumps the particular. The personal is the spiritual. Insofar as history is concerned with the interactions and transformations of institutions, the role of the personal in social structure is key to understanding the fundamental “material cause” or “matter” of history. While the universal trumps the particular in universal performance, the material trumps the spiritual in the transformation of human institutions since that transformation relies on structures to which the spirit is subject and in which the spiritual is merely an element. The playing out of the implications of institutions and social orders can spin out of our control. Both the Hegelian and Marxist approaches to historical explanation are germane.

The initial orientation of this essay is understanding the role of the personal in social structure. But we bring it up to get to our final goal, which is understanding the role of social structure in personal performance. This will provide us with two immediate gains. The first is an understanding of various modes of alienation. The second is a heuristic framework rich enough to understand feelings explanatorily and as personal. Individual psychology emerged within a social context so the securing of the proper model of that context will provide the explanatory context for psychology. We will get there in three stages. First is an understanding of a social whole. Second is the limitations of a linear model of social processes by understanding the abstractness of a personal

narrative. The third is an understanding of the human operational situation as embodying an “event space” mediated by meaning which enables the transcendence of who and where we are in social, historical and economic development. The event space is constitutive of our way of life. The mediating notion that enables the transition from one step to another is the notion of the non-systematic whole specified for each broad swath of social behavior. Thinking that whole heuristically enables understanding the limitations of the good of order. “Goods of orders” is the notion that needs to be developed. That analysis will be left for later.

We can think of the whole as a population. However, the question is a population of what? It is the population that needs to be thought of in terms of the whole if the social is to be understood. It is the distinction of statistics among populations that is telling regarding differences in ways of life and their impact. When dealing with social facts as opposed to, say, the rate of measles, meaning and decision come into play. The social fact exists as a result of decisions and opinions. So the state of a social whole with respect to some aspect of the ways of life can be determined statistically. The personal as the individual has a minor role or impact. But the collective actions all of which are personal and sometimes performed in terms of each other or with reference to each other are significant.

Now it is possible via modeling to take a bottom up approach and generate social-like relationships from the actions of rule governed individual agents. (Wolfram’s A New Kind of Science, Holland’s adaptive agents) It is this type of thinking that grounds the explanation of the stabilization of free markets in terms of relatively fixed prices. There are only a couple of choices and preferences which make up the rules. Buy or sell. Sell at the highest price available and buy at the lowest price available. Stabilization results from the collective operations of suppliers and demanders who have some knowledge of what each other is doing. Stabilization is typically within a range and the ranges form trends. Even if this approach fully explained the emergence of social facts, it would not be a reductive explanation since social facts are new types of organizations of the agents and, as processes, can become a type of agent in themselves as in the personal role in the performance of an institution.

On the other hand, it may be possible to apply the model of population genetics to the transformations of public opinion since within a social whole sub-populations do not always perform or think in reference to each other. There is an isolation which permits the development of new “species” or ways of thinking. Questions would include the elements of the viewpoint, the combinatorial possibilities, the transformation of ideas via realization and new insights, the rates of development of social learning and propagation and so on. Then there is the question of the survival of social opinion and knowledge which introduces another set of considerations. But a statistical analysis would be relevant to understanding the emergence of public opinion and its survival. The group that held a prevalent view would approach a social whole, if not be one. A political alliance would be one.

Typically a social whole is a non-systematic whole. Everything is not related to everything else, but everything is related to something that is related to something else, so that all the relations do not need to be interrelated. This permits an aggregate of elements and relations that in turn constitutes the potency of the whole. The social whole is non-systematic in this sense where the wholeness is one of common or linked intelligibility.

The intelligibility takes two forms. It is intelligibility which constitutes the whole and is operative in its structures, but may not be explicitly acknowledged. We have ways of going about things which work, but which we do not fully understand. Part of the social whole is meaningful and part is merely intelligible. Part is explicit and part is implicit or tacit. This means that there is an intelligible residue in social structure immanent in signs, symbols and behaviors. We find this in language where we can distinguish meaning as use versus meaning as conceptualized. (“It’s raining” – the “it” is a result of grammar “what’s the scuttlebutt?” – originated as gossip around the water barrel on sailing ships). Usage is skillful and the meaning emerges from the tacit in the non-systematic use of terms and relations. . The clearest instance of the intelligible residue is unacknowledged insights. Much of personal accommodation to social structure is an example, we learn how to get along without conceptualizing it. So the basic notion of the intelligible residue in social interaction is that part of the interaction that is meaningful – more or less explicit to some of the people in the social group and some of the interaction is both intelligent and intelligible, but not meaningful in the sense of being expressed via signs or artifice (mise-en-scene and orchestrated actions) in the broad sense. This needs to be distinguished from on a social level from elemental meaning immanent in signs and symbols which is understood by some sub-population of the social whole and the intelligibility of relations we live, but do not explicitly acknowledge

Like language, meanings can fall into disuse. We can continue to do the same thing but do it for different reasons or forget why we do it at all. The latter would be the weakest form of a social convention. Then it requires a type of cultural archeology to recover the origin and history of the practice and its meaning. However, there is a difference when this explicit understanding is achieved by someone within the culture versus an outsider. When we learn our history, for example, it is our living that is illuminated and it is our being with one another that is transformed. When we discover the meaning of our culture from the inside out, it takes on an existential dimension that someone outside the culture can only hope to approximate. It is a richer type of existential explanation. The notion that laws, social mores, etc are a matter of “convention” is true in the sense that they are what they are because people agree upon them, but it is abstract because it does not consider what they agree upon, which is a matter of history, circumstance and to on. There is a presumption by some that they could be anything. This is where historical analysis comes in. There is an understanding of the historicity of convention which is not an historicism.

The intelligible residue is an intelligibility immanent and lived but not conceptualized or, perhaps, even acknowledged. There are at least two other types of aggregates that result from social and collective behavior which result from intelligent performance and need to be understood formally, or as intelligibility resulting from intelligence, but are not intelligible residues. There is the “global” result from individual choices. This is the aggregate studied statistically mentioned above. There is the impact of social action manifest in unintended results. For example there can be a patterning of personal activity conditioned by the productive or distributive process, or the social surd can become apparent in some political effort such as nation building.. The preceding is potentially intelligible to some extent, but has not been constituted as a result of insights that have been adequately expressed meaningfully. The intelligible residue is what remains as understood post insight, but is not adequately acknowledged. It is the socially

tacit. There is a intelligibility in the emergence of the social structure or process which was yielded in the originating insights, but is not fully recognized as meaningful. This needs to be distinguished from elemental meaning immanent in signs and symbols which is understood by some sub-population of the social whole and some people happen to not understand. An example of the intelligible residue is unacknowledged insights. Much of personal accommodation to social structure is an example. We learn how to get along without conceptualizing it. So the basic notion of the intelligible residue in social interaction is that part of the interaction meaningful, that is more or less explicit to some of the people in the social group and some of the interaction is both intelligent and intelligible, but not meaningful in the sense of being expressed via signs or artifice in the broad sense.

There are types of social wholes. People within a group are immediately related to one another. People within an association (brother or sisterhood, the Elks, the Republican Party) are mediately related. They share common values, history and culture with respect to the association. Then we have institutions, which are cooperative enterprises. They can function at all levels of social complexity. A social whole is any of these or any aggregate where social activities constitute the relations among the individuals, groups, institutions and so on. Thus a corporation, by virtue of being a legal entity is a social whole since there are legal relations constituting it. But as an ongoing concern it is a more concrete social whole than an abstract legal entity with its production processes and so on. Native Americans constituted a distributed social whole of which Europeans were not a part prior to the discovery of America. They were not an integrated social whole where explicit, or known, relationships were constitutive of the whole. That is, the whole did not know itself as a whole. Its extent was not known. Yet there was a commonality of meaning and a way of life that would have allowed them to interact in ways that Europeans would not have been able to.

Durkheim develops the notion of a social fact which yields the primary distinction of sociological inquiry from the other sciences. First, there are performances of which an individual is a part, which would not exist if there were not more than one person involved. In this sense, virtually everything we do has a social aspect. Second, they have an element of meaning or interpretation which distinguishes them from the merely biological or ethnological. Third, they have an independence of the person. That is, it is not merely that I am interacting with another, but that I am doing so within a set of relationships I find myself within. Obviously, to some extent I can choose to participate or not, but if I want to participate, I need to speak the language, follow the social mores, respect the rites and rituals and so on. There is a cultural aspect in the sense that these are passed from generation to generation, a historical aspect in that they have origins (though usually veiled) and develop or decline. Clearly political and economic relationships also are social facts. Religion has provided an explanation of origin and continuance that legitimates and eternalizes the order or aspects of it. In contrast are the grand Gnostic narratives of the second stage of meaning discredited by Vogelstein and post-modernism..

It is reasonable to assume that social facts arose within preexistent intelligible, or mutually and tacitly understood, animal social behavior which renders sociobiology its explanatory power. We have the emergence of more effective ways of spontaneously self-organizing the group with the emergence of meaning and symbolic thinking. The

self organizing is done with respect to our relations with others, which makes it social. So the social whole then, can be understood in terms of those who are in social relations to one another. Like all other instances in the universe these relations are neither fully systematic nor fully non-systematic. To be fully non-systematic is impossible for then there would be no relations at all. To be fully systematic is logically possible, but not factual. It reduces the probabilities for survival and development whereas extreme social engineers tend to think it would make society better by making it stable. It appears that societies, like life, need some instability to survive, otherwise they are less adaptive. In fact the non-systematic and its transformation is internally generated to a large extent by the self-constitution of the situation. Then we deal with the effects of what we have done, many of which were not foreseen. Ways of regulating our own behavior and transforming the regulative rules as necessary to effectively meet social and political challenges becomes a necessity. This leads to a different notion of institutions as dynamic rather than static, developmental rather than merely transformative.

Now let us turn to another way of understanding social facts, the narrative. Social process is often considered as rational activity in terms of means and ends type of thinking. Likewise, it is considered linearly with a beginning and an end. This is akin to a narrative where the hero of the piece is tracked through a set of related activities where actions not central to the plot are ignored. In effect, the author plots a path through the aggregate of human events that constitute the “event space” for a particular period. Likewise, we each have our own event spaces where we do things and things happen to us or occur within our purview. Unlike the hero in a linear narrative, when we are busy we may be non-systematically bombarded with requests and demands. Likewise, we may have a set of unrelated tasks to perform to advance multiple goals. How do we make sense of this or can we?

. My event space is composed of those events to which I am adverting or to which I would advert if I knew they were occurring within my current pattern of experience. It is a subset of my horizon. It is what is operative for me now as an object of immediate or prospective concern. An analogy is Freud’s notion of the conscious and the pre-conscious. Event space would be both in the sense of what I know is happening and what I can come to know next based upon what occurs within my purview. It is like being in the world, but explicitly explanatory.

The notion of event space allows us to dis-integrate performance into what it is – response to, or action in terms of, meaning and values. The impact of events is understood primarily in terms of our values, unless we are in the intellectual pattern of experience where they are understood in terms of what they are. The notion of event space allows us to take the notion of the operational situation beyond the immediate. It takes it beyond a model for understanding animal behavior to one of understanding behavior within a world mediated by meaning for the events in our event space are meaningful. They could be occurring anywhere so the operational situation transcends space. I would not go so far as to equate it with the temporality of consciousness, since temporality is not the essence of consciousness but an aspect of it. It is very concrete. If I am a manager in a corporation my event space can encompass a set of unrelated events which are related to me because I have a set of unrelated projects in which I participate. Likewise with the multitasking mother who is simultaneously managing an aggregate of concerns..

As the examples indicate, the mediation of events by meaning in our event space permits multi-tasking, something that animals rarely do and if they do, they do so to a much more limited extent. Thus, our notion of time, in terms of simultaneity is much different. Rather than doing one thing at a time within a behavioral cycle until we complete the cycle, we can engage in multiple cycles within the same time period, interrupt them at various points and resume them later if necessary. Thus, our behavior can be non-systematic to deal with the non-systematic occurrence of events we need to deal with.

We can, and typically do, think of the processes in which we engage as having a beginning and an end. We may do them repetitively, and they are schemes of recurrence, but linear. In fact they are parts of cyclic schemes which make up the social structures. They appear linear to us because we have a limited role in them. Our schemes of recurrence are not those of the institution but are constituted via interactions with multiple institutions. Some of these interactions are recurrent, other not. Some are continual, others intermittent. Where the animal has a flexible set of schemes to adapt to situations, we have a general set of operations to which we assimilate aspects of the institutional scheme. For example, we have a general set of purchasing skills (otherwise known as “shopping”) that we can use to buy a variety of things from a variety of stores. We do not buy a TV every day or every time we see one.

The general institutional organization is a set of recurrent, interlocking schemes. The time of the social is the time of an aggregate of cycles. If one is a participant in multiple cycles, the situation can seem chaotic unless one has a sufficient understanding of what is going on, and may be chaotic even then.

Social rhythms are tied to the rhythms of the institutions. You are either part of the institution that makes enables other social participation or you are a client, parishioner, etc. It is the professionalization of society that has permitted more variation and opportunity via more efficient technology and organization. A large part of your rhythm is the rhythm of your professional or student life (what you do forty hours a week) and of your participations in other institutions.

When we are younger we are transformed more via our participation in social interactions and less from our “effort”. We cooperate (“do as we are told”) but do not know what is going on. We learn how to get along in the situation, but we are transformed according to “plan” with some statistical regularity. To determine what it is we are tested and polled.(poked and prodded) This is the process of growing up in an institutional society. However as we get older we tend to interact with more institutions.

There is a sense in which we have inverted the natural ecological order. Animals engage in recurrent schemes of behavior that have a beginning and an end and typically are performed from start to finish before another behavioral cycle is initiated. They do so with respect to events that occur non-systematically, but with some statistical regularity that constitutes a relatively stable habitat. For animals the order is in their behavior, the disorder is in the occurrence of the events that initiate the behavior. For us, on the other hand, the disorder is in our lives when we interact with multiple ordered institutional schemes of recurrence within the same time period. It is the ordering of these larger orders that constitute our way of life: the how much and how often of “what” (which you can get on eBay) that corresponds to the “how much?” and “how often?” of the standard of living.

If the idea of ordering these larger orders gives rise to the notion of utopias, the attempts to do so systematically have resulted in spectacular failures. On the other hand, we have no choice but to be collectively responsible for them. Acting reasonably requires an understanding of the role of the personal in these orders and the general structure of their impact on our way of life. By providing some considerations for a model for understanding social and biological activity, I hope to have shed some light on the personal and the world situation.