Theory as a Way of Seeing and Thinking

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[David Landes added the boldings for student convenience]

"Theory" is one of many modern contested terms. The attempt by many to give it a definition, to reduce it to a dead, neutral entity, can be readily grasped as a political maneuver. Theory in the popular parlance is treated as abstract and separated from the real world. The development of "positivist" science and elaboration of the hypothetico-deductive model of theory in nearly all our textbooks institutionalizes theory as *representational of* experience. Against this background, **I wish to claim theory to be *an intrinsic part of* experience itself.**

A "theory" is a way of seeing and thinking about the world. "Theory" is better seen as **the "lens" one uses in looking to and acting on the world** than as a "mirror" of nature. Lest the lens metaphor suggests the possible transparency of theory, as if it disappears if it is a good clean lens, recall that the clearest microscope gives us radically different observation from the telescope. Further, if the metaphor suggests the stability of a world only shown differently through different lens, where is the world not seen through some lens? We may compare our lens but not escape them. The lens metaphor helps us think productively about theory choice: What do we want to pay attention to? What will help us attend to that? **The treatment of observations and experiences as if they preceded and could be compared to theoretical accounts, hides the theoretical choice** (whether through concept or instrumentation or both) **implicit in the observation itself.**

Norwood Hanson captured well for the natural sciences what seems to be so hard for social scientists and everyday people to accept. **All observations are theory-laden.** In his metaphor, theory and the external world are like the warp and woof in the fabric called observation. While the woof may typically be the more visible, the observation cannot exist without the warp. The attempt to talk about one in the absence of the other unravels the total observation leaving neither the theory nor world to be of any interest.

The problem with most theories is not that they are wrong nor lacking in confirming experiences but that they are irrelevant or misdirect observation, that is, **they do not help make the observations that are important to meeting critical goals and needs.** There are many ways for abstract representations to be accurate, but none assume practical presentations. Despite popular mythologies, social science theories, whether by everyday people or scholars, are rarely accepted or dismissed because of the data. As Kenneth Gergen has shown, the **major theories** that have shaped everyday thinking and definition of social science problems have had very little direct data support. Rather they **offered compelling conceptions of core life issues challenging both existing assumptions and the supporting dominant values.** This should be no surprise as Thomas Kuhn demonstrated much the same in the natural sciences. For example, hardly a student today can get through college without one or many more presentations of Abraham Maslow's hierarchy of needs or Leon Festinger's cognitive dissonance theory. Both were widely taught before the data for either were very good, most instructors don't even know the data or assumptions made in data collection for either, and the support years later for each is very mixed. Human need structures are far more complex than Maslow wrote and people seek novelty and dissonance as much as they reduce it. **There are reasons why certain theories are accepted and not others, but not simply the facts.**

Gergen and Richard Rorty, among many have shown the inadequacy of theories as representational and the hypothetico-deductive model as a way of thinking about theory choice. The various assumptions of the preeminence of objective facts, the demand for verification, the goal of universal, temporarily irrelevant findings, and the presumption of the dispassionate bystander all hide the nature and evaluation of theories. Like with my cardinal, **theory does not shape observation, it is part of it**. **Facts are socially negotiated. Hypothesis testing is largely self-fulfilling over time since the theory shapes what will be attended to** and people respond interactively in testing situations. **All findings are a historical artifact** both because of theory and because people change over time in part in response to social science reports. **The question is only whether we accept the conditions and practices necessary to produce the scientific artifact.** Every theory carries the values of a research community that often substitutes its terms and interpretations for those lived by the subject community.

The modern philosophy of science and its attendant concept of theory, particularly as practiced in the social sciences, over-compensated for the fear of the medieval authority of the church, rhetoric over reason, and the ideological bases of everyday knowledge. In doing so, the social sciences themselves have at times become an arbitrary and capricious authority producing an ideology themselves with its own rhetorical appeal. **The greatest problem with a theory is not being wrong** (for that will be discovered) **but with misdirecting our collective attention and hindering our assessment of where it takes us.** Rather than assuming simplistic conceptions of science as a fixed answer, the relation of knowledge to the human community is the task to be worked out. **Social science theories have to be taken seriously,** not so much for their "truth" but **for the way they allow us to discuss rather than assume common sense** and consider **alternative ways of being engaged in the world**.

The point here is not to reject hypothesis testing or finding careful methodical ways to distinguish reality-based from imaginary truth claims. Such activities however need to be complemented by a more basic understanding of the relation of theories and the world, relations of power and knowledge, and the relation of theories to real human communities. **A theory resides in and returns to the practical world of life always before and after its brief abstract life in hypothesis testing**. As any linguistic form, theory is always a practice, a way of being in the world. Theories are developed and are accepted in human communities based on their ability **to provide interesting and useful ways of conceptualizing, thinking and talking about life events.** The social science community differs from the life-world community primarily in regard to what is interesting and useful because of both community standards and events that are significant.

Most often a philosophy of science attempts to reconstruct the practices of researchers as if they could be freed from the events of their time, as if we wished that they were freed, and as if everyday people's theories in natural languages have more difficulties than social science theories in technical languages. More realistically both everyday life and social science conceptions are needed. Everyday people respond to many mythologies but we have yet to see a life or a society run well based on a social science theory. This partially explains the double feeling of theorists that no one listens to them and the fear that someone might. Rather than beginning with an elitist view of theory, let's start with a reconstruction of everyday life. Eventually this reconstruction will serve as the basis for communication theory, moral democracy, and social science, but here I will start with the fundamental functions of theory.

Functions of Theories in Everyday Life and Science

As argued before, like all creatures people develop ways of dealing with practical tasks and problems in their worlds. **Some ways work, others fail. When they work they work within certain parameters or domains. Few theories are failures in regard to specific situations, and all theories ultimately fail if applied far enough outside of the specific conditions for which they were developed.** Theories thus differ more in the size of their domain and the realistic nature of their parameters than in correctness. We all operate day in and out with flat earth assumptions. It is only on the occasions when we wish to do things that require another model that we increase the complexity of our thought. If we do not move to another model, we will fail. In this sense **all theories will fail in time, not because of falsity, but because human purposes and environments change.**

Abstracting theory from this life context is essential for testing and critical reflection, but in doing so researchers and students can forget the essential life connection. In this sense, critical reflection and testing are moments in human theorizing but scientific research and theorizing cannot be reduced to these processes. This may be clearer in an example from J. L. Austin in his analysis of the "representation" problem in language studies. As he reasoned, the question **"What is a rat?"** differs greatly from the question **"What is the meaning of the word 'rat'?" The former treats conception as part of the human act of seeing the world in a specific interest, from a point of view.**

The latter question removes us from the life context and poses an abstract and universalizing question stripped of the specific domain and practical parameters. Whether the question, "What is a rat?" arises as a child's question or as part of a dispute as to whether the creature standing there is one, the focus is outward to the world, to the subject

matter. The conception raises new looks, new considerations, further observations, and a relation to the other. The latter question poses the issue of correctness, cleaning up the word, nomenclature committees, and operational definitions. As an analogue, the latter question is about theory as an abstract object, the former about the world with a theory as the point of view. When thinking about theory, these are important complementary questions. Unfortunately we often contextualize the former in regard to the latter rather than vice versa. When this happens theory is abstracted from the world rather than intrinsic to our being directed to it.

The variable analytic tradition of sequential hypothesis testing, strings of research reports disconnected from their conditions of production, and the "textbook" style knowledge which results from this, all have this odd quality of being concrete and specific yet only referencing back to themselves in their logical interdependence rather than leading to an understanding of the world. C. Wright Mills aptly referred to this as "abstracted empiricism." The more applied and specific such knowledge is made, the further it gets from directing attention to significant features of the outside world and the more tightly interconnected it becomes to its own small imaginary world produced out of itself**. The central problem of social science today has never been its excessive objectivity, but its subjectivity; its inability to escape its own arbitrary structuring of the world.**

The world is indeterminant, waiting to be made into determinant objects by our way of attending it. By investigating the functions of theory in life as it encounters the world, we can arrive at more fruitful ways of thinking about theory. Allow me to suggest **three basic functions**:

1. *Directing attention:* can we see differences that make a difference?
2. *Organizing experience:* can we form and recognize patterns that specify what things are and how they relate?
3. *Enabling useful responses:* can we make choices that not only enable us to survive and fulfill needs but also to create the future we want?

Directing Attention

Attention is largely a trained capacity. While our sense equipment is nature's or more properly our ancient forebears' theory of what we should be able to detect, our **conceptual schemes** and **sense extensions become the manner of our more immediate history**. At the most basic level theories direct our attention, that is, they guide us to see differences of importance. Perceptually, this is easy to see. I can recall the first time I looked into a microscope in biology class. The gray mess to me was clearly a mass of cells to the instructor. The eye needed to be trained not so much in seeing but in seeing the differences that mattered, setting the apparatus to be able to have those differences visible. The cell had to be out there, but it also needed to be in here in both setting the right power and noting the key features. Changing theories is like making a gestalt shift; what is figure and what is ground can be changed. Like changing the power of magnification of the microscope, you lose the ability to see certain structures for the sake of seeing others. It is not as if one or the other is the better representation of the "real" thing. **Each draws attention to and displays a different structure of potential interest, a different real thing.**

Perceptual examples show the basic relation but can be misleading. **Let me develop an example that keeps the perceptional experience "constant," but works with the conceptual relation**. Let me use a first grade problem. The teacher presents four boxes. In each there is a picture—**a tree, cat, dog, and squirrel** respectively. The child is asked which one is different. A child worthy of second grade immediately picks the tree. The child knows not only how to divide plants from animals, but more importantly that the plant/animal distinction is the preferred one to apply. In this sense the perception is valuational. We know in reflection that the plant/animal distinction is arbitrary and one specific **culturally prescribed way to think about the problem.** The squirrel as easily could have been picked if the child had distinguished on the basis of domesticity or things we bought at the store. Or the dog could have been picked since the cat, squirrel and tree relate in a playful interactive way. Or the child could have picked the cat since the other three are in the yard. Or any one of them could have been picked based on a having/not having, liking/not liking basis.

The issue is not one of the linguistic/conceptual determination of perception (e.g., how many kinds of snow Eskimos have). Rather the issue is the choice of the distinctions to be used, the differences that matter. No one has any problem working through the reconception of the dog, cat, squirrel, and tree problem. **We have a language that can reconceptualize the solution in many ways. The question is: which is the better frame to use to view the world, rather than the issue of accuracy or truth. Once the system of distinction is "chosen," then questions arise,** such as should this be classified as an animal, what features distinguish plants and animals, and how should individuals be classified (e.g., which is a virus?). And finally abstract theories and "empirical" questions and hypotheses can be raised and tested. For example, how many animals are there, and since this is an animal we expect these behaviors. The problem with starting with a hypothesis tested against the "real" world is that the reason for the quotation marks around "chosen," "empirical," and "real" is lost.

The child who circles the tree rarely raises the alternative conceptual distinctions to make the choice, nor do we typically when presented with the same problem. The issues do not become empirical after we have "decided" to utilize the plant/animal rather than the domestic/wild point of view. They already were. We would smile at the child, who when challenged, said that "Yeah, we could divide them into categories of domestic and wild, but they're really plants and animals." The child's complaint that we are relativists totally misses the point. **The presumed real, empirical, and unchosen often miss the value-laden, theory-based nature of observation.** Human choices, even if unwittingly made, are key, not the assumed nature of the things themselves. Whether we assume a behaviorist tak or reject it with some humanist view of internal properties, it is choice, not nature, which rules. **Education would be improved, I think, if children were asked to explore alternative ways of attending to the problem rather than picking the "right" one.**

Unfortunately we have acquired a number of bad habits from the old philosophy of science which lead us away from understanding the importance of theory in directing attention. The metaphysical position that theory provides words to name characteristics of objects in themselves and mirrors fixed relations among objects underestimates the inexhaustible number of things and relations our attention might be directed to see in things and hides the important issues in theory selection. Our simple practices of defining terms operationally or attributionally hides the theoretical construct's function in providing a stable object with presumed fixed attributes. Rather than questions like "what is communication or information," **we should ask questions like "what am I able to see, think, or talk about if I conceive of them in this way rather than that." Conceptions rather than definitions specify points of view**, a ways of seeing and talking, rather than name a domain of objects.

Organizing Experience

Theory not only directs our attention, it also presents our observation as being part of meaningful patterns. **The perception of an individual already pulls together past experience with similar people** (the lines of relation following the distinctions being utilized) **and reaches to anticipate possible actions. Everyday people, like social scientists, are constantly engaged in the process of trying to explain the past and present and trying to predict the future and possible responses to our own actions.** But prediction and control, like spiritual and teleological models, account for only part of the available structurings and human interests displayed in patterning. The nature of patterns and types of patterns experienced is potentially very rich. The observation of continuity rather than discontinuity or the seeking of simpler rather than more complex patterns are not simply given in nature but arise out of human orientation to the world. Prediction and control should properly be seen as one human motive that is at times privileged over competing motives and organizing schemes that differ greatly from prediction and control.

One of the facets of modern social science is the projection of its own motive to enhance control onto the subjects that it studies. This is perhaps clearest in interpersonal interaction studies. In everyday life interpersonal relations often show the greatest degree of open negotiation and mutual decision making. Ironically the usual research emphasis on uncertainty reduction, compliance gaining, and persuasion mirror more the philosophy of science used by the researchers than people I relate to. For example, in the *Handbook of Interpersonal Communication* trust and warmth are discussed only in relation to influence and compliance, the words 'ethics' and

'ethical' appear only twice in 750 pages. The modern focus on uncertainty reduction theory appears to be based on an assumed fear of difference and the otherness of others, rather than curiosity, excitement of novelty, and self change (one wonders whether objectifying the other is the cause or result of this assumed fear). John Lannamann properly identified the dominance of these types of studies as based on a complex set of unexamined values in interpersonal communication research. It is not as if the world cannot be seen this way, not that there aren't everyday people whose experience is organized in ways like this**. The universalizing claim of these studies, however, can easily lead to overlooking the full variety of ways people experience the world and, because of the claim of privilege, can influence people to give up other ways of structuring their observations.**

Clearly all communication theories are historically situated. People and societies concerned with individualism and control organize experience differently from those interested in the community and fate. Each orientation can produce empirically confirmable structures and orders, but all can be one-sided. While the orders produced may be quite different, the twin themes of differentiation and organization appear to be central to theorizing.

Enabling Useful Responses

Theories in everyday life as well as those in social science have a pragmatic motive. Calling theories "practical" draws our attention most clearly to this. While this may often be covered up with a claim of truth or a demonstration of what is, **the choice is always of this truth versus that one,** this "what" versus that one. **Constructs are developed and elaborated in directions that help people accomplish life goals.** Institutionalized social science merely extends this individual process. There appears to be little disagreement with this basic motivational frame, though it can be quite complex in practice.

Theoretical conceptions that are useful to one individual or group can be quite detrimental to others. The social choice of theories thus always has to consider questions such as whose goals will count for how much. Consequently, looked at from the perspective of the society, useful responses have to be considered in terms of some conception of social good. Unfortunately the issue of pragmatics is often read too narrowly both in everyday life and in the social sciences. "Practical" as a simple instrumental motive overlooks the competing human desires to overcome their initial subjective motives, to make their own histories toward a richer collective life. When theories are considered instrumentally, efficient and effective goal accomplishment would appear to be easily agreed upon social goods. But not only do such **goals have to be assessed from the standpoint of *whose* goals are accomplished, but efficiency and effectiveness are not themselves goods.**

John Dewey gives us a better lead on making choices regarding alternative theories. Richard Rorty phrased his basic questions as: "What would it be like to believe that? What would happen if I did? What would I be committing myself to?" Such a position does not so much give us an answer to the questions of social good, but poses the locus and nature of responsibility. Theories about human beings are different from theories about chemicals; they ultimately influence what the subject of the research will become. **How we conceptualize and talk about ourselves and others influences what we are and will be. Theories function to produce responses that produce ourselves, our social interaction, our institutions, and our collective future. Theories must be assessed in light of the kind of society we wish to produce.** We are concerned with meeting our needs and with doing so in a way that makes us better people.

All current theories will pass in time. It is not as if they are in error, at least little more or less so than those in the past. They were useful in handling different kinds of human problems, problems we might find ill-formed and even silly, as others will ours. What remains is the human attempt to produce theories that are useful in responding to our own issues. **We are struggling to find interesting and useful ways of thinking and talking about our current situation and helping us build the future we want.** Such hope is intrinsic to theorizing rather than external to it.

Power and Knowledge

At least since France Bacon, most Westerners have believed that knowledge is power, that having or possessing knowledge gives its holder choices and influence. Contemporary thinking has of course totally rearranged such an equation. Michel Foucault in particular has focused attention on the power *in* rather than on the power *of* knowledge. **There is a politics *within* the production of knowledge. In this sense, in each society, in each age there is a regime of truth generated out of a network of power relations.** Certain discourses are accepted and made true and mechanisms are developed which enable the distinction between true and false statements. Again, this does not suggest that "truth" is relative in any simple way, for within the constraint of interests and values competing claims can be compared. But what we are interested in making claims about, and the choice of constraints and values in making those claims, are historical choices and are politically charged.

The modern concept of "truth" is a historical product and has clear political consequences. The Greek notion of truth as that which shines forth and compels understanding (as surrendering to it) gives way to something which may be wrestled from nature and captured as a "fact." As Foucault has shown so well, the "will-to-truth" is a dominant modern drive and one which more constructs the possibility of elites than elucidates the world. **The claim of truth is more often a club than a new insight—a club in the double sense of a big stick that demands acceptance and a group of people who share initiation rites, a special language, and rituals of purification.** Against this, the claims of the social sciences can better be seen as **one of several competing forms of knowing**. The presence of **explicit theorizing hopefully opens useful dialogues as opposed to common sense or elite claims**. The focus is then on the basis for determining adequate behavior and the appropriate domains of application. **Unfortunately the modern social sciences try to totalize, to hide their own claims of determining adequate behavior behind mere "truthful" descriptions of behavior. In such a process, they privilege their knowing over competing way of knowing in other domains.**

The point here is not to find a way to settle conflicting knowledge claims, nor to degrade truth, but pose practical theory against privilege. The knowledge claimed in everyday life—in its institutions of science, commerce and religion—as well as knowledge about **knowledge claims in everyday life are politically loaded. Laying out their driving interests and mechanisms of knowledge production and defense is central to understanding how they work.**