

## What is Social Meaning? The Power of Signals

To undertake the study of cultural activity – activity in which symbolism forms the positive content – is thus not to abandon social analysis for a Platonic cave of shadows, to enter into a mentalistic world of introspective psychology or, worse, speculative philosophy, and wander there forever in a haze of “Cognitions,” “Affections,” “Conations,” and other elusive entities. Cultural acts, the construction, apprehension, and utilization of symbolic forms, are social events like any other; they are as public as marriage and as observable as agriculture. (Clifford Geertz “Religion as a Cultural System,” 91)

### 1. Recap and Introduction

I’ve argued that our best strategy for understanding systemic injustice is to take a “practice first” approach. We engage in social practices in order to coordinate in producing, distributing, and eliminating “resources,” and this requires shared frameworks of meaning for engaging with each other and the world.

Whether we employ a traditional conception of ideology, the Foucauldian notion of discourse, a contemporary account of common ground (Stalnaker), or just a notion of “culture,” we need some shared tools for interpretation and communication. Consider Purvis & Hunt 1993 (474)

...human individuals participate in forms of understanding, comprehension or consciousness of the relations and activities in which they are involved...This consciousness is borne through language and other systems of signs, it is transmitted between people and institutions and, perhaps most important of all, it makes a difference; [it] has consequences for the for the direction and character of their action and inaction.

This constitutes, they suggest, a “framework of meanings and values within which people exist and conduct their social lives” (479).

It might appear that questions such as how and why we develop certain practical orientations, are properly answered by psychology, specifically social psychology. For example, Tommie Shelby (2014) argues that

*An ideology is a widely held set of loosely associated beliefs and implicit judgments that misrepresent significant social realities and that function, through this distortion, to bring about or perpetuate unjust social relations* (66; his italics).

However, in the critical theory tradition we find Althusser claiming: “Thesis II: Ideology has a material existence.” (1917/2014, 258). He elaborates the thesis later: “I now return to this thesis: an ideology always exists in an apparatus, and its practice, or practices. This existence is material” (1917/2014, 259). Moreover, the potential contents of a cultural technē are a mixed bag:

- i. **Simple meanings** (pink means girl, red means stop) and other forms of signaling (greeting rituals, clothing choices, logos);
- ii. **Narrative tropes** (“First comes love, then comes marriage, then comes baby in the baby carriage”) and material signals and prompts for one’s place in them (wedding rings, “gender reveal” events and associated paraphernalia);
- iii. **Default assumptions** (“Marriage is between one man and one woman” “The US Constitution protects liberty and justice for all.”); Concepts (bachelor, marriage, sex, gender, race, water, justice) and alleged analytic truths about them);
- iv. **Elements of architectural design** (brick and ivy, toilets designated for men and women only, spaces only accessible by stairs, facade columns);
- v. **Heuristics** (imitate-the-majority, or imitate-the-successful);
- vi. **Familiar patterns of metaphor and metonymy** (“God is love,” “The pen is mightier than the sword”);
- vii. **Entrenched conceptual homologies** (reason : passion :: man : woman);
- viii. **Explicit public declarations** (“Black Lives Matter,” “Blue Lives Matter”).

So we should ask:

1) What exactly are the constituents of a cultural technē? Is it psychological? Material? Both? Neither? Is there a coherent ontology?

2) There are many possible cultural technē that could manage coordination of a group. What does it mean to say that a cultural technē is *ours*? What determines whether it is ours?

3) How does a cultural technē manage us? In particular, how does an ideological technē manage us, given that it is typically false or misleading and produces unjust or harmful social stratification?

4) What is it for a group to “take up” a cultural technē or for an individual to be “in the grip” of an ideology?

I will argue today that although individual psychology plays an important role in understanding a cultural technē works, a psychological approach to cultural technē/ideology is inadequate. Social meanings, like linguistic meanings, “aren’t in the head,” though they are taken up in developing social “know how”. This is in keeping with a broad content-externalism.

## 2. Psychological and Materialist Approaches

There is a temptation to say that a framework of meaning and values must be psychological because meanings and values are determined by what we believe, want, and care about. Moreover, our coordination would seem to be guided by a kind of “collective intentionality” that drives joint action. So why not say that a cultural technē is just a dominant or widespread set of beliefs?

Let’s assume a psychologistic answer to (1) and explore how one might then address question (2) and (3):

*Content Determination:* Our cultural technē has as its content the framework of meanings and values *F* because that content *F* is believed by the majority/the dominant.

*Dominant Entrenchment:* An ideology has the power to produce and/or stabilize unjust social stratification because the dominant believe it, i.e., the dominant believe the ideology and rely on it to enforce or entrench such stratification. (“Widespread” entrenchment is another option.)

However, if the content of our technē is determined by the majority/dominant, can the majority/dominant be corrected about the content? This just pushes the question back: why, for example, is it part of our cultural technē that women are inferior to men, that people of color are inferior to Whites, etc.? Could a group choose to adopt any random set of beliefs to serve as the cultural technē? There is a parallel here to the *Euthyphro* problem.

Against psychologistic/doxastic accounts

- The aptness of a set of beliefs as a cultural technē depends on whether their content, together, functions socially in a certain way. Neither dominant nor widespread *belief* is necessary for ideology to be effective. Even if we all disbelieve the ideology, we may conform to it because we (mistakenly) believe that others believe it. (Maybe we should consider *acceptance* instead of belief as a better option for psychologism.)
- For the most part practices and structures emerge in systems without central authority. And the dominant (or the majority) shift their attitudes when they stop serving the stabilizing social function; in the case of ideology, when they fail to maintain social stratification.
- Even if background beliefs play a role in some explanations, they may be entrenched because the built environment supports them. (Consider binary public toilet facilities.) Because ideology comes to shape the physical world, our behavior is shaped by the material conditions that have been informed by background ideology – maybe generations ago – and we don’t even consider explanations that might rationalize it. It is just “how things are.”

On my view, social practices have three main elements: material conditions, social meanings (the cultural technē), and individuals who take up the social meanings to interact with the material conditions. Psychologism puts too much weight on the individual.

## 3. Signaling and Content

Because (just) psychological states aren’t the answer to (1), let’s reconsider:

1) What exactly *is* a cultural technē? What are its ontological constituents?

I will narrow my focus and will consider only how *simple meanings*. Let's start by distinguishing *the signifier* [the symbol], *the signified* [the referent/information carried], and *the sign* [the signifier together with the signified].

We might first question whether all the content of a cultural technē is propositional (See Haslanger 2017, 2019), and what propositions *are*. And if propositions are included in a cultural technē, the uptake may not require “full-blown” propositional attitudes, i.e., attitudes that are “unobservable mental [causes of behavior], which represent situations under individually variable modes of presentation and influence behavior only tenuously due to holism, that is, constraint by whole networks of other mental states?” (Zawidzki 2013, 13-14). Instead, the psychological uptake of ideology might be better understood in terms of kinds of cognition we share with other social animals, e.g., a teleological stance?

In his famous paper, “Meaning,” Paul Grice distinguishes natural meaning from non-natural meaning. He starts the paper with three examples that he characterizes cases of natural meaning (p. 213):

"Those spots mean (meant) measles."

"Those spots didn't mean anything to me, but to the doctor they meant measles."

"The recent budget means that we shall have a hard year."

Grice doesn't spend much time on natural meaning in the paper, given his focus is to provide an account of non-natural meaning. But it is useful to recap his conclusions about non-natural meaning:

(1) "A meant<sub>NN</sub> something by x" is (roughly) equivalent to "A intended the utterance of x to produce some effect in an audience by means of the recognition of this intention"; and we may add that to ask what A meant is to ask for a specification of the intended effect... \

(3) "x means<sub>NN</sub> (timeless) that so-and-so" might as a first shot be equated with some statement or disjunction of statements about what "people" (vague) intend (with qualifications about "recognition") to effect by x.

Along the way, Grice criticizes what he calls a “causal theory” of non-natural meaning attributed to C.L. Stevenson on the grounds that it would be a circular, due to its reliance on a notion of communication that (he seems to think) is what is at issue in giving an account of non-natural meaning. This is Grice's characterization of Stevenson's view

[F]or x to mean<sub>NN</sub> something, x must have (roughly) a tendency to produce in an audience some attitude (cognitive or otherwise) and a tendency, in the case of a speaker, to be produced by that attitude, these tendencies being dependent on "an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication."

Considering Stevenson's view, Grice's distinction between “natural” and “non-natural” meaning seems too coarse Brian Skyrms (2010) reports:

Darwin sees some kind of natural salience operating at the origin of language. At that point signals are not conventional, but rather the signal is somehow naturally suited to convey its content. Signaling is then gradually modified by evolution. Darwin is thinking of biological evolution, but for humans (and some other species) there is a version of the account that substitutes cultural evolution or social learning for biological evolution. (20)

In the case of natural meaning, it seems that there is often what Skyrms calls a “natural salience” between the signifier and the signified: smoke means fire. One can learn that smoke means fire, presumably, as an individual, by induction. Other examples, however, seem to rely on a basic capacity for social learning; this may be what Stevenson had in mind by “an elaborate process of conditioning attending the use of the sign in communication.” Vervet monkeys are a suggestive example.

More generally, information can be effectively conveyed by signals with minimal prior coordination under several background conditions: speaker and hearer have a common interest, there are a limited number of live options, and the signal was unexpected, surprising. (Consider the cairn in the woods.) Over time, signals provide information by convention.

Note, however, that in signaling, neither the signifier nor the signified is “in the head.” Repeated signaling relies on a *system of signs*. If we are simply thinking about a framework or system of meanings, and if meaning is information conveyed by signifiers (the apparatus), then a framework can be described without reference to the psychology of those who take it up.

#### 4. Uptake in Practices

To say that a cultural technē/ideology is a system of signs still requires that in order for it to be *ours*, it must function as a tool of coordination in social practices. So we still have to answer:

4) What is it for a group to “take up” a cultural technē or for an individual to be “in the grip” of an ideology?

A cultural technē is taken up through social learning while engaging collectively in activities that distribute resources. It functions by making collectively salient some options rather than others and providing signals so we can coordinate. The taking up, however, is not just a matter of copying. It allows for elaboration, improvement, contestation, etc. It is dynamic and evolving.

The uptake may not always be in the form of belief and the information may not be propositional. The uptake may not be in terms of “full blown” belief, but only a teleological form of cognition. The signal may be only useful in a narrow context and not be dominant or widespread. And uptake may require other attitudes, including affective states.

#### 5. Conclusion

1) What exactly are the constituents of a cultural technē? Is it psychological? Material? Both? Neither? Is there a coherent ontology?

I’ve argued that a cultural technē is a **system of signs**. It includes an apparatus (*signifiers*) and the information they carry to pick out the *signified*. There are many possible frameworks that could enable us to coordinate, some better and some worse than others for achieving just coordination.

2) There are many possible cultural technēs that could manage coordination of a group. What does it mean to say that a cultural technē is *ours*? What determines whether it is ours?

A cultural technē is ours because it functions, through our practices, to manage our coordination, whether anyone actually believes its contents or not. To be effective, it must be “taken up” by individuals when engaging in social practices.

3) How does a cultural technē manage us, especially given that it is typically false or misleading and produces unjust or harmful social stratification?

It manages us because we are highly motivated to coordinate and it gives us the tools to do so. Even in cases where we don’t believe the information necessary for coordination, it is often in our interests to accept it for the purposes at hand. And because we act on resources in ways guided by the technē, the world comes to conform to what we are asked to believe. Then we aren’t believing falsehoods, but are actually believing truths! So it is hard to reveal the problem.

4) What is it for a group to “take up” a cultural technē or for an individual to be “in the grip” of an ideology?

A group takes up **a cultural technē** in the evolution and intergenerational transmission of its social practices. Such practices manage the framing of options, the production, distribution, recycling of resources, and contestation over their values, beliefs, and organizing principles.

A group is in the grip of **an ideology** when its cultural technē obscures valuable options and ways of valuing and if it organizes resources in unjustly.

Why does this matter? If ideology is material – if it is embedded in practices and the material conditions of our agency – and if we are highly motivated to coordinate, even when it isn’t in our *best* interest to do so then social change will only occur when we change our practices and both the cultural technē and the material conditions that support them.