

## THE CONCEPT OF THE PERSON AS THE GIFT OF SOCIETY

MARGARET S. ARCHER

Rom Harré's trilogy, *Ways of Being*, is briefly covered in the notes which preface his text for this meeting: *Social Being*, *Personal Being* and *Physical Being*. Social constructionism has become progressively more pronounced in *The Discursive Mind* (1994) and particularly *The Singular Self* (1998). Together, these volumes present the most comprehensive approach to the concept of the person within social psychology. Their leitmotif can be summed up in one quotation: 'A person is not a natural object, but a cultural artefact'.<sup>1</sup>

### HUMANITY'S INVOLVEMENT IN A MORAL ORDER

If viewed from the natural science model, the concept of the person 'tempts us to think of such concepts as referring to causally potent inner states of people. A closer look shows that the expression makes sense only as a feature of discourse'.<sup>2</sup> To Harré, we must change to a different and discursive ontology. This he schematises in the following diagram, which contrasts the Newtonian ontology, representing the mechanical picture of the world, with the Vygotskyan ontology, appropriate to social psychology.

#### TWO ONTOLOGIES

<b>Ontologies</b>	<b>Locative Systems</b>	<b>Entities</b>	<b>Relations</b>
<b>Newtonian</b>	Space and time	Things & Events	Causality
<b>Discursive</b>	Arrays of People	Speech acts	Rules & Storylines

Figure 1. *The Discursive Mind*.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Rom Harré, *Personal Being*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, 1983, p.20.

<sup>2</sup> *The Singular Self*, Sage, London and Beverly Hills, 1998., p.51.

<sup>3</sup> Rom Harré and Grant Gillett, *The Discursive Mind*, Sage, London and Beverly Hills, 1994, p. 29.

The appropriateness of this discursive ontology derives directly from the fact that the relations between 'speech acts' are not ones of causality. On the contrary, Harré maintains that the 'orderly structure of a conversation is maintained by norms of correctness and propriety. This is not a causal theory. In the physical world model, events and things are linked into structures and patterns by causal relations. But one speech-act does not cause another. Rather, one speech-act makes another appropriate or normatively accountable'.<sup>4</sup> The acceptability of this ontology depends upon our acceding that social life is purely conversational. Many other social theorists will want to protest that some of its constituents – structural properties, cultural constraints and the distributions of resources – cannot be reduced to speech-acts, may never even entail them, and yet exert causal influences of a constraining or enabling kind. Moreover, their causal influence does not depend upon correct conversational diagnosis. For instance, our 'life-chances' do not hinge upon our knowledge of them because the different opportunities associated with different social origins are independent of their discursive detection.

In advocating a discursive ontology, Harré takes as his central assumption that 'Conversation is to be thought of as creating a social world just as causality generates a physical one'.<sup>5</sup>

The first stage in the argument tries 'to show that what people have called 'selves' are, by and large, produced discursively, that is in dialogue... Selves are not entities'.<sup>6</sup> This means more than a rejection of Cartesian 'mind stuff' because it constitutes a denial, strictly speaking, of any private life of the mind. Our seemingly private mental lives of dilemma, deliberation and determination, of curiosity, creativity and contrition, and of anguish, awe and amendment, lose their privacy. With it, they lose the ability to make us (something of) what we are in public. Instead, there 'is no necessary shadow world of mental activity behind discourse in which one is working things out in private'.<sup>7</sup>

The word 'I' merely displays mastery of the first-person pronoun which indexes one's spatial location and expresses moral responsibility for the utterances made. Instead of a robust 'I', there is the discursive self, the

<sup>4</sup> *The Discursive Mind, op. cit.*, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> *Personal Being, op. cit.*, p. 65.

<sup>6</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 68.

<sup>7</sup> *The Discursive Mind, op. cit.*, p. 27.

meaning of whose symbol use is a function only of usage in discourse. Thus, there is no sense in which a psychological subject or agent has a nature which can be defined in isolation from a conversational context. We become a socio-spatial location, such that 'the study of the mind is a way of understanding the phenomena that arise when different sociocultural discourses are integrated within an identifiable human individual situated in relation to those discourses'.<sup>8</sup> The term 'ethogenics' has been coined for the study of human behaviour in its environment, construed as a normative one made up of the rules and conventions which constitute genres of discourse. Thus, via Wittgenstein, mental activity loses its 'inner' impenetrability and comes out into daylight as public discursive practices – framed within and governed by informal rules.

In this wholesale replacement of causal properties by rule-following,

Harré's basic claim is that discursive activities are involved in a moral order. This is summarised in the following quotation.

Discursive activities are always subject to standards of correctness and incorrectness. These standards can be expressed in terms of rules. Therefore a discursive practice is the use of a sign system, for which there are norms of right and wrong use...The use of the word 'I' in English is a discursive practice. One of its many roles is in the act of taking responsibility by a speaker for what he or she says and to what he or she is committed by the saying of it. According to the discursive point of view, in this and similar discursive practices of reflexive talk, I constitute myself as a self, as an embodied moral unit in the world. By using the indexical world 'I', I create my moral individuality for you or anyone else whom I might address.<sup>9</sup>

What might seem to us to be the private lives of our minds are, in fact, internalized from the public moral order. This is because Harré's is 'an ontology in which utterances, interpreted as speech-acts, become the primary entities in which minds become personalised, as privatised discourses'.<sup>10</sup> It is important to note here that it is not only the contents of our minds which are socially derivative (we think no thoughts which are not dependent upon public discourse). In addition, the form of private thought itself derives from the moral order (our epistemology is confined to the internalised conversation of society and we have no other means of access to knowledge). Thus,

<sup>8</sup> *The Discursive Mind, op. cit.*, p. 22.

<sup>9</sup> *The Discursive Mind, op. cit.*, p. 28-9.

<sup>10</sup> *The Discursive Mind, op. cit.*, p. 36.

Harré argues that the 'structure of the discourses in which psychological phenomena, such as remembering, displays of emotions, avowals of attitudes, attributions of causality and responsibility, and so on, *are created under the control of conventions of right and wrong performances*'.<sup>11</sup>

By making us intrinsically part of the public discursive order, Harré has succeeded in eliminating those 'inner entities' which to him share the dubiety of 'mental substances'. Instead, all has been brought to the surface because there is nothing other than the conversation of humanity – what might seem to us to be personal and idiosyncratic is derivative from private forms.

Harré is advancing a two factor theory. At the individual level, the only powerful particular is the 'person' and at the social level it is the 'discourse'. His present paper fills in the gaps between the two. To Harré, there are only two entities in question, bodies whose basic particulars are molecular clusters and discursive resources, or meanings, which are common to the social group. Between molecules and meanings there is nothing – no inner states, no mental attributes and no personal psychology.

There are only persons as powerful particulars and persons have no inner psychological complexity. Indeed, our very 'personal singularity is a product of social processes, while the very attributes that characterise the seeming 'free standing' person are through and through relational'<sup>12</sup> – a category which includes memory, intentionality, beliefs, rationality and emotions, which are all created through public discourse. Were it to be objected that many of these predicates apply to pre-linguistic children or indeed to other animate species, the response would be that for humans the key to understanding the transformation of these natural potentials into developed powers involves taking part in society's conversation.<sup>13</sup>

Yet many of us would resist the notion that our singularity as individuals reduces to our social specification. In short, most people believe themselves to be or to have 'a self'. To Harré, our common feeling of our distinctiveness is not misplaced, but we are grossly mistaken if we think we possess selfhood. The 'singularity we each feel ourselves to be, is not an entity. Rather it is a site, a site from which a person perceives the world and a place from which to act. There are only persons. Selves are grammatical fictions, necessary characteristics of person-oriented discourses'.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>11</sup> *The Discursive Mind, op. cit.*, p. 36. (My italics).

<sup>12</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 3-4.

Because of our embodiment, we occupy a special location which gives us a particular point of view. However, this position in time and space exhausts our singularity. Persons then are not like things but like places.<sup>15</sup> The social construction of selfhood is simply a co-ordination of the embodied point of view (site) with grammatical devices, the most important of which is mastery of the pronoun system. Site plus syntax together give rise to the fiction of being 'a self'. However, 'I' does not designate an entity but, rather, indexes a location such as '39N 77W' (the co-ordinates for Washington). Beyond that, 'I' does not refer to an individuated speaker who talks from their private inner being. It merely labels a speech-act as mine, which carries with it responsibilities within the public moral order. Indeed, the only meaning of 'inner' which Harré will entertain is the literal one of 'inside the skin'. What it can never be is a metaphor for 'the private', which has been disposed of through its dependence upon 'the public'.

In place of concepts that stand for inner properties, Harré's conceptualisation claims to have 'condensed this ocean into a drop of grammar'.<sup>16</sup> 'Person' then is the only genuine substantive term designating a real entity. Unsurprisingly, Harré aligns himself with Hume who, when he looked 'inward', could never detect his own self but only an array of memories and experiences. The self that was sought proved unavailable to private introspection. To Harré, the reason was quite simply that there was nothing there to find. The alleged properties of the Cartesian ego amount to no more than the grammatical rules for using the word 'I', rules which belong to the public and not to the private domain.

Nevertheless, many of us will feel unease about this emptying process which leaves nothing (of us) between the molecules and the meanings. There is only our bodily constitution and the stories we tell autobiographically – courtesy of the public linguistic medium. Most of us continue to harbour the notion that we have a sense of self and that its continuous nature is what distinguishes me from you. Some of us will maintain that the self that eluded Hume's introspection was precisely the self which was doing the searching. In *Personal Being* this common intuition is taken very seriously. However the 'self', or the sense of selfhood, is not allowed to be an entity or a stratum because personhood remains firmly *unstratified*. So what can a 'sense of self' be, such that it does not traduce this proposition

<sup>15</sup> *Personal Being*, *op. cit.*, p. 61.

<sup>16</sup> *The Singular Self*, *op. cit.*, p. 178.

and does not challenge the sole ontological level of 'persons'? The answer is 'a theory' – one which we obtain from society.

Thus, 'while 'person' is an empirical concept which distinguishes beings in a public-collective realm, 'self...is a theoretical concept acquired in the course of social interactions'.<sup>17</sup> We learn it by being taught it but this theory, acquired by all normal people, has the same ontological status as that which Harré accords to scientific theories in general – the stories which scientists tell one another. He suggests 'that 'I', the first person pronoun, does have a referential force to a hypothetical entity 'the self', in much the same way that the gravitational term *g* refers to a hypothetical entity, the gravitational field'. In other words, we can acquire this theory, the holding of which can do organisational work for us, but he does not concede the existence of a real stratum constituted by our 'selves' because the 'self' remains a theoretical construct.

'The self as a theory appropriated from society's conversation' has far reaching implications, some of them moral ones. Harré has the tough-minded honesty to confine 'personhood' to those capable of such appropriation, of mastering society's pronominal system. It is restricted to those who can speak: the pre- and a-linguistic represent empty spaces. This derives directly from Harré's bold assertion that the 'fundamental human reality is a conversation'<sup>18</sup> – and nothing else.

#### HUMANITY AND SOCIETY'S CONVERSATION

Harré coined a motto for his work – 'Nothing in the mind that was not first in the conversation'.<sup>19</sup> In elaborating this statement that all we are as human beings is a gift of society, his argument has three stages. Firstly, he posits the priority of language in human thought and action; secondly, he maintains that all mental activities and attributes are derivative from conversation and, thirdly, that our private reflections are parasitic upon public discourse. In conjunction, they lead to the conclusion that 'the minds of individuals are privatised practices condensing like fog out of the public conversation onto material nuclei, their bodies'.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> *Personal Being, op. cit.*, p. 26.

<sup>18</sup> *Personal Being, op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>19</sup> *Personal Being, op. cit.*, p. 116.

<sup>20</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 50.

The starting point is explicitly Wittgensteinian, namely it 'is based on the assumption of the priority of language use over all other forms of human cognition'.<sup>21</sup> This then becomes a straightforward doctrine of social construction. Harré asserts the 'essential linguistic basis for all human practices'.<sup>22</sup> Because of this, he moves on to explain both the degree of universality that characterises human beings as language users and also the extent of human diversity that derives from their using different languages. As he puts it, 'a large chunk of what it is to be a person comes with learning the local language'.<sup>23</sup> Thus, (embodiment apart) we are what we are through the affordances of language and we are who we are through theories of the self which are linguistic in origin. Harré's project is nothing short of a complete reorientation of psychology because he insists upon 'attributing the properties of mental-predicate ascriptions and avowals to the culture, not to minds'.<sup>24</sup>

Whereas traditional psychology was based on what has been termed the 'faculty model'<sup>25</sup> (i.e. that people are bundles of faculties, such as memory, attitudes, cognition, feelings etc.), Harré reverses the sequence and next argues how each of these is produced under the aegis of society's conversation. This is a new psychological paradigm, in which

not only are the acts which we as individuals perform and the interpretations we create of the social and physical world prefigured in collective actions and social representations, but also that the very structure of our minds (and perhaps the fact that we have minds at all) is drawn from those social representations.<sup>26</sup>

What is radical here is not only the large claim that our minds are culturally dependent, but also (i) that the reality of the world is deemed to be mediated through the cultural conversation rather than ever impinging upon us directly, and (ii) that it is only in a discursive environment that consciousness comes into existence. I have questioned both (i) and (ii) in detail elsewhere.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> *The Singular Self*, *op. cit.*, p. 21.

<sup>22</sup> *The Singular Self*, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

<sup>23</sup> *The Singular Self*, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

<sup>24</sup> *Personal Being*, *op. cit.*, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup> See Norbert Wily, *The Semiotic Self*, Polity Press, Oxford, 1994, Ch. 1.

<sup>26</sup> *Personal Being*, *op. cit.*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Margaret S. Archer, *Being Human: The Problem of Agency*, Cambridge University Press, 2000.

Let us simply note what a very large list of attributes, once deemed matters of personal psychology, are now held to be discursively dependent: intentionality, rationality, emotionality, the activities of reporting and recounting and the bundle of skills including intelligence. The display of any proto-skill takes place in the public domain, where it is subject to commentary and correction according to the moral order. Only after repeated adjustment to convention does the skill become part of an acceptable and thus fixed repertoire. Skills are construed as displays which earn a public encore or, at least, encouragement in the form of conversational correction. The implication is that without an encore, the proto-display falls into desuetude – deselected through discursive socialization. This, of course, is an account of the processes responsible for the persistence of a proto-skill and its development into an acknowledged skill. It is not an account of its genesis, which is not explained and thus leaves rather a large question mark.

Since it is impossible to examine the full gamut of ‘attributes’ with which Harré deals, let us glance at one – memory – which is held to be ‘a cognitive/discursive skill and not a native endowment’.<sup>28</sup> The old model of the memory ‘tool’, operating in conjunction with experience (such as recency, frequency and intensity) to generate recall (or failure to recall), is replaced by social constructionism. Attention shifts to how people represent their pasts in discussion and construct versions of past events in conversation. For example, take a memorial interchange between mother and child over an old photo of the two of them and note how dialogically the parent marks the significance of the pictured event (happy, familiar etc.). The mother also cues the child’s recall by supplying appropriate descriptions, provides contextual couching for reminiscences (one of many episodes) and positively sanctions the moral right to the recollection.

I think there are difficulties with this account. The example of a childhood photograph contains elements independent of the social constructions which significant others try to put upon it. Many of us find that our childhood memories are sieved through the photographs available, simply because these visual recordings are there (and assure us that we did indeed ride a donkey on the sands when we were about three). They tend to be looked at periodically until they can outweigh or overlay all the un-snapped moments (of flying a kite at the same age). Equally, the photos supply their own context pictorially and independent of commentary. We often go

<sup>28</sup> *The Singular Self*, *op. cit.*, p. 143.

through the albums alone and, whatever accounts we have been given, the visual evidence can still leave us thinking that, *contrary* to what we had been told, the house seemed rather small and father less than athletic.

The full brunt of the social constructionist account of memory is turned against Locke, who made our continuous sense of self dependent upon our embodiment and memories. Harré changes the basis of this continuity into one of narrative. 'My life is not a sequence of historical events but a story which I tell myself and which is forever being updated and revised'.<sup>29</sup> Above all, since 'one's life is lived and told with others, autobiographical storytelling, like all forms of memory work, is essentially social, produced dialogically'.<sup>30</sup> It seems to me that this omits the artistic license we (consciously) give ourselves when recollecting in public (to aggrandise or to be self-depreciating). Often we catch ourselves in the act of embellishing on 'the facts' (and to Harré who does this catching and against what?). Moreover, without any objective anchorage in 'what happened', our recollections become fantasies and all of our biographies become open to revision by the social group.

My main reservations about Harré's presentation of memory/autobiography as a social construct hang upon our having private thoughts and private lives. These latter are, of course, firmly repudiated by him. Public conversation and private thoughts form a continuous web. From 'a discursive point of view the private experience of a human being is shaped and ordered in learning to speak and write...This was Vygotsky's great insight. That ordering is expressed in language and other intentional, norm governed practices. This was Wittgenstein's great insight'.<sup>31</sup> In brief, what he takes from both is that inter-subjectivity has primacy over, and is prior to, intra-subjectivity. In his Vygotskian developmental account, the private is always posterior to the public because the private derives from internalisation of the public. Through symbiosis, the carer supplements the deficient efforts of the child by treating it as if it had the full complement of skills. Only thanks to this partnership is the child (aged about three) able to begin to develop the capacity for private discourse. This is, therefore, a secondary ability as are the powers of self-expression and self-reflexivity. Thus reflexive practices like self-criticism and self-exhortation simply borrow from

<sup>29</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 138.

<sup>30</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 146.

<sup>31</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 42.

society's conversation about criticism, exhortation etc. This loss of reflexivity 'proper' seems to deprive society of its fund of creativity, which even Mead – as one of the most 'over-socialised' of theorists – sought to preserve through his spontaneous 'I'.

#### CONCLUSION

The loss seems to go further. Not only are 'my thoughts' permutations upon society's conversation, but my reflexive deliberations *about society* are also restricted by it. This is in the important sense that 'I' am disallowed any 'direct' experiences of other parts of reality – nature, practice or the transcendental – which can make me other than I am and also what I want to be and try to be within society. This conclusion seems to follow ineluctably from the fact that experience is held to be secondary to society's conversation: 'discourses of self play the role of a grammar, the rules that make a discourse of persons possible. They are not the result of abstractions from experience. They are what make experience, as we have it, possible'.<sup>32</sup>

Conversely, a more robust concept of the self would allow that a person has become something of what she is through her (unmediated) experiences of reality: through interacting with nature (as in teaching oneself to swim), through developing practical skills (a solo mountaineer learning hand and footholds) and through experiencing transcendence (as in solitary contemplative prayer). She will also have become something of a different person in the process, in ways that have not depended upon a detour through society's conversation. Moreover, if any of the above experiences come to feature among her 'ultimate concerns', they will have served to shape her personal identity. In turn, how she reflexively reacts to face-to-face encounters and the 'positionings' others attempt to assign her will also be different. All of her actions and attitudes, including the reasons she gives for her acceptances, rejections or variations upon the 'positionings' proffered to her, will not be explicable within the confines of the small group itself – or even within 'society' at all.

<sup>32</sup> *The Singular Self, op. cit.*, p. 72.