

JEROME
BRUNER

ACTS OF
MEANING

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To Carol

Preface

BOOKS are like mountaintops jutting out of the sea. Self-contained islands though they may seem, they are upthrusts of an underlying geography that is at once local and, for all that, a part of a universal pattern. And so, while they inevitably reflect a time and a place, they are part of a more general intellectual geography. This book is no exception.

I have written it at a time when psychology, the science of mind as William James once called it, has become fragmented as never before in its history. It has lost its center and risks losing the cohesion needed to assure the internal exchange that might justify a division of labor between its parts. And the parts, each with its own organizational identity, its own theoretical apparatus, and often its own journals, have become specialties whose products become less and less exportable. Too often they seal themselves within their own rhetoric and within their own parish of authorities. This self-sealing risks making each part (and the aggregate that increasingly constitutes psychology's patchquilt whole) ever more remote from other inquiries dedicated to the understanding of mind and

the human condition—inquiries in the humanities or in the other social sciences.

There may be good reasons for what has happened, and perhaps it even reflects a needed “paradigm shift” in the human sciences. The “biological” side of psychology has abandoned its old base to join forces with the neurosciences. And the newly minted “cognitive sciences” have absorbed many of those who used to work in the vineyards of perception, memory, thinking, all of these now conceived as varieties of “information processing.” These new alignments may be for the good: they could bring new and unexpected theoretical vigor to the task of understanding man.

But in spite of the splitting and fragmentation that seem to be occurring, I do not think either that psychology is coming to an end or that it is permanently condemned to live in segregated parishes. For psychology as an enterprise long predates its “official” conversion into a set of self-contained divisions. Its great questions are still alive. The founding of Wundt’s “experimental” laboratory at Leipzig in 1879 did not cancel those questions; it only clothed them in new dress—the “new” positivist style so dear to the hearts of our late-nineteenth-century forebears. Even Wundt in his later years recognized how constricting the new “laboratory” style could be, and in formulating a “cultural psychology” urged that we embrace a more historical, interpretive approach to understanding man’s cultural products.

We are still drawing rich sustenance from our more distant, pre-positivist past: Chomsky acknowledges his debt to Descartes, Piaget is inconceivable without Kant, Vygotsky without Hegel and Marx, and the once towering bastion of “learning theory” was constructed on foundations laid by John

Locke. And had Freud's followers fought free of the model of "bioenergetics" that was the shallowest aspect of his theory, psychoanalysis might have continued to grow in theoretical stature. The more recent cognitive revolution was inconceivable without the supporting philosophical climate of its time. And, indeed, if one looks beyond the boundaries of "official" psychology to our sister disciplines in the human sciences, one is struck by the lively renewal of interest in the classical questions raised in the century since Leipzig by Nietzsche and Peirce, by Austin and Wittgenstein, by Jakobson and de Saussure, by Husserl and Cassirer, by Foucault and Searle.

It is not surprising, then, that a reaction has set in against the narrowing and "sealing in" that are afflicting psychology. The wider intellectual community comes increasingly to ignore our journals, which seem to outsiders principally to contain intellectually unsituated little studies, each a response to a handful of like little studies. Inside psychology there is a worried restlessness about the state of our discipline, and the beginning of a new search for means of reformulating it. In spite of the prevailing ethos of "neat little studies," and of what Gordon Allport once called methodolatry, the great psychological questions are being raised once again—questions about the nature of mind and its processes, questions about how we construct our meanings and our realities, questions about the shaping of mind by history and culture.

And these questions, often pursued more vigorously outside than inside "official" psychology, are being reformulated with a subtlety and rigor that yield rich and generative answers. We know far better now how to approach the Great Comparisons whose resolutions have always challenged psychology: the comparison of man and his evolutionary forebears, man as

immature child and man at full maturity, man in full health and man afflicted by mental illness or alienation, “human nature” as expressed in different cultures, and indeed even the comparison between man in flesh and blood with the machines constructed to simulate him. Each and every one of these inquiries has prospered when we have been willing to ask questions about such taboo topics as mind, intentional states, meaning, reality construction, mental rules, cultural forms, and the like. Occam’s razor, warning us not to multiply our conceptual entities more than “necessary,” was surely not intended to ban mind from the mental sciences. Nor were John Stuart Mill’s principles of induction meant to quell all forms of intellectual curiosity save those which could be slaked by the controlled experiment.

This book is written against the background of psychology today, with its confusions, its dislocations, its new simplifications. I have called it *Acts of Meaning* in order to emphasize its major theme: the nature and cultural shaping of meaning-making, and the central place it plays in human action. It is not just an autobiographical quirk that I should be writing such a book now, though the reader will soon find that it “projects” my own long history as a psychologist. But all single voices are abstracted from dialogues, as Bakhtin teaches us. I have had the great good fortune to be a long-term participant in the dialogues that form and reform psychology. And what I shall have to say in the chapters that follow reflects my view of where the dialogue stands today.

This is not intended to be a “comprehensive” study of all and every aspect of the meaning-making process. That would be impossible in any case. Rather, it is an effort to illustrate what a psychology looks like when it concerns itself centrally

with meaning, how it inevitably becomes a *cultural* psychology and how it must venture beyond the conventional aims of positivist science with its ideals of *reductionism*, *causal explanation* and *prediction*. The three need not be treated like the Trinity. For when we deal with meaning and culture, we inevitably move toward another ideal. To reduce meaning or culture to a material base, to say that they “depend,” say, on the left hemisphere, is to trivialize both in the service of misplaced concreteness. To insist upon explanation in terms of “causes” simply bars us from trying to understand how human beings interpret their worlds and how *we* interpret *their* acts of interpretation. And if we take the object of psychology (as of any intellectual enterprise) to be the achievement of understanding, why is it necessary under all conditions for us to understand *in advance* of the phenomena to be observed—which is all that prediction is? Are not plausible interpretations preferable to causal explanations, particularly when the achievement of a causal explanation forces us to artificialize what we are studying to a point almost beyond recognition as representative of human life?

The study of the human mind is so difficult, so caught in the dilemma of being both the object and the agent of its own study, that it cannot limit its inquiries to ways of thinking that grew out of yesterday’s physics. Rather, the task is so compellingly important that it deserves all the rich variety of insight that we can bring to the understanding of what man makes of his world, of his fellow beings, and of himself. That is the spirit in which we should proceed.

Acknowledgments

I CANNOT begin to mention all the people and institutions who shaped this book. For in many ways, it represents not only my most current thinking but also, as it were, a “return of the repressed.” Some of the influences, consequently, are in the distant past, like the Department of Social Relations at Harvard where, for a decade beginning in the mid-1950s, I was nourished by the company of such as Clyde Kluckhohn and Gordon Allport, Talcott Parsons and Henry Murray. It was a department with a purpose, and each month we met as a seminar to elucidate that purpose: how to reconcile views of Man as a unique individual with views of him both as an expression of culture and as a biological organism. The debates of those Wednesday evenings reverberate in the pages that follow.

Then there was “Soc Sci 8,” *Conceptions of Man*, in which George Miller and I tried to persuade a generation of Harvard and Radcliffe undergraduates that to know Man you must see him against the background of the animal kingdom from which he evolved, in the context of the culture and language that provide the symbolic world in which he lives, and in the light of the growth processes that bring these two powerful

forces into concert. We had become convinced by then that psychology could not do the job on its own. And so we set up our own version of an interdisciplinary human science in General Education, and for most of the 1960s, from September through May each year, we managed to stay just a step ahead of our undergraduates.

And in the midst of this, the Center for Cognitive Studies was founded, about which much more will be said in the opening chapter. I mention it here only to express a debt to yet another community that helped convince me (by this time hardly against my will) that the boundaries that separated such fields as psychology, anthropology, linguistics, and philosophy were matters of administrative convenience rather than of intellectual substance.

Then there were those longtime conversational partners who constitute one's Generalized Other—George Miller, David Krech, Alexander Luria, Barbel Inhelder, Clifford Geertz, Albert Guerard, Roman Jakobson, Morton White, Elting Morison, David Olson. And still the list is incomplete, for I have left out my former students—from recent New York, through middle Oxford, to early Harvard.

Several friends read early drafts of this book and provided useful suggestions: Michael Cole, Howard Gardner, Robert Lifton, Daniel Robinson, and Donald Spence. I am very grateful for their help.

I owe an especial debt to my hosts in Jerusalem who, in December 1989, made life so thoroughly agreeable when I delivered the Jerusalem-Harvard Lectures at the Hebrew University there—particularly President Amnon Pazi, Rector Yoram Ben-Porath, Professor Shmuel Eisenstadt, and Ms. Liat Mayberg. The lectures I gave in Jerusalem generated the

first draft of this book. I have rarely lectured to so intensely involved or so informed an audience as assembled those December afternoons on Mount Scopus. Their comments and questions started me on the road to fruitful revision. I also wish gratefully to acknowledge a grant from the Spencer Foundation that supported the work on which this volume is based.

At last I am able to express my gratitude to my publisher, Arthur Rosenthal, who, over the years, has censored any mention of his name from prefaces by me and other grateful authors. It is finally possible to escape his blue pencil, for he is now about to leave the directorship of Harvard University Press to preside over other matters elsewhere. Arthur Rosenthal as a publisher is a reward for hard work, a way of life. And as if that were not enough, there was the Press in its other embodiments: Angela von der Lippe, always skillfully encouraging, and Camille Smith, a manuscript editor with patience and imagination.

I have dedicated this book to Carol Fleisher Feldman, my wife and colleague. It will come as no surprise to anyone.

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The Proper Study of Man

I WANT TO BEGIN with the Cognitive Revolution as my point of departure. That revolution was intended to bring “mind” back into the human sciences after a long cold winter of objectivism. But mine will not be the usual account of progress marching ever forward.¹ For, at least in my view, that revolution has now been diverted into issues that are marginal to the impulse that brought it into being. Indeed, it has been technicalized in a manner that even undermines that original impulse. This is not to say that it has failed: far from it, for cognitive science must surely be among the leading growth shares on the academic bourse. It may rather be that it has become diverted by success, a success whose technological virtuosity has cost dear. Some critics, perhaps unkindly, even argue that the new cognitive science, the child of the revolution, has gained its technical successes at the price of dehumanizing the very concept of mind it had sought to reestablish in psychology, and that it has thereby estranged much of psychology from the other human sciences and the humanities.²

I shall have more to say on these matters shortly. But before going on, let me give you the plan of this chapter and the ones that follow. Once our retrospective glance at the revolution is

done, I then want to turn directly to a preliminary exploration of a renewed cognitive revolution—a more interpretive approach to cognition concerned with “meaning-making,” one that has been proliferating these last several years in anthropology, linguistics, philosophy, literary theory, psychology, and, it would almost seem, wherever one looks these days.³ I rather suspect that this vigorous growth is an effort to recapture the original momentum of the first cognitive revolution. In later chapters, I shall try to fill in this preliminary sketch with some concrete illustration of research on the boundaries between psychology and its neighbors in the humanities and the social sciences, research that recaptures what I have called the originating impulse of the cognitive revolution.

Now let me tell you first what I and my friends thought the revolution was about back there in the late 1950s. It was, we thought, an all-out effort to establish meaning as the central concept of psychology—not stimuli and responses, not overtly observable behavior, not biological drives and their transformation, but meaning. It was *not* a revolution against behaviorism with the aim of transforming behaviorism into a better way of pursuing psychology by adding a little mentalism to it. Edward Tolman had done that, to little avail.⁴ It was an altogether more profound revolution than that. Its aim was to discover and to describe formally the meanings that human beings created out of their encounters with the world, and then to propose hypotheses about what meaning-making processes were implicated. It focused upon the symbolic activities that human beings employed in constructing and in making sense not only of the world, but of themselves. Its aim was to prompt psychology to join forces with its sister interpretive disciplines in the humanities and in the social sciences. Indeed,

beneath the surface of the more computationally oriented cognitive science, this is precisely what has been happening—first slowly and now with increasing momentum. And so today one finds flourishing centers of cultural psychology, cognitive and interpretive anthropology, cognitive linguistics, and above all, a thriving worldwide enterprise that occupies itself as never before since Kant with the philosophy of mind and of language. It is probably a sign of the times that the two Jerusalem-Harvard Lecturers in the academic year 1989–90 represent, each in his own way, this very tradition—Professor Geertz in anthropology and myself in psychology.

The cognitive revolution as originally conceived virtually required that psychology join forces with anthropology and linguistics, philosophy and history, even with the discipline of law. It is no surprise and certainly not an accident that in those early years the advisory board of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Harvard included a philosopher, W. V. Quine, an intellectual historian, H. Stuart Hughes, and a linguist, Roman Jakobson. Or that among the Center's Fellows could be numbered almost as many philosophers, anthropologists, and linguists as there were proper psychologists—among them such exponents of the new constructivism as Nelson Goodman. As for the law, I must report that several distinguished members of that faculty came occasionally to our colloquia. One of them, Paul Freund, admitted he came because we at the Center, it seemed to him, were interested in how rules (like rules of grammar, rather than scientific laws) affected human action and that, after all, is what jurisprudence is about.⁵

I think it should be clear to you by now that we were not out to “reform” behaviorism, but to replace it. As my col-