

Review Section

Schutz's Theory of Relevance

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*A review of RONALD L. COX, Schutz's Theory of Relevance:
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In the course of his extensive research into the nature of social reality, human action, and social interaction, Alfred Schutz returned repeatedly to the phenomenon of relevance. Any attempt to analyze Schutz's crucial concepts (e.g., the Life-world, Intersubjectivity, Typification, Meaningful Action, and Ideal Types) or to use those concepts in the course of phenomenological social-scientific research will similarly call for an understanding of this underlying phenomenon. Ronald Cox's book offers a comprehensive and comprehensible critique of Schutz's analysis, and of the phenomenon itself.

The central importance of the phenomenon of relevance is perhaps best indicated by sketching Cox's own portrayal of how other, and perhaps more obvious, aspects of the social world lead to that phenomenon. This portrayal also serves to introduce Cox's own conception of the nature of his project, as well as suggest what I take to be his most problematic criticism.

Schutz's investigations were directed upon the everyday, ordinary experiences which comprise what phenomenologists call the "life-world." More precisely, and to some extent in contrast to much of Husserl's work, Schutz was especially concerned with the intersubjective character of those experiences. He found that we experience our environment (both social and natural) in "typified" ways; i.e. as organized in rather standard ways, and as habitually recognized as so organized, by the experiencers themselves. Cox uses one of Schutz's examples to illustrate this situation: we typically experience certain creatures as dogs, rather than cats or birds, on the basis of certain typical features. We can abstractively thematize those typifications as "types," and, thanks to *our* language, we can retain our typifications in a rather precise way: "common language" is their "prime storehouse" (pp. 6-8).

Why do we apply particular typifications rather than others? Schutz responds: relevance to situations or purposes is the determining feature. How

do we form particular typifications? Schutz finds that we select certain traits and disregard others as irrelevant to the character of a typified object. The resultant typified experience serves as a framework within which social action is performed.¹ For Schutz, then, the meaning of social action is not intrinsic to certain performances, motions, etc. Rather, meaning results from interpretation of those actions, in reflection upon them, as typified.

Social interaction also depends upon typifications. In particular, we each interpret another's conduct as if it were our own. This implicit assumption utilizes idealizations which provide a "general thesis of the reciprocity of perspectives." The typifications which support this thesis depend upon relevance. Cox concludes:

Since every social interaction can take place only through mutual typifications and the holding of relevance systems in common, the entire phenomenon of cosubjectivity—of there being an other for me at all—is at the same time an instance of the phenomenon of relevance. There can be no understanding of the cosubjective, of the social, without also understanding what relevance systems are and the role they play in our experience of each other in our world [p. 23].

Cox goes on to explore the relation between meaning and relevance.

Since, for Schutz, meaningfulness depends upon interpretation of typified acts and objects, which in turn depend on systems of relevance to situations and purposes, it is not surprising that not all meanings are compatible. Within "provinces of meaning," there is compatibility. But Schutz notes that moving from one such sphere of intelligibility to others involves "shock." For instance, shifting from the life-world (which Schutz holds is our primary province of meaning) to scientific or religious contexts involves a "discontinuity" [p. 26]. As Cox notes, the result is a situation in which the "cognitive style" and "fundamental distinguishing criteria" can be sufficiently different as to result in "incompatibility": the "experience in one province does not lead itself to transformation by rule or formula into another" [p. 27]. Due to the "relative separateness and incompatibility between the provinces," despite their "interconnections, overlaps, or enclaves" [pp. 29–30], "terms do not mean entirely the same thing" in different provinces: "their use is by analogy" [p. 29]. Indeed, "the very meaning of the experience [is] peculiar to a given province" [p. 30].²

¹Cox's perceptive elucidation of the formation and function of typifications is especially welcome as a corrective to the misunderstanding of this process, in Gorman (1977), as "socially engineered recipes" imposed by an "in-group" upon "nonthinking" actors. For a response to Gorman, see Kersten (1978).

²Although explorations of this issue would go far beyond the limits of this essay, I suggest that Schutz's work in this area constitutes a provocative parallel to Wittgenstein's (1953) notion of a diversity of language games and Thomas Kuhn's (1970) discussion of incommensurable world-views, or even "different worlds." Further, a comparison of appropriate aspects of Schutz's theory with William James' conception of "sub-universes of reality" (Cox notes this correlation, p. 25) would provide a phenomenological resolution of Kuhn's incommensurability thesis.

Cox recognizes that questions about the possible incompatibility of these provinces are part of a larger series of questions about relations among relevance systems, which "entail further questions concerning how to go about answering them" [p. 31]. "Schutz's own approach was to remain largely concerned with the life-world, pursuing the nature of relevance by attempting to explicate as fully as possible the interconnections between relevance systems and the structures of the lifeworld" [p. 31]. Cox holds that this approach, "while certainly important and even a necessary step in the analysis," is not sufficient: "The only way to answer these questions is to carry out the full constitutional analysis of relevance to the most fundamental levels of consciousness" [p. 31]. This is, then, Cox's project: having recognized that Schutz's "analyses give a whole added dimension to those of Husserl" [p. viii], Cox proposes to expand that dimension by "founding the structures of the lifeworld in the analysis of consciousness" [p. 31].

Chapters Five and Six of the book (and to some extent, also Chapter Four) carry out this endeavor. Before doing so, Cox provides (in Chapter Two) an excellent account of "Some Fundamentals of Phenomenology." This should be especially valuable to the social scientist who comes to Schutz's work with little background study of phenomenology. Cox gives what he notes is his "own understanding of phenomenology... heavily indebted to... Dorion Cairns" [p. 33], by defining and explaining a broad range of phenomenological concepts. These are all considered as phenomena which require consideration in the course of any phenomenological investigation of consciousness and experience. On the basis of these elucidations and the normed vocabulary they provide, Cox can present Schutz's theory and his own critique without either mystifying the reader with an exotic vocabulary or interrupting his presentation for explanation of methodology or terminology.

In Chapters Three and Four, Cox presents Schutz's theory of relevance and his own critique. In the last two chapters, he goes on to explore "The Founding of Relevance," i.e. the automatic (passive) and active (actional) constitution of relevance. This allows him to discuss the role of relevance in a social scientific theory which seeks to understand the full meaning of an action, for the agent and (thus) for the scientific observer. This leads to some provocative remarks on the relation of "ideal types," and social science in general, to the life-world which is both the foundation and subject matter of that science. Despite his policy of treating the published works as primary [p. ix], he acknowledges the need for an "interpretative exposition" [p. 72] of Schutz's principal, but unfinished treatment: *Reflections on the Problem of Relevance* (1970).³ Accordingly, the third chapter is almost entirely given

³This book was posthumously edited, annotated, and provided with an introduction by Richard Zaner, who notes in the introduction that the manuscript was written between 1947 and 1951. All but two of the articles which Cox cites were published after that time; the significant

over to setting out the three different types of relevance (topical, interpretative, and motivational) analyzed in that work, although the last section does deal with additional aspects of the general theory, as distilled from its use in Schutz's published articles.

This portrayal suggests that questions concerning the incompatibility of provinces of meaning should be pursued by exploring the "field-theme structure which is fundamental to the mind itself" [p. 74]. "We experience several realms simultaneously as interrelated" [p. 75] by selecting topics which are relevant to particular interests and dividing out attention accordingly. Thus, "even perception involves choice [rather than simple reception of data], since one may choose which perceptual elements become thematic" [p. 76]. Choice is exercised, Schutz argues, in accordance with the three types of relevance operative in our experience. To some extent, also, relevance structures are imposed upon us by the subject matter of our experiences as well as our prior experiences which are "passively" (i.e., nonvolitionally) synthesized with the current subject matter. Cox's discussion of these various possibilities brings out the intricate complexity of any experience. We find, he concludes, "a genuine interdependency of the three kinds of relevance," such that any "new" experience will be interpreted in terms of a "stock of knowledge at hand, along with the sedimentations of previous mental activities, all being habitual possessions" [p. 91].

By this point in the analysis of relevance, issues arise which are central to Cox's critical evaluation. The structures which Cox has been extracting from Schutz's work are, of course, offered as phenomenological descriptions. Even more, as Cox notes, the analysis "must be treated as a contribution to eidetic phenomenology" [p. viii]. In keeping with Husserl's requirements for such claims, then, these structures must admit of "self-giveness"; they must be accessible for coinvestigators, and must repeatedly show themselves to be as Schutz characterizes them. Yet even though they are utilized in all of our experience (if Schutz is correct), these structures are only descriptively

exception is "On Multiple Realities," which dates from 1945. The only book which Schutz published was *Der sinnhafte Aufbau der sozialen Welt* (1932; English translation, *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, 1967). (Zaner notes in his introduction to Schutz (1970) that this work was in progress for twelve years [p. xxiii].) At his death (1959), Schutz was working on the manuscripts which were formulated by his student, Thomas Luckmann, into *Strukturen der Lebenswelt* (1973; English translation, *The Structures of the Life-World*, 1973).

I note these dates in order to urge that care must be taken in setting together texts which were written over a 20-year span. This is especially so in regard to Schutz's writings on the temporal structure of consciousness. The earlier work (1932) is the least precise in using the terms "recollection" and "reflection"; all but one of Cox's quotations (in the section entitled "Schutz's Theory of Reflection," pp. 117-122) are from that work. (The only exception is from the 1945 article.) Most of Schutz's work on relevance was completed years later. Even in the early work, I would argue, a close reading supports my claim (following) that Schutz did not confuse or equate retroactive reflection with recollective reproduction.

accessible as the themes of a “reflective attitude”: one which requires that the investigator’s focus be altered from the ongoing events and processes which utilize these structures, to the structures themselves as informing the “flow” of mental life.

Schutz is quite clear in stating the aspect of this alteration which Cox rejects:

... when, by my act of reflection, I turn my attention to my living experience, I am no longer ... simply living within that flow... for the act of attention—and this is of major importance for the study of meaning—presupposes an elapsed, passed away experience... only a past experience can be called meaningful... [p. 120].

Elsewhere, Schutz notes an additional limitation which Cox also cites:

If I adopt this reflective attitude, it is however, not my ongoing acting that I can grasp. What alone I can grasp is rather my performed act (my past acting) or, if my acting still continues while I turn back, the performed initial phases (my present acting)... [p. 121].

Cox finds that Schutz, in effect, equates reflection with recollection, and that this “constitutes a misunderstanding of Husserl” [p. 124].⁴ This is not the only criticism of the theory of relevance which Cox proposes, but since he finds that the “roots” of other “troubles can be traced back to Schutz’s conception of the nature of phenomenological reflection” [p. 117]. I will confine my own critical remarks to this one issue.

As Cox understands Schutz’s position, “reflection must be limited to recollection” [p. 125]. In contrast, he finds Husserl “squarely against the position that reflection is only recollection” [p. 123]. “Reflection then includes recollection and anticipation, but is not limited to these, and includes the apprehension of the mental extent simultaneous with the reflecting itself” [p. 122]. This simultaneity is crucial, Cox holds: “if reflection on the on-going processes themselves is not possible, then phenomenology is also not possible, at least in the precise sense that Husserl conceived it” [p. 123]. Expanding upon this, he says:

If, as Schutz claims, an immediate grasping of the ongoing present phase of mental life is not possible, then the claim that phenomenology... must proceed only on the basis of evidential grasping of the affairs themselves would exclude... the processes of intentionality in the current extension of mental life... The only aspects of mental life which would be open to study would be those affairs which... could be recollected... Such a memorial presenting (Schutz’s reflection) is not, however, a presenting of the affairs themselves... [p. 125].

These are, indeed, dire consequences. Although “mental life” is not the only focus of phenomenological inquiry, it is certainly a predominant topic, and even the foundational study for all other investigations. The extent of the

⁴In all that follows, as in Cox’s text, “reflection” is understood as “phenomenological reflection,” rather than in any ordinary or general philosophical sense.

consequences is matched by the extent of what would constitute an adequate defense of Schutz's conception of retroactive reflection: nothing less than a full exploration of the character of phenomenological reflection, of the evidence it offers, and of the notion of self-giveness, will suffice.

This defense would begin by showing that Cox misunderstands both Schutz and Husserl on the nature of "originary" and "evident" "self-giveness," and does so on the basis of an ambiguity in the meaning of "immediate." Since (as Cox quotes Husserl) "phenomenological method proceeds entirely through acts of reflection" [p. 122], and also, "phenomenology proceeds only through the evidential having of 'the affairs themselves,' the immediate in person grasping of the processes of mental life" [p. 123], the question is whether "immediate" is to be understood in a *temporal* sense. Cox assumes that it is ("simultaneous"; c.f. the quotations from Cox in the previous paragraph). If Schutz shared that assumption, (and I would argue that he did not), he would indeed be liable to the consequences Cox indicates in his critical evaluation [pp. 125-6].

However, Husserl did not (and even, could not) use "immediate" in a temporal sense. Rather, he requires a "*non-mediated*"—"originary" and "evident"—presense of the state of affairs, to the act of reflection. The temporal sense (character) of these affairs *as* past, present, or even atemporal (as in the case of idealities) would be no more relevant to *this* requirement than, e.g., their aural or aesthetic characteristics. It seems that at least some of these affairs would be recollected: just prior to the definition of evidence which Schutz quotes, Husserl (1969) notes that "recollection gives for the first time original certainty of the being of a subjective object in the full sense . . ." [p. 157]. Husserl's definition then characterizes "evidence" as:

that performance on the part of intentionality which consists in the giving of something-itself . . . in which there is consciousness of the intended-to objective affair in the mode itself-seized-upon, itself seen . . . [p. 123].

Regardless of the temporal character of the affairs which are the object of a reflective act, then, Husserl limits an evidential reflection to what is "itself" present, rather than, e.g., merely reproduced.

Two recent studies suggest that evidence (in Husserl's sense) cannot accrue to affairs which are simultaneous with the reflective act. J. N. Mohanty (1973), in a portrayal of different types of evidence, cautions against a tendency to "confine consciousness's self-evidence . . . to the instantaneous living present" [p. 212] and goes on to stress the temporal span requisite to the type of self-evidence which is an experience of truth. Richard Zaner (1973) notes that:

Husserl unequivocally asserts his rejection . . . of the idea that evidence is a kind of privileged and special moment of mental life's cognition of an affair, that it is an insight occurring in a single mental process which supposedly has the sense of an apodictic, indubitable security . . . [p. 192].

Reliance upon simultaneity as the guarantee of self-givenness in reflection would seem to fall within this rejection.

This is then an indication of where an argument against limiting reflection to either simultaneity or recollection might begin. The full case requires a book-length study of reflection, and Cox has given us not that, but an excellent book on relevance.⁵ Reflection and evidence are subsidiary topics, but important ones, since an understanding of them is crucial to phenomenological method. One of the virtues of Cox's book is its disciplined focus upon a particular subject matter, as explored by a particular phenomenologist, and with minimal attention (appropriate to the needs of a reader new to phenomenology) to the intricacies of the method. He sets out to give us a "critical, balanced evaluation—but not baptism"[p. viii] of Schutz's theory of relevance. He is equipped with a thorough understanding of Husserl's analysis of the foundational role of consciousness for the constitution of sense, together with an appreciation of Schutz's search for the structures of the life-world. The result is a critique which is also an exploration of the phenomenon of relevance, in the life-world as well as "that province of meaning which Schutz called 'the World of Scientific Theory'"[p. 204].

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⁵I do not myself think that the act of reflection can be upon the phase of (its) mental life which is simultaneous with that act. This claim can be supported with considerable textual evidence from Husserl, but a more appropriate argument would be based in phenomenological analysis directed towards mental life. Given the complex temporal structure of that life (as investigated by Husserl and discussed in detail by Cox), such an argument may well be conceptually impossible. (I owe this point, as well as much of my thinking about reflection and evidence, to Richard Zaner.) A more promising approach seems to be by way of a transcendental argument built upon descriptive-phenomenological data.

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