

Action and Discourse

Some Thoughts Concerning a Non-dualizing Conception of Experience

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► **Purpose** – The paper aims at examining whether George Herbert Mead’s theory of language is an appropriate candidate for developing a non-dualistic conception of experience and empirical research. ► **Problem** – Josef Mitterer has limited his theory of a non-dualizing way of speaking to criticizing dualistic positions in philosophy and sciences but has not developed a non-dualistic conception of empirical research. To do this, the task is to forego the notion “description” as a remainder category of dualism to develop a new understanding of language. ► **Findings** – Mead’s communication and action theory contains a non-dualistic nucleus. His gesture theory of communication allows us to distinguish action and speech and connect them in a non-dualizing way. Further research should especially focus on the relation between immediate and reflective experience in Mead’s work. ► **Key words** – Non-dualism, communication theory, experience theory.

Introduction: How do new content in descriptions emerge?

Philosophical schools of thought that are based on dichotomy distinctions – distinctions such as language and world or description and object – are called “dualizing ways of speaking” by Josef Mitterer (1992, p. 49). He marks such distinctions as dogmas because they are simply presupposed without discussing the problems that arise from doing so. Mitterer characterizes his own thinking as a “non-dualizing way of speaking” (1992, p. 55); he does not presuppose a world categorically different from language. His justification for this decision is found in the “indirect” critique to which he exposes the dogma of dichotomy distinctions and in the making transparent of the procedure for establishing a dichotomy between description and object.

Mitterer shows that when there is disagreement between participants in a discourse it is impossible to reach a language-different object without getting caught up in infinite regresses. Such regresses appear when we concede that there is an object beyond the description and try to distinguish it from the description (Mitterer 1992, p. 90) as well as

when we try to show that the language-different object already existed before it was indicated (p. 95). This makes it impossible to reach the other side of the dichotomy unless we ignore the infinite regresses and presuppose, ex-post, our own description as the language-different object (p. 104). This way allows us to declare our own description to be the true one.

Abstention from presupposing a world categorically different from language has the consequence that the object of a description has itself to be understood as a description. Mitterer calls it “description *so far*” (Mitterer 1992, p. 60), whereas a description is the continuation of a “description *so far*” and, therefore, becomes the “description *from now on*.” Mitterer’s critique of the dualizing way of speaking is convincing. However, his non-dualizing way of speaking leaves us in the dark about the origin of the new or additional contents of descriptions that continue the “description *so far*.”

The above problem of new contents becomes obvious when Mitterer discusses the example of two persons who decide to examine their contradictory descriptions of a table as round and square (1992, pp. 80–82). According to the non-dualistic opinion, the examination cannot be conducted on the

object because the object is “neutralistic” in the sense that it allows all possible continuations, even contradictory ones. One could put it as follows: The “object *so far*” does not contain any conditions that restrict the freedom of further descriptions. Therefore, it is somewhat surprising when Mitterer tells us: “The examination of the table is conducted by inquiring into what shape it has – if it is shaped round or square or otherwise” (1992, p. 81; my translation). As instances of inquiring procedures he lists “‘exact’ looking at it, feeling the edge of the table with one’s hands, measuring the diagonals”; he points out that “descriptions are not taken from nowhere,” but are rather “based on inquiries” (1992, pp. 81 and 82; my translation).

There arise some questions in this connection. What kind of activity is it to inquire into something? What status does action have in the non-dualizing way of speaking? What does it mean when we inquire into what shape the table has?

A possible answer could be that inquiring is an activity different from describing, that is, that we, first, run our hand over the edge of the table, feel it as round or square and, then, describe it as round or square. This means that experiences as the results of acts are transformed into contents of descriptions. Is this answer compatible with the non-dualizing way of speaking? It seems that this is a dualistic concept because inquiries and their results are conceived of as something which is beyond descriptions and is only described subsequently.

A second answer could be that feeling with hands is itself a specific kind of describing. This answer is definitely compatible with the non-dualizing way of speaking and means that we are continuing the “description *so far*,” /the table/, in a specific way of describing, that is, with regard to a certain characteristic of the

table. According to this answer, feeling with hands is a linguistic activity producing certain linguistic contents (characteristics of shape in this case). However, we have not made any progress and did not learn any new information; for we already knew that describing is adding further description elements to a “description so far,” but we still do not know where the description elements stem from.

Conceiving of actions as descriptions implies that an empirical theory of experience is impossible on a non-dualistic basis because conceiving of actions as descriptions means that new descriptions are created from language. In this case we do not get an empirical theory of experience but a hermeneutical one or something similar. A non-dualistic empirical theory of experience requires acts that are different from descriptions, but not categorically different from them. A further demand is that experiences made within action can be “transformed” into descriptions. However, such a transformation must not consist in describing actions and their experiences; for in this case descriptions would refer to actions different from descriptions and we would fall back into dualism. But how can this feat be accomplished?

The central difficulty of treating the connection between description and action in a non-dualizing way is caused by the concept of description. As indirect critique, Mitterer’s non-dualizing way of speaking necessarily takes up the concept of description, that is, the one side of the dichotomy, and deprives it of its reference to objects beyond descriptions. The consequence is that, within the non-dualizing way of speaking, descriptions lose their function of describing objects and become continuations of descriptions already made, “descriptions *so far*.” The non-dualistic concept of description has a critical purpose towards the dualizing way of speaking and its truth claim, but with their loss of reference, descriptions lose any content and meaning. If we take references from descriptions what do we mean when we say “table” or “round”?

The non-dualizing way of speaking has the option of sticking to its negative standpoint, that is, to observe scientific research and to give researchers a rap on their knuckles when they neglect to emphasize that their research results do not tell the truth but only continue a “description so far.” In this case, the non-dualizing way of speaking does without any

theory of empirical research of its own. A further, constructive option is to develop a non-dualistic conception of experience and acquiring new knowledge, that is, a conception that allows us to connect describing and acting in a non-dualizing way. To do this, however, the concept of description, which is burdened with the original sin of the dualizing way of speaking, has to be abandoned, and we have to proceed to a different understanding of language.

On the difference between action and discourse

When we say that inquiries are the basis of description we evidently believe that we gain experience by action, and that experience somehow enters into description. In this connection the question arises of how description and action differ and what status experiences have within the two activities of describing and practical action.

Language is the communicative or public side of discourses. Discourses have, however, an internal or private side, too; it consists in the experiences that are merged with descriptions (such as imagery, emotions, and impulses to act) and is accessible to the member of discourse only. As an example let us consider that a friend of mine tells me about his apartment, where we are not currently present and in which I have never been; when he tells me that there is a round table in the corner of the living room then I have certain mental images parallel to his telling. Images are not the objects of descriptions but their contents. We do not describe mental images, but they appear simultaneously with the descriptions. Images may be broadened or specified, though not by describing them but through descriptions with broader or more specific contents.

In the same way, practical actions are merged with experiences such as perceptions, emotions, or impulses. Perceptions made in the course of actions are not the objects of these actions; they appear simultaneously with actions or within actions.

As members of discourses and as actors we become aware of a significant difference between description and practical action as

well as between the experiences that are connected with the respective activities. This difference becomes particularly apparent when description and actions take place simultaneously.

To make clearer what I mean by that difference I come back to Mitterer’s example of examining the descriptions of a certain table as round or square by inquiring what shape the table has. When someone tells me “this table is round” and I simultaneously touch the table feeling its edge with my hands, there is a difference to me between the experience I have on the basis of the linguistic description and the contact experience of my hands. Usually, mental images as experiences based on descriptions and perceptions as experiences based on actions differ in their intensities. However, the difference of intensity is not the one I am drawing upon, for on the one hand we can intensify our images and reach a great vividness and on the other hand perceptions can be slight and vague. The difference I mean is that between the sources of experience, i.e., between the kinds of activities that parallel the respective experiences. However intensive the image merged with the description of the table as round may be, I can distinguish it from the simultaneous experience I have in feeling the table with hands; and I can switch my attention from the one experience to the other. The same is the case when it is not another person but myself who is making the description, that is, when I am commenting on my own action. The difference in the sources of experience becomes particularly apparent when there is a difference with regard to the *content* of experience, that is, when what I perceive on the basis of my action differs from what I imagine on the basis of someone’s description.

The problem we are confronted with is whether we can find a conception that allows us to maintain the difference between practical action and description but not to conceive of it as categorical one. In what follows, I want to discuss George Herbert Mead’s theory of action and communication and ask if it can be helpful for elaborating a non-dualistic understanding of both language and practical action and of the different experiences, which merges in description and practical action. Mead’s answer may be given in a condensed form as follows: He does not understand linguistic utterances as descriptions (speaking in

the sense of describing something) but as gestures that are the beginnings of acts, which are, however, not carried out; he understands mental images as experiences stemming from past acts that have been initiated by gestures.

Some remarks on Mead's philosophical approach

I do not claim that the conception of Mead's philosophy and social psychology is non-dualistic in its totality, but I think that his theory contains some important aspects regarding a non-dualistic connection of action, communication, and experience. It is these aspects I want to take up in treating the problem at hand.

Mead belonged to the circle of pragmatists around John Dewey and maintained a strongly naturalistic standpoint. The nucleus of this standpoint is that humans as parts of nature interact with nature and that experience is nothing other than a phase of that interaction process (cf. Mead 1938, pp. 360–361). That is to say, experience is not located externally to nature as maintained in conceptions of mind as an immaterial substance. This position is influenced by Darwin's evolution theory. Mead's references to Darwin are well-documented by John D. Baldwin (1986, pp. 51–54). If we, in line with Darwin, suppose that humans evolved out of the animal kingdom, then what we call conscious activities must have arisen in the course of natural evolution, too, according to Mead's argumentation (1934, p. 19), and cannot be based on an immaterial mental substance. Consequently, Mead does not accept Descartes' dualism of mind and matter; he substitutes a functional concept of consciousness for the concept of mental states and intends to develop a theory of the genesis of conscious activities.

The rejection of the existence of two separated worlds, mind and matter, is the non-dualistic nucleus of Mead's approach. However, it may be doubted whether his methodological procedure concerning the genesis of conscious experience meets non-dualistic demands. To Mead, consciousness is reflexivity; conscious experience is reflective experience; reflexivity is produced by linguistic

activity – through speech we not only address other persons but we also address ourselves, react to our own behavior and analyze it in this way (see below in more detail). The problem of conceptualizing reflective experience as the product of natural evolution consists in the following: Mead has to presuppose immediate experience out of which reflective experience evolves, but the evolution process can only be conceptualized from the standpoint of reflective experience. As I see it, dualism is avoidable in this case only if we can do two things: show that immediate experience is a phase of our reflective experience process and take this condition into account in inquiring into phylogenetic and ontogenetic evolution. Mead maintained the opinion that immediate and reflective experience are two different, though not separated, phases of our experience process (1934, pp. 347–353), but he made no endeavor to develop his theory on this basis.

The opinion Mead holds on the scientific research process is similarly undecided between dualism and non-dualism. On the one hand he thinks that it does not make sense to speak of a world independent from our experience. As long as our action works and is not inhibited, that is in the situation of immediate experience, the world and its objects are simply there and there is no distinction between external and internal; in situations, however, where our action fails or is inhibited because of contrary impulses, there arises, in our perception, a problematic area that we separate from the external world and ascribe to our subjective experience (Mead 1938, pp. 31, 33 and 41). The hypotheses scientists construct concerning the problematic area can only be tested in the world that is simply there, that is, in the world of immediate experience. Therefore Mead writes: "Thus we can never retreat behind immediate experience to analyzed elements that constitute the ultimate reality of all immediate experience, for whatever breath of reality these elements possess has been breathed into them by some unanalyzed experience" (p. 32). On the other hand Mead takes the standpoint of an external observer when he writes that individuals and their environment are in the relationship of interaction and mutual determination and that the experiences of individuals are elements of that relationship (Mead 1934, pp. 349–350 and Mead 1938, p. 361). This is evidently a dualistic point of view.

A remark on the relation between immediate and reflexive experience may be helpful to further the understanding of the non-dualistic character of Mead's communication theory. Immediate experience is characterized by impulsive conduct, where stimulation and reaction are a unity and there is no separation of different elements of experience (Mead 1934, p. 348). It is not until problems arise in conduct that the situation falls into different parts; there starts a process of analyzing and distinguishing different elements and of relating the different elements to each other. Thus, differentiation is a product of reflective experience. Dewey and Mead repeatedly warn about the "psychological or historical fallacy" of introjecting, ex-post, elements that are the results of analysis as independent unities into immediate experience (Dewey 1896, pp. 376–377; Mead 1903, p. 102).

Mead's understanding of language

In what follows I try to summarize Mead's conception of language and communication included in the book *Mind, Self, and Society* (1934, especially pp. 42–134), which is based on student notes on his courses on social psychology. I want to inquire into two questions. The first question is in what way Mead's conception of language and communication differs from the conception of description that is based on the idea of reference. The second question is whether his understanding of language opens a non-dualistic access to action and experience. I shall not repeat Mead's phylogenetic and ontogenetic conception of the development of communication but restrict my presentation to the position language has within his theory of reflexive experience.

The crucial point of Mead's language theory is communication rather than reference to objects; and communication is rather coordination of actions than the transmission of data or characteristics of objects. Mead's considerations of language take gestures as the starting point. Gestures are the beginning phases of social actions: a gesture stimulates other persons to carry out a certain action. Mead characterizes this situation by different terms: gestures initiate actions, they arouse impulses to act, they elicit the readiness to act, or they stimulate taking certain attitudes. The

stimulation aspect of gestures makes up their communicative character. To Mead, linguistic symbols are also gestures, vocal gestures. Their distinctive feature consists in that they can be perceived by the person who makes them. Therefore, through speech, an individual stimulates themselves, and not only other persons, to take certain attitudes. This self-stimulation sets up the reflective nature of language.

Whoever clenches their fist at someone threatens to attack them and stimulates them to leave or to give up what they are doing. A vocal threat has the same function and, thus, is a gesture, too – a vocal gesture. Of course, the communicative aspect of gesture is not restricted to threats, though gestures always have the character of stimulation to do something specific. For instance, talking about one's experiences had on holiday involves the stimulation of the other person to participate by activating similar experiences in themselves.

According to Mead, objects are the stimulations we respond to and we experience in the context of our actions. The specific responses to objects are their meanings. Thus, the meaning of a table consists in the socially shared use of certain things. The different sensory experiences had in actions are the perceptual (visual, acoustic, olfactory, flavorful, tactile) characteristics of objects. Thus, the use of the word "table" is a gesture that initiates in us a certain set of actions and experiences connected with those actions.

As the initial phases of social actions, gestures can fulfill their communicative function of stimulation to actions. However, communication means that the actions initiated by gestures are not carried out. The part of action that is not carried out is that which is called "mental image" or "idea". Images or ideas come from past situations, from experiences had in past actions; the past experiences activated by a gesture are the meaning of the gesture. Thus, we can say that communication is potential action; potential actions consist in the experiences elicited by the gestures that are the initial phases of the originally complete action. It is evident that the success of a communicative act depends on participants sharing common experiences – or in other words, participants can communicate insofar as the gestures they use activate the same or similar experiences.

Action as the basis of "description"

If we want to maintain the term "description" within Mead's language theory we need to say that descriptions are gestures that elicit certain impulses to act as well as certain experiences connected with that act. How does this theory allow us to connect research activities and descriptions in a non-dualizing way? How does it enable us to make inquiring activities the basis of descriptions?

The formulation of the inquiring procedure (e.g., "my hand is running along the edge of the table to feel its shape") is, according to Mead's language theory, a gesture initiating a special set of actions and drawing attention to a certain spectrum of sensory characteristics. In addition to that, because of its stimulation character, the gesture elicits past actions that pursued a similar goal (to find out the shape of an object by feeling with hands) and arouses, as memory images, the attached past experiences. Past experiences allow us to characterize the current perceptions (that we have, for example, when touching the edge of a table); that characterization can be provided by selecting those past actions and experiences that are similar to the current perception. That linguistic gesture which belongs to the kind of past actions selected can be used to specify the current perception, e.g., that kind which led to the experience "round." Thus, according to the gesture theory of speech, the "description" of the table as "round" is the stimulation: "Initiate those actions that have led to the experience 'round'!"

In this way, I think, the gesture theory of speech allows us to conceptualize actions and the experiences attached to them as the basis of what Mitterer calls descriptions or the continuation of a "description so far." Linguistic gestures make it possible to identify current experiences with the help of past experiences or – to put it this way – let us become experiences of them, not, though, on the basis of an immaterial mind, but rather by initiating past actions and experiences. Gestures provide continuity between current and past experiences; past experiences enter into current experiences. And gestures have a communicative function insofar as they stimulate similar experiences in other persons. It is not possible to convey current experiences directly to others; we need to make the detour via common

experiences in past. In tasting wine it would not be helpful to say "This wine tastes of or like itself"; therefore we normally refer to a familiar taste shared by the participants, e.g., the taste of cherries or blackcurrants; however, the wine already tasted can serve as the "reference" to identify the taste of a new wine; but only on condition that all participants have tasted the "reference"-wine and reached agreement on its taste.

Past experiences and current experiences do not differ from each other in a dichotomous way. For, as experiences, they are made of the same "stuff" and are in a temporal relationship to each other, in accordance with Mitterer's "description so far" and "description from now on." According to Mead, a large part of our everyday practice consists of habitual actions, that is, actions based on schemata that were formed by past experiences and are applied to current situations. It is superfluous to say that there is no dichotomy difference between habitual actions and current actions.

Of special importance for gaining new experiences are situations where habitual actions are inhibited as shown in the following (cf. Mead 1938, chapter 2, pp. 22–44, and chapter 3, pp. 45–62). Such situations occur in everyday life; they characterize, however, the scientific research process in particular. Scientists are absolutely out to seek inhibitions of actions in order to resolve them. In Mead we can find three kinds of such inhibitions. Perceptual errors occur when an action already initiated or started turns out to be unsuitable at a certain point of its carrying out. For example, we see a human figure from some distance and decide to go to him to ask him the way, but then when we have come somewhat closer we realize that it is a tree. A different kind of inhibition appears when conflicting tendencies arise. Mead presents as an instance the "case of having doubt as to the identity of a person just met" so that we are not sure whether "to greet him as an acquaintance or to treat him as a simple passer-by" (Mead 1900, p. 3). A third possibility of inhibition is unsuccessful action. As an example of this kind of inhibition Mead offers the research into the causes of yellow fever; before the discovery of the parasite that is passed on to humans by mosquitoes, yellow fever was supposed to be an infection carried directly from the sick to the well; but quarantine turned out to be without effect, which stimulated the research into the genesis and

the course of the disease. Finally, we can also consider contradictory “descriptions,” as mentioned by Josef Mitterer, as a further form of inhibition. Different opinions in companies, political parties, governments, administrations etc can inhibit decision making.

According to Mead, language plays a central role in resolving action inhibitions. Our acting is not put together from separate acts closed off and independent from each other, but is embedded in a complex weave of connections. Mead presents a simple example: the impulse to seat oneself in a chair seen from a certain distance is inhibited for a moment in order to get close to it; and the sitting in the chair may be related to the intention to hold a conversation with somebody etc. Since speak-

ing potentially is acting, its linguistic symbols, as gestures, allow us to carry out, in our imagination, a number of operations that serve to solve problems:

- With the help of gestures we can reconstruct the course of our action in imagination and determine that sequence of the complex action where the inhibition has arisen; analyzing action is breaking it down, identifying the problem and closing it off from the unproblematic action sequences. Breaking down actions does not introduce a new kind of dichotomy, the dichotomy between analyzer and what is being analyzed, because the analyzer does not analyze objects but only his/her own experiences.
- By analyzing and breaking down the complex action with the help of gestures, the opportunity is offered to make new perceptions and combine them with images of past situations and create alternative possibilities to act; this is the phase of forming hypotheses.
- Finally, hypotheses are tested by carrying out the action plans of which hypotheses consist. The problem is resolved when the inhibition has disappeared and the action can be continued.

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Conclusion

The aim of this paper is to show that George Herbert Mead's gesture theory of language includes the potential to develop an experience theory or, more specifically, a theory of empirical science, in a non-dualizing way. Of course, the argumentation has to be elaborated on in more detail, especially with regard to two points: the relation of immediate and reflective experience, and the status of objects within this experience theory.

Mead's communication theory consists not in the difference between speech and action being a dichotomous one, but in their being cast in the same mould. This is the non-dualistic nucleus of his language theory. Speech is based on gestures and gestures are initiated, though not completed, acts – in Mead's word “truncated acts” (1912, p. 402); past experience of acts is substituted for the completion. In this way speech is bound to action and, as a counter to that, action becomes reflective through speech; the consequence is that speech becomes endowed with a quasi-materialistic touch compared with a conception that conceives of language as something absolute and based on its own self.

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