

# In A World Of Persons And Their Ways

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What I am going to do today is try to give two talks in one. The first part is something that you might think of as an introduction to Descriptive Psychology, and a large part of that will be to provide some if not definitive answers, at least state of the art answers to some of those old familiar questions like, “What is Descriptive Psychology?” “Why do you guys talk in these weird ways?” [microphone adjustment]

As I said, I want to try to provide some state of the art answers to some of the questions that keep bothering us, and a good part of that first talk will be that kind of thing. The second thing is to take some of the ideas in the first part and connect them to either the existing formulation or to some topics that are of interest. The first part I think is going to be a little over an hour.

## An Introduction to Descriptive Psychology

Okay, let me begin by going way back. When I was writing “An Overview of Descriptive Psychology” in the early 1980’s, I tried to reconstruct the spirit of the enterprise in which the first work in Descriptive Psychology was undertaken some twenty years before that, and I came up with four slogans. I noted at the time that slogans are apt for saying what you live by, and that that is quite different from what you happen to believe or even what happens to be true. The four slogans are these:

1. *The world makes sense, and so do people.* They make sense now.
2. *It’s one world.* Everything fits together. Everything is related to everything.
3. *Things are what they are and not something else instead.*
4. *Don’t count on the world being any simpler than it absolutely has to be.*

What I am going to say today can be regarded as an elaboration on these and very particularly on the first one, the one that says, “The world makes sense and so do people. They make sense *now*.”

Keep in mind that at the time I had a number of years of experience at making sense of the world and of people both with and without scientific theories and findings, psychological theories and findings, psychological tests and measurements, and a variety of clinical techniques. It seemed to me at the time that although all of these were of some value, there was some important sense, as yet unspecified, in which they were, if anything, a handicap or a liability rather than an asset. Saying “They make sense *now*” is an affirmation of that. (In thinking about it, I probably should have said, “They already make sense to begin with,” because I don’t mean that they make sense now but there was a time when they didn’t.)

Saying that people make sense is a good way to raise eyebrows. What you hear on every hand is how mysterious people are, how irrational they are, how emotional they are, how difficult it is to understand. And that is true, but this is a clear case of that maxim that says, “Values distribute across the possibilities”. We focus on those things about people that are mysterious, on those things that we don’t understand, but this is against a general background of understanding.

One of the closest things to a brute fact that we have is that people are not inherently mysterious to people. It is true that there are lots of things that we do not understand about a given person and lots of things that we do not know about a given group. But still, you know that meeting a stranger on the street is not like encountering a little green man from Mars, nor is it like turning the corner and encountering an inscrutable mobile artifact where anything, even the inconceivable, might be the result of that encounter. And having lunch with my Uncle Ben is not like meeting a stranger on the street either. With people, it tends to be I and Thou.

That people understand people is surely one of the most fundamental things about people. And though that is hardly open to question, there are questions one might ask. Probably the most natural question is, “How

come? How is it that people are not mysterious to people?" You could go in all kinds of directions from that. Fortunately there are a couple of quite mundane considerations that limit the possibilities of good answers. Let's call these two considerations (1) the *acquisition* consideration and (2) the *universality* consideration.

The acquisition consideration goes like this. Infants are not born with the characteristics that are paradigmatic of human beings, and we have experience with feral children that says that it is not just a matter of the maturity of the organism either. Rather, as we know, these characteristics are learned as the infant grows up.

So being human in the sense of having paradigmatic human characteristics is something that is acquired. It is acquired as a result of participating as a person among persons in a world of persons and their ways.

What is acquired in this way is primarily a general kind of ability rather than, for example, some kind of knowledge. Operating as a person among persons is something one *learns how* to do. It is something that one *knows how* to do. It is an ability that one comes to have. Among the various powers that persons have, arguably this is the most fundamental.

To digress, to be sure more than that is required in order to be a person. What is required in addition to having the ability to operate as a person among persons, is a history of actually doing that. And, secondly, what it is required is that the person does that directly rather than indirectly, which is to say that operating as a person among persons is not something you accomplish indirectly by actually doing something else and having this be a consequence. It is something that you do directly. You might say that is where you begin from, not where you end up.

What does *not* happen is that we first (somehow) acquire a theory or a definition about persons and then apply it to a set of individuals that we (somehow) select as appropriate subjects and observe the result. If we did that, then what we would acquire is primarily knowledge, and it doesn't happen that way. That is the *acquisition* consideration.

Now for the *universality* one. It is a truism that what is fundamental

to persons is common to (all) persons. That is a pretty reasonable sort of statement. As it happens, it is not true. However, it might as well be true. What we need is some way to keep that truism honest and as soon as I say that, I hope that half of you are thinking Paradigm Case Formulation. And indeed that is what it takes is a Paradigm Case Formulation. That's why I say that it might as well be true.

Now to digress again, just for a minute, this notion that what is fundamental is common is almost certainly responsible – largely responsible – for the near universal tendency for psychologists and other people to think of persons as essentially organisms. You can just hear the wheels turning, “Well, gee, we can't find anything common to all people, but at the very least they're all organisms, so organisms are what they must fundamentally be.”

What is *not* common to all persons is any matters of fact. People are known to disagree about matters of fact from the most trivial to the most profound. (And of course, they disagree about what is trivial and what is profound.) There is no body of statements that would draw universal assent. There simply is not.

If we were going to turn philosophical, we would ask, “What are the grounds of the possibility of this?” Well, we won't do that. Instead we will ask, “How can they do that? How can people disagree all over the place like that?” If we approach it that way, there is at least one answer that is quite clear. We can only disagree about matters of fact if we share the concepts in terms of which those facts are formulated. For example, we could not disagree about whether “the cat is on the mat” if we did not share the concepts of “cat,” “mat,” “on,” and so forth. If we did not share those concepts, we could only misunderstand each other in connection with that matter, but we could not disagree about whether the cat is on the mat.

Although misunderstanding is far from uncommon, we do routinely take it that our apparent disagreements about matters of fact are real disagreements and not merely misunderstanding, and there is a good reason for that. By and large the concepts that are involved in the facts or

purported facts that you and I disagree about are the very same concepts that are involved in other facts that we do agree about. So if we were to dismiss our apparent disagreements as being illusory because in fact we did not share those concepts, we would also have to dismiss our apparent agreements because we did not share the concepts. And nobody is going to stand still for that kind of conclusion.

Given all of that, concepts emerge as the kind of thing that might, after all, be common across (all) persons. That is the *universality* consideration.

How do these things help? Well, I said a minute ago that they restrict the range of possible answers. We may agree that people's understanding of people is primarily a matter of ability rather than knowledge, but what we want, perhaps not entirely legitimately, is knowledge about that state of affairs. *What is it* for people to not find other people inherently mysterious? *What* ability is involved? *How* is it exercised? And so on.

Because we are so truth oriented and knowledge focused, we are tempted to ask, "What is it that everybody knows about everybody that makes them not inherently mysterious?" But the answer to that would have to be "Nothing." There is nothing that everybody knows about everybody that makes them not mysterious. Both considerations point in that direction. It's *not* a matter of knowledge. It's a matter of competence. Just in passing, you might expect that if there were something that everybody knew about everybody, it ought to be easy to say what that was. After all, it's something everybody knows. But there isn't anything of that sort. Whatever there is to say about it is not simple.

Those two considerations – concerning acquisition and universality – have the further virtue that they suggest a formally viable alternative, and that can be outlined in six bullet points. Here they are:

1. The ability that people have that enables them to understand people is the ability to use, or act on, a certain concept. That concept is designated as "the Person concept" or, interchangeably, "the concept of a Person".

2. Mastery and use of this concept is what is universal across persons, and that of course is subject to our Paradigm Case Formulation.
3. It is universal among persons because mastery of that concept and the routine, spontaneous exercise of that mastery are what makes a person a person.
4. The concept of a Person can be articulated as a structure of interrelated component concepts and their component concepts, etc. If we do that, we will then also have articulated the ability to act on the concept of a Person as a structure of interrelated abilities to act on the component concepts. The overall concept corresponds to an overall ability. If you analyze the concept into component concepts, you automatically have analyzed the ability into component abilities.
5. The structure of interrelated component concepts is the “cognitive content” of the Person concept. This is as close as there is to being a “knowledge” aspect of the matter.
6. A delineation of this cognitive content will provide a ground level elucidation of what there is to understand about people and what it is to be a person.

Of these several points, I think that probably only the third one needs some elaboration, and to do that we can make use of the analogy of games. Consider. Mastery of the concept of baseball is universal among baseball players. That is so because mastery of that concept and the exercise of that mastery are what makes a baseball player a baseball player. A baseball player as such is not inherently mysterious to another baseball player. Even though his actual behavior might have been unpredictable and its rationale inscrutable, still it was already a possibility within the game. It was already a systematic possibility within the game of baseball. They were systematic possibilities because the conceptual structure of baseball creates (out of nothing) a logically self-contained universe of possible actions, interactions, relationships, and states of affairs, all of

which hang together and make a certain kind of sense – baseball sense.

Now the parallel. Mastery of the concept of the Person is what is universal across persons. What makes a person a person is the mastery of the Person concept and the routine exercise of that mastery. An individual person, as such, is not inherently mysterious to another person. Although his actual behavior may have been unpredictable and its rationale inscrutable, still it was already a systematic possibility within the Person concept. It was already a systematic possibility for the life of a person. This comes about because the conceptual structure of the Person concept creates a logically self-contained universe of possible actions, interactions, relationships, and states of affairs, all of which hang together and make a certain kind of sense – human sense. Common sense. This self-contained universe is what we commonly call “the real world”, and there is nothing, absolutely nothing, that lies outside its scope.

It might seem grandiose to be talking about something that “nothing lies outside its scope”, but in fact, it’s not only not grandiose, it’s not even original. People have been remarking on this kind of thing down through the ages. For example, there is an old Spanish philosopher who said, “Human life is a peculiar reality in that every other reality, effective or presumptive, must in one way or another find a place within it.”

Articulating a concept that has that kind of scope is obviously neither simple nor easy, but neither is it impossible. And, of course, this is the main task addressed by the conceptual work in Descriptive Psychology – to articulate the Person concept. In terms of articulating it into components, the four major components of the Person concept are the concepts of (a) Behavior, (b) Individual Person, (c) Reality, and (d) Language.

Okay, now at this point with this kind of rationale, you might say, “We’re in a position just to go ahead and do it.” And indeed we have. But, as you know, it raises certain questions. Questions like: “Why do you guys talk like you have a pipeline to the Truth?” “Who are you to say that this is how things are?” “What is Descriptive Psychology?” “What is it that Descriptive Psychologists do?” So let us address some of these issues. The first thing is to set the stage by introducing some basic distinctions.

### **Persons and Human Beings et al.**

There is an old Spanish saying that before the Spaniards discovered the Fulanese, the Fulanese did not know that they were speaking Fulanese. They thought they were just *speaking*. [laughter] Such things are not necessarily historically accurate, but they do have a point to make. In the present case, the saying directs our attention to an important phenomenon, namely that when we have empirically available only one kind of example within a general category of things, we may fail to make the relevant distinctions between the generic and the specific. Much may hinge on how we succeed or fail at that.

For example, in 1915 all the airplanes that we knew of consisted of a wooden frame covered with cloth, held together with wire, and with a motor-driven propeller in front. We did not at that time define airplanes in those terms even though it was empirically universal. All airplanes were of that sort. Had we done so, progress in aeronautics would very likely have consisted of building bigger and better airplanes consisting of wooden frames covered with cloth, held together with wire, and driven by a motor-driven propeller.

Similarly, in 1947 every computer that we knew of consisted of a supportive frame hung with vacuum tubes and relays and an overlay of control structures. That was empirically universal. Every computer was like that. We did not at that time define computers in those terms. Had we done so, progress in building computers would very likely have consisted of building bigger and better computers consisting of supports, relays, control structures, and vacuum tubes.

In 1990 all of the persons of whom we had public record were individuals who were specimens of *Homo sapiens*. In contrast to the case of computers and airplanes, in general psychologists *did* define persons in those terms because, as I mentioned, it was empirically universal. The conceptual frameworks and conceptual fragments which supported most of the efforts of clinical and research practitioners either (1) “defined” persons as organisms, or (2) made the *a priori* assumption that persons were organisms, or (3) simply addressed “organisms” as their subject matter.



On this basis, one could expect that progress in the field would consist of more extensive and detailed assimilations of the activities of human beings to the processes that are characteristic of organisms. And you think over the last ten years. I leave it to you whether that expectation has been borne out.

As in the case of airplanes and computers (and just about everything we can think of) there are good reasons for not confounding persons and organisms. As it happens, the alternative to this confounding is exceptionally easy. For this purpose we can introduce the following definitions immediately, and without preamble, because the logic is perfectly straightforward. Even though the first definition needs to be elaborated, that is not relevant to the present task.

So let me give you the four definitions that many of your have heard before.

1. A Person is an individual whose history is, paradigmatically, a history of Deliberate Action in a dramaturgical pattern.
2. A Human Being is an individual who is both a Person and a specimen of *Homo sapiens*.
3. An Alien Being is an individual who is a Person and has a biological embodiment other than *Homo sapiens*.
4. An Authentic Robot is an individual who is a Person and has a non-biological embodiment.

These are all straightforward because it is clear that our concept of a Person allows for at least these three subcategories, and that this does not at all depend on whether there actually are any alien beings or authentic robots, or whether we actually ever encounter any. Our concept of a Person already allows for these possibilities. After all, a generation raised on science fiction portrayals of human-like robots and aliens could have no illusions about that. “What’s the big deal?”

Of the four concepts defined, it is clear that the fundamental concept is that of a Person, since that is what is common to human beings, aliens,

and robots. The definitions provide the basic guidelines for not confusing persons with human beings, and not confusing human beings with organisms.

Let me say that the best way to lose your way before you take the first step is to either confuse persons with human beings or confuse human beings with organisms. So this is a preliminary for not going wrong in one of the ways that we can go wrong.

### **“The Grammar of Operating as a Person among Persons”**

The next one has to do with “What is the nature of this task? You mentioned articulating the Person concept as a structure of interrelated component concepts. What the hell is that?” In clarifying the nature of the enterprise, we can use the familiar and relatively transparent notion of the grammar of a natural language. I will use English rather than just talking about natural language.

Consider. Infants are not born speaking English. Rather, speaking English is something that they acquire the ability to do. They acquire that ability by learning to operate as an English speaker among English speakers in a world of English speakers and their English speaking ways.

That much is undeniable, but we are not content to leave it at that. Instead we ask, “*What* is it that they (all) learn? *What* is it that they now have that constitutes their being able to speak English? *What* is it that they know how to do when they know how to speak English? What was there for them *to* learn?” And so on.

Prompted by such concerns, we have generally distinguished the grammar and the lexicon of the language as constituting the language. Then we say, “To say something in English is to speak in accordance with the grammar and the lexicon of English.”

In this context, it is the grammar of English that is the most problematic. It is the notion most closely associated with the idea of what English *is*. The complexity and difficulty of the task can be indexed by the fact

that an entire academic discipline has not succeeded in turning out the definitive grammar of English, even though they are close and for many purposes we can say, “Yes, we know what the grammar of English is.”

Of course, the absence of a finally definitive grammar has never prevented us from teaching the grammar of English to schoolchildren who are native English speakers, using such devices as diagramming sentences, distinguishing parts of speech, and so on. It is instructive that some speakers who routinely speak in accordance with the grammar of English have an extremely difficult time learning to say what the grammar of English is.

These aspects of language are most informative because there is a thoroughgoing parallel between them and the issues we already noted before in the connection with the Person concept. In both cases the central task is that of moving from simply knowing how, to an articulation of *what* it is that one knows or has when one knows how (knows how to speak English, knows how to operate as a person among persons), and that transition is hazardous.

There is a reason why we raise those questions so insistently in regard to language and in regard to persons, whereas we are not much inclined to raise those questions when it comes to knowing how to draw a circle or knowing how to throw a ball or things like that. We raise those questions because there is clearly something systematic going on here. This is shown by a couple of features.

(a) One is that the various achievements that result from the exercise of that know-how have significant logical relations to one another.

(b) Second, the number of distinct possible achievements that are attributable to the same competence is indefinitely large or literally infinite.

The most attractive conclusion in such cases is that what we learned when we learned how is how to work some kind of system. This explains why from a finite set of learning experiences we acquire an ability that accounts for an unlimited number of distinct achievements. Thus, the task quickly resolves itself into the task of delineating the system that is

involved. And that can be done in a number of ways.

An explicit grammar for a natural language is a set of rules or conceptual procedures for “doing it right” or “doing it”, where “it” is “speaking the language”. In a similar vein, we can think of a “grammar” of the Person, or equally, a grammar of operating as a Person among Persons. This would be a set of rules or conceptual procedures for “doing it” or “doing it right”. Articulating the Person concept is essentially that kind of enterprise. It is essentially the kind of enterprise involved in writing a grammar. It is specifically the “grammar” of operating as a Person among Persons.

There are some differences. I said *essentially* that kind of task. There are several differences that we need to recognize. The first one is that, whereas grammars are done in terms of rules, the articulation of the Person concept is done in terms of concepts, and that is for reasons that we will get to pretty quickly. The second one calls for a little more development. It will not have escaped your notice that it is not merely a parallel or a similarity between the tasks of specifying what it is that one “knows” when one knows how in regard to persons and in regard to language, since, as I mentioned, the concept of language is one of the major components of the concept of a Person.

The notion of a language consisting of a grammar and a lexicon is admittedly incomplete. It is lacking an essential connection to the real world. Traditionally, this connection is supplied by verbal performances that are historically situated and context-dependent. Thus we have the language, represented as grammar and lexicon, and we have this historically situated act of speaking, or speaking in that language. Correspondingly, linguists speak of a theory of competence and a theory of performance. The theory of competence is essentially the grammar. The theory of performance is a theory about the speech act.

For linguists, a theory of linguistic performance is a very different thing from a theory of linguistic competence. Whereas the one – the theory of competence – is a matter of delineating a logical structure, the theories of performance have leaned heavily on the notion of persons as

organisms and of linguistic competence as being partially “wired in”.

I said that the concept of language is admittedly incomplete. It is not just practically incomplete. It is conceptually incomplete. The concept of language is a conceptual fragment that is inherently unintelligible except as a fragment of a more comprehensive conceptual structure. Let me go through a couple of moves here.

(a) It is a truism that verbal behavior is a form of behavior (a special case of behavior). Without behavior, there is no linguistic behavior either. Therefore, to speak of language is to presuppose the more general concept of behavior.

(b) Second, it is probably too obvious even to be a truism that every behavior is someone’s behavior. *A fortiori*, every linguistic behavior is someone’s linguistic behavior. Without speakers, there is no language. Language conceptually requires speakers who have something to say. It requires the concepts of individuals who engage in both verbal and nonverbal behaviors. Thus, there is a conceptual structure extending across language, persons, and behavior.

(c) I mentioned that acts of speaking (like all behaviors) are historically situated within a real world context and that it is this connection which makes language real. It follows that the conceptual structure that extends across persons,

behavior, and language encompasses the real world as well.

Notice that just by coincidence if you follow these simple things, what we have done is reconstruct the four major components of the Person concept, which are Person, Behavior, Language, and Reality.

The contrast between the linguists’ strategy and a Descriptive approach is illuminating. The linguists develop grammars as “theories of linguistic competence” and then switch to separate, qualitatively different, empirically oriented “theories of performance” to deal with the conceptual requirements concerning speakers, behavior, and real world con-

text. In contrast, the Descriptive approach retains a single non-empirical, ‘grammatical’ treatment of competence with respect to the entire domain that encompasses persons, behavior, language, and the real world. It is essentially the same kind of thing as a grammar or as the “rules of the game”, but it has a much broader scope. So that’s the second difference – the scope is much broader than language.

The third difference I will just mention, and that is this: Grammars have to be written language by language. There is no universal grammar. There is no single grammar that applies to all languages. In contrast, the Descriptive approach to the Person concept, there’s only one. It does apply to all things. What correspond to grammars of particular languages are descriptions of particular cultures. And the Person concept addresses *all* cultures, not just *a* culture, and it addresses them systematically, not just ad hoc, one by one. So that’s the third difference between a Descriptive approach and the notion of a grammar of a natural language. But still, it is essentially that kind of enterprise – writing the grammar of operating as a person among persons in a world of persons and their ways.

### **Speaking with Authority**

Okay, enough for that. Let’s go on to, “Why do you guys talk like you had a pipeline to the Truth?” Start with this consideration. If I am a competent player of a game, I probably will not be able to sit down and write down a set of rules which are the rules of that game (unless, of course, I learned the game by first learning the rules). After all, knowing how to play the game is different from knowing that these are its rules.

But then again, I might be able to sit down and do just that. I might be able to sit down and write you out the rules of the game. After all, who should know better than me? What we can say is that if I could do that, that calls for some other competence in addition to just knowing how to play the game. One can also say that, if you are sitting down to write down the rules, knowing how to play the game is a fundamental and irreplaceable asset.

What could confidently be expected of me as a competent player of

the game is that given a hypothetical action in the context of that game, I would be able to say that it was in accordance with the rules or that it wasn't. That you can have confidence in. Why should I be able to do *that* when I should not be able to just write down the rules, (but I can tell you if something is in accordance with the rules)? Well, the reason is that, that is the kind of judgment that I have to exercise in order to play the game. When I play the game, I have to be confident that the action that I take is in accordance with the rules, and I have to be able to recognize violations of the rules and challenge them. If I cannot do that, I am not a competent player of the game.

The rules of the games are something that we assent to and accept the responsibility of enforcing as a condition of there being such a game at all. They are not facts independent of us or antecedent to us that could be established independently of us. Neither divination nor systematic observation, scientific or otherwise, could do that job. The rules are normative, not empirical, and its being the case that they are normative is also normative, and not empirical. The only thing that is empirical is that particular people do particular things and not others.

So, when *as a baseball player* I say, "It's three strikes and you're out", I speak with authority, and I speak for *us* (us baseball players). I do not offer it as a personal opinion, or as a guess, or as a highly probable hypothesis, or as a part of a theory, nor yet as the outcome of an investigation. Rather I speak with authority as one who knows how to play the game. I am saying, "*This* is how you do it", and who should know better than me?

Any competent baseball player speaking as such would speak with the same authority. Each of us is in a position to speak for all of us.

Just in passing, there is a parallel thing in linguistics. It is a well-accepted conclusion in linguistics that the ultimate criterion for whether a given expression is a sentence in English is what they call "native speaker intuition", namely the judgments made by competent speakers of the language. It is not something that you can establish independently of what the speakers say or think. Of course the same would hold for persons.

The ultimate criteria for whether an individual is a person would be judgments by full-fledged persons.

Okay, this is the basic state of affairs which is complicated by, but should not be obscured by, certain auxiliary considerations. There are three of these.

1. First, as in any human enterprise, people differ in their degree of mastery, in their level of competence, and so their judgments often differ. However, partly because people learn to appraise their own level of capability, the absence of dead level agreement in judgment does not undermine the viability of the enterprise. It is no accident that we have *Webster's Dictionary*, *Hoyle's Book of Rules*, *Roget's Thesaurus* and other trusted repositories of judgment and competence. We settle many disputes by reference to those.

2. Second, I can be wrong. If I say "In baseball it's four strikes and you're out", my judgments can be readily impeached because there will be no "us" who play baseball that way. Now if the error is particularly egregious as in "four strikes and you're out", not only my judgment but also my standing as a competent baseball player can be impeached. After all, could I really play baseball if that's what I think?

3. There can be genuine disagreements, and these can be negotiated. If the negotiation ends in a standoff, we come to conclusions such as the following: "Well, it looks like you learned to play a different game than I did." Or, "You learned a different variation than I did." "I guess we speak different dialects of English." "Obviously, your concept of  $x$  is different from mine (ours)." And so on. Appropriate adjustments are then fairly easy to make.

If the negotiation ends in agreement, we will not have resolved a question of observational fact. We will not have *discovered* the answer to a factual question. What we will have done is to settle a question of how



we are to proceed.

In short, speaking authoritatively in this way, speaking for *us*, is not the same sort of enterprise as reporting an observation or a factual discovery. Nor is it the same sort of thing as arguing for a philosophical theory or a psychological one. It has its own hazards and reality constraints, and treating it as observational, factual or theoretical would be as egregious as saying “In baseball it’s four strikes and you’re out”, and it would have the same consequences.

Okay, that is why we speak as though we had a pipeline to the Truth. It is not a matter of truth at all. We are speaking with the authority of somebody who knows how to do it. Anybody who has that competence can speak with that authority. It just sounds strange because we are so focused on truth that we automatically take that viewpoint on things and then it looks like we are being grandiose.

### **The Trouble with Concepts**

Okay, now there are a number of questions having to do with, “Why do you do it the way you do it?” And one of them is: “Why do you do it in terms of concepts rather than rules?” I think I raised that question earlier.

Both games and grammars are defined by distinctive sets of rules and we use these heuristically all the time. We use them to clarify the nature of the problem that arises when we try to say what we know when we know how to do something like playing baseball or speaking English. Yet we’re going to do this larger job in terms of concepts, not rules. Why?

To begin with, the two idioms – namely concepts and rules – are conceptually so highly overlapping that they are almost totally interchangeable and convertible into one another. So you could say, “Well, it is not that much of a difference.”

Consider the notion that she knows the meaning of an expression (i.e., has the concept) if she knows how to use that expression correctly in the language games in which it has a place. That is a statement in terms

of concepts.

Now compare that to the notion that she knows the meaning of an expression if she knows the rules that govern its use in the various language games in which it has a use. It is the same idea in terms of rules. Notice how very similar they are. Both idioms direct our attention to a certain kind of selectivity, a certain principle of selection or rejection in regard to various cases, instances, actions, etc. It is the kind of selectivity that we saw earlier is necessarily exercised by a competent player of the game.

Some of the convertibility between the two idioms stems from the fact that (a) mastery of a concept involves, in part, the ability to act on that concept in some normative ways. And (b) acting in any of those ways can always be described as following a rule (i.e., the rule of “doing” whatever the action was). Conversely, following a rule (for example, writing down the positive integers in order or driving on the left side of the road) can be described as acting on a concept (for example, the concept of driving on the left side of the road). So it is very easy to move from one to another because they are so highly similar.

On the other hand, because the correspondence is not that one of them is a simple mirror of the other, the two idioms, in practice, show a different range of convenience. When a single isolated rule is in question (for example, driving on the left side of the road) stating the rule is clean, quick and generally preferable. Conversely, many of the concepts we use, perhaps the great majority of them, are cases where we can't specify all of the rules we follow when we act competently on these concepts though we don't doubt that it's a rule following kind of situation. (Remember the case of grammar, how difficult it is to set down all of the rules that are involved in something that a three-year old can do easily.) In such cases, talking in terms of concepts and acting on concepts is clean, quick and indispensable.

Notice that in such cases, as “generate the series of positive integers” or “drive on the left side of the road”, the phrase not only specifies the rule that I follow and the concept that I act on. It's also a straightforward ordinary language specification of my behavior – it is what I actually *do*.

There is a strong link in ordinary language between acting on a concept and simply acting, and as you know, the parametric analysis of behavior shows this.

There is a second consideration, which, by itself, is probably decisive for the choice of concepts rather than rules as the preferred idiom for this effort.

Wittgenstein once commented substantially as follows. He said, “A game is not everywhere demarcated by the rules. For example, there is no rule in tennis concerning how high I have to throw the ball when I serve.”

Think of the implications of that. It implies that there is more to mastering the concept of tennis than learning to follow all the rules. It implies that there is more to the concept than is encompassed by all of the rules. And that implies that doing it in terms of the rules would not be enough – that you would leave something out, that you would be missing something. The tennis example also brings out why acquiring concepts is fundamentally a matter of practice and experience. (After observing and participating in a few games of tennis, how high to throw the ball when you serve is probably not a big deal.)

Both considerations lead to the same conclusions, namely, that the way to do it is in terms of concepts and not in terms of rules even though it’s a great temptation. It would be simpler, it would be more understandable, it would be more communicable, and it would be insufficient. It is fortunate that there are good grounds for doing it in terms of concepts because when we do it in terms of concepts, our troubles are just beginning. There is a variety of problems – not merely in actually presenting concepts, but also with the idea of presenting a concept, and, indeed with the idea of “a concept”. That’s a pretty heavy load to be carrying.

So let’s review some of these troubles with concepts.

1. What is a concept? A very natural question, and a bad one. It is like asking, “What is a whenever?” There’s no such thing as a whenever. There’s no such thing as a concept. To para-

phrase a well-known architect and teacher, “If a concept were a something, it would have to be a very *peculiar* something.” But a concept is not a something, and it’s not something peculiar. Instead, what you do is you introduce a conceptual frame for making the notion of a concept intelligible. The basic frame is this, “P uses concept C in engaging in behavior B”, or equivalently, “P acts on concept C in engaging in behavior B.” Concepts are an aspect of behavior. They are not things.

Concepts don’t come in singletons. They don’t come one at a time. They come in pairs or larger sets. So “P acts on the concept C” is the same thing as “P acts on the distinction of C versus C1, C2, C3 and other alternatives.” Information theory makes clear why this would be so. If there were no contrasting set of alternatives, no information would be carried by ‘distinguishing’ C. (“Distinguishing it from what?” you would ask.) In that case, no basis for acting in one way or another would be provided, and we would say that no real distinction was being made.

Remember the maxim that says, “A person needs the world to be one way rather than another in order to have a reason to act in one way rather than another.” Notice, too, that when we talk about acting on a concept, that is you might say thrifter than talking about acting on a distinction. Why? Because it requires less knowledge on our part. If we say that he acted on the concepts of “cat” and “mat” and “on”, we can say that without having to know what the contrasts were. We do not have to know what he was distinguishing “cat” from or “on” from. So we can carry it off in situations where we don’t know these things, and mostly we don’t know those things. (To be sure we might be missing something important but that is the chance we have to take.) Okay, second consideration.

2. Concepts can’t be told. If I am trying to present you with a concept, I can’t just tell you. I can’t draw you a picture of one

either. So how do I present a concept? What is this notion of presenting a concept?

Mostly, we tell each other things. I tell you a fact or a purported fact by making a statement. Statements require concepts (so do beliefs). If I make a statement that “The cat is on the mat”, as you know there are at least three concepts involved. Concepts don’t require statements. They don’t require beliefs. They don’t require anything else.

Acquiring concepts is associated fundamentally with practice and experience. So the notion of presenting a concept to you, in a way, is illegitimate. If you are going to acquire that concept, you ought to acquire it by practice and experience. If I try to enable you to acquire it by some form of presentation, either it is because the presentation gives you the right practice and experience, or I’m hoping and guessing.

3. Statements (and theories and beliefs) have truth value. Concepts do not. If I tell you that “The pigs are rooting for truffles”, what I say may be true and it may be false. But if I say “pigs”, what I say could not possibly be true or false, nor could the concept “pigs” be true or false. Concepts don’t have truth value. Because concepts don’t have truth value, they can’t have assumptions either, or presuppositions. Nor could there be any evidence for them or against them. Nor could there be any arguments for them or against them. Nor could they be believed or doubted. In short, concepts have none of the familiar truth-oriented features that we are all so sensitized to and that we spend roughly *all* of our time dealing with. Okay. Next.

4. Concepts are acquired by practice and experience. The relevant practice and experience is participating in some of the social practices that involve using the concept in question. Historically our criteria for having acquired the concept include the following – and there are three.

(a) First, having the ability to recognize instances of the concept, if it is the kind of concept that has recognizable instances.

(b) Second, having the ability to relate the concept to other concepts appropriately. (This includes reasoning in terms of that concept.)

(c) And third, having the ability to act appropriately on that concept in some paradigmatic ways.

The salience of particular criteria will vary from concept to concept because concepts including conceptual structures vary among themselves. For some complex concepts, for example “arithmetic”, “science”, “chess”, “cure”, and the like, the third criteria is salient. The paradigmatic way of acting on the concept of arithmetic is to do some arithmetic. Someone who cannot do arithmetic but recognizes when somebody else is doing it, or just has a general description or definition of it, will be judged to be seriously lacking in respect to mastery of the concept. In contrast, for other concepts such as “red”, recognizing instances is salient, and that is probably because if you can recognize instances, the other two criteria are not a big problem.

The Person concept is much more like “arithmetic” than it is like “red”. The third criterion is salient.

5. Concepts are related to other concepts. When multiple relationships are involved, we speak of conceptual structures or conceptual systems. Patterns of conceptual interrelationships can be presented by means of:

(1) Schemas, diagrams, etc.

(2) Paradigm Case Formulations, parametric analysis, calculational systems, and definitions

(3) Discourse which connects concepts to concepts.

As it turns out, we need all of these, including the “etc.” A key consideration here is that although concepts cannot in general be shown pictorially, relationships among them can be indicated pictorially or schematically. And since conceptual structures involve interrelationships among concepts, portraying conceptual structures is not hopeless. That is why we use all kinds of diagrams and schemas and this, that, and the other because when you have interrelationships those can be represented pictorially or schematically.

When conceptual relationships are portrayed by means of discourse, pragmatically the most natural discursive form is that of prescription, injunction, instruction and the like. You say, “Notice this ... feature.” “Look at the difference between this one and that one.” “Use the concept in this way, namely...” “Consider a structure of the following sort.” “Use  $x$  as the conceptual frame for understanding P.” And so on. That is how you would naturally do it.

Equally pragmatically, however, this works only in short stretches, for the most part. Extended discourse in these forms is almost certain to be forced and unnatural and consequently, ineffective. The danger is that declarative sentences, which is the main alternative, are likely to be taken as statements when in fact they are not. Fortunately (since declarative sentences do predominate in Descriptive analysis) such an error is not inevitable, and some advanced warning helps. A student once commented to me, “Now I see why it’s not a theory. Everything you’ve been telling us for the last six weeks is like one long definition instead of a lot of different statements that may or may not be true.” And that was right on.

### **Connections to Existing Formulation or Topics of Interest**

Okay, that is the “Introduction to Descriptive Psychology”. Now what I want to do is take some of the ideas that appear here and connect them to some of the existing formulation or some topics that are of interest.

There are three things that I want to pick out from that, and here are the three:

1. First, “a baseball player is not inherently mysterious to another baseball player. Although his baseball behaviors may not be predictable, they were already *systematic possibilities within the game.*” And it is that notion of “systematic possibilities within the game” that is the crucial notion here.
2. Secondly, the notion that what an infant acquires as he grows up to be a normal adult is a certain kind of competence – namely the ability to “operate as a person among persons in a world of persons and their ways.”
3. Third is the case of the Fulanese. Remember “the Fulanese didn’t realize they were speaking Fulanese. They just thought they were *speaking.*”

### **Deliberate Action and Social Practices**

Now the first application is to an existing formulation that has to do with Deliberate Action and social practices. The current canon is that, to engage in a Deliberate Action is to participate in a social practice. I am not sure where this appears in print, but, at a minimum, it appears implicitly in the definition of a pathological state. Remember that definition says, “When a person is in a pathological state, there is a significant restriction (a) in his ability to engage in Deliberate Action and, (b) equivalently, his ability to participate in the social practices of the community”.

Let me digress here. Notice that this is not a definition. We call it a definition. We use it as a definition, but it is not a definition. It is a simple implication. It is a one-way implication, and it mirrors the same structure for the general notion of “state.” That one says, “When a person is in a particular state, there is a systematic difference in his powers and/or dispositions.” Again, a one-way implication, not a definition. The reason is simple prudence. It is not obvious that the opposite implication holds. To do that you would have to rule out all other explanations for being in that restricted state or the systematic difference in powers or dispositions, and it is not obvious that you can rule them out. So being of a prudential nature, when I did this, I was noncommittal. But I am confident in the



one implication and that is all we need for most purposes.

I think that the equivalence – saying that to engage in a Deliberate Action is to participate in a social practice – has always seemed to be stretching a point a little bit. It is just that there was no obvious reason to reject it. But our notion of the range of possible individual actions, at face value, seems to cover more ground than our notion of patterns of behavior. You might say, “Why should every individual behavior be part of a pattern?”

To put it differently, the only way that you could know that every individual behavior *is* part of a pattern is if you knew that it *had* to be (because you are certainly not going to establish that empirically). And there did not seem to be any necessity in this picture. There did not seem to be any grounds for saying that it *had* to be. Well, there was a necessity, but it was implicit. And, guess what? It came from the notion that people are not mysterious to people. That notion goes back a long time. Remember that slogan [“The world makes sense and so do people. They make sense *now*.”] was intended to reconstruct how things were back in the early 1960’s. So it goes back at least that far.

The necessity in the picture comes from the idea that just as there isn’t and couldn’t be a private language, there isn’t and couldn’t be a private behavior. (Private language would be a special case of private behavior.) Since social practices are essentially public and social and, therefore, necessarily intelligible to multiple persons, the equivalence would guarantee that individual behaviors were also public and social and therefore inherently intelligible to other persons. That is why the equivalence was there in that definition. It is to serve as an explanation for how come people are not inherently mysterious to people.

Now, I’m not prepared to give it up either. I am not convinced that it’s not true. But now I could. The notion that it was already a systematic possibility within the game does two things. (a) First, it supports the equivalence. It makes it less of a stretch. If that seems obscure, try it with baseball. How could any behavior, any baseball behavior, not be a participation in a social practice? After all, baseball *is* a social practice. So how

can any baseball behavior not be a participation in a social practice? (b) Secondly, it provides an alternative explanation for how it is that people are not inherently mysterious to people. It's an explanation at a more fundamental level. It is systematic rather than ad hoc, and it has further implications that would be difficult or impossible to draw from the social practice formulation. So it represents an advance in that sense.

Okay, that is the first application to an existing formulation.

### **The Ability to Operate as a Person among Persons...**

Now there is another one that is a little more complicated. Let's now refer to the notion that what an infant acquires as he grows up to be a normal adult is the ability to operate as a person among persons in a world of persons and their ways.

Empirically, one of the first principles of competence is that learning with respect to any task of significant difficulty brings forth significant differences in competence. Wherever there is a kind of competence, there is variation among persons in their degree of competence. So the brute fact is that, whatever the task is, whatever the competence, some people are going to be better at it than others and some people are going to be worse at it than others.

Apply this to the notion that there is something that is the ability to operate as a person among persons. What sense can we make of the notion that some people are better at it than others and others are worse?

Let me get rid of a red herring here first. It is not a matter of degrees of being a person. Being a person is an all-or-nothing thing. Being a person or not being a person is a matter of status. How good you are at it is a matter of competence. Now the reason that there is confusion here is that there are many, many statuses that are assigned on the basis of competence. You have to achieve a certain level of competence at chess before you qualify as being a chess player. You have to achieve a certain level of competence at speaking English before you acquire the status of an English speaker. And there are many others that work the same way. So it's easy to confuse the competence aspect with the status aspect. If

we get rid of that, then we can just now look at the competence aspect. What sense can we make of the notion that some people are better at being a person than other people are?

It is not the kind of thing that we normally think of in those terms. Normally it is a status thing. You are a person or you are not. And it is easy to think of you as being better at this or this or this, but better at being a person? What is this?

The developmental path from infancy to adulthood provides us with an appropriate orientation. We get better at being a person as we move from infancy to adulthood.

How do we do it? Through practice and experience in all of the nitty gritty of living a human life. Remember Sonja [Holt]'s talk [“The Competence Paradox in Moral and Ethical Judgment”, presented right before Peter's]. Nitty gritty like establishing and participating in various relationships and interactions; entering into projects long term, short term, large scale, small scale; observing, appraising, and making judgments in regard to ourselves, others, situations, groups, relationships, events, and so on. Things like betraying and being betrayed; admiring or being admired; helping or being helped; attacking or defending; nurturing or being nurtured; and on and on and on. All of the little detail that is involved in living a human life.

Following that line of thought puts us in touch with at least some of the source of deficiencies that one might expect and the grounds for such deficiencies. If competence is acquired through practice and experience, then an obvious ground for deficiencies in that competence is a limitation in the amount and kind of practice and experience. For example, a tennis player might be a good tennis player, but if the only games he has ever played have been against left-handers on clay courts in the daylight, we would say, “This guy has some serious deficiencies as a tennis player”. A baseball player who has learned how to play baseball, but has only participated in baseball games that are no-hitters is also going to have serious deficiencies.

There's an old German poet who said it very well. What he [Goethe] said was:

Wer nicht von dreitausend Jahren  
Sich weiß Rechenschaft zu geben,  
Bleib im Dunkeln unerfahren,  
Mag von Tag zu Tage leben.

Cleaned up and translated, it comes out, "Anyone who cannot give an account of three thousand years, remains in the darkness of inexperience and can only live from day to day."

Let me focus on that notion, the 'darkness of inexperience'. That assimilates to the transition from infancy to adult. The infant lives in the darkness of inexperience. The normative adult does not.

### **The Case of the Fulanese**

Now let's revisit the Fulanese. To repeat, the Fulanese didn't know that they were speaking Fulanese. They thought they were just *speaking*. As it happens, the Fulanese were right, and we are all more or less in that position.

When we learn how to do something from people who are already doing it, we learn to do it in the particular way that it is done. [break in tape] However, saying what I have to say is what I'm up to. Speaking English is *not* what I'm up to. It's not my Deliberate Action. It's not my behavior. If you were to diagram my Deliberate Action, there would be nothing about speaking English in the K [Know] value. There would be nothing about speaking English in the W [Want] value. Speaking English is not something that I have chosen to do. It is not something that I know I'm doing. The only place for it is in the Achievement parameter and the Performance parameter, and that would have to be supplied by

someone else who knew that I was speaking English. Those of you who remember the Oklahoma chair... Speaking English is like sitting in the Oklahoma chair. It is an unintended and unknown achievement, not an action.

If the case of speaking English seems questionable, turn the screw another notch and think of speaking with a Brooklyn accent. If I grow up in Brooklyn and everyone around me is speaking English with a Brooklyn accent, then, guess what? What I learn is to speak English with a Brooklyn accent.

If I'm young and innocent, I don't know that I am speaking with a Brooklyn accent. I'm not trying to speak with a Brooklyn accent. It is not something I choose to do. In that sense it's not part of my behavior. What I am doing is speaking, just like the Fulanese.

Move from just speaking with a Brooklyn accent, and now think about my thinking and judging and acting from a Brooklyn perspective, and then from a middle class Brooklyn perspective, and then from my family's middle class Brooklyn perspective. In effect, I'm a creature of my time and place. Why? Because when I learn how to do something from people who are already doing it, I learn to do it in the particular way that it is done. And that provides us with that same issue of the generic and the specific and the difference between them.

Now we can recapture the first part of that poem. "He who cannot give an account of three thousand years remains in the darkness of inexperience." Generally, one's own life experiences are not enough to develop beyond being parochial, provincial, naïve or something of the sort. Apparently we need exposure to other lives in other times and other places, and to other possible lives in other possible times and places in order to develop what you might call an exemplary level of competence at operating as a person among persons. Short of that, we are like the tennis player who has only played left-handers on clay courts.

Let's put this conclusion back into the context of the notion of "the systematic possibilities within the game." Apparently, it takes being ex-

posed to and impacted by a more or less representative sample of human lives and human situations (or at least a sample that is not strategically non-representative) in order to develop a normative or exemplary level of sensitivity and judgment with respect to “What are the systematic possibilities within the game?” – within the Person concept.

If we compare a normative or exemplary level of competence to operate as a person among persons, then we can contrast with a lower level of competence, which you might call a journeyman level (which means that you manage). That is the basis for talking about deficiencies in being human or being a person.

One example of marking a deficiency of this kind is the concept of “performativeness”. Performativeness is a significance deficiency on the model of color blindness. One of the salient characteristics of performativeness is the wide range of human phenomena where it makes a significant difference. It makes a difference from raising developmentally delayed children, to sexual stereotyping, to I-Thou relationships, and possibly to schizophrenia and the acculturation of refugees, and many others. Just as it takes a broad range of experience and exposure to develop the relevant competence, deficiencies in the relevant competence make a difference in a comparably broad range of human phenomena. The performative person does indeed live “in the darkness of inexperience”.

Q. Could you say just a little more about performative? Some of us may not understand.

PGO. It’s analogous to color blindness. It’s significance blindness. It’s being unable to see the significance of the behaviors that you observe. In clinical talk, it’s called “being concrete”.

So the notion of “the systematic possibilities within the game” connects now to our notion of what’s the archetype, what’s the ideal, what’s the highest level of aspiration for being a human being.

Let me drop that one and apply it to a different topic. I’ve mentioned more than once that by the early 1970’s, I had concluded that faculty members in the humanities departments of the university were, by and

large, demoralized and had lost faith in the legitimacy of their disciplines. My diagnosis was that, that was because the successes of science and technology seemed to imply that scientists had – or in the long run would have – all of the answers and that made the arts and humanities outmoded, quaint, and irrelevant, with nothing important to contribute. The notion of a liberal arts education as an essential preparation for the responsibilities of citizenship seemed equally outmoded. What would be needed in the future were technical skills based on scientific research.

The phenomena was clearly a “God is dead” reaction. They had moved from simple demoralization and depression to a *Lord of the Flies* kind of existence that we commonly tag as “political correctness”.

When we developed this notion – that acquiring competence to operate as a person among persons is essentially acquiring the judgment and sensitivity to deal with the systematic possibilities of human lives – we have articulated in fresh form the basic rationale for liberal arts education and for the arts and humanities departments at the university level. It is literature and the arts and the histories and languages and philosophies that take us beyond the darkness of inexperience, beyond merely being creatures of our time and place. To paraphrase our old Spanish philosopher, “Human life is a peculiar reality in that every other reality, scientific or otherwise, must in one way or another find a place within it.”

Let me do one last thing, and that is to come back to Bob [Brill]’s talk [“Contrasting Empirical and Pre-empirical Approaches to Psychology: Historical and Epistemological Perspectives”, presented earlier in the afternoon] and Ray [Bergner]’s response and Paul [Zeiger]’s response. Remember the issue was how do you go from the nonempirical to the empirical. Again, apply this notion of the systematic possibilities within the game. It is the non-empirical that generates the systematic possibilities. What is empirical is *which* of these possibilities actually occurred. That is why the pre-empirical comes first. You have to first generate the possibilities in order to go out and look and see which ones of those are actual. So we do have a framework for dealing with the issue of what’s the relationship and how do you get from one to the other. And I think

that is a good time to stop. [applause]

PGO. Any questions or comments?

Q. A quote came to mind from the end of the *Tractatus*, where he [Wittgenstein] says, “When all the questions of science have been answered, the fundamental questions of life will have been left untouched”.

Q. So Pete, what *is* Descriptive Psychology? [laughter]

PGO. Descriptive Psychology is the discipline that is engaged in the task of writing the grammar of operating as a person among persons.

### **Acknowledgments**

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