MICRO AND MACRO, THIN AND THICK, AND OTHER KEY CONCEPTS

SERIES INTRODUCTION

Chris Lorenz (2024) recently produced a review essay of Jonas Ahlskog's *The Primacy of Method in Historical Research: philosophy of history and the perspective of meaning.* What Lorenz has to say about Ahlskog's thinking is a good introduction to an emerging field of "Cognition Histories" (and Cognition Sociology). The sociological thinking is rolled into person's historical thinking because, the other new emerging fields, Public History, and Public Sociology, speak *the same language*. As a few lines in Lorenz's abstract, global scholars speak to the older fields of social philosophy-social psychology, the philosophy of history, and the philosophy of social science, which are being revised inside the new fields, **and I am sorry to say, that my Australian history and sociology colleagues (old and new) appear completely *stump* at the cognition**:

> Jonas Ahlskog presents a critical and lucid engagement with contemporary philosophies of history and makes a sustained case for a return to the ideas of history and social science as developed by R. G. Collingwood and Peter Winch. What philosophy needs again is, first, a recognition of the "primacy of method"—that is, the insight that *what* one knows about reality depends on *how* one knows it. Second, philosophers need to take "the duality of method" seriously again and to recognize that the modes of explanation in the human sciences and the natural sciences are categorically different from each other—especially now that this difference has been blurred in recent debates about the Anthropocene. Ahlskog's book is thus also a contribution to the classical debate about causal explanation versus meaningful understanding. On closer analysis, however, Ahlskog's "untimely meditations" on "historical method" suffer from an insufficient engagement with counterarguments. A first line of critique challenges the idea that human action cannot be explained causally. A second line of critique challenges the idea that all aspects of human action can be "understood," because the unintended aspects and consequences of individual actions cannot. These require causal explanation. A third line of critique concerns Ahlskog's denial of the fundamental plurality of ideas of history and the social sciences. Squeezing this plurality into one philosophical mold comes at a price. Unintentionally, Ahlskog's "untimely meditations" also show that much. (Lorenz 2024:1)

In my cognition history and sociology studies I agree with the challenges that Lorenz has stated. In this series I explain, from various overlapping fields (multidisciplinary-interdisciplinary education), the difficulty for persons to understand even their own cognition; to understand:

1. Key and Relevant Concepts
2. Picture-Image and Language
3. The Politics of Thinking
4. Neuroscience and Perception
5. The Humanities Discipline as Primary

The three-part series has a postscript whereby there is a demonstration of the practice for understanding persons having to live through a brutal period of a confused economy.

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Lorenz, Chris (2024). If you could read my mind: on the history of mind and other matters, A review essay of *The primacy of method in historical research: philosophy of history and the perspective of meaning*, by Jonas Ahlskog. New York: Routledge, 2021. pp. 220, *History and Theory* 0, no. 0 (May 2024), 1–12

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According to [Wikipedia](#):

> Cognition is the "mental action or process of acquiring knowledge and understanding through thought, experience, and the senses". It encompasses all aspects of intellectual functions and processes such as: perception, attention, thought, imagination, intelligence, the formation of knowledge, memory and working memory, judgment and evaluation, reasoning and computation, problem-solving and decision-making, comprehension and production of language. Cognitive processes use existing knowledge to discover new knowledge.

In the "BIBLIOGRAPHY AND REFERENCES" at the end of this essay is a considered selection of the literature which can be described as "the Cognition History and Sociology," in terms of the multidisciplinary-interdisciplinary educational models within the human-social-natural sciences and the humanities. Although there are disciplinary differences, there are no cognition differences as **comprehensive understanding**. Disagreement does not mean agreement is not *possible* and, in many cases, **actual** (think actuality; existentially genuine). "[swearword adjective] politicians" falsely think that they can "divide and rule." Setting how one person thinks against another. This is as much personal politics as it is partisan politics. Where such conflictual thinking goes wrong is ***not understanding the full semantics that a person might be using in reference to concepts***. These **concepts** are building blocks of worldview, or the external outlook and the internal meta-reflection combined. Concepts perform this role of **worldview** by organising ideas. The "idea" is find a "fit" as a schema (model). Worldview – the external outlook and the internal meta-reflection – speaks of the *tooling* (method) concept of 'scoping'. The question is how far deep and wide do we each have to go to understand.

A significant slice on the global history of sociology, philosophy, and historiography has been around discussions of Micro and Macro scopings, and Thin and Thick concepts, with the best scholars examining what [Randall Collins](#) calls, "*interaction ritual*" (IR). The sociological concept was first introduced in *Interaction Ritual: Essays on Face-to-Face Behavior*, a 1967 book by [Erving Goffman](#). The concepts are slightly different between Collins and Goffman but the concepts are mutually supportive. In the first essay, "On Face-work", Goffman discusses the concept of face, which is the positive self-image a person holds when interacting with others, and Goffman believes that face "as a sociological construct of interaction is neither inherent in

nor a permanent aspect of the person". [Reinhard Bendix](#)'s work *State and Society* (1973) enabled Collins to later combine this theory with Erving Goffman's microsociology, which resulted in Collins' publication *Conflict Sociology* in 1975 and later, *Interaction Ritual Chains* in 2004. Goffman was also one of Collins' professors during his time at Berkeley. Collins' identifies *interaction ritual* more in terms of **cognition** links in *schools of thought*.

It was Randall Collins's book, *[The Sociology of Philosophies: A Global Theory of Intellectual Change](#)* (1998), which taught me the problems of schooling, along with the paradigmatic criticism of [Ivan Illich](#) (via [Michael Macklin](#)). As Douglas Goodman (2001), as a critic of Collins, wrote:

> Randall Collins has always been interested in what he calls a "non-obvious" sociology (1982). A nonobvious sociology is one that reveals the hidden processes behind what is taken for granted and that demonstrates why the obvious questions are not necessarily the most central ones. [page 92]

> Sociologies of other disciplines tend to strike readers, especially those in the targeted field, as attempts to expand the jurisdiction of sociology and to fulfill Comte's dream of making sociology the ultimate explanatory foundation for all intellectual pursuits. Although we see some of this in Collins, his primary goal in this latest work is not to sociologically explain away philosophical truths. Instead Collins intends to use the history of philosophy to test his ideas about the relationship between concrete human interactions and social structures-that is, the relation between what have come to be called the micro and the macro. [page 92]

> **Whether the details of the work are ultimately convincing is beyond the scope of this article, but no reader can be unimpressed by the geographic breadth and depth of Collins's attempt.** Following the overview of the theory is a discussion both of what I find unconvincing in the micro theory and also of what I feel are Collins's new contributions to the sociology of knowledge. Finally, I will suggest what sociology of knowledge might say about sociological theory itself [page 93; my emphasis on the author's thinking]

> Collins's view of the micro-macro relation is inspired by the empirical achievements such microsociological approaches as ethnomethodology and conversational analysis. These microsociologies do not wholly reject macrosociological concepts, but they improve on their explanations by reconstituting macroconcepts on radically

empirical foundations. Whether structures change or persist depends entirely upon whether lying microbehaviors change or persist (Collin 1981: 989). Collins often describes structures as simple aggregates of microevents and has suggested a rather dubious sampling strategy that would ignore all traditional macrosociological variables (Collins 1981:988). [page 94]

Collins's sociology combines a micro theory of emotional solidarity with a macro theory based on conflict. Collins believes that the same processes that produce solidarity on the micro level produce conflict on the macro. The cultural capital, emotional energy, and group solidarities produced in IRs [*interaction rituals*] allow individuals to dominate hierarchies and encourage groups to engage in concerted conflict. IRs are both a site where domination is practiced and a supplier of the major weapons used in social conflict. [page 95]

[Goodman's key criticism] his theory lacks the prime advantage that Collins sees in a micro approach, its openness to empirical testing. Increases in emotional energy are no more observable than any of the macrostructures that Collins labels as nonempirical abstractions. In an articles Collins (1990b:50) admits as much. "My argument, that EE [emotional energy] declines over a series of interaction rituals depending upon the ups and experiences of power and status, is inferential. There is little direct evidence for it." [page 97]

Goodman's criticism of Collins' paradigm fails because it is, on *any reasonable reading*, a non-acceptance of nonempirical abstractions, and, as such, it is prejudice, a rationally-argued anti-intellectualism among academics. Philosophical principles (including ethics) are generally nonempirical abstractions; even consequentialist theories have to start in the metaphysics to prioritise natural values. A non-acceptance of nonempirical abstractions blanketly rejects all other theory for theoretical pragmaticism; that is, trapped and stuck thinking.

Nevertheless, as cited by Goodman it can be seen what is *valuable*. So, Collins does "not to sociologically explain away philosophical truths. Instead Collins intends to use the history of philosophy to test his ideas about the relationship between concrete human interactions and social structures-that is, the relation between what have come to be called the micro and the macro." Amongst the preservation of that methodology of 'philosophical truths' are the meta-reflective conceptions of 'thin concepts' and 'thick concepts'. The terms come from the fields of metaphilosophy and ethics, metaethics:

Yet another way of categorizing metaethical theories is to distinguish between centralist and non-centralist moral theories. The debate between centralism and non-centralism revolves around the relationship between the so-called "thin" and "thick" concepts of morality: thin moral concepts are those such as good, bad, right, and wrong; thick moral concepts are those such as courageous, inequitable, just, or dishonest. While both sides agree that the thin concepts are more general and the thick more specific, centralists hold that the thin concepts are antecedent to the thick ones and that the latter are therefore dependent on the former. That is, centralists argue that one must understand words like "right" and "ought" before understanding words like "just" and "unkind." Non-centralism rejects this view, holding that thin and thick concepts are on par with one another and even that the thick concepts are a sufficient starting point for understanding the thin ones. (Wikipedia).

A number of other psychological theories may also shed light on behaviour in the political context of avoiding understanding human factors, such as cost-benefit analysis, and free-choice paradigm. What strikes me in the debates are several observations:

- People actively avoid situations and information likely to increase cognitive dissonance – the discomfort from holding contradictory beliefs, ideas, or values, or dealing with new information that conflicts with existing beliefs, ideas, or values.

- People do not think much about their attitudes, let alone whether they are in conflict. They can come to conclusions as observers without much (or no) emotional or intellectual (cognitive) reflection.

Nevertheless, in spite of an over-emphasis in rational process or agency, there are basic elements in reasoning and choice which ought not to be ignored. Ideas on action and motivation may also provide some illumination. We continue to make ethical judgements. We can identify a person's motivation as malice, intellectual laziness, or just plain ignorance. These are what Bernard Williams called thick concepts – the way we, at the same time, combine our valuation and facts of the matter in language. We see it in others because we think and feel in the same way. It is an inescapable part of our socialization. It is also a fact about how the brain

is "wired". The big mistake of the ancients, and which we continue in modernity, is to emphasize the difference between emotion and reason.

In current discussions today on democracy, the biggest threat is the **thin concept** of "We the People", and the solution is the thick concept of "We the Persons". If you ask the question, who are people it is easy to see it is a thin concept, as the explanation goes not further than a category. If you ask the question, who are the persons it is easy to see it is a **thick concept**, since the question leads into the scholarship of personalism. What we get today are the thin concepts of the political rhetoric, signs without substance but which infer hidden or undisclosed beliefs. The advantage of thick concepts is that this political rhetoric has greater clarity. Now, as I argued in my past essay, *The Level Playing Field*:

> Every idea, word, term has a fit, in that we can measure some meaningful signal from when a person uses an idea, word, or term to explain their own beliefs. It has become fashionable in all quarters to nastily dismiss a proposition where someone is attempting to explain an idea, word, or term, and this is to deny any meaningful content in the thinking offer. This is absolute cynicism and should not be accepted in society, but provided as the meaning of a *moronic* thinking, and not to be hypocritical, each must admit that, to some measure, it is performed by each person sometime past. It is an emotional reaction of human development and society agrees it is a stage of immaturity; although most of us keep falling intermittently for this emotional trap.

All of the terms and concepts in this article has a fit to, not one, but to several overlapping schemas. Furthermore, there are many more sociological terms and concepts which can also be identified (many thanks to Neil Peach for the list; Szakolczai 2023):

- *Liminality*: 1. occupying a position at, or on both sides of, a boundary or threshold. 2. relating to a transitional or initial stage of a process. (Oxford)

- *Trickster*: a person who cheats or deceives people. (Oxford)

- *Imitation*: 1. the action of using someone or something as a model. 2. a thing intended to simulate or copy something else. (Oxford)

- *Schismogensis*: **Schismogenesis** is a term in [anthropology](#) that describes the formation of social divisions and differentiation. Literally meaning "creation of division", the term derives from the [Greek](#) words σχίσμα *skhisma* "cleft" (borrowed into English as [schism](#), "division into opposing factions"), and γένεσις *genesis* "generation, creation" (deriving in turn from *gignesthai* "be born or produced, creation, a coming into being"). The term was introduced by anthropologist [Gregory Bateson](#) and has been applied to various fields. ([Wikipedia](#))

- *(Total) Participation*: the action of taking part in something. ([Oxford](#))

Taken all together, what this *article* is arguing, as a *summative statement*, is that **true learning** is three metaethical concepts, which align together, and with all other terms and concepts mentioned in the article:

- **(true) Open Access**: the unrestricted right or opportunity to use or benefit from something, in particular academic writing or research. ([Oxford](#))

- **Open Participation**: Open Participation. Means that anyone may attend a Committee meeting and have the opportunity to offer an opinion on the subject of the meeting, or otherwise participate as a member of the advisory group. ([Law Insider](#))

- **Open and Level Playing Field**: A level playing field is simply a fair way to compare or judge two things. ([Britannica](#))

The full argument are these (forthcoming from 13 August 2024) essays on "Cognition Histories and Sociology". But the 'thisness,' of this first essay ([Haecceity](#)), is a start to a critical thinking conversation.

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