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978-0-521-38246-5 - The Methodology of Herbert Blumer: Critical Interpretation and Repair

Kenneth Baugh

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The methodology of Herbert Blumer

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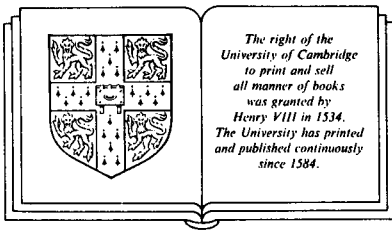
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Acknowledgments

Without invoking an entire history, I must mention some specific debts that this work has incurred.

From Florida State University's Department of Philosophy I want to thank Professor David Gruender for his diligence and effectiveness as a critic of an early draft of my argument.

I want also to thank the reviewers of the Rose series for their suggestions and objections. In responding to these, or deciding not to, I have reached the present version of this study.

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Preface: The standpoint of reading

This study is an interpretation of Herbert Blumer's methodology. As such, it is formed and informed by two distinct sources: a topic, Blumer's methodology, and an approach to that topic, interpretation. Whatever the topic may be in and of itself, here it appears only through interpretation, as interpretation. Any determinations constitutive of interpretation are therefore constitutive of the interpreted topic. More specifically, the assumptions and tendencies which interpretation inevitably *brings* to its topic predelineate the possibilities of construal, fore-favoring some constructions while forestalling others. With that in mind, I want to introduce this study by identifying some interpretive decisions which make my reading of Blumer what it is and not something else.

The first order of interpretive business is simply to locate the topic. Since Blumer's methodology is sited in an indefinite body of discourse, some limits must be set. My choice is to use only Blumer's publicly available texts. The special suitability of this choice lies in the balance it permits between deference and criticism: It at once allows a thinker to present ideas in a considered and deliberate form without thereby collapsing interpretive insight into authorial testimony. As a material witness a text can raise claims of its own over and sometimes against its author, provided, of course, that an interpreter is prepared to hear.

With Blumer's texts in hand, the question arises as to how the task of reading is to be done. Essentially, this task is that of placing texts within a context such that, in a seamless union of the two, a definite meaning is envisaged. The decision here is simply: What context? I will present my answer by critically working through some familiar alternatives.

For the most part, the Blumer secondary literature has approached the question of context from a limited range of choices. In the first case, Blumer's meaning has been determined by reference to his intention, that is, what he had in mind to convey. Interpretation thus directed assumes form as intellectual biography, autobiography, or simply repetitive authorial commentary, all of which accord thematic primacy to the self-under-

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standing of an author.¹ In the second case, Blumer's meaning has been found by reference to his milieu of influences. Here interpretation becomes intellectual history, recovering not merely the author's thought, but such thought in relation to its world, charting the derivations and adaptations which mark all ideas as a child of their time. In the third case, Blumer's meaning has been found within the texts themselves, which in this case become their own context. Focusing immanently upon the textual language, interpretation becomes summary or synopsis, attempting to restate a body of writings in a condensed or miniaturized version.

Despite their differences, all three ways of reading exemplify the same underlying tendency, which is to regard Blumer's meaning as a discrete episode within the history of discourse. So oriented, the job of interpretation consists in recovering the discourse event, that is, in retrieving and repeating it. This holds equally true whether the event is conceived by reference to an author's intention, a milieu of influences, or textual language alone; in each case the aim is *recovery*.

Such reading stands in marked contrast to the approach to meaning embodied in the working orientation of a methodologist. The methodologist's focus of attention is upon a theme, problem, or issue – in general, upon a subject matter – with which thinking grapples in an effort to reach adequate characterization and resolution. But the subject matter does not give itself easily; thought must wrest it from concealment. In this effort one methodologist may be more successful than another, grasping the latter's work in a critical and corrective way. And as methodology is not a terminal point in itself, but rather exists to guide the conduct of inquiry, methodological principles reach fulfillment in an indefinite horizon of application.

Taken together, these things – the thinking toward a subject matter which exists in concealment and in whose deconcealment and application others may effectively participate – specify the ways in which methodology exists as a contemporaneity of *renewal*. Such renewal comprises the context of meaning, and some implications of that context, of methodological thought *qua* methodological. By comparison with this context, the reading whose goal is recovery of a discrete historical episode of discourse omits precisely what is most essential. It is not an author's intention, a milieu of influences, or immanent textual language that makes a thought methodological, but simply a certain kind of responsiveness to a certain subject matter.

In this study I want to approach Blumer from a methodological orientation. This means, first and foremost, that the context for placing his texts is their subject matter. Insofar as the subject matter is real and not a figment of Blumer's imagination, it can be identified and dealt with by an indefinite

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number of persons. Thus, I invoke various thinkers without regard for historical connections to Blumer, requiring only that their ideas help to open up the topic. I also suggest new applications for some of Blumer's ideas. To the extent that the subject matter is in these ways developed independently of Blumer, contextualizing his writings by reference to it produces an interpretation which is *inherently* critical. This becomes particularly patent in those places where the themes I introduce subsume the verbatim of Blumer's texts, but a critical perspective is present throughout.

Most of this study is occupied with textual particulars of Blumer's work as they are taken hold of by my interpretive categories. The outcome of this exercise is to provide the basic gist of Blumer's position. Once that position is in sight, I take issue with it in matters where I believe Blumer is most clearly mistaken. Arguing against him frequently takes the form of further explication of the themes and issues in which Blumer's position has been critically cast; in this way criticism merely continues the work of construal. Finally, moving beyond the mistakes, I make suggestions as to how Blumer's position might be revised and developed to correct some of its errors, though my suggestions in no way constitute a comprehensive treatment of the issues involved. To the extent that correction is the place from which criticism speaks, discussion of the one flows naturally into the other. In every case the specific expository allocation of the moments of my reading is not mechanical but entirely dependent upon the needs of the topic.

Such, then, is what this study is, a "critical interpretation and repair." It is *not* an intellectual biography of Blumer. It is *not* a history of symbolic interactionism. It is *not* an attempt to relate Blumer to pragmatist philosophy (whether conjunctively or disjunctively). It is *not* a sociology of symbolic interactionism. It is *not* a history of twentieth-century American social theory. It is *not* a compendium of Blumer's publications.

What it *is* is simply an attempt to break with narrowly historical readings in order to view Blumer's methodology in its methodological significance.

Note

- 1 This is the view Blumer has gone on record as favoring. In a brief exchange in 1967 with Joseph Woelfel, the question of proper interpretation arose for the specific case of how Mead was to be read. Woelfel argued that Mead's thought needs to be constructed rather than merely reproduced:

Perhaps we should be less concerned with 'getting it right,' with finding out what Mead 'really said,' and pay more attention to what he could have said and should have said using the concepts he developed, or something like them (Woelfel, 1967: 409).

Blumer responded that Woelfel was "uttering nonsense" in claiming that "it makes no sense at all to discover what Mead 'really said' or 'really meant'" (Blumer, 1967b: 411):

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I am definitely concerned with what Mead *said* and *meant*. The task here is not that of trying to unearth some 'intrinsic nature' or 'inner essence' of Mead's scheme of thought . . . but, instead, that of trying to determine what kind of object his scheme of thought was to Mead himself. This is what we always do whenever we seek to find out what a person meant in the disclosure of his thought (1967b: 411).

Blumer goes on to suggest that Woelfel's view implies a thoroughgoing interpretive relativism wherein "any version by any commentator . . . qualifies as a depiction." The end result is "scholarship at its lowest level" (1967b: 411).

The debate between Woelfel and Blumer involves some much disputed issues in the theory of interpretation. As is evident in the "Preface," the position upon which this study is based is closer to Woelfel's side of the argument than to Blumer's. For a critical treatment of Blumer's position on interpretation, see Chapter 4, especially "Blumer versus Erving Goffman."