Acknowledging Ralph Pred

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Abstract

At the time of his death in May of 2012, Ralph Pred was working on a critical social theory inspired by process philosophy. In the book manuscript he left unfinished, *Syntax and Solidarity*, he develops a "radically empirical" sociology that enables him to identify and critically evaluate the different forms that social solidarity has taken in the history of civilization. The purpose of this paper is to draw attention to the importance of his unfinished project. The executors of Pred's literary estate would be happy to see his project, with due acknowledgment, publicized and continued.

Keywords: Active Voice Bias, Concrescence, Middle Voice, Sociogeny, Solidarity, Substance

1. Introduction

At the time of his unexpected death in May of 2012, Ralph Pred was working on a follow-up to his 2005 book, *Onflow: The Dynamics of Consciousness and Experience*. The sequel was to be called *Syntax and Solidarity*.

The purpose of this paper is to acknowledge Pred's contribution to contemporary philosophy and to draw attention to the importance of his unfinished project. Much promising material exists in manuscript. I hope scholars will consider examining this material for themselves. The executors of Pred's literary estate would be happy to see his project, with due

acknowledgment, publicized and continued. Upholding his legacy by bringing his last ideas to light of day will be the greatest honor we can do this remarkable man and his phenomenal originality.

2. Active Voice Bias

In *Onflow* Pred used ideas of William James, John Searle, Alfred North Whitehead, Gerald Edelman, and Martin Heidegger to develop a provocative theory of consciousness. The upshot of this synthesis was an original claim about the nature of consciousness that also drew on insights from linguistics. Not unlike Heidegger, Pred claimed that our being-in-the-world is a being-in-language. He noted that unlike some ancient languages, such as Sanskrit and Archaic Greek, which had a middle voice (called middle because it is neither active nor passive, but "in between"), our modern languages are all dominated by a syntax of active-voice transitivity. Few of us realize that there are quite different ways to structure a description – of ourselves, say, or of the world – than the one we take for granted in our default syntax. This leads us to read certain active-voice patterns into everything we think about.

Some straightforward examples of the grammatical differences between active, passive, and middle voice will be helpful. If we imagine a language where all three options exist and are morphologically distinct, the semantic differences will be unambiguous:

1. "He shaved$_{\text{active voice}}$" would mean he shaved someone else.
2. "He shaved$_{\text{passive voice}}$" would mean someone else shaved him.
3. "He shaved$_{\text{middle voice}}$" would mean he shaved himself.

In the middle voice, the subject is both active and passive, both agent and patient. That means the subject cannot remain unaffected by the activity it engages in. In the active voice the subject acts but is not acted on, making the subject seem impassive and the activity expressed by the verb a paradigmatically "transitive" relation. A language without the middle

voice option must, in effect, find ways to represent middle voice operations as special or deviant cases of transitivity. Modern Indo-European languages, for example, favor reflexive verbs to express, in the active voice, meanings once associated with middle voice constructions: "I shaved myself."

But what significance does this shift in linguistic structure have for us? Does loss of the middle voice limit our ability to understand ourselves and the world? Does it inhibit our ability to produce good explanatory theories? Pred makes a case worth considering.

Pred proved remarkably canny in ferreting out active voice bias in the work of celebrated philosophers and scientists. In *Onflow* Pred exposed a staggering weakness in Gerald Edelman's account of higher consciousness. According to Edelman, higher consciousness depends on the symbolic modeling of the self-nonself distinction, and hence on language. But central to the emergence of a grammar rich enough to model the self-nonself distinction is, he believes, the development of a rich subject-predicate relation. But Edelman is here taking as essential to language the active-voice grammar familiar to him from modern Indoeuropean languages. In a middle-voice based language, the self-nonself distinction could be neither absolute nor fundamental. Edelman's claim implies that "higher consciousness" is a function of the active voice, that native speakers of a middle-voice language would lack "higher consciousness."

In his unfinished manuscript Pred exposes more of these active voice presumptions. Noam Chomsky argues that rationality and linguistic recursion are the same thing. But recursion is insignificant in middle-voiced languages and impossible in non-configurational ones. Just as Edelman's claim implies that natives of the middle voice would lack higher consciousness, Chomsky's claim implies they would lack rationality, or what he also calls "intelligence." Are rationality and intelligence phenomena of the active voice?

John Searle in his ontology of society accounts for the existence of social facts through