

The symbol between ethics and communication in Alfred Schütz

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the concept of symbol and tries to outline its function as a means of communication. In order to describe the communicative qualities of symbol, it is necessary to show its ethical nature. The paper analyses the role symbols play in intersubjective relations, in the construction of the individual's reality, and in the human ability to attribute meanings and assign functions. The conceptual framework for the understanding of what symbol is, how it works, and how it is made is a particular combination of phenomenology and pragmatism, which lies on the theory of 'appresentation', as we can find it in Alfred Schütz's viewpoint. The paper invites a reflection on the power of symbol, particularly on its power to communicate the incommunicable.

Keywords: symbol; communication; appresentation; phenomenology; otherness.

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1. Preamble

The first question that arises from the paper title is just: why Schütz? Schütz is not ascribable to the list of traditional academics or university professors: he was a lawyer and worked at a bank in Vienna. He joined, as a free scholar, the private seminary — which was founded by economist Von Mises — where he could ground his research in sociological phenomenology. After moving to the United States in 1939 — with Von Mises and other intellectuals who left Europe after Hitler’s rise — Schütz began to approach pragmatism, through the reading of James’ and Dewey’s works. As such, he represents a rich and unique synthesis of phenomenology and pragmatism, which he interestingly applies to the study of society. Particularly, he is devoted to a precious theory of symbol.

In trying to define what symbols are, my initial assumption may sound a little rude: there would not be any individual nor social history without symbols. To be honest, my assumption is grounded in Ortega y Gasset’s definition of the human being, who is “constitutively, by his inexorable destiny, as a member of a society — the etymological animal. Accordingly, history would be only a vast etymology, the grandiose system of etymologies. That is why history exists” (Ortega y Gasset 1957, p. 203).

Ortega’s definition corroborates the idea of humans as ‘creators of meaning’. Also, it invites one to take into consideration the so-called ‘Thomas’ theorem’ — presented by W. I. Thomas in his 1928 book, *Child in America: Behavior Problems and Programs*: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas 1928, p. 572).

Hence, my analysis stems from the assumption that humans have a particular quality, since they are ‘meaning beings’. Humans describe their surrounding environment; they put the elements in a certain order; they try to control and predict the behaviour of other humans or events; they assign tasks and functions to other humans and animals; all this in order to solve several problems, such as: what can I eat? Where can I find drinkable water? Can I trust that person? How can I assign roles in order to fortify the village? What therapy is better against that disease? What strategy should we adopt in order to surprise the enemy? What school should I choose for my son? What bank should I open an account at?

The possible answers to these and further questions imply the ability to transcend the present and project to the future. Schütz refers to ‘Here’ and ‘Now’ as the current situation of the individual. Symbols are the tool by which humans can transcend their ‘Here’ and ‘Now’.

2. What is a symbol?

Philosophers have widely contributed the definition of symbols. Trying to picture the vast philosophical literature on this topic is not easy and not my aim. This is the reason why I will try to depict the concept of symbol in Schütz’s view. He is a very interesting combination of Husserl’s phenomenology and American pragmatism (since he leaves Austria under the Nazi’s threat). He worked on symbols and their role in society with a whole book written during his American period, *Symbol, Reality, and Society*, first published in 1955 (then included in the first volume of the *Collected Papers*).

So, what is a symbol? Schütz identifies two preliminary methodological points: 1) first of all, he pinpoints that the group of terms such as ‘sign’, ‘mark’, ‘symbol’, and ‘indication’ have not historically received a precise definition; 2) despite a general consensus on the fact that humans have a symbolizing nature, there is not certainty about the processes that support the human ability to create and use symbols. Schütz refers to several philosophers, e.g. Cassirer, Whitehead, and Ducasse. He recalls Cassirer’s distinction between signs and signals: signs are the operators of the physical world, while signals are the designators of the human world. In other terms, signs would be objects that are linked to physical entities, whereas signals would have a functional value, and thus are mobile and flexible.

What are the qualities of symbols? Schütz adds two more points: 3) we can refer to symbols when a sign relates to an object, which is hard or impossible to perceive: an animal’s footprint is perceived in a clearer way if compared to the animal itself that we do not see; smoke can stand for fire that we do not see. In *On Interpretation*, Aristotle uses the term ‘symbol’ in relation to words: “Those that are in vocal sounds are signs of passions in the soul, and those that are written are signs of those in vocal sound” (Aristotle 1962, 16a3). In Schütz’s view, this means that symbols have a primary quality: the relation between a symbol and an object is irreversible. So, fire cannot be a sign for smoke, and soul’s affections cannot be symbols for words.

Schütz identifies one more point: 4) according to Aristotle, “a name, then, is a vocal sound significant by convention” (1962, 16a19). But when we introduce the term ‘convention’, we necessarily imply the existence of society and communicating members. As a consequence,

Schütz poses a series of questions: “If it is true, as it is widely believed, that any sign or symbol-relation involves at least three terms, of which one is the subject of the interpreter, is this interpreter tacitly assumed to have already established communication with his fellow-man so that the sign or symbol-relation is from the outset a public one? Or, are sign or symbol-relations possible within the private psychological or spiritual life of the lonely individual? If so, to what extent can they be shared? Are my fantasies, my dreams, and the symbolic system involved therein also capable of socialization? Does artistic creation, religious experience, philosophizing presuppose intersubjectivity? If, on the other hand, there are private and public symbols, does a particular sociocultural environment influence the structure of either or both of them and to what extent? Is it not possible that what is a sign or a symbol for one individual or one group has no significative or symbolic meaning to another? Moreover, can intersubjectivity as such, society and community as such, be experienced otherwise than by the use of a symbol? Then, is it the symbol which creates society and community, or is the symbol a creation of society imposed upon the individual?” (Schütz 1962, p. 292).

There is a clear reference to Cassirer’s distinction between sign and symbol: a sign is a physical entity, which is linked to physical objects — smoke is a sign for fire independently from the presence of an interpreter — whereas a symbol — as for Aristotle’s definition of ‘name’ — is a convention, which calls for human creation and intersubjectivity.

3. How is a symbolic relation made?

Before intersubjectivity makes symbolic communication possible, it is necessary to understand how a symbolic relation is made. For this explanation, Schütz recalls Husserl's concept of 'appresentation' or 'analogical apperception'. When we refer to an object, we tend to go beyond the immediate perception of what is in front of us, involving an analogical apperception of the part of the object that we do not see: it is a kind of anticipation of what we expect to see if the object moved or we moved to see the object from another viewpoint. This operation is grounded in previous experiences, which drive us to expect something usual or familiar, rather than uncommon and surprising.

This idea, presented by Husserl, is well illustrated by Ortega y Gasset through the apple example: "Is the apple that Eve gives to Adam the same apple that Adam sees, finds, and receives? For when Eve offers it, all that is present, visible, patent, is half an apple; and what Adam finds, sees, and receives is likewise only half an apple. What is seen, what is strictly speaking present from Eve's point of view is something different from what is seen and present from Adam's. For every corporeal body has two faces, and as is the case with the moon's two faces, only one of them is present to us. [...] So far as seeing goes, what is strictly called seeing, no one has ever seen what he calls an apple, because an apple according to all accounts has two faces, but only one of them is ever present. Furthermore, if there are two beings seeing it, neither of them sees the same face of it, but another and more or less different one. [...] Hence to the actual presence of what is only part of a thing we automatically add the rest of

it; this ‘rest’, then, we will say is not presented but is compresented or compresent”(Ortega y Gasset 1957, pp. 63-4).

Ortega’s argument is a neat tribute — as he himself states — to the analyses that Husserl clarifies in his *Ideas for a Pure Phenomenology* and *Logical Investigations*. The apple example shows that the theory of appresentation explains how a symbolic relation is made. Hence, the subject relates to an object indirectly, through the mediation of something else, which stands for the object: this is the appresentation. The symbolic relation is a ‘Paarung’, that is, a coupling between objects. Particularly, the coupling involves a perceivable object — the symbol — and a non-perceivable object.

4. The world of things ‘Here’ and ‘Now’

Once we have seen how a symbolic relation is made, we still have to understand why we make such relations. As individuals, we are always surrounded by a world of objects (things, trees, animals, people). Some of these objects get in touch with us. The way we get in touch with objects defines a specific layer within reality. There are multiple realities and I ignore most of them; there are several sports and I do not know their rules or even their existence. There are many pastimes and interests and I can consider most of them boring. All this is the sense of Schütz’s reference to William James: in his *Principles of Psychology*, James claims that there are multiple, maybe infinite, levels of reality, each of them with its specific style of existence. James defines these levels of reality ‘subuniverses’ (James 1890, p. 290).

This assumption implies a couple of facts: 1) that, as Schütz holds, the subject is not just thrown in the world, but s/he constitutes the world; 2) that “reality means simply relation to our emotional and active life; whatever excites and stimulates our interest is real. Our primitive impulse is to affirm immediately the reality of all that is conceived, as long as it remains uncontradicted” (Schütz 1962, p. 340). To be honest, Schütz exchanges James’ term ‘subuniverse’ with his ‘provinces of meaning’: “By this change of terminology we emphasize that it is the meaning of our experiences, and not the ontological structure of the objects, which constitutes reality” (Schütz 1962, p. 341). The change is not just jargon: a generic appresentational relation requests that all the three elements (presenting object, presented object and interpreter) be within the same ‘province’, whereas a symbolic relation (which is a particular kind of appresentational relation) requests that the elements of the relation belong to two different ‘provinces’ at least.

Independently from the province of origin, all the objects belong to two different worlds: ‘the world within my actual reach’ and ‘the world within my potential reach’. Basically, things around me make no sense as long as they do not get in touch with me within a specific relation. Ortega defined things as ‘pragma’, on the basis of their being “favorable or adverse to me, caress or friction, flattery or injury, service or harm” (Ortega y Gasset 1957, p. 54). The truth is that, as individual, I am bound to what Schütz calls ‘Here’ and ‘Now’, that is space and time.

According to Schütz, our experience of the world is organized — we could say in a Kantian way — in space and time. Space allows us to define ‘Here’, from which personal experience stems, along with the definition of perspectives and distances, i.e. of what is ahead, behind, above,

below, near, or far. Similarly, all the time perspectives are defined from 'Now', so that the subject finds the categories of before and after, past and future, sooner and later, of simultaneity and succession, and so on (Schütz 1962, pp. 306-7).

The objects within my actual reach fall into the so-called 'manipulatory sphere', because the subject can modify them. The interesting consequence of this view is that not only the objects of 'Here' and 'Now' fall into the world of things within my reach, but also the objects from the past and anticipations of the future do. This implies the resort to the symbol: the world of things within 'my restorable reach' recalls Husserl's claim, "I can do it again" (Husserl 1929, p. 167).

But how can I restore things from the past? This is the role the symbol plays. When I act in the world, I am "motivated to single out and to mark certain objects. When I return I expect these marks to be useful as 'subjective reminders' or 'mnemonic devices'" (1962, pp. 308-9). That mark I made on the tree bark when I was in love or to remember the start of the trail to the shelter, the page fold in a book, the highlight of that note, the memo on the side of a paper: all these marks get in touch with me now through a symbolic relation, which is an appresentational function. This kind of relation is absolutely subjective: it does not require any intersubjective context and the choice of certain objects as marks is totally arbitrary.

Does this system work? Not always: as Schütz claims, "rereading a book I had read as a student, I find several marks on the margin whose meaning I no longer understand. Even more, I am uncertain why I found the marked passage of special interest. Why did I put a button into my pocket this morning? I tried to recall something but what it was I can no

longer tell” (1962, p. 309). How many times have we forgotten a password! Every website or service, whose access requires credentials, offers a way to reset the password should we forget it. And this happens despite our use of some kind of reminders (a pet’s name, a son’s birth date, our first car’s brand, etc.). We sometimes say that a person is messy, because s/he tends to forget where the objects s/he puts down are. This calls for a brief exploration of disorder.

5. Order and disorder: Bergson’s view

A basic issue in the definition of order and disorder is the difficulty to understand that we continuously invert the application of the terms. Schütz refers to Bergson’s *Creative Evolution* here: first of all, what we call ‘disorder’ is the mere absence of a particular kind of order that we were expecting. This is clear if we refer to Schütz’s claim: “What do we mean if we enter a bedroom and say, ‘it is in disorder’? The position of each object can be explained by the automatic movements of the persons who inhabited this room or by the efficient causes, whatever they may be, which put each piece of furniture or clothing, etc., in its place. All this occurs strictly in accordance with the order of physical causality. But we are simply not interested in this kind of order if we expected to find a tidy room. What we expected to find is the human orderliness of appropriate, although arbitrary, arrangements of things in the room. If, on the other hand, we imagine chaos, we have in mind a state in the world of physical nature which is not subject to the laws of physics but in which events emerge and disappear in an arbitrary way. In this case we apply to the world of nature the principles of human (and this is arbitrary) order”

(Schütz 1962, p. 300). So, we misunderstand order and disorder, because we consider cosmic disorder on human bases and human disorder by the law of physics and causality. As such, the expression ‘absence of order’ is meaningless, as long as it refers to a particular kind of order.

If we apply this view to the symbolic relation, we see that what a symbol is for an individual or a group of individuals could be wholly meaningless for others. Therefore, Schütz answers the initial questions on whether the symbol calls for intersubjectivity: no, symbols are not necessarily public. Nonetheless, is it possible for a symbolic relation to be intersubjective?

6. The I, the other and communication

An intersubjective symbolic relation is viable through an appresentation of the other, which makes the establishment of a ‘communicative common environment’ possible (Schütz 1962, p. 315). Etymology explains that the term ‘communication’ is from Latin ‘communis’, which is from ‘cum’ (with, together) and ‘munis’ (gift, offer). In other terms, communication implies a mutual gift or performance. Apel and Habermas, using the concept of ‘Mitteilung’, explained that the communicative act is an ethical act itself: strictly speaking, if there is communication, there is ethics. By implying reciprocity, communication involves the listening to the other, the understanding of the other, and his/her inclusion within our horizon. Every authentic communication entails an I-you relation, which allows the exchange of roles: who speaks, now listens to whom was listening, who now speaks.

Despite the establishment of a ‘communicative common environment’, it must be said that perfect communication does not exist: “Through the use of signs the communicative system permits me to become aware, to a certain extent, of another’s cogitations and, under particular conditions even to bring the flux of my inner time in perfect simultaneity with his. But as we have seen, fully successful communication is, nevertheless, unattainable. There still remains an inaccessible zone of the Other’s private life which transcends my possible experience” (Schütz 1962, p. 326).

Here can we see the double and ambiguous nature of symbol, which is both communicative — i.e. open to the other — and private — i.e. closed within the world of the self. This view — clearly influenced by Husserl — presents another I, who, just like me, as coexistent, unveils an unfathomable world, that is his/her interiority; I realize that s/he is not just other, but s/he is *alter ego*, that is bearer of an irreducible, inaccessible, incommunicable subjectivity. As Jaspers holds, the power of symbol lies in the fact that it “establishes communion without communication” (1932, p. 26). This should not sound weird to psychoanalysts, who work on a special kind of symbols — the interpretation of dreams — as the only means for the patient to communicate what is otherwise incommunicable.

Hence, symbols have a communicative nature, which stems from their establishing intersubjective relations. Each individual experiences his/her everyday reality within a social world, which is already mapped — i.e. pre-marked and pre-symbolized — by others. Signs and symbols surround the individual, who has to know their biographical history in order to properly interpret the world. “Hence, only a small fraction of man’s stock of knowledge at hand originates in his own individual expe-

rience. The greater portion of his knowledge is socially derived, handed down to him by his parents and teachers as his social heritage. It consists of a set of systems of relevant typifications, of typical solutions for typical practical and theoretical problems, of typical precepts for typical behaviour, including the pertinent system of appresentational references. All this knowledge is taken for granted beyond question by the respective social group and is thus ‘socially approved knowledge’” (Schütz 1962, pp. 347-8). This is what Scheler called “relativ natuerliche Weltanschauung” (1926, p. 58).

In the work *Equality and the Meaning Structure of the Social World*, Schütz titles the second chapter “The Social World as Taken for Granted”: the main reference here is William G. Sumner’s theory. He coined the term ‘ethnocentrism’ and applied it to social groups. Sumner holds that “each group nourishes its own pride and vanity, boasts itself superior, exalts its own divinities, and looks with contempt on outsiders. Each group thinks its own folkways the only right ones, and if it observes that other groups have other folkways, these excite its scorn” (1906, p. 13).

The social function of symbol promotes the group’s corroboration of its identity (that Sumner calls ‘in-group’ or ‘We-group’) and the recognition of an enemy (what Sumner calls ‘out-group’ or ‘Others-group’). This special kind of symbol is what we can call ‘myth’: all societies have their own founding myths, creation myths, salvation myths, damnation myths, etc., the so-called ‘central myths’, in whose name individuals can kill, sacrifice, fight, and destroy real or presumed threats. And taboos — which are another kind of symbol with social function — are created as to defend such myths.

According to Schütz, the communicative quality of symbol is confirmed by the fact that, “if an appresentational relationship is socially approved, then the appresented object, fact, or event is believed beyond question to be in its typicality an element of the world taken for granted” (Schütz 1962, p. 349). This means that, for the purposes of the transmission of socially approved knowledge, learning the mother tongue and, particularly, its vernacular and local variations, is fundamental: “Not only the vocabulary but also the morphology and the syntax of any vernacular reflects the socially approved relevance system of the linguistic group” (Schütz 1962, p. 349). Schütz reminds us that the Arabian language has hundreds of terms for denoting various kinds of camels, but none for the general concept of ‘camel’; or that “in certain North American Indian languages the simple notion, ‘I see a man,’ cannot be expressed without indicating by prefixes, suffixes, and interfixes whether this man stands or sits or walks, whether he is visible to the speaker or to the auditors” (Schütz 1962, p. 349). Nussbaum tells us — on the basis of Lutz’s inquiry — that “Ifaluk *fāgo* contains elements both of personal love and of compassion” (Nussbaum 2001, p. 164).

As Schütz claims, “the determination of what is worthwhile and what is necessary to communicate depends on the typical, practical, and theoretical problems which have to be solved, and these will be different for men and women, for the young and for the old, for the hunter and for the fisherman, and in general, for the various social roles assumed by the members of the group” (1962, p. 349). Each social group has its vocabulary of slang and gestures, of symbols and emblems. Schütz holds that “in order to find my bearings within the social group, I have to know the different ways of dressing and behaving, the manifold insignia, emblems, tools, etc., which are considered by the group as indicating social

status and are therefore socially approved as relevant. They indicate also the typical behaviour, actions, and motives which I may expect from a chief, a medicine man, a priest, a hunter, a married woman, a young girl, etc.” (Schütz 1962, pp. 350-1).

This is particularly true for the symbolic relations in myths and rituals. As a consequence, it is possible to assert that “the symbols become more discernible the more the social relationship is stabilized and institutionalized. The dwelling place of the family gets the appresentational meaning ‘home’ which is protected by deities such as the lares and penates. The hearth is more than the fireplace, matrimony and wedlock are the ceremonial (or even sacramental) and legal symbols for marriage, a neighbourhood is much more than an ecological concept” (Schütz 1962, p. 354). It is indisputable that what is intended for matrimony, hearth, and neighbour within a social group does not necessarily match what another group means. This is also the central topic that Voegelin — whom Schütz met at Von Mises’ private seminary — analysed in his work, *The New Science of Politics*, where he studies the danger of self-reference and self-interpretation of social groups.

7. Ethical value of symbol

The ethical value of symbol is grounded in the fact that the individual is projected towards the future: s/he plans and starts to work for the realization of his/her goals: this is what Schütz calls ‘working’: “Working, thus, is action in the outer world, based upon a project and characterized by the intention to bring about the projected state of affairs

by bodily movements. Among all the described forms of spontaneity that of working is the most important one for the constitution of the reality of the world of daily life. [...] The wide-awake self integrates in its working and by its working its present, past, and future into a specific dimension of time; it realizes itself as a totality in its working acts; it communicates with others through working acts; it organizes the different spatial perspectives of the world of daily life through working acts” (Schütz 1962a, pp. 213-4). Schütz produces a synthesis of phenomenology and pragmatism here, because he holds that the realization of the self is not possible with the operational evaluation of the acts only — as Mead, Dewey, and James would say —, but it calls for self-conscience, inner experience of working and acting, according to Bergson’s concepts of ‘attention à la vie’ and ‘durée’.

Hence, symbol is the tool by which the individual can produce working acts, through bodily movements (reference is to Merleau-Ponty here) that modify space and affect the others. In the pragmatic transformation of social reality, Schütz pinpoints the highest expression of responsibility of the self: once the action has been performed, the self can no more change the effects that the present moment of the execution has produced within the totality of the life history (Sanna 2007, p. 181).

Only the doing I, the acting I, the working I can have a hope of moral realization: according to Schütz, a guilty conscience stems from the failed realization of plans. And ethical non-realization, non-action, and plainly reflective life are even worse: “Mere mental actions are, in this sense, revocable. Working, however, is irrevocable. My work has changed the outer world. At best, I may restore the initial situation by counter-moves but I cannot make undone what I have done. That is why from the

moral and legal point of view – I am responsible for my deeds but not for my thoughts. That is also why I have the freedom of choice between several possibilities merely with respect to the mentally projected work, before this work has been carried through in the outer world or, at least, while it is being carried through in vivid present, and, thus, still open to modifications. In terms of the past there is no possibility for choice. Having realized my work or at least portions of it, I chose once for all what has been done and have now to bear the consequences. I cannot choose what I want to have done” (Schütz 1962a, p. 217).

Symbol is a cognitive and ethical fundamental tool, because it allows each individual 1) to create his/her own world; 2) to move within this world through space and time; 3) to enter in a communion with other worlds. Symbols are the maps of the human universe; they are atlases and calendars, book-marks, page folds, post-its, and all we use to mark the things we consider more important in that splendid and unique book telling the totality of human civilization. Symbol is bound to beliefs, which stem from the individual’s material conditions. All we do depends upon our beliefs, which are the motives for our actions, by defining our goals and plans to realize them.

The magic power of symbols was well-depicted by Pessoa in his *Book of Disquiet*: “Life for us is whatever we imagine it to be. To the peasant with his one field, that field is everything, it is an empire. To Caesar with his vast empire which still feels cramped, that empire is a field. The poor man has an empire; the great man only a field. The truth is that we possess nothing but our own senses; it is on them, then, and not on what they perceive, that we must base the reality of our life” (Pessoa 2010, p. 70). And this is not that far from what the poet Eliot suggested in his comment on Dante: “We have nothing but dreams, and we have forgotten that seeing visions was once a more significant, interesting, and

disciplined kind of dreaming” (Eliot 1932, p. 204). This is why it can be said that without symbols there would not be life, neither lived, nor dreamt.

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