

Is a Pragmatics of Collective Action Possible?

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NAISHTAT, Francisco, *Action et langage. Des niveaux linguistiques de l'action aux forces illocutionnaires de la protestation*. (Action and Language. From Linguistic Levels of Action to the Illocutionary Forces of Protest) Paris: L'Harmattan, 2010. 260 pp.

The projected elaboration of a pragmatics of collective action would appear to be a self-evident development, given the scope of the “linguistic turn” which spurred the whole evolution of philosophy in the 20th century and which continues to be its driving force. It is therefore perfectly normal that note should be taken of the shift in practical philosophy that this turn implies. The anthropology derived by Kant aimed at revealing the manner by which the use of reason rendered the human being free. Kant drew out the pragmatic nature of the use of this freedom in opposition to “pathological” anthropologies which described the influence of the biological and social conditions of human life as conditions which made that freedom the consequence of external factors. But Kant’s anthropology remained nevertheless an anthropology of subjectivity.

In contrast, a pragmatics of collective action came to seem preferable as a way of thinking that tended to show that the use of language allows human beings to be emancipated from the external conditions of their existence only when exercised in common, that is, by relying upon the application of the accord of collective judgement that it succeeds in constructing. The linguistic turn seemed necessarily induced to conceive practical reason on the same model by which it allowed the transformation of theoretical reason by purely and simply transferring the model of the semantic logic of scientific discourse to the pragmatics of language. It seemed easy to demonstrate that the transformation of human beings through the use of language made them into active creatures only per medium of collective activity since, given that every action could be governed only by language and the awareness of the accords and disaccords that are produced in and through it, such actions could only be collective in nature, or at the very least take on a collective dimension. Man could only become a pragmatic creature, forging his own self and his own history, by taking part in the actions of mutual transformation represented by his language acts.

It is this apparent simplicity which nevertheless has taken in all those who to date have been associated with this linguistic turn in practical philosophy, whether in analytical philosophy, as with Ludwig Wittgenstein, Donald Davidson, J.L. Austin, John Searle and H. Paul Grice, or in hermeneutic philosophy with Hans-Georg Gadamer, K.O. Apel, and Jürgen Habermas. If the laws of the language that governed human action were as objective as those which controlled its scientific descriptions of the world, they should be able to be described in the way that the modern philosophies of subjectivity described the laws governing thought and their pragmatic objectification in law, in ethics, and in politics. The stumbling block to the theories is located precisely in that they have merely taken over the modern theories and epistemology of practical reason by associating language purely with the awareness one has of its usages, and thereby becoming impaled, in the analysis of the language of action, upon the modern models of the nature of law, ethics and

politics. They thus impeded themselves from achieving that very shift which they claimed that the use of language always already enabled us to bring about: the shift from a subjective reason to a reason that was objective and common. The Leibnizian ambition to overcome the solipsistic closure of individual monads therefore remained and was preventing, through the problematic that it imposed, the achievement of this shift from *prima philosophia* to *linguistica philosophia*.

It is this long-desired transformation in the horizon of the “linguistic turn”, yet one that has not been realized up till the present, that is achieved in the work of Francisco Naishtat, *Action et Langage. Des niveaux linguistiques de l'action aux forces illocutionnaires de la protestation*, by revealing to us that a pragmatics of collective action is indeed possible, and how it is. This pragmatics involves two separate components in light of the difficulties it must resolve to avoid the trap of the methodological individualism which still encumbered this turn in philosophical thought, just as it weighed down Max Weber’s sociological theory along with contemporary historical theory. Because the problem involved both collective action as perceived by history and the way in which the thought of this history intervenes by means of discourse in that very history itself, it was necessary to be able to demonstrate that the disasters of history and the way in which postmodern thought transposed these disasters into unavoidable destiny were both tributary of that retrospective gaze which Walter Benjamin attributed to his *Angelus Novus*. One knows that the angel’s gaze, as it looked rearwards at the effects that the historical gazes of progress had seen as accumulation, could perceive only ruins. The pragmatics of collective action, in its retrospective view of speech-act theories, is likewise a negative pragmatics.

As the author writes, “It seemed to me that it was necessary to go further and analyse the type of performativity that collectives reach in collective action and expression. It is not simply a question to do with *causality* and the social *effects* of subjective attitudes as the Thomas theorem would have it (collective subjects as *effects* of beliefs or other mental attitudes) but it is rather more an issue of the performative capability of the actors dialogically to engender collectives and illocutionary forces whose existence, rather than being a simple monological effect, becomes a force that is tested within an appearance space that is governed by the publicity principle. All performativity naturally implies a shared belief, but it is realized particularly as a decentred act inscribed dialogically within public arenas.” If history in its self-generation effectively amounts to being this way of mutually generating for itself the collective and individual conditions for existence through engaged speech and the dialogic accord that it achieves, there is no need to share in the postmodern diagnosis of history (which interprets its disasters as unavoidable destiny) but rather it is a matter of showing that the modern-day crises of rationality, legitimization, and motivation are stages in the dialogue that humanity is having with itself and its “pathological” non-pragmatic other and that these crises should be analysed as such.

As Étienne Balibar very justly points out with respect to Naishtat’s analyses, the author’s “consequent intent (arising out of all his experience of the protest and utopian movements associated with the ‘Argentine crisis’ of which he has conducted, whether solely or collaboratively, a continuous study) is to restore the element of the pragmatic by incorporating within it the thesis (derived from Walter Benjamin and Hannah Arendt) of a *non-conventional* illocutionary force which ‘counteracts the plays of language’ and lays out the horizon for a ‘non-violent violence’. One can grant the author not only that this return effect of action on the language which makes it possible is a philosophical question of major proportions, but that it constitutes one of the ‘live questions’ of current political thought.”

This negative pragmatics of collective action and of human history consequently calls, as its complement but also as its foundational element, for a positive pragmatics of language acts and history. The challenge for the author was to “to harmonize the pragmatic critique of

representationalism on the level of meaning with the raw and extralinguistic quest for reference on the level of action, the pragmatic point of view being that every action shares a commonality with its descriptive frame of reference. That should allow collective terms to be received within the discourse of action differently from being treated as referring to substances, denotations or raw facts found at the margins of the discourse. But the pragmatic strategy adopted stood in contrast as much to semantic reductionism as to Austinian and Searlean conventionalism. For indeed it will be recognized that the Austinian tradition has completely left aside the phenomena of informal collective protest and the collective demand for justice in the public space. Effectively, the pragmatic contextualization of action developed by Austin and his school is rigidly fixed within strongly institutionalized frames of reference, such that the illocutionary forces emerging from the process of acting within the informal context of the public sphere are passed over by classical pragmatics, which remains befogged by the illocutionary forces present in situations of norm-bound statuses, fixed conventions and dedicated institutions with their reified patterns of authority, hierarchy and rank, as if pragmatic analysis ruled out *ipso facto* access to a collective way of acting which can be the bearer of a disruptive force, whether suspensive or creative, inscribing thereby a testable claim of illocutionary felicity, to the very extent that, being turned in decentred fashion in the direction of various publics, this particular illocutionary force offers itself in superabundance with respect to the reified framework of existing conventions.”

The strength and originality of the analyses presented by Francisco Naishtat arises thus from the fact that they develop in a rigorous, coherent, and in-depth fashion a theory of collective and individual action which succeeds in bringing together the most pertinent results from the French, Spanish, North American, and German philosophical traditions and does not isolate them from history, whether past or present. Within them there is developed a veritable logical pragmatics of language which never separates the sense of the statements and forms of expression from those who are engaged in speech-act exchange and from their association with action. This sense is described as a considered adaptation of the social contexts and the positions adopted where the relations of power, both intersubjective and social, are submitted to both public and private judgement and to the sharing of this judgement. To do this, Dr Naishtat draws on the interpretative theories of Donald Davidson, though abstracting from them their scientific positivism, as well as those of Gadamer, though taking out from them their intersubjective and social relativism which neutralized any application of these theories to collective and social decision processes.

In Naishtat’s analyses, the objectivity of collective and individual decision processes is effectively related to the recognized necessities of the relationship of these social and individual contexts with the outside world itself, and the necessities of the social world are reflected back to this relationship with the world. History in pragmatic terms is thus inserted within the world. Dr Naishtat thereby very skilfully and perspicaciously avoids the weaknesses in this domain of the theories of Arendt, Apel, and Habermas who reduced these necessities to moral and ethical obligations, thus putting on a psychological plane the judgement relationship with these decisions by consigning them to a collective or plural moral judgement to which no individual could have access.

But in doing so he also comes into line with the most perceptive intuitions of Heidegger, Benjamin, Wittgenstein, Rorty and the theoreticians of action such as Georg Henrik von Wright, Elizabeth Anscombe, Peter Geach, Arthur Prior, Chaim Perelman, Hilary Putnam, and Paul Ricœur, for he relocates them in a categorial space where these decisions lose their character as an unforeseeable event and/or of being arbitrary to become the result of an objective appreciation of the play of forces present: to become a collective rational decision, an historic event.

In this publication, Dr Naishtat has superbly managed to situate his philosophical position within that space of international discussion within which he has worked throughout the world,

contributing to colloquia and seminars where he constantly tests his positions in continuous dialogue with his top international partners. Far from being a theory of the conventional performative in the style of Austin, his theory of language acts is enriched by that which both establishes and legitimizes it: an exercise of creative shared judgement which does not separate the individual action from its communicational judgement test. This judgement is thus not reduced to being one that adapts the enunciation to the social and mental context, as it is in Austin and in Searle: it is rather at once a philosophical, social, and mental judgement which contrasts with the sophist reach of the adaptive judgement advanced by these authors. In so doing he proves that the pragmatics of collective action cannot but be philosophical, if it is accepted that philosophy is not limited solely to the reflections of professional philosophers and that all judgement, by the very fact that it requires the accord that it seeks from others through its act of expression, constitutes itself the collective action that makes all action possible.

Jacques Poulain
Université Paris-8

Translated from the French by Colin Anderson