

Knowledge, Truth, and Falsehood in Human Relations

OBVIOUSLY, ALL RELATIONS which people have to one another are based on their knowing something about one another. The merchant knows that his correspondent wants to buy at the lowest possible price, and to sell at the highest possible price. The teacher knows that he can tax the student with a certain kind and amount of learning material. Within each social stratum, an individual knows how much culture, approximately, he may expect of every other individual. Without such knowledge, evidently, these and many other kinds of interaction could not take place at all. One may say (with reservations which easily suggest themselves) that in all relations of a personally differentiated sort, intensity and nuance develop in the degree in which each party, by words and by mere existence, reveals itself to the other. How much error and mere prejudice may be contained in all this knowledge, is another question. Yet, just as our apprehension of external nature, along with elusions and inadequacies, nevertheless attains the truth required for the life and progress of our species, so everybody knows, by and large correctly, the other person with whom he has to deal, so that interaction and relation become possible.

§ 1. *Knowledge of One Another*

The first condition of having to deal with somebody at all is to know with *whom* one has to deal. The fact that people usually introduce themselves to one another whenever they engage in a conversation of any length or meet on the same

social level, may strike one as an empty form; yet it is an adequate symbol of the mutual knowledge presupposed by every relationship. We are very often not conscious of this because, for a large number of relations, we need to know only that quite typical tendencies and qualities are present on both sides. The necessary character of these tendencies is usually noted only when, on occasion, they are absent. It would be worth a special investigation to find out the kind and degree of reciprocal knowledge required by various relations among people; to find out how the general psychological assumptions, with which everybody approaches everybody else, are interwoven with the special experiences in regard to the particular individual with whom we interact; how, in many fields, reciprocal knowledge does not have to be equal on both sides or is not permitted to be; to discover how the development of existing relations is determined merely by the growing knowledge, on both sides or on one side, about the other; finally, on the other hand, how our objectively psychological picture of the other individual is influenced by real, practical and sentimental, relations.

This last influence is by no means one of mere falsification. It is entirely legitimate that the theoretical conception we have of a particular individual should vary with the standpoint from which it is formed, a standpoint which is the result of the overall relation between knower and known. One can never know another person *absolutely*, which would involve knowledge of every single thought and mood. Nevertheless, one forms some personal unity out of those of his fragments in which alone he is accessible to us. This unity, therefore, depends upon the portion of him which our standpoint permits us to see. But such differences by no means arise from differences in the quantity of knowledge alone. No psychological knowledge is a mere stereotype of its object but depends, as does the knowledge of external nature, upon the forms which the cognizing mind brings to it and in which it receives the given. But where the knowledge of individuals is at issue, these forms differ very much individually. They do not attain the scientific generality and super-subjective power of conviction which can be reached with respect to external nature and to merely typical psychological processes.

§ 2. *Knowledge of External Nature vs. Knowledge of Persons*

If A and B have different conceptions of M, this by no means necessarily implies incompleteness or deception. Rather, in view of the relation in which A stands to M, A's nature and the total circumstances being what they are, A's picture of M is true for him in the same manner in which, for B, a different picture is true. It would be quite erroneous to say that, above these two pictures, there is the objectively correct knowledge about M, and that A's and B's images are legitimated to the extent to which they coincide with this objective knowledge. Rather, the ideal truth which the picture of M in the conception of A approaches—to be sure, only asymptotically—is something different, even as an ideal, from that of B. It contains as an integrating, form-giving precondition the psychological peculiarity of A and the particular relation into which A and M are brought by their specific characters and destinies.

Every relationship between persons gives rise to a picture of each in the other; and this picture, obviously, interacts with the actual relation. The relation constitutes the condition under which the conception, that each has of the other, takes this or that shape and has its truth legitimated. On the other hand, the real interaction between the individuals is based upon the pictures which they acquire of one another. Here we have one of the deep-lying circuits of intellectual life, where an element presupposes a second element which yet, in turn, presupposes the first. While, in narrow fields, this is a fallacy that invalidates everything, in more general and fundamental fields it is the inevitable expression of the unity into which both elements fuse, a unity which, with our forms of thought, cannot be expressed otherwise than by saying that we build the first upon the second and, at the same time, the second upon the first. Our relationships thus develop upon the basis of reciprocal knowledge, and this knowledge upon the basis of the actual relations. Both are inextricably interwoven. In their alternation within sociological interaction, they reveal interaction as one of the points where being and conceiving make their mysterious unity empirically felt.

§ 3. *Truth, Error, and Social Life*

Our conduct is based upon our knowledge of total reality. But this knowledge is characterized by peculiar limitations and distortions. That "error alone is life, and knowledge, death" cannot, of course, be valid as a principle, because a person caught in continuous error would continuously act in an inexpedient fashion, and thus inevitably would perish. And yet, in view of our accidental and defective adaptations to our life conditions, there is no doubt that we preserve and acquire not only so much truth, but also so much ignorance and error, as is appropriate for our practical activities. We have only to think of the great insights which transform human life, but which fail to make their appearance or go unnoticed, unless the total cultural situation renders them possible and useful. Or we may think, on the other hand, of the "*Lebenslüge*" ["vital lie"] of the individual who is so often in need of deceiving himself in regard to his capacities, even in regard to his feelings, and who cannot do without superstition about gods and men, in order to maintain his life and his potentialities. In the sense that the expediency of the external as of the internal life sees to it that we obtain the exact amounts of error and truth which constitute the basis of the conduct required of us, error and truth are psychologically coordinate—although, of course, only by and large, and with a wide latitude for variations and defective adaptations.

§ 4. *The Individual as an Object of Knowledge*

But within the range of objects, which we may know correctly or about which we may be deceived, there is a section wherein both truth and deception can attain a character that is not found anywhere else. This is the inner life of the individual with whom we interact. He may, intentionally either reveal the truth about himself to us, or deceive us by lie and concealment. No other object of knowledge can reveal or hide itself in the same way, because no other object modifies its behavior in view of the fact that it is recognized. This modification, of course, does not occur always; very often, even the other individual is basically no more to us than a piece of nature which poses for

our cognition, as it were. Insofar as this cognition goes by utterances made by the other, and particularly by utterances which are not modified by any thought of being utilized for our cognition but which are wholly spontaneous and immediate communications, there becomes apparent an element of fundamental importance for the determination of the individual by his environment. Our psychic process, which runs its course in a purely natural manner, is nevertheless, as far as its content is concerned, almost always, at the same time, in accordance with the norms of logic. This has been declared a problem; and the most far-reaching conclusions have been drawn from it.

§ 5. *The Nature of the Psychic Process and of Communication*

In fact, it is most remarkable that an event engendered exclusively by natural causes should proceed as if governed by the ideal laws of logic. For, it is exactly as if a tree branch, so connected with a telegraphic apparatus that its movements in the wind set the apparatus in motion, thereby caused signs in it that yield a rational meaning to us. The whole of this problem is not at issue here; but one remark must be made. Our actual psychological processes are governed by logic in a much slighter degree than their *expressions* make us believe. If we look closely at our conceptions as they pass our consciousness in a continuous temporal sequence, we find that there is a very great distance between any regulation by rational norms and the characteristics of these conceptions: namely, their flaring up, their zigzag motions, the chaotic whirling of images and ideas which objectively are entirely unrelated to one another, and their logically unjustifiable, only so-to-speak probative, connections. But we are only rarely conscious of this, because the accents of our interests lie merely on the "usable" portion of our imaginative life. Usually we quickly pass over, or "overhear," its leaps, its non-rationality, its chaos, in spite of their psychological factualness, in favor of what is logical or otherwise useful, at least to some extent.

All we communicate to another individual by means of words or perhaps in another fashion—even the most subjective,

impulsive, intimate matters—is a selection from that psychological-real whole whose absolutely exact report (absolutely exact in terms of content and sequence) would drive everybody into the insane asylum—if a paradoxical expression is permissible. In a quantitative sense, it is not only fragments of our inner life which we alone reveal, even to our closest fellowmen. What is more, these fragments are not a representative selection, but one made from the standpoint of reason, value, and relation to the listener and his understanding. Whatever we say, as long as it goes beyond mere interjection and minimal communication, is never an immediate and faithful presentation of what really occurs in us during that particular time of communication, but is a transformation of this inner reality, teleologically directed, reduced, and recomposed. With an instinct automatically preventing us from doing otherwise, we show nobody the course of our psychic processes in their purely causal reality and—from the standpoints of logic, objectivity, and meaningfulness—complete incoherence and irrationality. Always, we show only a section of them, stylized by selection and arrangement. We simply cannot imagine any interaction or social relation or society which are *not* based on this teleologically determined non-knowledge of one another. This intrinsic, *a priori*, and (as it were) absolute presupposition includes all relative differences which are familiar to us under the concepts of sincere revelations and mendacious concealments.

§ 6. *The Lie*

Every lie, no matter how objective its topic, engenders by its very nature an error concerning the lying *subject*. The lie consists in the fact that the liar hides his true idea from the other. Its specific nature is not exhaustively characterized by the fact that the person lied-to has a false conception about the topic or object; this the lie shares with common error. What is specific is that he is kept deceived about the private opinion of the *liar*.

Truthfulness and lie are of the most far-reaching significance for relations among men. Sociological structures differ profoundly according to the measure of lying which operates in

them. In the first place, in very simple circumstances the lie is often more harmless in regard to the maintenance of the group than under more complex conditions. Primitive man who lives in a small group, who satisfies his needs through his own production or through direct cooperation, who limits his intellectual interests to his own experiences or to unilinear tradition, surveys and controls the material of his life more easily and completely than does the man of higher cultures. To be sure, the innumerable errors and superstitions in the life of primitive man are harmful enough to him, but far less so than are corresponding ones in advanced epochs, because the practice of his life is guided in the main by those few facts and circumstances of which his narrow angle of vision permits him to gain directly a *correct* view. In a richer and larger cultural life, however, existence rests on a thousand premises which the single individual cannot trace and verify to their roots at all, but must take on faith. Our modern life is based to a much larger extent than is usually realized upon the faith in the honesty of the other. Examples are our economy, which becomes more and more a credit economy, or our science, in which most scholars must use innumerable results of other scientists which they cannot examine. We base our gravest decisions on a complex system of conceptions, most of which presuppose the confidence that we will not be betrayed. Under modern conditions, the lie, therefore, becomes something much more devastating than it was earlier, something which questions the very foundations of our life. If among ourselves today, the lie were as negligible a sin as it was among the Greek gods, the Jewish patriarchs, or the South Seas islanders; and if we were not deterred from it by the utmost severity of the moral law; then the organization of modern life would be simply impossible; for, modern life is a "credit economy" in a much broader than a strictly economic sense.

These historical differences are paralleled by distances of other dimensions as well. The farther removed individuals are from our most intimate personality, the more easily can we come to terms with their untruthfulness, both in a practical and in an intimate psychological sense—while if the few persons closest to us lie, life becomes unbearable. This is a banality, but it must

be noted in a sociological light, because it shows that the measures of truthfulness and mendacity which are compatible with the existence of certain conditions, constitute a scale on which the measures of intensity of these conditions can be read off.

In addition to this relative sociological *permissibility* of the lie under primitive circumstances, there is also its positive *expediency*. Where a first organization, arrangement, centralization of the group is at stake, this organization will take place through the subordination of the weak under the physically and intellectually superior. The lie which maintains itself, which is not seen through, is undoubtedly a means of asserting intellectual superiority and of using it to control and suppress the less intelligent. It is an intellectual club law as brutal, but on occasion as appropriate, as physical club law. It may operate as a selecting factor to breed intelligence or create leisure for the few for whom others must work; for the few who need the leisure for producing higher cultural goods or for giving a leader to the group forces. The more easily these aims can be reached by means whose incidental consequences are only slightly undesirable, the less is there need for lying, and the more is there room for being aware of its ethically objectionable character. Historically this process is by no means completed. Even today, retail trade believes that it cannot do without mendacious claims concerning certain merchandise, and therefore practices them with good conscience. But wholesale business and retail trade on a really large scale, have overcome this stage and can afford to proceed with complete sincerity when offering their goods. Once the business practice of the small and middle-sized merchant reaches the same perfection, the exaggerations and outright falsehoods of advertising and praising, for which it is not usually blamed today, will meet with the same ethical condemnation which already is meted out wherever these falsehoods are no longer required by practice. In general, intra-group interaction based on truthfulness will be the more appropriate, the more the welfare of the many, rather than of the few, constitutes the norm of the group. For, those who are lied-to, that is, those who are harmed by the lie, will always constitute the majority over the liars who find their advantage in lying. For this reason,

“enlightenment,” which aims at the removal of the untruths operating in social life, is entirely democratic in character.

Human interaction is normally based on the fact that the ideational worlds of men have certain elements in common, that objective intellectual contents constitute the material which is transformed into subjective life by means of men's social relations. The type, as well as the essential instrument, of these common elements is shared language. But, on closer examination, it appears that the basis discussed here, by no means consists only in what both of two interacting individuals know, or with what they are acquainted as the psychological content of one another. For, it must also be noted that all of this is interwoven with elements known to only one of the two. This limitation reveals significances even more basic than those which result from the contrast between the non-logical and contingent reality of the ideational process and the logical and teleological selection we make of it in order to show it to others. Human nature is dualistic: we feel that each of its expressions flows from a plurality of divergent sources; we consider each measure of it as great or small, according to its comparison with something smaller or greater.

This same dualism also causes sociological relationships to be determined in a twofold manner. Concord, harmony, co-efficacy, which are unquestionably held to be socializing forces, must nevertheless be interspersed with distance, competition, repulsion, in order to yield the actual configuration of society. The solid, organizational forms which seem to constitute or create society, must constantly be disturbed, disbalanced, gnawed-at by individualistic, irregular forces, in order to gain their vital reaction and development through submission and resistance. Intimate relations, whose formal medium is physical and psychological nearness, lose the attractiveness, even the content of their intimacy, as soon as the close relationship does not also contain, simultaneously and alternatingly, distances and intermissions. Finally, and this is the decisive point: although reciprocal knowledge conditions relationships positively, after all, it does not do this by itself alone. Relationships being what they are, they also presuppose a certain ignorance and a measure of mutual concealment, even though this measure varies im-

mensely, to be sure. The lie is merely a very crude and, ultimately, often a contradictory form in which this necessity shows itself. However often a lie may destroy a given relationship, as long as the relationship existed, the lie was an integral element of it. The ethically negative value of the lie must not blind us to its sociologically quite positive significance for the formation of certain concrete relations. In regard to the elementary sociological fact at issue here—the restriction of the knowledge of the one about the other—it must be remembered that the lie is only one among all possible available means. It is the positive and, as it were, aggressive technique, whose purpose is more often attained by mere secrecy and concealment. These more general and more negative forms will be discussed in the following pages.

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Types of Social Relations by Degrees of Reciprocal Knowledge of Their Participants

BEFORE COMING TO THE
secret in the sense of a consciously desired concealment, one must note the different degrees to which various relationships leave the reciprocal knowledge of the total personalities of their members outside their province.

§ 1. *Interest Groups*

Among the various groups still involving direct interaction, the most important is the association based on some particular interest [*Zweckverband*], more especially that which involves completely objective member contributions, determined by mere membership. The purest form here is monetary contribution. In this case, interaction, solidarity, and the pursuit of common purposes do not depend on everybody's psychological knowledge of everybody else. As a group member, the individual is only the executor of a certain function. Questions concerning those individual motives which determine this performance, or the sort of total personality in which his conduct is imbedded, are completely irrelevant. The association based on some particular interest is the discreet sociological form *par excellence*. Its members are psychologically anonymous. In order to form the association, all they have to know of one another is precisely

would have to draw from our own experience

can influence us further in