

Reclaiming Humanity in Sociology

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Abstract

Because of positivist assumptions about the nature of science, sociologists have formulated theories that contained over-simplified assumptions about human nature. Based on a new philosophy of science, Margaret Archer has paved a way for sociologists to think about human nature in ways that are both more realistic and more congenial to Christian beliefs.

Keywords: Critical Realism, Persons, Culture, Social Structure, Agency, Mind

In *Being Human*, the late Margaret Archer (2000) wrote that her overall goal as a sociologist was to reclaim humanity. In her assessment, most sociologists' view of humans is impoverished, and she wanted to convince her colleagues that humans are more amazing and complex than they realize. One theme to which she returned repeatedly was personal identity. In that context she offered this example of her esteemed view of humanity.

In short, we are who we are because of what we care about: in delineating our ultimate concerns and accommodating our subordinate ones, we also define ourselves. We give a shape to our lives, which constitutes our internal personal integrity, and this pattern is recognizable by others as our concrete singularity. Without this rich inner life of reflection upon reality, which is the generative mechanism of our most important personal emergent property, our unique identity and way of being in the world, then we are condemned to the impoverishment of either 'Modernity's Man' or 'Society's Being', neither of whom play a robust and active role in who they are. They have been rendered passive because they have been morally evacuated since they themselves are not allowed to play a major part in the making of their own lives. Realism revindicates real power for real people who live in the real world (2000:10).

Archer's ideas offer a pathway for Christian sociologists to think about and teach sociology in a way that honors their Christian beliefs. In what follows I will suggest three ways in which this may be possible: embracing uncertainty, acknowledging complexity, and resuscitating authority.

Embracing Uncertainty

Jesus used ambiguity intentionally. He used parables to evoke the imagination of his listeners. He would sometimes drop a simple story into a conversation that left his hearers wondering why he had included the story. Jesus used the fuzziness of the story to encourage his listeners to look again at something they may have overlooked before, or to take seriously something they thought they already understood.

In John 3 we read that Nicodemus asked Jesus, “How can a man be born when he is old?” Jesus answered him by saying, among other things, “The wind blows wherever it pleases. You hear the sound, but you cannot tell where it comes from or where it is going.” Jesus did not offer clear, rational arguments; instead, he tried to provoke consideration of a reality that cannot be empirically observed.

Positivism was a drive for certainty. When Isaac Newton revealed that natural laws worked invariably, those who came after him sought to accomplish similar certainty in every area of knowledge. Few thinkers have more rigorously incorporated this drive into their thinking than Rene Descartes. He did not want to bother with any idea that did not have the certainty equal to ideas in arithmetic or geometry. He hoped that someday all knowledge could be expressed in mathematical equations. August Comte, the father of positivism, believed society was passing into a stage where people are increasingly inclined to use scientific descriptions that were measurable and verifiable.

Over time the demand for certainty spread from academicians to much of the larger culture. Concern for certainty elevated science and denigrated religion. And although postmodernism has undercut the expectation of certainty in academia, we still want to know whether claims can be verified using sensory observations. We are leery of believing anything of which we are not certain.

In sociology, the drive for certainty is strongest among the positivists. Positivism begins with the question, “What can we know?” Positivists only accept explanations that are empirically observable. Archer has rejected positivism and embraced the meta-theoretical perspective of critical realism first articulated by Roy Bhaskar (1975). Critical realism accepts explanations that include non-observable forces when observable forces do not provide an adequate explanation. Critical realism starts with the question “What must reality be like to produce what we experience?” Critical realists welcome mind, consciousness, and other non-observable phenomena when they cannot find adequate explanations for human action without them. Critical realism regards the exclusion of the contents of consciousness as bad science. Consciousness is real because without it we would not understand why other people do what they do. People offer each other reasons for their acts. Without those reasons our understanding of others would be impoverished. We cannot observe anything subjective (e.g.

intentions, concerns, identity, beliefs, or values) through our five senses, but to deny their existence is to undermine our understanding of most human activity (Archer 2004:2; Smith 2010:20-21).

For positivists, their theory of knowledge overrides their theory of reality, but for critical realists, their theory of reality overrides their concern about how we know it. When empirical verification is impossible, we can employ judgmental rationality, which means that we can still discuss and debate what we think is real and offer arguments and indirect evidence in support of our assertions. Even if the truth remains provisional, arguments can be productively offered and discussed. Positions can be elaborated, refined, and clarified in the process of discussion. Although the truth may remain inconclusive, reasonable people are able to make reasonable judgments about what the truth is. Knowledge is fallible. There are no certain ways of dissecting the contents of consciousness, but the world of insight that opens for those who believe it is real is voluminous (Archer 2003:34-35).

The best account is whatever explanation makes the most sense of a given phenomenon. Best accounts could include morals, motives, and emotions. If the subjective features of a situation improve our understanding, then it would be foolish to cast them aside for a more objective understanding. There is much that we can learn about ourselves as humans by paying attention to our own best perceptions, experiences, and interior examination (Smith 2010:106). Our deliberation, prioritization, and decision making cannot be observed, but we cannot doubt they are real because they have observable consequences. Positivism, which asserts that certainty is a requirement for acceptance as science, has imposed impoverished assumptions about human nature. Critical realism corrects this.

Acknowledging Complexity

Christians have a lofty view of human nature. Being made in God's image is indicative of the respect that Christians believe all humans deserve. Bearing God's image combines the dignity of making real choices, the burden of doing good, and the capacity to invent, deliberate, prioritize, grow, plan, and even change both themselves and the world around them. God is magnificent. Humans share a portion of that magnificence.

Like Christians through the ages, Archer extols the mental capacities of humans. In a few passages, her reverence for human mental power bubbles over as it does here:

(O)ur mental power of reflexive deliberation firstly secures our unique personal identities through our singular constellation of concerns, meaning that we are radically heterogeneous as people, rather than having common ends. Secondly, our subjectivity is dynamic rather than static because we modify our own goals in terms of their contextual feasibility, as we see it. Finally, by virtue of our internal dialogues we are active rather than passive because we can adjust and

adapt our projects to those practices that we consider have a better chance of realization (Archer 2003:134).

Human self-consciousness has the attributes of intentionality, rationality, and emotionality. Human mental capacities include intelligence, memory, cognition, evaluation, judgment, and commitment. And our minds have dispositions such as a desire for social significance, a desire for order, an appreciation for humor, a desire to flourish, and a desire to achieve goals. We appreciate goodness, truth, and beauty, but we also are attracted to sins, such as extreme wealth, status, and power. We are capable of both sympathy and callous disregard. We have a self-serving bias that can take many forms, including self-deception and a preference for others who are similar to ourselves. Our minds are complicated and beautiful things. Positivists may debase, deny, or ignore the attributes of human minds, but Christians are amazed at their complexity.

Archer's arguments are clear but complex; her social theory defies simplification. Her conclusions are reached through the process of eliminating other theories one point at a time, and reading Archer requires effort. Readers who have the persistence to accept the challenge of comprehending her dense arguments will better appreciate how complicated humans are.

This paper is focused on only four of Archer's books (1995, 1996, 2000, 2003). In these four early books, the evolution of her theorizing is on display. Her fourteen recent books explore the implications and applications of the social theory she discerned in her earlier works. Her intellectual productivity is impressive.

Resuscitating Agency

As recorded in Matthew 23, Jesus rebuked the Pharisees for being self-deceived because they believed that strict observance of the law is pleasing to God. He insisted that obedience is not enough because a change of heart was required, and people can change. People have a responsibility for choosing what they believe and whom they serve. Jesus asked his followers to undergo a spiritual and moral transformation, a rebirth. He expected them to choose a new path and desire different goals. Most sociologists are not as sanguine about the potential of people to turn their lives around.

Students who take Introduction to Sociology are often taught some version of social determinism. Humans are social products, and human behavior is largely determined by culture and social structure. Children are dependent on adults who have a huge influence on every aspect of each child's way of living and thinking. Norms, values, attitudes, perceptions, and identity are internalized. Socialization is an irresistible force, and social control takes over if socialization fails. Moreover, social structure determines whatever culture does not. Social patterns, stratification patterns, organizations, and institutions shape what people do. They

provide the routines, habits and roles that allow people to participate in organized social interaction.

Social situationism is a construct that Christian Smith (2015) has proposed to describe a large group of sociological theories that share several dominant assumptions. The first five of the key assumptions are as follows:

1. People as *people* are the products of the social interactions in which they engage over the course of their lives.
2. All human doings are *social*—not personal, interior, or private—and always informed, defined, and guided by collective processes of social communication and pressure.
3. The central activity in human life is social *communication of cognitive* definitions, meanings, knowledge, rules, vocabularies, and grammars.
4. People's actions are generated as highly local, variable, and contingent responses to *immediate situations* in which they find themselves.
5. People's reported "subjective experiences" are not useful evidence for social science explanations (2015:94).

Smith's net is wide enough to include all the following schools of thought: "symbolic interactionism, dramaturgical sociology, phenomenology, social constructionism, role theory, identity theory, and parts of cultural theory," as well as poststructuralist and postmodernist theories (2015:92). Each of these schools empowers culture and social structure and disempowers agency.

In addition to rejecting methodological collectivism (social situationism), Archer also rejected methodological individualism (rational choice, democratic liberalism, neoliberal economics). According to individualism, individuals predate society. Individuals are self-subsistent, self-defining, and self-determining, as well as autonomous, self-interested, acquisitive, and rational choice-makers (Archer 2000 chapters 2 & 3). According to collectivism, individuals are formed through social interaction, and socially dependent, plastic, blank slates on which society writes the script. Without cultures, individuals would not be able to interact, and without structures, individuals would not be able to survive. However, Marx, Durkheim, and Weber each tried to hold both of these views in tension in a *homo duplex* model of humanity (Smith 2015:56-57).

Archer's alternative to individualism and collectivism is a view in which structure, culture, and agency are stratified with distinctive properties and powers of their own.

The properties and powers of the human being are neither seen as *pregiven*, nor as *socially appropriated*, but rather they are emergent from our relations with our environment. As such, they have relative autonomy from biology and society

alike, and causal powers to modify both of them. In fact, the stratified view of humanity advocated here sees human beings as constituted by a variety of strata. Each stratum is emergent from, but irreducible to, lower levels because all strata possess their own *sui generis* properties and powers. Thus, schematically, mind is emergent from neurological matter, consciousness from mind, selfhood from consciousness, personal identity from selfhood, and social agency from personal identity. (Archer 2000:87)

Margaret Archer has spelled out her conclusions about the interplay between culture, structure, and agency, and has explicated her conclusions in four thoughtful books that detail how they interact (1995, 1996, 2000, 2003). For Archer, the essence of culture is ideas, the essence of social structure is relationships between social positions and the consequent distribution of resources, and the essence of agency consists of the internal conversations within the minds of agents. More specifically, culture is the “corpus of *intelligibilia*...all things capable of being grasped, deciphered, understood or known by someone” (1996:104). Once an idea has been employed repeatedly, it acquires independence from the agent who produced it, much like a book. Once the idea has been integrated into a matrix of ideas, like a library, that matrix of ideas develops its own causal power. This external reality sets the stage by both expanding and limiting the options and the possibility for action for those who follow. Agents that reside and operate from within this culture, mix and match ideas of the received culture to attempt to realize their projects. Any new ideas they generate will become a part of the resources the next crop of agents has available to use to fulfill their desires and preferences (2003:8-9).

Archer defines social structure as the relationships between the patterns of social interaction and the roles, organizations, and institutions that relate in some way to the material world. Social structures are both positional and distributional, including the distribution of materials, power, and resources (both physical and human) associated with those positions (Archer 1995:178). As outcomes of past actions, social structures are the preconditions that set the stage for action, blocking some acts and making others feasible. Present acts then become part of the preconditions that will condition future acts.

Agency is the capacity to impact outcomes through mental deliberation “such as thinking, deliberating, believing, intending, loving and so forth” that individuals use in selecting planning and executing projects (2003:2). Humans are not mere leaves that blow in the winds of social forces. They have internal conversations, self-consciousness, desires, intentions, concerns, and theories. People are intention-driven agents who try to plan and execute activities that they hope will attain their purposes.

Everyone is born into circumstances they did not create or choose. The culture and social structure in which they find themselves provides them with what they need to use in the

ordinary business of living. Culture provides or fails to provide the language, meaning systems, values, norms, and goals. Structures either provide or fail to provide the raw materials, occupations, roles, relationships, groups, money, and power they need to accomplish their intentions. For example, teens in the inner city are constrained by their circumstances in getting a good education, a decent job, and a stable family, whereas teens in the suburbs are enabled. The culture and social structure that an individual inherits act as an objective reality that constrains or enables the acts of that individual.

Nevertheless, culture and social structure are powerless without agency. Cultural and social structural causes are incapable of doing anything on their own. Only through the actions of people are their causal powers operative. They are latent formulas for how to do things when people embark on projects (2003:2). Only because people envisage a particular course of action can one speak of their constraint or enablement. Only when people desire to act do constraints constrain; only when courses of action access enablements do they enable. Social roles facilitate some actions and inhibit others, but role occupants are free to innovate within limits, and some innovations result in redefining roles (1995:168). Culture and structure condition action and supply directional guidance, but they do not determine social action (1996:144).

Agency is made possible through internal conversations. Sometimes our minds are busy even when we wish they would be quiet. We find ourselves having private, subjective internal conversations frequently, and they are available to no one unless we decide to tell someone. Through our internal conversations we define what we want, who we are, what we value, and what we intend to do. We mentally monitor our concerns, our goals, and our plans. Therefore, our inward, unseen life is a succession of evaluative assessments about our concerns, both our ultimate concerns and dozens of subsidiary concerns. We consider the best means to help us achieve our goals. As we deliberate our intentions, we become increasingly committed to completing our projects. Eventually enough personal power emerges to equip us to initiate and complete our projects (2003:1-9).

Archer refers to DDD (discernment, deliberation, and dedication) as the cognitive and emotional process through which we prioritize and rank our concerns and develop guidelines for our responses to each situation. **D**iscernment consists of mental experiments in which scenarios are played out imaginatively and evaluated. In **D**eliberation, the subject reviews the implications of possible projects for her other concerns and whether she has what it takes to succeed. Finally, in **D**edication, the subject reviews other goals and concerns that will be necessary to drop in order to succeed in the project under consideration. Even after the decision to proceed, the internal conversation continues, and the project remains open to revision (2003:102-105).

Archer discovered how internal conversations work from William James. We have a fuzzy idea, a preliminary awareness of a thought. We consider various words that could help to articulate this awareness. When we express our premonition to our self and hear our words as someone else might hear them, we reflect on their adequacy, and become aware of their inadequacies. We then go through various attempts to find the right words. By alternating between subjective and objective views of the same thought, we decide how to spend our time, what to eat, or what to wear. We will repeat this process until we feel that we get it right (Archer 2003).

Our personal identity is also the result of internal conversations as we clarify our aspirations, intentions, emotions, and attitudes. We reflect on past experiences to assess our personal strengths and weaknesses in relation to our priorities and preferences in order to choose what we care most about. We muse about our happiness, social relationships, our ultimate beliefs, our goals, and our reason for living. Gradually, we clarify what we stand for, what we are willing to strive for, and in what relationships we are willing to invest (2003).

In short, once we have a well-defined personal identity, we deliberate on how to realize our desires in relation to both our personal identity and our social circumstances. When we choose the most feasible and identity affirming projects, we become the author of the actions we believe will achieve our goals.

In contrast, sociological determinism exaggerates the causal power of culture and social structure and understates the generative power of agents. Archer turns that upside down when she gives culture and social structure latent powers that are manifested only when agents invest in implementing them. Agents are the authors of culture and social structures, but primarily, the authors of their own lives.

As Christians, this is worth celebrating. Archer has brushed aside deterministic social theories and revived the background assumptions that Christians believe. Humans can indeed generate and regenerate themselves, and subsequently their culture and social structures.

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