

On communitarianism: the possibilities and limits of transformation

Chris Tooley

Abstract: This commentary on the target article by Williams (2006) provides a comparative analysis of questions concerning systems of interpretation and their relationship to transformative action. By locating Williams' analysis as a communitarian approach, it is argued that both reasoning and individuality offers a more cultural self-determining stance. Moreover, with presuppositions of equality and agreement, it is also argued that in being applied to two-world environments it is responsive to concerns of well-being. Yet, insofar as it is able to constitute cultural identity and structural transformation, this commentary questions to what extent such an approach is able to displace discursivity and epistemological normalisation.

Keywords: culture, self-determination, transformation, well-being

Systems of interpretation and their relationship to transformative action have continuously occupied discussions on well-being and self-determination. As an ontological dimension of the self and *a priori* of knowledge, systems of interpretation fundamentally frame self-definitions, epistemologies and ideas of transformation. The key concepts, as well as their relations to one another, of any given system, act as 'transcendental signifiers' that give meaning and status to all other significations. Therefore, enduring questions are both normative and descriptive: what are the key concepts of interpretation? How should they be applied to transformation or bi-cultural interaction? To what extent, if at all, can they be modified?

By drawing on psychological and biological concepts and applying them to bi-cultural worlds, Williams (2006) offers a constructive analysis towards addressing these questions. To understand the possibilities and limits of his analysis, the purpose of this commentary will offer a comparative analysis against existing paradigms. To be succinct, by accounting for the relations between perceptual, cognitive and affective processes together with their relationship to the surrounding world, Williams appears to advance a communitarian approach.

Possibilities

In embracing socio-cultural, historical and subjective distinctions, communitarianism stresses that interpretation-action involves *individuality*: the non-interchangeable uniqueness of each subject ought to pervade and guide his or her actions (Hinchmann, 1996). Individuality concerns accounting for passions, desires and worldviews, which can be identified as Williams attributes 'affect' to the third part of the person triangle (Fig. 3). The significance of this approach provides a counter-image to the rational-self advanced by the liberal Kantian tradition, namely Habermas who asserts that interpretation-action needs to overcome individual dispositions and be legislated in the end upon reasoning (Habermas, 1984). In contrast, individuality holds that perception and cognition – reasoning, should not exclusively occupy the seat of judgement but needs to accommodate itself with individual uniqueness. As a result interpretation-action is attached to both reasoning and individuality offering a more cultural self-determining stance.

The communitarian approach can also be identified in Williams' treatment of understanding in applying systems of interpretation-action to bi-cultural or two-world environments. Explaining that successful actions require understandings of the 'specificities and commonalities of each world' his analysis closely aligns with Gadamer's *fusion of horizons*. Understanding occurs when two-horizons are simultaneously projected, engaged and fused (Gadamer, 1989). Furthermore Taylor argues, it offers the possibility of 'a dialogue of cultures where those from different cultural backgrounds can come to appreciate the points of convergence and difference between them' (Taylor, C. in Tooley, 2006). Again, the significance of this approach provides a counter-sphere to liberal approaches such as the 'ideal speech act' (Habermas, 1984). In displacing the power-relations of argumentation and relativism, a fusion of horizons is particularly responsive, in part, to concerns of well-being. For Taylor, it denotes a politics of recognition accepting who people are and what they believe in. There is also a presumption of worth: that all human beings have something important to say (Taylor, C. in Tooley, 2006). This is evident in Williams' analysis as the requirement 'to fit' presupposes equality, respect and tolerance. It also presupposes agreement, which is not always attached to liberal definitions of understanding. In fact, at the point of convergence or what Williams terms 'common variance', it offers the ability to articulate a bi-cultural language (Fig. 5).

Limits

While communitarianism can be seen to offer a more comprehensive account of interpretation-action by considering affective and surrounding world relationships that are absent from liberal traditions, it nevertheless works with a *narrow definition of power*. It only understands power as the consequence of some kind of rationality or structure – that power is negative. However, post-modernism tells us that power is not simply negative but is a positive phenomenon: it is productive (Foucault, 1980). Insofar as individuality is able to transcend negative constraint or mobilise structural transformation it is itself imbued and constrained by discursivity: the power-relations of discourse. The existing composition of individuality (concepts of perception, cognition and affect) has been forged in domination suppressing alternative compositions. Therefore, although Williams offers the possibility of transformation through 'system-surround interaction', in particular, understanding and changing the 'form' of the structures or constraints of the environment, this suggests that the 'perception, cognition and affect triangle' remains exposed to discursive power.

Another limit attached to communitarianism is the epistemological assumption of drawing on the familiar to explain the unfamiliar. In interpreting the thought of 'Others' or unfamiliar knowledge or action (signifier), it is normally referenced against what is already known and familiar (signified). For Foucault, in this situation the meaning within the signifier is defined by the signified and any differences it may embody upon 'Other' real or possible schemas, are unrecognised and discarded (Foucault, 1973). For Williams, this suggests by seeking to make the best 'fit' between perception-action-correction processors, the act of fitting operates as an epistemological process of normalisation.

Meaning and significance of new knowledge and action is referenced against and framed by the boundaries of the dominant composition of individuality or 'person-triangle'.

To conclude, while 'to fit' between perception-action-correction in pursuing transformative action, to some extent, offers cultural identity-authenticity and in being applied to bi-cultural worlds presupposes equality, agreement – well-being, the question remains: given the discursive power that imbues individuality and the epistemological process of normalisation, how do we engage in constituting cultural self-definition and structural transformation that also disrupts and displaces the power-relations permeating the discourse in which it rests upon?

References

- Foucault, M. (1973). *Birth of the Clinic*. London: Routledge.
- Foucault, M. (1980). *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*. Edited by Gordon, C. London: Harvester Wheatsheaf.
- Gadamer, H. (1989). *Truth and Method*. (Second Edition) London: Continuum.
- Habermas, J. (1984). *Theory of Communicative Action. Volume 1: Reason and the Rationalisation of Society*. Trans. Mc.Carthy, T. London: Heinemann.
- Hinchmann, L. (1996). Autonomy, Individuality and Self-Determination. In Schmidt, J. *What Is Enlightenment? Eighteenth-Century Answers and Twentieth Century Questions*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Tooley, C. (2006). *An Ethics of Self-Determination*. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Cambridge, England.
- Williams, L. R. T. (2006). Cognition, perception and action: Processes underlying problem-solving and well-being in single and double worlds. *MAI Review*, (1), Target Article 2.

Author Notes

The author expresses appreciation to Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga for providing a Doctoral Bridging Grant and for their continued support.

Chris Tooley (Ngāti Kahungunu) is a Gates Scholar at the University of Cambridge where he has just been awarded the PhD degree (November).

E-mail: chris.tooley@gatesscholar.org