

Arthur Bentley's Obstinate Philosophy

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Abstract

In the first half of the 20th century, Arthur Bentley was a relatively well-known philosopher of the social sciences, who is today mostly remembered by his collaboration with John Dewey on their book, *Knowing and the Known* (1949), and for a very early study on group pressures, *The Process of Government* (1908). Now largely forgotten, Arthur Bentley developed a unique methodology and epistemology for social sciences that remains unique to this day.

Over the years, and especially in opposition to the «semiotic» of Charles Morris, Bentley developed his own system and vocabulary of signs, signals, designations and symbols, or rather the behavioural activity of «symboling», in support of his radical «floating cosmology», a fundamentally relational, pragmatic and thoroughly anti-dualistic epistemology. At the core of his thought is the concept of transaction, a general epistemological principle that sees all distinctions, such as organism-environment, perception/cognition, subject-object etc., as subsumed under a more general whole, from which distinctions are drawn by an act of provisional reflection and naming. Thus all such dualisms and distinctions are treated as secondary separations within an integrated, inseparable whole, which in turn is constituted by the set or system of transactions proceeding in it.

The presentation will provide a short overview and introduction to Arthur Bentley's thought as it pertains to semiotics, in the hope of rescuing the thought of this fascinating thinker from the obscurity into which it has today fallen.

«Here Lies Obstinacy» offered Arthur Bentley as his own epitaph in a letter addressed to his long-time collaborator, the famous pragmatist philosopher John Dewey. «I am ruthless, irresponsible, willing to seem absurd, when necessary: I probably would not spare my best friend if his slaughter seemed important for what I was trying to do» (cited in Ryan 1997: 780-781).

Arthur Fisher Bentley, philosopher, political and social scientist, whom John Dewey considered as «one of the most genial men I've ever known» (cited *ibid.* 780), was born in 1870 in the state of Illinois, USA, into the family of a banker in a small town of Freeport. He acquired a higher education partially in the Johns Hopkins University, partially in the universities of Berlin and Freiburg im Breisgau in Germany, and defended his doctoral dissertation in the Johns Hopkins University in 1895, titled *Units of Investigation in the Social Sciences*, in which he emphasized the crucial role of the internal properties of the human mind for the study of all social phenomena.

His dissertation, however, was entirely built on a foundation of mentalist vocabulary, something which he was to abandon entirely in only a few years' time; indeed, it was his studies in Germany that played a crucial role in this. There he was introduced to the works of several influential German sociologists and economists, primarily Georg Simmel, Ludwig Glumpowicz and Émile Durkheim, who left in him a characteristically European streak, still relatively little felt in the United States at that time. Returning to the USA and heading to the University of Chicago, he and John Dewey were almost the only ones in that country who represented a society-centered perspective in their conceptions of the relationships between individuals and their surroundings, a view that could perhaps be briefly summarized by noting that it is much easier to derive an individual from the society than to get a society by putting together a set of isolated individuals.

Having graduated from the university and worked in the University of Chicago for only a year (1895-96), Bentley failed to acquire a suitable academic position and as he was also unsuccessful as a lecturer he disappointedly abandoned his scientific career and began working first as a journalist and then as an editor with the newspapers *Chicago Times-Herald* and *Record-Herald*. Researching social inequality and the conditions of the poor and the homeless, he didn't find it disagreeable even to sleep on cardboard boxes in the slums together with the homeless, and from this close and immediate experience was born his best known work, *The Process of Government* (1908), a book that is today frequently thought to be his most important contribution to social sciences.

«Today this book is recognized as one of the great classics in the field of political science, not only for America, but for the world at large,» writes Sidney Ratner (1954: xi) in his introduction to a collection of Bentley's papers, *Inquiry into Inquiries: Essays in Social Theory* (1954) that was published near the end of Bentley's life, and then again in his obituary: «*The Process of Government* [...] is, in my judgment, the most important contribution to systematic political theory ever made in America» (Ratner 1958: 574). Already in this book there is to be found the rise of Bentley's anti-mentalist, action or behavior-based approach that he was to develop much more thoroughly over the course of his entire career. Proceeding from this viewpoint, he argues that the true nature of governmental processes lies only in the actually happening, concrete legislative and administrative actions and events, conducted by

concrete people gathered in particular groups and collectives. The core of the book consists of an analysis of group interests, more or less well-known in political philosophy even today, and which in the middle of the 20th century became one of the primary starting points for studying pressure groups.

Soon after the publication of this, in retrospect his best-known book, Bentley gave up his job as a journalist due to stress and mental exhaustion, moved to the state of Indiana, to a small town called Paoli and started to grow an orchard, with which he was engaged until his death in 1957. For the next sixteen years, he had essentially no engagement with philosophy or science at all, until his business became successful enough that it guaranteed him a steady and sufficient income that could support his future philosophical activities. From then onward, Bentley became extremely active, and during the next twenty eight years, he published four more monographs (one, *Knowing and the Known* (1949) co-authored with John Dewey), one collection of papers, and about three dozen other papers, on topics ranging from the theory of relativity, mathematics and linguistics to questions of epistemology and the relations between organisms and their environments.

During the 1930s and 40s, Bentley was phenomenally active: the majority of his published papers were written during this period. Despite this, he also managed to write the book *Behavior, Knowledge, Fact* (1935), which he himself thought of as the culmination of his research. The problem that Bentley analyzed was the nature of the social fact, and in order to provide a sufficient answer to this question, he first abandoned any attempts to study social facts in isolation; instead, he attempted to define social facts as proceeding from the techniques and procedures used by the sciences themselves. The described facts as «behavioral» in the sense that facts are constructed by direct observation and the techniques used for this end, instead of independent mental operations or representations — systematically, he refused to allow as a fact any presentation or description that is not capable being directly and immediately observable in time and space. In addition to this analysis of methods and means to be used in the study of human behavior, Bentley also attempted to present a monumental «floating» or even «tellurian-sidereal cosmology» that sees all particular branches of the sciences as forms of local, situated knowledge that all have their own temporal extent, as functional and lacking any and all absolute foundations but are instead in a constant flux. This book with its «intractable, devastating logic of a process philosophy» (Lavine 1995: 39) is today rare even in second-hand bookshops and is rarely read.

In 1932, Bentley had sent his book, the *Linguistic Analysis of Mathematics* that had been published in that same year to John Dewey, who however left it unread for three years. But having finally picked up at the incitement of Ernest Nagel, he soon wrote back to Bentley with an apology and a comment that the book «has given me more enlightenment and intellectual help than any book I have read for a very long time» (quoted in Lavine 1995: 37). This letter laid the foundation to a long-lasting correspondence between the two philosophers that lasted for nearly twenty years until Dewey's death in 1952 and comprised of nearly two thousand letters. Over the course of this correspondence they wrote together a number of papers, primarily dealing with logical vocabulary and methodology to be used in the sciences, which were eventually published as *Knowing and the Known* (1949), and this was to become Bentley's the second «epoch-making» (Ratner 1954: xiii) book. And indeed — primarily due to the co-

authorship of John Dewey, this book does seem to be somewhat remembered today, having escaped the obscurity of almost all the rest of Bentley's *oeuvre*. In this book, they attempted to develop a terminology and methodology that they called the «transactional» strategy and the purpose of which was to consider human behavior and thought entirely naturalistically, to place mind back into nature and to unite it once again with the ever-changing diversity of the surrounding world, and finally to resist the ever-proliferating dualisms that the separation of the knower, the known and the processes of knowing are bound to bring along. Their attempt was to depict «language, with all its speakings and writings, as man-himself-in-action-dealing-with-things» (Dewey, Bentley 1949: 114), something that can only be accomplished only when «real» things are not separated from the mind, words from speakers, knowing from the known.

The resulting book was an ambitious, even pretentious work, with the transaction philosophy at its core claiming to be the successor of pragmatism and thought of by Dewey as the capstone of his philosophical career. However, the book met with an entirely different reception from the critics. Characteristic is the comment by Paul Kress that the book is mostly reminiscent of the misadventures of a lost mariner, «who has thrown the compass of reason over the side as so much excess ballast» (1970: 178), since in that vague cosmic flux presented in the book all distinctions and details have become lost along with any sort of concreteness. Today it is not rare to exclude *Knowing and the Known* from the Dewey's canon entirely, and it has definitely received the least attention among all of Dewey's works.

Of all the different fields and disciplines Bentley was engaged with during his life, including political philosophy and philosophy of science, sociology, psychology and logic, there is one that has seen some renewed interest in recent times: the question of the boundaries of the object of research in studying activity, perception and cognition. Out of Bentley's forgotten corpus, the one issue that ought to be recalled today is the question whether an organism's outer boundary, one part of its physiological makeup, or put even more simply, its skin, is suitable as the line that bounds the unit of investigation for the «behavioral sciences» and foregrounds it as separate from the environment (cf. especially Bentley 1941a,b). There is a long-lasting picture prevalent in cognitive sciences that sees the operation of the mind as if a «cognitive sandwich» (Hurley 2001: 3), according to which cognitive processes can be divided into three superimposed layers, into perception, cognition and action accordingly. Under this view, perceptual processes and behavior or action are peripheral and secondary to «cognition proper», and it is precisely the latter — the tasty contents of the sandwich — that cognitive sciences ought to focus on and that remains more or less separate from perception and action, the two halves of bread. Cognition is, in this picture, a separate «higher» process that operates according to rules that are unique to it, such as by computation, and is entirely closed off inside the boundaries of the organism. For «cognition proper», perception is mere input and behavior mere output, and both of them remain as if outside the organism: on the one hand, perception consists of a stream of signals or stimuli arriving from the environment, and on the other hand, behavior is conceived of as an application of entirely internal mental representations into the external environment for the purpose of attaining some goal. Cognition is thus a phenomenon characterized, among other aspects, but the fact that it is entirely internal to the organism, remaining within the boundaries of skin or skull.

Today, however, there is a strong and increasingly more prevalent movement away from this way of thinking, towards more perception and behavior-centered treatments that perceive action, cognition and perception as closely and inseparably intertwined (e.g. Hurley 2001) and that see the activities of organisms in their environments as playing a crucial role in cognitive and perceptual processes (e.g. Noë 2004). And it is precisely this line of thinking that Arthur Bentley can be considered as one of the «forerunners», even if he is a progenitor most likely in name only, since as he has been largely forgotten it is doubtful if he has had any impact on these approaches. In several papers he posed the question, what is this unit or entity that a behavioral researcher should investigate, and over and over he reached the same conclusion: the human skin as a boundary is arbitrary and is unsuitable to be considered as the limit of a behavioral system. The behaviors of any organism, but especially that of human beings in their behaviors of knowing, extend beyond its skin and form coupled systems with some sub-set of environmental entities. Cognitive processes are not contained entirely within the individual, opposed to the world of things «out there», as many researchers today, decades after Bentley, are beginning to discover (e.g. Clark, Chalmers 1998).

During his lifetime, especially near its end, Bentley was praised constantly and overwhelmingly. «I have no doubt that future generations will honor Arthur F. Bentley not only for his great insights and profound understanding of complex problems in many fields, but also for his great courage in daring to advance challenging hypotheses that went counter to the dominant fields and vested intellectual interests of his day,» Sidney Ratner wrote in his obituary to Bentley (1958: 577). Although a collection of papers titled *Life, Language, Law: Essays in Honor of Arthur F. Bentley* (1954) was published during Bentley's lifetime, contrary to the wishful predictions of Ratner and others, his work was soon forgotten.^[1]

The reason for him becoming but a barely noticeable footnote in 20th century philosophy and political theory is unclear. Frank Ryan (1997: 780-781) suggests three possible explanations. The first and probably the most decisive reason may be Bentley's excessively polemical, sharp, belligerent, quarrelsome way of writing. Second, Bentley's ideas may have been simply unsuitable for the general mood or milieu of the time he lived in. When *The Process of Government* was published in 1908 that dealt with interest groups and power struggles, most other researchers in sociology in the circles Bentley moved in were more interested in studying national moods and sentiments, and the warnings against dualisms and «psychologisms» littered all over *Knowing and the Known* some forty years later were ignored by the philosophers of the time who mostly operated under positivist ideals. «In the mid 1940s,» Ryan writes, «Bentley and Dewey stood virtually alone at the end of a road later travelled by Wittgenstein, Schutz, Kuhn, Dummett and Putnam» (ibid. 780). And the third reason may be that with two brief exceptions, Bentley's entire career developed outside the academia, he lacked necessary connections for a successful academic career and any recognition that might come from it.

[1] Besides this collection of papers, there have been only two monographs published dealing with Bentley's thought: James Ward's *Language, Form, and Inquiry: Arthur F. Bentley's Philosophy of Social Science* (1984) and the already referenced Paul Kress's *Social Science and the Idea of Process: The Ambiguous Legacy of A. F. Bentley* (1970). The philosophical correspondence between Dewey and Bentley has also been published (Dewey, Bentley 1964).

In certain respects, Bentley's fall into obscurity may be rather justified, especially if we were to try and assess this «austerely magnificent Bentleyan floating cosmology spanning millennia in time and space» (Lavine 1995: 41), but reading Bentley's polemical and not the most humble rhetoric that he fiercely applied to his intellectual opponents, one gets the feeling that despite his apparently hostile attitude, what has been lost is a brilliant and unique, often even humorous thinker who should be read even if just for his unique and idiosyncratic style, nowadays rarely seen in philosophical literature. In light of ongoing internalism-externalism debates and ecologically minded psychology, it would be good to recall Arthur Bentley's ideas and to take a look at one of the earliest manifestations of these debates, characterized by his pragmatist philosophy and inquiries into how in living processes action, perception and cognition are all deeply intertwined. If for cognitive processes «there is nothing sacred about skull and skin,» as Clark & Chalmers put it (1998: 14), one should recall Bentley's words, written already in 1910, that could be published without alteration in any of today's work in cognitive science:

However spatially isolated the individual appears at a crude glance, the more minutely he is examined, the more are his boundary lines found to melt into those of his environment, the more frequently are functions found which work through both individual and environment so that it cannot be told where the one ceases and the other begins. (Bentley 1954: 5)

It is now time to turn to the connections between semiotics and Bentley's ideas. The reason for trying to bring this obscure author back to light for semiotics is, in fact, because he developed his own system of signs and sign processes, and as such he should minimally be considered as part of the history of semiotics, although as an interesting author he is worthy of being scrutinized even more closely.

To begin with, it is important to understand the way Bentley thought about the role of a social scientist, or more generally, of the way that proper science should be done. Bentley thought of himself as a «methodologist» of the social sciences. By «methodology», he did not think simply the means or methods for conducting empirical research, but rather a sort of dual perspective which would simultaneously look at the concrete subject matter of science, and at the philosophical underpinnings, premises, beliefs, in fact the very conditions for the possibility of acquiring knowledge. In short, a methodologist reflects on the nature of that science, rather than merely the various research techniques used in the given discipline. Or in the words of Leo Strauss: «Methodology, as reflection on the correct procedure of science, is necessarily reflection on the limitations of science. If science is indeed the highest form of human knowledge, it is reflection on the limitations of human knowledge» (1971: 76). And it is precisely for this double goal: to do science and to reflect on the limitations of this knowledge, Bentley realized, at some point in his career, that he needs to turn to, or rather, invent semiotics.

The best example of this sort of a «methodological» approach is his book from 1935, titled *Behavior, Knowledge, Fact*, considered by himself as his most important and mature work. The problem that Bentley tries to analyze here is a classic one: the nature of a social fact. And as the very first step he abandons the study of social facts in isolation, as closed off into something self-contained. Instead, he presents the nature of social facts as stemming from

the very techniques and procedures used in the sciences themselves. Facts are «behavioral» not in the behaviorist sense, but in the sense that facts are constructed by direct observation and the techniques used in this activity of observation, rather than being either independent mental operations or representations, or simply things-in-themselves out there. Whereas even today there is a widespread belief in the opposing positions that sciences *either* discover the objective nature of the world, *or* that nature is culturally constructed, Bentley was already moving on an entirely different track, away from even putting the question in these seemingly opposite but in fact mutually reinforcing terms.

In fact, throughout his career, Bentley always emphasized the limited and local nature of all knowledge. One of his main interests was to figure out how this particular type of organism, commonly called the human being, with its limited capacities and means for experiencing and exploring the world, can come to knowledge. For him, all knowledge is always limited, temporary, postulational: nothing but sketches and musings presented in discourse that can be blown away at any given minute. This also leads to the conclusion that all knowledge has to be constantly maintained, constantly upheld – it is an activity, a behavior that only exists as long as the activity exists that keeps knowledge afloat. Once again, it is precisely for this purpose: to try and understand knowledge as action, of all knowing as doing, that Bentley realized that he needs semiotics.

As far as I have managed to find out, Bentley did not have a close connection with semiotics. He praises Charles Peirce in several occasions (e.g. 1941a: 19; 1954: 245-7), but rarely ever quotes him or makes use of his specialized terminology. The book *Knowing and the Known* includes a chapter titled «A confused 'semiotic'», which is a critical analysis of Charles Morris's book *Signs, Language, Behavior* (1946). As far as I can tell, this is the extent of Bentley's connection with and knowledge about semiotics. To a certain extent then, what we have here is a case of semiotics as serendipity.

What follows is a brief summary of the world of signs as conceived by Arthur Bentley. First of all, he declares outright that «all behavior, when transactionally viewed, may be described as *sign-process* from its earliest appearance onward» (1954: 297). He then divides such sign-process behaviors into three types: signaling, naming and symboling.

The first, the earliest, the simplest type of sign is, for Bentley, the signal, or rather, the sensory-manipulative-perceptive events, an activity of signaling. However, in his characteristic way, he immediately rejects the signal-response paradigm for perception that in some quarters holds sway even today. For Bentley, there are no «objects of perception» as separate «things», and there is no specialized power or faculty of perception that would be completely closed off within the organism, so that perception would look like a confrontation between a thing and a capacity to perceive. Instead, «The locus of perceiving, transactionally viewed as signaling, is the full space and time of the activity of the organism and environment together in the given event» (ibid, 300). A signal covers all aspects of perceiving, moving about and manipulating things. Signs are not some sort of super-organic isolates, but refer to the entire field in process in system. Thus if a dog's bark scares a rabbit, the signal is neither the bark, nor the dog as such, nor a specialized process taking place in the rabbit's brain, it is always an aspect or phase of the situation seen in full. The primary distinguishing character of this type of sign is its indirectness. Signals are distinguished from simple mechanical causes by

the *distance* or the laxness of connection between the parts of the system that make up the sign. Thus when the shadow of a predator falls on a creature, the creature reacts, but not to the shadow, but to the predator. The shadow as a signal refers indirectly to the predator, and this is something the creature can make use of, something that would not be possible if the shadow was a mechanical cause for the reaction. Later on, this sort of indirectness develops into that well-known primary character of all more complex forms of representation, namely that they operate in absence of what they refer to.

The next level of complexity in sign usage is designation. This refers to the level of linguistic sign operation. Now for designation, or naming, he declares outright that words and meanings are inseparable. Severing word as «physical» from meaning as «mental» is rejected, since «[n]aming and knowing, in the region of knowing by way of language-using, form together a common phase of a single behavioral transaction, the phase of naming-as-knowing» (ibid, 299). The named, the object referred to does not precede the name, but neither do names operate like all-powerful agents that, as if from the depths of their own *sui generis* powers, halt the flux of sensory information, place upon it a system of categories and thereby create perceived objects as if out of thin air. Bentley sees all formation of knowledge, assisted by the application of the behavior of designation, as a mutual process of constant attentive engagement with the environment, with knowledge forming within these relationships and behaviors, within the entire «transactional field». Neither knowledge nor designations can be reduced either to things-in-themselves, or to some mental faculties located purely within the organism and working like a mirror of nature. There is no solitary location where one can discover meaning as such and by itself, and neither is there pure verbal, object-less expression as such. The meanings of words that are severed from linguistic activity are not observable and thus incapable of being studied, and words separated from their meaningful appearance during active living processes are void of any meaning and thus constitute nothing at all: «Without life-in-process neither language nor linguistic meanings can survive any more than could other behavioral events, of whatever kind. [...] Knowing through naming is a phase of human organism-in-action. In organism-in-action the knowing is the naming; so postulated; so observed; so investigated» (ibid, 344).

Finally, the last behavioral level that has been reached in the use of signs during the course of evolution is the use of symbols. Symbols, or more properly the behavioral activity of symboling, are a unique and special case of sign. A symbol is a sign that has been purified of all reference, of all designation. It is a sign that no longer functions as a name for anything else. It only operates within a system of other symbols, *none* of which refer to anything outside this system. Symbols are pure or purified signs. «This forfeiture is no loss», Bentley declares. «It strips the symbolings down for action» (ibid, 343). The best example of a pure symbol system is, naturally enough, mathematics, and mathematical symbols are the best example of symbols as Bentley conceived of them. But he is not, in fact, some latter day Pythagorean who thinks he has now discovered the pure and absolute underpinnings of all sign processes. Symbols do not represent an absolute of signs, a pure essence of a sign or a culmination of a constantly evolving capacity for sign use; instead they are the result of a specific type of activity. Symbols have to be constantly maintained *as* symbols, and they are in a perpetual threat of slipping back into being mere designations. It requires constant vigilance, constant activity,

constant attention to keep symbols *as* symbols, and to prevent them from reducing back into designations. Furthermore, he does not think of the use of symbols as some natural capacity of a new type of creature, the *animal symbolicum* who has evolved a new sort of mental capacity to use an entirely new type of sign. As always, he rejects any reference to any sort of isolated, internal mental structure as invalid. Instead, symbols are what you can actively *make out of* other kinds of signs for use in specialized circumstances, primarily for acquiring scientific knowledge. Symbols are one way of operating with, or manipulating other types of signs – you get a symbol by purifying designations from any hint of representation.

Once again, why did Bentley need to come up with these semiotic distinctions? It was for the purpose of his double vision of looking at both particular knowledge and the basis or possibility of that knowledge that he saw he needed a semiotic terminology, a few snippets of which I have tried to describe here. Reflecting on the limitations of human knowledge, Bentley came up with this system of knowings as doings, of signs as behaviors that have to be constantly maintained, of sign-processes that need to be kept going through the constant comings and goings of active organisms in their environments. It is for understanding knowings and knowns in this sense that Bentley needed a semiotic approach and invented his own system of signs. Today a mere footnote in the history of sciences, Bentley should be re-inserted into the history of semiotics as a curious and unique semiotician.

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