

Learning to Express and Feel Appropriate Emotions in the Adult Way. Observations of Monday Morning School Rituals in Germany and India

*To mark the difference between family and private life on the one side and the context of school with its different social demands and requirements on the other, various Monday morning rituals have been implemented in schools over the course of time and in culturally diverse contexts. These rituals seem to reflect the mental state of a particular society as well as the more general zeitgeist. While students in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s were supposed to show a fresh handkerchief and their clean and tidy nails on Monday mornings in some parts of Germany, today other rituals can be observed. Taking the example of the ritual of “Monday morning circle” in a German elementary school and a school prayer in an Indian school, some specifics of these particular rituals and their implications will be analyzed. Starting from some theoretical remarks about the role of rituals, the philosophy of the *As If* by the German philosopher Hans VAHINGER is used to analyze the two examples.*

1. Introduction

Monday morning rituals have a long tradition in the history of schooling. Today in Germany it seems they have become especially fashionable and popular in primary schools, as one can see, for example, from the many contributions to related forums on the Internet. To mark the difference between family and private life on the one side and the context of school with its different social demands and requirements on the other, various Monday morning rituals have been implemented in schools over the course of time and in culturally diverse contexts. These rituals seem to reflect the mental state of a particular society as well as the more general zeitgeist. While students in the 1950s and the beginning of the 1960s were supposed to show a fresh handkerchief and their clean and tidy nails on Monday mornings in some parts of Germany, for example, today other rituals can be observed, such as the ritual of “Monday morning circle” in a German elementary school, which I will explain later in a little more detail, or morning prayers in an Indian school, which we observed in a field study in Bangalore during the summer of 2009.

In my contribution I want to ask the meaning, or more precisely, the function such Monday morning rituals might have. Therefore I will 1) briefly discuss the concept of ritual in general according to GEBAUER and WULF – or more precisely a certain aspect of it –, 2) introduce the philosophy of the *As If* of Hans VAHINGER as a consequence of this theoretical perspective and as an extension of it, 3) describe two cases of Monday morning rituals from Germany and India observed by our Berlin research team, and 4) look at the consequences of these considerations. It must be stressed however, that the intention is neither a substantial comparison as clear definable criteria are missing nor to make any statement about “the” German or “the” Indian context. The attempt is to use a theoretical perspective to identify possible fictions within such rituals and their probable functions in pedagogical contexts.

According to GEBAUER and WULF, rituals most of the time represent or allegorize something that they themselves are *not*. The ritual is not identical to what it refers to. For example, the gesture of opening a door for somebody else is a ritual used to show deference. The door is opened for the person so that he or she does not have to do it by him- or herself, and one stands aside to let that person enter the room first, deferring to him or her and giving

them the honor of the leading position. This ritual gesture says “this is deference,” but at the same time it is not, because if it were actually a case of deference this would include the belief in honor as an (old, traditional) principle and that the person is assumed actually to be in a higher position than oneself. As a performance of a gesture of deference this action is something different, a demonstration that implies at the same moment a negation: “this is not really deference but only a gesture”. The enactment of deference is nothing more (or less) than politeness. However, it is not a negation in the sense of a denial of deference but the mimesis of it. Mimesis here means the copying of observed behavior. But Mimesis is always seen as a creative act (although mostly unconsciously), too, as the behavior is never simply taken over but is always re-created by the observer. Rituals are characterized by their double meaning: the performance of a gesture that is citing something that the gesture actually is not. Communication is seen as equivalent to acting on a stage on which a performance takes place. For example the act of christening only symbolizes the change of the child; it does not really transform the child from a pagan into a Christian. Likewise, the politeness ritual represents deference but it is not actually a process of gaining more honor. “Rituals pretend to be something that they are not. It is *as if* they would point out real changes” (GEBAUER/WULF 2003, p. 104, translation and emphasis IC). GEBAUER and WULF emphasize the relationship between rituals and games.

My approach here will be somewhat different though. I want to take up the idea of the *As If*-characterization of rituals and investigate some of the consequences of this description. In doing so, I will refer to the concept of the *As If* as formulated by the German philosopher Hans VAHINGER (see in detail CLEMENS 2005).

2. Hans VAHINGER and his philosophy of the *As If*

The main interest of Hans VAHINGER (1852 – 1933) in his *Die Philosophie des Als Ob* (“Philosophy of the *As If*”, 1927) is the effectiveness (*Zweckmäßigkeit*) of logical thinking in achieving a goal. He compares logical thinking or the cognitive sphere with the functions of the bodily sphere and ascribes to both an empirical effectiveness in achieving a goal. This effectiveness is shown in the frequently smooth assimilation of thinking and the bodily sphere to given circumstances and contexts as well as in the adoption and incorporation or the rejection of newly occurring elements. Logical thinking is described as an autonomous incorporation of the environment by the observer under the conditions of the permanent question of effectiveness. The emphasis in the philosophy of the *As If* lies in the practical affirmation, the permanent experimental trial for the usefulness of a certain concept. Not to define a “right” concept of the “objective circumstances,” in the sense of a theoretically correct model that copies reality one-to-one is the target. Instead the question of whether the concept in use is useful for attending to relevant goals is the primary interest.

According to VAHINGER, to evaluate the events around us and perhaps to influence them to our advantage, thinking uses several strategies. The normal ways of thinking which are related directly to reality or which even form a copy of reality are not always adequate strategically. In these cases thinking must be organized in a totally different way, in what VAHINGER calls “magic tricks of thinking” (p. 18). It is here that his construct of the *fiction* and his philosophy of the *As If* comes into play. Fictions are cognitive concepts which have no substitute in reality. Fictions, as defined by VAHINGER, contradict reality and are themselves inconsistent in their construction. With the help of fictions, logical methods are produced and utilized, which use “wrong” or incorrect means to reach certain goals. Instead of being content with the given material found in reality, thinking uses ambiguous thinking forms to attain its goals through these questionable concepts. VAHINGER gives a great number of examples such as the case of “classifications”. Classifications are, according to him, semi-fictions, as the objects which are summarized under invented classifications might have equivalents in reality, but any classification will itself eclectically and/or arbitrarily emphasize

only some characteristics of these objects and neglect others: they make out that this would be the major and most important characteristic of the object, thereby defining it. Another example is Adam SMITHS' model of the national economy. It emphasizes egoism as the primary motivation of all human activity and especially all economic activity. This was necessary to understand human actions in a causal way. On this basis SMITH is formulating "that all human actions, especially those related to business and economy, can be regarded as if their driving motivation is solely egoism. Consequently all other reasons and causal factors like for example goodwill or habit etc. are neglected" (loc. cit., p. 30, translation IC).

Unlike in semi-fictions, where VAIHINGER assumes that the deviation from reality is only a more or less arbitrary change of reality, in *pure fictions* something completely unreal replaces the real. An example of this category is an ethical fiction such as the postulation of freedom. Only when based on the assumption of freedom of action can humans be punished for deviant actions. However, VAIHINGER argues that the construct of freedom is not only in itself inconsistent with, but also contradicts the observable reality, and a purely free, random action which has been done with no reason at all is ethically without any worth. But still such terms are the basis of any higher culture and ethics and are therefore both needed and valued. Consequently, imagined and abstract concepts like freedom have their value despite being unreal, and neither academia nor society on a certain level of civilization could exist without them.

The example from the academic field makes the effectiveness of fictions especially visible. As VAIHINGER explains, the so-called "exact" and "rational" natural sciences also operate with fictions to create correct results with which they can work further. He mentions the example of the fictions of differentials or "fluxions" in mathematics (p. 859). These are fictitious, contradictory cognitive concepts, which allow one to subsume the bent line under the concept of the straight and its laws. Bent lines are calculated using the formula for straight lines, which is actually not valid for them. But from this one gets results with which one can progress effectively. Karin KNORR-CETINA (1991, 2004) and her works can be seen in this tradition as well. She has shown in her sociology of science work in the field of high energy physics, that the scientists there have to work with "liminal strategies," which means that they have to calculate using approximations instead of fixed factors, because the factors are not known, but still the work has to go on and certain progress is attained using calculations from the approximated factors.

Logical contradictions are, according to VAIHINGER, no evidence for senselessness or valuelessness/uselessness. Quite the opposite: "these contradictions can not only not be denied but they are the means by which progress is attained" (VAIHINGER 1927, p. 86). Very often contradictions or "wrongness" are taken as impracticality, but this conclusion is as wrong as the conclusion that a concept is right only because it is useful. Concepts can be theoretically wrong yet practically fruitful. The insight into the necessity of conscious fictions as the indispensable basis of scientific research can be extended to and also made fruitful in the social sciences and psychology, as Paul WATZLAWICK (1985) has shown. He points out that what is seemingly discovered is only invented, but that the invention creates the 'reality' that confirms it. WATZLAWICK comes to a similar conclusion to VAIHINGER: that the crucial point of a concept is its usefulness for a certain goal.

The question that now emerges here is how one can describe the function of fictions in rituals. For what are they useful?

The contradictory cognitive concepts of fictions are not copies of reality and are still not worthless. Their power lies in that they "create the illusion of comprehension" and that they make it possible for us to orientate ourselves practically in the real world (VAIHINGER 1927, p. 92), because the imagined world (*Vorstellungswelt*) is not a copy of what is "out there", it is only an instrument with which we are able to operate in the real world. It enables us to act and, according to VAIHINGER, acting and the very possibility of being able to act is the final

and original purpose of thinking. Thinking constantly has to improve its imagined world, which is its tool of discursive thinking, in order to grasp reality, to deal with it and to express it. This in return makes it obvious why imagination can be (and sometimes might have to be) very arbitrary (p. 135). After all, what is important is not whether the imagination is right or not, but whether it is empirically effective or not.

Using the philosophy of the *As If* perspective, we can now specify the function of rituals and, in a second step, analyze the Monday morning school rituals. As mentioned above, rituals represent what they actually are not; they are marked through their double meaning, performing a gesture that indicates something that is different from the gesture itself. In doing so they don't pretend to be something – they are not a fake – but point to something absent, an included excluded third as Michel SERRES (1987) puts it. Instead of a fake, they do *as if*. A baby is not a member of a church only because it gets some water on its head; because we get the high school final examination certificate or reach 18 does not make us into (cognitive) mature adults. Here the “magic trick of thinking” comes into play, in other words: the fictions. Something unreal is placed instead of a something real, and the crucial point is whether the concept is useful in attaining a certain aim or not. The evaluation of any concept lies in the orientation of the ability of the concept to help in dealing with and acting in the real world.

In consequence, the question with regard to the observed Monday morning rituals and the role emotions are playing in it now is a) what is the “real” that the rituals represent? In other words, what is pretended to be there that is absent? What is the “As If” that is represented by the ritual? And b) which goal should be attained by this? What kind of illusion of comprehension do they create?

2. Two Monday Morning rituals

A) A Monday morning circle in a German primary school

In the German school we observed, it is common practice to start the school week on Monday mornings with a conversation circle. The students and the teacher form a circle with their chairs. A student will be appointed as discussion leader, normally someone who volunteers. As a symbol of his or her power and to attain the attention of the others, in the observed class the child is given a kind of a bell. But the power still remains with the teacher of course. Then the teacher and the children tell one by one about their weekend, especially from the perspective of nice or not so nice events. Common stories are concerned with family, friends, trips, sports or events of the weekend. The children don't have to tell something if they don't want to, and some children do not tell anything at all. When the group becomes too loud, the teacher intervenes. Another thing that is discussed in the morning circle is the working plan for the next week (it is a reform-pedagogic school with independent working phases and a child-centered learning model).

B) A Monday morning prayer in an Indian primary school

In the Indian primary and medium school, all students of the school come together in a semi-open celebration hall in the morning. It is very loud and crowded until the teachers are able to make all the students stand neatly in lines and be silent. Each class has its own particular place to stand. Teachers go through their lines to make sure that the students stand properly and behave in the right manner. Then all together they sing a prayer to a god, for the state of Karnataka, and for India. Some students, selected because they can sing very well, stand on the stage in front of the others. Children with birthdays also stand on the stage and they alone are allowed to wear their own clothes instead of the school uniform. After singing the prayers there is one minute of total silence. Nobody moves or says anything. It's the time for the “silent prayer”. The idea is that every child can use this time for a personal prayer for

whatever (good grades, big birthday presents) and to whomever (god, ancestors) they want to. After some information is given, the students walk one by one, class after class to their rooms.

3. What are the fictions in the rituals?

One can ask now what is the “real” that is represented in these rituals that is actually absent, focusing on emotional aspects.

In the German case the leading model of the whole situation seems to be the family with the teacher as mother or father and the students as equal siblings. The idealistic scenario that all of them are equal, including the teacher, is of course much too unrealistic for anybody to take seriously. Whenever the noise gets too loud, the teacher intervenes and makes his position clear. We are one family-like group, the setting suggests, interested in each others lives, feelings and stories. We can tell each other about our happy and sad moments, and we are empathetic with each other. But the crucial point, the glue that holds together a modern family – the emotion of love according to Robert DREBEN (1968) or Niklas LUHMANN (2004) – is of course absent and cannot be taken for granted in the classroom setting. The members of this group are not together because they love each other, but because it’s their job in the case of the teacher or because they have to be there in the case of the students. If there were no legal and organizational obligation, this community would not be there. All participants know that far too well. They don’t mix up the two very different contexts of home and family on the one side and school and class on the other. This becomes very obvious when one analyzes the themes and issues that are discussed in the morning circle. The verbalizations follow more or less fixed rules of what to say and how. Negative events or feelings will be told only to a certain extent to make sure not to lose face. But teachers sometimes also insist on the expression of more ambivalent issues. On the other hand, most of the students who tell something seem to enjoy the attention they get from the audience. One knows one should say something once in a while and sometimes one feels the desire to do so, but one always knows how much and in what way it should be said, and one is sometimes forced by the teachers to continue. Here the picture of a talk show or a group therapy setting might be the better metaphor.

It is obvious that it is a talk *about* emotions, but in an adult kind of speech. Consequently, the circle is a training situation of how to express emotional talk in a proper way. My suggestion therefore is that it is the adult *everyday world* that is absent and represented in the ritual. As John HERZOG (2008) has critically pointed out, the school structure and system nowadays that is spread over the whole world excludes the adult world nearly completely. Instead a separate, artificial world is created, made for children according to scripts currently favored about what is thought to be good and appropriate for them. Therefore to a large extent children cannot gain experience within the adult everyday world. From the pedagogic perspective, they have to be protected from the “hard” adult everyday world. At the same time the adult everyday world can’t be ignored completely. With the Monday morning ritual, a part of this real adult everyday world is represented in school life. This is even more obvious when the teacher and students discuss the work plan for the week within the morning circle. After all it is the school and the teacher who decide about what has to be done and when, and not the children. But to discuss it in the circle means to do “as if” it were an open exchange of points of view. And while communicating about their emotional moments of the weekend in an appropriate way – and this means in an adult way of doing so – they act “as if” all of them were adults. Teachers and children play as if they were acting in the adult world, and the ritual pretends that this world is present although it is not.

So what kind of illusion of comprehension is created here? By acting as if the participants were actually participating in the adults’ world, perhaps a comprehension of the functioning of this world can be attained, or at least a comprehension of the communication forms that are used in this world to express emotions.

In the Indian example, the setting is totally different. The metaphor is more akin to a military muster. The straight lines, the uniforms and the common singing seem to want to create a quite different kind of community and emotional setting. One is part of something important. This is also stressed by the prayer to the god and for the country, of which every student is a part. But instead of following a simplistic interpretation of individual and collective explanation patterns (TRIANDIS 1993,1995 etc., KÂGITÇIBASI 1997), a closer look is needed. For example, with the practice of allowing the birthday children to wear what they like, individuality is given a very special space. This becomes immediately clear when one sees these children on the playground together with hundreds of other students wearing uniforms. The saying “a king for a day” gets some new meaning then, and one can imagine the excitement of the children. Equally the honor and/or excitement can be imagined for those students who perform the prayer and the morning ritual on stage. Coming from different levels and classes, they are selected because they sing well and remember the prayers properly. They are role models for the others. Even more interesting is maybe the one minute silent prayer. It is a moment for the children and their wishes, ambitions, fears or hopes alone. Nobody listens. If the child really prays (our interviews suggest that they do not necessarily do so – they are children after all), can one imagine something more individualistic than talking to a god privately?

As in the German example, the Indian morning ritual also standardizes the expression of emotions. It transforms this expression of emotions into a totally controlled form. Actually it is a pure performance of emotions, if the singing of a prayer requires emotions at all. Nobody seems to really expect emotions, and the children in the interview suggest that they don't connect any deep emotions to the singing (if any at all). So which “real” is represented here that is actually absent? Very obviously through the military muster-like setting, the adult world is represented here, too. But unlike in the German example, it is not the adult *everyday* world. It is the fiction of an organized, structured and controlled world where everyone has his or her fixed place, but in which all are equal. Emotions are accepted in two ways: as joy and pride because of an outstanding position due to one's own achievement or talent, and in the case of a birthday, only because of one's own identity. The other space left for emotions is the silent prayer. The students are given a private realm for their emotions. They don't have to exhibit their emotions to an audience but are provided within the ritual with the possibility of a totally individual inner dialogue with themselves. So while standing in a mass of students, the student is being made conscious about his or her individuality and uniqueness.

4. Conclusion

With both forms of Monday morning rituals something completely unreal is created: an image of the adult world that is actually not at all what it represents. Both are concerned with the appropriate way of dealing with or of expressing emotions in the adult world. Emotions are given space in both forms, although in very different ways. Contrary to common descriptions, the perspective of individualism and collectivism is of no use here (although it is a logically consistent construct, as VAHINGER would perhaps say). While the German students are supposed to share emotions and to integrate themselves fully into a group, the Indian students are instructed to experience themselves as individuals within a meaningful, proud unit (as students of a particular school, as Indians). One could conclude, that while in the German case children learn to communicate their emotions in a way appropriate for team meetings focused on social or rather soft issues or psychotherapy-like sessions within the adult world, the Indian students of this particular school learn to experience themselves within a big, uniform group (school, nation) as individuals (and with emotions) that matter, without the need for others to confirm this.

However, representing the adult world for children in school becomes more and more difficult. “Generation Porn,” as the recent generation of youth is called in Germany, knows

more or different things about the adult world than at least some of their teachers. And one can then ask about the consequences of an artificial setting, in which the children are reasonably aware of its artificial character, observing a performance made for them, as if they would believe this has something to do with the adult world although they are aware of the fiction.

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