

Honor, Symbols, and War
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Part I

Symbols

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CHAPTER 1

Symbolism: Introduction

The idea of symbolism arises across the social sciences, but a solid definition of it is difficult to find. Some writers treat it as the basis of society, but they often give no definition of it or they define it in obscure and figurative language. A symbol “stands for” an idea. However, “stands for” is a metaphor, and its root meaning is unclear. A symbol “calls” an idea “to mind,” but apple pie calls ice cream to mind without the help of symbolism. After attending a conference on symbolism, anthropologist Melford Spiro complained that the participants had much of interest to say but had given so little attention to defining the term that it was not clear that they were talking about the same subject (quoted by Firth 1973, 54). The semiotician Umberto Eco (1984) recounts a 1920s debate transcribed in a French philosophical dictionary (Lalande 1926). After each definition, the dictionary offered a Talmud-like discussion by a group of academics. In the case of symbolism, for each criterion that one commentator suggested, someone else had a counterexample, and in the end a symbol was everything and nothing. To Eco the exchange read like an absurdist play.

An Approach to Defining Symbolism

Reckless of the past, I will try to make the idea of symbolism precise. I use three techniques that should increase the prospects of success. First, the notion is split into subtypes. Some of the more enlightening past discussions have done this, such as Sapir’s distinction between referential and condensation symbols,¹ which influenced the work of Victor Turner and Murray Edelman. The three va-

1. Sapir’s *referential* symbols are “agreed upon as economical devices for purposes of reference” (1937). Examples are oral speech or the telegraph code. *Condensation* symbols are “substitutive behavior for direct expression, allowing for the ready release of emotional tension.” These correspond most closely to our message and value symbols.

rieties I see as prevalent in international relations will be termed *message symbols*, *focal symbols*, and *value symbols*.

Second, the definitions of the types will be grounded on systematically collected facts. Computer databases of news articles were searched and hundreds of examples of symbols in international relations discourse were assembled. The corpus of real examples suggests the regularities that should be included in a definition and shows counterexamples to mistaken definitions. The third feature is the use of game theory. Many past definitions were put in terms as obscure as the concept to be defined. With game theory, the definition can be embedded in a well-studied framework: utilities, probabilities, and strategies. Focal symbolism and message symbolism are essentially social phenomena, and game theory is a precise way to formulate interactive decisions.

Family Resemblances

Most writers recognize the existence of subtypes of symbolism, but the procedure here is more radical. Rather than starting with a general definition of symbolism and then dividing it into types, I will work out each type first and the general concept will follow. The reason lies in the structure of the idea of symbolism. A common way to define a formal concept is to give a list of its required properties. This is the norm in mathematics: being a pentagon, or an open set, or an associative group involves features A and B and C, and so on. However, it does not work well for naturally occurring concepts. Symbolism, in particular, is not based on a checklist but on a *family resemblance*.² Consider the imaginary concept of "piffishness." Say it is based on a set of features, five in number, and an object is "piffish" if it possesses four of the five. The set of piffish objects is well defined and forms a psychologically natural cluster, since its members are similar to each other: they share at least three of the five features. It would not be surprising that a language would have a single name for them all. Still, a checklist approach would not work.

There is no set that is necessary and sufficient. Wittgenstein's metaphor of a family is apt. The resemblance among a group of brothers and sisters cannot be stated as a core set of if-and-only-if features. Not every member has the nose or the eyes or the forehead, but they all look alike.

A modification of the piffish example shows a stronger difference between

2. The concept of a family resemblance was introduced by Wittgenstein and amplified by Eco (1984), Lakoff (1987), and others.

family resemblances and the checklist approach. One can imagine a concept requiring four out of five features where two of the features are logically incompatible, making it impossible to possess all five. There would then be two types of piffish entities, one group with one feature and the other group with the other. All piffish objects possess the remaining three elements, so all are similar to each other. The concept of symbolism has this property of including contradictory features, and this fact may have caused the bedlam around a definition. Two defining features of symbols are that they have an innate connection to their referent and that they are arbitrary. The Swiss pioneer of semiotics, Ferdinand de Saussure (1922), endorsed the first condition, stating that a symbol must be connected to its referent either by similarity or by a part/whole relation. His example was the figure of Justice, blind and holding a balance scale, which map into properties of abstract justice. Working independently in the United States, C. S. Peirce (1931) stated that a symbol must be arbitrary, like the shape of the letter *a*. The field of semiotics continues to quote both definitions as authoritative, and this contradiction may have deterred writers from working out a more precise account.³ The resolution of the puzzle is to assemble the general notion from its subtypes.

There are some common meanings of symbolism that will not be used here, because they are so broad that the word would do no work. A symbol is sometimes just an abbreviated code, a prestipulated designator for something lengthier, an alternative to listing the details. Central in this meaning is the arbitrariness emphasized by Peirce—the more the code is simply stipulated, the more it deserves the name “symbol.” The character κ is a symbol when it means infinity in a mathematical formula but not when it appears in a Hebrew word, where its role evolved and is now established by precedent. In another usage of some philosophers, all words or letters are symbols since all language is conventional. Political science has also produced some uselessly general senses of the word. Some authors have associated symbolism with anything not encompassed by calculated self-interest, such as behavior involving norms or “psychological” factors.

The three important meanings are message symbols, focal symbols, and value symbols. The first two are treated in the next four chapters. Value symbols will enter the discussion, but we have less to say about them directly.

3. A modern semiotic definition in Peirce's direction is given by Sebeok (1986), who calls a symbol “a sign without either similarity or contiguity, but only with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata, and with an intensional class for its designatum.”

Message Symbols

In May 1994, Nelson Mandela was to be sworn in as president of South Africa. In a gesture of “hope and reconciliation,” he invited James Gregory, his white jailer for the previous 20 years, to attend the ceremony. The meaning of his act was clear. What was puzzling was why the world could immediately understand it. There was no prevalent custom of leaders inviting their jailers to their presidential inaugurations. Symbols are often compared to language, but somehow this kind of language is understandable the first time it is used.

Other examples of message symbols are a leader’s gift to another to show international friendship, or a visit to another nation’s war memorial. These are messages without words, but not every nonlinguistic communication counts as symbolic. A wink, or a discrete clearing of one’s throat, or a come-here wave of the hand are not symbols. What makes some communications symbolic? If their message is not in a known language, how can we understand them? And why not just say it in words?

Mandela’s inauguration message involved a unique symbol, but some symbols are used so often that they move toward conventions. At that point their connection with their meaning is immediately understood without the decoding methods typically used for symbols. Chapter 3 traces the evolution of the Gulf War yellow ribbons to see what induced shifts on the continuum between symbols and conventions and what was lost or gained.

Focal Symbols

As Jervis (1989) has pointed out, some symbols are different from Mandela’s in that they have no sender. The *New York Times* reported that on the morning of August 27, 1991, “in a surrender viewed by the Latvians as highly symbolic, the Soviet Army turned over the very image of its privileged status, its spacious officers’ club in the heart of Riga. Its loss to the occupying Soviet Army in 1940 was a major blow to the national pride, because it had been built by contributions by the Latvian public to serve as a national cultural center.” The Soviet military was not trying to communicate something to Latvians. Most likely, its action was just part of the withdrawal, and Soviet authorities did not expect the populace to take special notice. Still it was symbolic, so an account of the phenomenon must go beyond one of sending messages. It was a *focal symbol*, defined in chapter 4 as one that induces the observers to commonly expect a certain outcome in a game they will be playing with each other, through considering a certain part/whole relationship and each others’ views of the same.

Focal symbolism is important in bargaining. In the prenegotiation phase, questions regarding the shape of a table induce joint expectations, self-fulfilling ones, about who will give in later on the real issue. Focal symbolism also figures in international crises. In a game model of chapter 5, chance events like an unintended border clash symbolically suggest war and raise tension, inducing one of the players to preemptively attack. The theory of symbolism shows how a pre-crisis arms control agreement, even a purely symbolic one, might hold tension down and preserve peace in the crisis.

Value Symbols

The core properties of a value symbol are affect and polysemy. It has affect in the sense that people hold a strong attitude toward the ideas it represents, and the symbol itself comes to be valued by the group. A flag generates the same positive response as the country it stands for. The affect can be negative, of course, like the reaction of most Americans over the years to the symbol of Fidel Castro.

“Polysemy” means multiplicity of meaning. A value symbol unites various ideas under one cognitive entity, and thus creates a synergy among the emotions attached to each of them. A national flag represents its country in the geographical sense, as well as its history, culture, and institutions. When these are united in the flag, the group’s positive attitude toward each is augmented by the rest. A value symbol can function at the individual level—some are even purely private. When one is shared, however, the common attachment influences the individual’s sense of identity in the group (Schuessler 1994). When a person acts symbolically in the value sense, it is to express who he or she is, rather than to bring about external consequences. The polysemy property of value symbols is parallel to message symbols and focal symbols, which represent general ideas by concrete actions or events.

Value symbols get “reified,” that is, thought of and spoken of as if they were single, tangible objects. Some American lawmakers have tried to criminalize burning the U.S. flag. A flag burner might reply that he or she did not intend to burn *the* flag, only *a* flag, that there are plenty of others left. However, the attitude is that each flag is in a unity with the whole. When language uses the definite article, *the* flag, that is a signal that a reified value symbol has emerged.

The three categories of symbolism are not exclusive, and sometimes the same event involves several types. The emotional power of value symbols promotes their use as message symbols, as when someone waves or burns the flag to make

a political point. Focal symbols acquire strong values, and certain grand ones of recent decades, the construction and demolition of the Berlin Wall or Nixon's visit to China, have influenced history. However, to clarify the dynamics of symbolism, these episodes may be too grand. They have acquired so many associations that it is hard to untangle the dynamics of each kind of symbolism. It is better to look at small and passing symbolic events, and this approach is developed in the next chapter.