

LEISURE AS PLEASURE: THE CASE OF DR WATSON FOR SOCIOLOGY

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PREAMBLE

.. the task of the sociologist is not simply to discover historical and social reflection in works of literature, but to articulate the nature of values embedded within particular literary works. (Laurenson, Swingewood 1971 16)

Doyle's famous fictional character, Sherlock Holmes has become an institution which has given rise to Sherlock Holmes societies, special journals, and Holmesian experts and scholars. The topic of this article is the friendship of Holmes and Watson *as it can be shown to be meaningful for Watson*, leaving for another occasion the problems of its meaning for Holmes. The meaning of friendship may not be the same for both actors. Holmes is the thinker detective and Bohemian artist. As Watson observes, Holmes, like all great artists, lived for art's sake (Doyle 1930 559). Watson is simply Holmes' chronicler and a sober medical doctor. Doyle incorporates this difference as a primary feature of account.

If the essence of drama involves conflict as the precondition for the possibility of action, then one character can be treated as itself a dramatic occasion for action, or as the resolution of difference. We will develop the thesis that Watson's friendship with Holmes can be seen as a parameter of *Watson's relation to his own role and identity as a medical doctor*. Watson's words and deeds may be recollected as the dramatic re-enactment of the Victorian conflict between traditional aristocratic leisure and modern bureaucratic technology.

OCCUPATIONAL IMPERATIVE

The first Holmes novel, *Study in Scarlet* (1887), depicts Watson as the unhappy victim of monotony when he first came to share rooms with Holmes on Baker Street. Watson narrates:

Holmes was certainly not a difficult man to live with. He was quiet in his ways, and his habits were regular .. Sometimes he spent his day at the chemical laboratory, sometimes in the dissecting rooms, and occasionally in long walks .. Nothing could exceed his energy when the working fit was upon him; but now and again a reaction would seize him, and for days on end he would lie in the sitting

room hardly uttering a word or moving a muscle from morning to night .. As the weeks went by, my interest in him and my curiosity as to his aims in life gradually deepened and increased .. Under these circumstances, I eagerly hailed the little mystery which hung around my companion, and spent much of my time in endeavouring to unravel it. (Doyle 1930 20)

An ex-army officer wounded in war, Watson is convalescing due to subsequent ill health, and at the moment is a doctor without a practice. His interest in Holmes serves to distract him from his own dull existence as a convalescent. Watson's monotony derives from the fact that his domestic activities are not the sort which could invite or sustain another's interest. As a convalescent, Watson lacks the resources necessary for conversation. He lacks activities which by virtue of their doing, could provide topics for sociability. Professionally disengaged, he has nothing to invite another to talk about.

The housebound routines of the convalescent, which serve only the physical self, are sharply differentiated from the professions which serve the social self. The habits of natural routines are marked by insularity and natural, but not social necessity. It is not so much that one *could not* talk about them, but since one does not in the first place *elect* to do them, they fail to satisfy the requirements of social exchange. Such conversation is not required by nature. Natural routines lack social value because speech about the private or natural self amounts to no exchange, or no more than an exchange of what is already available to anyone, and so constitutes no exchange and no motive to converse.

For Watson, monotony appears as the experience of monologue in which natural and not social necessity dominates. Monotony presupposes an idea of what is particularly human and social. *People have to do something in order to create topics for conversation*. What is entailed in such a view is a theory of achievement, and not ascription, as the basis for sociability. Professional activities provide persons with different resources for conversation with the possibility of especially social subject matter because

people speak about what they do. Without the activity of professional life, Watson is solitary and without the social basis for sociability.

.. It is for the sake of special needs and interests than men united in economic associations or blood fraternities, in cult societies or robber bands. But above and beyond their special content, all these associations are accompanied by a feeling, or by a satisfaction in, the very fact that one is associated with others, and that the solitariness of the individual is resolved into togetherness, a union with others. (Simmel 1949)

The activities of professional life provide topics which permit persons to engage each other, and to differentiate themselves from nature. The togetherness or solidarity invoked by sociability is a "we" achieved from an otherwise undifferentiated natural body. "Sociability is the game in which one 'does as if' all were equal, and at the same time, as if one honored each of them in particular." (Simmel 1950 49) Equality is the individual achievement of freedom through social rather than natural activities, as the basis for social interaction.

Referring to the objectless quality of his life, Watson means the aim or purpose which, as the root of a profession, has public or collective significance. Thus it can serve as the basis for a social relation and discourse. Watson is at first mystified as he tries to discover Holmes' profession:

He was not studying medicine .. Neither did he appear to have pursued any course of reading which might fit him for a degree in science or any other recognized portal which would give him entrance into the learned world. Yet his zeal for certain studies was remarkable .. Surely no man would work so hard or attain such precise information unless he had some definite end in view. (Doyle 1930 20)

THE WATSON-HOLMES DIFFERENCE

Watson discovers Holmes' profession. He is an unofficial consulting detective. But what interests and attracts Watson is the difference between his own and Holmes' work. Watson's initial interest in Holmes sprang from a contingent matter, due to his poor health and lack of a medical practice. Later he found himself called to Holmes even when in good health, happily married, and in possession of a practice (Doyle 1930 151).

If the fact that Watson experiences monotony *even as he practices medicine* is taken as

the starting point for our analysis, then our task is to show: 1) how Watson's monotony and lack of a suitable topic for sociability can originate *in the practice of medicine itself*; and how Watson's relation to Holmes can be seen as Watson's attempt to make up for something unfulfilled by medical practice.

The medical practitioner could be located in terms of certain institutionalized "rules of irrelevance" which he/she maintains in interaction with others, especially although not exclusively, with patients (Goffman 1961 19). Parsons specifies the rules of irrelevance for medicine with the notions of *universalism* and *affective neutrality*:

Affective neutrality is also involved in the physicians's role as an applied scientist. The physician is expected to treat an objective problem in objective, scientifically justifiable terms. For example, whether he likes or dislikes the particular patient as a person is supposed to be irrelevant .. (Parsons 1968 435).

How could reference to the idea of affective neutrality help us to explain the possibility of Watson's experience of monotony? To be objective means to disengage one's subjectivity, and the question is, "What is involved in that subjectivity such that its suspension generates monotony for Watson?"

The medical practitioner's relation to the patient is circumscribed by the professional commitment to health. The profession is in the service of creating and preserving the preconditions for any or all human life, and as such, not contributing to the specific uses or actions of any one particular form of human life. For the medical person to be affectively neutral, he/she is effectively disciplined by the aim of the profession to be indifferent to all specifically social or political designations or properties, except insofar as they are relevant to the business of health. Goffman observes that such an attitude of indifference is itself a social achievement because it must "turn off" what otherwise would be "on". "The elegance and strength of this structure of inattention to most things of the world is a great tribute to the social organization of human propensities." (Goffman 1961 20) What is irrelevant for medicine is civic life, and thus, the "good" doctor is one who maintains a neutrality to his own participation in the doings of society.

Unlike the political arts, medicine refrains from discriminating the good, the virtuous, and

the noble from the bad, the shameful, and the ignoble. Health, as a universal precondition for collective life is not simply a prerequisite for any particular sociopolitical order. Health and sickness are reference terms which apply equally to any collective, whereas the distinction between the virtuous and the base are situated determinations which may vary in meaning from one society to another. Crudely put, the body and commitment to health does not provide the doctor with a topic for sociability, since the doctor's activities are not *doings* in the social or political sense. If people speak about what they do, and medicine is in the service of not doing, then the medical practitioner has nothing to talk about. Analytically, the activity of medicine differs little from convalescing in the sense that its routines provide no basis for sociability. The very universality of the standard for health – its applicability for any individual or collective – guarantees its lack of speech about the particular sociopolitical qualities of any such person or collective. Since the standard is the same in every case, no case is an occasion for difference.

As a medical doctor, Watson was *employed but not fully occupied* in his profession. The fact that medicine hopes to create the preconditions for speech, but not speech itself produces a social unease in Watson. The activity of medical professional life leaves idle time, and Watson is faced with the problem of transforming this time into meaningful leisure. We suggest, therefore, that the grounds for Watson's friendship with Holmes resided in Watson's monotony and his need for leisure and sociability. This is an outgrowth of Watson's practice of affective neutrality and Holmes' ability to furnish Watson with a subjective social experience through his remarkable labors. On the hypothesis that Holmes' work puts Watson in touch with the social realm, we ask, "What feature of Holmes' profession attracts Watson, and how may it be constituted to provide a subjective domain of topics for sociability?"

First, we note that Watson pictures Holmes as a symbol of creative solitude, and a genius with an imagination made possible by the freedom from convention, and freedom from organizational constraints. As an unofficial and private detective, Holmes is free of

controls imposed by the public police force, and can conduct his investigations in his own way. His successes over the regular police investigators symbolize the superiority of the individual over the collective organized effort.

Unlike the police force, Holmes is interested in developing his craft, and not in the solution of specific criminal investigations, or threats to the public order, or profit. As an artist, Holmes does not depend on externals such as having a recognized position, or even the commission of a crime. As Holmes remarked to Watson, "For the man who loves art for its own sake .. it is frequently in its least important and lowliest manifestations that the keenest pleasure is to be derived." (Doyle 1930 316) Thus, Holmes is not obliged, like the professional police investigator, to concern himself with every violation that is referred to him.

"Well, I'm afraid I can't help you, Lestrade," said Holmes. "The fact is that I knew this fellow Milverton, that I considered him one of the most dangerous men in London .. My sympathies are with the criminals rather than with the victim, and I will not handle this case." (Doyle 1930 582)

Pertinent to our investigation is the discrimination which Holmes shows in his speech. *He distinguishes between the noble and the ignoble as a precondition for his taking up a case.* He answers to his conscience with a higher moral order, and not to public opinion or convention. In this he is reminiscent of the responsible aristocrat of an earlier century.

Unlike the police official, Holmes is the *master of logic and technology.* His objectivity and logical tools are controlled by his subjectivity, and by conservative political values of justice and personal discretion. Holmes is the exemplar of the Victorian gentleman. An archetype of "civic culture," Holmes meets the modern forces of technology and bureaucracy with the traditional values of public conscience, personal favor, and sympathy for his client and for the underdog.

"The law cannot, as you say, touch you," said Holmes, "yet there never was a man who deserved punishment more. If the young lady had a brother or friend, he ought to lay a whip across your shoulders. By Jove!" he continued, flushing up at the sight of the bitter sneer on the man's face, "it is not part of my duties to my client, but here's a hunting crop handy, and I think I shall treat myself to –" (Doyle 1930 201)

Burke explains this principle of social freedom as follows: "Social freedom is that state of things in which liberty is secured by equality or restraint. This kind of liberty is but another name for justice. Whenever a separation is made between liberty and justice, neither in my opinion is safe. (Burke 1955 xviii) Freedom, in this case called *liberty* is also a restraint. Each person is free insofar as that person is willing to restrain himself. Self restraint is not simple obedience and compliance with the law, but rather, restraint is care for the relation binding individual and state. The law depends on the state, which in turn, requires defense. For Holmes, defense takes the form of interpreting each case with an eye to the welfare of the state. He discriminates the noble from the ignoble, and the good citizen from the enemy of the state. Ignoble men place liberty, as the pursuit of private good before justice, which is the pursuit of the state's good.

Holmes' freedom originates in recognizing that laws do not create order, but are the product of order. For the conservative, the relation between law and order is problematic. This relation must be recalled on each occasion, and Holmes responds to the conservative enterprise as an aristocrat by assuming personal responsibility for preserving the relation between law and order. But the bureaucratic framework conflicts with aristocratic life:

The objective discharge of business primarily means a discharge of business according to *calculable rules* and without regard for persons .. The more complicated and specialized modern culture becomes, the more its external supporting apparatus demands the personally detached and strictly 'objective' expert, in lieu of the master of the older social structure, who was moved by personal sympathy and favor, by grace and gratitude. (Weber 1952 215)

The aristocratic objection to bureaucracy is that it ends the need for personal action by substituting the impersonal action of compliance with the law. The bureaucrat treats the law as equal to order and the state, and so substitutes compliance for the aristocratic *quality of service*. Thus, while the bureaucrat upholds the law, this is done at the risk of losing sociability. The bureaucratic discharge of business generates no positive, singular, or creative act which people can discuss. The

basis of Watson's relation to Holmes now becomes clearer. Holmes represents the aristocratic qualities of the master of the older social order, qualities which represent an alternative to bureaucratic life.

NARRATOR VERSUS ACTOR

Watson, though devoted to Holmes, never becomes a student of detection because he misreads Holmes' aristocratic conservatism. The decisive factor in explaining this phenomenon resides in Watson's implicit intention to be ruled in his pursuit of leisure by the constraint of his medical profession.

Watson's own identity, and his difference from Holmes surfaces in the very format of the chronicle. As a form of writing, the narrative stands second to what is narrated, so as to preserve Holmes' firstness. The narrative is really a speech about a *doing* and in this sense, Holmes, the artist, generates the possibility of a subject matter or sociability for Watson. The narrative discloses Watson's secondness as a special sort of nonartist, as he is only the devotee of the artist. Watson recognizes Holmes as the artist for the aristocrat. The artist produces a work about which men can speak. The aristocrat is engaged in the artful display of the law. He needs freedom from the law in order to preserve the relation between law and order.

The narrative expresses Watson's love and admiration, while serving as a means to make available the character and the criterion of what is worthy to be loved. Thus Watson writes chronicles of Holmes' adventures as a mode of loving, because what he loves about Holmes cannot be properly respected or understood apart from the work which engages Holmes. Several times, Watson expresses concern about his task as narrator.

"In choosing a few typical cases which illustrate the remarkable mental qualities of my friend, Sherlock Holmes, I have endeavored as far as possible to select those which present the minimum of sensationalism, while offering a fair field of his talents." (Doyle 1930 888)

The narrator's speech must be controlled by commitment to preserving the artistic and aristocratic over the merely sensational. Watson notes that this is no easy task, and that he shall give preference to cases which derive interest, not from the brutality of the

crime, but from "the ingenuity and dramatic quality of the solution." (Doyle 1930 566)

The *sensational* exploits the *particular*. It possesses only a fleeting interest in the particular, and so represents the attitude of universalism. Sensationalism creates only a passing and fleeting interest in both the particular and in itself. Sensational literature is bad narrative because it fails to be true to its own nature *qua narrative as secondary*, since it treats nothing other than itself as *primary*. Sensationalism lacks a principled concern for what it will narrate. Therefore, it fails to acknowledge its own derivative or secondary nature, and the danger of mere sensationalism, in failing to distinguish between art and nonart is that it loses sight of the requirements for the practice of sociability.

Watson's reference to the danger of the sensational for the chronicler stands as a self-reminder of both how and why he produces such a corpus. In this way, Watson through his writing, speaks only to his class of nonartists in the hope of teaching them how to live as nonartists. Watson's world thus is offered as being framed by the distinction between the artistic and aristocratic, and the nonartistic. Unlike other literary figures, Watson puts himself in the nonartistic group.

If there are two kinds of men in Watson's world, there are also two classes of nonartists. These are *lovers* of artists and *nonlovers* or detractors. Watson's concern about the sensational voiced his opposition to the nonartist and to the life devoid of devotion, faithfulness and love. Watson, as chronicler and trusted companion of Sherlock Holmes, is undeniably lover of the artist, and the secondness which Watson achieves as narrator also represents for him the firstness of this class of men.

Watson's challenge is to make possible a viewing of the artist that is *ipso facto* beyond the capacity of the nonartist to formulate or understand. Watson's commitment to the social realm means preserving in the narrative the difference between itself and its subject. The challenge of the narrator, in demonstrating love for the artist, is to avoid making itself the limit of the knowable, while being limited to what it knows as less than the knowable. Art must be shown from the nonartist's side of the limit. The difficulty is that art is on the other side of the limit, and thus, cannot really

be known, even if displayed. As a solution to the problem of being limited by professional life, Watson uses the literary device of revealing his own ignorance about that which Holmes knows, in order to present Holmes' action without claiming to understand it. Watson provides evidence of the fact that Holmes is not limited to that which limits him. Though Watson cannot talk of the difference – he merely witnesses it. In this way, Watson preserves the difference between art and nonart which is beyond the capacity of the narrator to formulate.

What justification could Watson give for his understanding of the difference between his own nonart and Holmes' art? He perceives the difference as a *difference given by nature*. Holmes practices art because he is talented. The nonartist cannot create because he is not talented. Holmes is a natural genius, and this clarifies both 1) why Watson can excuse himself for not producing art, and 2) why it is that the mystery of creation is unavailable to all humans. Watson is untalented, and the mystery of creation cannot be formulated in the narrative. All the nonartist can do is to imitate art, and Watson, as nonartist, writes to imitate Holmes, the exemplar of aristocratic life. Initially, Watson writes to redress a wrong: namely, the fact that Scotland Yard officials mistakenly receive credit and public acclaim for Holmes' solution of a crime. Watson says to the despondent Holmes: "Never mind. I have all the facts in my journal, and the public shall know them .." (Doyle 1930 86) Watson shows that he is on the side of aristocracy as represented by Holmes in his determination to correct the record.

Why did Watson continue writing all of the other accounts? He shows himself to be faithful, but as Simmel writes, "Faithfulness might be called the inertia of the soul. It keeps the soul on the path on which it started, even after the original occasion that led onto it no longer exists." (Simmel 1950 380) The original occasion of Watson's writing is replaced by his unyielding resistance to the sensationalist and the nonlover. Faithfulness lives in a present which is consumed by the past. It is the activity of not losing what one begins with. As such, it makes impossible, either learning or seeking to become what one loves. Devotion seeks not to learn, but to keep

memorable. Devotion cannot learn because it is moved by the clarity of its purpose – the recall of talent. Devotion is not productive if production implies a present that orients to the future. In this sense, devotion experiences a present as something that continuously slips away.

In the narrative, Watson shows that he associates with nobility by orienting to what is other than the self, but while he likens himself to nobility, he fails to act nobly and conservatively because the other is pictured as a particular person rather than as a relation to the state. Watson's craft is pseudo art because, unlike Holmes' art, it does not achieve independence from the external. Without Holmes, Watson has nothing to write about. While his narratives are faithful to his theory of language as speech about action, it is doubtful whether they are representative of conservative life. First, conservatism is not reducible to faithfulness or loyalty. Watson misreads the conservative qualities of service and defense as *faithfulness*. He misrepresents the aristocrat's active relation to the state with his relation to Holmes as that of lover to the beloved. Watson treats the sensationalist as the incarnation of the modern universal spirit: movement, mobility, and motion. Watson's resistance to this impulse is countered by his commitment to stay with the particular. But conservatism is inadequately understood if articulated as the simple difference between rest and motion. Watson himself appears modern in his employment of one rule in the production of many narratives.

An obvious criticism of Watson's theory of language as self-contradictory would proceed as follows: If men speak about what they do, and the artist creates such doings, and art is the result of nature's gift of talent to some persons, then speech and the social world are given by nature. The difference between the natural and the social proves illusory, for it is a difference originating in, and given by nature. Thus, sociability, the compromise that man makes with the environment – that he will leave speechless nature to create a social world independent of his own speech – fails to achieve social world which is independent or freed from nature. The notion that men speak about what they do requires in the final provision for sociability, an account of the

creation of doings as that which is rooted in talent which itself is a part of nature.

A more analytic criticism would recollect Watson's theory of natural speech as the necessary consequence of a commitment to professional life: the idea that speech is rooted in nature, and hence, imitation, as the fate of the nonartist is not the cause, but the necessary consequence, given the election to the professional life. Watson is unwilling to forego a career in medicine, and is constrained to seek a form of leisure which could not itself require a decisive commitment or assume the status of a calling. Thus, it is appropriate to distinguish Watson's leisure-as-pleasure from Holmes' leisure-as-service. The work of detection is to generate occasions for the practice of discretion as the re-experience of commitment, while the work of narrative is to generate occasions for the relief from professional life. Analytically, the difference between Watson's imitation and Holmes' art is not the difference between talent and its lack, but is the difference between conservatism and the professional or bureaucratic life.

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