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# How Does Autodialogue Work? Miracles of Meaning Maintenance and Circumvention Strategies

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*In contemporary sociocultural studies, the human mind is often claimed to be dialogic. Precise elaborations of models of dialogicality are rare, however. We present a process model of dialogicality that occurs within a person's self-system (autodialogue) in the context of two kinds of tasks: making sense of ordinary happenings and understanding religious miracles. We start from the assumption that the person is involved in an ongoing self- and world-reflecting meaning-making in which the semiotically mediated reflections on the world and on one's own self are constantly created, negotiated, and transformed. Once a meaning emerges in an ambiguous action setting, it is instantly worked on through a process entailing circumvention strategies, which allow the person to rigidify or qualify it. The work of these strategies is elaborated theoretically with the help of a hypothetical example of reasoning from everyday life, and is demonstrated empirically by evidence from adults' reasoning about biblical miracles. Autodialogue is shown to work through the flexible construction of circumvention strategies in any here-and-now setting.*

*Interviewer: Can miracles happen today?*

*Interviewee: Miracles usually do not happen. But somehow they happen, anyway.  
(Excerpt from our interview study)*

In many ways, human reasoning in everyday contexts is a miracle. We are capable of making up our mind—as well as changing it instantly—about different aspects of our present relation to the environment. We use a standard tool, human language, in ways that sometimes are quite nonstandard from a linguistic point of view. Often, in an attempt to make sense of ourselves and the world at large, we do not obey rules of logic and reason in our internal and external discourses (see introductory excerpt). Yet (or as a result?) we manage, whether in communication with others or with ourselves. By such construction of meaning through language we can create our worries and our feelings of horror, as well as our hopes and our illusionary feel-

ings of security. The process of such construction is referred to here as *meaning-making*. We emphasize the time-based process of making, rather than offering yet another demonstration that human beings use semiotic systems in their psychological life.

Social sciences have recognized the richness of possibilities for meaning-making in everyday life (Edwards 1997; Garfinkel 1967; Pollner 1987; Wieder 1974; Wooffitt 1992). Ethnomethodology in the tradition of Garfinkel (1967) explicitly analyzes common sense and the construction of mundane reality as discursive practice. If our common-sense reasoning is challenged by some extraordinary experiences—for example, by miracles (see introductory excerpt)—we try to find a resolution that restores our “world in common,” either by establishing and maintaining a state of affairs in which there are definite and singular truths (Pollner 1974) or by harmonizing the two worlds in another way (Stromberg 1993).

We construct meanings as we move through the realm of our life experiences; often we do so extremely quickly, sometimes very slowly. Some of the constructions are related to our social roles (Smith and Kleinman 1989, on psychological cop-

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ing strategies among medical students), others with the need to feel secure about the future (Aphex and Tobin 1990, on meaning construction by fortunetellers). We construct meanings in order to control otherwise uncontrollable situations (Weisz, McCabe, and Dennig 1994, on primary and secondary control), to rebalance our interpersonal relations (Heider 1946, 1958), or to harmonize logical functioning with our beliefs in spirituality (Griffin 1995). Silences—absences of stylistic features of talk—similarly can act as communication devices (Ohnuki-Tierney 1994, on “zero signifiers”). Constructed meanings make the difference between shame and honor (Sande 1992), killing and personal rights (Danet 1980), and various ways of looking at morality (Shweder and Much 1987).

All these aspects of meaning construction, however, can be viewed from two standpoints. First, it is possible to analyze their structure. This leads to an analysis of psychological phenomena as overdetermined by meanings (Boesch 1991; Obeyesekere 1990). This approach provides the social sciences with information about the redundancy of control over psychological processes by systems of meanings. Second, it is possible to analyze the ways in which meaning construction operates “on-line”: how meanings are made and remade in conjunction with the flow of everyday life events. Here the meanings are made up for use in a particular here-and-now context. Many of the meanings created around specific objects may be abandoned as the need for action with regard to these objects passes. Meanings are created constantly; yet only a few survive. This process of meaning-making is framed by the social setting rules that people take for granted (Schütz and Luckmann 1973); the violation of such rules in challenging the roles of the persons involved can be complicated in practice (Garfinkel 1967:chaps. 1-4).

In this paper we take the second of the two perspectives. We are interested in making sense of the general processes that enable human beings to construct meanings which can be both flexible and rigid. We hope to demonstrate how identical mechanisms of meaning-making guarantee both of these opposite states.

## TWO WAYS OF CONSTRUCTING THE PERSON

The active agent who constructs meanings is the person. Ontogenetically, personal subjectivity emerges through relating with the social world (e.g., as in the often-quoted axiom of the primacy of the social in the person, expressed by Lev

Vygotsky and George Herbert Mead, among many others). Yet as a result of that development, the person becomes quasi-autonomous in relation to his or her social settings. The world of personal meaning-making thus is the world of personal subjective reflection on matters both outside the person and in the intrapsychological realm. Given such quasi-autonomy, psychology has taken two different, coexisting theoretical directions in viewing the person.

### *Person as Entity*

In the first of these theoretical approaches, the person is viewed as a conglomerate or structure of *unitary* characteristics, such as character or personality traits. Such characteristics may reflect the complexity of the person as an entity—either by their combination (e.g., any person can be described by some combination of the personality-reflecting terms in the English language, as in Allport and Odbert 1936), or by positing some quantification of similar unitary features (e.g., as in “personality measurement” by standardized scales). This perspective allows for the proliferation of ever-new unitary “building blocks” in the psychology of the person. In this construction, the person emerges as an ontological entity—some complex structure or set of dimensionalized parameters that exists similarly to other “things.” Processes of the person’s development cannot be conceptualized within this perspective except by assertions similar to those of alchemy, which merely state that one thing has turned into another.

### *Person as Dialogue*

Both historical (Baldwin 1897; James 1890; Mead 1934; Vygotsky 1931) and contemporary psychologists (Hermans and Kempen 1993; Watkins 1986; Wertsch 1991) as well as philosophers (Buber [1923]1994) and literary scholars (Bakhtin 1981; Volosinov 1973) have challenged the notion of the person or self as an entified unit; these challenges led to the notion of the *dialogical self*. From this point of view, the social others’ internalized voices are assumed to make up one’s self. Instead of appearing as a monologic entity, the self is seen as a relation of “I-Thou,” as in Martin Buber’s ([1923]1994) philosophy, in which “the other”—whether a person, an idea, an object, or God—is necessary for the development of self. Thus the basic unit is a duality rather than an entified unity, and this duality can be specified further as a duality of opposites (Hermans 1996; Linell 1992; Rychlak 1995). Only rarely, however, are the

actual workings of the dualities of opposites studied both theoretically and empirically. A theoretical basis for such effort is supported by the traditions of the Prague Linguistic School (Marková 1992). Empirical work in accounts of religious conversion (Stromberg 1993) is also noteworthy.

### BASICS OF AUTODIALOGICALITY

Our basic terminology includes the notions of meaning as a duality field, qualifiers of meanings, dialogicality between meanings, and circumvention strategies as regulators of the dialogicality.

#### *Meaning Complexes: Dualities of Opposites, and Qualifiers*

Our view of meanings entails a heterogeneous unit called the *meaning complex*. We view meaning complexes as consisting of signs (meanings per se) that present some aspects of the world, their implied opposites, and qualifiers that are linked with either signs or their opposites, making either (or both) fuzzy. *Meaning* here is a term that reflects semiotic presentation in field-theoretic terminology (Lewin 1942). Meanings are dual fields that are related by specific forms of oppositional relations, harmonious or tensional (for a thorough discussion of the role of tension, see Lewin 1936). In this paper we discuss meanings of this kind at two levels: words and utterances. An utterance constitutes a complex meaning created by combination of words.

*Roots of this formulation.* Our starting point is the basic notion of *opposites* united within the same whole. This point can be recognized as borrowing from different versions of past dialectical philosophical systems. In this case, however, the direct roots are in the theory of co-genetic logic (Herbst 1995), which formalizes the inevitability of looking jointly at a form (word, utterance) and its immediately (co-genetically) implied context. When a meaning emerges in the course of a person's life in a here-and-now setting (e.g., "I am sad," with *sad* as the emergent meaning), immediately and without reflection a fuzzy field of opposites emerges: all that could fit adequately into the field of *non-sad*. The generic form of such meaning complex is {A and non-A}; in our example, {sad and non-sad}.

In general terms this means that the emergence of any form, structure, or meaning {A} instantly differentiates what becomes "foregrounded" (Linell 1992) as {A} and what becomes "backgrounded" as a fuzzy field of its opposites. This foregrounding/backgrounding process was

called by Karl Bühler ([1934]1965) *fieldability of signs*: An emergent sign is situated within its field of appropriate other signs. Bühler did not emphasize the oppositional nature of the field, as we do here to show how dialogicality functions. In a similar vein, Gregory Bateson discussed the notion of class and its appropriate opposites. For instance, if a person utters the word *chair*, or {A} in our terminology, then the whole fuzzy field of "non-chair" {non-A} is instantly invoked. This field can be made to include any object that belongs to the class "admissible non-chairs" (Bateson 1971). Thus "table" and "car" are "admissible non-chairs"; "justice" is not. Bateson's examples, however, were offered within classical logical discussion of class inclusion, and not in a dialectical framework. Classical logic has found it difficult to reconcile issues of opposites (von Wright 1986). From a dialectical perspective, the unity of opposites {A and non-A} is an axiomatic starting point (Rychlak 1995).

*Opposites depicted as fields.* In our formulation, not only {non-A} but also {A} itself can be defined as a field. Different versions of {A} can exist because of the role played by *qualifiers* in the construction of the meaning complex. Consider the following utterances by a hypothetical person ({A} = "sad"):

- (1) I am sad.
- (2) I am somewhat sad.
- (3) How sad!
- (4) At times I feel sad.
- (5) I am generally sad.
- (6) I am never sad.

Each of the qualifiers ("somewhat," "at times," "generally," "never," even the exclamation "how...!") modifies the meaning of "sad" in the {A} part of this person's meaning complex. The use of qualifiers makes it possible to keep the meaning open for transformation (especially in line 6—for example, "I am never sad, but always happy" with "happy" as the new emerging meaning, which itself is instantly stabilized by the qualifier "always"), or to protect the meaning against preemptive challenges, whether from others (e.g., "Did I ever tell you I am *sad*? I told you I was *somewhat sad* at the time") or from oneself ("I do not need to try anything to overcome my sadness, because I am *generally sad*").

*Relations between the opposites within the whole.* We posit that two general kinds of oppositional relations can exist between the field of {A} and the field of {non-A}. First, the two opposites can coexist without friction; the opposition is non-tensional. We assume that non-tensional oppositions close the meaning complex to further transforma-

tion and are not interesting in the context of this paper. Second, in contrast, tensional oppositions are relations that open the {A and non-A} meaning complex to further transformation by entering a dialogic relation with other meaning complexes.

### *Dialogic Transformation of Meaning Complexes*

Meaning complexes are transformed in dialogic relations with other meaning complexes. If an {A and non-A} complex is to be transformed, its internal relation must be tensional. Then, in contact with another emergent meaning complex {B and non-B}, some version of the {non-A} field may become identified as {B}. The {B and non-B} complex is *inserted* (Surgan 1997) into the previous field of {non-A}. This insertion—the contact between two meaning complexes—allows for dialogicality in subsequent transformations.

Through the insertion, a relation is established between the newly emerged complex and the previous complex, which leads to a *contrast* of the two meaning complexes. This contrast can take different forms, depending on how the person regulates the [{A and non-A} <=> {B and non-B}] relationship. The two opposing complexes of this contrast can remain in harmonious coexistence (“At times I am sad, and at times I am happy”) or enter a state of rivalry (“At times I am sad, and at times I am happy, *but...*”). We assume a state of escalated rivalry in the case in which the newly constructed meaning {B and non-B} takes over and “destroys” the previously constructed meaning: {B} takes over the whole field of {non-A}, and {A and non-A} is overcome by {B and non-B}, as in this continuation of the previous example: “but, well, most of the time I am happy”. The former {A} may remain a version of {non-B}, with the potential for “revenge”—reversal of the takeover.

*The autodialogic process.* The above description is generic for all dialogic processes. *Autodialogicality* implies that the person himself or herself constructs this relation, whether in intramental or extramental talk (Surgan, Valsiner, and Josephs forthcoming). The autodialogic process can be set in motion by social suggestions from others, but it proceeds within the person’s own psychological sphere.

*Circumvention strategies.* Regulators of the relationship between meaning complexes are what we call *circumvention strategies*; these are semiotic organizers of dialogic (and autodialogic) relations between meaning complexes. They change the “outcome” of the person’s reasoning (e.g., con-

duct, internal feelings) *regardless* of whether the established meaning itself changes. For example, in “I am generally sad, but today the sun is shining!” the meaning is maintained, but the person has circumvented the meaning by distancing himself or herself. In this process, a “fragile” meaning can (but need not) be strengthened by a circumvention strategy, or alternatively can be overcome. Circumvention strategies are related to the goals constantly and instantly established by the person in the here-and-now context of life; because of this, we call them strategies. This does not imply, however, that they form a fixed set of “tools” ready for application. They are *constructed* instantly to make sense of a situation in the person’s continuous “effort after meaning” (Bartlett 1932). Below we elaborate in depth how circumvention strategies are constructed and how they work, especially in making sense of the religious world in the here-and-now context of everyday life.

### AN EXAMPLE OF AUTODIALOGUE IN ACTION: TRANSFORMATION OF BREAD

A person says or thinks “This is bread.” “Bread” entails the notion of a duality of opposition {bread and non-bread}, but it does not yet entail dialogicality or autodialogicality in the narrower sense of these terms as used here. A second person points to the bread and says to the first person: “This is the body of Jesus.” A relation immediately is established between two meaning complexes, namely {bread and non-bread} and {the body of Jesus and non-[the body of Jesus]}. Now, by our definition, dialogicality has come into being. If the first person picks up this social suggestion (or has constructed the second utterance by himself or herself) and elaborates it (for example, just by feeling the created tension or by “working on” it, as by asking “But is this bread really the body of Jesus?”), an autodialogic process has begun.

This autodialogic process involves a wider contrast: that between the symbolic knowledge domain of a religion—namely the literal though invisible transformation of bread into “Jesus’s body” during a ritualistic act in the Catholic “holy mass”—and the everyday knowledge domain in which bread has clearly specifiable mundane characteristics. At the intersection of such autodialogues between separate domains, the work of semiotic regulation of autodialogues can be studied most fruitfully. When a person in autodialogue interprets the two domains without separating them, the puzzlement implied above may continue. Anthropological research (Clark 1989) has shown that this transformation is not understandable to

people from some non-Christian communities in New Guinea who are in the process of becoming Christianized: They state clearly that the newly arrived "holy bread" ("Jesus's body") neither tastes like meat nor fills the stomach adequately. They fail to immediately understand the nature of the transformative process; this failure results in a rivalry between meanings. Such rivalry can be reformulated through circumvention strategies.

### *Puzzles of Meaning Transformation in the Everyday World*

How we make meanings in everyday life is no simpler than transforming a piece of bread symbolically into "Jesus's body." Imagine a mother watching her child eat a piece of something, labeled for the child as "bread," which suddenly falls on the floor of a restaurant. Before the child can retrieve it, the mother picks it up and quickly throws it away while telling the child that "this" is now *dirt*. Thus the thing known as bread has *invisibly* changed its identity. For the mother, the newly arrived meaning—dirt—may have completely taken over (destroyed) the previous meaning (bread), but this may not necessarily hold true for the child, especially if he or she continues to focus on the visually given structure of the bread: The bread was introduced as bread and remains bread. Thus the child may experience a rivalry of meaning. Rather than internally working through the tension created by the question "What is this thing in front of me, really and truly?" the child may solve the problem easily by his or her conduct—for example, by eating the bread while the mother is looking away. Whether the bread is still bread or is already dirt is no longer important here because the child has found a way to circumvent the challenged meaning by his or her conduct, which is meaningful in itself. Likewise, the mother's immediately emerging as-if-stable meaning (dirt) may be challenged and worked on at any time—for example, if she finds herself extremely hungry while only this piece of "bread" is available.

Let us take this example one step further, applying the analytical terminology elaborated above, and look at adult intrapsychological regulation of one's relation to a piece of bread that has fallen to the ground. Let us further assume that now it is the mother who is hungry and has nothing but *this* bread to eat. She might engage in an autodialogue like the following:

- Phase 1:
- The bread is on the floor. (1)
  - The floor is *dirty*. (2)
  - That's why *the bread is dirty*. (3)

- I *should not eat anything dirty*. (4)
- That's why I *should not eat this bread*. (5)

Phase 2:

- But I am *hungry*. (6)
- I *need to eat something*. (7)
- So even though the *bread is dirty*, (8)
- I'll eat it anyway. (9)

The parts emphasized in this internal dialogue represent the evoked meanings that enter into relations with one another.

### *Autodialogicality and the Unison Maintenance of Meaning*

*Focused meanings.* The term *focused meaning* is used here purely for technical reasons in order to denote the temporarily "highlighted" focus within the person's psychic organization, which can (but need not) be circumvented. Any meaning complex or contrast between complexes can temporarily become a focused meaning when its creation leads to a tension that requires some kind of resolution. In Phase 1 we see the "diagnosis" of the new state of affairs: the focused meaning (line 3), which leads to a self-oriented reflection (lines 4, 5). The autodialogic emergence of the focused meaning implies a specification of the still-unspecified opposite field of {bread}, namely {non-bread}, by the insertion of {dirty}, which leads to the new meaning complex {dirty and non-dirty}. In a complete overtake of {bread and non-bread} by {dirty and non-dirty}, the bread would have completely left behind its breadlike nature and would have turned unequivocally into a piece of dirt. Such a case would most likely result in an absence of further conflict or elaboration: Dirt is dirt, and it can and will be approached as such.

Alternatively, the dialogic relation between {bread and non-bread} and {dirty and non-dirty} could result in a contrast in the form of harmonious coexistence or in the form of rivalry: The bread is (to some unknown extent) still bread, but at the same time it is dirty—and this creates a problem. This latter state of rivalry in particular requires some psychological solution or temporary "decision."

*Macro organizers.* The focused meaning in our example is now related to what we call *macro organizers* (line 4). These are obviously (as in our example) or implicitly (as below) evaluative and moralistic ("you should; you should not"). Macro organizers operate on a more generalized semiotic level, depicting convictions, rules, worldviews, and the like, which can be self- or object-oriented. They guarantee stability, continuity, and pre-

dictability of one's attempts to make sense of life. Without them, life would be a flow from one state of fuzziness to the next.

Macro organizers are rather stable and resistant to change. In fact, they may be an example of {A and non-A} complexes in which the relation between opposites is non-tensional. Thus for each "should" (or "should not") there exists no access to the opposite part (let us call these "non-should" and "non-[should-not]"), which could indicate the insertion of any possible doubt into this suggestion by the macro organizer. In other words, line 4 in the example above cannot become something like "I do not know whether or not I am supposed to, or entitled to, eat anything dirty." Instead the "should" does its job precisely by ruling out any doubt about its opposite field. Once developed, macro organizers operate as *rigid generative processes*; these lead immediately to an infinite number of applications and specifications, all of the same kind and in the same direction (line 5 = application of the general rule to the specific content area by a simple deduction).

Furthermore, macro organizers are devices that constrain the construction of new meaning complexes or contrasts and the modification of present ones. The macro organizer in our example clearly foregrounds the {dirty and non-dirty} part of the contrast while backgrounding its counterpart {bread and non-bread}. In this way the autodialogic rivalry is minimized in the direction of a unison voice, which makes a straightforward action—not eating the "thing"—more likely.

Though macro organizers provide stability, their exclusive operation in one's life would lead inevitably to an imprisoned rigidity: The application of only a few basic rules would generate homogeneity within a closed system. The creation of any semiotic flux and novelty beyond the borders of our present semioscope would be impossible. Thus macro organizers—useful as they are—must be neutralized temporarily. To counteract an operating macro organizer (in our example, eating the "thing" despite its questionable identity), the person must invent "tricks"—circumvention strategies—that leave the macro organizers' general validity and applicability unquestioned, but nevertheless allow for an exception to the rule. These "tricks" are necessary because a direct "attack" on the macro organizer, whether initiated by the person himself or herself or suggested by another person ("but why should one *not* eat dirty things?"), leads—as we know from everyday life—only to circular protest or defense ("one should not do that because one should not do that") and often to a further strengthening of rigidity.

In general, Phase 1 can be summarized as an *autodialogic* construction of a *monologic* voice. Therefore our little scenario could be terminated here if we assumed that the person had no competing goal. Circumvention of the meaning would not be necessary because of the *unison maintenance of the meaning*.

### *Circumvention Strategies Elaborated: Modulation of the Dialogue*

As described above, circumvention strategies are semiotic means within a process of dialogic meaning-making which can modify the relation between meaning complexes. Such modifications can proceed in a number of ways.

*Circumvention of meaning by focusing on stronger, competing goals.* In Phase 2, the autodialogue is continued through the emergence of a new "voice," indicated by the word *but*, which introduces a new self-oriented meaning complex (hungry and non-hungry) (line 6) and its consequence (line 7). The new voice could be represented as well by any other linguistic term indicating a subsequent opposition, such as *nevertheless, yet, however*. This new meaning, with its focus on a strong motivational goal, now enters a new rivalry with the previously constructed contrast [{bread and non-bread}  $\Leftrightarrow$  {dirty and non-dirty}] with its latter part foregrounded and stabilized (by the macro organizer). Because of the entrance of this new "rival," however, we can assume that the {bread and non-bread} aspect now is foregrounded as strongly as possible, while {dirty and non-dirty} is overlooked. In general, each entrance of new meaning complexes changes the relation and the quality of the existing meaning complexes. If this new competing goal (hunger) has become intense (a clearly felt state of hunger), it could lead, as in our example, to the strategic circumvention (rather than the change) of the focused meaning, as established in Phase 1, precisely by *highlighting this stronger, competing goal*: The bread's true identity is still unclear, but the person is clearly hungry and eats it anyway.

*Circumvention of meaning by personal preferences.* A similar result can be obtained in the following way:

Phase 2:

*But I like bread.* (6)

And I *want* to eat something. (7)

So even though the *bread is dirty*, (8)

I'll eat it anyway. (9)

Here, as in our previous example, the focused meaning is not questioned or changed. Again, however, a shift in focus is assumed because of the

strong preferences {like and non-like}, which, in contrast to the macro organizer's previous emphasis on {dirty and non-dirty}, illuminate the complex {bread and non-bread}. The conduct, however, still can be organized in a meaningful way. In everyday discourse, such dialogic circumvention of the assignment of focused meaning is evident in the use of sentences such as "I should not do this, but I *still like* to do this." Again, the use of the circumvention brings temporary liberation by not denying otherwise fixed and firm constraints.

*Circumvention of meaning by focusing on harmonious coexistence of meaning complexes.* Separate domains of belief or meaning complexes can coexist despite their obvious incompatibility, thus guaranteeing enormous flexibility in the person's reasoning. In the following example, the bread's present state (being dirty) is not denied (line 6), nor is its identity as bread. This situation allows the person to act (to eat the bread as bread) at any time, again while neutralizing the macro organizer through the focus on bread instead of on dirt (line 7).

Phase 2:

But even if *the bread is dirty*, (6)

it is *still bread*. (7)

*Circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers.* The focused meaning also can be changed (more drastically than in the shifts of focus described above) through the use of circumvention strategies. This can occur by *focusing on semantic qualifiers* (line 6):

Phase 2:

But *maybe* the bread is not *so* dirty. (6)

I'll eat it anyway. (7)

As described above, both parts of {A and non-A} are viewed as fields, which include semantic qualifiers. The circumvention process can highlight some of these qualifiers, thus altering the particular {A and non-A} that is in dialogue with some strictly fixed other meaning complex (in this case, the focused meaning in Phase 1 fortified by macro organizers). By focusing on the qualifier, the macro organizer established in Phase 1 is not neutralized; rather, the connection between macro organizer and modified meaning has become blurred. The meaning constructed in line 6 is no longer *an unequivocal case* for the application of the macro organizer. An analytical working-through of this question would take time. (Is it or is not a "case" for the operating macro organizer?) The person, however, instantly performs the behavior in this moment when the temporarily activated meaning system is fuzzy. Thus the "problem" is solved productively before it is solved, so to speak.

*Circumvention of meaning by direct /symbolic*

*action.* The change of the focused meaning also can be more radical and less fragile than in the previous example. The simplest way would imply direct action toward the bread—for example, by wiping it clean (*circumvention and change of meaning by direct action*; line 6a below). Likewise, symbolic action can be directed toward the bread in an attempt to invisibly reestablish its previously clean status—for example, by kissing it (*circumvention and change of meaning by symbolic action*; line 6b below). In both examples, the visible structure of the bread remains identical throughout its transformation into something dirty and its retransformation into "unequivocal" bread. In both examples, the further application of the macro organizer becomes nonsensical because the bread is clearly bread again (and no longer dirt).

Phase 2:

But I can *clean* the bread. (6a)

[or alternatively]

But I can *kiss* the bread. (6b)

Symbolic action is one of the most powerful ways to circumvent a focused meaning through transformation. Very often, symbolic acts are rooted firmly in cultural belief systems and strengthened socially through rituals. They extend from our everyday beliefs in the need to wash our (visually) hands before eating to ritualistic and symbolic "healings" (as in exorcism). Such acts are easily applicable and guarantee success. If this success is not obvious, the correctness of the act's performance can be questioned (below, see our analysis of adults' understanding of miracles). Thus these acts are immune to contradictory evidence.

*Circumvention of meaning by the introduction of symbolic helpers.* An even easier way to circumvent meanings instantly in everyday life involves the introduction or immediate invention of *symbolic helpers*, whether socially suggested or autodiagnostically created. Symbolic helpers are nothing but decontextualized, trivial phrases that are ready to use and allow the person to distance himself or herself from the situation (change of internal feelings) while not necessarily changing either the focused meaning or the behavior.

If the person feels generally positive toward eating the bread in our scenario (otherwise there would be no need for any circumvention strategy), that person could distance himself or herself emotionally from the whole problematic situation of the somewhat dirty bread (rather than changing the behavior and/or the meaning complex) in the following way:

Phase 2:

But, well, that's life. You don't always get



what you want. [or]  
 But some days are just like that. So what? [or]  
 But tomorrow will be another day. [or]  
 But OK, that's life. Tomorrow the sun will  
 shine again. [or]  
 But anyway—take it with a smile. [or]  
 ... and so on.

This "list" of symbolic helpers could be continued *infinitely* by the insertion of well-known expressions (e.g., proverbs) or invented trivialities, which acquire a metaphorical power from their decontextualization. An immediately invented example might be "Well, that's life. But after all, a window is only made out of glass."

Through these kinds of circumvention, the person changes her own ways of feeling. She or he does not "leave the field" horrified by the problematic situation (the bread conflict), as in Lewin's (e.g., 1931) theorizing, but internally *distances* herself or himself from the field and thus changes her relation to the field. Useful as these symbolic helpers are, their excessive use leads to an infinitely floating "anything goes" attitude toward life. Therefore symbolic helpers are the counterparts of macro organizers: The predominance of the latter guarantees rigidity, while the predominance of the former results in a free-floating flux of constructions.

Until now we have focused on three general kinds of circumvention strategies: neutralizing the macro organizer (time out for the macro organizer), changing the focused meaning, and distancing oneself from the field internally in a productive way. The following strategies are employed as well.

*Circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer by a competing macro organizer.* An additional way of circumvention implies the challenge of one macro organizer by another, competing one, as in this example:

Phase 2:

*But you should never* throw away  
 anything which is *in principle* edible. (6)  
*The poor* in the world would be happy  
 to have *this bread*. (7)  
 So I *can (even must)* eat it. (8)

In this example, our previous macro organizer is temporarily overcome by a higher-level, clearly moralistic macro organizer (lines 6, 7). The general applicability of the Phase 1 macro organizer is not called into question; thus the person would continue to state that it is not good to eat dirty things. The moralistic nature of this newly introduced organizer makes it so powerful that it easily neutralizes the previous organizer.

The specific applications resulting from this new macro organizer (line 8) are assumed to be as rigid as those described in connection with the first one. Thus, paradoxically, the freedom of action or conduct (eating the bread anyway) is introduced through rigidity, which "interprets" the conduct as a case of a newly established rule. At any time, however, the first macro organizer can regain its previous strength—for example, by a refocusing through a social suggestion such as "How can you eat dirty bread? One should not eat dirty things!"

*Circumvention of meaning by the introduction of immunized symbolic organizers.* Finally, the newly introduced organizers can be of such a high level as to blur or reconcile the previously established rivalry between meaning complexes and even to overcome the Phase 1 macro organizer. These are called *immunized symbolic organizers*. First, they do not necessarily inherit the moralistic and evaluative notion of the macro organizers, although macro organizers easily can be derived from them. Second, they are immunized because no factual counterevidence can challenge them as a result of their purely symbolic nature. In the following example, two immunized symbolic organizers are introduced in succession: nature (line 6) and God (line 7).

Phase 2:

*But isn't* bread as well as dirt  
 part of *nature*? (6)  
 And is nature not given *by God*? (7)  
 And is not God's goal to care for us? (8)  
 I can eat the bread! (9)

This last, highest level of semiotic construction makes obsolete the rivalry between {bread and non-bread} and {dirty and non-dirty}. The complexes have been transformed into units of the same kind. Though this highest-level organizer (reference to God) does not directly include a moralistic or evaluative appeal, it certainly *suggests* indirectly the elaboration of "should" sentences. It is the person's own task to consider what follows, morally and behaviorally, from the immunized symbolic organizer. Through that process the organizer itself becomes even more powerful (compare the power of implicit suggestions in myths; Gupta and Valsiner 1996).

### Summary

Table 1 summarizes the basic constituents of the autodiologic process. In the remainder of this paper, we analyze empirical evidence as to how adults reason about religious miracles. Such miracles are challenging for psychological analysis. On the one hand, they are remarkable fictions; yet

many people believe in them. On the other hand, the miracle stories often include transformations of objects from everyday life with commonly known characteristics (bread, water, wine). In the case of miracles, the transformation should raise experience-based doubts in the believers, but it does not.

#### THE CASE OF MIRACLES: HOW DO ADULTS TALK ABOUT THEM?

Above we argued that the dialogic process mechanisms—circumvention strategies—make possible the coexistence of separate domains of beliefs despite their obvious incompatibility. Religious systems succeed in propagating belief systems that are empirically unverifiable by everyday experience and often in conflict with such experience. Such success requires a psychological analysis, which we present now in the realm of adults' understanding of miracles.

#### *The Study*

In a recent study (Josephs and Wolgast 1996), conducted in Germany, we studied parents' and children's joint attempt to make sense of three miracle stories from the New Testament: curing the blind man (Mark 8:22-26), miracle of the loaves and fishes (Mark 6:30-44), and Jesus walking on the water (Matthew 14:22-36). Furthermore (and this is the focus here), we interviewed parents separately about their own attitudes toward biblical miracles and miracles in general. The parents were recruited through their children, who either attended a Protestant kindergarten or belonged to a group of adolescents who met once a week in the same Protestant parish for leisure activities. Neither all of the parents nor all of the children, however, were Protestants (our sample included some Catholics and some unbaptized persons), nor did all participants claim to believe in the Christian faith. Members of religious groups

Table 1. Basic Constituents of the Autodialogic Process

Constituent	Definition
Meaning Complexes	Dualities of oppositions in the generic form {A and non-A}. Tensional or non-tensional relations between the opposites.
Contrasts	Relations between meaning complexes—following insertion of {B} into {non-A}—in the generic form [{A and non-A}<=> {B and non-B}]. Possible forms: Harmonious coexistence or rivalry.
Focused Meaning	Any meaning complex or relation between meaning complexes which becomes highlighted in the autodialogic process.
Takeover	“Destruction” of {A and non-A} by {B and non-B} as a consequence of escalated rivalry.
Circumvention Strategies <sup>a</sup>	Constructed semiotic regulators of dialogic (and autodialogic) relations between meaning complexes: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Circumvention of meaning by focusing on stronger, competing goals</li> <li>2. Circumvention of meaning by personal preferences</li> <li>3. Circumvention of meaning by focusing on harmonious coexistence</li> <li>4. Circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers</li> <li>5. Circumvention of meaning by direct action</li> <li>6. Circumvention of meaning by symbolic action</li> <li>7. Circumvention of meaning by symbolic helpers</li> <li>8. Circumvention of meaning by challenging one macro organizer by a competing macro organizer</li> <li>9. Circumvention of meaning by immunized symbolic organizers</li> <li>10. Circumvention of meaning by abstraction</li> </ol>
Macro Organizers	Moralistic and evaluative semiotic constructions in the form of “should” sentences.
Immunized Symbolic Organizers	Symbols of maximally high semiotic level which are immune against any counterfactual evidence.
Symbolic Helpers	Proverbs or self-made decontextualized trivialities that allow for personal distancing.

<sup>a</sup>Circumvention strategy 10 was not elaborated hypothetically, but within the analysis of the empirical material.

other than Catholic and Protestant Christians were not included in our sample.

All interview participants were eager to discuss the issue under consideration—miracles—partly out of curiosity, and partly because adults usually do not discuss such topics in everyday life. The interviews were semistructured and took place at the interviewees’ homes. Interviewees were asked the standard questions listed in Table 2. The interviewees also were encouraged to talk about the issue as frankly as they wished. Four fathers and 17 mothers participated.

The interviews were fully transcribed and analyzed according to our theoretically developed model (for a full presentation of data see Josephs and Valsiner 1996). In the following analysis we look especially for the emergence of focused meaning complexes and circumvention strategies. Rather than presenting the complete material here, we analyze some selected examples in depth.

*Focused Meaning and Its Circumvention Revisited*

The principal question presented to our interviewees was whether miracles—biblical or mundane—can or could happen. The participants started from two kinds of focused meaning complexes: {miracles happen and non-[miracles happen]} or {miracles do not happen and non-[miracles do not happen]}. Different versions of meaning complexes emerged because of the role played by qualifiers modifying these complexes. Thus interviewees began by constructing several variants of {A}—for instance, “miracles can happen,” “miracles can happen at times,” or “miracles usually don’t happen.” In this way the meaning complex is made more or less open to transformation.

*Absence of circumvention strategies.* Three

participants started with an “unequivocal” meaning complex (no qualifiers) by stating that miracles do or do not happen. One participant said:

Miracles do not exist. (1)

Luck, chance, and coincidence, however, do exist. (2)

Miraculous healing, as observed at Lourdes, can be explained by that. (3)

The unequivocal meaning complex elaborated in line 1 {miracles do not exist and non-[miracles do not exist]}, however, is assumed to create tension; otherwise the person would not continue. The fuzzy field of {non-A} becomes specified by the insertion of {B}, namely luck, chance, and coincidence (line 2). This insertion leads to a takeover of {A and non-A} by {B and non-B}. The person is no longer reflecting on miracles, but on luck, chance, and coincidence (line 3). Former {A}, however, remains a version of {non-B}. Circumvention strategies are not necessary because {B and non-B} allows for a non-miraculous explanation of miracles that fits with experiences in everyday life.

In most cases, however, the focused meaning complex is modified by qualifiers; this process leads to further elaborations and to the potential use of circumvention strategies. In contrast to the example involving bread, no problem of action—eating or not eating the bread—was addressed in the miracle scenario. The bread example created a problem only in the course of the person’s “motivated dialogue” (the motivation was the desire to eat the bread). In the case of miracles, however, the person’s motivation to enter a dialogue (“I do believe in miracles, but...”) stems from the desire and the need to make sense of the emerging meaning complex within her or his everyday world. This world, at first glance, is obviously not compatible with the world of miracles. How do circumvention strategies help in finding a resolution?

Table 2. Standard Interview Questions

Topics	Questions
Understanding Miracles in General	What is a miracle for you?
	Do you believe in miracles?
	Can miracles happen today?
	Under which conditions can miracles happen?
	Have you ever experienced miracles in your life?
Understanding the Biblical Miracles of these miracles?	How do you understand and interpret the biblical miracles?
	Did the biblical miracles happen the way they are told?
	What implications would you draw from your understanding

*The use of circumvention strategies.* Rather than starting with an unmodified, unequivocal {A}, the person in the following example defines {A} in a fuzzy way—by qualifier *usually* (line 1).

Miracles are *usually impossible*. (1)

Without *firm belief and praying* they would not happen. (2)

Jesus can do miracles with the *power of God*. (3)

But why is there war all over the world?(4)

Today only *little miracles* happen; we would otherwise have no war. (5)

Because of the modification by the qualifier, the emerging focused meaning complex {usually impossible and non-[usually impossible]} is filled with tension and “asks for” a *but*, or at least for an explanatory elaboration. This follows immediately through the *circumvention of meaning by symbolic action*, namely referring to “firm belief” and “praying.” Line 2, however, only indirectly depicts the *conditions* for a not-yet-offered specification of {non-[usually impossible]}. This newly constructed condition (line 2) is not elaborated so as to overcome the former {A and non-A} complex—for instance, through a simple reversal of the utterance (“With firm belief, they would happen”). When lines 1 and 2 are taken together, the person’s meanings as constructed to this point are maximally open. It is as if the person specifies the ground that is necessary for the elaboration of the figure—the miracle.

By the further *circumvention of meaning through the introduction of immunized symbolic organizers*—the power of God (line 3)—{non-A} is specified by the insertion of a new meaning {Jesus can do miracles with the power of God}. This newly introduced meaning holds for only one person, namely Jesus. A complete takeover, which might have been possible here through a generalization of line 3 in combination with line 2 (“if you believe firmly, miracles can happen with the power of God”), is blocked by the immediately following self-oriented question (line 4), which is of the “devil’s advocate” type: It seems as if the person is trying to apply his or her own construction to the critical test. Line 2 would provide a sound answer (“there are wars because people do not believe firmly enough”), but the person finds a “better” solution that does not place the whole responsibility for events on the shoulders of human beings: The problem is solved immediately by the *circumvention of meaning by focusing on semantic qualifiers* (line 5, “little” miracles). Because of that focus, all elaborated meanings can remain in a state of harmonious coexistence: Miracles usually do not happen, *and* without firm

belief they would not happen, *and* Jesus can do miracles with the power of God, *and* “little” miracles happen.

In contrast to the above example, *circumvention by symbolic action*, for many of our interviewees, is sufficient for a takeover or balancing of meaning complexes. One person, for instance, stated:

Miracles *usually* do not happen. (1)

But *if I believe firmly enough* in myself or in others, I can succeed, (2) and miracles *can happen*. (3)

In this example, referring to symbolic action (line 2) is extremely powerful in circumventing the focused meaning established in line 1. “Firm belief” is a miraculous construction in itself because nobody can judge where firm belief begins and where it ends. Because of its symbolic nature, it cannot be challenged by counterfactual evidence. If—despite “firm belief”—miracles do not happen, the intensity of the person’s firm belief can be questioned: He or she simply has not believed firmly *enough*. In everyday life, such constructions work easily: Mothers tell their children that they have not “believed enough in their power” to be successful in school, or a person can claim that if her partner “really loved” her, he would understand her or behave differently. The person’s lack of effort in the symbolic realm (believing, loving) always can be held responsible for the failure; this makes the reference to symbolic action especially effective in any educational context.

Asked specifically for her opinion about the biblical miracles, one interviewee answered:

The biblical miracles did not happen *literally*. (1)

But *somehow* they happened. (2)

The focused meaning here {did not happen literally and non-[did not happen literally]} is of the same fuzzy type as discussed above (through the qualifier *literally*): It is filled with tension and asks for an elaboration. What follows in line 2 is *circumvention of meaning by focusing on harmonious coexistence of meaning complexes*. In this case, harmonious coexistence implies a minimal elaboration of the {non-A} part by {B}: {non-[did not happen literally]} is elaborated minimally by {somehow they happened}, while the latter itself is fuzzy because of the qualifier *somehow*. The two meaning complexes can coexist harmoniously, with {A} remaining a version of {non-B} and vice versa.

A further example illustrates the same strategy:

*Rationally*, the biblical miracles cannot happen. (1)

I am a rational man. (2)

I believe in them anyway. I know this sounds crazy, but it is as it is. (3)

In the above example, which contradicts the classical syllogism, the contrast between the meaning complexes is more pronounced. Nevertheless, the person can be both rational *and* a believer in miracles at the same time, without being confused or feeling crazy. It is precisely this harmonious balance of incompatible domains of belief which allows people to reconcile their religious reasoning with their sometimes incompatible or contradictory everyday knowledge.

Rivalry—that is, the continuation of tension between the two meaning complexes—is found in the following interviewee’s statement:

As a rational person I do not believe that really everything has happened the way it was told. (1)

But I feel a split: Belief versus rational thinking? (2)

The next example illustrates a circumvention strategy we have not elaborated theoretically, namely *circumvention of meaning by abstraction (through construction of a higher-level sign)*. Interviewees used this strategy quite often:

The biblical miracles *might* have happened that way. (1)

But the symbolic meaning is more important for me. (2)

The fuzziness of the {A and non-A} complex in line 1 is circumvented by focusing on the symbolic meaning of the miracles (line 2). As a consequence, the person continues reflecting on his or her understanding of the symbolic meaning, while leaving aside the question of the concrete, literal reality of the miracles. Focusing on the “sign” quality of the stories is certainly a way to circumvent inconsistencies between the miraculous and the everyday world. In this manner, the miraculous in the miracles can be understood as a trope (a metaphor or simile), in an abstract rather than a concrete, literal sense.

In balancing the miraculous with the mundane world, this strategy seems quite effective. In everyday life, however, it mainly creates problems. The miraculous in everyday life often seems to be the conduct and action of another person. If conduct and action resist literal, concrete understanding, they can be easily interpreted as a sign. Everybody knows of breakfast-table comments between couples (such as “You look so strange. Is something wrong with me?”), where the look is understood as a sign, as a comment on the relationship. Higher-level signs have power: They lead us into the world of abstraction. As a result, they are immune to

counterfactual evidence.

In the next example, meaning is *circumvented by the introduction of symbolic helpers*:

The biblical miracles did not happen that way. (1)

But after all, it’s all a question of interpretation. (2)

Though the tension in the meaning complex (line 1) is not pronounced, it is completely overcome by line 2.

### Summary

Circumvention strategies are abundantly in use in adults’ reasoning about miracles. In most cases they appear in combination rather than alone, which makes them even more powerful. Some of our hypothetically set-up circumvention strategies (circumvention through focusing on stronger, competing goals, circumvention by personal preferences, and circumvention by challenging one macro organizer by a competing one) were not found in the empirical material, possibly because of the context and the topic of the interview. On the other hand, circumvention through abstraction was observed quite often in the empirical material, although we did not expect it theoretically. Similarly, our participants did not mention macro organizers. In the parent-child interactions, however, which are not reported here, they were brought in quite often, usually in reference to a symbolic action (“You should always believe in God; then he would help you”).

### GENERAL DISCUSSION

As we have tried to demonstrate, human reasoning is autodialogic, and some forms of the process that operate on the transformation of meaning complexes can be identified. These circumvention strategies constitute the core of human meaning-making. Our goal was not to present a complete “list” of circumvention strategies, which people “use.” New situations, in which new goals become important, might require new circumvention strategies. These strategies are not the “elements” of mind, or more global and general modes of control or coping activated in distressing situations (e.g., Weisz et al. 1994); rather, they are what people *do constantly* in order to get along in their daily lives.

We have demonstrated how secular and religious meaning complexes inhabit adults’ psychological worlds in ways in which neither is challenged directly by the other; nor are they mutually coordinated. Through circumvention strategies, the notion of religious miracles can be established in

ways that cannot be challenged by everyday, mundane experiences. We can argue that the special power of the human meaning-making system is the capacity to develop heterogeneous reasoning systems that present themselves to the person as if they were homogeneous. In other words, the context-specificity of the meanings made is a result of a general system of meaning-making that allows for the construction of context-specificity.

This general quality of the power of discursive construction is well recognized in the traditions of discourse and conversation analysis (Edwards 1997). Parallels to our analysis of circumvention strategy can be found in the ingenious role-modification (breaching) experiments in the ethnomethodological tradition (Garfinkel 1967, also see Heritage 1984) as well as in the sociology of conversations (Schegloff 1992, on conversation repairs).

Similar mechanisms may be operating in explanations of paranormal experiences, which challenge one's construction of everyday life (Wooffitt 1992), or in people's efforts to deal with "reality disjunctures"—those occasions on which people produce (or are faced with) more than one version of the world, as in traffic court (Pollner 1987). Wooffitt's and Pollner's analyses focus on "what really happened," and how this is decided in the presence of conflicting or implausible accounts of events. The survival of a single characterization of events is maintained against the threat of multiple versions by undermining the status of one or more of those versions.

One way of doing this is what Harvey Sacks (1984) calls "doing being ordinary": One can present oneself as an "ordinary," normal person, where *ordinary* implies nothing remarkable and therefore is true by default. "Doing being normal" is one way of dealing with unusual experiences—trying hard to see things as ordinary until "reality" no longer can be denied, according to the formula "At first I thought (mundane X), but then I realized (extraordinary Y)" (see Jefferson 1984, quoted in Edwards 1997). The latter implies the notion "I am normal because I did my best to understand the world in the usual way, so it must be the world that is crazy."

In our analysis, however, it was not always the person's goal to construct one true, unequivocal version of reality. Circumvention strategies permitted more flexibility—for instance, the "harmonious coexistence" of the mundane and the miraculous world.

For additional, ample empirical evidence of the flexibility of meaning-making through circumvention strategies, one can consult various efforts

to analyze religious conversion stories (e.g., Caldwell 1983; Harding 1987; Stromberg 1993) or people's actions in life-threatening circumstances (e.g., combat fighters; see Glavis 1946; also see Harvey Sacks's analysis of a report of a Navy pilot's remarks on serving in Vietnam; Sacks 1992, 1:205). Extreme circumstances require quick readjustments in the autodialogic process as part of the person's general survival. In addition, however, our constant construction of everyday experiences offers infinite examples of meaning-making through circumvention strategies, whether in personal relationships ("I should hate him, but I love him anyway"), in scientific work ("The paper is not a big deal, but after all, it is not so bad"; also see Gilbert and Mulkey 1984; Latour and Woolgar 1986), or in worrisome times ("I am damned afraid of the job interview, but after all, they will not kill me").

Various circumvention strategies that we have outlined here can be regarded as devices of "semiotic liberation" from the uncertainties of a here-and-now setting. These strategies allow for speedy distancing of the person's position from some aspects of this setting, while moving into a different position. Meaning-making becomes flexible, and can "leap out" from the logical schemes that people's reasoning is assumed to follow.

The flexibility we found in reasoning about miracles or bread is analogous—but not similar—to what "cognitive heuristics" researchers (Kahnemann, Slovic, and Tversky 1982) have discovered by examining "short cuts" in problem solving. Unlike the "cognitive heuristics" tradition, however, which contrasted statistical models of reasoning with those of real-life heuristics, we have tried to outline the specific devices that operate on the making of inferential "leaps" in real time. We focus on *how* autodialogue is modulated by one circumvention strategy or another (or combination of strategies) rather than demonstrating *that* inferential "leaps" occur in human meaning-making.

The cognitive heuristics tradition has demonstrated that the use of described heuristics depends on the person's interpretational *position* regarding the given task (e.g., Gigerenzer et al. 1989). In an attempt to move one step further, we have examined how that new interpretational position is actually achieved. For that purpose, the material about religious miracles proved appropriate. When people were confronted with a scenario that can occur both along the lines of a miracle story (e.g., Jesus feeding five thousand people with one loaf of bread) and, alternatively, in terms of everyday activities (e.g., a large family barely fed by a loaf of bread), the need to bring into action different

kinds of circumvention strategies was enhanced.

Yet, the liberation of the meaning-making process from the here-and-now action context cannot be unlimited (except in cases of psychopathology, as described amply, for example, by Janet 1925). Rather, semiotic liberation by circumvention needs to be constrained by reverse circumvention, which limits the flexibility of the autodiologue for a given moment. A person who claims that “with the power of God you can do everything, but unless you believe firmly nothing will happen” first makes use of a maximally amplified, liberated claim, which is then followed by a reverse circumvention strategy that effectively reduces the momentary liberation to a more fixed status quo in the here-and-now setting. Thus semiotic liberation and semiotic constraints are two sides of the same coin; their mutual interplay allows people to navigate efficiently through their everyday lives. An exclusive emphasis on either of these sides might result in a manic, free-floating construction of life or in a depressive state of semiotic imprisonment—a challenging topic for further investigation along the lines of the model of autodialogicality we have outlined here.

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