

SECRET AND COMMUNICATION
PRELIMINARY REMARKS TO A THEORETICAL APPROACH

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1. The Concept of Secret

The ordinary use of "secret" is so diverse that it covers a vast field of meaning; to narrow it we can turn to the dictionary and use its definitions as a starting point. In this case we necessarily neglect some particular occurrences of the word as a lexical items though at the same time we presume that they could be classifier into the following two definitions.

The Oxfords English Dictionary ¹ gives seven separate definitions of the word "secret" as a substantive; among them two are very particular (2. a prayer in liturgical use, 7. a coat of mail), two others do no more than specify things that can be the object of secret (4. a method, 5. a place), one lists only different phrases made with the word "secret", while the remaining two reveal the basic meanings of "secret" at once interrelated and contrasting:

1. Something unknown or unrevealed or that is known only by initiation or revelation, a mystery chiefly pl. the hidden affairs od workings (of God, Nature, Schience);

3. Some fact, affair, design, action, etc. the knowledge of which is kept to oneself or shared only with those whom is concerns or to whom it has been confided, something that cannot

be divulged without violation of a command or breach of confidence.

According to the first definition the secret corresponds to an object beside the bounds of knowing. The secret exists as a real object and it expresses a negative epistemological attitude. In this sense we deal with the secret as an epistemological phenomenon the cause of which has still been undiscovered. Then the secret is not a linguistic but rather a scientific problem; though language cannot be wholly excluded, for all our understanding is closely related to speaking: there is no problem until we consider a thing secret that is totally unknown; but as soon as we obtain the slightest information on it we name it although we know nothing of its cause but its being; then the epistemological problem becomes a linguistic one, too. For how can you name a thing without knowing the very essence of its existence? Still the solution remain scientific. So we cannot say we know a thing unless we have got the necessary information on its cause, for knowing its existence generally is not enough. ² According to the third definition the secret corresponds to a way of communication; it describes a situation in which the contact between potential addressers and addressees is prohibited. We can add other cases when the break-down of contact is not intentional: the addresser and the addressee cannot get into touch because of reasons of time-and-space; or there is contact but somehow they don't speak the same language and so they cannot understand each other. In this sense we deal with the secret as a linguistic phenomenon.

So we have two clear-cut definitions of "secret":

a.) the first refers to an epistemological attitude, to a relation between things and human consciousness. Here we could like to lay emphasis on "human consciousness" because we hold strongly the view that the secret can never be an attribute of things or a label attached to them by the human mind; neither can it be a type of behaviour sanctioned by conventions; briefly, it is not an entity but a system of relations;

b.) the second definition refers to a type of communication; in this sense it is less tempting to think of secret as an ontological entity than from an epistemological point of view. For it is not the knowledge but the divulgation of it that matters; not the information in itself but the fact that it is kept from others. So this type of communication will be describable in terms of those who keep the information to themselves and of those from whom it is kept; i. e. in terms of potential addressers and addressees.

We aim at giving a general and unified description of secret. This description is based on the two different definitions given above: according to them the secret is a system consisting of certain rules and conditions that orientates our activity to acquire knowledge. But communication and knowing cannot be separated; so we shall use the word "communication" in a wider sense: we consider every activity of the individual to get new information as a type of communication - allowing that in some cases the addresser remain unknown or be not a definite person but a thing, Nature, Fate or a social institute, etc. From this it is to be concluded that in a more specific description of

secret the interest would be shifted onto the code - especially in the case of literature and of complex social phenomena, when not only human language but other symbolic languages like the language of gestures, things, etc. could serve as a code. In some way or other the concept of secret always refers to a system of codes whether open or closed. We speak of a system of codes because the same secret can be reformulated in another code which, being a meta-language, can have the previous one as an object-language.

The secret can be described in terms of two systems: the one is to be called a system of epistemological conditions and the other a system of rules of communication. It is useful to deal with them separately for the epistemological conditions have to be satisfied before the rules of communication may come into operation; i. e. the epistemological conditions are presupposed in the rules of communication. This may serve as a framework of a general description of the two different definitions.

2. Secret as a System of Epistemological Conditions

In this section we shall try to set down some modal conditions of the function of secret. But because these conditions are strongly related to the operating of the rules of communication even the modal logical analysis must be completed with respect to some social aspects of the problem. This means that modality should be seen from the point of view of not one single individual but of a

whole community. We do not exclude the case when it is an individual who seeks to know but we have to concede that anyone from the community to which the above-mentioned individual belongs may join in the search. So the secret can function only in a community: this community does not correspond always to the society; we consider a community every association of people with a certain purpose and so with a definite system of norms which will help any of the members of the community in deciding the truth-value of a piece of information in the case of verification being hindered somehow. Sometimes this system which holds the community together strongly may change an already verified value into its opposite (see religion). According to the character of this system different types of community can be given: religious, political communities, communities of sports and clubs, etc. each of which has got a specific system of norms for deciding the truth-value of information: revelation or initiation, the present structure of power, different normative systems of rules, etc. The modal logical analysis of secret can be made only with respect to these systems because the function of secret involves the epistemological attitude of not one single individual but of at least two and at most three. These three epistemological attitudes i. e. modal contexts, will have the same piece of information, the same known fact, in their scope; but the truth-value of this - within the framework of the theory - cannot be defined. So our analysis has to be restricted to cases when to each triad of modal contexts we can give a relative system of norms with respect of which each piece of information acquires a positive truth-value in spite of having a negative one outside the community:

e. g. if the secret means the knowing or not-knowing of a certain miracle it is to be considered true because within the community every member of it thinks it so and we are concerned with their modal attitudes being the very meaning of secret and not with what they know which has got nothing to do with the concept of secret.

And now we turn to the three modal contexts. In the following lines instead of information we shall speak of statement; this statement refers to a fact or to the cause of a fact which we accept as true within a certain community. Furthermore we consider only the cases when a given p statement can be formulated as $f(x)$. Then x is a bound variable into which we can substitute proper names; for these latter we use the symbol d, which is a logical constant, while the possibility of substitution is expressed as x/d . Per definitionem $f(x)$ corresponds to the minimal information on the existence of the object, while $f(d)$ stands for the adequate information on its cause. ³ If $p = f(x)$ is a statement, then it can function as secret within a certain community and there can be defined three different modal contexts all of which will have p in their scope; all the contexts will have the modality of "know" /K/ with a, b and c in the index;

(i.) let a stand for those and only for those individuals who know about a secret in a given community but they don't know the solution to it; they know $f(x)$ but they don't know $f(d)$; e. g. they know that x robbed the bank but they don't know that x is the Great Ben;

(i.i.) let b stand for those and only for those individuals who know about a secret in a given community and they also know the solution to it; so they know $f(d)$ too; e. g. if $\ulcorner p = \underline{x}$ killed the president \urcorner and $\ulcorner \underline{x} = \text{Great Ben} \urcorner$, then b can make the following statement: "I know that Great Ben killed the president";

(i.i.i.) finally let c stand for those and only for those individuals who don't know about a secret in a given community; so they don't know even $f(x)$; e. g. they don't know that somebody killed the president. ⁴

In terms of a, b and c all the members of the community can be defined. The only problem seems to be x/d i. e. quantification in a modal context. Quantification is based upon identity. This problem is extensively dealt with by J. Hintikka in his book "Knowledge and Belief". ⁵ His answer to the problem of quantification in a referentially opaque and transparent context can be summed up in that the two types of quantification lead to the same result and that though a may know one of two expressions referentially identical, this does not mean that he has got all the evidence to know the other one too unless he knows the identity itself - even if this identity holds true in reality. So if we have a p statement that can be reformulated as $f(x)$, then the substitution of d for x is consistent only if a knows $\underline{x} = \underline{d}$. Otherwise a can only know of the possibility of the substitution. And this is really the difference between a (i.) and b (i.i.). This can be shown by writing $p/(x/d)$ instead of $f(x)$ and $p/(x=d)$ instead of $f(d)$. Now we can formulate the three modal contexts

in the following way:

- (i) $(\exists a)(\exists x)[K_a p/x/d \ \& \sim K_a p/x = d]$
- (ii) $(\exists b)(\exists x)[K_b p/x/d \ \& \ K_b p/x = d]$
- (iii) $(\exists c)(\exists x)[\sim K_c p/x/d \ \& \sim K_c p/x = d]$

Some special cases need to be explained:

$b = 0$: this means that the secret refers to something not known by anybody and so the possibility of knowing it is very restricted (in the next part we shall see that this case does not concede that the rules of communication come into operation); here may belong the situation before a forthcoming discovery or invention, etc. This is included in the first definition - i. e. epistemological - of secret when we lack even the minimal information on an object, so we do not know whether it exists (see first part). Now we can set down one of the main conditions of the function of secret: it is to be expected that there be at least one individual in a given community (b) who knows the solution to the secret: $b \geq 1$.

$a = 0$: this means that one of the basic conditions of secret is lacking: on the surface there seems to be no secret because there is no-one who could know about without knowing the solution to it, too; i. e. these may be only the extreme cases: those who know both (b) and those who know neither of the existence nor the cause (c). But under the surface there may be secrets even the existence of which is feared to be known. This is a reduced case with only b and c but probably a more serious case; although to analyze it further we should have special detectors to search for truth either in people's minds or in things but we are not concerned with truth

but with the divulgation of it and so we cannot investigate this problem further.

$c = b$: this means that there is no-one who does not know at least about the secret itself: this is rather a final situation in the genesis of a secret than one at the beginning of it (see further).

But the relative position of a, b and c may change from one moment to another i. e. with the starting of communication a given individual may shift from a position corresponding to a to that of b. This process may increase with the passing of time. The communication, which starts his process, is governed by rules which will be stated in the following part. But for a description of the epistemological conditions we have to prevent any of the individuals having the relative position of a, b or c from acquiring any new information from any kind of source. So we can conclude that the epistemological conditions are very time-related.

These conditions can be summed up in one:

$$\begin{aligned} & (\exists a)(\exists b)(\exists c)(\exists x) \{ [K_a p/(x/d) \ \& \ \sim K_a p/(x=d)] \ \& \\ & \ \& \ [K_b p/(x/d) \ \& \ K_b p/(d=x)] \ \& \ [-K_c p/(x/d) \ \& \ \sim K_c p/(x=d)] \} \end{aligned}$$

Still, the only problem seems to be whether we have to include the subsistence of p in our conditions or not; the concept of knowledge requires it, but many times the system of norms that holds together the community is against it and even "lies" are raised to the level of truth. A possible solution to this problem may be the introduction of alternative worlds. This is based upon Hintikka's work.⁶ If we presume that μ stands for

a possible state of affairs i. e. μ consists of statements that describe this state of affairs, then in this world μ there can be made the following two statements - with respect to our restrictions of a and b ⁷ - consistently: a.) "a does not know that b". These statements will be true only if there is a possible state of affairs relative to which p will be true. But this latter state of affairs need not coincide with the previous one relative to which we have made the two statements. So this world in which p is true can be called - with respect to a and b - an alternative to μ which we write μ^* . Then the epistemological condition of secret may be reformulated in the following way:

If $(\exists a)(\exists x)[K_a p/(x/d) \ \& \ \sim K_a p/(x = d)] \in \mu$, and
 $(\exists b)(\exists x)[K_b p/(x/d) \ \& \ K_b p/(x = d)] \in \mu$
and $(\exists c)(\exists x)\sim K_c p/(x/d) \in \mu$ and if μ^* with respect to
a, b and c - is an alternative to μ , then there is a μ^*
so that $(\exists x)p(x=d) \in \mu^*$.

3. The Rules of Communication

When defining the epistemological conditions we have seen that the secret can never be the equivalent of a given state of affairs or of the statements that describe this state of affairs (e. g. $(\exists x) (x \text{ killed the president})$) but only with its reformulation within a modal context (e. g. $(\exists x, y) (\exists b) K_b/x \text{ killed the president}/y$). The emphasis of modality is very important because it corresponds to what has been said in the first part: the secret cannot be considered an entity but the system of rules and conditions that govern the human activity to acquire knowledge and to communicate.

This governing mechanism is being analyzed now.

The epistemological conditions are needed for the communication of the secret: if $b = 0$ we cannot speak about communication but rather about a philosophical cognitive process. Though if we use the word "code" in a wider sense so that it includes the language of all those things, phenomena, gestures, etc. that can function as signs if we presume that there be a potential addresser communicating in each of these symbolic languages - we can define "communication" in a much wider sense according to which every human cognitive process can be a type of communication and so can have at least a virtual addresser while the addressee is man. In this aspect the epistemological conditions and the rules of communication are strongly related to each other: every condition determines the possibility of applicable rules.

If we use instead of the free variables a, b and c the corresponding classes A, B, and C, two different schemes of communication can be given:

- (i.) ADDRESSER = A or B; MESSAGE = $(\exists x) p/(x/d)$; ADDRESSEE = C;
- (i.i.) ADDRESSER = B; MESSAGE = $(\exists x) p/(x=d)$;
ADDRESSEE = A or C.

The first scheme is important for the function of secret in a given community because it increases the number of those who know about the secret but do not know the solution to it. So this rule tends to convert the elements of C into A. The second scheme is important for the annihilation of the secret in a given

community because it increases the number of those who not only know about it but also know the solution to it. This rule tends to convert the elements of A or C into B.

Further rules can be specified by restricting the numbers of the elements of classes A, B and C; we have seen that $B = 0$ refers to the epistemological definition of secret with $A > 0$: the minimal information received and with $A = 0$: the object totally unknown; then $B \neq 0$ refers to the other definition of secret that describes a type of communication; without this we lack one of the basic conditions of the communication of the secret; and then $B = 1$ is a border-line (see secrets of diaries) - with $A = 0$. And so on, every set of rules presupposes the existence of the given epistemological conditions; and vice versa: every epistemological conditions; and vice versa: every epistemological condition specifies a set of possible rules some of which may come into operation with respect to the other conditions.

So, in abstract, the basic rule of the function of secret prescribes that the first type of communication (i.) be open while the second (i.i.) be closed.

Finally the conditions and rules of the function of secret could summed up thus: if there is given a state of affairs there should be found individuals who do not know the cause of its existence nor its existence itself (classes A or C). This is a very general criterion. Otherwise we should have a world in which everyone's knowledge would be absolute for all men would

know all the things that are or that happen. Then a theory of secret would be useless. But in our world the human cognitive process is hindered and limited by the present state of human consciousness and by the structure of power of the given community.

4. Secret and Literature

This analysis of secret may have relevance when speaking about a narrative text. As we have viewed the secret in a modal context which describes a particular state, with every narrative text it is possible - even if theoretically - to construct different triads of modal contexts. These contexts would describe series of states. The difference between two such states would lie in the different substitution rules of a, b and c or in the ranges of A, B and C. Each change of state would be governed by special rules of communication: these rules would tell what new configuration of a, b and c is needed to arrive at a new state. This kind of analysis surely presupposes that within each state there be found some basic information, an elementary statement, which will appear in the scope of the modal contexts of a, b and c; i. e. this statement p should bear a privileged position in the structure of the text; e. g. if there is a text in which figure the two following statements: p = "x has smoked half his cigarette" and q = "y killed the king", we have to decide which of the two is to be considered more important in constructing the given state. There can be found a context in which q will be decisive; in ordinary life really this is more probable. But there can be found another context in which p will

be needed for constructing the given state, i. e. we will have to analyse p in the modal context of a, b and c. With literary texts this is the more probable. Moreover, it is possible that the equality $p = q$ is required. It might be that the reader only knows this equality; then a, b and c would stand for readers of diverse sensibility who have understood the passage on various levels. So an equality as such would function as secret not within the book but outside it, just for the readers.

But for constructing these states we can apply not only to the statements that figure in a given text but to the information conveyed by things, gestures, etc. which form part of the world of the text, too. So the analysis would shift from the linguistic code of the text onto its implicit, symbolical codes and the statements formulated on these languages would have to be utilized in choosing the modal contexts of a, b and c. So these statements would obtain a privileged position in the semantical universe of the work of art, and certain semantical problems as the message of the writer, the key-sentences of the book, etc. could be solved. The description of the series of changing states could aim at revealing points of conflict for the greater the number of the elements of A, the more intense the function of secret becomes and the more manifest it is that the solution is the privilege of few - the more it is to be expected that the second type of communication (i.i.) will cease to be closed. So this may not happen within the book itself; the secret may continue functioning outside it while the first type of communication is becoming

infinitely open, and it is the reader who has to find points of reference outside the work to break up the closedness of the second type of communication.

Notes

- 1 James A.H. Murray - Henry Bradely et al. (eds.): The Oxford English Dictionary vol. 9. Oxford (1961-2) pp. 357-358
- 2 The problem of taboo conveys this idea: it refers to a thing that is sacred and prohibited at once; sacred in that it is not known adequately - like things and workings of Nature - and prohibited in that it is known but feigned to be not known - like linguistical taboos in society.
- 3 See the epistemological definition of secret: $f(x)$ and $f(d)$ are parallel to the problem of naming after knowing the existence of an object and knowing its cause, too.
- 4 a, b and c correspond to the three levels of knowledge included in the epistemological definition of secret: c = the object totally unknown; a = its existence is known; while b = it is totally known.
- 5 Jaakko Hintikka: Knowledge and Belief, Ithaca - London 1962.
- 6 Op. cit.
- 7 i. e. they cannot get new information and there must be at least one individual who can be substituted for a and b.