

The World Mediated by Meaning

I am not attempting to define the meaning of the word, meaning. Indeed, several years ago there was published a book with the title, The Meaning of Meaning, but so far from finding some one meaning of the word, meaning, it concluded that there were several hundred.

The lack of definition, however, is no obstacle to sufficient clarity. Socrates sought universal definitions, but he had to admit that not only the Athenian public but also he himself was unable to produce them. While a current philosophy maintains that one reveals the meaning of a word, not by offering a universal definition, but by ascertaining how it is used appropriately.

I shall begin by indicating what meaning does, what are its functions. These will be said to be cognitive, effective, constitutive, and communicative. A second topic will be the carriers of meaning, and then we shall advert to the fact that meaning is not only expressed by language but also by intersubjectivity, by art, by symbols, and by an individual's or a people's character, achievement, stand. A third topic will be the differentiation of the worlds mediated by meaning, and finally we shall say something on the control over meaning.

Functions, carriers, differentiations, controls.

Purpose: Advert to world mediated by meaning; its diversity; problems

Prior to the world mediated by meaning, there is a world of immediacy: the world of the infant

Piaget: developing differentiating combining operations of head and neck, eyes and hands, maintaining balance, walking

When first hearing and speaking develop, words denote things immediate to infant -- no transition has as yet begun

As command and use of language grow

absent, the far away, the future, the ideal, the fantastic memories of other men, common sense of community, pages of literature, labors of scholars, investigations of scientists, experience of saints meditations of phil and theol

The larger world, mediated by meaning, does not lie within anyone's immediate experience; not sum integral of all worlds of immed exp
 Addition to experience: acts of understanding, formulation, reflection, judgement

These additions give mediated world its order, its ~~unity~~ structure, its unity -- make it an orderly whole of almost endless differences, partly known and familiar, partly in a surrounding penumbra of things we know about but never have examined and explored, partly an unmeasured region of the things we know nothing about.

It is this larger world that for us is the real world: within it there are unnumbered instances of narrow strips of space and time that make up the ~~world~~ tiny worlds of immediate experience of mankind.

Though the larger world is the real world, still it is insecure, for meaning is insecure. Truth, error; fact, fiction; honesty, deceit; science, myth.

Cognitive function of meaning: Next effective function

Besides the world that we know about there is the further world that we make. What we make, we first intend. Imagine, plan, possibilities, weigh pros and cons, contracts, orders, given and executed.

It is not enough to mean; one also has to do; but our technological society is aware that the intervention of meaning, of science and of technical inventions, vastly increases man's power of doing.

Effective to constitutive function

Transformation of nature - transformation of man himself

Child entering kindergarten; student completing doctoral dissertation

Recapitulation of the vastly longer process of education of mankind

Religions and art-forms, languages and literatures, sciences, philosophy, history, all had their rude beginnings, their flowering, their decline, their renaissance

What is true of cultural achievements, also of social institutions

Family, state, law, economy not fixed and immutable entities

Adapt to changing circumstance, reconceived in light of new ideas, subjected to revolutionary change

All such change essentially is a change of meaning -- a change of idea or concept, of judgement or evaluation, of order or request

The state can be changed by rewriting the constitution
more subtly it can be changed by reinterpreting the constitution
or again by working on men's minds and hearts to change the
objects that command their respect, hold their allegiance, & fire
their loyalty

Community is a matter of a common field of experience, and
without that people get out of touch
of a common understanding, and without that there arises misunderstanding,
distrust, suspicion, fear, hatred, violence
of common judgements and without them people live in different worlds
of common consent on values and goals, and without that cross-purposes
Such community is the source of common meaning, and such common
meaning is the act and form that finds expression in polity
and family, in the legal and the economic system, in customary
morals and educational arrangements, in language and literature,
art and religion, philosophy, science, and history

Much more could be said about constitutive meaning
It is here where man's freedom reaches its high point
here that his responsibility is greatest
here that emerges the existential subject who discovers for
himself that he has to decide for himself what he is to make of himself

But I must move on to my second topic: carriers of meaning
The most conspicuous, the most refined, the most far-reaching,
the most versatile carrier of meaning is language
Everyday language of home and office, work and play
Technical language of craftsmen, specialists of all kinds
Literary language: permanent work opus poeuma

But there are other carriers of meaning

By intersubjectivity is meant that human persons spontaneously
take care of one another. Just as one spontaneously raises
one's arm to ward off a blow to one's head, so with equal
spontaneity one reaches out to save another from falling.
Perception, feeling, and bodily movement are involved, but
the help given another is not deliberate but spontaneous.
One adverts to it not before it occurs but while it is occurring.
It is as if "we" were members of one another prior to our
distinctions of each from the others.

Besides the intersubjectivity of action and feeling, there also are intersubjective communications of meaning. Such communications are, I suspect, ~~an~~ extremely numerous. But my present purpose is to illustrate a ~~an~~ genre, and so I shall attempt a brief phenomenology of a smile.

First a smile has a meaning. It is not just a certain combination of ~~mere~~ movements of lips, facial muscles, eyes. It is a combination with a meaning, and so it is distinguished from the meaning of a frown or a scowl, or a stare, a glare, ~~a~~ a snicker, a laugh. We all know about this meaning and so we do not go about the streets smiling at everyone we meet. We know we should be misunderstood.

Next a smile is highly perceptible. For our perceiving is not just a function of the impressions made on our senses. It has an orientation of its own and it selects, out of a myriad of others, just those impressions that can be constructed into a pattern with meaning. Converse with friend ~~and~~ on noisy street, unattentive to surrounding tumult, select just the low sounds with meaning. Further, because of its meaning ^{smile} is easily perceived. Smiles occur in an enormous range of ~~a~~ variations of facial movements, lighting, angle of vision. But even an incipient and suppressed smile is not missed.

Where linguistic meaning tends to be univocal, smiles have many meanings: recognition ~~a~~ welcome friendliness friendship love joy delight contentment satisfaction amusement rejection contempt.

Meaning of the smile resides in the manner in which it modifies the intersubjective situation. It supposes the interpersonal situation with its antecedents in previous encounters. It is a determinant in the present situation both at its opening and as it unfolds. Moreover that meaning is not about some object. Rather it reveals or even betrays the one that smiles, and the revelation is immediate. I do not see ~~it~~ the smile and infer its meaning. Rather the revelation occurs inasmuch as the smile affects my feelings, attitudes, response.

Besides language and intersubjectivity, there are other carriers of meaning: there is the meaning of symbolic images and representations that call forth feelings or, inversely, are evoked by feelings. Such meaning has received great attention in our century not only from the pioneering psychotherapists but also from the later anthropologists that studied symbols outside any therapeutic context.

Again there is the meaning embodied in works of art: in music song or dance, in paintings mosaics sculpture, in architecture, in epic and lyric, in tragedy and comedy.

Finally there is what I would call incarnate meaning: it is the meaning inherent in noble heroic or traitorous and repulsive deeds: the meaning of Marathon or Thermopylae, of Socrates or Jesus, of Judas Iscariot or a Don Juan.

We have adverted to functions and to carriers of meaning; we have now to turn to differentiations of human consciousness, to the quite different manners in which men go about constructing their worlds mediated by meaning. We shall mention several such differentiations: the linguistic, the religious, the literary, the systematic, the scientific, the scholarly, and what perhaps may be named the modern philosophic.

The linguistic differentiation of consciousness has already been described: it is the transition from the world of immediacy, of the infant in the nursery, to the full human world, the world mediated by meaning.

It is well known how much names words speech are prized by primitive peoples, and the significance of that esteem may best be sensed in the story of Helen Keller. Cold water from a pump over a well was gushing over her hands. Her teacher then made the sign for the word water on her hand. That was the occasion when first she discovered that such a touch was a name, that it meant the water she had just felt. She was overcome with emotion, knelt down and touched the earth, and ~~made known her desire to learn its name~~ made known her desire to learn its name. Within a short space of time she had learnt about twenty names.

Another indication of the significance of language comes in a study by Ernst Cassirer - Philosophy of Symbolic Forms - in which there is indicated the evidence for the concomitance of aphasia, agnosia, and apraxia. Trouble with speech is accompanied by trouble with knowledge and trouble with action.

Speech is an almost universal human phenomenon. Almost as universal until this century has been the religious differentiation of consciousness. Endless in its variations, it commonly is marked by an intermittent withdrawal from everyday activities and concerns. It can be gregarious, but its intenser moments often are solitary and silent. Mircea Eliade has a book on Shamanism with the subtitle, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy. So down the ages there have been people devoting their lives to a growth in holiness, and such ascetics and mystics develop a type of consciousness expressed by the peace and joy on the countenance of a statue of the seated Buddha.

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A third differentiation of consciousness is the literary.

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Early language has little difficulty developing words that denote what is spatial, external, specific, human, in brief what can be ~~XX~~ found interesting, inspected, pointed out, named. But it has difficulty with the temporal, the internal, the generic, the divine. The tenses of its verbs refer not to different times but to different kinds of action. Possessive pronouns develop before personal pronouns: what a person has or owns is more manageable than the person himself. Homer is said to have countless words for such things as peering staring glaring peeking but no generic word to denote seeing. The divine finally is mediated by the hierophany, by the outward event or place or thing that was the occasion of a religious experience.

Now the development of a literature is the means for effecting the transition from the limitations of early language to the full articulateness of later expression. The matter is beautifully illustrated by Bruno Snell in his book, The Discovery of Mind. By his protracted similes, Homer was able to describe and so objectify the characters of his heroes; A lion never retreats, Hector is a lion. Then the lyric poets objectified intense personal feelings. The tragedians objectified decisions, their consequences, the conflicts that ensued. As the literature develops, reflections on human knowledge multiply. For Homer the muses were omnipresent and saw everything; that is why the bard is able to narrate events as though he were an eyewitness. For Hesiod the muses do

not inspire but teach. They may teach the truth but they may also may teach plausible falsehood. Hesiod had been singled out by them and taught not to repeat the folly and the lies of his predecessors but to tell the truth about the struggle in which man ekes out his livelihood.

Xenophanes was still more critical. He rejected the multitude of anthropomorphic gods and maintained that god is unity, perfect in wisdom, operating without toil, ~~xxxxxy~~ bringing things about merely by the thought of his mind.

For Hecataeus the stories of the Greeks were many and foolish. Man's knowledge is not a gift of the gods; stories about the past are to be judged by everyday experience; advance in knowledge is by inquiry and search, and the search has to be deliberate and planned, and not just a series of accidents such as happened to Odysseus.

The empirical interest lived on in Herodotus, in the physicians, in the physicists. But a new turn emerged with Heraclitus. He maintained that the mere amassing of information did not make men grow in intelligence. Where his predecessors were opposed to ignorance, he was opposed to folly. He pricked eyes and ears but thought them bad witnesses for men with barbarian souls. There is an intelligence, a logos, that steers through all things; it is found in god and man and beast, the same in all though in different degrees. To know it is wisdom.

Parmenides discovered argument. His arguments were not good, but they had the effect of revealing a component in human knowledge that could run contradictory to what seemed evident to sense. In a vague anticipation of the principle of excluded middle, he denied the occurrence of becoming, the existence of something intermediate between being and non-being. In another vague anticipation of the principle of identity, he concluded that there could be only one being.

The stage was set for the emergence of the sophists, of Platonists, Aristotelians, Stoics, Epicureans. There had developed the classical culture that reigned in the West up the present century.

So there arises the systematic differentiation of consciousness. Man objectifies his thinking processes in logic: the spontaneous process of ascertaining the meaning of words by learning correct or at least appropriate usage is supplemented by definitions; proverbs, the sage bits of advice that it is well to bear in mind on various occasions, give way to the formulation of principles; definitions and principles are so chosen that they cohere and form systems of interconnected terms; systems finally can be related to one another and, between them, organize the whole range of objects of human knowledge. Such was the achievement of the Aristotelian corpus, and the aim of the medieval theologian, Thomas of Aquin, was to adapt Aristotle to Xtian living.

By the scientific differentiation of consciousness, I refer of course to modern science. The aim of an Aristotle or an Aquinas was to ascertain and state what was true. Their systems were intended to be permanent achievements. But modern science, while it intends truth, intends it only as an ultimate goal. Its proximate aim is an every better understanding of the data of experience and, no less, the data accessible through experiment. What the modern scientist refutes, he will consider certainly mistaken. But what he positively advances, he will pronounce no more than probable, the best available opinion. So modern science is an ongoing process. As it advances in understanding, it is drawing nearer to truth. But until there are no unexplained phenomena, modern science cannot settle down in some permanent abode.

To speak of the scholarly differentiation of consciousness, I first must say something about the universal and spontaneous procedure of developing intelligence. This procedure is neither that of an Aristotle nor that of modern science. It is a spontaneous and interlocking accumulation of insights. They are acquired in a spontaneous process of teaching and learning that constantly goes forward in the individuals in a group. And this process is most pronounced in the new arrivals, in children learning from their parents and their peers, in newcomers gradually catching on the ways of speech and action in a new community.

Now while human intelligence everywhere develops in this spontaneous fashion, still the same fashion has different results in different communities. A person from the next village because speaks and acts in a different fashion. A person from another state is stranger still. A person from another country is not only strange but also foreign. So to move to another country involves learning a new language and adapting to a new style.

So we come to the scholarly differentiation of consciousness: it is a matter of coming to understand the ways of thought and speech and action of another people or of one's own people at an earlier time. Such knowledge is not systematic -- a matter of definitions and postulates. It is not scientific -- a matter of hypotheses and theories that can be verified in endless instances. Its structure is like the structure of common sense -- a gradual accumulation of insights that on the addition of a few more insights into some particular matter in hand will grasp what was meant by a statement, what was the aim of an action, what was done at a town meeting or a court or a school, in some strange and distant land. As common sense is the way our intelligence deals with the concrete and particular in the present, so too scholarship is a specialization of intelligence that grasps the manner in which people with a different brand of common sense dealt with the concrete and particular in their place and time. Finally there is what I should name the modern philosophic differentiation of consciousness. Just as clinical psychology among other concerns also aims at helping people to advert to feelings they have and experience but have not identified, objectified, named, brought out into the open, so too the cognitional theorist may direct his efforts to helping people to advert to their mental operations, to distinguish them from one another, to name them precisely, to relate them to one another, to combine them in various groups, to come to grasp the procedures of common sense, of systematizers, of modern science, of scholarship. Next on the basis of knowing what one is doing when one is knowing, one can go on to explain why doing that is knowing, and finally to outline what one knows when one does it.

I have spoken of the four different functions of meaning -- cognitive, effective, constitutive, communicative -- of its different carriers -- language, intersubjectivity, symbols, art, and meaning incarnate -- of several differentiations of consciousness -- linguistic, religious, literary, systematic, scientific, scholarly, and modern philosophic -- and now I shall have to say something about the controls of meaning.

the members of First, it seems agreed among anthropologists that primitive cultures, while quite intelligent and rational in every day affairs, none the less live in a world shot through with myth and magic. As our own being is being in a world mediated by meaning, so too theirs also is being in a world mediated by meaning. But while we have a fairly clear distinction between the cognitive, effective, and constitutive functions of meaning, they have not. In myth the constitutive function of meaning is not limited to constituting the subject but is extended into the constitution of the world in which he lives. In magic the effective function of meaning is not limited to directing human activity but it is extended to bringing about results beyond the range of human power.

Many factors contribute to the control of meaning that eliminates or at least neutralizes myth and magic: the multiplication and differentiation of arts and crafts, the growth of cities, the flourishing of trade, the concentration of power and with its breakdown the emergence of a new individualism and, if last, not least, reflection on human language and human knowledge. Alphabets make words visible, grammars schematize their morphology and syntax, dictionaries indicate their meanings, logics foster clarity, coherence, and rigor, hermeneutics explores different worlds mediated by meaning, philosophies ask whether the worlds we mean really exist.

happen to/

Perhaps the most venerable of the controls of meaning lies in the classical culture that took its rise in ancient Greece and Rome, came to new life well before the middle of the present millennium and, in many places, lasted right into this century. Its beliefs were regarded as eternal verities, its art and literature were praised as immortal, its laws and institutions were the deposit of the prudence and the wisdom of mankind. Change was never more than accidental: the substance of human

living was ever the same. There were the educated and the uneducated, but all genuine education had but a single goal, culture.

This normative notion of culture no longer obtains. Today we think of culture empirically. It is the set of meanings and values immanent in a way of life. There have always been many such sets. They may remain unchanged for ages. They may be in a process of rapid development. They may be in decline. In conclusion I may, perhaps, say that I have been indicated a context in which the topics of ~~their~~ this seminar may be ~~set together~~ set together. For I have spoken of cognitive, effective, and constitutive meaning. Technology is an instance of ~~embodiment~~ embodiment of effective meaning. Culture is an instance of ~~constitutive~~ constitutive meaning. Finally the ~~differentiations~~ differentiations of human consciousness -- linguistic, religious, literary, systematic, scientific, scholarly, and modern philosophic -- offer an introductory scale on which different cultures may be compared.

Contemporary acceptance of an empirical notion of culture can be unsettling. It can lead to the mistaken conclusion that there exist no cultural norms when all that follows is that such norms must be flexible. It is always right to be attentive, to be intelligent, to be reasonable, to be responsible. But one observe such general precepts in many different ways in accord with differing circumstances, differing educational opportunities, different ways of life.

To reflect on the world mediated by meaning is to come to appreciate the importance of language, to discern that it fulfils cognitive and effective and constitutive functions as well as the obvious function of communicating, to learn that there are radically different techniques in which human consciousness operates, to understand that to master all these techniques calls an almost life-long educational program, to comprehend finally the great variety of human mentalities that have developed down the ages and coexist at the present time.