

525B0DTE060: a start on the paper 'Dimensions of Meaning'

## Dimensions of Meaning

The development or, if you please, the upheaval that is going on in contemporary theology has its origin, not in some new revelation from on high, but in three fundamental changes in Western culture that, for Catholics, have recently come to a head. These changes are: a shift from an ideal of demonstrative science to the reality of empirical science; a shift from a classical to a historical apprehension of man; and consequently the need of a shift from a logical to a methodical approach to philosophy. Our concern is with the second of these changes, and our aim will be not to list opinions, not to describe, but to convey some preliminary understanding of the matter. Our remarks fall under two headings: I. Meaning and Reality; II. The Mediation of Meaning.

### I. Meaning and Reality

Provisionally, we shall think of 'meaning' as linguistic meaning. Problematically, we shall think of 'reality' as a world, and shall distinguish four worlds (= four totalities of objects). We proceed provisionally and problematically, because the cultural phenomenon that concerns us is prior to its many and disparate philosophic interpretations; and this priority would be only obscured if we began by attempting to settle what meaning is or what reality is.

#### (a) A World of Immediacy

It is a totality of objects apprehended without the intervention (mediation) of words, gestures, or similar vehicles of meaning. What such an apprehension is would be investigated in a psychology of child development (e.g., J. Piaget's numerous studies) or in a theory of knowledge.

One such world is the world of the infant, but it does not vanish entirely when we learn to talk about what is distant, absent, past, future, ideal, possible, obligatory, etc. There is always an immediate, present, here, now; it too may be mediated, for we speak about it; but it need not be mediated.

#### (b) A World Mediated by Meaning

It is a totality of objects mediated by a commonsense development of intelligence and ordinary language, by natural and human science and technical languages, by philosophy and history, by religion and theology.

It is a far vaster world than the world of immediacy. It is a common world, mediated by communication and common meaning, that includes (by meaning them) each one's private world of immediacy. It is an insecure world: besides truth there is error, besides fact there is fiction, besides sincerity there is mendacity, besides science there is magic, besides philosophy there is myth.

Is the real world the sum of worlds of immediacy?

### (c) A World Constituted by Meaning.

It is the world of human action, common action, community, of social institutions and their cultural superstructure;

It is not constituted exclusively by meaning, for its basis lies in human nature and human potentialities. But the determination of those potentialities are [sic] reached through meaning. Before doing or making, we consider and discuss what we can do or make, what it would be better to do or make, what we ought to do or make, what finally we decide to do or make. All such consideration or discussion occurs within an actual social and cultural context, which is the result of prior considerations, discussions, decisions, that have made our families, our polities, our laws, our educational systems, our mores, our economies what they now happen to be, that through language and literature, religion and science, philosophy and history have filled our minds with notions of what can, should, ought to be.

### (d) A World of Interiority

Besides objects, there are subjects and their acts. Acting subjects are conscious, present to themselves. But what consciousness is or means, what the subject is, what are his many acts and their interrelations, become known clearly and explicitly only when objectified and mediated by meaning.

The subject is not only mediated by meaning but also constituted through meaning. Growing up is a matter of gradually increasing the number of things that one does for oneself, decides for oneself, finds out for oneself. It reaches the existential crisis when one finds out for oneself that one has to decide for oneself what one is to make of oneself.

## III. The Mediation of Meaning

From the mediation of reality through meaning, we turn to the mediation of meaning itself. It becomes mediated when we not only mean but also reflectively

explain just what we mean. By such explaining, clarifying, exegesis, meaning becomes thematic.

#### (a) Meaning in Its Immediacy

The Athenians knew but could not tell Socrates what they meant by courage and cowardice, knowledge and ignorance, justice and injustice. Their meaning was unmediated, immediate, spontaneous, non-thematic.

Such meaning is not lacking in fulness, richness, depth, power. But it is not subject to explicit control. There are no techniques of criticism.

Uncontrolled meaning is an easy prey to myth and magic: meaning as constitutive and meaning as only mediative may be distinguished in the practical order (Malinowski's Trobriand Islanders) but the practical order itself is shot through and surrounded with mythical notions and magical rites.

#### (b) The Classical Mediation of Meaning

The classical mediation of meaning was through the universal, the essential, the necessary, the changeless, the ideal, the norm, the model, the exemplar, the perfect instance.

It knew about particulars, accidents, contingency, change, the contrast between ideal and real, between rule and exception, between laws and observance, between model and execution. But it regarded these further aspects of reality as a chartless sea; one could not avoid it but one could not master it; one did the best one could about it.

So it distinguished science and opinion, theory and practice, wisdom and prudence. Science, theory, wisdom dealt with the necessary, essential, changeless. Opinion, practice, prudence did the best they could with things as unfortunately they are.

#### (c) The Modern Mediation of Meaning

The modern mediation is engaged in charting the chartless sea. It is engaged in doing so without the old landmarks, compasses, quadrants. Meaning develops and goes astray. With such development and aberration man himself, his social institutions, and his cultures develop and go astray. The mediation of meaning is part of the flux.

The Aristotelian ideal of science was true and certain knowledge of causal necessity. Modern science is, not true, but on the way towards truth, not certain but probable, not knowledge but the best available scientific opinion, not of necessity

but of verified possibility, and if it speaks of causes, its goal is not to ascertain Aristotle's four causes but to reach a complete explanation of all phenomena, including all the phenomena of man. Modern mathematics follows necessarily from its axioms or postulates, but the axioms and postulates themselves are not regarded as necessary. Modern logic is not one logic but an open set of alternatives.

Meaning is not found only in language. It is sought in the interpretation of dreams, in the phenomenology of intersubjectivity, in the power of symbols, in the intentionality of consciousness, in the manifold forms of artistic expression.

Meaning is studied in language too, not only in the classical languages, but in all languages from the most primitive to the most evolved.

The meaning of words does not oscillate between the fixed poles of literal and figurative meaning. It floats between the upper and lower limits of the axiomatically formulated treatise and, on the other hand, the laws of imagination and affect at work in the dream. Just where it is floating in any instance is the hermeneutic problem.

Terms can be defined, but they can be defined in many ways, and the many ways can be arranged in genetic and dialectical sequences. There are doctrines, but what they are precisely is to be learnt by studying the course and causes of their development. There are authorities, but even they are historical entities, and what their witness stands for are hermeneutic and historical questions that in time will be answered more and more accurately.