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## **6 Elements of Meaning**

We will now go on to elements of meaning, functions of meaning, realms of meaning, and stages of meaning. First elements, and we distinguish (1) sources, (2) acts, and (3) terms of meaning.

First, sources of meaning. All conscious acts and all intended contents are sources of meaning, from the dream state in through the four levels. The fundamental division in the sources is into transcendental and categorial. The transcendental is the power to ask questions for intelligence, not the actual questions, the wonder behind them, questions for intelligence, questions for reflection, questions for deliberation. It is a capacity to attend, inquire, reflect, deliberate, the capacity that endlessly both heads for and recognizes data, intelligibility, truth, reality, values. The categorial are determinations reached through experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding. So the transcendental notions are behind the questions, and the answers come in categorial determinations.

Next, acts of meaning. Distinguish (1) potential, (2) formal, (3) full, (4) practical, and (5) instrumental acts of meaning. Potential meaning is what we call the elemental meaning of the smile, of the symbol, the purely experiential pattern. In the elemental meaning, a distinction has not yet arisen between meaning and meant; that distinction is still potential. The smile is simply an intersubjective determinant, the work of art prior, in the artist's inspiration, the symbol as internal communication prior to any attempt at therapy. Again, acts of sensing and of understanding of themselves have only a potential meaning. The sense in act is the sensible in act; intelligence in act is the intelligible in act. This is Aristotelian. You get a distinction between the sensing and the sense when you go on to the percept, which involves imagination. You get the distinction between

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<sup>1</sup> June 16 1970, part 2; audio may be found at 59600A0E070.

understanding and the understood when you go on to the concept, when you do this objectifying in perception and in conception. For example, for Aristotle, sounding and hearing are an identity; without ears you can have longitudinal waves in the air, but you have to have ears to have sound.

The formal meaning, the formal act of meaning, is the act of conceiving, thinking, considering, defining, supposing, formulating. By them all I mean the same thing. The distinction between meaning and meant has emerged when you are defining, but just what the distinction is is not yet clear. When you conceive you have an object of thought; but is it just an object of thought, or is it something more? It has not yet been determined. So in the formal act of meaning there is the distinction between meaning and meant, but what the distinction is is still unknown.

The full act of meaning is in the act of judging. One settles the status of the object of thought, that it is merely an object of thought, or a mathematical entity, or a real thing lying in the world of human experience, or a transcendent reality beyond that world.

Practical acts of meaning come with the judgments of value, in decisions, in actions. We will have more to say about this later, when we speak of the effective and constitutive functions of meaning. But the practical act of meaning is on the fourth level. It is also the existential act, you can say.

Finally, there is the instrumental act that externalizes, exhibits for interpretation by others the potential, formal, full, or practical acts of meaning of the subject. As expression and interpretation may be adequate or faulty, instrumental acts of meaning provide the materials for a special chapter on hermeneutics, to which we will come later on.

When an instrumental act of meaning expresses a practical act of meaning, you have the performative act of meaning that Donald Evans wrote on in *The Logic of Self-involvement*, London: SCM Press, 1963.

We have considered sources of meaning and acts of meaning; now we turn to terms of meaning.

The term of meaning is what is meant. In potential acts of meaning, the distinction between meaning and meant is not yet worked out. In formal acts, the distinction emerges but the exact status of the term remains indeterminate. In full acts of meaning there occurs the probable or certain determination of the status of the term; one settles whether or not *A* is, or whether or not *A* is *B*. In practical acts of meaning one settles one's attitude to *A*, what one will do for *B*, whether or not one will endeavor to bring about *C*.

With regard to the full term of meaning we have to distinguish different spheres of being. We can say that the moon exists. We also say there exists the logarithm of the square root of minus one. But 'exist' doesn't mean the same in the two cases. It doesn't mean that the logarithm of the square root of minus one can be seen floating around the sky, and it doesn't mean that the moon can be deduced from suitable logical postulates. There are different spheres of being. There is the real sphere, and that is existing simply, and that is presupposed by the others: the existence of the moon, the existence of people, and so on. That type of existence is something that is understood and verified in the data of sense or the data of consciousness. Besides that sphere of real being, there are lesser spheres. We say, 'It is only mathematical.' And by that you mean that it can be useful, perhaps, for treating reality, for dealing with reality, but it isn't making any statements yet about reality. In general, what mathematicians claim is that from suitably chosen principles or premises you can deduce so much rigorously; whether these premises are coherent is something they hope for but can't always demonstrate, and so on. Their claims are far less than what is presupposed in Aristotle's *Posterior Analytics*.

Then there is the sphere of the merely hypothetical, the sphere of the metaphorical, and so on. These are lesser spheres. In each of these cases, there is reached a virtually unconditioned. But what fulfills the conditions is different in each case. The fulfillment of the conditions for the real world is fulfillment in the data of sense or of

consciousness. The fulfillment in a hypothesis is possible relevance to an understanding of certain ranges of data. Fulfillment for a mathematical statement is that it follows from certain premises, and so on. There are the lesser spheres, subsidiary spheres, that are presupposed; they all presuppose the real because you say it is only mathematical, only hypothetical. Beyond the sphere of real being there is transcendent being that, while we know it through a virtually unconditioned still it itself is formally unconditioned, it has no conditions whatever. It is an absolute.

So you have the different spheres because you can give different meanings to the virtually unconditioned; all true judgments depend upon a grasp of the virtually unconditioned (chapter 10 in *Insight*) but what the conditions are that are fulfilled varies from one sphere to another.

The foregoing, of course, is a realist account of the spheres of being. If you want an empiricist account, well, understanding and judgment are subjective. If you want an idealist account, you are rejecting the empiricist and asserting the existence and constitutive functions of understanding.

## **7 Functions of Meaning**

Functions of meaning are cognitive, efficient, constitutive, and communicative. Meaning fulfills four different functions.

The cognitive function of meaning is the transition from the world of immediacy of the infant, of immediate experience, to a world mediated by meaning. It is only in a world mediated by meaning that we deal with the absent, the distant, the past, the future, the possible, the ideal, the normative. They don't exist in a world of immediacy, or they do so only very weakly. It is only in a world mediated by meaning that the vast proportion of what we know is known through belief.

Now, this world mediated by meaning is not within anyone's immediate experience, and it is not simply the summation of all worlds of immediate experience. It goes beyond immediate experience by adding on understanding, which groups and serializes and constructs and generalizes, so that you move out from your world of immediacy to the whole world. It is not just the sum of all experiences; it is an intelligently organized and rationally affirmed world. So much for the cognitive function of meaning.

The efficient function. Men work. They transform nature, they transform their environment, and in their doing so meanings are constantly being employed. They direct their work by meaning. We plan and consult and give orders, sign contracts, and so on. Without this meaning we would not be able to plan our work and produce things that we want, bring about the effects that we want produced. So there is the efficient function of meaning.

There is the constitutive function of meaning. Meaning is constitutive of language. Besides the meaning in the language, you also have the sounds or the written symbols. But you have just noise or mere sound or babbling if there isn't meaning in the language. Meaning is constitutive of the language. It is also constitutive of religion, of art forms, of languages, of literatures, of sciences, philosophies, histories. It is constitutive also of social institutions. What is marriage? It is what you mean by marriage. And if you change the meaning you get a different kind of marriage. And what the state is is what you mean by the state; and what the constitution says the state is to be. You change the state by reinterpreting the constitution or amending it, or reinterpreting, or changing the things that appeal to peoples' minds and hearts. There is therefore a constitutive function to meaning. What is a university? Well, it is what you understand a university to be, it is what you mean by a university. If you change that meaning, well, you get a different kind of thing.

Meaning, finally, is communicative. One advances from individual to common meaning. Common meaning is not a product developed overnight, it is a long development, a long development first of verbal and then of written language. The development of language, reflection on it: to move up to the language of one's time calls for training and education.

These functions of meaning can combine in different ways. The constitutive and communicative functions of meaning yield three things: community, existence, and history.

A community is not just a number of people with a common frontier. You have a community if you have common meaning: potential meaning, a common field of experience; formal common meaning, insofar as things are understood in the same fashion or in a complementary fashion; actual common meaning insofar as peoples' judgments agree; practical common meaning insofar as they have the same loyalties, a similar faith, and similar goals.

On the other hand, community breaks down when people have got out of touch, when they have not got a common field of experience, when they understand things in different ways and consequently misunderstand one another and become suspicious, when what one thinks is true the other thinks is false, and what one thinks is good the other thinks is evil. This is the breakdown of common meaning, and it involves the breakdown of community.

It is only with respect to available common meaning that the child develops, the individual develops, grows up, advances in experience, understanding, and judging, and, finally, finds out for himself that it is up to himself to decide for himself what he is going to do with himself, the existential moment. That process is named education, from the viewpoint of the schoolman; socialization, from the viewpoint of the sociologists; acculturation, from the viewpoint of the cultural anthropologists. And from the viewpoint of the individual it is his *Existenz*, it is his becoming himself.

The thing about existence is whether it is authentic or unauthentic. There is a major and a minor authenticity. There is the difference between an authentic and an unauthentic assimilation of a culture. One can be a Catholic or a Protestant, an Aristotelian or a Platonist, a Kantian or a Hegelian authentically or unauthentically. Authentically, if you really grasp what those different labels signify and live them. In the case of the unauthentic, you have no other language in which to understand yourself and think and talk about things. But you agree with what it is to be a Catholic, or a Buddhist, or a Hegelian, or a Kantian, or whatever you please, on a series of points, and on another series of points, well, you are just missing the point. The consequence is that you will use that language in a fashion that distorts its proper meaning, that devaluates its proper meaning. It is the case of the scribes and Pharisees who sit on the chair of Moses. Do ye according to what they say, but according to what they do, do ye not. The tradition becomes unauthentic; it can become unauthentic in individuals or in a group or in a whole society.

However, when the tradition itself is unauthentic, then assimilating it is only a minor authenticity. You authentically become something unauthentic; the tradition itself has to be subjected to criticism, because it can get off the line. In that case, your major authenticity is to reform the tradition, to go back to its proper origins, proper notions, proper sources.

Finally, because human living is a matter of this authentic or unauthentic existence, history is something totally different from nature. Nature is governed by laws, classical or statistical, or biological development. But human living, in its most important part, namely, when people are not asleep or in a coma, when their lives are informed by meaning – because meaning changes with time and place, human living changes with time and place. And that change of human living with time and place, because meaning changes, is what is meant by history in the strong sense of the word, that is, we are talking about man's historicity, saying that man is a historical being. As Gadamer puts it,

one's assumptions are not one's private judgments but the historicity of one's being. So to reject all assumptions, as the Enlightenment wanted, is to reject one's own historicity, to move oneself back two-hundred-thousand years.

Another point to be made, with regard to these functions of meaning is that, when the different functions are not distinguished, and when there isn't reflection on language, then the constitutive and the cognitive function can blend. You have the primitive not merely constituting his society but also the world in which he lives, his mythical world. The efficient and the cognitive can blend as we find in applied science, but when the lines are not clearly drawn you can have the cognitive or the communicative blending with the efficient to give you magic. If the functions of meaning are not distinguished and under control, subjected to control, there result myth and magic automatically.

## **8 Realms of Meaning**

The realms of meaning arise because there are entirely different ways of going about knowing. There is the commonsense realm of meaning which knows about persons and things in their relations to us. There is an account of common sense at the beginning of the sixth chapter of *Insight*. Theory knows things in their relation to one another. Once you start measuring and correlating measurements you drop out of the picture, the subject drops out of the picture. You arrive at entities that you can't imagine. This emergence of theory is very clear in the case of Socrates, who wanted definitions of the virtues: what is fortitude? What is temperance? What is justice? What is knowledge? No one could afford to say that he didn't have the slightest knowledge or notion of any of these things, but at the same time no one was able to give a universal definition that applied to all cases and only to those cases. Socrates just kept hammering home that point by asking, How do you define it? And they couldn't. But if you look up Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* you will find virtues and vices defined in general and a list of virtues with a vice by excess and



defect for each one of the virtues. You have a whole system. You have not merely the answers to the questions that Socrates asked but a context within which these answers occur. That context is a theoretical context, relating the virtues and vices to one another. You have to move out of the context in which Socrates put his questions and construct this new theoretical context to give answers to Socrates.

Similarly, in modern physics, there is Eddington with his two tables: one that is hard and solid and heavy, and so on, and the other that consists almost entirely of empty space, with here and there a wavicle that you can't imagine. It is the same table. But one is the table as known through theory, and the other is the table as it is for us.

So you have the two worlds. In Aristotle the worlds are the *priora quoad se* and the *priora quoad nos*, what is first for us and what is first in itself. They are at opposite extremes. In Plato, the phenomena and the noumena, two worlds. The emergence of the world of theory out of the world of common sense results from a systematic exigence. One wants to pin things down exactly. To get them pinned down exactly you have to start out from things that you can pin down and that you determine by defining them.

Meeting the systematic exigence gives rise to the critical exigence. Is common sense just primitive nonsense and science the only knowledge of reality, or rather is science merely pragmatic, useful for building machines, and so on, but quite irrelevant to human living, or are both valid in their respective spheres, and why are they both valid, and how do you go from one to the other? All these questions give rise to the critical exigence. You have to use common sense and theory to move into interiority, into the subject as experiencing, understanding, judging, deciding, and make interiority the basis that distinguishes and grounds and relates the world of common sense and the world of theory. That movement is the history of modern philosophy, and its close relation to science is very clear from Ernst Cassirer's first work, *The Problem of Knowledge in the Philosophy and Science of the Modern World*. It starts out pretty well from Galileo. The

first three volumes were 1906, 1907, 1920. I don't think it has been translated into English, *Das Erkenntnisproblem in der Philosophie und Wissenschaft der neueren Zeit*.

A fourth realm of meaning is the realm of the transcendent, the world which one enters through worship, through prayer, through asceticism, and even mysticism.

So there are these four realms of meaning. Consequently we have to distinguish differentiated consciousness, which functions and is at home in two or three or all four of these realms, and troubled consciousness which has two or more realms and can't put them together, like Eddington puzzled by his two tables, and finally, undifferentiated consciousness, which exists only in one realm and does all its thinking and knowing in one realm, the realm of common sense, and wants to substitute common sense for theory and interiority and the transcendent, or wants to use metaphors to deal with all these realms. The revolt of undifferentiated consciousness against theory and interiority is exhibited in the great desire that states that anything of great importance in philosophy can be handled in ordinary language, or in the demand that we return to the pre-Socratics, get behind all this shift to theory that you have in Socrates. And, of course, it is extremely difficult to explain to people of undifferentiated consciousness how or why there should be anything else. What's the good of it? Well, you can't tell it to him within the realm of undifferentiated consciousness. You have to expand out into these other realms before you will know what they are about.

## **9 Stages of Meaning**

Finally, stages of meaning. The most common differentiation of consciousness is the realm of common sense and the realm of the transcendent. You will find a rather intense religious experience in the East and in the West, the whole Christian tradition, the Indian tradition, the Chinese and Japanese traditions. Mircea Eliade also has a book on

shamanism with the subtitle ‘Archaic techniques of ecstasy.’ So that differentiation of consciousness is the most common, it is world-wide.

With the Greeks, with Socrates, with Plato and Aristotle and the mathematicians and the mechanists, and so on, in the Greek world you get a differentiation between common sense and theory. In a theologian like Aquinas, you have the differentiation of common sense, theory, and religious experience, certainly at the end of Aquinas’s life. Modern consciousness moves towards a differentiation of common sense, theory, and interiority. And finally, a fully contemporary theology wants a differentiation of consciousness: common sense, theory, interiority, and the transcendent, the religious.

These differentiations of consciousness are ordinal but not chronological. In other words, in the modern world you can have endless numbers of people who have completely undifferentiated consciousness. You can have a differentiation of consciousness of common sense and theory occur as with the Greeks and have it immediately overshadowed by a humanism that does philosophy in a popular sort of way. Isocrates and Cicero: their ideal was the orator and their virtue was philanthropia, the love of man, not because he is a fellow citizen or because he is educated, but because he is a human being, especially if he is suffering. And, of course, this name, philanthropia, was not too rigorously applied. If a conqueror wasn’t too thorough in plundering and enslaving the vanquished, he was exhibiting philanthropia.

Now these differentiations of consciousness serve to define stages of meaning.

### *10.1 Early Language*

There is pre-linguistic communication in intersubjective meaning, in artistic meaning, in symbolic meaning. You have ostensive meaning, where you try to grasp but you can’t get it, but at least you are pointing, and if it is understood as pointing you don’t try to grasp anymore. The meaning of pointing comes out. You can imitate another, and your

imitating the other can be meaning the other, the person you are imitating. Just as with imitation, you can do it more remotely, analogy: there is some similarity between what you are doing and what you are meaning. And the community has common insights, common needs, common tasks, and out of these ways of meaning there come language.

An early language develops on the level of insight into presentations. It is very full on anything that is spatial, specific, objective, human. It is weak on the generic, the temporal, the subjective, the divine. On the generic, Homer has all sorts of words for peering, and staring, and glowering, and so on, but he has no word for seeing. It is always specific meanings. The temporal: primitive languages will have all sorts of tenses but they are not presenting a synthesis of temporal moments the way Greek, or Latin, or English do in their tenses. They are signifying different kinds of actions, as in Hebrew. They are objective: possessive pronouns develop before personal pronouns, 'my' is previous to 'I,' it is my horse, my tent, and so on. But the 'I,' the personal pronouns, are later. There is religious experience but you have to have some object to be the hierophany, that is associated with the religious experience for it to become something that you can talk about, think about, concentrate on. Hierophanies are anything and everything, as you know from Mircea Eliade. But the object, the stone, the tree, the valley, and so on, become a hierophany because they are associated with the religious experience. Shintoism with 800,000 divinities is 800,000 hierophanies correlated with religious experience.

One moves beyond the limitations of early language, which is described by Cassirer in the first volume of his *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*, insofar as linguistic feedback starts providing the data in which you construct further linguistic elements. Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, New York: Harper Torchbook, 1960, shows how Greek literature led to Greek philosophy. It was, first of all, Homer in the epic, who is using animals and plants, and so on, to delineate human characters: a lion never retreats and Hector never retreats, so Hector is a lion; and it is worked out

endlessly. The lyric poets objectified intense personal feeling. The tragedians objectified human decisions and their consequences. History and medicine were concerned with setting forth what people were doing. The Sophists came along and raised all the puzzling questions that can be raised till the philosophers appeared on the scene. In philosophy you have, again, linguistic feedback, at a high point with Socrates. He is asking for definitions. Running through all this, as you will get in Snell, are the developing notions of knowledge. In Homer we find that while the Muses see everything, man's knowledge is very incomplete. But the Muses see everything, and so the bard can recite things as though he were right there. Hesiod: well the Muses don't tell you anything, they teach you, and they may teach you what's false as well as what's true, and what most of the poets have been saying in the past is false. Xenophanes criticizes the Greek idea of the gods, and so on. There is a question of knowledge developing, questions about knowledge, and it terminates with Plato and Aristotle, the big philosophers, the differentiation in the scientists between the world of common sense and the world of theory.

There is the further differentiation that takes place in modern times when the scientists take over the world of theory. For Aristotle, metaphysics provided the basic terms, and scientific terms were just further determinations of metaphysical terms. Modern science sets up its own basic terms, completely independently of any philosophy. It takes over the problem of explaining all phenomena. You can draw one of three conclusions: the positivist conclusion that philosophy has nothing to say; the analysts' conclusion that the philosopher doesn't bother about science, he purifies, clarifies commonsense language. And the third is that you base your philosophy upon interiority. That has been the tendency from Descartes, Kant, Hegel, and so on. In that case, when philosophy is based upon interiority, you have three realms and two differentiations of consciousness.

Now at the present time we have an enormous amount of undifferentiated consciousness and very highly differentiated consciousness, with the problem that never was the gap between the differentiated and undifferentiated so great and the necessity of bridging the gap more grave.

**Question 13:** You spoke of an unauthentic tradition, can you say more about that in terms of where we are culturally and even ecclesially?

**Lonergan:** Well, it is an endless topic isn't it? What I'm concerned with is to get authentic theology; that is why I am working at method in theology. We will have criticisms of theology later on when we get closer to grips with it. You will find chapter 7 of *Insight* on progress and decline, chapter 18 on moral impotence, chapter 20 on the role of religion in overcoming decline: my fundamental reflections are there.

**Question 14:** Yesterday you said: intermediate between judgments of fact and judgments of value there are apprehensions of value that are given in our feelings. Could you say a little more on that?

**Lonergan:** Feelings respond to perceptions in which there are values. The feeling reveals the value, your connaturality to that object, the response of your being to such and such a project: it is wonderful, it is horrid, it is damnable; those expressions of feeling reveal values or disvalues. *Insight* is mainly experiencing, understanding, judging. But there is this whole world of feelings that gives the world mediated by meaning its mass and momentum. Feeling and, on the other hand, this knowledge, experience, understanding, and judgment, are united on the fourth level, where you are making, raising questions for deliberation, evaluation, decision. Now, to have that fourth level you have to have this underpinning, which is not just this paper-thin stuff of experience, understanding, and saying yes or no. People are alive, and their being alive is not just a matter of flesh and blood, muscles, bones, and so on. Feelings are not merely pleasure and pain and on that

bodily level. There are feelings communicated in works of art, feelings in religion: the effective sermon, it may be loud or it may be very quiet, it can be extremely intense. The feeling evoked by a discovery, by the solution of a problem, and so on, all these feelings reveal values or disvalues, they revolt you.