What Is Meaning?

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There is a lot of discussion of a new realism in philosophy—externalism. Yet, we talk about “sense” or “meaning” all the time. The problem is to put meanings into the ONE reality of quantum mechanics.

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Introduction

“Meaning” is a difficult word. It is used in both every day life and in definition, convention, about action and life, etc.

When something lacks meaning, it is said to be meaningless and when it has meaning then meaningful. “Meaningful” and “meaningless” can be employed as moral terms to express liking or disliking. I will concentrate upon two usages of “meaning” below, as connected with intension first and with intention secondly.

Meaning = Intension

Following the classic semantics of Frege, words like “bachelor” has both meaning and reference. Intension is its meaning—also called “connotation”. To find the intension of “bachelor” we turn to a standard dictionary like Oxford English Dictionary:

The one connotation is unmarried man—the combination of manhood and unmarried. The denotation is something entirely different, namely the set of people in the world satisfying the connotation.

In this classic approach it is required that meaning and reference fit. To avoid ambiguity the concept in the intension should specify all real objects in the reference or denotation and vice versa.

Now we run into the problem of concept versus reality. Bachelors live in real world. But how about the concept of an unmarried man?

Perhaps concepts are abstract shorthand tools to talk about phenomena in a transaction effective way? Considering intension as real invited the accusation of reification—the fallacy of misplaced concreteness.

Anyhow, we have here the following identities:

Meaning = intension = concept

Meanings are not in head, say Putnam. They are social. Not so. Stipulative definitions operate well in the social sciences. Take “democracy” for instance with so many connotations—no social agreement on a conventional definition.

Meaning = Intention

Max Weber identified the basic micro unit in social science analysis as intentional behaviour. The
emphasis for Weber was upon intention—what he called “Sinn” (meaning). This word has a specific semantics in German philosophy and in religion. Sinn was the inner side of behaviour: thought, belief, will, emotion, etc. When outer behaviour was directed by complex Sinn, there was “Sinnzusammenhang”. Weber devoted much time to analysing such meanings or complexes of meanings in macro theories.

The humanities and social sciences understand outer behaviour by advancing intention or motive. He called it “deutend verstehen”. There is nothing similar in Marx and Durkheim. Actually, it anticipates the rational choice perspective.

This emphasis on the basic subjective nature of human activity opens up for the analysis of ideas, plans, hopes, etc. Since the relationship between inner and outer behaviour is many-one, finding the correct intention requires a conjecture or hypothesis with outer evidence. Intention or reason is simple or complicated, as when I walk over the street a la J. Searle in order to buy ice cream or when I travel to Dubai a la Mossad to spy upon terrorists. Action = intention + behaviour. Goals or means-end chains orientated behaviour.

Means and Ends

Weber declared that every rational action could be analysed with the means-end framework for understanding the inner aspect. Much criticism has been raised against Weber’s methodology of understanding an actor’s motive—the inner side. It is all wrong. Without intention, how to account for the outer side?

Weber stated that any hypothesis from “verstehen” needs corroboration or evidence. A social relation occurs when two persons relate to each other in consciousness, i.e. Sinn. What, then, does “Sinn” refer to? The scope of meaning is large and its importance makes a great difference visavi Nature and the natural sciences.

Searle and Putnam live in the so-called external world, whatever this may be—new realism: waves, strings or energy. And this external world of quantum quarks constitutes the ONE Reality.

Rational Choice

Weber emphasized TELEOLOGY, because humans want to realize their goals by selecting means. Of course they make mistakes:

1. The ends may be unfeasible;
2. The means achieve nothing.

The rational choice model develops the means-end framework into a utility-probability calculus of expected value blending TELEOLOGY with causation. Weber subjected also religious ideas of the virtuosi to the means-end perspective, as for instance in his distinction between various forms of asceticism.

To arrive at the decision model of game theory we must place restrictions upon TELEOLOGY. The goals must be realistic and the means must promote the achievement of the ends causally. Then one may calculate the maximization of expected value.

When people ask “Meaning what”, they look for what something signifies. It becomes a matter finally for intension or intention.

Objectivity

Weber discussed the possibility of objective and ethically neutral social science. Long before Searle did he make the crucial distinction between ontological subjectivity and epistemological subjectivity.
Conclusion

“Meaning” stand either for concept or motive and reason. Both occur in the world of phenomena, concepts as abstractions and means-ends as objectives driving behaviour.

Meaning as intention is not in the so-called external world except in the sense that actor x’s Sinnzusammenhang is outside of actor y’s Sinnzusammenhang. Other peoples’ mind is outside of me but not merely brain substance or neurological connections.

Is Searle Coherent?

In recent YouTube presentations Searle argues in favour of 4 propositions like the following:
(1) Intention belongs to OBJECTIVITY epistemologically.
(2) Intention belongs to subjectivity ontologically.
(3) Humans live in a sea of collective subjectivity or intentionally.
(4) Quantum physics is the one and ONLY Reality.
This is incoherent.

References