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Meaning and Action: A Colloquium

William M. Richards

On Friday and Saturday, October 22-23, 1971, the Philosophy Department of UD sponsored a colloquium on the subject of meaning and action. Eleven philosophers representing seven colleges and universities read papers after which criticisms and active discussion followed.* I should like to make a few brief remarks here in order to introduce the kinds of issues which the concepts 'meaning' and 'action' encompass, and their significance for our present understanding of man.

In the history of philosophy 'meaning' has been predicated of a variety of items: words, concepts, ideas, sentences, things, man, life, being, and even nothing. One thing is for sure, we human beings can talk to one another, tell stories, give directions, describe the beauty of a snowy evening, pray for forgiveness, call for help, write poetry, whisper sweet nothings, and more. In one way or another the language involved in these kinds of activities is invested with meaning. Our descriptions and calls for help are on occasion successful. How do we account for the fact that with a successful speech-act two or more persons understand the same (or a sufficiently similar) thing by the same word? Certainly no one but me can think my thoughts, and I cannot think another's thoughts. And yet meanings do seem to be held in common.

Some readers, of course, will recall Plato's well-known account for how meanings are shared. Plato suggested (and some would say with tongue-in-cheek) that there exists a world of Universal Forms or Ideas, and that men's souls were in contact with these Ideas before being joined to bodies. Two men upon hearing a certain word recall (from their disembodied existences) the Idea to which the word was associated. Plato's account relies heavily upon the sameness of men's original vision and the accuracy of each man's memory. If Plato was correct in his assessment of meaning and communication of ideas, we can expect rough going when our memories start to fade. Certainly some of us cannot even look forward to talking to ourselves in our old age! Alas, an introduction should not become too polemical. The Platonists among you will be chasing me with your chariots.

The concept of meaning for some philosophers (in the Platonic tradition) has been discussed in a similarly theoretical way, detached from the daily grind of making a living in the market place, or the laboratory, or the political arena, or indeed—the daily grind for many—of not making a living at all. But most philosophers (certainly most contemporary philosophers) believe that an account of meaning divorced from action is artificial. Language is something we use to do things,

*Four of the eleven papers have been omitted here at the request of the authors. The papers were either not ready for publication or were candidates for publication elsewhere.

and words or sentences, etc., have meanings in virtue of what is being done with them—whether engaging in political debate or robbing a bank. From this point of view, meanings are shared to the extent that human beings engage in common activities. A child does not understand the subtleties involved in the language of making love because he is not yet equipped to make love and is otherwise (presumably) unfamiliar with it. From this point of view the answers to the following questions are far from obvious: “Do Eskimos really know what the word ‘war’ means? Do Fifth-Avenue politicians really know what ‘hunger’ means? How many white Americans know what the expression ‘being black’ really means? What does a teacher mean by ‘student’ and what does a student mean by ‘teacher’?”

Aristotle recognized that men’s values and the meanings they attach to words are mediated by the role they play in the ‘polis’, or marketplace. Man is a social animal, indeed, a political animal. Karl Marx believed words can be invested with power; that properly put together and applied at the right time, words can shape the future of human societies. The American Pragmatic philosophers, notably William James, John Dewey, and C. S. Peirce, held that the meanings of words were a function of the activity in which they were integrated—of their “cash-value” in influencing behavior. And contemporary philosophers of a linguistic bent have begun analyzing the meaning of ‘meaning’ and ‘action’. The results of such investigations are revealing that, besides being intimately involved with one another, ‘meaning’ and ‘action’ are bound up with a whole web of concepts such as ‘intention’, ‘purpose’, ‘motive’, ‘reason’, and ‘explanation’.

I shall now briefly indicate how the papers included in this volume touch on this theme. Matthew Kabrisky and William Hasker deal with the pros and cons of constructing mechanical models of human behavior. Some philosophers and scientists would claim that human actions have the kind of structure that can be simulated mechanistically, e.g. by a computer, and that understanding the meaning of an expression is essentially a process of computing information whether by man or machine. Others would object that mechanistic explanations of human behavior, although valuable in their own province, are not wide enough in scope to encompass the intentionality or goal-directedness implicit in human action and meaning-contexts.

Another set of issues, explored by John Sommer and H. James Nersoyan, deal with the relative merits of precision and contemplation as they relate to meaning and action. It is suggested that in charting new conceptual terrain, and in constructing new concepts, perhaps some relaxing of the rules should be allowed regarding the criteria for meaning and sense. In some Eastern cultures the concept of action is endowed with far different qualities from what we are used to in our culture. Thus we should avoid becoming entrapped within a rigid analytic framework of precision and clarity.

Bernard Gendreau’s and John Opalek’s papers both deal with existentialist themes. *Man* is the locus of meaning, and not nature, language, or some transpersonal reality. Man is a being-in-the-world and his actions can only be understood from the perspective of his existential commitments and projects. Coming

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at the meaning-action concept from the point of view of linguistic philosophy, my own paper evidences a somewhat similar perspective. Just as the meanings of terms should not be divorced from their action contexts, so too, human activity should not be divorced from the context of basic human needs, instincts, and natural habits.

Taken as a whole, the papers included in this volume can provide some warrant for being optimistic about the future of philosophy in this country. There has been some concern that philosophers today are overly preoccupied with technicalities and turns of phrases, and detached from contemporary man's needs and questions. The present papers, although representing a pluralism of viewpoints, show a renewed interest in questioning what it means to be a man and how to talk about ourselves as action-oriented human beings. Philosophic thought and discussion of the type represented here, focusing as it does on the significance of meaning-and-activity, is itself an activity. There is no way to avoid action, not even in thought. Thus to the Platonist (if he is still reading) it should be pointed out that the locus of meaning does not reside in where you have been (i.e. in recollection of forms) but in where you are going (i.e. in projected activities).

