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The Reinstatement and Ontology of Meaning

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Abstract

While science and logic are incredible intellectual endeavors, and while reductionist methodologies have led to advances in knowledge, these methods do not tell the whole story of life, world, and reality. There are real phenomena that, due to their experiential and holistic nature, cannot be properly quantified over by limiting oneself to science, logic, or reductive means of explanation and description. Attempting to understand the world and the human condition requires a plethora of epistemic pursuits to more fully quantify over the plurality of phenomena. Existential meaning is, I argue, an experiential and holistic phenomenon, and as such it cannot be quantified over by reductive endeavors, pure logic, or scientific inquiry. Meaning emerges through the relation of a complex structure (human) in relation to the world, and it exists as an irreducible embodied and embedded experience.

Keywords: *meaning; experience; authenticity; phenomenological; being-in-the-world*

I. Introduction

The contemporary scene of many western cultures is one of increased nihilism. The technological age of detachment, the rise of scientism, and the still-felt repercussions of a mechanical universe have produced an attitude of perceived purposelessness and meaninglessness. This attitude is extended to both one's individual life and the cosmos at large. In this paper, I will argue that existential meaning is not absent from the world, but that it has become veiled

by the deification of science, logic, and reduction. Science and logic are indispensable tools in helping to frame the world in an intelligible manner, and reductive methodology has produced a wealth of useful information, but science, logic, and reductive explanation do not tell the whole story.

The meaning that I will argue for in this paper is not one of supernatural origin; it is found in the natural world of experience. As such, it is through phenomenological investigation that existential meaning is to be found, as opposed to reductive abstraction, science, or pure logic. I also will not be arguing against science, logic, and reduction as such, rather I will argue that these endeavors are not suited to reveal the nature of meaning in human life. I will argue that a phenomenological approach is essential not only in illuminating meaning, but also in understanding the world more generally and holistically, as experience reveals aspects of reality that cannot be understood through the strict and limited methodologies of reductive science and logic. I will conclude by suggesting a holistic approach to understanding, which places lived experience, next to science and logic as tools to revealing and understanding life, world, and reality.

II. Science and Reduction

While it may be impossible to exhaust questions such as “what is science?”, “how does science work?”, and “what type of knowledge is produced by science?” it is useful nevertheless, to give some general answers to such questions. This might serve as an incomplete but general description of the scientific enterprise: “science seeks to describe, control, and predict the natural world through observation and experimentation.” It attempts to determine causal relations and strives to obtain knowledge of how the universe functions. The Science Council defines science as “the pursuit and application of knowledge and understanding of the natural and social world following a systematic methodology based on evidence.”¹ It goes on to list criteria for scientific methodology which includes, at the top of the list, “objective observation.”² Science isn’t interested in how one *feels* about something, and it strives to ensure that the knowledge gained through a scientific approach is devoid of “particular perspectives, value commitments, community bias, or personal interests.”³

¹ The Science Council, “Our Definition of Science,” October 12, 2020, <https://sciencecouncil.org/about-science/our-definition-of-science/>.

² Ibid.

³ Julian Reiss, and Jan Sprenger, “Scientific Objectivity,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of*

Science is reductive, in that it seeks to reduce the world to scientific explanation, such as the reduction of complex entities, for instance human beings, to biological, chemical, or physical levels of description. The success of reductive science has led to the belief that reductionistic endeavors can explain everything. The problem with this is that there exist non-reductive phenomena such as meaning, and, applying a reductive methodology to something such as meaning has led to claims that meaning is not real, because it is not explainable in reductive terms. This is an attempt to reduce something, which is inherently holistic and perspectival to objective physical terms, such as particles and fields of force. Or, in other words, it is to apply the fantastical concept of “a view from nowhere” to something (meaning) which inevitably requires “a view from somewhere,” and someone or something, to have the experience. In short, reductionism fails to recognize the reality of holistic and relational phenomena, and it risks misunderstanding the human condition in relation to the world.

It might be useful to look at Frank Jackson’s *Knowledge Argument*, to show that a world reduced to scientific physical facts, does not convey a complete understanding of the world. The *Knowledge Argument*, sets up a theoretical circumstance, wherein a scientist named Mary, has lived her life in a black and white room. She has had the most rigorous education in science and has learned every physical fact about the world which includes every physical fact, regarding color vision. When she is released from her black and white room, and enters the world of color, will she learn anything new? I would argue that yes, she will learn something about the world, namely what it is like to see color.⁴

It is argued that she will not learn any additional physical facts about the world, however, because seeing the color red for instance, is not a scientific-physical fact, but nevertheless the experience of seeing red, imparts a new understanding of the world that Mary did not previously have. This leads one to conclude that there are things in the world that can be known, discovered, or revealed, but which are not reducible to physical facts. There are things about the world that are irreducibly experiential, and which can only be known or understood through experience. I will refer to this type of knowledge,

Philosophy (Winter 2020 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/scientific-objectivity/>.

⁴ Martine Nida-Rümelin, and Donnchadh O Conaill, “Qualia: The Knowledge Argument,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=qualia-knowledge/>.

as experiential knowledge. The neglect of experiential knowledge, parallels a void in one's understanding of reality and the human condition. If one wants to pursue a comprehensive understanding of the nature of reality, experiential knowledge must be admitted into the toolkit of valid resources for doing so.

III. Logic

Just as in the previous section, my goal is not to give an exhaustive description of logic, but to provide generalizations, as to what logic is and how it functions. On one conception, "logic is the study of certain mathematical properties of artificial, formal languages."⁵ In another sense, logic is a tool that can be used to test the validity of certain claims within an established theoretical framework. As with science, logic is disinterested in the subject, it generally does not take feelings or personal values into consideration when determining the validity of an argument or theory. If one asks, "what is a meaningful life?" and does not admit passion or personal interest into the equation, and instead chooses logic and reason as the sole tools of analysis, one will never arrive at a relevant conclusion. What can disinterested reason and logic tell of a meaningful life? How is one to use logic and reason alone, in determining whether a life in pursuit of academia would provide him or her, with a more meaningful journey, than a life of business management for example? A purely logical analysis of either endeavors does not include or admit of any talk, regarding existential meaning or value. On a purely logical and rational basis, meaning is unfounded. It takes experiential engagement with a pursuit to reveal whether it is meaningful to the person in question, not logical armchair theorizing. It should be noted, however, that logic can, and should reenter the picture, as one begins to reflect on the experience of meaning, because it is through logic that one might organize their experiences, and once one has chosen this or that possibility for being that they find meaningful, logic can help direct one toward that end.

IV. Meaning, Phenomenology, and Holism

Whether meaning exists in the cosmos without reference to human life, or life in general, is not the focus of this paper. Rather, what will be discussed, is meaning as experienced. In this, meaning seems

⁵ Thomas Hofweber, "Logic and Ontology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Spring 2021 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/logic-ontology/>.

to be a holistic phenomenon emerging from the human structure in relation to the world and as such, it is not reducible to any lower order explanations.

Holistic phenomena require a broader scope of analysis. That is, some phenomena might be irreducible if the phenomenon in question is ontologically dependent on other phenomena for its existence and/or mode of being. Such a phenomenon could only be understood in a holistic manner. Holism requires that one recognize the interplay of interrelated and unitary entities. This holistic approach stands in contrast to a reductive approach, which isolates a given entity or set of entities to be investigated without reference or concern for the wider world.

Phenomenology is a holistic philosophical approach in that it attends experience as experienced, in an attempt to reveal the structures of experience.⁶ In other words, that which shows itself in experience is admitted into the scope of phenomenological analysis. It is in this sense that phenomenology is holistic, i.e., it doesn't dictate a priori what may or may not be admitted into the investigation. Rather, experience is allowed to inform theory. We must, then, look to experiences of meaning and let such experiences inform our ontology of meaning. For this, a phenomenological approach is necessary.

V. The Ontology of Meaning

Meaning does not appear in our experience as a physical object, nor can we experience the phenomenon of meaning by conjuring up the concept or idea of meaning, as we might recall a fact. Meaning seems to be a holistic phenomenon of being-in-the-world. Being-in-the-world is a central concept of Martin Heidegger's phenomenological treatise *Being and Time*.⁷ "The compound expression 'Being-in-the-world' indicates in the very way we have coined it, that it stands for a *unitary* phenomenon. This primary datum must be seen as a whole."⁸ In other words, being-in-the-world is a necessary and unceasing relation between human and world, "it belongs essentially" to the type of being that we ourselves are, and it reveals human being and world as

⁶ David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Summer 2018 Edition), ed. Edward N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/phenomenology/>.

⁷ Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie, and Edward Robinson (Oxford, UK : Blackwell, 2002).

⁸ *Ibid.*, 79.

necessarily unified and inseparable.⁹ Because being-in-the-world is a holistic and unitary phenomenon, being and world must be examined together as being-in-the-world, if either being or world are to be properly understood. I will make use of the unitary phenomenon being-in-the-world, as I articulate the experiential and irreducible nature of meaning.

Meaning seems to reveal itself in experiences of active involvement with the world. The inability of reductive science to verify the existence of meaning does not, by necessity, lead to the conclusion that meaning must not be real. A more natural conclusion might be that meaning is an irreducible phenomenon. It is irreducible because if the human structure as such, is removed from the equation, and only the world is investigated, meaning cannot be revealed. Likewise, if human being is isolated from the world, meaning cannot be revealed. It would be akin to taking $2 + 2 = 4$ and removing the left side of the equation, leaving $+ 2 = 4$. The conclusion cannot follow, because an essential part of the equation has been removed. Thus, removing either human being or world from the equation, is to remove a fundamental and necessary part of the equation that leads one to meaning. Human + world = experience, and meaning is an experiential phenomenon (though not all experience is necessarily meaningful).

Meaning falls into the ontological category of experience and the epistemic category of experiential or phenomenological understanding, which are both holistic-relational categories. Meaning is an experience; it is something embodied rather than conceptually created. It exists and is known through experience. One must be present in the world – present to the experience – to experience meaning. Meaning as such, is very much real but it can be difficult to conceptualize due to its inherent experiential nature. It is an experience as opposed to a concept or fact. Just as the phenomenal experience of seeing red, reveals something about the world, so does the experience of meaning. It helps to reveal things about oneself to oneself, it helps in establishing what one values and what purpose one might have in life. The signal of meaning is absorption of self into the world; it is the Heideggerian involvement of authentic being-in-the-world, the modern flow-state, or the Zen concept of “mushin no shin” which translates as the “mind of no-mind.”¹⁰ The state of embodied meaning is marked by absorbed engagement with the world – it is the pursuit of excellence in one’s

⁹ Ibid., 13.

¹⁰ S. F. Radzikowski, “Mushin State of No Mind in Martial Arts,” *Shinkan Ryū Kenpō*, November 30, 2018, <https://shinkanryu.org/mushin-no-mind/>.

authentically chosen field of interest – or in being-with-others during a shared celebration.

Finding and experiencing meaning in life is linked to Martin Heidegger's concept of authenticity. According to Heidegger, authenticity requires that we "take ourselves back."¹¹ and make "manifest our freedom for choosing and grasping ourselves."¹² In other words, we must stand witness to the possibilities which are before us, and we must choose according to our "call of conscience."¹³ In this, we take responsibility for our own being, and we embark on an authentic journey. To live authentically "is to live a life that one oneself chooses, not the life that is prescribed for one by one's social situation."¹⁴ Such authenticity often involves the risk of failure and criticism but "[...] a meaningful life is one focused on authenticity."¹⁵ Authenticity is discovered through active engagement with the world and an experiential examination of self-in-the-world.

To reveal meaning, we might ask in what experience is the illusion that one is separate from the world severed? What leads to a feeling of unification between self and world? What draws one nearest to the world? It is in uncovering the perspectival but truthful answers to such questions that authenticity can emerge, and from authenticity, meaningful engagement with the world follows.

Experience unencumbered by reductive meta-analyzation of the experience in question is where one finds meaning. When one ceases to define, ceases to categorize, and embraces experience as such, the true manifestation of meaning emerges. Hindered by an advanced intellect and lack of wisdom, human-being is a plague unto itself. The conditions for happiness and meaning are ever-present but obscured by the anxiety of the intellect. This anxiety is self-made, wherein one lives within the conceptual creations of the mind, and not within the world. Experience ceases to be meaningful when the intellect takes hold of being and drowns it, in reductive conceptual anxieties. Like any tool, rational reflection must be used when it is needed and discarded when it is not. Just as one would not use a screwdriver to drive a nail, nor a hammer to tighten a bolt, one would not (or should not) use logic and reason to conjure existential meaning, though logic and reason can

¹¹ Heidegger, 287.

¹² Ibid., 188.

¹³ Ibid., 287.

¹⁴ Wendell O'Brien, "The Meaning of Life: Early Continental and Analytic Perspectives," *The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed March 1, 2022, <https://iep.utm.edu/mean-ear/>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

help appropriate and organize one's experiences of meaning, after one has lived the experience.

Absorbed involvement within the world, allows one to transcend the need for a manufactured meaning of life and allows one to experience true meaning through the unification of self and world. Meaning, then, is not in oneself, nor is it in the world, it is a holistic manifestation of human engagement with the world. Human-being does not simply project values onto the world, nor are values found inherently existing, independently within the world. Rather, meaning and value are holistic phenomena of being-in-the-world. Meaning is not simply a logical or rational concept from which the embodied experience of meaning can be extracted. The ontology of meaning, then, is irreducibly holistic, relational, and experiential.

VI. Conclusion

The rational mind engages in a translation of reality, and any such translation is necessarily fragmented and incomplete. Logic and rationality always require rules, and when rules are pressed upon the world, the world reveals certain aspects of advanced understanding due to a focused scope of inquiry, but in doing so, the world becomes fragmented and other aspects of it, become veiled and hidden from view.

Although we often take our concepts as absolute, we must remember that our judgments are tentative. Our conceptual creations are mere translations of reality, seated in a particular point in time, from a relative and perspectival position, with both implicit and explicit assumptions. We begin defining the contours of our world, in an attempt to organize our chaotic state of being. The contours defined, begin to blur quite quickly as the cosmos doesn't accept the definitions given. These are humanly produced narratives, descriptions, and explanations of the world in which we are thrown; attempts to define the contours of the cosmos. The foregoing analysis of meaning is no different, and as such we must not forget that these words, concepts, and theoretical constructions are mere signposts which are attempting to point to the phenomenon of meaning, in experience. In other words, this analysis of meaning should not be taken as meaning as such, it is instead, an attempt to show where meaning resides.

Because science and logic do not admit the use of subjective influences in their methodology, they are extremely valuable in obtaining objective (or at least intersubjective) data about the world, and in determining the validity of an argument. But it is precisely for this

reason that they remain inept at revealing meaning. Just as a scientific description of color vision does not include the phenomenal experience of seeing the color red, a scientific description of a universe devoid of meaning, does not include the experience of meaning as such.

However, reason and logic should not be discarded in favor of unbridled passion or emotion. Rather, passion, perspectival interest, emotion, and lived experience should be included as relevant and necessary tools in determining what meaning is and what a meaningful life might be, and we cannot take the scientific reductive view of the world as encompassing all that exists. Human experience must be admitted into the picture of reality, it must be admitted as part of the natural world, and the holistic phenomena which emerge from being-in-the-world, must be taken seriously. A “view from nowhere” is a dangerous and misleading conception, because a “view” must always be from “somewhere.” To view, or experience anything, implies a necessary and unceasing relation between the structure viewing or experiencing and, that which is being viewed or experienced. In other words, any viewpoint and every experience, necessarily, presuppose the unitary phenomenon of being-in-the-world, because any viewpoint and every experience is the view or experience, of an existing entity embedded in a world.

By admitting human experience into an investigation of reality, then, one also admits the unitary phenomenon of being-in-the-world, as it is here, where experience occurs. From this, forgotten things of existential importance like meaning, purpose, and value can begin to reemerge as really existing phenomena, and this can lead to a more holistic understanding of the world and the human condition. After all, meaning, purpose, and value never stopped being real, we just stopped believing that they were.

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