

Meaning and Spirit in Betti's Hermeneutics

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Abstract

*Betti's account of meaning is spiritual. Betti follows in Hegel's footsteps and explores the objectivations of the spirit, which he calls representative forms. The interpretation of these forms must capture their meaning from inside and refrain from attributing them an extraneous meaning. Betti invokes, in this sense, the classic hermeneutic canon *Sensus non est inferendus, sed efferendus*. Interpretation is however not a mere transmission of content from the text to the interpreter but a spiritual union between the interpreter and the objectivation of the spirit. This spiritual nature of meaning makes up the originality of Betti.*

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Meaning is a philosophical concept in progress¹. Following the Latin *sensus* that appeared in Roman and Medieval philosophy, modern "meaning" (or "sense") came into philosophical focus, especially in the 19th and 20th-century philosophy, along with the theme of language. Betti's notion of meaning belongs to the continental approach, although it differs in many ways from scholars like Dilthey, Husserl, Heidegger, Gadamer, or Ricoeur. A philosopher of law, Betti draws mainly from Hegel and the Roman humanistic tradition. His notion of meaning is spiritual. Meaning arises from dynamic creations of the living spirit

¹ See Figal 2009: 149.

(cultural products and human expressions like art and literature, law, theology, history). We can recognize it because we have a spiritual nature that partakes in the life of the spirit. The strength of Betti's position resides in this spiritual character, absent in other philosophers of meaning. This paper outlines Betti's view on meaning. I discuss his preference for objectivations of the spirit and question, in the last part, the exclusion of nature from the realm of meaning.

1. Meaning and spirit

In the first part of the 20th century, hermeneutics was not simply a method of interpretation but an attempt to propose a type of knowledge different from the scientific knowledge that became more and more dominant. This contraposition with science generated a novel approach to human life that natural science could not capture in its historical movement. At the same time, it also exposed philosophy to new vulnerabilities visible in the notion of meaning, as we will see in the second part of this paper. After several books on jurisprudence, Betti concentrated his scholarly effort on a general theory of interpretation. Since the law practice largely relies on interpretation, it is no surprise that Betti expanded his research to hermeneutics. He published in the same period as Gadamer, but Betti remained less known than Gadamer in philosophical circles.

Like other hermeneutic scholars, Betti's theory of interpretation investigates the notions of meaning and understanding. However, while Gadamer and those following him take their cue from Heidegger, Betti is suspicious about Heidegger's question of the meaning of being². For him, the expression "meaning of Being" (*Sinn vom Sein*) rests on a terminological confusion. It associates two incompatible terms: Being as such, which is independent of the understanding person, and

² Betti 2015 [1955]: (vol. I) 71 [104]. See also Danani 1998: 129–131.

meaning, which is dependent on the understanding person. As Betti derides it, Heidegger's "pompous expression" induces us into error because it makes us believe that there is a way to capture Being in its objective totality. In the end, the expression could not stand on its own. Heidegger is forced to re-direct his analysis toward a more modest goal, namely not Being as such but the existence of the human individual, the empirical ego ("je meinige"). In so doing, Heidegger reduces Being to the datum of human individual existence and experience, thus abolishing the distance between Being and the empirical subject. This restriction of Being to the empirical subject blocks access to the ontological problem. There is no place in Heidegger for a super-individual spirituality that would purge the ontological problem of this psychological subjectivism and validly pose the question of meaning. Betti affirms, like Heidegger, that the human being is open toward Being ("apertura verso l'essere")³ but tries to determine this openness differently. We can explain human openness toward being either as a drive to overcome the insecurity of immediate needs, or as an original richness within the human person. Betti opts for the second explanation. The human being is open to Being not because it is deficient but because it is spiritual. The human being is a spirit that explores and, at the same time, remains conscious of what transcends itself.

With his critique of Heidegger's "meaning of being", Betti moves the problem of understanding and meaning within the Hegelian realm of the spirit. Hegel's notion of spirit has an Aristotelian undertone, as it is not a static, abstract substratum but self-movement. In its self-movement, the spirit creates new products that break with previous structures:

³ Betti 2015 [1955]: 71 [103].

Spirit is indeed never at rest but always engaged in moving forward. But just as the first breath drawn by a child after its long, quiet nourishment breaks the gradualness of merely quantitative growth – there is a qualitative leap, and the child is born – so likewise the Spirit in its formation matures slowly and quietly into its new shape, dissolving bit by bit the structure of its previous world, whose tottering state is only hinted at by isolated symptoms (Hegel 1977: 6).

Betti picks up on Hegel and starts from what he calls “the living spirit” (*spirito vivente*)⁴. He describes the life of the spirit like Hegel:

[...] it is an impressive phenomenon with its own specific characters of the spirituality that preserves, accrues and develops itself following an appropriate law of autonomy. In its comprehensive unity, continuity, and organic totality, this spirituality parallels its course to that of the unceasing mutation of the individuals and even beyond their ephemeral life, transferring itself from generation to generation like a vivid flame (Betti 2015 [1955]: 37 [35]).

The self-movement of the spirit is expressive, as the spirit objectivizes itself in various products like words, music, art, human comportment. These objectivations of the spirit have a sensible form:

Anywhere we come into the presence of sensible forms through which another human spirit speaks to our spirit, our interpretive faculty springs up to action in order to find out the meaning of these forms. Everything – from the fugitive

⁴ Betti 2021: 10; Id. 2015 [1955]: 35 [29].

spoken word to the silent document and the mute archeological residue; from a piece of writing or a cypher and artistic symbol; from an articulated language to a figurative or musical expression; from an ordinary declaration to personal comportment; from our face's expressions to the forms of our conduct and character – all that comes to the attention of our spirit from that of another spirit calls upon our sensibility and intelligence to be understood (Betti 2021: 4)⁵.

Betti calls these objectivations of the spirit “representative forms” (Betti 2021: 5). The form is the sensible appearance of the represented content. It has a unitary structure in which perceivable elements are intertwined and communicate content. The sensible nature of these forms is not accidental; on the contrary, it is a peculiar combination between the ideal objectivity of values and the real objectivity of the sensible world. This combination has a spiritual value, which is dependent on the sensible, concrete form. Betti differentiates spiritual values from logical and ethical values. The latter can be Platonically intuited without sensible support. However, the first need sensible support and are grasped not through intuition but interpretation (Betti 2015 [1955]: 45 [53]). The connection between spiritual values and representative forms appears especially in artistic activity and in human action. The interpretation of art cannot dispense of its sensible configuration, in the same way in which juridical interpretation cannot abstract from the laws, institutions, and structures involved in human action. We can equate, I believe, the spiritual value of representative forms with their meaning. The interpretation of these forms is nothing else than a process of understanding their meaning (*senso*).

⁵ See also Betti 1988: 3.

The dependence of meaning on the sensible form reflects the duality of the Italian *senso*, which is both a perceptive sense (hearing, sight) and an intelligible content (signification). This duality follows, of course, the original Latin term *sensus*, which became *senso* in Italian, *sens* in French, *Sinn* in German, *sens* in Romanian, and *sentido* in Spanish. Hegel, who works with opposites, is keen to emphasize this duality in the German *Sinn*:

'Sense' is this wonderful word which is used in two opposite meanings. On the one hand it means the organ of immediate apprehension, but on the other hand we mean by it the sense, the significance, the thought, the universal underlying the thing. And so sense is connected on the one hand with the immediate external aspect of existence, and on the other hand with its inner essence (Hegel 1975: 129)⁶.

Betti does not explore this duality in detail. However, since meaning belongs to the sphere of representative forms, it seems that it only yields within the realm of sensible objectifications of the spirit and thus carries this duality of the original *sensus*.

Immaterial entities have, consequently, no meaning. At the same time, we should note that not all sensible entities have meaning. Betti restricts his theory of understanding and interpretation to the objectifications of the spirit, namely to cultural products and history. Only they carry meaning that calls us to interpret. Natural phenomena, on the other hand, are not the object of understanding and interpretation (Betti 2015 [1955]: 67 [96])⁷. They abide by natural laws. Knowing them entails explaining them through the category of causation. We

⁶ On Hegel's notion of meaning, see Ionel 2020; Clark 1960.

⁷ See also Betti 1988: 18.

mistakenly use, sometimes, the term “interpretation” to designate this type of knowledge. We might say, for instance, that a doctor “interprets” the symptom of a sickness. But this is an improper way of speaking. In reality, the doctor does not interpret but just diagnoses based on natural laws and causation. Given his general knowledge of that sickness, the doctor moves from symptom to its cause.

Betti admits that we can talk about the meaning of natural phenomena in a derivative way. He distinguishes, in this sense, between interpretation and attribution of meaning. When we employ the expression “the book of nature”, we attribute to nature a meaning that is not immanent in its appearance. The attribution of meaning has an aesthetic or religious nature, but is not an interpretation and thus does not yield truth in the same way an interpretation does. It has a speculative nature and reflects the worldview of the person who attributes meaning. It can generate lyrical emotions or interior experiences and eschatological visions different from the meaning understood in the primary sense (Betti 2015 [1955]: 68 [95]). The spirit is at work both in interpretation and attribution of meaning, but in different ways:

The cognitive power of the spirit is actualized both in the interpretation and the conferring of meaning, but the first process (the interpretation) and the second one (conferring of meaning) relate to different requirements. The spirit confers sense to the whole universal world in general (and this does not happen in the interpretation), but in a manner more pregnant and elevated the spirit confers sense to objects that in the world possess the spirit’s same nature. From this point of view, when referred to the world, the attribution of sense is fortuitous, while when referring to human beings it is regarded as planned (Betti 2021: 36).

Betti invokes the classic hermeneutic canon “*Sensus non est inferendus, sed efferendus*” affirmed especially in Biblical hermeneutics to defend the primary sense of meaning⁸. This canon offers the criterion for a correct interpretation: meaning is located within the *interpretandum*, and should not be inferred from exterior sources: “[...] the meaning must be that which is found in the datum and is obtained from it; it is not a meaning transferred from outside into it” (Betti 2015 [1955]: 70 [102]). Consequently, the interpretation is objective because it only relies on the intrinsic data of what is to be interpreted. The attribution of meaning, by contrast, cannot be objective because it unilaterally depends on the system of convictions and beliefs of the interpreter who confers meaning. Thus, “meaning should not be assigned unduly and surreptitiously to representative forms, but, on the contrary, must be deduced from them” (Betti 2021: 14). This primacy of the *sensus efferendus* over the *sensus inferendus* informs Betti’s canon of the autonomy of the object. The representative forms have their own law of formation, inner necessity, coherence, and rationality. Interpretation must rely on their immanent determination. Even when it considers the context of their genesis, the interpretation remains attached to their intrinsic order and does not bring any exterior scope. Betti’s second hermeneutic canon requires, indeed, the coherence of meaning within a totality so that parts are understood in view of a whole. For instance, when deliberating on a single criminal action in court, the juridical process needs to consider the “specific individual personality that the author manifested in such conduct” (17). Carla Danani notes that, for Betti, the meaning of representative forms includes potentialities that they open up precisely because they belong to the spirits’ dynamic totality (Danani 1998: 128).

⁸ See, for instance, the XVIIIth century German Biblical hermeneutics: Pfeiffer 1704: 163, “*Sensus literalis non est inferendus, sed efferendus*”; Opitz 1704: Tabula VII, 9: “*Sensus in Scripturam non inferendus, sed ex eadem efferendus est*”.

While insisting on the immanent character of meaning, Betti does not lose from sight the activity of the interpreter. This activity is attuned with the spiritual nature of meaning. Since what has meaning is an objectivation of the spirit, it speaks to the spiritual core of the interpreter. For this reason, the meaning of representative forms is not a mere transmission of content from one person to another, but a sort of spiritual union between the interpreter and what is to be understood.

The doors of our mind can be opened only from the inside and by a spontaneous impulse: what one receives from the exterior is simply the stimulation to vibrate interiorly in harmony with the impulse and to find an accord in commonality (Betti 2021: 6).

Following Hegel, Betti contends that there is a communal spirituality that unites human beings. This communal spirituality is not a substance with its own conscience but an "interior structure or form in a continuous living becoming" (Betti 2015 [1955]: 36 [32]) Human persons cannot detach themselves from this communal spirituality, which is like the atmosphere that they breathe. But, at the same time, communal spirituality also carries significations that raise us up to higher levels:

[...] the human spirit can run through this path or course to its end only because it establishes with the significative contents a confront that springs from life as something other than itself, something objective, something higher (Betti 2021: 71).

From the standpoint of the interpretation's spiritual nature, other hermeneutic theories might appear reductive. Betti takes issue, first,

with the Heideggerian and Gadamerian notion of pre-understanding.⁹ Prima facie, this notion seems correct because it shows that the interpreter is not merely passive. Indeed, Betti's third canon of interpretation affirms the actuality of the understanding. According to this canon, understanding is an event in the interpreter's life because it engages her personal experience. However, at a closer look, Heidegger's and Gadamer's view of pre-understanding endangers the objectivity of the interpretation. It does not capture the spontaneity of the living spirit, which alone makes possible meaning and its communication. On the contrary, spiritual pre-understanding is constituted by the spiritual horizon of the person:

Thus, every new experience becomes, for reasons of a certain assimilation, alive part of our spiritual cosmos, and consequently every time that new experiences are received in that cosmos, they are subjected to its own identical vicissitudes (21).

Second, Betti criticizes Anglo-American semiotics, which is naturalistic and assumes a behaviorist approach to signs. Such an approach entails a quantitative evaluation and thus cannot mount to the spiritual nature of understanding (Betti 2015 [1955]: 66 [95]). Against this approach, Betti maintains that "the hermeneutic theory is exactly the spiritual process of the understanding, with which a thinking spirit responds to the message of another spirit, which speaks through

⁹ Ivi, 22. Gadamer responds to Betti's criticism in Gadamer 1993: 387–425. See also Danani 1998: 129–131; Zimmermann 2015: 133–134. Palmer 1969: 46–66. Richard Palmer contrasts Betti's objective hermeneutics with Gadamer's existential hermeneutics: "If a distinction is to be made between the moment of understanding an object in terms of itself and the moment of seeing the existential meaning of the object for one's own life and future, then it may be said that this latter is clearly the concern of Gadamer, Bultmann, and Ebeling, while the nature of "objective" interpretation has been Betti's concern" (56).

representative forms" (*Ib.*). To avoid hermeneutic reductionism, we must thus uphold that meaning emerges from objectivations of the spirit and speaks to spiritual interpreters.

2. Critical reflections on Betti's account of meaning

In this part, I will discuss some merits and flaws of Betti's account of meaning. The main merits reside, I believe, in its spiritual character, and seemingly retrieval of the duality of *sensus* (sensible/intellectual). Betti owes both features to Hegel's philosophy, and the actuality of his hermeneutics might also recall Hegel's actuality. On the other hand, possible issues with his account regard the exclusion of natural phenomena from the realm of meaning and the rejection of causation dubbed a mere scientific construct.

Betti's spiritual account of meaning can address the concerns of some scholars that meaning is merely subjective, indicating a subjective reaction to an object. For instance, John Haldane warns that we should employ "meaning" carefully to avoid constructivism. The hermeneutic constructivist, in his view, maintains the existence of an object but conceives the process of making sense in terms of positing an intermediate foil between us and the object:

[...] we are imaginative and creative animals that construct an intermediate surface between ourselves and the purely material world, an intermediary lining on which we draw and colour our compositions. This is a concession to objectivity, allowing that there is something we seem to see which calls for our attention and earns our regard, but it is also and fundamentally a form of subjectivism inasmuch as it regards the source of that 'something' as lying within us (Haldane 2008: 140).

Joshua Hochschild voices a similar concern regarding the expression "meaning of life", which, in his eyes, emerged in modern times on the soil of subjectivism, nihilism, and skepticism. The quest for life's meaning irrupts from emotional distress and aims to establish a meaning that satisfies the subject:

[...] the question of the *meaning* of life seems formulated precisely to avoid both the moral field and metaphysical frame. Meaning is subjective, placing an emphasis on the interior life, feelings, emotions, awareness, consciousness (Hochschild 2021: 502)¹⁰.

Betti's spiritual account excludes subjectivism because both the interpreter and the *interpretandum* have a spiritual nature. They do not meet in an intermediary space constructed by the interpreter but in the horizon of the living spirit. The interpreter discovers in the object she interprets something higher than herself. Even if it touches her emotions, it does so to elevate her, not to maintain her into her bubble.

Moreover, Betti's spiritual account of meaning combats reductionism. As we have seen, Betti rejects behaviorist or structuralist accounts of meaning and signs. His approach brings meaning to the highest common denominator, not to the lowest. It is very similar, in this sense, to Viktor Frankl's approach to meaning, which rejects Freud's and Adler's psychological reductionism and frames the search for meaning in spiritual terms. Frankl claims that Freud's psychoanalysis and Adler's individual psychology appeal to the lowest human drives: sexuality in Freud's case, and the inferiority complex, will to power, status drive, or social interest in Adler's case. Psychology should,

¹⁰ I responded to Hochschild's concerns in "No Meaning for Believers? A Reply to Joshua Hochschild", published in the same issue.

however, do justice also to the higher human drives, namely to the spiritual nature of the human person. To Freud's will to pleasure and Adler's will to power, Frankl opposes the will to meaning, which springs from a person's spiritual core (Frankl 1986: xvii). The quest for life's meaning is not a process of invention but one of discovery. Frankl's experience in concentration camps showed him that meaning is ultimately not about what we expect from life but about what life expects from us, what tasks life poses to us, what purpose we need to fulfill. Frankl insists that this spiritual quest is not a secondary rationalization or sublimation of lower drives but constitutes, on the contrary, the primary drive of human beings:

Man's search for meaning is the primary motivation in his life and not a 'secondary rationalization' of instinctual drives. This meaning is unique and specific in that it must and can be fulfilled by him alone; only then does it achieve a significance which will satisfy his own *will* to meaning. There are some authors who contend that meanings and values are 'nothing but defense mechanisms, reaction formations and sublimations.' But as for myself, I would not be willing to live merely for the sake of my 'defense mechanisms', nor would I be ready to die merely for the sake of my 'reaction formations'. Man, however, is able to live and even to die for the sake of his ideals and values! (Frankl 2006: 99).

The second merit of Betti's account is to draw attention to the sensible dimension of the *interpretandum*. The representative forms are indeed sensible objectifications of the spirit. As we have seen, Hegel maintains the duality of *Sinn*, namely sense as perceptive power (hearing, seeing), and also intellectual content or signification. The current scholarship on meaning does not account much for this duality,

focusing instead on the intelligible signification. There are only a few exceptions. Gerhard Sauter decries the intellectualization of meaning in modern times and promotes a return to the original duality of *sensus* (Sauter 1995: 152). For instance, we cannot answer the question about the meaning of life from a purely intellectual, abstract standpoint. To answer it, we must be involved in concrete experiences that reveal meaning. Only within such experiences can we make claims about life's meaning. More recently, Jean-Luc Nancy takes Hegel's affirmation of *Sinn*-duality to support his own philosophy of *sens*. For Nancy, *sens* is not just a signification but the very movement of significations within the concrete world. Hegel's *Sinn*-duality testifies this global pervasiveness of the *sens*:

Sense is the ideality of the sensible and the sensibility of the idea: it is the passage of the one in the other. Sense is thus total and infinite; it is the infinite relation to self of everything, the whole as such (Nancy 2002: 49).

Finally, Steven Crowell's work on meaning in Neo-Kantianism and phenomenology reveals that the notion of meaning attempts to bridge Plato's two realms, the sensible and the non-sensible.¹¹ Crowell attributes to the Neo-Kantian Emil Lask the groundbreaking discovery of this new space of meaning. For Lask, meaning is the objective unity of the categorial form and material. As Crowell notes, Lask

conceives material purely functionally, as that which is clarifiable by way of logical form. Material is thus not defined by a certain way of being given, but by its functional relation to

¹¹ Crowell 2001: 40.

the category; it is that in the full object which is clarified, made intelligible (48).

Moreover, Betti's account of meaning implies that immaterial entities have no meaning. Robert Nozick holds a similar view (Nozick 1981: 600)¹². Nozick's point of departure is not the duality of *sensus* but the relational nature of meaning. Every time we question the meaning of something, we are looking for something that is not immediately visible in its appearance. If I find chocolate candy on my car tires and ask why the candy is there, it is because the motive of the situation is not immediately apparent. The meaning of the situation is a relationship between that situation and something else: perhaps the author's intention to prank car drivers, celebrate the coming Christmas, or simply show sympathy for her neighbours. Meaning is thus relational; it entails a relationship with something else. Going up the ladder of meanings, Nozick concludes that there must be something that is the source of meaning, although it has no meaning itself. If it had meaning, then it would have a relationship with something else, and therefore it could not be the source of meaning anymore. Nozick calls it the Unlimited, after the Kabbalist term *Ein Sof*.

Thus, Betti's Hegelian view on meaning and representative forms can add to the discussion about the sensible/intelligible duality of *Sinn*. Perhaps in discussing Betti, we could also revisit his source of inspiration, Hegel, and clarify how the current scholarship on meaning can benefit from a Hegelian view. We can recall, here, Gadamer's punch line "We all stand in the shadow of Hegel" (Gadamer 1988: 94).

I turn now to some objections we could raise against Betti's notion of meaning. The exclusion of natural phenomena from the realm of meaning seems the most problematic part of his account. Confining

¹² See also Oliva 2019.

meaning to the sphere of cultural products, human life, and human history runs counter to our everyday use of "meaning". One example given by Nozick is "Smoke means fire" (Nozick 1981: 574). In this sentence, "meaning" indicates a causal relationship between smoke and fire. Smoke indicates that there is fire nearby. Following Nozick's relational account, we can say that the meaning of natural objects concerns their relationship with something else, their role in their environment (for instance, the blooming of a flower is part of spring, and so on). This intuitive ubiquity of meaning comes to the fore in phenomenology and hermeneutics, which have made meaning universal, applicable to all entities, including the natural ones (Oliva 2018). Husserl connects this universality to the intentionality of consciousness:

In other words, to have a sense [of something] or 'to have something in mind' is the basic character of all consciousness that for that reason is not only any experience at all, but a 'noetic' experience, one having a sense (Husserl 2014: 178).

For Heidegger, meaning is "that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself" (Heidegger 2008: 193).

One could argue that Betti is not the only hermeneutic scholar that restricts the realm of meaning to cultural products. Gadamer, too, focuses his entire work on what Betti calls representative forms: art, tradition and history, and language. Once embarked on the interpretation mission, the hermeneutic scholar will unavoidably restrict his interpretation to cultural products, excluding natural entities. But even Gadamer has to make room for natural entities. Gadamer admits that there is also a language of things in underscoring the inner belonging of word and thing. He distinguishes between the nature of a thing (*Natur der Sache*), its essence, and the language of things (*Sprache der Dinge*), their concrete manifestation. The essence of a flower and the

blooming of a flower are two distinct features. The blooming is the manifestation of the flower; it captures its meaning in its concrete life.

More recently, hermeneutic scholars have promoted a hermeneutic realism that goes beyond cultural products. Günter Figal develops an account of objectivity aiming at re-establishing the theoretical interest for all things. Figal distinguishes between reference and enactment. He stresses that our relationship with things is not fully exhausted in our life enactment but entails a more primordial sense of reference (Figal 2010: 172). Following Figal, Theodore George proposes the concept of displacement, which is our exposure to exteriority. According to George, we have a responsibility to understand not only for pragmatic reasons but also because things compel us to understand (George 2020: 48).

Given his tenacious defense of objectivity within the horizon of the spirit, Betti would surely prefer to sit on the side of hermeneutic realism. Antonio Olmi (1995) shows indeed how Betti's canons of interpretation avoid pitfalls of other hermeneutic theories and lay the ground for a hermeneutic realism. Likewise, Gaspare Mura appreciates Betti's pursuit of truth and its moral and educational import, which reflects the humanist ideal of educating the whole person (Mura 2005: 197)¹³. In this sense, Mura promotes a truthful (or veritative) hermeneutics (*ermeneutica veritativa*) that, unlike what he calls the weak hermeneutics (*ermeneutica debole*), does not abandon the ideal of truth nor the trust that human beings can reach it and perfect themselves in their nature. However, to fully achieve this hermeneutic realism or truthfulness, Betti's hermeneutics would need, I believe, to include also natural entities.

Moreover, the Bettian account might also need to reconsider causation. Betti's idea that causation is a scientific construal dismisses the

¹³ See also Korzeniowski 2010.

Aristotelian discovery that causation is the primary nexus of reality. To be fair, Betti is not alone in his exclusion of causation from the realm of meaning. In a previous paper¹⁴, I showed how, starting with Heidegger, phenomenology dubbed causation a mere artificial construct. Heidegger criticizes the notion of causation because it is just a reflex of the productive comportment of the Dasein. We project on things the kind of processes we engage in when we make artifacts. Thus, causation is not a genuine feature of things but only our mental construct. Following Heidegger, other contemporary phenomenologists (David Cooper, Lawrence Hatab) exclude causation from the realm of meaning. Meaning is primary, causation is secondary and derivative:

Scientific thematization disregards this existential horizon by way of conversion into measurable elements of mass, weight, and gravitational force, an explanatory order *derived* from factual settings through procedures of abstraction, quantification, and causal reckoning – but no longer *attentive* to the meaning of such settings (Hatab 2020: 18).

However, we can hardly deny that the relationship between fire and the burning of a house is evident in our experience. This relationship relies on the intrinsic properties and powers of fire, along with the house's intrinsic properties, which make it vulnerable to being burnt by fire. To capture it, one does not need to assign any exterior meaning in the manner of Betti's attribution of meaning. On the contrary, one must only recognize its inner nature and structure in the first-hand experience we have of a causal process. Betti's exigency of objectivity cannot thus dispense of understanding natural entities and their manifestation in causation. But causation does not yield only in the material

¹⁴ Oliva [forthcoming].

natural sphere. It also works in human action and in history. Thus, the rehabilitation of causation must occur both in the domain of material natural entities and in the domain of human action and creation.

Conclusion

Betti's account of meaning is spiritual. Betti follows in Hegel's footsteps and explores the objectivations of the spirit, which he calls representative forms. The interpretation of these forms must capture their meaning from inside and refrain from attributing them an extraneous meaning. Betti invokes, in this sense, the classic hermeneutic canon "Sensus non est inferendus, sed efferendus". Interpretation is however not a mere transmission of content from the text to the interpreter but a spiritual union between the interpreter and the objectivation of the spirit. This spiritual nature of meaning makes up the originality of Betti. It also offers a compelling philosophical complement to the psychological work of Viktor Frankl, who is equally committed to a spiritual view of meaning.

At the same time, Betti's attention to the sensible dimension of representative forms recalls the original duality of the Latin *sensus*, the basis of the modern terms of meaning/sense in several languages. This duality is not sufficiently explored in the current scholarship on meaning, and Betti's account could contribute to revisit it.

Some of Betti's positions are questionable, even by his own standard. Indeed, his exclusion of natural entities from the realm of meaning seems to contradict his ideal of objectivity. The current discussion on hermeneutic realism would probably amend Betti's account to make room for all entities. Moreover, his view on causation as a derivative concept disregards that causation is a primary phenomenon, not a mental construal. This view is similar to other positions in

phenomenology and hermeneutics. By revising it, we need to re-discuss general commitments of the entire phenomenological and hermeneutic field.

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