Realist Meaning

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Abstract

The medieval Biblical hermeneutics universalizes the notion of meaning and begins a trend that reaches its peak in contemporary hermeneutics, crossing also into analytic philosophy. Accordingly, meaning conveys properties of the known object, its origin and transformation, its action upon other objects, and its place within a larger context. Meaning attaches to all things in the universe – not just language. Therefore, things have meaning, too. This paper first shows how hermeneutics extended the sphere of meaning from language to things. My short historical survey starts with medieval Biblical hermeneutics, continues with German Protestant hermeneutics, and finishes with contemporary hermeneutics and the influence of Neo-Kantianism. Then, I discuss the various significations of meaning that pertain to the object's aspects and question how this polysemy can be fruitful. Finally, I draw from Nozick's account of meaning that has many similarities with hermeneutics.

This paper shows that meaning is not just an ingredient of understanding but expresses real connections between the known object and other objects, a larger context, or even the world. Thus meaning is not the arbitrary product of subjective evaluation (what something

means to me, personally) but conveys properties of the object, its origin and transformation, its action upon other objects, and its place within a larger context. In hermeneutics, meaning attaches to all things in the universe – not just language. Things have meaning, too. This universalization of meaning started already in the medieval hermeneutics of the Bible and reached its peak in contemporary hermeneutics, crossing also into analytic philosophy. The hermeneutic extension is not merely a philosophical invention. It does justice to numerous everyday uses of meaning that attach it to situations, concrete objects, human life, and the universe, in addition to words. Meaning means, besides the signification of words, origin, purpose, cause, value, relevance, and direction. What I call *realist meaning* rests thus on the capacity for meaning to be expressed in a wide variety of objective aspects. In this paper, I first show how hermeneutics extended the sphere of meaning from language to things. My short historical survey starts with medieval Biblical hermeneutics, continues with German Protestant hermeneutics, and finishes with contemporary hermeneutics and the influence of Neo-Kantianism. Then, I discuss the significations of meaning that pertain to the object's aspects and question in which way this polysemy can be fruitful. I draw from Nozick's account of meaning that has many similarities with hermeneutics.

1. From the meaning of words to the meaning of things: Biblical hermeneutics

The modern term *meaning* and its synonym *sense* have roots in the Latin term *sensus*. In the Roman and medieval vocabulary, *sensus* designates either the sensible or intellectual capacity of a subject or the signification of a verbal utterance – simple or composite, spoken or written. When not referring to cognitive operations, *sensus* has a predominantly linguistic nature. However, there are cases in which

medievals employ *sensus* not only for words but also for things. Biblical hermeneutics is an exemplary case. It steps beyond linguistic boundaries by inquiring into the meaning of things narrated by the Scripture. Medieval Biblical exegetes distinguish between two types of meaning: the literal sense and the spiritual sense. The literal sense of the Bible corresponds to the linguistic meaning, namely the meaning of words and texts. The spiritual sense represents the meaning of narrated things, signified by Biblical words. Medievals distinguish between three types of spiritual senses: *sensus allegoricus* (concerning the contents of faith), *sensus moralis* (concerning the moral guidance following the model of Christ) and *sensus anagogicus* (concerning the afterlife). Aquinas clearly expresses this distinction:

> Therefore, that first signification whereby words signify things belongs to the first sense, the historical or literal. That signification whereby things signified by words have themselves also a signification is called a spiritual sense, which is based on the literal and presupposes it. Now this spiritual sense has a threefold division. For as the Apostle says (*Hebrews* X:1) the Old Law is a figure of the New Law, and Dionysius says (Cael. Hier. 1) *the New law itself is a figure of future glory*. Therefore, so far as the things of the Old Law signify the things of the New Law, there is the allegorical sense; so far as the things done in Christ, or so far as the things which signify Christ, are types of what we ought to do, there is the moral sense. But so far as they signify what relates to eternal glory, there is the anagogical sense (Aquinas 1984: 7).

For instance, the twelve stones chosen from the Jordan in *Joshua* 4:3 signify the twelve apostles (allegorical sense); the white gar-

ments of angels that appeared at the resurrection signify the human body's splendor in the afterlife (anagogical sense); and the temple signifies a morally balanced soul (moral sense). In some cases, one real object can carry all three spiritual senses. Jerusalem is one example: It signifies the Church (allegorical sense), the just soul (moral sense), and the heavenly city of God (anagogical sense) (Lubac 2000: 199; Dahan 2008: 325–350).

The diversity of spiritual senses rests on the abundance of divine inspiration and the variety of properties one thing has. Commenting on Henry of Ghent's defense of spiritual senses, Ian Christopher Levy notes that the hidden Scriptural meanings are bestowed by the Holy Spirit and involve properties of things (Levy 2018: 227). While a word points to only one thing at a time, a thing has properties that open up various simultaneously valid significations. One word can signify several things, but not simultaneously in the same context. For instance, the *sensus* as a signification of one word cannot simultaneously mean the sensorial power. The object Jerusalem, however, has properties that allow for multiple simultaneous significations: It is the site of the Church's birth, it uplifts and guides the soul through its holiness, and it is the place of resurrection and promise of salvation.

Since the exegesis must follow the order of spiritual senses as it reflects the order of things ruled by God, it can never be a subjective bestowing of meaning upon things represented by the Scripture. The spiritual sense is not the interpreter's construction, and the symbolism of things is distinct from the figurative language (Valente 1995: 21). Aquinas distinguishes between words and fictional works, on the one hand, and things that Scripture refers to on the other. While the first are human products, the latter are divine ones. For this reason, the interpretation of things is not arbitrary but must pursue the divine order:

Now, positioning things in their own course so that they can be used to signify other things is the sole prerogative of the one whose providence governs things – namely God alone. Just as human beings can use words or fictitious representations to signify things, God uses the course of things subject to divine providence in order to signify other things. But signifying things with words or with fictitious representations whose sole purpose is to signify such things does not make for anything but the literal sense, as is clear from what we said earlier. Properly speaking, therefore, only the literal sense can be found in any branch of knowledge developed by human effort. The other senses are only to be found in writings whose author is the Holy Spirit, with human beings serving only as instrument (Aquinas 2020: 33).

The distinction between a literal sense and a deeper sense of the sacred text also appears in the medieval Jewish and Islamic exegesis. As in the Christian case, the Jewish and Islamic exegesis, too, require discipline and avoidance of subjective speculations. The practice of interpretation stimulates life transformation, and access to the inner meaning of the sacred text facilitates the reader's union with the divine. Jewish exegesis distinguishes between four senses of the Bible: *peshat* (the literal sense, the plain meaning), *derashah* (the homiletical sense), *remez* (the philosophical-allegorical sense), and *sod* (the mystical sense) (Talmage 1999: 114–115). These four senses do not entirely reproduce the Christian four senses, even though there are some clear correspondences. For instance, *derashah* includes but is not limited to the moral sense. The four terms are united in the acronym *pardes* (from the initials P, R, D, S), which in Biblical Hebrew means "garden". In early rabbinic works, *pardes* was a metaphor for Torah's divine secrets. Islamic medieval exegesis distinguishes be-

tween two main meanings of the Qur'an: *zahir* (the literal, apparent, exoteric meaning) and *batin* (the inner, esoteric meaning). In this sense, the Shi'ite ta'wil is a spiritual exegesis that takes material things as symbols of spiritual ones. Henry Corbin notes that this exegesis follows an order given by Suhrawardi's and Ibn Arabi's science of scales, thus corroborating the esoteric meanings with the geometric laws of the science of perspective (Corbin 2014: 28).

Medieval hermeneutics was the first significant step in extending the domain of meaning from language to all things. For this reason, Gadamer credits the passage from *sensus litteralis* to *sensus spiritualis* with the awareness of the universality of meaning:

> One encounters such universality already in the doctrine of meaning put forward by Saint Augustine and Saint Thomas Aquinas when they saw that the meaning of signs (of words) is surpassed in importance by the meaning of the matter being discussed, and because of this they were justified in going beyond the *sensus litteralis* (Gadamer 2007: 65).

Because they relate to human life, spiritual senses constitute a sort of existential meaning similar to what we call, nowadays, the meaning of life (Oliva 2021a: 527). The successor of medieval Biblical hermeneutics in modern times, German Protestant hermeneutics, inherited this preoccupation for existential meaning and continued to enlarge the meaning's domain from words to things. Indeed, Luther maintained the idea of a deeper, existential meaning of the Bible, despite his distaste for excessive symbolic interpretations. This commitment to existential meaning comes to the fore especially in Schleiermacher's work that led the way in modern hermeneutics. Schleiermacher, too, assigned meaning (*Sinn*) both to the linguistic and existential domains. For him, the awareness of language and the under-

standing of the human person rest on meaning. Besides the meaning of words and texts, Schleiermacher also talks about the meaning of human beings. He distinguishes between the general meaning of human beings and the "individual meaning of a person and their particularities in relation to the concept of a human being" (Schleiermacher 1998: 13). In the existential context, meaning is synonymous with value and purpose. What Schleiermacher calls the value of life (*Wert des Lebens)* involves virtue (*Tugend*), destiny (*Schicksal*), purpose (*Zweck*), and happiness (*Glückseligkeit*) (Schleiermacher 1995).

2. The Kantian legacy and the challenge of science: contemporary hermeneutics

Schleiermacher's hermeneutics stimulated German philosophy to develop a robust notion of meaning. The inheritance of medieval hermeneutics crossed paths with changes in modern philosophy, particularly the rise of modern science and Kant's Copernican revolution. The notion of meaning became important for German philosophers addressing those changes, notably Hermann Lotze and Neo-Kantians. At stake was a new way of making sense of the world emboldened by (1) Kant's search for the *a priori*, namely for conditions of intelligibility that make possible our knowledge (Coffa 1991: 1), and (2) the need to address questions that science left unanswered. For Lotze, meaning is a matter of connections that go beyond what science can know through empirical methods of verification and statistical application of natural laws. The philosophical inquiry into the meaning of the universe must complement scientific research:

> Mechanical investigation, step by step, carries back the origin of events to their efficient causes, and makes no objection when another line of inquiry thinks it discovers fur-

ther a rational meaning in the total course of Nature (Lotze 1886: 410).

In Lotze's view, meaning represents the origin and end of the universe and human life as projected in a divine plan inaccessible to science. Lotze speaks thus about the "universal cosmic meaning" (16), "the meaning and plan of the cosmos" (302), "the end and meaning of the whole" (392), "the secret meaning that gives life to all things" (405), "the meaning of the universe" (451), "the meaning and ends of our own action" (406) and "the meaning of the One of which all its active elements are but dependent emanations" (449).

This holistic account of meaning prevailed in German philosophy from Neo-Kantians to hermeneutics. Neo-Kantians employed meaning for all objects of knowledge and conceived it against the background of a global intelligibility of the world. Neo-Kantian accounts of meaning associate the world's intelligibility with matters of value and validity. For Heinrich Rickert, *Sinn* is a determination of objectivity that makes knowledge possible. Every experience entails meaning-configurations (*verstehbare Sinngebilde*) (Rickert 1934: 81; Oliva 2006: 128). Likewise, for Emil Lask, meaning is a logical category that belongs to a realm of intelligibility different from the sensible realm and the transcendental structure of the self. Meaning designates the object's essence understood in its formal and material structure (Crowell 2001: 45). Finally, Cassirer places meaning within what he calls the symbolic pregnance of elementary perception shaped by various dimensions and connections: spatial-temporal order, causal connections, and the properties of things:

We determine the single existing thing in respect to its objective meaning, by articulating it with the spatio-temporal order, the causal order, and the order of thing and property.

Through this ordering, it takes on a specific directional meaning – a vector, as it were, pointing to a determinate goal (Cassirer 1957: 203).

Under the influence of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics and post-Kantian thinkers like Lotze, Rickert, Lask, and Cassirer, meaning took center stage in the hermeneutic school opened by Dilthey's philosophy of life. Like Lotze, Dilthey conceived of meaning in holistic terms. Focusing on life's meaning, he interpreted it as a parts-whole relation after the model of a phrase's meaning that emerges from the connection between words and sentences:

The particular events that constitute the life-course as it unfolds in the sensible world have a relationship to something that they mean, like the words of a sentence. Through this relationship, each particular lived experience is gathered together for its meaning on the basis of some whole. As the words in a sentence are connected into its intelligibility, so the togetherness of these lived experiences produces the meaning of a life-course (Dilthey 2002: 255).

Thus conceived, life's meaning represents the value and purpose of life events (*Erlebnisse*) as they fit into the value and purpose of life's whole. Unlike Lotze, Dilthey was merely interested in the ethical shape of life and disregarded what Lotze called "the universal cosmic meaning".

Heidegger's philosophy was the decisive step in establishing meaning as a universal hermeneutic notion applicable to all things. Heidegger's account of meaning was the converging point of Schleiermacher's hermeneutics, Neo-Kantianism, Dilthey's philosophy of life, and Husserl's phenomenology of meaning. Heidegger followed his

teacher Husserl's application of meaning to all objects of knowledge. Husserl explicitly advanced a universal notion of meaning that moved from the linguistic sphere to the sphere of intentionality (Ales Bello 2013; Crowell 2001). For Husserl, meaning (*Sinn*) represents the content of an intentional act 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).

While Heidegger preserved Husserl's meaning universalism, he put emphasis not on intentionality but on the integration of things into a larger context which is already available to us in pre-understanding:

> Meaning [*Sinn*] is that wherein the intelligibility [*Verständlichkeit*] of something maintains itself. The concept of meaning embraces the formal existential framework of what necessarily belongs to that which an understanding interpretation articulates. Meaning is the 'upon-which' of a projection in terms of which something becomes intelligible as something; it gets its structure from a fore-having, a fore-sight, and a fore-conception. In so far as understanding and interpretation make up the existential state of Being of the 'there', 'meaning' must be conceived as the formal-existential framework of the disclosedness which belongs to understanding (Heidegger 2008: 193).

Heidegger's notion of meaning has two main characteristics that testify to the influence of previous thinkers. As in Biblical hermeneutics and Dilthey's philosophy of life, meaning has an existential dimension. Although it applies to all objects, meaning emerges from human beings' pragmatic involvement with the objects they encounter. Thus, Heidegger stresses that meaning is an existential category of Dasein, not a property attaching to entities. Things have meaning only in relationship with the Dasein, and the world disclosed to the Dasein:

> Entities within-the-world generally are projected upon the world – that is, upon a whole of significance, to whose reference-relations concern, as Being-in-the-world, has been tied up in advance. When entities-within-the-world are discovered along with the Being of Dasein – that is, when they have come to be understood – we say that they have *meaning* [*Sinn*] (192).

A clear-cut account of realist meaning would need to amend this overly pragmatic framework and make room for real features of things.

Second, meaning has a global, holistic dimension (Steinmann 2008: 294), previously highlighted by Lotze. The meaning (*Sinn*) of something indicates its relationship to a totality. Heidegger uses other two terms, *Bedeutung* and *Beudeutsamkeit*. *Bedeutung* applies to an individual object, whereas *Bedeutsamkeit* indicates a totality of relationships. *Sinn* is, thus, the broadest notion, as it refers to a global intelligibility that includes *Bedeutung* and *Bedeutsamkeit*. This global dimension distinguishes Heidegger's account of meaning from other accounts that target individual objects, like Husserl's or Frege's accounts. Thomas Sheehan notes that, for Heidegger, meaning is nei-

ther an ideal unity of sense independent from the acts that grasp it (Frege) nor the noema, that is, the intentional content of a noetic act of consciousness (Husserl). According to Sheehan, this global dimension comes to the foreground, especially in the inquiry into the meaning of Being, in which meaning is the "horizon within which being appears as itself intelligible" (Sheehan 2015: XVIII).

Heidegger's ontological interest was decisive in molding meaning into a holistic notion. The investigation into the meaning of Being led him to interpret the mode of Being of the human being, which is grounded in its relationship with the entire world. For this reason, Steven Crowell claims that Heidegger ultimately identifies meaning with "world" as he moves "from the *transcendental logical* identification of meaning and 'object' to the *transcendental ontological* conception of meaning as 'world'" (Crowell 2001: 110). In Crowell's reading, this globalism of meaning is not abstract but emerges from human experience within history. Understanding is never about discovering a ready-made meaning but rather about grasping things against the background of one's personal projected possibilities. These possibilities range from the mere dominion of nature (as it was the case with the emergence of modern science) to better integration of human beings in the world they inhabit by simply letting things speak to them (as in the case of the classic model of contemplation). The existential and global dimensions of meaning are, therefore, intertwined.

Gadamer, Heidegger's student, offered a similar existential and holistic account of meaning. His starting point is the distinction between the nature of things and the language of things. While the nature of things is a matter of individual essence considered separately from subjective intentionality or interference with other things, the language of things expresses their relationship with other things and their belonging to a world that includes the subject. The second expression is not a philosophical metaphor but occurs in ordinary Ger-

man. One often says, in German, "Die Dinge sprechen für sich selber" ("Things speak for themselves") or "sie führen eine unmissverständliche Sprache" (they speak an unmistakable language). Both "the nature of things" and "the language of things" communicate the objective aspects of something, independent of subjective interests and biases. However, Gadamer thinks that the notion of "nature of things" became hostage to modern science's domination impulse. Pure objectivity is, in this context, just a mask that conceals the human will to tame and subordinate nature. We should turn, instead, to the genuine relationship between humans and things that comes to the fore in the language of things. This language is not given through a special kind of revelation but pertains to everyday experiences: "the language of things in which the primordial correspondence of soul and being is so exhibited that finite consciousness too can know of it" (Gadamer 1977: 76).

The existential thrust of the meaning conveyed by the language of things differs from the constructivist intended meaning. When we experience something, finding the right word to describe it relies on the intrinsic properties of the object, not on bestowing an intended meaning. "It is the right word, and not the subjectivity of the act of meaning, that expresses its meaning" (80). The anticipation of meaning that guides understanding rests on the subject's embedding in a world that provides already meaningful connections, not on the arbitrariness of human consciousness. This anticipation regards the existence and unity of meaning. We anticipate that something has meaning and that its meaning is unitary, concerning all its parts. We can even anticipate, to a certain degree, the type of meaning involved. If we see a vase of flowers on the crossing, we either think it got there by mistake (for instance, it fell off a truck transporting flower vases) or somebody intentionally put it there. Still, we cannot anticipate the full meaning of that vase's presence on the street.

What Gadamer calls the "commensuratedness of the created souls with created things" pairs with the relationships of things among themselves. Like Heidegger, Gadamer associates the existential and holistic dimensions of meaning. The language of things expresses "the original harmony of all things created" (81). Understanding always involves a totality of meaning (*Sinnganze* or *Ganze von Sinn*) because what is to be understood never stands alone but in relation to other things. For instance, the meaning of personal history arises from special events that shape the whole of a person's life (Gadamer 1986: 29).

3. What is the meaning of things?

We have seen how the hermeneutic tradition expanded the sphere of meaning beyond language and envisioned the meaning of things existentially and holistically. The meaning of a thing engages one or more relationships that the thing has with other things, projected against the background of a global intelligibility accessible to us as beings who have a world. Contemporary everyday language accommodates this meaning inquiring into the meaning of situations, actions, life, history, the universe, artificial intelligence, climate change, and so on. We now zoom in on a more precise determination of the meaning of things. What are the relationships that constitute meaning? Why is our belonging to the world relevant for the meaning of things? We still need more clarity about what meaning is. In their book *The Meaning of Meaning*, first published in 1923, C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards lament the vagueness of philosophical accounts of meaning:

> A study of the utterances of Philosophers suggests that they are not to be trusted in their dealings with Meaning. [...] In two ways it has been easy and natural for philosophers to hypostatize their definiendum; either by inventing a peculiar

stuff, an intrinsic property, and then saying let everything which possesses this be said to possess meaning, or by inventing a special unanalysable relation, and saying let everything related by this relation to something else be said to have a meaning (Ogden and Richards 1989: 185).

Hundred years later, we are still scrambling to define meaning, especially regarding the meaning of things. While debates about linguistic meaning have animated most of the 20th century, there are no substantial debates about the meaning of things. Compared to the centuries-long history of linguistic meaning, the history of the meaning of things is more recent and thus needs more time to settle and bear fruit. One notable exception is the meaning of life, whose study has increased in the last decades, especially in analytic philosophy (Metz 2013; Landau 2022), thus dispelling the analytic hesitance to employ "meaning" outside the linguistic sphere (Mawson 2016: 30). Another possible explanation for the difficulty in finding clarity about the meaning of things is its polysemy. When applied to things, meaning can have various significations: essence, origin, purpose, cause, relevance, value, and significance. Bringing all these significations within a unified account is not simple. For the most prudent among us, perhaps philosophy should stay away from such a messy concept. However, the frequency of occurrences in the everyday language compels philosophy to take charge of this expanded concept (Figal 2009: 149).

There seem to be several options at this stage. First, we could reduce meaning to one signification that can be the basis for derivative significations. Essence could be such baseline signification. Everything else about a thing derives, more or less, from its properties or, at least, has some bearing on its properties. This kind of reduction would also build continuity with linguistic meaning. Linguistic mean-

ing, too, is associated with the essence of the thing that a word signi-fies, although this is a controversial matter (Putnam 1994: 449). The word "tree" refers to the class of objects that share a specific es-sence. In the case of the thing tree, the derivatives of the primary signification indicate, for instance, in which way the essence of the tree supports its purpose and place among living things. Alternatively, they indicate the tree's origin on the scale of evolution, that is, how the tree's properties developed from previous forms of living. One could eventually standardize such an account as a sort of "historical essence", or "contextualized essence".

However, this simplified solution does not do justice to the sub-stantial dependence of these derivatives on matters outside the thing itself. For example, the importance of the tree for the ecosystem and, more particularly, the climate of a place and the well-being of those living in its proximity depends not only on the tree's properties but also on the climate, the place, and those living around it. This de-pendence shows that meaning is not exclusively intrinsic to a thing but has a relational nature that is as relevant as its essence. The oth-er significations of meaning – origin, purpose, relevance, cause, and value – are thus not mere derivatives because they engage primary importance features. The insistence of hermeneutics on the holistic dimension of meaning appears, thus, entirely justified.

The second solution would be to maintain all significations of meaning, find a common denominator and untangle the metaphysical and ethical assumptions that underpin the meaning holism. The first question we might raise here concerns the possible redundancy of meaning. If the meaning of things means purpose, origin, value, rele-vance, or cause, why don't we employ those words directly? Why don't we ask about the purpose of trees instead of their meaning? Or about the origin of the universe instead of its meaning? Why do we need a new word to express certain aspects for which we already

have words and, in philosophy, specific categories? The reasons for this linguistic overhaul pertain, I believe, to the holistic and existential nature of meaning. Meaning is an opportunity to rethink fundamental questions in a new key and integrate them into a larger picture that is both coherent and value-oriented. The connections expressed by meaning and the totality to which they belong carry value, that is, are governed by principles of order, goodness, and generative abundance. Meaning plays an integrative role, combining different philosophical fields in the same way Plato's *Republic* weaves questions about the good and the structure of reality. The existential thrust of meaning, highlighted by the hermeneutic tradition since the Biblical exegesis, does not conduce to subjective constructivism, as John Haldane or Joshua Hochschild fear (Haldane 2008: 140; Hochschild 2021: 502), but to a value-laden worldview.

Nozick's relational account of meaning is helpful in this regard and remarkably similar to the hermeneutic tradition. On the one hand, Nozick thinks that hermeneutics and phenomenology failed to advance a non-reductionist account of human meaning: "Far more important is the task /.../ of delineating what an illuminating nonreductionist view of man in society would be like. Too often, the so called 'interpretative' social theory, drawing upon the philosophical literature of the phenomenological school, is merely obscurantist" (Nozick 1981: 642). On the other hand, Nozick's account is similar, in spirit, to the hermeneutic one, as he defines meaning holistically and axiologically. Nozick is straightforward in defending meaning realism. Meaning, for him, is a dimension of reality that represents relational integration (Oliva 2019: 472–475). We ask about the meaning of something when we need an explanation that surpasses the thing itself. As we saw in the example of the meaning of trees, we ask for a connection that trees have with the ecosystem or the evolution of the vegetal realm. Similarly, the meaning of a word represents a connec-

tion that the word has with an object. This definition unifies, thus, the linguistic meaning and the meaning of things.

The meaning connection must be of a certain relevance:

> We can understand the question of something's meaning, roughly, as the question of how it connects up to what is outside it. Not all ways of connecting need be of interest, but for the ways that are, something's meaning is how it connects in these ways with what is external to it /.../ The question of the meaning of something is: given what is external to it, how does it connect (in the preferred ways) with that (Nozick 1981: 601).

Nozick gives two criteria of relevance for the connection. First, the connection must carry some value: "Meaning cannot be gained by just any linkage beyond boundaries, for instance, with something that is completely worthless. [...] Meaning can be gained by linking with something of value" (Nozick 1989: 167). Second, the connection must have a particular strength and intensity: "The greater the link, the closer, the more forceful, the more intense and extensive it is, the greater the meaning gotten" (168).

Starting from the uses of "meaning" in everyday language, Nozick distinguishes between eight kinds of meaning: (1) meaning as an external causal relationship. Meaning can express (a) causal consequences (for instance, in the sentence "Digging under a neighbor's country border means war", the meaning of the action of digging is the cause of war); (b) causal antecedents or causal concomitants (for instance, in the sentence "Smoke means fire", the meaning of smoke is to be the effect of fire); (2) meaning as external referential or semantic relation: synonymy ("brother" means "male sibling"), reference ("the man in the corner" means him), standing for a fact (a

white flag means surrender), or symbolizing (the meaning of Yeats' "rough beast"); (3) meaning as intention or purpose: intending an action ("What is the meaning of this outburst?"), purpose ("The workers' protest is meant to ask for higher salaries"), or intending to convey something that would show another person one's intention ("By that gesture, he meant to insult us."); (4) meaning as a lesson ("The Nazi period means that even a most civilized nation can commit great atrocities"; (5) meaning as personal significance, value, importance, mattering ("You mean a lot to me"); (6) meaning as objective meaningfulness: importance, significance, meaning ("Helping others conduces to a meaningful life"); (7) meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness: objective meaning in itself, apart from connections to anything else (for instance, the meaning of life in the face of death); (8) meaning as total resultant meaning: the sum of (1)-(7) (Nozick 1981: 574).

The question of life's meaning integrates all these kinds of meaning because it requires a unified worldview. This is not an anthropocentric spin on the structure of reality but rather a way to bridge the moral and metaphysical realms and recognize the value in the connections that make up the universe. The method proposed by Nozick is non-reductionist understanding, similar to hermeneutic understanding: (1) recognizing valuable traits without reducing them to something less valuable; (2) reasoning by analogy, discovering similarities and patterns and integrating parts into wholes.

> By its placement of each in relation to the others, the patterning will straddle the different dimensions, unifying them by simultaneously showing the meaning of each, and the value (organic unity) of the whole in the largest overall patterning and so the widest explanatory picture (641).

This account confirms the holistic and existential character of meaning. Because meaning is, for Nozick, not just a tool of understanding but a dimension of reality, it underpins and unifies all fields of reality and, thus, all fields of philosophical reflection. The polysemy of meaning is constitutive of this unifying role. Rather than fearing it, philosophy might greatly build on it. Meaning could be a liaison between branches like metaphysics, ethics, and anthropology without altering their integrity. Hermeneutics has already blended practical and theoretical philosophy (George 2020; Risser 2012), sometimes accentuating the first at the latter's expense (Figal 2010: 17). The relation between meaning and the metaphysical categories needs new consideration. We must overcome the opposition that some thinkers in the hermeneutic tradition and the classic metaphysical tradition establish between meaning and the metaphysical categories. For instance, the contrast that some hermeneutic and Neo-Aristotelian authors posit between meaning and causation needs revision (Oliva 2021b). Hermeneutic scholars like Heidegger and Cooper claim that meaning arises from our genuine experience, whereas causation is a construct. In contrast, Neo-Aristotelian scholars claim the opposite: Causation is a primary phenomenon in reality, whereas meaning is a construal. But this contrast is less insurmountable than it seems at first glance. In a previous paper, I attempted to define the narrative meaning of life as a causal relation, thus associating causation with existential meaning (Oliva 2021c). I found in Aristotle's definition of plot in *Poetics* resources for this identification and developed a notion of narrative meaning based on the Aristotelian causal model. Therefore, an account of realist meaning can preserve the continuity with the classical tradition while innovating according to contemporary questions and conceptuality. To get around the opposition meaning/metaphysical categories, we must examine how the hermeneutics of the lifeworld can benefit metaphysics (Koch 2016: 175) and how

metaphysics can enrich the existential approach in hermeneutics (Fried 2021; Mura 2005).

4. Conclusion

In this paper, I tried to defend a notion of realist meaning that entails the real properties of things and the connections things have with other things, human beings, and the universe at large. The extension of the sphere of meaning from linguistic meaning to the meaning of things started in medieval Biblical hermeneutics and continued in modern and contemporary hermeneutics under the influence of the Kantian legacy and challenges that science posed to philosophy. The meaning of things represents their origin, purpose, causal connections with other things, value, relevance, and place within a larger context. This polysemy should not discourage philosophy in pursuing a reflection on meaning. It rather constitutes the potential of this notion to unify various fields of reality, as Nozick's account shows. The commonalities between hermeneutics and Nozick's analytic philosophy of meaning testify to the important role that realist meaning plays in contemporary philosophy.

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