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# Emptiness and Work: a Meaning-Making Perspective

Pedro F. Bendassolli[1,2]

**Abstract** This paper aims to put forward the foundation for building a theory of meaning-making based on emptiness. The theoretical perspective underlying the discussion is the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation. According to this perspective, meaning-making is the result of the process through witch human beings use signs to build their relationship with their environment. Three topics unfold in the paper. First, emptiness is defined as a potential absence. Second, the paper identifies the two ways in which emptiness enters into the meaning-making process, either fostering it or, to the contrary, blocking it. When it fosters meaning construction, emptiness acts as a catalytic factor, that is, as a reservoir of possibilities, in the sense of a future-oriented set of new meanings to be built by the agent. However, when emptiness plays the role of a blocking or anti-catalytic factor, emptiness become a hyper-generalized sign, i.e., an empty meaning. Third, this paper illustrates the applicability of these theoretical reflections on emptiness through the example of work. Specifically, both the burnout and the so-called "placardisation" phenomena are analyzed in terms of the anti-catalytic factors at play in work, which lead to feeling it as empty.

**Keywords** Emptiness · Meaning-making · Work meaning · Empty work · Burnout · Meaningful work

Human beings are meaning-making creatures. We use meanings to mediate our relationship with the environment and adapt ourselves to it. Where do meanings come from? If we are unable to go beyond the legacy of our socialization process, we may be tempted to conclude that meanings have always been *there*, in the form of language, tools, rituals, monuments, codes, and so on. Even the idea of culture as a semiosphere

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(Valsiner 2014) can lead us to the conclusion that culture, along with its products or manifestations (for instance, meanings), is something we can feel, or even touch. Several definitions of culture currently available in many academic frameworks carry the implied idea that culture is *something* like an *entity*, and thus so are meanings.

Although culture and meaning are a part of our daily life, neither of these is an entity in the sense of being something that is simply *out there*, waiting to be grasped and transmitted. As cultural psychologists have argued (e.g., Valsiner 2007, 2014), culture is *inside* people, in the form of personal culture, and *in between* people, in the form of collective culture. In their way, meanings are made up of signs, broadly defined as abstractions from our experience. Meanings are the products of the agent's intentional operations using signs in irreversible time, constituting a future-oriented process. This entails that what has already happened is only a minor part of the infinite set of possibilities—of what has not happened yet, that should or could happen. Getting back to the questions about "where" meanings come from, we have two answers.

On the one hand, we can think that meaning comes from *nothing* (in the sense of a void). In this case, we could have a "Big Bang" type of explanation, similar, in metaphorical terms, to the theory about how the universe began. It is apparent, however, that this answer is not suitable in the case of meanings, because we are already embedded in a cultural system made of signs, i.e., mediation tools. But on the other hand, there doesn''t seem to be an identifiable *place* from which meanings come, an *out there*. First, this is because signs and culture are not *places* in the sense of something close-ended or entity-like. Due to the ambiguous nature of signs and the fact that our experience is a flow in irreversible time (durée; Bergson 1998/1911), meaning-making is an ongoing and open-ended process of sign construction, change and abandonment. Second, this process is not *plenty*, or *full*. For if it were, the only thing we would have to do would be to transmit blocks of meanings from one generation to the next, with no gaps, discontinuities or possibilities for new meaning construction.

The last assertion brings us to the main concern of this paper. At the same time that the process of meaning-making by an agent doesn't take place from *nothing* or a *void* (culture is everything except a void), it also doesn't happen in a *plenty* context, in the sense of a closed-ended one that is not oriented toward a still-to-be-born set of new possibilities. In this paper I propose to use the idea of *emptiness* to elaborate on the central characteristics of the process of meaning construction. Emptiness has both negative and positive meanings. The negative meaning roughly relates emptiness to something that is missing or lacking. The positive meaning, to be further developed in this paper, presents emptiness not as something that is missing, but rather as something to be brought into reality, a potentiality. Hence, the main goal of this paper is to set out the basis for constructing a theory of meaning production based on emptiness. This general goal is unfolded through three specific objectives.

The first one is to define emptiness. I am going to claim that although emptiness may be thought of as connected to nothingness, the concepts have their own particularities. Many authors use the two concepts interchangeably, and they seem to have their reasons for doing that (e.g., Winter-Lindqvist and Gang 2016). In this paper, however, I will maintain the differentiation to highlight the idea that meanings do not result from nothing or void (the Big Bang metaphor), nor are they something opposed to this nothing, i.e., they are not fully, close-ended products of the mind. My central argument will develop the concept of emptiness as a *potential absence*.

My second specific objective is to use the concept of emptiness that has been worked out to discuss the process by which we make meaning out of an absence as a potentiality. The core idea to be developed is that emptiness is the bottom-line condition for meaning-making. However, emptiness can either play the role of a reservoir of resources that fosters a process of meaning construction towards new meaning complexes or, to the contrary, hinder such a process by operating as a blocking sign.

Finally, my third specific objective is to use the concept of *empty work* to illustrate the analysis of those factors that are associated with the "destinies" of emptiness in the meaning-making process—as either a *catalytic* (fostering) factor or an *anti-catalytic* (hindering) one. My goal is to show that work is felt as empty when the fostering role of emptiness is inhibited. With this analysis, I expect to contribute to the comprehension of meaning-making, a central feature in the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation, and also to a criticism of current work environments, which are one of the most serious elements associated with the experience of empty work.

## Defining Emptiness

In this section, my goal is to define emptiness. I begin by discussing a distinction between emptiness and nothingness. My argument is that emptiness is to be thought of as a potentiality, while nothingness may lead to a misconception, namely, as it is a state of deprivation, to the idea of the void. Then I will try to ague that the potentiality of emptiness can be related to an absence, which also should not be confused with nothingness.

### Emptiness and Nothingness

The debate about the meaning of emptiness plunges into the history of philosophy. One departing point is the question of whether emptiness exists as such in reality (for instance, in matter) or whether it is only a representation created by the mind. In the first case, an ontological issue is at stake (e.g., is it possible to make something out of nothing?), and in the second case, an epistemological one. Dwelling on this topic, Pascal (1779/1970) proposed situating emptiness between matter and nothingness. In making that proposal, he gave rise to a differentiation between emptiness, which we can think as a sort of vacuity (Bitbol 1998), and nothingness, i.e., the absolute absence, the void (privation of matter, or empty space). Centuries earlier, Aristotle had proposed a similar idea by stating that emptiness was neither nothing nor something, but a concept to be placed *between* nothing and being.[1]

Aristotle is among those who denied the existence of emptiness as a absolute void or nothinghess, along with, for instance, Thales, Empedocles, and Anaxagoras (Close 2009). Aristotle asserts that nature abhors a vacuum—his notion of *horror vacui*. According to him, the absolute emptiness was not possible because all bodies have a common substrate, called *primary matter* or *proto-hyle* (Aristotle, 350 B.C./1862). This primary matter rests in a potential state and is actualized by form (*eidos* or *morphe*). However, at the most fundamental level, primary or undifferentiated matter becomes

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[1] We could say that throughout history, emptiness as a subject has been placed, to invoke Kant (1781/Kant 1998), between the noumenon (the thing-in-itself) and the phenomenon (what can be apprehended by our senses).

determined, i.e., assumes a form, only if it undergoes *resistance*—such as when a craftsman tries to transform brass into a statue. Primary matter aspires to have a form, while nothingness aspires to nothing, being deprived of life, since it doesn't exercise resistance, an action that only bodies can exert.

We can find in Aristotle's theory of the forms of matter a promising starting point for the idea of emptiness as something to be thought about from a future-oriented perspective, considering that Aristotle defines primary matter as *potentiality,*[2] in the sense of something that doesn't yet exist but that can be brought (or actualized) into reality through an act of resistance on the part of the agent. We also find in this idea additional support for the suggestion of differentiating emptiness-as-potential, on the one hand, and nothingness-as-an-absolute-absence, on the other hand, the latter suggesting a state deprived of matter or, considering our subject in this paper, deprived of meaning.

## Absence as Potentiality

More contemporarily, Bergson (1998/1911), in philosophy, and Bion (1967), in psychology, can help us bring this discussion of emptiness a step further, by signaling the relation between emptiness and *absence*. While Bergson helps us to think of emptiness as the presence of an absence, Bion supports us in the attempt of considering the "destinies" of emptiness throughout the developmental process, either as a dread absence that paralyzes or as an absence that fosters the meaning-making process.

**Bergson on Emptiness (the Presence of an Absence)** There is no place for emptiness and nothingness in Bergson's philosophical system, at least in the sense that "(…) the full is an embroidery of the canvas of the void, [and] that being is superimposed on nothing, and that in the idea of 'nothing' there is *less* than in that of 'something'" (Bergson 1911/1998, p. 148; emphasis in the original). He denies the tendency to think of the full based on the empty or to consider that existence appears as a conquest over nothing. According to Bergson, this tendency relies on fundamental illusions of human understanding; it is a pseudo-idea generated by intuition trying to enforce *stops* or breaks in the flow represented by *durée*.

There are two core ideas in Bergson's conception of emptiness. One is the idea of *substitution* and the other is the idea of *expectation* or *preference*. Both ideas are based on the premise that consciousness only jumps from one *presence* to another *presence*. Even if we tried to annihilate everything (by a mental experiment, as he proposes), either inside or outside of ourselves, by negation or by suppressing everything, something will still subsist—for example, the *who* who is conducting the experiment. This means that in order to represent even the more absolute emptiness, we must in the first place imagine

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[2] Epicurus and his colleagues had a different position regarding the logics behind Aristotle's *horror vacui*. They were the first to consider that there could be emptiness in nature—based on their idea of atom (without some kind of emptiness, the atoms couldn't move). This would be experimentally demonstrated centuries later by Rutherford's gold foil experiment and his and Bohr's model of the atom. Their findings changed our view regarding emptiness in nature, which is no longer to be thought of as a region of space that is *deprived* of matter, but rather as a bottom-line state that can be considered as a sort of *reservoir of possibilities*. These possibilities are enclosed in the movement or fluctuations of the subatomic particles and antiparticles. Besides, both *horror vacui* and the ancient idea of "aether" began to be seriously questioned (and eventually abandoned) during the seventeenth century, as a result of experiments by Galileo, Torricelli, and Pascal.

and conceive it as an active *being*. The emptiness is not more than but the *absence* of a memory, due to our imagination and our ability to desire and regret:

> The void of which I speak, therefore, is, at bottom, only the absence of some definite object, which was here at first, is now elsewhere and, in so far as it is no longer in its former place, leaves behind it, so to speak, the void of itself. A being unendowed with memory or prevision would not use the words 'void' or 'nought'; he would express only what is and what is perceived; now, what is, and what is perceived, is the *presence* of one thing or of another, never the *absence* of anything. There is absence only for a being capable of remembering and expecting (Bergson 1911/1998, p. 281 – highlighted in the original).

The first idea, substitution, derives then from memory and imagination. Someone who is trying to remember an object or expecting to encounter it again finds another object instead. As a consequence, that person will express the disappointment of the expectation by saying that he or she encounters nothing or emptiness. The very idea of emptiness is a mental substitution, a replacement, of an unexpected object (*presence*) by a desired object that is not there (*absence*). This "illusion" is caused by our own use of language, a sort of "(…) tinge that feeling gives to thought" (p. 282). Bergson goes on to say:

> The conception of a void arises here when consciousness, lagging behind itself, remains attached to the recollection of an old state when another state is already present. It is only a comparison between *what is and what could or ought to be*, *between the full and the full*. (…) the representation of the void is always a representation which is full and which resolves itself on analysis into two positive elements: the idea, distinct or confused, of a substitution, and the feeling, experienced or imagined, of a desire or regret (Bergson 1911/1998, p. 283 – emphasis added)

In this excerpt, we can notice the introduction of the second key idea: desire and regret. According to Bergson, these point to the pressure of vital necessities, in the sense that we are constantly going from the void to the full, as long as this is the "natural" direction our actions take. In a broader sense, this is anchored in Bergson's idea of change. To him, the *form* is only a "(…) snapshot view of a transition" (p. 302). In other words, the form that matter assumes is provisional (a snapshot); it is only a quality imputed to matter in order to handle the surrounding instability (*durée*).

**Bion on Emptiness (the Destines of Emptiness)** Bion (1967) develops a theorization on emptiness from a psychoanalytical perspective. He presents emptiness as inherent in our endeavor to create meaning through thinking. From Bion's perspective, thinking is a method of dealing with an absence, a gap, the lack of something, *the space between things*. And, based on this principle, he states that to be able to think, we need to *link* one thing to another, one thought to another. More importantly for my discussion in this paper, Bion highlights factors underlying the subjective experience that might be responsible either for helping the person to work on the emptiness, linking one thing to another and developing a thinking capacity, or for plunging her in an experience of nameless dread and fragmentation.

We learn with Bion that emptiness can turn out to have different *destinies* in mental processes, and that these depend on how the mother is capable of, on the one hand, standing the infant's terror and nameless dread of annihilation in the face of absence, and, on the other hand, containing and reflecting expressions of joy and pleasure. The point here is that absence is related to the image of one *absent object* (non-breast). In the beginning, the infant has nothing but empty thoughts or inborn expectations. They only become transformed into real thoughts, allowing the ability to think, if they match with what Bion calls realizations (both positive and negative)—for instance, the absence of the mother's breast. It is only when the infant is able to deal with this absence that the thoughts will actually be born. Here is where the destinies of emptiness are decided – either turning toward a mobilizing emptiness or, conversely, a paralyzing one.

At this point, two different meanings of emptiness can be inferred from Bion's perspective. First, an emptiness that must be faced in order for meaningful experience to be realized. Second, an emptiness felt as a negation of being and meaning, the experience of a nameless dread and fragmentation. The central role in this scenario is played by the mother (the Bion's most important "catalytic" element). If she were not capable of dealing with the infant's projections and terrifying feelings related to the absence (the non-breast), then the latter would be filled with *no-things* "(…) that are reifications of the raw, negative sensory and affective experiences in the form of a bad object" (Stevens 2005, p. 620). Later on life, the original role of the mother will be replaced by the role performed by many "significant others".

## Syntheses

For both Bergson and Bion, emptiness is associated with the potentiality of an absence. For Bergson, this potentiality is represented by the process through which the mind continuously makes substitutions in irreversible time (durée), trying to deal with the flow of experience (in the form of snapshots). For Bion, meaning is made from the absence, by self-striving to link things by thinking. Attempting to combine the ideas of these two authors, we could say that meaning is made in the absence of something (the breast, in Bion's theory) in the face of the presence of something else—in this case, the non-breast (an absence, in symbolical terms), leading to frustration of an expectation and the need to symbolically cope with it. In the next section, I will try to extend this concept of emptiness as a potential absence, but this time considering a semiotic perspective on meaning-making.

## Emptiness and Meaning-Making

### What Is Meaning-Making?

The previous sections set the stage for a definition of emptiness as an absence that encompasses potentialities, in the sense of a future-oriented actualization of undifferentiated things (or matter, to use the Aristotelian idea) into new forms (or snapshots, to

use a Bergsonian image, or *linking thoughts*, turning to Bion). In this section, I focus on the second specific objective I stated in the introduction, regarding the role that emptiness *qua* potentiality plays in the meaning-making process. I will dwell on the semiotic-driven concept of meaning-making proposed by Josephs et al. (1999).

Meaning-making refers to the process of using signs, through which we as human beings build a meaningful relationship with the environment (getting it transformed into an *Umwelt*) (Chang 2009), with ourselves and with others through culture. More specifically, meanings are the continuously changing *outcomes* of this process of sign operation. As I mentioned in the introduction, human beings are related to their environment in a mediated form due to signs.

Based on Peirce (1935), we can define a sign "(…) or Representamen, [as] a First that stands in a such genuine triadic relation to a Second, called its Object, as to be capable of determining a Third, called its Interpretant (…)" (Peirce 1935, p. 2.274). In other words, through sign operation, an object (picked out from the flux of experience in irreversible time) is (re)presented (or *signified*) to an agent who interprets it by taking into account expectations aimed towards the future. Most important for the current discussion is that by making meaning, the agent *transforms a potentiality into reality*— and the agent accomplishes this by facing the emptiness. But how does exactly emptiness relate to meaning-making?

First, we need to understand how meanings are constructed by the agent through sign operation. According to Josephs et al. (1999), the starting point for meaning-making is the agent's intentional action that leads her to *depart from* the universe of undifferentiated things. This is an empty universe, in the sense of emptiness that I presented previously: something that is not yet embedded into a form. An example is the pre-semiotic sensation triggered by some physiological arousal, when we are no longer able to classify by means of a generalized category of feeling (e.g., "I feel bad") exactly what is going on (Valsiner 2014). Meanings arise through an escalation process of abstraction from the undifferentiated flow of experience towards generalization (e.g., "I feel bad") and, eventually, hyper-generalization (e.g., "I feel something overwhelming").

Second, the sign operation is based on a cogenetic logic (Herbst 1995): When the agent creates meaning through signs, what she is actually doing is setting a distinction by which she settles on an inner, an outer, and a border between them (Tateo 2016). For example, when the agent comes up with a feeling category like "sad" to grasp what is going on in her experience at a certain point in irreversible time, she is simultaneously opposing this category to another one, in this case "happy". There is a distinction (some part of the flow of undifferentiated experience is selected), and then a settling on an oppositional pair. The act of making a distinction is carried out against a background where I propose to locate emptiness—an absence that fosters new distinctions (because it is a potentiality for the agent's intentionality towards the future), i.e., the emergence of new meanings.

In semiotics, there is a more formal way to describe such a process. According to Josephs et al. (1999), the action of distinguishing or differentiating—by which meaning is built up—encompasses the agent's creation of a point-like (bounded) sign, which the authors designate as A, at the same time as the creation of its opposite, which they designate as non-A. The non-A is an open field *complementary* to the point-like A, and

it is due to this open nature of the non-A that new meanings can emerge, through internal *differentiations* inside it (the non-A). As Josephs, Valsiner, and Surgan put it:

> Non-A is the countersign to the sign-A. This relationship is further specified as an oppositional complex in which it is possible to specify the meaning of A through non-A (but not vice-versa). Both parts of duality emerge together and are mutually deterministic (A cannot exist without non-A, and non-A cannot exist without A) […] It is further posited that the *indeterminate and purposively fuzzy part* (non-A) of the dual system {A & non-A} is the locus within which major transformation of the meaning takes place (p. 264; 265 – emphasis added).

However, the complementary pair {A—non-A} is settled against a background represented by the not-A, that is to say, "(…) the universe of undifferentiated everything" (Josephs et al. 1999, p. 263). In this semiotic model, emptiness *is only related to* the not-A side, "(…) conceptualized as an unbounded field of heterogeneity that is not related by the person" (p. 263). To summarize: an initial differentiation is made with respect to not-A, giving rise to both A and non-A (a first set of meanings). Then, from this point on, a further differentiation takes place, but this time inside the non-A field, eventually giving rise to a new point-like B and its opposite (non-B). For example: the undifferentiated field not-A may include an infinite set of possibilities for constructing concrete new signs out of it—e.g., "work" = A, with its complementary opposite field of *non-A*, or "non-work". But what does non-work mean?

It can include, for instance, leisure. However, over the course of history we have had many different meanings attached to non-work. Should we consider the activity of a woman cleaning a house on behalf of her family (without being paid for doing this) as work or non-work? And what if she was being payed to do the same activity? Or what about the fuzzy boundaries between work and play, as when someone is thinking of her work while on holiday? The changing nature over time of what work means can be traced back to continuous distinctions or differentiations made out of the non-A field.

However, although Josephs et al. (1999) have largely discussed the non-A field and its core role in the transformation of meanings, I believe that they underestimate the role played by the not-A field. They also seem to superimpose the non-A definition on the not-A definition, therefore hampering a full comprehension of emptiness in the semiotic process. Therefore, the point I want to advance is that emptiness can be thought about at two different level in the semiotic construction of meaning.

On the one hand, we have emptiness associated with the not-A side, as an unbounded field. In this case, emptiness consists of a set of *infinite* possibilities, a background condition *from which* the process of meaning differentiation in irreversible time can emerge. However, the non-A field can also be associated with emptiness, but as a *quasi-bounded set of possibilities*. The non-A includes, as Josephs, Valsiner, and Surgan put it, "(…) all the versions of signs that do not belong to the similarity set for A and those that do not belong to the (*infinitely large*) set of undoubtedly not-A" (p. 265; emphasis added). In the next section, I focus on the dynamics between these two manifestations of emptiness in meaning-making.
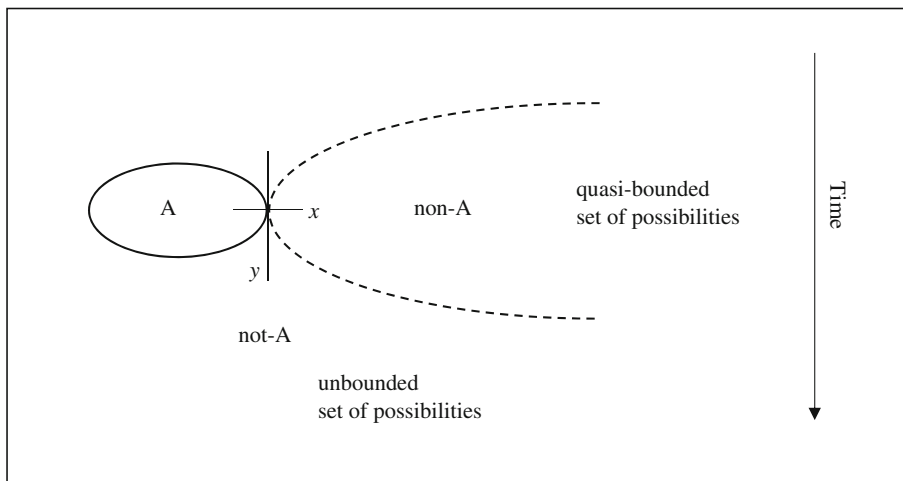
## Meaning-Making and Emptiness: a Step Further

Figure 1 illustrates the model of meaning-construction based on co-genetic logic. As I have said in the previous section, this process starts with a person's differentiation act, by which a sign is dialogically foregrounded and bounded (A) by reference to a complementary counter-sign field (non-A). The {A & non-A} dual system *stands against* the background of the undifferentiated or infinitely open emptiness (not-A). As a result, a dynamic tension is set up between {A & non-A}, represented by the *x*-axis, but also between [non-A—not-A]. The latter is illustrated by the *y*-axis in Fig. 1. Emptiness is then to be broadly positioned in the [non-A—not-A] spectrum. Therefore, the experience of emptiness should be segmented into two different levels, leading to specific psychological actions in the meaning-making process and in the interpretation or experiencing of emptiness.

On the *x-axis*, emptiness is related to the quasi-bounded set of possibilities represented by the non-A field. Based on the first section, emptiness is to be understood as absence that has the potential to foster new meaning formations. Emptiness is a reservoir of possibilities. Along the *x-axis*, these are possibilities for enriching or enlarging the point-like meaning (A). But what exactly happens along this axis?

According to the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation, the process of meaning transformation at this level is based on either (1) an evolving transformation of meanings (within A), leading to a further differentiation of A, including differentiation by integration, opposition, or even takeover (Josephs et al. 1999), or (2) a constructive elaboration carried out over the non-A field in such a way as to enlarge the nature of A or simply bring a new meaning to light, i.e., a new [{B & non-B}—not-B] complex. This happens over the course of the microgenetic process in which humans are engaged in their ongoing activities. As Josephs et al. (1999) point out:



**Fig. 1** Semiotic triadic process of meaning-making and emptiness

Non-A is paradoxically not only immediately co-created *in parallel* with A as a field of meanings, but it implies a yet-to-be-differentiated field of *meanings-to-be* or a *meaning potentiality*. In this sense, non-A links the present to the future. We can map the notion of the relation of "*as-is—as-if-could-be*" transformation elaborated on the {A & non-A} duality. Here the understanding of non-A goes along with the *as-if-could-be potentiality* (p. 265-266 – emphasis in the original).

Along the *x-axis*, the person is continuously engaging him- or herself in a process of meaning negotiations at the border of {A & non-A}. As such, the non-A field conveys a permanent tension between the actual and the potential in the meaning construction, between sign and counter-sign. However, despite its fuzzy and indeterminate nature, the non-A is still a *quasi-bounded* field. The range of possibilities within it is not infinite; otherwise, we wouldn't have even more complex meaning systems built out of it. Even if fluid, dynamic, and open, the border between {A & non-A}, the *x-axis*, draws a delimiting "whole" to this opposite but complementary set. I think that the characteristics attributed in the above quotation to the non-A field apply to the not-A field as well (or perhaps even better), despite the level difference that is at play.

Therefore, I argue that the boundaryless nature of the not-A field takes us one step further towards the comprehension of the relationship between emptiness and meaning-making. The [non-A—not-A] border, the *y-axis* in Fig. 1, points to an open and infinite set of new semiotic possibilities. Two fundamental operations can take place along this axis, both related to the *destiny of emptiness* in the meaning-making process—either as a reservoir of possibilities, leading to new meaning formations, or as a blocking or untenable situation. Then what exactly happens along this *y-axis*?

On the one hand, the not-A field can provide semiotic materials for new meaning construction. In such a case, the first destiny of the emptiness in the meaning-making process is that it is to be "used" by the person in his or her efforts toward new and more complex differentiations. This leads to the emergence of a new meaning {B—non-B}, as we discussed earlier. On the other hand, not-A can also provide the condition for the emergence of "empty" as a *new hypergeneralized meaning*, *phenomenologically felt* by the person as something that "lingers" after the meaning-making process. In this case, emptiness is apprehended as an *empty meaning*, something arising in not-A out of a full<>not-full reference. This means that the {A & non-A} system does not open itself to not-A *in order to produce a new meaning*, but rather *remains* at the [non-A—not-A] border instead.

## Synthesis

The previous section relies on the idea of emptiness as an absence/potentiality. The not-A field is inherently empty in the sense that it is a field of undifferentiated things waiting to be actualized into a form through an act of resistance. For instance, as we will see in greater detail in the next section, through work, human beings transform the undifferentiated nature (not-A) into cultural objects, at the same time producing meaning as part of the same process.

Consider the basic process of building of a house. Was the "form" of the house embedded in nature itself, as a proto-form? Unless you are a sort of Platonist, the answer is probably no: It was the human mind in its cultural embeddedness that

invented a myriad of types of housing (A<>non-A), making use of the raw materials coming from nature. It was through work, here understood as an act of resistance, that the emptiness-as-potentialities was materialized into a particular kind of house—the very idea of housing itself was set against the not-A field in the first place (our ancestors had nothing but caves or trees to shelter themselves). While the natural world is "empty" (encompassing a myriad of potentialities/forms), it contains all the ingredients currently behind almost all human artifact inventions. The not-A, in this context, is this large field of "absences" that fosters new meanings—in this example, through the process of transforming things into objects, artifact construction (the house).

However, when instead of being felt as a "world to be constructed", the emptiness embedded in the not-A field is felt as a something insurmountable, or is, to use the idea of Bion (1967), considered as a no-thing (nothingness), then something very dramatic may happen: The emptiness turns out to be a hyper-generalized sign. I think that this is a crucial point to be made: Considering that emptiness is not the same as nothingness, we can conclude that emptiness as a hyper-generalized sign is a particular form of meaning (an empty meaning, as we will see in the next section), and not a state/situation of *deprivation* of meaning (an absolute absence, nothingness or void). What does this mean?

It means that it is not possible to live *without* (deprived of) meaning. However, not in an essentialist perspective, as when we are told, for instance, that people have "lost the meaning of life" due to a "loss of values in society", but in a semiotic one: Meanings, as the result of sign operation, are basic mediation devices, such that "losing meaning" (in a hypothetical situation of absolute nothingess) would be tantamount to losing *contact* with (a shared) reality. Then when, for reasons I will suggest in the next section, taking work as a concrete example, someone gets stuck in the [non-A—not-A] border (Fig. 1), what happens is the conversion of the emptiness inherent to the semiotic process into a hyper-generalized meaning. For instance, someone might say "I'm feeling completely empty" (hyper-generalization), and this assertion has the potential, even if temporarily, of engulfing her attention and dominating her entire affective life, leading her to inaction. As a result, she is overwhelmed by this *meaning* of an *all-embracing emptiness*: Why then should she engage herself in a transformative action over the world? Why does this turn out to happen?

In order to further reflect on this, we need to identify possible anti-catalytic elements that could lead a person to psychologically create a meaning of emptiness as something paralyzing, blocking the meaning-making process, instead of considering *emptiness-as-possibility*, related to openness, creativity, innovation, and imagination. To illustrate this process, I will examine the case of *empty work*, thus turning to the third and last specific objective of this paper.

## Empty Work

### Definition and Three Attempts to Address It

Empty work is a phenomenon that emerges in the person–work relationship and it lies in the process of meaning-making. This implies that work is a privileged life dimension

in which the process of meaning-construction can be nurtured or, to the contrary, inhibited. Essentially, on the person's side, what is at question is what drives this process, i.e., which psychological factors need to be put into action to push the movement of sign construction towards increasingly more complex meaning structures. On the work side, however, what is at question is how work as an activity affords this same meaning-making process or inhibits it. This implies a different positioning compared to some approaches that can be found in the literature on this topic. There have been at least three major theoretical attempts to address emptiness in work in the sense of meaningless work, and I want to begin with these before discussing my own perspective.

I will call the first attempt the *existential perspective*. Here work becomes empty or meaningless when the person can't actualize him- or herself through work, which leads to a sort of imbalance. In this case, the person's values, needs, or desires no longer match what the work environment can afford the person. The stress here is on the "personal meaning" people attach to or pursue in work, and on the internal sources of such a meaning. An entire psychological body of literature on work meaningfulness attempts to discuss the *conditions* under which work can lead to self-fulfillment or self-realization (e.g., Dik et al. 2013; Pratt and Ashforth 2003).

One of these conditions is, for instance, that in order to be meaningful, work needs to fulfill the person's spiritual values, since spirituality is understood as an important source of meaning (Rosso et al. 2010). Other conditions presuppose that work is something that allows self-expression, allows a person to serve and connect to others, and allows a person to achieve superior—in both the moral and societal sense—goals (Lips-Wiersma and Morris 2009). One core idea behind this type of approach is that the quest for meaning is a universal human motive and one in which meaning "loss" can lead to psychological deprivation or even disorder (e.g., Klinger 1998).

The second approach, which I will call the *organizational improvement perspective*, is based on the idea that the work setting must be arranged in such a way that it brings meaning to people. The focus here is on the environmental conditions in which work unfolds—for instance, the task variety, work design, work conditions, interpersonal relationships, task purpose ("challenges"), leadership, and organizational culture. Based on an optimal mix of these characteristics, organizations can become "best places to work" where high levels of personal satisfaction can be reached.

We can also consider most of the motivational theories as falling under this broad approach regarding the role of the work environment with respect to the employee's feelings and behavior. If the work conditions or design are not adequately set up, they can interact with "inner factors" (for instance, the worker's personality) to give rise to a broad range of negative consequences, such as absenteeism, low engagement, mental health problems (stress or burnout), and demotivation. In sum, the more work conditions are impoverished, the more likely it is that people will find it difficult to find meaning in work and will become "boreout" (Rothlin and Werder 2007).

Finally, there is a third approach to empty work that is closely connected to meaning. I am going to call it the *work alienation perspective*. This perspective is broadly inspired by the concept of alienation put forward by Marx (e.g., 1999/1844). How should we understand alienation, and how it is supposed to relate to emptiness and meaning? It is far beyond the scope of this paper to fully discuss the disputed concept of alienation. However, considering my goal, it seems that one author in particular can

help us to answer the previous question. Following the Marxian vein, Leontiev (2009) has worked on a concept of alienation based on a theorization about activity and meaning. According to him, being alienated implies an *objective situation* in which the person has lost the *sense* by which he or she is working.

To support this position, Leontiev (2009) drew a distinction between the *sense* and the *meaning* of an activity. An activity can be carried out by means of several actions. The meaning of an action corresponds to the objective content of the action, i.e., its object, that which leads the person to perform that particular action. The meaning is the *what*. In contrast, the sense of the action is psychologically more complex than its meaning. It relies, according to Leontiev, on a process by which the human consciousness connects the object of the action (its content) to the motive (the *why*) of this same action. In order to forge this connection, both cognitive and affective resources are brought to bear in consciousness. Work alienation is associated with the *opposite* process, when sense and meaning become dissociated from one another. In the example of weaving that Leontiev puts forth, he states:

> Weaving has the objective *meaning* of weaving for him [worker] and spinning of spinning, but that is not the special feature of his consciousness. His consciousness is characterized by what the relation of these *meanings is to the personal sense* his labour actions have for him. We already know *that sense depends on motive*; consequently the sense of weaving or spinning for the worker is determined by what induces him to weave or spin. His conditions of life, however, are such that he does not spin to satisfy a social need for yarn, does not weave to meet a social need for cloth, but for wages; that also imparts sense to weaving for him, and to the yarn and cloth produced by him. Although the social meaning of the product of his labour is not hidden from him, it is a *meaning foreign to the sense this product has for him* (p. 226 – emphasis added).

The problem with the first approach is that it posits meaning merely as something enclosed within the person, as property of the self. In turn, the second approach, generally speaking, relies heavily on a sort of behavioristic prospectus according to which the environment is supposed to provide the stimuli that could promote a meaningful experience in work. And the problem with the third approach is concentrated in its overemphasis of the *objective* side of alienation. Objective means that whatever the kind of work the person might be performing, it will lead to an alienated condition if the person is detached from the sense of the activity—when the subject-work relationship is, for instance, summarized as a salary-exchange relation. So, in the example given by Leontiev in the previous quotation, workers can't change the sense of their activity by just a subjective turn—facing or describing the situation in a different way.

For instance, from an organizational improvement perspective, the worker could be provided with some subjective stimuli, such as the "employee of the month" strategy, or with some job improvement strategy. Neither strategy will change the fact that in capitalist society, the sense and the meaning of activity are separated from each other and everything is subordinated to economic exchanges aimed at exploiting human work. Leontiev (2009) believes that the sense of the activity is to be found in a collectively organized work, something that goes beyond the current capitalistic organization based on surplus value.

## The Semiosis of Empty Work

I have suggested that work is a specific cultural setting where the meaning-making process can take place. Work can provide some promoter resources for this process, or inhibit it instead. Now I need to further develop this point, by discussing how the person–work relationship turns out to be empty, or blocked in its meaning-making role.

Broadly speaking, work can be defined as a goal-oriented activity. It implies the action of a person that is aimed at getting things transformed into objects with a cultural purpose (Bendassolli 2016). By acting upon the environment through work, the person at the same time internalizes the cultural resources available to her through the culture (for instance, a particular work culture, strategies, tools, operations) and externalizes the efforts she makes to elaborate upon those resources—by producing the previously mentioned objects and by contributing to sustaining the culture itself, since culture is made through objects (Valsiner 2014). Work activity is then a process by which the person stands against nature, in the precise sense that nature "resists" our efforts to organize it in semiotic terms. Work is an intrinsically meaningful activity, both in the sense of being mediated by signs and in the sense of being a goal-oriented activity through which human beings struggle in order to reach something considered personally and socially valuable.

Returning to my previous discussion of the destinies of emptiness in the semiotic process, the first is to afford the emergence of new meanings. By working, we transform emptiness into something else: we turn it into objects (my previous example of building a house). Instead of doing nothing, we as a species have opted to engage in a particular process of struggling against nature. As I have suggested, at the same time that we produce useful objects through work, we also create meanings that are attached to these objects. We make future-oriented objects in the context of irreversible time.

Metaphorically speaking, we could say that nature is "empty" in terms of potential forms to which "things" (undifferentiated matter) could be fitted. Returning to a point I have already discussed, this means that the Aristotelian "final cause" depends entirely on the human spirit. It is the person *as an active agent* who frames the inherent emptiness (*qua* potentialities) in nature into specific forms, designed for specific purposes. This is the process by which work plays a crucial role in building culture as a meaningful environment, an *Umwelt*, and a crucial role in terms of acting according to imagination, creativity, and a full set of possibilities, the not-A field illustrated in Fig. 1.

However, work can also turn out to be empty in the second sense I mentioned in the previous section. Evidently, any human activity can prove to be provisionally empty. Provisional, in this case, refers to the dynamic process of meaning-making. The feeling of being empty is not to be thought of as a final state, or even as a state at all. Nevertheless, the person–work relationship can indeed turn out to be felt as empty, in the way I suggested earlier: emptiness as an empty meaning (as a hyper-generalized sign), something created instead of something else in the meaning-making, i.e., instead of a new {B<>non-B} dyad.

If work could never be felt (even though provisionally) as empty at all, we would certainly not be bombarded with a plethora of information concerning how to transform work into something more pleasant or meaningful in the current organizational contexts. Neither would we be frightened by the fact that an increasing number of mental

health troubles are being associated with work, partly because work has become a meaningless activity in many job arrangements since industrialization has intensified throughout the last two centuries, giving rise to a "dead man working" situation, to use a powerful image employed by Cederström and Fleming (2012). Instead of giving meaning to life, work would be "stilling" the meaning of people's lives (Paulsen 2014). Work is being transformed into empty work, an empty meaning.

My discussion will be focused on the possible semiotic process underlying empty work. And the next ideas should be considered as exploratory ones to be further empirically developed. I'm going to analyse two broad examples of anti-catalytic situations by which work can turn out to be felt as empty. I use "anti-catalytic" to designate those elements that act to hinder the process of meaning-making, blocking it or making the person "linger" at the [non-A—not-A] border—in other words, elements that act opposite to the way that catalytic elements are supposed to act (Cabell and Valsiner 2014).

## Anti-Catalysis in Empty Work

The first anti-catalytic situation I want to mention is related to time. Normally, we have the impression that working time is completely filled with an endless number of activities. However, time is experienced in a non-continuous way at work, as something that is phased. Obviously, this can vary according to the activity under consideration. A busy surgeon in a large hospital can have the feeling that she has no spare time, being consumed by urgent demands all day long. Time can also be felt as a ruthless enemy by professionals working in the stock market or similar areas, where tight deadlines can lead to a huge difference in profits. But time can also be felt like an eternal present in other work domains, or as a flat-line experience. This probably could be the case, for instance, with work in call centers—where time is entirely based on the monotone cadence determined by each phone call and by a verbal script to be strictly followed by the operator. And what about the experience of time in jobs where the rhythm of task demands can be highly variable (for instance, an airline pilot's job)? People working in these jobs can experience alternating periods of tedious idleness and periods of intense activity.

How might the experience of time lead to the feeling of emptiness? I think this can happen when work is *devoid of activity* and the person is devoid of transformative *agency*. This occurs when, despite everything the person can do, nothing will change the potential outputs (Paulsen 2014). This doesn't depend only on the person or only on the organization; rather, it is a phenomenon emerging from the person–work relationship. Let me further consider the phenomenon that the French work psychologist Dominique Lhuilier (2002) has designated as "placardisation," meaning something like "to place things in the cupboard."

**Placardisation and Time** In this case, the "placards" are all those workers placed by the organization in a "suspended state," a metaphorical cupboard, either because they could not be fired or forced to retirement or because there are no more real activities assigned to them. As a result, former workers are excluded from the ongoing activities in the organization (public or private) and then submitted to an experience of becoming "hidden" or useless *while they are still there*. In these cases, as Lhuilier put it, "Time is

frozen. The closed space of the *placard* gets time transformed into a shell, catching the person into the timeless cage of the present […]. The *placardisé* is drained by waiting, living in a time with no other and no signification" (p. 43).

As a consequence, the irreversibility of time becomes a perpetual state of waiting, similar to what happens to the characters in the play *Waiting for Godot* (Beckett 1954) or to Sisyphus, in Greek mythology, faced by an emptiness-as-an-perpetual-present, an eternal-same and pointless activity (Camus 1985). These metaphorical examples point to a situation where time is no longer experienced in its future-oriented and open nature, but squeezed into the here-and-now of work without a goal-oriented activity, without real/valuable outputs.

The meaning-making process is affected by this experience of endless temporality. The person no longer explores the possibilities that work could afford to him or her, being trapped in a hypergeneralized meaning of emptiness ("I feel empty"; "This work is empty"), holding on at the [non-A—not-A] border. To "feel empty", in this case, is to settle against a background of the fully<>non-fully representation. This means that the person may "idealize" a "fully" work situation but at the same time be completely disconnected from a corresponding action, in order to transform their relation to work—as much as this may practically be possible and relies on the person's "action power" (Clot 2009).

**Burnout and Psychological Distancing** The second anti-catalytic situation I would like to analyse is the feeling of emptiness that emerges as a result of a psychological *distancing* (Sigel 2002). I think that Leontiev (2009) makes a good point when he proposes to analyse alienation based on the split between the sense and meaning. This split can be reinterpreted as the result of a psychological distancing between the individual and their ongoing environment. Some organizational characteristics can help to create the conditions under which people detach themselves from the situation, either affectively or in behavioral terms.

Consider the widespread case of *burnout* syndrome (Maslach and Leiter 1997). Burnout is defined as an ongoing state of negative feelings regarding work, accompanied by anxiety and distress and by a feeling of low efficacy and low motivation or engagement regarding work. In previous definitions of this syndrome, these authors employed the idea of "depersonalization," where the affected workers no longer care about their clients—for instance, a doctor or a nurse with respect to her patients or a teacher with respect to his students. A person suffering from burnout is not affectively able to care about or to establish a basic relationship with the person that he or she is supposed to address as a professional. This seems to be a clear example of psychological distancing, in this case, between internal affective states and the actions directed towards the other in a work context. According to the burnout literature, this is caused by an interaction between the person and an overwhelming work environment (which can include moral harassment or symbolical violence), combined with the absence of social support (for a review, see Zawieja 2015).

According to the perspective advanced in this paper, what does burnout point to? Again, it is to the impossibility of the person engaging him- or herself in an action aimed at creating new meanings in his or her work, which leads to the emergence of a feeling of being empty, as commonly related by workers in this situation. In the first

moment, the psychological distancing can be said to be protective; however, it later becomes a "dissociative mechanism". As a consequence, the person can even continue to "normally" work and perform his or her actions (deploying *meanings*, in Leontiev's theory, or digging into the {A—non-A} dyad in Fig. 1), but the person cannot identify an opportunity or a reason to deeply engage him- or herself in order to build new meaning structures through the person's activity (*sense*, in Leontiev's theory, or a new {B—non-B} dyad). With a view to create new meanings, we need an affective feeling oriented towards the future, what psychology at the end of the nineteenth century called *apperception,* an activity "(…) by which individual perceptions, ideas, or idea-complexes are brought into relation to our previous intellectual and emotional life, assimilated with it, and thus raised to greater clearness, activity, and significance" (Lange 1907, p. 41). It is precisely the blocking of the dynamics of apperception that is poignantly illustrated by burnout.

## Synthesis

Trying to summarize and go beyond these specific cases (*placardisation* and burnout), I'm going to close this section by suggesting that the creation of meaning in work, the ability to "use" emptiness as a resource (instead of getting stuck in a paralyzing situation), depends on an *interplay between the internalization<>externalization mechanisms* (Valsiner 2014). If this process is blocked, then what is left for the person is to try to elaborate upon his or her own ideas and feelings, in a sort of closed loop or intra-monologue. Moreover, the hypergeneralized feeling of "being empty" plays the role of such a blocking, by cutting off the potentialities inherent in the person's ongoing or potential activity.

The work environment also plays a crucial role in blocking the internalization<>externalization process. First, it does so by creating conditions that hinder more authentic social interactions. The role of the other in meaning-making is crucial, supporting dialogicity, or, as stated by Bion (1967), through his example of the mother, the other is responsible for the process of turning no-things into emptiness (as a potentiality). Burnout and other mental troubles related to work have systematically been reported to be associated with an increasingly weak and fragile social dimension of work (e.g., Clot 2009).

Second, it does so by restraining the actual possibilities of using autonomy, creativity, and imagination. This happens when work is mostly based on repetition and strict attachment to standardized procedures and tasks or, even more so, when work is a pointless activity aimed at … nothing but profit, to put it as Leontiev (2009) did. This not mean that workers cannot transcend these environmental restraints, but we also cannot deny their existence, or we risk embracing a naïve subjectivist orientation toward the dynamics of meaning-making in work.

## Conclusion

The concept of emptiness that has been worked out throughout this paper can help us to rise above two opposite tendencies in the current literature on the meaning of work (for

a review of this literature, see Lepisto and Pratt 2016). On the one hand, there are those who believe that work is increasingly being deprived of meaning. Braverman (1974) made this point in the Marxist tradition decades ago by pointing out the impoverishment of the content of work in modern societies. As we have seen, the attempt to recast work from this situation is the root of many "reformist" organizational perspectives. In this sort of analysis, work is seen as *emptied from outside*. This is somehow the same positioning as that of Leontiev (2009), with his analysis of the objective wing of work alienation.

On the other hand, there are those who believe that work can be experienced as an inherently self-realizing activity, provided that the self can find inside itself some fulfilling resources. There wouldn't be room for emptiness at all, since the person is, in a metaphorical depiction, "full" (of motives, intentions, desires, needs, even of a "soul"). In this context, *the self is in charge of infusing work with meaning*. The problem would be if the self itself turns to be "empty", in terms of a nothingness (a void; see, in this regard, the analysis carried out by Cushman on "empty self", Cushman 1990).

One implication of the analysis carried out in this paper is the suggestion that empty work is a *relational phenomenon*—because meaning itself is an outcome of the relationship between the person and her environment and also other persons, in dialogical processes through sign operations. To the extent that one wants to foster meaning in work, emptiness has to be devised as a reservoir of possibilities, as a compelling *not-yet* to be worked upon by a person towards the future. Meaning is not a property of things or selves, but it is *in-between* both.

This paper also contributes to the perspective of the cultural psychology of semiotic mediation (e.g., Valsiner 2014), by calling attention to the critical role played by the *not-A* field in the meaning-making process. As a consequence, emptiness turns out to be a key for fostering a reflection on the ultimate purpose of engaging in making meaning. At a certain point, culture can give us the impression of "fullness", especially if grasped in the sense of an entity, as I suggested in the introduction. Understood as a process by which we use signs to mediate our relationship with the environment, culture is a sort of toolbox, to employ an image once suggested by Wittgenstein regarding to language.

At a superficial level of analysis, we might think that we can find in this toolbox every tool we need to make sense of reality. Every major event in our life—for instance, death—can be said to be regulated by culture. If we consider religion, there is a package of tools (i.e., meanings) designed to help us to deal with death. In some cases, a person can genuinely find relief by using these tools. However, even this powerful device (religion and its web of meanings) may present *holes* or *gaps*. Otherwise, why have the meanings surrounding death—even inside the religion mindset—broadly changed over time? One answer involves pointing to the infinite set of possibilities represented by the emptiness at the heart of the semiotic process of meaning construction.

Finally, a methodological note. The study of emptiness can be quite challenging—first, because it has to be analyzed as a dynamic phenomenon in meaning-making, and second, because the processes of experiencing emptiness-as-possibility and emptiness-as-an-empty-meaning (hypergeneralized sign) may appear to be more blurred in non-extreme cases (such as in the burnout and placardisation phenomena), which creates the need to challenge methodological strategies. Certainly, these are issues to be further

addressed by work and organizational psychologists who are interested in going beyond the simplistic approaches to meaning and work that are presently widespread in this area.

**Conflict of Interest**   The author declares that he has no conflict of interest.

**Ethical Approval**   This article does not contain any studies with human participants or animals performed by the author.

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