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Beyond the Meaning Given. The Meaning as Explanandum

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Abstract

The paper starts from the recognition of Bruner's contribution to the development of psychological science. It is claimed here that to proceed in that direction requires the building of an analytical notion of meaning. This analytical notion should distinguish between meaning-making and sensemaking, namely between the processes of elaboration and use of meaning (meaning-making) and the processes that makes the meaning emerge to be lived as psychological reality (sense-making). In order to discuss this distinction, two main issues are addressed – the limit of the hypostatized view of meaning and the dynamics of presentification through which meaning is endowed with value of life. These two issues are complementary – together they push psychology to search for a theoretical and methodological framework where meaning can be investigated as an emergent psychological phenomenon, and not only taken for granted as a premise.

Keywords Sense-making · Meaning making

Introduction

At a certain moment of time, meaning seemed to have left no traces in psychology. The syntactic view of mental processes shared and took ahead behaviourism's aversion to it: cognition was conceived as a set of intertwined operations of information processing, ruled by formal procedures working independently from the meaning of the objects they apply to, in the same vein as an addition works regardless of what it concerns (e.g. Fodor 1983). In so doing, meaning assumed the sense of *information*: a formal characteristic of the object, which computational rules process in order to organize it in representational forms.

Actually, as notions like schema (Neisser 1976), mental models (Johnson-Laird 1983), and scripts (Schank and Abelson 1977) show, cognitive psychology was not initially extraneous to the idea that cognitive processes are not blind to the content they apply to or to their contextual conditions (Sanford 1987). Yet, this view remained

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constrained within a procedural approach, namely the idea that cognition consists of operations based on rules that, though not blind to the context, are however closed within, and concerned with, the cognitive architecture.

One of Bruner's main scientific merits was to give new life to the rediscovery of meaning for psychology, by innovating the framework in which it can be developed (see Chaudhary and Pilli 2019; Iannaccone et al. 2019). To put it briefly, by means of an image, what Bruner did was to provide scientific dignity to an obvious recognition: cognitive processes are not mere mechanisms following inner rules, but part and parcel of the way human livings enact their being in the world (e.g. Bruner 1986, 1990; see also Grazzani and Brockmeier 2019; Smorti and Fioretti 2019).

According to this view, mental processes do not extract information from the environment; rather, they make the environment meaningful (Valsiner 2014). That is the difference between information processing and meaning-making. Meaning-making is not merely the operation of attributing semantic value to objects; it is the human activity of interpretation through which the individual makes the experience something endowed with sense, namely something that is consistent with and therefore reflects/enacts the person's whole form of life.

The role that Bruner attributed to narrative thought (Bruner 1991) is the main way he modelled this subject-centred, dynamic interpretation of cognition in terms of meaning-making. Narration is not a matter of recognizing and semantically organizing events and objects. Narration shapes the experience, gives it a form (e.g. Graneist and Habermas 2019); and it does so in terms of the on-going subject's striving to bring order to the experience, to make it part and parcel of a significant whole, endowed with a direction, namely a *sense*.

The shift in the view of the mind, from information processing to meaning-making, has opened a new frontier in the understanding of psychological processes. On the other hand, such a shift has raised new issues, like the discovery of a new continent that calls for a new season of explorations. The main difficulty in moving in that direction lies in the fact that the core category at the grounds of this scientific project –*meaning* – seems so obvious in its significance that it tends to be taken for granted, as if it were self-evident. This is only apparently paradoxical – indeed, the category *meaning* is at the grounds of psychological life, it constitutes the scaffolding of any instance of human experience. For this reason, it is not represented in its content, but the meaning of meaning is embedded in any form of life and as such, it is, as it were, imbibed by meaning-makers.

In what follows I will outline two main aspects – the ontological and psychological status of meaning - that need to be addressed in order to develop such a notion as an analytic, theory-grounded conceptual tool, that can therefore be used for framing the view of psychological processes in terms of meaning-making. To use an image, if psychology has to go in search of meaning, first of all what is being searched for has to be clear.

The Ontological Status of Meaning

In previous works (Salvatore 2016a, b, 2017, 2018), I have argued that a main obstacle to the development of a view of psychological processes as meaning-making lies in the fact that most of psychological science adopts implicitly, and often unawares, a

hypostasized notion of meaning, which conceives it as an entity, pre-existing the psychological and social dynamics involved in it..

It has to be recognized that the hypostatised view of meaning is consistent with the commonsensical theory of mind. It has a theoretical foundation too, provided by structural semiotics (de Saussure, 1916/1977; see Eco 1975). Indeed, the structural view of the sign as the relation of standing-for between signifier and signified entails that the latter must exist before the former: something may stand for something else only if this something else has a status of existence to which the reference is addressed – in brief, one can express something only if it is assumed that the something to express exists.

The hypostatisation of meaning can be useful in certain circumstances, in particular in order to simplify and operationalize constructs to be implemented for the sake of empirical analysis. However, this view becomes problematic when it is used to frame the modelling of psychological processes. This is so for several theoretical and methodological reasons, of which some of the main ones are outlined below (for a discussion, see Salvatore 2016a, chapter 1).

First, the hypostatization of meaning reflects psychology's more general tendency to reify its constructs in terms of entities (for a critical discussion of this approach in the field of the theory of emotions, see Feldman-Barrett 2006). In so doing, there is an inversion between Explanans and Explanandum, and this prevents meaning from being seen as a phenomenon that needs to be explained in the very fact of its (psychological) existence.

Second, the idea that meaning is a self-contained thing, having an independent existence in a saussurean language domain makes it hard to model it in a psychological key, namely to understand what it consists of, how it plays its role in psychological phenomena, as well as how to map it. Indeed, meaning does not have extensional properties - it is not a body having observable characteristics, occupying a space, exchanging energy/matter with other bodies. Therefore, to treat it as if it had extensional properties leads to wicked problems. Just to give a few examples, it raises issues such as: where is meaning– in the mind? in the society? and if so, where exactly? – how does it move from one point to the other in space? how is it possible that meaning, which is immaterial, is able to generate effects on behaviour (i.e. on material bodies)?Attempts to answer these questions have proved to be unproductive. Generally speaking, due to the premise they are grounded on (i.e. meaning as a self-contained thing), these efforts are implicitly led to interpret the semantic properties of meaning in accordance with a material causal framework (for a criticism, Heft 2013). In other words, they consider semantics as the explicative rule of the underpinning psychological process. Yet this approach presents two major flaws (for a systematic discussion, inter alia, see Bickhard 2009; Fodor 1983). On the one hand it raises the Homunculus paradox. Indeed, if the semantic rule has regulative power, this is possible insofar as it is interpreted in its content. Therefore, it requires a further semantic rule guiding the interpretation; in turn, the semantic rule interpreting the semantic rule requires a further semantic rule to be interpreted, and so forth ad infinitum (Salvatore 2016a, b). On the other hand, from a complementary standpoint one can see that the view of the semantic rule as endowed with causative power leaves a question unanswered: why, through which psychological mechanisms, is the semantic rule able to produce the result it produces? And this is just a different way of saying that the hypostatization of meaning leads to the Explanandum being confused with an Explanans and to the first being treated as if it were the second. Take a person that thinks - "Two plus three is five".

Surely the rule of addition makes the relation among the elements at stake (two, three, five) consistent; yet it does not explain why, through which mental mechanisms this relation has been instantiated as a psychological act. From a different perspective, the theory of social representation can be interpreted as an instance of the thorniness of the conceptual and methodological problems that occur once a hypostatized approach to meaning is involved. Indeed, whereas in Moscovici's original theorization (Moscovici 1961/1976), social representations were conceived as dynamic processes, later the tendency to view them as entities – i.e. in terms of contents that are active in society – became relevant. With it, several thorny theoretical and methodological problems arose – e.g. are the social representations shared (as would be entailed by the fact that they are social) or not (as the variability of the way of thinking in society suggests)? how is a social representation interiorized by persons? (for a discussion, see Verheggen and Baerveldt 2007; see also Salvatore and Venuleo 2013).

Meaning's Value of Life

By definition, meaning-making concerns signs, namely something that stands for something else. Yet meaning-makers do not view/experience the "something else" as something that is absent and for this reason represented by the sign. Rather, they treat the sign (at least certain signs) *as if it were* the thing it stands for.

Thus, meaning-makers enter into relation with the world through the mediation of signs (symbols, as well as icons and indexes, according to Peirce's typology); yet they experience such signs as concrete entities of the world, rather than something standing for it (see below, Peirce's definition of sign) – in other words, the sensemaker – systematically, even if not always (see below) provides *value of life* to the sign (Salvatore 2012), in so doing having experience of it in the terms of the thing (the piece of world) it refers to. For instance, when one sees a banknote, one does not see a piece of paper denoting monetary value, but money *tout court*; again, when one sees an apple, one does not experience the representation of the apple, but the apple *tout court*.

From a theoretical standpoint, this is quite a paradoxical phenomenon – indeed, the fact that the relation between the mind and the world is mediated by signs means that signs enable meaning-makers to relate to the object of experience, but at the same time that this relationship is always indirect, occurring by and in the terms of the linkage between mind and meaning. On the other hand, however, this relation can work as mediation insofar as it disappears,, namely insofar as it is treated as if it were not. In so doing, the meaning-maker has the *as if* experience of being in direct relation with the world.

It is worth noting that the disappearing of the mediational valence of the sign - and with it the subjective experience of being in direct relation with the world - is not a constant universal condition reflecting a transcendental property (in the Kantian sense) of the mind. Indeed, one can recognize many circumstances in which signs are experienced without value of life, even if they refer to existentially relevant objects of experience as well as circumstances in which signs are experienced as loaded with value of life, though their meaning is void of reference to facts and states of reality. An example of the first kind of circumstances is provided by how easily people are able to view the sufferance of large populations as abstract concepts (e.g. bombing, collateral effects, migration fluxes, genocide), working as cognitive organizers of data, but void

of existential power - as a story-format, rather than facts. An example of the second kind of circumstances is the psychological and existential valence that the national identity plays for many people – an abstract meaning that is felt to be endowed with its own ontology, to be made of flesh and blood (Carretero and Kriger 2011).

Thus, one has to recognize that the experience of signs as endowed with value of life is not something that has to be taken for granted as a starting point, but a very fundamental psychological process whose occurrence – in certain circumstances and under certain conditions – needs to be modelled. In the final analysis, such a fundamental process consists of the modality through which the mind determinates the conditions of experience, namely the conditions through which and in term of which mental states are experienced as if they were states of the world. Emerging from this on-going fundamental process, the body modifications that make up perception are experienced as the *thing* one sees, hears and touches. The same can be said for the experience of thinking of a thing that is lived as the experience of the thing one is thinking of.

Incidentally, it is worth adding that the recognition of the relevance of this fundamental process for psychological science is not at all a new claim. In fact, it is a way of coming back to the issue of *presentification*, that was very central in Continental Psychology between the 19th and 20th centuries (Albertazzi et al. 2001). This tradition recognized that the psychological process is not confined to mirroring the world. On the contrary, any psychological process addresses an object- it is always a process about something – a perception, a feeling, a thought of something – that is actively construed in its psychological reality (Brentano, 1874/1995). This is because as Meinong argued (Albertazzi et al. 2001; Valsiner 2009), and as experiments like those conducted by Kanizsa (1955) show, the psychological object has a content of being that is independent from its ontological status – it works as mental content even if it has no extensional properties; in sum, *it subsists* before and regardless of whether it exists (on the relation between subsistence and existence and the primacy of the former, already recognized by philosophy in the Middle Ages, see Eco 2009). Accordingly, once we recognize that the psychological reality – what I refer to with the expression the "value of life" of the sign – is not the necessary, inherent precipitate of the ontological status of the piece of the world addressed, then what emerges as central is the issue of presentification, namely of how the mind is able to provide psychological reality to its content.

Actually, this centrality was lost as a result of the increasing dominance of the neopositivist paradigm in post-World War II psychological science (Toomela 2007) and the consequent backgrounding of any problem that could not be subjected to direct measurement/observation. And it goes without saying that if there is a psychological phenomenon that cannot be investigated by direct measurement/observation it is presentification, namely the process which provides the form of the experience rather than being an object of it, and which therefore cannot be described in terms of observables. Thus, *re-presentation* took the place of present(ific)ation. This was not only a change in terminology. Cognitive psychology, and more in general contemporary psychological science, do not care about how the value of life of the meaning comes about, or how the world is presentified as reality-for-the-subject. Contemporary psychological science seems to assume this as its starting point, and focuses on how the subsequent psychological processes handle the presentified psychological realty, i.e. how they re-present it. In other words, contemporary psychological science does not consider the on-going dynamics that, like a sort of psychological big-bang, transforms

signs into psychological life, preferring to address the functional task of describing how such psychological life works, once it emerges.

On the other hand, it is hard to imagine that a view of psychological processes in terms of meaning-making can miss this aspect.

Beyond the Meaning Given

The previous discussion should have shown the need to go beyond the view of meaning as the starting point of psychological life and to consider it as a (basic) product of psychological processes. Psychological science should therefore develop the equivalent of the big bang theory in physics. To adopt a different analogy, this task consists of doing what Marx said he did with Hegelian dialectics: to turn it upside down – namely, to consider meaning the product of sensemaking, rather than vice versa. In what follows a possible way this conceptual task can be carried out is briefly outlined (for further details, see Salvatore 2016a, b, 2017, 2018).

To start with, it is worth noticing that the view of meaning as a state emerging from psychological processes finds its grounds in Wittgenstein's (1953/1958) definition of it as the way words are used, and more in general in the pragmatist view of it in terms of the effect the sign produces. In the final analysis, this view says that the meaning does not stand before its use, therefore before the psychological process underpinning such a use; rather, it is what results from it.

The pragmatist view of meaning is known to find its systematizations in Peirce's theory of the sign (Peirce, 1897/1932). The radical difference between Pierce's triadic theory and the dyadic of de Saussure's dyadic theory lies in the fact that the former does not consider the signified as a constitutive element of the sign.

> (…)or *representamen*, is something which stands to somebody for something in some respect or capacity. It addresses somebody, that is, creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign. The sign stands for something, its object. It stands for that object, not in all respects, but in reference to a sort of idea which I have sometimes called the ground of the representamen. (Peirce, 1897/1932, vol. 2, p. 228)

According to Peirce, the sign is something (*representamen*) that stands for something else; yet differently from de Saussure, the "something else" is not the given signified merged with the signifier. Indeed, the representamen has potentially infinite possibilities of standing for something else; these possibilities are constrained by the following sign triggered in the mind of the interpreter (in other texts, Peirce calls it *interpretant*), that establishes, from the standpoint of the interpreter ("to somebody"), of what the previous sign is the representamen ("the ground of the representamen"). For instance, for a certain interpreter, the photo of a cake may stand for the cake as regards its shape and colour, whereas for other interpreters it can stand for the birthday party where it was consumed.

For the sake of our discussion, what has to be highlighted in Peirce's triadic theory is that the sign is not the container of the signified; rather the sign (representamen) requires the interpretative function of the following sign - - the "equivalent sign, or perhaps a more developed sign" (i.e. the interpretant) – in order to acquire meaning - namely, in order for

the standing-for relation (i.e. the ground of the representamen) to be established. Incidentally, the triadic theory shows why the meaning has no extensional properties – indeed, it is not an inherent quality of the signifier, but the form of the relation between signifiers that follow. On the other hand, the interpretant is however a representamen, that in its turn requires to be interpreted by a following interpretant. Thus, representamen and interpretant are not different types of signs, but different positions/functions of the sign in the infinite semiotic chain making up interpretative activity.

In this sense, it can be concluded that *the meaning is the sign that follows,* namely the event of enacting a sign as a consequence and for the sake of interpreting the previous sign. The meaning is not held in the sign, it is the effect it has in terms of what interpretant it triggers in the mind of the interpreter. In the final analysis, the triadic theory of the sign leads beyond the view of meaning as a self-contained entity, to see it as the local effect of the whole semiotic dynamic. To use an image, the meaning is to the semiotic dynamics as the picture of a dance is to the dancers' movements, an instant the camera has blocked, in so doing reifying and abstracting it in a form which is extracted from the flow of time.

In short, insofar as it does not consider meaning as contained in the sign, but as the instant product of the ongoing dynamics of sensemaking, Peirce's theory of the sign enables us to go beyond the hypostatization of meaning, and to model it as the emergent product of the whole interpretative activity.

Peirce's theory also provides the conceptual tools for modelling the process of presentification. Here the central point lies in Peirce's specification that the interpretant is an "equivalent" sign. More specifically, the equivalence concerns the relation with the ground: the interpretant stands for the ground as the representamen stands for it. This means that the interpretant somehow reproduces through time the quality/ dimension of the object (the "some respect or capacity") that the representamen stands for. The ground is neither contained in the sign nor is ever grasped by the sign – rather, the chain of signs reproduces the ground by means and in terms of keeping the relation of equivalence active. For instance, take a person that tries to explain to a friend of hers where she spent her holidays– "I stayed in Salerno"; the friend replies: "do you mean the wonderful city in Southern Italy" "Yes, I do". Well, none of these three statements (for the sake of simplicity let's consider each of them a sign of the semiotic chain) contains the object it stands for (i.e. the city where the person spent her holidays). Yet this object is reproduced as the ground of the first sign by its being the invariant relation of equivalence over the succession of signs, namely what remains constant through the sequence of the three signs. In the final analysis, this means that the meaning lies in what signs keep invariant through their variation, just as the action of counting consists of what remains stable (i.e. the action of counting) generated by the variation of the numbers uttered. In what follows, this invariance generated by the variation will be referred to with the term *region of equivalence.*

The notion of region of equivalence is a way of modelling Peirce's view of the ground as continuously and dynamically instantiated by the succession of signs. It provides a possible way of addressing the puzzling issue of how signs are (not always) experienced as endowed with value of life. Indeed, one can advance the thesis that the presentification is a function of the stability of the region of equivalence. The more stable such a region is, namely, the more the chain of signs is able to trigger further signs that reproduce the same ground, the more the ground is subsumed within the sign, therefore the more the sign can be felt *as if it were* the object it stands for.

It is worth noting that this thesis claims that the stability of the region of equivalence is not experienced in itself, but in terms of its effects on the social practice it frames – the more the social practice reproduces its coordination through space-time variability, the greater the stability of the meaning grounding it, and the more such a meaning is presentified as a piece of life (with a different terminology, it is instituted as the canonical state of facts; cf. Fini and Salvatore in press). In the final analysis, the presentification is a function of the power of the semiotic dynamics to provide the condition of coordination of the action.

The instruction Jesus provided to his disciples - "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them" (Matthew, 18:20) offers a powerful image of this thesis: A meaning (to be "in the midst of them") is endowed with value of life - i.e. Jesus' presence as a fact-insofar as a semiotic dynamics (to be "in my name") grounds the coordination of the pattern of social action ("where two or three are gathered together"). In brief, a meaning is real for the meaning-maker when and on condition that living it as real works as the fundamental assumption enabling the activity grounded on such an assumption to be reproduced over time (Salvatore 2012).

The economic value of money provides another clear instance of the social nature of the stability of the region of equivalence. Money is a sign that does not hold its economic significance in itself. Rather, the significance is the global effect of the fact that the social practice of economic exchanges maintains its coordination in terms of its being the enactment of the region of equivalence amongst the transition of signs constituting it (e.g. the exchange between a banknote and goods). It is the social exchange (i.e. trade, saving, gambling, etc.) making up the transition of signs that generates the meaning of the signs, rather than vice versa- and until a new sign reproduces such coordination – namely, until a further economic/financial transaction is carried out - the meaning of money (i.e. its economic ground, rather than its aesthetic, material ground) has value of life for those who are involved in that practice.

From Meaning-Making to Sensemaking

A general implication of the discussion outlined above is worth highlighting.

From both the theoretical and methodological standpoint, two levels of investigation have to be distinguished. On the one hand, the level where meaning is experienced in its form of mental content and as such it is elaborated. On the other hand, the level where meaning is presentified. At the first level, understanding the meaning is a matter of modelling the inner semantic linkages between signs. The second level goes beyond the recognition of the semantic linkages in order to comprehend why and how these linkages (and not others) are those that comprise the process of meaning-making under investigation. In the final analysis, at the first level the meaning plays the role of Explanans, whereas at the second level it has the position of Explanandum.

I propose to use the terms "meaning-making" and "sensemaking" - usually treated as interchangeable with each other- to specify this distinction of levels. Therefore, "meaning-making" should be used for denoting processes of elaboration of meanings as they are already given to the subject; "sensemaking" should be used to indicate the on-going semiotic dynamics through which these signs work as the way of presentifying the world for the person. In short, according to this distinction, meaning-making is

embedded within sensemaking; the latter defines the conditions (i.e. the stability of the ground) in terms of which the meaning can be experienced, thought and elaborated.

Incidentally, it is worth noting that the sensemaking/meaning-making distinction implies an integrative view of the externalist and internalist semantic approaches – meaning is an inner mental content (level of meaning making); however, it is so because of how the signs are used in the world for the sake of grounding the coordination of the action (level of sensemaking).

In order to exemplify this distinction, consider the following excerpt that represents the beginning of an interview aimed at gathering a woman's life story.

> I was born on 27 September 1961. For a few months I lived with my mother and then my parents left me with my mother's aunt. At first, my mother took me to her uncle's house for a few hours. Instead, in the long run, she started leaving me there even at night. I had already become used to this and almost I was even better than at home, so much that I did not want to come back home. Perhaps there was not the love that I should have had for my mother and that instead I felt I had for my aunt.

At the level of meaning-making, a *representation of the Self* is enacted, comprising a network of meanings – the progressive displacement of the interviewee to the aunt, the adaptation to such a relational environment as a result of this progression, the view of the affective linkages as forms of habit, the description of such a habit as the preference for the aunt, in turn seen as the lack of involvement with the mother. The semantic linkage among these meanings shapes the representation of the Self the interviewee enacts in the dialogue with her interlocutor – i.e. the image of a person that has found an affective anchorage in a substitute figure as a result of the lack of affective commitment on her mother's part.

Yet one can ask – why does the interviewee select just such a pattern of signs as the way of representing herself? The recognition of the semantic linkage between these signs does not provide an answer to this question, because this question foregrounds just why this pattern of linkages *and not others* is enacted. Thus, the question shifts the layer of analysis to the level of sensemaking, where the semantic linkages between the signs are no longer the way of understanding the representation of the Self outlined by the interconnection among the elements of the life story that has been told (i.e. the meaning as Explanans); rather what has been told has to be comprehended as the mode by which the woman enacts a certain dimension of the world (better, of the relation Self-world) and in so doing reproduces the stability of the region of equivalence that grounds the inner sense of continuity of herself – i.e. the presentification of her life to herself. At this level of analysis – where the meaning is the Explanandum, one can see that the signs the woman mobilizes concerns a dimension of the Self-world relationship made up of the primary relationships one is part of and through which one is assimilated.

The latter interpretation, concerning the level of sensemaking dynamics, though it is expressed in terms of semantic content (and it could not be done any other way), does not concern the meaning conveyed by the interviewee. Rather, it is a kind of second-order meaning, that can be inferred by the interpreter from the text, as the condition of its production. In the final analysis, such second-order meaning can be seen as the structure

of the Self – one can call it the *representing Self* - consisting of the selection of a certain domain of the relation with the world as region of equivalence. In this case, the representing Self consists of the world as affective linkages one is thrown into and assimilated with. This region of equivalence grounds the representation of the Self enacted by the life story, namely a network of vicissitudes of relationships with caregivers.

Conclusion

In this paper I have tried to show that the development of psychological science, which in Bruner found one of its seminal promoters, requires the building of an analytical notion of meaning. More specifically, this analytical notion should take into account the dynamic of sensemaking that leads a certain meaning to emerge and to be lived as psychological reality.

   In order to highlight the value of going beyond the meaning given I have discussed two main issues – the limits of the hypostatized view of meaning and the dynamics of presentification through which meaning is endowed with value of life. These two issues are complementary –they bring psychology searching for meaning to search for a theoretical and methodological framework where meaning can be investigated as an emergent psychological phenomenon, and not only taken for granted as a premise. This is the ambition of the type of psychology that seeks to be the science of sensemaking.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

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