The Philosophy of Meaning and Value

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ABSTRACT

Meaning and value are fundamental to humans coexisting in civilized societies. The contemporary world demands mutual respect and understanding whether beliefs in particular thoughts and actions are accepted and shared among stakeholders. Philosophy is an ideal medium for interpreting and conveying such expectations. Philosophy provides the historical basis, the contextual relevance, and the contemporary reality to both expectations and outcomes in thought provoking and meaningful ways. Philosophy guides understanding in moral judgments, rational discourse, and perspectives routed in knowledge and experience. Constructing appropriate meaning is becoming even more relevant in contemporary era because of multiple variances, especially along the purview of nation states. Yet, globalization is nibbling away these colloquial understanding. Migration is on the increase. Global outsourcing and off shoring is rapidly creating new demands on communication and collaborative endeavors. Although the "problems" may be multifaceted, one common thread to the comingling and intermingling is language.

Keywords: *Philosophy, Constructing meaning, Positivism, Utilitarianism, Kantianism, Consequentialism*

1. INTRODUCTION

Wittgenstein remarked, "People who have no need for transparency in their argumentation are lost to philosophy" [2, p. 1]. The statement by Wittgenstein is an apt one for those who wish to understand meaning in language and therefore want to express clarity in reason. Ayer [1] noted that individuals should establish boundaries for meaningful language. Such meaning may not be apparent in its original form and may require analysis of the embedded logic to make sense. Philosophers have a role therefore to make sense of reality, thought, and knowledge [2].

Meaning is not a panacea for life existence but becomes helpful to such experience although one would hope that the events of life be more meaningful than not. Kant, for example, prescribed that life should be about the greatest good [14] for the totality of humans. Utilitarian's argued that ends justify means and Comte's positivism advanced that no one obtains knowledge through theory. Positivism and utilitarianism therefore seem unimportant in contemporary times because they lacked relevance. Notwithstanding, the role of intuitions in the current dispensation seem appropriate in giving meaning to life [14]. Individuals must therefore contend with such value judgments and their knowledge-base to construct rational meaning. Meaning and value are concomitant. Meaning gauges the significance and importance of value. Meaning therefore expresses a "good that is conceptually distinct form happiness or rightness" [14, p. 1].

One can view value from two perspectives; intrinsic and extrinsic. Intrinsic value is central to ethics and is the value "in itself" or "for its own sake" [6, p. 1]. Intrinsic value is essential to judgments of morality. Consequentialists base morally sound judgments solely on "whether its consequences are intrinsically better than those of any other action one can perform under the circumstances" [6, p. 1]. Other theories also posit that intrinsic value influences judgment. Intrinsic value

therefore affects one's responsibility for his or her actions [6].

Unlike intrinsic value however, extrinsic value is a derived value. Extrinsic value "is good, not for its own sake, but for the sake of something else to which it is related in some way" [6, p. 1]. Extrinsic value exists for actions or judgments that produce satisfaction not only for the doer but also for the beneficiaries.

I will further elaborate in the succeeding paragraphs, my perspectives and thoughts on meaning and value and provide a relatively succinct summary of the preceding arguments thereafter.

2. VALUE AND MEANING FROM THE TRADITIONALIST/MODERNIST PERSPECTIVES

Goldman [4] opined that the traditional epistemology of philosophers is to seek "truth, reason, and objectivity" (p. viii). Aristotle [12] posited that man can only achieve ultimate happiness by nurturing virtues such as "courage, moderation, justice, and prudence" [12, p. 5]. The Greeks appreciated shame because they recognize the difference between good and unpleasant actions [12]. The foregoing illustrates that individual autonomy is limited over an extended period during the course of history. This limitation arises out of the need to coexist without anarchy. The values and meaning that I construct from the environment therefore, will determine how civilized I am to fit within the coexisting group. For civilized living to occur however, one must first understand self.

Two thousand years after Aristotle, Descartes Cartesian dualism reminded humanity that "I think, therefore I am" [10, p. 1]. Such Cartesian image may be somewhat misleading. The world is not one of insulated thinking and meditation. Hardly ever, in a society of cooperation and collaborative endeavors do thinkers

pursue knowledge or truth solely for their individual pursuit. Mead [8] opined that the unitary 'I' Descartes posited is an incomplete picture of self because the self is neither autonomous nor complete. Mead argued that there is "the 'I' (the subject self) and the 'me' (the object of consideration by others)" [8, p. 420].

Mead posits that the 'I' and the 'me' seek two separate set of facts but the 'me' supersedes because the 'I' satisfy the self whereas the 'me' belong to the group. Therefore, the 'me' construct meaning within the context of such group. Anarchy and civilized living would be inconsequential if there were no group. Mead noted that the psychology of self lends focus to "the internal coherence and development of the psyche" [8, p. 421] of one's soul and being. Mead further proffered that although the psyche may be so profound in an individual's spiritual journey to accepting self, if one stops the analysis at this point, the portrait remains unfinished.

Dukerheim and Mead argued that "social structures and culture" [8, p. 421] are fundamental principles in understanding self. Marx posited that one derives his or her objective reality from the economic experience that he or she has to endure [8]. Maslow noted that individuals have to satisfy physiological needs such as oxygen and water and social needs such as security and prestige. I therefore construct meaning and value from fusing both the psyche and the surroundings in understanding self.

Freud, a Darwinian, advanced his Oedipus complex thesis in three stages (1) *oral*, (2) *anal* or *sadistic*, and (3) *phallic* that gives meaning to self. Lacan posited that it is impossible to have complete identity and meaning without language. Lacan argued that language is a defacto precondition to understand "culture, prohibitions, and laws" [10, p. 8]. Lévi-Strauss stated that the Oedipus complex provided a crucial role to human development and understanding. Lévi-Strauss posited that the Oedipus complex is "the pivot of humanization" [10, p. 8]. Lacan never disagreed with the sentiments expressed by Freud but believed Freud's theory to be limiting in *'fact'*. Lacan believed that however important the Oedipus complex, individuals cannot construct meaning in the absence of language, therefore language is necessary to complete the process of understanding.

In extending Freud's theory, Lacan noted the following:
  a. The child's desire to complement the missing part of the mother, the *phallus*,
  b. The intervening father depriving the child of the *phallic* and taking control, and
  c. The father restoring the *phallus* because of the mother's insistence.

These addenda, Lacan proffered, are important ingredients to have a comprehensive understanding of meaning and self.

3. VALUE AND MEANING FROM THE POSTMODERNIST PERSPECTIVES

Although the traditionalist/modernist views resonate with me, there are certain aspects to the postmodernist perspectives that seem sensible and appropriate in constructing meaning and value. I agree with postmodernists arguments that both epistemology and ideology contribute to meaning and value. I disagree however, that it is impossible for science to discover "objective truth" [13, p. 1]. Notable postmodernist thinkers such as Lyotard, Derrida, and Focault retain such belief.

Lyotard, for example, posited that the extent of transformation in recent history drastically change the rules of "science, literature, and the arts" [7, p. xxiii]. He further argued that conflicts between the narratives and science are not a new phenomenon but that such conflict always existed [7]. Notwithstanding, postmodernists agreed with Kant who argued that epistemological and ethical principles are not co-dependent. Postmodernists proffered that ethics or practical reasons are independent of epistemology or pure reasons [3].

Lyotard hypothesize that technology in the postmodern era contributes substantially to the pace at which both culture and knowledge change [7]. No one would doubt such fact. However, I disagree with Lyotard that knowledge "cease to be an end in itself" [7, p. 5] in contemporary times. Postmodernists such as Lyotard accepted that epistemology and ideology constitute meaning and value, independently or otherwise, but I would argue that epistemology and ideology constitute knowledge. Therefore, I am using knowledge to ascribe meaning and to construct value.

Lyotard noted that one should apply hypothesis strategically in relation to questions proffered and not to subjugate such assumptions to any predictive value of reality [7]. I would ask Lyotard to provide proof of the persons engaging in such occurrence. A hypothesis always has been a tentative assumption. One must vet its consequences for empirical or logical fact. With all the plethora of technology, such rigor remains as it was 2000 years ago. My approach to constructing meaning and value therefore remains unchanged; I use both psyche and surroundings to derive meaning and to instill my values.

Lyotard advanced the pragmatic view that language is essential to constructing meaning. This is not a new phenomenon. As stated above, Lacan believed Freud's Oedipus complex was incomplete without understanding language and posited his modified version. Mead noted the distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' but Lyotard argued that the 'me' becomes irrelevant in contemporary society because of the confluence of "techniques and technology" [7, p. 14]. Lyotard noted

that as society move decision-making from humans to machines then Mead's 'me' becomes less relevant as individuals recognize their insignificance in the "grand narrative." He conceded however, that some relevance will remain with the group because no "self" stands alone.

Lyotard proffered that science and knowledge are not synonymous. Knowledge therefore, "cannot be reduced to science, nor even to learning" [7, p. 18]. Learning is a set of independent statements conforming to truth or deception whereas science is merely a subset of these statements, said Lyotard. He argued that knowledge extends beyond truth [7]. Lyotard extended this same argument to customs. Lyotard concluded from his proposed arguments that what constitute good or bad custom, are acceptable and relevant rules. I would ask Lyotard whether these rules are not the result of knowledge because Lyotard seem to fail in his bid to separate the influence of epistemology and ideology upon knowledge and, by extension, the values and meaning individuals extract from such knowledge.

4. PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AND OUTLOOK

I advance that I construct meaning and value from multiple perspectives. I cannot therefore agree that such meaning or values comes entirely from Descartes unitary "I think, therefore I am" or completely from Mead's 'I' and 'me' philosophy. Instead, I believe that both sets of hypotheses infuse profound ideas to the debate of constructing meaning. Maslow, for example, posited that humans operate on a hierarchy of needs and further expounded that individuals accomplish such necessities singularly along the hierarchy moving from bottom to top. I would proffer that although humans may require such fulfillment, individuals would not necessarily await the outcome of one need to move to the next but would instead activate the knowledge and skill-sets necessary for each rung on Maslow's hypothetical ladder as opportunities present themselves. I cannot envisage any reason someone would delay a particular gratification simply because he or she places another gratification below the existing that he or she has not yet fulfilled.

I construct meaning from my personal and social view of morality and the law, from applying my cognitive skills, from my ethical principles, from ideology and culture, from my intrinsic and extrinsic values, from common sense, and from pedagogical, and epistemological knowledge. I therefore incorporate a plethora of ideas, reasons, and principles to derive meaning because of the values I place upon the very ideas, reasons, and principles. Values help me to construct meaning but meaning gives me value. Phenomenology is therefore an essential part of my understanding and reasoning for meaningful interpretations and adding value to my positions and pronouncements.

Phenomenology is my "experience or consciousness" [9, p. 1], but I build experience over time and within context and situatedness. Both society and technology co-constitute with each other to construct meaning. I therefore derive meaning from what Mead calls the 'object'. I am not isolated from the interconnectedness and interdependence between technology and society [9]. Although I am not necessarily agreeing with Lyotard to the extent that he places technology in contemporary times, I must agree that technology do play a major role in human's view of value and meaning. Each philosopher therefore seems to advance a piece of the puzzle required to complete the picture.

On the one hand, Kant prescribed that individuals should do an act because it is universally acceptable, that is, the act is appropriate for everyone. In other words, rightness and consequences are not necessarily interdependent. Kant, in advancing his *categorical imperatives* principle, noted that one's action should not have preconditions [5].

On the other hand, the principles of utilitarianism prescribed that individuals should engage in acts that produce the greatest good for the greatest number, that is, ends justify means [15]. These two views however, are absolute in themselves. In certain situations I will do something if I deem it necessary based on the value I place on the act or on its outcome. In other situations I will not carry out an act, not because I do not believe the act to be essential but because of fear of its consequence. For example, I may observe an accident with injured persons but refuse to help such persons because I may suffer a lawsuit for lifting a person inappropriately, and by so doing, create greater harm to the person. These respective perspectives that I advanced illustrate that constructing meaning and value is a comprehensive approach that incorporate a wide body of knowledge and experience. I therefore do not construct meaning and value from any single perspective.

5. CONCLUSION

Ayer [1] opined that language is meaningless in the absence of sensible reasons and Canfield [2] posited that in the absence of transparent arguments, meaning is essentially lost in language. Constructing meaning and value however, is a complex undertaking. Traditional philosophy, for example, requires interdisciplinary skills such as logic, ethics, metaphysics, and epistemology to construct meaning and to give value to truth. One requires logic to determine good and bad reasons. Logic helps individuals to recognize what common sense, cognitive skills, or scientific facts are. Individuals use ethics to distinguish between right and wrong. Metaphysics assist one's understanding of "mental, physical, and abstract things" [16, p. 1] and individuals need epistemology to examine the truth in knowledge.

The epistemology of traditional thinkers is the "quest for truth, reason, and objectivity" [4, p. viii].

Traditional thinkers therefore believed that meaning and value comes from Descartes Cartesian dualism unitary 'I' and from Freud's Oedipus complex. Such abstract hypotheses are incomplete within the contemporary and modern world in which we find ourselves.

Modern thinkers believed that ethical values and virtues resulted from "courage, moderation, justice, and prudence" [12, p. 5]. Nietzsche's 'will to power', for example, incorporates "energy, strength, enthusiasm, [and] self mastery" [11, p. 23]. Modern thinkers believed that constructing meaning is a continuum incorporating traditional views with updated formulae. I accept this view as accurate but incomplete. I would argue that such a view, although forward thinking, lacks credibility in certain respects. I must however recognize that the modern view of constructing meaning is the most complete although incomplete. I would further posit that a thorough representation of how humanity constructs meaning and values may itself be unattainable.

Postmodernists proffered that science is not possible to discover "objective truth" [13, p. 1]. Lyotard, for example, noted that so many translations have occurred since the 20th century that the prevailing rules of science, literature, and arts are no longer the same [7]. Kant opined that ethics is independent of epistemology, a view to which postmodernists subscribe. Postmodernists argued that practical reason (ethics) and pure reason (epistemology) are mutually exclusive [3]. Lyotard noted that the "grand narrative" of the traditionalists/modernists no longer has credibility irrespective of whether the narrative is about liberation or theory [7]. Lyotard advanced that the contemporary period has two fundamental changes unaccustomed in previous epochs; the complexities of the modern era and the multiplicity of methods. He questioned therefore, what becomes "pertinent to legitimation" [7, p. 42].

Lyotard is correct in advancing his two fundamental changes. However, I cannot accept that such advancement completely nullify the existing. I am certain that the values and meaning I construct comes largely from both engaging in social endeavors and from scientific training. Lyotard rejects relativism but I posit that all things are relative. The existing is relative to positions, situatedness, and meaning. However I may be situated, my understanding and reaction to values and meaning comes entirely from my social consciousness and from what I glean through science and education.

I therefore conclude that although all three perspectives; traditional, modern, and postmodern principles contribute substance to the debate, the least of the 'apostles' remain postmodernism. I believe that although the traditional and modern views are themselves incomplete, they provide the best alternatives to constructing meaning and values.

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