

What Does Anything Mean Anyway? Your Guess is as Good as Mine

We can think of the notion “meaning” as a search for “the ultimate”: beyond our imaginings, the discoveries of science, the revelations of mystics, the presentations of artists...and possibly “a ‘beyonding’ that might just be an unrecognized glimpse of infiniteness—no end, no outside”. We stop searching where-when we choose...since for any meaning we assume, we can still ask “Well...What’s the meaning of that?”

Our high school geography teacher ? “Mr. Searchwell” had two responses to any question we asked: They were **“Use your discretion”**, and **“Your guess is as good as mine.”** These two bits of advice were never given together. We got used to this and took bets on which one we would receive. And while we waited with mouths open wide, waiting to hear some more, Mr. Searchwell, a teacher of very few words, said nothing more. Many years ago, in search of a ‘meaning’ for a word, I happened to open the dictionary (“Webster’s Collegiate 10th Edition), at page, 28a”, with the title “Semantics in the Dictionary”. On seeing the word “semantics” I decided to read the chapter. I was quite surprised to find the following words (part of a two page entry): “Perhaps the first thing we need to remind ourselves is that when we speak of the meaning of a word, we are employing an artificial, if highly useful, convention. Meaning does not truly reside within the word but in the minds of those who hear or read it. This fact alone guarantees that meaning will be amorphous; no two people have had exactly the same experience with what a word refers to and so the meaning of the word will be slightly or greatly different for each of us.” So: What are we searching for when we ask what does anyone, anything, or any word means? Over the years, I have come to appreciate Mr. Searchwell’s responses, “Use your discretion.”, and “Your guess is as good as mine.”

“Consciousness of abstracting” and ‘the calculus’

There is a close **relationship between the general semantics principle “consciousness of abstracting” and “the principle of the calculus”**. A definition

of 'the calculus' which we could also apply to "consciousness of abstracting" goes as follows: **"The study of a continuous function by following its development/history by indefinitely small steps.** (Science And Sanity, page 582) The vocabulary of the calculus includes the terms "variables", "functions", "derivatives", and "limits". We can think of **"our living as a continuous function" involving selecting-and leaving out—"abstracting":** What we experience, see, hear, sense, `digest`, think-feel-reason`, believe, imagine and talk about; our plans, decisions, judgments, laws, opinions, explanations, opinions, stories we tell; our descriptions, standards, definitions, categories, values, discoveries, theories, visions, dreams, fantasies, enlightenments, philosophies, religions, knowledge, science; our biases, prejudices, hopes and expectations; 'meanings' we give or believe things have, etc., are all functions and derivatives-- abstractings and abstractings from our abstractions—"all functions of our selecting-and leaving out—and limited by the bits we have selected-and the great deal we have left out from all that's going on—the continuous function we call "The Universe". **The behaviour labelled "consciousness of abstracting" involves remembering** that whatever we 'do', we "are selecting-and leaving out". (**"Consciousness of abstracting" can be considered a self-reflexive master principle of general semantics...a self-reflexive master principle in that "all Alfred Korzybski's general semantics principles-and tools, including** **"consciousness of abstracting", non-identity, non-allness, non-elementalism, conscious-time-binding, consciousness of projecting, and others, involves abstracting."**) The **"principles of "non-allness" and "non-identity" are generalizations of the fact that we abstract:** " To better understand ourselves, and towards achieving better relationships at any level...personal, social, national, international, ecological, etc., it suits us to "remember ourselves as "time-binding abstractors?" We can deal only with fractions of what's going on: Forgetting this, we tend to treat parts we non-consciously select--as the whole...a source of a great deal of our personal, societal, and international problems.

"General Semantics" as stated by the founder "Alfred Korzybski", constitutes a **"theory of evaluation" based on the methods and approach of science and mathematics as human thinking at its best (in term of predictability)...and worth**

studying and copying. as critical thinking and behavioural guides. General Semantics constitutes an anthropological report on the species. As a theory of evaluation, a theory psychotherapy, a theory of sanity, a theory of communication, the system can be thought of as a “meta-psychology”, and a “meta-epistemology” (among many other features). The system offers an interrelated set of principles as tools we can use to understand ourselves as individuals, as ‘tribes’, and as a species of time-binding abstractors. We can use general semantics principle-tools to improve our ways of being and relating with-in ourselves, others, and our environments. When we are conscious of abstracting, we give ourselves opportunities (as in science) to modify, stop, refine, and consciously time-bind our attitudes, thinking-feelings about things, what we do-and how we do, towards possible improvements. (“Time-binding” is a label for our natural tendency to build on, expand, modify, etc., in our times, what others (and ourselves) have thought of, accomplished, and produced in our-their times. (The progress of science and mathematics are excellent examples of time-binding.)) “Conscious time-binding” involves recognizing our natural time-binding nature, and using general semantics principles to time-bind our natural time-binding, towards becoming more responsible time-binders, and avoid some of natural time-binding harmful results. (For instance: With natural time-binding, we build better bombs.)

Back to the notion of meaning. Some guesses from a general semantics perspective. In structuring the notion of meaning, we can think of ‘meanings’ we give, or claim things have, as (not necessarily conscious) assumptions, and unverifiable categorical propositions, speculations, and conclusions. The notion that things have meanings is based on (among other semantic variables (factors), the following: We can guess that our search for meaning involves a search for something we think will expand our understanding of things and help us better deal or cope with situations; that the notion that things have meanings is based on (among other semantic variables) arose (arise) from a strong belief that there must be something else going, other forces at work beyond what we see, hear, smell, taste, and touch; a strong belief that there must be some purpose to things; that things can’t be just happening all by themselves without any direction, design, management, program, or goals. We can guess: Our imagination and beliefs lead to a natural

desire and curiosity to know more; and a non-conscious conviction and judgment that everything must have this unknown we label “meaning” which if revealed, could help us make more and better sense of goings on, and so be better able to deal with situations. (Unfortunately, the idea of meaning became well established before the notions of “structure- function”, or autogeny.) We can guess that our natural impulse to know more, lead to myths and explanatory stories about gods and other powerful-to be feared, mischievous and malicious spirits, demons and beings to be appeased and worshiped.

We could think of our search for ‘meaning’ as an impulse which over times, and through time-bindings, lead to mysticism, religion, meta-physics, philosophy, psychology, and science. The emergence of the notion of meaning at psychological levels could be an ‘answer’ to impulses at non-conscious levels which emerge into consciousness as questions such as: What do you/sh/e they have in mind? What is she/he/they intend or is trying to say? What is this all about, what does this portend? What can I/we expect from this? How significant is this? What’s behind this? Can you say more about this? What’s going on? What sense can I make of this? What is/are sh-e, they, up to? What is this leading to? Why is ‘this’ happening? How did this come about?—and others. Many conflicts and problems at personal, social, and international levels, can be attributed to parties lack of awareness of how much the power of, and the wide range of assumed meanings and corresponding words, ideas, beliefs, values, etc.) they bring to a situation, contribute to their difficulties in resolving their differences. Maybe, just maybe, if as Korzybski suggested (Science And Sanity, page 503), instead of searching for meanings, **we work at making more of goings on at non-conscious levels, conscious**, and asked questions such as those mentioned above, this might lead to some structural-and-functional explorations...the make-up of things, how they work, relate, and with other things): In other words we could pursue “a what’s going on exploration”. Such explorations could help us avoid discords that usually result when we are unable to reconcile our different answers to what someone or something means.

Some puzzling questions arising from searching for meaning

Applying the principle of “order” (what comes first): Instead of “This means so and so: Wouldn’t it make sense for us to first “define meaning” so we will have some ideas regarding what we are looking for? From a “structural” approach: we could ask ourselves **“What definitive evidence is there to support a belief that things have meanings, or that things have to have meanings?”** Beyond guessing: How would I go about determining what someone or something means? How much do I know about the form of a meaning...Are there different forms? And if there are different forms, could I recognize a meaning without knowing its particular form?” If finding the meaning of anything is a function of a judgment --Wouldn’t it make more sense if I first decided on the evidence, standard, description, definition, and so on, which could direct my search, and also support my judgment and findings? How do I go about deciding on a “meaning-standard”--and if that standard is appropriate for determining meaning?” How, without a standard, a definition, or description, etc. would I know that what I found was a meaning? In terms of the g.s. principles “dating” and “indexing”: Is there any relationships between ‘meaning’, time-space and change? Does origin and evolution have anything to do with ‘meaning’? If I say that someone, some ‘thing’, situation, or word, means “A”--no more no less-- Does “A” hold for all times? Is meaning unchanging? Do I ignore as not significant any new information that comes up? Following the **“principle of non-identity”** (a word, symbol, or sign, is not the ‘thing’ it is about): If ‘meanings’ I give or think things have are presented in words, symbols, etc....How could I determine the representational accuracy of my words, and other symbols? Heart specialists know what they need to know to do heart transplants. Rocket specialists know what is necessary to send a rocket to the moon: Do I know what I need to know, in order to know what someone or anything means? How can I know if the information I have is relevant for knowing meaning? Can I know if ‘things’ have more than one meaning...and if so...Is there a “most important meaning”? How would I recognize this? If someone declared that something means “A”, and another says no “It means “B”--oppositions and irresolvable conflicts as to whose meaning is the ‘true’ meaning usually follow. **Words, ‘things’, situations, happenings, etc. can be thought of as “semantic variables”**. We reflexively give our personal and group commonsense, mystic,

religious, scientific, philosophic, and other “values” (‘meanings’, significance, importance, etc.), based on the experiences, knowledge, beliefs, values, standards, meanings, etc., we bring to situations. From this we can propose: **“Things do not have meanings: We give meanings”, significance, importance, and values.**

Some more puzzles arising from the notion of meaning

Imagine a declaration that the ‘meaning’ “A” of something, has been found... Could the question not be asked: “Well: What does “A” mean?” This question would in effect raise self-reflective circular questions involving the meaning of meaning! And here is an even more puzzling thing (this might need a little visualization): If things have meanings, from applying the **“non-elementalistic principle”** (not conceptually or verbally separating what is actually not separate), it follows that meanings are part of things: So in asking “what’s the meaning of anything”, I am in effect asking “What’s the meaning of this ‘thing’--including its meaning?--again leading to questions of “the meaning of meaning”. Most bothersome of all to me is the following: In looking for meaning based on a belief that things have meaning, I could be making it impossible to find what I am looking for if I were unable to distinguish between ‘a meaning’ I claim to have found...and the thing it is a part of, or, is a part of it? If meaning was external to a thing, how do I determine that this outside ‘meaning’ was the ‘meaning’ of that thing and not some other thing? Could two or more things have the same meaning? How can we say what someone or something means, if we haven’t determined what we are talking about when we use the word “meaning”? Discussions about words like “virtue”, “meaning”, “justice”, “the truth”, “spirit”, “soul”, “right”, “the best”, and others) usually result in conflicts and ongoing disagreements when different sides without having specified and agreed on what they were looking for, declare--and might even aggressively protect their claim to have found ‘it’! And here is another thing: If we don’t know all about anything (principle of non-allness)—in searching for the meaning of a thing, situation, happening, “X”, would this not in effect, be a search--not for the meaning of “X”, but a search for the meaning of “-X”? Could this be an example of our human ‘unsane’ self-harassing behaviours? We could avoid this particular ‘unsane’ behaviour, and

related conflicts, and disagreements, through being conscious of abstracting, and applying the **“non-elementalism principle”** and remember: **“Things do not have meanings--We give our individual meanings, significance, importance, and value to ‘things’, situations, happenings, etc.”**

The multi-meaning game: **A multi-meaning game is a way to abandon the idea that things have “meanings”.** The game can be played alone or with a group. In a group, players start by asking: “What’s the meaning of “A”? or “What does “A” mean?” “A” can represent anything; or players can recall situations they found puzzling and ask members of the group “What do you think this means? In a group game, each member writes the meanings she came up with--to be shared with others later. Group members work at coming up with as many ‘meanings’ as they can (including opposites) since a ‘meaning’ given and its opposite, would both qualify as ‘meanings’. General Semantics practitioners can play the game as a “consciousness of abstracting, non-identity, non-elementalistic exercise.” Playing “the many meanings game” is also a way we can extend our ‘minds’ “and expand the range of our consciousness through self-conscious critical creative general semantics based reasoning: An experience of hearing many ‘meanings’ given to the ‘same’ topic might make it easier to change, expand, and relinquish ‘meanings’ we gave, thought things have, or even the idea that things have meanings. The exercise can also be rewarding when we come across ‘meanings’ given that we had not thought of, and recognize that for others, things have ‘meanings’ different from ours. Becoming mindful that we unavoidably bring our differences to situations can help us avoid and better deal with a great deal of the conflicts, disagreements, and dissatisfactions that usually arise from not being aware of our differences. We can also avoid much confusion, and conflicts, by remembering **“words and ‘meanings’ as semantic variables”.**

The self-maintaining power of the notion of meaning: Applying **“the organism-as-a whole principle”:** From the interrelated processes of our organisms, and as continuous functions of abstracting, the ‘meanings’ we give or think things have, infect, affect, and modulate many aspects of our living.

'Meanings' we give or assume things have, operate consciously and non-consciously, reflexively and effectively support, maintain, and strengthen our belief in later 'meanings' we will give or assume things have. 'Meanings' at time(1) will bring about 'meanings' at time(2). Our knowledge and understanding, the judgments and decisions we make, our values, based on currently held 'meanings', will bring about later 'meanings' we give or believe things have; our attitudes, the way we think-and-feel about-and do things, the quality of our relationships with our selves, others, and the world around us, our attitudes, etc., are functions of 'meanings' we give. In caring for, and working to preserve our values, beliefs, and meanings, we influence meanings we will give, and protect meanings we gave, and vice versa. For better relationships, and towards saner more intelligent ways of being, it suits us, to practice **"catching ourselves giving meaning"**, or thinking we know what anything means. In catching ourselves, we can "prevent belief that things have meanings" from becoming an established behavioural paradigm. Catching ourselves doing things we usually do automatically can be a very difficult exercise. We naturally, without training and practice, believe, assume, judge, value, and usually give meanings automatically. Working at "catching ourselves" could be worth pursuing since a great deal of our problems, conflicts and dissatisfactions, confusions, anger, frustrations, and more, is based on our self-reinforcing and self-maintaining non-conscious judgments-beliefs-values-and meanings we give. Catching ourselves takes practice: We can catch ourselves at an intersection reacting as if the shift from red to green means "It's safe to go". We can catch ourselves believing that a promise made means it will be kept. We can catch ourselves accepting a relationship as symmetric: If you are my 'friend' (on face book, and elsewhere), this means "I am your friend". We can catch ourselves reaching for a cigarette, or automatically reacting, based on a conclusion...based on a judgment...based on a meaning non-consciously given. Recall times you heard the words, "That's not what I meant".

On radicalization: We might gain some understanding of the behaviour labelled "radicalization" by thinking of "radicalization" as similar to "conversion". Believing needs no training. Critical thinking and reasoning requires training and

willingness to practice. Imagine an individual suffering from a feeling that his or her life is meaningless...and with no critical reasoning tools, unable to make sense of his or her existence. Imagine such an individual hearing, reading words, and seeing images, and experiencing this as a joyful revelation: If this experience leads to a belief that at last he-she has found meaning they were so desperately searching for... We could reasonably guess that such an experience could lead to an irresistible impulse motivating someone to join a group, a community, and become involved.

Applying the “non-elementalism” and “consciousness of projecting” principle: We could take some responsibility for ‘meanings’ we give, and not project our assumptions as being identical with an inferred and imagined ‘meaning’. Whatever we say anyone, anything, or situation, means, since our saying is outside the person or situation, if we believe ‘meanings’ exist, we might self-reflexively consider what this ‘says’ about us: From ‘meanings’ we give or say things have, we are also saying things about ourselves: our evaluating and judgment skills; our experience, the level of our time-binding and conscious time-binding knowledge, development, understandings, our reasoning standards, values, etc.)

Some big questions.

What’s the meaning of life? “What does it mean to be human?” What does anything mean? Questioning our questions: (1) How do we know that ‘things’ have meanings. (2) But let’s assume that things have meanings: Can we know how much, and what kind of information is needed to arrive at a meaning? (3) And if things have meanings... following quantum mechanics “observer-observed principle”, since we, our logic, experience, standards and values will be the tools used in our explorations--How can we determine the degree of our contributions to the results of our search? Instead of searching for ‘meanings’, we might be better off taking a more structurally-and physically verifiable scientific approach; better off if we engaged ourselves in seeking to know as much as we can about lives, life, and ‘things’-- their histories, structures, make-

ups, behaviours, diverse interactions, and so on...and keeping the “non-allness principle” in mind: There could be goings on beyond the limits of or experience and understanding. Our search could be guided not by a determination to find meaning, but by looking for structural answers to the question “What t he is going on?” “Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young”, in their song “Teach your children” invited us along the road of life “To have a code we can live by.” Taking “a structural approach” with the proposition that “Things do not have meanings...not even the ones we think we are giving”, could be a general semantics code worth living by.

It's worth noting: Progress in science, one of humanity's most successful endeavours, is not achieved based on charisma, being impressed by the verbal skills of a leader, or searching for what things mean: progress comes with being guided by a “what's going on-structural approach” involving methods and operational paradigms accepted by workers in these fields”. Scientists, engineers, and technologists, have one set of agreed on mathematical standards that guides their investigations, measurements, evaluations, and calculations. Ongoing progress in these fields attests to the reliability and value of their methods and approach. We could minimize conflicts and problems arising in our everyday relationships, and our national and international politics...the consequence of the different standards, values, interests, concerns, beliefs, feelings, and meanings we usually non-consciously bring to situations. Using my discretion at its present stage of conscious-time-binding development: I guess it could be worth our times to follow Korzybski's general semantics advice: Instead of a futile search for meanings, we could “Study and apply a scientific-mathematical structural-operational approach as behavioural guides to modify our assumptions, conclusions, judgments, and meanings we give...and especially “how we use words”. This could be a way to become better at our guesses and guessing to satisfy our concerns about what is behind goings on. We could “try that” and see how it goes...and how we go.

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For more on general semantics principles and practices, read Korzybski's "Science and Sanity", Martin H. Levinson's "More Sensible Thinking", Bruce Kodish's "Dare to Enquire", and other books available from "The Institute of General Semantics. Visit <miltondawes.com>