

MEANING AS INTERPERSONAL

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Meaning addresses the connection between things. The meaning of a word refers to its connection with its referent—what it refers to. The meaning of a part in a system refers to the purpose it fulfills in connection with the rest of the parts that form the whole. Connectivity is the essence of the theory of meaning. Now to apply it to persons in relationship.

Meaning relates to ethics. As ethical considerations stem from relationship and purpose so meaningfulness stems from those same two existential and eschatological components. Significance comes from the combined interaction of lateral and longitudinal activity. Meaning differs from ethics because it covers more than moral matters, but its interpersonal character applies to ethics because we choose to purpose what others help us accomplish and because we relate through love. The fulfillment of purpose, the experience of living, and being loved give us a sense of worth.

In connection with the relational component, objectively God serves as a point of orientation for each of us and as a center of unity for all of us. He initiated love by creation and grace. Subjectively we have a sense of belonging, wholeness, orientation, and loyalty to someone bigger than ourselves, all of which fosters the experience of self-worth in the context of the church.

In connection with the directional component, God objectively establishes purpose and guarantees it with omnipotence. He creates the new, charts the course, and reveals his nature and purpose. Subjectively we realize personal purpose by participating in the plan of God. We have a sense of belonging to something bigger than ourselves. Objective meaning lies in God's personally being there with grace and purpose guaranteed by power. Subjectively meaning comes to us from response to his presence with trust and from our endeavors carried out within the guidelines of progress.

The sense of meaninglessness comes from sin because sin breaks relationships, frustrates purposes, and works against nature. Sin weakens the sense of worth because we sense rejection when sinned against. Sin diminishes our sense of worth because we do not find fulfillment through accomplishment. Meaninglessness comes when we reject the interpersonal structure of life.

Meaninglessness shows itself in many ways: seeking pleasure; attempting to escape through busy-ness, substance abuse, laziness, sleep, even suicide; straining after power, courting fame, accumulating possessions, amassing knowledge. Life is the biblical word for meaningful

existence, which Jesus came to provide in abundance (John 10:10). Receiving abundant life is the same thing as saving our “soul.” Losing life means losing our soul, losing identity, akin to something slaves lose from a societal standpoint; they are no one on their own. We find identity by entering relationships. By ourselves we stray like wandering stars; we do not play a part; we do not belong; we are meaningless. Objectively we lose identity when we separate; subjectively we feel meaningless. The rich fool had his life and soul required of him because he invested his identity in things and pleasure (Luke 12:15-21). Life as meaningful existence does not consist in things (Luke 12:15), inward-directedness, or self-centered behavior.

These insights from scripture appear also in other literature. George Herbert Mead in *Mind, Self, and Society* said,

“The self is something which has a development; it is not initially there, at birth, but arises in the process of social experience and activity, that is, develops in the given individual as a result of his relations to that process as a whole and to other individuals within that process.”

Karl Jaspers speaks similarly in *Existenzphilosophie*,

“The thesis of my philosophizing is: The individual cannot become human by himself. Self-being is only real in communication with another self-being. Alone, I sink into gloomy isolation—only in community with others can I be revealed in the act of mutual discovery.”

And there is the saying, “*The end of communication is community.*”