

Meaning Without Semantics — A Structural Account

A Companion Paper to Informational Ontology (Rev5)

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Abstract

This paper develops a structural account of meaning that does not appeal to semantics, symbols, representation, reference, or truth conditions. Working strictly downstream of Informational Ontology (Rev5), meaning is characterized as the organization of value across possible transitions within awareness. On this account, meaning is neither linguistic nor inherently intentional, and interpretation is not a process of decoding or symbol manipulation. Instead, meaning arises when value structures render counterfactual differences consequential for a system's continued organization. Semantic notions—where applicable—are treated as derivative stabilizations built atop pre-linguistic meaning rather than as its foundation. The result is an account of meaning that resists collapse into semantics, pragmatics, behaviorism, inferentialism, or eliminativism, while remaining compatible with linguistic, biological, and artificial systems.

1. Scope, Authority, and Non-Commitments

1.1 Downstream Position

This paper operates strictly downstream of Informational Ontology (Rev5) and presupposes the fixed regime sequence:

$$\Delta \rightarrow R \rightarrow I \rightarrow A \rightarrow V \rightarrow M \rightarrow P$$

No definitions introduced here revise, supplement, or reinterpret the ontology. In particular, the definition of **Meaning** as an organizational regime is assumed as authoritative. The task of this paper is clarificatory rather than foundational: to articulate what meaning is structurally, not to explain how language works or how semantic systems function.

Meaning is treated as a regime of organization, not as a linguistic, representational, or normative achievement.

1.2 What This Paper Does Not Do

To prevent misreading, several exclusions are explicit.

This paper does **not**:

- derive truth conditions or reference,
- posit symbols or representations as primitives,
- ground intentional content,
- reduce meaning to use, behavior, or communicative success,
- deny the legitimacy of semantic theories in their proper domain.

The absence of semantics at the foundational level is not a rejection of semantics as a practice. It is a claim about ontological priority.

1.3 Why Semantics Is Not Assumed

Semantic theories typically begin with symbols, expressions, or representational vehicles and ask how these acquire meaning. This paper asks a different question: what must already be in place for anything to be meaningful at all, including symbols, expressions, and languages.

If meaning required semantics to arise, then semantics itself would remain unexplained. The present account therefore treats semantics as downstream of meaning rather than its ground.

2. Structural Preliminaries

2.1 Why Meaning Is Not Primitive

Meaning does not appear at the level of information or awareness alone. Informational structure can exist without meaning, and awareness can register information without anything being meaningful.

Meaning arises only once **value** is present.

Without value, no difference matters more than any other. Without such asymmetry, meaning cannot arise. Meaning is therefore not primitive but structurally dependent.

2.2 Value Without Normativity

Value, as used here, is not normative. It does not introduce standards of correctness, obligation, or justification.

Value denotes differential constraint on possible transitions relative to persistence and organization. A system may be value-sensitive without being subject to error in the normative sense. Normativity requires correctness conditions; value does not.

This distinction is structural and load-bearing.

2.3 Possibility Space and Counterfactual Structure

Meaning depends on how value is organized across a space of possible transitions.

This involves counterfactual sensitivity: how present states relate to possible continuations, how different futures would matter differently, and how changes would alter significance.

No appeal is made to semantic possible worlds or modal realism. The possibility space at issue is generated internally by constraint and value.

3. Meaning as Structured Value

3.1 Definition: Meaning Without Representation

Meaning is the organization of value across possible transitions within awareness.

A state is meaningful for a system insofar as its value is situated within a structured field of alternatives such that differences among possible continuations matter for the system's persistence and organization.

This definition introduces no appeal to symbols, reference, truth conditions, or representational content. Meaning does not consist in what a state stands for, but in how it participates in value-mediated differentiation across possible futures.

Meaning, in this sense, is not semantic. It is structural.

3.2 Organization Across Possible Transitions

Value alone does not suffice for meaning. A system may differentially weight states without those weights being organized across alternatives in a way that renders counterfactual distinctions consequential.

Meaning arises only when value is structured such that:

- present states relate to non-actual possibilities,
- alternative continuations are non-equivalent, and
- differences among those continuations constrain future organization.

This organization need not be explicit, conceptual, or linguistically articulated. It need only modulate how transitions remain available, excluded, or differentiated for the system.

3.3 Counterfactual Load-Bearing Role (Clarified)

Counterfactual sensitivity is **necessary but not sufficient** for meaning.

Many systems—feedback controllers, thermostats, engineered regulators—are counterfactually sensitive in a minimal sense. Such sensitivity alone does not constitute meaning.

Meaning requires **value-mediated counterfactual organization**: counterfactual differences must matter because they are integrated into a value structure that constrains persistence, continuation, or internal organization.

Mere control sensitivity lacks this organization.

3.4 Meaning Is Not Aboutness

Meaning, as defined here, does not require aboutness.

Aboutness is a semantic reconstruction that arises when representational practices stabilize and external reference relations are introduced. Structural meaning precedes such reconstruction.

To say that a difference matters *to* a system is not to say that the system represents or refers to anything. It is to say that the difference participates in a value-organized possibility space that constrains continuation.

Aboutness presupposes meaning; meaning does not require aboutness.

3.5 Meaning Is Not Use

Meaning must not be identified with use, behavior, or action-guiding role.

Two systems may exhibit indistinguishable behavior while differing in meaning if:

- their value topologies differ,
- their possibility spaces are differently structured, or
- their counterfactual exclusions differ.

Meaning is individuated by the organization of value across possible transitions, not by overt behavior.

4. Interpretation Without Representation

4.1 Interpretation as Differential Constraint Sensitivity

Interpretation is not an operation performed on representations. It is a structural feature of how value constrains transitions.

A system interprets a state insofar as that state modulates the structure of available continuations in a value-sensitive way.

No content is extracted. No message is decoded.

4.2 Why Decoding Models Fail Structurally

Decoding-based accounts fail for three reasons.

First, decoding presupposes content. Any account that begins with content has already assumed meaning.

Second, decoding introduces regress. If interpretation consists in decoding, then decoding itself must be interpreted.

Third, decoding is causally inert unless its outputs alter transition structure. Once that alteration is doing the explanatory work, decoding becomes non-load-bearing.

4.3 Structural vs. Semantic Interpretation

Semantic interpretation assigns content, reference, or truth conditions to symbols. Structural interpretation consists in value-mediated differentiation of transitions.

Only the latter is ontologically basic. The former is a derivative practice.

The term *interpretation* is retained here only as a regime-relative label for value-sensitive transition modulation. No representational commitment is implied.

5. Why This Is Not Semantics by Another Name

5.1 No Reference, No Truth Conditions

Meaning does not require reference or truth. A meaningful state may guide action even when mistaken, incomplete, or unreliable.

Truth and reference presuppose meaning; they do not generate it.

5.2 No Symbol–World Mapping

Mapping theories treat meaning as correspondence between internal states and external states of affairs. Meaning, however, is dynamic and transition-structuring.

Static correspondences do no explanatory work unless embedded in value-organized possibility space.

5.3 Blocking the Redescription Collapse

This account does not redescribe semantics. It explains the structural conditions under which semantic systems become possible.

Semantics explains how symbols function. This account explains how symbols can matter.

6. Language as a Derivative Stabilization Layer

6.1 Linguistic Meaning Presupposes Structural Meaning

Language does not generate meaning. It stabilizes it.

Symbols become meaningful only insofar as they alter expectations, guide coordination, or constrain possible continuations. These effects presuppose pre-linguistic meaning.

6.2 Communication vs. Meaning

Communication concerns coordination between systems. Meaning concerns organization within a system.

A system may possess meaning without communicating it. Communication succeeds because it recruits already-meaningful structures.

6.3 Linguistic Success Is Non-Foundational

Norms, correctness conditions, and inferential roles presuppose systems for whom distinctions already matter.

Language refines and externalizes meaning; it does not ground it.

7. Relation to Other IO Papers

Meaning presupposes salience but is not reducible to it. Meaning depends on asymmetric possibility space but does not explain directionality. Purpose presupposes meaning but is not required for it.

All dependencies are one-way.

8. Conclusion

Meaning does not begin with symbols, reference, truth, or norms.

It begins when value is organized across possible transitions such that differences matter for a system's continued organization.

This account explains how meaning can exist without language, how interpretation can occur without representation, and why semantics is derivative rather than foundational.

Meaning is not linguistic by default.

Language is a late achievement built on a deeper structure.