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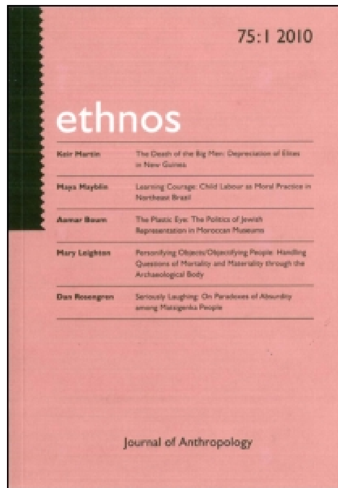

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The Scope of 'Meaning' and the Avoidance of Syllептical Reason: A Plea for Some Modest Distinctions

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KEYWORDS *Meaning, action, syllepsis, the problem of meaning, Weber, Geertz*

> *Syllepsis* 1. Gram. and Rhet. A figure by which a word, or a particular form or inflexion of a word, is made to refer to two or more other words in the same sentence, while properly applying to or agreeing with only one of them ...or applying to them in different senses (e.g. literal and metaphorical). Cf. ZEUGMA. (Syllepsis 1989)

> *PIANO, n.* A parlour utensil for subduing the impenitent visitor. It is operated by depressing the keys of the machine and the spirits of the audience. (Bierce 1911)

> She raised her hand, exercising her right to vote and the muscles in her arm.

> He successfully got on to the committee and the Dean's nerves.

> He expressed his anger and his class origins.

> Vulcan ideas about lightning and headaches are...an expression of how they desire to fit into the cosmological scheme of things, rather than of what they think these phenomena are.

Introduction

I should begin with an apology to the reader used to this journal's 'Bookmarks' feature, which usually involves extended rumination on a single work, and, perhaps, to the authors of the four works I introduce. I hope both constituencies will forgive me for addressing what I argue are the non-incidental commonalities in these otherwise very different publications,

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although I acknowledge (and regret) the extent to which they will appear in this as means to my end.

Although the notion of syllepsis is highlighted in my title, I only really turn to it in the closing stages. Here, just let me say that sylleptical formulations like the last two above are subversive of good explanatory practice; this came to be recognised in relation to straightforward functionalism, but it is no less a mark of many social scientific formulations framed in terms of meaning. Accordingly, I begin with a discussion of anthropological views of meaning and consider the fundamental heterogeneity of the phenomena considered to exemplify meaning, as a prelude to a critique of the essentialism about meaning that anthropological semiotics involves. Finally, I try to indicate how this leaves us in the same straits that the repudiated functionalism left us in with respect to the explanation of the specificities of cultural existence; I argue that we should learn to live with the methodological pluralism, the necessity of which the promiscuous use of 'meaning' tends to conceal. None of the distinctions I plead for are unfamiliar in other regions of academia; moreover, the virtues of the path I am suggesting that the anthropologists have habitually overlooked have been indicated before, by some anthropologists among others.

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During a recent vacation period, I tried to make an impression on my reading list (a forlorn hope, given the rate at which it grows nowadays, after the neoliberal turn in both universities and publishing). I did, however, get to two single-authored books and two edited volumes. What was curious, once I considered the matter, was just how strongly these different works tended to evoke the same set of rather variegated thoughts and memories: Argyrou's (2002) *Anthropology and the Will to Meaning*, Sahlins's (2008) *The Western Illusion of Human Nature*,[1] *The Limits of Meaning*, edited and introduced by Engelke and Tomlinson (2006), and the volume edited and introduced by Engelke (2009), *The Objects of Evidence*. Various, but – so to speak – with their faces turned in the same general direction: towards 'meaning' as a defining element of the anthropological project. Even, for example, the contribution by Knight and Astuti (2009) to the last-mentioned volume, which argues that cognitive science perspectives can illuminate and improve ethnographic ascriptions of mental predicates to people, seems to occupy an orbit solidly within the gravitational field of 'meaning'.

This attention to meaning is hardly surprising, perhaps: most practitioners seem ready to claim that the concept of meaning is at the centre of sociocultural anthropology as it is currently constituted. It would, for example, probably be hard to tell the story of the weakening of the divide that existed between those with Boasian and those with Durkheimian sensibilities except in terms of

their coming to appreciate the centrality of the concept of meaning in the study of human cultures. Even those who might be concerned about an opposition between structure and agency seem to be able to relax now, since, if cultural structures entail meanings, so too does agency; indeed, if the 'paralysing fear of structure' that Sahlins (1999:399) worries is part of the reaction to older notions of culture, now seen as overly essentialised, the cure may consist of realising how meaning and its making is preserved in the afterological subject. Thus, Moore (1999), reviewing anthropology at the turn of the twentieth century, states 'it is axiomatic in anthropology that humans make meaning out of life, indeed this is one of the features – if not the defining feature – of being human' (p. 17). Likewise, the official website of the American Anthropological Association tells us: 'Sociocultural anthropologists examine patterns and processes of cultural change, with a special interest in how people live in particular places, how they organise, govern, and create meaning'.[2] Against this, my view is that anthropologists might consider adapting for their own discipline, which is too important to allow itself to lapse into any sort of monomania, Austin's (1961:271) cautionary 'motto for a sober philosophy: *Neither a Be-all nor an End-all be*'. I think it is unfortunate that anthropology is so frequently construed as fundamentally concerned with 'meaning'.

Let me qualify this immediately, though: my argument is not that the opposition between society and culture was sensible, nor that the discipline is misguided in focusing, as it does, upon the social on the scale of a human life, at which level the 'meanings' relevant to the folks whose lives are under consideration are necessarily central; nor do I find it objectionable that a very wide notion of meaning is a working part of folk psychology, for I see sociocultural anthropology as an 'ethically thick' enterprise, historically and logically grounded in the questions we pre-theoretically ask about what humans do as agents; thus, the discipline itself is grounded in folk psychology (a notion that can be filled out with accounts inspired by sources as different as Wittgenstein's account of language games or cognitive science's perspective on 'theory of mind'). Rather, my objection is simply that coming up with good answers to the various questions that invoke the term 'meaning' depends crucially upon making each question more specific, which involves bypassing the generic notion. Since this is rarely done, good answers to one question are apt to be mistaken as good for other questions too, and the conceptual sin of syllepsis is committed in the name of methodological virtue; what is, at best, a handy rhetorical device and, at worst, a muddle is presented as analytical insight.

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My position is actually a Weberian one[3] It claims that the long and heterogeneous list of social, intersubjective and intrasubjective states and processes brought under the notion of 'meaning' (see the list below) encourages particular kinds of misunderstanding about action and socio-historical processes – as well as the relation between them; in particular, loose talk of 'meaning' tends to elide the distinction between semantic and causal relations, which is a mistake principally because it obscures the complex, varied and theoretically contentious dependencies between them. Anthropology's hope for ethically deep and analytically nuanced answers to our questions about the lives of social beings like us are subverted by this portmanteau concept of meaning; 'meaning' is no more suited to a serious examination of the large and heterogeneous set of phenomena to which it applies than 'bug' is to zoology or the biblical category of 'fish' is to marine biology. A term that covers linguistic (semantic *and* pragmatic), causal and constitutive relations is not in itself a problem, for polysemous terms are often no impediment to discourse, but adequate ethnographic analysis requires precisely that such different sorts of relations are distinguished; so the use of a portmanteau concept is, at best, foolhardy.

Perhaps, given current sensibilities, I should stress this last point (although it cannot be defended adequately here): anthropology is less useful to a rich ethics than it could be, were we less soppy about 'meaning'. To use the terms Rorty (1986) used in his response to Geertz's critique of his postmodern bourgeois liberalism, anthropologists would be more effective 'agents of love' if they spent as much time addressing the difficulties with the concept of meaning as they do in saying – by now, rather compulsively – how much they respect the cultural meanings of others. And while it is true that Geertz came to prominence with works that boldly asserted the need for just such an improvement in conceptual rigour (and which did much to undermine simple-minded functionalism), Rorty is right to raise the question, implicit in his critique, whether what we got from Geertz on meaning and culture did not have a certain 'karaoke' quality, notwithstanding the historical importance of his stress on meaning (see also Descombes 2002; Bazin 2003).[4]

In this context, something less than a full and fair case against anthropological uses of 'meaning' must suffice; but in this context, perhaps such a case would anyway be inappropriate.

Meaning and the Idea of a Social Science

In the early 1970s, when I was as an undergraduate (at the University of Sussex), it seemed that discriminations within the field of meanings would

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soon become routine; first, talk of the importance of meaning was everywhere, in anthropology and sociology no less than in philosophy or psychology. For example, David Pocock, one of my teachers, often claimed that Evans-Pritchard (his teacher) had brought British anthropology 'from function to meaning' and he insisted his students to steep themselves in the works of Leach, Turner, Douglas (so full of linguistic and semantic terms one barely noticed, even while their functionalist reflexes were also evident); we struggled to get a handle on Lévi-Strauss's (and Piaget's) structuralism while considering also transactionalism's account of human social conduct (Freddy Bailey and the Bill Epstein taught at Sussex in that period); and Goffman and (to a lesser extent) Garfinkel were required reading for us anthropology majors too; courses with titles like 'Comparative epistemology' or 'Concepts, methods and values in the social sciences' (usually jointly taught by representatives of different disciplines) were compulsory for students regardless of their major. 'Meaning' was a lexeme used in many different contexts and it was hard to avoid seeing it as a place-holder for more precise specifications in various disciplinary contexts (from history and English Literature through philosophy of language, social psychology and cognitive science to sociology and anthropology).

On a (to me) memorable occasion (a weekend retreat for students of humanities and social sciences), Rom Harré gave a talk contrasting the virtues of his philosophical realist account of science with standard positivist depictions. In the course of it, he suggested that attention to the fine grain of meanings was to the social sciences what care with measurement was to the physical sciences; in both cases, the epistemic adequacy of data depended on their precision (see also Harré & Secord 1972:Chap. 7). Although it was nicely expressed, such a view was widespread in the social sciences. For if Chomsky's (1959) devastating review of Skinner's behaviourist account of language was still producing its effects in the psychological disciplines, and Kuhn's (1962) iconoclastic message was still spreading its immense influence, Winch's (1958) Wittgensteinian challenge, in *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (originally published in 1958), had produced similar effects on the social sciences, most of which were still largely 'imbued with the spirit of positivism and subscribed to a broadly empiricist epistemology' (Pleasants 2000:78). Winch's stress on the contrast between the realm of meanings, reasons and rules, and that of causes left many worried that the social sciences were in the position of the psychology of the first half of the twentieth century, which Wittgenstein had characterised as beset by a mixture of empirical methods and conceptual confusion (Wittgenstein 1968:232).[5] And getting to grips with Wittgenstein,

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even through Winch (or, for that matter, trying to feel reasonably comfortable with disputes about the significance of incommensurability in the philosophy of science), meant gaining some idea, at least, about post-Fregean analytical philosophy, the eclipse of Lockean (in-the-head) ideas as the basis of meaning and the *various* devices that were used instead to speak about language and its role in thought and intersubjective relations (for the writings of Austin, Searle and – in anthropology – scholars like Dell Hymes were growing in influence).

If the effects of Winch's challenge were less evident in anthropology than in neighbouring disciplines, it was through this same period that Geertz was also assimilating aspects of Wittgenstein's (and Ryle's) work, along with some of Weber's, in articulating his vision of cultures as 'historically transmitted webs of meaning' and ethnography, therefore, as an hermeneutical or interpretive enterprise in search of descriptions of sufficient 'thickness' to put us in touch with the lives of others (Geertz 1973).[6] And given the by now widespread agreement with Geertz's (1973) statement that the practice of anthropology amounts to '*doing ethnography*' (p. 5), we might conclude that anthropology was already clear about the place of meaning in the analysis of human social life. If, moreover, one recalls that during this same period a very great deal of anthropological attention – in all historical traditions – was focused on the 'symbolic' or 'communicative', which almost everyone followed Geertz or Schneider or Leach or Turner in equating with the meaningful, then it can seem that the turn to meaning and interpretation was somewhat overdetermined in anthropology. By 1976, when Sahlins published *Culture and Practical Reason* (Sahlins 1976a), *The Use and Abuse of Biology* (Sahlins 1976b), and 'Colours and culture' (Sahlins 1976c), and Leach's *Culture and Communication* (1976) appeared, the following already seemed obvious to many anthropologists, no matter where they had been trained:

> At no time in the history of anthropology has interest in the symbolic character of cultural phenomena been more clearly pronounced. . .So fundamental has the concern for meaning become that it now underlies whole conceptions of culture, conceptions that are explicitly grounded in the premise that the semiotic dimension of human affairs should be the central object of description and analysis. (Basso & Selby 1976, p. 1)

For Geertz and many other anthropologists, as for Winch (if not for other philosophers interested in Wittgenstein), the centrality of meaning in the theories and empirical practices of the social sciences suggest rather deep differences between them and the natural sciences.[7] Since, though, what is to count as a deep difference here can only be discussed in relation to a particular

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theoretical account of science, it seems to me prudent to try to avoid this question.[8] However, this does point us back to Harré's simile between measurement and the interpretation of meaning.

Whatever kind of account one might now give of the old idea of a fundamental divide between the social and the natural sciences and the role of experiment, observation and interpretation in them, it is hard to deny that it is as necessary to *take care* when dealing with meaning as it is when determining the values of relevant variables. And if there are good grounds for thinking that there is much that is unarticulated in the process of making physical measurements (recall Polanyi's tacit knowledge, or Kuhn's paradigms, or Quine-Duhem constraints), it is also as well to point out that subtlety and precision with respect to meaning often depend upon what is *not* manifest in the properties of the immediate behaviour. Moreover, if – once the positivist vision of science had lost its pre-eminence – the sheer variety of disciplinary practices brought under the rubric of science came to the fore, and 'measurement' ceased to designate an epistemo*logically* significant category, the modest thought seems to become available that there is now less need for a rhetorical antithesis like 'meaning'. This thought becomes hard to resist, I believe, once we reflect upon the manner in which logical empiricist/positivist ideas lost their appeal, which had precisely to do with the weakness of empiricist theories of meaning, and the fundamental problems of the connected idea of a unified framework that might encompass the whole of science. The phenomena 'meaning' covers are too diverse to be regimented under a single framework, even for the restricted purpose of giving a unified account of science. If we have to live with the distinctions that variety impresses upon us when we wish to make sense of science as a *restricted* suite of real human practices, then there seems very little prospect of avoiding them when it comes to making sense of the wider fan of human practices.[9]

In a moment, I want to address the question why anthropology has hitherto resisted the charms of this line. First, though, let me try to motivate it a little better: as scholars in the tradition of Grice (1989) insist, knowing, for example, what the sentence, 'There's a supermarket around the corner', means, is a necessary but not sufficient condition for interpreting the speech-act its use would normally constitute in response to an interlocutor's worried observation that she was low on cigarettes.[10] And if we consider the task of interpreting the role of the sentence 'Brutus is an honourable man' in Mark Anthony's famous speech to the Forum in *Julius Caesar* (in which Shakespeare ingeniously makes repetition of the sentence through a long address comes to implicate exactly Brutus's *want*

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of honour), then it becomes clear that interpreting human interactions involves coping with the fact that what can be legitimately said to have transpired, in particular cases, is characteristically underdetermined – and sometimes positively contraindicated by – behavioural descriptions of the event, *including* those rich enough to capture the semantic content of sentences uttered. One could elaborate upon the complexities noted so far using some of the terminology set out by Austin (1962) – as I will attempt later, in discussing what I will designate 'the Grice-Austin line' and its relevance to anthropological concerns with 'meaning'. It is important to point out, however, that the same issues arise in relation to non-locutionary actions; if John and Pierre both raise their arms when the vote is called for, it does not follow that both of them cast a vote for the candidate, and if either of them walks into a store and removes an expensive pen from a display case, it does not follow that he has stolen it.

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Meaning determination, in the sense at issue here, is not, then, just an abstract or theoretical matter; indeed, meaning determination is to human practice roughly what soaring is to eagles. And just as soaring bespeaks many *different* processes of adaptation in the history of eagle lineages, so 'meaning' determination bespeaks many different processes of adaptation in our lineage.[11] This seems to be reflected in the division of labour inherent in the range of disciplines that are in some way or the other devoted to the aspects of the phenomena brought under the concept of meaning.

At this point, someone might argue that these considerations tend to support merely the usual anthropological claim that meaning is a function of the total context. While at some level that is undeniable, it is not very helpful either; 'context' is hardly more precise 'meaning'. So, although it makes the habitual rhetoric about anthropology's 'holism' less easy to slide past the punters, a better analytical strategy might be to bite the bullet and differentiate between the various aspects of meaning (to be discussed presently) and consider these in relation to socio-culturally discriminable features of the relevant setting: in short, to follow Weber's conception of what sociological analysis amounted to. Why anthropologists have preferred to constitute their object and their analytical practice in relation to 'meaning' is obviously a substantive question, best left to the Stockings of the future; I only want to suggest we ought to give it up.

For now, it might help if I suggest, using terms favoured by many anthropologists, that one ground for worrying about 'meaning' stems from the current analytical practice of using the term to characterise aspects of *both* sides of the following dualities: *langue* and *parole*, structure and agency, and structure and history.

The Varieties of Meaning

Consider the following sentences, none of which constitute unnatural uses of the folk concept of meaning and its linguistic forms:

A: semantic/constitutive relations:

(1) When the umpire raises his finger, that means you are out
(2) 'Homeothermic' means 'warm-blooded'.
(3) 'Ich habe es satt' means 'I am fed up with it'.

B: Causal/perlocutionary connections:

(4) He meant his promise to allay her fears.
(5) The ring that belonged to his grandmother means the world to him.
(6) (a) Inflationary pressures mean that interest rates will rise. (b) The doctrine of predestination meant that Calvinists faced telling existential anxieties.
(7) (a) Higher temperatures mean faster diffusion. (b) The increase in the rate of diffusion means that the temperature increased.

C: Illocutionary/Gricean relations etc.

(8) John meant to insult you when he said you remind him of George Clooney.
(9) His statement about the thin ice was meant as a warning.
(10) He meant to indicate he was joking with that wink.

The tripartite structure might require some more discussion, but I hope it is clear why I spoke of heterogeneity of this rubric: connections between a word and a synonym, a sentence and its translation, what someone intended, rules of games and the law-like relations between physical variables (regardless of direction) are all characterised using the term 'means'; but so too is what someone is planning to do, the economic (causal) significance or consequences of an event and the causal connections between people's psychological states and historical processes, etc.: so many ways in which we can put to use the notion of one thing's meaning something else.

Although there is nothing particularly remarkable about the polysemy of 'meaning', Weber and others involved in the *Methodenstreit* realised that getting clear about how the concepts of meaning and cause relate to one another was vital, particularly in the context of a discipline's explanatory ambitions (which is why the *Streit* over how to conceptualise the relations between them became so intense). And for Weber himself, being clear about the distinction between

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cause and meaning (which, he insisted. does *not* mark a dichotomy) was central to making sense of human society and history. I will come back to this.

The Problem of 'the Problem of Meaning'

Mention of Weber again may evoke another rather large – but, I will argue, not particularly intractable – issue that is implicated in those conceptions of anthropology cited earlier: the notion of meaning at work in 'the problem of meaning' and in 'meaning-making'. Getting clear about what one might dub this Durkheimian-existential notion of meaning (for reasons I hope will become clear) is not so daunting, but doing so is an important preliminary to getting down to the issues that are more ticklish. It is also important because it shows just how great confusion can become if one does not observe analytically significant distinctions.

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Engelke and Tomlinson begin the introduction to their anthology by citing Tambiah's warning that 'meaning' often represents a 'deadly source of confusion' in anthropology (Engelke & Tomlinson 2006:1, citing Tambiah 1985:138).[12] Although they note the warning, Engelke and Tomlinson suggest that seriously hedging on our concern with meaning might 'surrender one of anthropology's signal contributions to the human sciences' (1); they then turn to a discussion of their volume's focus upon 'questions of meaning' as these are addressed through studies of Christianity. Such studies, they say, have been important to issues of meaning because, first, it is often a focus of concern for Christians themselves and, second, because such Christian orientations to the world have been held, by critics like Asad, to be unduly influential in the anthropological conceptualisation of religion. As will be apparent, their discussion is by now focusing upon the notion of meaning as it appears in the phrase 'the problem of meaning', or in colloquial phrases like 'the meaning of life' (as in example 9). Of all the confusions that can arise from underspecified talk of meaning, this could be the most unfortunate; and its dissemination seems to have something to do with Geertz's immense influence, part of which stems from his articulation of Weberian themes, a conspicuous example of which is precisely the phrase 'the problem of meaning'.[13]

While the genealogy of this confusion might be worth pursuing, here we can only define its dimensions. There is no denying Weber's (1978) interest in questions of theodicy as these loomed in various religious historical traditions, nor that he claims that these questions can be related to 'intellectualism as such', which is evident in 'the metaphysical needs of the human mind as it is driven to reflect on ethical and religious questions, driven not by material need but by an

inner compulsion to understand the world as a meaningful cosmos and to take up a position toward it' (p. 499). It is worth noting, though, that Geertz (while a student and staff member at Harvard) imbibed Parsons' vision of Weber, in which Durkheimian preoccupations with social order were imposed upon (and produced consequential distortions in) a sociology focused upon the contingencies of societal history and the analytical centrality of agents, and their varied – often conflicting – interests, operating in a definite social-historical stream.[14] Notwithstanding his interest in the analytical notion of ideal types, Weber (1978) had an unswerving eye for the way quite different factors condition one another in the historical process, so even 'the metaphysical needs of the human mind' might be less relevant to particular outcomes than other factors, such as 'everyday purposive conduct' or 'economic ends' (p. 400). For Weber – as, perhaps, for Sahlins (2004), more recently (Chap 2) – it is an open question which factors (particular or 'structural') at work in a social setting make the difference to the way things turn out and, therefore, are explanatorily salient in accounts of a given historical juncture; amongst other things, Weber stressed, different social groups have different, culturally-conditioned sensibilities and interpretations of events, so that whatever inner need for meaningfulness humans might have is but one element in the empirical realities of the world – one, moreover, that might have different effects in different social segments of the same historical setting. Even taking account of the determinations of aggregate social forces, Weber was sensitive to the ironies of history, to the way even the smallest differences in states of affairs at a given time can produce large contrasts in possible historical outcomes – what one might characterise as a pre-chaos theory awareness of the sensitivity of nonlinear processes to initial conditions. Thus, even the standing characteristics of human beings will have very different effects in contrasting circumstances, just as the specific biographical characteristics of a person can sometimes have decisive effects on outcomes. Thus, Weber writes (in a passage that is a little startling if one takes Geertz on religion to be following Weber's lead), the 'salvation sought by the intellectual is always based on inner need, and is hence more remote from life, more theoretical and more systematic than salvation from external distress, the quest for which is characteristic of the nonprivileged strata'. He soon adds, in a sentence that Bourdieu might cite at this point and which seems almost custom-made for Asad's use in his critique of Geertz on religion: 'It is the intellectual who conceives of the "world" as a problem of meaning' (p. 506).

Given Weber's fundamental theoretical commitment to the *causal* role of subjective meanings in social action (and which feature in his definition of

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sociology), it is unfortunate that mere homonymy should tempt us into confusion. On the other hand, because the agent's understandings, beliefs, existential puzzles, etc., are one, sometimes crucial, dimension of the action she might take, it would be no less wrong to dismiss theological or existential 'problems of meaning' as factors that may have social and historical efficacy than it would be to overemphasise it. Agents may (or may not) puzzle over or worry about God's plans or the ancestor's willingness to help, and search for signs thereof, when considering their situations or their actions, but it seems evident that questions about *this* sort of meaning do not constitute a special *analytical* problem (even if, sometimes, their epistemic characteristics are socially consequential), no matter how prominent a role it might play in accounting for some social actions. 'Problems of meaning', in the sense at issue in Weber's sociology of religion, do not constitute an especially 'meaningful' kind of meaning (despite such locutions as 'more/less meaningful') in relation to sociological analysis; what agents feel, believe or value is relevant to questions about 'meaning' in the sense of examples in category B above, in which we refer to their casual significance in relation to social action, which may or may not have social-historical import. However, being seduced by the homonymy of the word 'meaning' into seeing 'the problem of meaning' as especially relevant to the sort of subjective meaning that, according to Weber, defines social action and, therefore, must concern the student of society, is a mistake: actually, a big one. And, alas, it is not clear that Geertz managed to avoid it.[15] Of course, it may turn out that Weber was himself confused about the many meanings of 'meaning', as is suggested, perhaps, by Schutz (1967:xxxi), who finds 'Weber's central concept of subjective meaning... [to be] little more than a heading for a number of important problems which he did not examine in detail, even though they were hardly foreign to him'. I do not believe he was confused, but – as the rather general notion of 'subjective meanings' suggests – he *was* concerned with the *broad* picture of factors that can make a social-historical difference and must therefore be attended to in explanatory endeavours: for this purpose, the distinctions we need in relation to the specifics of action and the various mental states it entails (intentions, motives, plans, desires, beliefs) can often (but certainly not always) be ignored.

I will say no more about what I earlier dubbed (in reference to the shoe-horning effects of Parsons' overly ambitious general theory) the Durkheimian-existential notion of meaning, for there are other fish to fry for someone worried about the term's mesmerising effects.[16] In particular, I want to consider the list set out earlier and the significance of the distinction I mentioned then, between the

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semantic and the causal dimensions of our broad concept – which becomes an issue particularly in relation to analysis of the group C examples.

Meaning in Relation to Language and Speech; Actions and Acts

First, and aside from the significance of idioms like 'the problem of meaning' or 'the meaning of life' in tempting us to be less cautious than we should, care still needs to be exercised, even in relation to the unequivocally semantic. It is worth stressing at the outset how important it is to avoid 'use-mention' mistakes;[17] to resist the seemingly perpetual temptation to follow Leslie White in holding that an axe is a concept as well as a material object for chopping wood (cf. Sahlins 1976a, 104), or Geertz (1973) in thinking that numbers (rather than numerals) are symbols, or Wagner in saying, in effect, that James Weiner is a name not a person (cf. Wagner 1974:107) or to ignore, for example, the fundamental difference between phrases such as 'the meaning of water' and 'the meaning of "water"'.[18]

One might, in setting out the foregoing point, gesture light-heartedly towards the way things can go astray by invoking Lewis Carroll's White King who was envious of Alice's acute eyesight, which enabled her to see nobody on the road even a very long way off.[19] Alternatively, one might reflect on the circumstantial nature of these howlers and less light-heartedly refer to one of Geertz's heroes – Wittgenstein – and his warning about the power of language to bewitch us if we forget the vast number of functions words and sentences fulfil in our lives, especially if, for example, we 'think of the meaning as a thing of the same kind as the word, though also different from the word' (Wittgenstein 1968:§120); or to Austin's (1961:Chap.3) warning about the dangers of thinking that because we can ask about the meaning of any number of words we can sensibly ask, *simpliciter*, about the meaning of a word, (although 'word' is a word someone might ask about). Instead, though, I will return to one of the texts that prompted this outburst.

Engelke and Tomlinson, despite their reliance upon the portmanteau notion of meaning in their discussion of 'the limits of meaning in Christianity', yet feel the need 'to provide some guideposts for *a* definition of meaning' (8; my emphasis). They do so initially by referring to Ogden and Richards' (1923) influential work, *The meaning of meaning*,[20] which lets me segue to a relevant and just discussion buried in a late chapter of that work, where the authors consider the way issues of 'meaning' frequently get re-packaged in terms of the notion of 'expression'. Ogden and Richards (1923) wonder why this unhelpful move is so tempting, and ponder 'the curiously narcotic effect of the word

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"expression" itself'; they add that it is but one term in this area that seems to inhibit rather than promote clear discussion. Terms like 'expression', they continue: 'stupefy and bewilder, yet in a way satisfy, the inquiring mind, and though the despair of those who would like to know what they have said, are the delight of all those whose main concern is the avoidance of trouble' (p. 231); 'meaning', they add, seems to be another example (as is 'embody').

So, even in 1923, Ogden and Richards concluded that some careful analysis of 'meaning' – if not the supersession of the term – would be helpful. And, as indicated by the intellectual ferment of the 1950s through the 1970s, to which I alluded earlier, it did become clear that the efforts of scholars during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did provide the broad outlines of such an analysis – sometimes through their failures, as when Carnap's logical empiricist program to formalise the language of observational science succumbed to critiques from within (most notably by his student, Quine).

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Aspects of this analysis have been used by anthropologists – if sometimes rather casually – to further their analytical aims, as, for example, Geertz used Wittgenstein and Ryle, or Tambiah, Bloch and Rappaport used the speech-act theory in their analysis of ritual. However, a good example of an anthropologist who founded his – by now rather influential – *general* theoretical work on a careful consideration of the various meanings of 'meaning' is provided by Dan Sperber.[21] In 1974, Sperber published *Le symbolisme en général*, which a year later appeared in English translation, as *Rethinking symbolism* (1975).[22] The work is dedicated, of course, to questioning the very notion that symbols have *semantic* meaning, but it begins by noting that '"Meaning" has so many meanings that it always seems to fit in somehow' (8). He then builds a case for a perspective which he has sought to fill out ever since; this concerns the distinction, crucial to contemporary linguistics, between semantics and pragmatics and his view that an analytically adequate model of pragmatic meaning depends upon seeing it as an aspect of broader psychological functioning.[23]

Sperber sets the scene in this early work by arguing that the only discipline to have shown the notion of meaning to be empirically central, and to have circumscribed it clearly, is linguistics. Linguistic semantics is primarily concerned with the systematic relations that exist between the words and sentences of a language, an understanding of which is part of the tacit knowledge of every competent speaker of a language. These systematic intuitions (deployed in our tacit understandings of analyticity, contradiction, synonymy, etc.) are what constitute semantic meaning in the linguistic sense: these, says Sperber, are conspicuous by their absence from the many of the realms in which

anthropologist invoke the notion. That is why, for example, Turner's claim that the *mudyi* tree means 'matriliny' to the Ndembu is not comparable to ordinary statements about what words or sentences mean. Consider, for example, the claim that 'widower' means 'man whose wife has died'. This entails that 'John finds life very hard since becoming a widower' is semantically equivalent to 'John finds life very hard since his wife died'. By contrast, the statement, 'The Ndembu believe the mudyi tree has special properties' is hardly the semantic equivalent to 'The Ndembu believe matriliny has special properties'.

Of course, we also speak of, say, the meaning a piece of music has for a particular individual: she often grows quiet and a little misty-eyed upon hearing it, for example, and we know that it reminds her of – evokes, as Sperber put it – an experience or event she counts as important. Here – and this is vital to being clear about the distinctions Sperber saw as at issue – although the effect is intra-psychic, it is still causal. ('Intra-psychic': not, I think we have to stress, intra-corporeal, for an entirely 'meaningless' piece of music that an individual hears nevertheless involves physiological effects within her body.) Sperber's case, in *Rethinking symbolism*, was that symbolism involved the evocation of one psychological state by another, which is a matter of causal relations. Later, Sperber and Wilson (1986) would address the general issue here in relation to processes of linguistic interaction, with the aim of relating Gricean pragmatics and semantics to the respective roles of psychological processes and 'codes' in communication: crucially, the relevance theory builds upon Grice's perspective that constitutes communication as a process that the expression and recognition of intentions.

But what of the famous winking case, which also involves what we speak of as meaning and implies the notion of communication? Geertz (1973) says the difference between a twitch and a wink is 'vast'; the latter involves:

> communicating in a quite precise and special way: (1) deliberately, (2) to someone in particular, (3) to impart a particular message, (4) according to a socially established code, and (5) without cognizance of the rest of the company... Contracting your eyelids on purpose when there exists a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal *is* winking. (p. 6. His emphasis)

While there is much to question in this passage from a Gricean perspective, and Geertz's account of thick description more generally (with its Durkheimian emphasis on 'codes'), it also suffices (if, we stress 'communicating') to draw attention to the question of human interaction's dependence upon intention as well as convention, which, in turn, brings us to ambiguities of category C in the list above and the relations between semantic orders and causal-explanatory descriptions;

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in other words, between the realm where the specification of rules and conventions serve our interrogative interests (e.g. our interest in the question what counts as goal in football) and one where they are necessary but insufficient to the answer we seek (e.g. why *those* players were so angry, and *those* others so happy, when the referee blew his whistle and pointed to the centre-circle after the ball went into the net). Geertz's formulation of the winking case seems to suggest that he follows theorists like John Searle in seeing paradigm cases falling under category C as constituted by rules or codes – convention.

We can, though, make a general point here: if we recall the Saussurean doctrine that signs are unmotivated – that there is nothing but a *conventional* link between a signifier and a signified – then description relevant to actions and interactions that employ signs often need to refer only to the relevant convention, but only if we take for granted the Peircean point that whenever we say, in a semantic/semiotic context, $x = y$ we are really saying $x = y$ *for* z – where 'z' designates something with the capacities of a cognitive agent.[24] And while it is an arbitrary fact about English that its speakers talk of 'water' when speaking about the stuff that constitutes 60% of our flesh and the medium in which fish live, *my* use of 'water', in the sentences I utter when I take the subject to involve water, is anything but arbitrary or unmotivated; it is to be explained by socio-psychological facts (my background, my mother-tongue, my desire to succeed in communicating a thought, etc.). Likewise, while it is a fact contingent on local historical circumstances that people drive on the left in England but on the right in Spain, so that which side of the road people drive on *may* be said to be arbitrary (but we would be foolish to think this amounted to saying that it was either historically uncaused or inexplicable), the fact that the international truck driver, Fred, drives on the left in England, and on the right in Spain, is to be explained by his knowledge *and* his observation of local laws and conventions, his desire to avoid accidents and convictions, etc.

Considerations such as these suggest that references to rules or cultural orders, in the context of agents' *actions* (including those that constitute the performance of speech acts), are explanatory only by reference to the cognitive powers of agents. To answer, for example, a question about the distribution of cars on campus by reference to the university's parking rules is actually elliptical; what explains the distribution is drivers' *observance* of the rules (which is why we are not surprised to learn that the distribution of parked cars is rather different on days when the parking inspectors are on strike). Once we move from considering the rules, norms, regularities and conventions – all

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(importantly) different dimensions of what we sometimes bring together under the notion of a 'cultural order' – to their role in the cognitive processes of and interactions between agents, then we are considering causal matters: this, it seems to me, is the heart of Weber's vision of sociology as the study of the way 'subjective meanings', particular motives and understandings framed in linguistic and other conventional terms of a particular historical cultural horizon, have social consequences small (e.g. piles of wood-chips (Weber 1978:8–9)) or large (e.g. a doctrine about a specific aspect of God's plans that is taken up by a social segment, at a particular juncture, to long-term revolutionary effect (Weber 1976)); in the latter case, 'subjective meanings' will be relevant to the explanation of the cultural orders of subsequent historical horizons (although – it *should* be superfluous to add – they will not be sufficient for such explanation). For Weber, the openness of these historical processes entails that the social sciences are ineliminably idiographic.[25]

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While it would be foolish to suggest that how, exactly, the semantic (or constitutive) and the causal realms depend up one another is worked out to the satisfaction of all specialists, it does seem clear that there *are* such dependencies and that we need to bring both to bear on our efforts to understand human social lives and their histories. Thus, for example, a concern with malaria depends upon both the properties of the concept of malaria (or term 'malaria') and the properties of the disease so designated (as mediated by an institutional context in which the concept and beliefs about the disease are dynamically embedded), which means that a comprehensive history of malaria has to be complex. To that extent, Sahlins is right about the relevance of culture to history, and vice versa; but neither of the terms of this formulation refers to anything that is *sui generis*.[26] And, at this point, it should become clear that whether one speaks, *as a social scientist*, of causal realms and meaningful orders, or of different levels of causal analysis, is largely a matter of taste; although one might bear in mind that the first way of speaking is liable to encourage folks to think in (falsely) dichotomous terms.

So far I have drawn some distinctions that mark the properties of states, events and process as these are relevant to meaning and the analysis of questions about socio-historical worlds. I have suggested that even once we avoid misconstruing semantic matters (by avoiding use-mention confusions), we still need to negotiate the varieties of meaning that are relevant to our analytical interests. My worries about the four works that started this rumination concern their tendency to ignore these complexities; which tendencies is encouraged by unqualified talk of 'meaning'.

Earlier, I referred to the fact, which grounds linguistic pragmatics, that our accomplishment in interpreting utterances cannot be explained solely in terms of the semantic properties the words and sentences used. My first example (the sentence about the supermarket's proximity) adverts to Grice's work on implicature, which gave rise to a thriving and technical literature, but I also suggest that the terms Austin introduced, and which are reasonably well-known in mainstream cultural anthropology, sufficient to motivate the distinctions for whose importance I am pleading.

Austin distinguished between the following dimensions of a speech-act: the locutionary (the sentence identified by reference to its grammatically relevant properties), the illocutionary (what the speaker's utterance of the sentence constituted, directly or indirectly) and the perlocutionary (consequences) aspects of acts of speech.[27] As also indicted above, the distinctions at work here pertain to actions, and are thus generalisable (and necessarily so); so we have the action as characterised by the agent herself, what she intended, planned or hoped to bring about by taking that action and what effects the action had, in the circumstances – what it amounted to. Thus, I say 'I'm sorry', I express regret, I seek forgiveness, I act to repair the friendship, as compared with my saying 'I'm sorry' coldly and with exaggerated formality, indicating my lack of regret and indifference to the threat to the friendship; again, you say 'I promise to come to see you tomorrow', you promise to come, you seek to allay my worries, cheer me up a little and get me to stop my present demands for advice. Likewise, however, I write my name, I sign a cheque, I pay for and arrange for the delivery of your birthday present, which I hope will give you a pleasant surprise tomorrow (or I miscalculate and you instead become irritated); you transfer money into an account and thereby officially become a student, eligible to attend classes and borrow library books, which also pleases your parents, but upsets the friend who wanted you to join him in a year travelling the world.

The broader analytical point – which concerns, to repeat the point, the relations *between* the meaningful as constituted by some sort of rule, or as describable by reference to some aspect of a cultural order, and the meaningful as a realm of causal significance – might be underlined by a story, which may or may not be true, about Alan Greenspan (when he was the head of the US Federal Reserve). He asked his audience at a business lunch this question: 'Do you ever wonder if people allow themselves to get carried away too easily when buying stocks?' He uses an ordinary interrogative, a proper sentence of the English language; you might be asked to read it aloud in a language class and if you were to comply, you and Alan Greenspan would have spoken the

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same sentence – you would have committed the same *locutionary* act. But given who Greenspan was, and given his audience, and given what he knew about his audience (which *always* contained financial journalists), and what his audience knew about what he knew, etc., almost everybody interpreted Greenspan's question to have the force of a warning about the stock market. That is, they took him to be using the sentence to give a warning – to have performed the *illocutionary* act of giving a warning (about the overheated state of the stock market). (He might have used the same sentence to simply enquire of, say, a friend if he ever wondered whether people allow themselves... That is, he could have performed the illocutionary act of asking a question with the same interrogative sentence. In the context of the lunch, then, Greenspan's was an 'indirect' speech act; it was a matter of Gricean implicature.) This reading of his illocutionary act had the effect of persuading journalists present to write up Greenspan's speech and highlight his warning, so inducing their readers (in light of their [contingent] interests) to consider their position in the stock market and think about the basis on which they enter into transactions, which, let us say, is what Greenspan intended to happen; in that case, getting people to consider all this would count as the *perlocutionary* act he performed – the effect he intended his question to have. Note the differences here in the 'meanings': the locutionary act is fixed by the language, the illocutionary act is fixed, when it is, jointly by three things, (1) the locutionary act performed (given the conventions of English, and in the absence of any special prior understandings on the part of your listeners, you cannot intend to ask for the correct time by saying to someone 'The pH of one's stomach is very low'), (2) the communicative intentions of the speaker and (3) the recognition of that intention (the 'uptake', as Austin called it) by those hearing it, but the perlocutionary act is not fixed by anything the speaker does, since it is contingent on worldly processes the speaker can take account of, but cannot control. I can warn you successfully, but you need not heed my warning, just as I can promise you in order to reassure you, yet fail to do so, or urge or beg you to stop smoking, yet fail to persuade you. And Greenspan's perlocutionary act may have had other effects: stock markets all around the world might have gone down sharply the next day (as investors sold their stocks), which may or may not have been what Greenspan intended, but if an Indonesian worker in a Nike factory lost her job because of the market downturn that followed his speech, this would have been an effect of the speech, but, we assume, an unintended one. Actions, including those that constitute the performance of illocutionary acts, have effects in the world, just like other events, which, of

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course, is why we go to the trouble of taking action; but even though, by acting, we usually succeed in fulfiling our basic intentions, that is not because the actions – still less our intentions – are sufficient to produce the effects we intend. We depend on the causal powers of the things of the world (including other people) too (the relative reliability in the patterns of which were presumably a necessary condition for the evolution of creatures like us).[28]

As Weber keenly appreciated (he had legal training (Turner & Factor 1994)), and as we can too, if we pause to consider what we care about when we evaluate legal and other sorts of responsibility, the powers we have in virtue of our capacity for action do not suffice to explain all the consequences produced by the effects for which a given act was necessary (given the other factors at work in that context), which is why, for example, we need the distinction between illocutions and perlocutions; but it is also the case that knowing the outcome of an action will not suffice to determine *which* proper action description will capture the relevant aspects of the actual network of causes that produced that outcome. Here, as elsewhere, causal relations can be hard to determine, and we are enjoined by Weber to seek adequacy at both the 'level of cause' and at the 'level of meaning'; but that is because he saw that what he lumped together as 'subjective meanings' are needed for a proper *causal* explanatory account. And what cultural conventions (including those relevant to speaking a language) someone is committed to (what, say, 'gift' meant in her speech-act) may not be sufficient, but they are necessary, to a proper analysis of her actions, and therefore to any causal history in which the actions play a role. Accordingly, there can be no opposition between the interpretation of rules and conventions and the analysis of causes in the social sciences: proper analysis invariably involves both because actions do.[29] An event, the occurrence of which involves, say, your winking at some jealous person's partner, is simply a different (if one prefers – an ontologically different) happening from the event that is in all other immediate respects identical except that it involves your twitch (your red face, etc).[30]

Ever since Strawson's (1964) influential paper, there has been lively debate about the relative centrality of intentions and conventions in general accounts of speech acts (and other sorts of act), which debate also covers those much-paraded paradigms of illocutionary acts, the explicit performatives; there are some daunting theoretical and metaphysical issues in play, concerning the proper place of cognitive processes and conventional forms in understanding and explaining actions and interactions. Complications that nobody can ignore abound. However, the basic distinctions – whose reflection on the lives of humans bespeaks more clearly than any theoretical account – are

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uncontroversial, relatively speaking, of course. And for anthropological or sociological purposes, these relate to the contrasts originally picked out by the Austinian trichotomy (if not, Austin's rule-centred account of it): loctionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary. It is a relevant and interesting fact about the early history of speech acts (Smith 1990) that both of the nineteenth century philosophers who identified them (independently), Thomas Reid and Adolf Reinach, dubbed them 'social acts' or 'social operations'. As noted earlier, speech acts are not unique as acts, notwithstanding the uniqueness of the imbricated conventional orders of the linguistic structures upon which they depend; one takes action as one element – hopefully a decisive one – in the stream of events, which turn out thus and so.

This last point, it might be worth pointing out, is also reflected in aspects of our language; there are whole classes of verbs that relate intentional actions to outcomes as trying relates to succeeding: treating versus curing, looking versus seeing, studying versus learning, looking for versus finding, listening versus hearing, entering versus winning (a race or competition), etc. (see Vendler 1967:chap 4). In all these cases, we have intentional acts or courses of them aimed at attaining some state of affairs where, nevertheless, the actions taken are necessary but clearly insufficient – and known to be so by the agents. And, to repeat, conventions (of the cultural order – if one wants court the dangers the definite article presents) are necessary too, but – again – these must not be set against intentionality: how else to explain why, when Barack Obama wants to say something about the sky, he will often use 'sky', whereas, when she wants to, Angela Merkel will do so by using 'himmel'?

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Syllepsis: Contemporary Problems and their Roots in Functionalism?

Finally, I want to make explicit why the issue of syllepsis arises. We have many different sorts of questions about ourselves, not only as bearers of various historical and cultural traditions, but as members of the same species too. This is an obvious point, but when scholars fall to arguing about which theoretically motivated answer is the most compelling, it can be forgotten that those answers may address somewhat different questions.[31] Humanistic scholars like Geertz rightly allow their robust intuitions about what matters to beings like ourselves to act as a litmus test of the questions worth posing; anthropologists, as agents of love, are, perhaps, less likely than most to be insensitive to the needs of the 'moral imagination' (Geertz 1983). Given such concerns, a demand for information relevant to the 'meaning' of events as these engage human understanding is appropriate. Yet, when one asks about

the meaning of an action, even a customary action, it needs to be borne in mind that the question, as I hope to have shown, is not fully determinate. Not only because it is ambiguous as between several different senses of 'meaning', but because, in relation to some of them, the appropriate interrogative interest is not identified. If we are asking about the meaning of an action with respect to its consequences for those upon whom it does or might impact, then causal narratives that link the event with their interests are in order (but not obligatory, perhaps); if, however, we are asking about the 'meaning' of the action itself, then the perspective of the agent's intentional profile – with respect to the action's illocutionary aspect, in the (purely exemplary) case of linguistic interaction – simply cannot be one among others, since it is this that defines the action. Greenspan's actions may or may not have 'meant' this or that consequence for the journalists, the stock market and those Indonesian Nike workers; but what illocutionary act he performed (given the appropriate uptake) in asking his question is simply not hostage to causal fortune in the same way. On the other hand, what illocutionary act *he* performed cannot be recovered from the cultural order, including the language of the community, no matter how minutely specified.

One of the characteristic responses that simplistic functionalist statements about human practices (biological, psychological or sociological) elicit concerns the occlusion of the agent's perspective on the action of interest and its constitutive role in defining the act intended, and, therefore, the proper characterisation of the action itself: a man tearfully and attentively performs some ('ritual') actions he holds to constitute the honouring of his dead paternal grandfather, or he ardently declares his undying love for a woman; a scholar explains to us, perhaps, that in the first case, the man is affirming his descent group identity or expressing the group's solidarity, or, in the second, that he is seeking to maximise his inclusive fitness. Such formulations are indeed problematic, for they seem to play fast and loose with the distinction between the illocutionary and the perlocutionary aspects of action: here the consequences of practices are read back into the level of description of the action. At best, we have a problematically sylleptical formulation: he honoured his ancestor and his clan. At worst, we have an outright distortion of his action: he honoured his clan – full-stop.[32]

These sylleptical moves are not restricted to claims that sacrifice the specificities of causal chains involving actions in favour of generic consequences viewed from a functionalist perspective; those which redescribe the action-specific sequence in terms of consequences that refer to generic meanings in which an observer has a theoretically motivated interest are no less problematic.

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The imputation of a structural-functional state as the telos of a social action is not really worse than the imputation of abstract meaning-making telos; both will produce sylleptical distortions of agents' specific roles in the causal sequences that constitute the fabric of *social* life. Singing the national anthem may or may not mean that one is a patriot. Indeed, perhaps the most best known formulation that is sylleptical in nature – Durkheim's argument that one's worshipping the clan totem means that one is worshipping the clan – is concerned both with meaning and function.

These final considerations may evoke in the reader important questions about, for example, the relationship between states and processes that are informative in the information-theoretic sense and those that are genuinely communicative, or those thorny issues in the philosophy of action that are discussed under the rubric of deviant or wayward causal chains. While these are connected to matters that we have been considering, at this point I can only acknowledge that working through those issues would require further refinements of the basic picture I have been working with: but not its abandonment. Indeed, the realities of the culture-historical life that humans lead everywhere require great sensitivity in the use of the causal-explanatory resources of any discipline intent on answering questions about that life: even Weber's formulations, regarding social actions' dependence on subjective meanings and their sociological consequences have to be seen as the beginning rather than the end of wisdom. Moreover, sometimes the right answer to a good question – an appropriate understanding – implicates not what is specific to the 'meaning' of some cultural event or form, but how it instantiates some more general humanly relevant characteristic.

Certainly, meretricious claims couched in terms of the mega-category of 'meaning' are counter-productive, not least, I have suggested, because it is likely to transpire that we are being offered familiar, disreputable old functionalism turned out in a swish new suit.

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Notes

1. The stimulation provided by this small work is wholly disproportional, since it evokes views and arguments that Sahlins (2004) made in *Apologies to Thucydides*, which, in turn, reminds the reader of all the marvellously stimulating – almost evangelical – works that he has produced since the 1970s, after turning his back on the star he had been as a younger man.
2. http://www.aaanet.org/about/whatisanthropology.cfm
3. Of course, this is likely to be seen as something less than an innocent claim about the provenance of my view; no less than Marx, Weber was a complex and prolific writer capable of inspiring very different scholars to see what Turner (2000:2) calls 'subterranean' paths connecting his thought and their own. In anthropology, for

example, it is less remarked than it might be that both Geertz and Bourdieu claim deep inspiration from Weber.

4. It is worth reminding ourselves that Geertz's earliest interventions – including some of those that have proved most influential (e.g. 'religion as a cultural system') – were often explicitly aimed only at *supplementing* functionalism. And while this is no place to argue the case, I think it is clear that Geertz had a quite particular interest in philosophy; with his writer's temperament, and impatient with the technicalities, he saw professional philosophy as a means to the end of advancing anthropology's claims on a Deweyan moral imagination.
5. Harré (like his students, Russel Keat and Roy Bhaskar) agreed that relations between the conceptual and the empirical needed to be handled carefully, but differed from the Winch-inspired followers of Wittgenstein, many of whom cleaved to a *dichotomy* between the social and the natural sciences, no less than he did from logical empiricists/positivists.
6. Geertz first cites Wittgenstein in his 1964, 'Ideology as a cultural system', and Ryle in 1962, in 'The growth of culture and the evolution of mind'. But he concluded his 1957, 'Ethos, world-view and the analysis of sacred symbols' with the sentence: 'The role of such a special science as anthropology in the analysis of values is not to replace philosophical investigation, but to make it relevant' (All three essays reprinted in his (1973)).
7. There were also some signs that the divide might be under pressure from social science – not in the way the positivists (and many hermeneuticists) had desired (worried about) it, through an assimilation of the social to the natural sciences – but in the novel post-positivist way, through the idea that meaning and its interpretation was at the heart of all inquiry. Mary Douglas's *Implicit meanings* (1975), for example, had appeared the year earlier; it is worth noting – here, only in passing – the mutual influence of Douglas ('the most interesting living Durkheimian' according to Bellah (2005)) and the pioneers of the Strong Programme's Durkheimian approach in the sociology of science (Bloor 1976). Here was one area of academic life where the extent of the impact of the critique of traditional models of science became obvious early on. Geertz would himself move closer to these early radicals in later essays, although he never did get round to offering us 'Science as a cultural system'.
8. One might suggest, though, that it is the tacit acceptance of the logical positivists'/empiricists' account of science as the search for natural laws that does most of the work in perpetuating the idea of a basic divide between the *Natur-* and *Geisteswissenschaften* (a 'peculiarly German' distinction that was actually introduced to the academy by Mill's Austrian translator, who used it to gloss Mill's empiricist opposition between the natural and the moral sciences (Ryan 1987)).
9. Lyons (1977) begins his two volume study, *Semantics*, by distinguishing 10 ways in which 'means' is used, and noting how important it is that linguists take account of these differences if confusion is to be avoided. It is not clear that anthropologists need to be less careful (see below).
10. That there is a normal use of the sentence in the context sketched emerges if we consider how we would construe the interaction had it turned out that although

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there is a supermarket around the corner, it was closed on that day and the speaker knew this when he spoke but did not mention the fact.

11. For a deeply thoughtful and comprehensive account of what this might mean, see Sterelny's (2003) study.
12. A warning that seems to me to be rather ironical; Tambiah's important role in drawing anthropological attention to the speech-act theory is qualified by his sometimes eccentric construal of the basic distinctions it involves. His approach seems to be grounded in an unsustainable conviction that such theory could augment basic Durkheimian approaches to ritual. In fact, Durkheim's (2001) view that ritual and belief differ fundamentally, as 'thought differs from action' (p. 36) seems to be a major source of a false dichotomy that has dogged anthropology more or less ever since (and is particularly clear in the interpretation of ritual).
13. As I noted at the beginning of this piece, the works mentioned – those by Sahlins and Agyrou no less than Engelke and Tomlinson – all work with this notion of meaning.
14. Parsons translations of Weber raise some questions (Schmid 1992:95–8), as do some of his rearrangements of the original texts (Tribe 2007); his actions seem to reflect his own view of the nature of adequate grand theory which, it seems, he could not envisage without Durkheimian structural foundations.
15. Even sensitive and knowledgeable, Weber scholars sometimes let down their guard. Thus, Campbell (2007) speaks of 'consumers ... creating their own world of meaning' as though this 'creation' involved something more ineffable than the consumers' perceptions, motives and beliefs as a function of their embeddedness in a definite milieu, at a definite juncture. More broadly, the implications of the line of argument I pursue in this piece extend also to the increasingly influential cultural sociology practiced by Jeffrey Alexander and his colleagues, in whose formulations Geertz's views looms very large.
16. So, the hyphenated (and oxymoronic) adjective is meant to capture the fact that 'the problem of meaning' can be considered in relation to collective representations of religion, seen as a primordial social institution that, as part of its systemic *function*, creates a 'world of meaning' for those partaking of it, *or* in relation to the 'moods and motivations' of individuals faced with having to choose courses of action, in concrete social situations, on the basis of values and specific understandings. Or it can be considered under both these rubrics, in which case, perhaps, the hyphenated term could be replaced with 'Parsonian' or 'Geertzian'.
17. Consider also this, possibly the most charming – though decisive – incitement to watchfulness about use-mention issues, from Quine (who elsewhere (p. 27) warns against 'the myth of the museum' in which meanings are the exhibits and words the labels):

> 'Boston is populous' is about Boston and contains 'Boston'; '"Boston" is disyllabic' is about 'Boston' and contains 'Boston'. 'Boston' designates 'Boston', which in turn designates Boston. To mention Boston we use 'Boston' or a synonym, and to mention 'Boston' we use 'Boston' or a synonym. 'Boston' contains six letters and just one pair of quotation marks; 'Boston' contains six letters and no quotation marks; and Boston contains some 800,000 people. (Quine 1979:24)

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18. The example of water and the term used to designate it is one of many ambiguous formulations – sometimes in portentous titles of books or articles – taking the form of 'The meaning of x', where x is filled with more or less ordinary nouns: 'culture', 'death', 'things', 'ritual', 'affinity', 'nature', 'paternity', 'death', 'style', to cite a few other examples. It might be argued that this ambiguity is motivated by widely shared disciplinary conceptions – and I might agree, but my problem is with their justification or coherence (see footnote 19).
19. Of course, the light-heartedness would not negate an important point, close to Carroll's (Dodgson's) heart. Also, Carnap's (1932) critique of Heidegger's 'metaphysics' stemmed from his view that sorting out the way *language* works was fundamental to producing a coherent framework for science – that getting logic and ontology right would decisively improve the epistemological problems; his notorious citation of Heidegger on 'nothing' and the confusion it involved about the logical category of the noun stems from this conviction. (Friedman's (2000) book begins with details of the trip Carnap made, 3 years before this paper's publication, to Switzerland to attend the disputation between Heidegger and Cassirer; Carnap had friendly discussions with his two senior colleagues – who knew and expressed admiration for his own work – with whom he shared a neo-Kantian heritage.)
20. They also refer to Putnam's (1975) rather different paper, 'The meaning of "meaning"', which might well have counted Ogden and Richards' work – notwithstanding its insistence upon the multiplicity and heterogeneity language's functions – as among those 'heroic if misguided' attempts to bring the concept of meaning out of the 'darkness' (p. 215).
21. Interestingly, he takes this programme to necessitate reconceptualising the social and its relations with the psychological; this is no coincidence, of course, but the complexities here mean it must be set aside in this context. I should acknowledge the role of Sperber's early work in causing me to worry about my Durkheim-honed convictions, worries that are directly connected to the content of this piece, despite the length of the interval between 1975 and now.
22. It is worth noting that this slim volume, which has enjoyed a rather ambiguous career in mainstream anthropology, is intellectually continuous with the work for which Sperber is now most famous, in psychology and linguistics. Indeed, the PhD thesis ('Presuppostion and non-truth conditional semantics', supervised by Noam Chomsky) of Dierdre Wilson, Sperber's co-inventor of relevance theory, with whom (I presume) he had been in conversation about the relations between semantics and pragmatics since both were at Oxford, in the 1960s, is the most up-to-date work in listed in the bibliography. I would argue that the extent to which this text was connected to seminal developments in a whole raft of neighbouring disciplines was underappreciated by Sperber's contemporaries.
23. Sperber is not the only notable anthropologist to realise the need to complicate anthropological understandings of meaning in relation to the diversity of action and interaction and to have made contributions widely appreciated in cognate disciplines; consider, for example, the impressive body of empirical and theoretical work of Stephen Levinson, who is also, perhaps, more widely cited in linguistic than in cultural anthropological circles. Sperber, though, is particularly forthright

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in arguing for his perspective in and insisting on its connections to philosophical, psychological and biological positions.

24. Thus, the question whether the following instance of the string – GIFT – signifies a German word meaning 'poison' or an English word for that which preoccupied Mauss, or both (as well as an indefinitely large number of terms in the universe's hitherto undescribed languages), has no determinate answer outside the specification of an agents use.
25. I resist here the temptation to return to Sahlins's (2004) scintillating discussion.
26. This, in turn (and in passing), suggests that the distinction between structure and agency, as it is sometimes, presented is a false dichotomy; structures are 'immanent' in the relations agents have with one another (which is just another way of saying that relations between agents *are* ordered or structured), but agents and structures do not interact, except metonymically. When we speak of a player's having a certain kind of relationship with the team, we are referring to her relation with other players. When the head of department outlines the department's relationship with the university, she speaks metonymically of the relations between that department and the other departments and the administration, etc, that together constitute the whole. Here the broader point – which is an ontological/mereological one, about wholes and their parts – can be made clearer if we see it applies too to the relations between, for example, the planets and the solar system. We talk about the relations between Mars and the system, but few of us would be tempted to make an opposition here; we appreciate that the system is constituted by the relations between the planets and their properties.
27. These represent only a subset of Austin's distinctions, but nothing relevant to this discussion is lost by using only these. It is worth noting, though, that acts of speech and speech-acts sometimes need to be distinguished, at least in a rough and ready way it is easier to exemplify than spell out – for speech-acts entail agents' project, in a way that acts of speech need not. Thus, locutions like 'It is raining' issuing from the mouth of a sleeper, or a language learner repeating what the teacher instructs her to do, will not count as statements about the weather (even if it is raining); on the other hand, one can utter a sentence, know that it is a sentence, and even utter it in circumstances where it has the right sort of effects (i.e. a native speaker, overhearing it, comes to learn something she did not know) without having any idea about the speech-act it is standardly used to perform (for instance, because one does not speak the language the grammar of which defines the sentence).
28. The points made through here – and the implicit contrast between the actions undertaken and the acts performed by an agent – suggest the possibility of a critical engagement with Humphrey and Laidlaw's (1994) interesting and influential perspective on ritual. They also pertain to the questions that must arise from a suggestion that intention and communication are linked in ways that are contingent on cultural context (Robbins 2008).
29. A lesson very nicely set out in Papineau's (1978) careful and highly readable first work.
30. To that extent, Geertz's discussion of winks and twitches, dependent as it is on the metaphor of depth, is unhelpful; as though an action were to its behavioural

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manifestation as depth is to surface, when it is more like the ontological contrast between a work by Picasso and a counterfeit, or between the government's and a forger's banknote – albeit ever so perfect. (Logical empiricism's 'myth of the given' lingers even here, in Geertz's seminal text, hidden behind the innocuous seeming metaphor.)

31. For an impressively sensitive and nuanced discussion of interpretation and explanation in relation to action and to social science interests – one that is informed by more than a passing knowledge of the anthropological literature – see Risjord (2000).
32. Characterising an action in terms of its consequences is not, though, more distorting than characterising it in terms of the causal grounds it presupposes. If I claim of someone – a person with a broad Liverpudlian accent, say – who has just requested that I close the window that what she said 'means that she comes from Liverpool', the distortion in respect of her request is not less than if I make the claim that what she said means that the cells in her vocal cords had just metabolised numerous molecules of ATP; in both cases, part of the causal antecedents are spoken of as the meaning of what she said, yet these are necessary antecedents to anything whatsoever that she may have said. The act itself – the request – is, once again, completely erased in a genus for species substitution. Edmund Leach's penchant for saying what things like making a cup of tea 'say' is subject to this critique.

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