

Educating for Meaning in an Era of Banality

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What specific cultural biases, if left unchecked, will leave our youth with incompetent intellects and distorted personalities?...How may education oppose, both emphatically and constructively, such biases as the school can hope to address?¹

“How do we figure out the ‘end’ or purpose of education?” my students recently asked me in response to Neil Postman’s *The End of Education*. To answer their question, I turned to yet another work by Postman. In *Teaching as a Conserving Activity*, Postman draws upon the concept of homeostasis to assert that balance, created through the interplay of opposing elements, is the mark of a healthy democracy. He proposes that education should act as a counterargument to the excesses in society, much as a thermostat activates the air conditioner when the room gets too hot — or the heater when the room gets too cold. Accordingly, he suggests that teachers and philosophers of education identify and develop ways to counteract these excesses.²

The purpose of what follows is not to explore Postman’s ideas, but to take his suggestion seriously. My aim is to identify the excess in society today and to lay out the philosophical foundation (or end of education) with which we might counter that excess.

American culture today suffers from an excess of meaninglessness, which is manifest in two ways: First, we experience what Max Weber calls “disenchantment”³; we experience our lives as lacking determinate meaning and feel empty, isolated, and alienated. Second, we rely predominantly upon what Hannah Arendt calls “banal” explanations of meaning; an insufficient lexicon of clichés and assumed interpretive explanations preempts the possibility for reflection upon meaning.⁴ Although these might appear to be two separate types and crises of meaning, Charles Taylor suggests that they are interrelated: the possibility of feeling that one’s life has meaning is dependent, at least implicitly, upon the degree to which we can thoughtfully provide explanatory accounts of meaning.⁵ In this work, I will be concerned explicitly with this second crisis of meaning, but the first can be assumed as a concern as well.

By meaning I imply the interpretive accounts we offer to explain the significance, purposes, and reasons for events. Meaning in everyday language — at the level of words and sentences — tends to take the form of banal clichés. Thus, the premise of this work is that the (or, at least *an*) excess from which our culture currently suffers is banality. I am concerned with the everyday ways in which we make sense of what happens and the way in which these everyday interpretations form larger worldviews that guide our conduct. Therefore, returning to my students’ question regarding the end of education, a more complete response would be that in twenty-first century America the purpose of education must be to teach us how to make sense of our lives in ways that are more robust than those offered by popular culture. Students in this banal era must receive an education in meaning.

In what follows I clarify what meaning is. To know how we “should” relate to meaning requires that we first know what and how meaning is, as prescriptions are based upon descriptions, even if the latter are only implied. In the process of describing meaning, the danger of an excess of banality and the ethical importance of counteracting banality will become clearer.

BANALITY, OR BEING AT HOME

Having meaning is a condition of human life. Humans have in common with other creatures that we build physical homes for basic shelter and protection, but the uniquely human home is a conceptual one made of interpretations. Interpretations are quick-and-ready explanations that enable us to respond to situations swiftly and in ways that are intelligible to those around us. We are born into communities that share understanding and, in this way, we always already have meaning.⁶

[I]n all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own. We grow up, and we become acquainted with men and in the last analysis with ourselves when we learn to speak. Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us.⁷

Without shared intelligibility, our actions, words, and feelings would dissolve into thin air; they would not be recognized as meaning anything to our selves and to those with whom we live.

An interpretation thus functions like a tool, whose purpose is not to call attention to itself, but rather to help us navigate our lives and live with others. Beyond convenience, interpretations provide peace of mind that life makes sense. In both cases, we can take interpretations for granted. If we had to question why we brush our teeth every time we woke up in the morning, then we would never get a start on our day. As Arendt explains,

Clichés, stock phrases, adherence to conventional, standardized codes of expression and conduct have the socially recognized function of protecting us against reality, that is, against the claim on our thinking attention that all events and facts make by virtue of their existence. If we were responsive to this claim all the time, we would soon be exhausted.⁸

Already accepted understandings (such as the idea that it is good for dental hygiene to brush regularly) shield us from what would otherwise be an exhausting existence if we had to understand everything for the first time.

Borrowing from Arendt’s use of this word, I call the disposition to relate to meaning in this way “banality.” When we adhere to given interpretations, we do not think about meaning; rather, we take meaning for granted.⁹ Shared interpretations are banal because their purpose is to be tried-and-true, predictable, stable, and unnoticeable.

THE “OF” OF INTERPRETATION AND THE RISK OF MEANINGLESSNESS IN BANALITY

Another important characteristic of meaning clashes with its convenient nature. An interpretation is a making sense *of* something. As Paul Ricoeur writes, “To say something of something is, in the complete and strong sense of the term, to interpret.”¹⁰ An interpretation cannot be created apart from a specific object and

originates in response to something experienced that our normal conceptual framework cannot explain. Richard Rorty states,

hermeneutics is the study of an abnormal discourse from the point of view of some normal discourse — the attempt to make some sense of what is going on at a stage where we are still too unsure about it to describe it... We must be hermeneutical where we do not understand what is happening but are honest enough to admit it.¹¹

The recognition of the need to search for meaning is predicated on the fact that ordinarily understanding is effortless. Meaning is therefore both something we take for granted, as suggested previously, and the result of an effort that emerges in response to situations in which we cannot assume understanding. This inherent contradiction implies that there is a risk in meaning: if detached from its original context, it might not be meaningful.

The fact that explanations of meaning are born in response to particular situations suggests that already accepted and shared interpretations are not (or are less) meaningful once they become detached from the situation that originated them.¹² Gadamer writes,

Precisely the most inclusive meaning of what is said — and meaning is always a direction of meaning — comes to language only in the original saying and slips away in all subsequent saying and speaking. The task of the translator [or interpreter], therefore, must never be to copy what is said, but to place himself in the direction of what is said (i.e. in its meaning) in order to carry over what is to be said into the direction of his own saying.¹³

Gadamer's point is that an interpretation is meaningful to the extent that it is related to the present context.¹⁴ For this reason, he argues in the latter half of the quote that if an interpretation is to be "used" again, it must be "translated" so that it relates to the new situation. Without direct relation to a context, an interpretation is only a generic rule of thumb that does not respond to the necessarily nongeneric complexities of life.

And, yet, interpretations must aim toward generalization. Arendt asserts that "The function of language is preservation; what it embodies is meant to remain, to remain longer than is possible for ephemeral human beings. Thus from the start the representation, being destined for permanence, stripped of its singularity, becomes an essence."¹⁵ The fact that we can explain a situation in language is useful not only for the understanding of the occasion that inspired it, but also for future occasions to which it might apply as well. An interpretation, distinct in its inauguration, is constitutionally meant to lose its distinctiveness. Gadamer explains this tension well:

[O]ne will find a conflict between the continuing tendency toward individualization in language and that tendency which is just as essential to language, namely to establish meanings by convention. For to be sure, the fact that one can never depart too far from linguistic conventions is clearly basic to the life of language: he who speaks a private language understood by no one else, does not speak at all. But on the other hand, he who only speaks a language in which conventionality has become total in the choice of words, in syntax, and in style forfeits the power of address and evocation that comes solely within the individualization of a language's vocabulary and of its means of communication.¹⁶

An interpretation is meant for others to hear, which means it must adhere to convention.

For instance, imagine that all the members of my family receive a letter from Great Aunt Stella accusing us of a litany of wrongs, from marrying the wrong spouses, to worshipping at the wrong churches, to cooking a terrible Thanksgiving turkey. While the rest of my family understands the letter as an expression of unwarranted criticism and anger (what we will suppose as the banal explanation in this case), I interpret it as a cry for help that merits a loving response. According to my interpretation, Stella criticizes us not because she disapproves of us (which everyone else assumes), but because she is lonely and does not feel welcome in the family.

For my interpretation to cause my family members to act differently, it must be both new and plausible to them. If I speak to catch others' attention, I must say something previously unsaid. If I said that the letter was indicative of illegitimate anger, then no one would pay me any attention since that is the assumed interpretation. At the same time, imagine my saying that Aunt Stella's letter indicated that she was feeling wonderful. This interpretation would be too far from conventional understanding and regarded as nonsense because it is unlikely that an angry letter could indicate good feelings. To communicate well, I must say something believable.

What makes my interpretation believable is that it accords not only with how we understand Stella (her behavior ever since Uncle Rupert died, her mode of communicating, and so on), but also with our general understanding of human beings, how a person in Stella's situation might feel, and how people communicate in general. That is, the interpretation cannot be entirely unique to Stella. That is why the argument that she feels wonderful does not make sense. We simply cannot imagine that any person who writes an angry letter could be feeling well.

In this case, the interpretation can be seen as plausible not only by my family, but by others outside our family situation. My interpretation will be specifically and immediately helpful to my family. It provides a new (because it is other than what the others originally thought) understanding that brings the family together to discuss the situation and act accordingly. But in being useful to other family members, it already has a general quality that enables it to apply to others outside of the particular situation with Stella. In offering a new explanation of the meaning of an angry letter, I enable future others to interpret such letters in this same way. However, this is risky.

While it may be helpful for others to apply the Stella interpretation to angry letters, it may also be misleading because not every situation will be just like Stella's. If my Stella interpretation becomes conventional, leading people to interpret all angry letters as cries for attention, the interpretation is potentially (a) meaningless and (b) incorrect. First, the interpretation can lose its meaning if we always give hugs to people who write angry letters under the assumption that what they really want is affection. While this might be the "correct response," it loses its meaning if performed habitually such that the meaning behind the response is forgotten. The person will not be moved by a hug if hugs are given mechanically. Second, the interpretation will not be appropriate for every angry letter. Consider the possibility

that the letter could be communicating something correct; the letter writer might be justified in his or her anger and might have important ideas to convey from which the letter recipient might learn important lessons. If the recipients mistakenly respond to the writer with hugs, it will not only further anger the writer, but it will also ignore the significant content and purpose of the letter. In such an instance, the recipient has not responded to the particular situation. Interpretations are therefore caught in “conflict.” They seem ill-suited to do what they originally intended to do — to tell the meaning of something specific — once they become conventional. Ironically, the understood “meaning,” once integrated into shared living, is possibly no longer (or less) meaningful insofar as it is detached from specificity.¹⁷

NATALITY, OR EXILE

While banality is the disposition to take meaning for granted, what I call “natality” is the disposition to make meaning the center of attention — to attend to the “of” of interpretations. So far, I have argued that meaning is dual in nature, with the capacity to be taken for granted or newly made; correspondingly, we can say that meaning can be either banal or natal. I asserted previously that as humans we are born into a banal world and with a related disposition for banality. Now I want to show you that we are likewise (literally) born into a natal world and with a disposition for natality. Arendt offers a helpful way to think about this.

Arendt suggests that natality is an essential part of the human condition, even if it is at times eclipsed by banality as a result of practical necessity. Natality is grounded in the fact that we are born. She states:

With the creation of man, the principle of beginning came into the world itself, which, of course, is only another way of saying that the principle of freedom was created when man was created but not before. It is in the nature of beginning that something new is started which cannot be expected from whatever may have happened before. This character of startling unexpectedness is inherent in all beginnings and in all origins. Thus, the origin of life from inorganic matter is an infinite improbability of inorganic processes, as is the coming into being of the earth viewed from the standpoint of processes in the universe.... The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle. The fact that man is capable of action means that the unexpected can be expected from him, that he is able to perform what is infinitely improbable. And this again is possible because each man is unique, so that with each birth something uniquely new comes into the world. With respect to this somebody who is unique it can be truly said that nobody was there before.¹⁸

For Arendt, the birth of each human being is a metaphor for beginnings that will take place throughout our entire lives. Though each individual is born literally only once, he or she has the potential to make comparably startling origins throughout his or her life.

Arendt’s concept of natality is most often associated with human action. Indeed, a strict reading of Arendt would lead us to conclude that natality refers only to the capacity for an individual to *do* something new. However, it is also possible to associate natality with the capacity to ask questions about meaning in spite of the fact that Arendt herself does not link the two overtly.

In fact, I would argue that Arendt's account of thinking about meaning cannot be severed from her understanding of natality. She seems to realize this when, in the final words of *The Human Condition*, she says:

[I]f no other test but the experience of being active, no other measure but the extent of sheer activity were to be applied to the various activities within the *vita activa*, it might well be that thinking as such would surpass them all. Whoever has any experience in this matter will know how right Cato was when he said: *Numquam se plus agere quam nihil cum ageret, numquam minus solum esse quam cum solus esset* — “Never is he more active than when he does nothing, never is he less alone than when he is by himself.”¹⁹

Although *The Human Condition* is ostensibly about the *vita activa*, its last paragraph gestures toward something that she suggests surpasses that: thinking. Furthermore, in her earliest and latest works (*Rahel Varnhagen* and *The Life of the Mind*, respectively) Arendt emphasizes thinking about meaning.

This pervasive concern with thinking would suggest that the capacity to act is inseparable from, and perhaps even originates in, thinking about meaning. Thus, although Arendt explicitly locates natality in the capacity to act anew, she would be uninterested in action without the meaning that is inevitably related to it. Specifically, Arendt suggests that meaning is created both by the actors who perform deeds that merit an explanation of their meaning and by the spectator who provides such explanations. She even considers speech, the articulation of meaning, to be the highest form of action. Natality, strictly understood as the capacity to do something new, cannot help but include the capacity to respond to what is done with an explanation of its meaning. Moreover, a new interpretation is itself a form of action in the world. For the purposes of this essay, I expand Arendt's strict use of the word natality to refer to the human capacity to think about and potentially make new meaning.²⁰

The idea that natality, the disposition to think about meaning, is constitutive of humanness is essential to understanding meaning. The births and rebirths of human beings prohibit us from clinging to banality. That is, the fact that each individual brings something unexpected and un-expectable to the world, and that such individuals live together under what Arendt calls the condition of plurality, suggests that an orientation to the necessarily nonbanal is part of human life. Our orientation toward the newness inherent in people who are capable of surprising rebirths prepares and, indeed, requires us to discard banal explanations, thus indirectly enabling us to make meaning. Inevitably, some natal person will do something the meaning of which we will have to think about, calling forth our natality.

Nonetheless, although natality is inherent in the human condition, the new, unpredictable, and anti-statistical admittedly disrupts normal life. Its “startling unexpectedness” challenges banal understanding and denies the comfort of prosaic explanations. If to have a home is to share interpretations with others, then loss or suspension of our normal way of interpreting renders us temporarily homeless. If banality is home, natality is exile. The fact that we can think differently means we always risk being rendered homeless by our thinking minds.

THE DIALECTICAL, OR THERMOSTATIC, NATURE OF MEANING

And, yet, natality is predicated on banality, occurring in contradistinction to it. Gadamer explains,

There is always a world already interpreted, already organized in its basic relations, into which experience steps as something new, upsetting what has led our expectations and undergoing reorganization itself in the upheaval.... Only the support of familiar and common understanding makes possible the venture into the alien, the lifting up of something out of the alien, and thus the broadening and enrichment of our own experiences of the world.²¹

We can think about meaning because we already have meaning that can be challenged by experience. We can be in exile because we have a home that we are forced to leave.

Thus, natality and banality exist in dialectical tension with each other. For interpretations to be shared and thereby functional, they must be generic. However, people and the actions of which they are capable exceed what can be predicted by a generic interpretation. The disposition for natality makes it possible for us to see the insufficiency of banal claims, as the interpretive natal mind tries to make sense of a particular. To make sense of a particular is to look at it from a distance, to analyze it in conceptual terms. Yet, as we saw in the case of Stella, this runs the risk of becoming banal again. A general interpretation, created in response to a particular, will show itself to be insufficient and once again be questioned and rethought until, once again, it has become banal. Natality interrupts banality but ultimately becomes banality again. The inherent particularity of the world will call upon natality, and the dialectic continues.

To say that both elements of humanness — natality and banality — are in tension is not to say that each exerts equal force. Acknowledging that meaning cannot be taken for granted often causes feelings of anguish and disorientation, as described by Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialist writers. Not surprisingly, we normally prefer to live in what Sartre calls “bad faith,” clinging to familiar explanations to avoid the painful experience of uncertainty that arises in an unpredictable world. Our thermostat is often broken. Despite the fact that interpretations formed in response to past events cannot anticipate future events, we try to make do with what we already have. We might choose banality because it seems more comfortable, enabling us to live without the discomfort associated with questioning. However, implicit in my argument is the idea that living in banality is ultimately uncomfortable — and not good for us as human beings — insofar as adherence to banal meanings creates the feelings of meaninglessness described previously.

To the extent that we persist with the banal meanings we use to frame our understanding, the meaning we live by is not exactly meaning, if at least half of meaning is responsiveness to an unforeseeable context. When we refer to our old interpretations, we erroneously treat them as “facts” — as things that we can *know that* rather than as tentative responses to the question “why?” Meaning itself requires that it arise out of every new context, and, thus, an old meaning assigned to a new event is not quite meaning-full.

For this reason, I posit natality as an educational ideal for which we ought to strive deliberately in institutions of education. The disposition allows us to see the limits of our interpretations and enables us to imagine new ones. To cultivate natality is to become accustomed to the movement between natality and banality. Natality exists self-consciously in relation to banality, making the cultivation of natality require attentiveness to banality and to the dialectic between the two.

Postman begs his readers to determine a clear end for education: “Without meaning, learning has no purpose. Without a purpose, schools are houses of detention, not attention.”²² I have suggested that the purpose of education is precisely to teach people to be more thoughtful about purposes. The fact that there is no meaningful end for education in this country speaks to just how poor we are at thinking about meaning. We can remedy this problem by refashioning education as a place where we think about meaning itself.

Indeed, Postman makes a suggestion similar to this in *The End of Education*:

We [human beings] are the world makers, and the word weavers. That is what makes us smart, and dumb; moral and immoral; tolerant and bigoted. That is what makes us human. Is it possible to tell this story to our young in school, to have them investigate how we advance our humanity by controlling the codes with which we address the world, to have them learn what happens when we lose control of our own inventions? This may be the greatest story untold.²³

In this era in which the thermostat seems to be stuck on banality, it is necessary to hold as the aim of education the cultivation of natality. If we teach our children to regulate their internal thermostats, they might learn that — and how — they can create the world. They might, perhaps, learn a bit more about what it means to be human.

1. Neil Postman, *Teaching as a Conserving Activity* (New York: Laurel, 1987), 29.

2. This might not make sense in terms of an excess of something generally seen as good, like compassion. However, Postman relies on his reader to interpret this concept within reasonable limits.

3. Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *Essays in Sociology*, eds. and trans. H.H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills (New York: Oxford University Press, 1958).

4. Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994).

5. Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989).

6. I take as axiomatic Martin Heidegger’s claims in *Being and Time* about Being-in-the-world, or being with others in a world of shared understandings. Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1962).

7. Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Man and Language,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 62–3.

8. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace, 1978), 4.

9. Both these terms (natality and banality) are Arendt’s, but she never explicitly juxtaposes them.

10. Paul Ricoeur, *Freud and Philosophy*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 22.

11. Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 320–1.

12. In reality, there are varying degrees of meaningfulness, but it is helpful identify the extreme cases for the sake of this argument.
13. Gadamer, "Man and Language," 68.
14. Although Gadamer writes about relating an interpretive text to the present, his point is still relevant: for meaning to be meaningful, it must be applied to a context.
15. Hannah Arendt, *Rahel Varnhagen*, ed. Liliane Weissberg, trans. Richard Winston and Clare Winston (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000), 170–1.
16. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "Semantics and Hermeneutics," in Linge, ed., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 85–6.
17. We can think of John Dewey's claim in *Democracy and Education* that when a child learns something, it is a real learning experience *for him*, even if all the adults around him already knew it. Of significance is that what is learned is new to the learner and therefore more meaningful as knowledge as he comes to know it himself. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (New York: Free Press, 1944).
18. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958), 177–8.
19. *Ibid.*, 323.
20. This diverges from Arendt's work insofar as she insists on separating thinking and action. However, I believe Arendt's distinctions (pervasive in all her work) should be read more as means through which to understand different elements of human life than as fixed, limiting terms.
21. Hans-Georg Gadamer, "The Universality of the Hermeneutic Problem," in Linge, ed., *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, 15.
22. Neil Postman, *The End of Education* (New York: Vintage, 1996), 7.
23. *Ibid.*, 87.

Many thanks to Chris Higgins for helping me develop these ideas and to Laura DeSisto for her help in final revisions of this essay.