

Meaning, Mind, and Knowledge: A Pragmatic View

Christine L. McCarthy
University of Iowa

The linguistic/semantic conception of meaning has led to problems when conceiving the nature of mind, and the relation of mind to body and world. Meaning is considered a feature of language. Terms and sentences have meaning; events do not. It is acknowledged that events are connected and have causal relations, but, not linguistic, they do not have bona fide “meanings.” This, of course, flies in the face of ordinary language use of the term “meaning,” evidenced by our common tendency to demand, What is the *meaning* of this? when events take an unexpected turn. This sort of spontaneous search for the meaning of events is, I believe, ubiquitous and inexpugnable. It is surprising, then, that meaning in this objective sense receives relatively little attention, at least in philosophy of education.¹

John Dewey is partly responsible for the current focus on linguistic/semantic conceptions of meaning. Dewey asserted that meaning only comes into existence with the advent of creatures sophisticated enough to be capable of language use. And language use, he avers, is a natural occurrence that would not be possible, conceptually, without the interpretation of sounds, gestures, and forms as meaningful. So, the plausible inference seems to be that meaning and language are equivalent, each being necessary and sufficient for the other, and that any investigation into meaning must therefore be confined to language and its use.

In this essay I shall argue, first, that the linguistic/semantic interpretation of meaning, with the concomitant neglect of objective meanings in nature, leads to practical problems. Second, I shall set out a realist conception of meaning, and relate this conception of meaning to concepts of mind and knowledge. Third, I shall discuss the relevance of abstract philosophical issues such as these to philosophy of education and the import of the objective conception of meaning presented for our conceptions of education.

Meaning, if wholly confined to language, is relative to the practices of a language community in the Wittgensteinian sense. A claim that a particular meaning is “not correct” indicates that the relevant language community does not employ or sanction the meaning in question. The epistemological thesis that Richard Rorty develops — there is no way to access the world, to find out what “really is” — works in tandem with and lends strength to the linguistic/semantic conception of meaning. No neutral comparison can be made between the meanings of the language in use and any (potentially postulated) objective meanings of things in the world. Thus acceptance of the “absence of access” thesis has contributed to the waning force of the realist notion that meaning is natural and objective and, consequently, testable.

David Carr observes, correctly I think, the current strength of what he calls the “*anti-realist* or *non-realist* — pragmatist, use-theoretical, coherentist and so on — currents of thought” and argues that such views support “the currently fashionable

fatuity...that there are *no* objective facts because all human observations are theory or value laden."² When the concept of meaning is restricted wholly to language, the coherentist account of truth finds a welcoming home. As long as the meanings in our linguistic community fit well together as a coherent package, we are assured by this conception of truth that our system of meanings overall is true. Different linguistic communities can have markedly different, but equally coherent, bodies of beliefs, and every one of the communities would have equal justification to regard its own culturally established belief set as true. Such coherent sets of beliefs would not be susceptible to critique from "outside" the relevant set of beliefs. Even from the inside, a coherent set of beliefs would not be susceptible to *objective* critique. It is only critique of the coherence of any particular belief when added to the whole that would be germane, and only this would be possible. Every community, in order to act, would treat their knowledge as if it *were* objectively grounded and about the world. Since each coherent set would, necessarily, be both true and justified, the set would meet the traditional criteria for knowledge.

Many will find such a state of affairs congenial, seeing it as the basis for a desirable mutuality of respect for the different beliefs of separate cultures. Others will see a situation rife with problems. Separate linguistic/cultural communities are very likely to remain separate, as there is no possibility of finding a neutral extra-cultural/linguistic means of assessing and coming to agreement on a single best (or better) set of beliefs. We will find ourselves necessarily committed to a cross-cultural epistemological and moral relativism, having no grounds for critique, much less possible condemnation, of the practices of other cultures. Public education will have to be equally accommodating to the truths and knowledges of the various different cultural patterns of belief within a politically-defined group. We would need either to provide education suitable to every religious and cultural belief set or simply to accept that education can only be accomplished ethically from within the various communities of belief. We would carefully avoid the adoption of assimilationist practices. Would any of this be "bad"? Granting the premises of the linguistic/semantic view, it would not be. But if those premises are in fact wrong, that is, if meaning does have an objective basis, if humanly-devised meanings can be brought to match, or at least to be consistent with, those objective meanings, then there is a problem. If it is possible to demonstrate inconsistency between our linguistic/semantic meanings and the putative objective meanings, we would have objective grounds for rejecting the faulty semantic meanings and the beliefs rising from them, grounds that are not limited to one community of belief or another. If objective grounds for evaluation of beliefs exist, then the better beliefs, and thus better practices, can be found. (As an example of such potentially better beliefs, I would suggest "evolutionary development of species is a better theory than creationism.") Finding a set of better beliefs would allow for improvements in the quality of human lives. Conceptions of the nature of meaning do seem to have practical socio-political consequences.

Despite Dewey's link to the linguistic interpretation of meaning, I maintain that Dewey actually, and consistently, held that meaning always is an objective relation

obtaining among things and events in nature. This is a controversial interpretation of Dewey's position, yet reference to Dewey's own statements makes his position abundantly clear.

In Dewey's pragmatic empiricism, it is invariably things and events that have meanings, and these things and events are seen *as* meaningful by organic things such as ourselves. When this occurs, language is invariably in the picture, for language is by definition the seeing of things and events as meaningful, which involves the employment of some alternative natural occurrence as a signifier of that meaning. The activity of "seeing" an event *as* meaningful, and using an event as a sign requires, clearly, the presence of an organism sophisticated enough to engage in this sort of activity, and such a creature is necessarily required if things are to perform as signs of one another. Dewey writes: "My view is that a *thing* signifies another *thing* in being employed as an evidential sign, and that in this *relation* both acquire meaning."³ If linguistic meanings may thus be considered primary, objective meanings — the meanings of things — must be considered ultimate. In evidence of this interpretation, note that, according to Dewey, "Meaning is simply a function of the situation: this thing means that thing: meaning is this relationship. A meaning is something quite different; it is not a function, but a specific entity, a peculiar thing, namely the [thing] as suggested" (*MW* 8, 75).

Meaning in this view is an objective relation that obtains between and among existent things and events, and linguistic meaning is a special case of meaning. This relation of "meaning something" obtains because of, but is not to be identified with, the causal connections that obtain between the various things. The meaning of an event is not only indefinitely vast, but is forever growing and so can never be known in full. But figuring out *something* about the actual meaning of an event, something relevant to the problem situation and to one's goals, is an achievable goal, and the goal of all inquiry.

Particular meanings, commonly thought of as "meanings in the mind," are natural meanings *that are conceived to obtain*. Such a meaning is a thing in its own right. It is not tangible any more than a dream or a memory. If it is to be useful, it must be "marked," that is, linked to some physical event that will serve as a sign of that meaning. The newly employed signifying events may be particular sound or gestures or, as a necessary preliminary, particular neuro-physiological patterns. A meaning thus linked to a new signifying event is separable from the originally meaningful thing: the new connection of thing-and-meaning "at once preserves the meaning-force of the situation and detaches it from the immediacy of the situation" (*MW* 8, 75). In Dewey's conception, a meaning thus linked "exists independently... and may therefore be thought about and ideally experimented with" (*MW* 8, 75). Over time, these meanings are elaborated, tested, and ultimately refined into a coordinated system of meanings. Wherever a system of meanings linked to secondary signifiers occurs, there is language and mind, and vice-versa.

There is an appearance of paradox in Dewey's position, suggested by two statements from *Experience and Nature*. "Meanings do not come into being without

language, and language implies two selves involved in a conjoint or shared undertaking" (*LW* 1, 227). And yet, at the same time, "meanings...are generated by existences...sustained by events...they are indications of the possibilities of existences...to be used as well as enjoyed" (*LW* 1, 311). How can the paradox be resolved? The key is, I believe, that Dewey interprets "language" very broadly. Whenever one thing is understood as a sign of another thing, language is present: "anything consciously employed as a sign is, logically, language. To say that language is necessary for thinking is to say that signs are necessary" (*MW* 6, 316). The conscious use of the secondary event as a sign requires an initial organic mediation that is not a matter of conscious awareness. The meaning of the event has to be "detached" from the event, and attached to a surrogate organic natural event, for example a complex neuro-physiological event, that is more readily manipulable than the original thing. The meaning is thus able to be incorporated into the "mind," which in Dewey's terms is the set of previously organically embedded meanings. It may then be attached to any number of more publishable things. This interpretation of the meaning of neuro-physiological patterns of activity is consistent with what M.R. Bennett and P.M.S. Hacker argue is the only tenable sense of "representation" that can occur in the brain: neural patterns of activity can have a "representative role" *only* in the sense that they are causally correlated with features of objects perceived. Brain states "represent" things, they argue, in the same sense that "a wide tree ring represents a year of ample rainfall."⁴ This is meaning as Dewey employs it: pragmatism carries with it a reinterpretation, a realistic interpretation, of "states of consciousness" as representations. They are practically or effectively, not transcendently, representative.

Organisms differ in their abilities to incorporate and use meanings, and human beings may be said to have the edge, due to their ability to *consciously* examine and rework their individual systems of organically incorporated meanings, and their ability to incorporate meanings into a consciously devised system of public, artificial signs. This further step may be considered the prerequisite for "language proper," and greatly facilitates the examination and use of meanings. The ability to consciously employ a system of artificial signs in communication emerged out of our species's social habits, and it contributes both to the further development of communal life and to the continual elaboration of meanings as well as, at times, the testing of those meanings. This increased potential in a social setting for testing of individual belief is a key factor in the development of human knowledge. "The social matrix and outlook of man's intellectual life focuses in the existence of objective truths...there are truths independent of individual wish and learning...graded as to supply rules by which individuals may regulate the formation of their private judgments and conclusions" (*MW* 6, 54). Meanings that are organically represented, meanings that constitute mind, might appear to be subjective, but *the* meaning of a thing or situation remains obdurately objective and independent of what is thought about it. Dewey puts it plainly:

The instrumental theory acknowledges the objectivity of *meanings* as well as of data...Pragmatic...empiricism may claim to have antedated new-realism in criticism of resolution of meanings into states or acts of consciousness....meanings are indispensable

instrumentalities of reflection, strictly coincident with and correlative to what is analytically detected to be given, or irremovably there. (*MW* 10, 348–9)

Dewey rejected the epistemological positions of both monistic realism and dualistic realism. But, he did not reject realism with respect to representations and describes his own view as “pluralistic realism”: “Smoke stands for fire, an odor for a rose...and so on *ad infinitum*. Things are things, not mental states. Hence the realism. But the things are indefinitely many. Hence the pluralism” (*MW* 13, 54–5). And further, “the future thing meant is objective — a fire...a rain storm...It is stood for or represented by something equally objective, mathematical figures, words, heard or seen things, etc” (*MW* 13, 57). Any particular thing can be employed as a surrogate for any other thing, in this relation. So, a sound, “tornado,” is used as a surrogate for the actual funnel cloud, and signifies the potential future event that the cloud itself signifies. More covertly, organic neuro-physiological states can function as surrogates, and thus become meaningful. “[M]eanings, in order to be apprehended, must be embodied in sensible and particular existences” (*MW* 6, 315).

Whenever organic events are serving a representative function in an organism, Dewey suggests, these events could be termed “mental.” The term “mental,” or its equivalent, “psychical,” serves merely to indicate the representational function and has no bearing whatsoever on the ontological status of the things involved, nor on the status of the meaning relation itself. “As exercising the function we may call it mental. Neither the thing meant nor the thing signifying is mental. Nor is meaning itself mental in any psychical, dualistic, existential sense” (*MW* 13, 58). The “mental” functions of representation that occur within an organism are not in any fundamental way different from those that occur in other precincts of nature. The funnel cloud, the word “tornado” and the complex neuro-physiological pattern all have the same representational function.

Things in problematic situations must operate through representatives...through psychical things, which...stand for and thus accomplish what things would accomplish — viz., mutually realistic significance — if they were only there. Psychical things are thus themselves realistically conceived; they can be described and identified in biological and physiological terms, in terms...of chemico-physical correspondents. (*MW* 3, 155)

It is useful, always, to ask whether or to what extent the organic state signifies the same meaning as the funnel cloud signifies, and whether the word signifies, in its public context, what the organic state signifies. The meaning that is there originally, in the funnel cloud, is the final arbiter of the adequacy of the meaning of any of the successive surrogates. The set of meanings are “operative” in that the meanings organically signified have physical and observable effects on the activities of the organism (*LW* 1, 247). The set of operative meanings are all that is properly meant by the term “mind.”

The conception of meaning as a relation among things provides the elusive comparison that makes tenable a correspondence view of truth. The epistemologically relevant question is, do our organic, “mental” meanings accurately represent, correspond to, the meanings within the situation? The interconnected system of particular meanings allows for a chain of reasoning that can eventually culminate in a prediction about the state of the world. The interconnected system of things and

events which the system of meanings is *about* itself has meaning (*the* meaning), and will in fact develop in some particular way. By overtly acting on the world, in a manner directed by both our organic meanings (mind) and our semantic meanings (language), we are able to test out our meanings. We may be able to verify that our meanings do correspond (at least in part and to some extent) to *the* meaning(s). In this way we come to have knowledge of *the* meaning(s) of the things and events that started the inquiry in the first place. If the system of meanings one develops does not in fact correspond to *the* meaning(s) of the objective situation, or at least to some part of the meaning(s), attempts to engage with that situation as a means to a foreseen consequence will frequently fail. But with success or failure, one continues to learn from the process something about the actual meaning of the situation. In this way, then, meanings are developed, created, and posited by humans to be employed as tools in the quest for knowledge of *the* meaning of objective states of affairs.

What is unusual in Dewey's conception of knowledge is the nature of the justification, the warrant, that some, but not all, true beliefs will receive; this is the process of inquiry characteristic of scientific practice. Any and all belief that is "knowledge" must be the result of just this sort of inquiry. Dewey's description of the scientific search for natural meanings makes clear its consistency with the interpretation I have set out. There are, Dewey writes,

situations in which we are aware that things mean other things....These situations define that type of knowing which we call scientific....the trait of meaning other objects is not discovered *ab extra*, and after the event, but is part of the thing itself. This trait of the thing is as realistic, as specific, as any other of its traits....as open to inspection and determination as to its nature, as is any other trait. (*MW* 3, 126)

The objects of knowledge, the "what" that gets known, will be in every case a relation, a meaning, that obtains among things or events. To know a thing it is necessary, first, to be able to symbolize its meaning, to attach that meaning to some other more tractable physical thing that will serve as the sign of the meaning. In scientific knowledge, insofar as it is accomplished, a system of meanings that accurately represent *the* actual meaning of events is gradually developed. The meanings in the system will have been selected so that, in a well-constructed system of scientific knowledge, "The meaning which one event has is translatable into the meanings which others possess. Ideas of objects, formulated in terms of the relations which changes bear to one another, having common measures" (*LW* 4, 107). Dewey concludes,

Instrumentalism is thus thoroughly realistic as to the objective or fulfilling conditions of knowledge. States of consciousness, sensations and ideas as cognitive, exist as tools, bridges, cues, functions — whatever one pleases — to affect a realistic presentation of things, in which there are no intervening states of consciousness as veils, or representatives. (*MW* 3, 153)

Instrumentalism thus recognizes the obvious fact of human involvement in the process of "creating meanings" and at the same time recognizes the apparently less than obvious fact that there are objective conditions, meanings of events, that provide the continual test and measure of the truth of the meanings we develop.

It is possible that objections will be raised to the view set out here. I will venture a few observations in anticipation. First, it is a curious fact that contemporary readings of Dewey's position seem to be strongly informed by conceptions of subjectivity related to or derived from postmodern thought, though it is clearly inconsistent with these. Eric Brede, discussing mind, sets out a "rationalistic symbolic processing model" which "accepts the existence of an objective reality, made up of things bearing properties and entering into relations... Knowledge is a storehouse of representations... Thinking is a process of manipulating representations."⁵ This model Brede describes as opposed to Dewey's transactionalism. Yet the similarity to Dewey's view is striking. Brede, however, endorses the conclusion of so-called pragmatists Rorty and Nelson Goodman that it is impossible for the "real world" to be accessed for comparison with one's meanings, a claim which illustrates the utter inconsistency of Rorty's pragmatism with Dewey's. "How can we possibly know that our representations of the world are correct?" Brede asks. For a Deweyan pragmatist, the answer is simplicity itself. We are in the world and of it, at all times, and access it directly in action. The "access" problem reveals, whenever it arises, an immersion in the dualist conception that "mind" is by its nature *disconnected* from body and world. Brede is an astute commentator on Dewey's work, yet the realism that is basic to Dewey's position has been simply discarded.

Hohn Holder sets a pragmatic "naturalist theory of experience" which he opposes to cognitivist views that take thinking to be "the deliberate manipulation of mental representations [and]... primarily about the truth of propositions." His treatment, however takes no note of the role of objective meanings of locally recurrent natural signs, focusing instead on the role of emotion, habit, and imagination as the "non-cognitive background" element in the thinking process.⁶ His treatment thus fails to solidly ground thinking as a natural activity in which meanings are indeed "processed."

A second, more substantive sort of objection might be that the views on the objectivity of meaning set out here are incompatible with the field of philosophy of education itself. James Cunningham seems to provide an argument of this sort, claiming that philosophy of mind, as a field, "seems to subscribe to biological reductionist models of mind and realist models of epistemology," while philosophy of *education*, in contrast, "overwhelmingly accepts the validity of certain constructivist models of knowledge."⁷ How odd it would be if this were true, if entire professions were able to adopt, once and for all, certain particular theoretical positions. It would be particularly odd in this case, for it would mean that *Dewey's* interpretation of meaning, mind, and knowledge would be ruled inadmissible as philosophy of education. It would also mean that the currently accepted views in the field would henceforth be immune from attack, and that, I believe, would indicate the imminent demise of our field as *philosophy*.

Objection might take the form of a more general claim that abstract puzzles, like the nature of mind and meaning, are not important to educators, whose interests some believe lie solely in matters directly relevant to practice. This raises a question

about the nature and purpose of philosophy of education itself. Do we engage, solely, in philosophical reflections on educational practice, doing work that is, by definition, relevant to practice? Or do we also venture at times into realms remote from practice, addressing substantive questions of philosophy, as these are relevant *conceptually* to education? Harry Broudy considered this question in 1969, and concluded that, if it is to be worthy of the name, philosophy of education *must* deal with philosophical problems relevant to education, as these are formulated in the basic fields of philosophy.⁸ More recently, Carr and Zeus Yiamouyiannis pondered the current dearth of epistemological inquiry in philosophy of education and deplored “the decline of interest in formal reflection upon questions of knowledge and truth.”⁹ I throw my lot in with those who take our subject matter to include philosophic problems related conceptually to education. Educators benefit from such abstract work, at the very least, simply by becoming more fully educated themselves about the conceptual intricacies of their profession.

Yet with the thesis developed herein, there actually are connections to educational practice. One might think that linguistic/semantic conceptions of meaning and nonrealist, coherentist conceptions of truth and knowledge could not actually do any real harm. But, this is an illusion. Philosophical meanings have intricate connections to other meanings. And meanings are *operative* and have effects on our actions in the world. Having the concept of objective meaning is of practical import in that it provides the conceptual basis for the objective testing of meanings. And this is important because human credulity appears to be boundless. Fervent belief can easily arise despite a dearth of evidence for the belief and in the face of considerable evidence to the contrary. Implicit in the conception of natural and objective meaning I have set out is the normative claim that meanings of all sorts *ought* to be subjected to rigorous and continual testing of their truth, with truth being a matter not of coherence but of correspondence to objective meanings in nature. Were this view to be widely accepted, it would have effects, first, on individual teacher’s practices, and second, on larger issues of educational policy regarding curricula. Dewey is eloquent about the practical effects of his philosophy on individual teachers:

What will happen if teachers become sufficiently courageous and emancipated to insist that education means the creation of a discriminating mind, a mind that prefers not to dupe itself or to be the dupe of others? Clearly they will have to cultivate the habit of suspended judgment, of skepticism, of desire for evidence, of appeal to observation rather than sentiment, discussion rather than bias, inquiry rather than conventional idealizations. (*MW* 13, 334)

The view of a naturalistic and objective nature of meaning, mind, and knowledge set out here would have educational meaning in providing a basic and necessary conceptual grounding of education in the “nature of science,” as advocated by Michael Matthews.¹⁰ And finally, it has broad educational meaning by virtue of its revival of Dewey’s unreconstructed realism, recognition of which appears to have been nearly lost among contemporary educational philosophers.

1. Ruth Garrett Millikan, *Varieties of Meaning* (Boston: MIT Press, 2004), 32.

2. David Carr, "Toward a Re-Evaluation of the Role of Educational Epistemology in the Professional Education of Teachers" in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1998*, ed. Steven Tozer (Urbana Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1999), http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES_Yearbook/1998/carr (emphasis in original).
3. All citations to Dewey's writings are taken from *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953: The Electronic Edition*, ed. Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1981). Subsequent references to selections from *The Middle Works, 1899-1924* and *The Later Works, 192-1953* will be cited in the text as *LW* and *MW*, respectively, followed by volume and page number (for example, *LW* 3, 91).
4. M.R. Bennett and P.M.S. Hacker, *Philosophical Foundations of Neuroscience* (Boston: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 142.
5. Eric Bredo, "Cognitivism, Situated Cognition, and Deweyan Pragmatism," *Philosophy of Education Society Yearbook 1994*, ed. Michael S. Katz (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 1995).
6. Hohn J. Holder, "An Epistemological Foundation for Thinking: A Deweyan Approach" in *The New Scholarship on Dewey*, ed. Jim Garrison (London: Kluwer Academic, 1995), 7-24.
7. James E. Cunningham, "A Common Ground: How McDowell's Recourse to Hegelianism Indicates the Potential for a Rapprochement Between Philosophies of Mind and Education," in *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1999*, ed. Randall Curren (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2000), <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/1999/cunningham>.
8. Harry S. Broudy, "How Philosophical Can Philosophy of Education Be?" in *What Is Philosophy of Education?* ed. Christopher J. Lucas (London: MacMillan, 1969), 114-22.
9. Carr, "Toward a Re-Evaluation of the Role of Educational Epistemology"; Zeus Yiamouyiannis, "A Teacher's Right to Know: Epistemological Controversy and the Preparation of Educational Professionals," in Tozer, ed., *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 1998*, <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/1998/yiamouyiannis>.
10. Michael R. Matthews, "Data, Phenomena, and Theory: How Clarifying the Concepts Can Illuminate the Nature of Science," *Philosophy of Education Yearbook 2003*, ed. Kal Alston (Urbana, Ill.: Philosophy of Education Society, 2004), <http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/EPS/PES-Yearbook/2003/matthews>.