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The meaning of meaning

“We cannot bear to live our lives without some sort of content that we can see as constituting a meaning... a society that functions well promotes man's ability to find meaning in the world.”

*Lars Svendsen*⁵

There is a sort of duality in the title of this book. The first reading is perhaps obvious. It suggests the idea that an individual can find meaning in their life in a working environment. The seeking out of meaning is something people can take an active role in – using their experience and the recipes put forward in this text. Yet there is another way to read the title, which requires a slight shift in perspective. If we pause after the word “meaning” and then read “at work”, it suggests the idea that meaning itself is active; that the organisation is a repository of evolving meaning. In this reading, what the organisation does and how it is constructed are determined by a collective understanding of a specific interpretation of meaning – one that grows and develops as the organisation itself shifts and changes. The implication of this is that an effective organisation creates the opportunity for individuals to find meaning. Some organisations are clearly better at this than others, but should we happen to work in one that is poor in creating the opportunity, we should seek to change it. As observed in the introduction, people should remember that the organisation has a status that is independent of themselves. It is an “it”. But also, it is something that they are part of. It is also a “we”. As Karl Popper reminds us in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, institutions cannot improve themselves – that is the responsibility of people.

In writing the above paragraph, I am conscious that some might object that it is probably far easier for managers to effect organisational change than for others. There may be some truth

⁵ Svendsen, Lars. (2005) *A Philosophy of Boredom*. (Kjedsomhetens filosofi, 1999. Universitetsforlaget, Oslo.) Trans. John Irons. London: Reaktion Books, p. 30.

in this, but flat and dynamic organisations that I have researched, and written about elsewhere, such as Patagonia, Virgin and Adobe, demonstrate the potential for individuals at all levels to find meaning and to change what the organisation does and how it does it. As a further illustration of this, Slawomir Magala in his book, *The Management of Meaning in Organizations*, relates an example of a woman with Afghan roots, employed by a facilities management contractor to clean the offices at Erasmus University in Rotterdam. The job specification allowed the cleaner less than one minute to clean each office. Not surprisingly, the woman felt this unreasonable, because it meant that she could not do the job properly. She contacted someone she knew at Erasmus, who also had an Afghan background, and together they persuaded the university to increase the contractor's payment in return for more time to clean each office. As Magala observes, "what they were fighting for was recognition as responsible, concerned and rational employees, rather than merely existing as anonymous cogs in a service machine."⁶

I am also reminded here of the experience of working for a company in London many years ago. The company of about 130 people was highly successful and led by an effective and inspirational CEO. I used to sit in an office across the corridor from him, so I got to eavesdrop a bit on conversations, especially if voices were raised. One of the more frequent visitors to his office was Maria, a young, junior assistant in her first job. She would regularly march into his office and give him an expletive-filled earful on everything, from what was wrong with the photocopiers to how reporting systems could be improved. We were always amused by these confrontations, but he always listened to her – and helped her implement the better of her suggestions. I think he liked her forthrightness and passion. It was an interesting

6 Magala, Slawomir. (2009) *The Management of Meaning in Organizations*. Basingstoke: Palgrave, p. 73.

contrast to his senior managers, who were more wary. I once asked one of them what the directors meetings were like. He told me that the CEO would first tell them what to think and then they would all agree with him. It's interesting to reflect now, that the two people who moulded the organisation the most, were the CEO and the junior assistant. The point about her, compared to the senior managers, was that she dared. And they didn't.

I never asked whether the junior assistant found meaning in her working life, but I am not sure whether she would have understood the question. She did things because she felt they were important both for her and for the company. She didn't actively seek out meaning. If she did find meaning, it came to her. This suggests the first attribute of the idea of meaning. We may seek to do things that we think will make us happy, give us satisfaction and provide fulfilment, but we never know what the result will be. Generally we don't tend to think in advance what will create meaning, but rather we use our experience to make judgements about what we think will be valuable for us. The sense of something having meaning comes afterwards. As Merleau-Ponty writes, "I make my reality and find myself only in the act... It is through my relation to 'things' that I know myself; inner perception follows afterwards."⁷ This suggests that meaning is always singular and difficult to generalise. Indeed we find it difficult enough to know what is right for us, as individuals, let alone others. Whereas I might uncover meaning for myself in writing this book (I don't know yet), someone else might find it more in running a company or training a football team.

In Virginia Woolf's novel *To the Lighthouse* (1927), we see that the need for meaning drives the characters in different direc-

7 Merleau-Ponty, Maurice. (2005) *Phenomenology of Perception*. (Phénoménologie de la perception, Éditions Gallimard, 1945). Trans. Colin Smith. Abingdon, UK: Routledge, p. 445.

tions. The novel takes place in two phases with a ten year gap between them (1910 and 1920) on the Isle of Skye in the summer home of a family called Ramsay. In 1910, Mr Ramsay, an academic philosopher, is concerned with his intellectual progression from one abstract point to another – he charts this in the form of an alphabet of development from A to Z, but he is stuck at Q. His goal is to reach R, but this quest, as with all his diverse imaginings becomes a dramatisation of a lost cause. His wife, Mrs Ramsay, counterpoints her husband's cold masculinity, as the character who helps the development of her children, brings people together and creates a social world. One of the visitors to the house is a painter called Lily Briscoe, who is plagued by self-doubt but seeks fulfilment through her painting of Mrs Ramsay and her son. When the house is revisited ten years later in 1920, Mrs Ramsay has died, and Mr Ramsay is troubled by his own self-worth and whether he can leave behind him the legacy he feels is so important. Lily Briscoe, who had never finished the painting of Mrs Ramsay, completes it in a sudden burst of enlightenment ("with a sudden intensity, as if she saw it clear for a second") and in so doing realises it has been the process of self-discovery that has been important. In the narrative the different individual needs rub against another, creating friction, as epitomised in the iconic, but much delayed trip to the lighthouse which is planned in the first section of the book, but only completed in the second.

The story also shows that our ideas about meaning change over time through action and learning as projects and goals are taken up and discarded. The characters in the novel are all concerned with their potentiality, but we should question how well they understand what that potentiality is. We might say that individuals never know what they are capable of, which suggests that Mr Ramsay might one day reach R. We might also wonder whether Ramsay is also mistaken, in that the achievement of R might generate little meaning. Perhaps he would then

need to aim at S or recognise that the intuitive, family life that his wife represents would provide more reward. Ramsay should of course understand that reaching an objective can never be conclusive, because the uncertain, aporetic nature of life still remains. He is surrounded by a halo of virtualities, the true meaning of which he cannot foretell and only some of which can be actualised, but on reflection, he might find that it was not the attainment of the goal that was meaningful but the journey itself. As Jean-Jacques Rousseau observed in *The Confessions* (1782), self-discovery is not concerned with finding something that was hidden from the individual, but is a matter of making the self in the course of searching. It is not so important what the output is, but how it is done: “we just are what we make of ourselves in the course of our quest for self-definition. The important thing is the creative act itself, not objective self-assessment or accurate representation.” Whether any such self-assessment could be objective or how representation might be judged accurate are problematic, but the emphasis on the journey seems appropriate.

The second attribute of meaning relates to the idea of perceived importance. The act of waiting on the street to meet someone seems to have little meaning, whereas if I am waiting while acting in a Beckett play, it becomes suffused with meaning. Similarly, the act of filling out a form seems inconsequential, but the writing and implementation of a company’s strategic plan seems to have more significance. For something to have meaning it needs to move beyond the everyday, unconscious things that we do. For example, most jobs entail a degree of repetition – there are orders to be met, customers to be greeted, systems to be administered. We may tend to operate on automatic when undertaking these tasks. Precedent and organisational culture determine the way these things should be done. But, sometimes there is something out of the ordinary that does not fit into established routines. This may generate discussion

and even a change in those routines. The reaction to the extraordinary is where meaning is re-created. This implies that the potential to create new meaning already resides inside the organisation. It is there within the culture, but requires an individual and then a collective catalyst to move it from the virtual to the actual. We can see this actualisation of meaning occurring within a specific organisation: Futbol Club Barcelona – one of the pre-eminent soccer teams in the world. FC Barcelona is fiercely proud of its Catalan heritage – not least because during the Franco era, when the Catalan language and expressions of Catalan identity were prohibited, it was a symbol of the region's autonomy. The slogan *més que un club* (more than a club) also suggests FC Barcelona's connectivity to Catalan society at a deep level. Not only are many of the players home grown and nurtured from a young age, such that seven out of the 11 players who started in the 2009 European Cup Final came through the club's academy, but the club is also owned by its 170,000 members who wield considerable power. Uniquely, to protect the identity of the club, FC Barcelona has never had a commercial shirt sponsor, even though it could command 15 to 20 million euros a year for doing so. The club CEO, Joan Oliver i Fontanet, says "the jersey is full of meaning", which is connected to beliefs about its societal role and its commitment to the young. However, the meaning of the shirt and the idea of *més* is more difficult to explain to people outside Catalonia who do not share in the club's heritage. To actualise the meaning of *més* internationally, in 2006 the club approached UNICEF and agreed to pay the organisation 1.5 million euros a year to carry the name of the global children's charity on its shirt. Fontanet says, "UNICEF has been our way to explain to the world who we are."

The third attribute of meaning is that it implies depth. When we want to know the meaning of a word we might go to a dictionary to uncover what is initially hidden from us or we might ask

of someone in a conversation, “What do you mean by that?” Language gives us the surface of things and helps point us in a common direction, but words are inexact abstractions, not the reality itself – as we are reminded by René Magritte’s 1928-1929 painting, *La Trahison des images* (The Treachery of Images), which is of a pipe, with the phrase underneath it, *Ceci n’est pas une pipe* (This is not a pipe). Even if we consult a dictionary we may be none the wiser, because the word we look up will be defined by other inexact abstractions, all of which are in constant movement as their meaning alters through usage. When we try to pinpoint meaning, we enter a moving maze. The writer and semiotician, Umberto Eco makes this point by distinguishing between dictionary and encyclopaedic knowledge.⁸ In the case

⁸ Eco, Umberto. (1999) *Kant and the Platypus: Essays on Language and Cognition*. (Kant e L’ornitorinco, 1997.) Trans. Alastair McEwen. London: Secker and Warburg.

of the former, the understanding of a word is constrained by its written definition. However in the case of the latter, experience among a community counts for more than linguistics as the encyclopaedic knowledge of a word becomes fuller through exploration and action – just think of Wikipedia. Or that great Enlightenment project, the *Encyclopédie*, which was edited by Diderot between 1751 and 1766. The 28 volumes he oversaw are a spider’s web of shifting nuances of meaning, cross references and footnotes, made all the more complex by the fact that the volumes were written alphabetically by some 150 different contributors with sometimes clearly opposing views. The tone of the 20 million word project is tolerant and discursive. The encyclopedists saw it as their task to confront superstition, to present new ideas and to open up debate about knowledge. Consequently they rejected received wisdom about many topics and subverted others by provocative links, such as transubstantiation⁹ and cannibalism. Not surprisingly, the Church lobbied against the project and the *Encyclopédie* was officially banned in 1759 by royal decree.

Fluidity of meaning suggests we cannot pin things down, but rather that we should recognise that our understanding of things is developed in our relationships. As Shotter says, “Meanings are not hidden in people’s heads, but occur out in the ceaseless flow of living language-interwoven relations between ourselves and the other and othernesses around us.”¹⁰ The French artist, Sophie Calle provides us with an excellent illustration of this movement. In the book of her exhibition at the 2007 Venice Biennale, *Prenez soin de vous* (Take Care of Yourself), Calle publishes an email from her lover ending their relationship and then asks 107

9 The Roman Catholic belief that when the bread and wine are offered during the Eucharist they become the body and blood of Christ.

10 Shotter, John. (2005) “Peripheral Vision”. *Organization Studies*, Vol. 26, No.1: 113-35.

women “to analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me. Answer for me.” The work is the filmed and written responses that show how each individual brings her own experience and ideas to the task of interpretation. In each case, an individual reading and response conceals but also reveals different elements of the text: a lexicometrist focuses on a deep analysis of the language used, a lawyer reads it from a legal perspective and a ballet dancer dances her response. The responses are also layered in that the women are responding to the content of the letter and also to the request from Sophie Calle. With each reading, our understanding of the content of the email moves from the surface text to deeper levels, such that by the end, we are aware of the multiplicity of meanings that can be contained within 22 sentences – and the impossibility of laying the meaning of the text to rest. The fact that Calle publishes the email and all the responses in a book shows that we the reader/viewer also become part of this open exploration of meaning. Each of us will value some responses more than others, weigh them in different ways and reach some sort of view on the meaning of the email.

In spite of the depth that Calle offers us, most of the time we do not sit thinking about the meaning of things and developing theoretical frameworks. Rather we think and act with others without deep reflection. We uncover ideas through writing and speaking to others and in hearing and seeing their responses in a less considered way. Often we do not know what we will say and do in the company of others before we do it (as Heinrich von Kleist says, “*l’idée vient en parlant*”¹¹), and equally we do not fully understand what people say to us, but if we are receptive, we can

11 The point Kleist is making in his unfinished 1805 essay “*Über die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden*” (On the Gradual Production of Thoughts While Speaking) is that talking helps us to bring forward ideas that are locked in our minds.

also find meaning in misunderstanding by creating unintended and unanticipated connections.¹² This view of language may seem uncomfortably imprecise and ambiguous, but this variability encourages expressivity and creativity. Yet we can only be receptive to this movement of discovery if there is an openness to the world. If we try to deny language movement or try to close down the flow of thought by a lack of receptivity to the language of others, we deny the opportunity for creativity and the uncovering of meaning through participation and openness.

The importance of depth and the ability to understand what lies beneath the surface of things are aptly illustrated in the 2001 film *Memento* in which the main character, Leonard, suffers from a type of amnesia. To try and maintain his grip on reality, Leonard tattoos his body with notes and takes instant photos of his experiences to which he also adds words. He tries to link this language together by cross-referencing and arrows. However, the lack of contextualization of the notes and tattoos means that whenever he approaches a new event, he cannot frame his expectations correctly. The words combined with images only give Leonard the possibility of understanding events, but the inherent ambiguity of the truncated language allows others to manipulate and take advantage of him. Leonard's experience also demonstrates the importance of memory in meaning. If we do not have a sense of the past, we will find it difficult to make sense of the present. Meaning comes when we understand the significance of things – when we can ask: What did it mean for

12 Steven Brown in an article on Michel Serres refers to Shannon and Weaver's (1949) book in which they look at communication in terms of information and ambiguity. They point out that when there is zero ambiguity there is perfect clarity between sender and receiver – and no information – as there must be absolute identity between the two parties. When there is maximum ambiguity, it is impossible to find information because what is intended cannot be distinguished from background noise. Maximum informational value is midway between the two extremes of ambiguity, where noise and signal are equally mixed.

me? When we cannot answer this question, because we lack the context to do so, then there is no meaning.

The other aspect of *Memento* we should note is that the story is told backwards. This disrupts the way we normally find meaning. There is a narrative quality to meaning in that each of our expectations and actions builds on previous experiences. We create narratives about our lives by making connections between what we did yesterday to what we do today. Luis Buñuel brings this issue to life for us in his plotless surrealist film *Un Chien Andalou* (1929). Buñuel says “we relentlessly threw out everything that might have meaning.” In other words, they (he is referring to himself and his collaborator, Salvador Dali) are trying to prevent the viewer from reading the film and finding conscious meaning by destroying the connectedness of images.

The final attribute of meaning is concerned with content. In the quote that started this section from Lars Svendsen’s interesting book *The Philosophy of Boredom* he writes “We cannot bear to live our lives without some sort of content.” If Svendsen is right about this then we are driven both by a negative fear and a positive desire. The negative fear is of a meaningless life – the concern that we live our days without finding depth and content, just skimming the surface. We worry that we will not realise what we may be capable of; that we have the potential to be a great writer or manager and that we miss the opportunity. The positive desire is our will to realise ourselves and to make a mark on the world, however small. The philosopher Giorgio Agamben, writes “There is in effect something that humans are and have to be, but this something is not an essence nor properly a thing: *It is the simple fact of one’s own existence as possibility or potentiality.*”¹³ We might wonder here about Agamben’s choice of

13 Agamben, Giorgio. (1993) *The Coming Community*. (La comunità che viene, 1990, Einaudi, Turin). Trans. Michael Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. XI.

career. As a young man, he was selected by Pier Paolo Pasolini to play Philip the Apostle in his 1964 film, *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*. Pasolini's portrayal of Jesus as a radical agitator driven by social injustice was a critical success and could have launched Agamben as an actor. However, he chose instead to be a philosopher. I thought that the opportunity to be a film actor would be more exciting than the academic world, but when I asked him about this, he shrugged it off and said that it seemed the better choice in terms of a meaningful life. This points to the serendipitous nature of the sometimes important decisions we make. I have previously used the following excerpt from James Joyce's *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916) – not least because I like the rhythm of the words in their sea-like ebb and flow, but also because it shows how we sometimes make important choices on the spur of the moment. The young man of the story, Stephen Dedalus, has been wandering through Dublin and imagining his future life as a priest and what life might be like if he joined the Jesuits. He finds himself on the beach and as he watches a girl wade into the sea, he suddenly recognises the falsity of the desire to be a priest and the need to become an artist: “‘Heavenly God!’ cried Stephen’s soul, in an outburst of profane joy... her image had passed into his soul for ever and no word had broken the holy silence of his ecstasy. Her eyes had called him and his soul had leaped at the call. To live, to err, to fall, to triumph, to recreate life out of life!”¹⁴ When we read this about the young man, we might question whether the resolve he makes is the right one. Becoming a Jesuit might have been more fulfilling, but while we often believe that we think through problems before we decide, in reality we often decide and then rationalise our choices. What we sometimes need is the courage to follow our instinct and perhaps to enjoy what Bernard Williams calls

14 Joyce, James. (1977) *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. St. Albans: Panther Books, p. 156.

moral luck. In other words, often how we determine the rightness of a decision is not so much the intent, but how it turns out. In this context, Williams talks about Paul Gauguin's decision to leave his family and prioritise his art as being judged by the success of the choice, but there are examples of moral misfortune. Take the nineteenth century artist, Benjamin Robert Haydon, whose speciality was large scale historical tableaux. He imagined himself a great painter following some early success and persisted in what he saw as his destiny. His failures and misfortunes were blamed on others, until his suicide in 1846. After his death Charles Dickens concluded he was a very bad artist: "...all his life he had utterly mistaken his vocation." The sadness of Haydon's life was that he was a good writer and was praised for it, just as his work as a painter was consistently criticised. As a critic in the *Morning Post* noted in 1841, "Let Mr Haydon rather write than paint."¹⁵ We might conclude by noting that when we choose to do something it only creates the opportunity for meaning. The possibility may never be realised. We can argue that the passion with which we pursue something can help us to find joy in our actions, but this of itself is no guarantee for finding meaning.

The very idea that we can be passionate about something suggests that we not only act to avoid boredom and meaninglessness, but that we also make life choices because of our impulse to find meaning. If we are merely passive, we allow others to make choices for us. In some sense passivity means we do not lead our own lives in that we actively construct and live them, but that we are rather bit players in the lives of others. When a manager dictates to someone exactly how he should behave, or prescribes a set of detailed actions so that he has very little freedom, then the individual begins to feel a threat to his sense of identity (or identities – if we argue that we have no absolutely

15 O'Keeffe, Paul. (2009) *A Genius for Failure: The Life of Benjamin Robert Haydon*. London: Bodley Head.

fixed identity). To have an authentic life, we have some opportunities to choose. And choose we must if we want to determine the life we want to live. This requires us, though, to have the courage to question and challenge the way things are. For a manager it also hints at the importance of understanding the importance of trust – in creating the freedom for people to build their own lives within an organisation. In *The Odd One In*,¹⁶ Alenka Zupancic makes the point, that we can never be certain that trust will be repaid, but she argues trust precedes itself in that there is something object-like about it. When we think about trust as an object in this way, rather than something that is purely psychological, it gives us both the confidence to trust others and joy in so doing.

16 Zupancic, Alenka. (2008) *The Odd One In: On Comedy*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.