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WHAT IS THE MEANING OF MEANING

I love stating publicly that I am an existential phenomenologist. What I mean by that is that I think that the task of philosophy primarily is to describe things, describe phenomena, as they pertain to our existence. When it comes to the question of meaning, like Merleau-Ponty said paraphrasing Sartre, we are condemned to it. What Merleau-Ponty means is that the world is significant, *it just is*, in the way things hang together in any place: in the room that you are in or where ever you are. Things refer to one another and constitute a significant context where you happen to find yourself, but there is nothing deep about that. That significance is just what it is to be in the world. It is meaningful when I get up in the morning and stumble through my routine, put the kettle on and make a cup of tea. The kettle is significant because it heats water and the tea-bag is significant because it infuses tea into the water and then it is significant that I drink the tea, and so on and so forth. But everyday life is a network of things, and relations between things, which are significant. But that significance itself is not a deep significance. We notice it only when it does not function, we notice it when it is gone, and this is what gives rise to the question of meaninglessness, when things cease to have meaning. That is, perhaps, when questions begin to form. The idea that things are explained by the brain is, in a sense, a delusion. I don't think they are. I think it is a question of, not to look inwards, but to look outwards. To look at social practices, social structures, to observe what you are doing. You are making tea, but that could just be a habit. I make tea in the morning, it is just something I do.

I was teaching William James and, in particular, his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1906). James is in that text not only involved with science, but basically establishes the science of psychology in the US. What he calls radical empiricism, just begins and ends with this idea that there is experience, and this experience is a plural sort of concatenation of stuff, to which we can add other stuff all the time. James uses the image of a mosaic to describe it. He says that his thinking is a mosaic philosophy, in the sense of a floor mosaic. We all live in our little mosaics with our pieces of stuff stuck together and that is our world, assembled and shaped through our childhood, our infancy. And then, hopefully, as we grow the mosaic grows larger, gets filled with different contexts, languages, knowledge of science or whatever it might be. But all that is happening

to that mosaic is that it expands laterally. The point being that, for James, there is experience which should be described, but there is no “bedding”; there is no sublime cause behind the experience. There is nothing hidden; there is just more little things. And I think the best way of thinking about science is that it is about getting to know more, about little things. And then you have to expand the mosaic by getting to know more little things. Meaning is something we make, that is clear, but the world where we find ourselves is a world where meaning has already been made. The structure of significance, of what has significance and value, is a world that we find. Wittgenstein used to ponder this idea of a philosopher writing a book called *The World we Found*.

The world is always a world we inherit; it has a certain structure that was made. But that structure was not always the case; there is historical change. In other words, the world that we find, that we are born in to, is a world that was made, as a world that can be remade. And certain people have the skill, the ability, the genius, the good fortune to be people that can remake that meaning in a particularly powerful way. Shakespeare’s world wasn’t dropped from the sky; he inherited a world with a whole set of conventions, and then new conventions were appearing linked to the emergence of theater in the Elizabethan period. He also inherited a whole bundle of stories that went together with that world. Stories of kings and queens from the mythic past, like Lear and Macbeth, and then he remade them in the form of plays. I think culture is the place where we can remake meaning, and certain people get to be really good at it while there are others who are not fortunate in that regard. I think it is really useful to think about things musically, because music is always about impure hybrid forms of cultural influence. All these traditions are cross-pollinating and moving back and forth geographically. For example, the way in which the musical traditions of the south crossed, what they until the 40s and 50s used to call the race line, in very powerful ways. These traditions cannot be isolated. One standard view of the history of American music is that you have to go back to blues and jazz. But, then, what was going on in the hills of Kentucky and eastern Tennessee; what of the poor white people who brought folk tradition from the British Isles, fiddling and dancing? That produced new forms. Music is a good way of thinking about remaking as, what we in a non-pejorative sense could call, bastard assemblies. We put things together in new ways and then remake meaning. You can say similar things in relation to literature and many other things as well, but in music you can hear it, instantly and intuitively, coming together. Listening to a song, you cannot avoid being reminded of another song, from years earlier.

There is a great distinction in Husserl between sedimented and reactivated tradition. The problem with traditions is that when they go dead, they become sedimented, just like a sediment on the bottom of a fish tank. What is required culturally, philosophically, is to reactivate those traditions, to mess up that sediment and then to reshape it in a different way. That is how change happens.