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Introduction

Our planet has just emerged from the uneven impact of the SARS-CoV-2 pandemic, some global elites thriving and the rest of humanity struggling to maintain a foothold. The future remains profoundly uncertain, dependent as it is on what so many feel is a troubled, insecure, and increasingly arbitrary and authoritarian world. Everywhere, there appears to be deepening economic inequality despite an overall reduction in poverty, a polarized civil society that flares up into spasms of violence, the rise of a militant majoritarianism, and the spread of fake news exacerbated by social media. This has undermined democracy itself because democracy requires reasonable equality, a civilized public sphere, a balance between majorities and minorities, and, perhaps most critically, a social order that respects the truth. Without these things, democracy's very nature is distorted.

The confidence many shared in the old pieties of the left or the right has been shaken to its roots, and public intellectuals of various persuasions, often relying on the old models, find themselves taken more or less completely by surprise, especially when they have to face the fact that many contemporary authoritarians are democratically elected. Despite many insightful attempts at understanding, the global conversation—if it can be called that given the level of acrimony that prevails—tends not to be *radical* enough and *general* enough. It is necessary to formulate the seemingly intractable questions that confront us with a fresh and foundational clarity and then answer them with an equally daring and innovative rigor. Only then can we find a way into the future.

This implies that we cannot approach these matters by the usual routes: either economics or political science or sociology, or, more academically, via one or another grand social theory. We have to find a radically new angle, taking the risk that that always entails. We have to dig deep under those seemingly intractable questions, and unearth possibly a new foundation altogether, a foundation that can help us build what I call, cautiously, a *partial* utopia, a vision for a not-so-distant future society within our practical grasp for collective human flourishing. Such a practical topos cannot simply be described by a list of desiderata, it must be accompanied by a grounding vision of the world we live in so that the desiderata may be actualized: it must be brought down to earth.

First among these intractable, foundational questions—because it is humanity’s oldest and remains unsatisfactorily answered—is whether and how humanity should seek meaning, and what its place in civilization is. It provides the architecture, the frame, the very *ground* for all of life. The advent of modernity around 1500 CE has uprooted this traditional inquiry in all sorts of unforeseen if not astonishing ways, and it is in this still ongoing context that the question must be asked anew.

One consequence of this uprooting has been that almost no one asks the large questions about meaning any more. Indeed, philosophers typically see its different manifestations as distinct phenomena and consider such questions as belonging to a quaint bygone era. To ask about the meaning of life without irony today is a mark of ignorance or naivete or both.¹ The subject has also been divided among so many specializations other than philosophy even though philosophy remains the master discipline in this one area. But philosophy itself has broken it down to its many branches so that few ask what is common to its various applications, whether we are asking for the meaning of a verb, the meaning of a play, or the meaning of modernity itself.

But if we are to provide a grounding vision of the world that will enable us to fashion an image of possible partial utopias by answering the large questions about meaning—one of the few fresh and radical avenues available to us—it is crucial to try to stitch its swatches back together, especially with the threads of several new ideas, some of which have appeared in greater detail in my earlier academic books.²

Meaning, then, is what I start with, and I will try to show how it permeates literally everything, not only language, its most obvious site, but also signs and symbols at large, actions from the simple to the complex, and objects of many different kinds including modernity itself. Based on these foundational building blocks, I will sketch the “meaningful” construction of society and civilization from the ground up. Weaving through this narrative is another that forms in many ways the heart of modernity, the emergence of modern science and technology with its most potent promise of a truly general artificial intelligence (AI). It is this enframing complex, this grounding vision of the world as it is today, that will enable us to speculate about the possibility of *partial* utopias, that will

1. Eagleton (2008b).

2. Parikh (1987/2020, 2001, 2010, 2019).

equip us ‘to show the fly the way out of the fly-bottle’, to borrow a phrase from the Viennese philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein.

So, rather than begin with one of the social sciences, I will be setting about the intractable questions that perplex and oppress us with language and symbols, as unlikely a point of departure for social issues as any. Upon further reflection, however, it may seem apt to be opening our inquiry with the very institution that makes us human, that enables our being with others in unfathomably varied ways, that gives us some of our loftiest civilizational achievements.

It is also because of these qualities that language is an essential starting point for figuring out whether and how a general AI might be possible. The recent advances of machine learning have startled everyone, even the experts. There are extravagant claims on all sides of the debate it has set off, and there are questions about meaning that must be answered before we can begin to dream about partial utopias.

To do my best to maintain the twin virtues of clarity and rigor in telling these intersecting and interdisciplinary stories about meaning and modernity, I will draw upon my version of situation theory and what I call situated game theory, two elementary mathematical frameworks described in plain English that I believe provide an *indispensable* language in which to express my novel argument. I urge you to be sufficiently patient so that you can see how potentially far-reaching conclusions emerge naturally from fairly commonsense assumptions, so that you can glimpse the way forward from our shared confines toward human emancipation.

A Map of the Book

The central argument of the book is that the world is full of meaning, that everything is meaningful, and understanding this key fact in some interconnected detail can help us realize a better society, even a partial utopia, if certain preconditions are satisfied. This requires spelling out in a foundational way what meaning is, what society is, what a better society might be, and what its preconditions are.

Our exploration of meaning will begin with language and then move on to society and artificial intelligence and ultimately to the possible formation of partial utopias. I begin this way not only because language presents us with the clearest and most familiar site of meaning. It is also because language is a social

institution and it *mirrors* other social institutions—and society itself—as I will show in later chapters (Chapters 7, 8, and 10).

Understanding the details of language (Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 7, and 8) will, in fact, prepare us in two ways. First, we will grasp a key social institution concretely and this groundwork will give us an analogical insight into how other social institutions can be understood via meaning as well (Chapters 9 and 10). Second, language and meaning play a deep role in the challenges and possibilities for AI (Chapter 11). Together, an appreciation of society and AI will allow us to speculate about the form and content of partial utopias and their preconditions (Chapter 12). Figure A is a road map of these connections.

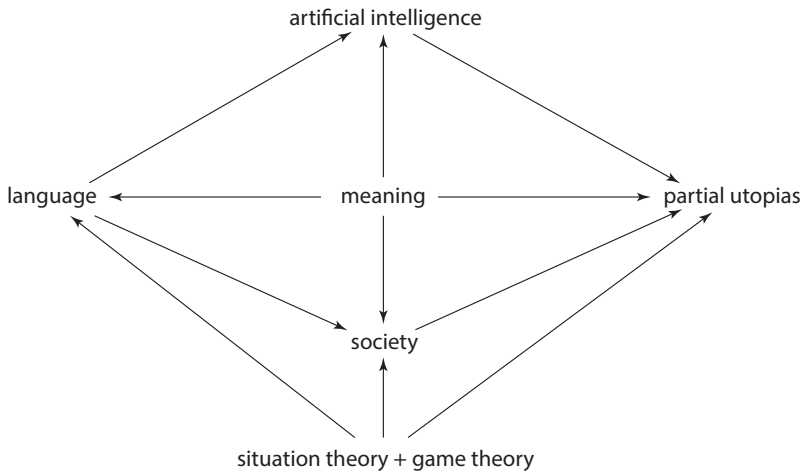


Figure A A Map of the Book

As Figure A shows, meaning lies at the center of the four elements of language, society, AI, and partial utopias, and arrows lead from language to society and AI and from there on to partial utopias. The combination of situation theory and game theory is the framework that undergirds the whole exploration (Chapters 5 and 6). The entire structure indicated by the map is, indeed, a new way of conceiving meaning and its relation to civilization, as will become clearer once the story begins.

We will examine the difficulties that plague language—ambiguity, vagueness, and context—and how these three aspects intersect with corresponding aspects of society and AI, and then move on to the heart of language—which is communication. Along the way, I will introduce situation theory and situated

game theory, the elementary mathematical frameworks that will enable me to express the argument. I will then indicate how meaning operates in the case of images, actions, and objects as they are central to civilization. And because our study is foundational, I will show how meaning relates to reduction and rationality and related notions that are key to acquiring a clear sense of how the whole picture is grounded. In the last part of the book, based on our earlier insights into language, meaning, and communication, I will look at the structure of society, offer my thoughts about the prospects for a situated artificial intelligence, and end with a discussion of partial utopias that will rest on both the nature of society and the possibilities for a situated AI.

Most emancipatory writing today offers helpful hints toward solving this or that social problem but fails, despite its best intentions, to provide a vision for life itself, its very meaning, what it is for. Without such a telos, however fragmentary, civilization becomes unmoored. I come to this challenge aslant: from language, the very elusive thing that makes us human, to the complexities of AI and society, and thence to the delicate possibility of partial utopias, which culminates with a sketch of the meaning of life itself.

Who is this book for? It is for anyone curious about meaning and its connection with our modern civilization, but it is especially for those interested in seeing how the fly may find its way out of the fly-bottle; for those prepared to grapple with things that may be unfamiliar and to add what they know to my thoughts. All books are collective endeavors in this sense, but this one is more so than most.

Paraphrasing Gandhi—in a gentle way, we can together shake the world.