A Directed Workshop on *Insight*, Chapter 1: Elements

OPTIONS

Worlds mediated by meaning are built out of four basic types of definitions: nominal, explanatory, implicit, and primitive. It is our selection of a set of concepts and associated operations that constitute the tools we use at the foundational level to come to understand the world in which we live. They fill our horizon, all organized and conceived through our intentions that we have both toward ourselves and the world around us. By making insights public, we have the possibility of communal worlds mediated by meaning objectified in various world views (Cf. Nash on world views).

REALMS OF MEANING

There seems to be a relationship between the kind of definition being employed and the realm of meaning within which it is best employed. So?

Nominal = common sense realm
Explanatory = theoretical realm (science)
Implicit = mathematical realm

Nominal definitions represent insights into the proper use of language, so nominal definitions are restricted to time-and-space specific communities. They are words used by a specific group of people, within their own historical and geographical situations, according to their own intentions. Different communities employ different words, so there is always a problem of translation between one such set and another.

Explanatory definitions add an additional insight into the phenomena at hand. But this addition is not constrained to specific communities but has something to say about the thing itself. This is a shift to the abstract, but a shift that still maintains connection to the concrete. Hence, we have the emergence of a realm of meaning that constrains the abstract to the sensate world.

Implicit definitions cut the connection between the abstract and the concrete, leaving the best site for such definition within the realm of mathematics.

LANGUAGE BOUNDARIES

Three domains, that of the nature and nomination of God, that of higher mathematics and that of music (how are these interrelated?) set the boundary conditions of language. They delimit the outermost reaches and constraints of lexical-grammatical discourse. But these boundaries are, as it were, active. There are vital truths and illuminations in their demonstration of the inaccessible. They instruct us, as do the seemingly paradoxes of relativity theory, that language is, within itself, infinite, that it is incommensurable in its potential, but not unbounded. What we either intuit or intuitively deny of the existence and meanings of 'God' — that stubborn monosyllable — what we cannot translate or paraphrase out of pure mathematics, defines the immanence of language, its inevitable 'infolding' (Darwin used the verb) inside the limits of our world.... Yet at the very same time, the walls in which all discourse runs up against, theological-metaphysical, mathematical and musical, enforce on us undeniable intimations of the transcendent, of the unsayable presence, of the 'other' across the border.

George Steiner, *Errata: An Examined Life*
(London: Orion Books, 1998), pp. 63-64

ADDING TO EXPERIENCE

Insights grounded in different realms of meaning add an extra dimension to common sense experiences. For example, watching a sunset is, as the word suggests, watching the "sun set." But from a scientific perspective, we now know that it is the sun that is immovable and the earth itself rotates. So this additional bit of knowledge adds to the common sense experience. (Colors due to pollution may destroy it.)

The same goes for other realms of meaning. For example, insights grounded in the realm of interiority add an additional dimension to common sense activities of coming to know. This is what is known as objectifying one's own consciousness, i.e., being able to clearly and distinct know what cognitive operation is being employed, the proper

ASIDES

1. I read **Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*** when I was 8 or 9 years old, and thought it was the greatest thing ever. But after high school's analytical approach to Shakespeare, could never read another line. Took many years later before it was possible to read his plays. Why? (insight) It was impossible for me at the time, totally immerse in the realm of common sense, to appreciate the extra dimension and depth a theoretical study of his works could bring to appreciating his plays.

2. **Science, as a heuristic structure**, is a study of things as they relate to other things, e.g., electricity and magnetic fields. Its structure or mode of understanding reality is contaminate when mixed with the realm of common sense, i.e., there is no "Ayrian" or "Communist" science, only science.

3. **"Primitive terms"** allows for an escape from the problem of infinite regress when a concept can only be derived from concepts that ground them, and so forth into infinity. Instead, we consider insights and the definitions that stem from them to operate at the level of understanding. Proto-insights or proto-definitions exist at the experiential level of cognitive operations. These sensate bodies and the tokens that point to them are the source material for formal definitions at the level of understanding. They constitute primitive terms.

4. Religious conversion (to charity?) is associated with feelings of **awe, mystery, and fear** (in the sense of facing something truly terrifying in its majesty and power). These feelings can be attached to various definitions, e.g., $e=mc^2$ has an aesthetic quality that transforms it from a mathematical equation to a thing of beauty in its elegance, simplicity, and unity. In a sense, the equation becomes a symbol associating the physical world with a transcendent sense of mystery.

5. Take the word "**insight.**" A nominal definition provides only an insight into the proper use of the world in the language common to a particular group or culture. An explanatory definition adds the additional elements of tension, unexpectedness, interior conditions, concrete to abstract, and habitual to the nominal definition, thereby placing it within an abstract realm that transcends both time and space. An implicit definition might be Lonergan's assertion that human beings, when release from immediate concerns, have "an unrestricted desire to know" that transcends any particular concrete realm of meaning. The primitive term might be the "aha!" experience that one has had in suddenly coming to understand what one previously didn't know.

6. It is one thing to know how to employ the terms **honesty, courage, and charity** and quite another to explain what they mean at an abstract level that transcends common usage to become universal. (Socrates questions concerning "valor.")

7. Nominal definitions leave open the possibility of **myth and magic** being taken as real, for the simple reason that there is a common insight into the proper meaning of the term without acknowledging content. "Unicorns" may well be real, in the sense that the possibility of their existence is embedded in the term itself; ditto "witch." Or a word like "racist" can be used as a powerful word of magic to harm another person, as if the word itself had authority beyond its purely nominal meaning. (Cursed be ye, ye racist!)

characteristics of that operation, and its position within the broad cycle of conditioning and sublating that constitute human existence. So not only is one aware of engaging in an intellectual endeavor, but one has a sound theory of what is in fact going on (Lonergan's cognitive operations).

Knowing theology provides an extra richness and depth to human living, as do philosophical speculations. In this we recognize the depth of understanding when engaged in Friedman's transdisciplinary framework as his notion of professional practice. This additional level of understanding fundamentally change such practice and indeed is a key task when training those people interest in an emergent cosmopolis: bringing to bear additional depths of meaning to common sense tasks.