

# What is Meaning?

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## Outline

1. Questions about meaning
2. Mental meaning
3. Language
4. Life
5. Art
6. Philosophy



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## Meaning Questions

1. What is the meaning of mental representations? Concepts, etc.
2. What is meaning of language? Sentences ..
3. What is the meaning of life?
4. What is the meaning of art?
5. What is the meaning of philosophy?

Method: consider alternative answers and choose according to coherence with all knowledge, especially science.

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## The Story so Far

1. Mind=brain, i.e. all mental processes are neural mechanisms, which are physical (biochemical) processes. Lectures 2-3.
2. Coherence can lead to truth. Lectures 4-5.
3. Humans have basic biological needs (e.g. food) and psychological needs (e.g. relatedness). Lecture 6.

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## Mental Meaning

How do concepts, beliefs, goals, desires, images, and other mental representations become meaningful?



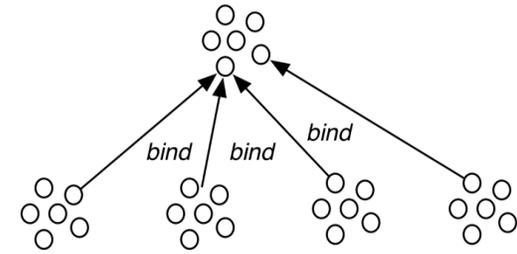
Possible answers:

1. Upward because of innateness
2. Downward because of connections to the world (external)
3. Sideways because of relations to other mental representations (internal)

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## FORMATION

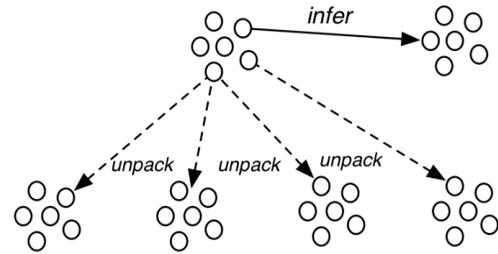
semantic pointer



sensory motor emotional verbal 6

## FUNCTION

semantic pointer



sensory motor emotional verbal 7

## Concepts

Downward meaning: relations with world via bindings of sensory-motor

Upward meaning: some concepts (e.g. face) may be innate: neural connections established by natural selection

Sideways meaning: relations with other concepts via associations and inferences

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## Beliefs

1. Beliefs are semantic pointers formed by binding concepts: e.g. belief that Toronto is the capital of Canada:
  - bind (bind relation capital)
  - (bind city Toronto)
  - (bind country Canada)
2. Beliefs acquire upward, downward, and sideways meaning from the representations out of which they are constructed, plus context.

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## Linguistic Meaning

Words get their meaning from associated mental concepts: word-word and word-world.

Sentences get their meaning from associated mental beliefs.

Multidirectional meaning: upward, downward, sideways

Social dimension: communication

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## Summary

Meanings in language and mind are **processes**, not things.

These processes result from underlying mechanisms: neural representation, binding, perception, action, communication.

Meaning is a process of multilevel emergence from social, psychological, neural, and molecular mechanisms.

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## The Meaning of Life

Meaning is a process, not a thing (42, god).

Key processes are emotional: semantic pointers that bind physiology, appraisal, social situation, self.

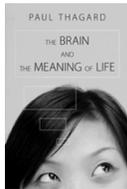
Needs are biologically and psychologically basic goals, including relatedness, autonomy, competence.

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## The Meaning of Life

Result: The meaning of life is the process of pursuing these biological, psychological, and social goals. Multilevel emergence.

Slogan: The meaning of life is love, work and play.



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## The Meaning of Art

1. Why do literature, music, painting, and film matter to people?
2. All generate emotions, i. e. brain processes producing semantic pointers that bind physiology, appraisal, situation, and self.
3. Positive emotions: beauty (as emotional coherence), happiness, surprise, engagement.
4. Negative emotions: sadness, anger, shock

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## Aesthetic Value

Art is valuable when it connects to human needs via emotions.

Successful examples:

da Vinci's Mona Lisa,  
Beethoven's Ninth Symphony,  
Tolstoy's War and Peace,  
Casablana



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## The Meaning of Philosophy

Why philosophy matters: attempt to answer fundamental questions about knowledge, reality, and morality

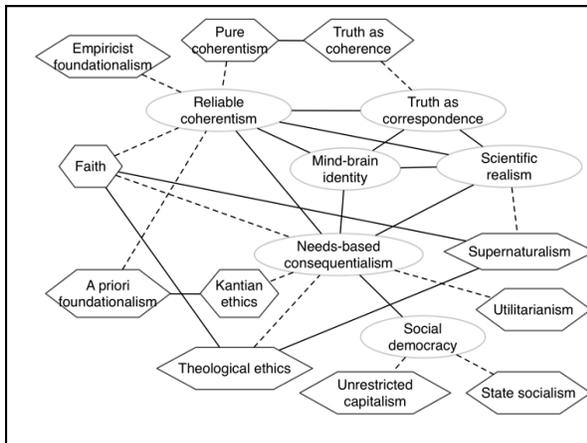
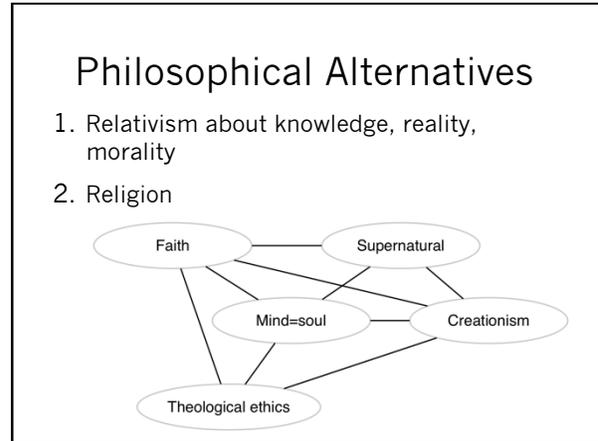
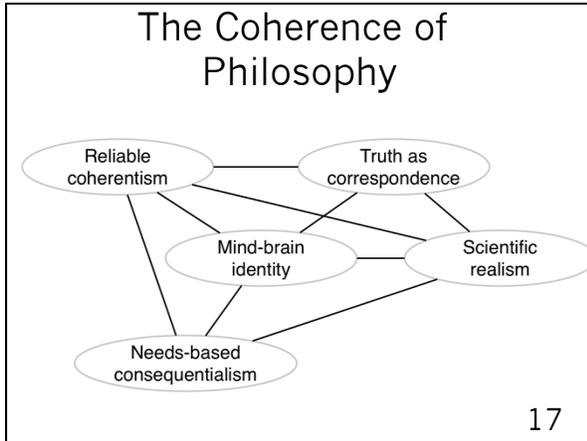
Connection to meaning of life:

Relatedness: good social world requires morality

Competence: gain knowledge and control over reality

Autonomy: avoid control by others (morality) and disconnection from reality

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### Government

Social democracy is the justified form of government because evidence shows that it meets human needs (biological, psychological) better than the alternatives:

1. Unrestricted capitalism · libertarian
2. State socialism
3. Feudalism
4. State capitalism
5. Anarchism

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## The Future of Philosophy

1. Continue to pursue fundamental questions about knowledge, reality, morality, and meaning.
2. Be revisionary, not conservative: philosophy needs to help change concepts, not just analyze them.
3. Be extraverted and oriented to the world, not introverted and concerned only with narrow technical issues.
4. Draw on all relevant intellectual resources, especially science.
5. Go beyond science in generality and normativity.

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## New Tools

1. 3-analysis of concepts using exemplars, typical features, and explanations
2. Value maps of controversial ethical and scientific issues
3. Coherence as constraint satisfaction
4. Neural explanation
5. Social cognitive-emotional workup

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## Conclusions

1. Meanings are processes, not things.
2. Meanings operate in brains through cognition and emotions.
3. Meanings are tied to human needs encoded in brains.



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