PART I

The Beginnings of Meaning

CHAPTER 1

The Place of Meaning

> A 5-year-old enters the preschool classroom and sees other children jumping around and dancing to music. He approaches a child and invites her to dance with him. She declines, and he goes off into a corner and sulks, staying separate from the others for a lengthy period. A second child enters and approaches the same little girl. She turns him down too. But this second child skips on to another child, who responds to his invitation and the two of them happily join the frolic.

These are remarkably different reactions to what is on the surface the same event. The first child experienced a devastating rejection. The second child did not. In fact, he may not have experienced "rejection" at all. He may have seen the turndown as something about the little girl or simply as not very consequential. The first child experienced another blow to self-esteem, while the self-esteem of the second child likely was enhanced, for he once again experienced that persistence leads to success. This event *meant* something very different to these two children. In fact, it is not possible to fully understand their behavior without taking meaning into account.

How do such profound differences in the meaning of experiences emerge? Are they part of a broader, organized network of meanings? What do they forecast regarding later ways of interpreting experiences? Finally, how does meaning making change with maturation? These developmental questions are of both theoretical and clinical importance. Exploring meaning is crucial for understanding individual personality. It is also at the center of the therapeutic process.

It is clear from the start that meaning is personal. Meaning is subjective. The individual *construes* meaning, based on a particular history of experiences. We see things as *we* are, rather than as *they* are (Nin, 1961). Meaning does not lie in the event itself, but in the interplay of the event, individual history, and the surrounding circumstances.

When there is shared meaning that is because there are shared histories and perspectives.

Meaning is also subjective in the sense that it involves the investment of the individual. A meaningful experience matters to the person. Meaning thus involves emotional as well as cognitive processes. Meaning involves more than the objective facts about any particular event or situation. It is influenced by the person's background mood and what the person feels regarding a particular situation and how these feelings color what is perceived.

Consider the simple example of a town square clock striking 10 times on a sunny morning. Leaving aside the case of human groups who do not artificially mark time by hours, for millions of people this event conveys the shared meaning of mid-morning. For some, of course, this may indicate time for a coffee break, for others a time to begin work or attend a class, or for a religious observance. So there is meaning that derives from culture and society. However, even this simple event can have profoundly different *individual* meanings. If a grown-up child or a parent, unseen for many years, is arriving on a 10:15 train, it may stir eager anticipation, excitement and joy for one or both of the individuals involved. In contrast, if one expects shortly to be taken to the executioner by a guard, dread, resignation, and terror would be expected. In both cases, without doubt, the striking of the clock is meaningful.

All of this is obvious, but meaning is, of course, much more nuanced than this. For our waiting parent or adult child both the meaning and reaction depend on the relationship history, both recent and cumulative. If when they parted, they were in the midst of an argument and the last words heard were, "I never want to see you again," the meaning of the hour would be quite different than if the last words were, "Be safe and know we love you." It also matters whether that argument was imbedded in a longstanding contentious relationship or was an atypical reaction to an acute stress. Is this a dreaded encounter or the fulfillment of a long-standing hope?

The entire developmental history of the individual all the way back to the earliest years and months of life also comes into play, especially experiences promoting or eroding trust. For some of us, fears of abandonment and loss are easily triggered; even the slightest hint of criticism can portend rejection. For others, expectations remain positive even in the face of threat. For some, each potential action must be scrutinized with regard to approval or disapproval from others. Some become anxious when certain feelings arise, regardless of the cause. What situations mean,

whether they are seen as threats or opportunities, manageable or overwhelming, depends heavily on our acquired beliefs about our own coping capacities, our expectations regarding the availability of others, and our abilities to tap both internal and external resources.

The Power of Meaning

In her book *The Power of Meaning*, Emily Esfahani Smith (2017) draws on an extensive literature, from existential philosophy to modern social and biological science, to make the case that seeking meaning is the preeminent human motive. We continually need to make sense of our perceptions and to seek order and coherence in our experience. "We have a primal desire to impose order on disorder . . . we see faces in the clouds, hear footsteps in the rustling leaves, and detect conspiracies in unrelated events. We are constantly taking pieces of information and adding a layer of meaning to them . . ." (p. 104). Human beings seem to be intrinsically motivated to extract meaning from experience. We cannot do otherwise. As cosmologist Neil deGrasse Tyson frequently points out, pattern recognition is in our nature. Human brains appear to be hardwired to seek order and to organize experience.

One example of the way our brains function to maintain organization of experience comes from a study of brain scans of people before and after experiences of low gravity in a space flight. After the low gravity experience, researchers found reduced activity in brain regions involved in "bodily self-consciousness" (images of our body position in the environment). Normally, our brain combines information from systems involving motion, balance, and vision to create a coherent experience. Being in low gravity alters some of these messages, so the brain apparently switches them off in order to fend off the incoherence that would result. Such an idea has striking implications for the clinical phenomenon of dissociation. When children experience chaos, trauma or unfathomable experience, dissociation is a means for maintaining some semblance of order in a disordered world.

Meaning is prominent in what we abstract from our experience. In a study carried out decades ago by John Bransford and Jeffrey Franks (1971), college students were given lengthy paragraphs to read, and then tested regarding them weeks later. They were asked which of two paragraphs was the one read before. One paragraph used vocabulary and wording that overlapped almost completely with the original, but it was constructed such that the meaning was entirely different. The other used

virtually all new language but conveyed the same meaning as the original. This was the one uniformly recalled as the same one that had been read before. This launched an entire set of studies regarding the meaning–extracting nature of human cognition.

The motive to seek meaning is rivaled only by the motive to survive, and at times the two motives are related. In "Man's Search for Meaning," Viktor Frankl describes how only searching for and finding meaning enabled people to survive in horrendous concentration camps during World War II. Stripped of all worldly possessions, separated from family, and existing in the harshest of conditions, some were still able to survive starvation and cold because they were able to find something to live for – some meaning for their continued existence. Sometimes this was a loved one whom they could someday care for again. For others it was some task in the future they hoped to undertake, some contribution that they could make to society.

Smith describes studies showing that finding meaning in life also seems to be important for physical health. Even when compared to measures of happiness, degree of meaning in one's life is the stronger predictor of cardiovascular and other aspects of health in large survey studies. As philosophers such as Sartre said, finding meaning is the purpose of life. It also apparently supports a healthy life.

In this book we will explore the nature of meaning making, from the very beginnings of meaning in infancy to the complex networks of meaning in adulthood. We want to understand how meaning making changes with development, and we want to understand how individuals form the particular *organizations* of meaning they do. By this we refer to the broader, integrated worldview of the individual and the unique network of meanings of each person. We believe that these individual organizations of meaning are the outcome of development, emerging from early beginnings and building step by step in a coherent, systematic way. A process in which each phase is built upon what was there before, yet also provides the foundation for what is to come, always characterizes development.

Meaning, Synthesis, and Integration

Meaning is the outcome of a process of synthesis and integration. For decades, psychology has recognized the interplay and reciprocal and cyclical nature of emotion and cognition (e.g., Sroufe, 1996). What one perceives influences what one feels, but at the same time what one feels influences what one sees as well. Affect and cognition are "non-dissociable," as

Piaget (1952) said. There are no cognitions without affect and no affect without cognition. We once said that temperament and experience are not carried in separate suitcases; there is only one suitcase (Sroufe & Fleeson, 1986). The same is true of cognition and emotion.

Moreover, emotional reactions unfold, and they do so in the social context. The same event in one context will entail different percepts and feelings than in another context. Meaning derives from the totality of the synthesized experience. For example, as Dan Siegel (2020) says, emotion is, in fact, a "value system for the appraisal of meaning." It both guides cognition and responds to cognitive interpretations. Even before there is "thought," infants make connections between sensations or actions and emotions, as we will discuss in Chapter 3. Without such an integrated process, meaning will be curtailed, distorted, or even obliterated.

A poignant example is the story of "Elliot" presented by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio (2006). Following surgery for a large frontal lobe tumor, Elliot's perception and logical reasoning were intact. He could perceive and describe in detail the events of his life – losing his job, losing his wife, losing his house, and becoming destitute. But his emotional reactions were completely blunted and not integrated with these perceptions. He felt nothing but indifference in the face of calamity. Without such integration, nothing was of personal significance. It had no meaning

The totality of feelings, cognitions, and awareness of the social context always governs the interpretation of a situation and always guides behavior from the earliest years forward. For example, without an attachment figure present, toddlers are generally not very comfortable playing in a laboratory. With an attachment figure present, they are comfortable, and the play improves noticeably in both amount and quality. Next design the playroom so that a screen blocks the view of the adult from where the toys are placed. Toddlers play dramatically less and spend a good deal of time going to where they can see the parent. They know the parent is there; their memories are fully adequate for that. And what is most noteworthy, without the screen they rarely look at the parent; rather they are reassured by the mere knowledge that they *could* look if they wanted to. The meaning of the whole situation is dramatically changed by the introduction of the screen and the concern it arouses.

Likewise, the reactions of the two children in our opening example cannot be explained by simply considering differences in cognitive ability. As 5-year-old children, these two boys had a common cognitive understanding of what happened. They both knew their request was received, and they both knew it was declined. What differed were the feelings that

were activated. These feelings colored their interpretation of the event – the meaning it had *for them.*

Meaning and Behavior

In his book *The Undoing Project*, writer Michael Lewis (2016) summarizes the groundbreaking work of cognitive psychologists Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. Of greatest interest to us, Lewis traces the evolution of this work across several decades. Even in the early years of their collaboration, the work yielded insights into the complicated workings of the mind. The mind, it seems, *imposes order* on fragments of sensations and experience, rather than the world imposing order on the mind. However, the early work was largely focused on cognitive operations, in that it was concerned with the logical errors that we all make. This was a great contribution, of course, meriting a Nobel Prize in economics for Kahneman following Tversky's death. Nonetheless, important as uncovering these errors was, it made it seem like they were due to simple faults in our cognitive machinery.

Soon they recognized that these errors were systematic and predictable. Then it became clear that more than faulty problem-solving machinery, the difficulty was in the perception of the problem. Increasingly, a role for emotion entered into the work. Decisions made by people, whether in economics, health, or any other human arena, are not simply made via cool calculus, but in terms of feelings as well. For example, it *hurts* more to lose something you already have than lose out on something you simply might get. Thus, people are more cautious with decisions framed in terms of potential loss, even when judgments regarding probable outcomes are not altered. Financial decisions aren't just economic decisions; they are emotional as well. As Lewis concluded, "to create a theory that would predict what people actually did when faced with uncertainty, you had to 'weight' the probabilities the way people did, with emotion" (p. 271). People make decisions and behave in terms of what a problem *means* to them, and what it means is emotional and cognitive in unison.

Kahneman and Tversky came to see that there were good evolutionary reasons for the mind to work the way it does. Avoiding harm and pain were more important to survival than always having the probabilities right. We would add that there are also individual historical reasons for viewing problems the way one does. Exaggerating threat, for example, or totally denying its existence, are the only ways for some children to survive malevolent childhoods, however illogical and maladaptive such perceptions

may later appear to the outside. The integration that leads to meaning includes history as well as current events.

So, clearly, personal feelings aroused influence how we perceive things – what we make of them. "We see things as we are, not as they are, as Anais Nin points out." Yet, at the same time, our cognitive activity influences our emotions, and it is this totality that yields the meaning we make of situations. In the famous experiments of Stanley Schacter (1966), for example, some research subjects were given placebo and some were given epinephrine (more commonly known as adrenalin). Adrenalin, of course, speeds up the heart rate and raises blood pressure, among other things. However, the participants were not told that it was adrenalin (which would be expected to make them feel keyed up and even anxious), but rather that it was a new medication, and varying effects of the drug were suggested to different groups. Depending on what they were told (the "cognitive set" provided), the participants had a hugely varied range of behavioral and emotional reactions. Some even became drowsy when that suggestion was made! Moreover, those given the drug had stronger paradoxical reactions than those given placebo; that is, the drug *was* having an effect, but the *interpretation* of the bodily reactions was key. The physiological changes happened for all the subjects given the drug, but it was the integration of the physiological changes and mental activity that determined the particular reactions; that is, what the feelings meant to the person.

Conclusion

Others before us have, of course, taken on the topic of meaning, and we are indebted to them for their insights. Individual variations in meaning making and their embeddedness in social experiences has long been recognized.

One prominent position in this past work is what was called "appraisal theory." For decades, psychologists, such as Magda Arnold, George Mandler, and Richard Lazarus, recognized that different individuals appraise or evaluate situations differently and therefore react to them differently. Mandler (1975) even referred to appraisal as "meaning analysis." All of these theorists acknowledged that emotions influence thought but at the same time they pointed out how interpretations reciprocally impacted emotion. This back-and-forth interaction between emotion and thought is in continuous operation. Appraisal theory was a powerful position, calling our attention to the evaluative component to

one's reaction to events. More than the event itself, it is how we appraise or evaluate it that impacts us.

As valuable as it was, we seek to go beyond this work in several ways. First, appraisal theory was focused on the meaning of specific events. We seek to understand the cumulative history of experience – the broader worldview of the person. Everyone puts together a story of their life which is more or less coherent (e.g., McAdams, 2013). It can be called making sense of or coming to an understanding of one's life or finding meaning. It is a, more or less, well organized view of the world and one's self in that world. It is a process that starts early and never ceases. In time, individuals vary greatly in how elaborated and/or coherent the story is. We sought to understand how this happened.

Second, appraisal was at times made to sound like a rational, analytical process. While emotion was seen as an "influence" on cognition, cognitive activities were given priority. But making sense of one's life/existence/experience is always subjective, primarily because the process begins much before conscious awareness of one's self. Before an individual can reflect on any interaction with an important caregiver, countless events have transpired that form the foundation of understanding. Therefore, as one becomes able to reflect upon and put together a story of one's life, there are already deep biases and expectations about the world that color how one thinks about current events. At this level of integration, one cannot separate emotion and cognition. They are, as Piaget said, "non-dissociable."

Related to this, the process of making sense of one's experience occurs on two levels. On one level, one consciously reviews one's experiences and arrives at an acceptable understanding. On another level, there is unconscious integration of experience, through habitual patterning of mind/brain functioning, further aided by the dreams of REM sleep. This is not voluntary and can only be altered through deliberate and sustained effort. Individuals vary greatly in their interest in self-examination and, even then, it can be useful or not.

Finally, we will emphasize the process of development; that is, *how* do individual people come to see the world the way they do. How do they come to engage and appraise different situations in the way they do? The starting point for appraisal theorists was the presence of the individual differences in adulthood. We want to go beyond that. We want to know why there are these differences. The major goals for this book are to answer questions concerning the origins and unfolding of individual differences in appraisal and in unique worldviews.

We have also received inspiration from numerous other scholars who have emphasized the role of social relationships in the development of meaning. Many of these were writing early in the twentieth century, and we will touch on them in the final chapter of the book. One more recent theorist is Robert Kegan (1982). Is his insightful book *The Evolving Self*, Kegan discussed many of the themes that we will also emphasize. He stressed the sociocultural embeddedness of the person from cradle to grave and rejected the idea of the free-standing individual. He also argued that meaning making was a lifelong activity. Meaning was so central in his position that he suggested that "it is not that a person makes meaning, as much as that the activity of being a person is the activity of meaning-making" (p. 11). His theory is clearly developmental, and he cites many of the same authors we will, such as Erik Erikson and John Bowlby.

We embrace Kegan's theoretical viewpoint and his core ideas. Our goal is to put flesh on these theoretical ideas by providing a more detailed, step-by-step account of *how persons in fact* construct the meaning systems they do, as well as to provide the much-needed empirical support for this position. How do some come to see their world as responsive and their actions as potent, while others have negative expectations regarding support and doubt their power to have any impact on their experience? The necessary longitudinal data are now available.