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Author

Taves, A

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Parsing Meaning and Value in Relation to Experience

Ann Taves, University of California at Santa Barbara

taves@religion.ucsb.edu

Drawing on Neville's axiological metaphysics, Barrett proposes an ecological approach to the perception of religious meaning and value, such that "the experience of rich and abiding value, impervious to hardship and misfortune, is ultimately what sustains religious belief and the religious life as worthy of commitment." Religious practices have value "when its meanings [the meanings of practices] come to life—that is, when the meanings of religious practices are perceived." In other words, he says: "value is an essential aspect of what distinguishes the religious insider's experience of meaning as a perceptual experience." We need, he argues, "a testable theory of how the experience of meaning changes under this and other conditions so as to provide access to value" (p. 4). He offers Gibson's ecological psychology with its "insistence on the essentially interactive nature of perceptual experience" as the basis for "an ecological approach to religious meaning and value" that starts from "the perceptual experiences of seasoned practitioners engaged in highly structured and overtly religious activities."

If I understand him correctly, he is proposing that we sidestep definitional problems surrounding "religion" by focusing on "seasoned practitioners" engaged in activities widely recognized as religious in order to ask why they perceive what they are doing as valuable when outsiders (and perhaps also less seasoned practitioners) do not. He wants to suggest that they perceive their actions as valuable because the meanings of the practices have "come to life" in the interactive context of the religious activities. When the meanings of practices do not "come to life," as they presumably don't for

outsiders, then they presumably have less value – their value is not “rich and abiding ... [nor] impervious to hardship and misfortune.” Does this mean that outsiders perceive no meaning in the practices, as Barrett seems to suggest, or that they simply perceive different meanings? This is a crucial question. If outsiders simply perceive different meanings, then Barrett’s key sentence should read: Religious practice has value “when its meanings [the meanings of practices] come to life—that is, when the meanings of religious practices are perceived [*as valuable*].” This seemingly minor shift in wording goes to the heart of my difficulty with Barrett’s proposal: his conflation of meaning and value.

I can use the following definitional paragraph (p. 6) to elaborate on key problems.

In contrast to the constructivist theories that view meaning as something added by the organism to environmental input, the ecological approach views meaning as a basic property of the interactive relationship between an organism and its environment. Any feature of the environment has meaning if it can be registered by the organism as a *significant contrast*: a discrimination of difference that has some potential consequence for the regulation of organism behavior. ... Value can also be understood in terms of contrast, and thus as being closely related to meaning. In the most basic sense, value is the importance that a significant contrast has for the organism.

We can begin with the portion that defines “a *significant contrast* [as] a discrimination of difference that has some potential consequence for the regulation of organism behavior.” A discrimination of difference in what most psychologists would refer to as a “percept.”

We can distinguish between a percept (“a discrimination of difference”), a *salient* percept (a difference that stands out as potentially significant), and a *significant* percept

(a difference that -- as best the organism can tell via appraisal processes – is *actually* significant). Discriminations of difference (aka “contrasts” or “percepts”) as such do not necessarily have consequences for the regulation of behavior, as Barrett’s definition tacitly acknowledges. Organisms have evolved so as to perceive contrasts with *potential* consequences as more salient (as attention-grabbing). The consequences of a salient percept for the regulation of the organism’s behavior are potential, that is, undetermined and unclear. The potential consequences have to be appraised, at which point, the organism determines – as accurately as it can – what consequence (value) it has for behavior. This appraisal process is, as Barrett argues, environmentally embedded and contextually driven. The organism may err in its appraisal. In short, while I would agree that any contrast is potentially significant in the broadest sense of the term, the conflation of perceptions of difference, perceptions of salience (of potential value), and perceptions of significance (of appraised value) obscures the differences needed to understand the problem Barrett is posing.

“Any feature of the environment has meaning” – I could expand this to read, “*any stimulus (however generated) has potential value or significance if it can be registered by the organism as ... a discrimination of difference that has some potential consequence for the regulation of organism behavior.*” This seems like a reasonable definition of a salient stimulus. Some dreams (internally generated) are more salient than others – they may stand out because we feel unusually aroused in the dream or because they are particularly vivid and memorable. Their salience generates the sense that they have potential, that they might “mean” something and, thus, that they might have consequences for action. Upon reflection (an appraisal process), we might decide that it was “just” a dream or that

it had significance for something (e.g., understanding our lives, signaling a new direction, or solving a problem).

In the last paragraph, I put “mean” in quotes to signal difficulties that I now want to address directly. Meaning is a very slippery term and the phrase “it might mean something” captures the difficulties nicely. In this usage, “meaning something” is linked to an appraisal process. This usage asks: Is it meaningful? Does it have significance? Is it valuable? We also use “meaning” in a more descriptive way when we ask: What did they mean by that? If we now turn to the first sentence in the paragraph, in which Barrett distinguishes between the way constructivist and ecological theories view meaning, we find the word “meaning” used in these two different ways. The conflation of two different meanings generates the impression that one meaning is correct and the other incorrect rather than just being different. This simply adds to the confusion, needlessly pitting so-called constructivist approaches against ecological ones, when they are focusing on different questions.

The difference is analogous to what philosophers refer to as semantic and foundational theories of meaning. Thus, as Jeff Speaks (2011) notes: “Even if philosophers have not consistently kept these two questions separate, there clearly is a distinction between the questions ‘What is the meaning of this or that symbol (for a particular person or group)?’ and ‘In virtue of what facts about that person or group does the symbol have that meaning?’” If we substitute “input” for “symbol,” the problem is evident. The semantic question is descriptive and can be asked at any level at which “input” is processed. Thus, in the semantic sense of meaning, we can view discriminations of difference or recognition of patterns as “meaning making processes”

(see Park & Folkman, 1997; Park, 2005; Paloutzian & Park, 2013). Barrett, however, is asking the foundational question: “In virtue of what facts about [seasoned practitioners] does the [input] have that meaning?” The foundational sense of meaning does imply values, such that “meaning” in the foundational sense translates as “value for some that it doesn’t have for others.”¹ Questions of semantic meaning have been more often asked by those Barrett labels “constructivists.” Questions of foundational meaning have been the focus of ecological psychologists.

In his generally quite accurate discussion of my book (Taves 2009), Barrett discusses what he views as its limitations. He notes that my approach “aims mostly at processes that, at least in theory, can be located inside the head. He recognizes, however, that I stress the role of social interaction in relation to the attribution of meaning and notes, too, that I could have included environmental structures and the like under the

¹ Neville (1981, 160-63) makes a parallel distinction when he discusses, first, “synthesis in imagination, which analyzes how more basic elements are synthesized in imagination, and, then, “the value of synthesis,” in which he asks, “why there is such a synthesis?” (emphasis added). He answers the latter question in several ways, depending on how the question is understood. “Insofar as the question asks for purpose served by imaginative integration in experience, the answer is in terms of evolutionary adaptability leading to more successful reproduction of the species. Insofar as it asks what value is accomplished in imagination, the answer ... is that it preserves some of the values in the world and reproduces them in a new experience. ... Insofar as the question asks for the value peculiar to imagination as synthesis, the answer is beauty.” In appropriating Neville’s philosophy, Barrett does not distinguish between these various questions. Instead he presupposes Neville’s conclusion that “experience begins in beauty” (p. 163), which Neville acknowledges must be justified, and Neville’s view that “religion has chiefly to do with world construction” and, therefore, that religious experience is rooted in “world-building through imagination” (p. 170). Neville is open to both the possibility that “religious apprehension merely grasps the natural beginning of human experience” and the possibility that in doing so, “the ontological foundation of reality is revealed” (p. 173). I am more comfortable with the more modest claim that “some apprehensions [that some people deem religious] might grasp [or focus on or describe in their own way] the natural beginning of human experience,” i.e. the way that experience is constructed out of more basic elements.

heading of “observable data.” I agree that I could have expanded on both of these points more fully. His focus, however, is on what he takes to be my premise: “that value is, at bottom, a simple quality of ‘specialness’ that is ascribed to certain things.” He adds:

In the introduction above, I described meaning and value as closely related, such that there can be no experience of value without meaningful contrast. For Taves, meaning seems to drop out of her analysis of specialness at the most basic level, leaving behind a highly abstract quality whose unconscious ascription is allegedly responsible for the ‘singularization’ of something as a bearer or special value (pp. 48-49). However, to construe specialness as a quality whose ascription is triggered apart from complex discriminations of meaning seems to entail the phenomenological claim that it can show up without relation to the manner in which experience unfolds in time. ... As a result, Taves’ theory directs attention away from the ecological conditions of religious experience.

I’ll make several points in response:

With respect to “the phenomenological claim that it can show up without relation to the manner in which experience unfolds in time,” I did not make this claim. It is, however, the sort of claim that Bill Barnard, whose experience I analyze, might make. Indeed, it is this sort of claim to have had a seemingly spontaneous experience with little or no relation to any “ecological conditions” that I wanted to see if I could explain using an attributional approach. In chapter three, I analyze Barnard’s experience over time and in context in so far as I could reconstruct it. My analysis of Bradley’s evangelical experience, which was urged upon him by his peers and unfolded over the course of several years, was thoroughly (and much more easily) analyzed as it unfolded over time and in context because he was aware of and invested in documenting its emergence.

Barrett finds the concepts of “specialness” too abstract and I have to concede I have been using it less in more recent work because it – like meaning – allows us to gloss over important distinctions. As with “meaning,” we use special to signify both something that is set apart from other things in its class (and, thus, salient) and something that has particular value (significant). Both “meaning” and “special” are useful terms to watch for “on the ground,” so to speak, where they highlight features of interest, but both can obscure the distinction between salience and significance, if we do not analyze the way in which they (“meaning” and “special”) are used carefully.

In my recent writings (Taves 2013, under review) I have elaborated on the building block approach, distinguishing between three interactive processes that people draw upon to generate phenomena that they sometimes characterize in religion-like terms. I refer to these as perceiving salience, appraising significance, and imagining hypotheticals. In light of this further work, I wouldn’t say – as Barrett suggests -- that “value is, at bottom, a simple quality of ‘specialness’ that is ascribed to certain things.” I would say that things which are salient stand out from things in their class and are therefore perceived as special (in so far as we want to use that term) in the sense of being non-ordinary. Stimuli may be salient, that is, grab our attention, for many different reasons all of which involve *potential* value, including potential survival value (evolved salience), potential cultural value (learned salience), or simply because they are unfamiliar (novel salience) and their potential value is unknown. But salient stimuli have to be appraised in relation to the environment (context), past experience, and the goals of the organism in order for the organism to determine their significance.

In my own appropriation of ecological psychology (Taves, in press), I have found

the ecological emphasis of affordances particularly useful, as it provides a crucial link between animals and environments. There are, however, a number of claims associated with the concept and with ecological psychology more generally that are not necessarily entailed by the concept and to which we need not subscribe in adopting it. The most controversial issue has to do with how perception couples the animal and the environment. Gibson and his followers have traditionally argued for direct coupling. This claim, understood as a form of “direct realism,” is premised on a particular understanding of perception grounded in the ability to scrutinize the “flowing stimulus array” that is derived from James and Dewey (Heft 2001), which Barrett seems to endorse. It stands in contrast to the representational view prevalent in the cognitive sciences more generally, in which it is assumed that perception is based on probabilistic cues (for an overview, see Goldstein 2009), which Barrett rejects. Ecologically oriented psychologists have offered different responses to these critiques (see, for example, Chemeno 2009: 105-34; Gallagher 2008; Vicente 2003). The key point, as Vicente stresses (2003, 256), is that the concept of affordances does not necessarily entail either view and, indeed, the animal and the environment may be coupled perceptually in more than one way depending on the circumstances and the amount of information available.²

If we return to Barrett’s opening question in light of a more qualified appropriation of Gibson’s approach, there is much that we could investigate to figure out why “seasoned practitioners” might perceive something – say, a feeling of presence -- that others, whether less seasoned practitioners or outsiders, do not. In contrast to Barrett, I find it hard to conceive of a “feeling of presence” as anything but a probabilistic

² This paragraph is taken with slight modifications from Taves (in press).

assessment of a feeling. I have no difficulty, however, asking what a feeling construed probabilistically as a presence might afford seasoned practitioners. It might, as Barrett hopes, provide an “experience of rich and abiding value, impervious to hardship and misfortune.” On the other hand, it might not.

Luhrmann (2012, pp. 254-266) provides illustrations. Several of the seasoned practitioners (congregationally recognized “prayer warriors”) in the Vineyard churches she studied not only had vivid positive feelings of a presence, but also negative ones that they construed as “demons.” Beyond construing various feelings and sensations as a presence, several congregants became preoccupied with fighting off negative presences (“spiritual warfare”). In one case, others decided that a “prayer warrior” named Sarah, who claimed to have seen an “imp,” needed exorcism (pp. 260-265). Sarah was confused by this, but eventually accepted that she was struggling with demons and needed to be “delivered” from them. The exorcisms did not work and eventually she was hospitalized, where she was diagnosed with bipolar disorder. Sarah’s (non-evangelical) family blamed “her depression on being born again.” Although her family and her (non-charismatic Christian) therapist disagreed with her, Sarah continued to pray in tongues, which she construed as a manifestation of the presence of the Holy Spirit, and to have physical sensations that she construed as demons.

These seasoned practitioners learned to pay attention to certain feelings and sensations (learned salience), which they viewed as potentially significant and construed (appraised) as unseen presences, both positive and negative, in accord with the teachings of their charismatic congregation. Moreover, some worried that they might be going “crazy.” Within the congregation, there was general agreement that positive and negative

entities were present, but there were disagreements over how particular feelings and sensations should be interpreted (appraised). Others (Sarah's family, her Christian therapist, and the hospital personnel) did not think that Sarah's feelings and sensations should be construed as presences, whether positive or negative, and viewed her church's cultivation of spiritual presences as making her *more* vulnerable to hardship and misfortune rather than less. A probabilistic approach to perception allows us to consider why people perceive certain feelings and sensations as salient and how interpretive frameworks embedded in practices enhance the probability that salient perceptions will be appraised as more or less significant.

In conclusion, Barrett's article has deep underlying problems. First, he appropriates Neville's axiological philosophy simplistically, asserting its conclusions and attempting to find a psychology that fits them. Second, he appropriates ecological psychology uncritically with little or no attention to the debates that have swirled around it, simply because it seems to fit with Neville's conclusions. Had he worked with the complexities and nuances in Neville's philosophy, drawn out Neville's presuppositions and caveats, and done the same with experimental psychologies, ecological and cognitive, he could have constructed bridges between Neville's philosophy and a range of experimental research in psychology. These bridges most likely would have been only partial, but they would have furthered the conversation in a more illuminating way.

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