

Zoom Session

April 26, 2023

1 p.m. Central Daylight-Saving Time

Walter Gulick, "A POLANYIAN SEMIOTIC:

TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF MEANING"

The Polanyi Society and the Michael Polanyi Liberal Philosophical Association will jointly sponsor a Zoom Session on Walter Gulick's recent essay "A POLANYIAN SEMIOTIC: TOWARD A COMPREHENSIVE THEORY OF MEANING" published in the current issue of *Polanyiana* (2022/2 v. 31) which is available online at <https://polanyiana.org/volumes/33>. As in other recent Zoom sessions, the focus will be on discussion: Walter Gulick will make a few introductory comments and Dale Cannon will initiate the discussion with a question or two. The Abstract for Gulick's paper is below.

To register to receive the link for the session, please send an e-mail to both Gus Breyspraak ([gus.breyspraak@ottawa.edu](mailto:gus.breyspraak@ottawa.edu)) and Phil Mullins ([mullins@missouriwestern.edu](mailto:mullins@missouriwestern.edu)).

Abstract: Are the different usages of the term—meaning—mere adventitious accidents, or is there an organic connection between these meanings? The thesis of this article is that (1) the referential semiotic usage of meaning has a typically unrecognized organic relation to (2) the sense of significance communicated when one feels that an event, or even one's life, is meaningful. An evolutionary account of the embodied origins of meaning reveals this connection. Both senses of meaning are inherent in the purposeful activities of living beings, whether occurring in simple beings like microbes or in complex forms among humans. Susanne Langer distinguishes between semiotic signals about physical reality and symbols whereby social and cultural communication occurs. However, both signals and symbolized information are useless unless they can be organized on behalf of an entity's welfare. Michael Polanyi's description of trick and latent learning among inarticulate beings illuminates the primal tacit ability to devise meaningful responses and initiatives supporting an entity's ability to survive and thrive. For those functions to be successful, the resulting actions must be measured and directed. Felt existential meaning functions as a guide to how surrounding events and one's actions are faring. Polanyi's notion of the responsible person provides the framework within which semiotic sensitivity and feelings of existential meaning are coordinated. Not only is the satisfaction of experiencing positive existential meaning tied to the success of one's purposes and projects, the joys of living are also connected to embodied experiences of active engagement.

Personal note: My essay is an attempt to distill what I find most significant in Polanyi's thought. But it is also an expression of what I deeply believe. In the Zoom discussion, I will be particularly interested in what you, my interpreters, make of my theory of existential meaning that comes most fully to expression in section XI, but which is alluded to throughout the paper. I am currently trying to develop that notion into a book-length manuscript. It's about a subject that I believe is much needed today.