Ethics, Cogenetic Logic, and the Foundation of Meaning

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In his interesting essay, Vähämaa (2018) discusses two issues that I find particularly relevant. The first one concerns the foundation of meaning in language, which in the era of connectivism (Siemens, 2005) and post-truth (Keyes, 2004) becomes problematic. The second issue is the appreciation of epistemic virtues in a collective context: how the group can enhance the epistemic skill of the individual?

I will try to explain why these problems are relevant and why it is worth developing Vähämaa's (2018) reflection in the specific direction of group and person as complementary epistemic and ethic agents (Fricker, 2007). First, I will discuss the foundations of meaning in different theories of language. Then, I will discuss the problems related to the stability and liminality of meaning in the society of "popularity". Finally I will propose the idea that the range of contemporary epistemic virtues should be integrated by an ethical grounding of meaning and a co-genetic foundation of meaning.

The Foundation of Meaning in Language

The theories about the origins of human language can be grouped in four main categories, based on the elements characterizing the ontogenesis and glottogenesis.

Sociogenesis Hypothesis (**SH**): it is the idea that language is a conventional product, that historically originates from coordinated social activities and it is ontogenetically internalized through individual participation to social interactions. The characteristic authors in SH are Wundt, Wittgenstein and Vygotsky (2012).

Praxogenesis Hypothesis (**PH**): it is the idea that language historically originates from praxis and coordinated actions. Ontogenetically, the language emerges from senso-motory coordination (e.g. gaze coordination). It is for instance the position of Mead, the idea of linguistic primes in Smedslund (Vähämaa, 2018) and the language as action theory of Austin (1975).

Phylogenesis Hypothesis (**PhH**): it is the idea that humans have been provided by evolution with an innate "language device", emerging from the evolutionary preference for forming social groups of hunters and collective long-duration spring care (Bouchard, 2013). Ontogenetically, language predisposition is wired in the brain and develops in the maturation in social groups. This position is represented by evolutionary psychology and by innatism such as Chomsky's linguistics.

Structure Hypothesis (**StH**): it is the idea that human language is a more or less logic system, in which the elements are determined by reciprocal systemic relationships, partly conventional and partly ontic (Thao, 2012). This hypothesis is not really concerned with ontogenesis, rather with formal features of symbolic systems of distinctions. It is for instance the classical idea of Saussure and of the structuralists like Derrida.

According to Vähämaa (2018), every theory of meaning has to deal today with the problem of a terrific change in the way common sense knowledge is produced, circulated and

modified in collective activities. Meaning needs some stability in order to be of collective utility. Moreover, meaning needs some validation to become stable.

The **PhH** solves this problem with a simple idea: if humans have survived and evolved, their evolutionary strategy about meaning is successful. In a natural "hostile" environment, our ancestors must have find the way to communicate in such a way that a danger would be understood in the same way by all the group members and under different conditions, including when the danger is not actually present, like in bonfire tales or myths.

The **PhH** becomes problematic when we consider the post-truth era. What would be the evolutionary advantage to deconstruct the environmental foundations of meaning, even in a virtual environment? For instance, what would be the evolutionary advantage of the common sense belief that global warming is not a reality, considered that this false belief could bring mankind to the extinction?

StH leads to the view of meaning as a configuration of formal conditions. Thus, stability is guaranteed by structural relations of the linguistic system, rather than by the contribution of groups or individuals as epistemic agents. **StH** cannot account for the rapidity and liminality of meaning that Vähämaa (2018) attributes to common sense nowadays. **SH** and **PH** share the idea that meaning emerges from what people do together, and that stability is both the condition and the product of the fact that we establish contexts of meaningful actions, ways of doing things in a habitual way.

The problem is today the fact that our accelerated Western capitalistic societies have multiplied the ways of doing and the number of groups in society, decoupling the habitual from the common sense meaning. New habits, new words, personal actions and meanings are built, disseminated and destroyed in short time. So, if "Our lives, with regard to language and knowledge, are fundamentally bound to social groups" (Vähämaa, 2018, p. 169) what does it happen to language and to knowledge when social groups multiply, segregate and disappear in a short time?

From Common Sense to the Bubble

The grounding of meaning in the group as epistemic agent has received a serious stroke in the era of connectivism and post-truth. The idea of connectivism is that knowledge is distributed among the different agents of a collective network (Siemens, 2005). Knowledge does not reside into the "mind" or into a "memory", but is rather produced in bits and pieces, that the epistemic agent is required to search, and to assemble through the contribution of the collective effort of the group's members.

Thus, depending on the configuration of the network, different information will be connected, and different pictures of the world will emerge. The meaning of the words will be different if, for instance, the network of information is aggregated by different groups in combination with, for instance, specific algorithms. The configuration of groups, mediated by social media, as in the case of contemporary politics (Lewandowsky, Ecker & Cook,

2017), leads to the reproduction of "bubbles" of people that share the very same views, and are exposed to the very same opinions, selected by an algorithm that will show only the content compliant with their previous content preferences.

The result is that the group loses a great deal of its epistemic capability, which Vähämaa (2018) suggests as a foundation of meaning. The meaning of words that will be preferred in this kind of epistemic bubble is the result of two operations of selection that are based on popularity. First, the meaning will be aggregated by consensual agents, rather than dialectic ones. Meaning will always convergent rather than controversial.

Second, between alternative meanings, the most "popular" will be chosen, rather than the most reliable. The epistemic bubble of connectivism originates from a misunderstanding. The idea is that a collectivity has more epistemic force than the individual alone, to the extent that any belief is scrutinized democratically and that if every agent can contribute with its own bit, the knowledge will be more reliable, because it is the result of a constant and massive peer-review. Unfortunately, the events show us a different picture.

Post-truth is actually a massive action of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), to the extent that the reliability of the other as epistemic agent is based on criteria of similarity, rather than on dialectic. One is reliable as long as it is located within my own bubble. Everything outside is "fake news". The algorithmic selection of information contributes to reinforce the polarization. Thus, no hybridization becomes possible, the common sense (Vähämaa, 2018) is reduced to the common bubble. How can the epistemic community still be a source of meaning in the connectivist era?

Meaning and Common Sense

SH and **PH** about language point to a very important historical source: the philosopher Giambattista Vico (Danesi, 1993; Tateo, 2015). Vico can be considered the scholar of the common sense and the imagination (Tateo, 2015). Knowledge is built as product of human experience and crystallized into the language of a given civilization. Civilization is the set of interpretations and solutions that different groups have found to respond to the common existential events, such as birth, death, mating, natural phenomena, etc.

According to Vico, all the human beings share a fate of mortal existence and rely on each other to get along. This is the notion of common sense: the profound sense of humanity that we all share and that constitutes the ground for human ethical choices, wisdom and collective living. Humans rely on imagination, before reason, to project themselves into others and into the world, in order to understand them both. Imagination is the first step towards the understanding of the Otherness.

When humans loose contact with this *sensus communis*, the shared sense of humanity, and start building their meaning on egoism or on pure rationality, civilizations then slip into barbarism. Imagination gives thus access to the intersubjectivity, the capability of feeling the

other, while common sense constitutes the wisdom of developing ethical beliefs that will not harm the other. Vico ideas are echoed and made present by the critical theory:

> "We have no doubt (…) that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking (…) already contains the germ of the regression which is taking place everywhere today. If enlightenment does not [engage in] reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate (…) In the mysterious willingness of the technologically educated masses to fall under the spell of any despotism, in its self-destructive affinity to nationalist paranoia (…) the weakness of contemporary theoretical understanding is evident." (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, xvi)

Common sense is the basis for the wisdom, that allows to question the foundational nature of the bubble. It is the basis to understand that every meaning is not only defined in a positive way, but is also defined by its complementary opposite (Tateo, 2016).

When one uses the semantic prime "we" (Vähämaa, 2018), one immediately produces a system of meaning that implies the existence of a "non-we", one is producing otherness. In return, the meaning of "we" can only be clearly defined through the clarification of who is "non-we". Meaning is always cogenetic (Tateo, 2015). Without the capability to understand that by saying "we" people construct a cogenetic complex of meaning, the group is reduced to a self confirming, self reinforcing collective, in which the sense of being a valid epistemic agent is actually faked, because it is nothing but an act of epistemic arrogance.

How we can solve the problem of the epistemic bubble and give to the relationship between group and person a real epistemic value? How we can overcome the dangerous overlapping between sense of being functional in the group and false beliefs based on popularity?

Complementarity Between Meaning and Sense

My idea is that we must look in that complex space between the "meaning", understood as a collectively shared complex of socially constructed significations, and the "sense", understood as the very personal elaboration of meaning which is based on the person's uniqueness (Vygotsky, 2012; Wertsck, 2000). Meaning and sense feed into each other, like common sense and imagination. Imagination is the psychic function that enables the person to feel into the other, and thus to establish the ethical and affective ground for the common sense wisdom. It is the empathic movement on which Kant will later on look for a logic foundation.

> "Act in such a way that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never merely as a means to an end, but always at the same time as an end." (Kant 1993, p. 36. 4:429)

I would further claim that maybe they feed into each other: the logic foundation is made possible by the synthetic power of empathic imagination. Meaning and sense feed into each

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other. On the one hand, the collective is the origin of internalized psychic activities (**SH**), and thus the basis for the sense elaborated about one's own unique life experience. On the other hand, the personal sense constitutes the basis for the externalization of the meaning into the arena of the collective activities, constantly innovating the meaning of the words.

So, personal sense can be a strong antidote to the prevailing force of the meaning produced for instance in the epistemic bubble. My sense of what is "ought", "empathic", "human" and "ethic", in other words my wisdom, can help me to develop a critical stance towards meanings that are build in a self-feeding uncritical way.

Can the dialectic, complementary and cogenetic relationship between sense and meaning become the ground for a better epistemic performance, and for an appreciation of the liminal meaning produced in contemporary societies? In the last section, I will try to provide arguments in favor of this idea.

Ethical Grounding of Meaning

If connectivistic and post-truth societies produce meanings that are based on popularity check, rather than on epistemic appreciation, we risk to have a situation in which any belief is the contingent result of a collective epistemic agent which replicates its patterns into bubbles. One will just listen to messages that confirm her own preferences and belief and reject the different ones as unreliable. Inside the bubble there is no way to check the meaning, because the meaning is not cogenetic, it is consensual.

For instance, if I read and share a post on social media, claiming that migrants are the main criminal population, despite my initial position toward the news, there is the possibility that within my group I will start to see only posts confirming the initial fact. The fact can be proven wrong, for instance by the press, but the belief will be hard to change, as the meaning of "migrant" in my bubble is likely to continue being that of "criminal". The collectivity will share an epistemically unjust position, to the extent that it will attribute a lessened epistemic capability to those who are not part of the group itself. How can one avoid that the group is scaffolding the "bad" epistemic skills, rather than empowering the individual (Vähämaa, 2018)?

The solution I propose is to develop an epistemic virtue based on two main principles: the ethical grounding of meaning and the cogenetic logic. The ethical grounding of meaning is directly related to the articulation between common sense and wisdom in the sense of Vico (Tateo, 2015). In a post-truth world in which we cannot appreciate the epistemic foundation of meaning, we must rely on a different epistemic virtue in order to become critical toward messages. Ethical grounding, based on the personal sense of humanity, is not of course epistemic test of reliability, but it is an alarm bell to become legitimately suspicious toward meanings. The second element of the new epistemic virtue is cogenetic logic (Tateo, 2016).

Meaning is grounded in the building of every belief as a complementary system between "A" and "non-A". This implies that any meaning is constructed through the relationship with its

complementary opposite. The truth emerges in a double dialectic movement (Silva Filho, 2014): through Socratic dialogue and through cogenetic logic. In conclusion, let me try to provide a practical example of this epistemic virtue.

The way to start to discriminate potentially fake news or the tendentious interpretations of facts would be essentially based on an ethic foundation. As in Vico's wisdom of common sense, I would base my epistemic scrutiny on the imaginative work that allows me to access the other and on the cogenetic logic that assumes every meaning is defined by its relationship with the opposite.

Let's imagine that we are exposed to a post on social media, in which someone states that a caravan of migrants, which is travelling from Honduras across Central America toward the USA border, is actually made of criminals sent by hostile foreign governments to destabilize the country right before elections. The same post claims that it is a conspiracy and that all the press coverage is fake news.

Finally the post presents some "debunking" pictures showing some athletic young Latino men, with their faces covered by scarves, to demonstrate that the caravan is not made by families with children, but is made by "soldiers" in good shape and who don't look poor and desperate as the "mainstream" media claim. I do not know whether such a post has ever been made, but I just assembled elements of very common discourses circulating in the social media.

The task is no to assess the nature of this message, its meaning and its reliability. I could rely on the group as a ground for assessing statements, to scrutinize their truth and justification. However, due to the "bubble" effect, I may fall into a simple tautological confirmation, due to the configuration of the network of my relations. I would probably find only posts confirming the statements and delegitimizing the opposite positions. In this case, the fact that the group will empower my epistemic confidence is a very dangerous element.

I could limit my search for alternative positions to establish a dialogue. However, I could not be able, alone, to find information that can help me to assess the statement with respect to its degree of bias. How can I exert my skepticism in a context of post-truth? I propose some initial epistemic moves, based on a common sense approach to the meaning-making.

1) I must be skeptical of every message which uses a violent, aggressive, discriminatory language, and that such kind of message is "fake" by default.

2) I must be skeptical of every message that treats as criminals or is against whole social groups, even on the basis of real isolated events, because this interpretation is biased by default.

3) I must be skeptical of every message that attacks or targets persons for their characteristics rather than discussing ideas or behaviors.

Appreciating the hypothetical post about the caravan by the three rules above mentioned, one will immediately see that it violates all of them. Thus, no matter what is the information collected by my epistemic bubble, I have justified reasons to be skeptical towards it. The foundation of the meaning of the message will not be neither in the group nor in the person. It will be based on the ethical position of common sense's wisdom.

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