

Essay

# Not Its Own Meaning: A Hermeneutic of the World

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**Abstract:** The contemporary cultural mindset posits that the world has no intrinsic semantic value. The meaning we see in it is supposedly projected onto the world by ourselves. Underpinning this view is the mainstream physicalist ontology, according to which mind is an emergent property or epiphenomenon of brains. As such, since the world beyond brains isn't mental, it cannot *a priori* evoke anything beyond itself. But a consistent series of recent experimental results suggests strongly that the world may in fact be mental in nature, a hypothesis openly discussed in the field of foundations of physics. In this essay, these experimental results are reviewed and their hermeneutic implications discussed. If the world is mental, it points to something beyond its face-value appearances and is amenable to interpretation, just as ordinary dreams. In this case, the project of a Hermeneutic of Everything is metaphysically justifiable.

**Keywords:** meaning; hermeneutics; ontology; foundations of physics; mental universe; idealism; non-dualism

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## 1. Introduction

To be amenable to interpretation, things and phenomena must point beyond themselves, thereby embodying semantic value or sense. For instance, these squiggles of ink on paper—which we call written words—mean more than just squiggles of ink on paper: they point to something beyond themselves. Similarly, the inner imagery we experience in dreams points to something beyond their face-value appearances, which has motivated depth psychologists to develop extensive hermeneutics of dreams (Ackroyd 1993; Von Franz and Boa 1994; Jung 2002; Fonagy et al. 2012). Finally, the symbolisms of religious myths point to something that transcends the face-value appearances of the symbols themselves and engages people at an emotional level (Kastrup 2016).

Influenced by twentieth century positivism and existentialism, the contemporary cultural mindset posits that things and phenomena only have semantic value insofar as we project this value onto them. Summarizing the essence of this mindset, Sartre wrote: “there exist concretely alarm clocks . . . But . . . then I discover myself suddenly as the one who gives its meaning to the alarm clock . . . the one who finally makes the values exist” (Sartre 1992, p. 77). Analogously, squiggles of ink mean more than squiggles of ink only insofar as we stipulate by convention that they do so. To the extent that alarm clocks and written words are inventions of human beings, it is reasonable to assert that their meaning consists in what we project onto them.

However, the contemporary cultural mindset extends this notion of projected meaning to nature itself. Fire only represents “the inseminating fury of sex and the ardor of the ascetic” (Ronnenberg and Martin 2010, p. 84) insofar as we project passion onto it. Stones only represent eternity (Ronnenberg and Martin 2010, p. 106) insofar as we project timelessness onto them. Without our projections, stones mean just stones; fire means just fire. In and of itself, the world supposedly is its own meaning. It does not inherently point to anything beyond its own appearance on the screen of perception. Whatever sense we may see in a fact of the world is supposedly a confabulation of human cognition, not intrinsic to the fact itself. “In this case,” as Zemach put it, “one may say either that this fact has no sense, or that the only sense it has is provided by its form” (Zemach 2006, p. 363). In other

words, “The sense of the world is identical with its form” (Zemach 2006, p. 367). Ortiz-Osés put it perhaps most simply: “When taken ‘existentially,’ existence seems to lack sense, whereas sense taken ‘essentially’ would appear to lack existence” (Ortiz-Osés 2008, p. 65).

As a result, our culture believes that the semantic value of the world is simply an artifact of human minds. The world doesn’t have a story to tell, a suggestion to make or an insight to convey. It isn’t saying anything. There is nothing meaningful to be gleaned from the world, just utilitarian predictions to be made about its behavior. Under such ethos, projects such as Ortiz-Osés’s—meant to formulate a symbolic hermeneutic of the world premised on the notion that “the whole of existence contains an almost secret essence” (Ortiz-Osés 2008, p. 1)—become metaphysically precarious, which Ortiz-Osés himself seems to have acknowledged (Ortiz-Osés 2008, p. 65).

At the root of this state of affairs is the split between mind and world that characterizes our present worldview. Indeed, according to the mainstream physicalist ontology, the fundamental building blocks of reality are physical elements that exist independently of mind (Stoljar 2016). The latter, in turn, is supposedly constituted or generated by particular local arrangements of these physical elements, such as brains inside skulls. Consequently, mind is insulated from the external world surrounding it beyond the skull.

The problem, of course, is that only mind can host intrinsic semantic value, for the latter consists of cognitive associations: the intrinsic meaning of an experience is the emotions, insights and inner imagery it evokes. For instance, the feeling of hunger may evoke inner imagery related to food because there is a cognitive association between the feeling and the imagery. A memory from childhood may evoke the emotion of happiness because there is a cognitive association between the memory and the emotion. These associative links are an exclusive feature of mentation.

So if semantic value is essentially mental and mind is insulated from the world beyond the skull, then semantic value cannot exist in the world. A non-mental world can *be* evoked, but it cannot intrinsically *evoke* anything. Such separation between meaning and world is what motivates our contemporary culture to consider the world semantically mute. “The human mind has abstracted from the whole all . . . meaning, and claimed [it] exclusively for itself,” wrote Tarnas (2010, p. 432).

Within mind, cognitive associations can go on indefinitely, as endless chains of evocations: a daydream may lead to a thought, which may evoke an emotion, which may trigger a memory, which may lead to another thought, and so on (Karunamuni 2015, pp. 2–3). But once we leave the inner space of mentation by evoking an external fact in the world, the chain must end. The world is the chain’s final destination, for it cannot *a priori* evoke anything else in turn. This semantic endpoint is what we call a ‘literal fact.’ Everything prior to it is sign, simile or allegory—roundabout, indirect ways to arrive at the destination. According to our contemporary cultural mindset, the value of these indirections is entirely conditioned upon their ability to ultimately point at literal facts. Anything short of it is considered delusion, for it allegedly can’t be anchored in truth.

But does our current scientific understanding of reality truly corroborate this split between mind and world, inside and outside? Are we justified in taking for granted that the world ‘out there’ is fundamentally distinct or separate from the mind ‘in here’? If not, could the world carry intrinsic semantic value and be amenable to interpretation, just as dreams are? Could there be a valid hermeneutic of the world, a vision of it as symbolic, suggestive of something beyond its own face-value appearances on the screen of perception? What would the implications of this possibility be for the way we relate to the world? These are the questions addressed in this essay.

In Section 2, the latest experimental results emerging from the field of quantum physics will be briefly reviewed. They empirically indicate that mind and world aren’t, after all, fundamentally distinct or separate. Section 3 will show how this continuity between mind and world can explain why the axioms of rational thought describe and model the world so uncannily accurately. In Section 4, the hermeneutic implications of the mental world hypothesis will be discussed. Section 5 then compares the analysis in Section 4 with what some of the world’s philosophical and spiritual traditions

have to say about the nature and meaning of the world. Finally, Section 6 concludes this essay with a brief discussion.

## 2. The Ontological Status of the World

The mainstream physicalist notion that the world is outside and independent of mind is an abstract explanatory model constructed in thought, not an empirical observation. After all, what we call ‘the world’ is available to us solely as ‘images’—defined here broadly, so to include any sensory modality—on the screen of perception, which is itself mental. We *interpret* the contents of perception as coming from a world outside mind because this seems to explain the fact that we all share the same world beyond the boundary of our skin, as well as the fact that the laws that govern this world do not depend on our personal volition. Stanford physicist Prof. Andrei Linde, well known for his theories of cosmological inflation, summarized it thus:

Let us remember that our knowledge of the world begins not with matter but with perceptions. I know for sure that my pain exists, my “green” exists, and my “sweet” exists. I do not need any proof of their existence, because these events are a part of me; everything else is a theory. Later we find out that our perceptions obey some laws, which can be most conveniently formulated if we assume that there is some underlying reality beyond our perceptions. This model of material world obeying laws of physics is so successful that soon we forget about our starting point and say that matter is the only reality, and perceptions are only helpful for its description. This assumption is almost as natural (and maybe as false) as our previous assumption that space is only a mathematical tool for the description of matter. But in fact we are substituting reality of our feelings by a successfully working theory of an independently existing material world. And the theory is so successful that we almost never think about its limitations until we must address some really deep issues, which do not fit into our model of reality. (Linde 1998, p. 12)

This model of reality has intuitive implications amenable to confirmation—or refutation—through subtle experimental arrangements, which Linde alluded to when he spoke of “some really deep issues.” Indeed, the properties of a physicalist world should exist and have definite values even when this world is not being observed: the moon should exist and have whatever weight, shape, size and color it has even if nobody is looking at it. Moreover, a mere act of observation should not change the values of these properties: the weight, shape, size and color of the moon should not become different simply because someone happened to look at it.

Operationally, these intuitive tenets of physicalism are translated into the notion of ‘non-contextuality’: the outcome of an observation should not depend on the way other, separate but simultaneous observations are performed. After all, the properties being observed are supposed to be independent of observation. What I perceive when I look at the night sky should not depend on the way other people look at the night sky along with me, for the properties of the night sky uncovered by my observation should not depend on theirs. Clearly—and in line with physicalism—contextuality implies that the world is independent of perception, insofar as perception constitutes observation. My perceptions should simply *reveal* what the properties of the world are in and of themselves.

The problem is that, according to quantum theory, the outcome of an observation *can* depend on the way another, separate but simultaneous observation is performed. For instance, if two particles A and B are prepared in a special way, the properties of particle A as seen by a first observer—say, Alice—are predicted to correlate with the way another observer—say, Bob—simultaneously looks at particle B. This is so even when A and B—and, therefore, Alice and Bob—are separated by arbitrarily long distances. For instance, what Alice sees when she looks at particle A in, say, London, depends on the way Bob concurrently looks at particle B in, say, Sydney. If the properties of the world were outside and independent of Alice’s and Bob’s minds—that is, outside and independent of their perceptions—this clearly shouldn’t be the case; unless there is some observation-independent

hidden property, covertly shared by A and B and *entirely missed by quantum theory*, which could account for the correlations. This was Einstein's point when he (in)famously suggested that quantum theory was incomplete (Einstein et al. 1935). However, as mathematically proven by John Bell (1964), the correlations predicted by quantum theory cannot be accounted for by this kind of observation-independent hidden properties.

Consequently, quantum theory appears to contradict non-contextuality and render physicalism untenable. A conceivable way to avoid this conclusion while accepting quantum theory would be to posit that particles A and B, or Alice and Bob themselves, somehow 'tip each other off' during observation, *instantaneously and at a distance*, so to coordinate their actions and produce the predicted correlations. This, however, would require faster-than-light communication and fly in the face of the overwhelmingly confirmed theory of special relativity.

Alternatively, a physicalist could attempt to salvage non-contextuality and the notion of a world outside and independent of mind by rejecting quantum theory itself. Yet, as it turns out, since Alain Aspect's seminal experiments (Aspect et al. 1981, 1982a, 1982b) the predictions of quantum theory in this regard have been repeatedly confirmed, with ever-increasing rigor. For instance, in an experiment performed in Geneva, Switzerland, in 1998 (Tittel et al. 1998), the particles A and B were separated by more than 10 km—as opposed to the 12 meters of Aspect's original experiment (Aspect et al. 1981)—reducing the already low likelihood that they could be creating the correlations predicted by quantum theory through some kind of signal exchange. Despite this greater separation, the predictions of quantum theory were again confirmed.

Then, still in 1998 but this time in Innsbruck, Austria, another experiment (Weihs et al. 1998) was done to eliminate another far-fetched possibility: that, *in advance* of the preparation of particles A and B, 'Alice,' 'Bob' and the system responsible for the preparation could somehow be 'pre-agreeing' on a hidden plan of action, so to later create the correlations without need for faster-than-light communication ('Alice' and 'Bob,' in this case, were automated measurement apparatuses). To close this unlikely 'conspiracy' loophole, the behaviors of 'Alice' and 'Bob' were programmed randomly and only *after* particles A and B had already been prepared. Nonetheless, the correlations predicted by quantum theory were yet again confirmed.

Critics continued to speculate about other far-fetched loopholes in these experiments. In an effort to address and close all conceivable loopholes, Dutch researchers have recently performed an even more tightly controlled test, which—unsurprisingly by now—echoed the earlier results (Hensen et al. 2015). This latter effort was considered by the periodical *Nature News* the "toughest test yet" (Merali 2015). Given all this, it seems now untenable to argue against the veracity of quantum theory.

The only alternative left for physicalists is to try to circumvent the need for faster-than-light signal exchanges by imagining and postulating some form of non-locality: nature must have—or so they speculate—observation-independent hidden properties that are *not* confined to particular regions of spacetime, such as particles A and B. In other words, the argument is that the observation-independent hidden properties allegedly missed by quantum theory are 'smeared out' across space and time. It is this omnipresent, invisible but objective background that supposedly orchestrates the correlations predicted by quantum mechanics. Non-contextuality and physicalism can thus be salvaged; or can they?

The problem, of course, is that non-local hidden properties are arbitrary: they produce no predictions beyond those already made by standard quantum theory. As such, it could be argued that they represent an effort "to modify quantum mechanics to make it consistent with [one's] view of the world," so to avoid the need "to modify [one's] view of the world to make it consistent with quantum mechanics" (Rovelli 2008, p. 16).

Be it as it may, it turns out that certain specific correlations predicted by quantum theory are incompatible with non-contextuality *even for large classes of non-local hidden properties* (Leggett 2003). Studies have now experimentally confirmed these correlations (Gröblacher et al. 2007; Romero et al. 2010), thus putting non-contextuality in even more serious jeopardy. To reconcile these

results with physicalism would require a profoundly counterintuitive redefinition of what we call 'objectivity.' And since our contemporary cultural mindset has come to associate objectivity with reality itself, the science press felt compelled to report on some of these results by pronouncing, "Quantum physics says goodbye to reality" (Cartwright 2007).

More recent experiments have again contradicted non-contextuality and confirmed that, unlike what one would expect if the world were separate or distinct from mind, the observed properties of the world indeed cannot be said to exist prior to being observed (Lapkiewicz et al. 2011; Manning et al. 2015). For all intents and purposes, the world we perceive is a *product of observation*. Commenting on this, physicist Anton Zeilinger has been quoted as saying that "there is no sense in assuming that what we do not measure [that is, observe] about a system has [an independent] reality" (Ananthaswamy 2011).

So the question now is: Can some form of physicalism survive the failure of non-contextuality? We have seen earlier that the intuitive tenets of physicalism are: (a) there exists a world outside mind; and (b) mere observation doesn't change this independently existing world. The failure of non-contextuality clearly rules out (b). Can (a) still make any sense in the absence of (b)? If it can, then the world outside mind must somehow *physically change, instantaneously*, every time it is observed. The plausibility of this notion aside, notice that one never gets to see the observation-independent world, for it supposedly changes instantly, in an *observation-dependent* manner, the moment one looks at it. Clearly, the only motivation to entertain this notion is to try to salvage some rather artificial and counterintuitive form of physicalism. And even if such an attempt were to succeed, the world we actually experience would *still* be conditioned by mind, insofar as it would be an outcome of conscious perception. For the purposes of this paper, therefore, the result would be indistinguishable from a truly mental world.

Already in 2005, Johns Hopkins physicist and astronomer Prof. Richard Conn Henry had seen enough. In an essay he penned for *Nature*, he claimed, "The universe is entirely mental . . . There have been serious [theoretical] attempts to preserve a material world—but they produce no new physics, and serve only to preserve an illusion" (Henry 2005, p. 29). The illusion he was referring to was, of course, that of a world outside mind.

Naturally, Conn Henry's position is controversial and debate around it continues to unfold. Nonetheless, the experiments do show that the idea of a mental world must be taken seriously, if nothing else for the sheer power of the empirical evidence now accumulated. Moreover, philosophers have recently proposed coherent ontologies that can, at least in principle, make sense of reality without the need to postulate anything distinct from mind itself (Kastrup 2017; Nagasawa and Wager 2016; Shani 2015). These ontologies provide coherent frameworks in which the experimental results can be placed and interpreted.

Finally, notice that, although the argument in this section has been based on quantum mechanical experiments carried out on microscopic particles under laboratory conditions, we know that the implications of quantum theory apply to our macroscopic world of tables and chairs as well. Indeed, quantum effects have been experimentally demonstrated for macroscopic objects at room temperature (Lee et al. 2011; Klimov et al. 2015). As such, the failure of non-contextuality indicates that the seemingly physical world we live in is a result of mental process at work and, as such, akin to a transpersonal dream: the tables, chairs, stars and galaxies we perceive within it do not have an existence independent of our minds.

### 3. The Continuity of Mind and World

In a famous paper titled "The Unreasonable Effectiveness of Mathematics in the Natural Sciences," physicist Eugene Wigner (1960) discussed "the miracle of the appropriateness of the language of mathematics for the formulation of the laws of physics." Indeed, abstract methods and results developed purely in thought have, again and again, succeeded in precisely describing concrete phenomena. That axiomatic intuitions turn out to correctly predict and model the structure and



dynamics of the world at large is difficult to make sense of under physicalism, this probably being the reason why Wigner used the word ‘miracle’ twelve times in his paper. After all, lest we incur the fallacy of circular reasoning, under physicalism we cannot logically argue for the validity of logic beyond our own minds, so the world could very well be absurd (Albert 1985). That it is not is Wigner’s ‘miracle.’

If the world is mental, however, the correspondence between the intuitive foundations of rational thought and the way the world works is perfectly natural. That we take the basic tenets of logic and mathematics to be self-evident truths betrays their *archetypal nature* in the Jungian sense: they reflect deeply ingrained mental templates according to which thought unfolds (Jung 1991). As a matter of fact, psychologist Marie-Louise von Franz went as far as to argue that the natural numbers themselves are archetypal (Von Franz 1974). Then—and here is the key point—the fact that these archetypes extend into the world clearly indicates that the world itself is mental and continuous with our minds. If there is no intrinsic separation between our minds and the objects of perception, naturally these objects should comport themselves in a way consistent with mental archetypes. Perceptual objects should be an expression of archetypal patterns in just the same way that thoughts are, so the world should be consistent—as it is—with our logic and mathematics. The apparent eeriness of Wigner’s ‘miracle’ melts away.

To visualize all this consider the following analogy: if mind is like a guitar string, then particular conscious experiences are like particular notes or patterns of vibration of the string. In this case, the mental archetypes discussed above are analogous to the elasticity, mass and length of the string, which determine its normal modes of vibration. Some of the archetypally-defined normal modes of mind thus correspond to the laws of nature, which we discern as regularities on the screen of perception: they reflect some of the ‘notes’ in which mind naturally ‘plays’ in the world at large.

Wigner’s ‘miracle’ is not only explainable by, but also constitutes further evidence for, the mental world hypothesis. As such, it is high time we considered the implications of this hypothesis for how best to live our lives.

#### 4. The Implications of a Mental World

Strong empirical evidence pointing to the conclusion that the world we experience is a result of transpersonal mental processes at work has now been reviewed. There is no fundamental separation between mind ‘in here’ and world ‘out there,’ which explains why the archetypes of rational thought describe nature so well. Yet, the latter point is not the sole implication of a mental world: if our minds are continuous with the environment we inhabit, nothing prevents the world from *intrinsically* evoking mental contents beyond perception, such as insights and emotions.

Indeed, according to analytical psychology, our nightly dreams carry intrinsic semantic value because they are manifestations of deeply ingrained psychological archetypes seeking to express themselves (Jung 1991). By interpreting the archetypal messages our dreams present to us in symbolic form we can, therefore, achieve meaningful insights that escape the reach of ordinary waking introspection (Ackroyd 1993; Von Franz and Boa 1994; Jung 2002). Now, if the world is akin to a collective dream also produced by mental archetypes, as discussed in the previous section, *then the same rationale should apply to our waking lives*. The meanings we think to discern in the world may not, after all, be mere personal projections, but actual properties *of the world*. All empirical facts may be archetypal symbols: extrinsic appearances of immanent mental dynamics. The entire cosmic narrative may be hinting at something prior to, and beyond, itself.

In a mental world, the images we perceive on the screen of perception aren’t essentially different from our own imagination, except in that the former are shared across observers. This collective ‘world dream’ symbolically points to underlying *transpersonal* mental dynamics, just as regular dreams symbolically point to underlying *personal* mental dynamics. As such, the world is amenable to hermeneutics: it means something; it points to something beyond its face-value appearances; it evokes something *a priori*; it is not its own meaning.

## 5. What the World's Traditions Have to Say

Curiously, despite empirical evidence for the mental world hypothesis having become available only in relatively recent times, philosophical and spiritual traditions have been hinting at the intrinsic semantic value of the world for millennia. For instance, based on his in-depth study of ancient Islamic mysticism, Henry Corbin suggested that the purpose of life is to interpret the world as a metaphor of transcendent meaning. He wrote:

To come into this world . . . means . . . to pass into the plane of existence which in relation to [Paradise] is merely a metaphoric existence . . . Thus coming into this world has meaning only with a view to *leading that which is metaphoric back to true being*. (As quoted in [Cheetham 2012](#), p. 59). The emphasis is mine.)

That the world isn't literal but metaphorical implies that it isn't the end of a chain of cognitive associations. Instead, its very purpose is to evoke, to point to cognition beyond its face-value appearances.

Analogously, in a clear suggestion that the things and phenomena of the world are symbols of transpersonal mental patterns, Hong Zicheng wrote in the sixteenth century:

The chirping of birds and twittering of insects are all murmurings *of the mind*. The brilliance of flowers and colors of grasses are none other than the patterns of the Dao. ([Zicheng 2006](#), p. 105. The emphasis is mine.)

Still along similar lines, the Hermetic tradition suggests that the world is a mental creation in a transpersonal mind:

That Light, He said, am I, thy God, *Mind . . . Mind is Father-God . . .* He [God] *thinketh* all things manifest . . . [and] manifests through all things and in all. ([Mead 2010](#), pp. 3, 23. The emphasis is mine.)

It then proceeds to suggest that the world is the symbolic image of these immanent, transpersonal mental processes:

Holy art Thou, O God . . . *of whom All-nature hath been made an image*. ([Mead 2010](#), p. 11. The emphasis is again mine.)

In the West, the inception of these notions goes, of course, all the way back to Plato and his 'Theory of Ideas,' according to which the ontological ground of reality is archetypal thoughts in a transpersonal mind ([Ross 1951](#)). The visible world around us is supposedly modeled after the patterns of these archetypal thoughts, which it thus symbolically points to.

Echoing all this, Nisargadatta Maharaj, a twentieth-century exponent of the Advaita Vedanta tradition in India, said:

When you see the world you see God. There is no seeing God apart from the world. Beyond the world to see God is to be God. ([Maharaj 1973](#), p. 58).

Thus, our only access to God is through the images on the screen of perception that we call the world. These images are the extrinsic appearance of God's conscious inner life. Beyond them, the only way to know God is to gain *direct* access to God's inner life—that is, to *be* God.

I will mention just one more example, since an exhaustive review of how these ideas are represented in the world's traditions is beyond the scope of this brief essay. Christian mystic and scientist Emanuel Swedenborg wrote extensively of the "correspondences" between the natural and spiritual worlds ([Swedenborg 2007](#), p. 63). These correspondences imply that the things and phenomena of the natural world are symbolic images of deeper, transcendent truths. The "correspondences" were Swedenborg's attempt to formulate a hermeneutic of the world.

## 6. Discussion

Physicalism has served important practical purposes over the past couple of centuries. It has provided scientists and engineers with an effective—if simplistic and ultimately wrong—picture of the world, conducive to the development of technology. By thinking of objects and natural phenomena as having standalone reality independent of their own minds, practitioners could achieve the degree of detachment and objectivity necessary for describing the world without bias. The predictive models of nature's behavior that resulted from this effort now lie at the foundation of our technological civilization.

But whilst valuable in a utilitarian sense, this focus on nature's *behavior*—as opposed to nature's *meaning*—is extraordinarily limiting to the human spirit. We are meaning-seeking animals (Tillich 1952). A long and productive life enabled by continuous advances in technology is ultimately vacuous and sterile if devoid of meaning. And the same worldview that facilitates the advancement of technology precludes us from finding and appreciating the meaning of life in the world. This, in essence, is perhaps the greatest dilemma of the contemporary zeitgeist.

In such a context, the alternative notion that the world points to something beyond its face-value appearances offers enriching new perspectives. After all, the world we inhabit now carries intrinsic semantic value; a message. Like the Voynich manuscript (Reddy and Knight 2011), it is akin to a book written in a yet-undeciphered language, clamoring for a suitable hermeneutic. Ortiz-Osés's project (Ortiz-Osés 2008) turns out to rest on solid metaphysical foundations after all. Each of us, as individuals, can now give ourselves permission to dedicate our lives to *finding meaning in the world*, reassured by the knowledge that this meaning *is really there* even if we can't immediately apprehend it. And whereas the world's meaning won't disappear if we refuse to look for it, the point is that the *option* to look is given legitimacy.

Because of its preoccupation with measurement and predictive modeling, contemporary culture is forgetting to read the letter for the sake of describing the envelope. The physical universe we can measure is merely the carrier of something implied. Exaggerated focus on the predictive models of science, crucial as they are for the development of technology, may distract us from fulfilling what may be our natural and innate telos. In the words of Ortega y Gasset, "Scientific truth is an exact truth, but incomplete and penultimate, that is forcedly integrated in another kind of truth, ultimate and complete yet inexact" (as quoted in (Ortiz-Osés 2008, p. 30)).

Looking upon the world interpretatively, as a scholar looks upon an ancient text while trying to decipher its meaning, is not only metaphysically and teleologically sound, it can also make life more wholesome. Psychotherapist Thomas Moore offers us an example: by looking upon our family members as characters and our family stories as episodes of a great saga, meant to subtly evoke something above and beyond its pedestrian literal appearances, we open ourselves up to the deeper archetypal sense they express (Moore 2012, p. 32). By extrapolating this powerful idea further, we can look upon our entire life as a small but crucial element of an unfathomable, symbolic cosmic drama. The experiences we go through are no longer literal and pedestrian, but carry deeper, hidden significance. Indeed, in a mental world it is as unreasonable to interpret life literally as it is to interpret dreams literally. Whoever thinks that a dream is exactly what it appears to be at face value? Most people's instinct upon having an intense dream is to immediately ask themselves: *What does it mean?* Looking upon life in the same way—and asking oneself the same question—can bestow on it a much more spacious, open and wholesome outlook.

With its focus on closed, literal explanations, the physicalist ontology that informs the contemporary zeitgeist decrees that the world has no intrinsic meaning. Instead of an open book waiting to be deciphered and grasped, the world becomes just pixels to be measured; an endless string of quantifiable parameters carrying no message. Instead of the starting point of an open, epic journey along endless cognitive associations, wherein the meanings evoked constitute and ultimately reveal the uncanny reflection of the observer in the observed, the world becomes the end point of a botched quest that never even gets started. By doing this, the physicalist ontology gives us permission to



procrastinate in semantic nihilism and an engineered sense of closure. It stops us from pursuing what the Islamic mystics studied by Corbin thought to be the purpose of life. For the ultimate meaning of it all may not be discernible in any particular end-point or conclusion, but only in the cognitive gestalt entailed by a *circumambulation*—to use a handy Jungian term—of associative threads. It may be discernible only in a “galaxy” of semantic fields that “are intimately connected, and their significations influence one another, so that the most important sense is found diffuse in its whole” (Ortega y Gasset, as quoted in (Ortiz-Osés 2008, p. 28)).

Historically speaking, the denial of the intrinsic symbolic meaning of the world is a recent aberration (Tarnas 2010). The antidote for this aberration is an extension of the application of hermeneutics beyond all discernible boundaries. What we need is a hermeneutic of the entire cosmos; a *Hermeneutic of Everything*.

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