Lady Welby on Sign and Meaning, Context and Interpretation

H. Walter Schmitz

And let us see that our interpretation is really scientific, that is, stands every test which we can learn to apply. (Welby 1906: 4)

In recent years, the extensive and far-reaching philosophical discourses on hermeneutics have tended more and more to pass over several fundamental questions on meaning and interpretation as though they were sufficiently clarified to allow them to be tacitly presupposed or to be dealt with in terms of general references. And yet, a general controversy becomes apparent throughout the abstract treatises whenever they address understanding and interpretation in everyday conversation. This becomes increasingly evident, the further one moves from the primary situation and experience of interpersonal communication toward the understanding of historic texts which have a long-standing tradition of affecting a reading public.

The gradual unfolding of Victoria Lady Welby’s (1837-1912) significs is one example of developing a chain of thought in the opposite direction. That is, Lady Welby’s point of departure at the beginning of the 80’s of the last century are theoretical and methodological problems she ran across as part of her concern with a suitable contemporary interpretation of the Bible, and the struggle with these problems led her in the course of 15 years to the discussion of fundamental precepts of a nature concerning the theory of signs. For in the choice and support of her method of interpreting the Bible, she recognizes that the apparently clear and simple “plain, common-sense meaning” (Welby 1883: 44) of utterances or texts is unreliable, because they are often misleading, just as many traditional words of a language and their use are. Now if a language which, in the form available to us, has its shortcomings to begin with is used to speak about nonhuman, holy matters it becomes all the more clear, how closely ideas which have been passed down to us are associated with words and linguistic images that contradict our current state of knowledge and that are sure to stand in the way of an adequate concept of what is godly. For this reason, according to Lady Welby, some of the most profound truths cannot be expressed in the words of man, unless it be by means of a paradox. Therefore, in her opinion, the training accorded to an individual should cover choice not only in the realm of his acts, but also in the area of interpretation:
that there should be test, alternative meaning, choice of readings, progress in discernment, alike in nature-revelation and word-revelation, as there is choice of good and evil. (Welby 1883: 314)

Thus, there can be no final interpretation of the Bible, but rather only ever novel, contemporary approximations which are germane to a particular time. In these approximations, what we usually are prone to mean by such words must be transcended to arrive at that which could be intended as meaning (1883: 166f, 44). Consequently, truths are in all cases attainable only in relation to an epoch’s potential for cognizance and be formulated only by the available means of representation and expression (1883: 104).

These considerations determine her major areas of work for the subsequent years: a critique of language and terminology; the central semiotic question “What is Meaning?” (cf. Welby 1903), together with the problems of interpreting signs; and, finally, the communications ethical need for education in using and interpreting signs. It also becomes clear in this context why Lady Welby – with the exception of one text (Welby 1897: 43) – always expounded in her significs exclusively on sign relations with two arguments, namely the connections between a sign and its “sense”, “meaning”, and “significance”. In 1902 she outlined the extent of significs accordingly:

Signifies treats of the relation of the sign in the widest sense to each of these [sense, meaning, significance]. (Welby/Stout/Baldwin 1902)

And in the same place she writes about “sense”, “meaning”, and “significance”:

It will be seen that the reference of the first is mainly verbal (or rather SENSAL, q.v.), of the second volitional, and of the third moral (...).

What is unusual about Lady Welby’s use of the term “sense” is that, in contrast to everyday usage but also differently than in philosophy (such as “Sinn” or sense in Frege’s works), in her case the etymology of this expression and hence its broadest reach of meaning are always encompassed. Her concept of “sense” is basically organismical. Through the perspective of the theory of evolution, adaptation is a condition of experience, and “sense” is the typical medium of adaptation. Thus, “sense in all ‘senses’ of the word” (1903: 27) is, for Lady Welby, the appropriate term for what constitutes the value of experience in this life on this planet. In spite of the differentiation of sense in humans into special senses with their greatly varying types of reactions, “sense” remains an “organic response to an environment” (Welby 1911a: 79), i.e. to a large extent a function of instinct or of unconditioned spontaneous reaction. In other words, the value of experience consists of the kind of organic reaction to a stimulus which is at the same time an interpretation or “translation” of the stimulus based on the physiology of human senses.

In this context it is relevant that Lady Welby takes “value” to have this meaning even when she speaks of the “value of ‘experience’” (1903: 27) or of “expression-values” (1911a: 79) in the context of “sense”, “meaning”, and “significance”.

This general definition of the relation between a sign and “sense” assigns a direct, spontaneous reaction of an organism to a stimulus in the organism’s environment, a sign, as its value (i.e. “Implication, indirect Reference, or intimate Response”). In Lady Welby’s works there is also a more specific definition from a communications point of view (cf. Ungeheuer 1970), which sees “sense” – the expression value of linguistic or nonverbal
signs — as being determined by the specific use of the sign as well, that is by “the circumstances, state of mind, reference, ‘universe of discourse’ belonging to it” (Welby 1903: 5). For a word as such, for example, does not have a definite sense for Lady Welby. Rather it receives its definite sense only by its use in a concrete situation and in a specific context. She writes to Alfred Sidgwick:

The ‘sense’ of a statement, rather the sense in which a statement is made (an important difference for Significs) is, I imagine, one which may, like Intention, be deliberately conveyed, but which also, unlike Intention, may be unconsciously and even unwillingly suggested. The sense in which one holds a given view may be called its mental direction, context, or environment: and perhaps few of us fully realise thus the full or special sense in which their expositions or contentions are taken by their readers or hearers. ‘It was plain what he meant’, says one: ‘Yes’, says another, but ‘he did not mean it in your sense. You forget that you are a Geologist and he is an Admiral’. The Geologist perhaps retorts, and this may start an interminable argument. In reading we don’t even get this chance of ‘clearing the air’.

From this perspective, it is only consistent that the truth of a statement, according to Lady Welby, depends on the sense in which it is made and not on formal exactness and clarity (Welby 1903: 120). And what Lady Welby wrote Russell (Nov. 14, 1905), where she refers to his well-known example in “On Denoting” (Russell 1905), also becomes understandable now:

[...] in speaking of the ‘present King of France’ as bald, we intend to convey what is sheer mistake or sheer nonsense. That is, it is not meaningless (or purposeless) but senseless.

Thus, Lady Welby defines “sense” in its more general and its more specific meaning as the reference by means of signs to reality as it can be perceived by the senses, or, more precisely, to previous, present, or potential experience. Here and elsewhere in Lady Welby’s works, a sign is any object in general which stands for something else: “[...] a sign always stands for something” (Welby 1903: 311).

In Lady Welby’s third book, What is Meaning? (1903: 5), she writes about “meaning”:

The Meaning of a word is the intent which it is desired to convey — the intention of the user.

And elsewhere “meaning” is designated as “volitional, intentional, purposive, rationally idealised sense” (1903: 27) or briefly as “intended sense” (1903: 69). In Lady Welby’s encyclopedia article on “Significs” of 1911 she states:

But ‘Sense’ is not in itself purposive; whereas that is the main character of the word ‘Meaning,’ which is properly reserved for the specific sense which it is intended to convey. (1911: 79)

Thus, “meaning” is primarily defined in terms of communication as the “expression-value” of the intentional and willed use of a sign, whose value consists of the communicative intention of the speaker or writer. This makes “meaning” no more identical than “sense” with the linguistic dictionary entry. “Meaning” is not an attribute of the word as a sign contained in vocabulary, but is instead solely the sense which a communicator intends to convey by using a word or an utterance in general in a concrete communication situation.
The "meaning" of a sign that has been used is, however, not identical to the sense in which the sign is used, and the "meaning" of an utterance also cannot be reduced to the sum of the sense in which the individual signs of which the utterance is composed are used. For the speaker's intention includes more than could be expressed in ever so many words. Understanding an utterance in the speaker's sense constitutes merely the groundwork for the interpretative reconstruction of the communicative intention associated with that utterance.

However, "meaning" occurs not only in uttered words, but in any occurrence where a will or intent is evident as it is in actions.

The third expression value of signs, "significance", is defined by Lady Welby as follows:

As including sense and meaning but transcending them in range, and covering the far-reaching consequence, implication, ultimate result or outcome of some event or experience, the term 'Significance' is usefully applied. (1911a: 79)

The elements of this definition of "significance" indicate that this "expression-value" consists of any and all kinds of consequences the hearer or reader can conclude from the understood signs, no matter whether speaker or author predicted, intended, subsequently realized these consequences or not. For to say that "significance" encompasses "sense" and "meaning" can really only mean that the hearer/reader's deductions and evaluations proceed from the discerned "sense" and the implied "meaning". For the hearer, for example, the speaker's uttered sound only has value as a sign, and this value is given to him as "sense" or "meaning". In this sense, "significance" is primarily determined by communication just like "sense" and "meaning".

However, supplementing the above there is, mostly in Lady Welby's later works, a more general use of the expression "significance", which no longer necessarily includes "sense" and "meaning". In this sense, every sign has "significance" inasmuch as it is a sign. Thus "significance" stands for the basic possibility and necessity of sign interpretation itself. For in its general sense, every impulse and impression, every phenomenon and every stimulus gaining attention and causing action has a referring or at least indicating or implicating value for an individual and must therefore be considered a sign attributed with "significance" (cf. Welby 1977: 182).

Attempting to relate Lady Welby's semiotic terms to those of other semiotic approaches, one can note that her triad "sense", "meaning", "significance" corresponds to a large extent to the differentiation between "indicative", "volitional", and "emotional" elements of meaning in Dutch signifies (cf. Schmitz 1984; 1990a; Heijerman/Schmitz (eds.) 1991). Peirce himself remarked on the similarity between Lady Welby's "sense" and his own "immediate interpretant" as well as a somewhat more limited correspondence between "significance" and his "final interpretant", whereas "meaning" and his "dynamical interpretant" differ significantly (cf. Peirce/Welby 1977: 109ff).

In contrast to other sign theoretical approaches - including that of Peirce - Lady Welby in fact does not start with definitions of a class of objects which are to be taken as signs and then investigate the relations which such objects or signs can enter into with certain features. She begins at the other end, so to speak, and concentrates on the problem of meaning, that is, on questions of the interpretation and communicative use of signs. This she does in the pursuit of theoretical and practical objectives.
Lady Welby’s sign theoretical contribution to the problem of interpretation is closely involved throughout with her theoretical or philosophical views, which are of equal importance; they also lead us to her thoughts on the functions of context in the process of interpretation. Lady Welby’s critique of language was, from the beginning of the eighties, a critique of handed down forms of language usage to the extent that they prove to be limiting constraints on expressive or communicative needs or are associated with meanings, ideas, or associations which have become untenable in light of the newest scientific knowledge or in light of the results of signfic analyses. Language criticism and the shattering of linguistic rigidity are also necessary because the language at hand influences and sometimes even paralyses thought (Welby 1911b: 37).

It should not, however, be concluded from this that Lady Welby presupposed a stability of the relation between signs and their meaning, much less that the meanings are strictly circumscribed and determined. Instead, she always makes use of an organic analogy for language, emphasizing its plasticity and flexibility, to the extent that she perceives them to be given, and calling for them where they have been lost by forms of language usage and inadequate views of language. To her, plasticity is a necessary quality of language if language is to remain a suitable tool to express the many facets of changing experience in constantly changing situations from the perspective of greatly differing individuals. Furthermore, words share in the life of the society to whose language they belong, and must therefore be able to adapt their meaning to the changing state of knowledge of that society. Thus, plasticity is imperative if language is to be a suitable means of knowing and communicating. Finally, it is also the prerequisite of the potential for linguistic signs’ adapting and their usability for widely varying, modified objectives and goals.

Lady Welby’s assessment of ambiguities in language is also influenced by this view, which can be characterized as a mobilistic concept of the relation between sign and meaning: namely, ambiguities are first and foremost a positive component of any language and they account for part of its adaptability. The only ambiguities that are capable of negative effects are those which arise or cannot be alleviated due to the communication partners’ faulty grasp of uncircumventable communicative regularities (Welby 1896: 194f; 1903: 74ff). In this vein, Lady Welby saw very clearly and stressed that neither the creation of international artificial languages nor the definition of all or of the major expressions of a language can do away with ambiguities at all or even to a significant extent (Welby 1896: 194).

Another major thesis of Lady Welby concerns language’s saturation with tropes. That is, having observed the use and need for figures of speech and tropes in natural languages, she sees the basic lexico-semantic relations of language as being the same as those which are required in the study of tropes, usually assigned to the discipline of rhetoric. True, in her opinion, numerous uses of tropes, figures of speech and similes can be criticized as being misleading, unsuitable, or contradictory to knowledge stemming from science. Yet she acknowledges their inevitability, their significant influence on synchronous and diachronous changes in signs, and their fundamental function in the process of broadening knowledge (cf. Welby 1903: 34, 157; 1907: 399; 1911b: 13, 32).

In the following comment, Lady Welby shows that, in addition, analogies cannot be circumvented:
[...] the only method we have for most of our mental work, involved indeed in its primary presupposition, i.e. the likeness between our reader's mind and our own. This we have to assume though we cannot prove it, or our writing becomes an absolute waste. No one can even controvert this statement, giving reasons for dissent, without the use of analogy. (Welby 1903: 24f)

Now how, in light of this view of language and the concept of a fundamental mobilism of the relation between signs and their meanings, shall interpersonal communication be possible? What means do exist to hone in on the "sense" and "meaning" of a concrete utterance? The situation, accompanying circumstances of speech, intonation, gestures, facial expression etc. and the context are used to accomplish this in conversation. These are all ways of testing assumptions and interpretations. And just as the fundamental analogy – the assumed "likeness between our reader's mind and our own" – is tested and established in light of its effect and its results (the process of communication and the resulting modifications of goals, attitudes, and actions of the other), the usefulness of other analogies and of expressions containing tropes, but also of our interpretations, must likewise be tested. In a thoroughly pragmatic sense, Lady Welby calls for a "test by result", "result on a living mind" (1903: 120f).

In conversations, we have access to queries and paraphrases as well as extra-linguistic contexts of action as means of verification. In the case of interpreting written texts, we can rely only on the text itself. Lady Welby understands the mutual accommodation between word and context, by means of which the actual meaning of the single word and that of the context are both determined, to be analogous to the adjustment of the organism to its environment:

But in any case it [context] is coercive: so much so that surely it would be wise to say that a certain word (with perhaps some few exceptions) has but a certain core of meaning, from which indeed its variations in value must start. This of course is the condition of dictionary definition, which however itself leaves something to be desired. And above all it seems almost invariably forgotten that while we do, if we think of these things at all, make some allowance for the power of its context over the meaning of a word, we rarely if ever make allowance for the power of a leading word in a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter, on its context: although this corresponds to the influence of a 'shibboleth' or partycracy on a group of persons who are banded together in support of some 'cause'. (1901: 191)

Since the effect of the context on the single word is largely undisputed, I would like to give an example of that which is still insufficiently realized: the effects of a single word on its context. Consider this sentence by W. Benjamin:

The sources flow where they will, and wherever they unite into a great current... there arise beautifully traced slopes, between which it streams as far as the eye can reach.

This sentence becomes a broad metaphor if, as in the original, the omitted words "of tradition" are inserted after "into a great current". Thus the word "tradition" determines to a large extent the meaning of the rest of the entire sentence.

And yet, however strong the mutual determination of word and context, the two-way influence between them and that between the whole text and its parts of various size never
give us final certainty about an interpretation that has been arrived at. Every interpretation is hypothetical!

It serves us for working purposes, but that is all. Yet even so its credentials are better than any ‘Foundations’ could be, as they vindicate themselves by results. The working test is pre-eminently that which applies to language. (Welby 1896: 198)

That this must be so follows, for Lady Welby, from the fact that the meaning of a sign depends not only on the context of its use and the situation, but at the same time on a whole series of purely subjective processes on the part of the sign user: his changing focus of attention; his conclusions and associations; the relations he draws to his memories, the present circumstances, and his particular leanings towards using these signs instead of those (Welby 1893: 512f). This makes communicating his own thoughts to others as much a special problem as interpreting the remarks of others. The semantic changeability of signs is, to be sure, what allows using the pre-existing language with its limited vocabulary of signs for communicating individual thoughts, feelings, etc. in the first place, but at the same time it leads to the impossibility of fully understanding one another. This is the conclusion to which reading What is Meaning? led Shadworth H. Hodgson, the first president of the Aristotelian Society, and Lady Welby answered him (Welby 1931: 74):

If we did not agree to differ – if we insisted on a monotony of mechanical duplication of view – we should mentally sink back into the primitive cell-form.

These fundamental questions concerning meaning and interpretation – Lady Welby wanted to see “Significs” instituted as a new discipline, a basic science (cf. Eschbach 1983), to deal with them – are the questions of which I said at the beginning that more recent works on philosophical hermeneutics pass over them and tend to presuppose them as answered. Present-day hermeneutics requires the constant recollection of the problems of sign usage and interpretation in the principally primary situations of everyday communication. Just as Lady Welby required it when, over 100 years ago, she tried to solve problems associated with contemporary Bible interpretation.

Notes

1 The following discussion is a rough sketch of the results of part of my more extensive studies on the history of significs (cf. also Schmitz 1983; 1984; 1985a; 1990a, b; 1993; Schmitz (ed.) 1990; Heijerman/Schmitz (eds.) 1991). The archive research in Canada, England, and the Netherlands necessary for these studies was made possible by financial support on the part of the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, to which I would like to express my appreciation and thanks.

2 On Lady Welby and her sign theoretical approach cf. Eschbach (1983), Hardwick (1977), Petrilli (1986; 1988a, b; 1993), and Schmitz (1983; 1985a; 1990b; Schmitz (ed.) 1990). In addition, E. Walther (1983) has dealt with Lady Welby’s significs and its followers in the signific movement in the Netherlands, but her discussion does not even indicate a sufficient understanding of the three articles by Lady Welby and Mannoury to which she refers. Such hasty forays into the history of science must turn out to be mistaken. Walther bases her discussion on articles from the 90’s (Welby 1893; 1896), that is, from a period when Lady Welby had not yet attained any more definite version of significs or of the central sign theoretical terms. For this reason the “shortcomings and errors, naive ideas and misinterpretations” which Walther (1983: 411) attributes to Lady Welby can be laid at the door of only one person, namely Elisabeth Walther herself.
From a letter of Lady Welby's to Alfred Sidgwick dated August 29th, 1908; it is to be found in the Welby Collection of the York University Archives, Downsview, Ontario, Canada.


Here “meaning” should be taken in terms of the sign theoretical concept of “sense”. Lady Welby herself pointed out on several occasions the ambiguity of the expression “meaning” in English. In cases like the one here, the expression is used in the meaning of “sense”; in others it has the meaning of “intention”. The same is true of the verb “to mean”.

This example is taken from the book Bildgesegnet und bildverflucht by Jürgen Nienaa (1977: 3). According to Lady Welby, the task of signify was if not to solve the problems of interpersonal communication, at least to contribute to their improvement.

References


Welby, Victoria Lady (1906): "What is Significs? (October 19th. 1906)." Unpublished essay; Box 30, file 43, 9 Welby Collection, York University Archives, Downsvsie, Ontario, Canada.


