

Critical Comments on Toews, “Intellectual History after the linguistic turn: the autonomy of meaning and the irreducibility of experience”*

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This interesting and rather challenging article reviews a wide range of works that in common explore the relation of meaning and experience after the linguistic turn and how this relation can support the development of intellectual history to occupy a position of central importance, not only in historiography, but more broadly in human studies. In these observations I will not focus on the particular worthy critical perspectives offered by Toews regarding the books under review, but instead look at what he represents as being their potential for filling of the gap left by (what he presumes to be the) deconstruction of conventional epistemology by the linguistic turn.

Traditional historiography had made experience foundational in that our observation of the evidence of the past conveys to us a direct knowledge upon which we might construct truthful statements.

That this is a simplification is not of concern here, for it serves as a counterpoise to an opposing view that among historians is attributed to the linguistic turn, but actually was more or less standard fare well before in the philosophy science (for example in the classic work of Imre Lakatos and Alan Musgrave, editors, *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, 1970). This trend emphasizes that experience is mediated in a variety of ways, such as by our instruments of observation, axiom sets, concepts as embedded in language, social perspectives and the powers of the mind itself, and these mediations make our experience of the past very much a function of the present.

The author looks at these two models in terms of experience and meaning, and in doing so introduces two presumptions that may be problematic. First, he implies that meaning and experience in a reductionist sense are incompatible. Unfortunately, he does not explore this point, but it is clearly what he has in mind when he says that the notion of “meaningful experience” that he feels offers an escape from conventional reductionism does not represent a compromise or middle ground between them, but their transcendence. What needs exploring is whether this opposition can be transcended simply on the basis of our individual experiences of daily life rather than our action in the world as social beings.

*John E. Toews, “Intellectual History after the linguistic turn: the autonomy of meaning and the irreducibility of experience,” *American Historical Review*, 92, 4 (Oct., 1987), pp. 879–907.

The other presumption that concerns me is harder to pin down, for it seems only implicit in the article. That is, just what is meant by the word "meaning"? I'm not here concerned with arriving at an exact definition and take the word in its loose and conventional senses. That is, meaning is conveyed through language or intentional communication. It can also refer to the relation of ontology and truth. However, in the context of this article, its meaning is clearly semiotic, where it refers to a relation of signs (word-symbols that index things), some kind of relation of correspondence between symbols themselves or between symbols and objects in the world.

The problem here is not the definition of meaning, but that its representation may be unrealistically narrow. First, it reduces the mediation of experience to language, when in fact there are other mediations that do not immediately reduce to language, such as the critical apparatus that we apply to texts, the physical powers of the mind that arise from the experience of individual daily life, and the framing of the object of study by our social location. Although these find expression in language, it suggests that semantics is probably not foundational, but is also determined by factors that lie beyond consciousness. A reduction of meaning to what is mediated by language seems to arise from the linguistic turn, but it seems too narrow.

Secondly, I don't see in this article any clear distinction between past meaning and present meaning. In conventional terms, we infer past meanings from the surviving evidence, although most historians today are not likely to follow intellectual historians' limitation of evidence to texts, with all the crippling limitations this implies. While we now understand that our encounter with the evidence necessarily engages present meanings, this does not obviate that meanings once did exist in the past. Doubts about our ability to make truthful statements about past meanings only arise from a radical skepticism that reduces all meaning to present meaning. This danger Toews is determined to counter.

In terms of today's scientific realism, we have no problem attributing reality to an unobservable such as past meanings, and I suspect that any hesitancy on this score reflects an old-fashioned empiricism. However, since Toews only discusses meaning as it arises in the mind of the historian, this point is moot.

There is uncertainty concerning his word "experience". Toews seems to assume that in the case of historiography, experience is simply the (mediated) impressions of the evidence on our sensory apparatus. The only instance in the article where the historian is represented as being at all active rather than passive is in the mental activity of constructing meaning. Activity for him is mental, not physical. This seems profoundly crippling and even suggests that his pursuit of "meaningful experience" may be chimerical. It is clear that our knowledge of the world does not reduce to its passive observation, but arises primarily from its active engagement. For example, our haptic sense, which involves a simple interaction of world and body, informs us pre-cognitively of causal relations. What activity in the world does is to engage the world as a process rather than as a hypostatized object. The world in which we act offers real possibilities, but the world we observe does not.

The broadly accepted position of scientific realism suggests that there is more to the world out there than just what is empirically observable or can be passively experienced by an observer. While the definition of unobservables in the sciences tends to be a vague and a function of the domain of knowledge, in general it does suggest that what we observe is only a one-sided aspect of the world to which must be added our knowledge of unobservable properties. These are ontological statements about the world that arguably have their origin in our (social) activity in it.

Now it is true that the past, while real, is not actual, and it is only the evidence that can be acted upon

(Toews' occasional suggestion there can be a dialog between past and present makes no sense, for what is not actual cannot engage in a dialog). The point is that the evidence is not acted upon in just mental terms, but physical as well. We encounter, select, refine, sort and otherwise manipulate the physical evidence through physical activities that transform the effects of past activity into useful historical evidence. That this activity is mediated by our mental life does not imply that the evidence fails to constrain the possible conclusions we might draw from it. Again, the implication that evidence is simply a mental construction seems to reflect the radical skepticism that Toews is so anxious to avoid.

This fixation on mental determinations is probably due to his central concern for intellectual history. While Toews aims to rehabilitate intellectual history, he goes much further and suggests that if it is adequately grounded on a "meaningful experience", intellectual history should occupy a central place, not only in historiography, but in all human studies. Could it be that an adoption of the skepticism inherent in the linguistic turn is what forces us to make mental objects foundational, or could it be that the social location of an academic favors a privileging of private intellectual capacities? Toews does not wish to adopt either view, but they are not easily dismissed.

More broadly, even if meaningful experience is instead to be foundational, I worry that this excludes the great majority of people in the past whose activity certainly shaped the course of history, but not in ways that are manifest in texts. For example, textual information about a rebellion might inform us of the meaning of the event for the writer of the text, and by subtle methods we might even get some idea of the meaning the rebels gave to their action, but in simple terms, what counts is the effect of the rebellion, not what the rebels might have had in mind. While we might explore intentions to help explain motives, the historical effect does not reduce to those intentions, but depends on the action itself in relation to existing structures. For example, the actual effect might well have been an unintended consequence. Or, if our hypothetical rebellion succeeded because the peasants had acquired arms and experience using them in service to the aristocracy, we understand a reason for the historical outcome in terms that have nothing to do with their mentality. That is, while intellectual history might serve as an integral part of the interdisciplinary study of the history of meaning, this seems a relatively modest function in relation to Toews' more ambitious hope that our understanding of history be (remain) historicized.

It appears that Toews' rather vague notion of "meaningful experience" rests upon a set of ontological assumptions that I will argue are the source of the contradiction between mind and world or between meaning and experience. If so, one can't marry them if they are construed in the first place as being incompatible. Toews understands this, but does not really provide the necessary criticism of the underlying ontological assumptions.

To develop this argument, I have to pay close attention to how Toews represents the world of meaning. He argues that it is best understood in terms of a semiological theory in which language is conceived as a self-contained system of signs whose meaning are determined by their mutual relations rather than their relation to some transcendental or extralinguistic object or subject. To clear this up, it is useful to represent his formula in terms that are meaningful outside the semiological hothouse. What is being talked about here is conventionally described as an "emergent system" in which properties or behaviors that characterize the whole cannot be explained in terms of the properties of the elements that constitutes its base. The causal relations of base elements transforms them and defines their function, and this gives rise to outcomes other than what would be implied by the likely effect of just their intrinsic properties. Toews' point is that it is the structure of the whole that gives words their meaning, not any meaning that might be presumed to be

independent of context or structural determination.

The implication that Toews seeks to avoid is that language not only shapes our experience of reality, but constitutes it as well, that different languages create incommensurate worlds, and that meaning is independent of the thought of the individuals who constitute the base of the system. He goes on to say that this would reduce historiography to a subsystem of linguistic signs that constitute its object, "the past", according to the rules that pertain in the prison of language inhabited by the historian. He feels the danger is that structuralist theories of language might reduce the world to nothing but meaning at the expense of historical experience. The response to this challenge for Toews is that human individuals nevertheless are what construct worlds of meaning in response to their experiences, and these experiences, although mediated by language do not reduce to it. The works under review to varying degrees suggest a dialectical unity of and difference between meaning and experience that makes them inseparable.

Unfortunately, this remains very cloudy. On one hand, it posits the individual as having experiences for which he constructs meaning. But if this represents the base of the system of meaning, from which shared meaning arises, and if this shared (communal) meaning is emergent and non-reducible, what can be the relation of individual meaning and communal meaning? The conventional approach to emergent levels is to say that an emergent level supervenes on its base, which means that the base is necessary for the emergent level and somehow determines it, but not in terms of a simple causal relation of empirical properties that would support a reductionist explanation. The problem is that supervenience does not presume to explain specific properties, and so they appear independent of its base. If meaning emerges from experience, meaning may depend on experience, but this does not explain the dependence.

In LaCapra's objections to the sociocultural history inspired by the Annales School, he claims they are guilty of an objectification that reduces meaning to hypostatized entities, mentalit on one hand and to self-contained ideas or essences on the other. LaCapra goes further to insist that meaning production is determined by linguistic structures, where the emergent whole determines its parts. A culture is an emergent complexity composed of heterogeneous elements governed by linguistic rules that determine the essential character of these supposed objects. I gather he accuses the Annales School of a factor analysis in which each determining factor is empirically defined at the expense of structural determinations: a dialectic of hypostatized entities.

Indeed, a reconceptualization of categories seems to be necessary so that a culture is seen to emerge from the creative, productive, activity that construes the meaning of experience in a way that is subject to the linguistic rules characterizing the semiotic whole. However, there is a traditional objection to such an approach in that it threatens to subsume the parts under the whole. In an "expressive totality", the parts lose autonomy and are reduced to expressions of the whole. This has been found objectionable on political grounds. If meaning is not a mirror or representation of reality, but constructs it, the whole apparently determines its parts, and we end with an indeterminant interactionism that loses touch with the empirical specificity of experience (historicity) that Toews would like to restore. Our recognition that an emergent whole determines the parts of a system cannot reduce those parts to simply an expression of the whole any more than an explanation of the whole can be reduced to its parts. One cannot help but suspect that the problem is really with how we see things as emergent systems in the first place.

In his discussion of Agnew, Toews bring up the point that Agnew assumes that the primary reality underlying social experience in modern society is the progressive transformation of social relations through commodity production and exchange. His objection to Agnew is that this is

simplistic and we are left with a problematic relation between static and fluid models of meaning construction. What he seems to be objecting to is that the effect of commodity production and exchange actually depends on worlds of meaning and so are actively constructed and complex. However, there is a subtle point of confusion here, although I don't know if it arises from Agnew or Toews.

A conventional definition of categories is based on the intrinsic qualities of things. That is, we observe the empirical properties of an entity and base our categories on those intrinsic properties that persist and are therefore labelled "essential". Accidental qualities, on the other hand, are merely the effect of outside influences and as the result of time, place and circumstance are *ad hoc*. Historical explanation might possibly consist of a description of the effect of these exigencies on a situation defined in terms of categories that are essentialist rather than historical. Just as in covering law explanation, the concrete particular is subsumed under the abstract.

In the Marxist tradition that Agnew addresses, this concrete-abstract contradiction is replaced by the intrinsic-extrinsic aspects of a unitary process. The unit of analysis is defined in terms of its extrinsic properties, in particular the unit's causal relation with a source of potentials for its empirical development. An obvious example is that of social class. In terms of bourgeois ideology, a class refers to a set of people who share certain important empirical properties such as income. In a Marxist view, a class refers to a group of people who share a "relation of production", which is their relation to the source of their development. However, the intrinsic concrete properties are not left out, but constrain rather than determine possibilities. The object of explanation is change and development, not persistence.

What is involved here is a view not peculiar to Marx, but represents a fundamentally different way to see things (an ontology) that in a very loose sense can be taken to represent external relations as essential, and this has been manifest a long time. For example, the history of the evolution of aesthetics from the ancient Rome to Early Medieval Europe illustrates a shift in ontology from meaningful surfaces to meaningful relations. Incidentally, this is an example of an inference of meaning from non-textual sources.

This alternative view does not represent things in terms of "systems" if the term implies a whole is characterized by properties or behaviors belonging to the whole and result from the casual relation of its constituents, also defined in terms of their intrinsic properties or behaviors. Instead of representing reality in terms of distinctions and separations, this alternative ontology sees things as levels that combine these intrinsic and extrinsic relations. A level is therefore Janus-faced (a characterization I borrow from Koestler's notion of holon), but in an asymmetrical way. The intrinsic properties constrain the possibilities of the level, and extrinsic relations are the source of those possibilities. The combination of the two is a probability distribution of possible outcomes. This means the level is seen not as a thing, but as a process. The empirical constraints we represent in thought as the past; the probability distribution as the future; and the actualization of the probability distribution as the present.

This way of seeing things has, since the Enlightenment, been marginalized and so left in a very undeveloped state. However, our digression here is relevant because it suggests that the prevailing ontology is neither inevitable nor must be accepted uncritically. It suggests there is no contradiction between freedom and determinism, no threat to our conception of things arising from the observation of empirical diversity. The authors being reviewed by Toews do not appear to break with Enlightenment ontological presuppositions, but merely to rearrange the furniture. Experience is still a causal effect of the world on the sensibilities of an atomistic passive observer; meaning is

still an emergent property of the mind that arises from the causal relation of mental objects (perhaps comparable to Adam Smith's representation of the emergence of economic value from a division of labor). A socially constructed language is the mechanism by which a hypostatized social whole influences a hypostatized individual as the individual passively experiences a hypostatized world.

So while Toews would have us believe that a reconsideration of conventional categories is underway, the tensions that he admits persist might suggest that this reconsideration is not sufficiently radical. Toews believes most historians no longer see language as a transparent medium mirroring objective reality, but instead as an emergent (non-reducible) system of the signs that construct or constitute reality. But in either case, this continues to see things in terms of the causal relation of hypostatized entities.

The contradictory nature of this approach is evident. In conventional terms, an emergent system has properties that arise from the interaction of its base elements and which by definition cannot be reduced to or explained in terms of its base. As a result, the linguistic system of meaning becomes self-contained, self-defining, having no necessary empirical relation to what is other, to anything outside itself. As Toews notes, this threatens to reduce truth to mental life, which would violate the historian's traditional commitment to a scientific methodology based on the construction of truthful statements based on the experience of empirical evidence. Toews sees the reviewed books as struggling to resolve the contradiction between an admission that evidence is constructed and the ability to use evidence to convey truth about the past, but a resolution of this contradiction is never really offered. He is only hopeful that if we apply to this contradiction the same intense scrutiny and critical self-awareness that was involved in the linguistic turn, it will eventually somehow be resolved.

However, this must remain wishful thinking, and doubts are encouraged by Toews' own representation of the issue. Late in his article, in connection with the "moderate historicist" views of Taylor for which he is sympathetic, Toews asserts that the reconstruction of knowledge on historicist foundations is possible if meaning is represented in terms of its relation to historical reality and social practices. He attributes to pragmatism a view that truth is socially constructed rather than validated by an appeal to a metaphysical or transcendental foundation. While this might imply a radical skepticism, Toews feels it is likely only in absence of communal ties, of a historically situated life and specific social practices, of an intimate relation of meaning and experience, and of discourse and communal practices. But what does all this mean?

Toews usefully examines this fashionable term "discourse" and offers two definitions that are implicit in the works under his review. One is the Foucaultian notion that breaks with the rationalist, subjectivist, and evolutionary assumptions of what Toews likes to call the "Western cultural tradition" and is implicit in conventional intellectual history. But does it really represent a break? In the Foucaultian view, discourses are objectively describable and archaeologically recoverable. If I understand correctly, this means that discourses are systems of statements that have emergent properties (linguistic rules) that give them an ontological independence and persistence, which are empirically manifest in textual evidence. As unique emergent systems, they are discontinuous and incommensurable self-defining worlds having no possible relation with anything else except in terms of exclusion, resistance or domination. I suppose this is like a marketplace in which autonomous individuals can only contend and never join as social beings as "a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine..." as John Donne put it. For Foucault, action within a discourse is determined by its ordering regularities and is manifested as institutions that represent structures of domination or systems of power, for there can be no essential relationship among hypostatized entities. Toews

tries to suggest that such a Foucaultian view is self-contradictory, for if a discourse is socially constructed, it is hardly autonomous.

The alternative notion of discourse offered by Baker sees it also as an emergent system having internal logics or sets of rules that constitute the world of meaning and action. However, these structures are not static because the behavior of the whole is continually under construction, for it emerges from the meanings constructed by individuals. Toews prefers this notion of discourse apparently because it more explicitly engages the creative individual responding to his circumstances, but it would have been helpful had he articulated it in more concrete terms. I get the impression what is specifically involved is that the individual creates meaning in response to his experiences of the world (evidence of the past), and through intercommunication these meanings interact to support the emergence of a system of signs that have a positive feedback that informs the individual's interpretation of his experiences.

I hope this is not a misrepresentation. Assuming not, it does expose a set of problems. The Self-Other relation of the individual and his world, in which the Self and Other are hypostatized as self-contained entities, implies, as Pocock puts it, that the weight of tradition precludes any direct causal determination of language by experience. This counter to a naive reflection or correspondence theory of truth must be taken seriously today, but there is nothing here to take its place that might suggest our statements have any truth value in relation to the world. If academic historians cannot represent themselves as truth-tellers about the past, then they probably alienate non-intellectual consumers of their product, who expect that histories at least approximate the truth or represent a perspective on the truth, if not a simple truthful account and explanation.

It is agreed that meaning is not a simple reflection of reality, but an emergent system having its own distinctive properties. While it supervenes on base experience, we lack an explanatory tool that shows why this relation is a necessary one in empirical terms. Furthermore, since the shared rules of meaning that arise at the social level are also emergent, the relation of individual and society becomes problematic, for the individual falls subject to rules that have no empirical relation with his personal needs or aspirations. The suggestion that these rules only set boundaries for individual free action still imposes an influence alien to the individual. That we are free to walk about the prison courtyard does not set us at liberty. A natural conclusion might be that the institutional manifestation of these rules should be as unobtrusive as possible, which was the point of the Enlightenment fondness for minimalist government, but then it would seem to enter into conflict with the modern assumption of discourse that the world of meaning is all inclusive. In short, if social rules are emergent, and if individual and society are hypostatized entities, then the old contradiction between individual and society that characterizes modern western thinking seems to persist.

When Toews turns to Hollinger, he raises the issue whether the approach labeled as discourse is meaningful outside modern Western culture, for the contexts represented by history are quite diverse. Hollinger's conclusion is that it is not a program for intellectual history, but a description of its practice. I take this to mean that an understanding of history based on discourse is not universal, but limited to a characterization of the modern, western or capitalist take on things, and so is suited to modern, western or capitalist society. That may be, but one then can't help but wonder how it can then claim to represent a radical break with past epistemology. From a global standpoint, then, is not Hollinger suggesting that discourse is merely a manifestation of western hegemony?

Toews pursues this issue only in terms raised by Pocock, that the community involved here

consists of relatively equal and autonomous actors sharing a common heritage of language systems. That is, when Enlightenment ideology arose, that was its presumption. Although not entirely true at the time and increasingly unrealistic in the course of the nineteenth century. Toews' question is, can we presume a community of discursive actors? Unfortunately, his reply, however interesting and suggestive, does not seem to resolve the question. For example, if society consists of contradictory classes, then discourse finds itself in the position of being a ruling-class ideology.

While Megill sees each of the perspectives of his four prophets of extremity, Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault and Derrida, as emergent and self-contained ideational entities, at the same time he represents them as having a dialectical relation. Unfortunately, this dialectical relation is one of the interaction of the perspectives of individuals, so it is not clearly a discourse. Nevertheless, Toews notes that this critical stance in the person of Derrida arrives at a deconstruction of the world view that Megill associates with western history from the late 19th century, and Toews seems to agree that this opens new possibilities for an alternative perspective.

Unfortunately, because historical change arguably arises from the interplay of needs and possibilities (with intentions being their emergent combination), such a deconstruction of the dominant western perspective can only represent a need for something else, not any real possibility for the construction of an alternative. Ideas cannot, I believe, be disconnected from our relation to the world and to society from which those needs and possibilities arise. Megill recognizes this, for he suggests that experience does not reduce to meanings and is also determined by natural and social needs (being an empiricist he can't add possibilities in as well). The aesthetic theory of these extremists, if reduced to meanings as they apparently intend, would reduce us all to madmen or fools. Toews agrees with this assessment, but only the extent that a connection of meaning with the world and society must be preserved.

Toews turns his attention to Jay, who looks at how one discourse (totality) exists within another (Marxism). However, Jay defines discourse in terms of three concepts: one, interpreted by Toews being the synchronic/diachronic binary pair, which he reasonably enough is associated with the space/time pair; the relation of the particular and the abstract, which Toews represents as the descriptive/normative pair; and the expressive/de-centered pair that is seen as the modern version of the subject/object pair. It would appear that Jay here reproduces the conceptual contradictions that have characterized and undermined the modern western (or capitalist) world view. However, Toews focuses instead on Jays' making the relation of experience and meaning central, for which he naturally has sympathy. Toews sees in Jay the view that while discourse does not reduce to a socially-determined ideological representation of social and individual experience or to mere expressions of individual intentionality, he does not question the underlying assumption that this reality arises from a dialectic of hypostatized entities. Merely shifting our focus to an individual's relation with the world and with society, away from the meanings imposed by linguistic rules, does not challenge what is essentially an empiricist factor analysis.

Toews suggests that LaCapra derives from Derrida a whole new attitude toward the production of cultural meaning, a liberating, critical stance. The implication is that the intellectual historian's central role can develop to become the interdisciplinary temple of cultural criticism. While undoubtedly by making an intellectual effort, it is possible to generate novel insights and understandings, the underlying issue is whether such developments can result in an entirely new ontology or epistemology. A radically skeptical position would see new insights as functions of semantic rules, but fails to explain why these rules change. Toews therefore counters that meaning emerges from individual meanings that exist in response to the world and society, and therefore the semantic

rules do evolve. However, this only shifts the issue to the base level, for it is doubtful that a passive experience of the world or of society will lead to an ontological rupture rather than simply an adaptation to experience. Toews suggests Jay and Poster see the historian as engaged in a dialectic of meaning and experience, which is to say the causal relation of a hypostatized mind and world, but their interaction (if we take experience to imply acting upon the world), only results in a change in the accidental features of each, not any essential change.

Toews suggests that the linguistic turn has turned back the tide of reductionism, but it is sobering to note that in the natural sciences, reductionist explanations have proved to be ever more successful when applied to non-emergent systems. When we address a situation that entails emergent levels, it is clear, from not just the linguistic turn, that a reductionist explanation of outcomes that can arise from a knowledge of an initial situation simply does not work. That the levels have a dependent relation is clear, although it is well understood that this dependency can't be couched in terms of a causal relation of their empirical properties. The direction, rather, that things seem to be headed in the natural sciences is to define the initial situation or base level in terms that go beyond its structure to include possibilities that arise from that structure's extrinsic relations with the wider world. The structure constrains these possibilities and gives rise to a probability distribution that is actualized as process.