The "Neglected" Question of Meaning:
Toward a Consequentialist Philosophy of Discourse

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The only solution is to reject the traditional formulation of verbal behavior in terms of meaning.

—B. F. Skinner

Preoccupation with the theory of meaning could be described as the occupational disease of twentieth-century Anglo-Saxon and Austrian philosophy. . . . When he [Wittgenstein] said "Don't ask for the meaning, ask for the use," he was imparting a lesson which he had to teach to himself.

—Gilbert Ryle

In Being and Time, Heidegger contends that Western philosophy has neglected the metaphysical question of Being and its temporality in favor of ontic questions about beings; according to Heidegger, it is disastrous to conflate beings with Being. Similarly, I claim that researchers in rhetoric and composition, although they make frequent mention of meanings, have neglected to provide a coherent, explanatory account of meaning and its temporality. At times, meaning is treated, if at all, intuitively and unproblematically, as if it were already well understood and, consequently, not in need of any definition. At other times, meaning is seen by researchers within rhetoric and composition through lenses provided by other disciplines, generating the seemingly endless stream of articles and books adhering to the formula of "An Xian or Yical approach to composition theory," where X refers to some particular thinker and Y to some particular intellectual movement.1 Or, still more problematically, the term meaning is occasionally effaced entirely in discussions of

language, as if language could be adequately explained without reference to it; for some theorists, the question of meaning may be too burdened with essentialist or foundationalist baggage to be worth raising.\(^2\)

It should be clear, then, that I am not treating the term "neglecting" merely as a synonym for "ignoring": The field of rhetoric and composition has not ignored meaning in the sense that meaning has not been theorized about or discussed at all, no more than theorists of ontology have ignored what constitutes existence. But, at the same time, "neglect" is not simply synonymous with, say, "inadequacy" (that is, that meaning has been inadequately treated by researchers within rhetoric and composition). We cannot overlook the fact that this neglect is also manifested in discussions of language that efface meaning entirely. For me, the neglect of the question of meaning extends over the full range of ways in which the temporality of meaning, language, and discourse have been inadequately conceptualized (that is, by treating meaning, language, and discourse in ways that violate their temporality) or disregarded entirely.

It is (too) easy to cite numerous texts, otherwise eruditely written, in which "meaning" or variants upon it (meaningful, meaningfulness, mean, meant), if not entirely absent, are used without further comment or definition.\(^3\) I find this ease puzzling. The fact that papers with such abbreviated handlings of meaning are routinely written, published, read, and cited raises questions about why a term like "meaning" does not require further comment, especially given the prominence of "meaning" as a subject of philosophical inquiry and empirical research. Rather than a single reason for this baffling treatment of meaning, several possibilities suggest themselves: (1) the question of meaning is not the focus of the study; (2) the question of meaning is tacitly assumed already to have an "answer"; (3) the question of meaning is deliberately set aside; (4) the question of meaning is unintentionally omitted. Let us explore each of these in turn.

First, the absence of the question of meaning in a given text may be pragmatic—that although the question has not been answered satisfactorily, the asking of the question would raise too many obstacles for the work of the paper to proceed. For the purposes of the text, then, meaning may be treated as a primitive term (a term that cannot be decomposed further by being defined by other terms but must, in some sense, be accepted as is). Language is assumed to be meaningful (and it is meaningful, which lends credence to this setting-aside of meaning); therefore, the researcher proceeds to discuss particular meanings as they present themselves to him or her without investigating why they are presentable
as meaningful in the first place. This is risky, especially if a researcher operates on only a tacitly accepted theory of meaning that may not withstand careful scrutiny; but it is also almost inevitable, for to say that we must understand something completely before we may speak of it is absurd. It must be the case that language-users—researchers included—may “assume” meaning analogously to the way physicists assume that gravity is attractive in calculable ways even if they cannot explain exactly how gravity works. Clearly, any piece of research must make many assumptions about what it can safely leave out, or no research could be conducted at all; and whether a particular piece of research abstains from asking the question of meaning is certainly not the only criterion by which it should be judged. The omission may be telling, but not necessarily so.

Second, the question of meaning in a given text may be set aside, not because it is too heavy for the text to bear its weight, but because the author believes that the question has already been satisfactorily addressed, if not completely resolved. Such seems to be the view of Paul Heilker and Peter Vandenburg, for example, who do not list “meaning” as one of their fifty-four terms in *Keywords in Composition Studies*. This is a staggering omission in a book purporting to speak about the “hot topics” of a field heavily invested in the study of discourse, though the omission may say more about the field than about the book.

An important clue for differentiating whether the absence of the question of meaning can be attributed to the first possibility or the second is the way that the author advocates or rejects, explicitly or implicitly, various traditions of thought about language. Does the author appear to rigidly embrace and echo thinkers or slogans associated with poststructuralism, or linguistics, or dialogism, or phenomenology? With what confidence are these attitudes toward meaning expressed? Does the credibility of the evidence and the analysis ultimately depend upon the assumed validity of the particular tradition within which the text attempts to situate itself? I cite a brief example: When Nancy Welch speaks unhesitantly of “the surplus” of a student’s first draft or of “the latent surplus of a present moment” that the technique of sideshadowing is intended to release, her claim that there is in fact this surplus depends upon the validity of her Bakhtinian framework (384, 385). As Bakhtin goes, so goes Welch. (This is not the place to inquire into whether and why there may be a “surplus” of meaning.)

Third, the question of meaning is not addressed in a given text because meaning is not considered problematic in the first place. The question *never arises* because the author operates on a tacit, common-
sense theory of meaning without appeal to any specific theory of meaning as a grounding. That the question may not arise is understandable, for people often look “through” language to meaning as opposed to looking at language (or, it should be added, meaning) itself (see, for example, Gadamer 65; Polanyi 57; Nystrand 75–76). People frequently attend to language only when it becomes problematic, when it resists being, as Heidegger would put it, “ready-to-hand.” A person does not require a conscious, formalized theory of meaning in order to participate in meaningful discourse, and this is fortunate—for there would be no discourse otherwise. As even Noam Chomsky concedes, a child does not acquire his or her language through encounters with formalized instruction in transformational grammar; the theory is not and was never intended to be a pedagogical tool for language-learning (Knowledge).

Finally, the question of meaning is neglected in the belief that such a question is not worth raising in the first place because it suggests a foundationalism or essentialism that unnecessarily mystifies “meanings” by according them a quasi-ontological status and/or that refuses to acknowledge as a bruta factum the historical contingency of language, with claims about “meaning-in-general” being necessarily ahistorical. In a postmodern age in which we distrust metanarratives to such an extent that we are no longer inclined to ask the “big questions,” as Martin Nystrand and John Duffy put it, addressing the question of meaning may seem misguidedly nostalgic.

Because this is such a powerful motivation that resists the question of meaning, I’d like to examine three specific examples of texts whose authors are disinclined to pursue an account of meaning-in-general. First, in a recent critique of the work of Ann Berthoff, W. Ross Winterowd dismisses the importance of “the foundational notion that composition is the making of meaning” (304). Meanings are made in composing, says Winterowd, but they are more the byproduct than the focus of the process:

Now, it is certainly the case that when we use language we make meaning—willy nilly, inevitably—but no one begins to write (or talk) with the purpose of making meaning. That is, language is symbolic action, and action implies motive or purpose, and that is the foundation of a valid theory of composition and of an effective composition pedagogy. (304)

For Winterowd, questions of use/action and purpose/intention should be brought to the fore, and questions of meaning necessarily fade away
because the making of meaning happens "willy-nilly, inevitably," *unnecessarily*. This stance has implications for Winterowd's pedagogy: "As a teacher of writing, my first question to a student about his or her text is this: 'What do you want this piece of writing to do?' That question generates a dialogue that allows both me and my student to read and critique the text as a piece of real-world discourse. It allows us to treat the text rhetorically" (305). Presumably, then, a question about the meanings of the text would not lead to so productive a dialogue or would inevitably treat the text as a piece of unreal-world, arhetorical discourse.

Eleven years earlier, Susan Miller proposed a historicist, textual rhetoric that would provide "a way to account for the variability and even the accidental conditions that actually determine the practical impact (as opposed to the 'meaning') of writing" (10). Like Winterowd, Miller appears to assume that "impact" is separable from meaning; but later she moves closer to my own understanding of meaning, which I will discuss later, when she articulates her resistance only to definitions of the term "meaning" that "do not include in that term the prominent or inconsequential fate of the written text, its writer's motives toward the textual world it enters, or its historical precedents" (36–37).

In a similar reversal (that is, moving from a rejection of meaning to a reconfiguration of it), Lynn Worsham describes the work of radical French feminists on *écriture féminine* as "one of the most dramatic developments in recent writing theory and pedagogy, not only because it may reformulate our notion of literacy and its consequences but also because it could produce a crisis in composition's self-understanding" ("Writing" 83). This projected crisis would result from the resistance of *écriture féminine* to the mastery of meaning that phallocentric academic discourse, which many composition instructors have attempted to (re)produce in their students, seeks to achieve. Discussing the work of Julia Kristeva, Worsham claims that the "desire to give meaning, to explain, to interpret...is rooted in our need for meaning when confronted by meaninglessness, our need for mastery when confronted by what we fear most: the enigmatic other that exceeds and threatens every system of meaning, including individual identity" (83). *Écriture féminine*, on the other hand, "arises not from the desire to give meaning but from the desire to go beyond meaning to a topos of pure invention where discourse becomes more radically political to the extent that it approaches the heterogeneous in meaning" (84). But we later learn that "to go beyond meaning" is only to go beyond meaning that could be totalized; reminiscent of Miller, meaning does not ultimately disappear because meaning
is not essentially phallocentric, but can be made heterogeneous (90). But if one accepts the heterogeneity of meaning as a starting premise, there is no reason to reject the term or even to change it.

I find myself sympathetic only to the first reason for neglecting the question of meaning, which is a pragmatic concession to the limitations inherent in the processes of research. The approach is, perhaps, incrementalist, attempting to resolve local problems in discourse in the hope that answers to more general questions will emerge later. Thus, the question of meaning is a question deferred, not ignored. The other justifications, however, strike me as unacceptable because they treat non-explanatory or inadequately conceptualized accounts of meaning, whether formalized or tacit, as explanatory; and even the act of rejecting the question of meaning requires that one has already “answered” it to one’s own satisfaction.

Some Consequences of Neglecting the Question of Meaning
An appropriate question to ask at this point is this: So what? What undesirable consequences arise from the general neglect of meaning in rhetoric and composition (or, from the neglect of meaning-in-general in rhetoric and composition)? And what undesirable consequences arise from the neglect of meaning in particular texts? Do we really need yet another theory of meaning? Responding to the first question, I contend that understanding how discourse works requires understanding what makes discourse meaningful; that answer, of course, is dangerously close to committing a petitio principii. For this claim to express something other than a tautology (that is, for this claim to be informative), we must find specific cases in which meaning, treated as a given, is non-explanatory or even obscuring. I will examine two instances: William Vande Kopple’s essay on grammatical subjects in scientific discourse and Scott Lyons’ essay on what he labels “rhetorical sovereignty.”

A brief aside: I am not treating the work of Vande Kopple or Lyons as representative anecdotes of “the field” in the sense that their work somehow encapsulates all of the ways in which researchers within rhetoric and composition have handled meaning. In fact, my own understanding of meaning destabilizes the very notion of “the field” as something that could be so represented (see Porter, “Literature”). But since a complete enumeration of texts is impossible (and an extended enumeration impractical), I am merely providing a few concrete examples of the neglect of the question of meaning for readers who might be skeptical that meaning in fact has been neglected; I am not asking
readers to make the inductive leap from two examples to a generalization about "the field" (no more than I would make that leap based on a reading of these texts only), but to at least accept the premise that some researchers have neglected the question of meaning as I have formulated it.

The foci of Vande Kopple's study, as he notes in his succinct title, are "Some Characteristics and Functions of Grammatical Subjects in Scientific Discourse." His central finding is that these grammatical subjects tend to be unusually long, due to the use of expletive constructions, compounds of keywords in parallel or antithetical structures, premodifications of keywords, and postmodifications of keywords with relative clauses (541). Promoting the use of extended subjects, argues Vande Kopple, are pressures on scientists to be precise in terminology, to be economical in expression, and to be efficient in conveying the vast accumulation of given information on a subject (546–55). Vande Kopple speculates that the writing of scientists "reflects" a mode of thinking, labeled "paradigmatic or logico-scientific" by Jerome Bruner, that emphasizes explicitness of reference, universal and objective truth conditions, and description and explanation (556–57).4

Unfortunately, Vande Kopple does not explicate what he means by "meaning," despite his stated interest in the meaning of grammatical features of discourse (535). By questioning the meaning of particular, formal properties of texts, Vande Kopple has already bypassed the question of meaning in general, just as much of the work in linguistics (the tradition in which Vande Kopple mainly operates, judging from his list of references) does.5 That is, Vande Kopple's analysis of the data already assumes a formalist theory of meaning and simply operates within it, enabling him to count words and taxonomize them into various functions (noun, verb, adjective) and to identify more extended structures (phrases, clauses, sentences).6 Nouns are not constituents of the physical universe, even if they are used to refer to those constituents: one does not ever simply encounter a noun. However, Vande Kopple tends to speak of linguistic entities as carriers of intrinsic meaning; thus, sentences can have a "main focus" (543), scientific discourse can "refer" (538), and nominalizations can "convey" information (554), even if Vande Kopple mentions in passing the intentions and strategies of authors in constructing the texts (and either way, the meaning of the text is fixed, whether by grammar or by intention). In fact, Vande Kopple elsewhere describes one of the functions of metadiscourse as helping "readers grasp the appropriate meaning of elements in texts" ("Some" 84; emphasis added).7 This may be an ill-chosen expression, but the choice is telling.
A (second) brief aside: to a large extent, locutions like “this text refers to” are unavoidable (in the sense that I haven’t yet found a satisfactory way of avoiding them), perhaps because of the profound sway of what I will define later as meaning apriorism (the assumption that the meaning of an utterance or text is always to be found in or grounded by something prior to that utterance or text or to any interpretation of that utterance or text) over common-sense and theoretical understandings of meaning. Similar expressions appear in this essay, but they should be read in consequentialist terms, not aprioristic ones. That is, according to what I will term later as meaning consequentialism (the assumption that the meaning of an utterance or text is the consequences that it propagates), to say that “this text refers” is not to make an essentialist claim about the “contents” of the text but a pragmatic claim about a particular consequence or subset of consequences of the text, one that I presume, but cannot guarantee, accords with consequences that text has evoked or would evoke in other readers. In this way, I make claims “about” texts with the understanding that its meanings are real insofar as I experience them, but also contestable insofar as others encounter those texts. However, because Vande Kopple offers no comparable disclaimer, I read his use of these expressions as manifestations of the formalist dimension of meaning apriorism.

It is important to note that I am not disputing Vande Kopple’s data, which no doubt emerged as a result of his interactions with the texts he studied, or even his general conclusions. Clearly, Vande Kopple did not require an articulated “theory of meaning” in order to gather his data; he simply “gathered” the meanings he perceived as ready-to-hand in the text. And equally clearly, Vande Kopple did not need to spell out a theory of meaning in order to have his paper favorably reviewed by peers and published in a major journal. In fact, I readily see those very divisions and distinctions in grammatical structures that Vande Kopple uses in his analysis; but my agreement with Vande Kopple that discourse as I experience it is amenable to such an analysis explains neither why it is amenable, nor why we agree that it is so amenable. And, as Ludwig Wittgenstein might suggest, pointing to his analogy of the mesh, the fact that discourse can be segmented in various ways that are consistent is not proof that discourse “really” is segmented in those ways (6.341, 6.342, 6.35). Rather, what I am trying to emphasize is the familiar notion that data are not innocently gathered from the page, available for all to encounter as meaningful, and therefore conclusions based upon that data are not innocent or objective, either (see Fish). What makes them seem
innocent or objective is that they are not challenged (that is, they are intersubjectively held to be valid), at least by those whose opinions matter. (Of course, why such intersubjective agreement occurs is an important problem for a theory of meaning to explain.)

As I said earlier, nouns cannot be objectively measured in the way that the quantity of ink on a page could. And if that is the case, then whatever meaning people ascribe to the text—or, as I would prefer to put it for reasons to be made clearer below, whatever consequences that text evokes in and through people—is not "contained" in the text, pace Vande Kopple. This is a key point: To my mind, the claim that a text is meaningful in itself (that is, that it has an intrinsic or objective meaning) is akin to the claim that the sun has gravitational pull. An intrinsically meaningful utterance or text, if one existed, could not help but be meaningful in the same way that the sun cannot help but be gravitationally attractive. But meaning does not operate in this way, for utterances and texts clearly do not consistently produce a certain consequence or uniform set of consequences. By not attending to this fact, Vande Kopple ascribes powers to the texts he studied that they do not have. Does that matter? Only if we wish to understand how texts actually operate.

Far removed from the theoretical orientation of Vande Kopple's work, Lyons' essay is a critique of the ways that Native Americans have been colonized and controlled through white American discourses that purport to speak of and for Native Americans. White culture, according to Lyons, has been able to exercise "rhetorical imperialism," which is "the ability of dominant powers to assert control of others by setting the terms of the debate. These terms are often definitional—that is, they identify the parties discussed by describing them in certain ways" (452). Examples of such imperialism would include the incorporation of Native Americans into U.S. government treaties, textbooks, and scholarly research written by whites. Lyons argues that rhetorical imperialism should be overthrown and replaced by what he calls "rhetorical sovereignty," which is "the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in this pursuit [of agency, power, community renewal], to decide for themselves the goals, modes, styles, and languages of public discourse" (449-50). And, in the abstract to his paper, rhetorical sovereignty is defined as "a people's control of its meaning," though it is unclear in the abstract and remains unclear throughout the essay exactly what "meaning" might be and how it operates in discourse (447).
The ethical force of Lyons' essay is compelling, but I am troubled both by the implicit theory of meaning that must underlie this doctrine of rhetorical sovereignty and by the unexamined essentializing of terms like "Native Americans," "Indians," "American Indian experience," "Native discourse," "a people." Let me take each of these problems in turn. First, it is unclear what leads Lyons to believe that meanings can be controlled by anyone or that "a people" has an "inherent right" to exercise that control. But what if people may only attempt to control, fix, or set meanings, yet such control—however so much we may agree with the motivations behind the attempt—can never be final because the consequences of utterances and texts cannot be indefinitely contained? And if we think of meanings in terms of the consequences that result from encounters with utterances—rather than assuming that meanings regulate or in some sense validate or authenticate those consequences—then these consequences, however unruly or random they appear, can never be perversions or contaminations of a privileged, pure, primary meaning that people "own," for the meanings of an utterance are its consequences (Adler-Kassner 221). As Stephen Yarbrough argues, "It is impossible to maintain or protect the 'integrity' of another's discourse or our own for the simple reason that 'meaning' and 'truth' and 'value' are consequences of discursive interaction, not antecedents" (167). In fact, Lyons says as much when he concedes that "sovereignty" is a "contested term" with "shifting meanings" and when he acknowledges that "discourses of resistance and renewal have never ceased in Indian country" despite the pressures of "hegemonic versions of the American Indian story" (449, 453). To say that a people can and should control meanings is to say that a people can and should forever remain isolated and static, immune from the consequences of contact with outsiders.

This brings us to the second problem: Lyons' peculiarly nostalgic vision of "culture" or "a people" as pure, peaceful, consensual, Edenic. According to Lyons, "A people is a group of human beings united together by history, language, culture, or some combination therein—a combination joined in union for a common purpose: the survival and flourishing of the people itself. It has always been from an understanding of themselves as a people that Indian groups have constructed themselves as a nation" (454). Different peoples can even form confederations, such as the Haudenosaunee (Iroquois League), that are "based upon the principle of peaceful coexistence" (455)—so peaceful, in fact, that "Haudenosaunee sovereignty is probably best understood as the right of
a people to exist and enter into agreements with other peoples for the sole purpose of promoting, not suppressing, local cultures and traditions, even while united by a common political project—in this case, the noble goal of peace between peoples” (456). This is a noble goal, indeed, but the absence of any tension between these “local cultures and traditions,” which curiously interact with each other only to promote each other’s different cultures and traditions, seems to imply that the goal was always already achieved.

There is a vast difference between treating “a people” as a fragile construct—what Benedict Anderson calls an “imagined community” and Carolyn Miller terms a “rhetorical community” that cannot be realized except through the relentless but ultimately quixotic effort to manufacture and maintain a shared history, a shared language, a shared culture—and treating it, as Lyons consistently does, as an actual collective of people welded together by history, language, and/or culture. This latter treatment assumes that history, language, and culture exist monolithically enough, purely enough, and substantially enough to bind persons together across space and time; but the assumption that history, language, and culture can do this is neither proof that they can, nor an explanation of why they can.

Does Lyons’ failure to theorize key terms like “history,” “language,” “culture,” and “meaning” matter? Yes, but only if one rejects his main arguments because they are grounded on implicit and, more importantly, faulty assumptions about spatialized and homogeneous history, language, and culture and about fixed meanings that peoples possess by inherent right. In short, I am hoping, through a propagation of the consequences of this essay, to inaugurate and promote an always partial, always transient community in which arguments such as these are rejected.

Toward a Consequentialist Philosophy of Discourse
This project arises from my sense that ending the neglect of the question of meaning is crucial for rhetoric and composition (and beyond it); that our field must develop a rigorous, explanatory theory of meaning, one capable of avoiding the pitfalls that attend classical, modern, and contemporary treatments of meaning; and that rhetoric and composition is uniquely positioned to pursue such a theory because of its interdisciplinarity. These are three admittedly provocative claims, in several ways, for they suggest (1) that the field does not currently have a well-developed, coherent understanding of meaning; (2) that questions
about the meanings of texts or the construction of those meanings cannot be addressed adequately without an understanding of meaning in a more general sense; (3) that the theorization of meaning should be prominent in contemporary inquiry until such an understanding is achieved; and (4) that as members of a field of research noted, perhaps even celebrated, for its eclecticism (Bizzell; Gates; Lunsford; Worsham, "Rhetoric"), we have the potential for constructing such a theory rather than importing one from other domains of inquiry because we need not have obstructing disciplinary commitments to any particular theory or methodology.

Of course, the explicit or implicit conceptualizations of meaning that appear in rhetoric and composition cannot be isolated from the larger, historical propagation of ideas about this elusive term. To understand why meaning is treated as it is variously treated within our field, we must take a wider perspective, tracing as far as possible the myriad ways meaning has been theorized (a broad project that this essay can only allude to, not complete). What emerges from such an investigation (even a partial one), I argue, is the inadequacy of treatments of time in considerations of meaning. Most of the important and intractable problems confronted by theorists—for example, accounting for the stability of discourse and its elasticity; the conventions of language and their misappropriations; the materiality of discourse and its temporality; its systematicity and its anomalousness; its memory and its forgetting—can be traced to inadequate theorizations of the connections between time and meaning that fall under the rubric of what I call meaning apriorism. The central tenet of meaning apriorism, which informs in one way or another every approach to meaning with which I am familiar, even those that struggle greatly against it, is that the meaning of an utterance is to be found always in some sense prior to that utterance or to any interpretation of that utterance—that if we are to look for meaning—as a speaker or writer, listener or reader—we must look behind us in time.12

Meaning apriorism involves a relation of some kind—or, better, sets of relations—between meaning and time, even if they are relations only of negation or denial. Three such relations maybe formulated as follows: meaning apriorism (1) locates meaning outside of time entirely in a transcendent, panchronic, eternal realm of divinity or of logic; (2) flattens time and its relationship to meaning by rendering time in spatial or absolute (Aristotelian or Newtonian) terms; and (3) distorts the temporality of discourse by treating the movement of discourse as evolution and
the movement of time as *duration*. In each case, the play of time and meaning is poorly conceived; and one of my central arguments is that distorted conceptions of the relationship between meaning and time necessarily lead to distorted conceptions of discourse: we cannot be clear about meaning if its relationship to time is already opaque in our thinking. Such opacity has led theorists into unnecessary dilemmas that force them to dismiss some quite meaningful linguistic phenomena as *secondary*, *parasitic*, or *meaningless*.

What I hope to offer, then, is the groundwork for a coherent philosophy of discourse, one that *integrates* meaning and time by fusing the meaning of a sign to its consequences (what I term *meaning consequentialism*), a claim that itself has evoked and will continue to evoke manifold consequences which, as they emerge, will illustrate the unfolding or, as I prefer to call it, the *propagation* of meanings. To pursue this project requires drawing upon the insights and dilemmas of many fields frequently opposed to or substantively isolated from one another: cognitive science and psychology; communication theory; composition and literacy studies; critical theory; cultural studies and anthropology; discourse and conversation analysis; hermeneutics; history; linguistics; literary theory; philosophy of language, mind, and time; rhetoric; semiotics; sociology/social theory; even theoretical physics. I am convinced that isolationist (or disciplinary) currents of thought in these disciplines lead to impoverished conceptions of discourse; but I also see important connections between these disciplines through overlapping concerns about (a) the production, dissemination, and consumption of meanings and/or discursive practices *through time*; (b) the proper theorization of formalized and decontextualized abstractions such as *culture, society, language, and discourse communities*, as well as critiques of their feasibility as analytic terms; (c) the acquisition and use of "language" by individuals through time and the connections between individual "language" users and social formations; (d) the relationships between past, present, and future, especially as they are represented (or created) through discursive practices; and (e) the construction of appropriate methodologies for studying discourse and/or time. Of course, the balancing act must be subtle, excruciatingly so, in order to avoid accusations of "thinness" often leveled at interdisciplinary research, but we cannot expect to find quick explanations for the complexities of discourse.
Manifestations of Meaning Apriorism

For the concept of probability or uncertainty is simply not applicable to the acts of giving meaning which constitute philosophy. It is a matter of positing the meaning of statements as something simply final. Either we have this meaning, and then we know what is meant by the statement, or we do not possess it, in which case mere empty words confront us, and as yet no statement at all. There is nothing in between and there can be no talk of the probability that the meaning is the right one.

—Moritz Schlick

The truth is that the discourse should have a meaning immediately evident, or it will never have one.

—Henri Bergson

I have already characterized the central premise of meaning apriorism as the assumption that the meaning of an utterance or text (or any sign) is to be found always in some sense prior to that utterance or text or to any interpretation of that utterance or text. In other words, meaning is always (at some point) grounded in the past and bounded by it, or it is grounded in and bounded by things (objects, entities, events) that are themselves panchronic, essentially atemporal.

This central premise, however, can be made manifest in a variety of ways: (1) the belief that if the meaning of an utterance changes for an interpreter, that change necessarily evolves out of the previous meaning(s) (what I term the principle of evolution); (2) the belief that the listener "completes" or "finishes" the construction of meaning, so that the meaning becomes a bounded and isolated historical fact or event (principle of completion); (3) the belief that the meaning of an utterance is a single unit (principle of unity) or (4) a "bounded" multiplicity or ambiguity (principle of scope) and is (5) static (principle of stasis); (6) the belief that the meaning of an utterance is housed within the mind of the speaker and/or fixed by his or her intentions prior to the production of that utterance (principle of ideation); (7) the belief that meanings, constrained by phonological, orthographical, morphological, syntactic, and pragmatic "structures," form an immense lattice-work (a "language")—whether conceived as totalizable or open-ended—that may be simultaneously studied holistically and diachronically, within an individual speaker (principle of linguistic holism) or (8) a social unit of varying sizes (principle of linguistic spatialism), without or with only minimal or
uninteresting distortion; (9) the belief that meanings may exist entirely apart from concrete utterances or, in some important sense, from language users (principle of formalism); and the belief that these meanings ultimately derive from some foundational origin, whether (10) innate biological endowments (principle of innatism), (11) the laws, objects, processes, and events of the physical universe (principle of empiricism); (12) the immutable laws of logic and reason (principle of rationalism), or (13) a mystical order of nature or the divine mind of God (principle of mysticism).

A general pattern emerges from these thirteen principles; there is a clear sense of movement in this series, but it is marked by retrogressivity: the movement of meaning is a movement backwards in time. We begin, in (1: principle of evolution), with a Peircean or Bakhtinian chain of interpretations, each one linked to the preceding one; we can arrive at the most recent or final interpretation—for Peirce concedes the pragmatic necessity of an end to interpretation—only in light of what precedes it. This is the limit of meaning apriorism, the extent to which this doctrine may be stretched before unraveling entirely. These interpretations, it should be noted, occur within the individual mind as part of the processes of semiosis, interpretation, and/or discourse. This succession of interpretations has an origin, a first interpretation, which is formed in response to the speaker’s material utterance (2: principle of completion); this first interpretation is an attempt to decode or decipher the meaning already within the utterance, and that interpretation is “successful” or “meaningful” only insofar as it duplicates this prior meaning. But for this “duplication” or “reduplication” or “reproduction” to operate, the meaning of the utterance must be assumed to be either unified or at least bounded in size and “frozen” in time to allow for complete (or sufficient) mapping (3, 4, 5: principles of unity, scope, and stasis). The meaning of the utterance becomes an unalterable historical fact, set in place by the semantic “concrete” of an originary and organizing principle (intentions, literal meanings, conventions, genres, reference, context). The mistake is to assume that the meaning(s) of an utterance mirror the unique particularity, materiality, unalterability, and duration of that utterance.

But meaning apriorism cannot rest here with the meaning of the utterance as the starting point, for what “caused” or “generated” this meaning in the first place? Why is the utterance meaningful? The answer offered by meaning apriorism is, once again, to look further back in time. It is presumed that the speaker has full control (see Bakhtin’s “speech plan” [77]) even before that meaning is instantiated in a concrete
utterance (6: principle of ideation); the thought precedes and constructs
the utterance, so we cannot account for the meaning of that utterance
without in some way incorporating this thought into our interpretation:
the meaning of the thought explains, guarantees, authorizes, or fixes the
meaning of the utterance.\(^5\) However, thoughts are intelligible only
within an a priori "web" of thoughts (Quine)—the meaning of the thought
is explicable only in terms of a choice made within that pre-existing
network called a "language," which the speaker has in toto at any
given moment (7: principle of linguistic holism) and which is also—
mostly or imperfectly—shared by members of a larger discourse
community (8: principle of linguistic spatialism). Individual meaning
is an internalization of communal meanings (see Luckmann; Schutz;
Vygotsky), perhaps "learned" even as a complex, conditioned reflex
(Skinner).

This system of meanings can be explained in terms of already existing
pragmatic language games with expressible or inferable rules (see Aus-
tin; Searle; Searle and Vanderveken) or in terms of an abstract, formal-
ized system—a calculus of meaning (9: principle of formalism) (see
Carnap; Chomsky, Syntactic; Tarski); the regularity of language-use
(discourse/performance/parole)—a product of linguistic "competence"
that is always liable to misfires in "performance"—is simply an unfolding
of the a priori rules of language-as-system (language/competence/langue),
which would be comprised of well-ordered pragmatic, semantic, syntac-
tic, morphological, orthographical, and/or phonological rules. But, in
order for languages to be universally translatable or universally acquir-
able, meaning apriorism explains this orderliness of language-as-system
in four ways, which may be separate or which may overlap. First, it is a
result of innatism (10: principle of innatism), with the biology of
cognition as master code (Fodor; Pinker). Second, it is a result of logical
atomism (11 and 12: principles of empiricism and rationalism), which
posits timeless "propositions" that underlie "synonymous" sentences in
different languages and that exist or at least subsist even if never thought
of by a subject of consciousness; and these propositions form the web of
a universal logic that underlies different modes of representation, with
meaning coded into the timeless, mindless—but also rational—logic of
the physical universe (Frege; Wittgenstein). And third, it is a result of
mysticism (13: principle of mysticism), in which all meanings are con-
tained within the omniscient mind of a divinity or some other kind of
spiritual entity and subsequently revealed to human beings (Aquinas;
Augustine; Emerson).
I suggest that my taxonomy of thirteen major principles is better suited to handle the nuances of and highlight some unsuspected parallels between theoretical approaches to meaning than, for example, the familiar taxonomies offered by the surveyors of rhetoric and composition (for example, the categories of expressivist, cognitivist, constructivist, social constructionist, formalist) (also see Porter, "Literature"). However, each of these principles in its own way is *locative*: each principle places meaning in certain privileged locations—whether they be transcendental, abstract, or virtual dimensions (mysticism, rationalism, formalism, scope); physical reality (innatism, empiricism); social groups or practices (spatialism, evolution, completion, scope); cognitive processes (ideation, holism, completion); or contexts (stasis, unity).

Although these locative principles imply conceptions of time, none of them is welded to a particular conception; thus, what we require is a set of temporal principles for meaning apriorism that "cut across" the locative ones. These temporal principles are: (14) the *principle of panchronism*, which denies the temporality of time by denying its movement (though experienced sequentially, time does not progress: past, present, and future have equal reality); (15) the *principle of simultaneity*, which denies the temporality of time by denying its relativity (treating time as an absolute standard shared by all objects and regions of the universe); and (16) the *principle of durativity*, which denies the temporality of time by denying its accidents, discontinuities, and losses. Consequently, meaning apriorism is made manifest through thirteen locative principles and three temporal principles.

No doubt, the "pie" of theories of meaning could be cut in many other ways, too, either by shrinking the number of principles still further or by multiplying them greatly. For example, it is possible to combine these thirteen major principles into a set of more generalized principles. Consider this higher-ordered set of six principles: (I) the *principle of transcendence* (encompassing mysticism and rationalism), which grounds meaning in a transcendent otherworld constituted by divinity or logic; (II) the *principle of integrity* (stasis, unity, scope), which assumes that meanings are treatable only as individuated wholes; (III) the *principle of physicalism* (innatism, empiricism), which locates the foundation of meaning in an objective reality; (IV) the *principle of structuralism* (formalism, spatialism), which posits that meanings form an abstract system—whether conceived as an independent entity (langue) or the
underlying logic that regulates discursive practices (languages, genres)—
and that the meaningfulness of a linguistic sign depends upon the
placement of that sign in relation to other signs; (V) the principle of
constructivism (ideation, holism), which grounds meaning in an
individual's intentions or other cognitive states and processes; and (VI)
the principle of interactionism (evolution, completion), which treats
meaning, not as a private possession of individuals, but as an outcome of
interactions between interlocutors.

Other arrangements can no doubt be made as well. But my own desire
is to avoid not only reducing meaning apriorism into a few principles that
risk blurring the subtleties of the analysis, but also amplifying meaning
apriorism into so many principles that they lose their sense of connection
and appear merely ad hoc. I think that the six higher-order principles,
though they have limited usefulness, are too blunt to carve the intricacies
of meaning apriorism; therefore, I will rely upon the locative and
temporal principles already discussed, which are sufficiently differenti­
ated yet still integrated both internally, in terms of the various theories of
meaning subsumed under the principle, and externally, in terms of the
differences and connections between the principles. That is, these prin­
ciples highlight important distinctions within theoretical approaches to
meaning, yet they are not autonomous axioms. Not only can a single
theory of meaning manifest multiple principles without contradiction,
but also each of these principles can be intimately linked to others almost
to the point of indistinguishability. For example, there is a strong
connection between variations of innatism and constructivism to the
extent that psychological models of the mind often include the biological
"machinery" of cognition. Does it make sense to draw a hard line, then,
between innatism and constructivism, even if innatism need not entail
constructivism?

I end this overview of meaning apriorism with a cautionary note: One
would search in vain for a theory that labels itself "meaning apriorism," and I am not asserting that any particular theory fully articulates or
commits itself to meaning apriorism. Rather, I think of meaning apriorism
as an analytic construct or useful myth that illuminates important simi­
larities in the consequences of classical, modern, and contemporary
treatments of the relations between meaning and time, without sug­
gesting that such consequences were inevitable, incontestable, and
self-propagating.
A Brief Sketch of Meaning Consequentialism

Words are flowing out like endless rain into a paper cup,  
They slither wildly as they slip away across the universe.  
—John Lennon and Paul McCartney

I suffer from an embarrassment: I have no workable theory of meaning in hand. This is, however, an embarrassment that my antagonists share; nobody has a workable theory of meaning in hand. . . .

—Jerry A. Fodor

Before sketching my own consequentialist philosophy of discourse, I think it necessary to address the question, “What is a theory of meaning supposed to do?” I take this to be a normative question, rather than an essentialist question (as if a theory of meaning could have only one goal), so I can only offer some of the key assumptions that have guided and continue to guide my project of theorizing meaning:

• I will not treat—as research in a wide range of disciplines does—meaning and meanings as givens, but will investigate the conditions that create the experience of givenness;

• I will not offer—as might classical, modern, or contemporary rhetorics in the handbook tradition—advice regarding how to propagate certain desired meanings, but will theorize why and in what ways meanings propagate in accordance to and apart from our intentions, and desires;

• I will not provide—as would certain traditions in philology, hermeneutics, and textual criticism—a method for determining the meaning(s) of an utterance, but will demonstrate why such determinations can only be provisionally made (and, therefore, aren’t really “determinations” at all)18;

and, most importantly,

• I will not assume a priori—as various antifoundationalist approaches to language must—that meaning has no essential properties, but will explain why these properties do not prohibit, but in fact result in, the propagation of contingent, even contradictory meanings. That is, I will not rest with the assertion that meaning is contingent or that meanings proliferate or that meanings may even be contradictory, but will attempt
in a principled way to explain why meaning and discourse operate as they do. To understand why the meanings of an utterance or text may be contradictory does not require an explanation that is itself self-contradictory.

I realize that this last bulleted item is likely to be especially contentious because of the embrace of antifoundationalism—at least in terms of meaning or language—within rhetoric and composition and beyond it. I do not reject antifoundationalism because it is self-refuting (in the sense that advocates of relativism are often accused of treating claims about relativism as objective truths), which it may be (see Dasenbrock; Porter, “Methods”), but because I find antifoundationalist theories to be, in the end, unsatisfactory and unproductive ways of conceptualizing language, meaning, and discourse—and not simply because they, too, fall comfortably under the rubric of meaning apriorism. Antifoundationalist theories not only fail to provide an explanatory account of the origin of meaning or language (see Hirsch; Hirsh-Pasek, Golinkoff, and Reeves; Spellmeyer, “Being”), but they also prohibit the very raising of questions about those origins. The word “origin” itself is distrusted, a holdover of modernist, Enlightenment thought; and language itself, we are repeatedly assured (Barthes, “Death”; Derrida; Gale), actively resists such questions.

This prohibition on origins, it should be pointed out, conveniently absolves antifoundationalist theorists from tackling some very perplexing and, perhaps for these theories, ultimately insuperable problems not only about meaning and language, but also, more importantly, about their own theoretical constructions. For example, consider Jerry Fodor and Ernest LePore’s criticism of antifoundationalist thought within the philosophy of science: “To reject foundationalism in the philosophy of science is precisely to reject the notion of a ‘first scientist’ in favor of the idea that science begins in media res,” producing a puzzling “steadystate [sic] picture of the physical sciences” (65). I find this a persuasive objection, and I argue that antifoundationalist theories of language exhibit this kind of steady-state, a priori thinking: languages, meanings, social formations, and so on are treated as if they have always already existed. For example, Richard Rorty’s (and, consequently, Michael Oakeshott’s) “Conversation of Mankind” has been characterized as a process that “has no beginning or end . . . [but] keeps rolling of its own accord, reproducing itself effortlessly, responsible only to itself” (Trimbur 606). And Bakhtin claims that
any speaker is himself a respondent to a greater or lesser degree. He is not, after all, the first speaker, the one who disturbs the eternal silence of the universe. And he presupposes not only the existence of the language system he is using, but also the existence of preceding utterances—his own and others—with which the given utterance enters into one kind of relation or another. . . . (69)

This position, of course, conforms to Bakhtin’s dialogic, social-interactionist conception of language and meaning, but does it account for all of the phenomena of discourse? Was there never a “first speaker”? Only if discourses have no beginnings; only if language was spoken prior to the existence of speakers. Note that Bakhtin’s exclusion of a first speaker isn’t accidental, for the existence of a first speaker—or even multiple “first” speakers—would throw into doubt his generalizing dialogic features of discourse into constitutive features of discourse.

“The eternal silence of the universe” has been disturbed so thoroughly and for so long—at least on the mote on which we reside—that it is perhaps difficult to conceive of that silence ever having been or, even if it had been, of that fact having any bearing on questions about contemporary phenomena of discourse. But I suggest that a theory that can avoid a steady-state, a priori treatment of meaning and discourse by explaining in a principled way how meanings and discourses could begin, possibly ex nihilo, in addition to accounting for the phenomena that occur afterward, would be the more fruitful and useful—because the more inclusive—theory. I am not claiming that meaning consequentialism already provides answers about the origins of meanings, but at least it has the potential to do so by not excluding them a priori.

As I have argued elsewhere, rejecting antifoundationalism need not entail a return to a modernist or positivist conception of Truth, even if we cannot or should not dispense with truths entirely (Porter, “Methods”). What remains of truth, then, is pragmatic concept, a standard to be sought even if never achieved with complete certainty (James; Popper). Although people must of necessity hold many true beliefs (Davidson), no single belief, however strongly held, is beyond the possibility of falsification (Popper; Sellars); as Hilary Putnam puts it, “we never have an absolute guarantee that we are right, even when we are right” (“Two” 96). My hope, then, is to say things that are “right” about meaning, language, and discourse, even if I cannot provide absolute proofs.

But what are these “things” that I hope to say? What is meaning consequentialism? What would a full explication of a consequentialist
philosophy of discourse look like? The latter two questions cannot be answered because in a very real sense meaning consequentialism does not yet "fully" exist and may not ever "fully" exist: meaning consequentialism is not waiting patiently in the future for its articulation into language. And I am also well aware that this essay alone—or even all the other work I've done—cannot call meaning consequentialism into being because of the complexities involved. The approach to meaning consequentialism must be incremental, through the patient explication and analysis of some of its key concepts; and this task, beyond the scope of the present essay, is one that I am pursuing in my research. And finally, the "meaning" of meaning consequentialism depends also upon the propagation of its consequences beyond me, and those consequences are not for me to control.

However, this "failure" to provide a full articulation of meaning consequentialism should not be taken as an indication of the paucity of my current conceptions of it. The central premise stands as a bold, even counterintuitive, conjecture: the meaning of a sign is its consequences. But I have only begun to realize the innumerable consequences, those that are already and those that are yet to be, inaugurated by that premise.21 This section, then, is my attempt to highlight some of those consequences, thereby providing readers with a sense of the substantive yet fluid development of my theorization of meaning consequentialism; of necessity, the entries below will be brief, with some concepts presented only aphoristically. My hope is not to persuade readers that the premises of meaning consequentialism are valid or true, but only that they have been rigorously constructed and are intriguing enough to merit inquiry within and, more importantly, beyond this essay.

Meaning consequentialism "currently" extends over such claims as the following22:

- Being consequential is "inherent to the notion of signs" (Freadman; see also Peirce 1.213); something that is not consequential cannot be a sign.

- Utterances, not sentences, are the primary units of discourse (see Bakhtin).

- Each utterance is a unique particular (cf. Bakhtin).

- Meanings are consequences of utterances.

- An utterance or text is polysemic if it propagates more than one consequence. An utterance or text does not propagate more than one
consequence because it is polysemic: polysemy is dependent upon consequentiality, not consequentiality upon polysemy.

- Whatever stability of meanings an utterance has over time is a result of, not the cause of, the stability of its consequences; the utterances with the most stable meanings, then, may be those that are the least consequential (that is, that propagate the fewest number of consequences).

- Interpretations are consequences of utterances; but the consequences of utterances extend beyond human cognition and into the material world. In this way, meaning consequentialism avoids grounding meaning in an anthropocentric constructivism in which "only people can mean" (Halliday 207).

- From the vantage point of any interpreter, an utterance may already have meanings; but these meanings are only anterior to, not pre-given for, any subsequent act of interpretation (see West and Olson 246–48).

- An utterance has as many meanings as it has consequences. These consequences may be conflicting and even contradictory: the principle of non-contradiction does not determine what meanings are permissibly propagated.

- An utterance cannot be "exhausted" of meanings until it no longer generates consequences.

- We may (try to) think of the meaning of an utterance as the total set of all its actual consequences; but this meaning cannot be conceptualized because (a) the total set of all actual consequences is inherently open-ended, (b) the meaning of each consequence itself is open-ended, (c) the total set of all actual consequences does not form a "super" consequence that can be cognized, and (d) the very act of compiling a complete list of consequences for the expressed purpose of compiling a complete list would itself produce at least one more consequence of the targeted utterance, ad infinitum. One cannot interact with an utterance without propagating additional consequences. This conception of meaning, I suggest, preserves the question of meaning without invoking a metaphysics: meaning is ineffable, not because it is transcendent, but because its ceaseless proliferation into a manifold of concrete consequences outpaces any attempt to contain or quantify it (Barthes, "From").

- The meaning of an utterance is neither an average of all its particular meanings, nor a court of final appeal for resolving disputes about
meanings; for the meaning is not a foundation, but a temporally (and spatially) distended outcome.

- An utterance is “thrown” or “projected” into the world (cf. Heidegger). Speakers and writers can only predict or hypothesize meanings, not master them: The meanings of an utterance always exceed our grasp. The consequences of an utterance are unknowable in advance because they are not determined in advance: An utterance does not “contain” its consequences which the passage of time subsequently reveals (like the “unfurling” of an already made flag; see Bergson 21). We are always confronted by the physical—as well as phenomenological—uncertainty of the “event horizon” of meaning.

- There can be no purely synchronic language, whether conceived of in terms of formalized, autonomous systems (cf. Saussure) or international or national languages, regional dialects, or local language games (cf. Bloomfield; Humboldt; Lyotard). Discourse must always be temporally distended. There isn’t one single unbroken chain connecting all past, present, and future utterances, but innumerable strands (some interweaving, some dispersed, some terminated); these strands unfold and propagate at different speeds and with different scopes (cf. Kaufer and Carley 25). No utterance affects society “as a whole”; and most only produce immediate, local effects.

- Time is not (a) an added dimension to space that exists all-at-once (as a panchronic timescape) even if experienced sequentially, (b) a flat plane of simultaneity spanning the entire universe, or (c) an unfolding continuity. Rather, time is relative, granular, discontinuous, yet also productive: time is traumatic, but also fecund—a dispersion of localized, contingent continuations and disjunctions without an essential, a priori continuity (see Levinas).

- Communication is less a matter of “sharing space” (proximity) than of “sharing time” (synchronicity). Interlocutors—even proto-interlocutors such as infants interacting with their parents (Butterworth and Grover)—cannot simply be in spatial proximity; they must also be reciprocally “attuned” to each other in what Ragnar Rommetveit has called a temporarily shared social reality (78).

- To keep discourses relatively stable (to keep people relatively synchronized through discourse) requires a massive, sustained effort carried out by educational institutions, media outlets, political institutions, religious institutions, and so on. Because discourses are not perpetual motion machines, they must be sustained by people with vested
interests who are willing to enforce these "official" discourses through schools until they become almost automatic for people to use and accept without question (Bourdieu 45). This is the part of the human cost, the "violence" of a system in which "the speech of the few has drowned out the bitter silence of the many" (Spellmeyer, Common x).

- Utterances and their consequences are subjected to discipline—that is, they must be made docile, useful, and predictable, as must human beings (see Foucault, Discipline; Nietzsche). Thus, discourses are sites of constant struggle and negotiation (Vološinov).

- There is a tyranny in associating meanings only with communication—as if there cannot be meanings in the absence of communication.

(In)Conclusion
What I have argued here, I assert with confidence, not with certainty; what I have offered is a series of bold conjectures to be examined, not a list of dogmas to be defended at all costs. I agree with C. Jack Orr’s critical-rationalist stance that “bold and creative theoretical variations are required for epistemological progress” (118) and that we can learn from even a failed conjecture; but at the same time, I believe that we should not reject a theory immediately for failing particular tests or for failing to provide ready-made answers to all questions. In short, what I am asking for is not an indefinite immunization of meaning consequentialism from critique, but, as Paul Feyerabend might put it, a period of grace in which an inability to immediately answer all questions or reconcile all initial refutations does not immediately consign meaning consequentialism to the scrap heap of theories, for if we cannot discuss or propose what we do not know, then we should all be reduced to the stillness of Cratylus or of Wittgenstein at the end of his Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus: “Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent” (7). Eternal silence would enfold the universe once more.

In any event, this utterance itself must come to an end (if not now, then when?); so, until its next breaking, silence.

Notes
1. Of course, these importations often serve as valuable introductions for members of our field to ideas at work in other disciplines, thus widening the available perspectives on meaning, language, and discourse. They become problematic, however, when these new perspectives are absorbed without critique, treated in isolation from alternative intellectual movements, and/or
framed in such a way that our field appears to be merely a site for applying theoretical approaches to meaning and language rather than as a equal contributor to the understanding of them; and I readily concede that my own published work on the philosophy of Donald Davidson and rhetoric and composition ("Pedagogy") may be read in this way, despite my intentions that it not be. The derivativeness of much of the research within rhetoric and composition may account in part for the fact that so little of our theoretical work is exported to other disciplines. That is, our field is comprised primarily of borrowers, not lenders, when it comes to theorizing of meaning, language, and discourse. We can do better than that.

My point is not that theorists within rhetoric and composition shouldn't read or cite work produced outside of our field—or even that we have the ability to determine whether our work will be read by others outside of our field—but only that the purpose of that reading and citing should be to join, shape, and even inaugurate wider conversations, not to provide summaries of privileged texts for the consumption of people within our field. I strongly agree with David Gorman that the purpose of broadening of our reading should not be "to hail a new group of master-thinkers" and that we should give "priority to thinking critically about theoretical issues, rather than waiting for some authority to tell us what our reactions should be" (620).

2. The ideas of this essay are themselves consequences of my numerous interactions with other people. In particular, I wish to thank Martin Nystrand, for all his patience, insight, and encouragement; Michael Bernard-Donals, for pointing me toward certain texts I would have otherwise overlooked and, more importantly, prodding me during moments of wavering to pursue a project that works against the grain of much contemporary scholarship; Jon Fowler, for the numerous conversations we've had about philosophical issues, wandering about the streets of Madison; and an anonymous reviewer, whose suggestions improved this essay and will certainly influence the direction of my continued work.

3. An alphabetical "sampler": Nora Bacon, who writes without any elaboration that students "had come to class eager to undertake meaty, meaningful writing tasks" (595) and that "a sentence's meaning is shaped by the circumstances in which it is uttered" (599); similarly, Kirk Branch: "There exists, in other words, a negotiated relationship in which the meaning of literacy is one of the issues at stake" (212); Vicki Tollar Collins quotes Mary McClintock Fulkerson with approval and without explanation to the effect that "feminism 'cannot account for the systems of meaning and power that produce that [women's] experience'" (547); Peter Elbow: "If a student really wants feedback on surface features on early drafts, I'll give it, but only if this doesn't deflect attention from thinking, organization, and clarity of meaning" (368); Henry Giroux: "It [pedagogy] encompasses every relationship that young people imagine to be theirs in the world, where social agency is both enabled and constrained across multiple sites and where meanings enter the realm of power
Kevin J. Porter

and function as public discourses" (11); bell hooks: “I had been taught in the segregated institutions of my childhood church and school that writing and performing should deepen the meaning of words, should illuminate, transfix, and transform” (2); Ilona Leki: “Clearly, there is no question here of words bringing further, richer possible interpretations of the writers’ intentions. Rather, these words stubbornly expose only a fraction of their meanings to L2 writers and force them to struggle in the dark” (80); Paula Mathieu: “Like the needs explored here, meaningful alternatives cannot be desired by people until they are articulated” (124); Beverly J. Moss: “Will the ethnographer make assumptions about what certain behaviors signify or how meaning is established in this community based on previous knowledge or on actual data collected?” (393); Lee Odell: “This concern with a mind at work seems especially appropriate if we see writing as an act of discovery, an act of constructing meaning” (7); Catherine Prendergast: “Why was such a meaning culturally unintelligible given the framework Heath was working within?” (481–82); Katherine Schultz: “What are the meanings of this writing in students’ lives?” (363); Ryan Stark: “But with Romanticism comes the aesthetically and economically motivated idea that the original expression is, in fact, original meaning or knowledge, meaning that was never thought or owned before” (460); John Trimbur: “The meanings and values that characterize a structure of feeling supply the motives that bump up against formally held, systematic beliefs” (287); Thomas West and Gary Olson: “Because subjects and meanings exist before negotiation, because they are anterior to it, does not mean that they are ‘pregiven.’ Subjects and meanings in part emerge in enunciative, co–constructive moments” (246); ad infinitum.

4. Surely Vande Kopple does not mean that texts that “reflect” scientific thinking—if we will allow that science is unified enough to have a uniform way of “thinking”—“reflect” that thought in the sense of “mirroring” the thought processes of the author-scientist. Scientific articles are not spontaneous, Elbowian freewritings, but carefully crafted pieces of prose (see John Schilb’s critique of similar claims about the mind-mirroring properties of the personal essay). The scientific article, despite being purported to be the reflection of a mode of thought, is never actually the thought of any person; consequently, the texts do not reflect or mirror a mode of thought, but rather are used by authors in an attempt to evoke a thinking (a process, not a “thought” or content) in a particular way. As George Dillon notes, “To read what I have written is to think faster, more sustainedly, coherently, and effortlessly than I do in composing” (32).

5. See, for example, Aarts; Bleyle; Montgomery; Tyler; Wilson. Out of a sense of fair play, and to avoid a tu quoque refutation, I also indict myself: Porter, “Stylistic.”

6. Ellen Barton critiques the textualist nature of Vande Kopple’s analysis of metadiscourse markers, finding instead that they serve interactional or interpersonal functions; in her study, she suggests that noncontrastive and contrastive connectives emphasize agreements and blunt disagreements be-
between members of a discourse community. For Barton, interactional meaning can override semantic meaning. However (to use a contrastive connective), Barton's analysis again assumes the meaningfulness of the metadiscourse markers; to speak of metadiscourse markers is already to have identified particular marks as metadiscourse markers.

7. It is interesting the note that by defining metadiscourse in this way, Vande Kopple allows that a text may contain at least one "inappropriate meaning" whatever that may be. How might this inappropriate meaning insinuate itself into the text? And why does discourse require metadiscourse to act as a guide for the unwary? And what guides the reader through metadiscourse?

8. For example, Lyons takes George Kennedy to task for his naturalistic and evolutionary view of rhetoric, in which Native American rhetoric serves as a kind of "Missing Link" between the rhetoric of civilized humans and the rhetorics of the animal world.

9. Stephen Brown, dramatically recounting the plight of the Athabascans in Alaska, also subscribes to notions of ownership and the powerless that results when a group is stripped of its capacity to speak for itself:

   Until the indigene is able to wage resistance in the arena of signification, he and she fights [sic] a losing battle, or at least fights [sic] at an extreme disadvantage. The native Other must enter the arena of Words, which heretofore has been dominated by the colonizer, must carry his and her liberatory struggle to the colonizer in this critical terrain of conflict as well, must master the colonizer's ink-tipped tongue if they are ever to enjoy the privilege of saying their own Word as a means of owning their own World. (218)

10. What Michael Bernard-Donals writes of Holocaust testimonies resonates with my own experience of Lyons' essay:

   Reading the language of those who survived gives us insight into both the profound difficulty of writing and the strong demand to obey the imperative to do so. In part, this is because the ethos of these speakers goes without saying: the language of the testimony and the events that lie behind it are so unimpeachable, and so horrifying, as to render the character of those who survived the crucible eminently sound. (565)

Confronted by such a testimonial, it is difficult to disagree without appearing to reenact the prejudices that led to the horror in the first place.

11. Of course, this realization about meaning doesn't excuse the ways in which certain texts and utterances have produced horrifying consequences; but we should note that the problem isn't that the "natives" are deprived of words entirely, but that their words are often inconsequential for their oppressors or produce undesired consequences.

12. It is important to note that while meaning apriorism in one form does lead to a view of language that denies time completely—for example, by positing an abstract system that exists in toto prior to its instantiations in utterances—we must also take a priori as a relative term, in the sense that meaning that is perceived to be "prior" is perceived that way by someone at some time. For
example, from the perspective of a listener, the meaning of an utterance is to be found in the speaker's thoughts, but from the speaker's perspective, the meaning is to be found in the abstract system. But apriorism also extends to cover the notion that once the speaker has set a meaning (or once a listener has "completed" the meaning, if we hold that meaning is constructed only by a speaker and listener in common), then that meaning is necessarily privileged over all others, as if the meaning itself is ever after to be found in that originary moment of instantiation or interpretation. Thus, in literary criticism, we have the perpetual efforts to reconstruct and preserve what the author "really meant" (see Barthes, "Death"; Foucault, "What"). And we have, in speech-act theory, J.L. Austin's flat refusal to integrate the perlocutionary effects of an utterance with its locutionary meaning or illocutionary force.

13. For recent work in discourse analysis on the chaining or "progressivity" of utterances in discourse, see Bergmann; Foppa; and Marková.

14. Consider an a priori account of interpretation in terms of photography. The faster the camera speed, the shorter the time interval "depicted" in the image; a fast shutter speed "slows" the movements of the depicted objects relative to the perception of the camera, thus reducing the "smearing" produced by the movements of objects in the camera's visual field. If the camera speed is sufficiently fast, the objects crystallize into the perfect clarity of immobility—a perfect duplication. (I am reminded here of Bergson's claim that form is frozen movement.) The point is this: for interpretation to duplicate meaning, it must outpace meaning to such an extent that meaning appears frozen in place; in some sense, the meaning of the utterance must be left behind so that it might be reconstituted. Further, the camera must remain fixed in relation to the depicted objects; were the camera also to move, this would create additional distortions in the image. But, paradoxically, this absolute immobility also connotes infinite speed, for the meaning is everywhere simultaneously. This is an illusion created by a flattening (or spatializing) of time. Note also that the spatial dimensions of the image remain constant: time diminishes until only purely spatial considerations are relevant.

15. We can further extend the metaphor of photography for interpretation in meaning apriorism to include the relationship between thought and utterance: in order for the utterance to duplicate without distortion the meaning of the thought, this thought must itself be "frozen" into place, at once both immobile, omnipresent, existing all-at-once. By treating time in progressively smaller increments, meaning apriorism shaves away layer by layer the relevance of time qua time (in terms of change, unpredictability, otherness, perspectivity) for considerations of meaning.

16. David H. Sanford and Barry Smith have independently argued that theory-building should not be primarily concerned with the reduction of that theory to a single principle or axiom. As Smith contends, "systems capable of describing real-world phenomena will require large numbers of nonlogical primitives, no group of which will be capable of being eliminated
formally in favour of any other group" (288). Thus, I am not disappointed by the fact, and hope that readers will similarly not find it disappointing, that my account of meaning apriorism isn’t reducible to a single principle—one cannot deduce, say, the principle of empiricism from meaning apriorism as I have formulated it—or that no single principle subsumes all of the others.

17. The biological component is not a necessary component of models of the mind, psychological or otherwise, especially when mind is modeled in terms of functions or operations that can be performed by different physical systems (see, for example, Putnam, “Psychological”; “Philosophy”).

18. As Barthes puts it, “If I have chanced to mention certain possible meanings, the purpose has not been to discuss the probability of those meanings but rather to show how the structure “disseminates” contents—which each reading can make its own. My object is not the philological or historical document, custodian of a truth to be discovered, but the volume, the signifiance of the text” (“Struggle” 136–37).

19. If language and meaning are always already social, then social formations must exist prior to them. This position was articulated by the eighteenth-century philosopher Lord Monboddo, who argued that language was not a natural or essential ability of human beings, but an acquired one. Monboddo believed that the development of even the simplest languages in human history prove that they could not precede, but must presuppose, the existence of prior “rational and social structures” that provide their “intellectual content” (Land 161).

20. Elsewhere, Bakhtin writes, “There can be no such thing as an isolated utterance. It always presupposes utterances that precede and follow it. No one utterance can be either the first or the last. Each is only a link in the chain, and none can be studied outside this chain” (136; emphasis added).

21. I say “already” because I am writing this section of the essay well after the fact of having written completed drafts of this and other essays, dissertation chapters, and book chapters. That is, I am here engaging in what Catherine Schryer, following Michael Serres, calls the “wolf’s game,” in which the author/researcher appears “to be there first in the past and calling the shots for downstream and future events” (87).

22. In this list, I can only allude to some of the key texts that I am working with, within, against. Several of the concepts I identify as belonging to meaning consequentialism are prefigured in the work of many philosophers, rhetoricians, literary theorists, and linguists, such as Mikhail Bakhtin, Donald Davidson, Jacques Derrida, Roy Harris, Martin Heidegger, Thomas Kent, Emmanuel Levinas, Jean-François Lyotard, C.S. Peirce, and V.N. Volosinov. I add this note not in order to drop names, but to acknowledge some of my predecessors whose work I could not substantively engage or credit in this essay.
Kevin J. Porter

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