

**A Review of: *Meaning, Language, and Time: Toward a Consequentialist Philosophy of Discourse*, by Kevin J. Porter**

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**Abstract:**

Kevin Porter's *Meaning, Language, and Time* is a fine contribution to scholarship, well worth reading, for a number of reasons. It is well worth reading if only because in the fields of rhetoric, communication, and composition, books that explore fundamental concepts and premises—particularly books that put such concepts and premises into historical perspective and into relationships with alternative theories—have become far too rare. But Porter's book is also well worth reading because the concept it explores is arguably the one most fundamental to rhetoric, communication, and composition—the concept of “meaning.”

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**Article:**

Kevin Porter's *Meaning, Language, and Time* is a fine contribution to scholarship, well worth reading, for a number of reasons. It is well worth reading if only because in the fields of rhetoric, communication, and composition, books that explore fundamental concepts and premises—particularly books that put such concepts and premises into historical perspective and into relationships with alternative theories—have become far too rare. But Porter's book is also well worth reading because the concept it explores is arguably the one most fundamental to rhetoric, communication, and composition—the concept of “meaning.”

I have often wished that we could ban the term “meaning” from theoretical discourse. Theorists have used it in many different ways—all too often within the same text—so many ways that without a stipulating definition the term is now virtually meaningless (whatever one takes “meaning” to mean). As that sentence illustrates, however, such a ban would be nearly impossible to enforce, even within one's own discourse. For that reason alone, Porter's exploration of many of “meaning's” meanings is a valuable contribution to scholarship. His most important contribution, to my mind, however, is his linking the concept of “meaning” to the concept of “time.” Linking meaning to time creates the possibility of developing analytic principles that can foreground similarities and differences among theories that we might otherwise overlook, as well as critical principles that can distinguish workable from unworkable

theories. Such a linkage is, I believe, not merely possible but quite necessary to any serious examination of meaning. However, it is right here at Porter's initial analytic division that I find the book's most serious flaws, flaws that determine the book's conclusions.

Early in the text, Porter makes his crucial distinction between two sorts of theories of meaning—"meaning apriorism" and "meaning consequentialism." He lays claim to the latter as his own and claims that the former "informs in one way or another every approach to meaning with which [he is] familiar" (17). "Apriorism" and "consequentialism" are not logical opposites, however, so why this dichotomy? I can only speculate.

On the one hand, the logical opposite of "apriorism" is "aposteriorism." If Porter had chosen to organize his thinking around this dichotomy, he would have been pitting theories that dissociate the individual's experience of discourse *from* its meaning, against theories that associate necessarily the individual's experience of discourse *with* its meaning. In short, Porter merely would have been claiming the philosophical ground that reader-response theory currently holds. (Oddly, Porter hardly mentions reader-response theory in any of its forms anywhere in this lengthy book.)

On the other hand, the logical opposite of "consequentialism" is "causalism." Causal theories of meaning are typically intentionalist and intermedial. Intermedial theories, E. D. Hirsch's, for example, rely on the notion of a linguistic medium—one that necessarily temporally precedes the utterances that refer to it. Porter, perhaps believing that intentions are necessarily linked to mediation, puts all theories that rely on intention into his "meaning apriorism" category. But Porter's last chapter approvingly relies on Donald Davidson's principle of charity, a principle that makes no sense except with reference to intentions and within a causal theory. Since Davidson's theory, although intentionalist, is immedial and indicative, and so not historical and linguistic, Porter would have been forced into an obvious contradiction if he had ordered his analysis about the consequentialism/causalism dichotomy.

Instead of these alternatives, Porter organizes his analysis around the temporal dichotomy of past and future: apriorism says that meanings lie in the past; consequentialism says they emerge in the future. According to Porter "the central tenet of meaning apriorism...is that the meaning of an utterance...is to be found in some sense, logically and/or temporally, prior to the utterance or to any interpretation [so that]...if we are to look for meaning...we must look *behind* us in time" (17). The central tenet of meaning consequentialism, in contrast, is simply, "The meaning of a sign is its consequences" (52). Porter rejects apriorism in favor of consequentialism, arguing that

... the Meaning of a text has no *a priori* constraints that can rule out even the most *absurd* meanings, but only *a posteriori* constraints: *We should rule out meanings of a text (from our own vantage at a given point in time and space) not by identifying meanings that are impossible for it to have had, have, or ever have, but by identifying consequence that it has not (yet) had.* (62)

In one sense, I think, this is perfectly true. Let's say I tell my colleague in the hall "It's one o'clock" in response to her question "What time is it?" She responds by saying "Where do you want to go?" Then I, in turn, respond with the name of a restaurant. In this case we can legitimately say that one of the "meanings" of "It's one o'clock" is "It's time for lunch." It could

just as easily “mean” “We've missed a meeting” or “We're finished for the day,” and so on. An observer could rule out most of the possible “meanings” as the actual meanings, that is, those my colleague and I acted upon, because the immediate consequence of my having said “It's one o'clock” (i.e., her response “Where do you want to go?”) is not very consistent with “We've missed the meeting.” However, these actual and possible “meanings” are not *meanings* at all but actual and possible *consequences* of my colleague and I having taken “It's one o'clock” to *mean* that it's one o'clock—that is, our having taking it to be a true statement about the current time (relative, of course, to certain social practices). In other words, there is a difference between the concepts of “meaning” and “consequences” that we cannot do without if either concept is to make sense. The only consequences that matter to rhetoric, communication, and composition are those of someone's having taking some act to *mean* something. Other consequences, such as the consequences of my having expelled some virus when I uttered the words “It's one o'clock,” are simply irrelevant.

The problems with Porter's dichotomization therefore seem to me obvious and irremediable. For one thing, it assumes that utterances, texts, and signs can mean something, whereas from my (pragmatic) perspective, only people can mean anything, although they may mean by using utterances, texts, and signs. So by limiting the meaning of an act to events that occur after that act, Porter limits the concept of meaning, disconnecting it from intentions, which apparently (although arguably) lie in the past, rendering our sense of the *function* of meaning problematic, to say the least. For another thing, the dichotomization does not merely limit the concept of “meaning,” it *replaces* it with the concept of “consequence.” Essentially, Porter defines a sign as something that has consequences, on the grounds that “something that is not consequential cannot be a sign” (53). Of course, something that is not consequential cannot *be* anything—and thus we are left with nothing to distinguish things that signify from those that do not. We are also left to conclude, since according to Porter's theory an utterance's meanings *are* its consequences, that “an utterance has as many meanings as it has consequences” (53), and so too we are left with no way to distinguish better from worse interpretations. We should not wonder, then, that having substituted the concept of “consequence” for that of “meaning,” Porter will claim that “There is a tyranny in associating meanings only with communication—as if there cannot be meanings in the absence of communication” (56). Tyranny? Perhaps. Even so, if we cannot distinguish the better from the worse (interpretive) consequences of our own and others' utterances, communication is not merely tyrannical but impossible. A statement, including a statement that is an interpretation of a statement, that cannot in some way be unacceptable cannot in any way be meaningful.

Porter, I must emphasize, is fully aware of this problem. Although it is obvious that for his theory to work, he will need to constrain the concept of “consequence” if he is to convincingly identify it with the concept of “meaning,” Porter admits openly that he is unable “*at this time* to provide a crisp analytic definition of *consequences*” (56). In effect, he openly admits that he has no answer to the question, “What is meaning?” He asks (I presume rhetorically), “...does meaning consequentialism entail that whatever consequences are *ascribed* to an utterance or text *are* meanings of it? And, if so, doesn't this lead us into the abyss of subjective meanings and unbreachable solipsism?” (57). Of course it does. Yet, even if we cannot buy into Porter's substitution of “consequences” for “meanings,” his book does inspire us to re-question our understanding of the relation between the meanings we intend and the consequences of our

having used utterances as we did in our attempts to achieve those intentions. This question, in turn, leads us straight to the issue that Porter tells us we must address if we are to understand meaning—the relation between meaning and time. However, here, I think, is the source of the flaws I see in Porter's book—his assumption that past and future are dichotomous, when in fact they are not opposites but exist only as phases of a present that is always in passing, a present that once passed no longer is. From this perspective of time, the meanings of an utterance do not exist prior to its occurrence, just as Porter says; but neither do they exist afterward, in the utterance's consequences. That is, meanings lie neither in our anticipations of how another will respond to our utterances (our intentions), nor in the other's actual responses to our utterances, but in the dynamic relation between the two.

Having said that, I nevertheless reaffirm my judgment that, overall, this is a fine book, one well worth reading. Most of the book is a valuable critique of what he calls “meaning apriorism” organized about three “temporal principles.” These are (1) “the *principle of panchronism*, which denies the temporality of time by denying its movement”—that is, “past, present, and future have equal reality”; (2) the “*principle of simultaneity*, which denies the temporality of time by denying its relativity (i.e., [by] treating time as an absolute standard shared by all objects and regions of the universe)”; and (3) the “*principle of durativity*, which denies the temporality of time by denying its accidents, discontinuities, and losses” (47). Using these principles, Porter critiques a broad spectrum of theory within a wide range of history, and his explanations and analyses of concepts—such as “speech communities,” “linguistic systems,” and “conventions”—are insightful and, in my view, more right than not. Most of this book, especially the parts critiquing the claim that the meaning of present acts lie solely in the past, is a very valuable contribution to scholarship. It's the parts promoting the claim that the meanings of present acts lie solely in their future consequences that I find seriously flawed.