Cultural models, agency, and affordances: looking for meaning

In the 1930’s Bartlett said that psychology requires an effort after meaning. Geertz suggests that meaning is central to consciousness and our reason for living. Many others have made similar comments on the importance of meaning. In anthropology, Sapir made clear that there were cultures insufflated with meaning while others were desiccated there of. Whorf and Sapir posited that meaning was in language; there were many others who rejected that view (see particularly radical embodied enactivist cognitive theorists) and thought that meaning did not need words per se but were a construct of our history of experiences that we could recall when some affordance in the environment triggered them. This triggering process was not culturally induced, but rather evolutionarily or phenomenologically induced. I would argue that meaning can be identified through three modalities–shared mental templates; affordances, and transcendental pools of meaning (this latter is my conjecture but motivated by the writings of a variety of scholars most significantly Whorf and Brown.). for Geertz meaning was inherent in structured webs of significance in which humans were embedded sort of like spiders, making the webs and in turn having the webs as econiches in which we live.

 The capacity for meaning must reside in our consciousness for without consciousness– that is being aware of ourselves being living thinking creatures in a world wherein we navigate as best we can–there is no meaning that we recognize as meaning. In this tour I will discuss attempts to understand meaning from both an agented and structural perspective and then I give a short review of how cultural and ecological perspectives of cognitive constructs and process allow for new ways to understand meaning.