

“Significance” requires analysis in “objective relativist” terms, because it makes no sense to talk about *x*’s being significant in itself, in entire abstraction from someone or something *for* whom or which it’s significant. At the same time, the relativity essential to the meaning of the concept cannot be merely *de facto* without making at least some prominent uses of the word unintelligible. There’s nothing odd or contradictory, for example, in a theological teacher’s replying to a student, “You don’t find Rudolf Bultmann’s theology significant? Well, you jolly well ought to find it significant!”

My thought, then, is that “significance” involves the same kind of objective relativity as “value,” as analyzed, for example, by H. R. Niebuhr. Indeed, the two terms seem but verbally different ways of saying essentially the same thing, if not also expressing the same concept.

As for the implications of this analysis, events of the past are significant in general because of our present interests and preoccupations. Insofar as the interests and preoccupations are cognitive or somehow involve cognition, we may say that past events are significant because or insofar as they express or imply answers to the questions arising from our interests and preoccupations.

At the root of all our interests and preoccupations, arguably, is one having to do with the ultimate meaning or worth of our existence. Because this fundamental interest and preoccupation involves cognition in a very broad sense of the word, it gives rise to a question to which some past event could conceivably express or imply an answer, thereby becoming more or less significant for us in a correspondingly fundamental way.

Such an event, then, could be rightly said to be of *decisive* significance for us—*de jure* as well as *de facto*!—provided we so experienced it that it became the explicit authorizing source of the same answer to our fundamental question implicitly authorized by ultimate reality itself.