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The Foundations of Meaning in *Uṣūl*: A Contemporary Perspective

While the task of jurisprudence (*fiqh*) is to determine what people are supposed to do in their daily affairs by inference from premises that involve the divine rulings of Sharia, the science of the principles of jurisprudence (*uṣūl*) is intended to facilitate such transitions by providing the relevant methodological principles and rules of validity for such inferences. In that sense, the science of *uṣūl* can be regarded as the logic of jurisprudence. One of the principles that a jurist needs to rely on to derive religious (Sharia) rulings concerns the evidence at their disposal. This evidence either directly comes from the Qurʾān and the Sunna or is grounded in reason. The former comes into two varieties: linguistic evidence which involves statements of the Qurʾān and the non-linguistic variety which includes, among other things, the actions of the *māʾṣūm* (infallible).

For linguistic evidence to fulfil its role, however, three things must be determined: (i) the *prima facie* meaning of the evidence and what it denotes, (ii) its reliability (*ḥujjiyya*), and (iii) whether evidence did, in fact, issue from the legislator. The questions that arise from the role of linguistic evidence in the process of deriving particular Sharia rulings have, however, spawned an important chapter in the science of *uṣūl* about the foundations of meaning. These investigations include discussions about the characterisation of meaning, its apparent arbitrary character as well as its different varieties. More fundamental questions concern the origin of meaning i.e., what renders words or expressions meaningful. Here, discussions of such concepts as convention, usage, and intention feature prominently. Although important insights are fleshed out in these *uṣūlī* investigations, the overall results are often fragmentary and disconnected. It is here that the contemporary analytic philosophy of language can fruitfully interact with the science of *uṣūl*. In this paper, focusing on the works of Mohammad Bagher Sadr, I shall try to bring some of the discussions of meaning in the philosophy of language to bear on the issues of linguistic meaning discussed in the science of *uṣūl*. Hopefully, investigations along these lines may result in the mutual enrichment of both disciplines.



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