

# Chapter 1

## Psychologies of Meaning

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### How Meaning Embarked on Its Journey to Psychology

Throughout the history of mankind, people have been extensively preoccupied with existential questions, such as: Why are we here? What is my purpose? What do I stand for? What is the meaning of life? These universal questions deal with the core concern of what it means to be human and have inspired various myths, religions, arts, and philosophies, in different cultures around the world and across time and traditions. Today, in an age of knowledge explosion and an instant-success culture where “better, faster, higher” are sacred values—issues, such as the nature of meaning, its sources and expressions, emerge more forcefully.

Processes of globalization and transition to an individualistic and pluralistic world challenge existing processes of continuity, socialization, and transmission of traditional patterns (Buxant et al. 2010). The fast-paced affluent society in which we live, allegedly, everything we need to exist, and even an overabundance of choice, has turned out to be limiting rather than liberating, often leading to frustration, continuous dissatisfaction, and regret (Schwartz and Ward 2004). More than ever, hunger for meaning has intensified. In the face of the uncertainties and instabilities of our times, failing to respond to the inner voice of meaning may lead to boredom, anxiety, disengagement, and an existential vacuum (Frankl 1969). Damon (2008) described many young people

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today as “directionless drifters” who experience emptiness, meaninglessness, and anxiety, such that “in the long run, lack of purpose can destroy the foundations of a happy and fulfilled life” (p. 16). Albert Einstein emphasized this by noting that, “The man who regards his own life and that of his fellow creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life” (Einstein 1934, pp. 13–14). And yet, though it appears as if existential needs are lying at the very core of human psychology, it took a considerable amount of time until academic psychology began to systematically address the psychology of existential concerns.

Perhaps the first visible sign that meaning would one day become a crucial part of psychological research emerged in 1964, when the *Journal of Clinical Psychology* published an article with the unusual title “An Experimental Investigation in Existentialism” (Crumbaugh and Maholick 1964).

Crumbaugh’s and Maholick’s 1964 article described one of the first attempts to investigate the “will to meaning” with the *Purpose In Life* test. Especially in the early days of empirical research into the psychology of meaning, the Purpose in Life Test was the only instrument available to psychologists and psychiatrists who wished to pursue this research; since then it has been applied in some 150 published studies.

Now, existentialism and empirical studies are rarely found in direct association with one another even today; but back in 1964, during the heyday of Skinnerian behaviorism, it must have seemed an even more curious, perhaps even frivolous combination. Puzzlement over the work of Crumbaugh and Maholick was probably not exactly diminished by the fact that these authors, in their modeling of the question of meaning and its psychological relevance, based their arguments on the theories of the Austrian psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor E. Frankl. Frankl was chiefly known to the wider public in America for his very personal account of his experiences in four concentration camps, rather than his research in the field of existential psychiatry and psychology. True, with the support of, among others, Gordon W. Allport, Alexandra Adler, and Sophie Freud, Frankl had already been appointed Visiting Professor at Harvard in 1961, 2 years after Carl Rogers voiced his opinion that Frankl’s psychological model was “one of the outstanding contributions to psychological thought in the last 50 years.” And yet Frankl’s complex philosophical, psychiatric, and psychological model of meaning-oriented psychology—going by the double name logotherapy and existential analysis—was still not nearly as well known and widespread as it is today. According to this school of thought, human psychology could not be understood solely in terms of learning history or drives, but essentially through existential concerns such as freedom, meaning, and purpose. Frankl’s model must, at the very least, have appeared suspect to an empirically oriented psychologist of those days. In his overview of the psychological significance of meaning awareness in the *Handbook of Positive Psychology*, Baumeister describes the reception of Frankl’s work in the States as follows:

Psychologists gradually have begun to study meaning in life. Frankl’s (1959/1976) early work emphasized the importance of finding value in life, and he is widely credited with

being a pioneer in the study of meaning. His work constituted a courageous rebellion against the behaviourist and psychodynamic paradigms that dominated psychological theorizing at that time. [...] Still, these works were isolated intellectually from the main work of their time (Baumeister and Vohs 2002, p. 608).

Damon, Menon and Bronk see the situation similarly in their review of the topic:

The notion that ethereal constructs such as “meaning” and “purpose” could make a difference—that they could motivate someone to do something, or even shape a person’s basic choices about how to live—seemed impossibly soft-headed and sentimental to mainstream psychologists of that time. If the behaviourist and psychoanalytic schools (the two best-known bodies of psychological work at midcentury) agreed on anything at all, it was that meaning, purpose, and other such belief systems were the products of more fundamental drives; that they were dependant on the drives for their shape, substance, and very existence; and that meaning and purpose were no more than marginal factors in behavioural development (Damon et al. 2003).

Despite the initial skepticism toward Frankl’s attempt to put existential questions at the heart of psychology (and psychotherapy and psychiatry), the enterprise pioneered by Viktor Frankl of a scientifically oriented existential psychology soon bore fruit with astonishing rapidity in the late 1960s. This development is evident not least in the huge volume of research publications concerned with the question of meaning in psychology, authored chiefly by Frankl’s students in Harvard and Vienna during these years.

## **What the Research Says: Studies in Meaning-Oriented Psychology**

The reserved attitude with which scientific and academic psychologists first approached this question—quite apart from the psychological *Zeitgeist* of the period—is undoubtedly all the more understandable when we consider that the question of meaning is not really one question but actually represents a cipher for a vast number of further questions. And it is by no means obvious whether these questions are answerable at all; neither do we know with any certainty into which area of expertise the responsibility for answering these questions falls.

This may also be the reason why Frankl and the first wave of American and Austrian researchers in this field initially chose to follow the pragmatic path of investigating meaning orientation through the lens of motivation theory and initially left aside the link with the European tradition of phenomenological and existentially oriented psychology and philosophy of meaning and personhood (e.g., Kierkegaard, Scheler, Jaspers, Heidegger, Binswanger, and Allers).

Thus they were first of all concerned to show that Frankl’s motivation theory—that the “common man” is essentially searching for specific and concrete meaning and purposes above and beyond those relating to his immediate physical, psychological, and social needs and concerns—is coherent and has huge psychological relevance.

The central question posed here was: “What part is played by meaning as a motivator of human action?”—and, as a large number of research papers published from the 1970s onward demonstrate (for an overview of psychological meaning research from 1975 to 2005, see Batthyany and Guttman 2005; Batthyany 2011), they produced ample evidence that suggests that the will to meaning cannot be deduced from or reduced to other psychological variables, but is a motivation in its own right. Thus some research showing that Frankl’s motivation and personality theory could withstand empirical testing was already available from the early 1970s on, though until just a few years ago such studies were still conducted in the pioneering spirit of testing the basic tenets of a psychological motivation and personality theory that was not yet anywhere near entering the mainstream.

Still, once it has been established that the will to meaning is a fundamental human motivation, two further research questions arise regarding the clinical relevance of these findings. The first relates to the influence of individual meaning fulfillment on the development of, or protection against, mental health problems; and the second, in turn, consists in testing Frankl’s prediction that a renewed meaning awareness should provide crucial healing and coping resources to patients who suffer from mental health issues or the psychological impact of negative life events.

In their literature review, Batthyany and Guttman identified more than 320 studies addressing the first question. In these studies, statistically significant correlations between lack of meaning awareness and a general increase in neuroticism scores or more specific mental health problems, ranging from depressiveness, substance abuse disorders, eating disorders, anxiety and obsessive compulsive disorders, phobias, and adjustment disorders, invariably accounted for a relatively large proportion of either the causative mechanism behind these disorders or the severity of their symptomatology (cf. Batthyany and Guttman, Chaps. II.1 and 2). In fact, frustration of the will to meaning (as measured with the Purpose in Life Test) was so strong a predictor of the presence of mental health problems that in their research overview Rosenberg and Green conclude that “findings indicate the usefulness of the *Purpose in Life Test* for discriminating psychiatric patients from normals in a population” (Rosenberg and Green 1998). Strictly speaking, however, these findings do not yet support the much stronger prediction of meaning-oriented existential psychology—namely that at least to some extent psychological problems themselves are caused or exacerbated by a deficit of meaning awareness, for *prima facie*, it is equally conceivable that increased neuroticism and mental distress could bring about a reduced meaning awareness without itself having been the result of a lack of meaning awareness.

The existential perspective on the impact of a lack of meaning awareness on mental health issues was in fact not tested in greater detail until relatively recently, when a number of researchers conducted regression analyses and prospective studies on the etiological role of meaning in psychological distress. Harlow and Newcomb (1990), for instance, used latent variable and structural models and found that the experience of a lack of meaning was by far the most significant mediator between, on the one hand, subjective loss of control and depression, triggered by uncontrollable stressful life events, and, on the other hand, substance

abuse in female participants, and self-derogation and suicidal tendency in male participants (see also Harlowe et al. 1986). Using a similar test design, Kinnier et al. (1994) demonstrated that feelings of meaninglessness were the most significant mediator between depressiveness and substance abuse; in addition, poor meaning in life emerged in this study as the only significant predictor of substance abuse, and explained much of the variance in substance abuse and addiction disorders.

Shek (1998) conducted a broad-based prospective longitudinal study among Chinese adolescents and (using a multiple regression analysis) found that, out of the seven factors tested, the purpose in life scores—followed by self-esteem—were first in their significance as predictors of subsequent general psychological morbidity. In another prospective longitudinal study, Mascaro and Rosen (2005) showed that meaning in life “explained significant amounts of variance in hope and depressive symptoms two months later beyond the variance explained by baseline levels of hope/depression, neuroticism, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience, extraversion, and social desirability” (p. 985). In a follow-up study, these authors furthermore found that meaning significantly moderated the relationship between daily stress and depression, leading them to conclude that meaning acts as “a buffer against the effects of stress on well-being” (Mascaro and Rosen 2006, p. 183).

At least one other prospective study, conducted over a time span of 14 months, found that the presence of meaning awareness in older study participants was a more significant predictor of successful aging than traditional factors such as social and cognitive resources and other demographic variables (Reker 2002). Hence both mediation analyses and longitudinal studies suggest not only that there are clinically relevant correlations between an experienced lack of meaning and mental health problems; they also imply that this relationship is present not only because a lack of perceived meaning is the result of a person’s poorer mental health, but because poor meaning in life is itself a significant predictor of overall mental health.

For several years now, this causal relationship has also been researched intensively in relation to a suicidal tendencies; so intensively, indeed, that one widely used test instrument in suicide research—the *Reasons for Living Index* (RFL)—is no longer limited, as are most earlier tests, to measuring the intensity and frequency of suicidal impulses, but also includes an index for the reasons why patients do not follow their suicidal impulses (Linehan et al. 1983). The RFL has proven to be a reliable and outstandingly predictive test (Malone et al. 2000; Gutierrez et al. 2000; Britton et al. 2008), which is hardly surprising from a logotherapeutic viewpoint. In fact, Frankl used a simplified heuristic form of this test as early as in the late 1930s when he was a young medical doctor at the Psychiatric Clinic in Vienna and had to decide which of his former suicidal patients could be released:

At first, we pose the question to the respective patient as to whether he still fosters suicidal intentions. In every case [...] he will deny our first question; whereupon we submit to him a second question, which almost sounds brutal: *why* does he no longer wish to take his own life? And now it is shown with regularity, that he who genuinely does not harbor

suicidal intentions is immediately ready with a series of reasons and counterarguments that all speak against him throwing his own life away: [...] that he remains considerate of his family or must think of his professional commitments, that he still has many obligations, etc. Meanwhile, the person who has only dissimulated his suicidal intentions will be exposed by our second question, and not having an answer for it, react from a position that is characterized by embarrassment on account of the fact that he is at a loss for an argument that would speak against suicide (Frankl 1947/2010, p. 22).

With the protective and preventive influence of meaning awareness even against suicidal impulses, we have already touched upon the second group of studies on the relevance of meaning for mental health. This second group deals either with the regaining of mental health in the course of successful meaning-oriented therapeutic intervention or with its maintenance in the course of successful prevention work during stressful life events. Debats (1996, p. 503), for example, found in a large therapeutic follow-up study that “meaning in life (a) affects both positive and negative aspects of well-being, (b) that it is related to improvement during meaning-oriented psychotherapy, and (c) that it predicts the outcome of psychotherapy, independently of patients’ pretreatment levels of well-being.” Similarly, Waisberg (1994, p. 49) reports of the results of a three-month course of therapy on patients with alcoholism that “the mean Purpose in Life Test (PIL) score before treatment was significantly below the normal range and the mean PIL score at the end of in-patient treatment was within the normal range. Furthermore, the PIL score at the end of treatment was predictive of changes in health at follow-up. It was also predictive of follow-up drinking/drug use status.”

Comparable findings demonstrating the curative effect (and predictive value in longitudinal studies) of increased sense of meaning in life have also been obtained in relation to numerous other groups of disorders: Batthyany and Guttman (2005, Chap. II.1) identified 79 such studies in which meaning discovery played either a significant role or, where the study design allowed this to be identified, a probable or confirmed primary role in the recovery of patients undergoing meaning-oriented psychotherapeutic or psychiatric treatment for a variety of psychological or psychiatric disorders (for earlier reviews see Kish and Moody 1989; Zika and Chamberlain 1987, 1992).

Studies looking at the significance of meaning awareness in the processing of external stresses and traumatic life events yield similar results. Batthyany and Guttman (2005, Chap. I.2) identified more than 150 such studies addressing the role of sense of meaning and purpose in profound life crises, illness, grief, and death. Impressive as these figures are, given that the first group of studies referred to above imply that the search for meaning is in any case a deeply human motivation, the finding that the search for meaning is particularly urgent and prominent in times of personal upheaval does not come as any great surprise. Additionally, quantitative studies are of course not capable of giving due attention to the perhaps more essential and existential question as to how patients might use specific meaning-oriented resources to cope with a particular kind of suffering.

A more empirically accessible question is how people cope with extreme life situations as a function of whether they succeed in activating individual meaning resources or discovering new ones in spite of, or even because of, their current

life circumstances. And indeed, such a positive relationship has been consistently demonstrated in numerous studies; further, these studies often reveal a large magnitude of the effect of meaning awareness on coping. For instance, Bowes et al. (2002) found in a study on female patients with advanced ovarian cancer that “the consequence of finding meaning in life was a perception of well-being defined by the women as satisfaction with their lives. Conversely, an inability to find meaning in life resulted in feelings of despair,” while Lyon and Younger (2001) report that, among a group of 137 AIDS patients observed over a period of several months, “purpose in life was a stronger predictor of depressive symptoms than was HIV disease severity and [...] was more important than laboratory markers of disease progression for predicting depressive comorbidity.”

The positive effect of meaning awareness, however, is not restricted to alleviating psychological pain in the context of chronic or terminal disease. Hence, for instance, studies on chronic pain patients have shown that meaning awareness correlates not only with significantly lower levels of hopelessness, depression, anxiety, and anger, but also show that successful completion of meaning-oriented (logotherapeutic) intervention brings about significant improvements in the clinical picture in chronic pain: “A 1 year follow-up study [showed that] of 23 adults who had participated in a multimodal treatment program for chronic pain, significant decreases in pain, depression, anxiety, somatization, hostility, and analgesic ingestion were found without symptom substitution.” (Khatami 1987; for similar results see Kass et al. 1991; Nagata 2003).

Considering the cumulative evidence, then, meaning can be seen as an important psychological resource, a metaphorical lighthouse that sheds light on life events and enables people to draw strengths and insights from their positive and negative experiences, gain perspective from present situations, and point toward a worthwhile and valuable future. The pervasive contribution of meaning as a vital feature of a fulfilling and flourishing life is evident in the words of Steger (2009, p. 685) in the *Oxford Handbook of Positive Psychology*:

Eliminating the meaning people perceive in their lives would seem to dismantle the inter-connecting filament on which are hung the most savory and desirable qualities of a full life. Life without meaning would be merely a string of events that fail to coalesce into a unified, coherent whole (p. 685).

Indeed, the emerging image of meaning as a link that connects the different states, qualities, and experiences in human life into one whole, seems crucial when considering the state of research in the field; and it seems crucial also when we try to come closer to a more refined definition and understanding of the concept of meaning itself. Hence, impressive as the aforementioned studies may be—and they only represent a relatively small section of the available data—they only show that from a purely pragmatic and functional point of view the question of meaning appears to be so central to the fulfillment of human existence that, in view of this data situation, contemporary psychology, to say the least, can no longer afford to ignore it. Nor does it. Once we go so far, however, new questions arise. To two such questions we shall turn next; and with them, to the disciplinary limits of meaning-oriented psychology.

## But What is Meaning, and What is it Good for?

The conceptualization of meaning has been addressed through different prisms and viewed as carrying multifaceted functions and manifestations, such as cognitive (for example, meaning-making, a sense of coherence); motivational (for example, goals, purpose); types (micro or meaning *in* life versus macro or ultimate meaning or meaning *of* life); the search for, or presence of, meaning; as well as dimensions and sources of meaning.

Various researchers have considered the different patterns of, and motivation for, meaning in life. For example, Baumeister (1991; Baumeister and Vohs 2002) suggested a model of four basic needs that guide the manner in which people make sense of their lives: purpose, values, a sense of efficacy, and self-worth that lay a significant foundation for the recognition of psychological needs and their fulfillment.

In addition to psychological needs as motivators for meaning, others have viewed existential needs for meaning within the larger context of human existence, identity, and belonging. Among other issues, the existential tradition, traced to Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, occupies itself with the question of how a person who has an existential need for meaning can find or create it in a seemingly meaningless and random universe (e.g., Yalom 1980). In a similar vein, Becker (1975) and exponents of Terror Management Theory (TMT) have viewed meaning as a fundamental ingredient that buffers (and hence, basically helps us avoid the experience of) existential anxiety and mortality salience (e.g., Grant and Wade-Benzoni 2009; Landau et al. 2011; Pyszczynski et al. 1999).

At the same time, the positive psychology movement has viewed meaning as a crucial resource for human functioning, striving, and flourishing. Recent years have seen a rapidly growing number of models and empirical studies on the construct of meaning in life (measured mostly by the *Meaning in Life Questionnaire*, MLQ; Steger et al. 2006).

The main emphasis of this field is the scientific study of happiness, flourishing life, and well-being rather than upon stress, trauma, and dysfunction (Keyes and Haidt 2003). In brief, while positive psychology focuses on human strengths and positive emotions (Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi 2000) and tends to emphasize the “brighter” side of human functioning; existential psychology traditionally tends to address the “darker” or unsettling aspects of human existence, such as guilt, suffering, and mortality.

Both disciplines have highlighted one aspect of human existence and at times tended to neglect the other. And yet, despite their different approaches, both positive and existential psychology—quite independently of each other, it seems—have come to view meaning and meaning awareness as central psychological (and philosophical) factors, relevant both for human striving and for human coping, as well as for understanding our place in the world. In order to broaden the psychological significance of meaning, a combination of both approaches may benefit each of them and embody a substantial step toward a deeper understanding of meaning and purpose.



As Oscar Wilde once said: “To live is the rarest thing in the world. Most people exist, that is all.” When do we really live, not just exist? What does it mean to truly live a full, meaningful, and authentic life? Living means the opposite of a “flat line”; it means highs and lows, losses and triumphs, joy and pain, light and shadow, triumphs and tragedies, accomplishments and adversities. A life worth living combines an integrative view of the human condition—the negative *and* the positive. We, as humans, are complex and multidimensional, thus exploring only a part of reality, only the negative or the positive, would be doing a disservice to the whole. A panoramic view affords an opportunity for integrating rather than separating. A full understanding of what it means to live, and not merely exist, requires a balanced view of the human yearning for personal meaning, interwoven in the numerous and rich conceptualizations and nuances, as well as horizons and moments in life. The fundamental human yearning to make sense of the world around us, to transcend our transient existence, to discover our unique authentic calling and to leave our mark—may manifest itself and be conceptualized differently through the prisms of positive and existential psychology but reflect a similar core essence. The different orientations, backgrounds and propositions of positive and existential psychology provide a fertile ground for a potential dialogue, based on each unique contribution to the understanding of core essences of the concept of meaning. Perhaps Frankl's logotherapy can be seen as a kind of hermeneutic bridge between existential and positive psychology, due to its inclusion of creative and experiential pathways to meaning together with suffering, and thanks to its optimistic future-oriented approach that emphasizes the unconditional meaning of life in all circumstances. The capability to acknowledge, learn, and grow from the necessities or givens of existence, as well as from the possibilities in life (Bretherton and Ørner 2004), exemplifies the significant promise concealed in gathering both unique and shared elements from existential in addition to positive perspectives in order to advance a richer understanding of the meaning concept, utilizations, and implications.

In brief, meaning and meaning motivation can, and have been, addressed from at least two pragmatic perspectives: meaning awareness helps us to function and flourish; and it helps us to cope with uncertainty, death awareness, and existential anxiety. Both perspectives are not necessarily in conflict; rather, they complement each other—and if there should be one common message to be extracted from both perspectives, it would be that meaning awareness plays a crucial role in human existence itself.

## **Taking Meaning Seriously**

And yet the question of meaning, of course, is not simply a question of psychological functioning. If we take seriously, from existential points of view, the human striving for meaning, then the question at issue is no longer merely whether the

meaning fulfillment we at least sometimes experience achieves the purpose of equipping us with certain psychological advantages in striving and coping and defense, but also, and with equal relevance, whether human beings really genuinely strive for meaning for its own sake, or whether a simpler motive is concealed behind the striving for meaning, for which the question of meaning is only a means to an end.

What is at issue here, then, is a question that we cannot simply sidestep because it is methodologically difficult to answer, as ultimately it is a matter of conceptual clarity. In other words, if behind the striving for meaning there is merely a striving for subjective well-being, or a striving for an emotional compensation or defense against the negative feelings potentially triggered by the consciousness of, for example, our uncertainty, vulnerability, and mortality, then the concept of motivation by meaning is, strictly speaking, inappropriate for the simple reason that meaning becomes not the goal but the means of our motivation.

Of course, psychology *can* be pragmatic enough simply to ignore these conceptual questions. But it cannot at the same time stand aside and fail to confront the truly burning questions presented by the meaning problem unless it is just concerned to regard meaning fulfillment as simply one path among many toward the creation or maintenance of a subjective sense of well-being and productivity, perhaps even a positive illusion of well-being and fulfillment.

It is at this point that the problem of meaning turns ultimately also into a question of the image of the human, and it also touches on the even more complex question of whether our search for meaning could refer to some objective correlate, which is really to be found “out there” in the world and is not merely in the eye of the beholder. Sure, we cannot and will not expect a meaning-oriented psychology to solve these aspects of the nature and meaning of meaning, any more than we would expect the psychology of religion to be capable of solving the question of the existence of God. What we can expect, however, or at least hope for, is an investigation of the question of what is the true goal of meaning motivation. And—in connection with this—we can expect contributions to a serious psycho-philosophical discussion of the question of meaning to make some effort to achieve acknowledgement of the fact that in speaking of the question of meaning there is undoubtedly more at stake than simply the question of whether it feels good to believe in a meaning, irrespective of how this meaning is modeled and understood.

This, at least, is the plea made by early European existential psychology and philosophy, as developed in the wake of Kierkegaard’s existential turn by its pioneers such as Frankl, Allers, Jaspers, and Binswanger. In this philosophical and psychological tradition, focusing on the question of whether “I am happy” or “it feels good” to believe in a meaning cannot take us beyond the point at which the question of meaning chiefly concerns discovering “what I am good for.” Put more simply, this plea argues that although a feeling of happiness and meaning-filled joy in life may be an essential element of motivation by meaning, this is only a

partial description and it certainly does not represent the whole spectrum of human involvement with the question of meaning. As Frankl put it, it might well be the case that an experience is not meaningful because it comes with happiness, but rather, it comes with happiness because it is meaningful.

At least from the perspective of European existential psychology and philosophy which, among other things, has had to consider the question of meaning against the background of the massive trauma of the concentration camps, a meaning-oriented existential psychology furthermore also has to explain whether (and if so, how) humans can experience meaning even in suffering—a meaning that is not sustained because it helps us to feel and function better, but also enables us to meet life in its fullness—for good or evil—and to find an opportunity to attain inner maturity or growth that in many a situation—such as sickness, guilt, and on our deathbed—can scarcely be viewed from a purely functional perspective any longer.

And, indeed, when we consider the question of meaning in view of suffering and mortality, we are constantly confronted with findings that do not seem to make much sense if the main rationale of meaning motivation is to feel good and avoid what feels uncomfortable, and that's it. Indeed, we find that humans often not only act mainly according to that which brings them a direct physiological or psychological advantage, but that they engage in the actions that they carry out because it appears more meaningful to them to carry them out than not to do so, even if the psychological price may be high and costly. As European existential psychology understands it, then, a fair proportion of our existential concerns are directed not solely toward a functional and pragmatic purpose inasmuch as they are good for us—but are striven for because they are recognized as good in themselves, that is, because they have a value rather than a function and as such are meaningful:

What kind of interest do we have that the last tigers in Russia, which we would never get to see anyway, should not be killed off? What kind of interest causes an artist, without regard for his or her strength or time of life, to labour to improve a work that probably hardly anyone will ever see? [...] Or what kind of interest makes a person want to know a distressing truth rather than be comforted with a kindly lie, even if the deception takes place at the deathbed and is therefore inconsequential? (Spaemann 1996, p. 234).

As previously mentioned, these are questions that appear to prohibit any oversimplified, exclusively pragmatic perspective on the question of meaning in psychology. At least they should prohibit such a perspective if psychology not only intends to consider the meaning question from the point of view of its psychological expediency but also takes into account the object of this question, that is, meaning itself.

Perhaps it was precisely against this background that, alongside the popularity gained in the field, recent responses have been made toward positive psychology, arguing that more depth and a greater existential-humanistic perspective should be taken into consideration (e.g., Schneider et al. 2001; Taylor 2001) and that core questions regarding the human condition cannot be fully addressed through a positive-only approach (e.g., Lazarus 2003; Wong et al. 2006).

Additionally, although they share significant links as contributors to full human life, happiness, and meaningfulness are not necessarily the same; whereas life can be meaningful but not happy, it is much less likely that the reverse is the case (Baumeister 1991). Some scholars have explicitly distinguished between meaning, happiness, pleasure, and joy (Peterson et al. 2005). For example, Wong (2011) broke down the distinction between hedonic and eudemonic motivations into two mindsets, and equated meaning orientation with eudemonia versus hedonic happiness orientation. McGregor and Little (1998) emphasized the distinction between happiness and meaning, which is echoed in Baumeister's (1991) illustration of the "parenthood paradox" where, while parental happiness decreases, parental meaning rises (Baumeister 1991, p. 161). Specifically, McGregor and Little show that goal efficacy ("doing well") is associated with happiness while goal integrity ("knowing yourself") is associated with meaning. This distinction is also expressed by Emmons (2003), summarizing research on personal goals and strivings: "happiness is most often a by-product of participating in worth while projects and activities that do not have as their primary focus the attainment of happiness" (p. 106). Likewise, Frankl (1967) also states that happiness can be attained as a result of meaningful living and not when pursued directly as an end. Graber (2004) quotes Helen Keller who testifies this stance in her words: "Many persons have a wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification, but through fidelity to a worthy purpose" (p. 67). These accounts emphasize the importance of joining forces in both application and theory. Integrating measures of positive affect (King et al. 2006) and satisfaction (e.g., Diener et al. 1985), as well as meaningful indicators, such as purpose, goals, and generativity have the potential to contribute to a richer and more complete picture of what it means to be psychologically well (McGregor and Little 1998) and existentially mature (Frankl 2010).

## **Of Trembling and Coping: Death, Meaning, and Our Minds**

An interesting new trend within social psychology seems to have taken the idea to also address the less positive sides of human experience seriously enough to attempt to connect the question of human suffering and mortality and the question of which coping mechanisms humans activate in view of their vulnerability and mortality. This has recently been much discussed in the context of Terror Management Theory. And yet, here again, the potential drawbacks of the pragmatic and functional approach to meaning as a coping mechanism soon emerge if viewed against the background of the early European existential approaches. For, according to the majority of the early European existential philosophers and psychologists, the question of meaning in view of our mortality is not necessarily primarily nourished by the attempt to avoid the conscious experience of the conflict between the survival instinct and our knowledge that our eventual death and decay is unavoidable (as suggested by the proponents of Terror Management Theory). For it

is also possible, at least if for the sake of argument we assume for a moment that the question of meaning addresses a genuinely existential dilemma, that the fear of death is interrelated with existential uncertainty, for example, the fact that we have no clear knowledge of who we might or should become before we die.

Hence, according to early existential theorists, although grappling with our mortality is accompanied by anxiety and potential terror, the avoidance of these affective states is not necessarily the ultimate concern, let alone the first concern, of the question of meaning vis-a-vis our own mortality. For the anxiety may as well be the effect of the truly virulent question of meaning, the core of which is meaning itself and the question whether our death will eventually eliminate and nullify the meaning and significance of our deeds and experiences. This is, of course, a very existential and predominantly philosophical question and much more complex compared to the study of its purely psychological consequences (and ensuing defense mechanisms).

Thus, if we take the concern about the meaning of mortality and death itself less seriously than the feelings coming with reminders of our inevitable mortality—feelings that are, of course, empirically much easier to capture, the pragmatic logic behind such a model of the search for meaning as a mere functional defense strategy is, at least at first sight, temptingly simple. Perhaps, though, it is too simple.

For then, the affirmation of meaning once again is not really the outcome of an engagement with the question of meaning in, through, or despite of mortality, but represents simply yet another way of affect regulation. The concepts used in such strategies may sound existential (i.e., death and meaning); but given that they are mere means to a rather unexistential end, namely affect regulation, it may be questioned to what degree these approaches may still be said to be concerned with meaning or other existential issues. In brief, the question is whether we really consider existential meaning as meaning for its own sake or, on the other hand, treat it as a psychological panacea for successful living and as a tranquilizer against existential uncertainty.

Naturally, the pioneers of the question of meaning in psychology were neither able nor willing to make it so easy for themselves, insofar as their concern, after all, was to show that the question of meaning, as a legitimate field of research, is not just another means to an end, merely in the service of inner equilibrium, or terror management, or of finding an impetus for a striving and successful life. For then, the question still remains open not so much how we make the most of our lives, but *why* we should do so at all—and this, after all, is the very question which lies at the heart of the will to meaning.

To illustrate how both the striving and the coping aspects of meaning can be utilized in clinical practice while taking meaning seriously enough to refrain from using it as a mere subjective coping or activation device, let us briefly look at the following case treated in the tradition of Franklian thought. It concerned a young woman who, as she stated, attempted suicide on account of a fundamental disappointment in life, but was saved at the last second. For the patient, there was no specific trigger, just a profound feeling of absolute despair about what she termed

her “failing life” and her difficult marriage, which had not, as she had hoped, brought a change and a greater depth to her life. As there was no specific problem at issue here, but rather a general idea in the mind of the woman that she was leading a disappointing life, there was scarcely any alternative other than to make the patient conscious of the “appeal” that was implicit in her own questions about the meaning of her life:

The patient’s suicide attempt was evidently the result of deep despair. Despair about what? First, the superficial strata are processed. The distress her husband had caused her. Gradually we move on to deeper strata. The joys that her life has denied her. The dreams that never came true. Finally, the most profound honesty is shown. Despair at herself. What she could have made of herself and didn’t. The woman she did not become. “I wanted to kill myself out of disappointment with myself,” the patient spontaneously confesses. Her case is not unusual. “Disappointment with oneself” is one of commonest motives for suicide and at the same time one of the absurdest, since a self that denies itself all future opportunities only increases its disappointment. “You wanted to perpetuate a disappointing self for all time?” I ask cautiously. “No, I wanted to destroy it for all time!” the patient objects. “The truth cannot be destroyed,” I argue. “The self with which you leave this world remains your true and final self; nothing and no one can correct it after your death.” The patient’s elemental desire is stirred, and we speak about the self as which she would prefer to enter eternal truth. It is an open-minded self full of imagination and aesthetic awareness. “I shall need some time to grow into this self,” she declares at the end of our conversation [...]. “Oh yes,” I reply, “and that is exactly what has been graciously granted to you in spite of your act of desperation: some time...” (Lukas 1993, p. 212)

Some time, yet not an unlimited amount; flourishing, and not for its own sake, but because life and death and meaning are interwoven into the fabric of existence itself. Hence here, the “appeal” or “summons” of mortality salience is not about finding a way of managing one’s own dissatisfaction by creating mere well-being and feelings of self-worth or by denying mortality. Rather, mortality calls upon this patient (and in fact, according to Frankl, Kierkegaard, and Heidegger, upon each of us) to become the person we could and should have been, that is, to accept responsibility for our own being in the face of transience and to shape it in such a way that we not only experience feelings of self-worth and meaning but also create grounds for recognizing our own worth by acting meaningfully (i.e., flourishing). This does not demand much theoretical and philosophical understanding from the individual: it merely leads away from the preoccupation with how one feels toward an existential view on what one may become and what one is good for. In brief, from a more traditional existential viewpoint, our mortality can be an invitation to honestly and positively deal with existential concerns rather than just an activating stimulus to create a subjective feeling of meaning as a buffer against being forced to grapple with the problem of death. In the first case, maturity, meaning, and perhaps even happiness are possible not because we deny death, but precisely because we accept its invitation to a life filled with meaning; in the latter, peace of mind is the result of denying mortality.

The latter is, therefore, questionable from the existential point of view for, as has already been pointed out, the question remains unanswered as to whether motivation by meaning really signifies meaning, or indeed, whether any such thing as meaning exists that is worthy of the name, or whether, on the other hand, it is a meaning only

because it has a psychological function. True, this question, as we have stated, is not the main concern of psychology. And yet, it cannot be ignored either. After all, it also shapes our implicit premises of what to expect from a psychology of meaning.

## **Transcending (some of) the Frontiers in Meaning Research Through Dialogue**

If, therefore, the insight that we gain from the epistemological and existential boundaries of meaning-oriented psychology should be that the existential entanglement of the human being is too great and too complex for any one scientific discipline to be able to claim for itself the privilege of offering an explanation, then that in itself is already a valuable piece of knowledge, which could perhaps also provide help to guard against oversimplification.

But this complex entanglement does not, of course, give anyone a *carte blanche* to speculate at will, free from empirical restraints, on the grounds that there can be no empirical answers to the central existential questions of meaning with which we are actually concerned—such as: Is there anything objectively meaningful? What is the meaning of meaning? Is meaning epistemologically accessible anyway? And, as Irish philosopher and logotherapist Stephen J. Costello put it, “is meaning wanting or just waiting?” (Costello 2013).

We do not expect answers to these questions anytime soon—in fact, we do not even know who should be able to provide such answers; and yet, we as editors felt that we owe it to the field of research both of us have been dedicated to for many years to point out that, despite all the progress in our field, these core questions of the problem of meaning in psychology are still open and are perhaps destined to remain open for a long time. It is at least as crucial to understand what we cannot understand as it is crucial to understand what we may understand one day. The different approaches to these philosophical questions may, after all, also be one of the reasons why there appears to be a very constrained dialogue between the two research traditions included in this book: positive and existential psychology. While both traditions make ample reference to meaning, there seems to be a surprisingly small overlap between the empirical and theoretical work of both fields; and yet, both traditions uncover important aspects of the still incomplete understanding of meaning itself and its role in human psychology.

It is therefore perhaps one of the great failings of the dialogue between existential and positive psychology that these questions have hitherto rarely been explicitly stated, discussed, investigated, or integrated. In fact, some 50 years after the appearance of Crumbaugh’s and Maholick’s empirical investigation, this is precisely where that very field of tension in which a meaning-oriented psychology will probably always find itself open up once more. Simply stated, some existentially oriented and philosophically inclined psychologists may view with suspicion all those positive psychologists and experimental existential social psychologists, who, for the last few years, have either been disseminating a highly optimistic

message about the “thriving” human being who thrives with and through the experience of meaning. Then again, no doubt positive psychologists view with similar suspicion the way in which existential psychologists further complicate the already complex background of this topic with fundamental philosophical questions about death, dying, and vulnerability. It is quite likely that both parties, for rather different reasons, take a blinkered view of the extent and the limitations of their own side and that of the other party. It would certainly not be the first time in the history of ideas that supposedly opposing fronts turn out to be in reality only two aspects of one and the same rather more comprehensive model that unites both “fronts” in an indivisible whole—a dialectical synthesis.

In short, a dialogue is needed here, for so much important empirical and theoretical work has now been done on the psychology of the question of meaning on both sides—positive and existential psychology—and, at the same time, there is still a certain lack of understanding on both sides of what the other side is doing, what its aims are, and, even more importantly, where there are “docking stations” for productive cooperation. Especially in view of the inherent intricacies of the meaning question, it seems all the more important that those of its aspects that *are* accessible to empirical and theoretical research are viewed in the larger context of crossdisciplinary, cooperative and creative research.

Against this background, the editors of this book have come together to map out this field of tension as it is today. Evidence for corresponding and even overlapping conceptualizations from both ends that reflect different human aspects—personal, as well as transpersonal and interpersonal, psychological as well as spiritual—suggests that “Consensus is emerging on what can be considered to be a taxonomy of meaning” (Emmons, 2003; p. 108). Identified by three independent researchers through varied procedures and conceptualizations in miscellaneous samples, a holistic account of human existential and psychological needs for meaning begins to emerge. From the positive psychology field, Emmons (1999) identified five such factors: personal strivings, achievement, intimacy, religion/spirituality, and generativity. At the more existential level, Wong and Ebersole respectively pointed to somewhat similar factors: a personal meaning profile, achievement, relationships, religion, and self-transcendence (Wong 1998); and life narratives, life work, relationships, religious beliefs, and service (Ebersole 1998). This may imply a consolidating and shared (even universal) language of meaning, where narratives of personal meaning, achievements, relationships, a transcendent or higher purpose—are themes that are often viewed as pillars for human well-being—for example, in the PERMA model (Seligman 2011)—and may serve as indicators for well-being. The cumulative efforts from both sides, positive and existential psychology, reveal the complex, somewhat elusive, and multifaceted nature of the notion of meaning in the context of a holistic view of human nature and of life as a whole—a view which, incidentally, once again begins to resemble the models proposed by the early European exponents of existential philosophy and psychology.

These perspectives roughly represent different and complementary aspects of the search for, as well as the function of, meaning, as a resource for coping with pain, stress, and suffering (e.g., Frankl 1963; Park 2010), in addition to one that



is linked with positive experiences (e.g., Hicks and King 2007). The rather scattered and independent enterprises raise the challenge of bridging what has been achieved so far, as well as current trends and topics in the field, to enable an integrative overview of the question of meaning both theoretically and empirically.

In accordance with recent calls for “Existential Positive Psychology” (Wong 2009), we see these perspectives as complementary to each other, and thus wish to offer a balanced and integrative bridge between these two significant views on the notion of meaning as a rich, complex, and multifaceted structure.

An integrative, balanced, and holistic view—that takes into account controversies and disagreements, as well as strengths and points of agreement—can provide a broader and fuller understanding of the question of meaning. This “collage” or “montage” of ideas, perspectives, and conceptualizations is also manifested in the multicultural landscape and contributions from both fields, in order to present a comprehensive and rich view on the issues discussed. What makes life worth living, in spite of the transient nature of human existence, is a critical question that has to be explored through different and complementary angles, taking advantage of the strengths inherent in both existential and positive psychology. Addressing the full range of human conditions, emotions, and concerns, as they are manifested in human motivations of fear of death, alongside the love of life, can deepen our understanding of positive human functioning, flourishing, growth, and mental health and portray “the life worth living” as a whole.

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