

The Search for Existential Meaning

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Abstract

This paper summarizes some aspects of my keynote address at the 2018 Vancouver conference of the International Network on Personal Meaning, which was also a celebration of its 20th anniversary and of Paul Wong's 80th birthday and long contribution to the field. In my paper, I argue for a comprehensive view of meaning at all levels of human existence, along the entire spectrum of the physical, social, personal and spiritual dimensions. A philosophical basis for our search for meaning has to provide us with a clear outlook that allows us to understand both the search for meaning and the challenges to the immediate meanings of our life which may turn out to be temporary meanings and might need to be replaced with more universal or lasting meanings.

Keywords: meaning, existential, life, dimensions, emotions, paradox, physical, social, personal, spiritual

Paul's contribution to the field

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Preface

Paul Wong's work in establishing the International Network on Personal Meaning has encouraged many colleagues to shift their research in a more meaning-orientated direction. The regular conferences have influenced numerous researchers and brought together many authors who, like me, had previously written about this topic (Deurzen, 2009, 2010, 2012), but who were stimulated to find greater confidence in speaking and writing about it, after being invited to share their work at the INPM with like-minded colleagues. The debate and cross-fertilization at these gatherings have greatly stimulated us and has provided the platform from which to launch a worldwide debate, allowing us to demonstrate the need to take meaning research seriously.

This paper is a direct result of being invited to the Vancouver conference, which obliged me to think more deeply about this fascinating topic and find a way to distil some of the most important ideas from amongst the many philosophical points that need to be made. The additional insistence on presenters producing papers is an additional stimulus for productivity and without it I would not have written this up. We should all be grateful to Paul and Lilian Wong for the care and support they have given to our field for so many years.

Introduction

The search for existential meaning is something that everyone is confronted with. None of us can take the meaning of our lives for granted when the world is in constant change and we are dealing daily with potential losses and transformations. The focus of a person's existential trajectory is often on the concrete action that needs to be taken in the world for the purpose of sheer survival. We prioritize the immediate practical goals, the projects and duties we have to attend to, rather than thinking too much about the ultimate purpose and meaning of our lives. This leaves us vulnerable when things go wrong because it is all too easy to forget about the

significance of what is happening in terms of the wider picture. When our path is temporarily obstructed, we are however reminded that we need to know our direction of travel in order to get going again or find a way around the obstacles. Many of us fail to think regularly about who we are, what is important to us, and where we are headed. We forget that we are in charge of the meaning, values, and direction of our trajectory. We fail to be responsible, i.e. answerable, to ourselves. When we do take notice and become more aware of the existential meaning of our life, we become much more capable of dealing with the negatives, the failures, the disappointments, and the losses as well. This is all about becoming more aware of what human existence actually is.

Life is Complex

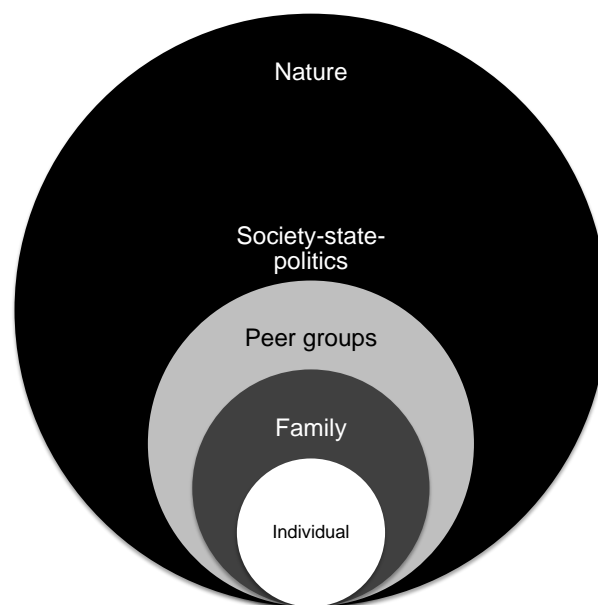
Life is never simplistic or binary. It is always complex and multiple. Neither dualism nor materialism or idealism can ultimately satisfy any who are challenged by their own existence. Soon enough, we discover that life is multi-layered and that many things at many levels are interconnected in complex ways. There are always counterpoints to any single thing that happens to us. We relate to physical things in the world, trying to achieve safety, but have to deal with threats and ultimately have to accept death. We relate to other people in a complex manner, tracing a path between love and hate, acceptance and rejection. We also have a relationship to ourselves and have to learn to deal with both our strengths and vulnerability. Ultimately, it is the way we relate to ideas and meanings that sets the tone of our everyday existence, and here too we can either get caught up in dark and despondent meanings or seek ways to become more inspired by life instead.

As individuals we have to find a way through this maze. We are surrounded by layers of pre-established meaning, which are determined by our family, our groups of reference, our

society, the state, our government, our culture, our ideology and also by the laws of nature on planet earth as well as those of the heavens and the universe all around us. No meaning we create or experience can ever be totally devoid of that complexity: we have to take it into account no matter what we do. We may get away with simplistic ideas for a bit, but ultimately the contradictions and complexities of life will always impose themselves on us.

Figure 1

Constrictions on the individual

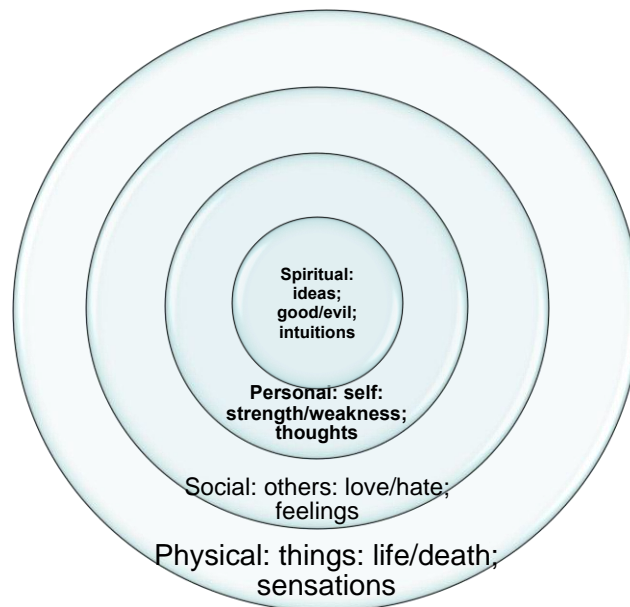


We are always situated in a particular time and place. We are always making something of what has been made of us, as Sartre (1960) and Merleau-Ponty (1962) both pointed out. It is therefore vital for us to take account of the effect these many layered influences exert on people's individual lives. It is helpful to have a model that reminds us of the complexity of life so that we can check how a person is constantly creating and changing meanings at many different levels. The Four Worlds model (Deurzen, 1997, 2012) provides a simplified overview

of the major dimensions of existence, each with their particular paradoxes and conflicts that we have to take into account. It shows the way in which we approach the world at each level, the tensions we may expect to have to deal with, and the ultimate objectives we seek to achieve. Being part of a world where we have specific tasks and expectations to meet is what provides us with a network of existential meaning. It is only when we get clarity about the way in which our meanings are created for us that we can also liberate ourselves from these and seek to establish new connections and meanings. In this respect, it is of profound importance to take account of the ambiguity and tensions of life (Beauvoir, 1944/2004, 1948/1970; Camus, 1942; Deurzen, 2015).

Figure 2

Four Worlds model, showing different dimensions of human existence and their paradoxes



The four worlds model is not hierarchical and makes no claims for being an accurate representation of human reality. It is a simple heuristic device to allow us to conceive of the layered nature of human existence and its paradoxes, illustrating:

1. Our physical embeddedness in a world of things where we find our bearings through our five senses and struggle with the contradictions of life and death, health and illness, pleasure and pain, harmony and chaos.
2. Our social situatedness in a world with other people, where we orientate ourselves with the help of our feelings as we contend with the contradictions of love and hate, belonging and isolation, dominance and submission, acceptance and rejection.
3. Our personal experience of creating a sense of self, out of a constantly changing landscape of personal and psychological experiences and capacities, modulated by our thoughts as we contend with strengths and weaknesses, confidence and confusion, perfection and imperfection, identity and freedom.
4. Our spiritual or ontological relationship to the meanings and purpose of life, where we find our direction by intuition, making sense of the contradictions and paradoxes of good and evil, truth and untruth, right and wrong, meaning and futility.

All of these dimensions of existence intertwine and are equally important. However, some of us become experts at all four and others specialise in building their lives around some dimensions more than others. We strengthen our connections at each layer of existence through experience and learning. The more we connect to the world at all levels in a meaningful manner, the stronger our sense of reality and mastery. Frankl has shown this with his recognition that values and meaning are created in multiple ways (Frankl, 1946, 1955).

None of us can survive for long if we refuse to connect to the world at different levels. We all need to do the work of connectivity, especially when life crises destroy meanings we had previously taken for granted. Baumeister's earlier work on meaning is particularly helpful in showing the importance of the multiplicity of these connections. His work combines well with the Four Worlds model. In his book *Meanings of Life* (1991), Baumeister provided us with an overview of four levels of meaning seeking, derived from his meta-analysis of research on meaning. Each of these ways of finding meaning is essential to our contentment and sense of purpose. Baumeister speaks of the need for efficacy, for value, for self-worth, and for purpose. Here is how this all fits with the Four Worlds model:

1. *We have a need for efficacy in the physical world*, which is about feeling competent and aligned in our embodied existence. The feeling of being at one with our body and at one with a world in which we can use and manipulate things aligns us with the world in a meaningful manner. It makes us feel capable and vital, skilful and fit for survival.
2. *We have a need for being of value in the social world*, which is about the feeling that we fit into society and have a contribution to make that is of some importance to it. Making a difference for the better to others makes us feel valuable and connected to the cultural network of meaning. This gives us a sense of being accepted and welcome in the world around us.
3. *We have a need for a sense of self-worth in our inner world*, by coming to terms with the idea that we have integrity and coherence within ourselves. This generates a feeling of consistent and continuous identity, which is that of being true to who we are. This is often based in an inner dialogue where we both approve of ourselves and reflect on possible

self-improvement. To consider ourselves to be good and valid individuals is highly generative of meaning.

4. *We need a sense of purpose in the spiritual world of ideas*, which is derived from having a worldview where all our beliefs and values make sense and come together in a way that we feel supported and which is coherent and clear. This enables us to find the fortitude to keep moving forwards in life with a strong sense of orientation in the world and direction for the future.

These four networks of meaning are worked on by each of us throughout our lives. We make stronger ties at each level whenever we can, but circumstances will sometimes disconnect us and cut us off from these threads that tie us to life. When we lose our physical capacity, this is a huge challenge to our efficacy network. When we lose important relationships, significant parts of the web of meaning are dismantled. When we start doubting our own integrity or good character, the core of our self-reliance and the meaning this generates is ripped apart. When the belief system and the values we hold dear are contradicted or undermined by reality, we may lose our bearings because we become severed from the very anchor that keeps our life safely tied up in the harbour of meaningful and connected existence.

The existential view is however that all our connections are subjected to a permanent process of change and transformation. Meaning is not static, and our meaningful connections are in flow and flux at all times. The more we are easy with this impermanence and flexible nature of our existence and safety, the more open we shall be to challenge and change. Our fourfold meaningful connections will be much the stronger for being actively in question (Beauvoir, 1970; Deurzen, 2015). As argued earlier, human existence is paradoxical in that it moves continuously between a number of polarities. We can never just stay stagnant or stable, but have

to engage with historical change, taking sometimes dramatic transformations into our stride. The below overview is a summary of various levels of challenge and change, showing our positive purpose, as contrasted with our negative concerns. The objective is never to just settle for achieving positive meaning and purpose but to be equal to our negative concerns at the same time. Tillich (1952) and Yalom (1980) called these negative concerns our ultimate concerns, and they showed the importance of not evading them. Jaspers' (1951) idea of limit situations is also very similar. Jaspers showed that we can only ever become strong in our dynamic existence to the extent that we face up to the troubles and difficulties that are inevitable and that limit us. It is the feeling of being able to balance between all meanings—positive and negative ones—that gives us a true feeling of existential buoyance and courage. This helps us trust that we will be able to find our bearings no matter what happens to us. We often find that we have to settle for minimal goals in life, and at times we may feel we cannot do even that much as we are depleted temporarily of our vigour.

Figure 3

A framework of meanings

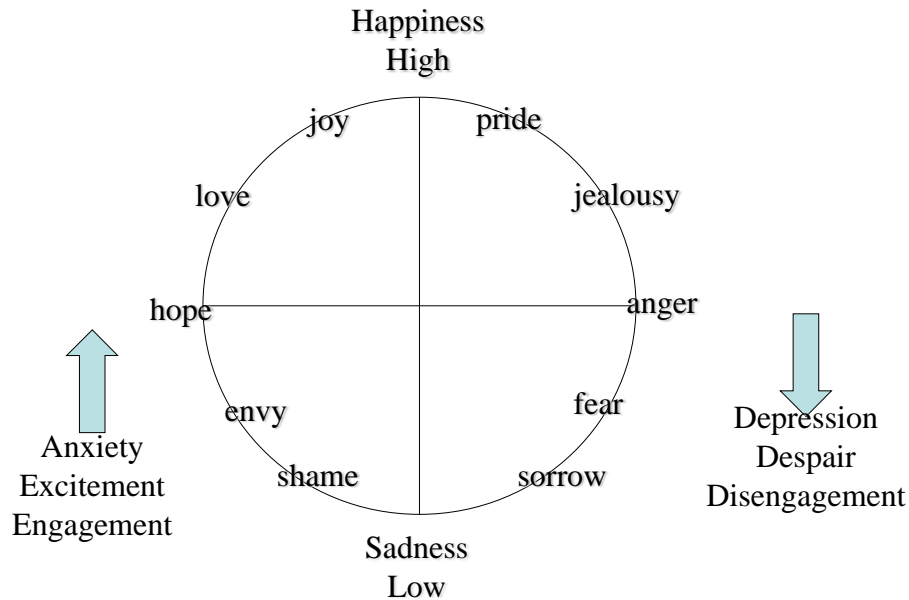
Dimension	Positive Purpose	Negative Concern	Minimal Goal	Optimal Value
<i>Physical</i>	Health	Illness	Fitness	Vitality
	Pleasure	Pain	Safety	Well-being
	Strength	Weakness	Efficacy	Ability
	Life	Death	Survival	Existence
<i>Social</i>	Success	Failure	Skill	Contribution
	Belonging	Isolation	Kinship	Loyalty

	Acceptance	Rejection	Recognition	Cooperation
	Love	Hate	Respect	Reciprocity
<i>Personal</i>	Identity	Confusion	Individuality	Integrity
	Perfection	Imperfection	Achievement	Excellence
	Independence	Dependency	Autonomy	Liberty
	Confidence	Doubt	Poise	Clarity
<i>Spiritual</i>	Good	Evil	Responsibility	Transparency
	Truth	Untruth	Reality	Authenticity
	Meaning	Absurdity	Sense	Value

The feelings we experience about the world and its meanings are a direct indication of whether we are currently navigating towards a valued meaning or whether we are moving away from it.

When we are going in the direction of what is meaningful, we shall experience emotions like hope when we come close to our meaning, or joy, when we unite ourselves with it. When we move away from what is meaningful and valuable to us, we shall experience more negative emotions, such as fear, when we dread the loss of what is meaningful and valued, or anger, when we want to protest and retrieve a meaning we feel entitled to.

The emotional compass can help us navigate our way across the networks of meaning that are ours. But this does not mean that we shall always aim for what is most valuable. Sometimes moving away from something we previously valued deepens our meaning, as we realize that we are making greater sense of something we previously only knew partially.

Figure 4*The compass of emotions*

The emotional compass needs to be used with great care, for meanings and values are relative to the overall picture of existence that we are developing. Different people feel different things in the same situations. We always need to explore carefully what the precise meaning is of a person's response to a gain or a loss in life. This brings us to moral issues: for our emotions are relative to the ethics we live by. If we think it is good to compete and win in life, then it follows that we shall feel elated when we do so. If we prefer a more cooperative stance, we may feel disappointed in ourselves or even guilty or ashamed when we dominate or win over others. It is ultimately only possible to gauge people's network of meanings when we understand the way in which they have connected to the eternal and universal meanings that determine our ethical stance. This will always involve an appreciation of the tensions and paradoxes of human

existence. Looking at Figure 3, we can see that the optimal meanings are never achieved without us learning to hold the tension between positive and negative meanings at all levels.

Illustration

When working with my client Rita, who came to me because her life had become quite meaningless after the death of her husband and son (Deurzen, 2010), it became soon obvious that here was a person whose connections to the world had been forcefully severed at all levels. She had no appetite for life, because nothing seemed worthwhile anymore and everything was in question. Her physical universe had fallen apart as she had lost the two people she treasured and looked after. Her social universe had been terminally diminished as she no longer thought of herself as a wife, a mother, a peer, or a valid person in society in any way. She no longer had any value. Her personal universe had shattered because she had lost all sense of self-worth, feeling that her identity had unravelled. Her spiritual universe had imploded because she could not understand how such things were possible or overcomable. The very idea of a world that made sense had been stolen from her. All was darkness.

We had to slowly and painstakingly work together to re-establish her capacity for even sensing, feeling, thinking, and intuiting. Communication had to be built up slowly to allow her to even consider making fresh connections to a world she no longer wanted to be a part of. For various reasons, she had stopped even going out into the world, and she avoided all social contact. She had fallen out of respect with herself and her worldview was disastrous and catastrophic. It was over many months that Rita began to retrieve her ability to connect to the world, then interact with the world again. Out of these new interactions she began to reweave the tendrils of meaning that had become totally destroyed. That repair work was slow and extremely meticulous, because she had to be able to integrate old meanings and values into this new

tapestry of human understanding and connectivity before she could truly dare to engage with the world again. It was like a kind of micro surgery, where nerve endings needed to be repaired and linked up together again. Once she began to feel just a little bit effective in the world and capable of some value again, she could construct a new, more dynamic sense of self-respect in showing her courage and her willingness to make a new contribution to a world she had lost most of her faith in. She was able to reconstruct a meaningful universe over time because she was willing to rediscover how this can be done and decided it was worth doing the work.

Conclusions

Human beings are often more fragile without their carefully woven frameworks of meaning and value than they can possibly imagine, as long as they take these for granted. To have a more refined understanding of the vital importance of meaning and of the multi-fold ways in which we connect and disconnect to and from the world around us, we could do a great deal worse than observing the slow repair work that is done by therapists within the existential-phenomenological tradition (Deurzen, 2010; Deurzen & Arnold-Baker, 2018; Vos, 2018; Yalom, 1980).

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