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RECENT EMPIRICAL FINDINGS ON MEANING AND HOW IT DIFFERS FROM HAPPINESS: A SOCIALLY PSYCHOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

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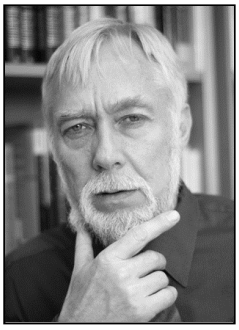

What is the purpose of life? Freud said that for most people, the answer was obvious: They want to become happy and remain happy.[6]

Yet perhaps that is not enough. Certainly the pursuit of pleasure alone does not reliably bring happiness. Thus, perhaps people want to be happy, but happiness does not seem to function all that well as a goal. At most it is a signal.

Viktor Frankl proposed there is more than happiness to life.[5] People desire meaning. From a place with a remarkably low level of happiness – a concentration camp that quickly executed most people who arrived there – he observed that whether people survived or not was related to whether they could find meaning. His theory far extended the psychoanalytic view of human nature. Instead of being mere packs of nerve cells sustaining life by following animal impulses, humans seek to understand their place in the universe and the broader, deeper significance of their activities.

Evolution, Meaning, and Today's Theories of Human Nature

Over the years, many different frameworks have been used to understand the human condition. In today's psychology, the dominant framework is evolutionary theory: Psychological tendencies and patterns are interpreted in the context of how the human mind evolved based on natural selection. Selection, in turn, is guided by what promotes reproduction and, as a vital prerequisite to reproduction, survival.

The evolutionary perspective raises difficulties for the assumption that people pursue happiness and meaning. Being happy has no obvious or

direct contribution to either survival or reproduction, and finding life meaningful offers even less. Some say nature cares not in the least as to whether someone is happy. A more charitable view is that happiness is at best an indirect means toward the true ends of survival and reproduction, such as when feelings of happiness arise from activities that promote survival (e.g., a good meal) and reproduction (e.g., great sex) and thereby encourage people to repeat those activities. In a limited sense, animals feel good when their needs are satisfied and feel bad when they are thwarted. Happiness itself may not improve one's reproductive fitness, but it could serve as useful signals that guide creatures to pursue things that prolong life and create new life.

A quest for meaning is even harder than pursuit of happiness to place in evolutionary context. Subjective meaningfulness is, as far as we know, unknown in the non-human natural world. Some of our own work has suggested possible ways to resolve this seeming gap between evolutionary theory and the human quest for meaning. Finding meaning may enhance survival and reproduction indirectly. Individual human beings do not manage either of those tasks alone but rather do so by virtue of integrating themselves into social groups. Stillman, Lambert, Fincham, and Baumeister found that people who find their lives more meaningful than others are better liked by others, and this was independent of several other factors such as happiness, extraversion, self-esteem, and agreeableness.[10] Raters who did not know how much the person considered his or her life as meaningful still were more attracted to people who regarded their lives as more meaningful. To be sure, highly handsome and beautiful people were liked regardless of how meaningful their lives were. But for people with moderate or low levels of good looks, having a meaningful life substantially enhanced their appeal to others.

In short, people like people whose lives have meaning. This could well be incorporated into an evolutionary analysis suggesting that finding meaning in life is helpful for facilitating one's interpersonal acceptance, which in turn would promote survival and reproduction. Young adults cite their families as prominent sources of meaning in life.[8] Likewise, when people experience interpersonal rejection or social exclusion, they subsequently rate their lives as less meaningful.[9]

The view of human beings as essentially cultural animals offers a broad framework for integrating meaning and evolution.[2] In that view, humankind developed a novel strategy for solving the eternal biological problems of survival and reproduction: culture. Humans survive and reproduce by creating complex social systems based on communication and sharing information, working in social structures with interlocking roles, and relying extensively on reciprocal exchange among non-kin to achieve mutually beneficial interactions. Culture consists partly of meaning, including the discussion of abstract principles as a basis for social organization, and the accumulation of collectively distilled knowledge across generations.

In that view, humans who mastered and utilized meaning would have had a competitive advantage over rivals who were less facile with meaning. Accordingly, today's human population is disproportionately descended from ancestors who used meaning to structure and guide their lives, and those tendencies would be prevalent among today's population. In plain terms, people today seek meaningful lives in part because our ancestors succeeded by doing so. Baumeister proposed that most if not all of the distinctively human traits are adaptations to make culture possible.[1] Gazzaniga's "left brain interpreter"[7] would be one prominent biological adaptation designed to help humans express their experiences in meaningful terms. A predisposition to use meaning and to seek a meaningful life would be prominent among those traits. Thus, the quest to understand one's life as meaningful may be linked to biological evolution and to the essence of what makes us human.

Happy Versus Meaningful Lives: What's the Difference?

Insofar as the pursuit of happiness and the pursuit of meaning can be distinguished, what is the difference? A large investigation by Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, and Garbinsky offered some preliminary answers.[4] The investigation used a series of surveys, including several items that asked people to rate their lives as to how happy they were and how meaningful they were. These enabled us to ask what was the difference in terms of other items on the survey.

To be sure, happiness and meaning were hardly unrelated. People responded to the main survey on three separate occasions, and each time happiness and meaning overlapped about half. To some extent, that may reflect a tendency for some people to claim that their lives have all manner of good things (i.e., both happiness and meaning) or lacked them. But clearly to some extent meaninglessness and unhappiness go together.

Even so, the correlations between happiness and meaning were far from perfect, and we decided to use the differences to explore what factors might predict one rather than the other – that is, to gain insight into the difference between a happy life and a meaningful one. We used statistical covariation techniques to correct both happiness and meaning for each other. In other words, our analyses focused on what variables correlated with meaning after correcting for any overlap with happiness, and vice versa. Thus, our findings pertain to the portions of happiness and meaning that are outside the overlap between the two.

The study was deliberately exploratory, so we were open to any findings that might emerge, rather than testing a narrow and well-defined set of hypotheses. Dozens of variables could be identified that correlated significantly with one variable but fell short of significance with the other, but those ostensible differences might in fact represent mere statistical fluctuations around the traditional criterion of .05 statistical significance. Therefore we set more rigorous criteria. We confined ourselves to variables

that correlated significantly in one direction with either happiness or meaning and also correlated in the opposite direction with the other, or zero at most.

Our findings can be grouped into five major sets of differences between what makes life happy and what makes it meaningful. The first has to do with satisfaction of basic desires. Over and over, we found that getting what one wants and needs was positively linked to happiness – and stubbornly irrelevant to meaning. A meaningful life, apparently, has little to do with satisfying one's urges. This dovetails well with Frankl's position, as death camps furnish very little in the way of satisfactions, yet they were a potent source of insight into the power of meaning. In our data, people who found life easy were happier, and those who found it difficult were less happy, as compared to other people. Indeed, people who said their lives were a struggle were relatively unhappy – but considering life to be a struggle reached almost a significant positive correlation with meaningfulness.

Likewise, good health correlated with happiness but was irrelevant to meaning. Having enough money to buy what one wants (and in a separate rating, to buy what one needs) was linked to high levels of happiness, but again it was irrelevant to meaning. Feeling vulnerable to societal economic fluctuations lowered happiness but also was unrelated to meaning.

Thus, feeling that one is able to afford practical necessities and likewise able to afford luxuries both contributed to happiness but had nothing to do with meaning. It seems the philosopher Hobbes had it right: happiness is about getting what you want. This is consistent with the evolutionary view that happy feelings evolved to serve as signals that guide people to do what is good for them. Meaning is something quite different.

The second set of findings pertained to time span, and these furnished a first clue as to where meaning comes from. The more people thought about the future and the past, the more meaningful their lives were. Specifically devoting thought to imagining the future was linked to higher meaning. In contrast, happiness was actually lower to the extent that one thought about past and future (and imagined the future). Thus, thinking beyond the present moment, projecting one's thoughts into past and future, detracted from happiness but increased meaningfulness.

The present, meanwhile, was associated with happiness. The more people thought about the present, the happier they were. This finding actually fell just short of the usual (.05) level of significance. Most likely it was weakened because people suffering from acute problems also must dwell on the present, and that pattern detracted from the general evidence for the opposite, namely that being here and now is a key to being happy. Focusing one's thoughts on the present was irrelevant to meaning.

Intrigued by the time dimension differences, we conducted a second study to elucidate the time dimension of happiness and meaning. In this study, people (here mostly students, unlike the larger investigation) rated a series of ideas in terms of their relevance to happiness and meaning. Again, the research participants linked happiness to focusing on the present and to

being oriented to the short term, and they considered happiness to be inherently fleeting. (They may be wrong about this in empirical fact.) In contrast, they linked meaningfulness to focusing on the future and to long-term contexts. Unlike happiness, they considered meaningfulness to be something that lasts and endures.

Thus, happiness is a matter of feeling good in the here and now. Meaning links past, present, and future together. Even if the present is profoundly unhappy, life can have considerable meaning by virtue of connections to other times. The continuity of the meaningful life across time is consistent with Frankl's basic understanding of the importance of striving toward purpose.

Our third set of findings pertained to social connections. To be sure, having strong bonds with other people increased both happiness and meaning (independently of each other as well as together). But there were crucial differences. People were happy when they felt others did things for them. In contrast, their lives were made meaningful by doing things for others. Helping people in need, for example, was associated with high levels of meaningfulness – but it was irrelevant to happiness and if anything approached a significant negative relationship.

To be sure, the link between helping and happiness indicated the importance of our statistical approach. When we simply measured the correlation between saying one often helped others and saying one was happy, ignoring meaning, there was a significant positive correlation. But when we corrected for meaningfulness, the correlation flipped from positive to negative. Thus, helping others does increase happiness, but this is entirely due to the fact that helping increases meaningfulness (which then overlaps with happiness). Take away the pathway through increased meaning, and helping others had no direct contribution to happiness – if anything, helping others slightly reduces happiness.

Two items asked whether people considered themselves to be givers and takers. Happiness went with being a taker and not a giver. Meaningfulness was the opposite: being a giver rather than a taker. Again, these differences only emerge so clearly when we correct happiness and meaningfulness for each other, but they do reveal important keys to understanding the difference between a happy life and a meaningful one.

A revealing finding pertained to whether people saw themselves as the sort of person who argues. That sort of person had lower happiness but higher meaningfulness than other people. Arguing is generally aversive, and so it is hardly surprising that it detracts from happiness, but arguing also indicates that one cares passionately about some things. Such caring comes with a meaningful life.

The findings about arguing foreshadow the fourth set of differences, which again confirm the wisdom of Frankl's perspective. People find life meaningful based on being seriously, earnestly involved in the affairs of the world. People may pursue happiness by withdrawing into a narrow circle of

pleasures and satisfactions, but meaning is not found on that path. Stress, worry, reflecting on one's struggles and challenges, anticipating spending a lot of time in deep thinking – all of these were associated with finding life highly meaningful, but they detracted from happiness. Bobby McFerrin's 1980s eponymous advice "Don't worry, be happy" was borne out by our data – with the less appealing proviso that not worrying also entails a less meaningful life.

Indeed, we asked people to report how many major positive and negative life events they had experienced. As one would expect, happiness was linked to having more good and fewer bad events. There was however an interesting twist: Although negative life events are less frequent than positive ones, they have far more impact on happiness, consistent with the basic psychological principle that bad is stronger than good.[3]

High meaning, in contrast, was linked to both positive and negative life events. Meaningful lives are full lives. Worry, stress, and misfortune are part and parcel of a meaningful life. This, too, is consistent with Frankl's insights. Deprivation, abuse, separation from loved ones and even their deaths will inevitably detract from happiness, but meaning can still be found.

The final set of differences had to do with self and identity. These issues were largely irrelevant to happiness, but they were consistently linked to meaning. Our survey asked people to rate each of 37 items as to whether they expressed and reflected the self. These comprised a wide and somewhat arbitrary assortment, including both basic tasks such as eating and working, and more specialized things such as texting and meditating. Of the 37, a whopping 25 were positively correlated with meaningfulness – and only two with happiness! If anything, concern with self-expression detracted from happiness; there were five significant *negative* correlations, outnumbering the two positive ones. Meaning is thus about expressing the self in one's activities. Indeed, we found that simply saying one is generally concerned with identity issues was a significant contributor to meaningfulness but had nothing to do with happiness.

Several aspects of self-concept were also relevant. People who considered their lives highly meaningful tended to rate themselves as wiser, more creative, and more anxious than others. Wisdom and creativity were irrelevant to happiness, and (not surprisingly) regarding oneself as anxious detracted from happiness.

We can sum up these findings as follows. The happy but not meaningful life involves seeking pleasure and satisfaction in the immediate present, getting others to do one's bidding, and avoiding stressful entanglements. The meaningful but unhappy life is a matter of striving and struggling to express oneself, to contribute to the welfare of others even to one's own detriment, guiding one's actions in the present based on past and future, experiencing the highs and lows associated with challenging involvements in ambitious projects with uncertain outcomes that involve things much bigger than oneself.

Coda

The first draft of this manuscript was written in circumstances relevant to its theme. Specifically, the first author was on an airplane crossing the Pacific Ocean. Because of his punishing travel schedule, he was upgraded to business class. The other passengers in his cabin were all enjoying the luxuries of that class: fine food, unlimited liquor, assorted movies and other entertainments, while he pushed himself to produce this manuscript. It was hard not to envy the simple joys of the other passengers, yet he did not yearn to trade places with them. Once they landed, those moments of pleasure would be gone forever, whereas he hoped that the meaningful activity of writing this article would serve important purposes and yield long-term value. To be sure, the author cannot claim to be ascetic nor indifferent to pleasure, but the flight offers yet another microcosmic illustration of how individuals must often chose between pursuing meaning and happiness. Those who choose meaning may suffer a palpable loss in the present – but hope that in the long run, the achievement of meaning will more than compensate for it. The tradeoff is deeply rooted in the human condition.

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Award, and an Early Career Award from the Society of Self and Identity. Her most recent award is the Free Will Essay Prize from the John Templeton Foundation (with Shariff). She has published more than 150 scholarly articles, co-edited 8 books, and has 117 unique co-authors.

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