

SELF-TRANSCENDENCE AND THE ASSURANCE OF MEANING

The question to be answered is not “What is the meaning of life?” but “What is it that makes life meaningful?”

Every living creature is aware.. It gathers information about its world, and that information needs to be meaningful. The kind of meaning required varies from one species to another, depending on its level of awareness.

- All species prior to the evolution of a nervous system – i.e. all unicellular species in the domains of *bacteria* and *archaea*, and all fungi, plants, and sponges in the domain of *eukarya* – possess only *simple awareness*. Simple awareness delivers *evaluative meaning* – the good news and the bad news relevant to the organism’s survival and reproduction. “This I should move towards; this I should avoid.”
- *Conscious awareness* belongs to all animals with nervous systems capable of housing mental constructs with which raw sensory data can be symbolically represented. Species at this stage of evolution can now abstract patterns from their sensory data, symbolically represent these patterns as perceptual categories, and then “perceive” the patterned regularities in their world that correspond to these mental constructs.
- The evolution of awareness has, in us and a few other species with elaborate nervous systems, given rise to *self-awareness* – the perception of ourselves as a subject who perceives. Self-aware creatures derive *contextual meaning* from their experience when they see how the self of which they are aware fits in the context of the larger wholes to which they belong. We humans do this by creating a conceptual map of our world and a narrative account of what’s happening in our world.

Under certain conditions (e.g. meditation, psychedelics, trance states) or for no apparent reason, we may experience another, non-ordinary state of consciousness, variously known as self-transcendence, mystical awareness, or unity consciousness, in which our usual sense of being a separate self is transcended in an all-embracing unity. It is recognized in all the world’s major spiritual traditions – in Hinduism, Jainism, and Sikhism as *moksha*, in Buddhism as *nirvana*, in Zen as *satori*, in Hasidic Judaism as *dveikut*, in Islamic Sufism as *fanaa*, and in Christianity as *the kingdom of God, the kingdom of heaven, or eternal life*.

By no means the exclusive preserve of religious or spiritual traditions, however, such *self-transcendent awareness* is thought to be potential within all of us. Indeed, what contemporary transpersonal psychologists such as Ken Wilber call “spontaneous spiritual awakenings,” or Jenny Wade calls “transcendent events,” or Michael Washburn calls “incursions from the Ground,” seem to occur, however fleetingly, in at least 50% of the population.

Among the several widely agreed-upon characteristics of self-transcendent awareness, one is what the Hasidic philosopher Martin Buber described as “the inexpressible confirmation of meaning.” In moments of unity consciousness, he wrote, “meaning is assured. Nothing can any longer be meaningless. The question about the meaning of life is no longer there. You do not know how to exhibit and define the meaning of life. You have no formula or picture for it, and yet it has more certitude for you than the perception of your senses.”

It is as if our experience of self-transcendent awareness delivers the ultimate in contextual meaning attendant upon our intuitive and experiential knowing that we belong inseparably to the One in which all things have their being.

Viktor Frankl (1905-1997), the Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, survivor of Auschwitz, and best-selling author of *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946), concluded that our human capacity to discern such contextual meaning is the core of our spiritual nature. Our experiential apprehension of meaning is, he said, “primarily a perceptual phenomenon” that delivers what he called “the wisdom of the heart.” This organ of perception can be dulled or only partially awakened, such that our discernment of meaning can

vary from the spiritual equivalent of 20-20 vision to virtual blindness. Each of us lives on a spectrum ranging from the deep satisfaction of a meaning-filled life to the ennui or despair of a meaningless existence. At the “life-is-meaningless” end of the spectrum, we suffer from what Frankl called an *existential vacuum*, which he regarded as the principal malaise of our modern era.

A number of factors can be identified as contributing to this crisis of meaning in our modern and post-modern Western society. One is a heightened individualism and a diminished sense of connection. Another is the erosion of empathy. Yet another is a kind of spiritual inertia. Most worrisome of all to Frankl, however, was the imbalance created by our post-Enlightenment reliance on the rational-analytic mode of knowing and on the scientific method as the only reliable purveyor of truth, with a corresponding disparagement of the intuitive mode of knowing and the myths in which intuitive truths are typically expressed.

The loss of meaning experienced by so many today has been bluntly expressed by some of our most eminent scientists.

- Francis Crick, the Nobel-prize winning molecular biologist who, together with James Watson, discovered the double helix structure of DNA, famously said that “*you* - your joys and your sorrows, your memories and your ambitions, your sense of personal identity and free will, are in fact no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associated molecules.”
- French biologist and Nobel laureate Jacques Monod made brutally plain the threat presented by this reductionist worldview. “The ancient covenant is in pieces. Man at last knows that he is alone in the unfeeling immensity of the universe, out of which he has emerged only by chance.”
- American biochemist Isaac Asimov echoed the same conclusion even more poignantly. “Science is complex and chilling. The vistas it presents are scary – an enormous universe ruled by chance and impersonal rules, empty and uncaring.”
- And yet another Nobel laureate, theoretical physicist Steven Weinberg, said it succinctly. “The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless.”

At the risk of being cynical, the upside to this existential vacuum may be that such ennui, such despair, and the abortive effort to fill our inner emptiness from a cornucopia of assorted goodies and entertainments may be precisely what is needed to drive our consumer economy. Perhaps this crisis of meaning is what Western society requires to fuel its economy. And what it doesn't need – what must be seen as an existential threat – is “the inexpressible confirmation of meaning” that attends our experience of self-transcendence.

Perhaps, too, any spiritual quest that opens us to the assurance of meaning may be the most revolutionary thing we can do to affirm our love for our beleaguered planet.

SOME QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION GROUPS

- 1) After millennia of pondering life's meaning, is it perhaps time to abandon the question and ask instead “What is it that makes your life meaningful?”
- 2) What, if any, is your own experience of self-transcendent awareness, and “the inexpressible confirmation of meaning” that is said to attend it?
- 3) Do you think a capacity for self-transcendent awareness is an inherent aspect of our human potential - the core perhaps, as Frankl suggests, of our spiritual nature? And, if so, what can we do to awaken it.
- 4) Do you think that we, in our Western society, are suffering from a “crisis of meaning”? And how, if at all, may this be related to the epidemic of depression, loneliness, and suicide from which so many in our society are reported to be suffering?
- 5) If, indeed, we in Western society are suffering from a “crisis of meaning,” what do you think is contributing to this crisis, and what, if anything, can we do to reverse this trend?