

The trans-rational constitution of meaning

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The unanswered question of meaning in life is one of the main causes for the current rise of depression. Often the unuttered question of meaning is hidden behind dissatisfaction and weariness of life. No society in the history of humanity has left the question of meaning so open as this one, in which the majority of people seek the meaning of life either in numbing themselves in consumption, diversion and hedonistic pleasures or – in the case of established religion – in a bold act of faith against all rationality. In former times, the social embeddedness of religious constructs and the lack of enlightened criticism of religion did not allow any contradiction between the collective construction of meaning and rational arguments. Apart from this social vacuum of meaning, it is not clear whether more people are depressed because they find this essential question unanswerable, or whether they ask the question of meaning because they are depressed, say, because they feel their lives so difficult and unsatisfactory, that they wonder why they are supposed to live it. I suspect that many therapists, who are faced with questions of meaning by their clients, have difficulties to address them, because they have avoided these questions for the most part instead of having answered them. Of course, the Franklians (the logotherapists) are an exception because they have made the subject of meaning the essence of their therapy. However, Viktor Frankl's methodology to derive meaning from the individual, concrete, as meaningful experienced act and to exclude the general, abstract questions, to me seems philosophically – and therefore for any reflective person also practically – highly unsatisfactory. Do not all of us want to know why we live and why there is life at all, or even one step more general: Why is there anything instead of nothing? Does it have only a causal reason that I exist (due to the evolution of increasingly complex carbon compounds) or a final one, a reason "for"? Does the universe or a lonely God need me or would it not be as good without me?

While materialists respond to this question with an ironic smile, it seems to be answered quite affirmatively in the New Age as with some monotheistic authors. The universe could dispense not a single atom without breaking down, it

is designed just the way that everything in it owns its fixed and necessary place, yes, each and every mosquito and microbe are wanted – how much more, then, you or me! But has this statement any rational reason or is it not just a rescue from the futility of existence, which proves to be mere nonsense, justified by nothing if you questioned it deeply? And if there is no justifiable meaning, then there is only the meaning of hedonism, the "after me the deluge" type of thinking that brings our earth gradually to the collapse. If there is no meaning other than the primary purpose of mere pleasure in order to escape the question of meaning in pure anaesthesia, then I have no responsibility for taking care of my environment, my fellow beings, and myself.

Since fleeing from the question of meaning into hedonism is unsatisfactory and, once the fun wears off, presents itself as Decamerone game against death, the question of how humans can find meaning in their life must be asked again and more seriously. What is meant by meaning, anyway? Apparently, an action is meaningful if it serves a goal that is experienced as meaningful itself. A life therefore is meaningful when a specific life goal was realized in it, a single phase of life makes sense if it helped reaching the overall goal. An action can be meaningful if it is part of a meaningful purpose, even if this is independent of the overall objective of life. But in any case, meaning is in some ways organized hierarchically and depends ultimately always on the overall meaning of your own life or of life in general. It is clear that the meaning of life of a person who believes in a continued existence after this life is therefore constructed fundamentally different from the meaning of an individual who believes to have only this one life available in order to enjoy it. In the former case, a meaningful life result is usually linked with the improvement of one's position in what comes afterwards. In the latter case, the question of meaning usually results in a meaningless hedonism.

The problem is that every meaning that we find somewhere quickly proves to be only a preliminary answer. If we find it meaningful to make a lot of money or to buy a new piece of art to hang on our wall, then we can ask again: Why and what for? And this question leads us into new needs of justification. Wherever we ask the question of meaning, we quickly fall into an infinite regress. The reason is that meaning for us generally turns out to be *meaning-for*. We are doing something *in order to* achieve something else with it. An act is justified only because of the higher meaning of that other, for the sake of what we act. If we want to finish school and sit for that purpose at home every day and learn, then learning makes sense, because we believe we can (only) by it finish our school.

In a more subtle sense, the meaning of life of many people is justified by what they mean to others. Clinical psychology knows that people, who are involved in a social network, less often react depressed / suicidal than isolated,

lonely individuals do. We gain meaning from the meaning of our existence to others in a double way: emotionally, because we are constructed as social beings, and therefore the reference to our fellow human beings exist very deeply in all our thoughts and feelings. But beyond this primary, pre-rational meaning provided by our social embeddedness, we can also constitute a rational meaning, if we can understand our life as a life for others. Altruism is a popular justification of one's own existence: I deserve it to live because others need me. My life is worth it because I am lovable, and I am lovable because I am helpful, noble and good to others. The justification of one's existence by direct or indirect significance for one's fellows has innumerable forms. Not only the extremes of a "helper syndrome" and the so-called altruistic surrender, in which one's own self-worth is totally determined by the possibility to help others and to sacrifice oneself for them, derive from it. The desire of the television star to gain popularity or the hope of the artist to become famous can be sublimations of the same motif. The helper syndrome, however, makes it clear that the supposedly altruistic urge to be helpful to others, is anything but selfless and results entirely from the selfish need to justify one's own existence by the other's recognition. Buddhism and the Eastern mentality in general take the ennoblement of the human beings as more important than their earthly state, so they look with a basic mistrust at someone with a great vocation to live totally "for others".

Moreover, the justification of one's existence in that it is helpful to other people or creatures in general, is only possible if these have a value in themselves, which is able to create secondary meaning out of itself. Do you believe that the well-being of every human is an absolute value? What about criminals? And would this still be the case if you could ask one of the creatures threatened with extinction on this planet? Or would you limit this absolute value on your "own family", your "best friends"? They may give your life meaning, because their well-being is absolutely meaningful, but not that of the others? Is here not one's own existence justified just by that being "my own", that perceived as belonging to oneself? But how can mine be the justification that this Me is meaningful? Though Kant noted in his efforts to establish a unified ethics that every person possesses a purpose in him- and herself, and not just a purpose for the sake of another being, so that the well-being of every human would be an ultimate justification for an "altruistic" act, accordingly. However, this Kantian maxim is a normative requirement, no affirmative statement, which means that the question of why a human should possess an ultimate value in and of him- or herself, still remains open. Unless one derives the absolute value of the human from the (according to traditional theology symbolic, not substantial) specularly between

man and God. Alternatively, one could (in the Buddhist view) regard every living being as consubstantial with me and therefore also suffering / in need of redemption and thus view its well-being not as an absolutely, but as a relatively reasonable meaning. Anyhow, still this does not answer the question of the meaning of existence as such.

So the regress goes on to the next level of reasoning. I try to find the reason for my existence in God or a somehow defined last fundament of all being. The monotheistic religions' concept of God is very well suited for this, since it represents the absolute, the very reason, offering an absolute, unquestionable, ultimate foundation for everything. Of course this *absolutum* is in no way empirically deducible (not even from the mystical experience, which is just as much in need of interpretation, and therefore only possibly, but according to the current state of knowledge not certainly refers to an absolute one). This is a metaphysical construction of an object of faith or of an inter-individual reality formation, but not a deducible consequence from the laws of rational thought. Therefore, the question of whether there is an ultimate meaning of my existence is not rationally decidable. It is only prerationally decidable by an act of personal belief.

If the Buddha, aiming fully at personal insight, was silent to the question why and whereby the universe was created, he did it precisely because it is not possible to understand the meaning of the whole from the standpoint of a small part of it. Our ratio is never able to grasp the Why of existence of the universe. Therefore, it is not possible to talk about it. Meaning thus must be constituted not rational, but either emotionally and prerationally as in the case of the good feeling that we have when we help others, if we are loved, or if we have good (by other recognized) achievements. It is also constituted prerationally if we have not only fun (elapsing all too quickly), but real joy in an activity or experience. And it is constituted *transrationally* when we become absorbed in a state of being that needs no more arguing for a meaning, because any question of meaning becomes superfluous, because it holds meaning in itself, beyond any hedonism. Such a state of meaningfulness is a mystical state of fullness, of connectedness, of the abolition of the individual, as it is included in the experience of complete presence, complete oneness with one's own actions (the peak experience of Maslow, the flow experience of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, the eternal Now of the mindfulness teachers).

For the Buddha, probably permanently remaining in this (and higher) states, the question of meaning had become meaningless – without meaning in the intellectual sense, too: there is no logical value any more for the answer to a question that has been done completely, it cannot be made more meaningful. Therefore, the only way I know to answer the question of meaning, which ap-

pears immediately valid in a definitive way, and therefore inescapable, is a trans-rational, direct experience of existence itself, the existence for the sake of existence. This is experienced in the depth of meditative contemplation and the width of mindful living. And for those who not sufficiently find these states in their minds, there is still a meaning-for: living *in order to* find one day the depth and width inside, the silence and the peace of mind, being assured that everything is well as it is. This is not far from Goethe's word that finally it turned out that the meaning of life was life itself, and not any purpose of it.