

MEANING IN LIFE AND SOCIETY

Joel Vos

This chapter examines the role of meaning in life in society. One of the oldest clues to the social context of our human quest for meaning seems to hide in the densely forested valley of Bella Coola in British Columbia (Vos, 2020). This isolated area can only be visited upon invitation by First Nations Canadians. The space is covered with petroglyphs dating back more than 10,000 years ago. These rock carvings repeatedly show the pattern of a concentric circle inside another circle embedded in another circle. The explanation has been passed from generation to generation that the inner circle symbolizes the individual, the middle one society, and the outer one nature and the universe. All three circles need to be perfectly balanced: not too much attention to the individual, and not too much to society and the universe. The individual in the center gets their powers from the centrifugal forces from the surrounding societal and universal circles. The individual can give something in return to society and the universe, like centripetal forces moving from the inside toward the outside. This is how the First Nations people in this area seem to have developed their sense of meaning for millennia: striving toward a balance between individual, society, and the universe. However, several First Nations authors such as Deloria (2012) have conveyed their worries about how

modern lifestyles seem to disturb the balance by making the self too big and projecting our individual meanings onto our surroundings without listening to others, nature, and the universe; they seem to consider the accelerating climate change and ecological collapse as a possible consequence of this imbalance.¹

In contrast with the balanced perspective of these First Nations people, the question that seems to characterize modern life is: What is my individual meaning in life? (Berman, 2009; Vos, 2017). This question about our personal meaning seems to disconnect the individual from their place in society and the universe. When modern individuals reflect on meaning in life, they seem to think about an individual quest, like an archetypical hero leaving the society of their village and fighting the dragons around them to develop an individual meaning independent from society and the universe, without a return to a contextual balance (Campbell, 2004).

The story about the petroglyphs shows that it is a historiological fallacy to assume that individuals in all times and places have asked themselves about their personal meaning in life. For the Bella Coola people, this was not an individual question; instead, it regarded the synergetic entwining and balancing between individual, society, and the universe. In sociological terms,

¹The story is based upon Vos (2020).

<https://doi.org/10.1037/0000432-025>

APA Handbook of Humanistic and Existential Psychology: Vol. 2. Clinical and Social Applications, L. Hoffman (Editor)
Copyright © 2025 by the American Psychological Association. All rights reserved.

we may describe this as the contrast between individualistic and collectivist approaches to meaning (Li et al., 2021; Vos, 2020). In epistemological terms, we may also describe this as the contrast between the belief that there is an individual meaning independent from any context (essentialist perspective) and the belief that all meaning is socially constructed (constructivist perspective; Vos, 2022a).

This leads to the key questions of this chapter: How do individuals develop their sense of meaning in the context of society, and how independent are they in doing this? Vice versa, how do individual meanings influence society? To answer these questions, this chapter follows a pragmatic phenomenological epistemology going beyond the oppositions of individualism/collectivism and essentialism/constructivism (Vos, 2021b). This approach is pragmatic as it focuses on the practical applications in our everyday lifeworld. In our daily life actions, we do not use extensive reflections and deliberations, but we act on the basis of implicit intuitions. Often, our actions and experiences reflect an underlying intuitive hierarchy of meanings, as we intuitively spend more time and energy on certain individuals, activities, and experiences than others. Pragmatic phenomenology explores these temporary meaning hierarchies in our lived everyday experiences instead of identifying absolute essences, as Sartre's (2001) adage says: "existence precedes essence." (p. 2). This pragmatic-phenomenological stance implies that this chapter will describe the psychological and social processes of how individuals develop their subjective experiences of meaning in life without making any claims about the metaphysical truth or essences underlying these experiences. This will be achieved via descriptive psychological, sociological, and anthropological studies.

This chapter consists of three parts. The first part asks how people have experienced meaning in life in different historical periods, and how the evolution of our sense of meaning in life seems entwined with the evolution of our neuropsychological capacity and the development of societies. As the research on existential evolution is still in

its infancy, these hypotheses are described tentatively. The second part systematically analyzes the relationship between meaning and society via systematic reviews of empirical research. As explained in detail elsewhere, this is done by answering 10 questions to provide a comprehensive overview (Vos, 2021b). The last part returns to the question of the First Nations Canadians: How we can balance individual meaning with society and the universe? This part will zoom into the topic of meaning and social justice. Together, this chapter gives a comprehensive overview of the existing research on the complex relationship between meaning and society.

This chapter shows that experiences and definitions of meaning in life seem to differ between cultures and eras. However, it can be helpful to have a working definition to know what we are generally referring to when we mention the term *meaning in life*. The following tentative definition of the psychological experience of meaning in life will be used throughout this chapter, based on a review of 37 studies that identified seven strongly correlated empirical components to the definition of meaning in life (see Chapter 9, this volume; Vos, 2016a, 2017).

For example, meaning includes a component on motivation, such as a sense of purpose, goals, or directionality in life, although this directionality does not need to be in the form of specific future goals but could also be about the path towards the destination. This also involves values, such as how individuals move towards their goals in life in line with their subjective ethical norms and values. An individual develops their sense of meaning in the context of their life story, generations before and after them, and it is this understanding of larger coherence that directs them in life. Individuals also need to feel worthy to follow their own direction in life and their own meaning needs to feel significant,

instead of robotically following the expectations from family, friends, and society. Living a meaningful life also includes practical skills, to translate the general sense of direction into specific steps, actions, and goals, for example via goal-management and self-regulation skills. Individuals will also need existential skills to live a meaningful life in the face of their inevitable challenges and human condition. Finally, individuals need to be committed to actually try realising their meaning potential in daily life. Thus, the experience of meaning in life needs all these components, and cannot be reduced to only one of these. (Vos, 2022d, p. 24)

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF EXISTENTIAL EVOLUTION THEORIES

It is a common misunderstanding that how we develop our sense of meaning in life is the same as people in all times and places (Vos, 2017). The fact that many individuals in modern Western countries find meaning by questioning what their personal meaning in life is regardless of their society and the universe, does not justify the conclusion that people have always asked themselves such a de-contextualized personal question about meaning in life (Berman, 2009). This is a historiological fallacy, as our approach to life evolves over time (Vos, 2017, 2023b).

The philosopher Richard Dawkins (1976) hypothesized that psychological and social phenomena, which he calls *memes*, including our sense of meaning in life, evolve like biological phenomena do. Dawkins based this idea on Friedrich Nietzsche's (2017) analysis of the historical transformation of values. Similarly, Martin Heidegger (2010) described the changeability of what we see as meaningful in each era: our horizons of understanding shift, just as light shines from a different angle on phenomena in each historical epoch. As elaborated later, cross-cultural and historical research shows, for

example, that most individuals in modern Western societies use a functionalistic approach to life and focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning. In contrast, in premodern and less capitalistic countries, individuals seem more inclined to use a traditional or phenomenological approach to life and focus on social and larger types of meaning (Vos, 2023a, 2023b, 2020). Thus, our experiences of meaning seem to evolve naturally without a linear direction, similar to biological evolution (this implies that existential evolution does not seem to follow a pre-given plan, which has made some existential philosophers describe human existence as "absurd"; Barash, 2000). The remaining question is how a comprehensive theory of existential evolution would look like.

Philosophical Existential Evolution Theories

Philosophers have hypothesized different mechanisms behind the evolution of our meanings (Heidegger, 1954, called such mechanisms *das Gestell*, i.e., the making ready—*stellen*—of what we see as meaningful). For example, Friedrich Nietzsche (2017) hypothesized that those types of meaning that help individuals to function better in life, such as courage and acceptance of fate (*amor fati*), will become dominant. Nietzsche described that the natural evolution of meaning seems to follow a Will to Power. He observed that humans continuously want to overcome their limitations and develop more functional types of meaning, like walking on a tightrope from ignorance to wisdom: we must continuously change our lives (Sloterdijk, 2014).

Although Nietzsche observed the natural evolution of meaning in life, he also described how the natural evolution of meaning is often disturbed by interventions from powerful individuals. This implies that not always the most functional meanings become dominant in society, but the meanings that have been promoted by the most powerful individuals. Whereas Nietzsche described the influence of religious leaders on the evolution of meaning, authors such as Foucault (2001/2008), Rose (1990), and Vos (2020) have

critiqued the influence of economic and political powerholders.

Whereas Nietzsche's philosophy of the Will to Power was relatively theoretical, his ideas influenced psychologists and psychology researchers. For example, Alfred Adler (2014) translated Nietzsche's Will to Power as a Will to Superiority. Adler wrote that humans are often oriented toward goals, motivated by striving for superiority. Adler assumed that infants often start with a feeling of inferiority and inadequacy, and they may develop superiority mechanisms to (over)compensate for these feelings. Adler's student, the psychiatrist Viktor Frankl (1970) disagrees with both Nietzsche's Will to Power and Adler's Will to Superiority, as he identified an even more fundamental Will to Meaning. Frankl observed that individuals try to find meaning in any situation—even in situations of suffering—without assuming any specific evolutionary mechanisms or a Nietzschean progression from ignorance to wisdom. Countless empirical studies have confirmed that individuals try to find meaning even in situations seemingly devoid of meaning (see reviews in Vos, 2016a, 2016b, 2017). Adler and Frankl translated philosophical evolution theories into individual psychological mechanisms. This chapter follows their approach by describing an existential evolution theory, linking collective and individual processes. Without examining the evolutionary dimensions of existence, we cannot justify existential claims about our human uniqueness (de Sousa, 2010; Sheets-Johnstone, 1986).

The Nature/Nurture Debate About Meaning in Life

Although Nietzsche did not explicitly use the term *evolution*, his existential philosophy fell in line with biological evolution theories emerging

in his era, such as Jean Baptiste Lamarck (1809/1984), who had proposed that humans evolve through adaptations over time. Charles Darwin (1859/2004) theorized that all species of life have descended from a common ancestor and that different species have evolved due to natural selection and the struggle for existence. A characteristic is more likely to be passed on, and thus become more common within a population, if it improves the organism's biological functioning and survival. Similarly, according to Nietzsche, meaning in life naturally evolves due to its functional benefits. For example, in evolutionary terms, we may hypothesize that social types of meaning, such as looking after vulnerable individuals and conforming to social norms, can be observed in most species and human religions because social types of meaning seem to benefit the survival of the species (De Waal, 1996; Kropotkin, 1902/2012; Vos, 2020).²

Darwin (1859/2004) posited that evolutionary change happens via the expression of genes passed on from parent to offspring during reproduction. Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Dawkins did not require materialistic mechanisms for the evolution of meaning in life. However, in terms of modern psychology, we may hypothesize that meaning in life evolves via epigenetics, involving the expression of genes under specific environmental conditions, in complex interactions between neurobiology and social processes such as socialization (Caruso & Flanagan, 2018; Vos et al., 2019). For example, human beings may value social types of meaning due to inherited neurobiological mechanisms, such as mirror neurons, which may have evolved due to their evolutionary benefits (Iacoboni, 2009). These mirror neurons may not be sufficient cause for the transmission of particular meanings, as children may need to learn from others how to develop social types of

²For Nietzsche, there was no bigger plan or purpose behind our meaning in life, as the religious traditions hold. Whereas his nihilistic philosophy may initially feel like a loss, this emptiness may transform into a free space for self-expression and self-realization (Vos, 2017). Even though our individual and collective perceptions of meaning in life may have evolved via blind variation and powers influencing us (we are human, *Mensch*, after all), we have some phenomenological freedom to transcend the limitations of our functionally evolved meanings (we can be Super-Human, *Über-Mensch*); that is, we can use our freedom to develop our own meaningful stories. According to Nietzsche, meaning that we design and master ourselves within the limits of our evolved life situation may give us a deep sense of fulfillment and awe for life. However, this requires a phenomenological attitude of letting go, *Gelassenheit*—trust that there is meaning after we let go of our traditional approaches to life (Visser, 2008; Vos, 2015).

meaning in their specific social context. Therefore, parents, clergy, and teachers may share rules, stories, and myths to tell others which examples of meaning they regard the most beneficial for the individual and the species. Social types of meaning may also be socially reinforced, for example via social exclusion mechanisms, police and court systems, and individuals with disproportionate anti-social traits may be less likely to thrive and survive in society. It has also been hypothesized that young children internalize the meanings from their caregivers out of fear of rejection (Greenberg et al., 2004). That is, as human infants depend on adult caregivers for their food and protection, they may do everything—including copying their caregivers' behavior and meanings—to prevent rejection from their caregivers which may lead to injury or death. In sum, meaning in life may evolve due to complex interactions of inherited biological traits and noninherited social processes: nature and nurture.

The Limitations of Existential Evolution Theories

Several authors have applied a Social Darwinist perspective to meaning in life, such as Dawkins (1976), Philipse (2004), Oudemans (2008), and Peterson (1999, 2021). It has been argued that some of these authors suffer from self-serving bias and lack of falsifiability (Dennett, 1996) by assuming that meaning can only be explained in terms of their biological or social functions (Vos, 2020). Their functionalistic determinism may be problematic and even fallacious. As these authors use a functionalistic lens to describe the history of meaning, it is understandable they only find examples of meaning with strong functional benefits, but this is not a logical argument.

A good example may be found in some popular functionalistic authors who seem to follow a neoconservative philosophy, such as Leo Strauss and Jordan Peterson (Vos, 2020). Based on a selective reading of philosophy and psychological research, they seem to argue that because some individuals in contemporary Western societies have become successful and happen to follow strong self-determining values, everyone must

follow such values. If we do not impose our order via self-oriented social rules, self-care, and self-selected friends, the universe may even succumb to chaos. These authors seem to commit a correlation/causation fallacy, as strong self-determining values may be the result instead of the cause of individual success, such as a privileged social context could make individuals focus more on self-oriented values (Vos, 2020). This may also imply an induction fallacy, as it may be difficult to derive a general principle from individual cases, and not everyone may define “success” in functionalistic terms.

The main fallacy of rigidly functionalistic authors is their is/ought fallacy, as they conclude from their functionalistic description of the evolution of meanings, that individuals must follow functionalistic meanings. Their subjective focus on the biological and social functions of meaning does not justify their conclusion that nonfunctionalistic examples of meaning in life should be dismissed. The fact that we have a functionalistic approach to life does not imply that people in other times and places also must have a functionalistic approach, nor does it mean that nonfunctionalistic approaches will die out. This viewpoint is confirmation bias and a self-fulfilling prophecy. We should be careful not to overinterpret the functional mechanisms of existential evolution theories. Martin Heidegger (1954) wrote that the functionalistic approach seems so all-encompassing in our era, that we find it difficult to experience any meaning beyond their practical functionality (Visser, 2013). In our contemporary society, many people seem to struggle to imagine and symbolize life in nonfunctionalistic terms. Consequently, also academics—whose ideal role should be to conduct politically neutral research and/or be transparent about their biases—may impose a functionalistic political agenda.

Countless examples exist of individuals with a nonfunctionalistic or phenomenological approach to life that seems prevalent in African, Southeast Asian, and South American countries (Vos, 2023a, 2020). For example, a popular stereotype says that according to the Buddha,

the journey is equally or possibly even more meaningful than reaching the destination (Ross, 2013). A Ugandan story suggests that it is equally meaningful, but less psychologically stressful, to go with the flow of the river—even though less directly functional than rowing in a direct line to cross a river (Vos, 2020). Several philosophers and sociologists have also reported a recent trend in Western countries to approach life in nonfunctionalistic ways (explained later). It seems possible to imagine an escape from an all-encompassing Darwinistic–Nietzschean functionalistic approach to life, and it is not an academically neutral conclusion but a political decision to focus merely on functionalistic meanings.

To summarize this section on the philosophical foundations of existential evolution theories, our experiences of meaning in life seem to evolve over time, most likely due to a complex interaction between social and bio-neurological mechanisms. However, we need to be critically reflexive about the limitations of our evolutionary perspective. For example, we cannot conclude that our contemporary types of meaning and approaches to life are the best. The only justified conclusion seems to be that meaning in life is in continuous flux throughout history.

A COMPREHENSIVE EXISTENTIAL EVOLUTION THEORY

The following is a hypothetical reconstruction of how people may have experienced meaning in life over the ages and the evolution of the underlying neuropsychological and social mechanisms that have allowed the change of our experienced meanings. Furthermore, this section will suggest how our sense of meaning may go beyond the functionalistic approach of evolution theories. This reconstruction is based on key publications as detailed elsewhere (Vos, 2020).

Evolutionary Stage 1: Development of a Prereflected Will to Live

It seems that all species try to stay alive. This is an inherent condition in evolution theory

(Darwin, 1859/2004). In their actions, animals show a will to life: sustaining life and preventing death. Animals and humans alike show behaviors of fighting, fleeing, or freezing when confronted with a potential threat to their existence (Folkman, 2011). Integral to these mechanisms of the will to live are pain and fear, which motivate individuals to withdraw from damaging situations in the present or future.

It would be an anthropomorphic fallacy to conclude that an animal consciously decides on a fight, flight, or freeze response because they have reflected and concluded that their life was meaningful. To our understanding, animals do not have an advanced level of conscious reflection and decision making, particularly not about complex topics as meaning in life (Kaas, 2019; Rakic, 2009). This innate will to live does not require reflection and conscious decision-making. We may label this preverbal and prereflected sense of meaning in life as *a will to live*, as described by Arthur Schopenhauer (1818/2012) as an irrational, “blind incessant impulse without knowledge that drives instinctive behaviors” (p. 87).

It may be hypothesized that the will to live is the most basic sense of meaning in life that humans can experience. Humans may share the will to live with animals thanks to their evolutionary oldest parts of the brain that they have in common with other animal species (Kaas, 2019; Rakic, 2009). Researchers have observed that even if all other types of meaning become unattainable in life, individuals may still find meaning in the fact that they are alive (Vos, 2017). For example, Frankl (1985) described how the inherent meaningfulness of human life was a key motivation for prisoners in concentration-camps to survive humankind’s worst imaginable atrocities. The will to live is associated with positive emotions, psychological, social, and physical well-being, and seems to help individuals survive against all odds (Bornet et al., 2021; Chochinov et al., 2005). In contrast, individuals lacking a will to live experience anxiety, depression, and poor mental and physical health (Chochinov et al., 1999). Thus, human beings may perceive life as meaningful,

possibly because this meaning may help the survival of our species.

Many existential philosophers regard the will to live as fundamental. Albert Schweitzer (1979) wrote: “I am life that wants to live in the midst of life that wants to live . . . reference for life is the highest court of appeal” (p. 4). Similarly, life has been a key principle for the existential philosophers Søren Kierkegaard, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche. These philosophers seemed to hypothesize that the evolutionary most basic sense of meaning in life is to be alive as an individual and even more so as a species. Life is sufficiently meaningful in itself: individuals may not need any other meanings. Individuals can find joy and gratitude in the mere fact of being alive, which has sometimes been described as “zest for life” (Vanmechelen, 2009). This is an example of an existential-philosophical type of meaning, which can be a very powerful example of meaning.

Evolutionary Stage 2: Development of a Prereflected Will to Prevent Death

The other side of the will to live is the will to prevent death. Although strongly related to the first stage, the will to prevent death may be a different experience (Brown et al., 2005; Vos, 2015). Research indicates that many animals can differentiate between death and life, can grieve over other dead animals, and are frightened when dying (Terlouw et al., 2016). It may be hypothesized that species benefit from existential feelings such as fear of death, as this helps to survive, such as running away from life-threatening situations (Vos, 2019).

Humans seem to have evolved a more advanced understanding of death than animals and seem to be able to be more consciously aware of their mortality (Panksepp, 2005). Many existential philosophers have described how the will to prevent death explains much of human behavior. For example, Heidegger (1927) adjusted Schweitzer’s formulation by writing that death is “the highest court of appeal” (p. 106), because when confronted with death, an individual can become aware of their life in its totality, including

its finality. In the confrontation with their mortality, “the self calls back the self to the self” (Heidegger, 1927, p. 125). That is, in confrontation with their mortality, individuals can become more fully aware of what truly matters in life and decide to actively use life’s opportunities to live to the fullest. Consequently, Ernest Becker (1997) suggested that many meanings in life—including the emergence of culture—seem to be derived from how we cope with our mortality.

Empirical studies based on Terror Management Theory seem to confirm that a confrontation with death and mortality can make us aware of the meaningfulness of life (Burke et al., 2010). For example, when individuals are subliminally primed about their mortality in psychological laboratory experiments, they may shift their attention to presumably life-preserving meanings. Due to the subliminal nature of these primes, this may tentatively be interpreted as involving evolutionary old neurological mechanisms. It seems that the confrontation with death triggers our fundamental will to prevent death. This confrontation may subsequently spark existential moods such as fear of death: We want to live, and therefore death is frightening. We can actively cope by confronting the death threat, for example, by fighting an enemy, or going to a doctor or psychotherapist—the equivalent of going to a safe space and licking our wounds like wounded animals do.

More than animals, humans also seem inclined to cope with their fear of death by changing their perception of the threat (Greenberg et al., 2004). Proximal defense mechanisms are rational or superficial ways to stop reminders about death, such as not watching the news anymore or changing our personal perception of the situation. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals who were afraid of death were more likely to argue that others were at risk of COVID-19, but they were not (Vos, 2021a). Distal defenses shift the attention to one’s world-view and meanings in life and rigidly hold onto them. For example, many studies showed that in response to the existential threat of COVID-19, some individuals became more conservative,

xenophobic, and sinophobic (Vos, 2021a). Individuals who associated COVID-19 with death were less likely to follow government guidelines, such as using personal protective equipment or going into self-isolation. Note that to trigger these proximal or distal defense mechanisms, the existential threats do not need to be large, real risks but can be purely imagined.

In sum, animals seem inclined to actively defend themselves against a threat to their will to live. In human beings, these defense mechanisms seem to have evolved into proximate and distal defense mechanisms, which seem to influence how humans find meaning in daily life. An overview of the role of death in existential therapies can be found elsewhere (Vos, 2018).

Evolutionary Stage 3: The Development of Prereflected Materialistic, Hedonistic, and Self-Oriented Types of Meaning in Life

Most animals seem to prefer and enjoy living in a good materialistic situation with sufficient food and shelter, hedonistic play, and being cared for (Balcombe, 2006). Formulated differently, animals seem to focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning in life (obviously in nonreflective ways). The difference with the previous evolutionary stages is small, as it may obviously be argued that materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning may be derived from a will to live and a will to prevent death: food, shelter, hedonism, and looking after oneself may help to survive. Food addiction may for example be caused by the evolutionary message “eat now as much as you can, because you do not know when you have food again.” Obviously, the pleasurable feelings associated with sex may also have stimulated the sharing of genes and the survival of the species (Norton, 2005).

Thus, materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented activities may be associated with feelings of happiness or meaningfulness because they may directly or indirectly fulfill our underlying will to live and prevent death (Berridge & Kringelbach, 2008). The biophysical and neurobiological mechanisms that enable our materialistic,

hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning may have initially evolved to support our drive to life and prevent death. However, possibly as a side effect, some materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning seem to go beyond a mere will to live and prevent death or may not be relevant anymore in our abundance societies. For example, the playfulness of animals may not always seem to have direct functions other than social bonding and the inherent meaningfulness of these activities. Similarly, many humans find meaning in materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented activities, some of which seem to go beyond an immediate utility to live and prevent death, and which may even endanger their lives, such as behaviors that form the basis of addictions and obsessions (Vos, 2023b).

Evolutionary Stage 4: The Development of Early-Verbal Social Types of Meaning

Most animals do not merely focus on their survival, they also look after each other and show moral behavior (De Waal, 1996). For example, when a forest is on fire, animals help others to get out safely—even other species or enemies. Furthermore, higher primates have developed complex social codes (De Waal, 1996) and may have a rudimentary differentiation between I, you, and others (Lurz, 2009). For example, a community of chimpanzees can have a social hierarchy, and individuals can get punished if they disobey. It may be hypothesized that social connections became inherently meaningful because it helped the survival of the species. Species may benefit in their survival from looking after offspring, collaboration, a sense of community, and peer support, e.g., to collectively fend off enemies and survive (Joyce, 2007).

Although many humans seem to believe that they determine their own meanings in life, in the reality of existential evolution, all our meanings seem to start with relationships. For example, higher primates use basic socialization mechanisms, thanks to which infants internalize meanings from elders, for example, via reward and punishment. The evolutionary basis of socialization and morality seems to be our social attachments

associated with neurohormones such as oxytocin (Churchland, 2018). If an infant does not follow moral codes they may get punished, rejected, or expelled, which may trigger a stress response. Terror management theorists have hypothesized that infants may imitate and internalize the meanings of their parents to prevent punishment or rejection as they depend on their care, food, and protection (Greenberg et al., 2004). Thus, the mechanisms of socialization and the focus on social types of meaning may have evolved on the basis of our underlying drive to live and prevent death. It has been argued that these social mechanisms are so deeply ingrained in our brains that, for example, infants can already develop a cognitive theory of mind at an early age (Bloch, 2015).

In early *Homo sapiens*, the inherent meaningfulness of social relationships seemed to fulfill an important role. Archaeological and anthropological research suggests that in the early hunter-gatherer societies and early settlements, individuals were not only motivated by functionalistic survival-of-the-fittest, but the community and relationships became meaningful as ends in themselves, and they started helping others and developing the community. The development of more complex social types of meaning went hand-in-hand with the emergence of early human settlements; different individuals developed unique social roles with specific tasks, such as women traditionally looking after children and men hunting. Individuals developed unique roles with unique meanings. Thus, meaning in life became more differentiated and individualized from which early communities benefited (Vos, 2020).

As elaborated later, most humans report social types of meaning as their most satisfying types of meaning, associated with large mental and physical well-being (Vos, 2023b). Existential evolution theories may explain this with the potential evolutionary benefits of such social types of meaning in life. However, it may also be hypothesized that social relationships may be perceived as inherently meaningful in ways that go beyond the immediate will to live and the prevention of death. For example, existential

philosophers have argued that individuals can (and should) relate to others as a *Thou* instead of an *It* (Buber, 1937/2010), with an irreducible uniqueness and alterity going beyond their mere functionality (Levinas, 1979).

Evolutionary Stage 5: The Development of Linguistic-Symbolic Approaches to Life

The experience of meaning in life seems to require the capability to differentiate the more-meaningful from the less-meaningful and use this perceived difference in our decision making. Therefore, a crucial leap in our existential evolution seems to be the development of our capability to identify, generate, and logically respond to basic patterns in and around us. Research indicates that not only humans but also monkeys and birds have a natural tendency to spontaneously infer and generate abstract hierarchical groups in response to basic visual information (Ferrigno et al., 2020; Liao et al., 2022). Compared with other species, higher primates and humans are also able to identify and generate patterns that are more complex, symbolic, or even imaginary and meaningfully communicate about this with others.

It seems that the development of the capabilities to identify and generate patterns, to symbolize and to use language went hand-in-hand with the development of more complex social rules and morality (Caruso & Flanagan, 2017). For example, the social types of meaning in higher primates may also be described as early verbal forms of meanings, like chimpanzees use simple language and have some symbolic understanding of their social context (Syal & Finlay, 2011). The capability to identify patterns, symbolize, and reflect on a basic level about social situations may have evolved due to their evolutionary functionality. It seems, for example, evolutionarily valuable to be able to use recognizable patterns of sounds, such as shouting “run!” or “help!” during an animal attack. Researchers on brain evolution suggest that the evolution of pattern identification and generation, language and symbolization went hand-in-hand with a quick

growth of the neocortex, possibly mutually reinforcing each other (Syal & Finlay, 2011).

Whereas chimpanzees have a rudimentary use of symbolics and language, homo sapiens have developed more efficient ways to communicate what is more meaningful and what is less meaningful. The development of language implied that individuals became able to symbolize and imagine beyond their immediate reality, and more clearly differentiate between sign, signifier, and signified (Christiansen & Kirby, 2003). Whereas animals immediately followed their materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented preferences—such as eating when hungry—humans became able to postpone gratification, and, for example, communicate when to have dinner later. Humans developed a clearer subjective distinction between past, present, and future time, which may have benefited their survival. Possibly as a side effect, this may also have brought a more conscious awareness of mortality, a crucial step in human existential evolution (Vos, 2019).

This new linguistic and neuropsychological capacity to reflect and communicate beyond the immediate present seemed to allow individuals to reflect on types of meaning beyond materialistic, hedonistic, self-oriented, and social types of meaning. Individuals became able to reflect on larger types of meaning in life—such as purpose, religion, and advanced ethics—and reflect in more existential-philosophical ways on meaning in life, as elaborated later.

Possibly initially as a consequence of the capacity to reflect in more existential-philosophical ways, individuals may have started reflecting and asking questions about life. Although existential questions may initially have been a byproduct of neurolinguistic evolution, it may be hypothesized that existential questions also help to efficiently focus our limited time and energy. It may also be hypothesized that the human species benefits from these types of meaning, because communities and humankind in general may benefit from individuals trying to improve the world due to a larger sense of purpose, vocation, or dedication to make the world a better place for all. Furthermore, existential questions also seem to have become

more relevant as the increased life span gave more time to plan ahead, in contrast to when humans died in their teenage years.

Evolutionary Stage 6: The Development of Verbal Traditions of Meaning in Life

The differentiation with the previous evolutionary stage may be artificial, but around the eighth century BCE, several large verbal meaning-oriented traditions emerged. Karl Jaspers (2011) hypothesized the theory of an axial age between the eighth century BCE and the third century CE, when individuals started following the organized traditions of Veda, Confucius, Buddha, and Jesus. Although this theory has been heavily critiqued, Jaspers seems uncontested in highlighting the fact that this period saw a large step in human existential evolution. Whereas socialization mechanisms and small-scale social norms can already be found in higher primates, the emergence of large-scale organized traditions seems to be a unique development (see Vos, 2020, for details). Humans developed stable organizations of complex symbolic and imaginary systems, stimulating the dissemination of meanings that religious authorities deemed important.

In the oldest religious texts, such as the Veda and Confucian texts, both phenomenological and traditional approaches to life can be found. However, the Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—seemed to introduce a stricter traditional approach (Vos, 2020, 2022d). An emblematic story in the Torah tells how people were worshipping the golden calf, which seemed to represent materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning. This angered Moses so much that he broke the stone tablets with the Ten Commandments. The Commandments offered the ultimate authority argument, telling people to focus instead on social and larger types of meaning. This traditional approach is possibly the clearest in the complex behavioral rules in the Torah. Some anthropologists have explained these rules for their health benefits (Douglas, 1986/2003), and the shift toward social and larger types of meaning may therefore be understood by their benefits for individual mental and

physical well-being as well as the community (Vos, 2020).

The shift toward a conformist traditional approach may also be explained by terror management theory (TMT). Countless empirical TMT studies have shown that feeling existential threat may lead to more conformist and conservative meanings, boosted self-esteem, rigid identities, and authoritarianism; in these ways, individuals seem to protect their survival even at the cost of others (Pyszczynski et al., 2003). Under existential threat, individuals are also more likely to believe in creationist/intelligent-design theories than evolutionary theories, possibly to develop a sense of coherence, significance, and indirect control when things seem falling apart (Tracy et al., 2011). The emerging awareness of death may have led early humans to transform morality from its initial function of promoting social cohesion to that of transcending death by pleasing gods capable of granting immortality (Pyszczynski & Landau, 2020; Sullivan, 2016). Understandably, individuals developed a more traditional approach to life in response to, for example, the struggle for survival of the Jewish people in the desert, the persecution of early Christian groups, and sectarian conflicts in early Muslim communities.

Thus, interpreted from an evolutionary perspective, the human species may have benefited from the emergence of religious and other existential or philosophical traditions for multiple reasons. First, religions seemed to prescribe types of meaning that foster group bonds and survival of the species, such as “do not kill,” and the relevance of the Torah sanitation rules when the Jewish people lived in the desert (Douglas, 1986/2003). Second, the appeal to existential urgency—“act now, as Judgment Day can come any moment”—may have helped individuals and communities to use their limited time and resources in the most efficient way possible (Vos, 2017). Third, the Abrahamic religions prescribe those types of meaning that research has shown to be good for individual mental and physical health (Vos, 2023b). That is, most of the oldest texts known to humankind are religious and spiritual texts describing the importance of social and

larger types of meaning in life and denouncing materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning in life, for example with the concept of “the flesh is weak.” The early gurus, prophets, and philosophers may have intuited the benefits of focusing on social and larger types of meaning in life—although it may also be hypothesized that social and larger types of meaning have become associated with positive well-being due to socialization and social conditioning (Vos, 2017, 2020, 2023b). Fourth, psychological research also shows how a sense of meaning—for example as stimulated by religions—may help as a psychological source of resilience and buffer against psychological stress (Vos, 2016a). Thus, the verbal traditions may have promoted types of meaning that seemed initially collectively and individually beneficial, which may also have reinforced the popularity of these traditions.

In sum, religious, traditional, and cultural meaning frameworks may have initially benefitted the people’s survival in their specific life situation (Poiani, 2011). However, we need to prevent the historiological and deterministic fallacy of concluding that because of their initial evolutionary value, these traditional approaches to life have survived and are still the most beneficial approach in our contemporary life situation. Whereas the traditional approach to life may initially have been evolutionarily beneficial in their context, in its extreme forms (e.g., rigid traditional authoritarianism) and in other contexts they may be less beneficial. For example, whereas harmony was a foundational value in Chinese society that people have described as beneficial, over time this seems to become forced and potentially oppressive (Chan, 2009). Countless studies suggest how religious organizations and traditional communities can be double-edged swords, limit individual freedom, and create psychological oppression (Pargament, 2001; Winell, 2006).

Some neoconservative philosophers in the 20th and 21st centuries seem to idealize the traditional–authoritarian meaning frameworks propagated by ancient Greek and Roman philosophers. They seem to read these texts through a traditional or functionalistic lens and seem to

overestimate the representativeness of these privileged authors. The majority of the population could not read and were told by others what their socioeconomic position and meaning in life were: women, enslaved persons, and ethnic minorities. The traditional approach to life may not have benefited them. Thus, although some early societies may have benefited from the evolution of large verbal traditions about meaning in life, some benefits may have been more beneficial for a small intellectual elite (Vos, 2020).

Evolutionary Stage 7: The Development of Functionalistic Approaches to Life

Until the end of the 16th century, most ordinary people did not seem to ask the question “what is my meaning in life?” They usually followed the expectations of society and the instructions from the clergy. For example, it was known at birth that a peasant’s son would become a peasant (Vos, 2020, 2017). Individuals seemed to fit in a social–cosmic–divine order (Lovejoy, 2017).

This started to change when a more educated and literate middle class emerged in Europe. For example, individual citizens started to read the Bible themselves and questioned the legitimacy of traditional authorities such as clergy and kings. The traditional approach to life started fading, individuals started questioning their allocated position and identity, and the growing middle class developed more opportunities to determine their own lives. Possibly for the first time in history, large masses started to ask the question, “What is *my* meaning in life” (Berman, 2009). Thus, the question “What is my meaning” seems to be a result from modernity and is at most four centuries old; before that time, it did most likely not occur to most ordinary people to ask such questions (Vos, 2017).

Evolutionary speaking, it may also be hypothesized that a traditional approach to life is less needed in individualistic abundance societies than in collective survival societies. The emergence of luxury, a middle class, and cities meant that more individuals no longer needed to fight for survival or depend on a landlord or king for their survival, and they had more opportunities to choose their

profession and social roles (although this did not apply to everyone, e.g., manual laborers; Berman, 2009). Hypothetically speaking, people may also have started searching for individual answers because a traditional approach to life possibly felt less satisfying (Vos, 2020, 2023a).

Under the influence of the mechanistic ideas of the Enlightenment and the Industrial Revolution, individuals also seemed to develop a functionalistic approach to their own lives. The Industrial Revolution stimulated a functionalistic approach to society by which large masses of ordinary workers seemed to become a functionalistic cog in the large socioeconomic machine, like smaller numbers of enslaved people in the Roman era. The ideal of machines fascinated many intellectuals who envisioned human beings as “human machines,” and propagated a functionalized approach to life, which still seems to dominate many Western countries (Vos, 2023a, 2020).

This involved the mechanistic idea that individuals can make and control their life, like a mathematical function: do behavior X, and you will get Y. Individuals started making decisions about their meaning in life, as if trying to go in the most linear way toward self-determined ambitious goals in life. Sometimes, people made the logical (and sometimes deliberately opportunistic) fallacy by arguing that because people did not get Y (for example, they are not rich), they must not have behaved perfectly (for example, they must have been lazy), and thus they are at fault of their own failures in life (thus, ignoring social circumstances beyond the individual’s realistic control) and they should not receive further social support or benefits. This fallacy seemed to create a blaming and guilt culture, which some neoliberal politicians may have used as mechanisms of social control (Vos, 2020) and which may be observed when therapists help victims of structural injustice (Vos et al., 2019). Thus, the evolution of an individual functionalistic approach to life also seems reflected in the evolution of modern political ideas:

Both neoliberal and Marxist ideologies build on this functionalistic and

materialistic approach to life—obviously with clear differences. Adam Smith described how individuals are driven by a broad range of meanings, including social and larger types of meaning and the latter should trump the materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning that he saw in the industrial society. However, Smith's texts were reinterpreted by neoliberals at the start of the 21st century, and in contrast with this plurality of Smith' meanings, the modern neoliberal utopia seems to be one in which individuals can functionalistically make their own meaning in life, preferably by buying materialistic stuff, hedonistic services, and self-development. The Marxist/Communist idea of revolution also seemed to have a relatively functionalistic focus on taking over the materialistic means of production, but the materialistic functionalism of the revolutionary stage was regarded as the temporary condition for the final Marxist utopia in which each individual can determine their own meaning in life. (Vos, 2022d, p. 34)

Economics and politics may involve functionalist methods to steer the dominant sense of meaning in a population. Economists and politicians may use functionalistic methods, such as propaganda and marketing, to popularize their personal meanings amongst customers and voters (Vos, 2020).

Evolutionary Stage 8: The Development of Phenomenological Approaches to Life

As described before, philosophers such as Heidegger (1954) warned that our dominant functionalistic approach to life limits our perception of our human potential. It seems that he was not the only one critiquing the functionalistic approach to life. Several sociologists and philosophers have observed a trend since the turn of the millennium that, globally, individuals are gradually

moving away from a rigid functionalistic approach to life (Rorty & Vattimo, 2005; Sloterdijk, 2014). For example, in 2016, world leaders at the World Economic Forum concluded that fewer individuals make their daily life and economic decisions based on functionality. Instead, they argued that the world is transitioning toward a meaning-oriented economy.

Vos (2020) conducted a systematic review of economic and sociological research publications showing a strong trend toward meaning-oriented economics. For example, many individuals no longer buy products or services merely for their immediate materialistic or hedonistic functionality but also for their social and larger types of meaning. This may be described as a phenomenological approach, whereby individual listen critically to their intuition about what they see as meaningful in situations. Individuals may choose any types of meaning: materialistic, hedonistic, self-oriented, social, or larger and existential-philosophical.

There may be several reasons why individuals are moving away from a functionalistic approach to life. One reason can be found in a global survey of 1,281 individuals which showed that traditional and functionalistic approaches to life are associated with smaller psychological and physical well-being than a phenomenological approach (Vos, 2023a). However, it seems difficult to completely understand this shift toward a meaning-oriented society as we are still using functionalistic-evolutionary terms that cannot do justice to a nonfunctionalistic approach. This phenomenological stage in our existential evolution seems to go beyond our existing scientific paradigms, as will be elaborated in the next part.

Summary and Implications

Existential evolution theory hypothesizes increasing complexities in the experience of meaning in life. Whereas animals seem to dominantly focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning, higher primates develop social types of meaning, and human beings may also focus on larger and existential-philosophical types of meaning. Individuals seem

to gradually evolve from a traditional to a functional and phenomenological approach to life.

The evolution of meaning in life seems to go hand-in-hand with the epigenetic evolution of our neuropsychological, linguistic, and social capabilities. The evolution of meaning may be partially regarded as a side effect of these capabilities, but the evolution of meaning also seemed beneficial for the well-being of individuals and the survival of the human species.

Although the human experience of meaning in life seems more complex than animals', this existential evolution theory may also indicate that many of our meaningful experiences may be deeply rooted in evolutionary principles. Many examples of meaning in life may be derived from our evolutionary will to live and our will to prevent death. Some aspects of our sense of meaning in life seem to be deeply rooted in older parts of the human brain we share with animals. Consequently, we may tentatively hypothesize that, like animals, humans may not always need theoretical reflection, and they may already live a meaningful life before they can reflect or verbalize this (Merleau-Ponty, 2013). That is, our nonverbal existence in our daily-life world may precede the formulation of our lives in reflected essences and theoretical terms (Sartre, 1946). Thus, our experiences of meaning in life may be simpler, more superficial, and less unique than how they may initially appear in our subjective flow of experience (Chater, 2018).

Furthermore, neurocognitive research questions the human experience of a free will and self-determination (Damasio, 1999). For example, Libet showed that before individuals made a conscious decision to do a simple action, there was already activation in the associated motor region in the brain (Libet et al., 1979); and Wegner (2002) showed that the feeling of agency can be disconnected from the agent's factual causal influence. Research indicates that humans do not need a rational or conscious approach to experience life as meaningful and fulfilling. Experiential approaches to meaning in life, such as focusing on our embodied felt sense, are associated with large satisfaction about decisions and life, and

good mental and physical health (Kim et al., 2022; Remmers et al., 2016; Vanhooren et al., 2022; Vos, 2017). As existential philosophers and mystics have already been suggesting for millennia (Visser, 2008; Vos, 2020), recent research confirms that an accepting approach to our experiences of life, instead of denial or avoidance of our flow of experiences, seems to benefit our sense of meaning and well-being (e.g., Schlegel et al., 2013; Zoellner & Maercker, 2006). Via experiential/intuitive processes, individuals seem able to intuitively differentiate right from wrong (Hauser, 2006; Zander-Schellenberg et al., 2019). Consequently, prereflective experiential approaches in psychotherapy, such as using dreams, art, and mindfulness, may address preverbal experiences of meaning seated in the evolutionarily older parts of the brain (Greenberg et al., 1994; Hofmann et al., 2010).

Humans do not seem to significantly differ from higher primates in their preverbal neurobiological structures of meaning (Sheets-Johnstone, 1986). Both animals and humans seem to meet the most basic definitional criteria of meaning in life of being able to recognize patterns in the world around us, which enable us to predict what could happen and, to a smaller or larger extent, shape our own decisions, behavior and emotions (Baumeister, 1991). In contrast with animals, humans have a higher-level capability to use language, reflect, and use symbols and imaginations to conceptualize and express their experiences of existence. In words of Gazzaniga (2018):

Let's face it. We are big animals with brains that carry out every single action automatically and outside our ability to describe how it works. We are a soup of dispositions controlled by genetic mechanisms, some weakly and some strongly expressed in each of us. Yet there is also good news. We humans have something called the interpreter, that weaves a story about why we feel and act the way we do. That becomes our narrative, and each story is unique and full of sparkle. (p. 4)

However, humans can be more than *post-hoc* storytellers trying to find a fitting story after their evolutionary older parts of the brain have already decided their materialistic, hedonistic, self-oriented or social types of meanings. For example, in contrast to animals, humans may experience larger and existential–philosophical types of meaning and have the ability of self-understanding, goal-management, self-regulation, social discussion, and development of inter-subjective meaning (Vos, 2017, 2016). These emergent evolutionary new functions also seem to enable humans to go beyond the immediacy of their physical experiences and experience a freedom to decide their approach to life. In these processes, individuals may also experience a free will and influence the cause of events (even though their rational, conscious decision may not be the starting point in time; Caruso & Flanagan, 2018). However, these uniquely human existential capacities may not always be a blessing, as they may also cause overthinking (hyper-reflection), obsessions with specific meanings in life (hyper-intention), disconnections from their prereflective flow of experiencing and intuiting meaning, overwhelming existential moods, and existential crisis.

In sum, our existential evolution seems to be rooted in epigenetic and neurobiological mechanisms and has opened up concrete opportunities of human meaning that animals did not seem to have. These opportunities are not necessarily functionalistic, as individuals may or may not actualize these opportunities, and these opportunities may or may not be functional to survival as human species (de Sousa, 2010). Again, these existential experiences are possible but not necessary for living a meaningful life, as individuals do not need theoretical reflection, linguistic eloquence, a sense of free will, or deliberate decision-making to live a meaningful life. In other words, our individual experience of meaning can transcend the mere functionalistic repetition of inherited patterns.

SYSTEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEANING AND SOCIETY

Aims and Method

The first part of this chapter³ describes how people in different times and places had different experiences of meaning in life. Meaning in life seems to be like a multi-faceted diamond; if we cast light from only the narrow angle of one specific time and place, we will only see one facet (Vos, 2021b). If we want to see more facets of the totality and complexity of meaning in life, we need to cast light from as many times and places possible. Therefore, this second part provides a systematic overview of the research field on meaning and society (Vos, 2022d, p. 25):

Trying to understand the phenomenon of meaning in life in its totality means that we will need to use a phenomenological method. Phenomenology is the study of how phenomena appear in our consciousness, such as examining how meaning appears in a [traditional or functionalist] way to some individuals and in a [critical-intuitive] way to others. Phenomenology does not tell what a phenomenon, such as meaning, is or should be for everyone, but asks a multiplicity of questions which each individual can give their own answer to.

The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (2019) proposed a system of four questions that he asked about a phenomenon: what is the matter or material (*hyle*) of the phenomenon, how is the form, shape, or appearance (*eidōs*), who is the individual who created the phenomenon (*kinoun*), and the goal, end, or ultimate purpose for which the phenomenon occurs (*telos*; Hankinson, 2001; Heidegger, 1995). Heidegger (1914) argued that modern science—and psychology in particular—has forgotten to ask all four

³This part follows the structure of my publication and lecture elsewhere (with permission): Vos, 2022d.

questions about phenomena. Instead, modern science reduces the fourfold to merely the questions what something is and by whom thanks this is created, for example resulting in an obsession with functional efficiency and materialistic achievement (Vos, 2020). Aristotle's questions about how and for what purpose a phenomenon exists seem to be merely answered in terms of materialism and efficiency (Visser, 2008). This simplification of life can also be found in the popular approach to meaning in life. For example, self-help books and pop philosophers seem to prescribe simple steps for individuals to make their life meaningful, and usually with a dominant focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning, such as finding meaning in one's successful career or social status (Vos, 2017). This seems to be a very narrow understanding of meaning in life, as we seem to have forgotten to ask all other questions.

In contrast with the limited view on life that populists seem to give, Heidegger wanted to understand the totality of our subjectively lived experience of meaning in life. This means that he asked many questions about each phenomenon, starting with Aristotle's fourfold but extending these with other existential questions. Formulated in philosophical-phenomenological terms, to understand how meaning appears in our consciousness, we need to move our focus away from the limiting dominantly populist approach to return the focus to the totality of Being. To do so, we must temporarily bracket or deconstruct our assumptions about daily life; that is, we need to temporarily set aside all the populist answers about meaning and examine meaning with an open unbiased mindset. Consequently, a new understanding of meaning may arise in our consciousness (Heidegger, 1914; Vos, 2015, 2021a). To avoid bias, we must do this process as systematically as possible by asking all possible questions about meaning and considering all possible answers.

This chapter will systematically ask many questions about meaning in life, particularly those that we seem to forget to ask in our functionalistic era. The following comprehensive set of questions is derived from Systematic Pragmatic

Phenomenological Analysis (SPPA), which is based on the works of Heidegger, Foucault, and other phenomenological-existential philosophers (Vos, 2020, 2021a; see Table 25.1). How real is meaning in life, or are some of our meanings merely imaginary and symbolic? How do we approach meaning, who is involved, and how do we relate? How do individuals develop their understanding, and how much freedom do they experience? What is the historical and cultural context of their understanding? Why do people experience meaning in the way do? Which impact does meaning have on daily life? Each individual will give their own unique answers to these questions. These nine questions could lead to a tenth step of a joint transcendent construct to emerge from the previous answers, like the pieces of a puzzle coming together to show one picture for an individual. To answer the questions, we will focus on systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses of empirical studies (Vos, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2021b, 2022a, 2022b, 2022c, 2022d, 2023a, 2023b).

Ontological and Epistemological Status

What is the overall ontological and epistemological status of our experiences of meaning? Does our sense of meaning regard reality, or is it merely symbolic or imaginary? Our ontological position describes what we think about reality, and our epistemological position how we assume that we can get knowledge about this reality. In the verbal traditions about meaning in life, many prophets, holy books, and religions seemed to claim unique access to The Truth. It seems that we can only accept the truth of their meanings if we also accept the authority or omnipotence of these religious and other traditional authorities.

However, in our postmodern era, few people would claim to know "the cosmic absolute meaning of life." Jacques Lacan (2001) suggested that we may not know the absolute Reality with a capital "R," but we may still create our own reality with a small "r." In other words, we may live a meaningful and satisfying life, but we recognize that we may not have the perfect unalterable answers to life. We seem to construct our reality with symbols

TABLE 25.1

Overview of 10 Phenomenological Questions About Meaning in Life

Simplified question	Full question	Formal name	Examples
Status?	What is the overall ontological status of the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] for the participant?	Ontological status	Reality Symbol Imagination
What?	What different types of meaning does the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] have for the participant?	Type of meaning	Materialistic Hedonistic Self-oriented Social Larger Existential–philosophical
How?	What approach does the participant have towards the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon]?	Approach to meaning	Traditional Functionalistic Critical–intuitive (also called phenomenological)
Where?	How are the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] embedded in the social context of the participant?	Relationship between individual and society	Social determinism Social-individual interactionism Individual determinism
When?	How do the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] change over time for the participant?	Development over time	Historiography Historiology
Who?	How do the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] fit in the life story of the participant?	Emergence of individual meaning (individual history)	Psychology Pedagogy Anthropology
Whose?	How much freedom does the participant experience regarding the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon]?	Sense of freedom	Symbolic versus realised freedom Negative versus positive freedom Individual versus structural freedom
Why?	What is the existential experience of the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] for the participant?	Existential well-being	Existential questions and concerns Realistic sense of freedom and limitations
Which?	How does the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] impact the daily life of the participant?	Impact on daily life	Many mental health problems, low quality of life, and low life satisfaction Few mental health problems, large quality of life, and large life satisfaction

Note. From *The Psychology of COVID-19: Building Resilience for Future Pandemics* (p. XXX), by J. Vos, 2021. Copyright 2021, Sage Publications. Reprinted with permission.

and imaginations. Symbols include our shared theories, values, and practices about meaning in life; for example, in many countries, an academic or job title may symbolize a successful and meaningful life. We may also imagine some personal meanings in life that may not be embedded in reality or a shared symbolic order, and we may create our personal habits, life stories, and life goals.

Generally speaking, people seem to have three general ontological/epistemological positions toward meaning in life. Individuals firmly standing

in religious and social traditions see meaning in life as an absolute meaning of life beyond the here-and-now (*transcendence*). Functionalistic reductionists see meaning as nothing more than symbols and imaginations, which can be completely explained as functions from nature and nurture, such as neurobiology and socialization (*immanence*). However, increasing numbers of philosophers, usually those standing in phenomenological and humanistic–existential fields, such as Sloterdijk (2014), Rorty and Vattimo (2005), and Vos (2020, 2017, 2015, combine

both positions, which may be called *immanent transcendence*, and which seems to be based on a critical-realist epistemology. According to them, we can live a meaningful and satisfying life while acknowledging the limitations and scientific explanations of our meanings.

According to these philosophers about immanent transcendence, the subjective experience of meaning in life relates to scientific explanations like the meaning of a sentence relates to its grammar and spelling. A sentence needs grammar and spelling, but its meaning transcends the mere scientific analysis of its grammar and spelling (Vos, 2015). For example, your life story could possibly explain why you are currently reading this text, but the meaning of this text for you may transcend this explanation. Individuals may intuit a hierarchy in their flow of experiences, such that reading this chapter may feel more meaningful than watching football in the local pub.

This intuitive hierarchy constitutes a symbolic and imagined reality for the individual, without claiming this to be the Absolute Reality or Cosmic Meaning of Life. This is like Nietzsche's statement that we should act 'as if' what we believe is meaningful and true, while we may know in the back of our mind that this is not a Universal Meaning Of Life or an Absolute Truth. Scientific scepticism and a sense of meaning in life can go hand-in-hand, and research indicates that this dual attitude toward meaning in life is not only possible, but also psychologically beneficial. (Vos, 2022d, p. 28)

Types of Meaning

What types of meaning do people experience across cultures and times? This question will be answered by discussing a systematic literature review of all studies in which individuals were asked about their meaning, values, or purpose in life (Vos, 2022, 2023b). This included 107 studies with 45,710 participants. Their findings were

categorized via thematic analysis. This revealed six types and 29 subtypes of meaning in life, including materialistic types of meaning (e.g., material conditions, professional-educational success), hedonistic types (hedonistic/embodied experiences), self-oriented types (resilience, self-efficacy, self-acceptance, autonomy, creative self-expression, self-care), social types (social connections, belonging, conformism, altruism, children), larger types (purposes, personal growth, temporality, justice/ethics, spirituality/religion), existential-philosophical types (being-alive, unique, free, grateful, responsible; Vos, 2023b). Subsequently, this universal meaning typology was operationalized in the Meaning Sextet Questionnaire, which confirmed that individuals report the meaning sextet in a world-wide survey in 1,281 participants in 49 countries (Vos, 2023b). This study also revealed that materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning are associated with low psychological well-being, and social and larger meanings with large psychological well-being (Vos, 2023b).

Vos examined how therapists may work with the meaning sextet in their work with clients. A meta-analysis of clinical trials on meaning-centered therapies showed that the more different types of meaning a client explored in psychotherapy, the greater was their improvement in psychological well-being (Vos, 2023b; Vos & Vitali, 2018). Vos explained this finding with a metaphor: If a therapist invites clients to consider a limited number of meanings, this is like fishing with a tiny fishing rod. Instead, if a therapist asks clients to consider all six types and 29 subtypes of meaning, this is like fishing with a large fishing net: the more types/subtypes of meaning therapists ask clients to reflect on, the larger is the likelihood that the clients may find examples of meaning that they intuit as important (Vos, 2023b). Furthermore, therapists, such as Elizabeth Lukas, suggest that clients should have between three and five important meanings in their lives, to prevent individual from feeling frustrated or doubting the meaningfulness of their existence, if they cannot temporarily or permanently achieve a meaning in life (Vos, 2016a–b). The more

examples of meaning individuals experience, particularly social and larger types, the better their psychological well-being is and the fewer symptoms, such as depression and anxiety, do they experience (Vos, 2023b, 2020). For example, individuals who experienced multiple meanings in life were able to cope more flexibly with the COVID-19 lockdowns and self-isolation, as they could shift their attention from meanings they could no longer attain—such as going to a football stadium or concert venue—to other meanings in their life (Vos, 2021b).

Approach to Meaning

How do different individuals approach meaning in life? To answer this question, Vos (2023b, 2020) conducted a historical analysis and a systematic literature review of empirical research on meaning in life on the basis of which he developed the Meaning Approach Scale (MAS). This scale was filled in by 1,281 participants in 49 countries, showing that individuals usually approach meaning in three different ways: traditional, functionalistic, and critical-intuitive approaches to meaning in life.

The traditional approach to meaning can be summarized as “follow what other people or Higher Powers communicate, signify or expect about your meaning in life” (Vos, 2023a, p. 4). This means that individuals follow the meanings prescribed by their religion or social expectations. They may also conform to the socioeconomic position they were born into, such as a cast or class system. For example, the place where you were born in medieval Europe determined whether you would be a peasant, landlord, etc. The functionalistic approach may be summarized as “determine your own meaning in life, like a mathematical function: do behavior X, and you will get meaning Y.” This approach of a mechanistic self-direction in life seems to include the following assumptions: individuals rationally and consciously decide their meaning in life (i.e., self-direction); individuals often define meaning in terms of specific well-defined and well-operationalized goals; individuals often set large goals (e.g., “live life to the max”); individuals

often try to move toward their goals in a linear fashion, trying to maximize every activity to achieve their goals in the most efficient way; individuals may randomly select and replace any types of meanings because there are no transcendent/hierarchic meanings. (. . .) Functionalistic meanings are like existential junkfood, McMeanings, as they give quick happiness but possibly little long-term health and fulfillment. (Vos, 2023a, p. 5)

The critical-intuitive or phenomenological approach to meaning can be summarized as “listen critically to your intuition.” On the one hand, an individual accepts what they intuit as meaningful via their flow of experiencing (they may examine this for example via systematic experiential or mindfulness exercises). On the other hand, the individual uses critical thinking skills, such as critical self-reflection and examining how realistic, rational, and helpful their intuitions are (described above as immanent transcendence and dual attitude).

In a worldwide survey, Vos (2023) found regional differences in the approach to meaning in life. In Western countries and neoliberal economies, individuals were more likely to have a functionalistic approach to meaning. Individuals in non-Western and less neoliberal economies were more likely to have a traditional or phenomenological approach. Furthermore, traditional and functionalistic approaches correlated with poorer mental health whereas critical-intuitive approaches correlated with better mental health (Vos, 2023a, 2020).

These differences may be explained by the ideological foundations of the different socioeconomic and political systems. For example, neoliberalism seems to be built on a functionalistic approach, and seems to stimulate individual customers and citizens to live their lives functionalistically (Vos, 2020). Consequently, the globalization of neoliberal consumerism and humanitarian military interventions may also implicitly export a functionalistic approach and a focus on materialistic/hedonistic/self-oriented types of meaning to countries that previously had a more traditional or phenomenological

focus on social and larger types of meaning in life (Vos, 2020). Traditionally communist countries seem to have a functionalist focus toward meaning in life, as the authorities seem to expect citizens to function like a radar in the socioeconomic system. Consequently, when communist countries open and integrate more neoliberal ideas, such as China and Russia, they sometimes seem to become more functionalistic than neoliberal countries. Many countries mix functionalism with religious and traditional approaches to life which are for example more dominant in countrysides and less economically developed regions.

Relationship Between Individual and Society

How is an individual's experience of meaning influenced by their social context, such as the dominant types and approaches to meaning of people around them? We have already seen in the previous sections how in premodern times and non-Western cultures, individuals seemed to dominantly focus on social and larger types of meaning with a traditional or phenomenological approach to life. In contrast, in Western countries and neoliberal economies, many individuals focus more on materialistic, hedonistic, or self-oriented types of meaning with a functionalist focus. These cultural and historical differences may have evolved due to socialization processes. For example, parents, teachers, social media, and marketing campaigns may teach what individuals should regard as meaningful in life, and how to approach this. This does not need to be explicit, like teaching religious or political doctrines in religious or communist schools, but implicitly via a hidden educational curriculum such as rewarding children for their educational success or social status.

It seems that politicians and marketers have tried in all eras and cultures to influence what citizens see as meaningful in life, such as Romans pleasing the plebs by offering bread and circuses. However, since Edward Bernays invented the concept of “public relations” in the early 1900s,

many politicians and economists seem to use propaganda in more professional, refined and systematic ways (Vos, 2020). Consequently, we are nowadays not merely sold a materialistically functional product or service, but a meaning in life that this product or service will provide. These slogans show how marketers try to sell us a meaning in life: “live life to the max” (Pepsi), “just do it” (Nike), “impossible is nothing” (Adidas), and remaining realistic “because change happens” (Zurich Insurance; Vos, 2020).

Some of the clearest and most extreme forms of propaganda to manipulate their citizens' sense of meaning were applied by Joseph Goebbels, Adolf Hitler, and Joseph Stalin. Whereas their propaganda was not always refined, neoliberal thinkers recommended to use more subtle and subliminal forms of propaganda. For example, Walter Lippman and Friedrich Hayek suggested that the intellectual elite should guide the population. The British politician Keith Joseph wrote how politicians should use psychological techniques to steer the population and ideally make people vote for their party. These theoretical ideas were applied to experimental political policies during Thatcherism and Reaganism. Examples include letting tenants buy their council houses to stimulate the materialistic and self-oriented ideal of homeownership that the conservative party promoted. School tests and a core curriculum in schools ensured that pupils would focus on learning skills relevant for the economic market but not necessarily critical thinking or life skills.⁴ Recent examples of authorities using psychological techniques to steer the population are governmental behavioral insights teams—nicknamed “nudge units”—and COVID-19 Communication Committees (Vos, 2021c, 2020). In line with the philosopher Michel Foucault, several philosophers criticized Western governments for increasingly using propaganda and mass gaslighting (Agamben, 2020; Esposito, 2020; Vos, 2021a). Ironically, Western politicians have rejected similar propaganda techniques in communist and religious/totalitarian nations,

⁴These examples and others are elaborated in Vos (2020) and Vos et al. (2019).

as Chomsky (2002) wrote: “Propaganda is to a democracy what the bludgeon is to a totalitarian state” (p. 95). Some authors have combined this idea of meaning manipulation with religion, such as Ivan Illyin, who seemed to inspire Russian president Vladimir Putin in his war against Ukraine (Snyder, 2018).

Propaganda and meaning manipulation may be popular because meaning in life seems to be a strong motivator for the socioeconomic behavior of citizens and consumers (Vos, 2020). For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the World Health Organisation EPI-WIN Committee recommended governments appeal to the meaningfulness of doing our citizens’ duty—alongside triggering a sense of existential urgency—to make individuals follow governmental COVID-19 guidelines, such as using protective personal equipment, social distancing, and getting vaccinated (Vos, 2021b). These examples show how meaning in life has increasingly become a key topic in economics. World leaders predicted during the 2016 World Economic Forum that most future economic behavior will be predicted (and possibly manipulated) via our sense of meaning in life. Since then, this functionalistic approach seems to have been propagated by many governments, enterprises, and supra-governmental bodies (Vos, 2020).

Development Over Time

How do the dominant types and approaches to meaning change over time across cultures? Each culture has its unique history, and this chapter can only sketch some generic trends. This section will apply an anthropological-linguistic approach (Ottenheimer & Pine, 2018) to zoom into the history of Indo-European words for meaning in life. This will indicate that people have moved from using traditional words to functionalistic and phenomenological words for meaning (see Leontiev, 1996; Vos, 2020, 2023b).

As described, during the Middle Ages, people were relegated to a position in the cosmic-divine social order, which determined their meaning in life, and people did not question their position and the rules imposed by the clergy and nobility.

The terminology from this period reflected that individuals were told their meaning by other people or God (Vos, 2022b). For example, the Indo-European words *significance* and *significado* referred to individuals receiving a *signum*, a message from above. The words *betekenis* (Dutch), *Bezeichnung* (German), and *token* (English) were derived from *teikan*, referring to an omen or message given by God. The late medieval word *vocation* was derived from the Latin word *vocare*, which literally means “being called” (German *Be-ruf*, Dutch *be-roep*). Luther explained how an individual could be called by God: God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid (Billing, 1951).

Similarly, the English word *meaning* comes from the German word *Meinung* (Swedish *mening*, Arabic *mahna*). *Meinung* originally referred to an individual being communicated to or being given directions, such as describing that God’s will was communicated (“ge-meint”) through their life, by being in service to the society, clergy, and God, thus without the individual deciding their personal meaning.

However, during the Reformation—possibly due to protestant critiques on traditional approaches to life—the word *Meinung* no longer implied a traditional attitude but a functionalistic attitude. In most Indo-European languages, the word *Meinung* started to have negative and mundane connotations, such as implying subjective random opinions, childish desires, vulgarity, etc. Other traditional words for meaning had also disappeared or had developed a secular connotation. Consequently, nowadays most people seem to have forgotten the original traditional meanings of words such as *meaning*, *significance*, and *vocation*. New words have also emerged, highlighting the individual freedom and human willpower to determine our own goals in life. For example, the English word *purpose* and the Spanish/Italian/Portuguese *proposito* were derived from the Latin *pro-ponere*, to pose/put/place forth. These words seem to reflect a functionalistic approach to life, whereby individuals pro-pose meanings as self-chosen, well-defined specific goals in life. Thus, there seemed to be a linguistic

transition from a traditional to a functionalistic approach to life.

Simultaneously by the end of the Middle Ages, the new word *Sinn* emerged in German, and later in other Indo-European languages (*Sinn/Zin/Sense/Sensida/Smesl/Senso/Sentido/Smisla*). This word was derived from the Latin *sentire*, which means perceiving and using all our senses. We may hypothesize that this holistic word *Sinn* refers to a phenomenological approach to life. For example, the medieval mystic Meister Eckhart and the church reformer Martin Luther used *Sinn* to describe meanings that were neither predetermined by a cosmic-divine-societal order (e.g., the traditional approach in *significance* and *vocation*) nor purely subjectively and randomly proposed (e.g., the functionalistic approach of *meaning* and *purpose*). Instead, an individual “senses” their meaning in life, not as a passive outsider-perceiver of their life as an external reality but in a dynamic embodied act of mutual-meaning-construction between perceiving and perceived (Merleau-Ponty, 1948). That is, before we can reflect and verbalize our meaning in life, we are already phenomenologically engaged in our lifeworld, embedded in countless meaningful relationships that do not require a conscious act of knowing. Perceiving our meaning in life is like intuitively sensing how we already live meaningfully in our daily-life world, and experientially understanding the difference between what is more meaningful and less meaningful (which is possibly grounded in our evolutionary primal sense of meaning). However, this process of intuitive sensing is not blind, as it does not accept any random traditional or functionalistic meanings: it is critical toward others and oneself (Vos, 2017). When we sense our experiences of life with a critical intuition, meaning may reveal itself like a *phainomenon*; the ancient Greek word *phainomenon* etymologically means *that which shows itself* (Heidegger, as cited in Wrathall, 2010). Thus, the word *Sinn* seems to refer to a critical-intuitive sensing of our meaning and a phenomenological approach to life.⁵

In sum, people in different times and places seem to use different words for meaning in life, reflecting their different approaches to life. The linguistic evolution seems to parallel our existential evolution, which may be explained with the Sapir-Whorff hypothesis that suggests that words function like ways of perceiving and experiencing the world (Husserl, 2012). Individuals may construct their sense of meaning through language, and the vocabulary that they have learned may shape how they experience and interact with our world (Norton, 2006). We may hypothesize that the increasing dominance of English as a global language—which uses functionalistic terms such as *meaning*, *purpose*, and *goals* but not critical-intuitive/phenomenological terms such as *Sinn* (that are more frequently used in continental European and Southeast Asian languages)—may in the end not only impoverish our terminology but also our sense of meaning in life.

Individual History of Meaning

How does meaning develop and change over an individual’s lifespan? Previous sections have already shown that individuals are exposed to many messages about meaning in life, for example, from parents, peers, and teachers during their upbringing and education, and from marketing and propaganda. However, there are few empirical studies on meaning across the lifespan (Steger et al., 2009). For example, Vos’s global survey on meaning in life (2023a) showed the trend that young people are more likely to have a traditional approach, individuals in their twenties and thirties a functionalistic approach, and older people a phenomenological approach. The limited empirical literature on the development of meaning may be loosely summarized with the “triad of the development of meaning in life” (Vos, 2017):

Individuals seem to develop their individual sense of meaning in the interaction between what they can(not) do, must(not) do and what they do (not) want. For example,

⁵This phenomenological understanding of *Sinn* reminds of Gendlin’s (1998) concept of *felt sense*.

individuals are influenced by what they can(not) do, such as their social-historical context, biology, personality, genetics, long-term physical and mental problems, early life experiences, attachment styles, life stage, and life experiences. Individuals are also influenced by what they must (not) do, such as following the rules set by parents, schools, governments, judges, tax offices; this also involves behavioral conditioning, reinforcements, and nudging, such as rewards and punishments can make individual follow certain rules. The psychological process of cognitive dissonance reduction may explain that individuals adjust their sense of meaning to a situation that they cannot avoid; for example, as individuals cannot avoid tax officers, they have to pay taxes and to avoid feeling bad about this, they may start seeing paying taxes as meaningful and 'for the common good'. Furthermore, within the restraints of what individuals can(not) and must(not) do, individuals have their own wishes, and they may have some bandwidth to make their own free decisions. (Vos, 2022d, p. 35)

Sense of Freedom

How much freedom does an individual experience to determine their personal meaning in life? How does an individual find meaning in times of crisis and adversity, and cope with existential boundary situations? Empirical research shows that individuals can experience a sense of freedom and transcendence, even in adverse life situations, such as prisoners in concentration camps (Frankl, 1948; Vos, 2016a, 2016b). Individuals who can maintain some sense of freedom to determine their own meaning in life seem more resilient in stressful life situations (even though freedom of will is neither necessary nor sufficient to live a meaningful life; Caruso & Flanagan, 2018).

For example, countless studies have shown that a sense of meaning can decrease psychological stress when coping with stressful life events, such as the diagnosis of a chronic or life-threatening disease (Vos, 2016a-b). It seems that meaning in life can function as a resource to cope with difficult life situations.

The ability to live a meaningful life in the face of life's inevitable struggles does not imply a naïve denial of reality. Meaning without acceptance of one's realistic constraints is likely to fail and lead to frustration, demoralization, and hopelessness. Therefore, Viktor Frankl promoted the idea of 'tragic optimism', which is a dual attitude towards life that fosters a realistic acceptance of one's life situation, while optimistically focusing on what remains meaningful—like his love for his wife gave him the strength to get through his ordeal in concentration camps. (Vos, 2015, p. 67)

Existential Impact

How does meaning in life relate to existential givens, such as our finitude, isolation, and suffering? In our daily life, we often seem to follow habitual patterns and live on an automatic pilot without expecting that anything changes, as we seem to have positive assumptions about the world as predictable, stable and benevolent. However, all of us will inevitably encounter boundary situations in life when we suffer and struggle and cannot continue our previously habitual meanings, for example when we lose loved ones, become unemployed, or develop a life-threatening disease. Such boundary situations seem particularly painful because they may reveal our habitual positive world assumptions as illusionary and confront us with life's ultimate boundaries, such as our finitude, suffering, loneliness, meaninglessness, or absurdity. Individuals need to appraise for themselves how existentially threatening this situation is, which external and internal resources they have to cope with, and

how they can negotiate between the meaning of this specific situation and their generic sense of meaning in life. That is, individuals ask themselves how they can still live a meaningful and satisfying life despite this existential threat and with the resources they have. Subsequently, individuals can have a myriad of responses to such situations. For example, individuals may try to continue their habitual meanings, or make minor, large positive or large negative changes in how they live a meaningful life (see Chapter 9, this volume; Vos, 2022a, 2022b).

The confrontations with a boundary situation in life may trigger existential moods, such as existential anxiety, guilt, hopelessness, isolation, and an existential vacuum. Existential moods do not regard specific objects—like dog phobias regard dogs—but life in general: life seems frightening. Whereas dogs can be avoided, life cannot (Vos, 2022d). A failure to cope in a meaningful way with these existential moods may lead to a crisis in their meaning, identity, existence, or spirituality. A crisis may start latent, with some feelings of discomfort or nonspecific low life satisfaction. This may spiral down into a larger crisis, when individuals feel overwhelmed by life's challenges and explicitly question life.

Instead of finding a meaningful coping response to a boundary situation in life, individuals may try to suppress their existential moods, to prevent to succumb into a crisis. For example, research on Terror Management Theory have shown how, in response to existential terror such as loss and finitude, many individuals seem to experience existential anxiety. Individuals may use proximate or distal mechanisms to fend off these existential moods. For example, some individuals may attempt to deny or forget the existential threat by, for example, minimizing the severity of a health risk such as COVID-19. Others may rigidly clasp onto stable beacons during the storm of life by focusing more on conservative or even nationalistic values and support authoritarian governments. In response to individual or collective boundary situations, individuals may get into a crisis, deny the threat, or develop a more conformist, traditional view on life.

Existential, meaning-centered, and humanistic therapists argue that individuals may also tolerate their existential moods, embrace their situation, and experience posttraumatic growth (see Chapter 9, this volume). These therapists promote a stance of experiential acceptance of the existential challenges that we may face in boundary situations in life, in structurally unjust situations in society, and in the dark shadow inside our Self. Clients are stimulated to learn to sit with and tolerate the reality of these existential challenges and existential moods. However, merely confronting clients with their existential moods and the facts of the boundary situation seems unhelpful and may even trigger a crisis, suicidal ideation, or psychosis in some clients (Vos, 2015, 2019; Vos et al., 2015). Research indicates that the most effective response to existentially challenging situations is to develop a dual attitude: living a meaningful and satisfying life while facing and accepting life's limitations (Vos, 2015, 2017; Vos & Vitali, 2018).

Psychological Daily-Life Impact

How does the experience of meaning in life impact our daily life, and more specifically, our everyday moods, mental well-being, and physical health? Countless empirical studies show that individuals who experience life as meaningful have better mental and physical health, such as lower levels of depression and anxiety and higher quality of life (Ryff et al., 2013; Vos, 2016a–b). The sense of meaningfulness is also associated with biomarkers, such as better immunological functioning, healthy blood pressure, and lower risks for cardiovascular disease (Vos, 2021c, 2016).

Most studies focus on the general perception of the meaningfulness of life, for example with the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (Steger et al., 2006). However, the previous sections showed how other surveys and meta-analyses zoom more into the specific health benefits of specific types and approaches to meaning in life. Individuals experience better mental health and quality of life if they have a dominantly critical-intuitive/phenomenological approach and focus on social and larger types of meaning in life, while

realistically accepting life's limitations. In contrast, individuals experience worse mental health and quality of life if they have a dominantly traditional or functionalistic approach and focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning in life. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, individuals with a stronger sense of meaningfulness and a critical-intuitive focus on social and larger types of meaning in life had a more nuanced perception of their health risks and experienced better mental and physical health (Vos, 2021b). Furthermore, research indicates how meaning can also be an important source to cope with crises, lack of privileges, structural injustice, moral injury, and posttraumatic stress disorder (Vos, 2020).

MEANING IN LIFE & SOCIAL JUSTICE

The previous part of this chapter gave an overview of the complex relationships between meaning in life and society, building on the existential evolution theory described earlier. We saw that individuals can develop their own realistic, symbolic, or imaginary sense of meaning in life during their lifetime. Individuals can develop different types and approaches to meaning, often influenced by their social context, with different degrees of individual freedom to develop their own sense of meaning. We have also seen how different types and approaches to meaning in life have different impacts on existential and psychological well-being.

Thus, the two previous parts highlighted how individual meaning and society are entwined, like the First Nations Canadians envisioned the individual as embedded in the circles of society and the universe. Individuals seem to develop their sense of meaning within their unique social-historical context and often follow the types and approaches that are dominant in their society (Vos, 2020). The previous parts also described the fragile balance between the meanings of individuals, society, and universe. For example, religious, political, and economic leaders may impose their meanings on others via propaganda and marketing.

When I spoke with the First Nations people in Bella Coola, they asked me to not only write about the imbalance in neutral-scientific terms but also to try to improve this balance and create a more just society and universe (Vos, 2020). Similarly, existential philosophers such as Sartre, Camus, and Fanon appealed to their readers to use their professional expertise to improve society. In this part, I follow their call and sketch how existential and humanistic psychologists may translate their expertise about meaning in life into social action. This part has a personal, critical-reflective tone, and should be considered a starting point for conversation and not a clear-cut truth. I position myself here at the intersection between existential psychology, humanistic psychology, critical theory, and critical psychology.

The Many Meanings of Social Justice

As the existential evolution theory showed, higher primates already have a rudimentary concept of social justice (De Waal, 1996). For example, many animals understand the concept of sharing resources equally among individuals (Bekoff, 2004). In human beings, morality seems to have evolved in a more complex way with the ability to reflect on larger concepts, justice in society, and even universal justice (Vos, 2020).

However, individuals differ in their ability to see the multiple meanings that social justice can have (Killen & Smetana, 2013). Translated into terms of the types of meaning, individuals may focus on justice in materialistic terms (e.g., fair wages), hedonistic terms (e.g., utilitarian pleasure and avoidance of pain), self-oriented development (e.g., opportunities for socioeconomic empowerment such as free education), social justice (e.g., power dynamics, fair treatment of subgroups, altruistic care), larger justice (e.g., larger purpose, ethics, religion, stopping climate change, change of political system) or in an abstract way (e.g., philosophical reflection on ethical principles). Furthermore, individuals may have a traditional approach to morality by simply following what they are told, while others approach morality in a functionalistic way as a

means-to-an-end. Still others have a phenomenological approach by which they try to do justice to the complex dynamics of the situation. Thus, social justice has different meanings to individuals. Possibly, individuals differ in their sense of social justice due to their unique social context and life story.

The previous paragraph was a hypothetical application of the previous sections on the topic of social justice. What does empirical research actually show about social justice? There are approximately 50,000 publications on the psychology of social justice (Vos, 2022b, 2022c). Different researchers use different terms to operationalize this. An unpublished systematic literature review identified seven dimensions in these different conceptualizations of social justice. Several concepts focus on the structurally unjust context, such as inequality, privilege, structural injustice, and stressful and traumatic life experiences. Other concepts focus on the unjust actions by others, such as microaggressions, discrimination, and institutional discrimination and victimization. Some researchers focus on the transactional dynamics, such as relational ethics, transactional drama triangle, codependency, and *folie-a-deux*. Others described the subjective experience and internalization of social injustice, such as shame, guilt, and (complex) posttraumatic stress disorder. Some researchers have examined the mechanisms of denial of injustice, for example via existential defense mechanisms (Terror Management Theory). Researchers have also shown how victims can contribute to the cycle of injustice and become aggressors themselves, via moral injury, intergenerational patterns, and trauma bonding. In addition, philosophers have written about social justice, for example in theoretical terms of the banality of evil, I-Thou/I-It relationship, and care for others and self.

Researchers often seem to describe the topic of social justice from the victim's perspective and discuss these seven dimensions independently. However, the existential philosopher Iris Marion Young (2010) developed a social interactional model of social justice. She moved away from an individual psychologization of the experience of

injustice to a model of collective social responsibility. She described how social injustice can result from many small contributions from many individuals, such as many individuals bearing some responsibility for buying from a firm that uses sweatshops. This is close to the First Nations People's concept of the balance between individual, society, and universe.

Vos (2022b, 2022c) used Young's dynamic concept of social justice to visualize the relationships between the seven dimensions of social justice as a vicious cycle. A structurally unjust context may lead to unjust actions by others, which may lead to unjust social interactions and denial of injustice, which may also lead to the victim's internalization of injustice and contribution to the cycle of injustice via their personal unjust actions. For example, an immigrant may arrive in a society where they have less socioeconomic resources and where there may be a nationalistic culture, which may lead the immigrant to experience discrimination, microaggressions, and stressful social interactions, which may lead to psychological problems such as anxiety and depression and to unhelpful behavior from the victim such as a fatalistic attitude or angry outbursts. Another example of a social responsibility model of social justice is the mutual traumatization and escalating conflict in war zones, such as enemies triggering traumatic stress response in each other (Vos, 2020). These examples suggest how victims of social injustice develop their personal meanings of social justice in dynamic social interactions.

The experience of social justice may be conceptualized as complex social dynamics, with many minor—often unintentional—contributions from many individuals. This is like the butterfly effect of structural injustice: a small action, or even just a brief thought or sense of meaning, may create a chain of effects and cause structural injustice. The same may be true for structural justice. The personal is political: individual cycles of personal (in)justice fit within collective cycles of structural (in)justice, and individuals contribute to collective (in)justice (Vos, 2022c).

Meaning-Oriented Researchers and Practitioners

What can researchers and practitioners do with their knowledge about meaning and social justice? First, psychological researchers and practitioners may ignore the structural cycles of injustice and their impact on an individual's sense of meaning in life. They may, for example, focus on individual psychopathology and ignore the underlying social injustice. However, the focus on individual mental health care problems may blame the victim, prevent them from looking for external causes of injustice, may inadvertently support unjust systems through helping individuals feel more comfortable with unjust systems, and thus they may ultimately deflect from a call for social change (Vos et al., 2019):

Imagine you visit the doctor after injuring your toe, and the doctor suggests removing your tonsils as a cure. You would call this a medical error. Imagine now, that you are underfed because you live from the food bank, and that you have infections due to the mould in your flat. Imagine that you tell your doctor that you are worried about your physical and mental health due to your socio-economic disenfranchisement. And imagine that in response the doctor recommends you improve your way of thinking or take antidepressants. You would call this a psychotherapeutic error. (p. 63)

Second, researchers and practitioners may recognize their impact on clients and society and take ethical responsibility for how their expertise may have been misused by others. For example, expertise from psychological professions has been misused for commercial and governmental propaganda and manipulation of people's meanings, such as the mass psychology from Goebbels and Stalin and, more recently, the CIA's torture manual and use of waterboarding (Klein, 2007; Zimbardo, 2011). Furthermore, although talking therapies have empowered many individuals, it has

also been abused to lock up political dissidents, oppress women, and deny stories of rape and incest (Vos et al., 2019). Thus, psychology may be used unethically to manipulate meanings.

Some concepts in existential and humanistic psychology may also have indirectly contributed to unhealthy trends, such as the emergence of an unrealistically optimistic popular self-help culture of "smile or die" positive psychology (Ehrenreich, 2010; Grogan, 2013). These popular simplifications may be detrimental to our mental health, as it seems important to focus on our "whole self" and not just our "good self" (Kashdan & Biswas-Diener, 2014). It is, for example, unrealistic and psychologically detrimental to try to always find something meaningful, be happy and optimistic, as life inevitably confronts us with existentially challenging boundary situations, society places us in structurally unjust situations, and we seem to carry a dark shadow side in our Self.

Furthermore, Maslow's pyramid of needs has often been misused. It seems to be a widespread myth that people first need to fulfill their basic needs in life (e.g., materialistic, hedonistic and self-oriented types of meaning) before they can realize their larger potential in life (e.g., social and larger types of meaning; see also Volume 1, Chapter 14, this handbook). Individuals may decide to wait to focus on living life to the fullest until they have first created the perfect conditions, which may be an unrealistically high demand. Empirical research does not support the myth of Maslow's pyramid: The fulfillment of basic needs is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for living a fulfilling and meaningful life (Kaufman, 2021; Vos, 2020). Furthermore, there is evidence that Maslow borrowed his ideas from the Blackfoot Indigenous tradition (Bray, 2019). However, whereas this Indigenous worldview was fluid, circular, continuously changing, dynamic, and relational, Maslow and colleagues seemed to translate this into a linear model and place the individual at the top, as common in individualistic Western worldviews (Blackstock, 2011; Cross, 2007). Similar to the Bella Coola people, for Blackfoot people, self-actualization was the starting point, which was embedded in the actualization

and continuity of the community and universe, with balance and harmony as desired outcomes. ‘The Blackfoot belief is not a triangle. It is a tipi where they believe tipis reach to the sky. Self-actualization is at the base of the tipi, not at the top, and is the foundation on which community actualization is built. The highest form that a Blackfoot can attain is called “cultural perpetuity.”’ (Blackstock, as cited in Bray, 2019). Similarly, Kierkegaard (2019) argued that human development starts with a narrow individual-oriented aesthetic stage, followed by broader ethical and religious stages.

Third, researchers and practitioners may use their critical self-reflection and expertise on meaning in life and social justice when assessing and treating clients. For example, the British Psychological Society recommends assessing clients with the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018). Instead of or in addition to diagnostic labels from *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* or *International Classification of Diseases*, practitioners ask their clients four questions about the threats in their life (how does/did powers affect you), meaning (what sense do/did you make of the threat), response (what did/do you do to survive) and strengths (what access to power resources do you have?).

Practitioners may also want to acknowledge how the psychological problems may have evolved in a cycle of injustice, and how the psychological problems may be the client’s way to make sense of their unjust life situations. Individuals may have developed unhelpful meanings as a result of their cycle of structural injustice, such as accumulative traumatic life experiences. Therefore, practitioners may consider addressing the underlying injustice and traumas. Practitioners may want to assess how individuals may have become stuck in a cycle of structural injustice and intervene in any of the seven dimensions to break the cycle, such as: (1) helping the client to move to a more just and safe social context, (2) learn how to cope with unjust social interactions, (3) recognize and validate the feelings of injustice instead of internalizing these feelings, (4) treat traumas,

(5) prevent unhelpful behavior, (6) stimulate more helpful coping responses, and (7) develop a strong sense of meaning in life as a source of resilience to cope with stress. For example, instead of treating a client with a standardized protocol for depression, a therapist may address how this depression was triggered by homophobic abuse and offer identity-affirmative therapy.

Fourth, practitioners may actively use evidence-based meaning-oriented interventions, as clients seem to benefit from systematically exploring their personal meaning in life. A meta-analysis of 60 clinical trials has shown that meaning-centered practitioners can help clients to live a more meaningful and satisfying life, accept life’s givens, and tolerate existential limitations. Clients in these clinical trials have reported large improvements in mental and physical health (Vos et al., 2015; Vos & Vitali, 2018). This meta-analysis also showed that meaning-centered therapists often use five groups of competencies in their work with clients, each of which is supported by empirical evidence: meaning-centered, assessment, relational, existential, and phenomenological-experiential competencies (Vos, 2017). Thus, therapists may want to use these competencies to help their clients to systematically explore and decide their meaning in life in a free critical-intuitive way, which can improve their existential and psychological well-being, particularly in boundary situations.

However, most treatment manuals are not systematically based on evidence-based therapeutic mechanisms of change about meaning in life. For example, although Frankl’s work has inspired many practitioners, some of his assumptions are still waiting for empirical support, and therefore logotherapists may benefit from embedding their practices in more systematic empirical research on meaning in life. Therefore, systematic meaning in life therapy (SMT) was developed on the basis of the systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses described in this chapter (Vos, 2017). SMT helps clients live a meaningful and satisfying life despite life’s challenges, by systematically exploring six evidence-based types and 29 sub-types of meaning via didactics, self-reflection,

experiential exploration, and homework, facilitated by the five groups of therapeutic competencies (Vos, 2017, 2022c).

Meaning-Oriented Economics and Politics

How could we further use our professional expertise on meaning in life? First, teachers may want to guide children and young people to listen critically to their intuition about their meaning in life and develop a personal sense of meaning in life (Vos et al., 2023). Several countries run successful meaning in life education programs (Vos et al., 2019).

Second, governments may want to limit the detrimental meaning manipulation by commercial adverts and propaganda and limit their own usage of meaning manipulation. Most of all, governments may want to empower individuals and give them opportunities to determine their own meaningful life (Vos, 2020).

Third, economists and politicians may want to investigate the transition toward a meaning-oriented society, without misusing their expertise for their own or commercial benefits. Sociological and socioeconomic research seems to indicate that many countries are transitioning from neoliberal and communist economic systems toward a meaning-oriented society, as concluded during the 2016 World Economic Forum (Vos, 2020). It seems almost unavoidable that societies become more meaning-oriented. The functionalistic focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning in life does not seem sustainable in the long term. This approach and these types of meaning are associated with worse mental, physical, and social health, possibly because they challenge primal existential evolutionary principles. Individual citizens and customers may feel frustrated, unsatisfied, and uncomfortable with these limiting societal answers about meaning in life, and they may start changing their own life; if enough individuals change their lives, they may become a global social revolution toward a meaning-oriented society.

Fourth, individual citizens and consumers seem to have four options to respond to the

popular approaches and types of meaning in their society, in line with Eric Olin Wright (2010). Individuals may try to find meaning within their socioeconomic system (e.g., follow some social expectations and where possible create your own small daily-life meanings), create alternatives to the system (e.g., work in co-ops, live in self-sufficient off-grid communities and communes), fight the system to create a more meaningful system for all (e.g., political activism, environmental campaigns), and dreaming about meaning-centered utopias (e.g., self-education, philosophical debates; Vos, 2020). Finally, the Declaration of Human Rights may be extended with the human right to live a meaningful life:

Living a meaningful life in a meaning-less system is possibly the ultimate act of personal rebellion that individual citizens can do within, outside, against and beyond an unjust system. Because this individual shows the emptiness of the system and reminds the people around them of the revolutionary dream of a system in which everyone can live a meaningful life. Therefore, individuals living a meaningful life are the largest threats to dictators and fascists. Frightened powerholders will allow individuals to suffer and to suppress their suffering with pills or hedonism, but they close churches, media, psychotherapy, music, and schools, and replace these with propaganda about their own meanings. They monopolize the methods of mass production of meaning. Therefore, we need to declare living a meaningful life an inalienable human right. Because everybody deserves a meaningful life. (Vos, 2022c, p. 154)

CONCLUSION

This chapter has shown how individual experiences of meaning in life are dynamically entwined with societal processes. Previous authors seem to

have dominantly conceptualized meaning as an individualistic, static phenomenon that regards meaning as an unchangeable state of mind of individuals independent from their social context. Other authors conceptualized meaning as a philosophical or theological abstraction from the dynamic totality of our subjectively lived experiences. Although some researchers may have alluded to the social power of meaning, it seems that its full power has only recently become more meticulously examined (Vos et al., 2023). The research field on meaning seems to be getting a new meaning. What is this new meaning of meaning?

There is an increasing awareness that the multi-dimensional experience of meaning is a relational topic at the dynamic intersection of individual and societal processes. Individuals develop meaning in relationship to others, as the philosopher Martin Buber (1937/2010) wrote; an individual develops their sense of self and world in relationships with others (*Ich werde am Du*). Our experience of meaning is often related to other people, such our social connections, belonging to a community and contributing to a better world. Due to its pluralistic nature, the experience of meaning can possibly only be fully understood with a multidisciplinary approach and pluralistic definitions. The synergy of multidisciplinary research is needed, as this chapter integrated evolutionary biology, ethology, psychology, anthropology and economics. This follows First Nations Canadians, who argued that individual meaning can only be understood within the circles of society and the universe. Finally, this chapter also showed how personal meanings are entwined with political meanings, like the adage from the feminist movement says: the personal is political. All experiences of meaning in life are embedded in sociopolitical and socioeconomic relationships:

What is going on in our personal life is often a reflection of what is going on in the world around us. This also implies that we may be in a personal crisis because our world is in crisis,

as Viktor Frankl wrote: ‘an abnormal reaction to an abnormal situation is normal behavior’. At the same time, the individual has the freedom to influence the world around them, via their way-of-being and their actions. This also brings up the topic of response-ability: the individual is called into action by the crises of the world. This reflects a sense of personal responsibility for one’s own life and one’s individual contributions to the world in crises, and also includes an ethical call to action to help others and work to prevent the larger crises in the world. Thus, the meanings of the individual and the meanings of the world around them are intertwined. Personal meanings and social meanings co-constitute each other, to some extent. It is this intertwining that gives meaning its pro-active (instead of reactive) emphasis. The social power of meaning serves as a catalyst that galvanizes health and adaptive collective action. (Vos et al., 2023, p. 131)

References

- Adler, A. (2014). *An introduction to theories of personality*. Psychology Press.
- Agamben, G. (2020). L’invenzione di un’epidemia [The invention of an epidemic]. Quodlibet. <https://www.quodlibet.it/giorgio-agamben-l-invenzione-di-un-epidemia>
- Aristotle. (2019). *Ethics*. Clarendon.
- Balcombe, J. (2006). *Pleasurable kingdom*. St. Martin’s Press.
- Barash, D. P. (2000). Evolutionary existentialism, sociobiology, and the meaning of life. *Bioscience*, 50(11), 1012–1017. [https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568\(2000\)050\[1012:EESATM\]2.0.CO;2](https://doi.org/10.1641/0006-3568(2000)050[1012:EESATM]2.0.CO;2)
- Baumeister, R. F. (1991). *Meanings of life*. Guilford Press.
- Becker, E. (1997). *The denial of death*. Simon and Schuster.
- Bekoff, M. (2004). Wild justice and fair play: Cooperation, forgiveness, and morality in animals. *Biology & Philosophy*, 19(4), 489–520. <https://doi.org/10.1007/sBIPH-004-0539-x>

- Berman, M. (2009). *The politics of authenticity*. Policy.
- Berridge, K. C., & Kringelbach, M. L. (2008). Affective neuroscience of pleasure: Reward in humans and animals. *Psychopharmacology*, 199(3), 457–480. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00213-008-1099-6>
- Billing, E. (1951). *Our calling*. Augustana.
- Blackstock, C. (2011). The emergence of the breath of life theory. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 8(1), 1–16.
- Bloch, M. (2015). *In and out of each other's bodies*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315634005>
- Bornet, M. A., Bernard, M., Jaques, C., Rubli Truchard, E., Borasio, G. D., & Jox, R. J. (2021). Assessing the will to live. *Journal of Pain and Symptom Management*, 61(4), 845–857.e18. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jpainsymman.2020.09.012>
- Bray, B. (2019). *Maslow's hierarchy of needs and Blackfoot (Siksika) nation beliefs*. Retrieved from <https://barbarabray.net/2019/03/10> on July 28, 2024.
- Brown, G. K., Steer, R. A., Henriques, G. R., & Beck, A. T. (2005). The internal struggle between the wish to die and the wish to live: A risk factor for suicide. *The American Journal of Psychiatry*, 162(10), 1977–1979. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.ajp.162.10.1977>
- Buber, M. (2010). *I and thou*. Martino Publishing. (Original work published 1937)
- Burke, B. L., Martens, A., & Faucher, E. H. (2010). Two decades of terror management theory: A meta-analysis of mortality salience research. *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 14(2), 155–195. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1088868309352321>
- Campbell, J. (2004). *Pathways to bliss*. New World Library.
- Caruso, G., & Flanagan, O. (Eds.). (2017). *Neuro-existentialism: Meaning, morals, and purpose in the age of neuroscience*. Oxford University Press.
- Chan, A. (2009). In harmony with the sky. In L. Hoffman, M. Yang, F. J. Kaklauskas, A. T. H. Chan, & M. Mansilla (Eds.), *Existential Psychology East-West*. University Professors Press (pp. 103–120).
- Chater, N. (2018). *The mind is flat*. Penguin.
- Chochinov, H. M., Hack, T., Hassard, T., Kristjanson, L. J., McClement, S., & Harlos, M. (2005). Understanding the will to live in patients nearing death. *Psychosomatics: Journal of Consultation and Liaison*, 46(1), 7–10. <https://doi.org/10.1176/appi.psy.46.1.7>
- Chochinov, H. M., Tataryn, D., Clinch, J. J., & Dudgeon, D. (1999). Will to live in the terminally ill. *Lancet*, 354(9181), 816–819. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736\(99\)80011-7](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0140-6736(99)80011-7)
- Chomsky, N. (2002). *Media control*. Seven Stories Press.
- Christiansen, M. H., & Kirby, S. (Eds.). (2003). *Language evolution*. OUP Oxford. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199244843.001.0001>
- Churchland, P. S. (2018). The impact of social neuroscience on moral philosophy. In G. Caruso & O. Flanagan (Eds.), *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, morals, and purpose in the age of neuroscience* (pp. 25–37). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190460723.003.0002>
- Cross, T. (2007). Through indigenous eyes. In Secretariat of National Aboriginal and Islander Child Care (Ed.). *Ngadluko Ngartunnaitya: For Our Children* (pp. 41–48). SNAICC.
- Damasio, A. R. (1999). *The feeling of what happens*. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- Darwin, C. (2004). *On the origin of species*. Routledge. (Original work published 1859)
- Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Macat Library.
- de Sousa, R. (2010). Existentialism as biology. *Emotion Review*, 2(1), 76–83. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1754073909345545>
- De Waal, F. (1996). *Good natured*. Harvard University Press. <https://doi.org/10.4159/9780674033177>
- Deloria, V. (2012). *Metaphysics of modern existence*. Fulcrum Publishing.
- Dennett, D. C. (1996). *Darwin's dangerous idea: Evolution and the meanings of life*. Penguin.
- Douglas, M. (1986/2003). *Purity and Danger*. Routledge.
- Ehrenreich, B. (2010). *Smile or die*. Granta.
- Folkman, S. (Ed.). (2011). *The Oxford handbook of stress, health, and coping*. Oxford Press.
- Foucault, M. (2001/2008). *The birth of biopolitics*. Springer.
- Frankl, V. E. (1985). *Man's search for meaning*. Simon and Schuster.
- Frankl, V. E. (1970). *The will to meaning*. Noura Books.
- Gazzaniga, M. S. (2018). On determinism and human responsibility. In G. Caruso & O. Flanagan (Eds.), *Neuroexistentialism: Meaning, morals, and purpose in the age of neuroscience* (pp. 223–234). Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190460723.003.0012>
- Gendlin, E. T. (1998). *Focusing-oriented psychotherapy*. Guilford Press.
- Greenberg, J., Koole, S. L., & Pyszczynski, T. A. (Eds.). (2004). *Handbook of experimental existential psychology*. Guilford Press.
- Greenberg, L. S., Elliott, R., & Lietaer, G. (1994). Research on experiential psychotherapies. In A. E. Bergin & S. L. Garfield (Eds.), *Handbook of*

- psychotherapy and behavior change* (pp. 509–539). Wiley.
- Grogan, J. (2013). *Encountering America: Humanistic psychology, sixties culture & the shaping of the modern self*. Harper.
- Hauser, M. (2006). *Moral minds*. Harper Collins.
- Heidegger, M. (1914). *Die Lehre vom Urteil im Psychologismus*. Barth.
- Heidegger, M. (1927). *Sein und Zeit*. Niemeyer.
- Heidegger, M. (1954). *The question concerning technology*. Niemeyer.
- Heidegger, M. (1995). *Aristotle's Metaphysics*. Indiana University. (Original work presented 1931.)
- Heidegger, M. (2010). *Being and truth*. Indiana University Press.
- Hofmann, S. G., Sawyer, A. T., Witt, A. A., & Oh, D. (2010). The effects of mindfulness-based therapy on anxiety and depression: A meta-analytic review. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 78*(2), 169–185. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0018555>
- Hussein, B. A. S. (2012). The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis today. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies, 2*(3), 642–646. <https://doi.org/10.4304/tpls.2.3.642-646>
- Iacoboni, M. (2009). Imitation, empathy, and mirror neurons. *Annual Review of Psychology, 60*(1), 653–670. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.psych.60.110707.163604>
- Jaspers, K. (2011). *Origin and Goal of History*. Routledge Revivals.
- Johnstone, L., & Boyle, M. (2018). The power threat meaning framework: An alternative nondiagnostic conceptual system. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 0*(0), 1–18. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0022167818793289>
- Joyce, R. (2007). *The evolution of morality*. MIT press.
- Kaas, J. H. (2019). *The origin and evolution of neocortex*. Routledge.
- Kashdan, T. B., & Biswas-Diener, R. (2014). *The upside of your dark side*. Penguin.
- Kaufman, S. B. (2021). *Transcend: The new science of self-actualization*. Penguin.
- Kierkegaard, S. (2019). *Concluding unscientific postscript*. Princeton University Press.
- Killen, M., & Smetana, J. G. (Eds.). (2013). *Handbook of moral development*. Psychology Press. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203581957>
- Kim, J., Holte, P., Martela, F., Shanahan, C., Li, Z., Zhang, H., Eisenbeck, N., Carreno, D. F., Schlegel, R. J., & Hicks, J. A. (2022). Experiential appreciation as a pathway to meaning in life. *Nature Human Behaviour, 6*(5), 677–690. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-021-01283-6>
- Klein, N. (2007). *The shock doctrine: The rise of disaster capitalism*. Macmillan.
- Kropotkin, P. (2012). *Mutual aid: A factor of evolution*. Courier. (Original work published 1902.)
- Lacan, J. (2001). *Ecrits*. Routledge.
- Lamarck, J. B. (1984). *Zoological philosophy*. University of Chicago. (Original work published 1809.)
- Leontiev, D. A. (1996). Dimensions of the meaning/sense concept in the psychological context. *Problems of Theoretical Psychology, 1*(1), 130–142.
- Levinas, E. (1979). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Springer. <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-009-9342-6>
- Li, J. B., Dou, K., & Liang, Y. (2021). The relationship between presence of meaning, search for meaning, and subjective well-being. *Journal of Happiness Studies: An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being, 22*(1), 467–489. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10902-020-00230-y>
- Liao, D. A., Brecht, K. F., Johnston, M., & Nieder, A. (2022). Recursive sequence generation in crows. *Science Advances, 8*(44), eabq3356. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.abq3356>
- Libet, B., Wright, E. W., Jr., Feinstein, B., Jr., & Pearl, D. K. (1979). Subjective referral of the timing for a conscious sensory experience: A functional role for the somatosensory specific projection system in man. *Brain: A Journal of Neurology, 102*(1), 193–224. <https://doi.org/10.1093/brain/102.1.193>
- Lovejoy, A. (2017). *The great chain of being*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315132310>
- Lurz, R. W. (Ed.). (2009). *The philosophy of animal minds*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511819001>
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1948). *Sens et non-sens*. Nagel.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2013). *Phenomenology of perception*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203720714>
- Nietzsche, F. (2017). *On the genealogy of morality*. Cambridge University Press.
- Norton, J. (2006). A depth psychology for our times. *Personal Construct Theory & Practice, 3*(1), 16–26.
- Ottenheimer, H. J., & Pine, J. M. (2018). *The anthropology of language*. Cengage.
- Panksepp, J. (2005). Affective consciousness: Core emotional feelings in animals and humans. *Consciousness and Cognition: An International Journal, 14*(1), 30–80. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.concog.2004.10.004>

- Peterson, J. B. (1999). *Maps of meaning: The architecture of belief*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203902851>
- Peterson, J. B. (2021). *Beyond order: 12 more rules for life*. Allen Lane.
- Philipse, H. (2004). *Atheistisch manifest*. Prometheus.
- Poiani, A. (Ed.). (2011). *Pragmatic evolution*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511980381>
- Pyszczyński, T., & Landau, M. J. (2020). In his own image. In K. E. Vail & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The science of religion, spirituality, and existentialism* (pp. 307–323). Academic Press. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B978-0-12-817204-9.00022-6>
- Rakic, P. (2009). Evolution of the neocortex: A perspective from developmental biology. *Nature Reviews Neuroscience*, 10(10), 724–735. <https://doi.org/10.1038/nrn2719>
- Remmers, C., Topolinski, S., & Koole, S. L. (2016). Why being mindful may have more benefits than you realize. *Mindfulness*, 7(4), 829–837. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12671-016-0520-1>
- Rorty, R., & Vattimo, G. (2005). *The future of religion*. Columbia University Press.
- Rose, N. (1990). *Governing the soul*. Routledge.
- Ross, F. H. (2013). *The meaning of life in Hinduism and Buddhism*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203706671>
- Ryff, C. D. (2013). Psychological well-being revisited: Advances in the science and practice of eudaimonia. *Psychotherapy and psychosomatics*, 83(1), 10–28.
- Sartre, J. P. (1946). *Existentialism is a Humanism*. Routledge.
- Schlegel, R. J., Smith, C. M., & Hirsch, K. A. (2013). Examining the true self as a wellspring of meaning. In J. A. Hicks & C. Routledge (Eds.), *The experience of meaning in life* (pp. 177–188). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-6527-6_14
- Schopenhauer, A. (2012). *The world as will and representation*. Courier. (Original work published 1818.)
- Schweitzer, A. (1979). *Reverence for life*. Ardent.
- Sheets-Johnstone, M. (1986). Existential fit and evolutionary continuities. *Synthese*, 66, 219–248.
- Sloterdijk, P. (2014). *You must change your life*. John Wiley & Sons.
- Snyder, T. (2018). *The Road to Unfreedom*. Tim Duggan Books.
- Steger, M. F., Frazier, P., Oishi, S., & Kaler, M. (2006). The meaning in life questionnaire: Assessing the presence of and search for meaning in life. *Journal of Counseling Psychology*, 53(1), 80–93. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-0167.53.1.80>
- Steger, M. F., Oishi, S., & Kashdan, T. B. (2009). Meaning in life across the life span. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(1), 43–52. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760802303127>
- Sullivan, D. (2016). *Cultural-existential psychology*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9781316156605>
- Syal, S., & Finlay, B. L. (2011). Thinking outside the cortex: Social motivation in the evolution and development of language. *Developmental Science*, 14(2), 417–430. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-7687.2010.00997.x>
- Terlouw, C., Bourguet, C., & Deiss, V. (2016). Consciousness, unconsciousness and death in the context of slaughter. Part II. Evaluation methods. *Meat Science*, 118, 147–156. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.meatsci.2016.03.010>
- Tracy, J. L., Hart, J., & Martens, J. P. (2011). Death and science: The existential underpinnings of belief in intelligent design and discomfort with evolution. *PLoS ONE*, 6(3), e17349. <https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0017349>
- Vanhooren, S., Grosemans, A., & Breynaert, J. (2022). Focusing, the felt sense, and meaning in life. *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*, 21(3), 250–268. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14779757.2022.2028660>
- Vanmechelen, X. (2009). *Conversations in Philosophy*. Cambridge Scholars.
- Visser, G. (2008). *Gelatenheid*. SUN.
- Visser, G. (2013). *Heidegger's vraag naar de techniek*. Vantilt.
- Vos, J. (2015). Meaning and existential givens in the lives of cancer patients: A philosophical perspective on psycho-oncology. *Palliative & Supportive Care*, 13(4), 885–900. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951514000790>
- Vos, J. (2016a). Working with meaning in life in physical health care. In P. Russo-Netzer, S. E. Schulenberg, & A. Batthyany (Eds.), *Clinical perspectives on meaning* (pp. 59–87). Springer.
- Vos, J. (2016b). Working with meaning in life in physical health care. In P. Russo-Netzer, S. E. Schulenberg, & A. Batthyany (Eds.), *Clinical perspectives on meaning* (pp. 59–87). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-41397-6_4
- Vos, J. (2017). *Meaning in life: An evidence-based handbook for practitioners*. Bloomsbury.
- Vos, J. (2018). Death in existential psychotherapies. In R. E. Menzies, R. G. Menzies, & L. Iverach. *Curing the dread of death* (pp. 145–160). Australian Academic Press.
- Vos, J. (2019). A review of research on existential-phenomenological therapies. In E. Van Deurzen,

- E. Craig, L. A. Längle, K. J. Schneider, D. Tantam, & S. du Plock (Eds.), *The Wiley world handbook of existential therapy* (pp. 592–614). Wiley. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119167198.ch37>
- Vos, J. (2020). *The economics of meaning in life: From capitalist life syndrome to meaning-oriented economy*. University Professors Press.
- Vos, J. (2021a). *The psychology of COVID-19*. SAGE.
- Vos, J. (2021b). Systematic Pragmatic Phenomenological Analysis: Step-wise guidance for mixed method research. *Counselling & Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 77–97. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12366>
- Vos, J. (2021c). The existential therapeutic competencies framework. *International Journal of Psychotherapy*, 25(1), 9–52.
- Vos, J. (2022a). *Systematic meaning in life psychotherapy: From systematic literature reviews to a systematic treatment manual*. <https://psyarxiv.com/xbk85/download?format=pdf>
- Vos, J. (2022b, April). The cycle of structural injustice: An overview and comparison of key concepts. *Society of Psychotherapy Research Conference*, Leeds.
- Vos, J. (2022c). How to create a meaningful society for all. *Advancing Humanistic, Existential and Transpersonal Psychology and Scholarship Conference*. Colorado Springs, CO.
- Vos, J. (2022d). Meaning in life across cultures and times. In A. C.-K. Chan, M. F. Steger, R. C.-F. Chui, N. Y.-F. Siu, S. C. P. W. Ip, & B. Y.-H. Lam (Eds.), *Proceedings of the meaning in life international conference 2022 - Cultivating, promoting, and enhancing meaning in life across cultures and life span* (pp. 21–40). Atlantic Press/Springer Nature.
- Vos, J. (2023a). The development and validation of the Meaning Approach Scale: Traditional, functionalistic and critical-intuitive approaches to meaning in life. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 1–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2023.2280629>
- Vos, J. (2023b). The meaning sextet: A systematic literature review and further validation of a universal typology of meaning in life. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 36(2), 204–231.
- Vos, J., Craig, M., & Cooper, M. (2015). Existential therapies: A meta-analysis of their effects on psychological outcomes. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, 83(1), 115–128. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0037167>
- Vos, J., Roberts, R., & Davies, J. (2019). *Mental health in crisis*. SAGE.
- Vos, J., Russo-Netzer, P., & Schulenberg, S. E. (2023). Meaning in a world in crisis: Perspectives of societal resilience and growth. *Journal of Constructivist Psychology*, 36(2), 129–137. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10720537.2022.2068710>
- Vos, J., & Vitali, D. (2018). The effects of psychological meaning-centered therapies on quality of life and psychological stress: A metaanalysis. *Palliative & Supportive Care*, 16(5), 608–632. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1478951517000931>
- Wegner, D. M. (2002). *The illusion of conscious will*. MIT Press. <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/3650.001.0001>
- Winell, M. (2006). *Leaving the fold*. Apocryphile.
- Wrathall, M. A. (2010). *Heidegger and unconcealment*. Cambridge University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511777974>
- Wright, E. O. (2010). *Envisioning real utopias*. Verso.
- Young, I. M. (2010). *Responsibility for justice*. Oxford University Press.
- Zander-Schellenberg, T., Remmers, C., Zimmermann, J., Thommen, S., & Lieb, R. (2019). It was intuitive, and it felt good: A daily diary study on how people feel when making decisions. *Cognition and Emotion*, 33(7), 1505–1513. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02699931.2019.1570914>
- Zimbardo, P. (2011). *The Lucifer effect: How good people turn evil*. Random House.
- Zoellner, T., & Maercker, A. (2006). Posttraumatic growth in clinical psychology - a critical review and introduction of a two component model. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 26(5), 626–653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cpr.2006.01.008>