



Meaning in Life Across Cultures and Times: An Evidence-Based Overview

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Abstract. *Background:* The topic of meaning in life seems popular in the general public and scientific community. However, many people seem to ask superficial and functionalistic questions which may lead to populist answers, potentially missing out crucial ingredients for a meaningful life. For example, many academics seem to focus either on hyper-specific personal projects and rigid therapeutic paradigms, or on non-evidence-based philosophies. The field seem to miss an overall picture of meaning in life, that a systematic review of empirical research may provide. *Aim:* The aim of this chapter is to go beyond the popular questions and answers about meaning in life and try to develop a comprehensive understanding of meaning across cultures and times, based on systematic empirical research. *Method:* This chapter has systematically answered a comprehensive set of questions about meaning in life: what; how; where; when; who; whose; why; which; which ontological and epistemological status? These questions are derived from Systematic Pragmatic Phenomenological Analysis, which has been developed in line with phenomenologists such as Heidegger, and Foucault. The answers to these questions focus on evidence-based research, systematic reviews, and meta-analyses of empirical studies, and their applications. *Findings:* Some individuals describe meaning as a Reality, such as a Universal and Cosmic Meaning of Life ('Transcendence'), whereas others seem to regard meaning as socially-shared symbols or subjective imaginations ('Immanence'); others combine aspects of both positions ('Immanent Transcendence'). Research has shown that there is a universal meaning typology: individuals in different cultures and times seem to experience materialistic, hedonistic, self-oriented, social, larger, and/or existential-philosophical types of meanings. Individuals can approach meaning in traditional, functionalistic, or phenomenological/critical-intuitive ways. An individual often develops their approach and types of meaning under influence from their social context. For example, individuals in neoliberal countries are more likely to develop a functionalistic focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning, whereas individuals in less neoliberal countries are more likely to develop a traditional or phenomenological focus on social or larger types of meaning. Both individuals and societies seem to change over time. In recent years, economists have observed an international trend, moving away from the materialist functionalism of neoliberalism and communism towards meaning-oriented economics. Some individuals may also develop their sense of meaning in response to feeling threatened by life's limitations, such as death, freedom, and suffering. Individuals seem to experience better mental health, and sometimes better physical health, if they have a dominantly phenomenological approach, focus on larger and social types of meaning, and have a general sense of meaningfulness of life. *Discussion &*

implications: Meaning in life is an evidence-based phenomenon across cultures and times, albeit with individual, social and historical differences in the questions and answers about meaning in life. The research findings have been used by psychotherapists to help clients live a meaningful and satisfying life while accepting life's challenges and limitations. Sixty clinical trials have shown that meaning-centered therapies have large effects on improving one's sense of meaningfulness, mental and physical health. The chapter sketches other opportunities to apply this research, such as meaning-centered education, politics, political activism, and human rights.

1 Introduction

The topic of meaning in life is popular, possibly even a hype. At least this is the impression if you walk into any bookstore in London, United Kingdom. The shelves seem overloaded with books on pop philosophy and self-help books with ambitious titles such as 'Seven steps to a meaningful life' and 'Manifest your purpose'. During the COVID-19 pandemic, many people understandably asked existential questions, which were answered in countless articles in newspapers and magazines (Vos, 2021a). Also on the scientific side, many psychology, psychotherapy, and medical conferences have jumped on the meaning bandwagon.

However, it almost seems as if the more we talk about meaning in life, the less we understand it. The popularisation of the topic of meaning in life sometimes seems to reduce the complexity and totality of the lived experiences of meaning into a 'Burger McMeaning' that you can order from an 'existential fast-food' author, get a quick fix for your existential hunger, but you may quickly feel hungry again due to its lack of healthy and fulfilling nutrients (Vos, 2017). That is, the philosopher Martin Heidegger (1927) said that in each era, people cast a different light at life, and in our era this seems to be the light of populism. How could we describe the populist light on meaning?

Firstly, there seems to be a lack of attention for systematic empirical research on meaning in life. For example, whereas conferences would never give the stage to a self-acclaimed expert on a psychological topic such as 'depression' or 'COVID-19', this seems to happen for the topic of meaning, -even though there is a large body of empirical research, and there are systematic researchers in this field. Philosophers are given the stage to present their personal theories, sometimes supported by a self-confirming selection of empirical papers, which may only be relevant for a specific group of individuals in a specific era. The topic of meaning may even be hijacked by authors who want to impose their political opinion, such as Jordan Peterson talks about meaning in life to levy his neoconservative ideology which he bases on a highly selective reading of the research field. Furthermore, the inspiring but non-evidence-based words from authors such as Viktor Frankl can sometimes be uncritically repeated time and again, almost like cult leaders. Some of Frankl's ideas such as the three pathways to meaning are uncritically taken as the foundations of many psychological treatments, despite a lack of empirical support (Vos, 2022b, 2017, 2016a; Vos & Vitali, 2018). All these ideas may be very inspiring, but may not apply to everyone and may not be supported by systematic empirical research. Consequently, there are many unfounded myths about meaning in the general public (see Table 1).

Table 1. Popular myths about meaning in life, and evidence-based alternatives (copied with permission from: Vos, 2017)

What meaning is NOT	What meaning is
One Absolute Ultimate Meaning of Life	Multiple meanings
Only for religious or spiritual people	Neutral description of the lives of all people
Only Big Goals in life	Range from small to large meanings
Unchangeable	Changeable, depending on life situation and life events such as becoming ill
One meaning for everyone	Unique for you
Others can tell what your meaning is	You are the only person who can discover what is meaningful for you
You can wait for others to take the initiative to make your life meaningful	You are responsible for discovering meaning in your life; others will not do this for you
Life can be without meaning	It seems always possible to experience meaning, in any life situation
You can find meaning randomly; simply pick and choose something	Everyone has a hierarchy of experiences that are less meaningful and experiences that are more meaningful; therefore you cannot randomly replace one meaning for another meaning.
Meaning is an abstract theory	In daily life, we usually do not think about what is meaningful for us; we simply DO things that are meaningful for us.
You can find meaning in books and by thinking	Meaning is usually found by intuitively feeling what is meaningful for you, and by engaging in activities in daily life
Meaning is only something in the here and now	Meaning is about the experience of something bigger than the daily life, feeling connected with something more important and valuable
We MAKE meaning	What we could experience as meaningful is already there; we only need to dis-cover this by using our intuitive feeling.

Secondly, even if researchers are given the stage, they sometimes seem to highlight only one small piece of empirical evidence, like casting light from one specific angle onto a multi-faceted diamond which only lightens one facet. This reductionism is for example visible in the elevation of authors who have only published one questionnaire or did one clinical trial on meaning and they are expected to know everything about meaning. However, meaning in life is a complex phenomenon. For example, a review of 37 studies has identified seven empirical components to the definition of meaning in life, which are all strongly correlated to each other, and therefore all components should be acknowledgment when talking about meaning in life (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. Therefore, the general experience of meaning in life may be defined as the total subjective experience of being motivated and committed to moving in a self-regulated and existentially-competent way towards self-determined directions, goals, or purposes in life, in line with one's values and understanding of the world, self-worth and significance of one's meanings (Vos, 2022a, p.45).

Thirdly, although meaning is a multifaceted phenomenon that may only be understood with multidisciplinary collaboration, sometimes there seems to be competition between different paradigms. Some authors also seem to claim the monopoly over the topic of meaning, as if only logo-therapists, positive psychologists or existential therapists can talk about meaning, and for example cognitive behaviour therapy or cognitive psychology are totally irrelevant for understanding life.

Fourthly, there also seems to be a clear cultural bias in how psychologists and psychiatrists approach meaning in a functionalistic way, for example in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy. These authors sometimes seem to approach meaning as something that we can 'make' and 'control', like the variables in a mathematical function, and where the type of meaning that we select appears random and replaceable. Although this functionalistic approach to meaning dominates modern-western and neoliberal countries, this functionalistic approach is less frequently found in other cultures and seems absent in most of human history, because most people seem to have a traditional or phenomenological/critical-intuitive approach to meaning (Vos, 2022b, 2017). However, popular authors and speakers touring events across the globe continue presenting meaning as something that we can make and randomly replace if needed.

The previous paragraphs are deliberately provocative for pedagogical reasons. In many situations, authors, speakers, and conferences will of course address both populist and evidence-based aspects of meaning in life, and they will acknowledge their limitations. However, this introduction shows how the experience of meaning in life is like a multi-faceted diamond; if we cast light from only the narrow popular angle we will only see one facet. If we want to see more facets and get an understanding of the totality and complexity of the phenomenon of meaning in life, we may also want to cast light from

other, non-populist angles. The aim of this article is to provide a systematic overview of the research field on meaning in life from all its multiple angles.

2 Method: Ten Systematic Questions, Ten Systematic Empirical Answers

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 populist way to some individuals and in a scientific way to others. Phenomenology does not tell what a phenomenon, such as meaning, is or should be for everyone, but it asks a multiplicity of questions which each individual can give their own answer to (Vos, 2020, 2021a, 2021b).

For example, the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle (2019) proposed a system of four questions which he asked about a phenomenon: ‘what’ is the matter or material (hyle) of the phenomenon, ‘how’ is the form, shape, or appearance (eidos), ‘who’ is the individual who created the phenomenon (kinoun), and ‘for what’ is the sake for which the phenomenon is what it is (telos) (Heidegger, 1995; Hankinson, 2001). The philosopher Heidegger (1914) argued that modern science -and psychology in particular- has forgotten to ask all four questions about phenomena. Instead, modern science reduces the fourfold to merely the questions ‘what’ something is and by ‘whom’ 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 a phenomenon exists seem to be merely answered in terms of materialism and efficiency (Visser, 1989, 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. 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 asking in our populist era. The following

comprehensive set of questions is derived from Systematic Pragmatic Phenomenological Analysis (SPPA), which is based on works of Heidegger, Foucault, and other phenomenological-existential philosophers (Vos, 2020, 2021b). 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 attempt to avoid populism and instead focus on systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses of empirical studies (Vos, 2016a, 2016b, 2017, 2019, 2020, 2022a, 2022b; Vos & Vitali, 2018). Finally, the chapter will finish with an explanation of how psychologists and practitioners may use these ten questions to help clients live a meaningful and satisfying life despite life's struggles (Table 2).

Table 2. Overview of ten phenomenological questions about meaning in life (copied with permission from Vos, 2021a)

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

(continued)

Table 2. (continued)

Simplified question	Full question	Formal name	Examples
When?	How do the experience and meaning of [the phenomenon] change over time for the participant?	Development over time	Historlography Historlogy
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

3 Findings

3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Status

This section answers the question: What is the overall ontological and epistemological status of our experiences of meaning: is this about Reality, Symbols, or Imagination? Ontology describes our assumptions about the nature of reality, and epistemology how we assume that we can get any knowledge about reality.

In our postmodern era, few people would claim that they know The Cosmic Absolute Meaning Of Life. However, many prophets, holy books, religious and spiritual groups have claimed that they have access to Truth. It seems that we can only accept the Truth of these meanings if we also accept the authority of these individuals, or if we believe in our own omnipotence, -this will be later described as a traditional approach to meaning. In

contrast, psychologists such as Jacques Lacan (2001) have said that if we cannot know the absolute Reality with a capital ‘R’, we may still create our own reality with small ‘r’; that is, we may live a meaningful and satisfying life while simultaneously recognising that we may not have the perfect unchangeable answer to life. We may construct our reality with our symbols and imaginations. Symbols regard our shared theories, values, and practices about meaning in life, such as receiving an educational degree or a promotion at work may symbolise a successful and meaningful life in neoliberal countries. We may also imagine our own personal meanings in life, such as creating our personal habits and life goals.

Thus, different people will look differently at meaning in life. For some, meaning in life is about an absolute Meaning Of Life which is beyond the here-and-now, -which may be called ‘Transcendence’. For others, meaning is nothing more than symbols and imaginations, which may be explained by nature and nurture, neurobiology, and socialisation, -which may be called ‘Immanence’. However, increasing numbers of philosophers, such as Sloterdijk (2014) and Vos (2020, 2017), combine both positions, which may be called Immanent Transcendence (this is often based on a Critical-Realist epistemology). These thinkers say for example, that we can live a meaningful and satisfying life, while we acknowledge the limitations and scientific explanations of our meanings. The subjective experience of meaning in life may relate to scientific explanations like the meaning of a sentence relates to its grammar and spelling; although a sentence needs grammar and spelling, its meaning transcends the mere scientific analysis of its grammar and spelling (Vos, 2015). For example, individuals may intuit a hierarchy in their flow of experiences, such as reading this chapter feels at this moment more meaningful than watching football in the 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 towards meaning in life is not only possible, but it is also psychologically beneficial (Vos, 2015, 2017, 2020).

3.2 Types of Meaning

This section answers the question: What types of meaning do individuals experience in different cultures and times? To answer this question, Vos (2022a; 2022b) conducted a systematic literature review on all studies in which researchers have asked what individuals experience as meaningful, valuable, purposeful, or important in life. The findings from 107 studies in 45.710 participants were categorised in six types and 29 sub-types of meaning in life: 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). This universal meaning typology was operationalised in the Meaning Sextet Questionnaire, which was developed via an interview study and input from scientific experts on meaning in life, tested in a pilot study, and confirmed in a world-wide survey in 1281 participants in 49 countries. The findings of the survey confirmed that in all countries, individuals report this meaning sextet.

The studies also showed that materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning correlate with low psychological well-being, and social and larger meanings with large psychological well-being (Vos, 2022a). Similarly, the more different types of meaning a client explored in psychotherapy, the larger was their improvement in psychological well-being (Vos, 2022a; Vos & Vitali, 2018). This was explained with a metaphor: if a therapist only invites patients to consider a limited number of meanings (such as Frankl's three pathways to meaning), this seems like fishing with a tiny fishing rod. In contrast, if a therapist asks patients to consider all six types and 29 sub-types of meaning, this seems like fishing with a large fishing net: the more types/sub-types of meaning are explored with a client, the larger is the likelihood that any of the types/sub-types may be relevant for the clients (Vos, 2022b).

Furthermore, meaning-centered therapists such as Elizabeth Lukas have suggested that clients should have between three and five important meanings in their life, as this could make them more resilient in the case that one meaning in life cannot be achieved (Vos, 2016b). Indeed, the more different types of meaning an individual experiences, the better their psychological well-being is, that is the less symptoms such as depression and anxiety do they report (Vos, 2020, 2022a). Vos' Corona Survey also showed that during the COVID-19 lockdowns and self-isolation, many individuals reported that they were not able to fulfil certain meanings in life -such as going to a football game, as the stadiums were closed. Individuals who had multiple important types of meaning in their life reported lower levels of stress, anxiety, and depression, as they could shift their focus towards other types of meaning that were not hindered by the pandemic (Vos, 2021b).

3.3 Approach to Meaning

Individuals seem to differ in how they approach any type of meaning in life. Therefore, this section answers the question: How do individuals approach meaning? The Meaning Approach Scale was filled in by 1281 participants in 49 countries, which showed that individuals can approach meaning in three different ways: traditional, functionalistic, and critical-intuitive approaches to meaning in life (Vos, 2021c, 2020).

The traditional approach to meaning ('do as others tell you') means that an individual follows what their religion or social expectations tell what their meaning in life is, or they conform to the socio-economic position that they were born into. This is like a cast or class system, or in Medieval Europe when the place where you were born decided whether you would be a peasant, king, etc.

The functionalistic approach ('you can make anything, regardless of others and life') is based on the post-modernist idea that an individual can achieve anything in life, like a mathematical function: 'do behaviour X, and you will get Y'. The functionalist approach has the following characteristics: (1) individuals can rationally and consciously decide

their meaning in life; (2) individuals can define meaning in terms of specific well-defined and well-operationalised goals in life; (3) individuals should set large ambitious goals ('live life to the max'); (4) individuals can move towards their goals in a linear line; (5) individuals need to maximise every activity in life to achieve their goals in the most efficient way; (6) individuals can randomly select and replace any types of meanings because all meanings have equivalent value to the individual; (7) individuals can achieve their goals in life by fulfilling materialistic conditions, e.g. by buying property, holidays or adventures; (8) individuals need to compete and fight for the survival of their personal meaning. Examples are the populist approaches to meaning in the introduction section. Many psychologists seem to approach meaning in a functionalist way, such as traditional applications of Acceptance and Commitment, Second-Wave Cognitive Behaviour Therapy, or Schema Therapy.

The critical-intuitive approach to meaning ('listen critically to your intuition') means that individuals listen critically to their intuition, which is also called a phenomenological or critical-receptive attitude. The critical-intuitive approach means, that on the one hand, an individual accepts what their flow of experiences intuitively tells them what is meaningful (e.g. identifying meaning via systematic experiential exercises), and on the other hand the individual uses critical thinking skills (e.g. focus on rational, helpful beliefs). This was described before as immanent transcendence and dual attitude. Many studies show that an experiential and authentic approach to meaning is associated with a sense of satisfaction and fulfillment in life (Vos, 2021c).

For example, the world-wide survey of meaning in life showed that in western countries and neoliberal economies, individuals are more likely to have a functionalistic approach to meaning (Vos, 2021c, 2020). In contrast, individuals in non-western and less neoliberal economies are more likely to have a traditional or phenomenological approach. Furthermore, traditional and functionalistic approaches are moderately correlated with worse mental well-being whereas critical-intuitive approaches correlated strongly with better mental well-being (Vos, 2021c, 2020). The modern economic philosophy of neoliberalism seems to be built on a functionalistic approach to life, and seems to promote individual customers and citizens to live their lives functionalistically (Vos, 2020). Consequently, the globalisation of neoliberal consumerism and humanitarian military interventions also seems to implicitly export a functionalistic approach and a focus on materialistic/hedonistic/self-oriented types of meaning to countries which previously had a more traditional or phenomenological focus on social and larger types of meaning in life; this cultural transition may consequently lead to an increased mental health crises in these countries (Vos, 2020). Communist countries seem to have had a traditional or functionalist focus towards meaning in life, as each individual was expected to function like a radar in the socio-economic system; when communist countries open up and integrate more neoliberal ideas, such as China and Russia, they almost seem to become more functionalistic than neoliberal countries (ibidem).

3.4 Relationship Between Individual and Society

This section answers the question: How is the experience of meaning influenced by their social context, such as the dominant types and approach to meaning by people around them?

The previous sections have already precluded on how in pre-modern times and non-western cultures, individuals seemed to have a dominantly traditional or phenomenological approach to life, and they seemed to focus on social and larger types of meaning. In western countries and neoliberal economies, individuals are more likely to have a functionalist focus on materialistic, hedonistic, or self-oriented types of meaning.

Individuals seem to be socialised in these approaches and types of meaning in a myriad of ways, often very implicitly and unconsciously. In modern western countries, parents and schools seem to teach relatively little and not explicitly about how to live life -in contrast with traditional religious schools or schools in communist systems. However, the school curriculum can implicitly teach a child that professional success and social status are meaningful, and that if you work hard enough you can achieve anything meaningful (Vos et al., 2019).

Furthermore, on an average day, an individual citizen sees about 4000 adverts and logos, which may give explicit or implicit messages about life such as Pepsi Max' slogan 'live life to the Max', Nike's 'just do it', Adidas 'impossible is nothing', Red Bull's 'put on your wings', and Zurich Insurance helps us to be realistic 'because change happens'.

Governments also explicitly use propaganda and psychological nudging to steer citizens' behaviour how they want, for example via the Behavioural Insights Teams -nick-named 'Nudge Units'- and COVID-19 Communication Committees (Vos, 2020, 2021a). Several critical philosophers and sociologists have argued, in line with the philosopher Michel Foucault, that modern governments increasingly use propaganda and mass gaslighting, like traditional communist countries already seem to have a longer tradition of doing, to make individuals conform, for example during the COVID-19 pandemic (Vos, 2021a; Agamben, 2020; Esposito, 2011). The reason that companies and governments are increasingly prescribing and manipulating the sense of meaning in life of individual consumers and citizens, is that meaning in life is a strong motivator for socio-economic behaviour. For example, the EPI-WIN Committee from the World Health Organisation recommended during the COVID-19 pandemic to appeal to the meaningfulness of doing our citizens' duty to make individuals follow the governmental COVID-19 guidelines and use Protective Personal Equipment such as mouth-masks and social-distancing (Vos, 2021a).

Consequently, the World Economic Forum concluded in 2016 that 'meaning in life' will be the most important topic in economics from 2020 onwards. They predicted that more than half of all economic behaviour will be predicted (and possibly manipulated) via the individual sense of meaning in life. This functionalistic approach from companies and governments seems reflected in the agenda of other supra-governmental bodies, such as UN agenda 2030 (Vos, 2020).

3.5 Development Over Time

This section answers the question: How do the dominant types and approaches to meaning change over time in a culture? Obviously, each culture will have its unique history, and details about the start seems relatively speculative. The world history of meaning in life may be summarised as follows (see details in Vos, 2020).

In contrast with popular belief, animals do not merely focus on their survival, they also look after each other and show signs of moral behaviour (De Waal, 2010). For

example, when there is fire in a forest, animals will help other animals to get out safely -even other species or enemies. Similarly, archaeological and anthropological research indicates that in the early hunter-gatherer societies and early settlements, individuals focused on social and larger types of meaning, which often trumped functionalistic survival-of-the-fittest; individuals focused most likely on the community, helping others, being connected with nature, and worshipping higher deities.

Most of the oldest texts known to mankind 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. The early gurus, prophets and philosophers may have intuited the psychological and social benefits of social and larger types of meaning in life (remember that the before-mentioned empirical studies have shown that social and larger types of meaning are the best for our mental and physical health). Whereas the oldest Vedic religions and Confucianism seemed to have both phenomenological and traditional approaches to life, the three book religions introduced a more traditional approach. An emblematic story is how Moses broke the stone tablets on which the Ten Commandments were written when he saw that his people were worshipping the golden calf. Instead of following materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meanings, individuals were explicitly instructed to listen to what the religious authorities told is truly meaningful, as directly communicated by the ultimate transcendent authority: God. The Thora included an elaborated set of behavioural rules, which some anthropologists have explained for their health benefits (Vos, 2020).

The general spirit of these rules seems existentially and psychologically beneficial as they promoted individuals to focus on social and larger types of meaning, but empirical research also indicates that it less mentally beneficial to follow these rules in a traditional or functionalistic way (Vos, 2020). However, Terror Management Theory (Routledge & Vess, 2018) may explain the shift towards a traditional focus, as countless empirical studies show that in times of existential crisis and social transition, like the Jewish people were at that time when they were for many years living in the desert or the early Christian communities were prosecuted, individuals may feel so existentially threatened that they will become more conformist, conservative, form more rigid identities, and follow authoritarian figures.

Philosophy students and neoconservative authors sometimes seem to idealise the Ancient Greek society and seem to overestimate the influence at the time of Ancient Greek philosophers such as Aristotle and Plato. The majority of the population could not read, and were told by others what their socio-economic position and meaning in life was: women, slaves, and ethnic minorities. Only a very small minority of 'academics' (for example those studying at Plato's Academy) was able to get rid of this traditional approach and of this materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented focus. The early philosophers seemed to understand the limitations of the traditional approaches to life, and they seemed to be looking for a phenomenological approaches to life, such as Plato's cave allegory or some Stoic philosophers. However, we should not generalise these philosophers, as other philosophers were more functionalistic and seemed to embrace materialism and hedonism, such as Democritus and Epicurus. However, some neoconservative philosophers in the 20th and 21st century, such as Leo Strauss and Jordan Peterson, seem to idealise Ancient Greek philosophers and call us to return to their

ideals, even though they seem to interpret the Ancient Greek through a traditional or functionalistic lens, and seem to ignore that these texts were written by the privileged few who used the oppression of minorities to dedicate their time to philosophising (Vos, 2020).

Flash forward to the European Middle Ages, which was dominated by the church who seemed to prescribe a cosmic-divine-social order: the position that an individual happened to be born into determined their meaning in life, and they were not allowed to question their position and the rules of the church and the king. In most European languages, this traditional approach is reflected in the etymology of the word ‘meaning’ which comes from the German word ‘Meinung’ or ‘meniti’, which originally described ‘something being communicated through oneself’, such as being-communicated-to, being-given-an-opinion, being-signified, being-given directions. Until the Middle Ages, the word ‘Meinung’ was often used to describe the traditional approach of how God’s will was ‘communicated’ (‘ge-meint’) through their work, by being in service to the community. However, during the Reformation, the word ‘Meinung’ transformed from implying a traditional attitude to a functionalistic attitude; in most European, Slavic, and Arabic languages, the word ‘meaning’ started to refer to negative and mundane connotations, such as subjective random opinion, vulgarity, childish desires and so on. To compensate for the loss of the traditional meaning of the word ‘meaning’, in several European languages, the word ‘vocation’ emerged to refer to a traditional approach to meaning, by which God, a higher power or destiny communicates someone’s meaning. The new word ‘vocare’ literally means being-called; Luther used a visual metaphor to explain how individual meaning was about being called by God: God is milking the cows through the vocation of the milkmaid.

However, at the same time as the increased functionalistic usage of the word ‘meaning’, a phenomenological word emerged in European languages by the end of the Middle Ages. The phenomenological approach is reflected in the word ‘Sinn’ in Continental European, Slavic, and Russian languages (‘Sinn’, ‘Zin’, ‘Sense’, ‘Sensida’, ‘Smesl’) with very similar meanings across languages, except for the English word ‘sense’ which seems unrelated to ‘Sinn’ in the other languages. The medieval mystic Meister Eckhart and the church reformer Martin Luther started using the term ‘Sinn’ to describe meanings that are neither pre-determined by a cosmic-divine-societal order (i.e., the traditional approach behind the term ‘vocation’) nor purely subjectively and randomly chosen (i.e., the functionalistic approach behind the term ‘meaning’). The word ‘Sinn’ is derived from the Latin word ‘sentire’, which means perceiving and is associated with using all our senses, thoughts, feelings, and behaviours. It is this term ‘Sinn’ that the phenomenological or critical-intuitive attitude refers to, and which is a more dominant approach to meaning in non-western and non-neoliberal countries, whereas the functionalist approach to meaning is primarily dominant in Anglo-Saxon countries which only use the word ‘meaning’ (Vos, 2017).

By the end of the European Middle Ages, a middle class emerged which became more educated and literate. This also meant that individual citizens started to read the Bible themselves and questioned the legitimacy of traditional authorities such as clergy and kings. The traditional approach to meaning in life started to fade, individuals started to question their allocated position and identity, and the growing middle class developed

more opportunities to determine their own life. Possibly for the first time in history did large masses start to ask themselves 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 maximum four centuries old; before that time, it did not occur to most ordinary people to ask a question like this (Vos, 2017).

The Industrial Revolution accelerated the functionalistic approach to life, by which ordinary workers seemed to become a functionalistic cog in a large socio-economic machine. The ideal of machines occupied the minds of intellectuals, and human beings were envisaged as ‘human machines’, and consequently a highly functionalised approach to life was propagated, which seems to last until today in most western countries (Vos, 2020, 2022a).

Similarly, both neoliberal and Marxist ideologies seemed to 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 neoliberal utopia seems to be one in which individuals can 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, -regardless of their individual type of meaning and of the approach to life.

As described before, we seem to live in an era dominated by the neoliberal paradigm, that seems to export the materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented functionalism to traditional and phenomenological societies. Former communist countries such as China also seem to transform their traditional communist approach into a materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented functionalism. Former traditional countries seem to respond by embracing some of these neoliberal approaches, or by defending their own approaches by radicalising in their traditional approach. The extreme response to the existential threat of a traditional approach to life, is the religious radicalisation of individuals who decide to hurt or kill those who they consider to be the threat to their way of life (Vos, 2020). As described before, to some extent this radicalisation may be understood against the research background, that the neoliberal/western functionalist focus on materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning seems to be mentally unhealthy. Furthermore, as Terror Management Theory implies, when individuals perceive a threat to their very existence -physically, mentally, socially, or spiritually-, these individuals may respond by radicalising in their views, and becoming more traditional, conformist and conservative in their approach and supporting authoritarian governments and military interventions more.

3.6 Individual History of Meaning

This section answers the question: How does meaning develop and change over an individual's lifespan? As the previous sections have shown, individuals are exposed to many messages about meaning in life, during their upbringing, education and socio-economic life in countries that seem increasingly dominated by meaning-manipulating propaganda. More empirical research is needed on how individuals develop their sense of meaning in life, particularly children and young people (e.g. Russo-Netzer, 2022). In the last decade, more studies have emerged on the neurobiology of meaning in life, but it seems that there are still many open questions and speculations, and that there is no scientific consensus yet about a comprehensive evidence-based model of meaning in life.

A scoping review of the empirical literature was summarised 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, 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 behavioural 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 taxed 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.

3.7 Sense of Freedom

This section answers the question: How much freedom does the individual experience to determine their own meaning in life? How does the individual find meaning in times of adversity, and cope with existential boundary situations? Empirical research shows that individuals can experience a sense of freedom and transcendence, even in the most adverse life situations, where there is not much they can do and they are told by others what they must do, such as being imprisoned in a concentration camp (Vos, 2016a, 2016b; Frankl, 1948/2013). Individuals who are able to feel some sense of freedom to determine their own meaning in life are more resilient in stressful life situations. For example, countless studies have shown that individuals who experience a sense of meaning experience lower levels of psychological stress when coping with a stressful life event (Vos, 2016a, 2016b). The sense of meaning could function as a resource to cope with difficult life situations, such as a chronic or life-threatening disease. However, 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, demoralisation, 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 Frankl’s love for his wife gave him the strength to get through his ordeal as prisoner in a concentration camp (Vos, 2015).

3.8 Existential Impact

This section answers the question: what is the existential impact of meaning in life, and how does meaning in life relate to existential givens, such as our finitude, isolation, and suffering? As described in the previous section, all of us inevitably face boundary situations in life, when we suffer and struggle: there are things we cannot do and things we must do, even though we may have different wishes. Countless studies show how individuals can respond in many ways to these existential limitations. In general, individuals seem to have the option to get into an existential crisis, deny or avoid the existential limits, or accept the existential limits.

For example, when individuals are struggling with existential topics -such as their finitude, suffering, or the loss of loved ones-, they may experience a latent or manifest crisis in their meaning, identity, existence, and spirituality. Often, a latent crisis starts with small feelings of discomfort or low satisfaction in life, without understanding their precise cause. This could escalate into a larger crisis, where individuals question everything in life and feel overwhelmed by life’s challenges (Vos, 2017).

Many studies on Terror Management Theory have shown how in response to existential terror such as confrontation with loss and finitude, many individuals seem to experience an existential anxiety. An existential mood is not about a specific object -like a dog phobia is about dogs- but this is about life in general: life in general seems frightening. Whereas dogs can be avoided, life cannot. Therefore, individuals can only try to deny their finitude and limitations, for example by minimising the perceived severity of a physical disease such as COVID-19. Alternatively, individuals can rigidly clasp onto stable beacons in times of crisis; for example, in response to collective crises such as 9/11 or the COVID-19 pandemic many individuals became more nationalistic, supported more authoritarian governments, and focused more on conservative values in life. Thus, in response to existential crisis, individuals can develop a more conformist, traditional view on life. However, individuals may also learn to tolerate their existential moods, and not defend themselves against the existential terror, but instead accept their life situation (Vos, 2021a).

Many existential psychotherapists seem to stimulate experiential acceptance in their clients, which means that they accept the reality of life’s limitations and the discomfort that this provokes. However, meta-analyses show that it is ineffective if therapists merely focus on having clients face life’s limitations (Vos, 2015, 2019; Vos, et al., 2015). The most effective existential therapists are those who stimulate a dual attitude in clients: living a meaningful and satisfying life while facing and accepting life’s limitations (Vos & Vitali, 2018).

3.9 Psychological and Daily-Life Impact

This section answers the question: How does the experience of meaning in life influence mental and physical health? This answer can be very short: countless empirical studies show that individuals who experience life as meaningful experience better mental and physical health (see reviews in Vos, 2016a, 2016b, Ryff et al., 2016). For example, a sense of meaning is associated with lower levels of depression and anxiety, and with a larger quality-of-life. Perceived meaning is also associated with biomarkers, such as better immunological functioning, healthy blood pressure and lower risks for cardiovascular disease, -although more research is needed (Vos, 2021c, 2016b). As described in previous sections, individuals seem to particularly benefit psychologically from a phenomenological approach and a focus on social and larger types of meaning in life, while realistically accepting life's limitations. For example, although the COVID-19 pandemic has made it difficult to experience meaning in activities that we may have found meaningful in the past, the pandemic may also have helped us reflect on what is truly meaningful in our life; individuals with a stronger pre-pandemic sense of meaning experienced a better mental health during the pandemic (Vos, 2021a). Meaning can also be an important source to cope with crises, lack of privileges, structural injustice, moral injury, and Complex Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Vos, 2020).

4 Discussion

This chapter has shown how the experience of meaning in life is a complex topic, which can be discussed from many different perspectives. Popular approaches often seem to have a functionalistic approach and a narrow focus on a small range of meanings in life. To understand the phenomenon of meaning in life, we need to move away from populist questions and answers, and ask a wide range of questions with an open mind for any answers.

What can practitioners do with this knowledge about meaning in life? Individuals seem to benefit from systematically exploring their personal meaning in life, on their own or with the help from a psychotherapist. A meta-analysis of 60 clinical trials has shown that meaning-centered therapists can help clients to live a more meaningful and satisfying life, accept life's givens, tolerate existential limitations, and as a consequence experience large improvements in their mental and physical health (Vos & Vitali, 2018; Vos et al., 2015). This has also shown that meaning-centered therapists often use five groups of competencies in their work with clients, each of which are supported by empirical evidence for their effectiveness: meaning-centered, assessment, relational, existential, and phenomenological/experiential competencies (see Vos, 2017).

However, most treatment manuals are not systematically based on empirical evidence about meaning in life, and little is known about the precise underlying mechanisms of change. For example, although Viktor Frankl's work seems very inspiring, many of his assumptions are still waiting for empirical validation, and therefore logotherapy may benefit from embedding Frankl's work in empirical research on meaning and psychology. Therefore, Systematic Meaning-Centered Psychotherapy (SMCP) was developed on the basis of the systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses described in this chapter

(Vos, 2015). SMCP helps clients live a meaningful and satisfying life despite life's challenges, via the five groups of therapeutic competencies. The core SMCP sessions systematically explore six evidence-based types and 29 sub-types of meaning via didactics, self-reflection, experiential-exploration, and homework (the treatment manual can be found in: Vos, 2017). Amongst other studies, a clinical trial in 70 cancer patients showed that large short-term and long-term pre-post therapy effects on psychological well-being and quality-of-life. Clients largely achieved therapy goals, were satisfied about therapy, and described large important life changes dominantly attributed to therapy. Patients described improvements in overall meaningfulness and life satisfaction. As expected, materialistic, hedonistic, and self-oriented types of meaning had become less important, whereas social, and larger meanings had become more important and more often achieved. Patients approached meaning less functionalistically and more phenomenologically. The improvements in psychological well-being and quality-of-life were predicted by the clients' meaning-centered changes and the therapists' use of meaning-centered, relational, and phenomenological/experiential competencies. Thus, SMCP had larger effects than other meaning-centered therapies. Therefore, it is recommended to systematically focus meaning-centered therapies on evidence-based mechanisms of change and therapeutic competencies, and not merely on trying to fit the popular paradigms in a field -e.g., traditional logotherapy by Frankl-, or mainly ground the treatment in a philosophical approach instead of an empirical approach -e.g., existential-analysis by Langle (Vos, 2022b).

What can others do with this research on meaning in life? Teachers may want to guide children and young people to listen critically to their intuition about their own meaning in life, and help them develop a sense of meaning in life. Several countries have for example already been successfully experimenting with Meaning in Life Education (Vos et al., 2019). Governments may want to limit the detrimental meaning manipulation by commercial adverts and propaganda, and limit their own usage of meaning manipulation to the bare minimum. Most of all, governments may want to empower individuals and give them opportunities to determine their own meaningful life.

Sociological and socio-economic research seems to indicate that many countries are transitioning from neoliberal and communist economic systems towards a meaning-oriented society, as was reflected in the final conclusions by world leaders in the World Economic Forum in 2016 (Vos, 2020). It seems 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 on the long-term, as this approach and these types of meaning are associated with worse mental, physical, and social health. Individual citizens and customers will 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, together they may become a global social revolution towards a meaning-oriented society (ibidem).

In line with Eric Olin Wright (2010), individual citizens and consumers seem to have four options to respond to the popular approaches and types of meaning in their society. Individuals can try to find meaning within their socio-economic system (e.g. mostly follow the meanings that others have imposed onto them, but for some small parts follow their own meanings), creating alternatives to the system (e.g. work in coops, or

live in self-sufficient off-grid communities and communes), fighting the system to create a more meaningful system for all, and dreaming about meaning-centered utopias (Vos, 2020). In this transition process towards a utopian meaning-oriented society, nations may want to formulate the ability to live a meaningful life as a human right. As the motto of the IMEC International Meaning Events & Community states: ‘Because everybody deserves to live a meaningful life’ (meaning.org.uk).

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