

Meaning of Life as Self-transcendence: A Critique of Egocentric Authenticity and its Practical Implication in Existential Therapy

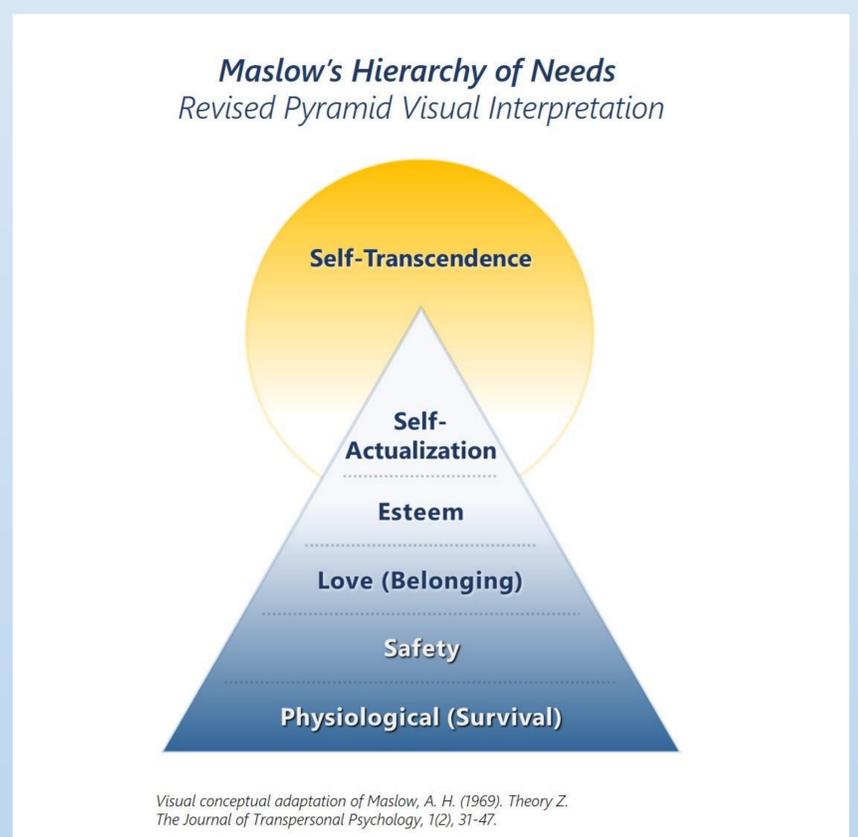
Abstract

Charles Taylor argues that we are living in “an age of authenticity,” in which everyone pursues self-fulfillment by staying true to themselves. This rhetoric of “authenticity” reminds us of what existential philosophers refer to as the “authentic” mode of existence, consisting in always being conscious the problem of Being and striving to realize the meaning of one’s existence. However, in the age of authenticity, being “authentic” no longer entails a consideration of the problem of Being or life’s meaningfulness. Despite their efforts to live authentically, people increasingly suffer from a lack of meaning in life, which has become, in Jung’s terms, a “general neurosis of our age.” This dissertation adopts an existential-therapeutic perspective in approaching the prevalent ailment of meaninglessness, aiming to shed light on its roots in order to develop a cure and investigate how this cure may be applied in psychotherapeutic practice to help patients trapped in existential vacuums increase their happiness and well-being. The focus of my criticism is the popular ideology of authenticity that fixes individuals’ views (almost exclusively) on their own selves in disregard of what transcends the self and its interests. I argue that it is precisely this egocentric mode of authenticity that detracts people’s ability to find meaning in life, because the true meaning of life, for it to be sufficiently heart-fulfilling, must be self-transcendent in nature, which links the individual to a higher end that lies beyond his own limited self. Self-transcendence is the cure that I seek to the ailment of meaninglessness in life. Having established a self-transcendent conception of meaning, I proceed to the practical question of how we may apply this insight to the practice of existential psychotherapy, specifically in treating patients trapped in an existential vacuum devoid of meaning. I illustrate how this key insight must be transmitted indirectly through the genuine I-Thou relationship between the therapist and patient in the therapeutic encountering. In the last part, closely related to my main theme of self-transcendence, I consider some social criticisms of psychotherapy for indulging the individual in his self-fulfillment in disregard of his responsibility toward others and society. I respond to such arguments by contrasting existential therapy with psychoanalysis to show that they may only apply to the latter but not the former. Overall, my findings in this essay indicate that there is an intimate relationship between meaning and self-transcendence, and self-transcendence as an antidote to the problem of meaninglessness should be among the top priorities of a psychotherapy that aims to nurture growth in its patients and to help deliver them into a truly “authentic” mode of being.

Introduction

There are two common maladies shared by people in this age. One is the lack of meaning in life, the other is the excessive pursuit of self-fulfillment as being true to oneself, which I will follow Charles Taylor to refer to as the ideal of *authenticity*. These two maladies constitute a major cause of mental distress for modern man and occupy an increasing weight in the reasons for which people seek mental help. The first malady seems pretty evident and has been widely acknowledged by philosophers and psychologists, while the second is much less palpable. How could the ideal of authenticity become a hindrance to our well-being? Isn’t it the other way around that living authentically plays a significant role in achieving happiness, as many philosophers and psychotherapists suggest? The answer lies in the dual character of authenticity. To live authentically so as to live according to one’s own wish and free judgement of what is good for oneself is important to our well-being, but it backfires in its tendency to narrow our vision on our individual selves in disregard of what transcends the self and its interests. The fixation of vision on the self and the resulting perception from which everything is reduced to its instrumental value which can benefit the self is *egocentrism*. The problem lies not in the ideal of authenticity itself but in its egocentric tendency, which conspires with the modern capitalist ideology of maximizing self-interest and consequently makes it convenient for modern man to have an egocentric interpretation of the ideal. This essay attempts to seek an antidote for the two maladies from both philosophical and psychotherapeutic perspectives. I argue that it is precisely such an egocentric mode of authenticity that makes our lives poor in meaning, because the real meaning of life, for it to be sufficiently heart-fulfilling, cannot do away with our connection with our fellow human beings and the development of social interest and love, as I believe self-transcendence is an ontological characteristic of the human being.

This essay is split into two sections. The first section aims at establishing the philosophical framework to argue for self-transcendent meaning. I will argue for the notion that a meaningful life can be best established through self-transcendence in response to the shortcoming of egocentric authenticity, against the background of the existential tradition of the distinction between ontological structure and ontic historical condition. I will first introduce authenticity as an ontological concept employed by existential philosophers and distinguish it from what common people refer to by authenticity. Then I will show how this discrepancy manifests itself in the egocentric re-orientation of the notion of authenticity as a result of some existentialists’ unsuccessful attempt to ground the meaning of life exclusively on an ideal of self-creating freedom. This will be followed by my arguing for a self-transcendent conception of meaning as a supplement to the ideal of freedom. In the last part of the first section, based on the logic of self-transcendence, I will discuss love as an attitude towards the world. The second section will show how this conception of meaning can be applied to existential therapy to assist patients who suffer from meaninglessness. I will start by proposing self-transcendence as an answer to the extensive problem of existential vacuum. This will be followed by my explaining the way how this answer can be transmitted in existential therapy. In the last part of the essay, I will argue against the prevailing criticism of psychotherapy as fostering people’s self-indulgence. To conclude these two sections, I will briefly reflect on possible competitor understandings of how to achieve a meaningful life and possible objections to my privileging of self-transcendent meaning, as pointing out the directions for the development of my thesis into a larger research program.



Conclusion

I’m aware of the deficiency in my argument that some self-transcendent meanings are illusory and even detrimental. For instance, we can find that what causes the religious extremists to conduct brutal violence is always a kind of self-transcendent purpose. But the problem of meaninglessness is just one problem among many, and the value of self-transcendence is far from exhausting all what we care about. For the religious extremists, they may be self-transcendent without being wholesome. The aim of this essay is to show the intimate connection between self-transcendent and meaning. I also suggest this insight can be applied to the clinical practice of psychotherapy to deal with the problem of existential vacuum. Though I’ve set the background of this discussion under the scope of existential therapy, this definitely does not mean other types of therapy cannot benefit from it. After all, meaning is a universal human problem embedded in the very structure of our existence, and self-transcendence as an answer to it can also be regarded as an ontological characteristic of human beings.

This paper belongs to a larger research program. Having reached my conclusion of self-transcendent meaning, as I stated in the beginning, the next step in the development of this research would be to consider alternative possible claims regarding the meaning of life, and possible ways that objections could be raised to my claim. But that is for another paper.