

## **Outline of a Theory of Meaning through the perspective of health care students.**

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It is doubtful whether there is a question that defines more the human being than that related to meaning. It is a question that accompanies us not only in all that we do and decide, but also in our thoughts, memories, feelings and fantasies, as we ask ourselves at every turn what it all means, what a distant memory signifies, or the strange way in which we perceive something, or a dream that we've had, or a complex thought. Just as we consider the human being a "rational animal", as a symboliser, as *homo ludens* (the playful), we can also, in an equally radical and primary manner, conceive of the human being as "one who searches for meaning".

There is perhaps no experience that triggers the question more of meaning, than death, precisely because faced with death we expect to understand the meaning of life, of existence in its totality and at the same time the contemplation of the starry sky. If we look closely we can see that in both cases what is in play here is the question about supposedly absolute limits – absolute to such an extent that from both sides we open ourselves up to the possibility of non-being. On the one side pertaining to death is a sort of "existential non-being", and on the other side is a "metaphysical-cosmological non-being". This shows us that the question of meaning confronts us directly with the possibility of non-being, of nothingness, in one case hurling us against the meaning of our existence and in the other, towards the state of plenitude. In other words: what does all "this" that we exist in mean, or is it all meaningless?

Meaning presents itself in three states, and it is necessary to differentiate between them:

- 1) The existential state, the one that most concerns us. Here meaning makes itself present through the following justification: what justification is there for what I'm doing, thinking or projecting?
- 2) The metaphysical state, which refers to the state of plenitude: whether there is meaning or not, not only concerning our own being but also concerning the immensity and plenitude of being. Here meaning acts as a guide.
- 3) The semantic-linguistic state which concerns words and language. What meaning is given here by signification: What does a particular word mean? What does what you just said, mean?

Of course these three states interact, as only a being capable of speech asks themselves about the meaning of their own existence or the meaning of the state of plenitude.

What is particularly surprising is that meaning above all reveals itself – and does so bit by bit – but of course only in potential terms.

Meaning is constructed from the meeting of the given and what is imbued; that is, meaning gives itself, bestows itself, is present in the apparently attractive person that I see in the street, or in the snow-covered Andes that invite you on a Sunday to go and explore them. However, what is given in meaning is merely a potential if it isn't completed by what we imbue it with, that is to say we imbue with meaning, impressions, association and interpretation that which is given. Meaning is therefore what comes out of this meeting, of this union of the given and what is imbued.

We can understand this better if we pay more attention to that which precisely begins to emerge from this meeting, that is, the generators of meaning, which are the following:

- 1) The bond: meaning arises out of the emotional-mental-volitional-intellectual bond (or any other kind) that I have with someone or something: with a person, a landscape, the dawn or dusk, with a painting, a film or a piece of music.
- 2) After the bond comes shelter: that with which I have a bond also shelters me in a certain way – I feel protected, cocooned, like when I listen to Gustav Mahler's *Third Symphony*.
- 3) This protection in turn generates a union; the meaning is in this way related to limits. Within the limits of that which shelters me – which could be a relationship, my career, or work – I am protected. Furthermore, it could come about that I feel stifled and suffocated within these ties, that I enter into a crisis with them, which provokes a loosening of the bond, which is inexorably followed by new ties.
- 4) The shelter, when it assumes a "happy bondage", generates reaffirmation, which permits meaning to strengthen and prolong itself over time.
- 5) The result of all of these generators which synergetically strengthen each other, is support: at the end of the day meaning is what supports us in our existence.

From the moment in which meaning is constructed from the union between the given and the imbued, the fact that it gives itself, bestows itself, refers back to dispensing sources, which are the following:

- 1) Sources of reference: these correspond to the important reference points that humanity has had since time immemorial namely love, work, knowledge, play, friendship, and death. It is clear that each of these feeds meaning in us, even if we have nothing more than love and work. Death plays a curious role here given that meaning is experienced in a particular way within the timeframe given by death, which luckily we generally aren't aware of.
- 2) Programmatic sources: these respond to the way in which we concretely project the world and how history constructs itself: art, technology, science, economy, laws, politics, religion, and philosophy. At every moment the world is the result of the transformative actions of these sources.
- 3) Occasional sources: just as meaning is born out of the given and the imbued it is also born with the bond and in end also with an occasional source; of course these three moments of the birth of meaning are presented together. The occasional source is based on the sort of "existential fate" in which we find

ourselves. For example, starting with a book that we're reading, having picked it up by chance, we decide to study philosophy; or after a chance meeting with her we become a couple.

4) The occasional sources can remain that – something purely sporadic – but it is probable that some occasional sources become a longer-lasting source as we can see in the two examples recently given: philosophy or the relationship. There is no doubt that what we most desire are the longer-lasting sources of meaning, and for the same reason we can become distressed, overwhelmed and saturated by them, needing new occasional sources which are the only ones that can renovate meaning. When a longer-lasting source enters into crisis we tend to break the bond of meaning and are led to break away.

5) Meaning has the impressive capacity to, in a certain way, make itself material. The iconic sources show as much. Not only are there traditional iconic sources with a powerfully charged history, such as the cross, the sword, the berretta, or the flag, but also the clock, the portable phone, the hat that you use, your bedroom, a particular landscape where you go on holiday – all these can transform themselves into iconic sources.

But at the same time what happens with meaning is that just as we experience what is, what establishes itself, grows and expands until it becomes determining, can also shrink, grow pale, become diluted and fade away and disappear, that is to say, we then experience its absence.

Furthermore, the question of meaning can only really be adequately asked as far as we recognise, admit and assume the possibility of there being no meaning.

We understand from the phrase “the background of meaning” the double possibility that is constantly and in all moments in play: for example watching a game of football in a stadium or on the television, deciding to go on a journey to a place that seems attractive, these are situations and experiences that presuppose both the possibility that meaning will establish itself, and that it will not. And that is as it is even though there are actions and decisions involved which could be of the utmost importance and intensity, such as that I have to get up in the morning to go to work, or that I'm kissing the person I love.

At every moment we have within ourselves the possibility of meaning being established or not.

The statements given by students of the various areas of health care, as well as those provided by professors and employees, have been particularly illuminating concerning the problematic of meaning. The questions around “pushing the limits to the extreme” or “meaningless experiences” or “the seductive element of something in the academic career itself” were not only well received, they also sparked, motivated and provoked many things.

There are thoughts here that are profound and have a universal import, that are present in all historical eras and are deeply anchored in the human spirit.

It is worth highlighting for example that concerning the issue of “something that attracts you, links you to the studies and motivates you” the student of dentistry speaks of “the satisfaction of doing good to someone”; “the fact of working in a place that is at the same time so small and yet so large (the mouth)”.

Or statements from other students of health care:

“I like knowing that every day is different and new, in which there is no black and white, but only many different nuances”.

And in answer to the invitation to talk about something “meaningless” we are confronted with the same perspicacity:

“Everything makes sense in this life or the next, everything has an explanation”; “Behind daily life profound questions of existence are hidden”; “To wake up without a mind”; “To feel that life has no meaning”; “The lion’s jaws are a warm and damp place”; “Thinking about nothing”; “I breathe... I live... I feel”; “Beach, the sea and tranquillity”.

Or let us consider this superficial declaration of meaninglessness: “Human nature”.

This is extraordinary: to realise that a student of health care has, probably with little or no philosophical training, not only a profound experience of meaning, but also of meaninglessness.

The background that we find ourselves in presupposes the paradox that everything, without exception, both has a meaning and is meaningless. It either has it or it doesn’t. If it has a meaning it is because there is a bond or some source that gives meaning, but if it has no meaning, it has none. And this doesn’t only refer to looking three times at a watch (like the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*) but also in whether you perform a blood transfusion or not on a Jehovah’s Witness.

To continue with the experiences of meaninglessness: “Who killed the Dead Sea?”; “The key that the water comes out of”; “A directionless arrow”; “The garden of the earth and its infant inhabitants”; “I live to get old”; “The more I go forward and the more I learn, the more I fall behind and know less”; “To fly surrounded by grass, forgetting yesterday, not thinking about tomorrow”; “Ignorance sometimes makes us wiser”; “Life is a flow of meaninglessness... and whoever says the opposite has no idea”; “The people in the hall, today’s bus driver, the green leaves, the face of a stranger in the metro, the tiny things that change my day and break the routine”; “Running aimlessly through the forest”; “The meaninglessness of time and speed. Always living in a rush, focused on the future and not on the present”; “The most important thing is the flow, everything comes together in infinity”; “I once saw a trauma expert dressed up as a clown running down the street in Ethiopia”.

Let us highlight the extraordinary intuition of the health care student who relates meaninglessness with the phrase “you’re healthy”. Amazing, unbeatable!

Or the student who declared that meaninglessness is nothing more than saying “hello”.

I ask myself – and I recognise that I am rather stupefied –: How does a student of health care have such a profound understanding of both meaning and meaninglessness? Well, if I think about it, it’s because they experience death.

In the theory of meaning outlined here death, among all the human experiences, indisputably has the power to trigger not only the question about meaning but also the possibility that there is no meaning; meaningless experience. Perhaps that explains why Dürer would position the thinker next to the skull in a lonely room.

The students of health care have had to confront death in their practical work, and not only death, but also physical or psychological sickness, organ failure, and invalidity in all its forms. More than this, they are also confronted with decomposition and putrefaction, and of course there are pathologies that they witness in people, in patients with whom they develop relationships. In all this then one learns to value the fluctuation, the coming-and-going of the background that meaning seemed to have and now seems to lose, or perhaps seems to lose in some ways and in other ways seems to gain in strength.

By way of comparison I bring up the following statement that reflects not only the death of a patient but also a moving ethical dilemma, that leads us to confirm once again the extent to which death has the power of equalising not only the king with the beggar, but also the rich with the poor, or even the honest man with the thief; even though the last example may seem to be an *existential injustice* especially when the honest person dies prematurely while the other continues causing harm. But in the end the equalising factor of death affects all, without exception:

“Being on a shift when a 16-year old patient was brought in severely haemodynamically challenged, on a non-invasive mechanical ventilator, with an aggressive leukemia that was killing him, a slow death that made him suffer great pain; a kid full of life, a young church-goer who loved his family. In the bed next to him was a 14-year old boy with bullet wounds all over his body, a drug trafficker who even at that age had been condemned for theft and violent attacks that had left people dead... I can say that life is unfair, the pain and the suffering of the innocent boy who was only trying to do good and on the other hand the patient next to him in the condition he was in, living and recuperating so that he could carry on doing harm”.