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# WELL-BEING AND THE MEANING OF HUMAN LIFE

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to present the meaning of life as finitistic and evaluative. Bearing in mind the specificity of the human subject, we have defined the meaning of life as the condition of the subject that results from implementing one's own, chosen (superior) aspiration, that is, intended well-being. Hope, a prospective emotion, is an important element in implementing this aspiration. When combined with other elements, the disappearance of hope leads to demoralization as understood in psychotherapy by Jerome D. Frank. The article also emphasizes the significance of spiritual strivings perceived as the sphere of the ultimate concern, whose aim is Transcendence. We discuss research results according to which, having transcendent goals (superior aspirations) - even though they take time and energy - is directly connected with one's sense of life.

*Keywords:* hope, ultimate, concern, transcendent, goals

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## 1. Introduction

The question regarding the meaning of life may arise in various situations and contexts. It is not a question we pose daily as it contains an air of solemnity. This, however, does not change its meaning. At some point in our lives, we wonder why we live and what the sense of our lives is. Sometimes, due to huge difficulties, suffering, and pain in everyday life, one surrenders and does not see the meaning of her/his existence. According to Karl Jaspers, we ask about the meaning of our lives in boundary situations or when we expect vital changes to occur, that is, when the meaning of our lives is being questioned or doubted [1]. It is trivial to remark that conceptually the term 'sense of life' is vague, which is characteristic of colloquial expressions. And yet it conveys consciously or unconsciously assumed meaning. "When one person says to another: 'My life has no sense' or 'He has found the meaning of his life', they understand each other, whether it is a Mathematics student talking to a philosopher or a housewife speaking to her neighbour" [2]. This meaning does not refer solely to one, specific sphere of life, but should be sought in one's life as a whole, in each

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of its spheres. The awareness that one's life has meaning, despite the fact that it does not look as it should at a given moment, helps one to endure.

Let us outline some terminological clarifications. The term 'sense' poses serious difficulties when we try to define it. It comes from the Latin *sensus* which means "a sense, sensory cognition or feeling", but also "way of thinking", "viewpoint" or "taste" [3, 4]. According to J. Tischner, it belongs to the category of terms that are primordially indefinable and means something, thanks to which a given thing is comprehensible [5]. W. Stróżewski emphasizes various levels of considering 'sense': there is a semantic sense (meaning), phenomenological sense (the content, the way in which a thing is given), ontological sense (a synonym of order and rationality), ontic sense (the sense of what is in e.g. theistic approaches), metaphysical sense (possible sense of existence) and axiological sense (sense as that which is valuable) [3, p. 425-435]. S. Kowalczyk broadens the category of 'the sense of life' and includes cosmological, anthropological, historical, doctrinal, ontological, axiological, individual and social, natural as well as supernatural elements [6]. Psychologists are also aware of the ambiguity of 'the sense of life' and yet they increasingly recognize its significance and make it the subject of their research [7].

Before we point to the approach to the 'sense of life' that we adopt, we shall limit the scope of its application by interchangeably using the words 'sense' and 'meaning'. Meanings (senses) can be divided into non-semiotic and semiotic. Semiotic meaning that refers to sentences, signs, and signals can be limited to speech expressions and then to semantic meaning (leaving aside pragmatic and syntactic meanings). We are interested in the non-semiotic meaning as finitistic (e.g. 'this is the meaning/goal of my life') and evaluative (e.g. 'to him life has lost its meaning') [8]. The finitistic approach is related to the category of goal, while evaluative approach introduces emotional evaluation of the expected state as something positive, which allows one to gradually achieve the intended goal.

By 'human life' we understand the duration of a human being that is a real being which sustains its stability (its *status quo*) via energy and information metabolism with the environment. One of the distinctive features of a human being is its capability to pose questions regarding the meaning of one's existence and the existence of the world [9].

## 2. The structure of motivation

Before we present a more detailed analysis of 'the sense of life', it is worth paying attention to its context: first of all, these are motivational processes as they determine the activity of subjects. "*Motivational structures*, among which we include internal driving forces, such as drives, needs, longings, motives, and aspirations, initiate, maintain and finalize our behaviour, and determine its dynamics. In this mechanism, *emotions* have a complex role to play: their function is motivational and cognitive; they initiate our actions and in certain circumstances serve as substitute information. Thanks to an agent's *mind*,

whose elements are language and knowledge, he/she knows *how* to achieve his/her aims and *how* to perform certain actions.” [10]

In many species, the motivational system is a complex structure with a mesolimbic and mesocortical dopaminergic pathway. There are two characteristic features of this system: quick habituation to given stimuli as well as, but not only, homeostatic but also heterostatic character. J. Koziellecki distinguishes between a homeostatic (related to satiation) motivation and a heterostatic (related to aspirations) one [11]. Homeostatic motivation appears when mechanisms of the human body detect a deficit in certain values, which disturbs the balance and gives rise to tension that leads to certain kinds of behaviour. This kind of motivation is defined by the difference (D) between the standards of the regulation (S) and the actual state (A). For example, the decrease in liquid levels in our body below a typical level activates our search for water. Under favourable conditions, difference D (S, A) is reduced causing satiation (which is a kind of reward). Many homeostatic processes are mainly internal and automatic, for example, maintaining constant body temperature or the proper balance of oxygen and carbon dioxide in the bloodstream. However, heterostatic motivation is the difference between the actual state of affairs and aspirations that in the case of human beings have no boundaries. Hence our insatiability, the anthropic constant of the human being. In order to define the field of motivational processes at least to some extent, we shall divide needs into vital (biological), social and personal [12]. Vital needs include the need for food, oxygen, sleep, the need to maintain constant body temperature, needs related to our sexuality, health, physical and social safety, etc. They are determined by the condition of our body as well as cultural factors. Among social needs, there is the need for friendship or the need for power. Personal needs are related to our striving to confirm our self-worth, to know and to know ourselves as well as the longing for transcendence. Among personal needs, there is a need for a meaningful life.

Viktor Frankl perceives the sense of life as the crucial motive of human existence [13]. Some may claim it is a bit exaggerated. And yet if the need for a meaningful life is understood as the background of all other needs, then its significance reveals itself in boundary situations (such as illness, death of loved ones, disability, deportation, imprisonment in concentration camps), which the Austrian psychiatrist experienced himself. Bearing in mind the specificity of the human motivational system, we will define the sense of life as the implementation of a superior aspiration. In this article, the intended well-being of an individual will be an equivalent of this aspiration.

According to V. Frankl, there are various ways of achieving a meaningful life: by experiencing something that is sublime (art, music, literature), by creating something sublime and original (both great and small works that change somebody's life are significant), by one's own approach towards life (it is always worth trying to change oneself).

### **3. Basic premises of human well-being and sense of life**

The idea of well-being is contained in the broader model of the world that everyone has and which, let us emphasize, is largely an acquired model. We possess the ability to learn a great deal, which is related to the plasticity of the brain, the adaptation that allows the formation of specialized circuits (modules) in response to changing requirements of our environment, the social one in particular. It is especially the frontal cortex that is responsible for the fundamental abilities of the human mind and that is fully operational when we are 20-30 years old. This acquired model of the world contains certain expected states to which we strive, that is, our well-being. This idea of well-being has a cognitive element (the content of well-being) along with a whole range of emotional states that can be generalized as the longing to 'be well'. This 'being well' is determined by biological, and cultural factors and the specifics of a given subject. However, in itself, it is probably universal [14]. Of course, we do not mean that people use the criterion of 'being well' in all situations, for it would surely have a detrimental effect. As a background emotion of contentment or satisfaction with achieved goals, it seems to fit into a broader system of 'the sense of life'.

Let us now proceed to define more precise characteristics of the category of 'a sense of life'. We shall, above all, refer to K. Obuchowski, who emphasized its subjective dimension. Then we shall discuss a different approach, though by no means inconsistent with Obuchowski's, in which Transcendence is the locus of the sense of life. According to K. Obuchowski, among various needs, man has the need to realize his/her potential and abilities [2]. In order to fulfil them, we must have a specific worldview understood as 'a model of the world and of ourselves' that allows us to determine who we may become.

This worldview background is crucial as it outlines the trajectories of one's possible actions. However, it does not suffice to produce a sense of life. "We experience the meaning of life that is its immanent content when it arouses our curiosity, when it moves us deeply, when it is a mystery that we want to embrace, comprehend and explore [...]. Of those in whom these aspirations and experiences are vivid we say that they possess 'a flair for life'." [15] What determines the sense of life may simply be given, that is, uncritically taken over from our social milieu or determined by biological inclinations. K. Obuchowski claims that this uncritically adopted model of the sense of life is highly regarded in our culture that objectifies men, thus making them more predictable and available to the demands posed on them [2, p. 244].

In this way, the sense of life is not reduced to the otherwise significant fulfilment of social roles or being subject to biological tendencies. According to K. Obuchowski, this sense is the need of adults whose personalities cannot grow if they do not create their own concepts of life in which they can positively fulfil themselves. In 'the sense of life' there is intentionality, generality (that is, realization in a broader perspective) so that its modifications are possible, the ability to predict the results of realization and, of course, taking specific actions.

K. Obuchowski emphasizes that 'the sense of life' should be the basis for active and decisive actions that are altruistic, stable in terms of direction, and changeable when it comes to their shape [2, p. 254].

A subject must have the possibility to change the 'content' of the sense of life, which is crucial when circumstances or the very subject alters. "I think that fulfilling one's sense of life regardless of the conditions, actively going beyond their framework, constituted the basic factor in overcoming the two enemies of man's identity - despair and mental loneliness." [2, p. 267] The Polish psychologist analysed cases of people who were perfectly adapted, effective, professionally competent, and successful in their private lives. However, these people complained that 'everything was wrong'. They were irritable, frail, reluctant to work, prone to fall into professional conflicts, with weak memory. "They repined that what they liked best was to lie on a couch and look at the ceiling." [2, p. 232] However, what they shared was the conviction that their present position was in conflict with their early adolescent expectations regarding their goals in life. "[...] these people were adapted to the world but not adapted to themselves, which revealed itself only after their maturation was completed, that is, in the period of life which, one would expect, should no longer pose such technical difficulties as does the phase of achieving maturity." [2, p. 235] Their successful therapy did not mean they reverted to their adolescence but, rather, returned to certain inclinations that they could develop and realize on the basis of their early preferences.

The role of the meaning of life reveals itself most vividly in extremely difficult conditions, that is, created in order to destroy one's personality and to reduce a subject to an object. Such were Nazi concentration camps or Soviet labour camps and deportations to areas difficult for human habitation. K. Obuchowski claims that in such circumstances the sense of life not only gave people a reason to survive, but also increased their activity. Despite objectifying conditions, they put into practice their idea of existence. K. Obuchowski emphasizes that, surprisingly, in certain situations, irrational beliefs turn out to be very helpful. For example, in the camps, on the basis of hardly reliable premises, people believed their future to be positive. They thought that their present condition would last only 'until next Christmas' as 'it cannot be like that anymore, it must improve' [2]. Also, they were under the impression that Poland was the chosen nation.

According to K. Obuchowski, when the extreme conditions continue and one lacks the concept of oneself, one has no chance to defend oneself as there are only two protagonists of the drama left: the oppressed person-object and the cruel world. The lack of a sense of life weakens one's motivation to act. Why do anything if it does not make sense? However, if one has the concept of oneself-in-the-world, then the situation is quite different. Then there are three protagonists: the objectified human being, the subject as the person who transcends what is happening at present, and reality. Boundary situations as well as less radical events in our lives reveal the significance of hope (a prospective

emotion). For, according to K. Obuchowski, hope sustains the ability to think abstractly, make plans, and maintain control over events [2, p. 272].

#### **4. The syndrome of demoralization and the quality-of-life therapy**

The connection between hope and the sense of life is often discussed in literature regarding palliative care. Polish research conducted on a group of 50 patients, reveals that the longer the duration of illness, the bigger the tendency of a patient to lose the sense of one's life [16]. This disease entity was referred to as 'demoralization' by Jerome D. Frank. It describes the mental condition of a person who loses hope and the meaning of life, which entails helplessness, the conviction that there is no valuable future ahead, decreased efficiency in coping with issues of everyday life as well as social isolation [17].

Unlike those with depressive disorders, patients with demoralization syndrome, may behave normally with a full range of emotions (including positive ones). It has been estimated that this syndrome affects 13 to 18% of patients. Factors that contribute to its occurrence include: being single (unmarried, divorced, separated or widowed), being unemployed, or socially isolated. No connection between demoralization and age, sex, or level of education has been identified. Interestingly, the stage of the disease and the type of treatment seem to be unrelated. In the case of demoralization, which is essentially a loss of the sense of life, the attempts to alleviate suffering are different than, for example, in cases of depression. Empathetic listening, psychological support as well as meaning-centred psychotherapy are recommended [18]. It is worth mentioning the results of research conducted by C.E. Ross who claims that "religion reduces demoralization and provides hope and meaning" [19].

Researchers who analyse data regarding people who set significant, general goals for themselves, conclude that they achieve higher levels of satisfaction and have better physical health than people who lack such goals [20]. As previously stated, the idea of well-being, a superior aspiration, varies throughout history, as well as at the level of individual people. Its implementation entails certain emotional states, which altogether can be defined as the meaning of life [21].

Quality-of-life therapy emphasizes the revision of one's goals, standards, and priorities as a strategy for enhancing one's happiness and satisfaction [22, 23]. Similarly, setting one's goals that may increase one's sense of life is one of the elements of well-being therapy as well as counselling and goal-focused group psychotherapy [24]. Due to empirical data, we may come to the conclusion that having, for example, a goal in one's life contributes to well-functioning, whereas alienation and anomie are usually connected with distress and dysfunctions [25]. "The eternal hopes of the human for a happy and eternal life in the consumerist paradise are invariably thwarted by the reality of suffering, old age, incurable illnesses, and above all, even if subjectively distant yet inevitable, death." [26]

When it comes to achieving well-being (a superior aspiration), not all goals are equal. R. Emmons enumerates three types of purposeful pursuits that are connected with well-being: intimacy, generativity, and spirituality. Spiritual striving may be defined as a subject's orientation toward finding the sacred (what transcends the empirical world) and recognizing one's dependence upon a superior power [23]. When one is overwhelmed with hopelessness and lacks sense of life, one needs not only the support of loved ones, but also a relationship with the Absolute. This reorganizes one's goals as one faces the ultimate concern, to use the term coined by Paul Tillich ("Religion is das, was uns unbedingt angeht"). The ultimate concern is one's "passion toward the Infinite", while the dynamics of faith are the dynamics of one's ultimate concern [27]. This concern is the ultimate aspiration and is the only one that answers the question regarding the meaning of our lives [28].

"In devotional writings, spiritual growth and spiritual maturity are viewed as a process of goal attainment, with the ultimate goal being intimacy with the divine." [23] Taking our spiritual strivings seriously requires time and energy. However, they are connected with a higher level of satisfaction with one's life, including married life [29]. Significantly, many more women undertake such strivings. Conflict and fragmentation are sources of stress that can undermine making something meaningful, and thus well-being. Having a general plan for life has a stronger positive impact in groups that are restricted, repressed, or excluded, as well as among the elderly and chronically ill [30]. Goals and all variables connected with spiritual goals have been identified as the key determinants of both supporting one's health and avoiding health risks [31].

R. Emmons has conducted some research regarding the connection between well-being and neuromuscular diseases (NMDs) that affect four million people in the USA [20]. Most of the patients were diagnosed with post-polio syndromes, with symptoms such as fatigue, slowly progressive muscle weakness, muscle and joint pain, and muscular atrophy. Research conducted by R. Emmons was related to other neuromuscular diseases such as Charcot-Marie-Tooth disease and Limb Girdle Muscular Dystrophy Facioscapulohumeral Dystrophy.

The above research was significant as the spiritual life of people suffering from these diseases had not been analyzed before. On the other hand, there is extensive literature that shows that spiritual needs are particularly vital in people with chronic diseases. Moreover, religious beliefs can be the source of mental empowerment and overcoming physiological limitations thanks to recognizing one's participation in a holistic vision of the world. In order to analyze more precisely the effectiveness of religious beliefs in coping with disability, the researchers proposed the Personal Strivings Assessment Packet [20]. It helped evaluate subjective well-being, health, the ability to function as well as other factors related to the quality of life in over 200 subjects with neuromuscular disease. Participants were obtained through the University of California, Davis, Medical Center Neuromuscular Disease Clinic.

The set of goals set by patients and the extent to which they actually achieved them were evaluated. The best predictor of one's well-being (life satisfaction, positive emotions, and vitality) was one's goal-based social integration. In other words, when the significance and achievability of goals increased, people with NMD felt more satisfied. Researchers also proposed an evaluation of the level of spirituality based on goals. Participants evaluated their own intimacy with God - their assessment correlated with their higher/lower satisfaction with life. "The results of the research [...] suggest that rehabilitation providers will need to take seriously their patient's spiritual beliefs and goals, and to develop methods for assessing their clients' spiritual and religious functioning and its impact on their well-being. A personal strivings assessment can be easily integrated with existing tools designed to assess patient spirituality." [23]

## 5. Conclusions

The aim of this article was to seek the meaning of life of a human being. Accordingly, we proposed its understanding as non-semiotic, finitistic, and evaluative. By 'life of a human being', we understand the duration of a human being, a real being, who maintains his/her stability (*status quo*) via energy and information metabolism with the environment. One of the distinctive features of a human being is its capability to pose the so-called fundamental questions, including one regarding the meaning of one's existence and the existence of the world. Bearing in mind the specificity of the human subject, we have defined the meaning of life as the condition of the subject that results from implementing one's own, chosen superior aspiration (the idea of well-being). The sense of life may be treated as the main factor determining individual differences in terms of a mental well-being expressed by the frequency of happiness experienced. Hope is an important element in implementing this aspiration. Therefore, it is worth introducing 'hope therapy' as a specific approach. Hope therapy offers techniques for guiding persons to formulate goals more clearly, prepare various pathways for attaining these goals, recruit the energy to make a strong effort, and treat obstacles as simple challenges. This is especially important, because the disappearance of hope leads to demoralization as understood by Jerome D. Frank. The article also emphasizes the significance of spiritual strivings perceived as the sphere of the ultimate concern whose aim is Transcendence.

The high level of the sense of life most strongly correlates in a positive way with relationship with Transcendence, so we may talk in terms of psychotherapeutic effect of human spirituality/religiosity, as it responds to the to the human need for a sense of life and well-being, allows one to find the value of various border situations and existential experiences, especially tragic ones. We discuss current research results according to which having transcendent goals (superior aspirations) - even though they take time and energy - is directly connected with one's increasing meaning of life.

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