Identity and Meaning: 
Contrasts of Existentialist and Essentialist Perspectives

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Abstract

At first glance, the tasks of establishing a sense of personal identity and finding meaning in life would appear to be quite closely related. Both appear to be ways of addressing some of life’s paramount questions: “Who am I?” and “What should I be doing with my life?” Yet until quite recently, the development of psychological theory and empirical research on the two concepts proceeded largely independently. To understand the parallel but independent histories of identity and meaning, it is helpful to examine not only their respective definitions, but the manner in which they were introduced into the field and the differences in their underlying philosophical foundations. It is my hope that through a better understanding of the nature and histories of the two constructs, a more effective coordination and integration can be achieved.

Erikson and Frankl: Innovators in Understanding Identity and Meaning

The seminal thinkers on identity and meaning, Erik Erikson and Viktor Frankl, were contemporaries. For a period of time they were both living and working in Vienna, though their understandings of psychological functioning were quite different.

Erikson was born in 1902 in Frankfort, Germany of Danish heritage. He was raised in the Jewish religion by his mother and German-Jewish stepfather, a pediatrician. Erikson entered the psychoanalytic milieu of Anna and Sigmund Freud, first as a tutor in the Heizing School, a school run along psychoanalytic principles. He later entered training as a child psychoanalyst, though his previous formal education had ended at the gymnasium level (equivalent to secondary education). In 1933, with the rise of Austrofascism, Erikson and his wife left Vienna, traveling first to Denmark and then the United States where he taught and practiced. His interests turned to normative patterns of development across cultures, as well as to psychological problems in development. His writings on identity, first in Childhood and Society (Erikson, 1950), later in Identity and the Life Cycle (1959), and Identity: Youth and Crisis (1968), as well as subsequent works, reflected his psychoanalytic perspective.

In contrast, Viktor Frankl, born in 1905 in Vienna of Jewish parents, grew up to receive training as a physician. With his interest in psychology, he gravitated to work with patients with mental problems. One of his early medical assignments was responsibility for a ward of women with suicidal concerns. He had expressed an early interest in psychoanalysis, first in the work of Freud, later Adler, but his own theorizing took a different direction. His interests in philosophy, particularly existentialism, as well as with religious and spiritual expression led to developing a focus on the role of meaning in people’s lives. His exposure to the suffering of his patients and his own experiences in concentration camps during World War II, as well as the loss of his wife and other family members in those camps, strongly influenced his psychological theory. Frankl’s classic work on the importance of finding meaning originally appeared as Trotzdem Ja Zum Leben Sagen: Ein Psychologe erlebt das Konzentrationslager [Still Say Yes To Life: A Psychologist Experienced the Concentration Camps] in 1946 and was later republished under the title Man’s Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy (Frankl, 1963). It was followed by The Will to Meaning (published in English in 1969) and numerous other writings on the role of meaning in life and how to find it.

These brief biographical sketches make clear both significant similarities and differences in their background. Whereas the similarities likely contributed to their focus on allied psychological concepts, it is the differences in their backgrounds that set the course of their theorizing in different directions. The divergence in their theories has led theorists and researchers who followed their lead to work with either the concept of identity or with meaning in life, not both, and to do so from quite different philosophical perspectives. That long period of separate conceptual development now appears to be ending.

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Conceptual Definitions of Identity and Meaning

Identity

Erikson (1963, 1968) located the task of identity formation at the point of transition from adolescence to adulthood, when the developing person faces decisions about who to be, what to stand for, and what to stand against. During childhood, under circumstances conducive to healthy development, children are largely defined by identifications with parents and significant others within their immediate context. At adolescence, there is an expansion of the person’s social world with an accompanying greatly expanded recognition that there are more ways of doing and believing than had been encompassed within those earlier identifications. Simultaneously, there is a recognition of the adolescent’s emerging capacity to choose options different from those currently present and the need to prepare for a future that will eventually involve functioning outside of the immediate family, and often community, outside of the present context. Given the adolescent’s perception of time, this is a gradual process, with independence and individuation seen as a relatively distant eventuality, but gains in urgency as the person moves from adolescence into what Arnett (2000) terms *emerging adulthood*. The conceptual definition of identity that I will be using here builds upon the work of Erikson (1968):

Identity refers to a person’s self-definition in terms of those goals, values, and beliefs, whether chosen, developed through identifications, or ascribed, to which there is an unwavering commitment and that therefore provides direction, purpose, and meaning in life (Waterman, 1984).

This definition is composed of three parts. (a) The reference to goals, values, and beliefs pertains to the “what” or types of content included within a person’s identity. Such goals, values, and beliefs are domain specific, for example, pertaining to career choice, or perspectives on religion, spirituality, or gender-role expression. (b) The reference to whether such goals, values, and beliefs are chosen, developed through identification, or ascribed refers to “how” a person’s identity becomes established, that is, the processes by which identity is formed, or alternatively, to the avoidance of making identity decisions. (c) The reference to the role identity plays in providing direction, purpose, and meaning in life pertains to “why” identity contents are important to the person, that is, the functions that identity serves.

It is significant that the content of a person’s identity is almost always discussed in terms of particular domains of identity concern. Erikson (1968) identified the choice of work/career and the development of an ideological worldview, that is, religion and politics, as domains most central to forming a personal sense of identity. In empirical research on identity formation, investigators have greatly expanded the range of domains seen as relevant to identity formation, including gender roles, sexual orientation, sexual expression, race and ethnicity, marriage, parenting, and leisure pursuits, among others.

It is the topic of the processes of identity formation that has received the most theoretical and research attention. Important contrasts are made between the maintenance of childhood identifications into adulthood, a process Erikson (1968) referred to as foreclosure, and a more active, reflective process of choosing among available alternatives, a process that Erikson saw as integral to the identity crisis. Still another approach is to refrain from making identity commitments, preferring to keep one’s options open, not projecting into the future, but rather allowing one’s behavior to be determined by pressures within the immediate context. This process has been referred to as remaining identity diffuse. With respect to these processes of identity formation, it should be recognized that, within Western industrial nations, there are domains of identity concern in which the person has relatively wide freedom of movement, such as with respect to career choice or the role of religion or spirituality in one’s life, and other domains of self-definition, in which freedom of movement is substantially more difficult, such as gender identity and racial/ethnic identity. However, even in domains of the latter type, there is still a range of options as to the attitudes to take toward such ascribed aspects of identity and to their expression. In contrast to industrial nations, traditional and tribal societies may severely curtail the range of options available across all domains of identity concern.

With respect to the functions that identity serves, three were specified in the definition provided above. However, a review of the writings of Erikson and other identity theorists reveals a much broader set of functions, including subjective continuity over time, coherence across domains, social comparisons, interpersonal self-presentation, commonality with others, and individual distinctiveness (Waterman & Archer, 1990). It is the functions pertaining to purpose and meaning-in-life that provide a bridge between identity and meaning in both the theory and research literatures.
Meaning

In comparison to identity, the concept of meaning has frequently been defined in more elliptical terms. Frankl (2000) identified meaning with self-transcendence:

...man is oriented toward the world out there, and within this world, he is interested in meanings to fulfill, and in other human beings. By virtue of what I would call the pre-reflective ontological self-understanding he knows that he is actualizing himself precisely to the extent to which he is forgetting himself, be it through serving a cause higher than himself, or loving a person other than himself. Truly, self-transcendence is the essence of human existence. (Frankl, 2000, p. 138)

Wong (2012) identifies the five most important and enduring questions about the meaning of human existence as: (a) Who am I? (b) Why am I here? (c) Where am I going? (d) What is the meaning of suffering and death? and (e) How can I find significance and happiness? In describing the struggle to find answers to those questions, meaning has been conceptualized in multiple ways with the emphasis placed on purpose (Klinger, 1977; Ryff, 1989), significance or a higher calling (Baumeister, 1991; Yalom, 1980), perceptions of order and coherence in one’s existence (Reker & Wong, 1988), and ultimate concerns (Emmons, 1999).

The particular definition for meaning I will be using here is taken from Steger, Shin, Shim, and Fitch-Martin (2013):

Meaning is the web of connections, understandings, and interpretations that help us comprehend our experience and formulate plans directing our energies to the achievement of our desired future. Meaning provides us with the sense that our lives matter, that they make sense, and that they are more than the sum of our seconds, days, and years.

With respect to the content of meaning, Frankl’s emphasis on self-transcendence, the questions posed by Wong, and the sense of mattering referred to by Steger, involve a range of broad philosophical concerns that are not domain specific. The resolution of such concerns, however, may find expression through one or more of the domains identified as relevant to identity formation such as “living according to the will of God” or “finding a way to make a difference in the lives of others.”

With respect to the functions served by the quest for a meaningful life, Baumeister (1991) identified four main needs that meaning satisfies: (a) the need for purpose, providing a sense of direction connecting the present to the future; (b) the need for values, providing a basis for justifying one’s actions; (c) the need for a sense of efficacy, involving the belief that one can make a difference; and (d) the need for a basis of self-worth.

Similarities and Differences between Identity and Meaning

Despite the differing conceptual origins of the concepts of identity and meaning, they are strongly inter-related. Most importantly, they provide answers to the same set of existential questions. In doing so, these constructs serve a substantial number of functions in common, including providing a sense of continuity between past, present, and anticipated future; establishing a basis for coherence across domains of life considered personally salient; and serving as a guide to decision-making about what to do and how to do it. Arguably, the most important of these is the sense of direction identity and meaning jointly provide, as this allows one to project into the future, to know both who one is and who one seeks to become.

Another area of parallels between the constructs concerns the processes by which identity and meaning are formed. For both constructs, personally salient commitments may be present or they may be absent. The presence of commitments with respect to each is seen as predictive of successful functioning and well-being; their absence is predictive of a range of problems in living. Further, the manner in which commitments are established can be viewed as parallel, that is, they emerge after a period of active exploration and search for answers, or they may become established through identification with parents or other authority figures in a person’s life.

One of the most important differences between constructs of identity and meaning concerns the level of conceptualization on which they operate. There is a level of concrete pragmatism involved in making identity decisions. When choosing a career, the questions that must be considered include what one would like to do, what one is capable of
doing well, and what opportunities are likely to be available for the pursuit of a given career. Similarly, with respect to choosing what to believe and practice with respect to religion, the elements weighed when making a decision are likely to include not only matters of theology and doctrine, but also the likely reactions of family and friends, the social climate of the community of worship, and even the convenience of the religious practices. Such pragmatic considerations can be identified within every domain of identity concern. In contrast, with respect to finding meaning in one’s life, considerations of self-transcendence, mattering, and even the broad philosophical nature of meaning concerns are not domain specific. Meaning is experienced as an overarching part of one’s life with influence that cuts across domains of identity concern, and influences the choices made in most, if not all, such domains. Finding meaning in life refers to what one sees as a higher calling and, therefore, pragmatic considerations are not viewed as determinative of what is meaningful.

Three Questions Concerning Making Identity Decisions and Finding Meaning-in-Life

Whereas most theoretical and empirical research attention on the subject of identity has been focused on the processes of identity formation, a focal concern in my work has been on the quality of the identity decisions being made, by whatever process. When the focus is placed on the quality of identity decisions, there are three questions that call for attention. First, are some identity choices we can make “better” than others that are equally available to us? I submit that the answer to that question is unequivocally “yes.” If you grant me that premise, then the second question becomes: What constitutes the nature of “better” choices, that is, what serves as the criteria for considering them to be better? And the third question is: How is someone who is trying to form a sense of personal identity to identify which, among the alternatives available, are the better ones to choose? My efforts to answer those questions have led to the development of what I now term eudaimonic identity theory and to a body of empirical research investigating the premises and hypotheses embodied in that theory (Waterman, 1984, 1990, 1992, 2007, 2011). Given the interrelations between the concepts of identity and meaning, I believe these three questions have comparable applicability to finding meaning in life and that the answers to the questions are mutually supportive for the two constructs.

Philosophical Perspectives Underlying the Concepts of Identity and Meaning

The first two questions posed above concern whether “better” identity and meaning alternatives exist and the criteria for determining what constitutes a better choice. These are matters in the realm of philosophy and I will now turn to an examination of the philosophical perspectives underlying concepts of identity and meaning.

To begin, I will describe two alternative metaphors for conceptualizing the tasks of identity formation and finding meaning in life, both rooted in philosophy. These metaphors portray establishing identity and meaning as acts of creation (or construction) or as acts of discovery.

The process of creation/construction involves bringing into existence something that has never before existed. It entails selecting from among virtually unlimited possibilities and constructing, from the elements chosen, something deemed to be a value. Creation is the way of artists, architects, and engineers. This metaphor is allied with an existential philosophical perspective.

To say that we have made a discovery means that we have come to recognize something about the nature of the world or ourselves. That which is found is something that already exists. Now it is recognized and understood. Discovery is the process of making the unknown, known. Discovery is the way of explorers and scientists. This metaphor is rooted in essentialist philosophy.

Identity and Meaning as Existential Concepts

With respect to identity and meaning, two quotes from Erich Fromm sum up both the creation metaphor and its existential underpinnings in the human situation:

Man is the only animal for whom his own existence is a problem which he has to solve and from which he cannot escape (Fromm, 1950, p. 23).

If [man] faces the truth without panic, he will recognize that there is no meaning in life except the meaning man gives his life by the unfolding of his powers by living productively (Fromm, 1947, p. 53)
A central theme running through existentialist thought is human freedom to choose who we are to become and therefore our personal responsibility for the choices we make. However, while we are responsible for the identity and meaning decisions that we make, the existentialists tell us that there are no absolute standards or criteria that we can use when making those decisions. There is no essential human nature that determines what destiny we are to fulfill. We are, and we must decide who and what we will become. We should not turn to external authorities, or to loved ones, to tell us what we should do. To do so is, to use Sartre’s term, to live in bad faith, or in Heidegger’s reference to inauthenticity, to become lost in the they; this idea is also central to Fromm’s concept of escape from freedom. If this perspective has merit, then identity decisions are ultimately arbitrary. This led some existentialists, such as Kierkegaard and Camus, to emphasize the absurd position life places us in. We must make crucial life decisions, to create our lives, without criteria for what we should do and without seeking outside guidance in the process.

For the existentialists, being arises from nothingness. We have an obligation to choose who we are to become in terms of our goals, our values, and our beliefs. The constraints on our choices are minimal. We cannot do that which is impossible for us to do. Beyond that, we have a virtually limitless array of possibilities. We become defined by the choices that we make.

Existential philosophy provides a basis for concluding that there are better identity and meaning choices to be made. The criteria for determining the nature of better choices involve freedom, responsibility, and authenticity. Better choices are ones we make for ourselves because of the being we wish to become. Better choices are ones that most successfully fulfill the functions served by a sense of identity and personal meaning. However, I do not believe the existential perspective is particularly helpful in identifying how a person is to recognize the nature of the better choices that might be made. When the criterion to be used is authenticity, how is one to tell which among an array of alternatives is more authentic than another? What is it that makes one alternative more authentic? The existentialist philosophers appear to be silent on this point. It is here that I believe an essentialist perspective can be most helpful.

**Identity and Meaning as Essentialist Concepts**

Essentialism is a perspective that has been used in the fields of philosophy, biology, and psychology. Essences are the properties or attributes of an object that make it what it is and without which it would be a different thing. Within essentialism, existence and form arise simultaneously; there can be no existence without some form. For a person, that form exists as what one’s being is at the present point in time and the potentials for what the person may become in the future. Within psychology, essentialism is associated with the concept of organismic development (Goldstein, 1939/1995) and is a central aspect of Erikson’s epigenetic eight-stage theory of psychosocial development. Development unfolds as it does because, at each stage, the person is optimally ready, on the basis of generic human nature, to benefit from certain types of experiences provided by the social environment. Such potentials, as the essence of a person, are key elements determining the course of development and predict what is most likely to occur across the life-span (Kanovsky, 2007).

While it is often assumed that essences are fixed, unalterable aspects of an object, such is not necessarily the case. Certainly, many of our potentials are rooted in our genetic make-up and physiology. As our physiology changes, whether breaking down due to age or accident, or improved through physical training or medical interventions, so too do our potentials change. Our potentials are also a function of the experiences that have been afforded to us, for without experiences we would not have knowledge of what might be possible. If we do not know of it, it is not an option available for us to choose to become. Within the epigenetic theory of development, the appropriate experiences at the appropriate time are as necessary for healthy development as is the physical potential to benefit from those experiences.

Within philosophy, an essentialist perspective is embodied within eudaimonism (Aristotle, 4th century B.C.E./1985; Norton, 1976). The term *eudaimonia* traces back to classic Hellenic philosophy, where it received its most notable treatment in Aristotle’s *Nichomachean Ethics*. It is traditionally translated as *happiness* but there are many philosophers and psychologists who believe a more accurate translation is *flourishing*. For Aristotle, eudaimonia was something very different from hedonic pleasure.

The many, the most vulgar, seemingly conceive the good and happiness as pleasure, and hence they also like the life of gratification. Here they appear completely slavish, since the life they decide on is a life fit for grazing animals. (Aristotle, 4th Century B.C.E./1985, p. 7)

Eudaimonia was considered to be the proper goal in life, an objective state of being, a way of living. Aristotle meant it to convey activity expressing virtue or excellence, acting upon the very best within us. He did not view eudaimonia as a
subjective experience or way of feeling.

However, a brief etymological analysis of the word eudaimonia, in English, suggests that both an objective and a subjective meaning are plausible. The word is composed of three parts:

(a) eu- meaning good or desirable, as in (e)utopia, an ideally desirable society.
(b) -daimon- Originally this meant a guiding spirit or tutelary god provided at birth to help set a person on the right path. The idea of the daimon was later internalized, as reflected in the view of Heraclitus that “man’s character is his daimon.” The daimon can thus be thought of as a “true self” representing the person’s best potentials, latent talents, resonating values, and ways of living that he or she is capable of expressing. It is the concept of the daimon that makes eudaimonism an essentialist philosophy.
(c) -ia. This syllable typically refers to ways of feeling, as in euphoria (feeling happy), melancholia (feeling sad), or anhedonia (the inability to feel happy). The implication here is that there are particular feelings associated with experiences of the good, true self.

This etymological analysis suggests that the term eudaimonia conveys two meanings: One objective, centering on the concept of the daimon, the other subjective, centering on the feelings present when acting in a manner consistent with the daimon.

As I use the term here, the daimon refers to those potentialities of each person, the realization of which represents the greatest fulfillment in living of which each is capable. These include both the potentials that are shared by all humans by virtue of our common specieshood, that is, our generic human nature, and those unique potentials that distinguish each individual from all others. The latter can be termed our individual, essential nature. As David Norton (1976) described the daimon, it is an ideal in the sense of being an excellence, a perfection toward which one strives, and, hence, it can give meaning and direction to life. Note how the functions of the daimon and the functions of identity coincide and that striving to live in accord with one’s true self provides the basis for a meaningful life.

According to the ethics of eudaimonism, each individual “is obliged to know and live in truth to his daimon, thereby progressively actualizing an excellence that is his innately and potentially” (Norton, 1976, p. ix). This spirit underlies two famous classical Hellenic injunctions: “Know thyself” and “Become what you are.” Norton phrased it as “freely living the life that is one’s own.” This is an affirmation of personal responsibility and a statement of personal integrity. It requires a commitment be made both to the principles by which one chooses to live and the goals toward which one’s life is to be directed. This commitment involves a conscious recognition and acknowledgement of personal truths already known intuitively. This is the objective meaning of eudaimonia as it refers to a way of living and is consistent with the translation of the term as flourishing.

However, the etymological analysis also suggests that the term eudaimonia has a legitimate subjective meaning as well. When we are aware that we are striving to live in accordance with the daimon, to realize our best potentials, there is a characteristic subjective, cognitive-affective state that accompanies that recognition. This constellation of subjective experiences includes feelings of rightness about one’s actions, centeredness in what one is doing, strength of purpose, competence, fulfillment, being who one really is, and doing what one was meant to do. I have referred to such experiences as feelings of personal expressiveness (Waterman, 1990). We feel good about ourselves when we experience such feelings, and it renders the translation of eudaimonia as happiness, as well as flourishing, fully appropriate.

A eudaimonic, essentialist perspective on identity and meaning thus provides not only a set of criteria for what constitutes better identity and meaning choices in one’s life, that is, choices in accord with one’s best potentials, but also identifies the basis for identifying which among an array of choices available, represent those better alternatives, that is, subjective eudaimonia (feelings of personal expressiveness).

The two meanings for the term eudaimonia discussed here, the objective and the subjective, are not in competition with each other. They are inherently interrelated. The latter, the subjective definition, follows from the former, the objective definition, and cannot exist without it. Since subjective eudaimonia results from acting in ways consistent with one’s personal potentials, it is necessary, objectively, to be striving to live in accord with one’s true self (essence) in order to experience eudaimonia. As positive as the subjective experiences of eudaimonia are, they are not the goal in life to be pursued; they are not meaningful in themselves. Their value is in the function that they serve. That function is what they say about who we are and what we have the capacity to become. It is the development and expression of our potentials, living authentically, that is the hallmark of a meaningful life, well-lived. Subjective experiences of eudaimonia serve as an indicator that we are having some success in that regard.

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Although Erikson was not inclined to examine the philosophical roots of his theory, there are reasons to believe that its foundations are primarily essentialist. His eight-stage epigenetic theory of psychosocial development can be considered to fall within the organismic perspective, since the stage sequencing is viewed as culturally universal and unfolds as a function of coordinated biological and social demands. This indicates the presence of innate potentials of a developing system, the essential form of a generic human nature. When making identity choices, he discusses the need to integrate elements of soma (biology), psyche (mind/personal ways of thinking), and ethos (community). Such combinations result in highly individual identity decision-making, making it plausible that the theory would accommodate a unique individual essential nature as well as a generic human nature.

**Identity and Meaning: Integrating Existential and Essential Philosophical Concepts**

Given that existentialism and essentialism are generally considered to be dialectical polar perspectives, the attempt to generate an integrative synthesis when contemplating the tasks of identity formation and meaning-making would appear to be a daunting task. Nevertheless I believe it possible to advance a theoretical perspective that preserves the existential values of freedom, responsibility, and authenticity; while simultaneously utilizing essentialist values associated with the presence of both a generic and an individually unique human nature, with eudaimonia as the means by which such a nature is identified and developed. What follows is the brief outline of what such an integrative theory may entail.

Sartre’s famous dictum that “existence precedes essence” is meant to convey the notion that there is no inevitability about who we are to become; rather, it is something that we have the freedom to choose, and therefore personal responsibility for the choices made. However, Sartre and other existentialists also recognize that there is a generic human nature. That is, we cannot become something outside the range of possible human functioning. What the essentialist, eudaimonic perspective adds to this is a unique individual nature as well. In other words, we cannot become something that is outside of individual nature. This has less to do with what we might attempt to do, and more with what we are inclined to do and have the capacity to do well, or at least better than other things we might do. Our individual nature includes our physical make-up, for example, making it more likely that some of us can become successful musicians while others cannot. Such difference will exist across the range of human endeavors for which temperament, aptitude, intuition, inclination, cognitive and emotional intelligence, among other factors are contributing factors.

Existential psychologists did not necessarily reject an essentialist perspective in its entirety. Viktor Frankl (1963) explicitly employed the metaphor of the discovery of meaning, rather than its construction. Erich Fromm (1947-1950) in the passage quoted above, spoke of meaning emerging from the unfolding of a person’s powers, whether those powers were exclusively aspects of a generic human nature or an individual nature is unclear. In considering the religious essence of being human, Paul Tillich, as quoted by Rollo May, believed that existentialism was not possible without essentialism:

> Man’s particular nature is his power to create himself. And if the further question is raised of how such a power is possible and how it must be structured, we need a fully developed essentialist doctrine in order to answer; we must know about his body and his mind, and, in short, about those questions which for millennia have been discussed in essentialist terms. (Rollo May, 1960, p. 13)

Rollo May (1960) also wrote: “. . . ‘being’ is to be defined as the individual’s unique pattern of potentialities. These potentialities will be partly shared with other individuals but will in every case form a unique pattern for this particular person” (p. 19). Thus, the adoption of both a generic human nature and a unique individual nature is explicit here.

Consistent with an existential perspective, both a generic human nature and individual human nature place limits on our range of freedom of choice, but do not eliminate it. With specific reference to our individual nature, while we may not be able to do very well those things outside the range of our better potentials, we can choose to strive to become the best we are capable of at given type of endeavor. And if we value an activity, we may well choose to become mediocre at it rather than doing it poorly. However, the concern of Aristotle and contemporary philosophical eudaimonists is not with individual human limitations, but with a person’s best potentials --those things a person could potentially do more successfully than other things that the person might choose to do. Human freedom comes into play in that we must actively choose to pursue our talents, even if we do not choose what those talents are. Further, it is error to believe that there is only some singular latent potential that represents the one route to personal meaning and fulfillment. As I discuss below, we have a multitude of possibilities in varying domains that are among the better alternatives we could make of our life. This means that there will always need to choose which potentials to pursue and which to leave dormant and undeveloped.
Having chosen which of our potentials to pursue, we also have the freedom to choose the goals toward which our talents are to be directed. And with that freedom comes responsibility. We have the capacity to make ethical or unethical choices, or choices that may be morally ambiguous. For example, a talent for plotting a clever crime may be developed in the service of a successful criminal career, a career as a consultant in crime prevention, or a career as a crime novelist and screenwriter.

**Research on the Interrelationships of Identity and Meaning**

There have been a substantial number of studies demonstrating an empirical linkage between various measures of identity functioning and indices of meaning-in-life. In samples of high school and college students, the findings are consistent in indicating significant associations between the presence of identity commitments and high scores on meaning and purpose-in-life (Beaumont, 2009; Beaumont & Scammell, 2012; Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010; Côté & Levine, 1983; Schwartz, Zamboanga, Wang, & Olthuis, 2009; Schwartz et al., 2011; Simmons, 1983; Waterman, 2007). The associations found are mostly in the modest to moderately strong range. As expected, measures of identity diffusion and identity distress are negatively related to the presence of purpose and meaning in life (Beaumont, 2009; Burrow, O’Dell, & Hill, 2010; Côté & Levine, 1983; Schwartz et al., 2011; Waterman, 2007).

The findings regarding the relationship of identity variables with the search for meaning are less clear. A significant positive association between identity exploration and the search for meaning was found by Burrow, O’Dell, and Hill (2010) but was not replicated by Hill and Burrow (2012). Beaumont (2009; Beaumont & Scammell, 2012) reported that the search for meaning was associated with identity diffusion and distress. There were, however, inconsistent findings with respect to a negative association with the presence of identity commitments.

Overall, while the expected relationships between identity and meaning in life constructs were mostly confirmed, yet the strength of these associations based on the measures employed in this research suggests that they are, indeed, assessing different constructs.

**A Eudaimonic Perspective on the Development of Identity and Meaning**

Having described what constitutes the desired outcome for identity and meaning from a eudaimonic perspective, the next question to consider concerns how such an outcome can be achieved. How does one go about the process of identity formation such that one can find meaning and live with authenticity? How can we come to discover our better identity choices and act upon them? I describe four steps to the process:

The first step is the identification of those potentials for what we can do in our lives, better than other alternatives equally available. We are not born with knowledge of what constitutes our better potentials. Those potentials must be discovered. Recall that I described a distinctive subjective state as associated with acting on the basis of our potentials, that is, feelings of personal expressiveness. When one engages in an activity for the very first time and thinks: “Where has this been all my life? Why didn’t I know about this sooner? This is fun!” that is one type of such experiences. Consider what is implied when such an experience occurs on the first exposure to an activity. It cannot be the specific activity in and of itself that is generating that reaction, since the same activity that is experienced so positively by one person, will be experienced with only mild interest or indifference by others, and some may actually experience it as aversive. So feelings of personal expressiveness are telling us something important about ourselves in relationship to a given activity. They are an indication as to where one’s potentials may lie and what activities are worth pursuing further. I make no claim that such first reactions to activities are always indicators of our better potentials, and subjective eudaimonia is far more complex than what occurs on first exposures to activities. Still, such reactions are a very good place to start the process of self-discovery. To maximize the likelihood of encountering experiences that may generate such feelings of connection, parents should expose their children to a very wide array of varying activities, with the full recognition that most will be greeted with only mild interest or indifference. But it only takes making one intense connection with an activity to perhaps ignite a life-long passion.

The identification of one’s potentials is only the start of the process; those potentials need to be developed. No matter the type of activity for which one has a natural talent, when one begins, one is a novice. One does not as yet know what one is doing, cannot do it particularly well, and may do not even know what needs to be done to develop that talent. What is known is the desire to develop that latent possibility into actual skills.
The second step involves investing hard work and dedicated effort to the development of those skills. Anders Ericsson (Ericsson & Charness, 1994) suggests it takes 10,000 hours of dedicated training and practice to become a master for any talent. A lot of that practice is not fun in the sense of hedonic pleasure. What helps sustain a person through those years of developing talents is eudaimonia, the perception that one is becoming the person one most wishes to be. Feelings of personal expressiveness, now far more complex than those first reactions mentioned above, help to reinforce and sustain behavior through the inevitable stalls and even setbacks that are part of talent development.

Not everyone who embarks on the development of a particular skill will continue with its development. A lot of people discontinue their pursuits long before they get anywhere near investing 10,000 hours in it. If one’s potential is relatively modest with respect to a particular skill, the more complex elements of personal expressiveness will not emerge. The activity stops being fun and the person moves on to try other things. Sometimes the actual potential may be quite strong, but the person’s connection to it does not match the intensity of the latent talent. When a teenager says to a parent: “I know I am good at math, I just don’t care about it,” it is a strong indicator that feelings of personal expressiveness are not present. There is more to potentialities than just latent talent; there are associated values as to what is, and is not, personally important and worth pursuing in life.

It is not a matter of whether something is easy or difficult for a person to do. Csikszentmihalyi (1990) points out we often feel best about what we do when there is a balance of challenges posed by an activity and the skills we bring to it. Too much challenge and we feel anxious. Too little and the result is boredom. With the two in balance, we are in the subjective state of flow. By learning to meet the challenges we encounter, our skills improve. Flow is still another element in what is termed eudaimonia, feelings of personal expressiveness. Note again that flow is selective. The balance of challenges and skills for some activities (those that are valued) yields experiences of flow; the corresponding balance for activities not valued, are merely tasks to get through and be done.

Once a talent has been developed to a certain degree of proficiency, the question we must consider is toward what end or goal is that talent to be directed. Dealing with this question constitutes the third step in the process and it typically occurs in overlap with the development of skills. From a eudaimonic perspective, just as a person resonates with some activities more than others based upon that person’s potentials, so too the person is likely to resonate with some goals and values more than others, based upon temperamental and other essential aspects of personality. However, it is also plausible that early learning experiences, with regard to goal setting, play an important role. Some people seem inclined to be more adventurous and greater risk-takers than others, whether for essential or experiential reasons. In addition, rational considerations regarding the likelihood of goal attainment may also play an important role, with respect to which identity-defining goals are selected.

The process of establishing a sense of personal identity and finding meaning in life is still not finished with the selection of those life goals considered worth pursuing. It remains necessary to find opportunities within one’s social context to implement one’s identity choices. This is the fourth step in the process I have outlined. Depending on the talents being developed and the goals one has chosen to pursue, one’s social circumstance may afford many or few opportunities to act upon the choices made. For some, one’s life course may be relatively smooth because the opportunities for the expression of one’s identity are readily available. For others, there may be many roadblocks. Finding oneself blocked on one’s chosen path can be a source of considerable frustration. Some who have chosen a difficult path may overcome the existing blocks directly, for example, by trying harder than others pursuing the same limited opportunities. Others may strive to find inventive ways to make their own opportunities, not by way of competition, but rather through creating a market for their talents that did not previously exist. Some may choose to leave their existing constraining social context, trying to find a more promising environment with greater opportunities for the expression of their talents and their values.

There can be no guarantee that one will ultimately find successful outlets for one’s talents in pursuit of one’s chosen goals. The recognition of this is distressing and reflects a need for courage in pursuit of a meaningful life, just as is required under existentialist assumptions. There are, however mitigating conditions that exist with respect to the existentialist pursuit of meaning. It is important that these be recognized. When I write of individual human nature and our best potentials, it should not be assumed that we have but one potential for excellence and one course of action that we would find personally expressive and fulfilling. Everyone has multiple potentials, multiple latent talents that we could, and would, find meaningful in our lives.

When terms like potentials, aptitudes, and talents are employed, it is easy to assume that the intended focus is on making career decisions. However, those terms apply to a wide range of human endeavors, from romantic attachments, to parenting, to religious and/or spiritual expression, to prosocial community action, to the pursuit of various avocational activities. In all of these domains, as in many others, there are wide individual differences. The nature vs. nurture debate
concerning individual differences, with respect to any aspect of behavior, has long-since been resolved that both are involved. If we take seriously the idea that an individual’s unique personal nature does indeed play a significant role across the broad spectrum of human behavior, then the essentialist, eudaimonist thesis follows that experiences of authenticity and achieving personal fulfillment will be derived from doing those things that one is both inclined to do and to do well. On the nurture side, striving for improvement in the quality of performance in domains in which we are not naturally talented will, in all likelihood, lead to improvements in the quality of performance, but if neither natural inclination nor aptitude are strong, those domains are not likely to become ones that provide major sources of meaning or satisfaction in our lives.

In sum, everyone has the potential to live a full, meaningful life in multiple ways, if efforts are directed at identity formation toward knowing who we are, that is, (a) identifying those many potential directions for our life for which we have natural inclinations and capacities, (b) investing diligent effort to develop those potentials, (c) choosing goals that allow for the full utilization of those talents in personally meaningful ways, and (d) finding or generating opportunities within our social context for the pursuit of those objectives, or find a different, more promising social context for their expression.

An Agenda for Future Empirical Concurrent Research on Identity and Meaning

As indicated at the opening of this article, research on identity and meaning in life has proceeded largely independently. Given the theoretical linkages between the concepts, it would be valuable to expand their study concurrently. As the literature review of research, provided above, indicates, it has been established that respondents who have established a strong sense of personal identity are also more likely to have found purpose and meaning in life. However, these studies have been almost all one-time correlational assessments. What are needed are longitudinal studies to determine if there are typical sequences to the development of such commitments, and if so, in which direction. Cross-lagged panel studies will move us a step closer to determining whether there may be a causal relationship between identity and meaning.

Research on the possible linkage of identity exploration and the search for meaning has been less extensive and has yielded less consistent findings. One problem here is that existing instruments, assessing the search for meaning, do so with items that solely measures ongoing or current search, whereas many identity instruments distinguish current search from past search activities. Instruments should be created for the assessment of three categories of search: (a) current search, (b) past search that was successfully resolved with the establishment of meaning, and (c) past search that was not successfully resolved, but rather ended without the establishment of meaning.

Another line of research that should be conducted would involve qualitative studies of the processes involved in establishing a personal sense of identity and meaning-in-life. At present there are numerous studies using narrative and discursive methodologies in which the information generated is interpreted in terms of either, or both, identity and meaning constructs, without systematically considering the possible differences between them. A focus on the contrasts of the ways in which each is successfully established would be particularly valuable. It would also help to learn more about what approaches to identity and meaning formation do not work in this regard.

Although the development of identity and meaning through the four-step process outlined above appears logical, it remains to be determined whether the process actually unfolds as hypothesized. Are there characteristic ages at which transitions between steps are most likely to occur? What is the typical length of time individuals remain in each step? What contextual variables help to promote such development and what variables thwart the process? Are there moderating or mediating variables that affect the development process?

Finally, it has been established that both successful identity formation and successful development of purpose and meaning-in-life are associated with well-being, whether defined as subjective or psychological well-being. It remains to be determined whether identity and meaning make the greater contribution to well-being in combination or separately.

Concluding Comments

I began this article with the observation that the concepts of identity and meaning in life had their origins in theoretical systems grounded in different philosophical perspectives. The result was that subsequent work on these concepts, both theoretical and empirical, proceeded very largely independently. However, it can be argued that concepts, in themselves, are atheoretical, and that this is particularly true with respect to their operational definitions. Despite apparent overlap in the conceptual definitions of identity and meaning, there have been only a few research studies conducted to examine empirically their interconnections, most of those appearing within the past five years. The findings from those
studies provide grounds to believe that these constructs are part of a common nomological web associated with the nature of well-being. While progress has been made with respect to empirical research, similar progress toward understanding their inter-relationships has not been made at the level of theory, due in no small part to the different philosophical grounding for their theories of origin. Placing these differing philosophical assumptions side by side, as I have done here, points to both the difficulties and the opportunities for integrating work on identity and meaning. I have endeavored here to outline what I see as required within an integrative theory. I have also advanced here an agenda for future research investigations directed toward identifying their interconnections. Achieving a more comprehensive appreciation of how individuals come to define themselves with respect to identity and meaning, and the implications that such self-definitions have for well-being, will require continuing advances with respect to both theory and research regarding how these constructs are integrally connected.

References


