Human Arenas
https://doi.org/10.1007/s42087-023-00376-0

RESEARCH

Meaningfulness, Death, and Suffering: Philosophy of Meaning in Life in the Light of Finitude

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Received: 18 May 2023 / Revised: 1 November 2023 / Accepted: 2 November 2023
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Abstract
Subjective sense of meaningfulness of life, or *meaning in life*, is a growing theme of interest in psychological research. Psychology of meaningfulness originates from existential psychology that aligned closely to mid-twentieth century philosophical existentialism. Now positive psychology is a strong field of study of meaning in life. This article investigates the role of the negative element of human life, that is, death and suffering, plays in psychologies about meaning in life. This article proposes the concept of *finitude* for the negative element of human life, aims to clarify the central concepts of meaning in life and meaning-making, and offers a short intellectual historical background on questioning existential psychology and meaning in life. The article concentrates on selected classic existential psychological thinkers (Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Irvin Yalom), on Tatjana Schnell's contemporary existential psychology, and on Martin Seligman's contemporary positive psychology.

Keywords Meaningfulness · Meaning in life · Finitude · Death · Suffering

Introduction

In this article, I investigate psychological approaches to meaningfulness, or sense of meaning in life, in terms of human finitude, that is, the reality that the human being is mortal and inevitably harrowed by suffering of some kind. Psychological approaches to meaningfulness refer to a manifold branch in psychology that concentrates on subjective sense of meaning in life and holds it a central factor in mental health and well-being (Steger, 2017; Schnell, 2021) and in coping with stressful life events (Debats et al., 1995; Park, 2010). Yet sense of meaning alone does not predict happiness and they need to be separated for moral reasons (Baumeister & Vohs, 2002, p. 612–613). Two fields of psychological study are particularly concerned with the theme of meaningfulness: existential psychology and positive psychology (see Batthyany & Russo-Netzer, 2014). The role of finitude or negative

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Published online: 18 November 2023

element of human life has emerged as an important question in psychological research concerned with the theme of meaning in life, especially in the "second wave of positive psychology" or "positive psychology 2.0" (Held, 2004; Ivtzan et al., 2016; Wong, 2011), but the question is interesting for the whole field.

In terms of meaningfulness, psychological research is concerned with subjective sense of meaning in one's own life and not with the popularly established question about meaning of life. The question about meaning of life is depicted as a philosophical question that psychological research cannot reach with its means (e.g., Martela & Steger, 2016). Two important concepts in psychological research of meaningfulness are *meaning in life*—explaining how meanings are subjective and embedded in practical life (e.g., Schnell, 2021)—and *meaning-making* that explains how meanings are constructed by the individual (Wong, 1998; Steger 20). The need for meaning in life and meaning-making as the process of making sense of life as meaningful are held as inevitably essential features of the human being in psychological research about meaningfulness. The concept of meaning in life is so central that the whole field of study is often depicted as study of meaning in life (e.g., Landau, 2022).

I approach the task philosophically by asking what bearings finitude carries for human beings in terms of meaning in life. By this, we aim to shed light on the philosophical basis of existential psychology and its core concepts of meaning in life and meaning-making. In doing so, we investigate philosophical grounds of existential psychology not only in the light of finitude, but we also aim to bring systematic clarity to the concepts mentioned as such. We hope this is beneficial in bridging philosophical and psychological existentialisms that consider the theme of meaning in life.

The article concentrates on the concepts of meaning in life and meaning-making in existential psychology and existential psychotherapy by investigating the key formulations by Viktor Frankl, Rollo May, and Irvin Yalom. I chose to explore these three as they were instrumental in formulating existential psychology in their own psychotherapeutic models. To be specific, I investigate psychological ideas in this article, not psychotherapeutic schemes, but the latter obviously involve certain psychological ideas. Regarding contemporary conceptions, I focus on Tatjana Schnell's and Martin Seligman's theories of meaning in life.

Frankl, May, and Yalom were chosen because they played key roles in the formation of existential psychology. Schnell represents an interesting line of thought in the contemporary psychology of meaningfulness, and Seligman is an important figure as the initiator of the movement of positive psychology. However, other thinkers could have been included, and with this selection, I do not claim to present the whole branch of study but only to illuminate the role of finitude within it. Of these thinkers, I refer to their key outputs regarding psychology of meaning in life (Frankl, 2000 [1948], 2004 [1956], 1978; May, 2009 [1953], 1958a, b, 2009 [1969]; Schnell, 2009, 2011, 2014, 2021; Seligman, 1990; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Seligman, 2004 [2002], Yalom, 1980).

Two questions: (1) What was the role of human mortality and suffering (finitude) in the classic existential psychological theories? and (2) How is human finitude approached in the contemporary existential and positive psychological theories? To formulate the answers, I next declare the theoretical premises and clarify what I mean with the philosophical idea of human finitude and how it connects to existential questions ("Theoretical Background and Premises" section). In the "Meaning in Life and Finitude: Existential Foundations" section, I present the core ideas of existential psychology and finitude, which I analyze closer in Frankl's, May's, and Yalom's thinking ("Suffering and Death in Frankl's, May's, and Yalom's Existential Psychologies" section) and in contemporary existential ("Negative and Positive Approaches in

Contemporary Existential Psychology" section) and positive psychology ("Positive Psychology and Meaning in Life" section).

Theoretical Background and Premises

By investigating philosophical grounds of existential psychology in the light of finitude, I draw from the questions asked by the existential philosophers in the twentieth century and briefly sketch the intellectual historical background of their questioning (Taylor, 1989, 2007; Neiman, 2015 [2002]). Mid-twentieth century existential philosophy regarded meaningfulness of life in a context where the (Christian) idea of God as the dominant source to explain the world had succumbed. Albert Camus sharply claimed that since God's existence seems completely absurd and to have no meaning whatsoever, the only important question is suicide in terms of why we choose to live at all (Camus, 1990). Another key question regarded what consequences this has for an individual. In general, the answer was that the collapse of any predominant transcendent world explanation compels the individual to grasp her sense of meaning herself. This approach was strongly emphasized and produced as an idea by, for example, Sartre (1963).

Although Martin Heidegger himself refused to accept the label of existentialist philosopher, his idea of being-towards-death as the fundament of the human being was and is central for existential philosophical attempts to explain meaningfulness. Heidegger's view of human life both explains why we need meaning and gives conditions that determine under what circumstances meanings are construed. In short, the idea of being-towards-death claims that life is defined by finitude that is manifested in death as the ultimate limit of human life (Heidegger, 1962). While I adopt the core of Heidegger's thanatology in terms of finitude and connect to what the modern existential philosophers initiated, I do not aim for exegesis of these sources but rely on later philosophical considerations, in particular on those explicated and formulated by Pihlström (2014, 2016). By drawing from Pihlström's philosophy, I consider suffering, along with death, as a *fundamental limit* of the human being.

To further explicate our philosophical premise, I draw from negative philosophy as a theoretical approach and explore how this approach characterizes contemporary existential philosophical formulations. In negative philosophy, issues are approached from a negative point of view, for example, moral responsibility is explored in terms of guilt, health is explored in the light of illness (Pihlström, 2014), and, as is done here, meaningfulness is approached in the light of the limits within which meanings are construed and also in terms of absence or *crisis of meaning* (Schnell, 2021). The distinction between positive and negative philosophy has, obviously, direct connection to how questions are approached in psychology. Depending on the starting point, the underlying idea is human flourishing and well-being and how to promote them, or whether psychological investigation is guided by focusing on illness and suffering and how to cure and alleviate them.

The positive approach of promoting well-being and happiness has influenced contemporary psychology of meaningfulness greatly. While the distinction of negative and positive approaches is important and useful, it is unclear how the division characterizes the current field of study in psychology of meaningfulness.

Meaning in Life and Finitude: Existential Foundations

The approach to the human being in existential psychology can be illustrated by first focusing on the concept of meaning-making. Meaning-making basically refers to an individual's practice of making sense of experiences "connected to an individual's fundamental orientations to the self, others, and reality" (Ojalammi, 2021, p. 16), or in relation to the *worldview*, as we might call the setting of these fundamentals. Other proposed terms are, for example, global meaning (Park & Folkman, 1997) and assumptive worlds (Janoff-Bulman, 1989). Thus, the concept of meaning-making does not refer to meaning of life as such but to meaningfulness in how an individual explains and justifies her experiences in relation to her sense of life as meaningful, which is about meaning in life. Problematically, late psychological study of meaning in life has not paid attention to how personal sense of meaningfulness is constructed in relation to a socio-historical and cultural context. Whereas early formulators of existential psychology, Frankl (2000 [1948], pp. 120–122) and May (2009, p. 14) paid critical attention to cultural factors in the sense that what role American society played in *lack* of meaningfulness or in the need to search for meaning.

In psychological considerations, the somewhat popularly established elementary philosophical question about meaning of life can be considered as an echo from the age prior to secularization where Christian cosmology served as the normative source to explain life and the world. Meaning of life refers to an ultimate explanation for why we have this life in the first place, but as the twentieth century existential philosophers painfully noted, due to secularization, we are at loss to have any pre-formulated ultimate meaning to explain our life, that is, a meaning that would be universal and normative by its nature (Nagel, 1979, 1986; Tartaglia, 2015).

Secularization, that is, the adoption of the scientific worldview and dissolution of the *enchanted world* where transcendent forces were held self-evidently true, altered the general stance towards death. In an enchanted world, meaning of life was pre-dictated by a Christian imaginary that justified the way of mundane life with an order of transcendence that was operationalized with the idea of afterlife of heaven or hell. Thus, Christian imaginary gave predetermined reasons for mundane events and explanation for human experiences of those events (Taylor, 2007). The dissolution of enchanted world, or disenchantment, led to a social imaginary where we need to capture and make meanings without the normative and universal presumption of transcendence or afterlife (Taylor, 2007). This is the starting point of modern existentialism and the root of the nagging impression that existence is absurd. Since we die, what is the point of all this? What is the meaning of life for one who eventually ceases to exist and has nothing left of life? Or more broadly, what is the meaning of the whole human race since it will most likely cease to exist altogether at some point in history? In asking these questions, the modern existential philosophers concluded that there indeed is no ultimate reason for our existence, there is no meaning of life, that is, we must be nihilistic about any *ultimate* reasons for our being.

While mortality is a source of anxious quest for meaning of life, interestingly, in the context of secular imaginary, it is a necessary pragmatic postulate for us to form any meaningful life, as Heidegger pointed out. Heidegger argued that endless life would demolish meaningfulness because everything could be done or pursued for in the future, since there would always be endless amount of time. Thus, endless life would slip into absurdity because nothing would be worth anything or meaningful at the given moment. Pihlström (2016) has argued, based on Todd May's analysis—both were inspired by Heidegger's philosophy—for the absurdity of endless life, the necessity of death, and for

subjectivity to be sensible only as temporally limited. According to this line of thought, eternal life would lead to an eventual merging of subjects because every subject would at some point do whatever and reach any goal that every other subject would too. So, *temporal finitude* is at the same time the reason for our tribulations of meaningfulness and a necessary condition for subjectivity that is the starting point for us to form meanings in this life and sense of meaningfulness of this life. In other words, death, paradoxically, both gives conditions to form meanings in this life and threatens a sense of life as meaningful (May, 2008).

Besides mortality, suffering is the other character of human finitude (Pihlström, 2014). Suffering is an inevitable part of anyone's life. We endure, for example, illness, emotional pain from losing loved ones, anxiety over how the future will turn out, and fatigue from having to take care of too many things. Suffering takes countless forms and stems from countless causes, and these are forms of suffering that occur without acts of moral evil that too is an inevitable part of this reality and too often the reason of horrific suffering. However, the inevitable reality of suffering means that life is not only temporally finite, but life is finite also *qualitatively*, in the sense that we are not able to fulfill everything we aspire for. We humans fail to be completely care-free about the present and future (and the past), we mourn the deaths of our loved ones, we fall ill and are troubled by illness of our loved ones, and so on.

What finitude, in both mortality and reality of suffering, holds in terms of meaningfulness is that meaningfulness does not refer only to a kind of ultimate and universal meaning of life, but it involves how an individual justifies her experiences, reasons, and means. Thus, in the light of finitude, *meaning-making is a personal form of theodicy*, as by forming meanings in our everyday life, we also justify our experiences, reasons, and means in and of life that is inevitably harrowed by suffering (Neiman, 2015). The close relation of suffering and crisis of meaning embodies the intertwinement of suffering and meaning-making. Deep suffering of any form can inflict a crisis of meaning and thus a need to reform one's personal sense of meaningfulness. Also, the relation of suffering and meaningfulness is manifold as a crisis of meaning is itself a source of suffering. Nevertheless, the notion of *crisis of meaning* when experiencing deep suffering from a traumatic event is an extreme example of how suffering and meaning-making are coupled (Schnell, 2021), but it is not only in the extreme that this relation is relevant. As the qualitative finitude of life, which reifies in suffering, is inevitable, we are bound to explain and justify our experiences in relation to suffering, and not only because of suffering. Meaning-making does not take place only after and in relation to deep experiences of suffering but also in relation to what delimits the everyday life and what is at least a potential source of suffering. In more practical terms, meanings are made of life that is inevitably finite in a qualitative sense and in which there is suffering.

The modern wave of existentialism has from its beginning emphasized the personal nature of fundamental meanings that human beings attach to their lives and everyday practices, exactly because any "universal" world explanation has dissolved. In other words, in the contemporary psychology of meaningfulness, meanings are seen as personally formed and subjective by nature. This issue connects to human freedom. A human being is both free to decide upon her life and compelled to do so as there are no pre-formulated answers. Yet, these personal meanings tend to have a relational nature: with and within our close relationships, individuals construct and test their own systems of meanings. As such, personal meanings are constructed within a certain historical, cultural, and social setting (about culture in psychology that also is concerned with meaning systems, see Valsiner, 2012, 2014). The contemporary psychological study of meaningfulness has not taken this

matter into account as a theoretical issue but rather only an empirical question of what challenges society poses to people in terms of meaningfulness (Valsiner, 2012, p. 4).

Suffering and Death in Frankl's, May's, and Yalom's Existential Psychologies

Existential psychology is a manifold wave of thought that grounds in the idea that the personal sense of meaning in life is fundamental for one's mental health and for the human being in general (Correia et al., 2015). In this way, early existential psychology was concerned with what the human being is. Although Viktor Frankl was not the first to adopt and elaborate the existential question as primary for the human being and mental health, his work was central for the development of existential psychology (see May, 1958a, b). Frankl was a psychiatrist educated in the Freudian psychodynamic school, of which he however grew critical. His central criticism of psychodynamic psychology was its attempt to explore the human being as an atomized and "an-atomized" machine that is first ripped apart to separate faculties and then pieced together from these different parts, which fails to see the human being as a whole (Frankl, 2000 [1948], p. 27).

The wholeness of the human being, for Frankl, is constituted by freedom and responsibility. A human being needs to take personal responsibility and fulfill her freedom to be truly an authentic person. Authenticity concerns a decision about what one is going to be; to make that decision is a matter of personal responsibility to fulfill human freedom, which means that one needs to have a subjectively formed purpose in life (Frankl, 2000 [1948], 2014 [1969]). Ultimately, taking responsibility is about being conscious of the question of existence (Frankl, 2000 [1948]). A human being is compelled to grasp her own meaning of life that directs her practices in everyday life and is thus manifested in practice. So, for Frankl, deciding on your own existence is not about intellectual reflection but action (Frankl, 2014 [1969]). As a psychologist, he based his analysis on his study of mental pathologies and held that failure to take personal responsibility is a core underlying reason for mental illnesses, but nevertheless claimed to form ideas that concern the human being universally (Frankl, 2000 [1948], 2014 [1969]).

Although he grew critical of Freud's theories, Frankl's background in psychodynamics is apparent in his dealing with levels of consciousness. The exact, and rather complicated, relation of the unconscious, preconscious, and conscious is not a primary issue for our topic at hand, but Frankl's idea of spirituality that locates in the unconscious is interesting: the capacity to take responsibility to decide upon one's meaning of existence is spiritual by nature and it locates in the unconscious (Frankl, 2000 [1948]). For Frankl, there indeed is a God who is the true source of meaning of life but capturing this meaning is a matter of personal decision.

Frankl named his existential psychological approach first as existential analysis (Frankl, 2000 [1948]) and later formulated the therapeutic model of logotherapy (1956). He distinguished these two approaches based on the scope of spirituality: logotherapy is about "therapy from a spiritual perspective," existential analysis is about therapy that "targets personal spiritual existence" (Frankl, 1956, p. 171). In Frankl's work, existential analysis is the broader concept of existential psychology while logotherapy refers to more strictly determined psychotherapeutic treatment. It is important to note that though Frankl himself believed in God's existence, he did not require such spirituality in logotherapy. Yet he determined spirituality in mundane terms as referring to taking authenticity, fulfilling personal responsibility, and finding subjective meaning and purpose in life.

Frankl was deeply inspired by Heidegger's philosophy (Frankl, 2000 [1948]; Brencio, 2015), particularly by the idea of the fundamentality of human freedom and the idea of the human being as *Dasein*, a being-in-the-world, who is not a subject observing and exploiting the world as an object but a being who is inevitably tangled with the world in which she lives (Heidegger, 1962). Moreover, *Dasein* involves the idea of the human as a being-towards-death: a being who is guided by the sight or consciousness of her eventual non-existence, death, that essentially is an event that definitely prevents the *Dasein* to exploit her freedom (Heidegger, 1962). Death is a primary nominator for why the human being is concerned about the meaning of her existence, for Frankl, as is characteristic for any existential thinker (Frankl, 1978, p. 126).

Suffering is another key factor in Frankl's thinking. Dealing with existence as suffering is, along with death, an issue that challenges one's sense of life as meaningful (Frankl, 2000 [1948]). Frankl depended on Heidegger's idea in explaining that suffering is a problem as it restricts an individual to exploit her freedom as a human being. Frankl's solution for the problem of suffering was curious, inspired by his own experience as a prisoner at Nazi death camps: as life has meaning, there is meaning in suffering, too. Thus, a human being needs to overcome suffering through finding meaning in whatever desperate situation she is in and so to exploit her freedom (Brencio, 2015). While Frankl maintained suffering is a threat to the sense of meaningfulness, he interestingly depicted mundane tribulations as necessary for meaningful life. This proposition on suffering seems paradoxical but he simply thought that challenges and tension in life are needed in order for it to be meaningful. In a similar fashion to Rollo May later, he feared that the Western culture of his time did not pose enough challenge to people (Frankl, 2000 [1948], 120).

Rollo May was an important figure in the early development of existential psychology in introducing European existential philosophers and psychologists, such as Frankl, to an American audience, particularly to the newly formed circle of humanistic psychology of which he was an integral part (May, 1958a). In many key aspects, May's psychology follows Frankl's ideas that were grounded in Heidegger's philosophy: the human being should be approached as a whole, and the fundamental issue the human being faces is the question of her existence (May, 1958a, b, 2009). A failure to grasp one's own reasons—a state that, according to May, epitomized the whole American culture he lived in—leads to "a hollow man" who is directed by outer expectations (May, 2009, p. 14). Besides Frankl and Heidegger, May grounded his thinking in analysis of Søren Kierkegaard and Friedrich Nietzsche, who he claimed both emphasized the need to abandon external expectations and to personally grasp a meaning of one's own life, which he likened to Paul Tillich's idea of "courage to be" (May, 2009).

The modern idea that a human being should be approached in terms of her capabilities and making the most of these was founded in American humanistic psychology (see Moss, 2015). May's involvement in the humanistic psychology movement seems to have influenced to how he thought an individual should be inner-directed and so seek to be "outstanding" (May, 2009, 12). However, his point of departure was programmatic analysis of mental illnesses, anxiety, despair, alienation, or suffering in general, for which the reality of death played a significant part. So, his main endeavor was not to figure out how an individual could make most of her capabilities, as in general is the task of the contemporary movement of positive psychology, but to Tabure out how an individual could overcome her tribulations (May, 1958a, 2009). Yalom also stated that May grounded his thinking in existential analysis (Yalom, 1980, p. 23).

Irvin D. Yalom contributed significantly to development of existential psychotherapy at a time when existentialism was already well known to psychologists. Yalom maintained

existential psychotherapy's closeness to psychodynamic psychotherapy by stating the former is a form of the latter (Yalom, 1980, p. 7). However, his theory of existential psychotherapy did not ground so much in Freud's theories as such but more in Neo-Freudian interpersonal psychodynamics that emphasized culture, social relations, and need for love and security in shaping the child's psyche rather than the child's inner instinctual forces and qualities (Yalom, 1980, p. 7–8). Further, Yalom rejected the idea of primacy of first experience, an idea that was central in psychoanalysis (Yalom, 1980, p. 11).

Yalom's approach to existential psychotherapy was notably negative. He stated that a therapist should see every person as a fearful, suffering human being (Yalom, 1980, 10), and suffering is a universal matter for the human being (Yalom, 1980, 12). Further, in accordance with the negative approach, the human being is inevitably concerned about her existence, which relates to four ultimate concerns: death, freedom, existential isolation, and meaninglessness (Yalom, 1980, p. 7–9). Yalom explained his approach in Freudian terms as in psychoanalysis the primary cause for anxiousness is the innate human drive, but in existential psychotherapy anxiousness is caused by awareness of ultimate concerns.

The basic approach to the human being in Yalom's existential psychotherapy is significantly similar to Frankl's: the human being is a creature concerned with the meaninglessness of her mortal life and thus is compelled to quest for meaning in her life. Yalom's conception of freedom is interesting, and close to Sartre, to whom Yalom explicitly refers (Yalom, 1980, p. 220–222). For Yalom, freedom of the human being meant a negative, agonizing need for coherent and meaningful external structure, which just is not there. There is no inherent design to our human reality; therefore, the human being is compelled to freedom and responsibility in terms of being the author of her own life (Yalom, 1980, p. 9). This understanding of freedom differs notably from Frankl's idea of freedom as a positive fundamental capacity.

Yalom's idea of existential isolation is an interesting application of Neo-Freudian interpersonal psychotherapy to Heidegger-inspired existential psychology (Yalom, 1980, p. 353–355). It is not about loneliness, or even existential questions about loneliness, but awareness of our inevitable isolation as creatures. The human being cannot be reached, reality is subjective, not shared, and thus every single subject is condemned to existential isolation from other subjects (Yalom, 1980, p. 9).

Frankl, May, and Yalom connect to the same line of thought in early existential psychology, but they had differences in their thinking. The most fundamental difference regards epistemological position on reality. They all emphasized the personality of meaning in life, but Frankl adhered to an objective external structure of reality. Especially Yalom, and May to some extent, moved to reject such an idea and adopted a stance closer to the atheistic existential philosophers such as Sartre and Camus. In terms of finitude, their position was primarily based on Heideggerian ideas and maybe not ambivalent, but at least complicated. Finitude threatens the sense of meaningfulness, but mortality and suffering are seen as necessary conditions for human life to be meaningful. The rationale is, in principle, quite simple: endless human life is not imaginable and human life without tribulations and challenges to overcome would be meaningless. In this way, the classic formulators of existential psychology characterized meaningfulness in terms of finitude.

Negative and Positive Approaches in Contemporary Existential Psychology

What exactly is meant by "meaning" has received a lot of attention in the later and present movement of existential psychology and in research on the meaning in life in general. Three principal areas of this concept can be distinguished: (1) the fundamental idea of meaning, (2) relation of meaning with human faculties, and (3) engagement of meaning to practical life. Regarding the first, which is quite generally accepted, meaning has been characterized to incorporate *purpose* as a subjective and personal direction of life and *coherence* as the element of life making sense (e.g., Steger et al., 2006). In addition to these, the element of *significance* as life experienced as valuable has widely been proposed as a third component of meaning in life (King et al., 2006, p. 180–181; Reker & Wong, 2012). Regarding the second area of meaning in life, meaning has been explained to involve three fundamental human faculties of *motivation/action*, *cognition*, and *emotion/affection* (Reker & Wong, 1988, 2012). Engagement of meaning to practical life has been represented with the idea of *source of meaning* (e.g., O'Connor & Chamberlain, 1996). Also, the idea of folk concepts of meaningful life is an important contribution for the discussion how meaningfulness is engaged to practical life (Fuhrer & Cova, 2022).

Although attention to the concept of meaning has been intense, the key development that characterizes the current psychological study of meaning in life is a turn to empirical study (see, Greenberg et al., 2004). The empirical study of meaning in life was initiated in research on the psychological bearing of the existential psychological idea of death awareness in terror management theory in the 1980s. Since then, efforts to study meaningfulness and crisis of meaning empirically have formed the prevailing line of research in the field of existential psychology (Solomon et al., 2004).

Tatjana Schnell is a prominent figure in the later formulation of existential psychological theories. She defines meaningfulness as the individual's "basic trust that life is worth living" and breaks it down to coherence, significance, orientation, and belonging, which all are necessary for an experience or sense of life as meaningful (Schnell, 2021, p. 7). Coherence is the impression of consistency and comprehensibility that our perceptions, intentions, and acts are sensible for ourselves. Significance, simply, is the perception of your own actions having a consequence, without which they would be irrelevant and thus meaningless. Orientation is about purpose or direction, in other words, to have intentions and goals worth reaching for. Belonging refers to perception of being part of a larger whole, of having a worthy and meaningful place in the world, which Schnell likeness to Yalom's idea of existential isolation as a need to have a place in the world (Schnell, 2021, p. 7–8).

While she has aimed to develop conceptual ideas about meaning in life, Schnell represents the contemporary trend of empirical psychological research. Her work is guided by devotion to drawing conclusions from empirical data. To explain what meaning in life is in practice and how meanings are formed in a practical sense, Schnell has, with extensive qualitative research interviews, distinguished 26 sources of meanings that are ultimate in the sense that they are not further reducible to any other deeper source of meaning (Schnell, 2009, p. 487). The sources of meaning are, in essence, themes or areas of human life, such as social commitment, health, generativity, individualism, and power. Further, the 26 sources are grouped into five larger dimensions: horizontal self-transcendence, vertical self-transcendence, self-actualization, order, and well-being and relatedness. Schnell identified these dimensions by quantitative exploratory analysis of loadings of the 26 sources (Schnell, 2009, p. 487–488)

and she also identified that the set of dimensions is parallel with the classification of sources of meaning by Robert A. Emmons (2003; Schnell, 2009, p. 488).

In the interviews with which Schnell identified the 26 sources of meaning, she set out to identify how subjective meaning in life incorporates cognition, action, and emotion (Schnell, 2009, p. 487). Later, however, she concluded that meaning in life is not an emotion. Emotion plays a part in meaning merely as a confirmatory function, such as when feeling joy in achieving a long-term goal (Schnell, 2021, p. 35). Nevertheless, sources of meaning are entangled with life in a practical sense, or, in other words, sources of meaning are involved with actions carried out in different arenas of life, through which meaning in life has a significant role as a motivator (Schnell, 2021, p. 149–153). Cognition plays part especially in "unconscious evaluation processes that check the coherence or incoherence with the respective superordinate context" (Schnell, 2021, p. 35).

Schnell relies on the line of thought that was established in the 1970s to explore meaningfulness in terms of loss of subjective sense of meaning in one's life, that is, crisis of meaning. As such, crisis of meaning refers to experiencing your own life unbearably empty, life to not have worth and being boring, which causes suffering (Schenll, 2021, p. 8). Frankl used the term of existential vacuum to point to the same phenomenon (Frankl, 1948, p. 93). The suffering inflicted by crisis of meaning can be explained as a failure of making sense. This failure causes suffering because human being is "a compulsive meaning-maker" or always in need to make sense of her experiences (Valsiner, 2014, p. 1). First empirical studies of crisis of meaning built on understanding meaningfulness as a continuum between two ends, meaningfulness and crisis of meaning; thus, absence of meaning would necessarily be about a crisis of meaning (e.g., Purpose in Life Test, PIL; Crumbaugh & Maholick, 1964). However, Schnell has found that while crisis of meaning does necessarily involve absence of meaningfulness, absence of meaningfulness, in contrast, does not necessarily involve crisis of meaning (Schnell, 2021, p. 6–7). The contemporary attention to crisis of meaning contrasts to the classic works of existential psychology, as it assumes there are events that specifically challenge an individual's sense of life as meaningful, rather than seeing the human being as inevitably concerned with the meaningfulness of her existence.

In terms of finitude and the negative approach to the human being, on which Frankl, May, and Yalom relied, seeing meaningfulness as a two-dimensional phenomenon of meaning in life and crisis of meaning represents a shift in existential psychology. This shift renounces seeing the human being as a creature who is preoccupied with the meaningfulness of her mortal life and whose sense of meaning is in constant peril because of existential suffering. Instead, crisis of meaning is approached as a dimension of its own and not the normal state of human being. This does not mean disinterest in negative and traumatic issues of human life, but rather, as is characteristic for Schnell's thinking, withdrawal from an attempt to determine the essence or ontology of the human being. Instead of a philosophical-cum-psychological attempt to depict the human being as a creature, Schnell represents the now prevailing line of thought in existential psychology that relies on empirical study of the human being and meaningfulness. In terms of the nature of human being, this line of thought aims to adopt a neutral stance and rely on empirical knowledge gathered regarding meaningfulness and its role for mental health and well-being. Yet the heritage of negatively oriented early existential psychology is apparent in how Schnell concentrates on traumatic and anxious issues in human life that threaten sense of meaning and might lead to crisis of meaning, such as (one's own) mortality and the death of a loved one.

So, the approach to negative elements of human life, or finitude, has changed in the existential psychological research on meaningfulness, but finitude still plays a significant role in how the crisis of meaning has received attention. Moreover, much of the discussion about

meaning in life has found its scientific locus within the movement of positive psychology that has aimed to revise the psychological approach to finitude. Positive psychology is based on the well-argued notion that mainstream psychology has concentrated on negative issues of human life in an aim to understand and offer means to cure mental illnesses. Mainstream psychology has been clinically oriented and preoccupied by mental pathologies. Positive psychology, in contrast, is devoted to exploration of human capacities, how those capacities could be maximized, and maintains that the human being should be approached in terms of what contributes to happiness, well-being, and flourishing and not in terms of pathologies as what prevents reaching these goals for which human beings strive.

Positive Psychology and Meaning in Life

The formation of positive psychology is a curious development. The underlying paradigm of exploring the human being in the light of capabilities was first initiated in the movement of humanistic psychology that, since the 1950s, aimed to shift attention in psychology from treating mental illnesses to promoting mental health and well-being (Moss, 2015). Despite the obviously similar basic approach in humanistic and positive psychology, they have positioned themselves in feud with each other for reasons that are not completely obvious (Robbins, 2015). Martin Seligman, the president of the American Psychological Association, outlined positive psychology in his presidential speech at the association's conference in 1999. Seligman determined the theoretical standpoints in more detail in a special edition of the journal *American Psychologist*, co-edited with Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

The confrontation between positive and humanistic psychology has been explained with two substantial, theoretical reasons. The first concerns the philosophical approach to human being on which psychological theory is based and the second is about the role of empirical study (Robbins, 2015).

In terms of the philosophical basis, positive psychology has moved from the idea of promoting well-being and happiness as such (later branded as "a pleasant life" by Seligman) to promoting living by maximizing your personal strengths "a good life" that could lead to a "meaningful life," in which one makes the most of one's personal strengths and finds subjective purpose and meaning in doing so (Seligman, 2004, p. 275). In depicting the idea of meaningful life, Seligman has determined positive psychology to rely on Aristotelian philosophy and, in particular, on Aristotle's concept of eudaimonia in seeing the human being as inherently good and that good life is about fulfillment of personal interests. So, the essence of the human being is to maximize her personal capabilities, which does not mean hedonistic endeavor but *eudaimonic* good life that is based on virtuous living (Seligman, 2004, p. 153).

The nagging questions are whether the adopted philosophical basis really plays a decisive role in the dispute between positive and humanistic psychology, whether this dispute is based on deep analysis of the philosophical sources, and whether there even is a decisive difference in the theoretical approach to the human being between positive and humanistic psychology. These three questions are not straightforward to answer, as I demonstrate next.

First, the concept of eudaimonia is used to explain how promoting of well-being is not about hedonistic endeavor but about virtuous living (Huta & Waterman, 2013). Further, Woolfolk and Wasserman (2005) state that analysis of Aristotelian philosophy is not very deep in positive psychology. For example, the classical essentialist idea of man does not seem seamlessly fit with principles of positive psychology. If the answer is that there is

no intention to adopt anything else than the narrowly determined concept of eudaimonia, then the question is, why claim to adopt Aristotelian philosophy? Yet, it is not clear to what extent positive psychology meant to adopt Aristotelian philosophy in the first place. Further, the determination of eudaimonia does not seem to be in contradiction with what the movement of humanistic psychology set out to advocate (Moss, 2015). Also, to depict humanistic psychology as reliant on phenomenology is itself a stretch, at least, let alone how phenomenology has been illustrated in some statements within the movement of positive psychology. Waterman's (2013) much cited paper on the divide of humanistic and positive psychology, for example, depicts a seriously faulty and mistaken illustration of phenomenology. Waterman mistakes in not distinguishing philosophical and psychological phenomenology, presenting phenomenology as idiographic, saying that phenomenology treats communication inevitably unreliable and stating that phenomenology has closed dialogue with quantitative methods (Morley, 2014).

Second, regarding the true difference in the role of empirical study within positive and humanistic psychology, according to Robbins (2015), humanistic psychology did not adopt the now prevailing trend of empirical psychological study, whereas positive psychology set out to develop knowledge and to test its hypotheses with empirical designs. This is a key reason positive psychology has triumphed over humanistic psychology in psychological exploration that is based on maximizing well-being and human flourishment. As regards the study of meaning-making, positive psychology has contributed to the research about meaning in life and it is a central scientific locus for much of the discussion about psychology of meaningfulness (much research on meaning in life is published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology*).

Third, the negative elements of human life, or finitude, play a particular role in the positive psychology movement. Contrary to hasty critics who blame positive psychology for hollow and light positiveness, orientation to maximizing capabilities and well-being does not necessarily mean ignoring negative elements of human life. While the movement is preoccupied with promoting positive elements of human life, there have been attempts to include the idea of what we call finitude in positive psychology, which have been labelled "the second wave of positive psychology" (Held, 2004; Ivtzan et al., 2016) and "positive psychology 2.0" (Wong, 2011). These attempts have aimed to develop an idea of how negative elements such as anger and sorrow have an inalienable place in human life and must be seen as valuable in promoting well-being and happiness (Held, 2002, 2004) and how death awareness plays an important role in human life and should not be seen a priori as a cause of negative outcome (Ivtzan et al., 2016). Moreover, an uncritical search for happiness might have injurious consequences if it leads culturally to a "tyranny" of positive thinking in which everything else is subordinate to personal happiness (Ahmed, 2007; Ehrenreich, 2009), which Seligman himself stated in addressing one should be careful in falling to be a "slave to the tyrannies of optimism" (Seligman, 1990, p. 292).

Conclusion

This article has proposed a philosophical conception (finitude) for the negative element of human life that plays a significant role in psychological approaches to meaningfulness. Psychology of meaning in life and existential psychology are concerned with how an individual experiences life as meaningful (or is in crisis in terms of meaning) and how it contributes to such key psychological aspects such as well-being, happiness, and resilience.

Meaningfulness is studied in two fields of psychological research: existential and positive psychology. The former grounds in classic works on psychology of meaning, which were closely aligned with philosophical existentialism, aimed to determine the nature of the human being, and were concerned with existence as the primary issue of human life. The contemporary existential psychology of Tatjana Schnell represents two key shifts: adoption of empirical means of study and adoption of a neutral stance on the human being, and thus disengagement of the kind of negative approach that holds awareness of death as the primary issue for meaning in life. Finitude, however, plays a key role in Schnell's deep attention to crisis of meaning. Positive psychology has also adopted empirical methods to study meaning in life. Positive psychology has seemingly ditched the negative and finitude altogether by adopting the idea of promoting well-being and happiness as the primary premise of the new movement in psychology. However, the positive approach does not necessarily mean ignoring negative elements in human life, and explaining how negative elements fit into the theory of positive psychology has gained ground within the field of positive psychology itself.

Author Contribution Not applicable.

Funding Open access funding provided by University of Eastern Finland (including Kuopio University Hospital). Emil Aaltonen foundation (grant).

Availability of Data and Materials Not applicable.

Declarations

Ethical Approval Not applicable.

Competing Interests The author declares no competing interests.

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