How can we fulfill our innate desire for meaning while promoting sustainability?

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Introduction

The Darwinian view holds that at some point in the evolution of *Homo sapiens*, we developed greater capacities for social intelligence. With this advanced capacity, we developed a consciousness and a sense of time, which consequently came with the perception of aging and the awareness of our mortality. The conscious mind has evolved a very effective method to suppress this anxiety surrounding our mortality: through a desire for creating meaning. Our current strategies for cultivating meaning in life through delusions and distractions (Aarssen 2011) have created a disconnected and selfish culture. This essay aims to evaluate the motivations behind our desire for meaning, our current strategies for cultivating meaning, and how we ought to find meaning if we want to move towards living more sustainably. In this essay, I will argue that the meaning of life must be redefined using contemporary Buddhist philosophical concepts in order for our species to make significant shifts towards sustainability.

Why do we have this innate desire to find existential meaning?

Our desire for meaning can be described from either a Buddhist or biological perspective. From a Buddhist perspective, we have this striving or craving, *tanha*, for meaning, which comes from the root source of desire, or *raga* (Barash 2014, p. 173). From a biological perspective, we can look to our genetic drives to understand why we seek meaning. The pyramid of motivations, a revised model of hierarchical needs based off Maslow's (1943) model, contends that we have four underlying drives: Survival Drive, Legacy Drive, Leisure Drive, and Sexual/Familial Drive (Aarssen 2015). Humans have a fundamental, biological desire to meet these needs because a failure to meet them can limit gene transmission success (Aarssen 2015). Leisure and legacy drives blend together to give us our uniquely human, innate desire for existential meaning, purpose, and larger-than-life self-identity (Aarssen 2010).

Leisure drive is an integral component of the human pursuit of happiness that helps us dispel negative feelings, allowing us to find release from the suffering caused by our self-impermanence anxiety. We satisfy our leisure drive through various forms of relaxation, cognitive stimuli, and intellectual enlightenment (Aarssen 2010). Some examples of leisure include shopping, hobbies, television, music, or parties. Attraction to leisure was honed by evolution purely for sheer intrinsic enjoyment, serving a key role in assisting in gene propagation (Aarssen 2015). By distracting the mind with these many options for pleasure, leisure drive enables a forgetting of self and thus a denial of death (Becker 1973). Leisure drive allows us to create meaning in our lives by being sufficiently distracted, diverting the sentient mind from recognizing the fact that life is likely meaningless.

While our leisure drive motivates us to pursue happiness, our legacy drive motivates us to leave some essence of ourselves for the future. It deludes us into thinking that we can create something that extends past our current existence. These legacy delusions can manifest in three different ways: through religion, parenthood, and accomplishment. Religion provides us with an explanation for our existence while relieving our fears of mortality through the adherence to ideologies that endorse an after-life and salvation. Parenthood provides some individuals with a false hope that they can leave extensions of themselves that might transcend death, while allowing parents to find meaning through raising their children. And finally, accomplishment, which may be the most important domain for legacy drive in the modern world. Accomplishment results in recognition or status and is displayed through our desire to be attracted to things like financial wealth, materialism, successful business, and showing kindness to others through selfless acts of compassion (Aarssen 2010). Although our drive to accomplish things to create

our self-identity and bring meaning to our lives is likely the main contributor to global change issues, I will later argue how it may be our best option for implementing change.

How are we currently finding meaning and why is it a problem?

When legacy and leisure drive are deployed together, they successfully provide us with sources of meaning. The predominant ways that we cultivate meaning in our lives are through belonging, possessions, and accomplishment. Our desire to belong, an extension of our leisure drive, creates a desire within ourselves to be a part of something greater or more permanent than ourselves. Studies have shown that people consider their social connections with friends and family to bring meaning to their lives (Lambert et al. 2010). People can belong to various groups- religions, races, families, sports teams, etc.- and this fulfills our need for social connection while distracting us from our fears of impermanence. Subsequently, we find meaning through our possessions, fulfilling our desire for pleasure (leisure) while helping us create this sense of identity that we hope can somehow extend our legacy. Our desire to accumulate possessions and consume conspicuously is a direct result of the uniquely human awareness of mortality and our biological inclination to accumulate wealth to enhance our fitness (Kasser and Kanner 2004). Meaning is directly linked to cultural identity (Baumeister et al. 2013) and materialism forms the backbone of Western culture, thus our possessions and consumption habits are direct indications of meaning in our lives. Finally, one of the most dominant routes for finding meaning is through accomplishment. The project of civilization is an endless mission of progress and our progress is often marked by personal or collective accomplishment. Aarssen (2013) supports that we find happiness and meaning through struggling to reach our individually prescribed goals and achievements, fulfilling both our legacy and leisure drives while distracting us from our self-impermanence. Accomplishment today is fueled by our attraction to financial

wealth and consumerism, philanthropy, showing kindness others, and competition to name a few. To accomplish something worthy of praise by other humans convinces us that we are special and indirectly provides meaning in our lives.

Not only are our current strategies for cultivating meaning creating a selfish, disconnected, and deluded culture, but they are embodiments of the three Buddhist poisons, or *trivisa,* that are responsible for suffering: greed (the desire for more), ill-will (hatred and anger), and delusion (ignorance) (Barash 2014, p. 174). We cannot continue to find meaning by allowing our primal drives for legacy and leisure to take precedence while neglecting our evolved capacity for rational, conscious thought. In doing this, we are forgoing the responsibility of humanity, and prioritizing our own self-interest to minimize our fear of mortality (Aarssen 2015). When the meaningfulness of our life is based off our social alliances, we favour those in our in-group while excluding and dehumanizing "the other" (Billig and Tajfel 1973). This ultimately leads to a lack of empathy for those that are labeled as "the other", promoting the ill-will of the out-group members and therefore creating more suffering. If we want to make global change, we must reject this idea that we are separate from those of different political, religious, or social affiliations and recognize that we are inextricably linked to each other. Furthermore, we cannot continue to find meaning through conspicuous consumption and materialism if we want to conserve our resources for generations to come. The exploding human consumption is the driving force behind the unprecedented planetary change we are witnessing, from the increased demand for energy, land, food, and water (WWF Living Planet Report 2018). Our desire to create meaning through achievement has resulted in a delusion of interminable progress. But the "march of progress" is going too fast and too far for the good of humankind, and if we fail to find a new way to create meaning in our lives, the existence of many species, including humans,

is at risk. If we want to move towards living sustainably, we must find strategies to create meaning in our lives that put an emphasis on the collective rather than the individual. I believe that this new source of meaning can be contrived through embracing three Buddhist philosophical concepts: embracing our impermanence, understanding the not-self, and recognizing our interconnectedness.

How should we find meaning?

To begin with, I think that it is possible for us to eliminate our self-impermanence anxiety and consequently reduce the power that our leisure and legacy drives have over how we find meaning in our lives. We can achieve this through embracing the Buddhist theory of impermanence. This theory ascertains that things are constantly changing from one moment to the next. We must recognize that we are merely temporary combinations of physical components that create an identifiable being for a short period of time (Barash 2014, p. 68). In doing this, we may stop trying to cling to our fabricated constancy- the idea that we do not change. If we can accept that illness, aging, and death are imminent yet natural transitions of life, we can eliminate the fear of our mortality and create meaning in life that is not based solely on avoiding this fear. To make this change, we must first start with our own self-perception of our mortality. This can then stimulate a cultural evolution to create a civilization that embraces mortality rather than fears it. Contrarily, I can see how embracing our mortality in an effort to become more sustainable may seem paradoxical. It could be argued that if we are to accept that we are impermanent, we must also accept the mass extinctions that other species, as well as humans are facing. However, I do not believe that accepting the plight of the planet that is caused by our unsustainable actions would be in line with Buddhist principles. Not only would we be deluding ourselves, which is one of the three Buddhist poisons, but the repercussions of our unsustainable

actions would be causing massive suffering to countless species, including humans. It is therefore essential for us to try and minimize this suffering. To achieve this, we must recognize our mortality and embrace the impermanent nature of our existence.

To bring about sustainable change, we must abandon the concept of finding meaning rooted in self-interest. We can achieve this through embracing the Buddhist concept of not-self, *anatman.* This concept does not uphold that a person lacks an individual identity, it just presupposes that there is no intrinsic essence that makes us any different from anyone else (Barash 2014, p. 45). This concept of the not-self can help us recognize the illusion of our separateness, not just from nature but from other humans, and how being human actually joins us to nature (Barash 2014, p. 29). This joining to the environment erases the boundaries between "us" and "them", making it evident that we inter-are and allowing us to find meaning in these interconnections rather than in our individuality (Barash 2014, p.37). In this way, the concept of not-self can prevent us from placing ourselves into dichotomies in the hopes of belonging. Furthermore, once we understand that the self is just a construct with no inherent meaning, we will start to question the other constructs in which we place so much value upon, such as money, possessions, and personal achievements. In doing this, we may no longer derive our sense of meaning from these valueless items. We can hopefully develop economic institutions that are less focused on individual achievement and more supportive of wealth distribution.

Lastly, I believe that it is essential that we accept the Buddhist concept of interconnectedness to create the most authentic and sustainable source of meaning. When we recognize the codependent arising of all existence, we become compassionate beings (Barash 2014, p. 103). This compassion allows us to gain an awareness of the suffering of others. If we can see the suffering that our excessive consumption is creating, we should realize that finding

meaning through it is fundamentally wrong. This is where I think that our desire for accomplishment motivated by our legacy drive can help to create this shift in meaning that we desperately need. Aarssen mentions that our accomplishment is fueled not only by consumerism and wealth, but also by showing kindness and compassion to others (2010). If we were to find meaning through demonstrating empathy and attempting to alleviate the suffering of everyone that we can extend our reach to, I think that could result in the paradigm shift that we need to create sustainable global change. It could be that we do not need to focus on suppressing our biological drives, but instead using them in a way that benefits others rather than benefiting just our selfish interests. Perhaps if we are not preoccupied with our mortality, our legacy drive could fuel sustainable change by evoking a sense of meaning that is grounded in showing compassion and recognizing the suffering of others.

Conclusion

We must stop allowing our selfish interests to define how we seek meaning in our lives. If we want to create the paradigm shift needed to address anthropocentric global change, we need to seek meaning in a way that is based in compassion rather than exclusion, that favours the collective over the individual, and that prioritizes interconnectedness rather than separateness. We cannot continue to allow our core genetic drives to be our only motivator for finding meaning. But we can use these Buddhist concepts of impermanence, the not-self, interconnectedness, and compassion to create a cultural evolution that might be able to rescue us from the failings and intrinsic constraints of our own genetic makeup (Baumeister et al. 2013). For this to occur, we must use our cognitive toolkit to make change at the individual level, which can result in the creation of wide-scale cultural evolution. By suppressing some of our selfish biological desires and embracing certain Buddhist philosophical concepts, we might just be able

to satisfy our intrinsic desire for meaning in a way that promotes the peaceful coexistence of all beings.

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