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PROMOTING CONSCIOUS AND ACTIVE LEARNING AND AGING

HOW TO FACE CURRENT
AND FUTURE CHALLENGES?

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**THE MEANING OF LIFE AND CONSCIOUS AGING:
EDUCATING THROUGH THE PERSPECTIVE OF THE END**

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Abstract

In this chapter a broad analysis of the concept of meaning is done, where it can be assigned to the plant and animal life; the particular case of meaning given to human life is also analysed and discussed.

From the conception of J. LeDoux, who asserts that human brain activity is synaptic, the question is raised of the human brain as that which discovers the various senses attributable to sensory perceptions, namely aesthetic, ethic and rational sense.

It is proposed that the deepest sense assigned by the brain to human life is symbolic immortality, especially religious, according to Lifton, as hope in the life of the world to come.

Finally, it is assumed that it is possible to educate for the end of the body's life time, so that it is accepted as a significant time for the person.

Keywords: Meaning; Brain-mind-self; Gerogogy; Death

Where the concept of the meaning of life is discussed.

The extreme question: 'Does life have meaning? Does it have any meaning?' has troubled philosophers since the dawn of Greek thought

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and for some, may have even been the origin of philosophy itself, as an abstract reflection exercised over the mental content we call ideas.

This question unfolds into two, which have different ranges.

The first refers to life in general as it is perceived in plants and animals, made up of living cells.

The second focuses on a specific model of life which is the life of human beings.

I am therefore stating that human life is not just life in general. It is more, it is different.

Life in general, which expresses itself in plants and animals, is studied by Biology.

Biologists do not worry at all about meaning, nor do they spend a minute of their research time asking themselves or other researchers whether life has any meaning or not.

Life is here, it happens in the universe, in physical and chemical structures. It can be studied with the method of these scientific subjects and others, like Mathematics, and out of these studies no conclusion arises that has to do with meaning.

When scientists ask a question in the scope of Biology, what they wish to find is a causal relationship between a biological fact and another biological fact. For example, asking if the pH of the cellular micro-environment limits the cellular membrane permeability in relation to calcium ions, places us in the field of chemistry-physics, in specific facts, and the answer is yes or no; and neither answer will assign any meaning to the permeability of the cell membrane.

I conclude that biological life that expresses itself in plants and animals has no meaning; nor does it need any.

Of course a more attentive and shrewd listener (and reader) will already be thinking: it is easy to exclude meaning from biological life if you do not explain the 'meaning' you assign to the word 'meaning'.

And they are right. But the question of the meaning assigned to the word 'meaning' is only meaningful when it is thought by human intelligence.

In other words, assigning meaning is a specific activity of the reflective intelligence of modern man. Exercised freely.

Because only intelligent human beings have the capacity to assign a meaning to sensitive and sensory perceptions; because only they have the neuronal structures through which the assignment of meaning to perceptions can be biologically processed.

Assigning meaning is an activity of the human brain; it is a mental capacity.

We know that such activity developed slowly in time, keeping up with the evolution of individuals of the *Homo* species. One may state that when *Homo* developed this mental capacity fully, he then earned the designation *sapiens*.

Sapiens assigns a meaning to perceptions and this meaning conditions strategic decisions, forever oriented towards the survival of each individual and, indirectly, the species.

It seems, to neurobiologists of the likes of Joseph LeDoux (2002), that the assignment of the meaning of fear of certain perceptions creates the neuronal networks that will coordinate behaviour adapted to individual survival, particularly immediate flight or fight.

In modern man, which is what concerns us here, there are three levels of assignment of meaning to perceptions, each of which is anchored in cellular areas, neuronal networks and specific chemical neuromediators – the neuropeptides.

The first level is the assignment of an aesthetic meaning, pleasant or unpleasant. It is what human beings exhibit upon birth and during the first years of life. This aesthetic meaning determines their choices and their actions.

The second meaning assigned by human beings to perception is ethical meaning: the meaning of good and bad for the subject, of positive or negative, of acceptable or unacceptable by the individual subject.

These two capacities of the subject as a cognitive agent are exercised by what we call, in general, the limbic and amygdaline system, suprachiasmatic.

Damásio and other neurobiologists consider that the assignment of an aesthetic and ethical meaning to perceptions – visual, auditory, tactile,

taste and olfactory – points to the cerebral capacity that Goleman (2000) designates emotional intelligence.

Nevertheless, let me state that these two meanings do not have to be congruent. Let me give you an example.

When I encounter a bee, I acknowledge that aesthetically it is a beautiful living object but ethically it represents bad to me and I either kill it or run from it.

It has been stated – and with a good basis so it seems – that more than half (some mention 80%) of our decisions are motivated by the aesthetic and ethical meanings assigned by our emotional intelligence to the world around us, which enters us through our sensory organs – the organs that lead to the assignment of meanings – and record them, as senses, in our working memory.

The third level is the rational.

By entering this third level we are reaching the highest level, which includes rational pondering of perceptions and the use of the logical capacity of thought.

Rationalizing perceptions to decide behaviours is a function that depends on the brain in its entirety, but it is commanded by the so-called executive brain which is the supraorbital prefrontal cortex. This cerebral area, which in *Homo* represents the largest number of neurons in the beings of the Primate class, receives inputs from all cerebral areas and is connected in a network to the most important territories for the motor and other responses.

Everything happens as if Man knew that he knows he can use the perceptions and memories of the aesthetic and ethical meanings to assign them a rational meaning and integrate them into what Damásio (2000) designates as the autobiographical Self.

When he reaches this threshold, *Homo* is now *sapiens*; *sapiens* is he who knows he knows.

And it is this *sapiens*, the *sapiens* who will invent the question of meaning in his own life as a human being conscious of himself, in other words, self-conscious.

Self-consciousness as an inner and autonomous virtual space within each of us, does not have, up to this moment, any neurobiological expla-

nation. Joseph LeDoux (2002) called his book *Synaptic Self* but concludes that “the self is so fragile an entity it is disconcerting”.

It is in fact disconcerting to understand how the electrical-chemical activities of the various areas of the brain, active or at rest, make each one of us what we in fact are in our self-consciousness.

But it is this self-conscious Self that asks about the meaning of living of humans, these living beings that are in the world, like all others, who know a world and live in it, but who also know themselves and are and live in the world, with a memory of the past already lived and the capacity to imagine the future to be lived.

The meaning that intelligence seeks is not only for the present, it is also for the past, and in an extreme way, for the future.

Who am I, where do I come from and where am I going: these are the questions for which Man’s intelligence has forever sought answers that will, as a whole, comprise the meaning of human life.

What meaning(s) does human life have?

Throughout historical times, many meanings have been proposed for human life. All of them have a common bearing – the meaning, as to its origin, is sought in nature, and as to its end, in the supernatural.

It is so in the most significant myth of human history, which is the Hebrew narrative described in Genesis; this description appears with the invention of writing but was, surely, an oral narrative passed on from generation to generation for many thousands of years. In the current human tribes that have not yet ascended to writing, researchers find mythical narratives on the origin of the world and the origin of Man from nature, be it nature represented by Mother Earth, be it living nature – animal, as a rule. Now, regarding the meaning of the end of human life, the oral and later written myths of peoples with whom the ‘civilized’ ones presently contact, like the Indians from Northeast Canada, all draw on a supernatural life (Abram, 1996).

The assignment of meaning to human life is not, of course, an individual decision. It is a collective proposal that is embedded in dialogue that feeds the socialization of peoples and which ends up being the main motivation for social cohesion, from the most primitive of societies.

The content of the myths that assign meaning to the living of humans is, in its specific expression, very varied; but as I mentioned, it always binds human beings to nature.

Therefore, the main meaning of the living of humans is that they are part of nature, being bound to it in order to survive.

As natural beings, we must comply with the natural programme: we are born, we grow, we reproduce (or not) and we die.

The death of each one is part of the meaning of our life, as living objects in the natural world.

It is not a personal tragedy.

It is not an unpredictable surprise.

It is not a vengeance of the gods.

Dying is as natural as living is natural.

The life cycle of men is like that of plants and other animals – they are all born, they all live, they all die.

That being so, the first topic for pedagogy on dying is this – dying is as natural as living.

Living is not avoided, as dying is not avoided.

Just like living is socialized, so too has dying always been socialized.

Even though in modern and developed societies the dying of people is already considered by the other members of society, and even the very family members, an individual and natural event, rituals still persist that accompany the process of dying to the end; and after the end, in various forms, from inhumation to cremation.

As I usually say, death does not exist; you and I exist, who will die.

The issue before us now, since we have already accepted dying as a natural event, is to know whether there is a meaning for the dying of humans.

I will answer, first, on a biological level.

Yes, there is a biological meaning for the death of humans. If they do not die as individual beings, the fate of the human species would be of

mass extinction by food shortage (as has probably already happened with many other species); even with great progress in agricultural production, planet Earth has the capacity to hold a finite number of individuals of the human species; without natural death, the number would be infinite and the species would extinguish itself when not even violent massacres would allow the temporary survival of the species.

And at the specifically human and personal level, can individual dying have any meaning?

At a conference in the Academy of Sciences in 1993, among other thoughts, I wrote the statements I will comment on next. I quote from the text:

“With the death of each man, a specific cultural universe comes to an end, more or less rich but always original and unrepeatable. What a man leaves behind upon death – his writings, the cultural objects he created, the memory of his word, of his gestures or of his smile for the ones who lived with him, the children he generated – everything expresses a reality that is beyond the physical body, a certain physical body, that that man used to live his limited personal time to be a man” (Serrão, 2010, p. 283).

What I mean to say in this excerpt of a longer text is that the meaning of human life is immortality.

As beings that create culture, which is expressed in the modifications that human intelligence produces in nature, be it a chiselled flint or a Manhattan skyscraper, humans invent meanings for natural objects by transforming them into significant cultural objects. These cultural objects remain tied to their inventor and creator, ensuring him temporal immortality, if they are not perishable.

This immortality is, of course, a symbolic immortality – one of literary and artistic creation in general.

Our world is full of objects of symbolic immortality. Leonardo da Vinci is symbolically alive in the beautiful *Gioconda*, Camões lives in *Os Lusíadas*, Rodin in *The Thinker*, Shakespeare in *King Lear*, and thousands and thousands of creators are alive in other cultures, well outside this western culture where the four I mentioned, from among thousands and thousands, lived and became immortal.

Lifton, one of the creators of this concept of symbolic immortality, acknowledges other forms besides this one. For example, the biological, represented by the generation of children, and transcendental meditation, in which one attempts to live outside the strict bond to the specific world, how life is imagined after the corporal death; and he particularly highlighted the religious form which, for example, in the Hebrew tradition and later in the Christian religion, is an agreement or alliance made with Yahweh and renewed with Jesus of Nazareth.

This contract, if regarded and thought of as a form of symbolic immortality, places in everyone's joyful life, in the world, the assurance of immortality. Moses said, 'do these ten good things and Yahweh shall be with you for all eternity'. And Jesus of Nazareth was very clear, 'love one another and you shall have eternal life'.

If we accept, as I do, that the meaning of life is personal immortality, we can state that the whole process of living is one of hope for that immortality, which will have to be built, day after day, and must be present even on the last day. Many millions of people throughout the World repeat that 'they await the life of the world to come' (last sentence of the catholic Creed). It is not a position of faith; it is a declaration of hope.

Educating for hope in symbolic immortality in any of its forms is educating through the perspective of the end, which will be an end for the body but permanence for the spirit and its works created within the span of life.

A Chilean psychiatrist, Fernando Lolas Stepke (1993, cit. by Stepke & Drumond, 2007) proposes the neologism *gerogogy* to characterize "a process of education towards old-age, which anticipates the predictable changes and allows the maintenance of the capacity to respond to them. Gerogogy is also a negative learning since, in a way, contrary to pedagogy, it comprises unwinding what has been wound and preparing to not be. Death, as an *exitus* could thus be arranged in a continuum, and we would need to perfect gerogogy towards a *tanatogerogogy*: educating for death in old-age" (p. 88).

The need for this pedagogy for death is the result not only of the growth of a post-modern culture, in which nothing has value and noth-

ing has meaning, but of the undeniable fact that the process of dying is no longer an event experienced and accompanied within the family environment, having become banal in hospital routines.

In a doctoral thesis made by the Chaplain of the São João Hospital, in Porto, Father José Nuno Ferreira da Silva (2012), this predominance of the process of dying in hospital is widely demonstrated. And his proposal is this, fully supported by anthropological and philosophical arguments: because the hospital, where people die, is not prepared to be a good place to die, this flaw must be corrected, by creating in it the structural, physical and human conditions, so that hospitals are good at treating patients and equally good at making the dying process dignified; in other words, so that living is dignified and good up to the moment of death.

The process of dying is a time that can be grandiose and happy for people, especially the elderly if they have absorbed a good tanatogero-gogy. In other words, if they are sure they have not lived in vain and that much of what they did was good and will remain for a very long time in the memory of others.

Nowadays, it is possible for people who know they are in the process of dying – a few short months, some weeks – to be helped by well-prepared professionals, to build their symbolic immortality in an active and committed way. This type of tanatogero-gogy, learning of a good life up to the end, is being practised in some palliative care units. For example, I witnessed all the enthusiasm and work in the preparation of a religious wedding that the lady in the process of dying wanted to have with her companion, the father of her children. I had no doubt that it was a form of symbolic immortality built one week before her body stopped living.

1. While having no intention of writing a didactic text, I tried to present elements that, through the diversity of the situations and cultures, will permit the construction of a process of education towards a good and peaceful experience of the dying process.

There is no meaning in speaking of the dignity of death.

But there is a lot of meaning in speaking of the dignity of life, of the whole human life, from conception until death.

Each one lives their process of living until dying as one more component of their past biography. And life lived in the process of dying is, for many, the recapitulation of the most striking aspects of their biography: I remember an old man, living the final stage of a neoplasia, who told me everything he had done in Angola for over forty years, with such perfect memory I was amazed, given the state of cancerous cachexia he was in. But it was a way of creating a form of symbolic immortality and dying, a few days later, in peace.

Educating through the perspective of the end will have to be done by those who have the experience of accompanying people in the process of dying and who fully know the grandeur and spiritual force that manifest themselves very often during this time.

Not doctors, nor nurses, nor social workers, nor volunteers, nor family members.

They might have such professions.

But in this intervention, with those who are in the process of dying, they will only be carers.

Caring for another, who is going to die, is work of the highest dignity that demands the possession of the greatest human virtues, without which the carer will not attain the primordial end – which is that of generating inner peace within those who are going to die.

I will leave you with the main ones to close this presentation and as a challenge to the applicants for carers of old-age and terminally-ill patients: compassion, prudence, courage, moderation, integrity and altruism; also competence and humility.

With these personal virtues, the carer can carry out an education through the perspective of the end, as from any age, to any person.

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