

EXISTENTIAL ORIENTATION AND MEANING IN LIFE

PhD course at Faculty of ARTS, Aarhus University

May 15-16, 2024



Photo by Claudia Welz (2023)

Description:

Life is the main thing, and meaning is the main thing in life. This can be illustrated with the help of the following parable: A barefoot man finds a single gold coin and converts it into two silver coins. With one coin, he buys a plate of rice. With the second, he buys a flower. To the question “Why,” he replies: “The rice is to live. The flower is to have something to live for.” To survive, for the sake of existence, a plate of rice is needed. For a sense of life, for meaning in life – a flower is necessary. Thanks to meaning, we differentiate between what’s important and what’s less significant, and we adjust our choices accordingly.

Personal experiences of meaning in life are varied and diverse, depending on our individual ways of orienting ourselves in the world. Therefore, in this course, we will investigate the link between existential orientation and meaning in life.

Can we expect a common or shared orientation towards existential meaning in life? Søren Kierkegaard identified three overlapping realms or dimensions of life that could be seen as worldview archetypes: the esthetic, the ethical, and the religious. These three dimensions of existence are intricately connected to our experiences of different modalities of meaning in life.

The course readings combine Kierkegaard's philosophical and theological search for meaning in different realms of life with Martin Buber's Chassidic stories about the love of God and one's fellow human beings, and the psychological pursuit for meaning despite massive trauma, in particular the approach developed by Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl in his "logotherapy."

In his keynote lecture, Dr. René Rosfort (Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, University of Copenhagen, Denmark) will focus on "Kierkegaard's Existential Approach: The Single Individual Between Faith and Reason." In her keynote lecture, Dr. Tami Yaguri (Ono Academic College) will present the "Art of Meaning," her own method of identifying and formulating meaning in a dialogical exchange, which she also employs in training art therapists and psychotherapists. In addition, Dr. Yaguri will conduct a workshop on personal meaning in life with the course participants.

Aims:

This course aims to provide

1. a critical discussion of theories and practices of pursuing meaning in different aspects of life's way
2. an interdisciplinary and interreligious approach to finding personal meaning in life
3. an introduction into the philosophy of orientation with a view to orientation in life crises.

Literature: The course materials will be forwarded via email.

Target group: This course will primarily target PhD students, but advanced MA students, postdoctoral researchers as well as colleagues interested in the theme are welcome, too.

Language: English

Form:

- Keynote lectures
- Reading sessions where classic texts are discussed
- Workshop on personal meaning in life
- Presentations of PhD papers

ECTS credits:

1,5 ECTS for preparation and participation without paper

2,5 ECTS for attending the course and presenting a paper

Lecturers:

Course responsible: Claudia Welz

Invited speakers: René Rosfort and Tami Yaguri

Time: May 15-16, 2024 (9:00-16:00 on both days)

Venue: Campus Nobelparken, Studenterhuset, Nordre Ringgade 3 (entrance Fredrik Nielsens Vej), 8000 Aarhus C, Building 1427, room 246 = auditorium M2

Program

Course day 1 (May 15): Philosophical and religious approaches to meaning and existential orientation

- 9:00-9:15 Welcome and introduction by course convenor Claudia Welz
9:15-10:00 Reading session 1: Kierkegaard on finding meaning in life
10:00-10:15 Coffee break
- 10:15-10:45 PhD paper 1: Brent Lyons (University of Oxford): "Kierkegaardian Anxiety and Meaning"
10:45-11:15 PhD paper 2: Ville Hämäläinen (Tampere University): "Inclosing Reserve as an Existence-Difficulty: Existential and Narrative Accounts of Inwardness"
- 11:15-11:30 Coffee break
11:30-12:15 Reading session 2: Philosophy of orientation and Chassidic wisdom à la Buber
12:15-13:00 Lunch break
- 13:00-13:15 Introduction to keynote lecture 1, which is part of the hybrid lecture series "Kierkegaard's Methodology in the Context of the History of Philosophy" (Research Unit for Kierkegaard Studies, Aarhus U.)
13:15-14:00 Dr. René Rosfort (Søren Kierkegaard Research Center, University of Copenhagen): "Kierkegaard's Existential Approach: The Single Individual Between Faith and Reason"
14:00-14:30 Discussion
14:30-15:00 Coffee break
- 15:00-15:30 PhD paper 3: Cassandra Swick (University of Oxford): "Existential Orientation and Mood: An Exploration of Kierkegaardian Earnestness and Bipolar Disorder"
15:30-16:00 PhD paper 4: Jordan Spencer Jacobs (Universidad Complutense de Madrid): "Between Kierkegaard and the Kozzker: An Exploration in the Footsteps of Abraham Joshua Heschel"

Venue: Campus Nobelparken, Studenterhuset, Nordre Ringgade 3 (entrance Fredrik Nielsens Vej), 8000 Aarhus C, Building 1427, room 246 = auditorium M2

Program

Course day 2 (May 16): Psychological and therapeutic approaches to meaning and existential orientation

9:00-9:45 Reading session 3: Frankl's logotherapy, meaning, and the absurd

9:45-10:00 Coffee break

10:00-10:45 Keynote lecture 2: Dr. Tami Yaguri (Ono Academic College):
"Towards the Art of Meaning"

10:45-11:15 Discussion

11:15-11:30 Coffee break

11:30-12:00 Introduction to a future workshop with Dr. Tami Yaguri on personal meaning in life

12:00-13:00 Lunch break

13:00-13:30 PhD paper 5: Lone Vesterdal (University of Southern Denmark):
"Imagination and Transformation"

13:30-14:00 PhD paper 6: Cecilia Pihl Jespersen (Aarhus University): "Meaning and Sense-Making in Illness Understanding – 'I'm still so confused because it just doesn't have *any* meaning'"

14:00-14:30 Coffee break

14:30-15:00 PhD paper 7: Lasse Borg Kjerkegaard (Aarhus University): "On the Edge of Meaning: Towards an Account of Anomalous Experiences of Meaningfulness in Schizophrenia"

15:00-15:30 PhD paper 8: Sebastian Bloch (University of Southern Denmark): "Measuring Meaning in Life in Denmark: Translation and Validation of the Danish Meaning and Purpose Scales"

15:30-16:00 Wrapping up & course evaluation

Abstracts of PhD Papers

**Brent Lyons (University of Oxford):
“Kierkegaardian Anxiety and Meaning”**

There is a strand of Kierkegaardian thought that serves as a powerful corrective to contemporary philosophical, theological, and psychological notions of anxiety. Namely, I suggest a close reading of Kierkegaard promotes a view of anxiety that yields possibly the most meaningful of all experiences. It is for this reason that Kierkegaard’s pseudonym, Vigilius Haufniensis, suggested that anxiety is “an expression of the perfection of human nature,” that to rightly understand anxiety is to learn “the ultimate,” and so on. Yet many interpretations characterize Kierkegaardian anxiety as a detrimental misrelation of the self. Others have it that Kierkegaard is merely providing a solution to some of the stickier theological problems of original sin. But left out of both interpretations is an extraordinarily powerful, positive method for orienting the experiencer of anxiety toward a relationship with God – our deepest source of meaning.

In this paper, I show first the distinction Haufniensis makes between fear and worry qua ‘actuality’ on the one hand, and anxiety qua ‘possibility’ on the other. Second, I show that when God offers one a new life, this new explosion of possibility properly arouses anxiety. Third, I show a distinction between meaning ‘in’ life versus the meaning ‘of’ life. And finally, I show how anxiety marks the beginning of a new story with God (our ‘poet’), in which the individual (God’s ‘poema’, as St. Paul put it) is invited to new meaning in life, where one is taken up into a grander meaning ‘of’ life.

**Ville Hämäläinen (Tampere University):
“Inclosing Reserve as an Existence-Difficulty:
Existential and Narrative Accounts of Inwardness”**

In Søren Kierkegaard's *Stages on Life's Way* (1845), Quidam appeals to his religious vocation as a reason to abandon the beloved girl, albeit acknowledging that the real reason behind the break-up was his combination of heavyheartedness (*Tungsind*) and inclosing reserve (*Indesluttethed*). The literary and existential dimensions have received attention merely subordinately to Kierkegaard's psychology (Nordentoft 2013; McCarthy 1978).

This paper will examine existential meanings that inclosing reserve gains in the aesthetic, ethical, and religious realms, and how those are accompanied by the narrative structure. I will approach *Indesluttethed* as an existence-difficulty, using Frater Taciturnus' word, but also from the perspective of a narrative account (cf. Clark & Phelan 2020).

For Quidam, heavyheartedness and inclosing reserve foil his attempt to cultivate a religious life-view. While some scholars (Tolstrup 2014) argue that inclosing reserve is a lack of inwardness, I would argue that it is rather a wrong kind of inwardness. It prevents the intimacy of two people or the fulfillment of marriage, as Vincent McCarthy (2015) remarks.

While being discussed in all other parts of the book, *Indesluttethed* is absent from Assessor Wilhelm's essay and the ethical stage in general. In addition to Quidam, the narrator, Frater Taciturnus, too, insists that inclosing reserve and heavyheartedness are needed for one's becoming religious. Taken together, the ethical is rather a confinium between the aesthetic and the religious than any self-standing stage.

Quidam's state of *Indesluttethed* may tempt us to psychologize Quidam's character. By comparison, a narrative account may partially answer the question why Kierkegaard is approaching the term from various perspectives, i.e., psychological study, literary depiction of *Indesluttethed* as an existence-difficulty, and a combination of these.

References:

- Clark, Matthew, and James Phelan. 2020. *Debating Rhetorical Narratology: On the Synthetic, Mimetic, and Thematic Aspects of Narrative*. Theory and Interpretation of Narrative. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press.
- McCarthy, Vincent. 1978. *The Phenomenology of Moods in Kierkegaard*. The Hague: Nijhoff.
- . 2015. *Kierkegaard as Psychologist*. Northwestern University Press.
- Nordentoft, Kresten. 2013. *Kierkegaards psykologi*. 2. [i.e. ny] udgave (Fotografisk optryk af 1972 udgaven). Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Tolstrup, Christian Fink. 2014. "Inwardness/Inward Deepening." In *Kierkegaard's Concepts: Tome IV: Individual to Novel*, edited by Steven M. Emmanuel, William McDonald, and Jon Stewart, 33–38. Kierkegaard Research: Sources, Reception and Resources 15. Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate.

Cassandra Swick (Oxford University)
**“Existential Orientation and Mood:
An Exploration of Kierkegaardian Earnestness and Bipolar Disorder”**

This paper will explore the relationship between mood and existential orientation in meaning making, arguing that the two categories are distinct. As a case study, it will explore the connection between mood and the experience of meaning in individuals with bipolar disorder: in a manic or hypomanic state, an individual can experience an unusually intense sense of meaning, while in a depressed state, he or she then experiences an intense loss of meaning.

This raises an important question: what is the relationship between these symptoms and existential orientation? Does existential orientation (which determines the content of meaning) remain constant as mood (meaning as subjective experience) changes?

The paper will examine Soren Kierkegaard’s distinction between “mood” and “earnestness” in his discourse “At a Graveside” as one possible answer to these questions. In the context of the discourse, mood is any way of thinking that is not earnest reflection upon one’s own existence. This category can include the conventional sense of the mood as emotion, but also thinking objectively and not personally.

Earnestness, on the other hand, is related to: (1) commitment to Kierkegaardian subjectivity (2) in the context of relationship with the eternal. It appears that earnestness is an existential orientation that transcends moods like those experienced in bipolar disorder because of its rootedness in the eternal. While the subjective experience of meaning radically changes with clinical mood, earnestness is something that can persist through many psychological states. This implies that mood and existential orientation are distinct categories.

**Jordan Spencer Jacobs (Universidad Complutense de Madrid):
“Between Kierkegaard and the Kotzker:
An Exploration in the Footsteps of Abraham Joshua Heschel”**

In 1973, shortly after the passing of Abraham Joshua Heschel (b. 1907), a final work came to press under the title *A Passion for Truth*. Comparing and contrasting the Baal Shem Tov (1698-1760) with the Kotzker Rebbe (1787-1859), the text offers a fitting overview of the dual influences, and in turn, the competing tensions, that coursed through the life and thought of Heschel. “I was taught,” Heschel reflects, “about inexhaustible mines of meaning by the Baal Shem; from the Kotzker I learned to detect immense mountains of absurdity standing in the way. The one taught me song, the other-silence” (xiv).

Indeed, in our own confrontation with “Existential Orientation and Meaning in Life,” such a foray may offer at the very least *some food for thought*. Nevertheless, in the same work Heschel offers another comparison that may catch the reader by surprise: one that places the Kotzker Rebbe alongside Søren Kierkegaard.

In the paper under consideration, I would like to approach Heschel’s treatment of the Kotzker and Kierkegaard, directing myself towards elements common to both, while also considering the larger significance, and relevance, of their ideas in the 21st century.

Admittedly, such a task is not unique to me, as Heschel himself, in *A Passion for Truth*, rhetorically posits a similar inquiry. However, more than 50 years after the text’s initial publication (and more than 70 years after Heschel offered his prognosis of a “technical civilization” in *The Sabbath*) we appear to be at a moment ripe and wanting for a fresh encounter with such ideas.

**Lone Vesterdal (University of Southern Denmark):
“Imagination and Transformation”**

Can *Bildbetrachtung* – viewing images and reflecting upon them – transform lives? I am performing an action research project on the effects of using classical paintings and sculptures in pastoral care group sessions. Paintings, and works of art in general, are means or instruments of ‘acting’ for pastoral caregivers providing spiritual counselling. Traditionally, the Christian church has high standards for architecture and art in the churches.

But what does it in fact mean for the participants in local pastoral group sessions to reflect on human existence and meaning with the help of paintings? And what is the link between imagination and transformation? This is the main question in my study. I have developed a new method and new materials for pastoral care in group sessions, and I am involved in the validation of both the method and the materials.

In my presentation, I will explain the method and the content of the materials. I will also present a theological theory of imagination and its effect regarding existential transformation and the experience of meaning and hope in life.

**Cecilia Pihl Jespersen (Aarhus University Hospital):
“Meaning and Sense-Making in Illness Understanding –
‘I’m still so confused because it just doesn’t have *any* meaning’”**

Cecilia Pihl Jespersen¹, Heidi Frølund Pedersen¹, Lise Kirstine Gormsen¹, Maria Kleinstäuber², Aida Andersen³, Eileen Connelly⁴.

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Background

Functional somatic disorders (FSDs) are characterized by bodily symptoms without a primary biomedical explanation. Illness understanding is considered key to the treatment of FSDs, yet the underlying process of sense-making and experience of meaning is often less explicitly addressed. Illness understanding may contain both the acquisition of new information, the process of making sense of this information by connecting it to one's experience, and the process of finding meaning with this understanding within one's values and beliefs. Illness understanding, thus, can be considered an existential process.

As part of a qualitative exploration of the existential dimension in FSD, this study investigates the patient's experience of sense-making and meaning in the initial negotiation of illness understanding.

Methods

8 patients with FSD were followed at the Clinic for Functional Disorders, AUH. Assessment and individual consultation were observed and audio-recorded, and these data were used to inform qualitative interviews with the patients. The coding and analysis were conducted during spring 2024 using thematic analysis. The theoretical framework for the analysis is based on enactivism and defines the existential dimension as a reflexive stance-taking motivated by our concerns and values, and both by secular/philosophical and spiritual/religious worldviews.

Perspectives

Negotiating a nuanced illness understanding is a central yet sometimes challenging clinical endeavor. This study could broaden our knowledge on how to approach this existential journey by supporting the patients' process of making sense and finding meaning in their situation.

**Lasse Borg Kjerkegaard (Aarhus University):
“On the Edge of Meaning:
Towards an Account of Anomalous Experiences of Meaningfulness in
Schizophrenia”**

One very peculiar aspect of experiential life reported by people with schizophrenia is their anomalous experiences of *meaningfulness*. At times, these experiences may be unusually intense: innocuous things and events may be sensed to possess a mysterious, urgent and often menacing significance, often one which is incommunicable. Much more pervasively, however, it seems that people with schizophrenia see little to no meaning in many of the aspects of everyday life that others rely on and take for granted as meaningful, which leads patients to an existence marked by profound passivity, withdrawal, and alienation.

My paper will engage with these anomalous experiences of meaning, and I will attempt to cast light on why they polarize in such a seemingly paradoxical way, sometimes as an excess of experienced meaning, but more pervasively as a dearth of it. I will do so in a manner that gives earnest consideration to testimonies of the felt quality of these anomalous experiences.

Drawing on insights and arguments from Husserl and Heidegger, as well as on classical and contemporary work within the tradition of phenomenological psychopathology, my paper will re-emphasize and modify the concept of ‘common sense’ as it has been used within psychopathology.

This modification will underscore the roles that various levels of intersubjectivity play in everyday experiences of meaningfulness, both tacitly and explicitly. By investigating and uncovering these, it will be possible to sketch a novel way to understand anomalous experiences of meaning in schizophrenia, as well as their seemingly paradoxical polarizations.

**Sebastian Bloch (University of Southern Denmark):
“Measuring Meaning in Life in Denmark: Translation and Validation of the Danish Meaning and Purpose Scales”**

Meaning in life is associated with different aspects of physical and psychological health. Existing instruments measuring meaning in life have either lacked conceptual comprehensiveness or been too comprehensive to gain widespread use in clinical settings. This article presents the translation and validation of the Danish Meaning and Purpose Scales (MAPS-Da) in a Danish context.

Method: An extensive translation procedure was conducted including forward-backward translation, cognitive interviews for content validation, and a pilot study including 477 respondents.

Results: Confirmatory factor analysis showed factor structures similar to those found with the original German scale. Construct validity was established using the subscales of MAPS-Da and measures of mental health and satisfaction with life. Correlation analysis showed that being a parent and being married were the factors most associated with meaningfulness.

Discussion: Results are discussed in the light of former literature and relevant theory.

Conclusions: The MAPS-Da appears to be a valid instrument for measuring meaning in life.