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Apes in Tuxedos: Robust Sense of Meaning Built upon Our Evolutionarily Developed Basic Psychological Needs

Frank Martela

Why do humans seek meaning? Many thinkers on meaning take it as self-evident that the quest for meaning is a fundamental human need (e.g. Frankl 1963; Maslow 1968). But for this to be so, there needs to be some kind of evolutionary origin for the human need for meaning. However, as Baumeister and von Hippel note, the interface between biological evolution and cultural meaning is still unexplored, and thus their contribution helps to initiate an important conversation. And I think they are on the right track when they suggest that what makes life meaningful mostly boils down to basic animal functions and needs, which are just dressed up in a more reflective attire. Humans are indeed "apes in tuxedos," and the grand question about meaning and what makes life worth living can to a significant degree be answered through understanding our biologically inherited basic nature.

However, in my view, there are two separate phenomena in need of an evolutionary explanation: meaning as comprehension and meaning as purpose and worthiness (Martela and Steger 2016; George and Park 2016). Comprehension—being able to understand what is happening and what various stimuli signify—is the first key facet of meaning. A rudimentary form of pattern-detection and processing of stimuli in order to react in the most advantageous

way is part of all biological life. The ability to use symbolic language to label things, to transfer understanding from one person to another using such symbols, and an enormous capacity to simulate various scenarios in one's head to predict their long-term outcome, makes humans unique in the animal kingdom (Clark 2016; Baumeister and von Hippel 2019). But the basic instinct to feel distressed and alert in situations we don't comprehend, and the inherent need to maintain meaning and make sense of one's environment (Heine, Proulx, and Vohs 2006), is probably something we have inherited from our ape-like ancestors. The evolutionary advantages of such pattern-detection and the ability to comprehend one's environment are easily seen: in order to choose the appropriate reaction, we need to have an accurate view of what is actually happening (Heintzelman and King 2014).

However, often when we ask about the meaning of life we are not merely seeking to *understand* life. We want to *find value* in life (Martela and Steger 2016). The great philosophical writers concerned with the meaning of life have first and foremost sought an explanation for why their own lives—and human life more generally—would be worth living (Camus 1955; Carlyle 1991; Tolstoy 2000). This question of value is a by-product of the human ability to reflect about our lives. Many of our actions are triggered by basic biological drives. Hunger motivates us to seek food; our child's cry motivates us to alleviate their pain. But humans have a unique capacity to stop in the middle of the action and ask "why": Why am I doing this? What is the justification or value of this action?

In seeking justification for actions, various cultures have tended to provide some transcendent explanations: almighty God or a cosmos where everything has a purpose have guaranteed values. As these worldviews tended to be all-encompassing, reinforced through various rituals, and shared by the whole group, they felt self-evident to the degree that it was virtually impossible to think "outside" of these worldviews (cf. Taylor 2007; Hyman 2010). However, the modern scientific worldview seems to undercut such ultimate sources of

transcendent justification, instead viewing the human being as an accidental outcome of natural selection that is born, grows, dies, and decomposes in a cosmic eyeblink. Tolstoy (2000, 15) expressed the scientific view of human life in very blunt terms: “You are an accidentally cohering globule of something. The globule is fermenting.”

Thus, it was the rise of the scientific worldview that led to a crisis in the availability of ultimate justifications for human action and worthiness—to a crisis of meaning (Martela 2020). It is hard to fit together the idea that life has some objective meaning with the fact that life is not intentionally created but a random product of natural selection.

However, the whole need to have an *objective* meaning is not a biological necessity, but a cultural symptom of particular historical conditions. As Baumeister and von Hippel note: “What is modern is not the need to apply meaning to life, but rather the problem of doing so without the collective consensus rooted in seeing religion and its attendant moral prescriptions as objective facts.” On a more basic level, what humans need to experience is that their actions and goals are worthwhile and that their lives are worth living. John Dewey distinguished between “prizing” and “appraising” (Dewey 1939). Prizing is the act of preferring one thing over another. It is primarily emotional and something that every animal engages in. A total lack of prizing would lead to inaction as no impulse would move us in any direction. Appraising, in contrast, is the reflective evaluation of our preferences to settle which of them are, in fact, worth valuing. What thus separates humans from animals is that we don’t settle for mere instinctual prizing but that we want to reflectively endorse our actions and our lives.

The questions about finding direction in life and finding one’s life valuable—the purpose and worthiness facets of meaning in life (Martela and Steger 2016)—are thus rooted in the need to have “a framework of values, a philosophy of life” (Maslow 1968, 206) that can provide reflective justification for the worthiness of our lives and actions. However, there

is no reason to think that such justification ought to be “objective.” We have the option to decide that some of our inbuilt preferences are not only worth valuing *before* reflection, but also *after* reflection (Martela 2018). For example, we tend to see helping others—such as saving a person from drowning—as something that is highly meaningful (Martela 2017). An evolutionary story could be told for how we have—through mechanisms such as kin selection (Hamilton 1964), reciprocal altruism (Trivers 1971), indirect reciprocity (Alexander 1987), and strong reciprocity (Gintis 2000)—developed a preference for helping others (Barclay and van Vugt 2015; West, El Mouden, and Gardner 2011). But the fact that this preference is not objective but “inbuilt” to human nature is no reason to abandon it. There are many reflective reasons to endorse helping others as a key human value and a source of meaning: such a value is crucial for building functioning groups and societies where people can thrive. No wonder that empirical research has tended to find that helping others increases people’s sense of meaningfulness (e.g. Martela and Ryan 2016; Van Tongeren et al. 2016; Klein 2017).

Evolutionary pressures shaped our motivational systems and thus what we can see as a good life (von Hippel and Gonsalkorale 2018). Accordingly, the most potent candidates for sources of meaning are those that are aligned with our human nature and our built-in motivations, such as the need to belong and have deep relationships (Baumeister and Leary 1995), the need to live autonomously and authentically (Deci and Ryan 2000; Schlegel et al. 2011), and the need to develop and exercise one’s talents and experience a sense of mastery (Deci and Ryan 2000; Martela, Ryan, and Steger 2018). Humans have certain basic psychological needs and these needs provide a very good first draft for what makes life meaningful (Martela 2018; 2020). I thus agree with Baumeister and von Hippel that “many—if not most—life meanings are firmly rooted in animal motivations.” As these needs are part of our human nature, we find them intuitively attractive and worth pursuing. But—though space doesn't permit a full review of these—we can also find reflective reasons to uphold

them as key values. Thus, the basic needs can provide robust sources of meaningfulness that appeal to people across cultural and other boundaries. Rather than being made out of thin air, meanings are mostly found (Baumeister and Landau 2018)—and found within us. The fact that meanings originate from our ape nature doesn't disvalue them. These needs are well worth being dressed up in tuxedos and reflectively endorsed.

To summarize, complex biological organisms like humans most probably have innate tendencies to need to comprehend the world around them and to experience some actions as preferable to others. While the human capacity for reflection has greatly assisted in the first task, it has complicated the latter, leading to the need to endorse our actions and lives also after reflection. This, in turn, has led to the need to have value frameworks that can be used to justify one's actions and ways of living. And the rise of the scientific worldview has challenged the sense of objectivity typical of previous value frameworks, leading to a crisis of objective meaning. Fortunately, science can also help us to identify the most robust sources of meaning available to us humans by identifying the basic needs that virtually all humans share and that typically are also worth endorsing reflectively. Thus science can help in making our reflective value frameworks concordant with our basic human nature.

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