

6.1

ARE OUR HIGHEST ORDER DIRECTIONS 'GIVEN'?

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Supplementary material for Integrating counselling and psychotherapy: Directionality, synergy, and social change (Sage, 2019).

If each human being has a unique set of highest-order directions, where do these come from? For religious existentialists, like Buber and Frankl, such 'super meanings' (Frankl, 1986, p. 33) are 'given to us': the unique contribution that we, and only we, are called on to make to the world as we encounter particular situations (Heard, 1993). Frankl (1986) writes, 'the life of every man has a unique goal to which only one single course leads. Steering this course, man resembles the flier who is "piloted" into the airport through nocturnal mists to make a blind landing' (p. 55). Similarly, Buber (1964) states, 'For as the needle of the magnet has chosen from all points of the compass the north...so the soul from the beginning has chosen its direction out of the fullness of the all-possible' (pp. 57–58). From this perspective, then, our unique, highest order meanings are not something we choose or create, but something we discover. However, for both Buber and Frankl, this purpose is not something that is contained 'inside' our psyche, but emerges through our encounters with the world. Buber (1964) describes this with typical poetical elegance when he writes:

Since we cannot live without direction like eternal beings, there remains for us in the eternal only a single way: our direction. Not over the things, not between the things—in each thing, in the experience of each thing, the gate of the One opens to you if you bring with you the magic that unlocks it: the perfection of your direction. (p. 53)

Research, however, challenges some of these assumptions. People, for instance, do not seem to have one super-meaning in life, to which they constantly strive (Baumeister, 1991). Rather, life seems to be made up of much smaller meanings and purposes, built up over the period of a lifespan, rather than imposed upon it (Baumeister, 1991). However, the broader question of whether we come into life with given directions is, most likely, beyond empirical investigation.

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