

Chapter 8

Destiny Is in the Details: Action Identification in the Construction and Destruction of Meaning

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Imagine the following sequence of events. The alarm clock clamors, you throw back the blanket, stretch your limbs, adjust your position in the bed, step on the floor, proceed to the bathroom, take a shower, brush your teeth, slide clothes on, scramble some eggs, sit at the breakfast table, use eating utensils, put dishes in the sink, pack your briefcase, exit the house, get into the car, step on the pedals and turn the steering wheel for 30 minutes, pull into a parking space, exit the car, walk into your office, sit down, turn on the computer, push keys on the keyboard for several hours, shut down the computer, reverse the sequence of acts that got you to your office from home, enter your house, and engage in a series of acts that terminate several hours later with your getting into bed and falling asleep. Was this a meaningful day, and if so, why?

We cannot escape the objective nature of everyday experience. Yet we live in a phenomenal world that is decidedly different. People go beyond the detailed physicality of their interaction with the world to derive understanding and personal meaning, and it is this subjective state that defines their personal and interpersonal experience. What is less clear is how they do so. What principles are at work that enable people to transcend the objective aspects of their moment-to-moment actions and life experiences and to do so routinely, even automatically? Our aim in this chapter is to provide insight into this issue by focusing on the link between the world of movement and the world of meaning. The vehicle for this endeavor is action identification theory (Vallacher and Wegner 1985, 1987, 2012; Wegner and Vallacher 1986), a perspective on the representation and control of behavior with clear implications for how people find meaning in life. Central to the theory is the assumption that the minutia of everyday life are not transcended, but rather are fundamental to the construction—and destruction—of personal meaning.

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The Canonical Views of Meaning

Speculations and formal theories concerning the meaning of life are not new nor are they in short supply. Philosophers have approached the issue over the centuries from a wide variety of perspectives (cf. Baggini 2004; Nozick 1981; Westphal 1998), and in recent years psychologists, social scientists, and even neuroscientists have taken on the topic (cf. Baumeister 1991; Churchland 1989; Csíkszentmihályi 1990; Seligman 2002). For a topic that is so central to personal experience, it is odd that no one point of view has prevailed. Lay people, scientists, and philosophers have yet to agree on much of anything concerning the factors that provide meaning in everyday life.

If definitive answers are not forthcoming, the question has at least been parsed into more manageable issues. When addressing meanings in life, theorists and researchers have narrowed their focus to consider ideas that are amenable to empirical investigation. These include the following: Is the meaning of life open to conscious representation? How important are goals to the experience of meaning? Is the uniquely human capacity for self-awareness basic to the quest for, and attainment of, personal meaning? Do people achieve meaning through their connections with others? Does meaning derive from coherence in people's personal understanding of the world and their place in it? We discuss each of these ideas briefly, then suggest how the issue of meaning can be reframed in a different manner altogether.

Conscious Versus Unconscious Meaning

Social scientists commonly assume that meaning is consciously constructed. Blumer (1969), for example, suggested that meaning results from the interactions among thoughts, emotions, and behaviors specific to a given circumstance or situation and that people act on the basis of these meanings. This quite reasonable idea is embraced by many psychologists (e.g., Weber 1964). Cooley (1902) extended the relation between meaning and conscious representation of action by proposing that people come to understand their actions and form meaning through the "looking-glass self," an imaginary reflection of how one appears to others. The idea of a looking-glass self was further developed by Mead (1934), who theorized that meaning emerges from an individual's internal self-directed dialogues that guide the individual in imagining how other people perceive his or her actions. Collectively, these perspectives consider meaning as something consciously emergent from a person's actions and interactions with others or with his or her environment.

Some social scientists and psychologists, however, have postulated that the fundamental meaning in life is not open to conscious representation. Most famously, Freud (1998/1900) suggested that people were often unaware of the real meanings of their goals and behaviors. In this view, the true meaning associated with action was locked away in the unconscious, accessible only through the interpretation of

people's dreams. Similarly, Jung (1959) proposed that people consciously engage their world while draped in a persona that masks the real identities and meanings people possess. More recently, evolutionary psychologists have argued that the meaning of action resides in distal causes that are opaque to people as they respond to the proximate influences in their moment-to-moment and day-to-day lives (e.g., Buss 2005). People ascribe personal meanings to romantic attachment, for example, although the ultimate meaning of this realm of experience is the potential for gene propagation.

Meaning Through Goals

Theorists clearly disagree regarding the conscious versus unconscious *sources* of meaning, but there is general agreement that the *experience* of meaning is linked to objective action—what people actually do in their daily lives. Action, however, is a tricky concept that has been framed in myriad ways by philosophers and psychologists. So depending on how action is conceptualized, any number of perspectives could be advanced regarding the link between what people do and their subjective experience of meaning.

A common perspective on action centers on the concept of *goal*. As an action or set of actions evolve, the individual presumably updates his or her reflection of what was accomplished and considers what is expected or desired to come about from the activity. Goals, in turn, typically reflect values in that they organize and direct behavior towards the pursuit of desired, pleasurable future states. Frankl (1959/2009), an existentialist philosopher, implicates the commitment to a cause or goal beyond oneself as a source of purpose and meaning. In a similar vein, McGregor and Little (1998) merge a sense of identity with goal pursuit and accomplishment as an explanation for sense of meaningfulness. The idea that people are goal directed is widely embraced in contemporary psychology (cf. Carver and Scheier 2002; Higgins 1998; Miller et al. 1960; White 1959), and it is reasonable to assume that this feature of action is central to the experience of meaning in life. Some theories specify the content of goals that give meaning to action. Thus, people are said to be motivated by concerns ranging from achievement and power to affiliation and intimacy (e.g., Murray 1938).

The link between goals and personal meaning, however, is mediated by the affect associated with one's judgment of success or failure in goal attainment. In this view, meaning is the result of an iterative process in which people continuously update the content and understanding of their goals in service of affective responses to perceived progress towards those goals (e.g., Carver and Scheier 2002; Higgins 1998). This process can evoke the construction of meaning when goal pursuit is fluid and successful, leading to greater coherence in what is judged as meaningful. Alternatively, this same process can yield deconstruction of meaning when goal pursuit fails and an individual must shift focus to understand the source of the failure or abandon the goal and reorganize his or her sense of self.

Meaning Through Self-Concept Fulfillment

Other perspectives maintain that meaning is formed from behavior that is in accordance with one's true or authentic self rather than based on goal pursuit in particular (Kernis and Goldman 2006; Schlegel et al. 2009). There are many variations on this theme. Weber (1964), for example, posited that people ascribe meaning to their actions and those of others based on subjective perceptions of the self and others. Baumeister (1991) argues that meaningfulness may be satisfied by the fulfillment of four fundamental needs: having a sense of purpose and ability to accomplish that purpose, harboring a sense of life legitimacy and value, possessing self-efficacy, and having and maintaining a sense of self-worth. Wong (1998) lists nine factors contributing to the ideal meaningful life: achievement striving, religion, relationship, fulfillment, fairness-respect, self-confidence, self-integration, self-transcendence, and self-acceptance. Ryff (1989, 1995) lists self-acceptance, positive relations with others, autonomy, environmental mastery, purpose in life, and personal growth as central ingredients for psychological well-being. Heine et al. (2006) list self-esteem, cognitive closure and certainty, affiliation, and symbolic immortality as the criteria for experiencing meaning in life.

Meaning Through Social Connections

The need for meaningful, stable, lasting, and caring relationships is a fundamental motivation (Baumeister and Leary 1995). Relationships provide contexts for both the development and expression of the self. Feedback from "significant others" (e.g., close friends, relationship partners) has potentially significant implications for self-meaning and subjective well-being. Negative feedback and the possibility of social rejection signify a threat to social bonds, motivating people to reevaluate their own actions. Prolonged disruption to social relationships leading to social exclusion and ostracism reflects quite poorly on a person's self-concept and can conjure a loss of meaning in life (cf. Williams 2001).

The importance of social connections to a feeling of personal meaning has been demonstrated in social psychological research (cf. Baumeister and Leary 1995; Twenge et al. 2003; Williams 2001). Twenge et al. (2003), for example, induced some participants to feel socially rejected and others to feel accepted. This manipulation had a profound effect on participants' experience of personal meaning. When asked if they agreed with the statement "Life is meaningless," 21 % of the rejected participants answered in the affirmative, whereas none of the participants in the accepted condition did so. If merely feeling rejected can undercut a person's sense of meaning, one can imagine how intense the loss of meaning is when a person is actually cut off from social ties (Williams 2001).

Meaning Through Coherence

Yet another perspective emphasizes the importance of *coherence* in the experience of meaning. Coherence is widely implicated as a core component of personality and behavior (e.g., Cattell 1950; Cervone and Shoda 1999; Pervin 1989; Swann et al. 2003), the attainment of which is often treated as a dynamic process involving multiple reciprocal interactions that give rise to organization (e.g., Allport 1961; Bandura 1989). People are agents that actively organize their beliefs about the self, the world, and the relationship between the self and the world (Vallacher and Nowak 2007; Heine et al. 2006). This active press for coherence is postulated to underlie the emergence of meaning. From this perspective, the progressive mastery of skills and the coordination of action with respect to higher-order goals, values, and self-defining attributes provide personal bases for meaning.

Reframing the Issue

We do not quibble with any of the many accounts of what drives motivation and provides meaning in life. Each contender for the elusive “master motive” may well provide an important basis for meaning in people’s lives. The issue is not which goals, values, or self-views provide personal meanings, but rather *how* these meanings are forged. What processes are at work in the personal construction of meaning from the conduct of action in everyday life? We suggest that the highest and most abstract meanings in people’s lives do not transcend the concrete and seemingly trivial aspects of everyday behavior, but instead are intimately connected to these features of experience.

Action Identification Theory

At a fine-grained perspective, daily life is composed of countless details—a successive series of discrete actions, reactions, habits, behaviors, and thoughts. Action identification theory (Vallacher and Wegner 1985, 1987, 2012) is a set of principles that specifies the links between the granular nature of experience and the higher-order subjective nature of experience that provides meaning and purpose. The theory is based, somewhat ironically, on the inherently uncertain and ambiguous meaning of discrete actions. Indeed, the more concrete and movement based an action, the greater its potential for forging personal meaning. But this very uncertainty also means that the meaning derived from action can take on a wide variety of different representations with respect to content and valence. Two people doing exactly the

same thing may forge mutually contradictory meanings, and the same person can derive wholly different meanings from the same actions at different times or in different contexts.

Levels of Action Identification

Action identification theory begins with the recognition that any action can be described in many different ways. The act of typing, for example, may be identified as “expressing an idea,” “composing a manuscript,” “furthering one’s academic career,” or “striking computer keys.” The set of identities for an action can be structured within a hierarchy, ranging from *low-level* identities indicating *how* an action is performed to increasingly higher-level identities referring to *why* an action is done. Lower-level identities commonly reflect the movement-defined and concrete aspects of an action, whereas higher-level identities are superordinate and commonly more abstract and subjective. It is important to note, however, that identification level is a relative concept. Because act identities exist in relation to each other, whether a particular identity is low or high level depends on the identity with which is compared. Thus, the identity “typing words” is high level with respect to “moving one’s fingers,” but low level with respect to “composing a manuscript.” The task of action identification theory is to specify the factors that make one act identity in the identity hierarchy prepotent to the exclusion of the others and thereby reduce the uncertainty of action.

Principles of Action Identification

Despite the range of potential identities for an action, people experience little hesitancy in identifying what they are doing, have done, or intend to do. The interplay of three principles allows for this constraint on the open-ended nature of action identification.

The first principle holds action is maintained with respect to a single prepotent identity. The prepotent identity provides a frame of reference for initiating and carrying out an action and for reflecting on the action’s performance. The framing of one’s actions in terms of a single identity is central to models of self-regulation and in a broader sense to any theory that posits a link between mind and action (e.g., Carver and Scheier 2002; Higgins 1998; James 1890; Miller et al. 1960). In some instance, the prepotent identity is relatively high level, centered on the action’s purpose, goal, consequences, or implications for self-evaluation. But the prepotent identity in other instances may be relatively low level, reflecting the action’s molecular features. The second and third principles of the theory dictate the level of the action’s prepotent identity.

The second principle holds that when both a low-level and a high-level act identity are available, there is a tendency for the higher-level identity to become prepotent. In essence, people prefer to frame their actions in higher-level rather than lower-level terms (e.g., Wegner et al. 1984). People are concerned with whether their behavior facilitates progress towards goals, nurtures skills, maintains values and standards, and supports their self-concepts. As actions become well learned and effectively maintained over time, they typically become identified in higher-level, superordinate terms. For instance, “chopping vegetables” transforms to “cooking a meal” and later may be identified as “displaying one’s culinary prowess” and perhaps serving an even broader, more abstract goal of “impressing a date.” Once established, higher-level purpose and goal-oriented identities persist as long as the performance of an action is fluid, effective, or proceeds undisturbed. From this principle, once a set of actions becomes learned and routine, people take meaning from their goals and values rather than the details of their actions.

If the second principle were the only basis for identifying what one is doing, our minds would be populated with increasing abstract goals, implications, and consequences. Clearly this is not the case. Sometimes we are highly focused on the mechanical features of our behavior, despite the press for comprehensive understanding of what we are doing. This constraint follows from the theory’s third principle, which holds that when an action cannot be effectively maintained with respect to its prepotent identity, there is a tendency for a lower-level identity to become prepotent. This principle is engaged when a difficult action is attempted for the first time or when a well-learned or personally easy action is somehow disrupted. The person may wish to maintain the action with its effects and goals in mind, but a lower-level identity may be necessary to perform the action effectively (e.g., Vallacher et al. 1989). Returning to the culinary example, if the expert chef suddenly encountered a grease fire, his or her action identity may suddenly transition from “impressing a date” and “displaying one’s culinary skill” to a lower-level “operating the fire extinguisher” identity (resulting as well in a duly unimpressed date). The unexpected circumstance forces a shift from rehearsed actions that yield a higher-level identity to immediate attention to the details of one’s actions, corresponding to a focus on lower levels. Thus, the meaning behind an action is influenced by disruptions and novelty with these leading to a change in action meaning from something high level to something low level.

Meaning Through Action Identification

Action identification has straightforward implications for people’s experience of meaning in life. But rather than emphasizing the *content* of meaning, it depicts the *process* by which meaning of any kind is forged. Thus, the issue is not whether people find meaning through goals, the expression of values and self-defining personality traits, or a supportive social network that includes close relations. What gives life meaning is the construction of higher-level identities for one’s actions,

regardless of what aspect of experience—task performance, self-expression, or social relations—these actions represent. High-level identities provide coherence for the specific lower-level acts that define our daily experience. Without the lower-level acts, high-level identification would be an empty concept, devoid of firmly anchored meaning. By the same token, the experience of meaning can be undermined by the same principles that generated meaning in the first place. Below we discuss both the construction and deconstruction of meaning through action identification.

Emergence and the Construction of Meaning

Taken together, the three principles of action identification theory impart a dynamic interplay to the connection between mind and action. Low-level identities are adopted out of necessity rather than preference and thus are relatively unstable. The movement to a lower-level identity specified in the third principle thus provides the precondition for the adoption of a stable higher-level identity specified in the second principle. This tendency to embrace a higher-level identity when one is in a lower-level state is referred to as the *emergence process*.

Sometimes this process simply amounts to a temporary disruption to one's ongoing goals and concerns. After a brief detour to regain control of an action, the person is back on track to implement the original higher-level identity. If this were always the case, though, people would never develop insights into their actions or chart new courses of action. But research on action identification has shown that when a higher-level meaning has been abandoned in order to regain control of an action at a lower level, the person becomes sensitive to cues to higher-level meaning in the action context, and these may provide an avenue of emergence to a new way of understanding the action (e.g., Wegner et al. 1984). Without the experience of a lower-level identity, the change from one high-level identity to a different one would not occur.

Emergence can also be observed on a longer time scale. As a person becomes increasingly competent at an action, for example, he or she will tend to identify the action in terms of its consequences, self-evaluative implications, and other forms of meaning, rather than in terms of its lower-level details. This "sealing off" of lower-level act identities is consistent with research on skill acquisition and has been demonstrated for a variety of actions, including piano playing, essay writing, tennis, karate, and video games (Vallacher and Wegner 1985). People initiate each of these acts with a relatively high-level identity in mind, move to lower-level identities as they learn the action, and then move to a higher-level act identity as the action becomes mastered. The emergent identity, however, is rarely the same high-level identity that motivated the people to engage the action in the first place. Playing the piano, for example, may be identified initially as "impressing my friends," but after a sustained period of low-level maintenance, a proficient piano player may identify piano playing as "relaxing myself." The tendency for an emergent act identity to differ

from the action's antecedent identity provides a scenario by which people develop new motives, interests, concerns, and insights into their mental makeup.

The emergence process can also promote the prepotence of negative high-level identities. A person can deflect an undesirable characterization of his or her behavior, for example, as long as he or she has a more flattering depiction available at the same identification level. Someone informed that he or she has demonstrated insensitivity, for example, may be unperturbed by this feedback if he or she looks upon the action in question as offering constructive feedback. But if the person is induced to focus on the action's lower-level details, he or she is primed for emergence and thus is more likely to accept the unflattering higher-level characterization (e.g., Wegner et al. 1986). Because of the emergence process, people are capable of accepting responsibility for actions with negative consequences and implications and are open to new insights into their motives and personality dispositions.

When conceptualized in terms of the emergence process, meaning ceases to be something static, inflexible, and universal, but instead becomes an element of the dynamic mind-action system. This dynamic process-oriented view of meaning formation allows for a wide range of application and provides insight into why meaning can be experienced in very different ways, from adherence to cultural norms to the attainment of personal fulfillment. In each case, a higher-level identity provides a coherent understanding of one's behavior, whether the specific lower-level acts enacted in a local context or the pattern of one's lower-level acts enacted across diverse contexts and time frames.

Knowing the nature of the lower-level acts, however, is not necessarily informative of the higher-level meaning that emerges. In fact, the greater the novelty, difficulty, or complexity of such action, the greater the range of potential meanings that may emerge over time (Vallacher and Wegner 2012). The lower-level act of "pushing a button," for example, takes on a host of diverse meanings, depending on the context surrounding the act, the implications and unintended consequences of the act, or the person's past history or current concerns. Moreover, the higher-level meaning associated with an activity early on may be quite different from the meaning linked to the action as it becomes fully mastered and integrated into one's life (Vallacher and Wegner 1985). An act such as "running an experiment," for example, may be identified as "establishing one's reputation" early on in a scientist's career, only later to be supplanted by other meanings, such as "contributing to science" or "developing a new theory."

Deconstruction and the Collapse of Meaning

Despite the coherence and stability in understanding provided by high-level identification, an action identified in this way can lose its meaning. The deconstruction of meaning can be manifest in various ways. An action identified in relatively high-level terms can be disrupted, for example, with a concomitant shift to lower-level identities in accordance with the theory's third principle. Conditions of cognitive load such as

stress, exhaustion, time pressure, or the influence of drugs and alcohol interrupt a person's ability to carry out an action at its accustomed level of identification (Baumeister et al. 2000). A well-learned, more or less automatic behavior such as driving, for example, is disrupted under conditions of cognitive load. When exhausted, "going to the store" suddenly becomes "keeping the car between the lines" after a lapse in attention and near miss with oncoming traffic. A good night's rest is usually enough to alleviate the detrimental effects of such exhaustion, thereby reinstating proficiency in driving enough that a high-level identity can once again emerge as the optimal level for action maintenance. Temporary disruptions to well-learned actions are common, reflecting typical variability in people's effectiveness as they carry out activities. Transient disruptions to one's identification and associated meanings do not tend to signify serious threats to a person's sense of self or long-term goals.

Other threats to higher-level meaning can prove more problematic and enduring. A personal goal may become unattainable, a self-defining value may prove impossible to express, a cultural norm may lose its relevance, and meaningful social ties and close relationships can be ruptured. In such instances, the person may experience doubt about the meaning of his or her actions, even to the point of existential crisis and despair. A person whose values are threatened, for example, may question his or her identity and connection to the culture in which he or she lives. In like manner, someone who fails to achieve an important goal in some sphere of life (e.g., career, self-fulfillment, mastery of skilled action) may reconsider the time and effort he or she has spent engaging the lower-level acts subsumed by the goal.

The deconstruction of higher-level identities centered on social relations can prove especially troubling. A person who loses his or her connection to a social network or an intimate partner may ruminate on his or her personal worth, questioning long-standing assumptions about self-perceived attributes and strengths. Attempting to block the negative implications of loss or exclusion from self-awareness does not solve the problem. Such attempts instead lead to a deconstructed cognitive state characterized by a present-oriented focus on concrete immediately available stimuli (Twenge et al. 2003).

The deconstruction of meaning through relationship rupture or social exclusion does not always end poorly, however. The unpleasantness associated with the loss of meaning as one shifts from higher-level to lower-level identities is a precondition for emergent understanding and renewed attempts to achieve a meaningful understanding of one's social behavior. As with the disruption of skilled action, social rejection can alert the person to a problem that requires attention, motivating him or her to select different lower-level acts that hold potential for reinstating harmonious social relations.

The How and Why of Meaning in Life

One of the fundamental questions beguiling philosophers and scholars since the beginning of civilization is "what is the meaning in life?" This question may have eluded a clear answer for so many millennia because it is the wrong question.

The better question might be “*how* and *why* is there meaning in life?” According to action identification theory, meaning is an emergent result of how one identifies his or her actions. Meaning does not stem from abstraction, but rather is rooted in the real world and in day-to-day experiences. Ambiguous situations, difficult tasks, or novel encounters force the individual to engage the world with greater focus upon the details of his or her actions. Meaning, in such circumstances, becomes inexorably linked with action details so that more abstract formulations of what is meaningful are cast out of the conscious. Comparatively, simple, rehearsed, and well-learned tasks allow the individual meanings of each movement and action to coalesce into an emergent coherence. The coherence between multiple separate actions facilitates a shift in perspective from lower-level to higher-level identities. Meaning then emerges in conjunction with higher-level identifications, which are manifest as a wide variety of higher-order psychological constructs, ranging from idiosyncratic goals to socially shared norms, values, and beliefs.

Meaning does not remain fixed in either a low-level or high-level action frame. Instead, as a person progresses through his or her daily life, shifts in identifications translate to shifts in the perception of meaning and what is meaningful. Meaning is therefore something as rich and dynamic as anything in life; it continually evolves, becomes constructed, and falls into deconstruction, only to give way to other, new meanings. Much as James (1890) famously conceptualized consciousness as a stream of thought, the same could be said of the stream of meaning.

The course of meaning in a person’s life may come to settle upon important goals, beliefs, and values, but postulating that such lofty things are the source of meaning loses sight of how and why these higher-level states are meaningful to begin with. Consider if every impulse, desire, or goal were gratified immediately upon its occurrence in consciousness, such that no attention to details, motivation to overcome obstacles, or challenge to build one’s skills was required. Would the immediate and effortless satisfaction of meaningful goals be meaningful? Considering that great wealth allows a person to purchase the objects of his or her goals on a whim, the classic and empirically accurate adage that money cannot buy happiness suggests that things obtained without the details and without some element of personal effort are often meaningless.

Action identification provides a systematic way to understand the generation of meaning in life. Destiny is in the details—meaning emerges from the journey and progression towards an end state. It is sourced in the coherence among the individual detailed elements that combine to bring goals, beliefs, and values into a reality linked with one’s actions. The identification and understanding of one’s actions is how meaning is constructed and deconstructed and how it evolves throughout a person’s life. Meaning is not a tangible, static thing. Rather, meaning is dynamic and evolves according to the connections people have with others, the world, and the reality of their experiences. Identifying *what* is meaningful in life is as futile as chasing one’s own shadow. The *how* that identifies one’s actions gives rise to the *why* behind one’s pursuits, generating a coherent yet dynamic meaning in life that, although an undeniable force, nevertheless remains as translucent as the wind.

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