Existential Elements: death, boredom, loneliness and fear as manifestations of meaning

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Abstract

With the help of the philosophy of language and the study of meaning in the dimension of metaphysical implications, we will finally put very sensitive topics about the transcendence of human mind, body and existence out of the reach of superstitions and doctrines promoted by pseudo-sciences (astrology, ufology, parapsychology, numerology etc.), religions (creationism, intelligent design) and some other activities that cannot be precisely verified by other crictical perspectives, also not considering any experimental results and definitions from Biology, Physics, Chemistry and Psychology and all the contingencies of the scientific method. We will define the most prominent human existential elements in terms of metaphysical (modes and possibilities of existence) and linguistical (naming, meaning and term property attributions) notions, being death, the lack of meaning, boredom, the search for meaning, loneliness, the attempt of meaning and fear, the rejection of meaning.

Keywords: meaning, existence, finitude, people, life.

Elementos existenciais: morte, tédio, solidão e medo como manifestações do significado

Resumo

Com a ajuda da filosofia da linguagem e do estudo do significado na dimensão das implicações metafísicas, finalmente deixaremos fora do alcance de superstições e doutrinas promovidas por pseudociências (astrologia, ufologia, parapsicologia, numerologia etc.), religiões (criacionismo, design inteligente), e algumas outras atividades que não podem ser verificadas precisamente por outras perspectivas críticas, tópicos muito sensíveis acerca da transcendência da mente, corpo e existência humana, também não considerando quaisquer

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resultados experimentais e definições da Biologia, Física, Química, Psicologia e todas as contingências do método científico. Definiremos os elementos existenciais humanos mais proeminentes em termos de noções metafísicas (modos e possibilidades de existência) e linguísticas (nomeação, significado e atribuições de propriedade a termos), sendo a morte, a falta de significado, o tédio, a busca por significado, a solidão, a tentativa de significado e medo, a rejeição do significado.

Palavras-chave: significado, existência, finitude, pessoas, vida

Introduction

Tomasini (2017, p. 7-8) gives us the biological definition of death, and this is relevant, once we normally attribute "life" to those who apparently have physical body movements: 1. A final event; 2. An absolute state (being); 3. Part of dying process. Within this perspective, he also brings us the official definition of death proposed by the US President's Commission for the Study of Ethical Problems in Medicine and Biomedical and Behavioural Research set up by Ronald Reagan (1981): *"...an individual who has sustained either (1) irreversible cessation of circulatory and respiratory functions, or (2) irreversible cessation of all functions of the entire brain, including the brain stem, is dead"*. Tomasini says that this definition, although very "scientific", has problems in the (1) preciseness of how much oxygen can be left to still consider someone alive (and it depends from person to person) and in (2) what would it be a "real total brain failure because of the lack of the oxygen. He is certainly appealing to the fact that concepts, in general, according to the philosophy of language, are problematic to be rigid (ex. Is a concept described by its sheaf of properties like the descriptivist theory says or only the group of proper names can actually "pass" the Kripke's possible world's test? LYCAN, 2008, p. 39).

Tomasini, in his search for the definition of death, doesn't restrict himself to biology, but also describes death in a more conceptual level (Idem. p. 12): as a form of *change* and as a particular kind of personal *identity*'s loss. He says that there would be a *social death*, which *"is a relational or narrative change that happens as consequence of real changes in the intrinsic nature of biological materiality"* (Idem. p. 13). That means that when someone dies, one cannot provide any more changes and effects in one's social reality and we would have to *reinterpret* what we understand about this dead person as a linguistic and institutional being.

Although this is closer to what we are doing here in this paper, Tomasini's first attempt to define death in the first paragraph already yields to philosophical problems and the more conceptual attempt is rather euphemistic and sociological. We want to talk about death itself! (and what this exactly "self" is).

Let us be a little more practical about the death topic. When someone enters into an airplane for the first time in his or her life, one realizes that there is something strange in that situation: one doesn't have any other option beyond two simple things, which are, or to land safely or to die. This person has never put him or herself into a situation like this before. He or she has always had more than two options. "*Everyone, of course, does eventually have to die and will someday be beyond saving*", says Rachel Nuwer (2023). Well, if it were so easy to be sure of something, we would not have developed either any science, as an attempt to describe the natural phenomena, given as our very structure and condition for reality, or religion, given as dogmas, as an attempt to force explanations using the faith.

All these things that we have developed are not by chance. We fear death! We fear pain! We fear the unknown and the uncontrollable. What comes after (and before) death? Without any apparent reason to live, are we dead when we are bored? Why do people kill themselves when they don't feel welcome in the society or by a lover? Is fear a mere unpleasant feeling, as a survival tool, or can we really learn something about ourselves from it?

Promises of an eternal life, harmony for everyone in a paradise[2], spirits, ghosts and their unfinished business in the earthly plan, the good, the bad, right, wrong, the fair, taught by religions; the search for friends, love, a good job and a traditional "happy family" (directly from TV butter commercials), the will for a promotion, more money, capitalist dreams, taught by coaches; the control of our unconsciousness, child traumas, the unknown and bizarre, the ugly, the anxiety, taught by a psychologist, math and physics, all of this, might not be the ideal explanations for our biggest existential insecurities and doubts.

It is the role of philosophy, more specifically, the philosophy of language (naming, meaning and term property attributions) as the study of the conceptualization's problems themselves, including idealist metaphysical implications, to give the best answer for these

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[2] Which is, by the way, a linguistic impossibility. Ultimately, people would *fight* for the meaning of concepts, because, according to the pragmatics of language, if the religious paradise seeks to have people talking there, concepts have to vary their meanings related to the context of the utterances, generating ambiguity and, thus, fights. It seems that even after death, if the Christian paradise really existed, we would not be tax free to be happy.

fundamental problems of human life, since no other known species, apparently (we never actually know), bothers about these profound questions which surpass worries about our own animal survival. It is about *transcendence*.

Inspired mainly by the series of books by Lars Svendsen (2005, 2008, 2017), on this paper, we will analyze and conclude with originality, using linguistical concepts, answers to the definition of four specific existential issues: 1. what is death, boredom, loneliness and fear? After answering this, we must, then, ask: 2. are they connected in a certain and unique way? 3. Why these four, specifically?

1. Death: the lack of meaning

We will analyze Geofrey Scarre's book called Death (2007), where he assesses the opinion of the most famous philosophers who have written about the topic and, of course, his own opinion, and demonstrate that any explanation, theory or superstition that we have nowadays is insufficient and inconsistent, being linguistically *contradictory* and, thus, metaphysically *impossible* (according to an idealist view).

He asks "*Why, after all, should the living concern themselves with a state that, by definition, they do not occupy?*" (2007, p. 1). Like we have seen above, and this is a common sense, we all fear death because we fear the unknown and we have given rise to a lot of fragile and incoherent answers to what comes after death. "*Why should we study and have a 'good' life, if we are all going to die in the end*?", we ask ourselves. Sometimes, we try to justify this with the excuse that we are leaving for the world our legacy and contributions for a better future for humankind (including this paper, which I personally think that can make people, at least, think about something that they don't usually think about). Death is supposed to be the contrary of life, so the living should not care about this, as much as we don't care, for a while, about losing a job, while we are still working for a company… until we do! So, death is about an apparent and unavoidable *transformation*. But, can we even be *aware* that we are dead or being alive, and given this condition a name, is a *necessary* condition to consider the existence itself as a linguistic reality (because it has a name)?

Is there a good or right way to live?[3] Should we all be heroes? Should we all have to do great things? What are the criteria to classify all of these, anyway? There is none, actually. At least, nothing more than realize that, the more influence you can perform on human existence and the promotion of the longevity of this species, more important you are supposed to be, although we do not have any special reason for continue living. Apparently, we have a *psychological* tendency to believe that everything in this world is *compensated*. That is, everything has a price and, sooner or later, we will pay for anything that happens (allegedly, either good or bad). This means that, for example, a person considered a hero should have had a "heroic and honorable death" (if dying in a certain way could be considered any advantage) for all of his or her deeds.

Geofrey mentions the Roman Stoic philosopher Seneca: he was "*just one of many writers to have warned against wasting the limited time we have*" and that "*people who do not think about their own frailty or notice how time is passing are shocked, when death comes, to realize how little has been done*". Once more, without any real criteria, these are just coaching and an arbitrary meritocracy. Seneca finishes saying that "*Having limited horizons and being reluctant to dwell on ultimate questions, they are controlled by their fate rather than controlling it*" (2007, p. 3), giving a particular importance to the definitive and an undoubtful importance of the philosophical activity in answering the biggest existential questions, seeing as practically *slaves* those who deny this approach and only concern themselves about material and practical life of consume.

Geofrey talks (2007, p. 17) about Plato and his argument, in *Phaedo*, that we are supposed to have a kind of eternal life because there must be something that *remains*, which would be the soul, made by spiritual substance and, thus, resistant to time and transformations of materiality. This makes sense: if there are the things that decay, the opposite, linguistically speaking (metaphysically existent), exists too. Geofrey disagrees with the idea of eternal life, because "*all the analogies of our experience suggest that nothing is of infinite duration*", without noticing, like all critiques to determinism (i.e. when a non-determinist person has to be determinist to criticize the determinism), that the truth of this statement should be eternal

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[3] Considering relevant the metaphysical key in this paper, we should mention Whesley Fagliari (2020, p. 21), who brings Kant's idea of the *categorical imperative*, an *a priori* law, that is supposed to guide the human actions, saying what and why do something. He says that it was important to Kant to consider an *experience-free* analysis in order to achieve a "pure" conclusion on human's morality (same method that we are using here). The imperative says that we, as rational agents, should act always thinking about whether that action could be *universalized*, also, putting the humans as an end in themselves and not as a mean.

too, if he want to defend it. So, he contradicts himself. Anyway, this idea flirts with the initial question of this section, about why we care for doing great things, be respectful and gentle, to be compensated as a spirit in an eternal, secure and happy life after death. According to this, this death would not be more than a simple *different* kind of life. Independently of whether this promised paradise is true or not, this does not concern us, for this is not about death at all. So, what is death, anyway?

More than trying to define death itself as a phenomenon comprehensible to human beings, Geofrey highlights some aspects that could help us to see any importance whatsoever to think about this in the first place, saying that "*death is personal extinction, and that the various ethical and existential questions that the prospect of death raises are most profitably viewed from this perspective*" (2007, p 19). That is, we should think about how the world would be *without* us, at least, supposing its persistence, because, according to an idealist point of view, the reality is what I can perceive (of course, we also have the realist view, that says that the world exists independently of us). Otherwise, how could I say that there is a *real* world if it doesn't cause any influence to my senses (which I don't have anymore, as a dead person)[4]. We agree when he says that "*I cannot readily imagine the world without me. I can imagine, for example, observing my own funeral, but when I do so I am not really imagining myself as dead, but rather as a living onlooker*" (Id. Ibidem).

Mentioning Martin Heidegger, Geofrey (2007, p. 29) talks about how life is a mode of being-towards-death and, for this, we should be *authentic* while living, doing all the things which we actually believe in, without yielding to any social pressure about "doing the right thing". This idea makes us think that life is something that we should, at principle, respect and honor, as a gift from God (according to some religions), and be thankful to be exiting. However, we know that things *must not* be like this or anything else in particular (by the way, there are people who say that they don't have any obligations in life, because they have not

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[4] In his book, Geofrey (2007) says that "Of course, we recognize that the objective world will go on without us; other people will continue to live in a world that does not finish when we do" (p. 28). "once dead, I shall not be around to have a tragic sense of what I have lost, prior to my death I can regret the fact that the world of my consciousness will come to an end, and that there will be nothing to matter to me anymore" (p. 29), which is a direct and ungrounded answer to the very question of his own investigation. He is simply ignoring the idealist argument, which is *as strong as* the realist (why should a physical world depend on our minds to exist, anyway?), and implying that, just because he continues to live in the world after he sees someone dying, it would mean that someone else would do the same when he die. But, he would never know! This is the very big mystery that we are trying to solve here in the first place.

asked to be born). Does that mean that death would be any kind of reward related to the things that we have done in life based on how much we have "honored" it?

Mentioning Simone de Beauvoir (1972), who says that "*death is the external limit of my possibilities and not a possibility of my own*", Geofrey says that we cannot grasp the full meaning of our own mortality from our own experience. Instead, she notes, "*I know that I am mortal, just as I know that I am old, by adopting the outsider's view of me*" (1972, p.34), highlighting the importance of the other's view. However, this is a big problem, because he is assuming once again something that is convenient to the simplicity of the investigation, which is, the assumption of other's minds, without any metaphysical truth and, thus, contingent[5].

Either way, he says that death is a phenomenon that cannot be truly *solo*. We have always to think about the people who will be affected by our deaths (which is something that we will not develop, because we have seen in footnote 3 that there is no proof that the world persists after our deaths, in *our* perspective, which could be the only one actually existing). If there be other's minds and perspectives (idealistically or realistically speaking? Undecidable), we could define death as our "*own most possibility*" (SCARE, 2007, p. 36), while this is, indeed, the only thing in this world that *only I* can do: to experience my own death, because, contrary to thinking, for example, no one could try to simulate something that is not comprehensible to human, material, living and linguistic existence.

In conclusion, we can define death as the true *lack of meaning*, even more than something that we *might* understand eventually (e.g. the total number of the galaxies in the universe) and more than contradictions, like "the squared ball", because, in these cases, we can, at least, *try* to imagine those things, while death *must* be something *out* of the knowing of the things, which is something that we do using language and, thus, meaning. And, yes, we are contradicting ourselves, linguistically defining the lack of meaning itself *with* meaning. But, at least, we now know *all the things* that death *is not* (which is, by the way, everything that exists).

2. Boredom: the search for meaning

[5] André Renan Noara (2020, p. 156) says that there is a possible solution for the other mind's problem, that is: or we accept that other subjective perspectives exist because they behave just like me (the agent thinking in the experiment) or I reject them because I have no absolute proof whatsoever about their existence. The solution would be John Searle's necessary conscious *subjectivity* phenomenon caused by the *objective* brain phenomenon based on a biological naturalism. We, of course, reject this solution, because we believe that the metaphysical dimension is more fundamental than the scientific perspective and arguments.

Scientifically speaking, we can define this as a psychological state in which we feel that we are alive, we want to live, but we don't know what to do with this will. Often, we cannot decide this because we are not *completely* convinced what is the *right thing* to do, for we can always imagine ourselves doing something better than this that we have decided to do. What would it be the model of the most bored being possible? That would be God Himself, who cannot decide what is good to do to improve his existence and/or to cause any pleasure to him, because, according to the medieval definition, he doesn't need any further improvements! He is supposed to be perfect and not in need of anything. So, can we assume that a human being who (authentically) says that he or she is bored is someone close to be a god?

Either way, how could a father be bored when he has to feed his children and he doesn't have enough money to do so? How could a teacher be bored when he or she knows that there are practically innumerable young people to be educated? How could an athlete be bored knowing that he or she has a lot of medals to earn? How could a scientist be bored while he or she is still unsatisfied with the answers which have been achieved? All of these human problems should avoid us to be bored, because they don't have an end, since human life doesn't have a proper and ultimate meaning. However, because of this very reason, we convince ourselves that doing all these things doesn't seem to be a smart move, because it has no end.

According to Lars Svendsen in his *A Philosophy of Boredom* (2005), "*Human beings are addicted to meaning (...) Our lives must have some sort of content. We cannot bear to live our lives without some sort of content that we can see as constituting a meaning. Meaninglessness is boring*" (p. 30). We know this since the deduction of the *cogito* (originally from St. Augustine[6], but normally attributed to René Descartes), that says that, even in front of the worst hopelessness of the question "what if you be deceived?", at least, we know that we are *something that is being deceived*. Which means that, while we think, we are something. It is impossible for us to be alive, aware of ourselves, and not think. Even think about *not thinking* is an instance of thinking. Therefore, we are addicted to meaning, to think

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[6] St. Augustine's *City Of God* (2015, p. 263): "I am most certain that I am and that I know and delight in this. In respect of these truths, I am not at all afraid of the arguments of the Academicians [i.e., skeptic philosophers], who say, "What if you are deceived?" For if I am deceived, I am. For he who is not, cannot be deceived; and if I am deceived, by this same token, I am. And since I am if I am deceived, how am I deceived in believing that I am? for it is certain that I am if I am deceived. Since, therefore, I, the person deceived, should be, even if I were deceived, certain that I am not deceived in this knowledge that I am."

about anything whatsoever and, with time, we have gotten more sophisticated and we don't worry (mainly) about survival issues anymore, but with the problems concerning art, entertainment, justice, honor, taste, beauty and argumentative consistency. All these things have been created to substitute our previous concerns. Svendsen completes: "*Boredom can be understood as a discomfort which communicates that the need for meaning is not being satisfied. In order to remove this discomfort, we attack the symptoms rather than the disease itself, and search for all sorts of meaning surrogates*" (Id. Ibidem).

So, boredom is not just a matter of "having nothing to do" (which is physically impossible, since we are always doing something, voluntarily or not), but *seeing meaning* in doing something. For "meaning", we mean something that appears to be useful, but, useful for whom? For ourselves? For the others? For the past, present or future? Is it even pleasant to be useful? Isn't this supposed to be tiresome by definition? Who wants to get tired, anyway? Again, these questions make us think what is the meaning of all this. In general, we don't even know the meaning of *search for a meaning*. Thus, this is, essentially, the definition of boredom.

3. Loneliness: the attempt of meaning

Sometimes, the best idea of being happy in being alone, not depending on anyone's opinion, not having to please anyone, not having to justify yourself or skipping the things you like to do because someone is disapproving your routine. Maybe, these are the best reasons behind the increase of single people around the world, generating problems with lack of young people (because children are not being born), mainly in the richest countries. However, at the same time, it doesn't seem that anyone is actually able to live the rest of their lives quite alone and this is not only restricted to romantic relationships.

Comparing this to boredom, what is, exactly, the difference between a search for meaning and an attempt of meaning? In a search, you are in a state of *not knowing* what you want to find, like Meno's paradox[7], about how can we know that we have found something that we were looking for if we don't know the shape of this very something that we want to

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[7] Socrates and Meno were having a discussion about the concept of virtue. Ebrey (2014, p.1) brings us a good English version of this: "(1) And how are you going to search, Socrates, for this thing [virtue], when you don't know at all what it is? (2) For what sort of thing, from among those you don't know, will you propose when you are searching? (3) And even if you should completely hit upon it, how will you know that this is the thing you didn't know?", which shows us that there is nothing like "certainty" in life, since we do not have the absolute right *parameter* to compare with, but only convenient answers.

find? Loneliness is an *attempt of meaning* while we are sure that what we need is a *companion*, an animal, a mother, a lover, whatever. On this case, we have an objective, although, once again, most people get lonely because the people that they have around appear not to be the ideal kind of person that could complete their necessity of being accompanied. According to Svendsen (2017, p. 105), "*loneliness is experienced as being imposed from without[8], as resulting from an unsatisfactory social environment that does not live up to one's expectations*".

Maybe, a search for an *ideal* companion, in the job, church, parties, universities, neighborhoods, very related to the problem of seeing a proper and "correct" meaning in their thoughts and actions, which cannot be a hundred percent hit, will always cause us frustration and makes us think about whether, in this life, there is someone that could actually "mean the world" to us. As we know, ultimately, being accompanied is not necessarily a good evidence to prove that you don't feel lonely[9].

Searching for a good definition, Svendsen, in his *A Philosophy of Loneliness* (2017), brings: "*there are various definitions of loneliness, but they do have some things in common: a sense of pain or sadness, a perception of oneself as being isolated or alone, and a perceived lack of closeness to others*" (p. 10). Aristotle has once said that the human beings are, essentially, *social animals*, and, it is part of our mission in search for meaning, argued above as a necessity for the *intentionality[10]* of our minds (proved by the cogito argument), to take a first step believing that other human beings (or other beings, like a "Wilson" volley ball) are our best shot to find a meaning for life because, at least, we can ask them the answers for the questions or simply count with them to help us to find those answers. Therefore, loneliness is a step further ahead the boredom, for we know that we have to make an *attempt of meaning* of ourselves, in *another being*, although this is not necessarily easy to find, if ever.

4. Fear: the rejection of meaning

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[8] From "outside", which means that no one could get lonely if he or she had been born alone. There would not be any expectation to be frustrated in the first place and, biologically speaking, it is impossible, for a mammal, for example, to survive alone while he or she is a baby.

[9] Svendsen (2017, p. 11) says that: "What matters is not the extent to which an individual is surrounded by other people – or animals, as the case may be – but rather how that individual experiences his relationship to others."

[10] John Searle defines *Intentionality* (1983) as "that property of many mental states and events by which they are directed at of about or of objects and states of affairs in the world" (p. 1)

What all the previous three topics have in common is surely a dimension of fear: of the unknown, of having no purpose, of being alone. Another thing that they have in common, even including death, which is supposed to have no meaning at all, is that, as topics of survey, they are all abstract ideas of the human existence that we *reject*, because we *fear* them.

Biologically speaking, the humans have fear because "*a creature without the capacity to feel fear will have a worse chance of surviving and procreating (...) It increases our readiness and can thus help us out of dangerous situations or prevent our ever landing up in them.*" (SVENDSEN, 2008, p. 21), which is something that is totally related to the concept of *courage*, although people say that who has too much courage without fear, is just a dumb person. In other words, we are who we are nowadays, as this current species, because we have developed fear. With science, we can now fear a lot of other things that we would never bother about if we didn't know, for example, about weather, meteors, viruses or if we hadn't developed fire guns, bombs and poisonous gas, among other dangerous things.

So, when we can finally have grasp of what are those things that we fear, "*you cannot easily remove fear by an act of will*" (Idem., p. 26), which is why this is something that we must, even before the attempt of removing it from us, *reject it* (although necessary for surviving, fear is an unpleasant feeling). We cannot, however, remove the fear itself, but only the things that provoke it. The fear goes out automatically when the dangerous things go away. When we fear something unreal, like an imagination or dream[11], this is just us convincing ourselves that these fantastic things exist and fear works normally. Putting this aside, since we are not here to discuss the necessary and sufficient reasons for something to exist, the important thing is to note that, after all the steps throughout dealing with meaning, this is the last step of a *cycle*, when we *reject the meaning* that is making us feel threatened and uneasy, which are unpleasant feelings. So, this is fear.

To complete the argument, Svendsen says that "*The person who fears will normally attempt to escape or avoid what he believes is threatening his life, health or interests (..) to attempt to create the greatest possible distance from the feared object, to get outside the range of danger*" (p. 31), showing that it is in our nature, even when people kill themselves

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[11] Dreaming is nothing more than respecting our necessity of thinking, since the cogito proof, while we are *resting*. This means that, since we cannot stop having ideas, whether you remember this action or not, we must think about something that we *don't control*, otherwise, we would not rest. That is why our dreams are generally so weird and, in several cases, about our deepest fears and anxieties, because, in normal life, we are always making an effort to *reject* them. This means that, the fact that we dream, is a good evidence to see fear as the rejection of a given meaning (of the things we fear), as we wanted to demonstrated.

(believing in going to a better reality in death, although, like we have seen, this *literally* doesn't make any sense), to always tend to the most pleasant things that could happen to us, making pleasure (one of the fear's contraries), maybe, the *sensation* or *understanding of meaning* itself (or even the *acceptance* of meaning, an extra concept in the present work).

After having answered the question 1 of the introduction with the definitions of the four existential issues, it is, now, evident that the thing that connects them is *meaning*, answering the question 2. To answer the question 3, we can argue that these four, in this particular order, reveal a *crescent* way of dealing with meaning, from its non-existence, through its search, its first object of interest and, finally, its rejection and, thus, *rebooting* the cycle. Would it be a good evidence to prove that life is, as numerous cultures and religions say, an eternal cyclical adventure?

Conclusion

For those who thought that this paper could be any kind of self-help text, they are now very disappointed, we suppose. Our objective here was to give a proper definition, using linguistic and metaphysical notions, in order to avoid all the contingencies (half-truths) of the popular, religious and scientific explanations. With the help of strong metaphysical and logical deductions of the cogito and defining these very problematic concepts (death, boredom, loneliness and fear) as instances (or in function of) meaning, there is no better meaning to them, literally. This is, also, a good evidence that everything in this world could and should be defined with (and as) linguistic concepts, if definition is, indeed, what we want from them.

Following this cyclical order, we have a clearer shape of what constitutes the human life and what we should do with it (if we actually should do something at all), thus, contributing to further ethical notions, as how people's behavior would change knowing, now, what death is and is not.

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