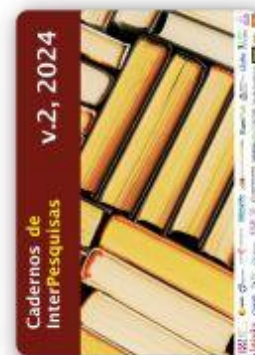


Artigo:

The concept of the meaning of existence in the work “Man is not alone” by Abraham J. Heschel

O conceito de sentido da existência na obra “Man is not alone” de Abraham J. Heschel

El concepto del sentido de la existencia en “Man is not alone” de Abraham J. Heschel



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Resumo:

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) é amplamente reconhecido como um dos filósofos e teólogos mais influentes do século XX. O presente trabalho teve como objetivo propor a apresentação e discussão da concepção de sentido da existência na obra *Man is not alone* (1951) do filósofo judeu Abraham J. Heschel. Foi observado que a filosofia de Heschel apresenta uma visão diferenciada da existência e da essência humanas. Ele desafia as perspectivas materialistas e individualistas, propondo que a verdadeira essência da humanidade está na busca de significado, no reconhecimento do valor intrínseco de cada um e nas dimensões éticas e relacionais da vida. Essa abordagem oferece uma estrutura profunda para a compreensão do que significa ser humano, incentivando um envolvimento mais profundo com os aspectos espirituais e morais da existência.

Palavras-Chave: Abraham J. Heschel. Filosofia da religião. Sentido da existência.

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Abstract:

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) is widely recognized as one of the most influential philosophers and theologians of the 20th century. The aim of this paper was to present and discuss the concept of the meaning of existence and the essence of man in the work *Man is not alone* (1951) by the Jewish philosopher Abraham J. Heschel. It was observed that Heschel's philosophy presents a different view of human existence and essence. He challenges materialistic and individualistic perspectives, proposing that the true essence of humanity lies in the search for meaning, in recognizing the intrinsic value of each person and in the ethical and relational dimensions of life. This approach offers a profound framework for understanding what it means to be human, encouraging a deeper engagement with the spiritual and moral aspects of existence.

Key-words: Abraham J. Heschel. Philosophy of religion. Meaning of existence.

Resumen:

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) es ampliamente reconocido como uno de los filósofos y teólogos más influyentes del siglo XX. El objetivo de este estudio era presentar y debatir el concepto del sentido de la existencia en la obra *Man is not alone* (1951) del filósofo judío Abraham J. Heschel. Se observó que la filosofía de Heschel presenta una visión diferente de la existencia y la esencia humanas. Desafía las perspectivas materialistas e individualistas y propone que la verdadera esencia de la humanidad reside en la búsqueda de sentido, en el reconocimiento del valor intrínseco de cada persona y en las dimensiones éticas y relacionales de la vida. Este enfoque ofrece un marco profundo para comprender lo que significa ser humano, fomentando un compromiso más profundo con los aspectos espirituales y morales de la existencia.

Palabras-Clave: Abraham J. Heschel. Filosofía de la religión. Sentido de la existencia.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this paper is to present and discuss the concept of the meaning of existence and the essence of man in the work *Man is not alone* (1951) by the Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel.

Abraham Joshua Heschel (1907-1972) is widely recognized as one of the most influential philosophers and theologians of the 20th century. Born in Warsaw, Poland, Heschel came from a lineage of prominent Hasidic rabbis (LEONE, 2003). This spiritual and intellectual heritage profoundly shaped his worldview, influencing his work and philosophical approach. Heschel was educated in an environment of mystical pietism, typical of the Hasidic communities of Eastern Europe (ALMEIDA, 2019). This context provided him with a solid foundation in Torah studies and traditional devotional practices, where meditative prayer, or *davening*, played a central role. For Heschel, every human action had a cosmic and divine significance, reflecting the belief that human beings are vehicles of God's manifestation (LEONE, 2003).

Heschel's philosophy looks to Jewish tradition to shed light on modern man. He argues that modern science, although powerful, is neither the only nor the best way to explain reality. Instead, he proposes that religion can be a protagonist in the construction of a new paradigm of knowledge in a secularized society (PFEFFER, 2011). Heschel emphasizes that the world rests on three pillars: study to participate in divine wisdom, worship of the creator and compassion for others. He criticizes modern civilization for subverting these pillars, turning study into a quest for power, charity into a public relations tool and worship into a form of ego worship.

In his intellectual encounter with the Frankfurt School during the 1930s, Heschel positioned himself as a critic of dehumanizing modernization (NOGUEIRA & NARCÉLIO, 2022). Forced to emigrate to the United States due to Nazi persecution, he continued to advocate transcendence, study and prayer as ways of revering humanity. In the 1960s, Heschel became actively involved in the struggle for civil rights and interfaith dialogue, considering these actions as religious expressions of the Jewish prophetic tradition (PFEFFER, 2011; ALMEIDA, 2019).

Heschel believed that modernity had failed to meet the deepest spiritual needs of the human being (NOGUEIRA & NARCÉLIO, 2022). He saw prayer as an essential means of transcendence, an exercise that should involve the totality of the individual - body and mind as a single entity. For him, prayer was a supreme form of offering to God, replacing the traditional sacrifice of the Temple of Jerusalem with the dedication of the individual himself (LEONE, 2003).

Heschel's works try to inspire the faithful to look at the world in an unexpected way, leading them to the experience of God. He outlines the struggle between God and the human being, a dynamic in which both have active positions: God seeks man, who in turn must respond to the divine call. This interaction reflects Heschel's vision of the need for a mutual and continuous commitment between the human and the divine (PFEFFER, 2011; ALMEIDA, 2019).

A central aspect of Heschel's philosophy is his critique of the way modern society treats knowledge, compassion and worship (NOGUEIRA & NARCÉLIO, 2022). He argues that these practices should be seen as ends in themselves, not as means to achieve other goals. This radical reorientation is necessary, according to Heschel, in order to confront the spiritual crisis of our age and rediscover a deeper meaning in human existence (PFEFFER, 2011).

Heschel's approach also highlights the importance of interreligious dialog. He believed that no religion is an island and that all religious traditions have something valuable to offer for mutual understanding and global peace. This commitment to interfaith dialog and cooperation reflects his view that spirituality should be inclusive and engaged with the world (PFEFFER, 2011).

Heschel leaves a legacy of thought that continues to influence theologians, philosophers and religious leaders around the world. His ideas offer a profound critique and spiritual alternative to modernity, promoting a vision of life that integrates ancient wisdom with contemporary challenges. By emphasizing the importance of transcendence, compassion and authentic worship, Heschel invites everyone to rethink the role of spirituality in modern society.

THE MEANING OF EXISTENCE

The search for the meaning of existence is fundamental to Abraham Joshua Heschel's philosophical research. The author comments that modern man,

therefore, believes that his security lies in refraining from raising such issues. Ultimate questions have become the object of his favorite unawareness. Since the dedication to tangible matters is highly rewarded, he does not care to pay attention to imponderable issues. (HESCHEL, 1979, p. 191)

In other words, there is a detour from deep existential questions, preferring to focus on tangible and immediate concerns. This avoidance is a form of intellectual self-defense, aimed at maintaining a sense of security in the face of potentially disturbing definitive issues. However, in moments of crisis or reflection, individuals can be faced with the profound emptiness of a life dedicated only to smaller, superficial goals.

Heschel (1979) argues that every human action is an implicit search for meaning. This search is not just about finding purpose in individual acts, but about understanding whether there is an inherent meaning to existence itself. He postulates that consciousness is inherently directed towards unifying being with meaning, leading human beings to explore whether meaning is something that must be created or something intrinsic to existence. In this context, “man may, indeed, be characterized as a subject in quest of a predicate, as a being in quest of a meaning of life, of all of life, not only of particular actions or single episodes which happen now and then” (p. 192).

Inherent in the human condition is the certainty that existence and meaning are intimately linked. This conviction fuels the tireless human search for meaning, despite frequent failures and frustrations. Heschel (1979) emphasizes that this search is not a mere intellectual exercise, but a deeply rooted aspect of being human, essential to our experience and identity. The search for meaning is not just about individual fulfillment, but touches on broader existential concerns that encompass the whole of life.

The nature of existence itself is fundamental to understanding its meaning. For Heschel (1979), existence is more than just a series of momentary events or actions. It involves a deeper relationship with time and space, characterized by independence and temporality.

While existence as a general category remains indefinable, it is directly known to us and, in spite of its indefinability, not entirely out of relation to the mind. It is not an empty concept, since even as a most general category it cannot be completely divested of some relations. There is always a minimum of meaning in our notion of existence. (HESCHEL, 1979, p. 199)

This intrinsic temporality of existence highlights the fleeting nature of life, making the search for lasting meaning all the more urgent. The author explores whether existence implies a necessary relationship with something beyond itself, suggesting a metaphysical dimension that underpins our reality.

Heschel (1979) comments that human beings are not self-sufficient and that life has no meaning unless it serves a purpose beyond itself. By stating that "man is not an all-inclusive end to himself. (...) For if a person thinks that he is an end to himself, then he will use others as means" (p. 194), he criticizes the idea that human beings are absolute ends in themselves, suggesting that this perspective leads to a sense of futility and existential despair.

The author proposes that true fulfillment comes from being needed, from serving a purpose that transcends individual existence,

The feeling of futility that comes with the sense of being useless, of not being needed in the world, is the most common cause of psychoneurosis. The only way to avoid despair is to be a need rather than an end. Happiness, in fact, may be defined as the certainty of being needed. (HESCHEL, 1979, 194)

This need to be needed is a fundamental human impulse, essential for mental and emotional well-being.

In another aspect, he shows that the relationship between individuals and society is complex. Although social roles and responsibilities are important, Heschel (1979) argues that they cannot provide the ultimate meaning of existence, since

The first answer that comes to mind is a social one—man's purpose is to serve society or mankind. The ultimate worth of a person would then be determined by his usefulness to others, by the efficiency of his social work. (...) Who needs the old, the incurably sick, the

maintenance of whom is a drain on the treasury of the state? (...) What we are able to bestow upon others is usually less and rarely more than a tithe. (HESCHEL, 1979, p. 195)

Society itself needs meaning and therefore cannot fully satisfy the individual's existential quest. This perspective affirms the value of each individual, even those who don't seem to make a significant contribution to society. In continuity, the author presents a poetic speech about the importance of recognizing the intrinsic value of each person, regardless of their social usefulness,

There are alleys in the soul where man walks alone, ways that do not lead to society, a world of privacy that shrinks from the public eye. Life comprises not only arable, productive land, but also mountains of dreams, an underground of sorrow, towers of yearning, which can hardly be utilized to the last for the good of society, unless man be converted into a machine in which every screw must serve a function or be removed. (HESCHEL, 1979, p. 195)

Human existence, according to Heschel (1979), begins with the individual. Although social values and collective goals are significant, they derive their importance from the individuals who make up society. The author challenges the reduction of human beings to mere instruments of social function, advocating a vision of humanity that recognizes the unique value and potential of each person. This approach highlights the ethical and religious dimensions of human existence, in which each individual is seen as valuable in their own right.

Commenting that "it is in surveying one's inner life and discovering the graveyard of needs and desires, that we become intimately aware of the temporality of existence", Heschel (1979, p. 197) also explores the temporality of human desires, contrasting them with the more enduring nature of thoughts and concepts. Desires, by their nature, are transitory, often leading to a sense of impermanence and futility.

In contrast, intellectual pursuits and the search for meaning are oriented towards permanence and lasting significance. This dichotomy reflects the broader human struggle between transient pleasures and the search for lasting values. This analysis highlights the importance of seeking lasting meaning amidst the ephemeral nature of existence.

In this context, Heschel's philosophy focuses on the idea that human life is a search for meaning that transcends individual desires and social roles. In one of his speeches, he argues that

Man's quest for a meaning of existence is essentially a quest for the lasting, a quest for abidingness. In a sense, human life is often a race against time, going through efforts to perpetuate experiences, attaching itself to values or establishing relations that do not perish at once. His quest is not a product of desire but an essential element of his nature, characteristic not only of his mind but also of his very existence. This can be shown by analyzing the structure of existence as such. (HESCHEL, 1979, p. 198)

This search is intrinsic to human nature and reflects a deeper metaphysical reality that links existence to meaning. By recognizing the limitations of temporal achievements and the need for a higher purpose, the author provides a framework for understanding the essence of humanity and the deep meaning of our existential journey. In doing so, he raises one of the main points of his philosophy, the sense of the ineffable.

In conclusion, Heschel's exploration of the meaning of existence challenges people to look beyond superficial concerns and engage deeply with the fundamental questions of life. His emphasis on the intrinsic connection between being and meaning, the importance of serving a greater purpose and the value of each individual offers a rich and nuanced perspective on what it means to exist. His

insights continue to resonate, encouraging a deep and thoughtful approach to the perennial human search for meaning.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Abraham Joshua Heschel's exploration of "The Meaning of Existence" investigates the human search for purpose and understanding. Heschel (1979) argues that human beings inherently seek to unify being with meaning, driven by an existential need rather than mere intellectual curiosity. He emphasizes that this search is not about individual acts, but about understanding whether existence itself has an intrinsic meaning. This search for meaning is seen as a fundamental aspect of human nature, reflecting a deep connection between existence and purpose.

In discussing "The Essence of Man", Heschel (1979) points out that human beings are not self-sufficient, but find fulfillment in serving purposes that go beyond themselves. He criticizes the modern emphasis on individualism, suggesting that true fulfillment comes from being needed and contributing to the greater good. The author also highlights the intrinsic value of each person, regardless of their social usefulness, and emphasizes the importance of individuality, ethical living and relational interconnectedness in defining the human essence.

Ultimately, Heschel's philosophy presents a different view of human existence and essence. He challenges materialistic and individualistic perspectives, proposing that the true essence of humanity lies in the search for meaning, the recognition of one's intrinsic worth and the ethical and relational dimensions of life. This approach offers a profound framework for understanding what it means to be human, encouraging a deeper engagement with the spiritual and moral aspects of existence.

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