
THE NOETIC DIMENSION: CONTRIBUTIONS OF EDITH STEIN AND VIKTOR FRANKL ON THE MEANING OF LIFE

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the relevance of the noetic dimension in understanding the experience of abandonment lived by 15 girls sheltered at Fundação Casa de Nazaré, in Pernambuco. Based on the contributions of Edith Stein and Viktor Frankl, phenomenology and logotherapy, it seeks to analyze how the search for meaning can help these young girls rebuild their lives and find a place in the world. The qualitative data analysis technique used derived from Logotherapy, using two instruments: the Purpose in Life Test (PIL Test) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), in addition to semi-structured interviews. The objectives of the study were: to analyze the experience of abandonment from the perspective of phenomenology and logotherapy; to investigate the relevance of the noetic dimension in the construction of identity and the search for meaning in life; and to evaluate the potential of religious and community practices as resources for overcoming trauma and fostering personal development.

KEYWORDS

Noetic dimension, phenomenology, logotherapy, Edith Stein, Viktor Frankl, abandonment, meaning in life, spirituality, community.

INTRODUCTION

The process of neglect, which includes abuse, mistreatment, and negligence suffered within the family environment, provokes feelings of aversion and revulsion in the society. This reality leads to feelings of inadequacy, low self-esteem, depression, and hopelessness in the individual who experiences these adversities. A constant existential void implants itself and remains ever-present in the suffering individual. According to authors who adhere to the phenomenological approach of Existential Psychology and Logotherapy, the theoretical framework of this paper, this condition can be reversed through the search for the meaning in life.

Like all psychological theories grounded in an anthropological vision, Logotherapy understands human nature as comprising three dimensions: biological (sensory and somatic), psychic (psychological), and spiritual (noetic). Individual values and freedom of choice are found in the noetic dimension, and they are aspects susceptible to therapeutic interventions that can modify the sense of life for those experiencing an existential void. These interventions aim to promote the individual's autonomy in seeking a new perspective on the world, new desires for meaning that drive the freedom of will in the search for new choices. Thus, Logotherapy understands that suffering is a human condition, but it is always possible to search for a new meaning in life.

This study aims to address the meaning of the noetic dimension both for Phenomenology and Existential Psychology/Logotherapy, taking into account the importance of the religious community in the process of overcoming and dealing with suffering, based on the experience of childhood abandonment. In this constitutive process the goal is to analyze the experiences of a group of girls in a state of neglect, sheltered by the Catholic community Fundação Terra, living in "Casa de Nazaré," a shelter associated with the pastoral care of the Catholic Church, located in the municipality of Arcoverde, in the state of Pernambuco. Considering the trajectory of 15 girls, aged between 9 and 15, a question arises: to what extent can the dialogue between the meaning of the noetic dimension, phenomenology, and existential psychology/logotherapy contribute to the constitutive process of individuals who have experienced childhood abandonment?

The path outlined for conducting the research began with bibliographic and documentary research, using a qualitative approach (case study) and conducting structured interviews. The qualitative data analysis technique used came from Logotherapy, based on two tools, namely: Purpose in Life Test (PIL TEST) and the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MIL). Considering the previously described tools, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire proved to be the most parsimonious, with fewer items. However, it promoted thinking on the construct which contains more than one dimension, understanding the concept of meaning in life as both search and presence. Thus, the objective of the current study was to adapt this questionnaire to the Brazilian context, gathering evidence of its factorial validity, convergent validity and internal consistency. The two tools were used in individual sessions in the city of Arcoverde, at "casa de Nazaré" shelter, through the distribution of a printed booklet containing the tools and a detachable sheet and the Free and Informed Consent Form (FICF). When any external factor interference was perceived during the experiment, the volunteer was invited to move to a location with fewer interferences. Whereas the Purpose in Life Test (PIL-Test) has three sessions (A, B and C), to which quantitative data are assigned in the first part and qualitative data in the last two. In these two parts, the first one contains 13 incomplete phrases to be completed. The second part consists of a paragraph about future objectives and past experiences and both parts are essential in the individual therapeutic context. The in-depth interview included questions about gender, education, religion and other sociodemographic issues. In this way, the Research uses the inductive method, starting from the experience of the girls, sheltered by the Catholic Church's pastoral care, to a general reflection on the possible contributions of dialogue between the meaning of the noetic dimension, phenomenology and existential psychology/logotherapy for the constitutive process of individuals who have experienced childhood abandonment. The research was validated by the Ethics Committee, through process No. 79995417.20000.5203.

The text is divided into four sections: the first one aims to analyze spirituality as a dimension that constitutes human nature and therefore should be investigated by the humanities. This section situates phenomenology, Viktor Emil Frankl's existential psychology /logotherapy, and Edith Stein's anthropological perspective as the main theoretical contributions for this analysis. The second section intends to analyze the meaning of the noetic dimension from Edith Stein's holistic perspective of the human being. The third part seeks to articulate the theoretical contributions of Frankl and Stein to understand the possible contributions of the dialogue between

the sense of the noetic dimension, phenomenology, and existential psychology / logotherapy in light of the described case study. Finally, the last section aims to follow the narrative of girls who experienced childhood abandonment and were sheltered at "Casa de Nazaré," focusing on the search for meaning in life and re-signifying suffering, with the intervention of the Catholic community Fundação Terra in the municipality of Arcoverde, in the state of Pernambuco.

1. Theoretical contributions of phenomenology to the consideration of spirituality as an essential dimension of human existence

The 19th century was marked by a belief in truth, progress, and development as ideals common to all humanity. During this period, absolute confidence in Cartesian rationalism, reaffirmed by the supremacy of scientific thought, impacted how thinkers perceived society and individuals. Franz Brentano [1] refutes this rationalist paradigm when he develops the theory of intentionality, which is based on subjective experience, where the argument revolves around the alignment of the mind with objects and mental states. In this sense, he describes the person as an intentional being, whose conscious experience is directed not only toward the external world but also toward their own internal experiences and spiritual states. Thus, the assumptions of the phenomenological approach are born. Brentano [2] invested in discovering a new science of the mind, researching mental acts that, in his view, differed from one another according to intentionality, since the act is intentional and directed toward an object, and the thought being about something or the perception of something. It is important to understand the meaning, however, not all things are immediately comprehensible. Brentano deepens the understanding of intentionality, consciousness, and the structure of the experienced world from the here and now, thus making it a descriptive study of phenomena as they present themselves to experience. He does not yet treat spirituality as an object of study but paves the way for this dimension to be considered relevant by followers of this conception.

Phenomenology was consolidated in Germany with Edmund Husserl [3]. The intellectual highlights the importance of the human being in the intention of the meaning of what is shown or is presented. Husserl was a student of Franz Brentano; furthermore, he studied with the greatest specialist in Aristotle of the 19th century, which profoundly influenced his way of doing philosophy. He understood that the soul is the principle by which one first lives, feels, and understands. Husserl begins to take an interest in "psychic acts," which makes possible the conception of what he named the perceptive act. Through this perception, it is understood that not every act that is lived can be identified, as it is of a psychological nature, and therefore the analysis must be refined and requires specific attention. He further asserts that through the recording of the acts, the touch, the vision, the hearing, and the smell, it is possible to identify and materially feel one's body. The most important of these senses is touch, which puts one in contact with the world. One starts from the acts, and through them, concludes that the external world exists. Husserl concludes that it is possible to assert that one has a body, but this is based on the analysis recorded from the acts of bodily sensations. The consciousness of corporeality comes from the experiences related to sensations impressed upon matter; therefore, there is not only interiority and exteriority but also the consciousness of what inhabits the human being.

When recording the control act, it is not a matter of psychic order or bodily order, but of what phenomenologists call the sphere of the spirit, a concept used to indicate everything that was not body. Husserl and his followers analyzed it in two ways. One is formed by the psychic impulse, which are acts not desired or controlled by the individual. The other part, which decides, evaluates, thinks, reflects, is called the spirit. The human being consists of body-psyche-spirit as dimension, and the three are connected. Each human being possesses all three, with one being more developed than the others. Husserl distinguishes psychic act from spiritual act, the former being one that always have reasons to execute, it is the universe of motivation, where attention functions as an

involuntary act. The latter is attention as a voluntary act conducted by the individual, not triggered by external factors. Although Husserl did not extensively explore the spiritual dimension of the person, his methodological approach provides fertile ground for further investigations in this regard.

An important figure in Phenomenology was Max Scheler, who believed that human perception is organized into hierarchical values, where spiritual and religious values are superior to sensory and utilitarian values [4]. The philosopher observed the presence of animal characteristics in humans, with the psychic character that would include instincts, drives, and everything that naturally conditions and determines humans, and the spiritual elements, which differentiate from what is understood as life in its natural sense, highlighting the psychic aspects. While in the psychic reality man is driven by something, placing him in a cause-and-effect paradigm, the spiritual reality is entirely situated in the realm of current days. Although spirituality is not the core theme of the works of any of the three philosophers mentioned—Franz Brentano, Edmund Husserl, and Max Scheler—each of them offers a unique perspective on the subject, influenced by their own intellectual background, paving the way for the topic to be analyzed in greater depth later. The concepts of intentionality and consciousness can be interpreted with the purpose of illuminating the spiritual experience. Intentionality, for Brentano, refers to the mind's direction toward an object, meaning consciousness is always directed at something. This characteristic of consciousness can be seen as a foundation for spirituality, as it suggests that the human mind is naturally open to transcendence and contact with the divine. Moreover, Brentano's emphasis on the distinction between physical and psychic phenomena can be seen as supporting the idea of a spiritual dimension of the reality that transcends the material world. Max Scheler, a philosopher and phenomenologist, dedicated himself more directly to the philosophy of religion and ethics. His work is considered a milestone in the philosophical reflection on religious experience, wherein the experience of the sacred is fundamental for understanding the human being, who possesses within themselves a feeling of admiration and respect when something is perceived as superior and transcendent.

Edmund Husserl [5] did not directly dedicate himself to the philosophy of religion. However, his methods and concepts can be applied to the analysis of spiritual experience. This approach can be used to explore religious and spiritual experiences in a profound and authentic way, without falling into reductionism or dogma. Husserl's phenomenology seeks to describe the experience as it is lived by the individual, without assumptions or preconceived theories. The path charted in the field of phenomenology makes possible the anthropological perspective in Edith Stein's [6] theory, where soul, person, and the relationship with God are addressed in a complex and profound manner. Her view of the human being stands out for its emphasis on the spiritual dimension, the centrality of the soul, and the importance of the relationship with God.

A contemporary of Edith Stein, Austrian psychiatrist and philosopher Viktor Frankl [7], stood out as a promising scholar, however, began to feel the need to refute the predominant psychoanalytic method of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. With a remarkable life story like that of his contemporary Edith Stein, Frankl endured the suffering of the Holocaust, where he lost his family, material possessions, and all his intellectual work. After surviving those years of horrors, he wrote about his experience, emphasizing what enabled him to withstand so much pain and suffering, which he denominated as the search for the meaning in life.

From then on, Frankl [8] developed his own psychological theory, Logotherapy (Therapy through the Meaning in Life), a form of existential analysis applied in the search for new desires and areas of interest in existence. Influenced by existentialist philosophy and phenomenology, Frankl believed that the fundamental human desire is to find meaning and purpose in life, and not merely seeking pleasure or avoiding suffering. He argued that even in the most difficult circumstances, such as the extreme experiences of the Nazi concentration camps that he himself endured, finding meaning in life can be the key to survival and resilience. His therapy focuses on the

subjective experience of individuals in their search for meaning and personal understanding of their own lives. Frankl introduced the concept of noetic dimension to refer to the human capacity to transcend circumstances and find meaning in life, even when facing suffering. This dimension, present in everyone, allows us to connect with something greater than ourselves, whether through values, beliefs, love, or creativity. Spirituality can be a rich source of meaning in life. Through connection with something greater than ourselves, whether through God, nature, art, or other values, we can find purpose and meaning in our experiences. Frankl recognizes that religion can be a powerful tool in the search for meaning, offering beliefs and practices that can help people cope with suffering and find meaning in their lives.

Edith Stein [9], a follower of Husserl and a philosopher converted to Catholicism, expands phenomenology by integrating the spiritual dimension of the person. She argues that the human person possesses a unique spiritual depth that transcends their physical and mental dimensions. For Stein, the profound meaning of being is developed through the conduction of the human toward an ascension to the meaning of being in God, the ultimate purpose and supreme possibility of this process of evolution [10]. Hence, the importance of spirituality as an essential dimension of human existence is highlighted. In her anthropological perspective, man is endowed with body, soul, and spirit. The human being is a spiritual being in evolution, and the quest for perfection has the divine as its ideal, thus making it possible for the person to transcend and come closer to divine perfection. Through transcendence, the animal and instinctive nature of the human person can be avoided when open to divinity. For the author, religion is important in the aspect of learning, where spiritual formation is essential for the gradual awakening of the spirit. According to Mendes [11], Edith Stein's theory acquires pedagogical dimensions when addressing spiritual evolution as a process of learning and maturation in the search for the ultimate meaning of existence. Spiritual formation is at the service of the gradual awakening of the spirit, but the learning process is individual and must respect uniqueness. For Stein, the full realization of the person occurs not only in the personal sphere but also in the formation and evolution of the individual, enhanced through contact with the community. The spiritual community holds an essential place in the formation of the person and in the constitution of their individual personality [12].

Her writings will later complement this thought in such a way that the principle of individuation is spiritual-objective: a form that shapes matter and enables the individual not only to have a determined sensory constitution and the energy to perform movements, but also the form, a living force capable of keeping the multiplicity of material components of the organism united. Therefore, it is understood that the unity of the substantial form in the organism already has a formed unitary structure, being a spiritual and not a material principle.

Beyond the experiences in the face of the tragedy of the times of Nazi violence and persecution, an integrative dialogue and vision between Stein [13] and Frankl [14] is understood when they evaluate that individual actions are complemented and strengthened in collective and community contexts. For both, it is important for the constitution of people to reaffirm themselves in community life, and this communal life does not exclude singularities. The more a person can live in a personal manner, the more they contribute to and enrich community life.

The community relationship is grounded in religious experience, where there is care for others through acts of solidarity, which enhances the sense of belonging within the religious community. In this sense, understanding human associations from a phenomenological perspective seems to aid in deepening proposals that involve society, public space, and coexistence among family groups. For this study, the notions of singularity and alterity proposed by Stein's phenomenology, along with logotherapy, emerge as fertile fields for the relevance of the Casa de Nazaré religious community in redefining the pain and suffering of girls experiencing family

abandonment. This aspect is investigated throughout this work.

2. Edith Stein and her integrative vision of the human being: from the individual spirituality to the interaction experience with the religious community

Edith Stein's philosophical project can be divided into three stages. The first one extends from her PhD thesis in Gottingen in 1916 to her conversion to Catholicism in 1922. Under the guidance of Husserl [15], she wrote the thesis and two essays known as *Beitrage*, in which she outlines some important topics on the intersubjective experience [16]. After converting to Catholicism following her readings of Saint Thomas Aquinas [17], Stein expanded her reflection on the relationship between man and God, accepting in her research the revelation data and the examination of the soul, in line with the Spanish mysticism of Saint John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila.

The second phase spans from 1922 to 1938, a period marked by her moving from the Carmel of Cologne to the Carmel of Echt in the Netherlands, when the author dedicates herself to studies of a pedagogical-anthropological nature. In the final stage, from 1938 to 1942, Stein produced her eminently mystical writings at the same Carmel of Echt [18]. Stein argues that philosophy cannot be understood as a deductive science, neither as an inductive one. This method of proceeding does not work according to the laws of mathematics, nor within the framework of natural science, although induction and deduction can aid in a certain way. It focuses on the phenomenology to build a theory on the creation of intersubjective bonds including in its analyses the psychophysical and spiritual individual. For Edith Stein, the spiritual aspect is what defines the person and opens up the possibility to step outside themselves to relate cognitively and affectively with others.

Edith Stein [19] sees an interconnection between vital force and love. The vital force drives individuals to seek and express love, while love provides meaning and direction to the vital force. Together they form a solid foundation for the integral development of the human being, both at a personal and community level. For Stein, this vital force is intrinsically connected to the essence of the human being, used as an internal engine that propels action and personal development. The vital force is also an element that sustains human resilience. Love, according to Stein is a central element in human life and in the structure of the community. Love is not only a feeling, but a transformative force having the power to shape interpersonal relationships and promote spiritual growth.

The experiences of the community contribute to making the understanding of shared meanings and values possible, generating purposes that will motivate concrete actions of the person and their stance toward others, including the creation of cultural works that strengthen the life of the community, which in turn will effectively influence their personal training process.

The community is not just an assemblage of individuals, but an entity that has its own life, a "we" that transcends the individual "I". In Stein's noetic theory, life in community is crucial, through interpersonal relationships and community engagement the individuals can transcend their personal limits, grow and develop in ways that would be impossible in isolation. Therefore, the community provides a context for growing virtues such as solidarity, empathy and justice.

Stein [20] argues that the commune allows participants to recognize each other, contributing to a sense of belonging and social cohesion. Additionally, the community has the power to shape and influence individual consciences, promoting values and standards that guide moral conduct, providing support and comfort in challenging situations, capable of nurturing relationships, and building a sense of collective identity that enriches personal and social life. Living in community is crucial for the individual's full realization, and this is significantly extended to the religious community. Stein, who converted to Catholicism and became a Carmelite

nun, could see the vital therapeutic role in the religious community, especially regarding the re-signification of suffering.

Furthermore, the religious community provides a sense of purpose and direction, helping individuals find meaning and value in their lives, even amidst suffering. The sharing of experiences and the solidarity present in the religious communities offer a continuous support. Living in a religious community provides an atmosphere of spiritual and emotional support, where individuals can share their pain and find comfort in their common faith. Stein believes that religious faith, when experienced in community, has the power to transform individual suffering into an experience of spiritual growth. Through collective religious practices, such as prayer, liturgy and meditation, members of the community find a deeper meaning in their pain, perceiving it not as punishment but as opportunities for closeness with the divine and for inner strengthening. This vision of religious experience in community which is part of a person's constitution is aligned with the results of the phenomenological investigations, Stein and Frankl and will be analyzed in the next section of this paper.

3. Contributions of the noetic dimension for the theoretical framework of Frankl and Stein.

Logotherapy approaches religiosity when it speaks of supra-meaning [21]. This represents a dimension that explains suffering beyond the intellect, beyond the ability to comprehend that life can be endowed with an unconditional meaning. Thus, religiosity may or may not help a person find meaning in life, just as not every crisis of meaning can be resolved by religious belief [22]. Initially, logotherapy is neutral regarding whether a person is religious or irreligious. For Frankl [23], the relationship between logotherapy and religion is a subject matter of study in an attempt to understand it as a specifically human phenomenon, unlike other psychotherapies that consider religion to be harmful to humanity. As corroborated above, for empathy to occur in relation to another person, both freedom and identification are necessary.

The movement of self-reconfiguration and reorientation of existence is characterized as a non-linear process, permeated with moments of despair and belief, relapses and restarts. Thus, it is from the spirit that the possibility emerges for a person to mobilize themselves to respond to a request from the world, even under less favorable conditions. This possibility can lead to significant learning and improvements in the conditions of existence, making it possible to transcend martyrdom. In the aspect of transcendence that aims at evolution toward overcoming suffering, it can be said that existence is a projection of personal possibilities. When the limit fulfills its true function, still being immanent, it points toward something more, toward something beyond which is called Transcendence [24].

Frankl [25] asserts that the human conscience is not identified with the superego, as psychoanalysis claims. It always points toward meaning, like a compass directed toward the north, which may have a transcendent meaning in the realm of religiosity. Frankl [26], further explains that:

Religion is a human phenomenon that occurs in the patient, one among other phenomena that Logotherapy encounters. In principle, however, religious and irreligious existence represents coexisting phenomena for Logotherapy, and it has the obligation to maintain a neutral position toward them.

From the moment a suffering individual seeks to find meaning in their existence, they strive to understand the purpose of their life and manage to broaden their focus of the limit and transcend time, allowing themselves not only to remain anchored in the present but also to direct themselves toward goals and other targets. The focus on the human possibility of relating to the absolute is an inherent characteristic of the spirit, and it is this aspect that Frankl aims to highlight in his psychotherapeutic school. The intention of Logotherapy is to reclaim the spiritual element in psychology and explore its possibilities.

Frankl asserts that spirituality is not a concept tied to religion but is ontological to the human being in their search for meaning in existence. It is a feeling that exists within the human being and is transported beyond them. This feeling is expressed through work and love. This love is an active power of the person that can either come across personal barriers or enable integration. Affection is the communication of this love, expressed through relationships and psyche.

For Stein [27], love is an expression of the deepest nature of the human being, a force that connects individuals. Love possesses both an ethical and transcendent dimension, serving as a guiding force for moral conduct and the pursuit of the common good. It is within the context of community that love manifests in its most powerful and diverse form, through solidarity, empathy, and compassion—feelings that create bonds, strengthen social cohesion, and promote an atmosphere of mutual support.

The meaning of human life becomes well-defined through the lived experience of this love, although each person realizes it in a unique way. However, not every form of existence in the world fully realizes the self or aligns with the spiritual nature. A person responds to the questions that life poses, and according to the meaning they find in these questions, they become responsible. Love is a fundamental human need. It is effective, constructive, infinite in dimension, and an indicator of existential meaning [28].

Stein's Phenomenology offers an expansive view of the person. It allows for a deeper understanding of much of its dynamics, opening the perspective to various qualities of lived experiences and invites us to stand before others with a humble attitude, recognizing that one is in the presence of inexhaustible richness. A reductionist understanding of the human being tends to ignore the noetic dimension or reduce it to the psychological dimension, as often occurs in Freudian psychoanalysis.

Humans and animals are composed of a biological dimension, a psychological dimension, and a social dimension. However, humans differ from animals because the noetic dimension is an integral part of their being. At no point does a person abandon the other dimensions, but the essence of their existence lies in the spiritual dimension. Thus, the particularly human existence is spiritual existence. In this sense, the noetic dimension is considered superior to the others, as it is also more comprehensive because it includes the lower dimensions without denying them—this ensures the wholeness of the person [29].

In contrast to psychodynamic reductionism, Frankl believes that existence operates in a noodynamics manner (noetic dynamism). Noodynamics represents the characteristic tension of human beings, the existential dynamics. Living in pursuit of reducing this tension or homeostasis stands in opposition to human self-transcendence. This is because noodynamics is the tension that arises between a person and meaning, between what is and what ought to be. Frankl explains that self-distancing is an attitude toward psychic and somatic phenomena that involves rising above their level and opening a new dimension—the noetic phenomena [30].

According to Frankl's definitions, the noetic dimension is an indeterminate yet determining dimension; the dimension of the uniqueness and deepest identity of the human being, which also implies free, creative, and responsible transcendence of the limitations [31]. Frankl notes that it is necessarily unconscious because it drives the person outward and beyond themselves, where self-consciousness ceases to exist, and all interest is directed toward other individuals.

The noetic dimension is also present in the work of Edith Stein, who deeply investigated the pure self, the body, the psyche, and the spirit, capturing the self as a being that inhabits a body that feels, perceives, moves, and opens themselves to the world and to other individuals. Stein [32] addresses three fundamental elements of her method, seeking the relationship between phenomenology and major modern philosophical currents: Catholic philosophy, which dates back to traditional scholasticism, and Kantian philosophy. These three elements are:

the objectivity of knowledge, the intuition, and the idealism. These aspects of the noetic dimension discussed throughout the text can be verified in the narratives of the protagonists in this research, where the path to finding meanings in life is identifiable even in situations of suffering caused by family abandonment.

4. The Importance of spirituality in the search for meaning in life: an analysis of the narratives of the girls sheltered in the religious community Casa de Nazaré

When a child is hurt in her childhood due to parental lack of love or abandonment, they carry those internal conflicts into adulthood, manifesting them in their professional, marital, and family relationships. Observing the girls sheltered in the religious community Casa de Nazaré, who are in the transition phase between childhood and adulthood, it was possible to see the positive influence of spirituality and the material and spiritual support provided by the religious community Casa de Nazaré in the face of the situation of experienced abandonment and suffering.

According to the Ministry of Health, the main reasons given for the situation of neglect are: 37% parental neglect; 20.7% due to parents with substance abuse/alcoholism; 19% domestic violence; and 5.5% sexual abuse by parents and/or the ones responsible for them. This reality is reflected in the situation of the girls in the shelter, where 33.30% of the parents are incarcerated and 20% are unemployed. These issues can also be identified through the testimonies of the participants.

E1: "[...] there was nothing at home"; E3: "[...] I have food here"; E8: "[...] my father is unemployed [...] I have food here"; E12: "My parents didn't have money for food and were unemployed. I study and have food"; E13: "My father abandoned my mother, and she couldn't support us"; E14: "I study and learn I have food here"; E15: "My father is in prison and my mother is unemployed. I came to live here [...] it's better here because I have food". E1: "[...] My mother died when I was 6 years old, and my father is in prison. It's much better to be here than at home". E2: "[...] My mother died when I was 4 years old, and my father is in prison". E3: "[...] My mother is in prison for drug use, and my father is also in prison". E4: "[...] My mother is in prison for drug use, I worry about my sisters. Only I could come here". E6: "[...] My father abandoned me and my mother lives alone at home. She couldn't support us". E7: "[...] My father is in prison and my mother is also in prison for drug use. There was no one to take care of me". E8: "[...] My father is unemployed at home and my mother was arrested due to drug problems. There was no one to take care of me."

There is a correlation between the social aspects and the economic level of these families, which leads these girls to be placed in foster care. Poverty and lack of material resources, although they are risk factors for neglect, are not in themselves causes of neglect, and therefore, are insufficient to explain or fully depict a situation of neglect. However, poverty increases the social vulnerability of families, intensifying other present risk factors. Stein [33] states that the intensity of life is also related to the vital sphere—vital state—which means that the intensity of life tends to be low in situations of vulnerability, so it is only natural for this vital state to diminish. When sheltered, the vital state of the girls tends to be elevated due to the guarantee of food and protection provided by the institution.

In her noetic theory, Stein relates vital force and love, where both play core roles in understanding human experience and personal development. From Stein's perspective, vital force is the intrinsic energy that drives humans to live and grow. It is a dynamic force manifested in the will to live, the search for meaning, and the ability to face challenges. The meaning in life is found to the extent in which one responds adequately to daily life events and not to an idealized and distant project from the past. Indeed, religiosity is understood here as a value in the Steinian sense, that is, as a significant element in the formation of the person. The spiritual dimension would be the reason for the search, and allowing oneself to be guided is the religious dimension. This

occurs when the girls at Casa de Nazaré exhibit deep, selfless thinking completely focused on important acts, to the point of not considering themselves but instead being inclined toward the well-being of others, simultaneously oriented toward a spiritual existence. Thus, they fulfill themselves through self-transcendence. This is reflected in the in-depth interviews:

E1: "[...] I pray for them every afternoon and feel a peace that I didn't have at home"; E2: "[...] At 3 p.m. we pray and on Sundays we go to the service; I pray for my family"; E3: "[...] I am Catholic and I like to pray"; E4: "[...] I am Catholic and I like to pray"; E6: "[...] I pray every day, and I feel peace and joy here"; E7: "[...] I am happy here. I pray every day, and I feel peace and joy here; I have friends"; E8: "[...] I pray every day, and I feel peace and joy here; I have friends, food, and clothes"; E10: "[...] I am Catholic and I like to pray. I have been here for two years"; E11: "[...] I am Catholic, and I like to pray. I have been here for one year. It is better here".

Therefore, spiritual existence is unbreakable because it is not reflective when it is achieved through self-transcendence. This reality can also be verified by evaluating the results of the PiLT (Purpose in Life) developed by Crumbaugh and Maholich in 1964. For this investigation, the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), originally in English and suggested by Steger, Frazier, Oishi, and Kaler [34], was used. It consists of 10 items to be assessed. Its adaptation to the Brazilian context was performed by Aquino [35], and this adaptation was implemented in this research. According to Steger [36], research on the perception of the meaning in life sometimes highlights the belief in the presence or absence of a purpose for existence, while at other times, it emphasizes the understanding of how and where people find this meaning, in addition to indicating the degree of engagement in this search. In a literature review, this author identified two research methods on this same construct. The first one involves gathering a series of responses to the following question: What gives your life meaning? [37], which allows identifying various sources of meaning in life, such as relationships, religious beliefs, health, and personal growth. The second method consists of an inventory with a list describing potential sources of meaning in life, and respondents can rank the importance of these desires [38]. The result found detected $\tau = 491$; $p = 016$. These values indicate that the dimension of present temporality was positively correlated with the presence of existential fulfillment. This means that the greater the existential presence, the stronger the relationship with the present. Those who rated well their present will also experience a proportional presence of fulfillment and, as a consequence, self-realization.

What is specifically human is found in the freedom of these girls in relation to consciousness, the portion of meaning that allows them to distinguish the values of existence. As observed, both the theoretical studies and the practical investigation in this study indicate that the relationships established in the family context directly influence the child's psychic and relational development. In the absence of this care, the Casa de Nazaré shelter takes on the responsibility, initiating educational practices that transmit habits, values, and beliefs that foster patterns to be internalized and repeated by the children in adulthood. In a more promising alternative, these children who were taken in by Fundação Terra, at Casa de Nazaré, were supported and cared for.

The analysis of the personal journeys of the interviewed girls allows us to identify five common experiences that characterize a distinct movement in the formative process. These experiences were named as follows: 1) strong intensity psychophysical experiences; 2) the experience of personal limits; 3) the experience of self-listening; 4) the experience of inner struggle; and 5) the experience of a free decision, all of which are present and described by Stein. Stein also distinguishes three components of an experience: what is received (the content); the living experience of this content, that is, the way it is perceived by the person; and the consciousness of living [39]. The movement of self-reconfiguration and the reorientation of existence is characterized as a non-linear process, permeated by moments of despair and belief, of relapses, and restarts. In this way, it is from the spirit that the possibility emerges for a person to mobilize themselves to respond to a request from the world, even under the

most unfavorable conditions. In this respect, it is possible to affirm that freedom is a constitutive element of the human person. It can involve a centripetal movement, which traps the person in what they have configured of themselves; or a centrifugal movement, which allows the eruption of a self-configuring energy, capable of confronting already established psychosocial determinisms.

In the results obtained regarding the meaning in life through the Meaning in Life Questionnaire (MLQ), an average total score of 48.20 (SD=8.38) was found, ranging from 30 points as the minimum score to 64 as the maximum score. This is very good, meaning that they have a meaning in life. The girls who rated well their present are also in proportion to the presence of fulfillment, as explained, aligning with Frankl [40]. This result can also be verified in the following account: E9: "My dad used to hit me a lot. It was my grandmother who took care of me. I don't have a mother. My grandmother left me here. I study here and stayed in this house. I am Catholic, I pray. I wake up happy here." The development of personality is described as a succession of qualitatively different phases, but these phases are marked by disorders, whether intellectual or emotional. In each crisis during childhood, adolescence, adulthood, and maturity there are life assessments regarding what has been achieved and what has not. For this reason, what matters is not the person's age, but the awareness of their valuable and dignified existence. Being able to achieve inner fulfillment, even if they are a mature person, they feel that they exist for something or someone. Thus, they live with a better quality of life.

As observed, existential crises for Frankl [41] are truly moments of evolutionary crises because they provoke axiological reflections, become inscribed in them, and project the meaning in life. Each situation instigates the person to find meaning in order not to fall into existential emptiness. The reformulation of a life project leads to the formulation of new alternatives, different from those previously established as necessary. The specificity of religious experience lies in the object of the content of the experience, whether through religious experience with the transcendent or through people or nature itself that can be a sign of this presence. This can be seen in the in-depth interview:

E1: "[...] I pray every afternoon and feel peace that I didn't have at home." E2: "[...] at 3 pm we pray, and on Sundays we go to mass." E3: "I am Catholic, and I like to pray." E4: "I am Catholic, and I like to pray." E6: "I pray every day." E7: "[...] I pray every day." E8: "I pray every day." E9: "I am Catholic, I pray[...]" E10: "I am Catholic, and I like to pray." E11: "I am Catholic, and I like to pray." E12: "I am Catholic, and I pray. I am happy here. I've been here for two years." E13: "[...] I am Catholic, and I like to pray." E14: "I am Catholic, and I pray." E15: "I am Catholic, and I pray every day".

For Edith Stein, religious practice is a fundamental element for the experience of transcendence and the search for the meaning in life. To her, religion is not merely a set of beliefs, but an existential path that leads the individual to a deep and personal relationship with the divine, as well as offering concrete means to connect and reactivate the vital force in the search for new meanings in life, whether through prayer, meditation, sacraments, or other spiritual practices. This connection strengthens the experience of transcendence, allowing the individual to feel part of something greater than themselves. Prayer, for example, can be seen as an important tool for overcoming the limits of the human condition, such as suffering, death, and finitude. By connecting with the divine, the individual finds solace, hope, and a deeper meaning in life. In the case of the girls sheltered in the religious community of Casa de Nazaré, it is possible to observe that religious practice occurs in a community, which provides a supportive environment. Participation in a religious community strengthens the feeling of belonging. It was also possible to verify that religion provides a framework of reference that helps the individual make sense of their existence.

In summary, for Edith Stein, religious practice is a fundamental path to transcendence and the search for the

meaning in life. It offers tools to connect with the divine, cultivate inner life, develop virtues, overcome human limitations, and find a deeper purpose in existence. The community participates from the very beginning of the person's formation. As observed, spirituality is not necessarily associated with belief in the existence of God, but rather with a natural attitude of the human being, which is reflected in a thoughtful love for life, that is, the pursuit of autonomy, respect for individual uniqueness, personal growth, and the rejection of rigidity, authoritarianism, and alienation. This is consistent with human development in its freedom and entirety.

CONCLUSION

Through the proposed dialogue based on the noetic dimension of Frankl and Stein, supported by the theoretical and methodological framework of phenomenology, existential psychology, and logotherapy, it was possible to understand the importance of spirituality in the formative process of the girls sheltered at the Catholic community Casa de Nazaré, located in the municipality of Arcoverde (Pernambuco). The experience of abandonment during childhood, as experienced by the 15 girls, represents a deep trauma that significantly impacts their lives. Addressing this complex issue required a multifaceted perspective, seeking to understand the nuances of their experiences and the tools available to help rebuild their sense of self in the search for a new meaning in life. In this context, the dialogue between the noetic dimension, phenomenology, existential psychology, and logotherapy offers a valuable theoretical framework to support the constitutive process of these individuals. Each of these areas contributes uniquely to understanding the reality of the girls and to building a path of overcoming and re-signification.

Throughout the text, an effort was made to demonstrate that the greater the search for meaning, the greater the temporalization of the future. Thus, the girls at Casa de Nazaré demonstrated with this study that they have a search for the meaning in life and good hope for the future. Through the results obtained from the Purpose in Life-Test (PIL-Test) and the Life Meaning Questionnaire (QSV), it was understood that the higher the score in the presence of meaning, the more positive the perception of time. Additionally, it is inferred that the higher the score in the search for meaning, the more positive the perception of the future. Through the narratives from the interviews, it was possible to illustrate the intense psychophysical experiences these girls faced and the successive state of painful distension. It was also found that, after being sheltered, with access to material support, care, and the inclusion in a spiritual life through a religious community, it was possible to mobilize the vital force capable of rescaling their suffering in the search for a new meaning in life.

The interviewees demonstrated that the five experiences described by Stein: psychophysical experiences, personal limits, self-listening, inner struggle, and free decision marked a process of transformation of both the individual and the context in which they are situated. They illustrated a formative movement in which each one began to act and intervene in the world guided by a new personal project. By becoming aware of what they had lived through, they were able to give it meaning, with new life options and perspectives, in accordance with the call for spiritual activity development.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the noetic dimension of Stein's integrative vision complements both individual and community movements. In the 15 interviewees, psychophysical experiences, personal limits, self-listening, inner struggle, and free decision marked a process of transformation of the individual and the context in which they are embedded. Thus, for Stein, behavior is motivated by a foundation that justifies it, and by analyzing the lived experience, it is possible to go beyond a pathologizing label to understand the meaning of this act for the person. Edith Stein helps to understand that the authentic reason for the connection between acts is not the fulfillment of the act itself, but its content of meaning. In this way, the same motive can lead to different acts, depending on

what is experienced, thereby avoiding the reduction of the girls to a type of pathology.

Finally, it is expected that this study will contribute to the scientific literature demonstrating that people who engage in religious practice and experience a religious community are associated with physical, psychological, and emotional well-being. These individuals are less likely to exhibit risky behaviors [42]. Ultimately, this study aimed to illustrate the importance of recognizing that it is impossible to understand the psyche without considering the spiritual dimension and motivation. This interweaving of different spheres of life helps human beings avoid remaining on the surface of action, but by delving into the inner life of the person, one can understand the values and meanings that drive them.

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