

## Chapter 1. Introducing some reflections on “a life that matters”

*Many major historical figures in philosophy have provided an answer to the question of what, if anything, makes life meaningful, although they typically have not put it in these terms. Consider, for instance, Aristotle on the human function, Aquinas on the beatific vision, and Kant on the highest good. While these concepts have some bearing on happiness and morality, they are straightforwardly construed as accounts of which final ends a person ought to realize in order to have a significant existence.*

This is how the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy starts its essay on the meaning of life (2007).

Wikipedia describes the meaning of life as

*... a concept that concerns the possible purpose and significance that may be attributed to human existence and/or one's personal life. It has been the subject of much philosophical, scientific and theological speculation, and there is a huge variety of views concerning this philosophical problem.*

*It is often expressed in various related questions:*

*\_ What is the meaning of life?*

*\_ Why are we here? What are we here for?*

*.....*

*\_ What is the purpose of, or in, (one's) life?*

*\_ What is the significance of life?*

... and so it carries on to suggest a long list of questions which are asked to reflect on the meaning of life.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The fact that the meaning of life is introduced in terms of questions which are asked in a reflection process will later resonate well with one of the observations made by the research panel. They suggested that the reflection process rather than the results of the process enhanced their life meaning.

This study will enter this conversation, or perhaps contemplation, by contributing a narrative approach<sup>2</sup> of reflecting on the meaning of life. The aim will therefore not be to *tell*, but rather to *engage* in a sharing of *contemplation* on the meaning of life. The result may therefore be *process* rather than *content*.

This study has explored whether a pastoral narrative process is able to enhance participants' experience of meaningfulness or significance in their work environment. In doing so, the researchers had a twofold objective, namely

1. to gain insight and experience in the topic of Meaningfulness (in personal and professional life); and
2. to facilitate participants' journey to "a life that matters".

The study has been positioned in a work environment, but the research process has introduced meaning discourses from other areas of life as well.

In this chapter, I will first provide a context for the study, suggesting that the voices of statistics, education, coaching clients, pastoral therapy clients, educationalists and philosophers alike proclaim a story of need for meaning in life. Once the framework of need has been provided as a preamble to the story of meaning, I will proceed to pay attention to epistemology and propositions.

The rest of this chapter will be dedicated to the development of a suitable epistemological context for the study, an epistemology which will be aligned with the work ethic within which the study will be positioned. The discussion of epistemology will start by discussing why it is so important to reflect on epistemology. The discussion of epistemology will include a description of modernity, postmodernity, social constructionism and critical relational constructionism. The philosophical context will propose and describe discourses which will facilitate the narrative approach adopted in the study. Included here will be a description of what is meant by discourse in this context and a discussion of discourses like externalization, deconstruction and unique outcomes.

In conclusion, the chapter will reflect on the propositions developed and indicate how these will be adopted and progressed in the rest of the thesis.

In integrity with the narrative context which will be introduced as an approach to the study, a conversational style will be adopted in this thesis. The reader will therefore be included in the discussion by use of the plural first person "we" and asking rhetorical questions as an invitation to participation.

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<sup>2</sup> The narrative approach will be discussed later in this chapter once an epistemology has been proposed.

## 1.1 Motivation for the study

*Human beings are meaning junkies. McNamee (2007)*

When I discuss the research process later on, I will indicate that the research will be qualitative in nature. I will therefore not attempt to motivate the study by convincing readers of this thesis that, say, 73.27% of all people consider their lives not to be as meaningful as they could be. Statistics, I would like to suggest, are narratives like all other narratives, founded in a certain paradigm and perspective and informed by frameworks of meaning. They are therefore not definitive and should be considered as suggestions in the same way as the other voices invited into this study are contributing meaning to the research. The figures quoted in the following paragraphs should therefore be considered within this context.

On February 4, 2009 Freek Robinson in his radio program on RSG, *Praat Saam*, quoted statistics indicating that 70% of South Africans consider their lives not to be meaningful (Afrikaans term used “sinvol”) and that 2 out of 5 South Africans are unhappy in their work environment.

Frankl (2004: 105) quotes surveys indicating that 89% of people polled in France admitted that people need “something” for the sake of which to live. In another statistical survey of 7 948 students at 48 colleges conducted by scientists from Johns Hopkins University, 78% of the respondents indicated that their first goal was “finding a purpose and meaning to my life” (:105).

Authors attribute the success of books like *The Purpose-Driven Life* (Warren, 2002) to the great number of people struggling with life’s big questions like “Why am I here?” and “How do I live a life that is significant?” (Miller, 2007). Taylor (1966:1) suggested that our greatest desire is to have a meaningful life.

Echoing these voices, in conversations with friends and acquaintances everybody seems to agree that their lives could be more meaningful. Experience from my own pastoral therapy and life coaching practice indicates that many of my clients struggle with the meaningfulness of their lives. These personal experiences are confirmed by research done by writers like Porras et al (2007).

Webster (2002) suggests that “the loss of traditional mythical metanarratives” has led to a quest for more meaningfulness in life. More specifically, he posits that the “significance of human existence and personal worth” have become more uncertain, thus leading to an enhanced need for more meaningful lives. He describes how in Australia despite improving standards of living in terms of material wealth and longevity, there has been no associated improvement in quality of life, even

calling the material affluence “a waste of time” after Adams (2000: 24). He continues to link this to “the death of God” and the “eclipse of modern authoritative traditions”. This also reminds of Rolheiser’s account of Nietzsche’s madman in *The Shattered Lantern* (2004:20-21). Rolheiser uses this story as the introduction to a text on the “rediscovering” of a “felt presence of God” – a text within which various discourses of meaning and spirituality are developed.

Webster’s proposals confirm what O’Connor and Chamberlain have reported (1996:461-462). They described the loss of a meaningful world and linked the lack of meaning to psychopathology, lowered well-being, substance abuse, and suicidal tendencies. To this they added neuroticism, anxiety, and anomia, whereas high levels of meaningfulness correlated with good self-esteem, control and extraversion, thus positioning meaningfulness as central to successful functioning.

In Part I of their book, Porras et al (2007: 33-83) describe how meaning precedes success, based on research of the lasting success of the lives of 200 people they call builders.

Perhaps one should add the famous quote of Nietzsche at this stage:

*He who has a WHY to live for, can bear with almost any HOW. (quoted by Frankl, 2004:109)*

Scott (2000) also quotes Bohm in stating that we are meaning-seeking beings (my own paraphrase), but the meaningfulness of our lives is “efficiency programs mainly for economic expansion”.

Table 1. Results from the 2001 Staying Connected Survey

	<b>Where do formers say they find meaning?</b>	
	<b>Very Meaningful Life</b> (123 out of total 230)	<b>Somewhat Meaningful Life</b> (81 out of total 230)
Spirituality	80%	53%
Relationships	79%	80%
Family	61%	64%
Community	51%	37%
Work	40%	35%
Self Knowledge	31%	43%
Dreams	24%	26%
Accomplishments	24%	20%

Divided between formers who claim to have a Very Meaningful Life or a Somewhat Meaningful Life.

**11% of the respondents said they had Very Little Meaning in their lives and 1% said they had No Meaning At All.**

In December 2001 Staying Connected, a publication designed for alumni of Catholic full-time volunteer programs published by the St. Vincent Pallotti Centres, sent a survey on the meaning of life to 700 former volunteers. The responses they got back were enthusiastic. 230 former volunteers took the time to take the survey and answer questions such as, *What defines meaning in your life?* and *What influences affected your decision making before and after volunteering?* The survey can be accessed on their website at: [www.pallotticenter.org/meaningfullifesurvey.asp](http://www.pallotticenter.org/meaningfullifesurvey.asp)).

Louw (2007: 9-11) relates the experience of a meaningful life to the Frankl's "barbed wire syndrome" – an experience of systematic classification and incarceration as in the prison camps of the Second World War. He brings a South African perspective to human experience of meaning in life by referring to Nelson Mandela's Robben Island experience and the Second Anglo Boer war. Making it more current he continues to describe the life on the Cape Flats. Giving it a more global perspective, he opens the conversation to include globalism, "Bush"-ism and the destructive use of religion to maintain the ideology of "barbed wire" classification as it is done between Christianity and the Islam. He posits that meaning in life is concerned with the ideology of cultural life systems, making the statement that a meaningful existence is inter alia a systemic matter (2007:11). As such, he suggests that the lack of the experience of meaning in life is embedded in global systems.

As is evident from the sources quoted in this section, meaningfulness and the quest for a meaningful life have remained a topic of discussion through the ages. And although it is an age-old topic of discussion, it seems as if it is now ever so important as a current life narrative discourse. This therefore is the conversation that this study would like to join, hoping to contribute even one paragraph to the narratives of meaningful living.

Seeing that my voice will be resonating throughout this text in the telling and retelling of contributions to the study, I consider it necessary that I provide the larger research community with an account of the "Who Am I" story. This will position my story within the multilogue of meaning stories in this text. Therefore, I will attempt to indicate how this study topic has been an integral theme in my life story.

## 1.2 Epistemology

### 1.2.1 An understanding of epistemology

This research thesis will still discuss epistemology, ontology and methodology in separate sections, but the thesis will be aligned with Foucault's thinking later on and discuss these constructs as meaning discourses.

Guba and Lincoln (1994: 108) provide us with a very useful understanding of the discourses epistemology, ontology and methodology. They categorize alternative inquiry paradigms according to their stance on the following three questions:

***The ontological question***

*What is the form and nature of reality and, therefore, what is there that can be known about it?*

***The epistemological question***

*What is the nature of the relationship between the knower or would-be knower and what can be known?*

***The methodological question***

*How can the inquirer go about finding out whatever he or she believes can be known?*

This not only provides a continuous story line through ontology, epistemology and methodology, but also makes mention of the relational nature of epistemology. This is well aligned with the ethical position of the study.

## **1.2.2 Why epistemology is so important in this study**

Why is it important to reflect on epistemology?

Austin Cline (1998) at About.com offers the following answer to the question:

*Epistemology is important because it is fundamental to how we think. Without some means of understanding how we acquire knowledge, how we rely upon our senses, and how we develop concepts in our minds, we have no coherent path for our thinking. A sound epistemology is necessary for the existence of sound thinking and reasoning — this is why so much philosophical literature can involve seemingly arcane discussions about the nature of knowledge.*

Paul Roberts (2003: 222-223) provides a twofold response, the first of which is rather humorous or even cynical:

*A 'critical-cynical voice' responds: "Because in order to get your thesis you have to write a section on epistemology and show you know what you are doing here. Also, whilst we are talking about rules, real or imaginary internalisations, don't you have to write the thesis all in one type face which rather scuppers this little experiment?"*

He then continues on a more serious note to discuss the implications of positivism and empiricism, quoting Gergen. I include his response to our question verbatim, to indicate that it does not quite provide an answer. It leaves the reader with a feeling that he skirts around the point, much like the student who has to provide an answer to a question for which he or she has not studied and then tries to negotiate the dilemma by adopting some knowledge that he or she might have to fit the question!

*A 'scholarly voice' takes up this challenge for most of the remainder of this section.*

*Epistemology is important here because I see this thesis as an example of what Schon (1995) calls an 'epistemology of practice', in contrast to traditional views on epistemology, with its norms of, in Schon's words, "technical rationality". Traditional epistemology possesses what Ken Gergen at the September 2002 'ninth approaches to emerging inquiry conference' called the "commanding presence" of Cartesian-empirical-positivistic thought. This has dominated western thinking since the mid-seventeenth century and is generally considered to establish the philosophical basis of modernism. Such an epistemology assumes that there is an objective world, knowledge of which can be progressively gained by empirically verifiable methods that guarantee truth and objectivity independent of the knower of it. This knowledge can be cast in the form of timeless general truths, independent of social, political, and personal context.*

Not very convincing, we may have to agree.

This study is about meaningfulness, and if we would like to reflect on meaningfulness, it would be critical to reflect on the creation of meaning – and that is the realm of epistemology.

Furthermore, I would like to propose that we reflect on epistemology as the study of knowing, and knowing or knowledge is associated with Power. In this regard, see Wessels' (1999: 61-67) account of Foucault's power/knowledge discourse. According to this discourse, "a domain of knowledge becomes a domain of power" (Wessels, 1999: 61). Wessels quotes Kearins (1997:9) on Foucault, suggesting that "rituals of power are exactly what sets up the nonegalitarian, asymmetrical relations". I am concerned here with the power of exclusivity or centralization with regards to contribution to the research discourse. It is therefore important to reflect on epistemology, which will in turn encourage a participatory generation of knowledge during the research process. The epistemology selected should therefore be aligned with the research ethic.



### 1.2.3 Epistemology and ontology in a social constructionist context

There are however, strong voices emerging about the historical distinction between ontology, epistemology and methodology which is Cartesian in nature. Foucault for one, suggested that

*...we should ask: under what conditions and through what forms can an entity like the subject appear in the order of discourse; what positions does it occupy; what functions does it exhibit; and what rules does it follow in each type of discourse? (Foucault, 1977, pp.137-138).*

This will have to be accounted for in the thesis. Garry (1996: 102) disagrees with this perspective, indicating that she can see no good reason for “collapsing the epistemology-ontology distinction. Neville Spencer (2000) takes up the debate and concludes that ontology precedes any discussion of or reflection on epistemology.

*For any theory that we have about what knowledge is, we must have a presupposition about what the world is like. That is, we must assume that the world exists in such a way that it makes our theory of knowledge possible. There is no escaping having a theory of ontology; it is only a question of whether or not it is consciously acknowledged and studied or whether it is left as an implicit presupposition of one's theory of epistemology.*

He then introduces the postmodern position on the creation of meaning or truth, stating that relativism provides an insurmountable logical anomaly in the discussion of epistemology and ontology. This is a result of limiting the discussion of postmodernism to relativism. In this text we will argue that *relationalism* as an integral discourse within social constructionism and critical relational constructionism creates space within which these arguments can be considered in a more constructive manner. Spencer (2000) states that

*In the case of postmodernists, the dilemma of relativism always auto-subverts their philosophical position. Whilst they deny that there is such a thing as truth (clinging to the realm of epistemology and denying that ontology is even a legitimate subject) any argument they make must surely be making an assertion about the way things are (hence having a theory, albeit implicit and contradictory, of ontology).*

This however, sounds like an argument steeped in modernist discourses of theory and based on knowledge as received ideas (see his summary).



#### 1.2.4 The epistemology proposed for this study

My own understanding of epistemology is that it is that branch of philosophy concerned with the discourses of knowledge and knowing.

I align myself with Hosking (1995:7) when I adopt a relational epistemology, because it opens up space for a multi-meaning context, the relational development of meaning ethics and the associated ability to question what is taken for granted (often society discourses) and the elevation of suppressed meanings. In her own words:

*A relational epistemology greatly broadens the possibilities for meaning and disallows one true meaning. However, **there are socio-cultural limits to what will be allowed as real or true, right or wrong, desirable or undesirable; not anything goes. Limits are constructed and reproduced in multiloguing. In narrating [,] a particular text reference is made, usually implicitly, to a cultural context whose meaning is taken for granted. As a result its appropriateness for the reality constructed in the current text cannot be questioned. It is the unavailability for questioning the taken-for-granted context that preserves the status quo (Argyris, 1982; Schattschneider, 1960) and often leads to seeming changes that in fact are simply more-of-the-same (Watzlawick et al., 1974).***

*This muting of other possible meanings could be seen as an avoided sense-making process.*

*(My emphasis in the first paragraph).*

She then continues to indicate how a relational epistemology supports or even fosters a participatory ethos. On the same page she posits that a relational epistemology provides the necessary space within which identity (I/other) and relationship can be accommodated.

Hosking (1995: 8) then provides a profound suggestion about how a relational epistemology opens up possibilities for inquiry into meaning making, inviting an ethic of networking and negotiation “to be referenced to other contexts and so take on new meanings”.

In this way, the conversation is therefore expanded to other disciplines, allowing and inviting voices from a broader community of inquiry.

She consequently confirms the key premises of a relational epistemology to be

*The claim to know is a claim to be able to construct the meanings of a running text.*

Implied in this premise is the dynamic nature of the creation of knowledge. Furthermore it suggests a deviation of knowledge as a given, proposing that is constructed.

*Meaning making is a process of narrating and a reflection of the oppositional unity of text and context.*

A narrative epistemology is positioned and the dynamic relationship between what Bruner (1986: 14) referred to as the Landscape of Action and the Landscape of Meaning is engaged. Text in this regard may be considered as action and context may refer to meaning or identity.

*Text and context cannot be separated as if they were entities, since both entail each other and derive meaning only from their opposition or difference.*

This principle refers to the dynamic interaction between the Landscape of Action and Landscape of Meaning or Identity and can also be related back to the third order cybernetic discourse.

*Meaning is produced through multiloguing: an actively relational process of creating (common) understandings on the basis of language.*

In this premise the multi storied nature of meaning is introduced. Meaning as a language discourse is also proposed and relationality is suggested as the nature of the ethos of the meaning making process. Process is also key to this premise as it distinguishes our epistemology from those which are concerned with knowledge as content.

*Meaning can never be finalized, nor has it any ultimate origin; it is always in the process of making.*

This liberating principle opens space for deconstructing and reconstructing meaning discourses and provides the opportunity for development of meaning as a dynamic process.

*Meanings are limited by socio-cultural contexts.*

The relational nature of the meaning making process has as its logical consequence the implication that meaning will be delimited by its generative community. This implies that meaning cannot exist beyond its relational context. The consequences are multiple, but as long as one realises that the meaning which are perceived to be available are limited, it can be liberating; it therefore implies that there may be other meanings outside the local social-context.

In the next sections I will describe why I am positioning this study within a (Critical) Relational Constructionist paradigm, using a narrative approach.

### 1.3 Postmodernism

This study will be positioned within a postmodern paradigm. I shall introduce this section with an understanding of what postmodernity may be. The wording of the previous sentence was chosen to be as vague as to suggest the existence of different understandings. Terminology like “definition” will therefore never be used in the thesis.



Figure 1. "Man Drawing a Reclining Woman." From the second edition of Dürer's *Underweisung der Messung or Work about the Art of Drawing* (Nuremberg, 1538). Reprinted in and courtesy of *The Complete Woodcuts of Albrecht Dürer*, ed. Willi Kurth (New York: Dover, 1963).<sup>3</sup>

If we were to agree that postmodernity will refer to “beyond modernity”, it implies that we will first have to familiarise ourselves with modernity. I will therefore offer a “critical assessment of the claims of modernity”, spending some time on “profiling modernity”.

<sup>3</sup> “Symbolism of Figure 1 and relevance to Postmodernism: There are obvious problems of anachronism in using a Dürer woodcut from 1538 to exemplify issues of postmodernism; nonetheless, of all Dürer's work, this image may well be the most postmodern, however impossible such a statement may seem at first blush. The image has been analyzed in detail by theorists because of its supreme self-consciousness. Since it lays bare man's reliance on prosthetic instruments for representation, the image could be said to anticipate a number of issues important to postmodern theorists, particularly the extent to which humans are separated from the real because of tools like language, science, and artistic conventions of representation. That separation is literalized here by the screen separating the woodcut into two halves and it is underscored by the "real world" outside the window that the artist does not see. The artist here can only "see" by way of his grid, which could be read as a commentary on science's tendency to dissect, disinfect, and thus destroy the natural world of creation, sexuality, and reproduction. The woman and the natural world are here intimately aligned: they are both presented to the viewer as flowing horizontal lines that suggest a "natural" alignment. Creation here is taken away from the female or the natural and bestowed to the tool-laden man, here equipped with not one but three phallic devices designed for representation. The right half of the canvas, by contrast, is decidedly vertical (the man, the plant, the phallic pen and viewpiece, the containers). The power of the male creator over nature is further underlined here by the potted tree to the artist's right as well as the fact that the woman is made to lie in an apparently uncomfortable, constricted position; she is made to conform to the left-hand space of the canvas just as the artist here seeks to make the female form (with its curved lines and sensual corporeality) conform to the straight lines of a grid.”  
<http://www.cla.purdue.edu/academic/engl/theory/postmodernism/image/> last accessed on April 07, 2009.

The initial paragraphs of this section will concern themselves with the story of modernity. This will be followed by a description of the implications of postmodernity on ethics and epistemology. In conclusion I will spend some time on an impression of the advances and risks of postmodern discourses.

### 1.3.1 Modernity: An Understanding

If we were to agree that postmodernity represents a critique of the claims of modernity, it would require us to develop an understanding of the profile of modernity. I shall therefore attempt to position postmodernity within a flow from the premodern to the modern to postmodern.

Hatab (1997) suggested the following useful distinction between premodern, modern and postmodern ethics and I would like to posit that his propositions can be generalized to include epistemology and other research discourses as well:

*The premodern is that which sees ethics as adherence to a traditional pattern typically grounded in religious authority. The modern is that which sees ethics grounded in a rational theory typically implicated with a conception of the human person as a free rational individual. The postmodern questions all groundings, whether traditional or rational, and it especially questions the modern emphasis on subjectivity, independence, and mastery.*



Figure 2. Picasso: Woman in the Studio- a study of self-reflection

During the course of this section, some of these concepts introduced above will be rephrased in different language.

Modernity is essentially a historical period in Western culture and has its origins in the Enlightenment at the end of the 18th century. The Enlightenment and the historical era which it introduced, is most often characterised by three major features, namely the power of reason over ignorance, the power of order over disorder and the power of science over superstition (Burke, 2000). Modernity can therefore be said to be characterised by ([http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/existentialism/what\\_is\\_modernity.shtml](http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/existentialism/what_is_modernity.shtml)):

1. *Rejection of ancient cultural, literary and aesthetic models in favour of the superiority of modern models.*

2. *The emergence of an epochal self-consciousness and self-confidence characterised by a belief in the progress and improvability of mankind.*<sup>4</sup>
3. *The establishment of a bourgeois society and social life characterized by liberal democratic institutions, free market economy, a dominant middle class, and private property (capitalism, the modern nation state, political and legal egalitarianism)*
4. *Philosophical and scientific claims for superiority and enlightened maturity of critical reason over historical tradition, ecclesiastical authority, ancestral devotion, classical culture and pre-scientific superstition.*
5. *The emergence of modern humanism characterised by autonomous self-assertion, scientific naturalism, technological mastery of nature, the demystification of human nature and nature generally, the liberation of theoretical curiosity, liberal optimism about progress and the secularization of culture.*
6. *Philosophical, social, political and legal insistence on the autonomy, self-determination, rational independence, and natural rights of all individuals (especially the right of freedom).*
7. *Modernisation by means of technological and industrial developments and its consequent effects upon societies, customs, and individuals.*
8. *A social, political, and philosophical emphasis upon the autonomous individual in contrast to communal identity.*

Modernity thus corresponds to the era characterised by the ideals of the West, an era that is relatively recent. Of specific importance to this study are the claims to autonomy, self-determination, critical rationality, technological mastery and demystification of human nature, and individual rights. These have an influence on discourses of social connectedness, meaningful lives, and spirituality.

Richard Smith quotes Zygmunt Bauman in saying that late modernity came to be characterised by globalisation, which implied that our actions have *distant* consequences. We are therefore not immediately aware of the consequences of our actions. We are therefore also not immediately aware of the significance of our actions and thus their meaningfulness. This can therefore be

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<sup>4</sup> See the painting of Picasso, *Woman in the Studio*.

assumed to instil doubt about self worth where such a value judgement is based on achievement, performance or material wealth.

This is further strengthened by the division of labour which diminishes responsibility, or at least the individual's window on responsibility. Sometimes the occupation of roles is also so fleeting as not to make it constitutive of identity (compare military national service in this respect). According to Bauman (1993:18) traditional sources of moral authority (rules, principles, commandments) have also collapsed. This era therefore came to be associated with a certain disenchantment or a "loss of foundations".

From a research perspective, it may be said that modernity and its associated positivist paradigm is characterised by external realities, defined or bounded realities and scientific methodologies. According to Hosking positivist research is positioned in

*naïve realism (that real reality exists and can be apprehended);*

*dualist/objectivist epistemology (self and other are bounded and separate realities; empirical findings to be judged in terms of their truth), and;*

*scientific methodology (achieved in experimental manipulation and the verification of hypotheses (Hosking, 1996).*

Søren Kierkegaard (1813 – 1855) however was quite harsh in his evaluation of modernity. Based on the effects of industrialism and universalism, and its agents mass, herd (similar to the sentiments expressed by Nietzsche), crowd, race, public, (resulting in anonymity, impersonality, bloodless abstraction, numerical or statistical mode of being) he proclaims that

*"Modernity is a spiritless age plagued by the social-political, religious, and philosophical dissipation of the existing individual through a reductive levelling of spiritual tensions essential to authentic selfhood." and*

*...to be lost in spiritlessness is the most terrible thing of all.*

<http://faculty.ccri.edu/paleclerc/existentialism/kierk.shtml>).



### 1.3.2 Postmodernity

Traditionally every new concept or discourse introduced starts with a “definition” in modernistic terms or a description or understanding in late-modernistic or postmodern terms. This section will attempt to provide a better understanding of the postmodern dialogue or discourse.

As will become clear in the following paragraphs the postmodern discourse is perhaps better described in relational terms. As will be discussed later (see the section on Critical Relational Constructionism) meaning is often understood to be relationally constructed. In this regard it is also informative to refer to the paper by White (2000) in which he discusses the concept of absent-but-implicit. In this paper he refers to meaning as being constructed “in relation to” or “in contrast to” the meanings or descriptions of other things (2000:36).

In a similar vein Postmodernity will be described most often by contrasting it to Modernity. Therefore we are indicating that there exists a certain congruence in the postmodern epistemological ethos. This may therefore serve to respond to the criticism often expressed against postmodernity implying that is merely “against modernity”, thus trivializing postmodernity as epistemological discourse.

### 1.3.3 Postmodernity in relation to or in contrast to modernity

As Lowe (1991: 42) indicates, postmodernity is (true to its nature) not easily “defined”; it is sometimes used to signify “an intellectual or artistic movement”, and sometimes “to denote an historical epoch or culture. He continues to say that for some, “postmodernity is primarily a form of analysis or critique, while for others it is a contemporary experience.” As indicated previously, I shall use the term to denote “beyond modernity” and therefore pay special attention to postmodernity as a challenge to the claims of modernity.

Scholars from the Frankfurt School use the term to denote an epoch also defined as “late capitalism”. This refers to the last stage of the industrial society, society at the end of the century. They describe it as being characterised by the huge development of science and technology ‘which became its main value reference, which generates economic prosperity, but creates an “unidimensional man”, stripped of sociological imagination and the capacity to react creatively to the human challenges of the new society.’ The main social discourse of the “late capitalism” is “the language of the purpose” instead of “the language of meaning“. One might associate this with Kantian philosophy, especially with its teleological discourses. The scholars of the Frankfurt School “considered thus the postmodern society as an epoch of decadence” (Gitta Tulea and Ernest Krausz,



1997). It is clear that this view of postmodernity is actually a postmodernist evaluation of certain strong modernist trends (and failures!), which have been emerging in the latter part of the twentieth century (Tulea and Krausz, 1997).

Postmodernity and post-structuralism are sometimes used interchangeably. Post-structuralism, typically associated with French philosophers like Foucault, Derrida, Baudrillard and Lacan, most often refers to a movement away from the structuralist view that the individual is shaped by sociological, psychological and linguistic structures over which (s)he has no control, but which could be uncovered by using their methods of investigation (Piercy, 1996).

The French historian and philosopher, Michel Foucault, may be considered to be the most important representative of the post-structuralist movement. Having been regarded as a structuralist in his early life (Jones, 1999:1), he disagreed with the structuralists on two counts: Firstly, he did not think that there were definite underlying structures that could explain the human condition, and secondly, he thought that it was impossible to step outside of discourse and survey the situation objectively [compare positivism]. This is important for our discussion of epistemology and ontology.

Jacques Derrida, another philosopher, developed *deconstruction* as a technique for uncovering the multiple interpretation of texts. Influenced by Heidegger and Nietzsche, Derrida suggests that all text has ambiguity and because of this the possibility of a final and complete interpretation is impossible.

Roger Jones (<http://www.philosopher.org.uk/poststr.htm>, 1999), in his article titled 'Post Structuralism', proposes that post-structuralism and deconstruction can be seen as the theoretical formulations of the postmodern condition. He continues: 'Modernity, which began intellectually with the Enlightenment, attempted to describe the world in rational, empirical and objective terms. It assumed that there was a truth to be uncovered, a way of obtaining answers to the question posed by the human condition. Postmodernity does not exhibit this confidence; gone are the underlying certainties that reason promised<sup>5</sup>. Reason itself is now seen as a particular historical form, as parochial in its own way as the ancient explanations of the universe in terms of gods.' Postmodernism is therefore positioned as a respectful paradigm, not making claims to absolute knowledge.

According to Jones the postmodern subject has no rational way to evaluate a preference in relation to judgements of truth, morality, aesthetic experience or objectivity. As the old hierarchies of thought are torn down, a new clearing is formed on the frontiers of understanding: quite what

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<sup>5</sup> Certainty is discussed in more detail in the chapter on Theology.

hybrids of thought will metamorphose, interbreed and grow in this clearing is for the future to decide. These thoughts open up space for new constructions of meaning. The statement that ‘no rational way’ of evaluation is available in postmodernist thinking signifies a movement away from Descartes’ “cogito ergo sum” philosophy.

Post-colonialism and the advent of the so-called information age brought promises of openness and improved communication, thus having the potential to resolve conflict and facilitate peace. However, Habermas, speaking of the postmodern society, remarked that the extension of the means of communication allows not only a wide range of information but is also conducive to a permanent connection between different people, different cultures, different social discourses and thus facilitates a better general understanding, a blurring of real or apparent contradictions. But he warns, at the same time, that this process may become really positive, only when it is performed between equal members. In the end, in spite of its beneficial aspects, the globalisation of information doesn’t minimize the possibility of conflicts or terrorism, as long as the fundamental social problems are not resolved or at least approached in an active way (Gitta Tulea and Ernest Krausz, 1997). We only have to reflect on experiences of conflict and misunderstanding in the workplace, church, community and the world at large to appreciate the significance of this statement.

So what is the ‘postmodern world’? One short description is provided by the French critic Lyotard, who defines the postmodern as “incredulity towards metanarratives.” This breaks away from the traditionally “modern” ideas of linear progress, rational control, and one right (usually white, male, European) way of doing things. Let us attempt to bring these thoughts together by the following quote from Anderson: “What seems to bind these currents together, at the centre of the vortex, is a question that has no absolute answer - or the act of questioning itself” (Walter Truett Anderson, 1991:32). This has far reaching implications for a study of meaningful living. Not only does it suggest that there is no single absolute version of a “life that matters”, but it also creates the space for agency in creating meaningful lives which are local to our own life stories.

It can be underlined also, as a concluding remark that if the pluralist society and the pluralism of cultures of the postmodern era discarded ‘reason’ as a unique etalon of humankind, it also discarded its fundamental connotations: freedom, democracy, universal values of justice, truth and good, the ethos of the dignity of man beyond differences of race, sex, religion, national belonging and so on (see also Gitta Tulea and Ernest Krausz, 1997). It is, rather, in a postmodern paradigm that ethos and dignity move beyond a cultural definition and cultural rigidity to assume a negotiated meaning, built on similarities rather than differences.

Hekman quoted by Lowe (1991:43), suggested that modernism “insisted that knowledge can be founded upon or grounded in, absolute truth. It assumes that knowledge is ‘about’ something external to the knower, and can present itself objectively to the knower.” Postmodernity, however, “represents a radical questioning of the foundationalism and absolutism of modern conceptions of knowledge.” Lowe then adds another description of the implications of postmodernity, this time by Parker (1989: 133):

*“Postmodernity provokes an attitude of uncertainty, of studied doubt, and any attempt to gain knowledge involves a continual reflexivity which underlines the provisional and transitory nature of that knowledge. This doubt and reflexivity also informs and subverts self-knowledge.”*

It is with this uncertainty that the research panel will have to struggle, negotiating a path of meaning amidst the challenges of uncertainty. In the chapter on theology and spirituality, the discourses of certitude and security will be discussed again, attempting to bring these two narratives into the conversation on a “life that matters”. Reflexivity will be introduced as a meaning making process, suggesting a way in which the “continual reflexivity” can create a context for ever new meanings, thus subverting the tendency to get stuck in static and problematic perceptions of meaning or lack of meaningfulness.

Three postmodern themes discussed by Lowe, are worth noting:

1. The rejection of modern metanarratives,
2. The displacement of modern dualities and differentiation, and
3. The development of discourse-sensitivity.

### 1.3.4 Discourse

I have been using the term discourse a few times in this chapter already, without having provided a discussion of the concept. This section will provide an understanding of discourse within a postmodern context.

I will now provide a description of *discourse* in some detail because it will be central to some of the thinking introduced in the thesis. Lowe quotes Collins (1989) suggesting that one way of characterising postmodern experience would be to describe it as being discourse-sensitive (Lowe, 1991:44).

For our purposes and following Lowe, *discourse* may be taken to relate to the process of conversation and refers to *...a multifaceted public process through which meanings are progressively and dynamically achieved* (Davies and Harre, 1990:46 quoted by Lowe, 1991:44). Bearing in mind the postmodern ‘repudiation of a representational view of language’, this suggests that meanings are not dis-covered in conversation, but are ‘progressively made or fashioned through conversational action itself.’ Thus, discourse-sensitivity would refer to an emphasis on the ‘*constitutive force* of discourse, on the ways in which particular conversational practices fashion realities and set in train certain consequences’ (Lowe, 1991:45).

The second use of discourse relates to a broader and ‘more overtly political’ form of analysis according to Lowe. On page 45 of his paper, he refers to the tendency of post-structural theory to displace attention from language to discourse, which *historicises* and *politicises* the study of language use through emphasising the historical specificity of what is said and what remains unsaid (my underlining). Lowe then states the ‘definition’ of discourse which will be used in this study:

“..., discourses ... refer to *systematic and institutionalised ways of speaking / writing* or otherwise making sense through the use of language.” (1991: 45)

‘These discourses constitute knowledge, but none of the discourses is assumed to represent essential, fundamental realities; they are not pre-given, or *natural, but socially constructed*’ (my italics). Introducing a Foucauldian perspective, he continues by saying that “discourse refers not only to the actual words and statements themselves, but their connection with the complex of social and power relations which prevail in a given context and which constrain what is said.” (1991: 45)

As Ball (1990) said: ‘Discourses are thus about what can be said and thought, and also about who can speak and with what authority.’ Discourses thus constitute knowledge and confer power, implying that meaning results not from language itself, but from institutionalised discursive practices which constrain its use and pre-empt alternative uses. Thus, a discourse can be seen as a form of *rhetorical imposition*; and truth can be said to represent the unrecognised fiction of a successful discourse (Lowe, 1991:45 quoting Fowler 1987).

Thus, it is evident that postmodern discourses provide a critique to certain strong discourses which form the basis of modernity. Especially important are essentialism and the emphasis on representation, the definitive nature of truth and objectivity. These resulted in directive deductions, and empirical realities (which imply passive observation – compare this to positivism - and rational reasoning - see reference to the strong link to the Enlightenment).

The section on research ethics will expand on the implications of the adoption of a postmodern paradigm.

### 1.3.5 Postmodernism summarised

Adopting a postmodernist approach, I shall follow Freedman and Combs (1996:22) in positioning my epistemology and posit that:

*Realities are socially constructed;*

*Realities are constituted through language (to this Hosking (1999:117) adds “and other forms of action” and with Morley (2004: 318) include “conversations, conventions, and cultural traditions”);*

*Realities are organised and maintained through narrative; and*

*There are no essential truths.*

From this statement it becomes clear that I am positioning the study firstly within the postmodernist discourse, adopting a social constructionist approach and mediated by a narrative discourse. These concepts will now be investigated as they refer to meaning.

This conversation will be taken up again in Chapter 3 when the research methodology is discussed. In that chapter the ethical implications of the postmodern epistemology will be discussed at length. In the way that another little piece of the life song is encountered in every social connection that we make according to the lore of the indigenous Australian people<sup>6</sup>, we may also encounter another aspect of the postmodern discourse in every chapter of this thesis, hopefully adding some meaning and expanding our understanding of the study topic every time we do.

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed discussion of the *Songlines* as creative and navigational rituals for life stories, see Wikipedia at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Songlines> and Bruce Chatwin (1987).

*Also, since the Ancestors created all the land through song, and they walked while they sang, the Aborigines maintain a roadmap of the entire continent in song. You can get anywhere in Australia, know the waterholes and hunting-grounds along the way, if you learn the right songs. Apparently, an Aboriginal gone 'Walkabout' was doing just that, learning songs by traveling to the end of the song lines he knew and asking whoever he found at the end who could teach him the next few bars and whether he would have permission to sing them, to walk to the end of the new verse.*

<http://www.synaptic.bc.ca/ejournal/drmtime1.htm>

## 1.4 Social Constructionism

*The terms in which the world is understood are social artefacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationship. Gergen (1985:267)*

In this paragraph, meaning as social construction will be expanded upon. Freedman and Combs (1996:1) refers to this suggesting that “[u]sing the metaphor of social construction leads us to consider the ways in which every person’s social, interpersonal reality has been constructed through interaction with other human beings and human institutions and to focus on the influence of social realities on the meaning of people’s lives.” Later on in the same text (1996:16), they provide this useful description of *social constructionism*:

*...its main premise is that the beliefs, values, institutions, customs, labels, laws, divisions of labour, and the like that make up our social realities are constructed by the members of a culture as they interact with one another from generation to generation and day to day. That is, societies construct the “lenses” through which their members interpret the world. The realities that each of us takes for granted are the realities that our societies have surrounded us with since birth. These realities provide the beliefs, practices, words, and experiences from which we make up our lives, or, as we would say in postmodernist jargon, “constitute our selves.”*

The progression from an objectivist approach, or perhaps more specifically, a cybernetics approach, is described by Hoffman (1990). She describes the process in terms of her own evolution from a so-called cybernetics approach, to a subsequent second-order cybernetic approach and then onto a social constructionist approach. The description given by her is useful for the distinction between a constructivist and social constructionist epistemology.

Hoffman (1990:1-2) describes cybernetics as the brainchild of Norbert Wiener; he called it the “science of communication and control”. It described the activity of feedback cycles, both in machines and human affairs. Through this metaphor, she ascribed to a theory (or better perhaps, a discourse) of family therapy in which a symptom was described as part of a homeostatic cycle that stabilised the family.

Quoting Hoffman, the following historical description of constructivism is given:

*Based on the work of the biologist Humberto Maturana and his colleague, cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, constructivism derives from the work of Kant, Wittgenstein, Piaget and*

*others. Von Glasersfeld formulated it as follows: "...constructs are shaped as the organism evolves a fit with its environment, and ... the construction of ideas about the world takes place in a nervous system that operates something like a blind person checking out a room. The walker in the dark who doesn't bump into a tree[,] cannot say whether he is in a wood or a field, only that he has avoided bashing his head."*

Efran and Lukens (1985: 24) single out six ideas important to an appreciation of Maturana's view of constructivism:

- a. Living systems are "structure-determined" - their operation is a function of how they are built, arrayed or put together.
- b. Living systems are "informationally-closed". Their autonomous organisations cannot be described as being simply "caused" by or directly "instructed" by outside forces.
- c. Organisms survive by fitting with one another and with other aspects of the surrounding medium – that is become "structurally coupled". When the fit of the organism and its medium is insufficient, there is disintegration - in our more usual language, the organism "dies".
- d. The career of a living system consists entirely of a purposeless "drift" in a medium. There are continual shifts in response to changes in both the external environment and internal perturbations until the point of disintegration, which can come at any time.
- e. Human beings are observing systems who describe, distinguish, and delineate in words and symbols (language). Without the observer nothing exists.
- f. We do not perceive an objective universe. The objects we think we see and study are products of the activities of our own nervous system. There is no objectivity, only "objectivity in parentheses."

As Efran, Lukens and Lukens (1988:2) suggest, "an objectivist enterprise... is built almost entirely on the belief that objective truth is discoverable" and can be "properly revealed". In an informative paper on constructivism, they refer to George Kelly who insisted that we do not "confuse our inventions with discoveries", suggesting that "any so-called reality is - in the most immediate and concrete sense - the *construction* of those who believe they have discovered and investigated it." According to them the "heart of constructivism is the recognition that our hypotheses about the world are not directly provable", implying that scientific hypotheses persist for two reasons, first, because of utility (they are useful in the scientist's work), and secondly, "because no one has yet been able to either disprove them or come up with a better alternative."



Efran and Lukens (1988:28) quote George Kelly (1969) stating that “none of today’s constructions - which are, of course, our only means of portraying reality - [is] perfect and, as the history of human thought repeatedly suggests, none is final.”

Furthermore, according to these authors (1988:28), Varela (1979) proposed that for a constructivist, ‘everything said is said from a tradition,’ and has meaning only within that tradition. Constructivism lays a strong emphasis on the value-laden nature of all human undertakings (1988:29). They also point out the following three positions taken in constructivism:

- a. Hard and fast boundaries cannot be objectively drawn around *any* particular social unit;
- b. Any unit of analysis selected for attention, no matter how arbitrarily chosen, has an impact on the direction our thinking takes and the problem-solving pathways that appear to open before us. New units suggest new possibilities.
- c. Language is the one essential that ...complex coordinations of action in a social community cannot do without, and that is why constructivists insist on talking about human lives as “conversations”.

Hoffman (1990:3) explains the difference between constructivism and the social constructionist discourse by indicating a departure from the positions held by constructivism: social constructionism sees the development of knowledge as a social phenomenon and holds that perception can only evolve within ‘a cradle of communication’. Furthermore,

*social construction theory posits an evolving set of meanings that emerge unendingly from the interactions between people. These meanings ... may not exist inside what we think of as an individual “mind”.*

Gergen (1994:49-54) posits the following suppositions as central to a social constructionist account of knowledge:

- a. *The terms by which we account for the world and ourselves are not dictated by the stipulated objects of such accounts.*
- b. *The terms and forms by which we achieve understanding of the world and ourselves are social artefacts, products of historically and culturally situated interchanges among people.*
- c. *The degree to which a given account of world or self is sustained across time is not dependent on the objective validity of the account but on the vicissitudes of social process.*
- d. ***Language derives its significance in human affairs from the way in which it functions within patterns of relationship.***

- e. *To appraise existing forms of discourse is to evaluate patterns of cultural life; such evaluations give voice to other cultural enclaves.*

In making the statement that ‘it is the form of relationship that enables semantics to function’, Gergen (1994:52) proposes that:

- a) *we find that propositions do not derive their sense from their determinant relationship to a world of referents;*
- b) *we find that the semanticist view can be reconstituted within a social frame;*
- c) *the semantic possibilities for word meaning are brought into being by following the treatment of reference as social ritual, with referential practices as socio-historically situated.*

Gergen continues to suggest that social-constructionism is a ‘congenial’ companion to Wittgenstein’s (1953) conception of meaning as a derivative of social use, with words acquiring their meaning within what can be described as “language games”. This term is also used frequently by Hosking (2005a: 609, 2005b: 271, 2007:3).

The view of meaning as derived from micro-social exchanges embedded within broad patterns of cultural life, as proposed by Gergen (1994:53), lends to social constructionism strong critical and pragmatic dimensions, by drawing attention to the way in which languages, including scientific theories, are used within the culture.

According to Hosking and Morley (2004: 318) Social Constructionism refers to those meaning frameworks which are founded in the constructive ability of human minds and their “origins in conversations, conventions and cultural traditions”. This therefore implies that meaning is socially constructed.

#### **1.4.1 Critical relational constructionism (CRC)**

Hosking (1999: 118) suggests that there are many forms of social constructionism. These forms differ with respect to their

- a) emphasis on socially constructed “products” or processes
- b) centring of individuals or communal construction processes and
- c) reflexive recognition of the researcher’s participation in construction processes.

I would like to align my epistemological position with her critical relational constructionism because of the implications it has for (participatory action) research. With regard to social constructionism, Hosking (1999:318) continues to position herself as taking a relatively uncommon approach by emphasising processes (and not products or content), by exploring the implications of viewing research processes both as processes of construction (rather than a means to produce data or to report findings) and as relational processes in which ‘the researcher’ is inevitably actively involved, co-constructing particular meanings, people and worlds. Thus researchers are invited to do something other than ‘report’ products and processes - *joining with* the co-researchers is now facilitated through some form of collaborative or participative action.

CRC suggests that processes are local and pragmatic (Hosking, 1999: 120) as compared to claims of global significance which may be associated with modernist approaches to research. She posits that

*Relational processes, whether constructed as development or therapy, or e.g., as action research... vary in whether or not they punctuate processes with conventions such as a before and after of e.g., ‘finding out’ and ‘applying’, with causal presumptions and the like, or try as much as is possible to stay in the moment of a particular coordination (e.g., Anderson 1997).*

Hosking (2005a: 609) distinguishes between three social constructionist discourses, which she calls a) entitative, b) constructivist and c) critical relational constructionist. The first narrates relations as existing between independently existing entities in subject-object (S-O) relationships. This is similar to what Hoffman (1990) calls an objectivist or first-order cybernetic discourse. Hosking (2005: 610) quotes Hermans et al (1992) to illustrate the role of language in this discourse:

*language is needed to express concepts mapped onto objects, properties and relations in a literal, unequivocal, context-independent fashion (Hermans, Kempen and van Loon, 1992).*

The role of language is therefore that of unique description or identification.

Hosking (2005: 612) describes social constructivist discourses by indicating that although reality cannot be known “as it really is”, external realities still remain the focus of modernist scientific interest in objective knowledge.

Compared to the first two discourses, Hosking (2005: 611) then continues to describe CRC as

*Instead of centring mind and ‘real’ reality, CRC centres language and discursive practices – and these are seen as constructing relational realities – including what is thought to be a person. This means that CRC is not talking about subjective interpretations and is not adopting idealism in place of realism. Rather, this is another ‘map’ about another ‘territory’ (to borrow*

*freely from Korzybski*) - where the objective-subjective, real-relativist dualisms are no longer relevant. This discourse centres construction, not discovery. CRC centres the construction of (what might be thought of as) objects – including the Self, including CRC, and including Science and its meta-theory.

Following this description, this study can therefore be expected to construct meaning by means of a relational process, rather than report pre-existing knowledge about what constitutes a “life that matters”.

#### 1.4.2 Discussing the “critical” in Critical Relational Constructionism

CRC needs to be positioned within the discourse of critical theory<sup>7</sup>. Wikipedia proposes the following description of Critical Theory within Social Theory:

*Critical social theory is, in contrast, a form of self-reflective knowledge involving both understanding and theoretical explanation to reduce entrapment in systems of domination or dependence, obeying the emancipatory interest in expanding the scope of autonomy and reducing the scope of domination.*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> According to Wikipedia, *critical* is derived from the Greek word *kritikos*, meaning judgement or discernment. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_theory#In\\_social\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory#In_social_theory)

<sup>8</sup> The initial meaning of the term critical theory was that defined by Max Horkheimer of the Frankfurt School of social science in his 1937 essay Traditional and Critical Theory: Critical theory is a social theory oriented toward critiquing and changing society as a whole, in contrast to traditional theory oriented only to understanding or explaining it. Horkheimer wanted to distinguish critical theory as a radical, emancipatory form of Marxian theory, critiquing both the model of science put forward by logical positivism and what he and his colleagues saw as the covert positivism and authoritarianism of orthodox Marxism and communism. Core concepts are: (1) That critical social theory should be directed at the totality of society in its historical specificity (i.e. how it came to be configured at a specific point in time), and (2) That Critical Theory should improve understanding of society by integrating all the major social sciences, including geography, economics, sociology, history, political science, anthropology, and psychology. Although this conception of critical theory originated with the Frankfurt School, it also prevails among other recent social scientists, such as Pierre Bourdieu, Louis Althusser and arguably Michel Foucault, as well as certain feminist theorists and social scientists.

While modernist critical theory (as described above) concerns itself with “forms of authority and injustice that accompanied the evolution of industrial and corporate capitalism as a political-economic system,” postmodern critical theory politicizes social problems “by situating them in historical and cultural contexts, to implicate themselves in the process of collecting and analyzing data, and to relativise their findings” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 52). Meaning itself is seen as unstable due to the rapid transformation in social structures and as a result the focus of research is centered on local manifestations rather than broad generalizations.

Postmodern critical research is also characterized by what is called, the *crisis of representation*, which rejects the idea that a researcher’s work is considered an “objective depiction of a stable other” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002:53). Instead, in their research and writing, many postmodern scholars have adopted “alternatives that encourage reflection about the ‘politics and poetics’ of their work. In these accounts, the embodied,

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_theory#In\\_social\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory#In_social_theory)

From this proposed understanding, it is evident that the proposed epistemology, post-foundational practical theology as introduced in Chapter 2 and participatory action research which is introduced in Chapter 3 are all aligned with the motives, objectives and ethics of Critical Theory. Philosophers who are associated with Critical Theory include names like Derrida, Foucault, Umberto Eco, Althusser, Baudrillard, Deleuze and Guattari, Gramsci, Habermas and Hall.<sup>9</sup> This list reminds strongly of proponents of post-structuralism, action research and postmodernism, which serves to strengthen the integrity of the Critical Theory-Postmodernism-Participatory Action Research conversation.

Hosking (2005: 616-617) offers the following as key features of a relational constructionist orientation – and respecting her position as one of the important proponents of CRC, I will report it as she wrote it:

*Talk of the individual self, mind operations, and individual knowledge gives way to discourses of relational processes, viewed as language-based inter-actions.*

*Relational processes are seen as processes that (re)construct Self-Other realities as local ontologies<sup>10</sup> or “forms of life” (person-world making); and (re)construct mind - metaphorised, for example - as an imaginal space in which Self-Other relations are discourses (e.g., Hermans et al, 1992; Jaynes, 1976).*

*The unitary conception of Self is replaced by a dialogical conception of Self as multiple Self-Other relations such that Other, including the body, is no longer discourses as ‘outside’.*

*Relational processes have a local-cultural-historical quality such that discourses of the past and future are constructed and re-constructed in an ongoing present.*

*Relational realities are viewed as constructions such that subject-object relations may be constructed in particular relations (e.g., in ‘scientific’ inquiry) - but do not have to be.*

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collaborative, dialogic, and improvisational aspects of qualitative research are clarified” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 53). For an example of postmodern critical work, see Rolling’s (2008) piece, entitled *Secular Blasphemy: Utter(Ed) Transgressions Against Names and Fathers in the Postmodern Era*.

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_theory#In\\_social\\_theory](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_theory#In_social_theory) last accessed on April 07, 2009.

<sup>9</sup> [http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/resources/critical\\_authors.html](http://www.uiowa.edu/~commstud/resources/critical_authors.html) last accessed on April 07, 2009 provides a list of useful links to these resources.

<sup>10</sup> This will be important to the study in as far as this research will not attempt to provide global answers to the question of what constitutes a meaningful life; it will rather describe the process through which the co-researchers developed an enhanced experience of meaning in their own lives.

*Power is (re)constructed in relational processes e.g., by being linked to talk of crediting and discrediting knowledge/identity claims, closing down or opening up possibilities, creating (more or less) local realities and relations between them.*

#### **1.4.2.1 Local realities**

Central to the understanding of a meaningful life in this thesis will be the position of “local-ness”. This is a critical reflection on the suggestion of universal truths and meta-narratives. It is founded in the unique, multi-storied realities of participants. According to Hosking (2007: 3)

*... it centres the assumption that constructions of persons and worlds and their relations, including constructions of knowledge, truth and ethics, and including constructions of science, are local relational realities.*

#### **1.4.2.2 Power as it relates to meaning**

Furthermore, she suggests that this discourse is critical in its approach to power (2007: 5). It will therefore be suspicious of claims of superiority:

*[I]t is critical in the sense that it is suspicious about any claim to know what is and what is best for the other.*

It differs from other versions of critical theory in its narration of power. In this regard Hosking (2007:5) suggests that power is relational and not a one-way or “un-contested” construct:

*For a start, it is not characterised by the assumption that any particular form of life possesses power over other groups and certainly does not assume that power is one-way and uncontested. Rather than constructing a particular form of life as a stable entity with properties and possessions, a critical constructionism theorises power as a relational process. Power is an ongoing, relational construction, able both to open up and to close down possibilities. So all acts (texts) ‘act into’ processes that are already ongoing (con-texts) and so may contribute to the ongoing (re)production of power relations.*

#### **1.4.2.3 The researcher position in constructing meaning**

Another way in which this discourse is critical is in its narration of the position and action of the researcher. Hosking here suggests a reflexive position in which observer recognizes his or her intervention in the research process (2007: 5-6):

*One of the many ways in which a critical relational constructionism is critical is that it invites reflexive recognition of its own constructive potential and participation in power relations (Foucault, 1977, 1980). It assumes that the human scientist, who acts to observe Other, is*

*necessarily acting into some already ongoing processes and relations and is, in this sense, intervening. This re-constructs the (post) positivist science account of research design and procedures: research processes now are storied as power-full processes of social construction.*

#### 1.4.2.4 *Objective knowledge external to the knower*

In summary, she proposes (Hosking, 2007: 6) that CRC

*(1) cannot rest on any claim to know how things really are (2) is not defined in terms of an interest in challenging closure or dominance relations, and (3) does not limit itself to talk of knowledge, independently of power relations.*

Rather

*A critical relational constructionism collapses the process/product binary and views the process as itself the product (e.g., Brown & Hosking, 1986). Relations become significant, not as the instrumental means to achieving some rational ends, but for their moment-by-moment openness to and appreciation of other possible selves and worlds (e.g., Harding, 1986).*

## 1.5 Narrative Approach

*"..stories serve as meaning-generating interpretive devices which frame the present within a hypothetical past and an anticipated future."*

*(Freedman and Combs 1996:99 quoting Bruner 1986a: 18)*

Previously I have proposed that within a postmodern epistemology meaning is relationally or socially constructed. It was also suggested that meaning is mediated through language, language thus understood not only as descriptive, but also as generative of meaning. Flowing from these two premises, it is then suggested that these realities are organised and maintained through narrative (Freedman and Combs, 1996:22). This section will therefore revisit narrative and introduce a further discussion of the narrative discourse as hermeneutic meaning making discourse.

White (1992:3-4) describes the narrative discourse as derived from an interpreting process and states that:

*Human beings are interpreting beings – we are all active in the interpretation of, in giving meaning to, our experiences as we live our lives. An act of interpretation is an achievement. It is not possible for us to interpret our experiences in a vacuum. A frame of intelligibility is necessary for any interpretation of lived experience.*



This implies a *relational* and interpretative aspect to making sense, giving meaning to an experience (cf. social construction). Such frames provide a context for experience, and make the attribution of meaning possible. Meaning therefore does not pre-exist the interpretation of experience.

The meanings that we derive in the process of interpretation have real effects on the shape of our lives, on the steps that we take in life. Thus, such meanings are not neutral in their effects on persons' lives, but are constitutive of these lives. The **personal story** or **self-narrative** provides the principal frame of intelligibility for our lived experience. The personal story or self-narrative is not radically invented inside our heads. Rather, it is something that is negotiated and distributed within various communities of persons and in the institutions of our culture. The personal story or self-narrative also structures our experience. It is the personal story or self-narrative that determines which aspects of our stock of lived-experience are selected for expression (White and Epston, 1990:12).

It is also the personal story or self-narrative that determines the shape of the expression of particular aspects of our lived experience. We can say that it is the stories that we have about our lives that actually shape or constitute our lives. But, our lives are multi-storied. No single story of life can be free of ambiguity and contradiction. No sole personal story or self-narrative can handle all of the contingencies of life (White and Epston, 1990: 11).

As our lives are multi-storied, so are they multi-motivated. The act of living requires that we engaged in the mediation of the dominant stories and of the sub-stories of our lives.

Cochran (1997:5) adds to this, proposing that a narrative

*offers powerful resources for composition and for making meaning" by "providing a temporal organisation, integrating a beginning, middle, and end into a whole; in being a synthetic structure that configures an indefinite expansion of elements and spheres of elements into a whole (Ricoeur, 1984); and the plot of a narrative carrying a point.*

Stories teach us how to live, how to act. Alasdair MacIntyre says we can only answer the question "What am I to do?" if we can find the answer to the question "Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?" MacIntyre (1981: 216) asserts:

*We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed. It is through hearing stories about wicked stepmothers, lost children, wolves that suckle twin boys,*

*youngest sons who receive no inheritance but must make their own way in the world and eldest sons who waste their inheritance on riotous living and go into exile to live with the swine, that children learn or mislearn both what a child and what a parent is, what the cast of characters may be in the drama into which they have been born and what the ways of the world are. Deprive children of stories and you leave them unscripted, anxious stutterers in their actions as in their words. Hence there is no way to give us an understanding of our society, including our own, except through the stock of stories which constitute its initial dramatic resources.*

McAdams (1993:11) says that we each seek to provide our scattered and often confusing experiences with a sense of coherence by arranging the episodes of our lives into stories. His thoughts invoke the power of myth.

*This is not the stuff of delusion or self-deception. We are not telling ourselves lies. Rather, through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. In order to live well, with unity and purpose, we compose a heroic narrative of the self that illustrates essential truths about ourselves.*

### 1.5.1 Narrative process

The narratives process which was adopted in this study started with the stories of meaningfulness of all the co-researchers. From within these stories we identified the dominant meaning discourses, externalising any internalised discourses as we did. In the process we did not focus our attention on problematic discourses only, but also externalised the positive discourses. As White has indicated, even “good” discourses can be totalising when they become single-storied (2000: 35). As these discourses were identified, they were named and subsequently deconstructed to surface the power discourses present in them. The deconstruction process allowed us to develop an understanding of what in our society maintained these discourses, who benefitted from them, who were marginalized by them and what the effect on agency was. In doing so, we engaged the absent but implicit values and passions at work in the research community.

The narrative approach which has been followed in this study included the discourses of de-centring, externalization, re-membling, deconstruction, unique outcomes and the discourse which White (2000) called “absent, but implicit”. Each of these discourses will be discussed in turn.

### 1.5.1.1 *De-centring*

The position assumed by the therapist or facilitator in a research process is not that of an expert. This suggests an ethos within which the knowledge of the therapist or facilitator is not considered to be superior or privileged in any way above that / those of the clients or co-researchers. Rather the facilitator is removed from the centre of the meaning making process and placed not outside as an objective observer, but in the circle of meaning making as a co-generator of meaning. In this regard, Speedy (2000: 364) refers to a position which is in opposition to a “posture of authoritative truth”.

In this regard, we should first consider the discourse of “not-knowing” as introduced by Anderson and Goolishian (1992:29). In this important chapter they propose not-knowing as an ethical non-privileged position for the therapist. This position is characterized by authentic curiosity and “being informed” by the client, thus de-centring the therapist who now relinquishes the expert status and the power associated with that.

If we relate this back to this study and the researcher as facilitator, it does not imply that the facilitator is not-knowing in the sense of not being able to contribute any meaning to the process, but is an equal contributor to the knowledge process. Knowing in this context rather refers to a pre-determined knowledge of what constitutes the problem and what the solution should be, mostly expressed in meta-narratives and “experience-distant” discourses. Speedy refers to local solutions and call them “experience-near” solutions (2000: 368).

### 1.5.1.2 *Externalising questioning (Carey and Russell, 2002:1-6; Morgan, 2000:17-32; O’Hanlon, 1994: 21ff; White and Epston, 1990:38)*

Carey and Russell (2002:3) position externalising as a vital aspect of the narrative approach. They suggest that

*Basically, externalising conversations are the doorway to preferred stories and all the delightful skills, ideas and knowledges that people have.*

The practice of externalising questioning is closely related to the premise that “the problem is the problem, the client is not the problem” (see for example Carey and Russell, 2002:1). This suggests a certain internalisation of the problem.

The problematic discourse is therefore “separated” from the client through a series of externalising questions. Key words which mark the opportunity for externalising are “to be” (that is, words like

“am”, “is” and “are” as in “*I am a failure*”) and any verb describing a problem situation (like “the boys *are bullying* me”). The moment words like these are used, the therapist or research facilitator will have to recognise the opportunity to ask questions like

*What is this [name the internalized problem] doing to your relationship with your colleagues?*

*What is the bullying doing to your happiness at school?*

The client should be invited to provide a name for the problem at this stage. This name may be revisited throughout the process of research or therapy, making sure that it is still appropriate and descriptive, considering any growth or story development which might have taken place. This turning of adjectives into nouns is what Phillip Hart refers to as reification (2007:7). This is also a term commonly used by Wenger (2002: 55, 57-62). White and Epston (1990: 38) call this “objectification” of the problem.

Let us consider the implications of such externalizing. Not only will the problem now be identified as being distant from the client, but it has also been named and can be *deconstructed* to find out where its power base lies, what supports this way of thinking about such problems and its strengths and weaknesses. This also makes it possible to develop the story line of the problem as distinct from the story of the client. Even in the naming of the problem the “power balance” can be perceived to shift somewhat to the client. My experience has been that naming as a creative process, even if it is only to a small extent, is empowering and restores some agency to the client.

It is very important to heed Freedman and Comb’s (1996:47) reminder about externalising though:

*Externalization is more important as an attitude than as a technique.*

It is however important to reflect on the ethics of externalization. Does externalisation, for instance, not lead to the client no longer taking responsibility? In this regard, it is well worth spending some time on the paper by Carey and Russell (2002) as well as White and Epston’s discussion of responsibility and externalisation (1990:65). They indicate that externalising in no way excuses people from their responsibilities, but in the perspectives which are enabled during the externalisation process, the real effects of problematic actions on clients and other people alike are made more visible (2002:4).

Furthermore, externalising allows the therapist or facilitator to adopt a position of curiosity rather than expertise in the co-exploration process.

The tendency or temptation to blame self and others is also removed by externalisation. As the problem becomes externalised, the problem is “allowed” to be the problem again rather than the person assuming that role.

Carey and Russell (2002: 5) also suggest that externalisation is about power and politics. Instead of allowing problems to be internalised and thus wielding inherent power over clients, the client’s identity is now removed from the problem identity.

Externalisation of problems and strengths alike allow multiple stories to develop, thus reducing the risk of totalisation.

O’Hanlon (1994: 25) repeats the cautionary note from Freedman and Combs on the previous page, suggesting that externalisation should be adopted as a paradigm and not merely as a technique.

In the words of Carey and Russell (2002: 5)

*Externalising conversations enable me to be a part of the process of people reclaiming their lives from the effects of problems.*

### **1.5.1.3 Deconstruction (Griffith and Griffith, 2002: 151ff; Morgan, 2000: 45-51)**

Griffith and Griffith (2002: 151) describe deconstruction as a systematic inquiry process of the “interpretative assumptions” from which a belief emerges. This inquiry process has a twofold objective. The first is to identify the assumptions which form the foundation of the belief, and the second is to explore the cultural and societal politics supporting these. Invariably this will lead the explorer into the power domain.

Freedman and Combs (1996: 46) remind us that deconstruction cannot be discussed without mentioning Derrida. They describe how Jacques Derrida and other deconstructionists suggested that any symbol or text is as far as its meaningfulness is concerned embedded in its context. This opens space for multiple meanings instead of just one true meaning can co-exist within different contexts. They relate this to narratives and point out that all narratives are full of “gaps” and “ambiguities”. Focusing on these it becomes apparent that the “officially sanctioned meaning” of a text is but one of various possible meanings.

Deconstructive listening and questioning therefore inquire about the context in which the problem story (lack of meaning or an insignificant life in our case) exists, the ideas and beliefs that are sustaining the problem and the history of the ideas or discourses (Morgan, 2000: 46).

Deconstruction in the way that it has been introduced in this study has not been used to refer to a “breaking down” process. It is used to describe an opening up of space for multiple opportunities and possibilities, but exploring the origin of discourses or taken for granted truths. In doing so the pillars of such truths are identified to reveal the relational politics involved. The interests of various parties within the situational community are thus surfaced and a map of benefits and exploitation by such assumptions can be developed.

Once this is revealed alternative possibilities can be explored and re-embedded as part of the absent but implicit values available to the community.

#### ***1.5.1.4 Re-membering (Morgan, 2000: 77-84; White, 1997)***

As will become evident in the questions asked to my co-researchers, it was attempted to develop new histories and contexts for many of their experienced meaningful story events. In doing so, it is imperative to authenticate such new histories. This has often been done by inviting outside witnesses into the conversation. I would typically ask questions about where a certain unique outcome or positive story originated, who the influential agents were and who could attest to this positive attribute or value revealed in the client story.

The alternate story or meaning story is therefore populated by members who were witnesses of supportive events, hence the “re-membering” description of the process. Often these members of life stories were “significant others” in the lives of the clients or fellow researchers, some of them no longer alive.

In the re-membering process the client or in this study, the co-researcher, gets the opportunity to deliberately include or exclude members into or from their “life club” (Morgan, 2000: 77). Morgan refers to choosing to include or revising the membership or even revoking the membership of people. This is an act of empowerment already and restoring of agency as such.

#### ***1.5.1.5 Absent, but implicit***

*Meaninglessness is but meaning which has lost its bearings.*

Adaptation of Paolo Freire’s words in his book, *Pedagogy of Hope*

The phrase “absent, but implicit” which was coined by White, refers to that which is absent in the life stories, but implicit in the life expressions (2000: 36). This construct is particularly important

when life meaning is discussed as it was often employed by White to inquire about values, meaning and hope. That which is *absent, but implicit* describes the preferred reality, which is a) value indication or assessment, b) opens up space for the alternate story and c) becomes an ethics proposition as well. Quoting White, a typical question about the *absent, but implicit* would be:

*What does your dissatisfaction reflect about how you would prefer things to be? (Duvall, Beres and Bedauin, 2008: 10)*

Leading to rich discussions about what is important in life, this also served as an opening to explore links to traditions, cultures and people who shared such values, principles and commitments. Inquiring upon these, actions congruent with such “valued directions” could also be identified, explored and deconstructed.

In discussing life meaning, conversations about the *absent but implicit* could include “hopes that things could be different in one’s life”, prospects of better things to come, “dreams of a life lived more fully”, anticipations, visions, wishes and other meaningfulness discourses. Following White’s suggestions, the rich descriptions referred to in the previous paragraph could invite conversations “tracing the trajectory” of the absent but implicit in the lives of my fellow researchers as far as expressions of lives which could be more meaningful are concerned. These discussion could explore the relationships the fellow researchers had with the previously absent but implicit. Typical questions which could facilitate these conversations could include

*How did you manage to hold onto your life purpose or passion for so long, despite everything you went through which was so discouraging?*

## 1.6 The bridge to the rest of the thesis

Now that an epistemology has been described and the study has been positioned in the context of why it could contribute not only to the lives of the co-researchers, but also to the academic discourse around life meaning, a context and a challenge have been created. A context has been developed which will require reflection on the research methodology which would be congruent with this epistemology, and also a research ethics which will have to be negotiated and put in place to sustain the research process. The challenge will be to align this with a pastoral theological positioning in such a way which will be authentic, congruent and respectful of existing discourses while exploring the implications for life meaning.



## Chapter 2. Theological Positioning

*God reminded Job that anyone who was not around when the foundations of the universe were being laid, should be more filled with wonder and less with conclusions.<sup>11</sup>*

Rolheiser (2004:97)

This study has attempted to research and provide new ways of looking at existential meaning. It should therefore relate to discourses within theology which are engaged in conversations with existential meaning. Existential theology will therefore be examined to determine whether such a relationship exists.

This study is however positioned within the practical theology and pastoral theology discourses. In adopting a theological position, care will be taken to ensure an alignment and critical integrity between epistemology and ethos - as discussed in the previous chapter - and theology. The discourses of “not knowing”, multi-storied realities, relational realities and narrative unity are critical to the discussion of theology as it pertains to this study.

Within the limited scope and aims of this study the primary discourse will be a life meaning discourse. In this chapter I would therefore attempt to suggest how the study topic is positioned within existing practical theology discourses rather than propose a new theological paradigm. If the literature indicates that meaning is not well represented within the practical theology discourse, a supplementary understanding of practical theology will however be proposed. This understanding will explore existential meaning within the practical theology discourse.

### 2.1 Chapter overview

In this chapter, the conversation between (existential) meaning and theology will be explored to draw and initial framework around a discussion of practical theology and meaning. In this regard the work of some prominent theologians like Paul Tillich will be introduced and its implications for an existential meaning discourse in theology examined.

This chapter will next offer an understanding of practical theology. I will thus start by proposing an understanding of practical theology. This will be followed by an exploration of what the practical theology discourse has to say about meaningful living. As this study is positioned within a

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<sup>11</sup> Job, chapters 38-40.

postmodern paradigm, the conversation inevitably thus becomes a three-way discussion and the postmodern epistemology-practical theology relationship will be discussed. Based on this, I will subsequently attempt to establish a relationship between the study discourse and practical theology. Once that has been done, we proceed to position “a life that matters” or life meaning within the pastoral theology discourses.

Pastoral theology as part of the practical theology discourse will subsequently be discussed to explore how the pastoral relates to the meaning discourses.

Any critical tenets of postmodern epistemology and relational constructionist paradigm as proposed in chapter 1, will be identified and discussed at length in this chapter.

Care will thus be taken to discuss how “not knowing”, multi-storied realities, relational constructionism and narrative unity relate to and contribute to the discussion of practical theology and pastoral theology.

The chapter will be concluded with a discussion and enquiry about the way that these discourses and participatory ethos and postmodern (research) ethics are aligned, thus facilitating continuity within the thesis.

## 2.2 A conversation between Theology and Existential Meaning

In his book, *Jesus and the quest for meaning*, Thomas West (2001) refers to the multitude of books on the quest for meaning being published annually. In 2001, the *Books in Print* listed 267 books with the word *meaning* in its title. Most of these discussed the quest for meaning. An advanced search of Google Books of *meaning* and *theology* resulted in 160 hits, only 30% of which discussed life meaning or existential meaning. A meaningful life is therefore not that well represented in theology literature. The theologians included below were however identified in a search of the library databases accessible through the University of Pretoria, complemented by an Internet search via the Google search engine. The key words used in these literature searches were “theology” AND “meaningful”, “practical” AND “theology” AND “meaningful” and “pastoral” AND “theology” and “meaningful”.

Subsequently, in a reflection on the conversation between theology and existential meaning, Paul Tillich, Jürgen Moltmann, Ernst Bloch, Vincent Brümmer and Karl Rahner will be introduced and their views on theology and meaning described. These theological voices were identified and selected through the search process described in the previous paragraph.

### 2.2.1 Karl Rahner and the Graced Search for Meaning

Considered to be one of the most important theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Karl Rahner (1904-1984) was a member of the Jesuit community (see for instance the Cambridge Companion to Karl Rahner edited by Marmion and Hines). Karl Rahner was influenced<sup>12</sup> by Heidegger and wrote a dissertation<sup>12</sup> suggesting that the human search for meaning is rooted in the *unlimited horizon of God's own being experienced in the world*. To the end of his life, Rahner was convinced that existential meaning was intimately related to the experiences, history, and sacramental life that are God's world of grace. In this regard Kelly (1993: 29) reports that

*Rahner portrays God as inspiring the world to shape human destiny and to liberate people to see God in all things, in order to know in that freedom that their search for meaning can only end in God.*



2-1 Spes of Hope; engraving by Sebald Beham, c 1540

This quotation immediately alerts us to the way that our narratives about God and the discourses which are informed by them will impact the quality of the existential meaning derived in this way. If our narratives of God are love narratives, we may experience an embeddedness and valued sense of meaning. If however, we have a dominant story of God as the Righteous Ruler who punishes sin – a story which renders low prominence to grace and care – the meaning we experience through our experience of God may leave us feeling alienated, deprived of a personal relationship with God and eventually positioned as individuals who have to comply with strict rules and commandments. Instead of an ethic of what a life within the grace of God may look like, the Ten Commandments can then easily be perceived as rules which need to be complied with – leading to a compliance ethic which instils a culture of compliance to the minimum requirement of the rule. This does not suggest that the discourse described becomes a problem discourse – the individual's relationship with the

<sup>12</sup> This dissertation was initially rejected by his Catholic advisor, Martin Honecker, but was published in 1939 under the title, *Spirit in the World*.

discourse will determine whether it inspires a problem saturated narrative or whether it becomes a meaningful life narrative.

We will later see how my fellow researchers all indicated that God, the Divine or Spirituality effected their sense of meaning, typically stating that *God gives my life meaning*, initially as an absolute statement without elaborating how or what the nature of this existential meaning is.

Rahner, using Heidegger's notion that the question of the meaning of one's being is preceded by an *a priori* understanding of the world's horizon of meaning<sup>13</sup>, said that the search and longing of the human subject for meaning of experience is grounded in a "preconceptual" grasp of God's infinite horizon of being as a condition (and fulfilment) of the human search for meaning (Kelly, 1993:5, 7).

This suggestion sensitises us to our theological narratives as epistemological framework for "a life that matters". As suggested above this may leave us in a position of valued embeddedness or alienated anxiety. This is closely related to God being the origin and goal for both human beings and the world (*arche* and *telos*) (Burke, 2002: 81-82). *Telos* or life purpose will be discussed later on as a meaning discourse introduced by the co-researchers to this study.

### 2.2.2 Ernst Bloch and his *Revisionisme* – also of anthropology

In order to appreciate the work of Moltmann, we need to reflect on the life and life contribution of Ernst Bloch first.

Early in his life, Ernst Bloch developed the concept of anticipatory consciousness, a concept which became the cornerstone of his life's work (Lester, 1995: 19). Bloch suggested that hope or the human capacity to hope is the existential core of human existence.

His magnum opus was *Das Prinzip Hoffnung*, which appeared in 1959 and contained his philosophy of hope. This philosophy of hope is founded in the proposition that humankind is not at peace with herself, but transcends herself and designs herself according to the future (Weiland, 1971 :29). Simplistically he posits humans as beings who hope. This philosophy drew lines to the theology of hope of described by theologians like Moltmann. Moltmann will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Bloch suggests that the mistake of psychology has been that she attempted to understand humankind in terms of our pasts, our personal historical narratives only, thus totalising persons by

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<sup>13</sup> See for instance *Sein und Zeit* (1927).

embedding them mostly within traumatic experiences from their youths (Weiland, 1971: 30). This hope, according to Bloch, expresses itself in dreams and fantasies, but also ultimately becomes the driving force of social re-visioning and every revolution. This it does by designing other, better possibilities and reaches out to *that which is not yet!*

It is however, also important to reflect on dreams and their potential to be mere castles in the air, thereby alienating us from authentic possibilities. In this respect, Bloch, turned to Marxism as a philosophy which he considered to be able to unite utopias and science, dreams and reason.

Although Bloch described himself as an atheist, he had an excellent knowledge of the Bible. He described our faith in God and our following of Christ as an everlasting exodus, characterised by an eternal act of rebellion. This exodus discourse was later taken up by Moltmann and developed further.

Weiland (1971:34) describes Bloch's philosophical journey as a demythologising, de-theologising non-religious interpretation of the Bible as the Book of the exodus, of the Kingdom of hope, which in Marx became "concrete utopia".

### 2.2.3 Jürgen Moltmann: Future, Hope and Meaning

*The meaning of each several present becomes clear only in the light of hopes for the future.*

Moltmann (1967: 176)

For Moltmann a meaningful life was inextricably related to hope as a life orientation directed at the future.

If hope was dependent on a perspective of the future, this implies that a certain life dynamic is required: life thus have to be dynamic with the potential of change over a time horizon. Moltmann (1967:79) refers to this requirement or assumption as an imperative *historical flux with room for open possibilities ahead*. This implies that Christian hope relies on the ability of Christ (as the source of hope) to change the world.

It comes as no surprise that for Moltmann the Bible was the Book of breaking and moving away, his religion of the Old Testament that of Exodus and his religion of the New Testament, that of the coming Kingdom of God (Weiland, 1971: 91-93). This illustrates Moltmann's perspective on faith as being directed to the future. This future expected by faith is a future of freedom. God's history with

humankind is thus a history of freedom or a history within which humankind becomes free - is liberated.

Moltmann (1967: 17-18) proposes that *hope's statements of promise anticipate the future*. Its meaning for our present lives derives from the position that

*in the promises, the hidden future already announces itself and exerts its influence on the present through the hope it awakens.*

But *hope* was not described in isolation in Moltmann's construction of the concept. Hope has an *inseparable companion* in *Faith* (Moltmann, 1967: 20). Thus Moltmann posits Hope as an agent which

*sets this faith open to the comprehensive future of Christ.*

Quoting Kierkegaard, Moltmann (1967: 20) eloquently describes hope as a *passion for what is possible*.

Positioned against Hope is Despair. This Despair is positioned as an obstructive force, not destroying Hope but as the sin which prevents access to the fulfilment of Hope (Moltmann, 1967: 23). Thus Despair would have us hope no more.

As a critique to Hope as living for the future, we should therefore ask whether Hope does not *cheat us out of the happiness of the present* (1967: 26). This may effect a life never lived, but hoped to be lived (1967:27). Not only can Hope thus cheat us out of the happiness of the present, but also of the God of the present, the eternally present God (1967:28). To this Moltmann (1967:28) responds by suggesting that Hope is not cheating us out of the happiness of the present; on the contrary it is (*my underlining*) *the happiness of the present* in that it makes the present bearable. He continues to argue that *expectation makes life good*

*for in expectation man (sic) can accept his whole present and find joy not only in its joy, but also in its sorrow.*

In this regard we are reminded of the Beatitudes, proclaiming apparent paradoxes. If we read them in the perspective created by Moltmann above, perhaps a new significance is added to the words.

#### 2.2.4 Brümmer on Meaning and the Christian Faith

Brümmer (2006: Preface, unnumbered) suggested that religious belief should be understood as a means for understanding the meaning of life and our experience of the world, rather than as explanatory theory. This enables us to direct our lives accordingly in a way which makes sense of our actions. Believers in the Christian tradition therefore claim that their lives are meaningful *because they seek to attain ultimate happiness in the love of God.*

Quoting Wittgenstein, Brümmer suggested that religious traditions provide conceptual models or “pictures” (we would perhaps prefer to refer to these as lenses) in which we could interpret our lives as meaningful (2006: 94). This also facilitates an understanding of the challenges encountered in life: (2006:99). If the Genesis narrative of the Creation of the earth is understood as a creative narrative, it provides a song of praise for the fact that the creation derives from the hand of God and is thus meaningful (2006:99). Furthermore, such religious traditions go further and provide us with suggestions of appropriate and meaningful behaviours and attitudes when we are confronted by such challenges (2006:94). Thus narrating our lives as “in the presence of God”, not only do we learn to understand ourselves, but also our relationship to the world. This then becomes what makes our lives meaningful. This religious interpretation bestows significance to our world of experience.

These religious traditions enable us to relate life and the world around us to God by means of the metaphors provided. Therefore, for instance

*My life is meaningful because God loves me and I am a child of God.*

And

*The world around me is meaningful because it has been created by God his wonders to proclaim. (Brümmer, 2006: 204).*

Once again, following Wittgenstein, Brümmer (2006:204) suggests that in order to participate in this paradigm, we have to be introduced to the language game expressing it.

According to Brümmer (2006: 206) meaning thus is effected by our experience of living in fellowship with God and by a belief that God is involved in what happens in the world in which we live. The presupposition in this position is therefore that God exists and His Kingdom and His Will are realities.



### 2.2.5 Tillich and the Anxiety of Non-Being

*Being religious means asking passionately the question of the meaning of our existence and being willing to receive answers, even if the answers hurt.*

Paul Tillich (1958)

*The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*

Paul Tillich (2000: 190)

Paul Tillich (1886 – 1965), sometimes described as the “Apostle to the Intellectuals”, provided a *new vocabulary* to address *modernity’s confrontation with death and meaninglessness* and its so-called *discontents* (Tillich, 2000:xi, xiii).

In 1952 he published his landmark text on existential meaning, *The Courage to Be*. This text came to be referred to as an *indispensable* text in the theological conversation of the meaning of life (Gomes in Tillich, 2000: xii).

The search for the meaning of life, Tillich called his *ultimate concern* (interview with Tillich on YouTube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9\\_9eXEJ6I](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1P9_9eXEJ6I)). Another strong statement in this regard suggests that we are human *only by understanding and shaping reality, both our world and ourselves, according to meanings and values* (2000: 50).

Tillich’s (2000:38) position on meaningfulness aims to dispel the anxiety of *ultimate nonbeing*. The description of nonbeing offered by Tillich (2000:40) juxtaposes it to being, in a way which reminds us of the *absent but implicit* introduced by White (2000). This discourse is intended to convey the understanding that in the expression of any experience of life, there is a discernment we make between the expressed experience and other experiences that have already been given meaning and provide a contrasting backdrop, which “shapes” the expression being foregrounded. Such ontological nonbeing therefore becomes a nothingness in contrast to the state and nature of being, or put differently (2000:40)

*Being is the negation of the primordial night of nothingness.*

This anxiety is described as threefold, appearing in the anxiety of death, the anxiety of meaninglessness and the anxiety of condemnation (2000:41). In this section we will focus only on the second appearance, namely the existential anxiety of meaninglessness. This Tillich (2000:46) suggests

*threatens man as a whole.*

This *whole* is suggested to span his *spiritual* as well as his *ontic self-affirmation*. This is achieved by **participating** creatively in the *various spheres of meaning*. Participation is key to the previous explanation, as it is in this participation that the affirmation is effected.

Anxiety of meaninglessness is described by Tillich (2000:47) as anxiety about the loss of an *ultimate concern*, of the loss of

*a meaning which gives meaning to all meanings.*

And this anxiety, he posits (2000:47), is aroused by the loss of *a spiritual centre*<sup>14</sup>, *the special contents of the spiritual life*, of an

*answer, however symbolic and indirect, to the question of the meaning of existence*<sup>15</sup>.

This occurs as a separation or the fear of a cut off from *creative participation* in activities of culture (think about perceived threats to one's home language), frustration about something which one *passionately* supports (a lifestyle, political model or basic right for instance) and being transferred from one object of devotion to another to another because their inherent meanings dissipates (think about anyone or object one loves, adores).

Tillich (2000:xvii) suggests that, against this anxiety, stands the courage to be which he posits as being

*rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt (2000:190).*

This however, is not a simplistic proposition as it is positioned in the philosophical context of existentialism. Existentialism here is understood to be *a series of philosophical arguments about the relationship between the individual and God or the universe* (Gomes in Tillich, 2000: xviii). According to Gomes (Tillich, 2000: xix)

*the fundamental existential question has to do with the fundamental question of individual meaning and purpose in an existence from which God has been displaced as the source of meaning, purpose and order.*

Tillich (2000:139) calls existentialism *the expression of the anxiety of meaninglessness and of the attempt to transfer this anxiety into the courage to be as oneself.*

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<sup>14</sup> In this regard, also refer to the chapter on Spirituality and a Meaningful Life

<sup>15</sup> On page 51 of *The Courage to Be*, Tillich even suggests that *in the "first" meaningful sentence all the richness of man's spiritual life is potentially present.*

Then the courage to be becomes the courage *to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable* (2000:164). This expresses a position of grace compared to sin, which Tillich described as *estrangement* or *separation*, and the *human condition* as *separation* from God, the self and community. This has significant implications for pastoral therapy where problems in my experience often present themselves to clients in such a way as to convince them of being separate or different.

When Tillich refers to courage *rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt*, the transcendence implied refers to the transition beyond theism. That which is above the God of theism, has the ability to transcend the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, taken into the courage to be. Tillich (2000: 186) posits that while Mysticism takes in the centre of self and power of being, it fails to enter and accept the radical doubt concerning the concrete, *plunging directly into the ground of being*, yet leaving the world of finite values and meanings as concrete. Therefore it does not solve the problem of meaninglessness. This God above the God of theism, the power of being, does not devalue all concrete with meaninglessness, but accepts the doubt that allows their potential restitution. Absolute faith is found in mysticism that transcends the theistic objectivation of a God who is a being.

In conclusion, Tillich (2000:189) suggests that becoming aware of this state, the power of being or ground of our being, is to change the traditional symbols of theism to that of the God above theism. Symbols that promote theism, such as immortality, providence, judgment, inherited sin, remove the awareness of the power of being, the self-affirmation in spite of the threat of nonbeing. When the traditional symbols are changed to facilitate acceptance (of grace), they can enable us to become aware of the power of being to withstand and take in itself the anxiety of fate and death and that of guilt and condemnation.

### 2.3 Practical Theology: An Understanding

Various descriptions of Practical Theology and its domain of influence exist. Fowler (1983:149) describes practical theology as a “theological reflection and construction” which is critical and constructive of the praxis of the Christian community’s life and work in its various dimensions. This description is therefore broad enough also to include meaningfulness as one of these *dimensions*.

Hendriks (2004:19) focused on its hermeneutic nature, suggesting that it concerns itself with how the Word should be proclaimed in word and deed in the world.

Heitink refers to a theory of action, suggesting a role of mediation of the Christian faith in the praxis of the modern world (1999:6). He agrees with other practical theologians that practical theology deals with God's activity through the ministry of human beings or the church (1999:7).

Louw (1998:95-98) proposes an understanding of practical theology as the hermeneutic of God's encounter with human beings and their world. Elsewhere (2008:103) he suggests that praxis in practical theology has an intentional implication, as it refers to the *intention of human actions, and to the meaning of our engagement in life issues and to the quality of our being human within the systemic realm of human relationships*.

Magezi (2005:93) quotes Louw (1998) and indicates that the role of practical theology in South Africa may be described as *confessional, interactive and contextual*. *Confessional* here refers to the Scriptures being the only source of knowledge, while *interactive* links gospel insights to *empirical* insights from secular sources, and *contextual* links the situation aiming to generate transformation by means of situational analysis. This transformative praxis in a culture of reflection, as was suggested previously, potentially opens space for a process of reflection on life meaning and deconstruction of societal (including church) discourses of meaning. This will be an inference and not a direct reference though.

Heitink as translated by Bruinsma (1999: 266) posit that "the core question" which practical theology must address is the meaning of life, a question which they suggest, is "rooted in anxiety and despair"<sup>16</sup>. Ironically perhaps, this question is prevalent even in a culture which lacks nothing as far as material things are concerned and among people enjoying perfect health. This perspective then links practical theology to the discussion of a meaningful life. Section 2.4 will elaborate on this relationship.

The reference to *anxiety and despair* strongly reminds of the work done and the sentiments expressed by Tillich (2000: 32-63). Tillich concerned himself with the fundamental existential question of individual meaning and purpose in an existence from which God has been displaced as the source of meaning, purpose and order (2000: xix).

The voice of practical theology however has been found to be surprisingly "soft-spoken" in my literature searches, literally only providing two hits when a search for "practical theology" and "existential meaning" was done. This seems to suggest that this study is contributing to a hitherto vastly unexplored area of concern for practical theology.

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<sup>16</sup> This reminds of Tillich's description of the human experience of *non-being* or meaninglessness (Tillich, 2000: 32ff).

## 2.4 Practical Theology and a Meaningful Life

*To let God be God means not only that we do not set limits to the infinite, but also that we allow God to give us meaning, significance, uniqueness, and eternal life.*

Rolheiser (2004:106)

*The courage to be is rooted in the God who appears when God has disappeared in the anxiety of doubt.*

Tillich (2000: 190)

### 2.4.1 Positioning “life that matters” discourses within a postmodern practical theology

I will now proceed to position the study within a postmodern practical theology context by pointing out the relationship between Practical Theology and a meaningful life.

Heitink and Bruinsma (1999: 266) posit that “the core question” which practical theology must address is the meaning of life, a question which they suggest is “rooted in anxiety and despair”. Ironically perhaps, this question is prevalent even in a culture which lacks nothing as far as material things are concerned and among people enjoying perfect health.

Similar sentiments are expressed by a number of other authors (Van der Ven, 1990:45; Pieterse, 1993: 45, 135; Müller, 1996: 5, 97; Gay, 2006:305). But not only is Practical Theology concerned with meaningful living, it is also a transformative praxis (see among others Tracy and Cobb, 1984: Chapter 1; Browning, 2003: 317-322 and Pierce, 2007: 246). Transformative here opens the space for alternative stories about meaning and how it is informed by theological reflection.

In his book on Liberal Theology, Rasor (2005: xii) suggests that religion is fundamentally concerned with the problem of finding meaning and orientation in life. He quotes Tillich (2005: xiii) who referred to meaning in life as the “ultimate concern”.

Meaningful living and transformative praxis thus confirm the relationship not only to the topic of this study, but also to the research ethic selected, namely participatory action research.

## 2.5 The relationship between Pastoral Therapy and the study area

On the website of the Faculty of Theology, Louw proposes that for Pastoral Theology

*The main objective is to help people towards a meaningful life with the aid of an appropriate understanding of God and his presence.*

Botha (1998: 124) suggests that

*There is a vital link between pastoral therapy and theology. In the pastoral conversation, the pastoral therapist has to interpret, i.e. to theologise within the concrete situation of the individual seeking counsel (Veltkamp 1988:201). Clinebell (1984:50) stated: 'It is in this sense that pastoral care and counselling are ways of doing theology'. Pastoral therapy is probably the one situation in which the theological skills of theologians are tested to their very limits.*

This paragraph is included as an example of how the relationship between pastoral therapy and theology can be described. And we have argued that theology should concern itself with a reflection of existential meaning, or a life that matters.

Peterson (1992:1) says that

*Pastoral work takes Dame Religion by the hand and drags her into the everyday world, introducing her to friends, neighbours, and associates. Religion left to herself is shy, retiring, and private; or else she is decorative and proud – a prima donna. But she is not personal and she is not ordinary. The pastor insists on taking her where she must mix with the crowd.*

The relationship of pastoral care and meaningful living is proposed by Peterson (1992:76) when he suggests that pastoral care can assist people to “comprehend their lives as connected narratives that have meaning and makes sense”.

The relationship between pastoral care and meaningful living has been described by a number of other authors as well. Included in this list are Albers (1986: 214), Clinebell (1984:28), Evans after Kierkegaard (1995:79), Gerkin (1993: 198), Heitink (1979: 71, 75, 79), Veltkamp (1988: 20-21) and Wicks et al (1993: 42).

Louw (2007: x) says that care for human souls is concerned with human suffering, with compassion, quality of life, hope, future and **giving meaning to life**. This positions the quest for meaningfulness or “a life that matters” within the realm of pastoral care. He proceeds to introduce soul (*nepfesh*) as a gasp of air as a metaphor for our “intuitive” focus on something which is more than experience, which goes beyond, which transcends, on the quality of our relationship with God. Soul is

mentioned in this context because Louw then comes back to put soul in the context of a function of existence, describing how we live meaningfully every day. Soul therefore is associated with the meaning of life or *logos*. This is important because it introduces a relational approach to soul, which forms the bridge to Frankl's existential theory - discussed in the same book from page 126 onwards and also in Frankl (1992: 101ff) - on humanity and also to our adopted social constructionist epistemology.

This resonates well with what Briskin wrote in 1998. Briskin refers to soul as a metaphor for "coping with the contradictions and limitations of modern life" as it struggles to "extract a deeper *meaning* from the ongoing feast of possibilities that lie before it" [my italics] (1998: 18). In a description of how "efficiency took things apart in order to control the fragments", Briskin (1998: 139) then indicates how soul seeks *logos*, which is associated with "meaning, understanding, voice, language, and expression" in a quest towards wholeness.

I will now invite the reader to reflect on the integrity of the proposed epistemology, practical theology and reflections on a "life that matters". This will be done by exploring the relationship these discourses have with some critical meaning discourses which were encountered in the research process. In the limited scope of this study only the discourses of "not-knowing", and narrative unity will be considered.

## 2.6 "not knowing" and theology

In chapter 1 we suggested that the not-knowing position opposes an expert position in the meaning making process. This is a discourse against a totalising or definitive knowing position. As such it would therefore oppose a foundationalist perspective in theology.

In simple terms "not knowing" as it refers to theological discourse would suggest that we do not have a final understanding of God. This may re-member our "God story" with some ancient "God stories". Nolan (2006:140) describes how mystics<sup>17</sup> refer to God as *unknowable*. He describes a process he calls *unknowing* which refers to abandoning all our preconceived ideas about God. He posits this within a context of transcending our models of knowing – unknowing these in order to experience God. This may also be described as a de-objectifying of God. Nolan (2006:141) introduces the thinking of God as no-thing, contracted to a discourse of God as "nothing". Resolving that God cannot be an object of our knowing, he reverts to a position appreciating the mystery of God.

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<sup>17</sup> See also the discussion of Mysticism in the section on Tillich previously.



In this context we are reminded of Brueggemann's *imaginative* knowing. Reminding us of the human ability to constitute realities as we converse, he posits that knowing does not consist in settled certitudes, *but in the actual work of imagination* (1993:13). In a statement which is well aligned with the objectives of this study, Brueggemann first shows that imagination does not provide certitude (which is so often required as essential to the security discourse in our society), but does

*yield a possible "home" when we accept a **participating**<sup>18</sup> role as "home-maker"(my boldfacing).*

Later Brueggemann (1993:16) elaborates on the imagination process and quotes Kearney (1987:39-58) in indicating that the imagination needs to be *critical*, and *poetic*, and then *ethical*. Critical to this social *shaping of reality* are the modes of discourse and the nature of the questions introduced into the process of imagination.

### 2.6.1 Imagination as a discourse within theology

It is important that we learn more about the nature of the *imagination* proposed by Brueggemann. Brueggemann (1993:16) describes imagination as the process of organising social reality *around dominant, authoritative images*. Reflecting on the assumptions that we hold and utilise in our social discourses, he then reframes these as

*Sturdy, powerful acts of imagination, reinforced, imposed and legitimated by power.*

Once again, this resonates well with the epistemology that we have described in the previous chapter. In describing CRC, we indicated that it was *critical* in that it

*does not limit itself to talk of knowledge, independently of power relations.*

Thus, Brueggemann (1993:17) concludes, postmodern imagination in displacing the imagination of modernity, is

*Less sure and less ambitious and which more modestly makes a local claim.*

It is however, important to note what Rolheiser says about imagination. Rolheiser (2004: 87, 103) cautions that we cannot simply imagine the existence of God. Reminding us of our relational constitution of meaning (White, 2000:36) he explains that any attempts to form pictures of God and to understand him rationally or intellectually would be doomed to failure and even disillusion

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<sup>18</sup> See Tillich above.

(Rolheiser, 2004:103). We would be resorting to our finite means to try and explain or describe God as Infinity. We would be looking for consistencies with our own lives and resources of experience,

*An enterprise that, by definition, undercuts our ability to believe in God.*

We should therefore be sensitive not to limit the Infinite and thus our faith in God by resorting to only familiar discourses. We should therefore revisit Brueggemann's position on imagination and reflect on his understanding of imagination as knowing or meaning making. In doing so we will have to ensure that we adopt a relational understanding of imagination which will not be limiting of our perception of God. As long as we consider imagination to have limitations in its being dependent on our *absent but implicit* discourses and therefore always understating our understanding of God, we would be congruent to our adopted epistemic and ethical position. In telling our God stories we would be wise to contemplate Brueggemann's proposal of local knowledges, contextual realities and pluralistic knowledge narratives.

The last word in this paragraph belongs to Rolheiser:

*The God who is met in the measured expectations of our own desires and imagination dies in his own impotence and irrelevance.*

Rolheiser (2004:121)

If we adopt a position of not-knowing, we are clearly deprived of certainty. How will that impact a meaningful life though?

### **2.6.2 The postmodern position and certainty: uncertainty as pastoral challenge in the generation of meaning**

*It may be that the demand for certainty is an unreasonable demand for a form of security that we cannot possess.*

William Valicella (2006)

The "not knowing" discussed in the previous paragraphs can clearly strip us of our preconceived knowing and therefore of our certainties. This quest for certainty as a proxy for security (compare Valicella, 2006 quoted above) becomes visible in traditions and other institutions which may include ceremony<sup>19</sup> (Griffith and Griffith, 2002: 171-172), institutions like delineated roles<sup>20</sup> and

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<sup>19</sup> Griffith and Griffith (2002:166-172) contrast ritual and ceremony, suggesting a certain liminality characteristic of ritual whereas ceremony is, according to them, associated with order, control and stability. Both are symbols, but ritual is participatory in nature and therefore invites its participants into a transforming

individualism (Wheatly, 2007: 205), religion<sup>21</sup> (Baker, 1999:34-48, Masih, 1991: 35) and myth (Nolan, 2002: 53).

Why is it important to dedicate one section of the chapter on the theological discourse on certitude or certainty in the context of a “life that matters”? This question will be addressed from a philosophical, theological and pragmatic perspective.

### 2.6.2.1 *A philosophical perspective of certitude*

Allen and Springsted (2007:129) indicate that epistemology is the primary concern of modern philosophy. They then proceed to describe the search for certainty and the grounds for certainty as the driving force behind epistemology. Kate Kirkpatrick (2008) observes that René Descartes – whom she calls the “father of modern western philosophy” – has established the demand for certainty and immunity from doubt as the basic rules for philosophical investigation. Not only did this have implications for philosophy, but also for the sciences **and for religion**. Masih (1991:35) claims that the very nature of religion is that it excludes any doubt. Kirkpatrick continues to describe these implications, suggesting that foundations which were laid in this manner were considered to be unshakeable. Thus human knowledge came to rest on the *certainty of the 'I'* - the self became more authoritative than established teachings or the authority of others, including the Bible. Certainty therefore came to be considered a worthy goal, and a strong discourse developed which supported a quest by individuals searching for truth *with fear and trembling*. But there is more to it than we can find in ourselves – even in this demand for certainty or quest for certitude did modernist thinking fail in its endeavours.

*I think, therefore I fear. (Yeong, 2008:24)*

### 2.6.2.2 *The pragmatic view of certitude*

Apart from its relationship with security alluded to above and described later in this section, certainty also provides a reference framework which facilitates judgement, assessment and evaluating – actions which have attained value status in our metric-centric world (Du Toit, 1997: 939).

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dynamic. They use the metaphor of the theater to describe ceremony as inviting an audience, which may then rather be constitutive of stability (and therefore certainty and security). In summary they suggest that ceremony *indicates*, while ritual *transforms*.

<sup>20</sup> This Wheatley links to control which becomes isolating into individualist discourses in society and corporate institutions.

<sup>21</sup> Baker (1999: 37) proposes an understanding of *religiosity* as a common tendency to negotiate security “from God, the gods or something that acts as a god in our lives.”

Security and feelings of certainty or certitude have become almost synonymous in our society. The modernist tenet of “knowing” was an attempt to reduce the anxiety of not-knowing or uncertainty<sup>22</sup>. In our desperate attempt to know, we most probably became victims of the way that Paré (2002) describes discourses as delimiting, blinding us to more possibilities (see section 1.3.1.3 in Chapter 1). In order to know we adopted a scientific position of objectivity and invested it with a powerful ethic of positivism, reifying the expert knowledge in the process. We often form an understanding of a discourse by exploring its opposite. Often the opposite of certainty is understood to be doubt. Doubt is invested with pejorative sentiment and to discuss doubt in the context of theology may easily lead to the conversant being labelled a heretic.

Wheatley (2007: 112-134) describes how the fear of uncertainty leads to a loss of security. She continues to indicate how this anxiety leads us to specific behaviours to “fund” – to use Brueggemann’s (1993:20) term - our security. She refers to a certain *surrendering* of personal freedom to gain security. This *surrender* most often plays out in our demands that leaders, the church, Others *rescue us, save us, provide answers and give us firm ground or strong life rafts* (This may be described as entering the realm of foundationalism of course.). We only have to think about accusations that the *church is quiet* about issues ranging from Harry Potter and the Da Vinci Code to gay membership of the church to appreciate this statement. But this surrender goes beyond the mere appeal for answers: it can be described as placing us under *bondage* (Du Toit, 1997: 939). But what is the nature of this bondage? Apart from being a delimiting discourse in the manner described in the previous chapter, it is also a political act steeped in discourses of power and control.

Perhaps the consequence should be restated as subjection to control by the certainty discourse. Hendryx and Pitchford (1) recall the work done by Foucault on knowledge and power, indicating that knowledge as the result of epistemologies is driven by the demand for certainty. Certainty and power are therefore closely related. Applying this to the modern church, they proceed to suggest that the church may be *big on certainty, but low on humility and faithfulness*. They therefore advise that we should rather replace our certitude with a willingness to become learners and seekers instead. According to them certainty puts us in control; but to be a faithful Jesus follower we must be willing to let go so we can discover a new level of dependence on God. They posit that the true Jesus follower will begin to see how deeply immersed he/she has become to a narrow set of rules, firmly entrenched in a limited Enlightenment epistemology: an outdated way of knowing the world, they claim. Du Toit concurs and describes what he calls “the government of truth” which is bound up with the drive for mastery and control (1997:947).

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<sup>22</sup> Nolan (2006:132) refers to an obsession with absolute certainty.

### 2.6.2.3 *Theological perspective of certitude*

Du Toit (1997) writes an article about Truth. Without caution for any loss of generality, truth (as a form of certainty) can be replaced by certainty in this paper and it would still be an informative commentary on certitude. In this paper he suggests that truth is linked to the notion of being (1997:939). In a statement which may provide us with another perspective on certainty, he suggests that *a lie is considered to be a truth for the time it is believed in* (1997:941). Applying this to certainty, it suggests that certainties remain certain while they are considered as such. We may therefore not be faced by the challenge of the loss of certainty, but by the realisation of transient certainties.

Owens (2000:53, 64, 179) suggests that the demand for certainty is motivated by a *desire for reflective control over belief*. This *desire for control over belief* may be understood as fundamentalism (Hendryx and Pitchford, 1). We may therefore expect to observe a growth in support of fundamentalist religions in times of uncertainty like these (Webster, 2002:1).

Nolan (2004:132) points at the failure of the attempts of modernity to provide security through certainties and alludes to the experience that many of the things we previous took for granted are now being questioned. He describes how even scientists are admitting that they do not have the answers to many of the questions we are faced with these days. Suggesting that the *obsession with certainty* is nothing more than slavery similar to the other materialistic forms of slavery like clinging to possessions. In a very challenging statement he declares that this liberation from slavery may even require us to lose our certainties about God. Referring to the inadequacy of our thinking about God and the practices associated with our worship of God, he proposes that we need the freedom to abandon some of these certainties including some of our ideas and practices about God and worship. Proposing the practice of detachment he suggests that we should become detached from devotional practices and contemplation alike. Further discussion of detachment unfortunately falls outside the scope and ambit of this study.

Supporting Nolan's views above, in the Episcopal Press and News of March 08, 2005 the presiding bishop has declared that *certitude is the enemy of truth because God's truth, which was given human form in Jesus, who declares himself to be the truth, and continues to dwell among us in his risen reality through the agency and driving motion of the Spirit of truth – God's truth is larger, stranger, wilder and infinitely more paradoxical than anything we can understand or imagine or contain within our tidy notions of righteousness. Furthermore, God's truth is always unfolding and being enlarged.*

Brueggemann is quoted to have said that

*We all have a hunger for certitude, and the problem is that the Gospel is not about certitude, it's about fidelity. So what we all want to do if we can is immediately transpose fidelity into certitude, because fidelity is a relational category and certitude is flat, mechanical category. So we have to acknowledge our thirst for certitude and then recognize that if you had all the certitudes in the world it would not make the quality of your life any better because what we must have is fidelity.*

(quoted by Hjalmarson, date unknown).

Brueggemann (2002a: 527) continues to list the reasons for the loss of the text which result from a quest for certainty. He proposes that we have lost the text to a degree because of our attempts to force the text to yield dogmatic certitudes, because we have become self-sufficient and affluent, because we have become too knowing and technologically competent and we have *willed that the text should be relevant*.

Rolheiser continues the discussion, providing us with some invaluable insights in his preface to his book *Against an Infinite Horizon* (2001:9). He starts off by saying that faith is *to see everything against an infinite horizon*. And then he proposes in a memorable quote which links this section to the study topic and the theological conversation, that faith is not a matter of *basking in the certainty that there is a God and that God is taking care of us*. *Seeing against an infinite horizon*, faith as a way of seeing, enables us to see the divine within the ordinary and the ordinary in the context of the infinite.

We end this section with these words from Karl Rahner quoted by Rolheiser (2001:11):

*In the torment of the insufficiency of everything attainable, we come to understand that here, in this life, all symphonies remain unfinished.*

## 2.7 Narrative unity and theology

In this section I will discuss narrative unity as introduced by MacIntyre (1984) and Taylor (1989) and reflect on its significance for the theological position proposed previously. It will explore unity in the context of meaningfulness requiring continuity and of Christian identity<sup>23</sup> and the power relationships invested in the offices of the church.

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<sup>23</sup> Refer to the chapter on Identity and a life that matters later on.

This paragraph will therefore introduce a discussion on the positioning of the theological dialogue in the context of time and society. Does the locality of theology narratives proposed earlier extend to the time dimension? Therefore, is all that matters in our narrative context only the immediate presence?<sup>24</sup> This section will also ask the question of exclusivity: “Who can and may discuss theology?” and “Where should theology be discussed?” Can life therefore be classified into a secular compartment and a theological compartment?

### 2.7.1 Narrative unity

*"making sense of one's life as a story is also, like orientation to the good, not an optional extra. ... In order to have a sense of who we are, we have to have a notion of how we have become, and of where we are going."*

Taylor (1989: 47)

*Humans "make sense of their lives as an unfolding story in a way that gives meaning to their past and direction to their future"*

Abbey (2000: 37-38)

I will first discuss narrative unity, indicating how it pertains to the discussion of theology as I do.

Taylor (1989: 528, 38) posits that a reflection on our lives suggests a *narrative unity*, which he describes as a *thematic unity* as opposed to the *mere sameness of the human condition*. This discourse is therefore concerned with our lives *as a whole*. This argues against the divisory practice of categorising a life into a professional life, a church life or religious life, and similar societal classifications. This can easily lead to a variety of ethical systems and even epistemologies being supported. This can become a cacophony of voices competing with each other in the quest for meaning.

MacIntyre (1984: 218) supports Taylor's description of the unity of human life and its narrative embodiment, but adds a moral perspective to this unity. He proposes that a “good life”<sup>25</sup> has narrative unity. This unity goes beyond individual unity and extends to the human narrative.

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<sup>24</sup> Refer back to Moltmann and his *historical flux mentioned above*.

<sup>25</sup> The “good life” or eudaimonia reminds us of Virtue Ethics with Socrates, Plato and Aristotle as some of its main proponents. In our study this may translate to a meaningful life.



Another perspective he adds to narrative unity is that it becomes the unity of a *narrative quest*, which he then links to *telos*.<sup>26</sup>

Narrative unity is important to this study in that MacIntyre (1984: 217) explains

*that some people who complain, sometimes before attempting or committing suicide, that their life is meaningless are actually saying that their narrative unity has ceased to make sense to them and that, in their perception at least, their life no longer moves toward a telos, or good.*

In describing the Biblical text as narrative, Brueggemann (2007: 31-32) provides a perspective which accommodates theology as discourse within a narrative paradigm, and therefore opening space for a theological discussion of narrative unity.

The discourses of tradition and interdisciplinary conversation bridge onto MacIntyre's discussion of how narrative unity expands to include not only individual unity, but also the unity of humankind as discussed above.

## 2.7.2 Temporal unity

When we discuss the implications of the locality of knowledge and Brueggemann's *timeliness* (1993:5-7, 9) we may well reflect on the question of temporal locality. Does locality of knowledge negate the past and future?

In this respect it is important to observe what Brueggemann (1993:55) refers to as "telling a past, and dreaming a future" or as a *counterimagination* to:

- *Remember a rich past in the face of entrenched amnesia,*
- *Entertain a covenantal<sup>27</sup> present in the face of a regnant commoditization*
- *Hope a marvellous future in the face of an established, resigned despair.*

In this description, the opportunity to create a narrative unique outcome embedded in a local history and proposed as a lens to a preferred future reality is once more presented. Müller (2008:7) describes this by saying that "where harmony exists between yesterday, today and tomorrow, there

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<sup>26</sup> This is also important for this study as it was one of the themes identified by the research group and as such becomes the topic of a later chapter in this thesis.

<sup>27</sup> Refer to our discussion of Sacks' description of covenant earlier in this chapter

will be integrity, wholeness and maturity – the basic ingredients of spirituality”. This is important for the narrative themes which will be discussed later in this thesis.

### 2.7.3 Inclusivity

Narrative unity with regard to inclusivity addresses the questions of “Who can and may discuss theology?” and “Where should theology be discussed?” Can life therefore be classified into a secular compartment and a theological compartment?

If we adopt the post-foundational theology position, one of the premises of our theological position becomes the interdisciplinary dialogue. This opens up the theology conversation to previously excluded conversationalists. If we were true to our epistemological and theological position, we should therefore create space for the so-called lay community. In this “interdisciplinary” conversation our stories of faith and believing may therefore be enriched or thickened in the narrative metaphor.

What would the role of ministers, pastors and theologians be within this understanding of the theology discourse. I would like to suggest that we adopt the proposition by Brueggemann (1993:19-20) in this regard. Brueggemann introduces the discourse of *funding* in this regarding. Latching onto his imagination metaphor, Brueggemann suggests a role of *funding postmodern imagination*. It is important that we understand this as a facilitating role: the church is encouraged to provide the resource in basic building blocks and not full constructions of discourses. Brueggemann describes a process of supplying *little pieces* which can be used *in different configurations* (once again supporting the position of a multi-storied reality).

I would like to add another ethical context to this process: I would like to add the first four of Bosch’s seven perspectives on missionary work (see Chapter 3) as an ethic to the role of the minister, pastor or theologian. This implies that – once again adopting the conversation metaphor – different perspectives co-exist in the theology discourse. Secondly a genuine dialogue presupposes and implies a commitment to one’s own theological tradition, epistemology and ethical position. As a third perspective, *dialogue...is only possible if we proceed from the belief that...we are not moving into a void, that we go expecting to meet God who has preceded us and has been preparing people within the context of their own cultures and convictions....We do not have him [God] in our pocket, so to speak, and do not just ‘take him’ to the others*. This anticipates the fourth perspective which proposes that we can only do this in a spirit of humility.

Narrative unity in this context proposes the creation of narrative space for some voices which were perhaps previously silenced by privileged “expert” voices in the theology conversation, rejecting the temptation to divide our lives into watertight compartments of theological life spaces and non-theological life spaces.

## 2.8 The bridge to the rest of the thesis

In inviting the theology conversation into the discussion of “a life that matters”, we have indicated that it is aligned with the epistemology and study area which were proposed in the first chapter, and in turn it has introduced the discourses of uncertainty, purpose and spirituality which will have to be taken up as conversation points in later chapters of this thesis.

The voice of Theology has been invited into the meaningfulness conversation. To this effect Rahner suggested that meaningfulness is intimately connected to our experiences of God in the world and links the meaning conversation to Grace and God’s Purpose for human beings.

Hope was introduced into the conversation as a meaning discourse by Bloch and Moltmann, proposing that what the capacity to anticipate, wish for and hope may be central to our life meanings. Hope here is understood as a life orientation directed at the future, the passion for what is possible. His theology thus became an exodus theology, a quest toward hopeful futures.

Brümmer suggested that theology may provide the pictures of life within which we can position our lives meaningfully. Meaning thus is effected by our experience of living in fellowship with God and by a belief that God is involved in what happens in the world in which we live.

When we invited the voice of Paul Tillich into the meaning conversation, non-being or rather the anxiety of non-being was posited as the primary concern in the quest for meaningful living. Creative participation in meaningful living was indicated by Tillich to be key to existential meaning. Tillich concludes that that which is above the God of theism, has the ability to transcend the anxiety of doubt and meaninglessness, taken into the courage to be.