



ISSN Print: 2664-9799
ISSN Online: 2664-9802
Impact Factor (RJIF): 8.97
IJHER 2025; 7(2): 544-546
www.humanitiesjournal.net
Received: 09-10-2025
Accepted: 14-11-2025

Dr. Sashi Bhusan Kumar
Assistant Professor
P.G. Department of
Philosophy, R.N. College,
Hajipur, B.R.A. Bihar
University, Muzaffarpur,
Bihar, India

Corresponding Author:
Dr. Sashi Bhusan Kumar
Assistant Professor
P.G., Department of
Philosophy, R.N. College,
B.R.A. Bihar University,
Muzaffarpur, Bihar, India

The crisis of meaning in modern life: A philosophical inquiry into fragmented existence

Sashi Bhusan Kumar

DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26649799.2025.v7.i2.g.307>

Abstract

Modern life appears full of choice, mobility, and stimulation, yet it quietly produces a pervasive sense of meaninglessness. This paper examines the crisis of meaning as a defining experience of contemporary existence. It argues that the fragmentation of time, identity, and community weakens traditional sources of coherence and purpose. Drawing on existentialism, phenomenology, and recent cultural theory, the study explains how meaning becomes fragile in a world shaped by digital saturation, constant acceleration, and the fading of shared narratives. The crisis, however, does not signal the disappearance of meaning; it indicates that meaning is now more difficult to locate, sustain, and weave into daily life. By analyzing ordinary behavior and emotional states, the paper reveals how modern individuals navigate a world that often feels directionless. It also suggests slow, mindful practices through which meaning may gradually be reclaimed.

Keywords: Modernity, meaning, existentialism, identity, fragmentation, phenomenology, contemporary life

Introduction

The modern world is organized around expansion - of speed, access, consumption, and opportunity. It gives individuals more than any previous age: more knowledge, more communication, more tools, and more choices. Yet this abundance often leaves people feeling strangely hollow. Many individuals speak of a low, persistent sense of incompleteness. They go through their days as if something essential is missing, though they cannot fully describe what that "something" is. The paradox of modernity is that life becomes wider but not necessarily deeper.

The philosophical concern with meaning has long roots. Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre each addressed meaning from different angles but reached a similar point: humans must interpret and sustain their existence despite uncertainty. Kierkegaard saw meaning as a personal commitment, always shadowed by anxiety (Kierkegaard 1980: 41-67) ^[5]. Nietzsche viewed meaning as a creative act in a world where old certainties have collapsed (Nietzsche 1968: 7-24) ^[7]. Camus identified meaning with rebellion against absurdity (Camus 1991: 1-31) ^[2]. Sartre insisted that since existence precedes essence, humans must author their own values (Sartre 2007: 21-45) ^[8].

In the twentieth century, the question of meaning shifted toward an analysis of cultural structures. Heidegger warned that individuals lose authenticity when absorbed by the distractions of everyday life (Heidegger 1962: 219-224) ^[4]. Marcuse argued that modern capitalist societies redirect human desire into shallow forms of pleasure (Marcuse 2002: 7-9) ^[6]. Taylor examined the burden of moral choice in a world with conflicting frameworks (Taylor: 1991: 3-22) ^[9]. Bauman described a liquid modernity where relationships, institutions, and goals lack durability (Bauman 2000: 1-15, 53-90) ^[1]. Han diagnosed a form of psychic exhaustion produced by a culture obsessed with performance and comparison (Han 2015: 1-11) ^[3].

While each thinker illuminates part of the problem, the contemporary crisis of meaning has its own distinct texture. Unlike the dramatic existential crises of the past, today's meaninglessness is quieter, more distributed, and more closely tied to everyday life. It emerges from scattered attention, unstable identities, weakened communities, and the collapse of shared narratives. It is not one crisis but many small crises accumulating in the background of daily experience. This paper offers a philosophical inquiry into this condition. It argues that the modern crisis of meaning is fundamentally tied to fragmentation - of time, self, relationships, and collective stories.

It explores how these forms of fragmentation shape emotional experience, behaviour, and consciousness. At the same time, the paper suggests that meaning remains possible, though it must be approached with greater intentionality. Meaning today is an achievement rather than an inheritance.

Discourse

1. Fragmentation of Time: Living Without Depth

Time in modern life rarely unfolds gently. It rushes, breaks, and scatters. People jump from one task to another, from one notification to the next, rarely completing anything without being pulled into something else. The experience of time becomes fragmented into tiny segments that lack continuity. This fragmentation disrupts meaning because meaning requires duration. Even simple joys - reading, walking, conversation - need uninterrupted time to deepen. Heidegger's notion of "fallenness" becomes clear here. When individuals lose themselves in busyness, they no longer listen to the deeper rhythms of their own being. They move through life without inhabiting it (Heidegger 1962: 163-179) ^[4].

Leisure itself is no longer restorative. Instead of slowing down, many people fill their rest with digital consumption - scrolling, watching, comparing. The mind remains in motion even when the body is still. A person tries to relax yet feels restless. One tries to concentrate yet becomes distracted within minutes.

Without temporal depth, emotional and intellectual depth weakens. Meaning becomes something people hope to find "later" - perhaps during a weekend, a holiday, or retirement. But later rarely arrives. The speed and fragmentation of time follow them.

Thus, the crisis of meaning is inseparable from the crisis of time. A shallow experience of time produces a shallow experience of self, and this hollowness quietly expands.

2. Fragmentation of Identity: The Self as a Moving Target

Identity today is fluid, perhaps too fluid. Earlier, the self-developed within stable cultural and social frameworks. The question of "Who am I?" had fewer competing answers. In contrast, the modern self-shifts constantly. It changes roles, voices, and behaviour across different contexts - office, home, social media, friendships.

Charles Taylor's idea of the "buffered self" explains this instability. Without strong, shared markers of value, individuals must design their own frameworks. This freedom is appealing but exhausting (Taylor: 1991: 65-73) ^[9]. When every choice must be justified alone, the search for meaning becomes heavy and relentless.

Digital culture intensifies this instability. Social media encourages performative identity. People craft profiles, curate experiences, and present fragments of themselves for approval. Over time, the curated self competes with the lived self. One begins to wonder which self is authentic.

Meaning requires coherence. It grows when individuals sense continuity across their experiences. But when identity feels like a shifting mosaic, coherence becomes difficult. Purpose becomes fragile.

3. Fragmentation of Community: Belonging without Presence

Human beings derive meaning from belonging. Earlier societies created shared rituals, communal stories, and collective moral frameworks that helped individuals understand their place in the world. Today, these structures are weaker. Mobility, digitalisation, and social fluidity reduce

the stability of relationships. People move frequently. Extended families disperse. Neighbourhoods lose intimacy. One may communicate with hundreds of people yet rarely feel truly known.

Bauman's concept of "liquid relationships" captures this perfectly (Bauman 2000: 168-201) ^[1]. Connections today are flexible, replaceable, and often superficial. They offer convenience but little depth. One can leave a digital group with a click. One can mute a friend without confrontation. This emotional lightness gradually reduces one's sense of belonging.

Without community, individuals carry the weight of meaning alone. They lack the reassurance that their lives fit into a larger story. Meaning becomes an individual struggle rather than a shared journey.

4. The Noise of the World: Attention and the Loss of Inner Space

Meaning requires silence - not the absence of sound, but the presence of mental space. Modern life, however, is overwhelmingly noisy. Notifications interrupt thought. Social comparison interrupts self-worth. Information overload interrupts inner clarity.

Byung-Chul Han argues that the modern subject suffers from "hyperactivity and tiredness" - two forces that together create emotional flatness. One is always active yet rarely fulfilled. Even reflection becomes difficult because attention is constantly pulled in different directions (Han 2015: 1-2, 8-11) ^[3].

A distracted mind struggles to engage deeply with anything - books, relationships, goals, or even one's own emotions. Shallow attention produces shallow experience. And shallow experience cannot support meaning.

Thus, the crisis of meaning grows not from dramatic events but from the daily erosion of attention.

5. The Collapse of Shared Narratives

For centuries, human life was anchored in large narratives: religious frameworks, community ethics, philosophical traditions. These narratives provided orientation. They told individuals what mattered.

Modernity weakens these narratives. People adopt fragments - spirituality without institutions, activism without roots, personal values without collective support. Nietzsche saw this collapse as the beginning of cultural nihilism: the moment when values lose their force (Nietzsche 1968: 134-142) ^[7].

When individuals no longer inherit meaning, they must create it alone. But creating meaning requires clarity, strength, and continuity - qualities that are hard to sustain in a fragmented world. Thus, meaning becomes unstable.

6. Consumption as a Substitute for Meaning

When meaning weakens, consumption steps in. The market offers stimulation as compensation for the lack of depth. People purchase experiences, objects, and digital content to fill emotional gaps. But stimulation does not nourish the inner self. It fades quickly, leaving a deeper emptiness.

Marcuse warned that consumer society shapes desires so subtly that individuals begin to equate pleasure with purpose (Marcuse 2002: 14-15, 21-58) ^[6]. But pleasure is brief. Purpose requires endurance. This substitution of stimulation for meaning produces a cycle: momentary excitement,

followed by emptiness, followed by more consumption. The crisis continues.

7. The Ordinary Experience of Meaninglessness

The modern crisis of meaning often appears in small, quiet forms: waking without motivation, feeling mentally absent during conversations, drifting between tasks, sensing that life is moving but not deepening. These experiences are not severe enough to count as “existential crises,” yet they shape daily living in profound ways.

Such ordinary emptiness reveals the structural nature of meaninglessness today. People rarely collapse dramatically; instead, they slowly feel less connected to themselves. They continue functioning but without inner conviction.

This subtle erosion is difficult to address because it hides behind busyness. Individuals tell themselves they are simply tired or stressed. But beneath these explanations lies a deeper sense of disconnection.

8. Toward Reconstructing Meaning: A Philosophical Possibility

Although the crisis of meaning is structural, it is not irreversible. Meaning remains possible, but it must be cultivated consciously. In a fragmented world, meaning becomes an achievement rather than a default condition. Several philosophical practices can help individuals rebuild coherence:

a. Recovering Slowness

Slowness is not inactivity. It is presence. It allows emotions to settle and thoughts to mature. Even short periods of deliberate slowness - unhurried breathing, mindful walking, undistracted conversation - begin to repair the fragmentation of time. Slowness turns experience into something one inhabits rather than merely passes through.

b. Strengthening Attention

Attention is the foundation of meaning. Without attention, nothing can be appreciated, understood, or integrated. Strengthening attention may begin with small acts: reading a page without checking the phone, listening fully to a friend, or focusing on a single task. As attention deepens, so does experience.

c. Crafting Personal Narratives

When shared narratives weaken, individuals can still shape personal ones. This is not an exercise in self-flattery but an attempt to understand one's life as a coherent story. A narrative does not eliminate uncertainty, but it offers direction. It helps individuals see patterns, values, and commitments that hold their life together.

d. Committing to Relationships That Endure

Belonging generates meaning more naturally than any intellectual exercise. Genuine relationships - grounded in trust, vulnerability, and continuity - anchor individuals. They provide emotional resonance and moral grounding. They allow individuals to feel seen. Meaning flourishes where one is recognised.

e. Embracing Difficulty Instead of Avoiding It

Philosophers from Kierkegaard to Camus remind us that meaning deepens in struggle. Modern culture often treats discomfort as something to avoid, but discomfort is a sign of

engagement. It signals that one is alive to life's demands. Facing difficulty builds resilience, which in turn strengthens meaning.

f. Reclaiming Inner Space

Creating inner space - through silence, reflection, or solitude - helps individuals reconnect with themselves. It protects the self from being overwhelmed by noise. Inner space is where values clarify, where identity stabilises, and where meaning takes root.

These practices are not solutions in the strict sense. They do not erase fragmentation or guarantee fulfilment. But they create conditions in which meaning becomes possible again.

Conclusion

The crisis of meaning in modern life is not an isolated event but a cumulative effect of cultural, technological, and emotional fragmentation. It emerges from scattered time, unstable identity, fragile community, diminished attention, and the collapse of shared narratives. These forces slowly weaken the structures that support human purpose and coherence.

Yet the crisis is not absolute. Meaning has not disappeared from the world. It has only become harder to sustain. Modern individuals must approach meaning intentionally, crafting it from within rather than receiving it from outside. This requires slowness, attention, narrative, relationship, and courage - the courage to face life's uncertainty with openness. Meaning today is not discovered as a hidden treasure but built as a daily practice. It grows through presence, commitment, and self-understanding. The modern world may be fragmented, but the self does not have to be. Individuals can still shape meaningful lives by resisting the drift of fragmentation and embracing the depth that comes from inner clarity and genuine connection.

In this sense, the crisis of meaning is also an invitation. It calls individuals to live more consciously, to recognise the value of what endures, and to cultivate an inner life capable of withstanding the noise of the world. Meaning is not a luxury. It is a necessity. And it remains available to anyone willing to engage with life fully, patiently, and courageously.

References

1. Bauman, Z. *Liquid Modernity*. Polity Press, USA; 2000.
2. Camus, A. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*. O'Brien J, translator. Vintage Books; 1991.
3. Han, BC. *The Burnout Society*. Butler E, translator. Stanford University Press, Stanford, California; 2015.
4. Heidegger, M. *Being and Time*. Macquarrie J, Robinson E, translators. Blackwell Publishers Ltd, Oxford, UK; 1962.
5. Kierkegaard, S. *The Concept of Anxiety*. Thomte R, translator. Princeton University Press; 1980.
6. Marcuse, H. *One-Dimensional Man*. Routledge Classics, London and New York, Second Edition; 2002.
7. Nietzsche F. *The Will to Power*. Kaufmann W, Hollingdale RJ, translators. Vintage Books; 1968.
8. Sartre JP. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Macomber C, translator, Yale University Press; 2007.
9. Taylor C. *The Malaise of Modernity*. House of Anansi Press; 1991.