
A PHILOSOPHICAL ASSESSMENT OF HUMAN DEVELOPMENT APPROACHES AND THE VIETNAMESE EXPERIENCE

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Abstract

The perspectives on human development (HD) has appeared in many scientific forums and received an increased attention of scholars. Analyses of HD were put on the international agenda programmes in the early 1990s, which was tied to the context of the knowledge economy and globalization since the mid-1980s. This corresponded to the flattening forces levelling up the old advantages of development that had been creating the theoretical premises to the development to shift its focus from macro-level to micro-level, from socio-economic to the human, from widespread imposition to approach the specific cases. In other words, the philosophical theory of human development pays special attention to the human as the motivation and goals of development, not only with the meaning of mass representation but also with the individuals representing themselves in their specific community. From the philosophical perspective, this study points out three approaches to human development (human development approach from capabilities, human development approach from rights, universal approach in human development) and generalize some of the outcomes achieved in human development in Vietnam.

Keywords: Vietnam, economic, sustainability, human, centred

1. Introduction

In the 1980s, the overemphasis on increasing the economic input led to a form of ‘alienation growth’. Paul Krugman called this type of growth as “sausage-making” [1], which means growth without development. This practice indicates that if the economic growth does not consider the human (i.e. the human being as a person endowed with intrinsic dignity and value) as the goal of development, such growth can lead to a lot of risks such as: increase in the unemployment; exclusive growth (due to only a few people getting their benefits from the economic growth); growth with no voice (because the growth does not guarantee democracy); growth with no origin (because the growth takes place, but loses its cultural identity); growth with no future (because the growth lacks sustainability). Since the mid-1990s, the concept of ‘growth quality’ has begun to appear on

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economic forums. Since then, the need to find a new connotation for economic development for the aims of human development has become increasingly urgent. From this new goal, two new theories have emerged: (1) sustainable development and (2) human development – and these two constitute the new directions of development theory. In that context, besides giving some perspectives on sustainable development with the pillars of economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability, development norms for the actual human-wealth development of each country have emerged as one of the promising options. This emphasis does not mean denying the roles of income and wealth in a country's development, but it has the meaning that income and wealth are not the ultimate goals of development. Rather, they are useful means of further strengthening the freedom to achieve the life that the human wants [2]. The study of human development from the philosophical perspective provides us with the point of view both specific and comprehensive in finding the motivation for human development in today's global economy.

It is becoming increasingly obvious that abstract economic and political theories need to be complemented (and sometimes even replaced) by practically oriented philosophical perspectives on human development. In order to solve the problem of contextualization, the new development theory must take into account the balance between economic growth, environmental and resource protection, and ensuring the equality between the generations and within a generation. Also, a genuine development must ensure the development of individual capabilities of each person, as well as capability of the community, and social capability. All of this is to ensure that the human is the goal of development. Using the analytical and synthetic methods of philosophical-scientific reflection, the author studies three basic approaches to human development, analyses their specific contributions, and introduces some outcomes in human development in Vietnam today against the background of the said approaches.

2. The capability approach in human development

The unemployment and inequality in income distribution have led to the concentration of power and wealth in the hands of some people on the one hand, and the impoverishment of a large part of the population on the other. The growing number of impoverished individuals and local communities has become major stumbling blocks for societies pursuing the goal of maximizing the growth while paying no attention to human development. Therefore, the strategy of 'basic needs', officially accepted by the World Bank already in 1973, has emerged as a new variant of the strategy of growth that takes into account the 'basic needs' of those specific classes that do not benefit from growth. This is one of the viable approaches to address the inequality in income through some sponsorship (i.e. targeted subsidies) and support programs. However, the approach of basic needs focuses merely on the final outcomes rather than the mechanism or means by which the poor are able to develop and get the opportunity to catch up with other groups in the society.

The capability approach proposed by Amartya Sen in the late 1980s [3, 4] has opened up the possibility of solving the inequality on the level of opportunities that led to the inequality in sharing the achievements in the development of the economy to maximize the growth, income, and increase in consumption of goods. According to Sen, the test results of progress, development or poverty reduction were not only reflected in the country's growth, but also in whether the human has achieved more freedom or not, in other words, whether the human has expanded the opportunities of choices and improved the capabilities of choices or not [4]. The improvement of capabilities and the expansion of freedoms are understood as a mechanism for the poor and disadvantaged groups to develop and catch up with other groups in order to close the inequality gap and contribute to the overall growth of the whole society.

The core focus of the capability approach is that it concentrates on what an individual is able to do, that is, on what he or she is competent to do. Therefore, the development process becomes the process of developing the capabilities, not the process of maximizing the material benefits or enjoying material life [4]. Commodities are the means to help the human survive and operate, but they are not the ultimate goal of life. The usefulness of wealth lies in that it allows humans to have their essential freedoms. However, the relationship between wealth and development is not unique, because apart from wealth, there are other important influences on human life.

The failure to ensure an adequate and reasonable standard of living, not going to school or not getting adequate health care due to economic constraints, threatens to limit human capability. Although we can observe such close relations among them, economic growth does not always accompany human development. The evidence is that there are countries with a high growth and high per capita income, but their poverty rate are still high, the health status of the citizens is still inferior to more developed countries (with higher human development indices) with the same income and lower growth [5]. Therefore, whether some of the policies have been successful depends also on how they help to improve the human lives in all aspects (living standards, education levels, safety and health status) [6], not merely on how they facilitate an increase in the production of material wealth.

Human development is thus a process of building the human capabilities and using those capabilities in economic, political, cultural activities, and so on. This will establish a healthy base for tangible improvements in the humans' living standards, education levels and health status [7]. It should be emphasized that the capability approach and the perspective in human development are not based on reallocating the income to ensure the equality, but are rather focusing on creating the opportunities for development and bringing these opportunities to all people on the basis of equality. There is a double focal point or two foci, to be more precise: the individual's wellbeing and the individual's situatedness in and responsibility to his social environment [8]. The human capabilities are diverse and therefore unique to each person. For this reason, the development must essentially relate to the development of each individual and each person. The

improved capabilities help the human be equal in the opportunities (seizing the opportunities, creating the opportunities and implementing the opportunities). The capability-based point of view rests in the conviction that the most appropriate approach is to create the environment where all people have ample opportunities to choose and develop their capabilities, to be able to choose what they consider most valuable to them at the time of choosing, and realizing such choice [4].

It can be affirmed that the capabilities are the combination of the abilities to perform selected functions (or achieve the functions), including basic functions closely related to the physical needs for survival, such as getting enough nutritious, having accommodations, good health, getting adequate care, avoiding the risks of diseases, premature death, etc. There are other functions, which aim towards the higher and more complex needs, such as social relations, freedoms, social inclusion, etc. and which are predicated upon the lower functions [9]. These functions cannot be arranged in a hierarchy according to which one is better than the other, but each function has its own value, as long as it makes the human satisfied [10]. Nussbaum, for example, identified ten basic competencies needed for human life: survival, health, body integrity, feelings and thoughts, emotions, practical reasons, social participation, playing, environment control [11]. Sen argues that there are nine essential competencies, including health, education, economic safety, time balance, political voice and management, social connection, environmental conditions, and human security [12]. As we can see, authors vary in their specific articulations of competencies but their ideas overlap significantly.

In the capability approach, there are three issues that need to be considered: (1) *Functionings* – valuable behaviours and conditions that create the happiness for the human beings such as health, safety, and good career, etc.; (2) *Capabilities* – the combination of functionings that a person can achieve; (3) Subject/subjective agency – the person who acts proactively and creatively to create his/her opportunities, pursue his/her opportunities and perform his/her choices of the goals that are valuable to him/her [12]. Although there is no agreement on the combination of functions that create the human capabilities, the authors agree that human capabilities are reflected in the different priority combinations of the subject in performing the functions (activities).

Therefore, the combination of functions prioritized by an individual (in terms of what they are getting and doing) is an integral part of their capabilities. With this understanding, the capabilities can be seen as the reflection of the freedom to achieve valuable functions. This implies that human capabilities are the freedom of the subject in choosing to perform the combinations of valuable functions. A person may prioritize the performance of one combination of functions, while another person may consider a different combination of functions as more important and necessary to be performed in a given situation. Not only is it important that the function be performed by a person as a result of the activity; but also that the process to perform that activity or that person's capability to freely find a practical option, would reflect his/her choices to do things in the way they want. The freedom to choose the alternative activities is essential here. In

other words, the capabilities are the real freedom that the human enjoys in order to have their meaningful lives [13].

When it comes to assessing the capability approach within the framework of human development, many researchers have emphasized the role of each individual's subject as a member of the society and community with the capabilities to engage in the economic, social, and political activities. The subjectivity indicates the capabilities of the human to pursue his or her own goals and do good things in accordance with his values. The subject here is understood as an active agent, i.e. "someone who acts and creates the change" [4, p. 44]. Opposite to the subject as a free, active agent is someone being forced, imposed or passive. Thus, the subject in the capability approach is considered to be positive, creative and able to act according to one's own desires [5]. Moreover, the concern for the subject emphasizes that the participation, debate, democratic practice, and empowerment need to be strengthened and nurtured together with the physical wellbeing of each individual. Another point of view was introduced by Alkire, Deneulin, Shahani who believe that the subjectivity and the expansion of the freedoms go hand in hand with each other [14, 15]. All people need the freedom to be educated, speak in public places without fear, the freedom of speech, assembly, etc. to take control of their lives. At the same time, by becoming active, free subjects, all people can set up or struggle to establish such an environment.

In summary, the subjective aspect is very important in assessing an individual's competence. Subjectivity understood in the above-described sense includes an emphasis on the autonomy (of the individual as well as the local group) in setting one's goals, predicting the conditions for achieving set goals, and the capabilities to realize those intended goals [5]. Thus, the developed capabilities are not only meant as an instrument to help make choices from the existing opportunities but are also conducive to expanding the opportunities of choices for the subject by creating the opportunities for the human as a motivated subject with the inner motivation to choose.

3. The rights-based approach in human development

It can be argued that human development is intimately connected with facilitating and expanding citizens' freedoms in a given socio-political context. Rights-Based Approach to Development (RBA) currently enjoys much attention and is increasingly applied by development agencies, donors, and governments. This approach is based on the idea of applying human rights standards and ideas to every step of the development process. This point of view urges towards the realization of human rights, not just economic growth, as this is the final goal of development. The focus on human freedoms is in contrast to narrower points of view of development, such as the definition of development seen only as Gross National Product (GNP) growth, or income growth, industrialization, technological advancement, social modernization, etc. GNP growth or personal income is important as a means to expand citizens' freedom. However, if a given

society only focuses on economic growth, such strategy, in many cases, seems to pose a threat to the peaceful life of citizens when their rights are violated. A high-GNP-growth society does not automatically bring freedom to everyone because freedoms also depend on other determinants, such as social institutions and economic and educational institutions [6], as well as political institutions (the right to participate in social management and decision making).

In his famous book *Development as freedom*, Amartya Sen frankly addresses the question, “Development can be seen as a process of expanding the real freedoms enjoyed by citizens” [16]. Therefore, it is essential to consider whether a country’s development strategy is truly for the sake of its people, reflecting a long-term, sustainable development plan, or whether it is just assessing development based on economic indicators. Also important is to ask the question whether the assessment of implemented strategies is formulated with taking into account a careful articulation and implementation of the human rights.

RBA emphasizes empowering citizens to improve their capacity to choose and expand development opportunities, to demand legitimate rights and to protect themselves against violations of rights. Associated with the fundamental right to freely choose (the power of choice) is the task to widen people’s choices [United Nations, *Human Development Report 1990*, United Nations Development Programme, 1990, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/219/hdr_1990_en_complete_nostats.pdf]. It is crucial to understand that more options do not necessarily mean better living standards. Amartya Sen has warned that a wider freedom of choice can sometimes make people more anxious and miserable [17]. Therefore, improving the quality of options is more important than increasing the number of options [15, p. 12-13].

The presented arguments lead us to believe that human development must pay more attention to improving other aspects of life, above all, enhancing human freedoms [13]. The expansion of freedoms not only makes human lives richer and happier but also allows them to exercise their own will, interact and influence the world that the human is living in. Therefore, as we can read in the UN Development Report of 2001, meaningful development means expanding people’s freedom of choice to the life they value [United Nations, *Human Development Report 2001*, United Nations Development Programme, 2001, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/262/hdr_2001_en.pdf]. Besides existing opportunities, people with well-cultivated competencies have the freedom to create new opportunities by themselves. In other words, the more competent a person is, the more empowered he/she is, the higher the chance of having good choices and the greater the likelihood of realizing them. Thus, whether at the individual, community, or social level, capacity and freedom are still the most important factors for the expansion of choices and the realization of human choices.

Moreover, this rights-based approach aims to help citizens play a more active and proactive role in the state’s sustainable development decisions and policies. This was reflected in the 2000 Human Development Report, a landmark Declaration on human rights and development, which focused on human rights as

essential for human development: “Poverty eradication is a major challenge for human rights in the 21st century. A proper standard of living, adequate nutrition, good health care, decent education, employment and protection against natural disasters is not only a development goal but also a human right.” [United Nations, *Human Development Report 2000: Human Rights and Human Development*, United Nations Development Programme, 2000, http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/261/hdr_2000_en.pdf].

Initially, most scholars and social theorists tended to underestimate the connection between human rights implementation and human development. In the 1990s, development and human rights were still going on two straight parallel paths in both conceptual and practical operations: one side was almost dominated by economists, social scientists, and even policymakers; another side was strongly influenced by political activists, lawyers, and philosophers.

Emphasizing human rights in development leads to sharing the common goal between realizing human rights and human development in an interactive relationship. Hence, we see a creative, dialectic relationship here. Meaningful development means expanding people’s freedom of choice to the life they value [http://hdr.undp.org/sites/default/files/reports/262/hdr_2001_en.pdf]. In this development concept, people return to the central position with a newly internalized meaning of both, human motivation and true goal of development. Development, rather than “by bureaucracy, for bureaucracy and of bureaucracy” [18] becomes a process of ‘human, by human and for human’, directed at satisfying the needs of human beings by continually expanding their opportunities to develop their capacity and freedom of choice.

4. The holistic approach in human development

The core focus of the holistic approach to human development is to address the quality of life in all aspects that all people - regardless of nationality, class, race, gender inherited as bearers of their unique identities.

Speaking of a holistic approach to human development, Sudhir Anand and Amartya Sen pointed out: “One particular feature ...[of the holistic approach] is particularly worth emphasizing in the context of policy discussions today, viz. *universalism*. It is of specific interest in interpreting the task of ‘human development’ in a world that is characterized, on the one hand, by enormous inequities in contemporary living conditions, and on the other, by real threats to the prospects of human life in the future.” [19]. This implies that inequality in opportunity to live relative to the given space (group, region, domain, country, etc.) and the given time (current and future generations) that we observe in the present global world is the result of a widespread adoption of the one-sided development model, which has focused only on increasing physical wealth and capital in the past. This situation has reached a level of concern that the future of humanity itself is threatened [20, 21].

Humans cannot develop holistically without regard for expanding both the external relations of each individual and the inner and spiritual world. The inner world of the human person has experiences, among other things, a dimension of meaning, i.e. the spiritual aspect of its being. This deeper meaning may refer to a religious narrative or at least a spiritual-mystical experience of transcendence, but it also may remain purely in the immanent realm of looking for and experiencing meaning within the framework of the temporary realm. We can, therefore, agree with the invitation for a “hermeneutic recovery of religious sources for human flourishing” [22, p. 173], while affirming other (competing) definitions of transcendence that are tied rather to the “immanent frame” [23], to use Charles Taylor’s incisive terminology. The failure to cultivate the dimension of meaning (i.e. the spiritual dimension) of one’s personal development results in a shallow, flattened existence that tends to be dominated by a futile chase after money, social status, power, or intense experiences (alcohol, drugs, adrenaline sports, sex, etc.). Hence, the growth of pure wealth often leads only to the expansion and increase of power for the part of the society that represents the main beneficiaries of growth, while psychologically and relationally can distort the structure of human personality and the cohesiveness of the human society.

It should be emphasized that the holistic approach can only be successfully promoted if it recognizes and adequately integrates the cultural characteristics of each community. Based on a common policy (one that defines the guiding principles and values), each region and each locality must develop a development plan based on its own cultural, social, and environmental characteristics [24]. This is a bottom-up development strategy, rather than a top-down strategy. As Chambers remarked, the connection between academic knowledge on the one hand, and power and wealth on the other, has created increasingly misleading recognitions and assessments of the role of the local people in fighting poverty [25]. Escobar concurs and observes further that the discipline of Human anthropology itself gradually became increasingly adapted to the bureaucratic demands and orders of the authorities, instead of being open to impartial analyses and interpretations of actual human experiences [26].

To effectively use development resources both from outside and those available from inside of each community, naturally requires a competent coordination of actions among policymakers, project staff, local authorities, and citizens. We may consider as useful Nelson’s and Wright’s differentiation of three levels of local communities’ involvement in the development process: (1) citizens playing an informative role; (2) citizens playing an advisory role, taking part in identifying development priorities, monitoring and evaluating development work; and (3) citizens playing a decisive role [27]. All of these need to be not only coordinated but united around a common vision of the nature and main goals of the development process.

The holistic approach shows that development is a process through which members of society improve their individual and institutional capacities to mobilize and manage resources, create sustainable outcomes, and distribute them fairly in order to improve the quality of life in accordance with their own

aspirations [28]. From here, the development is built bottom-up and for the sake of the people who create it, as opposed to being imposed from top-down and being tailored to the interests of the powerful. A human-centred approach recognizes and integrates the role of state authorities in human development. The state remains an active player but the real challenge here is empowering local citizens to realize their own priority options, through which they can participate in the implementation of programs and projects that bring practical and sustainable benefits to them and their community. The bottom line in all of this is the following: the development should not be seen merely as a unidirectional process ‘for the people’ (who remain largely passive), but rather as a multidirectional process with multiple active agents (i.e. government agencies, outside help/sponsors, local leaders, local people) all of whom intentionally work toward a common goal. This is fundamentally different from the development strategy driven by the market or based mainly on state-directed redistribution (or even a combination of both).

5. Some outcomes of human development in Vietnam

Following the implementation of several human development approaches in the recent decades (mainly from the 1980s onwards), Vietnam has achieved some impressive outcomes in improving the quality of human development. After more than 30 years of innovation (Doi Moi), (1) *people are perceived as active subjects of all development processes* that have been recently taking place in Vietnam and (2) *human persons have been intentionally promoted to the centre of the socio-economic development*.

When it comes to defining and assessing the indicators pertaining to the first point, we can distinguish five groups of indicators:

- (a) people-oriented human development principles are thoroughly understood and clearly reflected in socio-economic development policies, plans, and programs;
- (b) quality and quantity of human resources have been improved, and gradually caught up regionally to approximate the national average;
- (c) a civilized, educated, and healthy lifestyle is increasingly popular and dominant in social life and gradually becomes the new social norm;
- (d) the desire to develop into a useful agent of social change (useful for the community and the society), as well as the passion to build a rich and safe country is can be increasingly observed in all strata of the population;
- (e) The ability to discern and successfully integrate the desirable habits, behavioural patterns, and advanced qualities of the developed countries (considered as highly-civilized) among the younger generation is generally positive.

Indicators of progress for the second point, namely that people and their interest are being placed at the centre of the socio-economic development, are the following:

- (a) the Vietnamese society is clearly and continuously progressing on the Human Development Index charts compiled by the UN Development Programme;
- (b) the fact that the human development index tends to be higher than the economic index has been maintained for the past 20 years;
- (c) the average life expectancy is quite high, not inferior to those of high HDI countries, and continues to increase;
- (d) the high education index is still maintained and moving forward;
- (e) the economic index has been steadily improving;
- (f) the social security system has many good points and has a positive trend;
- (g) poverty reduction achievements have been impressive and, as such, commended by the world community; the rate of poor households in 1993 decreased from 58.1% to 5.35% [ADB Portal, *Poverty in Vietnam*, 2019, <https://www.adb.org/countries/viet-nam/poverty>];
- (h) the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) have been completed earlier than Vietnam's original commitment to the United Nations.

Among the mentioned indicators, achievements in poverty reduction in Vietnam have indeed been highly impressive. "Broad-based economic growth has improved the well-being of almost everyone in the entire population. The General Statistical Office estimates that the poverty rate fell consistently from 58 percent in 1993 to 37.4 percent in 1998, 28.9 percent in 2002, 16 percent in 2006 and 14.5 percent in 2008. Some 28 million people are estimated to have been lifted out of poverty over approximately one and a half decades, an achievement widely applauded." [29] This is internationally considered an important step towards achieving the set Millennium Development Goals.

People are leading healthier and longer lives. "In 2005, the lifespan of Vietnamese people reached 71.3 years, exceeding the set target (which was 70 years). And then, it became 72.8 years in 2009 and 73.0 years in 2012 [30]. In 2016, the average lifespan of Vietnamese people increased to 73.4 years." [31] Moreover, according to the 2018 World Bank Report, "70% of Vietnam's population is now classified as *economically secure*, including the 13% who are now part of the *global middle-class*. These income classes are growing rapidly, rising by over 20 percentage points between 2010 and 2017. An average of 1.5 million Vietnamese joined the global middle class each year since 2014, confirming that households continue to climb the economic ladder after escaping poverty. The rise of the consumer class changes society's aspirations and the focus of the poverty and shared prosperity agenda shifts from combatting extreme poverty to effecting broad improvements in the quality of life and supporting the further expansion of the middle class. Rapid job creation and an ongoing transition to wage employment are driving gains in poverty reduction and shared prosperity." [World Bank, *Climbing the ladder Vietnam Poverty and Shared prosperity: update Report Poverty Reduction and Shared Prosperity in Vietnam*, 2018, <http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/206981522843253122/pdf/124916-WP-PULIC-P161323-VietnamPovertyUpdateReportENG.pdf>]

During the Doi Moi (Renovation) period, Vietnam's human development index (HDI) has also risen dramatically over the past 18 years. Today Vietnam belongs to the group of countries with an upper-middle HDI level, specifically of 0.694 – ranked 116th out of 189 countries worldwide. Vietnam is also one of the few countries whose HDI ranking is 14 higher than its own gross national product (GNP) ranking [32]. Vietnam has transformed from a poor and slow-developing country to one that has lower middle-income level, with an economy ranked 40th in the world and foreign reserves of over USD 64 billion in 2018 [A. Hà, *Dự trữ ngoại hối Việt Nam đang ở mức nào? (Vietnam's foreign exchange reserves are at a certain level)*, EnterNews Portal, 2019, <https://enternews.vn/du-tru-ngoai-hoi-viet-nam-dang-o-muc-nao-147866.html>].

6. Conclusions

The three analysed approaches – Capability Approach, Rights-Based Approach, and Holistic Approach – may slightly differ in terminology, their stated methods and goals but there is more that they have in common than what distinguishes them. Above all, all three innovative approaches respond to the challenge of one-sidedness and the resulting imbalances that the traditional development strategies focused almost unilaterally on economic growth were known for. Instead of emphasizing mainly the macroeconomic indicators, they concentrate primarily on the need of the human persons as individuals and in local communities; in place of promoting first of all the interest of the wealthy and the powerful, they aspire to promote the interest of the common folks, building a more robust and stable middle class and empowering large segments of the population to choose their own destiny (i.e. make important life-choices) and work toward them; and instead of thinking of short to mid-term gains, these approaches are thinking long-term, desiring to build safer, sustainable human societies with a more holistic human social, economic and environmental ecology.

The last three decades have been a witness to Vietnam's struggle for reform and development. While the typical, traditional Western approaches to development, oriented primarily on the macroeconomic success indicators, have certainly resonated in the Vietnamese socio-economic circles, the Vietnamese culture has shown some remarkable resilience, prompting policy makers to consider implementing new approaches to development. Historical and national narratives, along with the specific ideological underpinning of the Vietnamese society, promote the traditional family values, the value of the community [33] and, therefore, also of the relationality of the human person. The moral imagination and social responsibility of the human agents are cultivated in these intimate circles of relationships on the level of families and local communities. In its developmental efforts, Vietnam has made it a priority to implement such approaches that promote the well-being of the people and local communities. Although there is still a long way to go and there are many things that need optimization, the Vietnamese society has achieved remarkable success, gradually improving not only its GDP and GNI ranking, but also its human development

index (HDI). To continue on this promising path, the currently designed and implemented development strategies must take into account a holistic development of a human being, which includes the deeper dimensions of spirituality (or transcendence and self-transcendence) and meaning.

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