

THE MEANING OF LIFE
A STORY OF CONFUSION

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Within our first philosophical studies, the meaning of life was answered in terms of our origin and what makes us what we are as human beings. These earlier philosophers asked questions about our purpose in this life and sought to understand and explain what it meant to be a person, and what it meant to think or to know something. Most of these earlier answers addressed these questions with a religious answer rather than a philosophical one. However, more recent philosophers including Nozick and Taylor have considered the topic quite seriously albeit differently in philosophical terms. Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialist writers made this the most important question asked in twentieth century Europe.

I will attempt to unravel the question, “What is the meaning of life?”, and present previous arguments that have been presented. I will be presenting three separate kinds of philosophical approaches to this question. I am interested in understanding what one is talking about when one discusses “the meaning of life”, and what kinds of considerations are presented when one tries to

determine what life-goals would be worthwhile for the individual as well as for others. What are the different ways a life can be understood as having meaning? Many of the philosophical considerations of the meaning of life are concerned with the way that a life should be lived and what the goal of living should be in the final consideration. Some philosophers find a meaning separate from those I've stated, others, like Schopenhauer, find no meaning in life at all.

What sort of question is "the meaning of life", and if we found "meaning", would we recognize it? What sort of thing would it be? Is it possible to actually seek it out and look for it? These are the questions that require answers before any deep and meaningful understanding to the question of meaning can be found.

Historically, the question of the meaning of life has been understood as being synonymous with the question of purpose in living. Those seeking the meaning or purpose in life were seeking specific parameters that they could live within that would define a well-lived life, and dictated goals that should be striven for throughout a good life. Conversely, philosophers such as Lucretius, Marx and Glover seek a justification for life in order to explain why possession of life is better than surrender to death. These questions ask why one should suffer

through life at all, and why should one respect human life if life itself has no meaning.

Since the earliest philosophers such as Aristotle, men have set out to question what the goal of life is and how that goal should be met. Aristotle himself was very concerned in how determine how to live a happy life, and he believed that man's highest aspiration should be a life of serious philosophical contemplation. He espoused that in order to live a good life; man should live a moderately lived life, and do nothing unintentionally or casually. He spoke against amusement and felt that happiness was a state of *character*.

Unfortunately, one could argue that his philosophies have not aged well, as few people today seek a life of quite contemplation and moderation as a way of life, free from amusement.

A common judgment against the search for the meaning on life is the opinion that human life itself is so short and finite in comparison with the infinite nature of the universe that it is not possible for human life to have meaning when compared to all existence. When thinking in these terms, the main critique is that life is short and that all humankind will soon be dead and forgotten. It follows that those that hold this opinion about life must therefore only be able to

find meaning in the infinite and eternal. And these eternal and infinite things exist in abstract ideas, such as mathematical symbols.

In response to those asking such questions, Parfit for example, a useful question to ask in response could be, if life would infinite, would it then have a meaning, and what would that meaning be? It could then be argued that only finite life has meaning, because it is death which defines our lives, this ending point being as Schopenhauer suggests, the “goal of non-being”. It could be that our search for meaning in life is actually defined by how short its length is, and would therefore define how we experience life. It seems that for many people near death that they find a new desire to accomplish their deepest desires and wishes that they were able to put off in hopes that they had much more life in which to accomplish things. The human response of fear of death indicates that we give our own life value and importance, if not to other people as well.

Philosophers such as Moore have posited that we cannot prove if an instantaneous murder of the entire world really matters. It can be suggested that life is contingent and really has no meaning other than what was ascribe to it. If there is no higher power that cares if we live or die, what does our existence mean. It is in this sense that life could be understood as having no meaning.

Nagel asserts that to ascribe importance to our lives is absurd, and that it is this absurdity of non-importance and meaning that makes us human.

This can become a moral dilemma in some philosophies that are dependant on there being some sort of meaning. If there is no higher purpose or meaning, how can one base their actions, what moral guide can there be? How could one know what is right or wrong, or what needs and desires should be fulfilled, denied or only experienced in moderation? Most of these answers are found only through practice and experience, and a pleasant medium if found. As humans, we seem to strive to define ourselves naturally through the invention of goals, complications, and beliefs. In response to this, if we imbue life with meaning, does that necessarily give it meaning? In order to understand how to answer this question, it is important to understand what value and purpose means in relation to meaning.

Thus far I've mainly discussed whether meaning must be externally given or if it can be internally given. Does one have an advantage over the other? For example, a pig in a pig farm has a certain future and purpose to its life, to become fat and eventually be slaughtered and then served as food. This pig has meaning in its life, but if this same meaning were to be applied to a human, they

would find it sorely lacking. This is also applicable to externally motivated meaning, such as through religion. What would it mean if an individual were to be instructed by God to do an action? Is it enough that it was from God to assure that the action was a moral one? If God were to act for the murder of one's own child, as God did asked of Abraham, would refusal be justified? If so, what is this higher power that has more meaning than that of God?

Tolstoy struggled with this problem, and tried to determine what could justify meaning in life. In the end, he was unable to ascribe meaning beyond a certain point, and optimistically took a Cartesian turn and concluded that "in faith alone could we find the meaning and possibility in life".

If we were to instead reject the idea of an external source of meaning, it can be construed that we can only find internal meaning to our existence. If this is true, then we are choosing our own meaning to life, which would then lead us to the conclusion that it is possible that each individual has a different understanding of meaning, and therefore the meaning of life depends on who you are. Seeing as how it can be reasonably asserted that as of yet, no one has been able to determine a universal meaning of life, that the meaning is many things, and is an individual association of elements and ideas.

Individuals feel that their lives are inconsequential when presented in contrast to the immensity of the universe. We are just mere flashes in comparison, and that can lend a meaningless and despair to those that contemplate life in these terms. This would make our lives similar to that of Taylor's Sisyphus, in which we are condemned to a life of meaningless activity. However, when seeing life in this way, it is important to realize that while what we do may not have an impact of enormity in the scale of the universe (as nothing actually could, other than the universe itself), we can and do have an effect on the things we are in contact with and upon our own lives.

It could be argued that the best lived life is one that is very happy and full of maximum pleasure. However, if presented with a thought experiment like Nozick's pleasure machine, most people would not want to live out their lives as a brain in a vat, so perhaps meaning is more than just pleasure, but also perhaps, pleasure that we feel that we have earned or can appreciate only through the effort it took to enjoy the pleasure. In trying to understand meaning, Tolstoy suffered an arrest of purpose, and that as humans, we cannot but help to have goals and therefore ascribe meaning to our lives, making them somehow important, if only to ourselves.

Therefore, meaning derives from the complexity and the struggle we experience with interacting with the world. We associate value to concepts and things when we have had difficulty or have had to invest in some way in it. For example, a hard earned meal tastes better than one in which the origin is completely unknown. A glass of wine out of a fine glass, after having visited the vineyard tastes much more exquisite than the same wine served from a box into a paper cup. Our lives gather meaning by the amount of interactions we have with other people, as we generally confer meaning about ourselves in relation to larger groups, or by the level of interest or respect one gets from a group. If an individual defines meaning for themselves, they therefore confer meaning onto those of whom their opinion matters.

We seem to define our meaning in life by our experiences, which is why we find real activities to be more valuable when compared to television or Nozick's Pleasure Machine. Therefore, we must derive meaning in life from real interaction with the world, with authentic sensation and feeling. "To travel is better than to arrive," as Taylor stated, seems to be quite wise, as we are defined by our goals, activities and desires, and they are what gives us meaning. It is the living which gives us meaning.

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