

What Makes Life Meaningful? A Philosophical Inquiry

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Abstract:

What gives life its meaning is one of the oldest and most difficult questions in philosophy. People want happiness, success, relationships, knowledge, and security. None of those things automatically provides a life with meaning. In this paper, I study the notion of meaning in life through a philosophical investigation of several influential approaches. Philosophers like Aristotle argue that the meaning of life is related to virtue, eudaimonia, and the active actualisation of our capacities, i.e. human capacities. Again, another philosopher, Kant, links the very meaningful life with morality and good will. In a similar way, Nietzsche raises questions about inherited values and emphasises the “creation of values” and “self-overcoming”. Other existentialist thinkers, Sartre and Camus, tried to explore meaning from the perspective of a world that does not have a preordained purpose, asking questions about freedom, responsibility, absurdity, and personal creation. Viktor Frankl also suggests examples of how to find meaning through love, through work, through responsibility, and through one's response to suffering. It professes that meaning cannot be reduced to pleasure, external success or a fixed purpose imposed from the outside. A meaningful life demands a personal commitment and values that can be critically justified. It demands self-knowledge, responsibility, relationships and engagement with something other than narrow self-interest. The meaning is therefore not merely discovered or arbitrarily created. It is generated in the manner a person understands, chooses, and lives.

Keywords: life, happiness, virtue, responsibility, suffering, self-understanding.

Introduction:

What is the meaning of life? This question looks easy, but it is difficult when we ask what meaning actually means. Human beings do not just want to survive. They ask themselves why they are alive. What is there to strive for? Does it matter that they exist? A person can have wealth, social status, education, relationships, or professional success and still feel that life is meaningless. In contrast, someone who lives in difficult circumstances may find life to be very meaningful. Thus, the philosophical question of meaning is not the same as the question of happiness. A person living a meaningful life is not necessarily happy, nor is a person living a meaningless life necessarily unhappy. In contemporary philosophical discourse, happiness and morality are often viewed as distinct from the meaning of life, but there may be some overlap

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among the three. Meaning is often tied to activities and commitments related to the good, the true, the beautiful, love, creativity, knowledge, and contribution.

There are a number of ways of approaching the question. Does meaning come to human beings pre-packaged from God or nature or some universal purpose? Or do people need to create their own meaning? Is a meaningful life primarily a life of virtue, of moral responsibility, freedom, love, creativity or self-realisation? Can suffering itself have meaning? These questions are explored through Aristotle, Kant, Nietzsche, Sartre, Camus and Viktor Frankl in this paper. It claims that no one factor is sufficient to explain meaningful existence. A meaningful life is one that has an active relation between the individual and values, relationships, responsibilities and purposes that go beyond immediate pleasure or self-interest.

Meaning, Happiness and the Good Life

Before talking about specific philosophers, it is worth distinguishing meaningfulness from happiness. Happiness generally means a state of subjective well-being, pleasure, satisfaction or contentment. But meaning is about whether life has significance or value beyond immediate experience. Someone may be unhappy when doing something of profound value, like caring for another person, seeking truth, or working for justice.

The current philosophy of meaning in life makes a distinction between *meaning in life* and the more general question of the *meaning of life*. The first is about whether and how the life of an individual can be meaningful. The second is whether human existence as a whole has a purpose. This distinction is important because it saves us from the assumption that life must first have some predetermined cosmic purpose before individual lives can be meaningful. Even if a person does not believe the universe has assigned a particular purpose to humanity, he or she can find meaning in friendship, intellectual inquiry, creative activity, moral action, or service to others.

Nor can meaning be simply equated with morality. A morally good action might add to meaning, but meaningfulness has other dimensions such as creativity, knowledge, love and personal commitment. So, in current discussions, meaning is thought of as a different sort of value. It may overlap with happiness and morality, though. The philosophical question is not so much “What makes me happy?” as “What makes my existence worth living?”, “What gives significance to what I do?”

Aristotle: Meaning and Human Flourishing

Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics* is one of the first systematic treatments of the good life. Aristotle begins his ethical investigation by taking it as considering that human action is for some good. Humans have many ends, and there must be some highest good which is desired for itself. Aristotle agreed that the highest good is eudaimonia, which is often translated as happiness, flourishing or living well. To Aristotle, eudaimonia is not merely a pleasant psychological state. It is accomplished through actively exercising virtue. The virtues, such as courage, justice, temperance, friendship, practical wisdom and others, constitute a person’s character and enable human beings to live well. Thus, as Aristotle sees it, ethics is not only about specific actions, but about the creation of a good life in general. Modern scholarship also

emphasises that Aristotle links human well-being with virtue and the active exercise of human capacities. And this way of thinking can give a very significant answer to the question of meaning. Life is meaningful only when human faculties are cultivated and used in great activity. Meaning is not then something that one just feels, but it is associated with how one actually lives.

Aristotle's approach, however, raises a question. Can we establish universally what human flourishing consists in? In modern societies, you find different cultures, values and forms of life. Aristotle's account offers a strong framework, but may not fully explain the modern individual's need for personal freedom and self-definition. But his central insight remains relevant: a meaningful life does not feel good; it is lived well.

Kant: Meaning, Morality and the Dignity of Human Beings

Immanuel Kant is mainly concerned with the good life in terms of morality. Thus, for Kant, the moral worth of an action is not related to its consequences or to its producing happiness but to whether it is performed from duty and in accordance with a good will. According to Kant, human beings must never be used merely as a means to an end. Every person has dignity and must be respected as an end in himself. Thus, meaningful existence can be tied to moral autonomy: the capacity to act according to rational moral principles, rather than merely following desires, social pressure, or external authority. This is important in that it renders the question of meaning responsible. If meaning was simply about satisfying one's needs, then almost any successful activity could have been meaningful. Kant is against this purely subjective understanding. A meaningful life must also include the fact that one's actions are in relation to other rational beings.

But Kant's position might not be enough. Human beings do not live from moral duties alone. Love, friendship, creativity, intellectual curiosity, and personal projects also seem to contribute to meaningfulness. Kant thus provides an essential dimension of meaning: moral responsibility, but not necessarily the whole story.

Nietzsche: Making Meaning in a Meaningless World

More radical is the challenge of Friedrich Nietzsche. Nietzsche raises the question, instead of accepting traditional religious and moral values as given, of whether, after the decline of traditional foundations, humans can create new values. His critique of nihilism is particularly important for the question of meaning. If inherited values are no longer authoritative, then humans confront the possibility that nothing is objectively significant. Nietzsche does not leave it at that. Rather, he or she stresses overcoming oneself and creating values. From this point of view, a meaningful life is not necessarily one in which a person finds a pre-made purpose. It can be a life where the person actively transforms himself or herself and creates values through which life can be affirmed.

Hence Nietzsche shifts from the question "What purpose is given to me?" to "What values can I create and affirm?" His approach gives considerable importance to individual liberty. But it also creates a problem. If the individual makes meaning entirely, then why can't any personal desire be called meaningful? If our theory is purely subjective, it may be hard to distinguish a

genuinely valuable commitment from an arbitrary obsession. Thus, Nietzsche's philosophy is a strong advocate of creativity and self-transformation. However, meaning may require more than individual assertion. Values that can survive critical reflection and transcend the isolated self may be what is called for.

Sartre and Camus: The Freedom, The Absurdity, and The Responsibility

Existentialist philosophers and their philosophies make the problem of meaning more acute. Jean-Paul Sartre, in his philosophy, rejects the idea that humans have a fixed essence that determines the course of their lives. Humans are radically free and responsible for what they make of themselves. Meaning is not just something that is found, like an objective fact. We help to create it by the choices we make and the commitments we enter into. Sartre's position places freedom at the centre. If man has no predetermined essence, then the individual has to take responsibility for his existence. But this freedom is not easy. It's stressful because you can't just say, "Oh, that's just nature.", or "That's just destiny.", or "That's just God."

Albert Camus offers another way to tackle the problem. In *The Myth of Sisyphus*, he discusses the conflict between the human need for meaning and a universe that offers no clear answer. This results in what Camus calls the absurd. We took absurdity in a very wrong sense; the meaning of absurdity is not that life is devoid of meaning; rather, absurdity is the rise out of the conflict between the human need for meaning and the universe's silence on it. Camus turns away from suicide and from a simple escape into metaphysical certainty. His response is revolt: to go on living, to go on taking part in existence without the assurance of an ultimate explanation. This is an important insight. Maybe meaning does not require certainty about the ultimate purpose of existence. Even in a state of uncertainty, living a meaningful life is possible. People can find meaning in involvement, relationships, creativity and life itself; all these coexist.

Viktor Frankl: The Meaning in Responsibility and Suffering

Frankl, drawing on his very own experiences of extreme suffering and his work as a psychiatrist, argues that human beings can find meaning even in terrible circumstances. This person shows many avenues through which individuals can find their meaning, those are creative or meaningful work, love and relationships, and one's attitude toward unavoidable suffering. But here, that suffering is good is not the key point. The key point is that how individuals react to it can be meaningful when suffering is unavoidable. This method tests the assumption that a meaningful life must be lived in comfortable circumstances. Wealth, security, health, and social position can be lost, but a man may still be able to respond meaningfully to existence. Frankl thus relates meaning to responsibility. Meaning is not merely a private feeling. It is a matter of responding to the particular situation in which one finds oneself. But Frankl's approach is not to be taken as glorifying suffering. Suffering that is preventable should not be accepted just because it might give meaning. His strongest argument is primarily related to the case of inevitable suffering. How one will react when a situation is out of his or her hands, when he or she can't remove suffering, is the question: how one responds to it.

The discussion above reveals a core philosophical tension. These philosophers' positions can be roughly divided into two approaches: meaning as discovered and meaning as created. If

meaning is fully discovered, then there must be some objective structure that tells us what is meaningful. This can provide stability but may reduce individual freedom. If meaning is totally constructed, then people are more liberated, but then the meaning runs the risk of becoming totally subjective. A middle ground between these extremes may be stronger. Meaning is not merely given from the outside, nor is it arbitrarily invented by the individual. Human beings create meaning through their commitments. But the commitments can be judged by values like truth, love, responsibility, justice, creativity and contribution. This stance is in line with current philosophical debates that distinguish between subjective and objective approaches. The subjectivist theories link meaning to personal context like goals, care, love, and commitment. On the other hand, objectivist theories assume that some of our activities and values are meaningful because they possess value in themselves; they are independent of whether an individual wants them. A meaningful life, therefore, is both valuable and personally engaging. We have to care about something that is important, but what we care about also matters more.

Meaning, Relationship, and Transcendence

Another important aspect of a meaningful life is that it frequently involves transcendence of narrow self-interest. Love, friendship, knowledge, artistic creation, moral action and service all turn the attention away from immediate personal satisfaction. This doesn't mean that self-interest is always evil. Humans are born looking for security, pleasure and well-being. The trouble is when life is 100% taken up with these things. Someone who lives solely for consumption, status, pleasure, or recognition may achieve many goals, yet still feel empty.

Meaning seems to pack a bigger punch when the self is attached to something larger than itself, another person, a community, an intellectual pursuit, a creative project, a moral cause, or humanity itself. Modern philosophical accounts also refer to relationships, morality, intellectual inquiry, creativity, and the search for the good, true, and beautiful as important examples of meaning-conferring activities. So, meaningfulness is a kind of transcendence. The individual does not disappear, but the individual is no longer the measure of value.

Critical Remarks

The above-mentioned philosophical approaches demonstrate that the meaning of life cannot be explained by one single factor, such as happiness, success, freedom, morality, or personal choice. For Aristotle, meaning in life is connected to “eudaimonia”, virtue, and the development of human potentialities, and he argues that a life is meaningful when one lives well, not merely when one enjoys pleasures. Kant adds a moral dimension by emphasising autonomy, duty, and respect for human dignity, and shows that meaningful existence cannot be entirely divorced from responsibility toward others. Nietzsche, however, does not share the view that mankind is given meaning. He talked about self-overcoming and the creation of values. Sartre develops another radical freedom and responsibility, which means the individual must take their own responsibility for meaning created by themselves and their own existence. For him, meaningful living is not about finding an ultimate purpose, but about continuing to live, in spite of its absurdity, and about relating to existence. Frankl adds another dimension, showing that meaning can be found in work, love, responsibility and one's response to inevitable suffering. These perspectives reveal an important tension between meaning as

something found and meaning as something made. If meaning is entirely predetermined, individual freedom seems limited, and if meaning is entirely created by the individual, it is difficult to distinguish meaningful commitments from arbitrary desires. So, a meaningful life can be understood neither simply discovered nor totally invented. People are engaged in creating meaning by virtue of their choices, relationships, values and commitments. But we can judge these commitments by values that go beyond immediate personal gratification. Meaning requires personal involvement, but it is not a matter of subjective preference. A person has to care about something, but it also matters what it is that the person cares about. In this sense, self-understanding becomes relevant, because individuals are asked to reflect whether their goals do really express their values or whether they are only a reflection of social pressure, fear, comparison, or the desire to be recognised. Meaning also grows through relationships because the very feeling of love, friendship, and responsibility binds all the individual's existence with the lives of others. Similarly, engagement with something beyond narrow self-interest can make a person's life meaningful: creativity, knowledge, moral action and contribution. Meaningfulness therefore involves a transcendence in which the individual remains important but transcends a purely self-centred view of life. Meaningful existence does not, at the same time, require complete certainty about the ultimate purpose of the universe. You can live with commitment, responsibility and purpose even when you do not know. That is, meaning is more properly understood as a continuous relation between the individual and what the individual considers genuinely worthwhile. It is a matter of how one understands oneself, how one chooses commitments, how one relates to others, how one responds to difficulties, how one engages in activities that have value. Hence, a meaningful life is not necessarily the happiest, richest or most successful life, but a life in which one's existence is tied up with values and commitments that give one's living significance.

Conclusion:

There is no one definitive answer to the question, "What makes life meaningful?" The possibilities suggested by the philosophical traditions examined in this paper are different. Aristotle links a meaningful life with flourishing and virtue; Kant with moral autonomy and dignity; Nietzsche with self-overcoming and the creation of values; Sartre with freedom and responsibility; Camus with the absurdity of existence; and Frankl with the importance of responsibility, love, work and one's response to unavoidable suffering. Together these perspectives suggest that meaning is not merely handed to us or completely created by us. Human beings shape their lives through choices, relationships, values, and commitments, but not all commitments are created equal. A life of meaning is a life engaged in something that counts as truly worthwhile.

Purpose is not only about having a purpose but about the way one lives. It reveals itself in the constantly changing tension of freedom and responsibility, of self-understanding and action, of the individual's commitment and concern for others. The meaningful life is not the easiest, happiest or most successful life. It is a life in which one's existence is tied to values, relationships, activities and commitments that give one's life meaning. In the end, that question of meaning may not have a once-and-for-all answer. It is still a philosophical task that each individual must tackle in the manner he understands and lives his life.

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