



What, If Anything, Is the Meaning of Life?

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INTRODUCTION

The question “what is the meaning of life?” is one that has been asked at least since the rise of Western Existentialist philosophy in the late 18th century. Prior to that, the question had analogues that appeared within each framework of philosophical, religious, or social thought that preceded the frameworks of Existentialism, Modernism, Post-Modernism, so on which carry the question forward. Questions like “what is the good life?”, “what life do the gods wish us to live?”, “what is my station in the world, and how do I fulfill it?”, and so on are all in a way analogous to the meaning question in that they occupy a sort of centrality for how one will live their life, and imply a standard by which one’s life can in the end be judged as successful or not.

In this paper, I seek to address, in its most general form, the question of the meaning of life, where “meaning of life” stands not only for the question as it first appeared in Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, and Sartre, but also for its analogues that arose in philosophical worldviews of the past.

In the first part of the paper, I offer an overview of many of the most important essays, books, and thinkers that have contributed either to clarifying the question or its history, or to answering the question in one of its forms. In the second part of the paper, I will shift to provide an argument for my own thesis regarding the question, using the body of research covered in the first section as a background and foundation for the position I take. In its simplest form, my position states that: since meaning of life is a subjective concept, there is no such thing as the meaning of life, which suggests a sense of universality and objectivity for the concept of meaning of life.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The Meaning of Life, A Reader, E.D. Klemke¹

The book uses Camus’ beginning of *The Myth of Sisyphus* to show that exploring “What is the meaning of life?” is an important and urgent question. It claims that “meaning of life” consists three layers of meanings:

1 E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, *The Meaning of Life: A Reader* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018), Introduction.

1. Why does the universe exist?
2. Why do humans exist?
3. Why do I exist?

It also provides three approaches to the question:

1. The theistic answer which believes that the meaning of life is found in the existence of a god.
2. The non-theistic answer that denies the existence of God and therefore the objective meaning of life.
3. The question itself is cognitively meaningless. These three approaches respectively correspond the three stands mentioned in the following source.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy-The Meaning of Life²

Thaddeus Metz begins his investigation of the question of whether life has meaning with an investigation of the meaning of “meaning”, which is a very important background discussion for the initial question. Metz defines “meaning” as “something that provides a basic reason for action”, and proposes a possibility that “meaningfulness is not all or nothing and instead comes in degrees.” Then, Metz explores different approaches to answering the question of meaning of life.

Metz’s Three Potential Approaches to the Question of Meaning

The first of these possible answers is super-naturalism. Super-naturalism is a view according to which a spiritual realm is central to meaning of life. Metz divides supernatural viewpoints into two kinds: god-centered views and soul-centered views. The second type of solution is naturalism, which Metz defines explicitly as “the view that a physical life is central to life’s meaning.” He divides this kind of view into two kinds: subjectivism, where meaning of life varies between each individual and depends on each person’s variable pro-attitudes, and objectivism, believing that meaning of life is

2 Metz, Thaddeus, “The Meaning of Life”, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Winter 2022 Edition), Edward N. Zalta & Uri Nodelman (eds.), URL=<<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/win2022/entries/life-meaning/>>.



constituted at least in part by something that is inherently valuable in itself. The third kind of solution is nihilism, by which the author means the position that life has no ultimate meaning.

The author states that meaningfulness does not equal happiness, safety, or morality. "It [meaningfulness] is conceptually distinct from happiness or rightness." In other words, none of the conventional standards of current society is amount to the meaningfulness of a life. This further shows that it is impossible for an objective meaning of life to exist because there is no necessary connection between any of the common standards of measuring the "successfulness" of one's life and whether a life is meaningful or not. Although for many people, earning a lot of money, gaining a high social status and becoming successful means living a meaningful life, there are still some people who acknowledge the value of their life even though they might not be "successful" in common definition.

Thaddeus Metz also raises the relevance of the "Interpretive Turn" in the field of philosophy to the question of the meaning of life. A consequence of the Interpretive Turn is the position that "meaning-talk is logically about whether and how a life is intelligible within a wider frame of reference." It can be further explained that inquiring into life's meaning equals seeking sense-making information and combining them into a narrative of one's life, and stories clearly have meanings.

However, to clarify, making sense out of one's life is not the same thing as discovering the objective meaning to one's life. It is to interpret one's life experiences in his or her own ways and create a narrative with its unique meaning instead of discovering the innately ever-present objective meaning. This is also the argument mentioned in Nietzsche's works which will be discussed later in this article.

Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy-Naturalism³

The article can be mainly divided into two parts based on two types of naturalistic view—ontological naturalism and methodological naturalism.

Ontological naturalism is the position of which all spatiotemporal entities must be identical to or metaphysically constituted solely by ultimately physical entities. In other words, everything is in some sense constituted by physical entities, but it cannot be classified as ontological naturalism unless it is nothing but physical entities all the way down.

Many ontological naturalists thus adopt a physicalist attitude to mental, biological, social and other such "special" subject matters. They hold that there is nothing more that gives rise to the mental, biological and social realms than arrangements of physical entities. There is a question of

3 Papineau, David, "Naturalism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (Summer 2021 Edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2021/entries/naturalism/>>.

what the metaphysical nature of "meaning" is in a materialist worldview, but this question lies beyond the scope of this paper.

On the other hand, methodological naturalists see philosophy and science as engaged in essentially the same enterprise, pursuing similar ends and using similar methods. From the methodological naturalist perspective, then, philosophical views are synthetic claims that answer to the overall tribunal of a posteriori observational evidence.

The obvious objection to this view, however, is that it does not accord with philosophical practice. In particular, it seems in tension with the central role that *intuitions* play in philosophy. The typical way to assess philosophical views is arguably to test them against intuitive judgments about possible cases, instead of against *a posteriori* observational data.

A typical example of methodological naturalism is the Canberra Plan, which argues that metaphysics can explain the features of the world described by physics and what the different classes of everyday belief represent. This logic is similarly applicable to meaning of life as the metaphysical "meaning" can be used to explain the physical "life".

New World Encyclopedia-Fact and Value⁴

This article mainly focuses on the fact-value distinction, which is an important distinction to discuss before aiming to explain the meaning of life, because whether the meaning of life is a factual or value statement is essential to the answers and explanations of this question. In brief, those who hold to the fact-value distinction hold that factual statements describe reality, while value statements merely "evaluate" reality from a particular perspective, and evaluations are neither true nor false.

To understand the distinction further, we must explain three concepts: facts, propositions, and values. A fact is "a state of affairs that makes a proposition true", and a proposition is "a thought or content expressed by a sentence."

A value statement expresses the speaker's evaluation of a thing: whether they personally approve or disapprove, like or dislike a thing. Value statements express feelings and attitudes, and thus act as prescriptions, which means that they instruct one to act in accordance with the value that is being expressed—to either do the thing approved of, or not do the thing disapproved of. A straight-forward reading of the fact-value distinction would hold that statements about the goodness or badness, or meaningfulness of a life are merely personal evaluations, and therefore are not factual statements. Thus, there would be no truth about the meaning

4 New World Encyclopedia contributors, "Fact and Value," New World Encyclopedia, , https://www.newworldencyclopedia.org/p/index.php?title=Fact_and_Value&oldid=1035558 (accessed October 17, 2022).

of life any more than there would be any truth about whether a vanilla ice cream tastes good or bad.

This position was central to the Logical Positivist movement, which embraced it through the Principle of Verification, an axiom that stated that “a sentence is strictly meaningful only if it expresses something that can be confirmed or dis-confirmed by empirical observation.” On this view, the question of the meaning of life was dismantled even further. Before, on the grounds of the fact-value distinction, statements about meaning of life were merely personal evaluations. Viewed through the Principle of Verification, such statements, since they are evaluative judgments or value statements, are literally meaningless. However, nowadays, almost everyone in the field of philosophy rejects the Principle of Verification. The statement itself cannot be verified empirically as well.

Doing Ethics Through Science: Naturalism and the Fact-Value Distinction, Bryce McDonald⁵

This article also focuses on the fact-value distinction, but through a different stance. It begins with explaining the definition of fact-value distinction, which states that there is a “categorical difference” between facts and values with facts being objective, empirically verifiable things (statements about what “is”) and values (statements about what “ought” to be) being normative concepts. The strict distinction between the two kinds of statements means that we cannot derive obligations about how we ought to behave from factual observations of the way things are.

Bryce McDonald argues against fact-value distinction, claiming that in nature, there is no “brute fact”, or an uninterpreted proposition. In other words, every statement involves valuation, and so is in some sense a value statement. similar to the meaning of life, there is no such thing as factual, objective meaning of life, but only subjective meanings, or people’s interpretations, of life. The classification of a person as a particular career or role does give them moral obligations. However, these obligations are value statements instead of factual statements, and are not causally related to the meaning of life.

What is Scientism, and Why Is It a Mistake?⁶

Adam Frank focuses on explaining the distinction between science and scientism, arguing that science is a method of inquiry toward nature, while scientism is one of many philosophical views. Scientism believes that science is the best or only objective means by which society should determine normative and epistemological values.

5 Bryce McDonald, “Doing Ethics through Science: Naturalism and the Fact-Value Distinction,” *The Harvard Ichthus*, June 15, 2019, <https://harvardichthus.org/2019/06/doing-ethics-through-science-naturalism-and-the-fact-value-distinction/>.
6 “What Is Scientism, and Why Is It a Mistake?,” *Big Think*, December 9, 2021, <https://bigthink.com/13-8/science-vs-scientism/>.

According to scientism, science explores the real and objective world, which is the world independent of humans. It argues that these truths are superior than others, and therefore, “all aspects of our experience must, eventually, reduce down to the truths that science reveals.”

Then, based on scientism, any knowledge that is neither logical deduction nor empirically testifiable assertions are meaningless. However, scientism makes a similar mistake with the Principle of Verification, because the assertions in scientism itself will be considered meaningless under its own definition.

A Short History of Ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre⁷

Alasdair MacIntyre argues that moral concepts change as social life changes. They are embodied in and are partially constitutive of forms of social life. In other words, whether an action is morally right or wrong needs to be considered under its cultural and social context.

MacIntyre further argues that culture is strongly related to assigning a set of meanings to the evaluative vocabularies. It uses justice as an example by stating that one cannot ask or answer the question, “What is justice?”, but only the questions, “What is justice-at-Athens?” or, “What is justice-at-Corinth?”

On this account, we can conclude that it must be the same for questions about meaning of life. One cannot explore the meaning of one’s life without considering his or her past experiences, family backgrounds, personalities, society and culture and many other factors. Therefore, it seems that meaning of life only makes sense when it is in the existence of different meanings with each only applied to an individual’s own life, and there is no universal meaning of life applied to everyone. There is only the meaning of life for this particular person in this particular time and place.

MacIntyre also proposes that “what is good for X” and “what X wants” do not mean the same thing. A similar idea is also portrayed in “Notes from the Underground” by Fyodor Dostoyevsky, where the “underground man” claims that people often want things that are exactly the opposite of what is in their best interest. This leads us to the question of whether meaning of life is more connected to achieving what is good for a person, or if it is more connected to achieving what the person desires. We could distinguish two views on the basis of the question: one we might call the Desire Satisfaction view of life-meaning, the other we could call the Well-being view of life-meaning.

On the Meaning of Life, John Cottingham⁸

While MacIntyre focuses on the ways in which meaning is

7 Alasdair MacIntyre, *A Short History of Ethics*. S.I.: UNIV OF NOTRE DAME PRESS, 2022.

8 John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2009).

constructed by social and historical conditions, and can only be understood from within their own historical framework, John Cottingham focuses more narrowly, on the ways in which the shift of the center of people's life from god to humans affects one's conception of meaning of life.

In medieval Europe, God is an essential part of people's perceptions of meaning of life. People generally believe that a life following the God's instructions is a meaningful one. In a relatively short historical time span, however, the question of life's meaning has acquired a new urgency, with a new focus surrounding humans. In modern eras, for most situations, human's own ideas and perceptions instead of "the God's orders" decides the meaning of life. However, this also gives us a hint that "meaning" is strongly related with "context", and in this situation historical and cultural context. In different eras, people can have different definitions of the phrase "meaning of life", and therefore offer different answers toward this question.

The Death of God and the Meaning of Life, Julian Young⁹

This book uses Nietzsche's proposition that the notion of God--which also symbolizes all types of absolute beliefs in Western society--is "dead" as a milestone-like partition of philosophical beliefs. This proposition is especially important in the inquiry toward meaning of life, and further explores the shift of people's conceptions of meaning of life centering god to humans.

Before this, God is closely connected with "meaning", and people's spiritual life seems to be a bit easier, since they always have a central belief where they can go to find meaning.

After this idea, however, meaning of life becomes more diverse, and people enter a period of confusion when they cannot find a purpose or meaning for their life, which gives birth to nihilism as well as existentialism. This is also part of the reason why Nietzsche is being called the first existentialist.

Beyond Good and Evil, Nietzsche¹⁰

This book argues that concepts of good and evil, or morality, are culturally constructed instead of inherently true, similar to the points regarding context mentioned before.

In the book, Nietzsche also talks about "slave morality" and "master morality." Slave morality is a moral system (like Christianity and communism) that requires submission to

9 Young, Julian. *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Routledge, 2014. "Preface" and "Ch.1: Untangling the Question."

10 Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Beyond Good and Evil: Prelude to a Philosophy of the Future*. Soesterberg: Aspekt Publishers, 2022.

others for "the greater good" (the individual submitting to the community), while master morality is individualistic, that which makes a man the master of his own destiny and fate. Nietzsche believes that only a life in the latter scenario can be considered as a meaningful life.

The Gay Science, Nietzsche¹¹

In this book, Nietzsche announces the famous statement that "God is dead". Here, "God" not only means the God in traditional Christianity, but anything that performs the function in human life that was once performed by the God of traditional Christianity.

Then, what should people attach their meaning of life to? Nietzsche believes that we are to create ourselves as beings who are "new, unique, incomparable". He proposes that humans are influenced by a herd instinct, just like the concept of "das Man" proposed in Heidegger's famous philosophical work *Being and Time*, to follow the crowds, be influenced by the social norms and values, and gradually lose the ability to think critically and act independently.

Nietzsche and Metaphysics, Guoping Zhou¹²

One of the biggest concerns in Nietzsche's philosophy is the lack of culture in his era. He describes people's inner world as "homeless souls where there is no sky, no spiritual pursuit, no faith, with everywhere a terrible secular tendency and frivolous worship of the present."

This sets the basis for his argument that we should live our life as a piece of great artwork, as a narrative. He believes that knowledge will be nothing but separate pieces without a coherent inquiry toward the meaning of life. In other words, a life that simply follows the crowd and without one's own independent thinking is meaningless, which leads us to Heidegger's similar argument about authenticity.

Along story short, Nietzsche believes that to live a meaningful life we are to narrate our lives into an organic whole in such a way as to disclose the 'hero' who we are, and we choose our own story.

However, it worth noting that this narrative of our lives is based on our real life experiences, or what we actually lived through. These two elements--the ability to narrate our life into an organic story and life experiences that are consistent with the story we narrate--are both essential in the discovery or creation of our meaning of life. If one can narrate a full and consistent story through his or her life experiences, their life can also be "meaningful" to themselves even if they did not live in the typical "hero" way.

11 Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm, Thomas Common, Paul V. Cohn, and Maude Dominica Petre. *The Gay Science*. Mineola, NY: Dover Publications, Inc., 2020.

12 Zhou, Guoping. *Nietzsche and Metaphysics*. Beijing: Life·Reading·New Knowledge·Triple Bookstore, 2017.

The New Atheism and Five Arguments for God, William Lane Craig¹³

This article provides five main arguments for the existence of God and investigates their premises in details. It is a very thought-provoking article because it is the first article I've ever read that shows the theism arguments logically. In this sense, theism becomes more like a logical argument instead of an unexplainable belief or religious theory. It is also important in the discussion of meaning of life because theistic theories believe that the existence of God gives meaning to life. Therefore, we need to either prove that God does not exist or argue that the existence of God does not necessarily leads to a meaning of life.

The Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy, Robert C. Solomon¹⁴

In this book, meaning is defined as something that exceeds existence. It is only possible for a thing to be meaningful when it is put under a certain context or background. For most people, "the meaning of life" does not exist because there are many things that can be meaningful to their life and are equally important to them.

In this part of the book, the author lists many different types of possible answers to the meaning of life, such as "God as meaning" or "Future life as meaning" and many different definitions of life, such as "Life is a story" or "Life is a game", exploring different philosophers' ideas along the way.

It also expresses a different kind of view, claiming that there is no single meaning to life. It is not because life does not have any "real" meaning, but because life has *too many* real meanings for any single one to emerge as *the* meaning.

On the Meaning of Life, Garrett Thomson¹⁵

This article claims that the question "What is the meaning of life?" is not a straightforward empirical question that can be settled by observation. Instead, the question itself needs clarification.

One of the obstacles in answering the question is the word "the", which implies that life has either one meaning or none and excludes the possibility that life has many meanings (which is completely possible).

There are several reasons to reject a question: Unanswerable question, unknowable answer, or no universal answer. Therefore, to make the question about the meaning of life is answerable, we need to initially reject these three scenarios.

13 Craig, William Lane. "The New Atheism and Five Arguments for God." Popular Writings | Reasonable Faith. Accessed October 20, 2022. <https://www.reasonablefaith.org/writings/popular-writings/existence-nature-of-god/the-new-atheism-and-five-arguments-for-god>.

14 Solomon, Robert C. *Big Questions: A Short Introduction to Philosophy*. Wadsworth, 2017.

15 Thomson, Garrett. *On the Meaning of Life*. Singapore: Thomson Wadsworth, 2003.

Critique of Pure Reason, Immanuel Kant¹⁶

Kant's view on the meaning of life retains both traditional Christianity and modern science. As a typical empiricist, he is trying to figure out what we can know without appealing to any sources other than our own experience, and he believes that the meaning of life depends on the pursuit of the highest good. He argues that only creatures with rationality, such as humans, have the ability to act in accordance of laws and rules, and any meaningful life must at a minimum be one that is ruled by reason.

The World as Will and Representation, Arthur Schopenhauer¹⁷

The main argument of this book by Schopenhauer is that life is suffering, because to live is to will, which is to pursue a goal, which is either satisfied or not. When it is not satisfied, one suffers due to his or her desire; when it is satisfied, one is bored and too suffers. This leads us to a question: if life is nothing but suffering, then how in the world can it have any meaning?

One way of responding to Schopenhauer's dilemma is to argue that the reasoning is fallacious because Schopenhauer's logic is incomplete. First, we can have multiple goals. While some might not be satisfied, many others can be satisfied, so we can have a balanced emotional status. Also, some goals are not eliminated even when the desire is fulfilled, such as becoming a life-long scientist. After the goal is satisfied, the person can still experience long-term satisfaction without being bored.¹⁸

The Myth of Sisyphus, Albert Camus¹⁹

The theme of the book is absurdity, which in general "is born of the confrontation between human need and the [as it seems to us] unreasonable silence of the world". It is a desire for there to be a "meaning of life", "some great idea that transcends [life] . . . and gives it meaning." This status is stated as absurdity because, as Camus argues, there is actually no meaning to life.

However, Camus also claims that we can find meanings that transcend this sense of nihilism, which is the very act of realizing the meaninglessness of life. Therefore, he presents two types of heroes living with absurdity:

Revolt: like Sisyphus, whose story personifies the endlessly

16 Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Pure Reason*. S.I.: Duke Classics, 2020.

17 Schopenhauer, Arthur, Judith Norman, Alistair Welchman, and Christopher Janaway. *The World as Will and Representation*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020.

18 Young, Julian. *The Death of God and the Meaning of Life*. New York: Routledge, 2014.

19 Camus, Albert. *Myth of Sisyphus*. New York: Random House US, 2012.

repetitive life of the modern industrial worker. Camus argues that Sisyphus could be happy because he scorns the Gods and understands his own noble soul, toughly facing the destiny (in revolt).

Excess: like Don Juan who sleeps around with endless beautiful women. They live 'without appeal' to any 'deceptive divinity', but always maintains lust for experience. They believe that life is 'not to be built up but to be burned up'.

Camus argues for a sense of "goallessness" because he believes that to have aims, as "everyday man" does, is to lack freedom. "Everyday man" lives in the future, while absurd heroes focus on the present and successions of the present.

However, there is a difference between having a goal and modifying it as self grows and being obsessed and enslaved by a goal and focuses on it no matter what. Actually, being immersed in absurdity and become goalless can make life full of boredom.²⁰

Being and Time, Heidegger²¹

Heidegger claims that a meaning life is one that is authentic, meaning real and without deceptions, meaning that is not misled by Das Man, or "The They". "The They" refers to a sense of averageness that levels down all possibilities and uncertainty of Being.²² However, we often succumb to the pressure of "public opinion" to conform to the norms that are approved by the group or subculture to which we belong.

He also claims that to be able to make the distinction between essential and irrelevant life-options, one must grasp one's life as a "totality", as a "whole", which is very similar to Nietzsche's idea about creating life as an artwork and giving it meaning by connecting it into an intact narrative or story.

This also implies that we have to think of our lives as something that will end because death is what completes the whole of our life. Therefore, if we have not wrestled with the fact that we will die, then we cannot ever conceive of our lives in the whole. As mentioned in "Sophie's World", one cannot know what it is like to be alive unless they realize that they are going to die.²³ Also, Heidegger is the first thinker so far who has made death central to the meaning of life, rather than simply an obstacle.

20 Ibid.18

21 Heidegger, Martin, John Macquarrie, and Edward S. Robinson. *Being and Time*. Eastford, CT: Martino Fine Books, 2019.

22 e-Journal, Exordium. "Working for Das Man: Heidegger's Theory of Existence by Nick Holt." EXORDIUM, September 13, 2018. <https://exordiumuq.org/2017/07/23/working-for-das-man-heideggers-theory-of-existence-by-nick-holt/>.

23 Gaarder, Jostein, and Paulette Møller. *Sophie's World: A Novel about the History of Philosophy*. Brantford, Ont.: W. Ross MacDonald School Resource Services Library, 2012.

Madness and Civilization, Michel Foucault²⁴

Foucault's most visible aim appears to be freedom—freedom from the regimes of 'knowledge'. He claims that we should not oppress genius with normalization by calling it "madness". In this sense, he would argue that a life that achieves freedom from "knowledge" and "judgments", such as what it is to be sane rather than mad, would be a meaningful one. According to Foucault, these regimes of knowledge are constantly suppressing and limiting us. Therefore, "transgression", in other words resistance, is necessary.

However, author Julian Young claims that freedom actually is not Foucault's ultimate value. Rather, similar to Nietzsche, "the creation of oneself as a beautiful artwork" is Foucault's ultimate purpose. He believes that in order to achieve so, one must first free themselves from the clichés established by the regimes of knowledge that surround us.

ARGUMENT

First of all, just as the discussion of every question needs to have a purpose or aim, I'd like to discuss why humans have the drive to ascribe meaning to their lives.

Considering this question from the perspective of genetic reproduction, thinking about meaning of life is unhelpful to evolution at all. By contrast, some people might choose not to have children so that they can aim for their own meaning of life, which is harmful to their own genetic reproduction. This seems strange because the top priority for all the other individuals in a species is to reproduce and spread their own genes and as much as possible and make their own genes as competitive as possible.²⁵ Therefore, it shows the difference between humans and other animals--humans have spiritual connections, interpretations, and unique cultural backgrounds and reason.

I think meaning is both a byproduct of the development of our cognitive system and a delusion. The ability to cooperate is an important difference between humans and animals--not just within a group or community, but cooperate with every other human on earth. In order to keep this entire global society and different political and economic systems working, people must believe in the meaning of certain concepts. E.g. People must believe that there are meanings to money so that they can live properly in this society. Also, people must believe that laws have meaning so that they won't be arrested.

Similarly, people must believe that life is meaningful, at least to a certain extent, so that they will not commit suicide. If we do not have brain and cognitive ability, then we do not need to ascribe meaning to things because we just follow what our genes lead us to do. However, since our brain develops and

24 Foucault, Michel. *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason*. London: Routledge, 2009.

25 Dawkins, Clinton Richard. *The Selfish Gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016.

our society is based on everyone's universal belief in certain abstract concepts, ascribing meaning to things becomes essential and becomes a habit.

Moving on to the problem "What, if anything, is the meaning of life?", one of the main obstacles in answering it involves defining the two main terms — "meaning" and "life".

Meaning is the value of something that exceeds its existence—something that humans add onto a certain thing. It is an evaluative statement, a value statement, which has no objective right or wrong standards. It represents the purpose of something's existence. In other words, meaning of life depends on every individual's own values, experiences, and perceptions of their own identity and experiences. It is people's own explanation of the purpose or why-exist of their life.

Existence

This leads us to the question about the definition of existence, which can be divided into two types of existences. For tangible, empirical things, their existence are independent of people's perceptions. People's perceptions give them meanings, but they still exist even if people believe they are meaningless. For epistemological things, by contrast, their existence depends on people's perceptions and they are subjective concepts. In other words, once people believe they are meaningless and give up on these concepts, after a certain period of adjusting, their existence no longer stand as well. However, in both cases, the meaning of the existences is defined by their purposes and influences of their existence, and meaning is a conceptual, evaluative matter depending on people's perceptions.

By "meaning of life", or the concepts beyond the existence of life, I believe that the meaning of one's life depends mostly on how he or she views their experiences and respond to them instead of the experiences themselves. In other words, the life experiences are the raw materials of a life, and people's interpretations and reflections of them are the frameworks that determine the meaning.

Philosophers such as Nietzsche has a similar argument, claiming that narrative story-making is what makes our life meaningful. In other words, if we are able to connect our life experiences together and discover a consistent purpose, then our life is a meaningful one. The common problem, however, is that many people's life experiences are separated from each other, each with a different purpose, and some even seem to be meaningless. This seems to give arise to an objection toward this argument. However, later philosophers such as Heidegger further developed on this argument.

He believes that a meaningful life must involve authenticity. In other words, there are many events in a life. Some are minor, daily details, while some are authentic and real, and it is important to make the distinction between these two life-options.

Above all, we can conclude that meaning of life involves cohering the authentic events in one's life into a single or several purposes. Also, the actual life experiences and one's interpretations of them should be coherent. Otherwise, it is a type of self-deception.

Life

Moving on to life, it can be explained through three main ways from macro to micro:

1. All forms of biological life and civilizations (not only organisms on earth but also all the other potential alien civilizations in the universe)
2. Humanity's existence as a whole
3. Life of a specific individual (their process from birth to death)

In this essay, the discussion will be focused on the third scenario, which is what, if anything, is the purpose or meaning of an individual's life?

First of all, I argue that there is no objective meaning to life in any situations because there is no single individual or organization that is authoritative enough to provide the universal standard or perspective from which to view that life. Actually, "objective meaning" not only does not exist, but also makes no sense at all because there is no possible situation, at least in current human perceptions, where an objective meaning even can exist.

Let us consider a few basic facts about the framework of "existence". Consider first, a hippopotamus. It is a creature that has a set of qualities or conditions, which could all in fact be met by reality—that is, it is possible for hippopotamuses to exist. What is more, if we go out and search the world, we will find that it just so happens that hippopotamuses do actually exist. Not only are the conditions of their existence possible for reality to accommodate, reality does in fact do so.

Now consider the unicorn—a horse with a single straight horn emerging from the center of its forehead. It is clear to most every adult that unicorns do not actually physically exist on earth. Reality does not accommodate them. However, it is *impossible* for them to exist if certain conditions or coincidences in evolutionary history took place. There is nothing about a horse with a horn that makes it impossible for reality to accommodate. They could exist; they just do not. In this case, the existence of unicorns is not a fact but does make sense as a possibility; it is not logically incoherent, or nonsense.

Contrast the concept of hippopotamuses and unicorns now against the concept of a *square circle*. By *square circle*, we mean a flat, two-dimensional shape that has only three sides, and whose interior angles add up to 270 degrees, and that also has only four sides, each of equal length, and whose corners are each 90 degrees, so that its interior angles

add up to 360 degrees. A square circle is obviously, literally nonsense. Such a thing could not *possibly* exist, for the most basic facts about reality are such that reality cannot possibly accommodate this set of simultaneously contradictory conditions in a single object.

We thus have three kinds of beings: Ones that are possible, but not actual. Ones that are both possible and actual, and ones that are neither possible nor actual.

We can ask then, when we consider the concept of a meaning of life, which category of being is it? First of all, we do not know the answer to the question of the meaning of life, and we do not know how to go about finding the answer. For example, one might not know how to perform a surgery, but they can find out how to find the answer--read medical books, attend medical schools, or learn after doctors. For meaning of life, however, we do not know anything.

We cannot deny the existence of an objective meaning. However, since we do not even know how to find the answer and we have better hypotheses mentioned below, due to inference to the best explanation, we currently abandon the hypothesis that there is an objective meaning of life and turn to more logical and reasonable approaches.

Therefore, I will argue that in the case of the concept of an *objective meaning of life*, there is simply no conceivable scenario in which a single, objective meaning would exist; reality simply cannot accommodate the existence of such a thing. When we unpack the concept we will find that it is actually nonsense, like a square circle.

I propose that all meanings are given by people—along with all other abstract concepts--are created by humans and they will no longer exist without humans because they belong to evaluative and subjective statements. For example, love is such a concept created by humans. It does not mean that the signs of love do not exist without humans. Mice can also feel certain impulses and emotions (signs and expressions of love) because of the hormones excreted in their neural system. However, they do not discuss topics such as “what is a good relationship”, “what is the meaning of love” or “why do I love”--at least not in a way that humans can perceive and detect.

In other words, the concrete signs of the abstract concept exist no matter there are people who think about and discuss about the abstract concept or not. Actually, it is the behaviors and experiences that exist first so that people can have the opportunity to create the abstract concept. Things such as meaning come after signs and expressions of the concept. Therefore, meaning can be seen as a summary of the root of the signs that can be applied to future signs.

Moving back to the example of love, one might believe that the meaning of love is to find the missing half of oneself. Then, it is highly likely for him or her to start a relationship with a person that is similar to himself or herself, with whom

they can communicate about their common interests, and this pattern can be applied to their future relationships as well. Similarly, one might also prefer someone who holds completely opposite characteristics with themselves and be easily attracted by those kinds of people. Then, they will also follow this pattern and define the meaning of love in another way.

Consequently, meaning of life can only be subjective and defined by every individual. However, people’s answers about meaning of life are different and can sometimes be contradictory to each other. For example, Person A might think that life’s meaning comes and only comes from God’s direction, while Person B believes life’s meaning only exists when God does not exist. We cannot say that both are correct, otherwise God both exists and does not exist. Then, this meaning becomes a set embracing everything in the world, which is not plausible.

Therefore, there is only one scenario where all the different definitions of meaning of life can co-exist and be equally valid--these meanings are applicable only to certain individuals who proposed that specific meaning. Just as mentioned before, meaning only makes sense when considered under context. In the case of the discussion about meaning of life, it is only reasonable when putting under the context of every individual’s life.

In the previous instance, Person A’s definition of his or her meaning of life makes sense specifically for their life, and is meaningless and inapplicable to Person B’s life. It is vice versa for B. Then, the conflict between the two ideas is no longer a concern because they are not considered under the same context.

However, this explanation seems to raise a question--what if a person’s conception of the meaning of life is that their life is meaningful only if other people think their life is meaningful, or only if other people believe in the same meaning of life? Then, it seems that we can never satisfy the person’s meaning of life and other people’s meaning of life simultaneously. Since this goal might never be achieved, can we say that a life with this definition of meaning is always meaningless? The answer is no. Actually, the meaning can be shown through the process of making efforts to convince others about this meaning, which is similar to the beliefs of the missionaries.

In conclusion, “*the meaning of life*” does not exist because there is no objective and universal meaning to life. “Meaning of life” is a subjective concept that only makes sense when it is proposed and applied on each individual separately.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, meaning is a quality that is ascribed to the world and the things in it, from within the mind of every person. It, by definition, cannot be objective or universal any more than an opinion or perception—which also exist purely within the individual mind—can be universal. This does not

mean that meaning does not exist, but that its existence is not the sort of thing that we can ascribe universality or objectivity to.

When applied to meaning of life, the above arguments suggest that since we cannot ascribe objectivity or universality to meaning, there is no single and universal meaning of life. Therefore, the concept of “the meaning of life” is implausible. However, this does not deny the existence of “meaning of life”, which is a subjective answer that everyone individual can draw in different ways from their own experiences and mind.

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