

PERCEPTION AND PERPLEXITY OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

Introduction

The question whether life has any meaning is difficult to interpret. This is the big question- the hardest to answer, the most urgent and at the same time the most obscure. The more we concentrate our critical faculty on it the more it seems to elude us, or to evaporate as any intelligible question. For millennia, thinkers have addressed the question of what, if anything, makes a life meaningful in some form or other. The basic idea of the question of life's meaning is depicted, to rethink the age-old question again, in this article by tracing the right sense of the quest under the first title to avoid ambiguity and by presenting the significance of the question and basic categories of the answer.

Descriptive Definition

Before initiating the meditations on the meaning of life, the meaning of the 'meaning of life' should be established. The question of life's meaning in this thesis is not the semantic meaning of the word 'life' or any sort of definition of 'life' or a description of this term's usage. Though 'meaning' is the term which appears to most naturally find its home within a linguistic context, there are additional non-linguistic contexts in which the locution, "What is the meaning of x?" makes perfect sense.¹ Such a non-linguistic sense of the meaning of life is the discussion taken into consideration here which is radically not in the easy-to-define sense.

For the further clarification of the focus, the meaning of the term 'meaning' has to be established which seems so intricate. 'Meaning' has multiple meanings and at least some of the more

¹ IEP, "Meaning of Life: Contemporary Analytic Perspectives," <http://www.iep.utm.edu/mean-ana/> (accessed on 2 December, 2014).

prominent ones mitigate its usefulness in the context of trying to formulate the intuitions driving the question of the meaning of life. This term has different meanings as it relates to the various disciplines of study such as medicine, science, mathematics, culture, etc. The word ‘meaning,’ as in general sense, as a noun means what is intended to be, or actually is, expressed or indicated; signification; import; the end, purpose, or significance of something. As a verb it means to have in mind as one's purpose or intention; to intend for a particular purpose, destination, etc.² As far as this thesis is concerned the non-linguistic philosophical sense is taken for the quest of the meaning of life.

The quest for the meaning of life can also be expressed in different forms, such as "Why are we here?", "What is life all about?", and "What is the purpose of existence?" or even "Does life exist at all?" Before inquiring the meaning of life, it should be established with certainty that there is a meaning for life; or else there rise another question of whether there is any meaning for life or not.

Big Question

What is the meaning of life? Probably it's the ultimate human question for which multitudinous answers have been presented; in spite the search for the meaning is not silenced. This question of the meaning and value of life has been debated by philosophers for centuries. Many major historical figures in philosophy have provided an answer to the question of what, if anything makes life meaningful, although they typically have not put it in these terms. Consider, for instance, Aristotle on the human function, Aquinas on the beatific vision, and Kant on the highest good. Theologians and psychologists were also concerned about this much perplexed

² Dictionary.com, "Meaning," <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/meaning>(accessed on 2 December, 2014).

question. Even the laymen think of this question when they undergo some difficulties or whenever they were confused of the life experiences that they go through. The question whether life has any meaning is difficult to interpret, and the more one concentrates his critical faculty on it the more it seems to elude him. Though it seems to be somewhat vague, it is sufficiently intelligible for us to seek to answer intuit is less likely to be conceived in wonder than in a mood of disquietude. It is not asked seriously in a spirit of disinterested intellectual curiosity or grateful life-affirmation. Rather it emerges when one's sense of the meaningfulness of life has been deeply shaken – when one fears that life, or at least one's own life, is without meaning. The typical intonation of the question may be more revealing than the words. “What can it all mean?” may have more in common with a sigh than with a grammatical question. It's an announcement that the foundation of one's sense of meaning has been undermined.³

The quest for the meaning of life is one of the most important questions, if not the most important question, of human existence. This, of course, creates a *prima facie* impasse, and thus, makes the quest more complicated in spite of all its apparent significance. Philosophically, the question therefore has seemed insurmountable to many. It is surely not the question about the semantic meaning of the word “life,” but what then is it a question about? Is it a question about all of existence? Is it asking for comprehensive explanation of why the universe exists and of our place within it? And if so, is it asked with strong teleological assumptions at the fore, such that a purely efficient, mechanistic causal story would leave the inquirer unsatisfied? These many confusions are indications of a deeper perplexity.⁴ Indeed, there is a profound human impulse to

³ Jeffrey Gordon, "The Question of the Meaning of Life: Answerable or Unanswerable?" https://philosophynow.org/issues/73/The_Question_of_the_Meaning_of_Life_Answerable_or_Unanswerable (accessed on 2 December, 2014).

⁴ IEP, "Meaning of Life"

seek a sweeping, deep explanation, context, or narrative through which to interpret existence, and then move beyond localized foci by living into this universal, totalizing narrative.

Some spurn this question by supposing that there is no meaning in life at all because of Quest's outer shell as absurd. But the indestructible fact is that man cannot live without meaning. At least man tries to create his own meaning for his life. Man does each and every deed with an attempt of making that particular deed to make it meaningful, though it may not be meaningful according to social norm. Meaning gives the motivation for any activity. Meaning in life is a vital element that gives coherence to the person's worldview and a critical factor for his/her psychological and spiritual well-being. If someone does not strive to find meaning in his life, then sooner or later he will lose his psychological well-being. Meaninglessness causes a situation called "existential vacuum."⁵

Meaningfulness in life helps a person to have a foundation set of principles that motivates and guide his choices and behaviours. Ultimately, the searching the answer for this riddle will take the truth seeker from fact (knowledge) through meaning (philosophy), to religion (value).⁶ The end result is that if people are conscious of the noble reasons for their lives, then they will gladly make the choices that lead them there. That, of course, will produce a better, more benign world on which all of mankind can live and thrive.

Victor Frankl said that man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only

⁵ George Kleftras and Evangelia Psarra, "Meaning in Life, Psychological Well-Being and Depressive Symptomatology: A Comparative Study" <http://dx.doi.org/10.4236/psych.2012.34048> (accessed on 2 December, 2014).

⁶ Bob Hurt, "The Meaning, Value, and Purpose of Life" <http://bobhurt.com/articles/philosophy%20-%20Meaning,%20Value,%20and%20Purpose%20of%20Life.pdf> (accessed on 2 December, 2014).

answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.”

Meaning of Life: Subjective or Objective

In addition to the perplexity of the Big Question, two conflicting viewpoints on meaning of life arise: subjective meaning of life and objective meaning of life. The former perspective holds that there is a specific meaning for our lives and they are common to all in its essence even though not in execution while the latter holds that there is no specific meaning for our lives as a common meaning even in essence since each person determines the meaning of his/her of life. There is logical space for an inter-subjective theory according to which there are invariant standards of meaning for human beings that are constituted by what they would all agree upon from a certain communal standpoint. However, this orthogonal approach is not much of a player in the field and so it is set aside in this discussion.

Subjectivists believe that there are no invariant standards of meaning because meaning is relative to the subject, i.e., depends on an individual's pro-attitudes such as desires, ends, and choices.

Roughly, something is meaningful for a person if she believes it to be or seeks it out. According to this view, meaning in life varies from person to person, depending on each one's variable mental states. Common instances are views that one's life is more meaningful, the more one gets what one happens to want strongly, the more one achieves one's highly ranked goals, or the more one does what one believes to be really important. It is maintained that the relevant mental state is caring or loving, so that life is meaningful just to the extent that one cares about or loves something. As far as evolution is concerned in the generation of an individual human life, only two factors intervene: chance and the survival of the fittest. This implies that an individual life

cannot be said to have any predetermined purpose and meaning, and if at all meaning is added to human life, that should be subjective.⁷

Subjectivism was dominant for much of the 20th century when pragmatism, positivism, existentialism, noncognitivism, and Humeanism were quite influential. However, in the last quarter of the 20th century, “reflective equilibrium” became a widely accepted argumentative procedure, whereby more controversial normative claims are justified by virtue of entailing and explaining less controversial normative claims that do not command universal acceptance. Such a method has been used to defend the existence of objective value, and, as a result, subjectivism about meaning has lost its dominance.⁸

Objectivists maintain, in contrast, that there are some invariant standards for meaning because meaning is (at least partly) mind-independent, i.e., is a real property that exists regardless of being the object of anyone's mental states. Here, something is meaningful (to some degree) in virtue of its intrinsic nature, independent of whether it is believed to be meaningful or sought. They believe that meaning is constituted (at least in part) by something independent of the mind about which we can have correct or incorrect beliefs.⁹ Obtaining some variable pro-attitude is not sufficient for meaning, on this view. Because one could take anything as a meaning for his/her life, and possibly it can be even not worth of having as meaningful. Hence, there should be a specific meaning for life which should be evidently common at least in essence which is independent of human mind, and if such a meaning is derived from Supreme Being it can

⁷ Carlo Cellucci, "Knowledge and the Meaning of Human Life," <http://www.naturalism.org/Knowledge%20and%20the%20meaning%20of%20life.pdf> (accessed on 6 December, 2014).

⁸ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "The Meaning of Life," <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/#toc> (accessed on 6 December, 2014).

⁹ Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "The Meaning of Life"

establish justice and lead to hope of better humanity. Even the consensus of community as the meaning of life can lead to wrong destiny. Consensus of any sort in any given community is objective meaning, since it is not independent of human mind.

Mostly, theists believe in objective meaning of life since they ascribe God as the author of the existence of life on the face of the earth. Meaning of any sort suggests an author or creator. Creator only knows the purpose of creation. Even though creation can be used for different purpose or held from fulfilling the original purpose, original objective meaning exists independent of creation. Therefore, for theists, God is the only source of knowing the meaning of human existence on earth since God Himself is the author of meaning of life.

Above two are the conflicting major viewpoints on the meaning of life if at all meaning of life is considered. Even if one comes to the point of considering a meaning for life, the above views lead to another absurdity. In simple categorization, atheists believe in subjective meaning or no meaning while theists believe in objective for life.

Naturalistic Meaning

Most of the writings on meaning of life these days are by naturalists in the sense that they believe that a significant existence is possible in a purely physical universe or a world as known by science. Naturalists view that meaning does not depend on objective value of any sort, instead favouring the notion that meaning comes from intrinsically worthwhile activities that one loves, is emotionally tied to or finds meaningful.¹⁰ Discussing the meaning of life, in naturalism, is a defining characteristic of being human and meaning should be pragmatic in nature. Naturalism

¹⁰ Thaddeus Metz, "New Developments in the Meaning of Life," www.centenary.edu/attachments/.../metznewdevelopments.pdf (accessed on 6 December, 2014).

also actually leaves us with that pesky problem of meaning. Since chance and survival of the fittest are the reason for the existence of the human race on earth in naturalistic ideology, any specific meaning for life is not possible. If that is the case, what would be the need for any subjective meaning even? Some naturalists even argue that our need for cognitive meaning is an unintentional side effect (an evolutionary spandrel) of our cognitive, problem-solving, time-projecting brains as the beginning to scientifically understand why our brains need meaning and how our brains produce meaning.¹¹

As defined by philosopher Paul Draper, naturalism is "the hypothesis that the natural world is a closed system" in the sense that "nothing that is not a part of the natural world affects it." More simply, it is the denial of the existence of supernatural causes. In rejecting the reality of supernatural events, forces, or entities, naturalism is the antithesis of supernaturalism.

Naturalistic meaning of life is determined by the following naturalistic principles:

- (1) There is no God and no deity; there are only us, the material world, and the ecosystem surrounding us. There is no soul and super nature, everything, including ourselves, are made of materials.
- (2) Things happen, not because of God's wish and design, but because of the underline natural principles and the randomness embedded in those principles.
- (3) There is an end to everything, from the Cosmo to our individual life. The values of things are not in their everlasting eternity. The values of things reside in their duration, in the process.
- (4) Our value systems and appreciation of things should shift from the infinity and eternity, which do not exist, to the transient moments which happen all around us.
- (5) There are three

¹¹ Todds Hammer, "Naturalism and the Meaning of Life," <https://toddsammer.wordpress.com/2007/05/11/naturalism-and-the-meaning-of-life/> (accessed on 6 December, 2014).

cornerstones for our humanist principles: science, which tells us how things work; evolution, which tells us where we came from, and why we are the way we are; happiness principle, which tells us how we should conduct our life. (6) The purpose of life is to pursue happiness during our life. A good life is a happy and exciting life. The ultimate measure of life's success is the happiness in our life. (7) Things do not have meanings, good or bad, we give them the meaning.¹²

Such principles are the premises for the concept of naturalistic meaning of life for they constitute the understanding of the reality for the naturalists. Hence, no room for Supernatural Source to give any objective meaning for the existence of humanity as a whole exists. The meaning of life in a naturalistic sense is to work towards the remediation and reconciling of social ills and conflicts, to help create a peaceful, cohesive and tranquil social environment and world-state. To help others realize and attain their highest potential possible. Nevertheless, anyone can consider any worthless thing as meaning for his/her life, and that cannot be questioned by anyone according to the naturalistic ideology which proposes relativistic meaning of life.

Supernaturalistic Meaning

As far as supernaturalism is concerned for the expectation of providing an ultimate meaning of life, the basic premise which the very existence of God has to be primarily established, or else life would have no meaning. For instance, Wittgenstein claims that “to believe in God means to see that life has a meaning” and “to understand the question about the meaning of life.

“Similarly, Dummett claims that only “religious faith gives a meaning to our life. “Among countless others, historic representatives of supernaturalism in the Near-Eastern ancient world

¹² Wangqiu, “The Secular Humanist Principle,” <http://purpose-of-life-1.blogspot.in/2008/12/secular-humanist-principle.html> (accessed on 6 December, 2014).

and in subsequent Western history are Qoheleth, Jesus, Paul, Augustine, Aquinas, Edwards, Pascal, and Tolstoy.¹³ Meaning in life requires the existence of some supernatural realm or supernatural beings. That is to say: meaning has only been thought possible if there is a supernatural realm in which we can achieve eternal salvation, or from which a divine being bestows meaning upon our mortal human lives. With their rejection of supernaturalism, and its associated religious doctrines, naturalists are forced to abandon this conception of meaning. The classic example coming from Christian theology which argues that meaning is a function of both God (a supernatural being) and everlasting life in heaven (a supernatural realm). Hence, God is the basis for anything that might be called meaningfulness in life.

Supernaturalism in general is the claim that life is meaningless if the only world that exists is the one known by physics. Meaning in life must come from a spiritual realm that one relates to in the appropriate way. Roughly, supernaturalism maintains that God's existence, along with "appropriately relating" to God, is both necessary and sufficient for securing a meaningful life, although different accounts can be given as to the nature of this relationship. A supernaturalist theory¹⁴ implies that the relevant purpose beyond one's pleasure as such to seek out is a relationship with a spiritual realm, or that such a relationship is the relevant way to transcend one's animal nature or to make one's life worthy of great pride or admiration. But this objection from naturalists assumes without justification that human life has a purpose and meaning only if it is part of God's design, specifically, only if it contributes to that design. Such assumption raises the question: In what sense has God's design an ultimate purpose and meaning? This ends up in the dilemma: Either God's design has an ultimate purpose and meaning as it is part of an

¹³ Cellucci, "Knowledge and the Meaning of Human Life"

¹⁴ In addition to God-based supernaturalist theories, there are soul-based theories, where meaning in life is thought to be a function, not so much of God, but rather of having an indestructible soul whereby immortality is possible.

even higher design, or it has an ultimate purpose and meaning in itself. Both horns of this dilemma present difficulties.¹⁵

Still the supernaturalist position can be plausibly viewed as possessing three distinct yet related dimensions: metaphysical, epistemological, and relational-axiological. Metaphysically, it is argued that God's existence is necessary in order to ground a meaningful life because, for example, conditions necessary for securing a meaningful existence like objective value are most plausibly anchored in an entity like God. In addition to the metaphysical dimension, supernaturalism often requires, at some level, orthodoxy (right belief) and orthopraxy (right practice), although much debate exists on the details. God's existence may be a necessary condition for securing a meaningful life, but it is generally thought that one must additionally relate to God in some relevant way in the epistemological and axiological dimensions.¹⁶

Conclusion

From the inception of philosophizing process of man, the question of life's meaning has been a significant quest. Since the meaning of our particular acts can be explained by reference to goals and conventions, there should be a meaning of our lives as whole too. If each and every act entails a meaning, then there should be a greater meaning for the life as whole, and what would be the greater meaning for human life? In spite of the vitality of the meaning and impossibility of meaninglessness, and the responsibility of being meaningful, the Riddle has become more complex. Atheists believe in subjective meaning or no meaning while theists believe in objective for life since theists ascribe God as author of the existence of life on the face of the earth. Meaning of life in the naturalistic and subjective point of view can be easily selfish or immoral

¹⁵ Thaddeus Metz, *Meaning in Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 79.

¹⁶ Cellucci, "Knowledge and the Meaning of Human Life"

since there is no set worth living style as meaningful. While naturalism suggests to no specific and ultimate purpose for human existence, presumably people will consider more satisfactory a meaning like that of supernaturalism, for which human life exists in virtue of the fact that it has been created by God and its ultimate purpose and meaning is to contribute to God's design. God, the Great Designer, has clear purpose, which noble in its nature, in creating human beings and placed on this earth. Therefore, God is the one who provides the meaning for human life as a whole.