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Meaning in Life: What Makes Our Lives Meaningful?

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Imagine becoming so fed up with your job and home life that you decide to give it all up. Now you spend your days lounging on a beach.

One day, your friend Alex finds you on the beach and questions your new lifestyle: “You’re wasting your life!” says Alex. You tell Alex that you were unhappy and explain that you are much happier now.

However, Alex responds: “There’s more to life than happiness. You aren’t doing anything *meaningful* with your life!”^[1]

But what *is* a meaningful life?

Here we will review some influential answers to this question.

1. Cosmic Pessimism vs. Everyday Meaning

Pessimists might say that life has no ultimate or cosmic meaning and thus that a beach bum’s life is no more or less meaningful—in the grand scheme of things—than the lives of Beethoven, Martin Luther King, Jr., or Marie Curie.^[2]

However, many philosophers argue that even if there is no ultimate meaning *of* life, there can be meaning *in* life. Our lives can be meaningful in ordinary ways, ways that don’t require that we play a special role in some kind of grand cosmic narrative. Call this *everyday meaning*.^[3] What might give our lives this kind of meaning?

2. Subjectivism

Subjectivists say that someone’s life is meaningful if it is deeply fulfilling, engaging, or satisfying.^[4] And different people find different things meaningful; a challenging career might be engaging and fulfilling

for others, but boring and unsatisfying to you: you may find life on a beach much more fulfilling.

Some subjectivists distinguish between the *judgment* that one is fulfilled and actually *being* fulfilled. Fulfillment feels good, but it seems possible to be mistaken about whether we are fulfilled. Perhaps, as you lounge on the beach, you confuse being merely *content* with fulfillment.^[5] If you tried other things like writing poetry, volunteering, or starting a business, they might end up being more fulfilling, and hence more meaningful for you.^[6]

Subjectivism, however, has counterintuitive implications. Suppose someone found it fulfilling to spend *all* their time gazing at the sand. This may seem too bizarre, aimless, or trivial to credit as meaningful. And what if someone found meaning in ethically monstrous activities, like torturing babies or puppies? Vicious projects like these don’t seem to add *positive* meaning to someone’s life.^[7]

Someone would have to be a rather atypical sort of human being to be truly fulfilled by sand-gazing or puppy-torturing. Could such strange lives count as meaningful? Subjectivists may say yes, but many would reject that answer and conclude that subjectivism is false.

3. Objective Meaning

Objective accounts hold that meaningful lives involve projects of positive value, such as improving our character, exercising our creativity, and making the world a better place by pursuing and promoting truth, justice, and beauty.^[8]

Being a beach bum doesn’t really make the world *worse*, but it doesn’t make much of a positive contribution either. Your friend Alex is concerned that you are squandering your potential and thereby failing to make something meaningful of your life.

However, your decision to become a beach bum *could* be a way of rebelling against the “rat race” of a workaholic and overly competitive society. Perhaps you are choosing to cultivate a life of mindfulness and aesthetic contemplation of natural beauty, in protest against superficial or soul-crushing social norms. Framed that way, your life seems to align with important, enduring, *objective* values.

Objective accounts of meaning, however, must explain why some activities are objectively more meaningful than others.

The difficulty is that what seems frivolous or pointless from one point of view may seem valuable and worthwhile from another. For some, climbing Mount Everest might count as an admirable exercise of physical and mental endurance, an inspiring achievement. Others may think it is stupid to climb big rocks, risking death and wasting resources that could be directed toward other more valuable causes.

But perhaps such people are just being narrow-minded. The meaningfulness of being a beach bum, a mountain-climber, or anything else might depend on our motives or options and not just on what the activity involves.^[9]

4. Hybrid Theory

The *hybrid theory of meaning in life* combines insights from subjectivism and objective accounts: a meaningful life provides fulfillment *and* does so through devotion to objectively valuable projects.^[10]

Hybrid theory differs from objective accounts because it insists that a meaningful life must also be fulfilling for the person living it. There are *many* such projects available to us, since there are many fulfilling ways, given our distinctive personalities and abilities, that we can engage with values like truth, justice, and beauty.

However, just as a subjectively fulfilling life might seem trivial or despicable, perhaps a meaningful life doesn't always feel fulfilling.^[11]

Consider George Bailey in the classic film *It's a Wonderful Life*.^[12] George thinks his life has been wasted and wishes that he'd never been born. Luckily, his guardian angel Clarence rescues George from a suicide attempt and helps George understand how meaningful *his* life choices have been. Hybrid theory implies that George's life now *becomes* meaningful because he is finally fulfilled by all his good works, but objective accounts suggest that George's life was meaningful *all along* even though he didn't realize it!^[13]

Recall the opening scenario: did you ditch a meaningful (but sometimes frustrating) life for the beach?

5. Conclusion

The psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl held that the search for meaning is the fundamental human drive.^[14] He claimed that a sense of meaning in life gives people the strength to

persevere and even thrive despite the adversity and injustice we must sometimes confront.^[15]

Questions about meaning in life often arise when we suspect that something is missing from our lives. Despite their differences, the theories surveyed above seem to agree that there are many things we might do—or try—that would be meaningful. Talking about it with your friend Alex may be a good place to start.^[16] Why? Because good relationships frequently rank as important sources of meaning; perhaps meaning is often made—or discovered—together.

Notes

[1] Emily Esfahani Smith (2017) uses this distinction between happiness and meaning in life in her survey of psychological research on meaning in life. See also her TED Talk, "There's More to Life Than Being Happy."

[2] See, e.g., Benatar (2017) and Weinberg (2021) for defenses of the pessimistic outlook. At least one theist agrees with the pessimists that if life has no *divine* meaning or purpose, then nothing we do or become has any lasting significance and that our lives are all equally absurd: see Craig (2013).

[3] Many philosophers who propose theories of meaning in life are either agnostic or skeptical of the idea that life as a whole has any divine meaning or purpose. See, e.g., Wolf (2010). Of course, if one does think life as a whole has divine meaning or purpose, then having meaning *in* one's life might well involve living in accord with the supernatural point of existence. Some of the accounts of meaning in life are consistent with religious ideas about the meaning of life; I leave it as an exercise to the reader to work out which views will or will not cohere with their own religious convictions.

[4] This idea is developed in the final chapter of Taylor (2000).

[5] John Stuart Mill issues a similar warning against conflating happiness and contentment in *Utilitarianism*, Chapter 2.

[6] This point is developed in more sophisticated subjectivist accounts of meaning in life. See, e.g. Calhoun (2015) and Parmer (2021).

[7] See Campbell and Nyholm (2015) or their contribution in Landau (2022) for discussion of "anti-meaning": activities, projects, and lives that have negative and destructive significance.

[8] See Metz (2013) for discussion of several different accounts of this sort; Metz defends his own version in the final chapter. On creativity, see Taylor (1987) and Matheson (2018).

[9] Examples like the beach bum are often under-described—including in this essay! It is worth taking such examples and considering variations of intentions, motives, circumstances, and so forth in order to consider how changes in these various elements may alter our assessment of the meaningfulness of the life or activity. Whole lives are usually, if not always, more complex than these brief examples. Philosophers who endorse *narrative theories of meaning in life* would suggest that the focus on particular activities and roles fails to consider that a meaningful *life* might also need to make holistic sense as a meaningful story. See Kauppinen (2012).

[10] The term “project” here includes not just completable activities like painting a picture but also open-ended activities such as maintaining strong relationships with friends and family. This approach is developed by Susan Wolf in *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, and in three essays collected in Wolf (2014): see the essays in Part II: “The Meanings of Lives,” “Happiness and Meaning: Two Aspects of the Good Life,” and “Happiness and Morality.” The text of *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters* is available at the Tanner Lectures website. See the print edition for excellent commentaries on Wolf’s position and a response by Wolf. A similar view is developed by Peter Singer in *How Are We to Live?* (1993), Chapter 10.

[11] Another potential problem is that while hybrid theory aims to take the attractive features of subjective fulfillment and objective accounts of meaning in life, it inherits the possible *problems* with both views, too. Furthermore, if subjective and objective accounts contradict each other, hybrid theory might be inconsistent.

[12] This point is developed, using the example of George Bailey, in Smuts (2013).

[13] For a similar study in a life that seems very meaningful from the outside (a successful career, prosperity, and a happy family), but is wracked by unhappiness, existential dread, and moral guilt within, see Leo Tolstoy’s *My Confession* (2005). Tolstoy’s crisis of meaning is often discussed in the literature on meaning in life, both for the gripping way in which he describes his fear of death and his

feeling that life is meaningless, and for his discussion of the solution to the problem to be found in religious faith.

[14] Frankl (2006).

[15] Of course, this does not *justify* the actions of those who have put others in despicable situations. For Frankl, the point is about motivation rather than justification. Revolting against oppressors, for example, may be a highly meaningful project for those who are oppressed. See also Camus (2018).

[16] On relationships and other sources of meaning in life, see Smith (2017). Further recommended reading: Landau (2017), Landau (2022), and Singer (2009). For discussion of how ordinary “folk” intuitions about meaning relate to various philosophical theories of meaning in life, see Fuhrer and Cova (2022).

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