

## Why Does My Life Matter?

A Socratic Dialogue

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It has been a fruitful few days. I have had the good fortune of dialoguing with many people in the wise city of Christchurch. Just this morning I found my friend Emma, sitting at her usual table in Greg's cafe. She was looking troubled, so I talked with her.

- *Socrates*

SOCRATES: Good morning, Emma. I see you are here again, in your second home, enjoying coffee.

EMMA: Hello Socrates. Yes, I am. Every day is much the same. I sell shoes, drink coffee, then sleep and start again. I wonder what all this is for. What's the point of life?

SOCRATES: A significant question, indeed. Have you managed to come up with an answer to this question?

EMMA: Well, to tell you the truth, I think it's all pointless. I was once a religious person and it all seemed fairly straight forward: we are here according to God's plan. But recently I have been questioning this. It seems to me that God probably doesn't exist, so what's the point of life? Is there any meaning? How can there be meaning if there is no God? How can my life matter if there is no God? I am starting to think that because there is no God, there is no meaning to life. And if there is no meaning to life, then my life doesn't really matter.

SOCRATES: You have said much, my wonderful friend. Shall we examine this essential question in our normal manner? Or are you content to ruminate privately over it?

EMMA: I'd be grateful for some help, Socrates.

SOCRATES: Let us begin then, as we always do, by establishing the premises and conclusion of your reasoning. Your first premise is: because there is no God, there is no meaning to life. You then suggest that if there is no meaning to life, your life doesn't matter, which leads to to deduce that your life doesn't matter.

For clarity, here is your argument:

<p>P1. (premise) Because there is no God, there is no meaning to life</p> <p>P2. (premise) If there is no meaning to life, then my life doesn't matter</p> <p>C. (conclusion) Therefore, my life doesn't matter</p>
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Is this an accurate summary of your deduction?

EMMA: Yes, Socrates. You have expressed it as succinctly as always.

SOCRATES: You seem to presuppose that meaning must exist for life to matter. Is there not another way to look at it?

EMMA: It seems to me that without meaning, nothing really matters. Am I wrong?

SOCRATES: I do not know yet. Remember, I have little knowledge and I am eager to learn from you just as you appear eager to learn from me. We must examine your logic together, from the beginning. You are making a fundamental assumption upon which your deduction depends, are you not?

EMMA: Yes, that life doesn't matter if there is no meaning.

SOCRATES: Take a step back, my friend. What is the assumption that has triggered your reasoning?

EMMA: That there is no God. That's what started me thinking about all this.

SOCRATES: When I sat down, you started by saying that God *probably* doesn't exist. Then you moved to the more certain position that God *doesn't* exist. Which is it?

EMMA: Uh, I will stick with *probably*. Paul has convinced me that God *probably* doesn't exist.

SOCRATES: So you are not certain?

EMMA: Not entirely. Paul told me about the discussion you and he had about God. I can't be certain that God doesn't exist.

SOCRATES: So it is possible that God is alive and well, providing meaning to life?

EMMA: It is possible, but I don't think it is true.

SOCRATES: Even if you don't think God exists, you have accepted the possibility of his existence. Should we not, therefore, reword your premises?

P1. (premise) Because there is possibly no God, there is possibly no meaning to life

P2. (premise) If there is no meaning to life, then my life doesn't matter

C. (conclusion) Therefore, possibly my life doesn't matter

Is this not a more reasonable argument?

EMMA: Okay Socrates. I know how much you like precision.

SOCRATES: Precision is needed to ensure we are examining the right argument. Now, let us suppose that God does not exist. What would follow from this? That there is no meaning to life?

EMMA: That is what I am saying.

SOCRATES: But you are alive. To whom does your life matter?

EMMA: My family.

SOCRATES: Indeed, and no doubt your life matters to your friends too. But looking more closely, to whom does *your* life primarily matter?

EMMA: My life matters to me.

SOCRATES: Is this not the reason why you are asking these questions? Because you know your life *does* matter? If your life didn't matter, would you bother asking questions like this?

EMMA: Okay, I accept that my life matters to me and to my friends and family.

SOCRATES: Allow me to suggest a new argument:

P1. (premise) If there is no meaning to life, then my life doesn't matter

P2. (premise) My life does matter

C. (conclusion) Therefore, there is meaning to life

We have now deduced that there is meaning to life. This has followed from your realization that your life matters. And you will notice that there is no mention of God

in this argument. Have we not succeeded in providing an antidote to your earlier argument?

EMMA: But I am unsatisfied. I still don't know *why* my life matters.

SOCRATES: That is a new question, and a worthy one indeed. Tell me, do you ever act admirably and perform good actions?

EMMA: I try my best to do so.

SOCRATES: Have you then not answered your own question? Why does your life matter? It matters to your friends because you are admirable and perform good actions.

EMMA: Perhaps you are right.

SOCRATES: Now, is a world with the possibility of good better than a world without the possibility of good?

EMMA: Of course.

SOCRATES: And does the value of a world increase with the occurrence of more good?

EMMA: Sure. The more good the better.

SOCRATES: Then, all other things remaining the same, does it not follow that a world in which you exist and perform good is better than a world in which you do not exist?

EMMA: I suppose so.

SOCRATES: Is that not why your life matters?

EMMA: I think I need to spend some time considering what we have talked about. What you have said makes sense, but I still feel unsatisfied with our conclusion.

SOCRATES: Then you must go and meditate on our dialogue. We shall surely meet again to revisit the question of meaning in life.