

# The Relativity of Life's Meaning: A Multifaceted Approach

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## *Abstract*

This paper explores the concept that the meaning of life is not a singular, fixed truth but a relative construct shaped by a combination of personal interpretation, external influences, and temporal evolution. While existentialist and nihilist perspectives often frame meaning as either self-created or non-existent, this paper argues that meaning is a product of both individual agency and external forces—including culture, history, religion, social interactions, and time.

By integrating these perspectives, this paper challenges both absolute and nihilistic views, arguing that meaning is neither purely self-created nor externally dictated. Instead, it is a fluid and evolving construct shaped by individual perception and societal influences.

## 1. Introduction

The question of life's meaning has been central to human thought for millennia. Various philosophical traditions have proposed competing answers: religious and teleological perspectives assert an absolute purpose, existentialists claim meaning is self-created, and nihilists reject meaning entirely. However, these perspectives, while insightful, tend to overlook the complexity of how meaning is actually experienced.

This paper posits that meaning is neither purely subjective nor wholly absent but shaped by personal perception, external influences, and temporal change. Unlike absolute theories, which seek a singular answer, or nihilistic views, which deny meaning altogether, this approach embraces a dynamic understanding of meaning, acknowledging its evolving nature across time and circumstance.

## 2. The Relativity of Meaning

To understand the relativity of meaning, we must first recognize that it does not emerge in isolation. While individuals may seek purpose independently, their understanding of meaning is always influenced by external forces. These include:

- **Cultural and Historical Contexts** – Different societies and historical periods shape how individuals perceive meaning. For instance, ancient Stoic philosophy emphasized virtue as life's purpose, while modern existentialist thought (e.g., Sartre and Camus) suggests that meaning must be self-determined.
- Nietzsche's concept of the "death of God" illustrates that even the rejection of religious belief compels individuals to redefine meaning within a secular framework.
- **Personal Experience and Development** – Meaning evolves throughout life, shifting as individuals accumulate experiences, encounter challenges, and grow. Viktor Frankl, in *Man's Search for Meaning*, emphasizes that even suffering can lead to a profound redefinition of purpose.

These factors illustrate that meaning is not a universal constant but a relative phenomenon, changing based on time, place, and circumstance.

### 3. Free Will vs. Determinism: Who Shapes Meaning?

One of the key tensions in this discussion is whether meaning is truly self-created (free will) or shaped by forces beyond our control (determinism).

- **The Free Will Perspective** – Existentialists like Sartre argue that meaning is entirely self-determined. In *Existentialism is a Humanism*, Sartre claims that humans are "condemned to be free," responsible for constructing their own meaning without external guidance.
- **The Deterministic Perspective** – Determinists argue that meaning is heavily influenced—if not outright dictated—by biological, psychological, and societal factors. Neuroscience, for example, suggests that brain chemistry and social conditioning shape decision-making, limiting the extent to which we freely create meaning.

The reality likely lies between these extremes. While individuals possess agency in shaping meaning, their capacity to do so is inevitably influenced by environment, upbringing, and external conditions. This interplay suggests that meaning is neither fully autonomous nor entirely predetermined, but a negotiation between personal choice and external limitations.

### 4. The Role of Interpersonal Influence

While external factors like culture and history shape meaning on a broad scale, personal relationships also play a crucial role in shaping one's sense of purpose.

- **Relationships and Social Bonds** – Many find meaning in love, family, and friendships. Aristotle, in *Nicomachean Ethics*, argues that deep friendships contribute to human

flourishing, reinforcing the idea that meaning is often co-created rather than purely individual.

- **Opposition and Conflict** – Adversarial relationships and ideological challenges also shape meaning. Nietzsche's concept of the "will to power" suggests that struggle and opposition are essential for personal growth and meaning formation.

This interpersonal aspect reinforces the idea that meaning is not found in isolation—it is heavily shaped by human interaction. However, meaning is not only experienced on a grand existential level; it also manifests in the everyday, through the significance we attach to our actions and roles in daily life. This distinction leads us to the next crucial aspect of meaning: the interplay between existential and practical dimensions.

## 5. Existential vs. Practical Meaning

Philosophical discussions often focus on existential meaning (the grand purpose of life), but most people experience meaning on two levels:

- **Existential Meaning** – The broad, philosophical purpose of existence, which varies from person to person. Some may find it in religious faith, others in scientific pursuit, art, or personal fulfilment.
- Work, hobbies, and personal achievements serve as tangible sources of meaning.

This duality suggests that meaning is not just a lofty philosophical construct but also an integral part of everyday human experience. A scientist may seek universal truths while also deriving meaning from their research and mentorship of students.

## 6. The Role of Negative Experiences

Philosophical discussions of meaning often emphasize positive growth—self-discovery, progress, and fulfilment. However, negative experiences are just as influential in shaping meaning.

- **Disappointment and Failure** – Meaning is often redefined in response to setbacks. Frankl's logotherapy argues that suffering can serve as a catalyst for discovering a deeper sense of purpose.
- **Suffering and Hardship** – Nietzsche's idea of *amor fati* (love of fate) suggests that embracing suffering, rather than avoiding it, is key to personal growth. Loss, struggle, and pain force individuals to reassess their priorities, often leading to a transformed sense of meaning.

Thus, meaning is not merely shaped by idealized growth but also by the harsh realities of existence. It is not static, nor is it always uplifting—it is an evolving construct shaped by both triumphs and failures.

## 7. Conclusion

The meaning of life is not an absolute truth, nor is it something entirely self-created. Instead, it is a dynamic, evolving phenomenon—one that is relative to individual perception, cultural and historical context, interpersonal influence, and temporal change. Meaning is shaped both by free will and deterministic forces, making it neither wholly independent nor entirely imposed.

Furthermore, meaning operates on multiple levels—it is both a grand philosophical question and an immediate, practical experience. While positive experiences contribute to meaning, so too do negative experiences, as hardship often serves as a catalyst for reassessment and growth.

If meaning is neither fixed nor self-created in isolation, then perhaps the question is not "What is the meaning of life?" but rather, "How will I shape the meaning of my own?" Just as Heraclitus observed, "No man ever steps in the same river twice," meaning, too, is ever-changing—flowing with time, shaped by experience, and never the same from one moment to the next. In the end, the meaning of life is not something we simply discover—it is something we are continually shaping, whether we realize it or not.

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Ultimately, meaning is not something to be found once and for all, but something that must be continuously shaped, adapted, and redefined as life unfolds.

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