**The Evolutionary Cause of Meaning**

**Introduction**

There is one question that eludes our grasp throughout the centuries like a deer being chased through the woods. What is the meaning of life? This question has been debated with religious vigor; yet no one in mankind has successfully conquered it. Some of the most prominent theories today still have errors that do not encompass all situations of the complexities that humans present. This is why the examination of meaning needs to be conducted further, and perhaps a more novel approach to be put forward into consideration. Most modern models of meaning are purely philosophical, yet a biological basis may be the correct solution. That is, the origin of meaning behind one’s actions stems from a biological factor that drove us to possess meaning. This is to ask and answer why there is meaning and not simply what qualifies to be where we originate purpose.

Some interpretations such as the humanistic approach to meaning, one of self-actualization, have longstanding issues with this biological prepositional interpretation. The issues arise when considering how even in the absence of some of these sources of meaning that are laid out in the humanistic interpretations, there is still meaning of the individual that are prevalent. As one can see, this would cause a great conundrum as one sees that there is meaning when none should be present (or at least very little). Some of these issues can be shown through the lens of what people would call atrocities where others degrade others, and it is done in the name of some individual purpose which goes against these humanistic models of meaning. This can be evident when examining an actual humanistic model and dissecting it.

**Current Theories/Thinking**

There are many variations of thoughts among thinkers over human existence including more naturalistic to religious inspired views. Yet, Adams proposes one perspective that is humanistic in his essay The meaning of life. While bringing forth an interesting take on the origins of human meaning, his magnum opus has fallen through the sifter of reasoning in several areas. In short, his thoughts on the derivation of the overarching purpose of the individual come from how well we fit our self-identity, contributions to others/historic movements, being in an order of goodness, and how we interpret what a worthy life entails. While making these conclusions though, he makes a fatal mistake by concluding that science is working against the derivation of meaning while in actuality, it adds meaning to many.

           In the beginning, we found meaning in mythology and it was fulfilling, until it was not enough, and this is where science took over (Adams). This is the first view that is shared with us to be a supporting premise for some of his later arguments, yet there are flaws with this line of thinking. In saying that the ancients moved away from meaning in religions and towards one of science is downplaying the role of many recent generations of thinkers. There are many groups of individuals who are religious and still derive meaning through that source while still contributing to science. Think of Galileo who was a devout Catholic while publishing very controversial writings at the time on the order of planets. As one can see, this would be a clear flaw in logic if he were to allow for mythology to be inclusive to modern-day religions. As shown, he believes that mythology was our first model of the world where we included the complexities of meaning and normative structures in describing the world with spirits who had their own free will. Then, we dispatched the idea of mythology which left us with only a one-dimensional understanding of the world, which was of factual meaning (i.e., science). This, he concludes, deteriorates meaning by only having part of the picture rather than a whole. One might ask, “Was the use of spirits not our first attempt to describe the phenomenon that was happening around the world? Is that not the same thing as the goal of science, to understand what is happening around us?”. This is a clear gap of logic that cannot be found in the foundational premise of an argument, as one can very easily reason that our use of mythology was just people trying to find reasoning and meaning in the events of our environment which is the same goal of modern science.

           His next point claims that if we were to define the purpose of the general actions of our lives as being of relationships with others, he then claims if it were to be that though we would then have a humanistic society, but instead we have a society that is focused on wealth and power (Adams 72). So, he concludes that it cannot be derived from this as we see it is not a humanistic society. If you recall from earlier, the conclusion will come to be that we partly derive purpose from our relationships with others. This is him begging the question as he is assuming what he himself says to be wrong, is in fact correct.

           Another topic of discussion that is a major principle of Adams is that modern science is the destruction of all inherent meaning and normative structures. This issue needs to be scoped through another lens. Instead of having the presumption that we changed our focus from normative structures to only factual models of the meaning of life, we see upon another look that we have always sought what he has called factual meaning as concluded prior when discussing about mythology, but we can still derive inherent meaning from this view. When Socrates gave his *Apologia* to the Athenian crowd, he proclaimed that his life was solely driven by the pursuit of knowledge and confirming the wisdom that was given by the oracle of Delphi. His works were the essence of what seeking true knowledge and weeding out illogical ideas of others is, it was to him that facts/philosophy were the foundations of his purpose. That purpose would also be self-constituted, thus meaning it to be inherent meaning unlike what Adams states.

In his next point on science, he brings back the argument against modern science by stating.

But the scientific world is not our home. There is no place in it for us. And we “mutilate” ourselves and deny our humanity when we conceptually repackage ourselves so that we will fit into the world. (Adams 74)

This is a dangerous line of thinking as it undermines the human drive of curiosity about the world around us. This scientific understanding is the basis of all knowledge as it is our term that we brand the process of discovering knowledge and rather than us mutilating ourselves to fit into this understanding, it is our way of discovering what lies more deeply in ourselves and our place which only enhances our meaning with understanding.

           Adams then expands on how science has harmful meaning and robbed us of our potential by claiming “that the more we understand the universe the less point there seems to be to any thing” (Adams 76). This then harms us further, he argues, by our need to have meaning in our lives and religion is one thing that sets out to do this. The last part is very accurate as many devote their lives to their faith as that is where that individual derives their meaning from, but once again, science is incorrectly identified as to be a harmer of meaning. If we look at the noble Socrates, we will see his own meaning was birthed from acquiring knowledge and if Adams were to be correct, we would expect that as Socrates aged and the more scientific background he gained, which is understanding of the world around oneself, the less of meaning he would have in life. But this is not what we see as Socrates at his trial went willingly to death as he argued that his life had more meaning than others due to the examination of knowledge and he would not back down if acquitted in the humiliation of others for the quest of knowledge. Does that seem like a response of someone that had diminishing meaning in one’s life? No. It is the utterance of someone who has a purpose and the drive to stand up for that purpose/goal.

           As one can tell at this point, Adams is averse to modern science with many similar arguments raised against it, but he also makes another claim that life is a conceptually defined structure with inherent meaning. We then, through our experiences and self-planned life milestones, create a normative structure. This would then mean that we have inherent meaning and derive it also through the creation of normative structures via the accomplishment of goals, which will lead to the manifestation of meaningfulness. This I do not have disagreements with as we do create meaning through the completion of goals as that is clearly the source of meaning to many who strive for degrees or positions in societal hierarchies.

           Society plays a vital role in how we live and determine life outcomes. Many times, we base our actions on the effects it has on others showing that we can derive purpose partially from this factor. This is a similar take that Adams proposes except that it is a necessity rather than part of sources of purpose. The error in this thinking is that it is not all-inclusive, where most people this would apply to, there are yet others that live the lives of hermits in the mountains completely secluded. It is similar to a pack of wolves. They are also social animals like us, but for numerous reasons, some are kicked out of the pack and live a life hunting alone. They still have a purpose like the other wolves, to survive. It would be hard to argue that all the hermit-living peoples do not have a purpose, but rather than saying that we cannot create meaning from that, I am proposing that this is a part of a grander reason rather than a necessity for meaning to be present as Adams is proposing.

           This then leads into the next objective of his argument, which is that participation in historic movements, community, and relationships are also places where the individual derives their meaning, yet there is also general meaning which includes eternity of something of the person for it to exist and be inherent. This is elaborated further by explaining that the eternity he is talking about is the kind of one where we leave a legacy upon others and have a rippling effect upon them. In a way, this is true when we seek to leave something to be remembered by others or we seek monetary value in things as it is another means to have something that outlasts you. This way of thinking would then place the individual meaning to create some form of eternity which is not an illogical way of thinking and more novel which I would agree to as some do have the goal of money or power.

           One of the last areas he discloses where the individual derives purpose is being in an order of goodness. He states,

 Some people may within a short time become a great human being and make a tremendous impact on the course of human history for a better world. And of course, one can in an equally short time become a powerful evil force and greatly impoverish or degrade the human order. (Adams 80)

This statement specifies that he does mean that being in an order of goodness would entail that one is creating positive effects upon the world, and it also implies that if one is not, then they would know for it to be wrong/harming their and others purpose in life. This works simply fine for most people if one looks at a select few at a select time. It falls apart when one looks at people that are notorious such as Adolf Hitler. This is due to the fact that if we look at what was happening at the fall of the Third Reich, we see more and more resources were being dumped into the effort for the extermination of the Jews and other groups rather than moving those resources towards the war effort. If we were to expect Hitler to lose meaning because he at least subconsciously knows what he is doing to be not in an order of goodness, he would at least focus on winning the war and not furthering his ideological purpose until after the war was concluded. This is even more notable when we look at his manifesto, Mein Kampf “I believe that I am acting in accordance with the Almighty Creator: by defending myself against the Jew” (Hitler 65), this sentence further shows that he derived meaning from this ideology rather than how Adams supposes that he would degrade his order of goodness. It is a declaration that this is what he believed and where his actions will revolve around. What is the purpose of an individual? It can be seen through the overarching actions one makes throughout their life and so this clearly depicts where he found his meaning. This antisemitism is not what the average individual would say is in the order of goodness, and I am sure Adams would agree with that statement, therefore being in an order of goodness is not a requirement for purpose.

           This is where we finally arrive at the conclusion that purpose originates from fitting into our self-identity, value to others in the community, how we interpret what a worthy life entails, and being in an order of goodness, but science has degraded these meanings. We can firmly conclude that science is a tool to enhance meaning as it is how we seek knowledge, prosocial behavior and fitting in are components of a larger whole of what meaning is, and being good is not a necessary component of that.

**A New Interpretation**

When looking at where we know that one can derive meaning, we see a pattern that may be explained simply by biology. When examining where we already know individuals derive meaning from, we begin seeing a pattern. Some areas we commonly derive meaning include religion, relationships, service to others, jobs, innovation, searching for knowledge, etc. All of these are pro-social behavior, which means that there is a benefit to others. This is important as when looking at other areas of science such as psychology and upon seeing pro-social behavior, we conclude that biology may be at play. This is due to when seeing strategies such as tend-and-befriend, the individual typically has a greater chance of survival when in need as there is the built social structures that can take care of their needs. Then under this interpretation of biology, it would be beneficial to possess pro-social behavior in order to increase survival rates. Consider this study done by a group of researchers on chimpanzees with personality traits and survival rates,

We found that higher agreeableness was related to longevity in males, with weaker evidence suggesting that higher openness is related to longer life in females. Our results link the literature on human and nonhuman primate survival and suggest that, for males, evolution has favored the protective effects of low aggression and high quality social bonds. (Altschul, et al. 2018)

This clearly demonstrates how prosocial behavior may be inbred in different situations to lead to longer lasting life. Why might we want to be more social and less dominating? Well, it is commonly accepted that organisms will do what is needed in order to reproduce or to live a longer life, this is what is called our survival instinct, which further allows for the window of reproduction. While dominance may provide more frequent chances for reproduction, it is not as consistent of a way to have opportunities for the organism to reproduce as compared to prosocial behavior as shown in this study. The importance of this study is how it shows that prosocial behavior is beneficial in other species as well as humans. Meaning then could be just an example of evolution aiding species to be more prosocial thus leading to longer survival rates. This study is just one example that demonstrates how biological influences may be a candidate for humans finding meaning throughout their lives, but I must admit would require further study to fully show this.

We can also look at this through the scope of a distinctive style of thought, a causal argument. The concomitant variation is defined by Good Reasons to be observing a pattern in a possible cause and possible effect (Faigley 122). As previously mentioned, there does appear to be a pattern in meaning leading to prosocial behavior. That is, there appears to be prosocial behavior in all associated actions with meaning such as relationship to others, jobs, generosity, etc.; this also connects to the pattern we see in other primates that pro-social behavior prolongs the life which would allow for greater reproduction chances and thus biology/evolution is happy.

It is important to note that this line of thinking does not necessarily mean the disregard of other models, but at the very least a reworking of the prepositions to them. Think of purpose theory which states that meaning comes from fulfilling the individual’s purpose that God puts onto them. Or in psychology, this variant of purpose theory states that it is derived from creative values. A biological understanding does not exclude the possibilities of either of these variations, or other models as well, but rather would change the first premise of each to go something like this. An omnipotent being requires meaning to be fulfillment of their role, so this being creates an organized structure to will this which uses the medium of biology. As you can already see, this modification can make other models coincide with this model seamlessly and better understand why meaning exists.

War is another issue for creating models of meaning as there are all these complexities of the human mind where cognitive dissonance is a common occurrence. This is where models struggle at fully functioning and should be considered when discussing purpose. The argument that I propose for the biological argument, is that there are ingroups and outgroups of people in our lives. Those in our ingroup tend to possess similar qualities to us and are vital to our daily lives. These people we view as individuals with uniqueness while those in our outgroup we view do not. Those in our outgroup are those we shy away from and view as outcasts. They tend to be thought of as all being similar rather than being true individuals as they are. This allows us to dehumanize them and demote them from being a full fledge person to one of a category/stereotype. This is one of the fundamental steps that happens upon the initialization of war. Then when we see some of the atrocities that happen around the world and there appears to be a conflict between a model of meaning and one’s actions, we can explain this away by using the ingroup/outgroup dynamic where we display these prosocial behaviors, sometimes exclusively, to those in our ingroup.

**The Diary of a Civil War Plantation**

One such real world example of the displaying of ingroup/outgroup was the civil war, in which one of the primary reasons that the South fought the North was due to slavery as we all know. We can look at two different perspectives, one of Adams’ and one of a biological point of view, to see which one is seemingly more applicable to a real-life example.

First, let us consider it through the lens that Adams proposes. We would expect to see the South, who fought to keep slavery, to become nihilistic very quickly! Consider you were a small plantation owner who did own slaves. From Adams’ point of view, you would not derive meaning from being in an order of goodness as you would subconsciously believe that your actions to be wrong as you are taking freedom among other things from others. You are also most certainly not deriving purpose from contributing from others as you are taking away the freedom of others. That leaves you with deriving purpose from fulfilling one’s self-identity. This is only one source that he lists and thus meaning that there is less meaning that the individual would possess and becoming more nihilistic in nature.

Let us now consider a different point of view. You, as a Southern plantation owner, would still derive purpose in your life by how you act with our own ingroup. One of the first things we do as a human being when meeting someone new is categorize them into whether they are in our ingroup and our outgroup. Those in our ingroup are similar and thus as the Southerner, we would consider only others that are most likely to be white to be in our ingroup. Thus, if we consider deriving meaning from prosocial behavior to be only applicable to those in our ingroup, we no longer have that issue of nihilism as Adams’ humanistic approach faces. We can also look at how you as a plantation owner would believe this hierarchy to be correct and thus have no problem with slavery. So now let us go look at an actual story and see which view plays out.

Keziah Goodwyn Hopkins Brevard was the widow of a plantation owner who kept an active diary from the start of the war to its end. She starts by writing on November 9th, 1860,

Oh My God !!! This morning heard that Lincoln was elected- I had prayed that God would thwart his election in some way & I prayed for my Country- Lord we know not what is to be the result of this-but I do pray if there is to be a crisis-that we all lay down our lives sooner than free our slaves in our midst-no soul on this earth is more willing for justice than I am, but the idea of being mixed up with free blacks is horrid !! I must trust in God that he will not forget us as unworthy as we are- Lord save us- I would give my life to save my Country (49).

It is important to keep in mind that this is a diary which shows what she authentically believes and is less affected by social pressure from others. We see throughout this excerpt that she was religious and did derive meaning through this medium. Then we see her strong belief on African Americans, and she affirms multiple times that she would even *die* for this belief. This is defined in Good Reasons to be a proposal style of argument which means there is a proposed action to an event (Faigley 177). This is what we see here when she says several times to die for this belief and “save my country”. When looking at people who we attribute to having strong purpose, we look at what they say and what they do to externally see this. If one were to have no purpose, we would expect that they would have little motivation for actions and give up in the face of adversity to their beliefs or person. This is clearly not what we see as she iterates her willingness to die for her belief. Thus, we can conclude that there is meaning in this belief as well. Then later the afternoon she wrote,

I have left a serious & what has been an all absorbing theme to a common one-but the die is cast-"Caesar has past the Rubicon." We now have to act, God be with us is my prayer & let us all be willing to die rather than free our slaves in their present uncivilized state. This is a cloudy, drizzly day-well Abolitionists you desire our blood-you are not better than we are & God can say to you "this far- & no father"- Mary Brooks wrote me a note this morning, from it I learnt the sad news that Lincoln was elected- This day corresponds with the note (50).

Here, she continues her story where it includes other’s views which happen to be similar as they are in the same in-group. Then, compared the weather to the day of election, which the day was a rainy and cloudy. This analogy shows her emotions towards Lincon and the coming change on slavery which upends her hierarchical view. Emotions are also a very key component in looking for purpose in a person. Think back to when you were doing something that is connected to a meaning in your life, you will see that you were emotional at times of partaking in that meaning and most likely you will get some emotions from just thinking of it! That is not to say that emotions equate to meaning, but there is a connection where we get emotional from them. Now let us go back to the diary, we see that there are tons of explicit and implicit emotions shown. First with the explicit, she uses words such as sad and horrid prior which is an obvious place of emotion. There is implicit expression of emotions as well when she is comparing the weather, which was gloomy and rainy, to the day of election where Lincon was officially elected president. As stated prior, his presidency threatened her meaning of social status/hierarchy which created the expression of emotions.

We can now see that the viewpoint of Adams does not accurately fulfill what is seen as a biological viewpoint does. War is an area where meaning can break down as it is a clash of people and their ideological meaning. This furthers why war is necessary to be included in the consideration models of meaning.

**Conclusion**

Purpose has been questioned throughout human existence with many interpretations to show. But one key factor has been left out of consideration in these interpretations. Biology. This could allow for greater understanding of the body and life in general. While this interpretation of life can be standalone, it can also be taken as a modification of the work that has been done by others previously as well. Biology gives a unique understanding of why meaning occurs which is absent in today’s thoughts which only possess the goal of asking what qualifies as meaning. This is further reason for innovative ideas to be sprouted out for the furtherment of human nature and life as we know it.

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