

THE MEANING OF LIFE

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According to some, questions about the meaning of life are inextricably bound up with questions about God and religion. Without God, it is suggested, humanity amounts to little more than a dirty smudge on a ball of rock lost in an incomprehensively vast universe that will eventually bare no trace of us having ever existed, and which will itself collapse into nothingness. So why bother getting out of bed in the morning? If there is a God, on the other hand, then we inhabit a universe made *for us*, by a God who *loves us*, and who has given us a *divine purpose*. That fills our lives meaning.

But is God, or religious belief, really a necessary condition of our leading meaningful lives? How, exactly, is the existence of God supposed to make our lives meaningful? And if meaningful lives are possible whether or not there is a God, what makes for a meaningful existence? This chapter examines these and related questions.

What do we mean by a 'meaningful life'?

One of the difficulties we face in giving an account of how humanism, or any other view for that matter, can allow for the possibility of a meaningful life is in identifying what constitutes a meaningful life in the first place. I imagine there is a broad consensus that certain answers won't do.

First of all, surely there is more to leading a meaningful life than, say, feeling largely happy and content. Someone continuously injected with happiness-inducing drugs might have a pleasurable time, but that wouldn't guarantee a particularly worthwhile or meaningful existence.

Secondly, there are presumably more ways of leading a meaningful life than just doing morally good works. While leading an exceptionally virtuous existence is *one* way in which one might, perhaps, have a meaningful existence, it is not the only way. Many great artists, scientists, explorers, musicians, writers and sportsmen and women have, surely, lived meaningful lives, despite not being noticeably more moral than the rest of us (indeed, some have been rather immoral).

It seems that not only is a lifetime spent performing good deeds not necessary for a meaningful existence, neither is it sufficient. Consider a man living under a totalitarian regime who devotes his entire life helping sick children but only because he fears the terrible consequences of not obeying his orders. Has he led a meaningful life? Despite his good deeds, it is by no means obvious that he has. What this example illustrates, perhaps, is that, in order for your life to be genuinely meaningful, you must exhibit a kind of *autonomy*. You must be self-directed, rather than just following the instructions of another.

I suspect many of us would add that someone might *think* their life had been a pointless waste of time when it was in fact highly meaningful. Conversely, I suspect most of us would allow that someone might *think* their life highly meaningful when in truth it was not.

For example, has a woman who has successfully devoted her life to leading a white supremacist movement thereby led a particularly meaningful existence? She and her followers might think so. But does that guarantee that she has? It seems to me the answer is 'no'. To lead a meaningful life, you need not be particularly moral. But surely, if your life's central project is downright *immoral*, then it cannot give your life meaning. Because of the immoral nature of this racist woman's project, it cannot make her life meaningful (though her life could still be meaningful for other reasons, of course). That, at least, is how my intuitions run (though I acknowledge others will disagree).

Also notice that a meaningful life might presumably end in the failure of its central project. Consider Scott of the Antarctic, who struggled valiantly to be the first to reach the South Pole. Despite his failure, Scott's life is held up by many as a shining example of a life well-lived. The same is true of many other heroic failures, including for example, those Germans who tried, but failed, to assassinate Hitler in order to bring a quick end to the Second World War.

We have seen that there are, perhaps, certain features a life must possess if it is to be meaningful – a not immoral project or goal pursued in a self-directed way, for example. But is even that sufficient? It seems not, as a lifetime spent pursuing a worthwhile goal by an enthusiastic incompetent is often rather more farcical than it is meaningful.

Is the search for *the* meaning of life a wild goose chase?

The above section is intended to illustrate the point that it is rather difficult to provide a watertight philosophical definition of what makes a life meaningful.

Part of the difficulty we face, here, perhaps, is that we assume that in order to explain what makes for a meaningful life we must identify some one feature that all and only meaningful lives possess: that feature that *makes* them meaningful. But why must there be one such feature? Perhaps the search for *the* meaning of life – this single, elusive, meaning-giving feature – is a wild goose chase. Perhaps the concept of a meaningful life is what the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein calls a *family resemblance concept*. The members of a family may resemble each other, despite there being no one feature they all have in common (e.g. that big nose or those small ears). Wittgenstein supposes the same is true of, for example, those things we call 'games'. Activities such as backgammon, solitaire, football, chess and badminton resemble each other to various degrees. But is there one thing all

and only games have in common, in virtue of which they are all games? Wittgenstein thinks not:

Don't say: 'There must be something common, or they would not be called "games" – For if you look at them you will not see something that is common to all, but similarities, relationships, and a whole series of them at that. To repeat: don't think, but look! – Look for example at board-games, with their multifarious relationships. Now pass to card-games; here you find many correspondences with the first group, but many common features drop out, and others appear. When we pass next to ball-games, much that is common is retained, but much is lost. – Are they all 'amusing'? Compare chess with noughts and crosses. Or is there always winning and losing, or competition between players? Think of patience. In ball-games there is winning and losing; but when a child throws his ball at the wall and catches it again, this feature has disappeared . . . [T]he result of this examination is: we see a complicated network of similarities overlapping and cross-crossing: sometimes overall similarities, sometimes similarities of detail. I can think of no better expression to characterize these similarities than 'family resemblances'; for the various resemblances between members of a family: build, features, colour of eyes, gait, temperament, etc. etc. overlap and criss-cross in the same way. – And I shall say: 'games' form a family.

If Wittgenstein is correct, the search for the one feature all and only games possess is a wild goose chase. It does not exist. But of course that does not entail that either there is, after all, no such thing as a game, or that what makes something a game must be some further mysterious characteristic we have yet to identify.

Perhaps we make the same kind of mistake if we assume that, if meaningful lives are possible, then there must be

some one feature that all and only the meaningful lives share. Our inability to identify this feature amongst warp and weft of the Earthly features of our lives may then lead us mistakenly to conclude that either our lives lack meaning, or else the elusive meaning-giving feature must be other-worldly.

When we look at lives that are meaningful, and compare them with those that are not, we may find, not a single feature possessed by all of the former and none of the latter, but a great many factors that have an impact on meaningfulness, including some to which we have already alluded: a project freely-chosen, a project that is not deeply immoral, a project pursued with some dedication and skill, engagement in activities that help or enrich the lives of others, and so on. The impression that none of these worldly features are sufficient – that some further, magical, other-worldly ingredient is required if our lives are *really* to have meaning – may in part be a result of our failing properly to register that the concept of a meaningful life, like that of a game, is a family resemblance concept. Talk about ‘*the*’ meaning of life may be symptomatic of this confusion.

Is God required for a meaningful life?

While we might struggle to provide a watertight philosophical definition of what makes for a meaningful life, most of us tend to agree about which lives are meaningful and which are not. There’s a broad consensus that, say, Marie Curie, Socrates, and Scott of the Antarctic led highly significant and meaningful lives, whereas a mindless follower-of-orders, or someone who has devoted their life entirely to torturing small animals, has not.

However, some Theists argue that, if there is no God, then *no* life is meaningful – not even the life of a Curie, Socrates or Scott. Let’s look at three such arguments.

1. A moral argument: One simple line of argument that may tempt some is: a meaningful life is a morally virtuous

life; but morality depends on God; thus there cannot be meaningful lives without God.

We have already looked at two reasons why this initial line of argument won't do.

First, the lives of many great artists, musicians, explorers and scientists have surely been highly meaningful, despite the fact that the individuals in question were not particularly moral. While moral lives can be meaningful, meaningful lives need not, it seems, be especially moral (though, as we have seen, it's arguable that their central projects must not be downright immoral). In which case, even if there were no such thing as morality, a meaningful life might still be possible.

Secondly, the above argument in any case just *assumes* that morality depends on God, a claim we have already seen is dubious.

2. The ultimate purpose argument: A second argument for the conclusion that meaningful lives require God focuses on *ultimate ends or purposes*. Surely, the argument runs, a life has meaning by virtue of its having some sort of final aim or goal. We must be here for some purpose. But only God can supply such a purpose.

Some religious people, for example, maintain that our ultimate purpose is to love and worship God. They suppose that without God there can be no such purpose, and with such a purpose, life is meaningless.

But is God required for us to have a purpose? It seems not. Each living organism has a purpose, to reproduce and pass on its genetic material to the next generation. We each exist for a purpose, a purpose supplied by nature, whether or not there is a God.

What this example also brings out, of course, is that merely having a purpose is not, by itself, *sufficient* to render a life meaningful. Discovering that nature has designed me for no other purpose than to pass on my genetic material hardly makes my life seem terribly significant. Indeed, my life is, on this measure, no more

significant than that of a worm, which has the exact same purpose.

In reply, it may be said that I am overlooking a crucial difference between purposes: those for which we have evolved and those bestowed on us by some higher, designing intelligence. It is the latter, they may maintain, that render a life meaningful. But is this true? No. It is notoriously easy to construct counter-examples involving super-intelligent aliens. Here's one of my own devising.

Suppose humans have been bred on this planet for a reason – to wash the smelly underwear of a highly advanced alien race. The aliens will shortly return to pick us up and take us to their enormous alien laundry. Would this fact, or its discovery, fill our lives with meaning? Hardly.

Perhaps it will be conceded that merely being designed by some higher intelligence for a purpose is not enough to render our lives meaningful. The purpose must be one that we positively embrace and that makes us feel fulfilled. Washing alien undies fails on both counts.

But now suppose the aliens have designed us so that we discover we profoundly enjoy washing their underwear. In fact, once we start work in their laundry, we finally feel fulfilled in a way that we have never felt before. We rest each evening with an enormous sense of satisfaction that we are now doing what we were always *meant* to do. Would this make our lives meaningful? It's by no means obvious that it would (whatever we might happen to think).

In reply, it may be said that I am focussing on a silly purpose, certainly not the sort of purpose God has in mind for us. God made us for a particular purpose: to *love* him. It is this specific purpose that makes our lives meaningful.

But, again, this seems dubious. Suppose a woman wants to love someone who loves her unconditionally in return. It occurs to her that she could have a child for that purpose, and does so. Does the purpose for which this new person is created automatically bestow meaning upon their life? Not obviously. Some of us probably were conceived for such a purpose. Yet few would point to that fact

in order to explain why their lives have meaning. I cannot see why God's creating me to love him would give my life any more meaning.

In fact, isn't creating human beings solely for some end a rather demeaning and degrading thing to do, as a rule? But then why is God's doing it any different? It is debatable whether, if there were a God of love, he would even *want* to create human beings for a particular purpose.

So the question of how our lives can have meaning is not, it seems, easily answered by appealing to divine purpose. In particular, the question of *how* our possessing a God-given purpose makes our lives meaningful has not, so far as I can see, been adequately explained. More often than not, we are offered, not a clear account of how God's existence makes our lives meaningful, but merely a promissory note that, in some mysterious and unfathomable way, it just does.

3. A divine judgement argument: Here's a third argument. It seems lives don't have meaning just because we judge that they do. Presumably, a life devoted solely to kicking other people in the shins at every available opportunity would not qualify as meaningful, even if we all thought it did.

But, the Theist might now add, if lives aren't meaningful simply because we judge them to be so, then they are meaningful only because *God* judges them to be so. So a meaningful life requires God after all.

This is a popular argument. Unfortunately, it runs into difficulties similar to those that face the parallel argument that if things aren't morally right or wrong because we judge them to be so, they must be right or wrong because God judges them to be so. The Euthyphro dilemma crops up here too. We can now ask:

Are lives meaningful because God judges them to be so, or does God judge them to be so because he recognizes that they are?

The first answer seems ridiculous. Surely, had God judged that kicking people in the shins at every available opportunity is what makes life meaningful, that wouldn't make it so. But the second answer – God merely *recognizes* what makes for a meaningful life – concedes that there are facts about what makes for a meaningful life that obtain *anyway*, whether or not God exists to make such judgements. But then these are facts to which humanists are just as entitled to help themselves as are Theists. God is redundant.

Does meaning require immortality?

We have not, as yet, found a good argument for supposing a meaningful life requires the existence of God. Let's now set such arguments to one side, and consider a slightly different claim: that, whether or not meaningful lives require God, they do at least require that we be *immortal*. How, Theists sometimes ask, can a life have any meaning or point if it ends in death? True, we may have achievements that outlive us, such as books written, buildings designed, and children well-raised. But those books will eventually be forgotten and those buildings will crumble. Our children will soon wither and die. Indeed, the human race as a whole will eventually disappear entirely without trace. But then, without immortality, isn't our existence all for nothing – a pointless waste of time?

It seems to me that, while a longer life might be desirable, it is not necessarily more meaningful. True, if you live longer, you may achieve more, do more good works, etc. But is a long life exhibiting such virtues thereby more *meaningful* than a shorter version? Presumably not. Nor is it obvious why extending such a life to infinity imbues it with any more meaning.

In fact, it is sometimes in the manner of our death that our lives acquire particular meaning and significance. Someone who deliberately sacrifices their own life to save others is often held up as an example of a person whose

life is particularly meaningful. I might add that, if we compare the sacrifice of a religious person who lays down their life thinking they will be resurrected in heaven, and an atheist who lays down their life thinking death is the end of them, surely it is the latter individual who intends to make the greater sacrifice, and whose action is, for that reason, much more noble and meaningful.

Even when a life is not sacrificed for others, the manner of its end can often be what marks it out as particularly significant. We rightly admire those who face death with courage and dignity. Death is often an important episode of the story of our lives, an event that completes the narrative of a life in a satisfying and meaningful way. The fact that we die, and that death really is the end, does not make our lives meaningless. Indeed, the finality of death gives us an opportunity to make our lives rather *more* meaningful than they would otherwise be.

Religion vs. shallow, selfish individualism

Let's now turn to religious practice. Setting aside the issue of whether God exists, perhaps it might still be argued that religious reflection or observance is required if our lives are not to be shallow and meaningless. Here is one such argument.

It is sometimes claimed, with some justification, that religion encourages people to take a step back and reflect on the bigger questions. Even many non-religious people suppose that a life lived out in the absence of any such reflection is likely to be rather shallow. Contemporary Western society is obsessed with things that are, in truth, comparatively worthless: money, celebrity, material possessions, etc. Our day-to-day lives are often lived out within a narrow envelope of essentially selfish concerns, with little or no time given to contemplating bigger questions. It was religious tradition and practice that provided the framework within which such questions were once

addressed. With the loss of religion, we have inevitably slid into selfish, shallow individualism. If we want people to enjoy a more meaningful existence, we need to reinvigorate religious tradition and practice (some would add that we need, in particular, to ensure young people are properly immersed in such practices in school).

There is *some* truth in the above argument. Religion *can* encourage people to take a step back and contemplate the bigger issues. It can help break the hypnotic spell that a shallow, selfish individualistic culture can cast over young minds.

However, religion can itself also promote forms of selfishness – such as a self-interested obsession with achieving one's own salvation or personal enlightenment. And of course religion has itself been used to glorify material wealth, by suggesting that great wealth is actually a sign of God's favour.

Is it true that *only* religion encourages us to think about the big questions? No. There is another long tradition of thought running all the way back to the Ancient world that also addresses the big questions – a secular, *philosophical* tradition. If we want people, and especially children, to think about such questions, we are not obliged to take the religious route. We can encourage them to think philosophically.

Indeed, there is evidence that introducing philosophy programmes into the curriculum can have a dramatic impact on both the behaviour of pupils and the ethos and academic standing of their schools.

Most contemporary humanists are just as concerned about shallow, selfish individualism as are religious people. They too believe it is important we should sometimes take a step back and consider the big questions. They just deny that the only way to encourage a more responsible and reflective attitude to life is to encourage children to be more religious.

If we really want to encourage young people to *think* about the big questions, philosophy is, arguably, a much

more promising approach. The Church of England poses the question 'Is this it?' on billboards and buses, promising those who sign up to their Alpha Course 'An opportunity to explore the meaning of life'. However, when the religious raise such questions, they are often posed for rhetorical effect only. They are asked, not in the spirit of open, rational enquiry, but merely as the opening gambit in an attempt to sign up new recruits. Unlike religion, philosophy does not approach such questions having already committed itself to certain answers (though it does not *rule out* religious answers, of course). Philosophy really does encourage you to think, question and make your own judgement – an approach to answering the Big Questions that, in reality, many religions have traditionally been keen to suppress.

The claim that *only* religion encourages us to think about the big questions is not just false, it is rather ironic when made by religions with long and sometimes violent histories of curtailing independent thought.

Do humanists miss out on something?

It may be that we do miss out on *something* if we give up religion. Consider belief in Santa Claus. For the child who comes to believe in Santa, the universe appears wonderfully transformed. From within the perspective of their bubble of belief, the world, come December, takes on new meaning and significance – a rosy, magical glow. There is something it is like to inhabit this bubble of belief – to be a true believer in Santa – something its very hard to understand if you have never experienced it yourself.

When the child grows up a bit and the Santa bubble pops, it can be distressing for the child: the rosy glow vanishes leaving the world seeming rather sad and drab by comparison.

There's no doubt that popping the bubble of religious belief can be distressing for its occupant. The magic and

meaning may appear to drain out of the world, leaving it seeming cold and barren. Isn't it better to live inside such a religious bubble if we can?

I don't believe so. If there is no God, then the magical glow the world seemed to take on when viewed from inside the bubble was always an illusion. When the bubble pops, the world might seem a little drabber for a while. But, personally, I would rather see the world as it is, than as I might like it to be.

In fact, isn't an appreciation of what is really important in life actually likely to be obscured by such a bubble? Compare belief in Santa, his workshop at the North Pole, the flying reindeer and so on. When that bubble pops, those colourful characters all vanish, but what was always most important come December 25th – love, getting together with our friends and family, and so on – are all still in place. In fact, for us grown ups, wouldn't belief in Santa – and the accompanying activities of posting letters to the North Pole, putting out the mince pie and milk – threaten to be a disabling distraction, preventing us from recognizing what truly matters?

I believe the same is true of belief in Gods, angels, demons, an after-life and so on. It is true that, without religious belief, we may miss out on *something* – e.g. on seeing the world as a divinely-ruled kingdom, on the comforting promise of being reunited with loved ones after our death. But we may gain rather more – including a more mature and clear-sighted view of what is really valuable and significant in life.

As the writer Douglas Adams once said: 'Isn't it enough to see the garden is beautiful without having to believe there are fairies at the bottom of it?'

Humanism and the meaning of life

Some readers may be feeling short-changed. They may ask: 'But what is the specifically humanist answer to the

question: what makes for a meaning of life?' The fact is that there is no official 'humanist answer'.

The truth is that (with a few obvious exceptions, such as lives of religious piety) most humanists tend to agree with the religious about which lives are meaningful and which are not. Like most religious people, they agree that raising good children, pursuing intellectual enquiry with dedication, producing strikingly original and moving art, and so on are all ways in which we can enjoy a meaningful existence. Setting aside reference to the divine, humanists also apply much the same *criteria* in judging which are meaningful and which are not.

Humanists merely differ from *some* religious people in supposing (i) that those lives that we generally agree are meaningful are still meaningful even if there is no god or gods, and (ii) that belief in a god or gods can actually be an impediment to our living full and meaningful lives, by for example: leading us *not* to think about the big questions; forcing us to live a certain way out of fear divine punishment; or wasting our lives promoting false beliefs because of a mistaken expectation of a life to come.

From the humanist perspective it's what's before us – the rich warp and weft of our worldly, human lives – that really matters.

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