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## The Meaning of Life: What's the Point?

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*Editors' note: this essay and its companion essay, [Meaning in Life: What Makes Our Lives Meaningful?](#) both explore the concept of meaning in relation to human life. This essay focuses on the meaning of life as a whole, whereas the other addresses meaning in individual human lives.*

At the height of his literary fame, the novelist Leo Tolstoy was gripped by suicidal despair.<sup>[1]</sup> He felt that life is meaningless because, in the long run, we'll all be dead and forgotten. Tolstoy later rejected this pessimism in exchange for religious faith in life's eternal, divine significance.

Tolstoy's outlook—both before and after his conversion—raises many questions:

- Does life's having meaning depend on a supernatural reality?
- Is death a threat to life's meaning?
- Is life the sort of thing that can have a "meaning"? In what sense?

Here we will consider some approaches to questions about the meaning of life.<sup>[2]</sup>

### 1. Questioning the Question

Many philosophers begin thinking about the meaning of life by asking what the question itself means.<sup>[3]</sup> *Life* could refer to all lifeforms or to human life specifically. This essay focuses on human life, but it is worth considering how other things might have or lack meaning, too.<sup>[4]</sup> This can help illuminate the different meanings of *meaning*.

Sometimes, we use "meaning" to refer to the *origin* or *cause* of something's existence. If I come home to a trashed house, I might wonder, "What is

the meaning of this?" Similarly, we might wonder where life comes from or how it began; our origins may tell us something about other meanings, like our value or purpose.

We also use "meaning" to refer to something's *significance* or *value*. Something can be valuable in various ways, such as by being useful, pleasing, or informative. We might call something meaningless if it is trivial or unimportant.

"Meaning" can also refer to something's *point* or *purpose*.<sup>[5]</sup> Life could have some overarching purpose as part of a divine plan, or it might have no such purpose. Perhaps we can *give* our lives purpose that they did not previously possess.

Notice that even divine purposes may not always satisfy our desire for meaning: suppose our creator made us to serve as livestock for hyper-intelligent aliens who will soon arrive and begin to farm us.<sup>[6]</sup> We might protest that this is not the most meaningful use of our human potential! We may not want our life-story to end as a people-burger.

Indeed, a thing's meaning can also be its *story*. The meaning of life might be the true story of life's origins and significance.<sup>[7]</sup> In this sense, life cannot be meaningless, but its meaning might be pleasing or disappointing to us. When people like Tolstoy regard life as meaningless, they seem to be thinking that the truth about life is *bad* news.<sup>[8]</sup>

### 2. Supernaturalism

*Supernaturalists* hold that life has divine significance.<sup>[9]</sup> For example, from the perspective of the Abrahamic religions, life is valuable because everything in God's creation is *good*. Our purpose is to love and glorify God. We are all part of something very *important* and *enduring*: God's plan.

Much of the contemporary discussion about the meaning of life is provoked by skepticism about traditional religious answers.<sup>[10]</sup> The phrase "the meaning of life" came into common usage only in the last two centuries, as advances in science, especially evolutionary theory, led many to doubt that life is the product of intelligent, supernatural design.<sup>[11]</sup> The meaning of life might be an especially perplexing issue for those who reject religious answers.

### 3. Nihilism

*Nihilists* think that life, on balance, lacks positive meaning.<sup>[12]</sup> Nihilism often arises as a *pessimistic* reaction to religious skepticism: life

without a divine origin or purpose has no enduring significance.

Although others might counter that life can have enduring significance that doesn't depend on a supernatural origin, such as our cultural legacy, nihilists are skeptical. From a cosmic perspective, we are tiny specks in a vast universe—and often miserable to boot! Even our most important cultural icons and achievements will likely vanish with the eventual extinction of the species and the collapse of the solar system.

#### 4. Naturalism

*Naturalists* suggest that the meaning of life is to be found *within* our earthly lives. Even if life possesses no supernatural meaning, life itself may have inherent significance.<sup>[13]</sup> Things are not as bad as nihilists claim.

Some naturalists argue that life—at least human life—has *objectively valuable* features, such as our intellectual, moral, and creative abilities.<sup>[14]</sup> The meaning of life may be to develop these capacities and put them to good use.<sup>[15]</sup>

Other naturalists are *subjectivists* about life's meaning.<sup>[16]</sup> *Existentialists*, for example, argue that life has no meaning until we *give* it meaning by choosing to live for something that we find important.<sup>[17]</sup>

Critics (including nihilists and supernaturalists) argue that the naturalists are fooling themselves. What naturalists propose as sources of meaning *in* life are at best a distraction from life's lack of ultimate or cosmic significance (if naturalism is true). What is the *point* of personal development and good works if we'll all be dead sooner or later?

Naturalists may respond that the point is in how these activities affect our lives and relationships *now* rather than in some distant, inhuman future.<sup>[18]</sup> Feeling sad or distressed over our lack of cosmic importance might be a kind of vanity we should overcome.<sup>[19]</sup> Some also question whether living forever would necessarily add meaning to life; living forever might be boring!<sup>[20]</sup> Having limited time may be part of what makes some of our activities and experiences so precious.<sup>[21]</sup>

#### 5. Conclusion

In Douglas Adams' novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, the supercomputer Deep Thought is prompted to discover "the meaning of life, the

universe, and everything." After 7 ½ million years of computation, Deep Thought determines that the answer is...

*forty-two.*

Reflecting on this bizarre result, Deep Thought muses, "I think the problem, to be quite honest with you, is that you've never actually known what the question is."<sup>[22]</sup>

Adams may be wise to offer some comic relief.<sup>[23]</sup> Furthermore, given the various meanings of "meaning," perhaps there is no single question to ask and thus no single correct answer.

Tolstoy's crisis is a reminder that feelings of meaninglessness can be distressing and dangerous.<sup>[24]</sup> However, continuing to search for meaning in times of doubt may be one of the most meaningful things we can do.<sup>[25]</sup>

#### Notes

[1] Tolstoy (2005 [1882]). For discussion of Tolstoy's rediscovery of meaning that extends his ideas beyond the specific religious outlook he adopted, see Preston-Roedder (2022).

[2] For more detailed overviews of the meaning of life, see Metz (2021) and the entries on the meaning of life by Joshua Seachris and Wendell O'Brien in the *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*.

[3] Ayer (2008) suspects the question is incoherent. For a response, see Nielsen (2008). For helpful discussion of the meanings of meaning, see Thomas (2019).

[4] For discussion of meaning beyond humans (and agents), see Stevenson (2022).

[5] Notice that purpose appears to be one type of value, as discussed in the preceding paragraph.

[6] Nozick (1981) develops this point about purpose; Nozick (2008) offers the key points, too. In a different spirit, the ancient Daoist philosophy of Zhuangzi (2013) provides some perspective on the advantages of being "useless" (having no purpose) and the dangers of being "useful."

[7] On this proposal of the meaning of life as narrative, see Seachris (2009). A similar approach that emphasizes the notion of interpretation rather than story or narrative is proposed in Prinzing (2021).

[8] A starter list of life's features that might lead one to tell such a story about life: war, poverty, physical and

mental illness, natural disasters, addiction, labor exploitation and other injustices, and pollution. For more, see Benatar (2017).

[9] Some, like Craig (2013), argue vigorously that life can have meaning *only* if supernaturalism is true. For further discussion and examples, see discussions of supernaturalism in Seachris, “The Meaning of Life: Contemporary Analytic Perspectives” and Metz (2021).

[10] See Landau (1997) and Setiya (2022), Ch. 6, for discussion of the origin of the phrase.

[11] Nietzsche’s discussion of the “death of God” in *The Gay Science* (2001 [1882]) reflects these sorts of concerns.

[12] For recent defenses of this view, see Benatar (2017) and Weinberg (2021).

[13] See I. Singer (2009) for a wide-ranging naturalist approach. Wolf’s (2010, 2014) approach to meaning in life is one of the most widely accepted views amongst contemporary philosophers.

[14] For a helpful discussion of the idea that some things might be objectively valuable, see Ethical Realism by Thomas Metcalf.

[15] Metz (2013) and P. Singer (1993) defend this sort of view of meaning *in* life. Transhumanists would argue that the best uses of our abilities will be those that help us overcome the problems, like disease and mortality, that beset humans and may transform us in substantial ways: perhaps we can achieve a natural form of immortality through technology! On transhumanism, see Messerly (2022).

[16] Representative subjectivists include Taylor (2000) and Calhoun (2015). Susan Wolf’s works (2010 and 2014) develop a “hybrid” account of meaning that combines objective and subjective elements.

[17] For classic expressions of this existentialist view, see Sartre (2021 [1943]) and Beauvoir (2018 [1947]). For a brief overview of existentialist philosophy, see Existentialism by Addison Ellis. For a more detailed, contemporary overview, see Gosetti-Ferencei (2020).

[18] On this point, see Nagel (1971), Nagel (1989), and “The Meanings of Lives” in Wolf (2014). For further discussion see Kahane (2014).

[19] Marquard (1991); see Hosseini (2015) for additional discussion. Albert Camus makes a similar

point, invoking the notion of “moderation,” at the end of *The Rebel* (1992 [1951]).

[20] Williams (1973) gives the classic expression of this idea. For a brief overview of Williams’ argument, see Is Immortality Desirable?, by Felipe Pereira.

[21] Of course, this outlook does mean that death can sometimes rob people of potential meaning, since death can be untimely. But death would not erase the meaningfulness of whatever one had already experienced or achieved. For arguments concerning whether death harms the individual who dies, see Is Death Bad? Epicurus and Lucretius on the Fear of Death by Frederik Kaufman.

[22] Adams (2017), Chapters 27-28. Asking a computer to give us the answer might also be a problem.

[23] For additional comic relief, see the film *Monty Python’s The Meaning of Life* (1983). Such playfulness may seem irreverent of these “deep” philosophical questions, but Schlick (2017 [1927]) argued that the meaning of life is to be found in play!

[24] For discussion of crises of meaning and an introduction to psychological research on meaning in life, see Smith (2017).

[25] William Winsdale relates that the existential psychiatrist Viktor Frankl was once asked to “express in one sentence the meaning of his own life” (in Frankl (2006), 164-5). After writing his answer, he asked his students to guess what he wrote. A student said, “The meaning of your life is to help others find the meaning of theirs.” Frankl responded, “That is it exactly. Those are the very words I had written.”

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