

Academy for Lifelong Learning

What's the Meaning of Life?

November 25, 2020

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Important Provisos

- **First: I'm not a professional philosopher**
 - I want answers that are personally meaningful, even if there remain subordinate questions which a professional philosopher might feel demand clarification
- **Second: Invoking a deity doesn't really help**
 - How would one determine what a deity really wants and how would that lead to a meaning for one's life? (Pointing to an authority doesn't do it for me.)

Session Plan

- Clarifying the question
- Best understanding of “self”
- Human desire for “meaning”
- Answers to the question
- My answer to the question
- Why it makes sense for me

Clarify the Question

- What's the meaning of life?
 - 1 THE – assumes there is at most one meaning, there might well be multiple possible meanings
 - 2 LIFE – not *all* life, but specifically *my* life
 - 3 MEANING – the challenge is to determine which possible meanings for my life are most appropriate
- Revised:

What could, what should be the meaning of my life?

The Self

- Should the “self” be reduced to the protoplasm which makes up the brain?
- **NO!**
- Two important conclusions from Cognitive Science
 - The self is embodied, with protoplasm outside the brain an active if participant in the self
 - The self is embedded in a number of guiding environments, each with important communities

Early 20th Century

- G.H.Mead – Chicago psychologist/philosopher who recognized the importance of context to guide, direct and constrain action and thought.
 - Never followed the “objective” behaviourist view of psychology
- Lev Vygotsky – Moscow psychologist/learning theorist who focused on how the masses could be educated now that the yoke of capitalism was lifted.
 - His view of zone of proximal development is still in use.
- Unfortunately behaviourism dominated English psychology during the mid-20th century. Cognitive Science is changing this.

Embedding

- I view four environments as particularly important in shaping (my) human behaviour
 - Social Environment, defined by communities with norms and expectations
 - Aesthetic Environment, defined by communities which create, enjoy and assess aesthetic experiences
 - Conceptual Environment, defined by communities which develop and support abstractions
 - Physical Environment, defined by communities which inhabit, modify and develop the physical world

Age & Meaning

- Does meaning become more important as we age?
 - We begin to recognize that we will not live forever
 - The summing up of a life takes on greater importance
- For 3rd Age members - an interesting background question
 - Regardless of what was important, meaning becomes important
- And 3rd Age meaning may be critically important for society
 - Responsibility to community – fading in importance
 - We may be critically important to preserving community

Possible Meanings

- Supernaturalism
 - God-Centred Views
 - Soul-Centred Views
- Naturalism
 - Subjectivism
 - Objectivism
- Nihilism

See “The Meaning of Life”
Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy

Supernaturalism

- One View: God has a plan, our challenge is to figure out that plan. Meaning comes from doing God's will.
- One Alternative: God has so structured everything so that doing what comes naturally is following God's will.

- One View: Our Soul is the essence of what we are. We must follow our Soul and not succumb to physical pleasure.
- One Alternative: Our Soul is our guiding essence. We must not fight what it tells us is right.

Naturalism

- Subjective: Deep introspective thought will lead us to a personal meaning that is “right” for us.
- Objective: Meaning comes from doing objective “good” in the world. Our challenge is to do that “good”.
 - How do we determine what’s really “right” for us or determine what is actually doing “good”?
 - Note: A combination of subjective and objective factors is often used with respect to meaning

Nihilism

- There is no evidence that life (personal or collective) has a purpose. Meaning in any grand sense is an illusion.
- Hedonism – We are basically pleasure seeking and pain avoiding creatures. Seeking pleasure and avoiding pain is the “logic” behind individual life.
- Despair – It’s all meaningless. Our challenge is survival in the face of a meaning-free universe.

Drives: Big 3

- Pleasure
- Virtue
- Meaning

We are drawn to those things that give us pleasure. We are drawn to things which are virtuous, even when there is no pleasure involved. And we are drawn to things that are meaningful, even absent pleasure or virtue.

- See: Alfred Adler - “What Life Could Mean To You”
- See: Irvin Yalom – “Existential Psychotherapy”
- See: Victor Frankel – “Man’s Search for Meaning”

Too Simplistic?

- Pleasure
 - Eating a piece of chocolate is pleasurable
 - Hearing the interweaving lines in a fugue is pleasurable
 - Time alone with a loved one is pleasurable
 - etcetera, etcetera
- Are deeper pleasures more valuable?
 - “Yes”, based on my experience!
- But ... it's not scientifically objective
 - That's life: Our lived experience isn't “objective”

Real Virtue

- “Treat others as you want to be treated”
 - Also: “Do not treat others as you do not want to be treated:
 - And: “Wish upon others as you wish upon yourself”
- Factor in the context and it gets complicate
- Alternative: Follow the rules as laid down by ... XXX
- Actual(?): Virtue is learned from the social groups from which you learned about life
 - And my parents were virtuous!

Meaning

- It has to be meaningful on a personal level. I need to feel good about a meaning in order for me to accept it as (one of) the purpose(s) of my life.
- It also needs to contribute in a positive way to mankind. I would narrow that down to positive contributions to my social, aesthetic, conceptual or physical environments.
- Caution: Neither dimension is absolute, or fully objective. Human assessment and human judgment are involved. We are, after all, human.

See Susan Wolf's "Meaning in Life, and Why it Matters"

Contributions

- We all have environments that we find to be significant and that are personally important. For me:
 - Social Environment
 - Aesthetic Environment
 - Conceptual Environment
 - Physical Environment
- And there are communities (social groups) associated with each of these personally important environments.

Social Environment

- We are all part of multiple social environments – family, church, club, association, neighbourhood, etc.
- Unlimited range of possible contributions:
 - Helping an old lady across the street
 - Helping your neighbour in the yard
 - Playing an active role in a church/club
 - Playing an role in your professional association
 - Launching a major neighbourhood initiative

Aesthetic Environment

- “Art” comes in many, many flavours. There’s theatre art, concert hall art, art museum art, etc.
- Contribution can take many, many forms:
 - Attending a concert
 - Taking (or giving) a course
 - Participating in a concert or theatre performance
 - Writing a review of art that pleases (or displeases) you
 - Creating new art for the concert hall, or theatre or museum

Conceptual Environment

- Our cognitive power is increased by the introduction (and explication) of new and useful abstraction:
 - Advance from Roman to Arabic numbers
 - Celsius scale to measure temperature
 - Newton's laws of motion
- Contributions: developing new abstractions or aiding in the more wide-spread use of valuable abstractions
 - Introducing new abstractions in your world
 - Explicating new abstractions to new audience
 - Developing or adapting abstractions

Physical Environment

- We are shaped by the physical worlds we inhabit
 - The current pandemic forcefully demonstrated the importance of being able to access satisfying physical environments
 - It “hurt” when we were (temporarily) denied physical access to our cottage (on the Curve Lake First Nation lands)
- Contributions
 - Planting a flower on the street
 - Beautifying a street or park
 - Participating in neighbourhood planning
 - Placemaking
 - Planning framework

Important

- These are the four environments that I now find to be personally most important.
- Social and physical environment could be on everyone's list, but there are a wide range of other possibilities
- Doing “good” in an environment is often a mixed blessing. It's enough for it to be “good”, now, for the important stakeholders of the environment.

Bonus

- Your contributions will be part of effecting change in environments important to you
- The changes you helped bring about will echo into the future, living beyond your life span
- It's not immortality, but it is a presence after death

Limitation

- I'm comfortable with this view of the meaning (or purpose) of my life.
- But I'm one individual with one set of personal experiences in a life now in it's 9th decade.
- I have been successful if the ideas presented seem like they may have some value in your search for meaning.

Thank You