

# The Meaning of Meaning

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## Does life have any meaning?

THAT QUESTION has been asked ever since people began asking questions. But the last three centuries have persuaded more people to ask the question because the traditional answers, which children imbibed with their mother's milk and grew up to accept without challenge, were no longer unchallengeable. In a modern, urban, mobile, individualistic, scientific culture, the old answers were no longer satisfactory to many men and women. Humanism was born out of this dissatisfaction.

Losing old answers, even when they are uncomfortable, is not easy. Many people suffer "meaning anxiety." They cannot bear to live without meaning. They want new answers as powerful as the old.

One of the problems providing the answers is that the word "meaning" has a multitude of meanings. When people ask, "Does life have any meaning,?" they are not always asking the same question. Often discussions and arguments about the meaning of life are meaningless because the participants

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do not realize that they are trying to address different issues. The result is a waste of time.

Historically, there are four distinct questions that are subsumed under the query, "Does life have any meaning?:"

"Do I live in a just world in which I will be rewarded for doing good and punished for doing evil? And, even if not, will my suffering serve a good purpose?"

"Will I live forever? Or is my life temporary and ephemeral?"

"Do I have an assignment from God or, from the universe? If so, what is it?"

"Are my desires and my expectations compatible with my power? Or is life an inevitable story of continuous frustration and disappointment?"

Since these four questions are different one from the other, I will deal with them separately.

### **Justice**

In a world with so much suffering, most people want to believe that their suffering serves some good purpose. They are even willing to confess to crimes they have not committed so that their pain will not be unjust. Guilt is more acceptable than a universe without justice. Job's agonizing kvetching for over forty chapters is testimony to this need.

In the Western religious tradition, whether Jewish, Christian or Muslim, four answers to the question of divine or universal justice are popular.

The first and oldest simply asserts that God is just and that he rewards the good and punishes the evil in this world. Suffering is not a challenge to God. It is a challenge to the sufferer. He must discover the sin that he has committed for which he is being punished. Pain never reproaches God. It reproaches the victim.

The second removes reward and punishment from this life to the next life. Divine justice is not applicable to earthly existence where suffering is often a test of the believers faith in the ultimate justice of God. People of little faith are punished because of their demand for justice now, for immediate gratification. People of strong faith are rewarded with external happiness. Postponing justice to the afterlife made this life accept-

able and meaningful for millions of people. The success of Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity and Islam depended on this new answer.

The third answer is that suffering is purifying and ennobling. The Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 and the martyr image of the crucified Christ attest to the belief that the path to human fulfillment moves through the pain of compassionate self-sacrifice. Suffering is not evil. It is an opportunity for self-development.

The fourth answer is the answer of the book of Job. Human beings cannot understand the universal good of which human suffering may be a part. From the human perspective undeserved pain seems unconnected to any good purpose. From the divine perspective it is neither undeserved nor without redeeming merit. It all fits into a broad scheme of things which only God can comprehend and which the human intellect is too inferior to fathom. Asserting faith over evidence is the only way to meaning.

In the Eastern religious tradition, especially Hindu and Buddhist, one strong answer prevails. It is Karma. Karma is the universal force of justice. It guarantees that every good deed yields an appropriate reward, every bad deed an appropriate punishment. Since the individual soul moves from life to life, from body to body, through the process of reincarnation, the deeds of this life are rewarded and punished in succeeding lives. Suffering is not related to behavior in this existence. It is the deserved punishment of my behavior in an earlier existence. We are the products of our own actions. In modern times New Age Thinking thrives on karma. Reincarnation is the rage. And social action is unnecessary since the victims of poverty, disease and war are only receiving what they deserve.

If such faith offends you, there is always Harold Kushner. He was the philosophic rage for over three years. His *When Bad Things Happen to Good People* tries to rescue the reputation of God. He admits that most suffering is evil. But he does not hold God responsible for it. God is limited in power but good. He wants to prevent evil but he is not always able to do it. He gets an "A" for effort and good intentions. Like human beings, God is the victim of a morally indifferent universe. There is no universal justice. But God is trying to do his best to remedy the situation. The world is not as meaningful as we would want it to be. But a good God with

limited power is certainly better than a rotten God or no god at all. As long as God is trying life has meaning.

From a humanistic perspective all of these answers, whether traditional or modern, are unacceptable. They throw in deities we would be reluctant to accept. They also make excuses for what is inexcusable. Most human suffering is simply undeserved and without redeeming value. Not even a well-intentioned but incompetent deity, who cannot guarantee justice, can diminish that reality. And being a humanist means being strong enough to know that.

If what gives meaning to life is inevitable justice, then humanism finds no meaning in life.

### **Immortality**

For many people life has no meaning unless it lasts forever. If death is real, it denies life any significance. Immortality means more than an opportunity for justice. It is the guarantee that we are more than a fleeting moment, more than a burp in the digestion of the universe.

Almost all successful religions promise immortality. Some give you a one-time earthly experience followed by an eternal afterlife. Others give you the eternal cycle of reincarnation and rebirth. But the promise is there. Even sophisticated Greek philosophers like Plato and Enlightenment ideologues like Voltaire promise immortality. The reality of death has not been very popular.

But, popular or not popular, the reality of death is one of the foundations of humanism. And if what gives meaning to life is immortality, then humanism finds no meaning in life.

### **Assignment**

Many people today are trying to find themselves. They are looking for the "real me." They are searching for their assignment from the universe. They really want to know what God intends them to be and do. They want to be in touch with who they really are, with their special place in the universe, with the special role that they fulfill in the world.

If what they choose to do relates only to their own personal preferences, then their life has no meaning. But if what they choose to be is a reflection of a divine mission or divine call,

is an expression of an atonement to the purposes of the universe, then their existence will have meaning.

The ever-popular Joseph Campbell dramatized this search in the Jungian archetype of the hero, who undertakes a perilous journey in order to discover his real self, his mission in life. From Odysseus to Moses, from buddha to Jesus, the saga of the hero reflects a universal search for meaning. "Follow your own bliss" is only possible if first you discover what your "bliss" is.

Searching for your assignment is an old enterprise. Teleology, the science of purpose, has been around for a long time. Aristotle identified the Final Cause as one of the four constituents of reality that applied to all things. Matter, structure and context are not sufficient to make something real. Some final purpose is also necessary.

But the formal cause, the essence, implies a built-in purpose. All living things have "programs" which destiny has given them. Acorns are slated to become oak trees. Tadpoles are slated to become frogs. And infant children are "destined" to become mature adults. And Aristotle is not reluctant to describe the characteristics of the mature or "happy" adult, a condition which arises from understanding the pre-determined essence of the human being, which is universal. Even each of our organs, including our sexual ones, have a purpose which nature (or God) has conferred upon them.

Non-humanists may spend time getting in touch with their ideas and their feelings, but they are not trying to find their assignment. They are not trying to discover the role that destiny has chosen for them in the drama of the universe. Even if they bumped into a god with an assignment for them, they would not be automatically overjoyed.

The assignment may not conform with their own judgment as to what is appropriate to their own needs. The right to be in charge of your own life precludes turning over that job to either God, destiny or nature.

The great service of the modern existentialist movement is that it has made us aware that for us as humans beings, programming, even divine programming, must still confront our personal judgement and decision. Because something is does not mean that it ought to be. Because the universe is heading in a certain direction, does not mean that we have to follow. Because nature has bestowed upon us certain tendencies to action, does not mean that we have to indulge them. It is our

evaluation of the universe, not the universe's evaluation of us, that determines our action.

When we "find" ourselves we rarely find one clear directive. We discover conflicting desires and drives each claiming primacy for its agenda. In the end, we have to choose among them. And the universe cannot help us, because it has created the confusion.

If an "assignment" is essential to the meaning of life, then humanists find no meaning in life.

## **Happiness**

Schopenhauer killed himself because he believed that life was meaningless. Nature had perpetrated a cruel hoax on the human race. It had designed human beings to desperately want what was not achievable.

Traditional religion maintained the same posture when it spoke of a life on earth. Human existence on earth is continuous frustration. We want peace and tranquility. We want safety and security. We want to be free of death and the penalties of death. But none of the things we really want is realizable in our earthly existence. Only the next life can satisfy these needs. If we keep our sights focused on this life alone, we will despair.

Otherworldly philosophers and religions have always been popular because they promise satisfaction and happiness. Especially today there is a revival of traditional supernatural religions because many people have grown more pessimistic, believing that the happiness they want is not possible in this life. One of the reasons for this pessimism is the rise in expectations. People want much more out of life now than their parents and grandparents wanted. They want love, interesting work, health, good friends, successful children, leisure and public recognition--all of them combined with a pain-free existence. Since their wish list is excessive and unrealistic, they go through life in continuous despair, always complaining about how meaningless their life is. In the end, they become either confirmed cynics or converts to "pie in the sky."

Now it is quite possible that life by its very nature, is continuous frustration. Our growing up takes so long that we often spend more time training than using our talents. Our self-understanding takes so long that we often become wise long after it can make any difference. We often spend so much time

searching for what we want that we do not find it until it is time for retirement. But all of these frustrations do not preclude happiness.

If your vision of happiness is a life without pain, struggle or suffering then happiness is not a realistic achievement. If your image of the happy life is graduation from fear and anxiety, then the happy life is an illusion. All of these visions of happiness generally derive from supernatural religions which describe the afterlife as perpetual leisure without problems. They are infantile projections of life in the womb. And they are, from the humanistic perspective, colossally boring.

Happiness derives from a deliberate balance between pleasure, usefulness and feeling in charge of your life. It thrives on problem-solving. Where there are no problems, there is no happiness. It needs fear. Where there is no risk of losing anything, nothing is precious. It depends on courage. Refusing to surrender to despair gives us a sense of control.

The sign of happiness is vitality. And vitality is the excitement of anticipation. If we have everything we want we cannot be happy. The heaven of Christianity, as Shaw so rightly demonstrates, is really hell, a place where pleasure is possible, but not happiness.

There are no guarantees of happiness in this world. But, with wisdom, good humor and good luck, it is a realistic possibility. And if the meaning of life is the possibility of happiness, then life has meaning.

But we will convince nobody else of this truth unless, before we start preaching, we find happiness ourselves.