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Thinking About Life's Meaning

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The lively controversy among people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs over the meaning of life suggests that philosophers are not alone in their enthusiasm for the issue. Nor are they content to leave the response to such questions entirely in the hands of poets, theologians, and psychologists. The fact is that the controversy itself is much in need of conceptual clarification, coherent articulation of issues and beliefs, and critical appraisal of conflicting viewpoints - all philosophical tasks. Our aim here is to offer a brief discussion of philosophical contributions to this topic. We shall survey three most prominent views of the meaning of life -- pessimism, theism, and humanism -- and indicate some of the strengths and weaknesses of each. In doing this, we have summarized many of the arguments and analyses which philosophers have developed elsewhere in great detail. We encourage interested readers to pursue these points in their original sources.

It is illuminating to begin by looking at some situations in which questions of life's meaning arise and asking why philosophers, and indeed most of us, raise such questions in the first place. Among life's burdens, few are more difficult to bear or shake off than the suspicion that one's existence is meaningless. Such apprehension finds a variety of expressions: that nothing matters; that life is absurd; that there is no point to it all; that life is not worth living; and so on. These concerns seldom arise as detached and abstract reflections on the nature of things. More often they are prompted by great stress in one's life. Confronting the monotonous routine of daily life, feeling a sense of futility in one's pursuits, bearing the loss of loved ones, realizing the inevitability of one's own death, finding one's achievements or goals trivial, and experiencing the loss of religious faith are among the events and situations which generate doubts about life's meaning. Dispelling these doubts, once they grip a life, is seldom a simple matter and never guaranteed.

Sometimes, of course, the expression of such doubts is but one way of voicing deep emotional turmoil and as such may be symptomatic of an underlying psychological disorder. When this is the case, a medical-psychological approach is required to diagnose the illness and prescribe appropriate treatment.

However, when a person's concern is to establish what would count as life's having, or failing to have, meaning, his reflections have turned philosophical. It is the aim of philosophical inquiry to determine the very intelligibility of such questions and to evaluate responses.

As our list of doubt-generating situations above suggests it is often a starkly pessimistic picture of reality that yields the conviction that life is meaningless. This picture -- so vividly drawn by the 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* -- suggests that all our strivings lead either to failure, and thus frustration, or to only minimal success, which inevitably gives way to boredom. Whatever our accomplishments, they have no lasting significance. The brief pleasures of life are but momentary interruptions in the incessant flow of pain and suffering. In the course of our lives we sense a clash between our aspirations and the darkness and disorder we face. From this, a pessimistic attitude emerges. It is intensified by memory and anticipation, whereby the past continues to haunt us and the bleak prospects of the future create anxiety. It becomes entrenched as our hopes give way and the tragic sense of life prevails. Death is viewed as the final blow which nullifies any meaning we might have thought life to have.

Theistic thinkers, drawing upon the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, agree that if the pessimistic picture is accurate, then life is meaningless. Indeed, if any person accepts the pessimistic picture, he or she must regard his or her own life as pointless. Of course, theists readily acknowledge many of the more poignant aspects of that picture: our existence is a continuous struggle, pain and suffering are unavoidable, and death terminates our earthly lives. However, theists claim that this portrayal is far from complete. What pessimism has left out is the fact that the universe is a *creation* and that the creator brought forth his creatures according to a cosmic scheme. His plan unifies the creation, subjects it to moral law, and has all life aiming at an ultimate destiny which gives purpose to our strivings and struggles. The suffering incurred along the way is essential to the undertaking and builds character, making the individual more worthy of divine love and better suited to an eternal life of bliss.

Although the details of this scheme vary among theistic thinkers and creeds -- compare, for example, Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Abraham Heschel's *Man is Not Alone*, and Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* -- each presents a rendition in which human existence is assured of meaning by virtue of the opportunity to participate in a relationship with the deity which culminates in the realization of some good and lasting purpose.

Much of our thinking about life's meaning shares the assumptions and traces out the implications of the theistic outlook. The reason for its influence is not difficult to find. Theism responds to our most profound questions about life: "Why are we here?", "What has ultimate value?", "How should we live?", and so on. Theism has traditionally been taken to provide, in a non-arbitrary way, convincing and deeply satisfying answers which, as Tolstoy observed, allow people of faith to accept privation and sorrow "without perplexity or opposition, but with the calm and firm conviction that it was all for good."

The pessimist generally concedes that if the theistic assumptions were true, then the wretchedness and senselessness of human existence could be seen as conditions of, or prerequisites for, meaningfulness. However, the theistic
view is rejected as God's existence is 
denied: for without the guarantor, the 
guarantee -- which alone could salvage 
the human situation -- is empty.

There is, however, a third point of 
view, commonly called humanism, which 
rejects both the despair of pessimism and the 
lofty promise of theism. The view 
found in contemporary writers such as 
Kurt Baier (The Meaning of Life), Hazel 
Barnes (An Existentialist Ethics), and Kai 
Nielsen (Ethics Without God). Much of 
the humanistic challenge focuses on three 
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we possess. We are easily preoccupied with our appearance, who our friends are, the causes we embrace, the work that we do, and so forth. Yet we have the capacity to step aside from our lives and look upon them, somewhat detached and objectively, as if we were spectators. And from that vantage point we question the very seriousness with which we take our lives. We ask, but cannot satisfactorily answer, why we should live this way and not some other way. This questioning raises the possibility that the pattern of our lives is arbitrary and, given this, the seriousness which we invest in them is absurd. Such a view can be taken of any life, regardless of its particular pattern. "If we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point," Nagel observes, "we can step back also from the progress of human history, or of science, or the success of a society, or the kingdom, power, and glory of God and put all these things into question in the same way." How should this fact about human nature be regarded -- as tragic? as a cause of despair? or with a sense of irony? One thing seems certain: this distinctively human capacity to question our own lives makes us interesting and odd unto ourselves; but it cannot rob us of our joys and sorrows, our loves and hatreds, our cares, our concerns -- the stuff of which life is made.