

“The” “Meaning” of “Life”

“What is the meaning of life?”

It is not necessarily an idle question.

It is not necessarily a joke.

I think it arises from a real feeling people have: that some important element is just missing from their lives. They feel unfulfilled. Their lives are pointless. Like zombies, they are merely “going through the motions” in life, working meaningless boring jobs, doing meaningless activities to pass the time. And after living limited, fragmented, alienated lives, they just die and it was all for nothing.

They are hoping for an answer that will give them a lift: more hope, more energy, more “life”.

I have taken a lot of philosophy classes and read a lot of philosophy texts.

I have **never** encountered any serious treatment of the specific question “What is the meaning of life?” in any philosophy class or textbook.

“The meaning of life” – *in those words* – is not an issue for contemporary academic philosophers.

Broadly speaking, since Kant (1724-1804), there have been two main contemporary philosophical traditions:

1. Anglo-American
and
2. Continental

The Anglo-American tradition focuses on linguistic analysis, logic, argument, and scientific method.

Main early figures: Frege, Russell, Moore, Wittgenstein

The Continental tradition focuses on human experience, subjectivity, human values as the result of human choice (Nietzsche, existentialism), quest for power (Foucault), class struggle (Marx), etc.

My graduate school philosophy program – like most secular graduate philosophy programs – was oriented toward the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy. But as a graduate of an important Catholic university, I have read widely in Continental philosophy.

I'm going to be talking about the question "What is the meaning of life?" from the point of view of both these traditions.

An important background note: like Western generally, philosophy today is overwhelmingly **secular**.

Philosophers are all about reason and argument. If a claim lacks rational support, philosophers' first impulse is to reject it, on the grounds that people often talk nonsense without realizing it's nonsense. We see philosophy's job as trying to keep the nonsense to a minimum.

Philosophers adopt the secular point of view because it is the view best supported by reason and argument.

Many religious people would actually agree. If you think about it, the whole point of *faith* is that you choose to believe stuff that is not supported by reason.

The secular point of view took hold in philosophy, and in the culture at large, for good reason.

A thousand years ago in Western Europe, most people were Christian.

Pretty much everybody believed three things:

1. Jesus came to Earth – Earth, not any old random planet. The human planet is special and favored by God, so God puts Earth in the center of the universe.

2. Human bodies had been made in the image of God and Jesus took on the form of a man. So the human body is special.
3. God created human souls free and immortal. Nothing in the universe is as important as human souls. The window into the soul is human consciousness.

Since the Renaissance, all three of these notions were disrupted.

(Naturally, at first, only the “educated” people – overwhelmingly male and a small minority of the population of Europe – were aware of these disruptions. You had to be able to read – not only read, but read Latin – to be aware of the geocentric revolution, for example.)

Disruption #1

The 16th century: Galileo and others are able to demonstrate that the heliocentric view is false.

The human planet is nothing special.

Disruption #2

The 19th century: Evolution tells a new and compelling story about the origin of the human body.

The human body is nothing special.

Disruption #3

19th-20th century: Freud tells us human consciousness results from causal forces over which we have at best only partial control. Immaterial souls do not exist.

The mind is the brain. Mental activity ceases after death of the body. Our actions and decisions are not free.

The human mind is nothing special.

These revolutions in thought account for the turn to secularism in the culture and in philosophy.

Educated people gradually became aware that the Christian story was not “factual”. Christians like Kierkegaard (19th-century) even acknowledged religious faith was a kind of insanity.

So the secular point of view is adopted by the majority of educated people, including philosophers.

Back to the meaning of life.

Most contemporary philosophers – both Continental and Anglo-American – agree that we have to settle the following three questions of definition before we can begin to talk intelligibly about the meaning of life.

1. What does “life” mean in the context of this question?
2. What does “the” mean?
3. What does “meaning” mean?

The meaning of the word “life” in this context

When people sincerely ask “What is the meaning of life?” in the usual sense (“I am feeling unfulfilled, empty, bored, hopeless, etc., and I am asking for help”), the appropriate human response is NOT

“Well, just look up *life* in the dictionary!”.

Furthermore, when people ask about the meaning of life, they probably don't mean *any and all life* (plant life, for example).

I don't think anyone urgently needs to know the meaning of broccoli, for example.

In the context of the sincere question “What is the meaning of life?” we primarily mean *human* life.

So far, so good.

The Meaning of “the”

In the languages of modern Western philosophy (mainly English, French, German) we find common words denoting what logicians call *definite description*.

These are the words corresponding to “the” in English.

A definite description is a word that introduces or modifies *a single unique entity*.

There are two ordinary kinds of definite descriptions:

1. Phrases of the form “*the X*”; and
2. Proper names (in context).

When my friend says “Open *the* door”, she’s talking about one specific door. Which door is determined by context, but the word “the” tells us the speaker has exactly one door in mind.

Proper names such as “Barack Obama” or “New York City” denote specific single individual things.

Even class names, like “*the* set of all men named John” can be definite descriptions if you think classes are real (in addition to individual things). Since we sense only individual things, and classes are abstract objects (not sensed), whether and how classes are real is still a hotly debated issue in philosophy.

So phrases of the form “*the X*” denote *one* thing.

Asking about “the” meaning of life implies we’re looking for one and only one meaning that applies to every human.

The meaning of “meaning”

Anglo-American philosophers have standardized the notion of “meaning” in verbal definitions.

(Intro Logic texts typically devote an entire chapter to the this.)

There are four main kinds of verbal definitions:

1. Lexical definitions
2. Stipulative definitions
3. Persuasive definitions
4. Theoretical definitions

Examples

Lexical:

Dictionary definitions

Stipulative:

“Let’s call the offspring of a male tiger and a female lion a *tigon*.”

Persuasive:

“Liberal” means “drippy-eyed do-gooder”

Theoretical:

“ ‘Table’ means any object that conforms to the Form of Tableness, and a ‘table’ is ‘better’ than another if it more closely approaches the Form of Tableness.”

I think we should reject lexical, stipulative, and persuasive definitions of the meaning of life.

When people ask “What is the meaning of *life*?”, they are not asking for a lexical definition of *life*. As we have seen, in the sense of meaning we want, you can’t just “look it up”.

Nor are they asking primarily for a stipulative definition – a proposal about the new word *life*. They already know what they mean by *life*.

Nor are they asking primarily for a persuasive definition. The point of a persuasive definition is to beg the question. To say “Abortion is defined as the ruthless killing of helpless babies” sidesteps all the pesky moral issues surrounding abortion, and stops argument in its tracks, because nobody is in favor of the ruthless killing of innocent babies.

When people ask “What is the meaning of life?” they want a **single theoretical definition of primarily human *life***: a narrative, or a story of their boring, painful, bound-to-die life that makes sense to them and hopefully, makes their boring, painful, death-destined life more bearable.

Here are some common theoretical definitions that purport to explain the meaning of life :

- Typical Christian narrative: Life is your chance to know and love God and obey God's commands so you can attain an eternal reward.
- Trump-type narrative: Life is all about getting as much money and power as you can.
- Family/Community narrative: Life's purpose is caring for and promoting the well-being of family and community.

- Aesthetic narrative: Life is all about experiencing as much high-quality pleasure (fine arts, good music, great literature, etc.) as you can.
- Biological narrative: Life is all about genetic replication, adaptation, for the purpose of continuation of the human species.
- Social Justice narrative: Life's purpose is to do whatever we can to create a fair and just society.
- Absurdist narrative: Life is absurd; it has no objective meaning, so we should either kill ourselves or we should live passionately in the face of death.

The candidate meanings I have described are not the only possibilities. These are just some of the common narratives. But of course, people could invent other more idiosyncratic ones, e.g.,

The meaning of life is winning at golf.

The meaning of life is caring for animals.

The meaning of life is growing new varieties of roses.

The meaning of life is to protect the planet.

Etc.

Because Anglo-American philosophers focus on linguistic analysis, logic, argument, and scientific method, I think you might begin to see why Anglo-American philosophers don't talk about "the" "meaning" of "life", then.

Reason #1: The Problem of "the"

As we have seen, *the* meaning of life implies a single meaning of life. Not many possible meanings.

Given the meaning of "the", if you argue for a single one over all the others, you must also be able to deliver convincing arguments showing why your winning theory beats out all the others. That's just what philosophers do; we are nothing if not *thorough*.

Reason #2

Given the meaning of life as *every human* life, the winner in this meaning of life contest must apply to every human. The religious narrative, for example, claims to apply to every human, but given that contemporary philosophy is secular, the religious narrative presupposes non-material entities (e.g., God, angels, demons), and is thus unacceptable.

The biological narrative applies to every human, but the biological narrative doesn't satisfy the living human questions: it probably doesn't make anybody feel more fulfilled and alive.

The Trump narrative ("seek power") leaves out the people over whom the power is exercised.

Reason #3

All these narratives are too simple.

They beg important philosophical questions: i.e., they assume philosophical questions have been settled when in fact, those questions are still very much debated.

Each one introduces more philosophical problems.

For example,

The religious narrative presupposes the existence of a God and as we have seen, most contemporary philosophers of both traditions reject non-material entities.

The Trump narrative ignores many important ethical questions about justice and fairness. Is it fair that some people acquire great wealth and power while others starve? “Power” here means power over other people (if Trump is our role model). So clearly this option leaves out the people over whom one has power, so by definition, it does not apply to all human lives.

The family/community narrative does not address the fundamental question of why anyone should prefer the interests of their family or community over others. This question comes up in ethics all the time.

The aesthetic narrative presupposes that we know how to distinguish better and worse aesthetic creations. Is Mozart “better” than Dolly Parton? (if so, why?) Is Leonardo da Vinci “better” than Mark Rothko? (if so, why?) This is a topic for aesthetics.

The biological narrative doesn't begin to address the questions people usually have in mind when they ask about the meaning of life. The biological narrative doesn't say anything about people's subjective experiences.

People want a narrative that shows how their lives can be more fulfilling, not pointless, not boring, not fragmented, not alienated. The narrative should also provide guidance for how to think about death.

The social justice narrative assumes we know what a fair and just society would look like. And this raises other questions. “Is a just society one in which everyone has approximately the same level of material wealth, or is it permissible for some people to have a lot more than others?” Questions about human nature also arise, e.g., “Are gender roles biologically determined, such that the ideal society would encourage women to choose stay-at-home motherhood over careers in the world?”

The absurdist narrative – Life is absurd; it has no objective meaning, so we should either kill ourselves or we should live passionately in the face of death – brings us to the Continental approach.

Recall that Continental philosophy focuses on human experience, subjectivity, human values in the face of the death of God.

Continental philosophers think highly of the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

Nietzsche (1844-1900) rejects the Christian God because he thinks Christianity teaches people that suffering is good and pleasure is bad – with the tragic result that people endure their suffering humbly and *never really live*. He said Christianity teaches people to suffer and “long for death”.

Christianity teaches that all human souls are equally valuable to God, and therefore a virtuous person must treat all people with equal care and respect. Nietzsche thinks this is nonsense. Like Plato, he thinks it obvious that people (men, for Nietzsche) – the stronger, more intelligent, more dominant – are more valuable than others.

Nietzsche thinks Christianity brainwashes the superior men into thinking they should sacrifice themselves to serve the inferior ones, when the “natural law” is the opposite: the superior men should rule over the inferior ones. Christianity is bad because it reverses what Nietzsche takes to be the “natural” order: it makes the superior men the slaves and the inferior men the masters.

Nietzsche urges the superior men to claim their true nature and destiny – to create meaningful lives on their own terms.

Continental philosophers after Nietzsche generally rejected the Nazi implications of his thought – both Camus and Sartre fought in the French Resistance during WW II.

But most Continental philosophers of the mid-20th century agreed with Nietzsche that life has no intrinsic meaning; and they also admired Nietzsche's call to reject conventional wisdom and conventional morality in order to choose your own authentic life.

Albert Camus (1913-1960), for example, says the only real philosophical question is whether to kill oneself. Because "God is dead", there is no ultimate divine warrant for any particular choice. In Camus' novel *L'Étranger*, a man commits a random murder just because he feels like it, and in the end looks forward to his execution when people will greet him with cries of hatred.

Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) wrote a novel titled *Nausea* (nausea being, in his view, the appropriate response to the world) and a play called *No Exit* in which the characters are trapped forever in an enclosed space without any means of escape. The last line of *No Exit* is “Hell is other people”.

The absurd life doesn't sound like much fun.

For Continental philosophy as I have described it, the choice of meaning is always accompanied by **anguish**, because if God is dead, no meaning is “objectively” better or worse than any other.

Every human life is **absurd**, then. We *must* choose (or live in “bad faith”), yet my choice is justified only by the fact that I chose it. I can't be “certain” in any objective way.

Thus, for Continental philosophy, if life is to have meaning to anyone, each person must choose or create that meaning for themselves. There is no “the” meaning of life – no single meaning of life.

So you can see why Continental philosophers don't address the question of "the" (singular, unique) meaning of life:

The meaning of life is whatever you choose it to be.

No meaning is "the" meaning of life.

So Anglo-American and Continental philosophical traditions are **both silent** on the question of the meaning of life for three main reasons:

1. The use of “*the*” in the phrase “the meaning of life” implies a single meaning for human life generally. But neither tradition gives a satisfactory “objective” single answer.

2. Anglo-American philosophers don't talk about the meaning of life because all the ordinary proposed narratives about the meaning of life are overly simplistic. They all beg important, relevant philosophical questions. They presuppose that philosophical questions about human nature, social justice, aesthetic value, etc. already have answers.
3. Continental philosophers assume the Absurdist position. They take for granted that God is dead, so life has no meaning. You're on your own.

So don't be naïve. If anyone tells you they can explain the meaning of life in words, you can be pretty sure they're not academic philosophers.