**The Meaning of Life**

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**What is the meaning of life? To answer this question, it is necessary to understand what it is asking. Words have meanings, but obviously “What is the meaning of life?” is not asking the meaning of the word „life‟. If you want to know the meaning of life, you will not get an answer to your question if you learn that life is, say, a self-organising process in which a system of production modules makes things that perpetuate the modules‟ own existence.**

How are we to understand the expression “the meaning of life” if not in this over-literal way? One possibility is that the phrase means something equivalent to “the purpose of life.” The words „meaning‟ and „purpose‟ are often substitutable in this way. For instance, if I find your behaviour puzzling, I can equally ask what the *meaning* of your behaviour is and what the *purpose* of your behaviour is. For life to have a purpose in this sense would be for some individual(s) to have created all human life, or the universe as a whole, and to have had a purpose in doing so. The meaning of life would then be the purpose this individual (these individuals) had in creating things as they were created. One common conception of the meaning of life is that there is a person, God, whose purpose in making people was that people would then be able to appreciate the greatness of God, for example. But, as philosopher Tom Nagel has argued, this is not the sense of “the meaning of life” people are usually interested in. Suppose an alien species created human life in order to provide them with a future food supply. Then the purpose of human life is to be food for aliens. That would be the meaning of life, if we take

„meaning‟ to mean „purpose‟. But learning that this was the meaning of human life would not really answer the question you were asking, if you wanted to know the meaning of life. This is because learning the meaning of life is supposed to be comforting, and to guide your decisions about how to act so as to help you attain a meaningful-feeling life. Learning that aliens had a certain purpose for human life would not help with these things.

In the same way, suppose a person like God exists, and that the purpose of human life is to glorify God. That is what God made people to do (if you don‟t believe this yourself, go along with the idea for a moment for the sake of the argument). Still, if you ask “What is the meaning of life?” and you learn that you were created in order to glorify God, this may leave you fairly unimpressed. You might find this a better purpose than being food for aliens, but not one that, somehow, gives your life *meaning*. Some people might find this purpose one which was comforting and motivating, but others might not. Yet the meaning of life is supposed to be something which, by definition, comforts those who learn it

and which would help them to make their lives feel meaningful. Thus, the sense of the question “What is the meaning of life?” is still unclear.

There is at least one more way in which to understand “the meaning of life.” Sometimes we ask things like “what does it mean when the sky above is blue but there is a dark line all the way around the horizon?” or say “I wonder what the meaning of my ex‟s new message on the answering machine

might be.” The word „meaning‟ in this context means something much more like “information” or “upshot.” You can wonder what information the sky provides without thinking there is a purpose behind it, and you can wonder what the upshot of a message might be without failing to understand the sentence making it up. In this sense, asking what the meaning of life is would come to something like asking what information life gives us, what it teaches. Presumably, since the meaning of life is

supposed to be universal, comforting, and useful to make your life feel more meaningful, the question “What is the meaning of life?” should be understood, on the present way of thinking, as asking “What information does life give everyone which is (if understood and accepted) universally comforting and good for making life feel more meaningful?” If this question were answered, it would, I think, be a good answer to the question “What is the meaning of life?”

Religions often claim that the information life gives us is that we will be comforted and feel our lives meaningful if only we will accept that religion. Jesus, or the revelations of the prophet Mohammed, or Buddhist insight, or Taoist interpretations of the world, or the like are said to comfort and provide meaning to all who accept them. And indeed, many religions seem to offer a kind of comfort to those who believe, even when they are very poor or in difficult circumstances. Likewise, many religious people feel that their lives are full of meaning. They don‟t feel empty or directionless or unmotivated: they have a clear mission in life. The only problem with these religions is that *many* of them work very well for achieving these ends. Thus, no single religion can justify the claim that it alone holds the meaning of life (in this third sense), since life does not teach us that only one religion can accomplish the things that knowing the meaning of life is supposed to accomplish. This might lead us to speculate that religion in general is the meaning of life—that life teaches us to embrace whatever religion suits us best—but this too is unlikely. After all, people who are not inclined to the supernatural, and who insist on getting answers to all possible questions, are not likely to find any religion comforting or capable of adding a feeling of meaning and purpose to their lives.

Life teaches us that finding out what we really care about, and then working for those things, is what brings comfort and purpose to life. Some people really care about a particular religion or group of divine beings (or one being), and these people can find meaning in their lives, at least in part, by being involved in religion. But these same people also usually care deeply about a few other things as well— family, or excellence at playing a musical instrument, or the thrill of challenging one‟s physical limits, or the satisfaction of a perfectly crafted piece of furniture. They will not have as meaningful lives as possible unless they work for these other things as well. A person who cares about Thor, gardening, and his own children will, in the long run, feel that there is something wrong with his life unless he devotes himself to Thor, gardening, and his children. These non-religious sources of meaning in life are, of course, just the sorts of things non-religious people will find provide them with meaning too. People for whom religion is not a matter of profound concern will not find that it brings comfort or a feeling of purpose, but the things they care about—friends, family, work, love, knowledge, art, or even bowling—these things will do so, in a way nothing else can.

**Thus, the meaning of life is the lesson of life that we need to be happy, and that lesson is this: learn what you care about (and if you don‟t care much about anything, find something to care about and cling to it!) and devote yourself to it.**