The Meaning of Life

The School of Life

The Meaning of Life

Published in 2019 by The School of Life
70 Marchmont Street, London WC1N 1AB

Printed in Latvia by Livonia Print

A proportion of this book has appeared online at thebookoflife.org

The School of Life offers programmes, publications and services to assist modern individuals in their quest to live more engaged and meaningful lives. We've also developed a collection of content-rich, design-led retail products to promote useful insights and ideas from culture.

www.theschooloflife.com

ISBN 978-1-912891-18-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

The Meaning of Life

The School of Life

Contents

iii. Selflessness

iv. Immortality

v. The art of storytelling

Introduction

To wonder too openly, or intensely, about the meaning of life sounds like a peculiar, ill-fated and unintentionally comedic pastime. It isn't anything an ordinary mortal should be attempting, or would get very far by doing. A select few might be equipped to take on the task and discover the answer in their own lives, but such ambition isn't for most of us. Meaningful lives are for extraordinary people: saints, artists, scholars, scientists, doctors, activists, explorers, leaders... If we ever did discover the meaning, it would, we suspect, be incomprehensible; perhaps written in Latin or in computer code. It wouldn't be anything that could orient or illuminate our activities. Without always acknowledging it, we are operating with a remarkably ungenerous perspective on the meaning of life.

Yet, in truth, the subject is for everyone. It is for all of us to wonder about, and define, a meaningful existence. There need be nothing forbidding about the issue. A meaningful life can be simple in structure, personal, usable, attractive and familiar. This is a guidebook to it.

A meaningful life is close to, but at points importantly different from, a happy life. Here are some of its ingredients:

- A meaningful life draws upon, and exercises, a range of our higher capacities; for example, those bound up with tenderness, care, connection, self-understanding, sympathy, intelligence and creativity.
- A meaningful life aims not so much at day-to-day contentment as fulfilment. We may be leading a meaningful life and yet often be in a bad mood – just as we may be having frequent superficial fun while living, for the most part, meaninglessly.
- A meaningful life is bound up with the long term. Projects, relationships, interests and commitments will build up cumulatively. Meaningful activities leave something behind, even when the emotions that once propelled us into them have passed.

- Meaningful activities aren't necessarily those we do most often. They are those we value most highly and will, from the perspective of our deaths, miss most deeply.
- The question of what makes life meaningful has to be answered personally, even if our conclusions are marked by no particular idiosyncrasy. Others cannot be relied upon to determine what will be meaningful to us. What we call 'crises of meaning' are generally moments when someone else's – perhaps very well-intentioned – interpretation of what might be meaningful to us runs up against a growing realisation of our divergent tastes and interests.
- We have to work out, by a process of experience and introspection, what counts as meaningful in our eyes. Pleasure may manifest itself immediately, but our taste in meaning may be more elusive. We can be relatively far into our lives before we securely identify what imbues them with meaning.

This book considers a range of options to discover where meaning might lie for us. It is anchored around a discussion of eight centrally meaningful activities: love, family, work, friendship, culture, politics, nature and philosophy. Most are well known; the point here is not to identify entirely new sources of meaning so much as to try to evoke and explain some familiar choices. The options should provide orientation, enabling us to find our own preferences or, when we dissent, to design alternatives.

Along the way, we hope to underscore that our lives are more meaningful – and certainly more capable of meaning – than we might initially suppose. Increasing the amount of meaning in our lives doesn't have to involve any radical outward moves. Our lives almost certainly already have some hugely meaningful aspects to them, but we may not be correctly valuing, understanding or appreciating these. It is time to turn the pursuit of a meaningful life from a comically complex impossibility to something we can all comprehend, aim for and succeed at.

II.

Sources of Meaning

i. Love

Care

One way to get a sense of why love should so often be considered close to the meaning of life is to look at the challenges of loneliness. Frequently, we leave the topic of loneliness unmentioned: those without anyone to hold feel shame; those with someone might feel (a background degree of) guilt. But the pains of loneliness are an unembarrassing and universal possibility. We shouldn't feel lonely about being lonely. Unwittingly, loneliness gives us the most eloquent insights into why love matters so much. There are few greater experts on the importance of love than those who are bereft of anyone to love. It is hard to know quite what all the fuss around love might be about until and unless one has, somewhere along the way, spent some bitter, unwanted passages in one's own company. When we are alone, people may try to show us kindness; there may be invitations and touching gestures, but it will be hard to escape the lingering sense of the conditionality of the interest and care on offer. We are liable to sense the limits of the availability of even the best-disposed companions and sense the restrictions of the demands we can make upon them. It is often too late, or too early, to call. In bleak moments, we may suspect we could disappear off the earth and no one would notice or care. In ordinary company, we cannot simply share whatever is passing through our minds: too much of our inner monologue is overly petty or intense, random or anxiety-laden to be of interest. Our acquaintances have an understandable expectation, which it would be unwise to disabuse them of, that their friends should be normal.

We must operate with a degree of politeness, too. No one finds rage or obsession, peculiarity or bitterness especially charming. We can't act up or rant. A radical editing of our true selves is the price we must pay for conviviality.

We have to accept too that much of who we are won't readily be understood. Some of our deepest concerns will be met with blank incomprehension, boredom or fear. Most people won't care. Our deeper thoughts will be of scant interest. We will have to subsist as pleasant but radically abbreviated paragraphs in the minds of almost everyone.

Love promises to correct all these quietly soul-destroying aspects of single life. In the company of a lover, there need be almost no limits to the depths of concern, care, and licence we are granted. We will be accepted more or less as we are; we won't be under pressure to keep proving our status. It will be possible to reveal our vulnerabilities and compulsions and survive. It will be OK to have tantrums, to sing badly or to cry. We will be tolerated if we are less than charming or simply vile for a time. We will be able to wake up our lover at odd hours to share sorrows or excitements. Our smallest scratches will be of interest. We will be able to raise topics of awe-inspiring minuteness (it won't have been like this since early childhood, the last time kindly others expended serious energy discussing whether the top button on our cardigan should be done up or left open).

In the presence of the lover, evaluation will no longer be so swift and cynical. They will lavish time on us. As we tentatively allude to something, they will become eager and excited. They will say 'go on' when we stumble and hesitate. They won't just say 'poor you' and turn away. They will search out relevant details; they will piece together an accurate picture that does justice to our inner lives. The fragile parts of ourselves will be in safe hands. We will feel immense gratitude to this person who does something that we might have come to suspect would be impossible: to know us really well and still like us. We will have escaped from that otherwise dominant and devastating sense that the only way to get people to like us is to conceal most of who we are.

We will start to feel as if we exist. Our identity will be safe; we won't be the only guardians of our story. When the world's disinterest chills and erodes us, we will be able to return to the lover to be put back together again, reflected back to ourselves in terms that reassure and console us. Surrounded on all sides by lesser or greater varieties of coldness, we will at last know that, in the arms of one extraordinary, patient and kindly being worthy of infinite gratitude, we truly matter.

Admiration

In Plato's dialogue *The Symposium* (c. 385–370 BCE), the playwright Aristophanes suggests that the origins of love lie in a desire to complete ourselves by finding a long-lost 'other half'. At the beginning of time, he ventures in playful conjecture, all human beings were hermaphrodites with double backs and flanks, four hands and four legs, and two faces turned in opposite directions on the same head. These hermaphrodites were so powerful and their pride so overweening that Zeus was forced to cut them in two, into a male and a female half – and from that day, each one of us has nostalgically yearned to rejoin the part from which he or she was once severed.

We don't need to buy into the literal story to recognise a symbolic truth: we fall in love with people who promise that they will, in some way, help to make us whole. At the centre of our ecstatic feelings in the early days of love there is gratitude at having found someone who seems to complement our qualities and dispositions. Unlike us, they have (perhaps) a remarkable patience with administrative detail or an invigorating habit of rebelling against officialdom. They may have an ability to keep things in proportion and to avoid hysteria. Or it might be that they have a particularly melancholy and sensitive nature and are in touch with deeper currents of thought and feeling.

We do not all fall in love with the same people because we are not all missing the same things. The aspects that we find desirable in our partners speak of what we admire but do not have secure possession of in ourselves. We may be powerfully drawn to the competent person because we know how our own lives are held up by tendencies to panic around bureaucratic complications. Our love may zero in on the comedic sides of a partner because we're only too aware of our tendencies to sterile despair and cynicism. Or we may be drawn to an atmosphere of thoughtful concentration in a partner as a relief from our own skittish minds.

We love in part in the hope of being helped and redeemed by our lovers. There is an underlying desire for education and growth. We hope to change a little in their presence, becoming, through their help, better versions of ourselves. Just below the surface, love contains a hope for reparation and education. We usually think of

education as something harsh imposed upon us against our will, but love promises to educate us in a more gentle and seductive way.

Aware of our lover's qualities, we may allow ourselves some moments of pure rapture and undiluted enthusiasm. The excitement of love stands in contrast with our normal disappointments and scepticism about others; spotting what is wrong with a person is a familiar, quickly completed and painfully unrewarding game. Love gives us the energy to construct and hold on to the very best story about someone. We are returned to a primal gratitude. We are thrilled by apparently minor details: that they have called us; that they are wearing a particular pullover; that they lean their head on their hand in a certain way; that they have a tiny scar over their left index finger or a habit of slightly mispronouncing a word…. It isn't usual to take this kind of care over a fellow creature, to notice so many tiny, touching, accomplished and poignant things in another. This is what parents, artists or a God might do. We can't necessarily continue in this vein forever, and the rapture may not be entirely sane, but it is a hugely redemptive pastime – and a kind of art all of its own – to give ourselves over to properly appreciating the real complexity, beauty and virtue of another human being.

Desire

One of the more surprising, and at one level perplexing, aspects of love is that we don't merely wish to admire our partners; we are also powerfully drawn to want to possess them physically. But we can only start to understand the role of sexuality in love if we can accept that it is not just a physical experience that we want.

Sex delivers a major psychological thrill. A lot of our delight has its origin in the idea of being allowed to do a very private thing to and with another person. Another person's body is usually a highly protected and private zone. It would be deeply offensive to go up to a stranger and finger their cheeks or touch them between their legs. The mutual permission involved in sex is dramatic and at the core of our desire. We're implicitly saying to another person through our unclothing that they have been placed in a tiny, intensely policed, category of people; that we have granted them an extraordinary privilege.

Therefore, it is not so much what our bodies do in sex that generates our excitement; it is what happens in our brains. Acceptance is at the centre of the kinds of experiences we collectively refer to as ‘getting turned on’. It feels physical: the blood pumps faster, the metabolism shifts gear, the skin gets hot. But behind all this lies a very different kind of pleasure rooted in the mind: a sense of an end to our isolation.

ii. Family

Emotional nepotism

One of the things that makes families so important and so meaningful is that they are centres of unashamed nepotism. We are used to thinking negatively of nepotism. We are taught that a good society is one in which people rise and fall according to their own merits or flaws, and do not gain unfair favour from their families. But, in a crucial emotional sense at least, most of us don't actually believe this. We are all, more or less, emotional nepotists.

Historically, the idea of nepotism in Europe was particularly associated with the Catholic Church during the Renaissance. The word 'nepotism' was born when a series of popes took to appointing their nephews (*nipote* in Italian), along with other family members, to top jobs irrespective of their talents and simply on the basis of their connections.

In 1534, the already elderly Alessandro Farnese was elected pope and took the name Paul III. One of the first things he did was to elevate his young grandson (also called Alessandro) to the influential and lucrative position of cardinal. He made another grandson the duke of one of the small Italian states that was, at that time, directly under the control of the pope. It was all appallingly unfair. In this regard, nepotism presents a deep affront to modern enlightened ideals of open competition, especially around work and careers.

Nevertheless, we have to admit that the idea of bias towards relatives possesses – in the emotional as opposed to the professional sense – a reassuring and attractive side as well. What's more, we have all already been the beneficiaries of the starkest, grossest nepotism. We wouldn't have got here without it. That's because when we

were born, despite the millions of other children in the world, irrespective of our merits (we didn't really have any), our parents and wider family made the decision to take care of us and to devote huge amounts of time, love and money to our well-being. This was not because we had done anything to deserve it – at that time, we were barely capable of holding a spoon, let alone saying hello – but simply because we were related to them.

TITIAN, *Pope Paul III and His Grandsons*, 1545–46.

Nepotism is what ensures that a series of tantrums will be forgiven; that unpleasant traits of character will be overlooked; that we'll be supported as we rant and rage in the small hours; that parents will forgive children who have not been especially good – and that children with somewhat disappointing parents will still, despite everything, show up for the holidays.

Because of the existence of family, we've all experienced belonging, not based on our beliefs, accomplishments or efforts (all of which may change or fail), but on something purer and more irrevocable: the fact of our birth. In a world in which our employment generally hangs by a thread, in which we are judged swiftly and definitively by almost everyone, in our families at least, we know that we can't be sacked, even if we don't make very special conversation at dinner and have failed dismally in our careers. Given how fragile our standing generally is in the eyes of others, this is a source of huge ongoing emotional relief.

Within families, there is often a welcome disregard not just for demerit but for merit as well. Within the family, it may not really matter how badly, or how well, you are doing in the world of money and work. The daughter who becomes a high court judge will probably not be loved any more than the son who has a stall in the market selling origami dragons; the steely negotiator and demanding boss in charge of the livelihoods of thousands may be teased endlessly by their relatives for their poor taste in jumpers or tendency to belch at inopportune moments.

Although nepotism is genuinely misplaced at work, some version of nepotism is extremely important in our emotional lives. However competent and impressive we might be in some areas, there will inevitably be many points at which we are distinctly feeble, and where we urgently need at least a few people to be patient with our failings and follies; to give us a second chance (and a third and a fourth) and to stay on our side even though we don't really deserve it. Good families aren't blind to our faults; they just don't use these faults too harshly against us.

Knowledge

Our family members are probably the only people in the world who ever deeply understand key parts of us. Perhaps we don't always get on better with them than with other people. They might not know the details of our current friendships or the precise state of our finances. But they have a knowledge of the underlying atmosphere of our lives that others will almost certainly lack.

When we make new acquaintances in adult life, we are necessarily meeting relatively late on in our respective developments. We might learn the broad outline

of their childhood, but we won't know what the holiday caravan or the beach house were really like; we won't understand the details of the jokes, the smells, the textures of the carpets or the favourite foods, or the finer-grained aspects of the emotions in circulation.

With family members, the knowledge tends to be the other way round. They might not know too much about our present and they weren't necessarily ideally wise or intelligent witnesses, but they were there – which gives them a definitive edge in grasping a great share of who we might be. Relationships in adult life are often complicated by a lack of intimate knowledge of the past. If we had been the brother or sister of the loud, domineering figure we meet for the first time over dinner, we would have understood that they were still, at root, trying to be heard by their inattentive mother. As a result, we would know the perfect response ('I'm listening now') that would instantly have calmed them down. If we had shared a bath with the tough, exacting chief financial officer at work when we were three, we would know that his highly rigorous, inquisitorial approach (which is so off-putting) was an attempt to stave off the chaos that surrounded him at home after his parents' messy divorce. The full facts would make us much more ready to be patient and generous.

Safe strangeness

One of the reliable horrors, but also profound advantages, of families is that they force us to spend time around people we would otherwise never know about, thought we wanted to meet, or imagined we could get along with.

Our friendships and professional networks are hugely but harmfully efficient at keeping us closely tied to a particular age, income and ideological bracket. We subtly yet firmly expel all those who do not flatter our world view. Family life does the opposite. It is because of the unique structure of a family that an 82-year-old woman and a 4-year-old boy can become friends or that a 56-year-old dentist and an 11-year-old schoolgirl can have an in-depth conversation about tyre pressure or splash each other at the beach.

The family creates an environment in which there is enough safety to allow for encounters with radical strangeness. A brother-in-law will bring us into contact with

life in the Russian diamond market; the university researcher who has just published a paper on the carbon cycle in the Takayama forests of Japan gets to sit down for lunch with an accountant specialising in insolvency cases. And in family settings, points of connection end up being found despite all the obvious differences. We do the dishes with someone whose political views are pretty much the opposite of our own but discover we agree about how to rinse glasses properly. We rescue the picnic from an unexpected downpour with someone who earns 83 times more than us serving as our loyal assistant. Prompted by our nieces and nephews, we get into an adult vs. child water gun fight, supported by a cousin whom our friends would dismiss as a long-haired loser but whom we realise is great at spotting an opportunity for an ambush.

Families, at their best, hold out against generational segregation: we get to hear the political views of a great-aunt and encounter convictions that were widespread in 1973. We receive an update on the dramas of the junior hockey league; a younger cousin is agonising over school exams and tentatively exploring what they might like to do after turning 21; an uncle has recently retired and is trying to come to terms with a life without work; at the funeral of a grandparent there is an 18-month-old niece crawling around, and we are temporarily connected with the world of changing nappies and messy spoon feeding.

So often, otherness – other stages of life, other attitudes, other outlooks – are presented to us in tricky guises that make it hard for us to engage with them confidently. It is not surprising, or intrinsically shameful, that we are often awkward around people who seem to be quite unlike us, but our picture of them (and hence of ourselves) is thereby drastically impoverished and inaccurate. When family life goes well, on the other hand, we are exposed – at first hand, and in a warm way – to ranges of human experience that might otherwise only be presented to us in caricatured and frightening styles in the course of our independent lives.

Parenthood

Most of our lives are spent in situations of numbing sterility. There is usually no option but to conform and obey impersonal rules. In our work, we don’t generally create anything of particular wonder or interest. We don’t know how to paint or to

play Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor. We can't personally manufacture an iPhone; we don't know how to extract oil from the ground.

And yet, without being conscious of the specifics, we are at points capable of doing something properly miraculous: we can make another person. We can conjure up the limbs and organs of a fellow creature. We can create a liver; we can design someone else's brain; we can – by ingesting a mixed diet perhaps including bananas, cheese sandwiches and ginger biscuits – make fingers; we can connect neurons that will transmit thoughts about the history of the Ancient Persians or the workings of the dishwasher. We can choreograph the birth of an organic machine that might still be going close to a hundred years from now. We can be the master coordinator and chief designer of a product more advanced than any technology and more complex and interesting than the greatest work of art.

Having a child definitively refutes any worry about our lack of creativity and dismantles (at least for a while) the envy we might otherwise feel about the inventiveness of others. They may have written a stirring song, started and sold a bioengineering company or plotted an engaging novel. But we will have created the oddest yet most inspiring work of art and science around: one that is alive; one that will develop its own centres of happiness and secrecy; one that will one day do its homework, get a job, hate us, forgive us, end up being, despite itself, a bit like us and, eventually, make humans of its own who can spawn themselves into perpetuity.

However much they may resent one another, grow apart or be worn down by the humdrum nature of family life, parents and children are never entirely able to get past the supernatural sequence of events that connects creators and created. Because two people met fifteen years ago in a friend's kitchen, liked the look of one another, swapped phone numbers and went out for dinner, there is now – across the table – a being with a particular sort of nose, a distinctive emotional temperament and a way of smiling that (as everyone remarks) strikingly echoes that of a dead maternal grandfather.

Parenting demands that one address the greatest, founding philosophical question: what is a good life? As we go about answering it in our words and actions over long years, we will know that we have been spared the one great fear that otherwise haunts us and usually manifests itself around work: that of not being able to make a