

Commonplace

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1 Orientation

Meaning is not a property of objects; certain objects are meaningful to certain people but not to others. Meaning is also not something a subject can generate at will. Rather, meaning emerges during the right interaction between the subject and the object. Since meaning is not a property of objects, there is no meaning *of* life, there is only meaning *in* life; *in* the way you interact with your life. So the question is not "What is the meaning of life?" but "How can I interact with life such that I can experience meaning?". The answer to the first question would have been a propositional one such as "The meaning of life is X." However, since the first question is invalid we have to answer the second one. And the second question does not expect a proposition as an answer, but an action. From this we get

The first change in orientation: from rigid ideas and abstract ideals to the lived experience.

So, there is no distant objective meaning of life X that you have to strive towards, but rather, each and every one of your interactions with life can either be a meaningful one or not. Thus, with regards to meaning,

Virtue is the only good, and vice the only evil; everything else is indifferent.
— Seneca, "Letters to Lucilius", Letter LXXVI

This brings us to

The second change in orientation: from having (objects, achievements, status, desired circumstances) to engaging in the right interactions.

Now, because meaning emerges during interaction, living a meaningful life also involves

The third change in orientation: from self-centeredness to caring for others.

At the core of a meaningful life is the shift from "How can the world be relevant to me? How can I derive what I want from it? How can I make it fit my ideas?" to "How can I be relevant to the world? How can I be relevant to myself, to others, and to something that transcends me (e.g., a child, a form of art)?" This is a synthesis of John Vervaeke's research on meaning in life and it aligns with findings from the 80-year Harvard Study of Adult Development. As the study authors conclude:

Among Harvard Study participants, the happiest and the most satisfied adults were those who managed to turn the question "What can I do for myself?" into "What can I do for the world beyond me?"
— Robert Waldinger and Mark Schulz, "The Good Life"

As Seneca would put it:

No one can lead a happy life if he thinks only of himself and turns everything to his own purposes. You should live for the other person if you wish to live for yourself.

— Seneca, "Letters to Lucilius", Letter XLVIII

2 Metaphysics

Now, because a meaningful life is based on relationships,

The good life is a complicated life. For everybody. The good life is joyful . . . and challenging. Full of love, but also pain. And it never strictly happens; instead, the good life unfolds, through time. It is a process. It includes turmoil, calm, lightness, burdens, struggles, achievement, setback, leaps forward, and terrible falls.

— Robert Waldinger and Mark Schulz, "The Good Life"

And the natural question to ask as a follow-up is "Why didn't God create an existence without suffering?" And the answer to that, following John Vervaeke following Aristotle and Spinoza, is that God, as the ultimate cause of everything, *is* existence; God could not have created a different existence because God *is* existence.

Consider how the chain of causation works using this example of me holding a glass of water in the air:

The First Link: The glass of water has the potential to be up in the air but it actually is in the air only because my hand actually holds it there right now. My hand has the potential to hold the glass in the air but having the potential is not enough; my hand has to *actually* hold the glass in the air.

The Second Link: My hand has the potential to hold the glass in the air, but in order to actually do so it needs my arm to actually support it right now in this position.

The Third Link: My arm has the potential to hold my hand in that position, but in order to do so it needs my shoulder to actually hold it so that it can actually hold the hand so that the glass can actually be in the air.

The General Rule: Each link borrows its actualizing power from the link above it. If at any second you were to take away any link from this chain, everything further down the chain would lose its causal power. If you take away the shoulder, the glass will fall on the ground; it will no longer be up in the air, and neither will the arm or the hand. Everything that has a potential requires a prior link to actualize that potential.

The Final Link: Therefore, the chain must ultimately rest on something that has no potential, so that it does not require a prior cause. Thus, the ultimate cause of everything, the Nature of all things, the causeless cause, God, is pure actuality with no potential, namely: existence itself.

Antonio can refer to two things: Antonio as a whole and Antonio himself. The whole and the self are different. Similarly, Nature can refer to two things: Nature as a whole and Nature itself. **Nature as a whole is existence as a whole (everything that exists) and Nature itself is existence itself. Therefore, the Nature of all things, God, could not have created a different existence because God is existence.**

Therefore, God has two limitations: (i) God cannot choose to not exist, and (ii) God could not have created a different existence. God could not have created a different existence because God is existence, and because God is existence itself

God cannot choose to not exist.

These two limitations also bind us. We cannot choose to not exist: we are collections of cellular components that will persist after the death of this organism, becoming parts of other organisms (plants, animals, bacteria) that will continue to suffer. The physical laws organizing these components into living beings will endure unchanged as well. Therefore, we—as cellular components temporarily organized as such by these laws—cannot solve suffering through death. Our only option is to use this configuration to ensure that when we inevitably partake in future organisms, we suffer as little as possible.

But the future is not so far away. We are biologically interconnected with Nature, not only through birth and death, but continuously. Every month I ingest and eliminate an amount of food and water equal to my entire body weight. Thich Nhat Hanh beautifully pointed out that when you look mindfully, you can see the clouds in a piece of paper. Similarly, when you look mindfully, you can see the clouds in your own body. The rain fell and became the water you drink, which flows through your blood and cells. When you breathe and sweat, that water evaporates back into the air to become clouds again. I am not a fixed biological entity separated from Nature; rather, Nature continuously creates me through this cycle of exchange. As such, there is a single Nature that continuously twists itself into countless different beings.

Nature as a whole is a living, moving organism, that has reason (the laws of physics; everything in Nature happens for a reason, everything in Nature happens as a consequence of the rules/laws of Nature), a body (the atoms), and a direction (constant change and motion).

Since neither Nature itself (pure actuality) nor Nature as a whole can choose to not exist, its only option is to take care of itself while it in-

evitably exists while understanding that it could not have been anything other than what it currently actually is. So we, as manifestations of Nature, have no option but to try to take care of Nature as a whole to the best of our abilities, while understanding that Nature could not have been any different than it currently actually is.

This is enough for me to justify the fact that a meaningful life is a life dedicated towards contributing to the world at large while understanding that it could not have been any different. God could not have created a different world with different rules because God is the world with all its rules. As a consequence of the fact that everything evolves geometrically out of the rules of nature, the people you encounter could not have been any different than they currently actually are.

Say to yourself the first thing in the morning: today I shall meet people who are meddling, ungrateful, aggressive, treacherous, malicious, unsocial. All this has afflicted them through their ignorance of true good and evil. But I have seen that the nature of good is what is right, and the nature of evil what is wrong; and I have reflected that the nature of the offender himself is akin to my own—not a kinship of blood or seed, but a sharing of the same mind, the same fragment of divinity. Therefore I cannot be harmed by any of them, as none will infect me with their wrong. Nor can I be angry with my kinsman or hate him. We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against nature: and anger or rejection is opposition.

— Marcus Aurelius, “Meditations”, Book II

Adapting Robert Sapolsky’s points from “Determined”, if people could have chosen to have the capability, the upbringing and the knowledge re-

quired to understand virtue and to live a virtuous life everybody would have chosen to, but they could not. However, even with all our imperfections, we can still experience meaning by engaging in acts of caring; by orienting towards, by developing, and by identifying with our capacity for caring.

Well, what does Zeus say? "Epictetus, if it were possible, I would have made your little body both free and unrestricted. As it is, though, make no mistake: this body does not belong to you, it is only cunningly constructed clay. And since I could not make the body yours, I have given you a portion of myself instead, the power of positive and negative impulse, of desire and aversion—the power, in other words, of making good use of impressions. If you take care of it and identify with it, you will never be blocked or frustrated; you won't have to complain, and never will need to blame or flatter anyone. Is that enough to satisfy you?"

"It's more than enough. Thank you."

— Epictetus, "Discourses", Book I

The man who is to give you the poison has been telling me for some time, that I should warn you to talk as little as possible. People get heated when they talk, he says, and one should not be heated when taking the poison, as those who do must sometimes drink it two or three times.

Socrates replied: "Take no notice of him; only let him be prepared to administer it twice or, if necessary, three times."

I was rather sure you would say that, Crito said, but he has been bothering me for some time.

Let him be, he said. I want to make my argument before you, my judges, as to why I think that a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be a good cheer in the face of death and to be very hopeful that after death he will attain the greatest blessings yonder.

— Plato, "Phaedo", 63d

3 Character

The aim is thus to remain in genuine relationship with what transcends you—other people, living systems, future generations, the specific communities you are embedded in, forms of arts and crafts, knowledge, value systems, practices and ecologies of practices, traditions—while being caring enough to act on their behalf, humble enough to keep investigating whether your current understanding of what benefits them is mistaken, and resilient enough to accept what the process costs. Socrates exemplifies this in Crito, he first rigorously examines whether fleeing would be consistent with what he genuinely owes to Athens and to justice, and then actively commits to his death penalty in Phaedo:

If being the cornerstone of Western thought for 2500 years to date and having countless people trying to embody your character over millennia can be considered to be among the greatest blessings, then Socrates has indeed attained them. By manifesting the type of character that embodies the qualities we have highlighted, Socrates was able to experience meaning in the face of injustice and death. My primary endeavor is thus, actively engaging in embodying and manifesting Socrates' character. In a sense, his character still lives in us, his "soul" (the original greek word for soul being psyche) is very much alive and thriving, still helping people, still philosophizing, as he speculated in Phaedo.

Now, with regards to the embodying process, there are a few components to it. Firstly, I think Socrates' ability to let the guard be while continuing to pursue something valuable that transcends him (in this case, the practice of philosophical inquiry) is eloquently captured in Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT). So we have:

The first component: Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT).

Selected resources: "Get Out of Your Mind and Into Your Life" or "A Liberated Mind" by Steven C. Hayes.

In the context of this character, ACT is properly framed within the Stoic and the Spinozistic worldview and ethics; the further developed systems of metaphysics and ethics that enabled Socrates to cheerfully commit to his death penalty in the quote from Phaedo. So we have

The second component: Stoic and Spinozistic worldview and ethics.

Selected resources:

1. Meditations — Marcus Aurelius
2. The Inner Citadel — Pierre Hadot
3. The God of Einstein and Spinoza — John Vervaeke
4. Complete Works — Spinoza

Now, these first two components can be more harmful than beneficial without the investigative process that Socrates employs in order to make sure that his actions properly serve the community. And ability to properly investigate is a skill that is acquired.

So much at least I can confirm with confidence about any who have written or propose to write on these questions, pretending to a knowledge of the problems with which I am concerned, whether they claim to have learned from me or from others or to have made their discoveries from themselves: it is impossible, in my opinion, that they can have learned anything at all about

the subject. There is no writing of mine about these matters, nor will there ever be one. For this knowledge is not something that can be put into words like other sciences; but after long-continued intercourse between teacher and pupil, in joint pursuit of the subject, suddenly, like light flashing forth when a fire is kindled, it is born in the soul and straightway nourishes itself.

— Plato, "Letter VII", 341c

By writing drama instead of a treatise, Plato afforded us the opportunity to accompany Socrates in his daily affairs. Plato afforded us the opportunity to spend time with Socrates and to learn from his character, to acquire skills from him. Read to be transformed, not informed; look at the character behind the events, at the decisions he makes, at his values, at his behavior. When reading, try to place yourself in the dialogues and imagine yourself in Socrates' position; try to imagine what his mind must have been like in order to produce those decisions and behaviors, and try to embody it. There is an element of beauty to this, reading Plato is a profound act of friendship.

Cleanthes would never have been the image of Zeno if he had merely heard him lecture; he lived with him, studied his private life, watched him to see if he lived in accordance with his own principle. Plato, Aristotle and a host of other philosophers all destined to take different paths, derived more from Socrates' character than from his words. It was not Epicurus' school but living under the same roof as Epicurus that turned Metrodorus, Hermachus and Polyaenus into great men. And yet I do not summon you to my side solely for the sake of your own progress but for my own as well, for we shall be of the utmost benefit to each other.

— Seneca, "Letters to Lucilius", Letter VI

Francisco Gonzales made an astonishingly excellent point about this, so I refer to his book for

The third component: Investigation. Learning to investigate and engaging in investigative processes in order to determine what the best course of action is for each situation you encounter.

Selected resources:

1. Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry — Francisco J. Gonzales
2. Complete Works — Plato

Now, the most important point about this investigative process, is that it necessarily happens in a community; it necessarily happens in dialogue. In the quote from Phaedo, Socrates presents his arguments to the people around him, whom he calls his judges. You see things from your perspective, so the only way to investigate whether or not your perspective is the right one for the situation, is via an external observer, that is: another human being. An external observer has the ability to look *at* your perspective rather than *through* your perspective so the investigation can happen. This brings us to

The fourth component: Community. Continuously engaging in dialogue with other people so that you can gain access to different perspectives and continuously adapt your own.

Now, if the perspectives we exchange during these dialogues are to help us better ourselves in any way, they have to be based as much as possible on knowledge rather than speculation. One of the accusations brought against Socrates that resulted in the death penalty presented in the quote from Phaedo was that he believed the Moon is a rock rather than a deity. This brings us to

The fifth component: Science. Being acquainted with the latest science available for as many domains as possible in order to understand as much as possible about the world so that your decisions and your judgment are as informed as possible. Find highly refined and highly curated books or lecture series from rigorous scholars who have dedicated their lives to the subject and cover as many domains as possible and a spectrum of domains that is as broad as possible.

Finally, the core requirement of this constant effort of continuous learning coupled with continuous investigation is intellectual humility, namely, the ability to recognize that you are always acting out using incomplete knowledge, finite experience and limited computational power and committing to continuously updating your understanding. Note how in the quote from Phaedo, Socrates argued that "a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is *probably* right to be a good cheer in the face of death". So,

The sixth component: Intellectual humility.

Selected resources:

1. Superforecasting — Philip Tetlock

I wanted to say that this is the final component and the end of the commonplace but this sixth component prompts me to continuously update it. As such, I am to devote continuous and considerable care to this commonplace and to my character. So I will leave myself with a question to help me return to it.

While being received in the house of a man who had devoted considerable care to his many possessions, while leaving only him-

self in utter neglect, Diogenes cleared his throat and looked around him, but instead of choosing any nearby spot, spat directly at the master of the house. And when the man grew angry and asked why he had done that, he said that he could see nothing in the house that had been so neglected as its owner. For every wall was adorned with wonderful paintings, and there were images of the gods on the floor portrayed in magnificent mosaics, and all the furniture was bright and clean, and the coverings and couches were beautifully adorned, leaving their owner as the sole thing there that could be seen to have been neglected; and it is the universal custom in human society to spit in the worst available place.

— Diogenes, "Diogenes the Cynic: Sayings and Anecdotes, With Other Popular Moralists. A new Translation by Robin Hard. Oxford World's Classics.", 145b

If Diogenes were to enter into your life at this very moment, and be surrounded by everything that currently comprises it, such as your material possessions, your achievements, your status, your relationships, your work, your habits, your character, and everything else, after he clears his throat, where would he spit?