

My General Philosophy—Finding Meaning

Many people, like me, probably struggle with the notion that there are reasons why we are here. I would say that even if someone claims to have it all figured out there are always moments when they question their reality. Therefore it can be difficult for people to find meaning in life, or at least it can be difficult for me. But I do believe that it is possible and necessary. To me it seems that most people try to find meaning by way of consistency but my premise is the opposite! Life is inconsistent and chaotic and so the way to find meaning is not through dogma but by diving into the chaos.

The general rule is thus: there is no one philosophy or set of rules that can govern reality or how we should live. No philosophy is appropriate for every situation. Some of them even go against human nature. For example, Kant's categorical imperative can be very useful, but it is too rigid. Under the categorical imperative something like lying could be considered morally unjust, but there can be a situation where lying is the right thing to do! From a utilitarian perspective, if lying would result in more good than telling the truth, then it may be morally justifiable. But once again there is a problem with that point of view. We can only make guesses about the future, and the further we look the more events become probable in an endless tree of possibilities. So it is really impossible to be absolutely certain that the actions we take will truly lead to the best outcome. There lies the problem with utilitarianism.

The bane of every ethical philosophy is abstraction, which is why nihilism is very attractive. Nihilism doesn't have the weakness of abstraction because the very core of nihilism is the ultimate abstraction: nothingness. Since

every other philosophy eventually crumbles, the conclusion must be that there is no meaning! But although that is a logical conclusion, reality is not a very logical or rational place. It is ironically an error in logic that reality is logical, and in an effort to make sense of the world we forget that the world doesn't necessarily make any sense. As Plato said, we are trapped in a dark cave looking at shadow puppets, unaware of the true nature of reality outside of our extremely narrow perspective. Everything we believe we know is a *guess* based on evidence based on an environment filtered through our senses. And so the nihilists conclude that there is nothing, no meaning, but don't realize that it is just as presumptuous as believing we have the answer.

I believe that there is meaning. I cannot prove that there is, only show my thought processes, feelings, and experiences that lead me to believe in meaning. There are three levels to consider in philosophy: the abstract, the practical, and the metaphysical. Each level requires a different approach to finding meaning. Practical philosophy falls apart in the abstract and has no bearing on the metaphysical. Abstract philosophy attempts to supersede the practical, but fails in the face of real situations. Metaphysical philosophy transcends the physical universe and attempts to establish the basis for abstract and practical philosophy, but it is esoteric and apparently detached from reality. The three levels exist on a spectrum from practical to abstract to metaphysical. Meaning has to be extracted from all three levels.

Practical Philosophy

The practical level is the most straightforward but arguably the most difficult because it has real consequences for being “wrong”. Practical philosophy can be likened to ethics because, like ethics, practical philosophy governs how we should conduct ourselves in relation to others. However, the two are not exactly the same. Practical philosophy extends further than ethics. For example, ethics does not concern itself with how things are defined and with laying boundaries; things which practical philosophy is precisely concerned with. Thus ethics can be said to fall under the set of practical philosophy.

Definitions and boundaries are important because unless we know *what* we are arguing, or where things start and end, it isn’t possible to determine the correct course of action or the correct state of mind. Thus definitions and boundaries are practical philosophical pursuits because knowing them leads to direct, practical outcomes. Therefore, it can be said that practical philosophy is a philosophy of outcomes. If there is no sought outcome or end state, then it is not practical.

How can meaning be extracted from a philosophy which is concerned with the end state? In order to practically find meaning we have to find meaning. It doesn’t seem to make any sense. But it is actually the wrong approach. It really isn’t possible to find meaning from practical philosophy—that is to say it is impossible to find meaning by *searching* for it. Meaning presents itself on its own accord through the end states of practical philosophy, and it is indescribable. It is something we simply feel.

Abstract Philosophy

The abstract level is hard to define because it sits on the boundary between practical and metaphysical and it serves as the transition level between the two. Abstract philosophy is concerned with the underlying principles and reasons behind practical philosophy. For example, many (probably most) people believe that cutting in line is wrong for practical reasons: if everyone cut in line then waiting for anything would be too chaotic to be at all effective. Thinking abstractly, why exactly would that happen? Or more appropriately, why would that even be undesirable? Why would it be bad? Thus abstract philosophy can also be called extrapolated practical philosophy.

Finding meaning in the abstract level is challenging because it seems to extend forever. Anyone who has ever talked to a child will run into the endless “Why?”. Children, and Socrates, are famous for responding to every answer with another “Why?”, to the point where their poor victim will eventually become so annoyed that they dismiss the child altogether (or in the case of Socrates, kill). “Why is the sky blue?” “Because light from the sun scatters and refracts and only the blue light shines through.” “Why?” “Because light particles can collide with air particles and bounce off of them.” “Why?” “Because light particles and air particles both have mass and take up space, and no two things can occupy the same space.” “Why?” and so on and so forth. Eventually there comes a point where nobody knows the “true” answer. That is the realm of metaphysical philosophy.

If meaning in the practical level is found in the end state, and the abstract level is an extrapolation of the practical, then it follows that meaning is found in the abstract *in the pursuit*. That is because once an end state is developed by practical philosophy it becomes

the starting position of abstract philosophy. When a child asks why the sky is blue, no one lays the foundation first, they go to the end state. The sky is blue because of light scattering. It is only after the child persists that they are forced to examine and contemplate the reasons.

Completion is both a blessing and a curse at the same time because with completion comes a feeling of emptiness. When we finish something, or when we reach a far-away conclusion, we are left with the question, “now what?”. We are always striving for greater and greater accomplishments, and that feeling extends into the realm of philosophy. If meaning were only to be found in the end state then there would be no point in pursuing it! There are many things which are unsolvable, unachievable, and impossible to know, yet those are the very things worth solving, achieving, and knowing. In the abstract, pursuit is meaning.

Metaphysical Philosophy

By extending the abstract so far that it exceeds the realm of physics we enter the metaphysical level. Coming from the Greek meaning “*beyond nature*”, metaphysical philosophy is what it truly means to go beyond into the unknown; into the unknowable. Metaphysical philosophy concerns itself with the essence of

things. What is knowing? What *is* knowledge? Therefore metaphysical philosophy also asks what is the essence of meaning?

If metaphysical philosophy makes us question what meaning even is, then how could it be that meaning could be derived from it? To find the answer we simply need to look at the physical and abstract levels. In the physical meaning is extracted from the end state. In the abstract meaning is found in the pursuit of meaning. Thus, knowing that the metaphysical is an extrapolation of the abstract, we can derive the source of meaning, metaphysically, in the extrapolation of meaning in the abstract. A runner can find meaning in a race in three places—two of which are at the finish line (finishing the race) and at the race itself (in racing). The third is found by extrapolating from the first two: the runner’s very ability to run the race. As such, meaning can be found in the metaphysical level by the very fact that we can ask the question “what is meaning?”. The fact that we can question meaning makes it real.

I fully believe it is possible to live a meaningful life. What sort of meaning is different for everybody; it really depends on where we look. In my opinion it’s all about what and who we resonate with. All we need to do is take it in.