

The Meaning of Life 2

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Introduction

Recall Tolstoy's question:

... My question - that which at the age of fifty brought me to the verge of suicide - was the simplest of questions, lying in the soul of every man from the foolish child to the wisest elder: it was a question without an answer to which one cannot live, as I had found by experience. It was: "What will come of what I am doing today or shall do tomorrow? What will come of my whole life?" (Tolstoy, p.14)¹

Differently expressed, the question is: "Why should I live, why wish for anything, or do anything?" It can also be expressed thus: "Is there any meaning in my life that the inevitable death awaiting me does not destroy?" (Tolstoy, p.14)

Life has meaning only if it has significant value or purpose over time, where this value makes life choice worthy. There are two different ways of understanding this value:

- **Internal Value:** the value or purpose that comes when people see their goals or purposes as inherently valuable or worthwhile.
- **External Value:** Meaning or purpose that comes from outside of ourselves in relationship to something that we may or may not be aware of.

When we ask about the meaning of life, we are asking about internal value. We are asking why we should feel that there is something in our lives that makes them worthwhile. Is there any project or goal that could shape our psychology so dramatically that we are motivated to get up in the morning, keep going, and find all the trials and tribulations of life worthwhile? Pessimists, recall, claim no. Their argument:

¹Tolstoy, Leo, 'A Confession', 1882

1. Life is choice worthy only if it has internal value.
2. Life has internal value only if life has external value.
3. Life has no external value.
4. Life has no internal value (from 1–3).
5. Life is not choice worthy (from 1 & 4).

This argument is valid; the conclusion follows from the premises. Is it sound, i.e., are the premises true? The most important Premises are 2 and 3, which we saw Tolstoy arguing for via a fable. We can summarize his argument for Premise 2 as follows:

- a. I will find some project/goal valuable over a long period of time, only if I believe that project/goal is externally valuable.
- b. None of my projects/goals are externally valuable.
- c. I will inevitably discover that my projects/goals have no external value.
- d. I will inevitably cease to find internal value in my life (from a–c).
- e. I will inevitably cease to find life choice worthy (from d)

Why did Tolstoy accept Premise 3? I suggested that Tolstoy assumes that a goal or project has external value only if that goal contributes towards some eternal enterprise.

Optimism

Optimists claim the Tolstoy's arguments for Premises 2 and 3 fail. There are two versions of Optimism. The first version accepts Premises 1 and 2, but rejects Premise 3. They find external value in religion. The second type of Optimist accepts Premise 3, that life has no external value, but denies that internal value depends on there being external value, i.e., they deny Premise 2. The first type of Optimism is associated with Theism, the second with Atheism. I discuss each in turn.

Theism

Tolstoy did not remain depressed. He reports meeting and talking with rural farmers at a time in Russia when farmers lived a menial existence. They had nothing. Yet Tolstoy sees in these rural farmers an acceptance of life's vicissitudes. Reclaiming his faith, he realized that he had found value in the wrong things. His art, his family, etc., could never provide the meaning he had sought. None of these could live forever. But since God is an eternally perfect being, Tolstoy thought He could provide that value. These two claims summarize Tolstoy's new optimistic views:

1. A human's life has external meaning only because it is part of God's plan, a grand cosmic order that encompasses every entity in the universe.
2. A human's life can have internal meaning if they align their life—their goals, projects, ambitions—with God's plan.

On this view, life will be choice worthy if you can identify God's plan for you and set about realizing that plan.

Meaning & Christianity

Tolstoy doesn't detail how Christianity construes the meaning of life. He merely says that if you believe that God exists, then you can see that your life has some external value. But can we say something more about what this external value consists in?

At this point, Christians point to one person, Jesus, who they claim had a meaningful life. Reflecting on the details of his life, we might construe the internal and external value of his life as follows:

- **Prime Example:** His life had a purpose. All of Jesus' life involves suffering for the sake of mankind. Saving mankind is the external value his life had. All the aspects of his life were organized around this one overarching purpose; he thought his life had God given external purpose and spent his time and energy trying to fulfill that purpose.

Christians also emphasize other characters with God given purposes. Noah, the Saints, the Apostles, are all individuals who were supposedly given important jobs by God. These tasks, these jobs, give their life external value according to Christianity. Their lives also had internal value because they identified their God given purposes, saw them as worthwhile, and devoted their time and energy to realizing them.

Objection

Here I briefly raise a problem for this account of the meaning of life. Suppose we grant that the lives of Jesus, Noah, the other Saints had external value because each of them had a God given purpose. It does not thereby follow that each human has a God given purpose. The candidates for this God given purpose seem unsatisfactory:

- **Suggestion 1:** Our purpose is to serve God.

This is a very natural suggestion. A Theist might claim that we were created by God to do his will. That would seem to give our lives the significance we desired. The problem, though, is that being in service to someone is not obviously a thing we would always choose. Granted, if God created us to serve him, then our lives would be significant to God. But notice that bees are significant to the bee keeper, yet that hardly shows us why a bee should find its own life significant.

To motivate this objection, consider the very far fetched idea that God created us to perform a very specific role. Once our species has grown large enough, he will signal to an alien race to move to Earth where they will find a new rich food source. Us! If this were the case, God would have created us to be the food in some alien's hamburger. We would have a role in his grand design. We would even know what it is. I doubt, though, that anyone would be happy to find out that they were created as food for some superior being. A menial role in a stage designed for another does not make life choice worthy.

There is a second worry with the claim that God created us to serve him. God is all loving, all knowing, and all powerful. If he is all loving, he would never have created us merely to serve him, especially since our lives involve so much suffering and pain. Suppose that we had the ability to create a new fully conscious species. It is only an evil creator that would create such beings to suffer and toil in servitude to them.

- **Suggestion 2:** The existence of God shows that we have a purpose, but we do not know what that purpose is.

God is all loving, therefore he would never have created us without a purpose. However, since he is all loving, he would never have created us merely to serve him. Nevertheless, we do not know why he created us. We do not know to what end he intended our lives to serve.

This also seems a natural suggestion. The idea is that we do have a purpose, but we just do not know what it is. The problem is that the suggestion avoids answering the question at hand. How, if at all, would the existence of God provide life with external meaning?

By themselves, these objections do not completely undermine the Theist's account of the meaning of life. What they do, however, is show that belief in God should not in itself be comforting. For God's existence to be comforting, we need to know why he created us, to what end our lives serve. Unless those details are forthcoming, the unsettling possibility is left open that he created us for reasons that none of us should be happy to live with.

Atheism

Our second optimistic approach to the meaning of life rejects the need for external value altogether. These optimists ask us to consider the lives of people

who clearly lead meaningful lives. If we can identify why we think those lives valuable, we might be able to decide how, we ourselves, can live meaningful lives without external value.

Who has lived a meaningful life? M.L.K, Gandhi, Einstein, Leonardo Di Vinci are clear candidates. Can we see anything similar to their lives? Here are two candidates:

- **Candidate 1:** A person's life is meaningful if and only if their life makes them happy.

Candidate 1 is an obvious suggestion. Maybe you can live a meaningful life by just living a happy life. The difficulty with Candidate 1 is that there are many obvious cases of people who lived meaningful, but unhappy lives. Gandhi, Mother Teresa, and Einstein, for example were not happy, but they lived meaningful lives. Additionally, obvious cases of meaningless lives are filled with a good amount of subjective happiness and contentedness. So happiness doesn't make a life meaningful. As an example, watch this vide about the experience machine: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yJ1dsNauhGE>

Susan Wolf has offered the following alternative account:

- **Candidate 2:** A meaningful life is one that is a) actively and at least somewhat b) successfully engaged in a project (or projects) of c) positive value.²

Wolf's account has three distinct conditions. She argues for each by contrasting meaningful and meaningless lives. Her example of a meaningless life is 'The Blob:' a person who spends every moment in front of a television set, drinking beer and watching situation comedies. Compare the Blob to the life of Iran Deckard in Phillip Dick's *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, or the soma consuming citizens of Aldous Huxley's, *A Brave New World*, or the television watchers of Ray Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*, or the citizens of The Capitol in Suzanne Collins' *The Hunger Games*. These are all examples of people who live lives that are subjectively pleasant, but are meaningless.

Active vs. non-Active Life

Our first condition says that a meaningful life must be one that is actively engaged. Consider the cases of people whose lives are useless due to a lack of activity: the Blob sitting on the sofa day in, day out, drinking beer and watching terrible television. That life is meaningless precisely because of the lack of activity.

²'The Meaning of Lives', Susan Wolf

Wolf asks us to conclude with her that a meaningful life must be one actively engaged in some project, where these projects are any kind of ongoing activity or involvement. The projects engage the person, they see them as constituting part of what their life is about and they pursue them with zest.

Success vs. non-Success

Consider cases in which the project around which somebody has organized their life is revealed to be bankrupt, e.g., the inventor who devotes their life to creating an automated car only to be beaten to the punch by Google. Or the CEO who spends a life developing a business that is superseded by new technologies, e.g., the CEO of a nuclear power plant company that ends up seeing nuclear power replaced by solar power. These lives are clearly tragic. There's something miserable about devoting your life to a project that never sees fruition.

In contrast, the lives of M.L.K, Gandhi, Mandela were clearly meaningful. Not only did they single-mindedly pursue some project, they were successful. So too were those athletes who spent every waking moment not only training for the olympics, but securing a place and doing well. (Compare this to, say, the person who trains all day every day to compete for the Olympic track team, but has never and will never run a mile in less than 10 minutes)

These cases show us that for a life to be meaningful it must be organized around some project that the person succeeds at (or at least has a very reasonable chance of succeeding at).

Projects of Positive Value

Consider cases in which a life, though actively engaged, is wasted on a project without any positive value. Someone might decide to adopt as their life project the task of counting the number of grains of sand on Sandy Hook beach. Someone might decide to take as their project the task of everyday digging a hole and re-filling it. These projects energize the person; they actively pursue them. Furthermore, the person might succeed at these projects. Nevertheless, a life devoted to such works seems utterly worthless.

Wolf concludes from this that a meaningful life must be one dedicated to project of some positive value.

Objection

The Atheist claims that life can have internal value without external value. Wolf's defense of this claim relies on the claim that a life must be devoted to a project of positive value. That is, it is not enough that you value a project, the project itself must be of some genuine positive value. It seems we are back

where we started. Tolstoy worried that since he and everyone else will ultimately die, none of his goals and accomplishments were of any external value. If a goal had positive value, it would have external value. So Wolf owes us an account of external value that is compatible with our mortality.