



CHAPTER

9

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THE MEANING OF LIFE

CHAPTER OBJECTIVES

9.1 OVERVIEW: PHILOSOPHY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

- Understand why people think questions concerning the meaning of human existence are extremely important and relevant.
- Understand why and how examining the question of life's meaning is personal.
- Explain the difference between external and internal meaning.

9.2 PESSIMISM: LIFE HAS NO MEANING

- Summarize the pessimistic views of Tolstoy, Schopenhauer, and Darrow.

- Critically examine the case for pessimism and that for optimism.

- Assess Baggini's charge that pessimists confuse external and internal meaning.

9.3 OPTIMISM: LIFE CAN HAVE MEANING

- Explain the religious externalist approach to life's meaning.
- Critically examine Tolstoy's view and his justification for it.
- Explain why some philosophers think the notion of a God assigning a purpose to humans should be objectionable to believers and nonbelievers alike.

- Summarize the internalist's position on life's meaning and produce an argument for or against it.

- Devise an argument for the idea that death and the ephemeral nature of human endeavors are irrelevant to the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a person's existence.

9.1 OVERVIEW: PHILOSOPHY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

Enter: a contented man. He makes his living crafting ornate clay pots, which he sells to the people in his village. He loves his work and is mostly satisfied with his life. But one day a friend gives him a philosophy textbook, which he begins to read, starting with the last chapter entitled “The Meaning of Life.” A question in the first paragraph jumps out at him: “Does life have meaning?” He has never thought seriously about the meaning of life, and as he ponders the question, he realizes he has no answer. And he does not have an answer even after fretting over the question for several days. For most of his life, he has made pots, day after day, all of them the same shape and size, all of them produced in exactly the same way—and he seems destined to endure this monotony into old age. What is the point? he thinks. What does it matter whether I make a million pots or none? What has my life been about? What meaning or purpose does my life have? Is life meaningless? He has no idea. And the thought of a meaningless existence brings on a crushing despair that cannot be eased by drink, or drugs, or distracting activity. As his misery deepens, the potter stops making pots, and he wonders why he ever started.

For the meaning of life differs from man to man, from day to day and from hour to hour. What matters, therefore, is not the meaning of life in general but rather the specific meaning of a person's life at a given moment.

—Viktor E. Frankl



Figure 9.1 People often begin their search for meaning by asking, “What is the meaning of life?” But the first step in finding answers is to understand the question.

Life has no meaning the moment you lose the illusion of being eternal.

—Jean-Paul Sartre

Do you see any resemblance between the potter and yourself in this little tale? It would not be surprising or unusual if you did. At one time or another, in one way or another, most people ask themselves if life has any meaning, any point. Like our potter, many of them seem satisfied with their lives—until they begin to wonder whether it is a meaningless charade. Then “the meaning of life”—a phrase often tossed around in mock seriousness or for comedic effect—is infused with a more somber tone. A few insist that questions about the meaning of existence are themselves meaningless. But most who have contemplated such things take them to be extremely important and relevant to their lives. Many philosophers have tried to clarify the concepts involved and to give discussions of life’s meaning more precision, but they too think the questions about meaningful or meaningless lives are worth asking and answering. The existentialist philosopher Albert Camus, for one, declares that “judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy. All the rest—whether the world has three dimensions, whether the mind has nine or twelve categories—comes afterwards.”¹

Some people, including a fair number of students, think philosophy is *mostly* about the question of life’s meaning. In a sense, they are not far wrong. Most of the topics covered in the preceding chapters—God, free will, knowledge, ethics, and justice—can inform your thinking about this important sort of meaning. And your conclusions about the meaningfulness of life are directly or indirectly related to your actions and beliefs regarding lifestyle, work, morality, political involvement, free will, God, and other issues. If by thinking carefully about life’s meaning (or lack thereof) you decide to dramatically change your career choice, you would not be the first.

What, besides a course in philosophy, can push someone into this kind of serious reflection? Often the tripwire is a disturbing thought—the inevitability of death, the brevity of life, the smallness and triviality of our lives compared with the unimaginably vast universe, the shortness of our lives in the context of eternity, or the eventual obliteration of everything we have cared for or created.

Consider this odd fairytale based *very loosely* on a real event. A graduate student with a master’s degree in business pays a visit to a philosophy professor. The student has come seeking something that she has so far failed to acquire in her studies: the ultimate secret, the meaning of life. The professor pauses, then answers in his best guru-like voice, “The meaning of life is . . . a big purple thing.” Silence. The professor chuckles; the student doesn’t know whether to laugh or sigh.

With his absurd answer the professor means to make a point, or several. There is no great secret concerning the meaning of life, no cryptic bit of knowledge that, once known, will reveal all. There is no slogan or incantation or parable that will ensure your life is worth living. Moreover, no one can simply hand you the meaning of life as if it were a gift basket. The process of examining the question of life’s meaning or purpose is *personal*. You have to make that journey yourself. No one can bestow upon you what you must find for yourself, no more than a friend can tell you what your favorite foods are supposed to be.

Probably most philosophers would agree with all this. Many would also add that although there is no straight road to understanding the “big question,” there are guideposts here and there that can help you find your way, some of which we discuss in the following pages.

Many people think they have an intuitive grasp of what is meant by “the meaning of life.” But the concept in common usage is actually vague and slippery. So, for purposes of this discussion, we can say that to ask whether your life has meaning is to ask whether it has significant value or purpose over time beyond the good of merely being alive. Through the centuries, people have claimed that such significant value is derived from being part of God’s plan, serving the greater good of humankind, helping others, caring for and protecting family, giving and receiving love, creating art, searching for knowledge, and many other activities and states.

Philosophers have gone further and distinguished life’s value or meaning from happiness and moral rightness. Someone might be continually and blissfully happy because she is, for example, taking psychotropic drugs, but few would call such a life meaningful. And some people can lead meaningful lives while being miserable because their meaningful activities are arduous or dangerous. Physicians working in a war zone treating wounded children may be sad because of the suffering they witness—and still feel their lives have meaning. Moreover, many things that people do to add meaning to their lives are also morally right, but moral rightness and meaningfulness need not go together. While creating a beautiful painting, an artist might add meaning to his life, but the act of creation seems to be morally neutral. Morality and meaningfulness are not synonymous.

Perhaps the main impediment to clear thinking about life’s meaning is confusion about what *meaning* refers to. Consider the phrase “the meaning of life.” For most people, these words refer to *external* meaning—meaning or purpose that comes

My life has no purpose,
no direction, no aim, no
meaning, and yet I’m
happy. I can’t figure it out.
What am I doing right?
—Charles M. Schulz



Figure 9.2 Is a meaningful life possible only when lived in accordance with God’s plan?



PHILOSOPHY LAB

Imagine that you are a devout person who feels that your life can be meaningful only if you act according to God's plan. Fortunately, an oracle can tell you exactly what God has in store. He wants you (and everyone else on the planet) to . . . serve as food for beings on another planet, who happen to be God's favorite people. You and all other humans, on the other hand, are to be meat for aliens.

Now that you know God's plan, is your life finally meaningful? That is, if you know only that God has a plan for you but know nothing about it, would that fact alone make your life meaningful?

1 When you talk about the meaning of life, which sense of the term do you use—external meaning or internal meaning?

Life takes on meaning when you become motivated, set goals and charge after them in an unstoppable manner.

—Les Brown

from outside humanity. Whatever meaning people have in their lives is bestowed or assigned by God, by some metaphysical order, or by the workings of some universal principle. For Christians, to have a meaningful life is to be part of God's plan for all of humankind. But many people also speak of a different kind of meaning—what some refer to as “meaning *in* life.” This is *internal* meaning—meaning or purpose that comes from inside people, that humans can give to themselves. In this view, life can be meaningful for persons if they come to see their goals or purposes as inherently valuable or worthwhile.

Many people, including those who accept a religious worldview, assume that if life has no external meaning, it has no meaning *period*. They believe humans can have a purposeful life only if God created them with a purpose. The opposing view is that even if there is no external meaning, people's lives can still be meaningful because meaning and purpose come from within. Because of these different senses of meaning, a person who states that life is meaningless may actually be asserting only that life has no external meaning but still has internal meaning. Someone who declares that life has meaning may reject the notion that humans are given a purpose by a higher power, claiming that lives are made meaningful only by human choices. Unfortunately, the phrase “the meaning of life” is frequently used to refer to both external and internal meaning.

To the question of whether life holds any meaning for us, there are two principal answers: (1) Life has no meaning (the *pessimist's* view) and (2) life in some sense does have meaning (the *optimist's* view). The optimist's answer can be further divided: Either (1) life's meaning is external (the common religious perspective) or (2) life's meaning is internal (the view held mostly by the nonreligious or nontheistic).

9.2 PESSIMISM: LIFE HAS NO MEANING

The pessimists (also called nihilists) have something in common with the religious optimists: They both believe that unless a divine entity or transcendent reality has provided the world with ultimate purpose or value, life is meaningless. In other words, life can have no meaning if external meaning is nonexistent.

Among famous pessimists we can count the renowned Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910). Before undergoing a Christian conversion (and becoming an optimist), he found himself at age fifty doubting the existence of God and being tortured by the thought that life was entirely without meaning or purpose. Here we can see that his agony at the loss of meaning was extreme:

Life is without meaning.
You bring the meaning
to it. The meaning of life
is whatever you ascribe it
to be. Being alive is the
meaning.

—Joseph Campbell

Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession*

[F]ive years ago something very strange began to happen with me: I was overcome by minutes at first of perplexity and then of an arrest of life, as though I did not know how to live or what to do, and I lost myself and was dejected. But that passed, and I continued to live as before. Then those minutes of perplexity were repeated oftener and oftener, and always in one and the same form. These arrests of life found their expression in ever the same questions: "Why? Well, and then?"

At first I thought that those were simply aimless, inappropriate questions. It seemed to me that that was all well known and that if I ever wanted to busy myself with their solution, it would not cost me much labour,—that now I had no time to attend to them, but that if I wanted to I should find the proper answers. But the questions began to repeat themselves oftener and oftener, answers were demanded more and more persistently, and, like dots that fall on the same spot, these questions, without any answers, thickened into one black blotch.

There happened what happens with any person who falls ill with a mortal internal disease. At first there appear insignificant symptoms of indisposition, to which the patient pays no attention; then these symptoms are repeated more and more frequently and blend into one temporally indivisible suffering. The suffering keeps growing, and before the patient has had time to look around, he becomes conscious that what he took for an indisposition is the most significant thing in the world to him,—his death.

The same happened with me. I understood that it was not a passing indisposition, but something very important, and that, if the questions were going to repeat themselves, it would be necessary to find an answer for them. And I tried to answer them. The questions seemed to be so foolish, simple, and childish. But the moment I touched them and tried to solve them, I became convinced, in the first place,

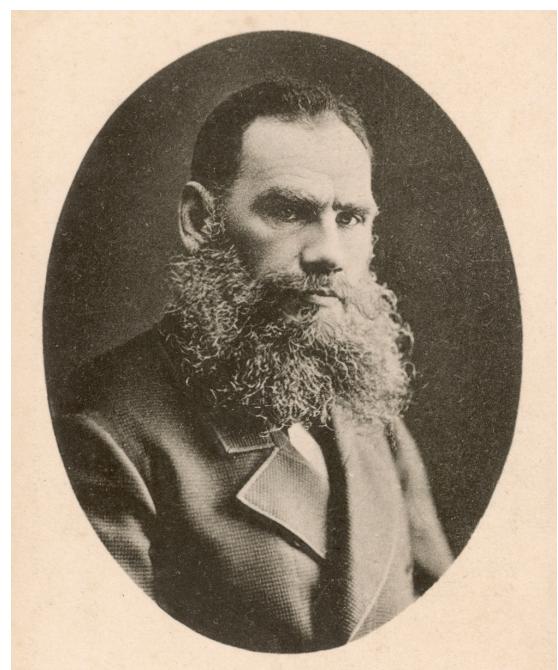


Figure 9.3 Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910).

Leo Tolstoy,
My Confession

2 Is Tolstoy's pessimism about life's meaning a result of his objective assessment of his life, or is it merely a product of his unique personality traits?

that they were not childish and foolish, but very important and profound questions in life, and, in the second, that, no matter how much I might try, I should not be able to answer them. Before attending to my Samára estate, to my son's education, or to the writing of a book, I ought to know why I should do that. So long as I did not know why, I could not do anything. I could not live. Amidst my thoughts of farming, which interested me very much during that time, there would suddenly pass through my head a question like this: "All right, you are going to have six thousand desyatinas of land in the Government of Samára, and three hundred horses,—and then?" And I completely lost my senses and did not know what to think farther. Or, when I thought of the education of my children, I said to myself: "Why?" Or, reflecting on the manner in which the masses might obtain their welfare, I suddenly said to myself: "What is that to me?" Or, thinking of the fame which my works would get me, I said to myself: "All right, you will be more famous than Gógol, Púshkin; Shakespeare, Molière, and all the writers in the world,—what of it?" And I was absolutely unable to make any reply. The questions were not waiting, and I had to answer them at once; if I did not answer them, I could not live.

I felt that what I was standing on had given way, that I had no foundation to stand on, that that which I lived by no longer existed, and that I had nothing to live by. . . .

All that happened with me when I was on every side surrounded by what is considered to be complete happiness. I had a good, loving, and beloved wife, good children, and a large estate, which grew and increased without any labour on my part. I was respected by my neighbours and friends, more than ever before, was praised by strangers, and, without any self-deception, could consider my name famous. With all that, I was not deranged or mentally unsound,—on the contrary, I was in full command of my mental and physical powers, such as I had rarely met with in people of my age: physically I could work in a field, mowing, without falling behind a peasant; mentally



Figure 9.4 Is life any less meaningful because it is short?

I could work from eight to ten hours in succession, without experiencing any consequences from the strain. And while in such condition I arrived at the conclusion that I could not live, and, fearing death, I had to use cunning against myself, in order that I might not take my life.

This mental condition expressed itself to me in this form: my life is a stupid, mean trick played on me by somebody. Although I did not recognize that "somebody" as having created me, the form of the conception that some one had played a mean, stupid trick on me by bringing me into the world was the most natural one that presented itself to me.

Involuntarily I imagined that there, somewhere, there was somebody who was now having fun as he looked down upon me and saw me, who had lived for thirty or forty years, learning, developing, growing in body and mind, now that I had become strengthened in mind and had reached that summit of life from which it lay all before me, standing as a complete fool on that summit and seeing clearly that there was nothing in life and never would be. And that was fun to him—

But whether there was or was not that somebody who made fun of me, did not make it easier for me. I could not ascribe any sensible meaning to a single act, or to my whole life. I was only surprised that I had not understood that from the start. All that had long ago been known to everybody. Sooner or later there would come diseases and death (they had come already) to my dear ones and to me, and there would be nothing left but stench and worms. All my affairs, no matter what they might be, would sooner or later be forgotten, and I myself should not exist. So why should I worry about all these things? How could a man fail to see that and live,—that was surprising! A person could live only so long as he was drunk; but the moment he sobered up, he could not help seeing that all that was only a deception, and a stupid deception at that! Really, there was nothing funny and ingenious about it, but only something cruel and stupid.²

The German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860), another famous pessimist, argues that life is so bereft of meaning and so fraught with misery that the nonexistence of the world is preferable to its existence.

3 What bearing, if any, does the ephemeral nature of our existence have on the question of whether life has meaning? Does the fact that we will die negate the possibility of meaning in life?

The sole meaning of life is to serve humanity.

—Leo Tolstoy

Arthur Schopenhauer, "On the Sufferings of the World"

Unless *suffering* is the direct and immediate object of life, our existence must entirely fail of its aim. It is absurd to look upon the enormous amount of pain that abounds everywhere in the world, and originates in needs and necessities inseparable from life itself, as serving no purpose at all and the result of mere chance. Each separate misfortune, as it comes, seems, no doubt, to be something exceptional; but misfortune in general is the rule. . . .

The best consolation in misfortune or affliction of any kind will be the thought of other people who are in a still worse plight than yourself; and this is a form of consolation open to every one. But what an awful fate this means for mankind as a whole!

We are like lambs in a field, disporting themselves under the eye of the butcher, who chooses out first one and then another for his prey. So it is that in our good days we are all unconscious of the evil Fate may have presently in store for us—sickness, poverty, mutilation, loss of sight or reason.

4 Is Schopenhauer right about the meaninglessness of life? Does the wretchedness of our existence show that life has no meaning?

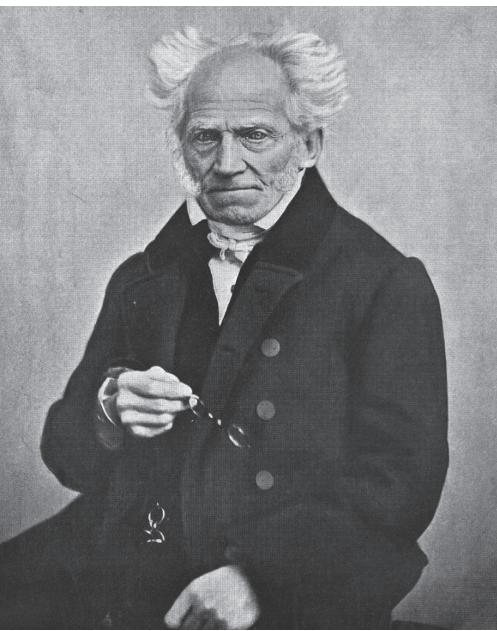


Figure 9.5 Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860).

Arthur Schopenhauer,
“On the Sufferings of
the World”

- 5** What is Schopenhauer’s argument for the meaninglessness of life? Is his assessment of life based on objective facts or on his distinctive frame of mind?

I have always believed, and I still believe, that whatever good or bad fortune may come our way we can always give it meaning and transform it into something of value.

—Hermann Hesse

No little part of the torment of existence lies in this, that Time is continually pressing upon us, never letting us take breath, but always coming after us, like a taskmaster with a whip. If at any moment Time stays his hand, it is only when we are delivered over to the misery of boredom. . . .

Certain it is that *work, worry, labor and trouble*, form the lot of almost all men their whole life long. But if all wishes were fulfilled as soon as they arose, how would men occupy their lives? what would they do with their time? If the world were a paradise of luxury and ease, a land flowing with milk and honey, where every Jack obtained his Jill at once and without any difficulty, men would either die of boredom or hang themselves; or there would be wars, massacres, and murders; so that in the end mankind would inflict more suffering on itself than it has now to accept at the hands of Nature. . . .

Again, you may look upon life as an unprofitable episode, disturbing the blessed calm of non-existence. And, in any case, even though things have gone with you tolerably well, the longer you live the more clearly you will feel that, on the whole, life is a *disappointment, nay, a cheat*. . . .

If children were brought into the world by an act of pure reason alone, would the human race continue to exist? Would not a man rather have so much sympathy with the coming generation as to spare it the burden of existence? or at any rate not take it upon himself to impose that burden upon it in cold blood.³

The distinguished atheist lawyer Clarence Darrow (1857–1938), defense attorney in the famous Scopes “monkey trial,” came to the same conclusion that Tolstoy and Schopenhauer did: Life is not worthwhile. “Life is like a ship on the sea,” he says, “tossed by every wave and by every wind; a ship headed for no port and no harbor, with no rudder, no compass, no pilot; simply floating for a time, then lost in the waves.”⁴

Against the pessimists, it has been argued that most of them have been guilty of perpetrating the confusion mentioned earlier—mixing up the two senses of *meaning*. Contemporary philosopher Julian Baggini explains:

Julian Baggini, *What's It All About?*

It seems to me that when most people say that life is meaningless, they are talking about meaning in one or both of these senses. They are saying—rightly, in my view—that our lives were not created with any purpose or goal in mind and that there is nothing beyond or after life that can provide a purpose for what we do in this life. But to conclude that “therefore life is meaningless” is simply to ignore the many other ways in which life can be meaningful. . . .

What is missing is the recognition that life can be meaningful if we find it worth living for its own sake, without recourse to further aims, goals or purposes. . . .

The same kinds of consideration apply when dealing with [existentialist Albert] Camus’s question about how we can live life if it is absurd and meaningless. Again it is only “meaningless” in certain particular senses of the word. . . .



Nietzsche: Reflections on Meaning

Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900) lived in the nineteenth century, but his ideas echoed loudest throughout the twentieth, and they resound still, over one hundred years after his passing. Today he is both reviled and embraced, and he has outraged many—including exponents of Christianity, contemporary culture, traditional morality, democratic socialism, and Western philosophy. Among those who have claimed to be inspired by his words are Marxists, postmodernists, atheists, anarchists, feminists, reactionaries, vegetarians, and Nazis. Some have claimed him as one of their own even though he has given them no explicit reason to (as in the case of the Nazis). The divergent perspectives on his work are due in part to his writing style, which is mostly brilliant but by turns opaque, poetic, aphoristic, vague, and ironic. But most debate is over the substance of his views, of which the most famous (or notorious) are his doctrine of the will to power, his notion of the mighty human being known as the *Übermensch* (Overman or Superman), and his claim that “God is dead.” On these topics some philosophers consider him a nihilist, but others reject that characterization, arguing that Nietzsche was concerned about ultimate meaning and the intellectual and spiritual vitalization of humanity.

From 1873 to 1876 Nietzsche produced *Untimely Meditations* (actually four essays under the single title). In 1879 he resigned his university post because of his failing health and spent the following decade writing and wandering about Italy and Switzerland, lonely and in great physical pain. Out of this period came such works as *The Wanderer and His Shadow* (1880), *Daybreak* (1881), *The Gay Science or Joyful Wisdom* (1882), *Beyond Good and Evil* (1887), and *The Genealogy of Morals* (1887). *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, his well-known masterpiece, appeared in the years 1883 to 1885. In 1889, on a street in Turin, he collapsed after seeing a horse being whipped. He spent the remaining ten years of his life insane, dying in August 1900. By the time of his death, he was world-renowned, and his writings were the subject of extensive scholarship and controversy.

A central concept of Nietzsche's is the *will to power*, the fundamental nature of existence as a drive to control and dominate. The will to power is not the real world behind appearances (as in Descartes), nor ideas in the universal mind (as in Hegel), nor the will to live, nor the conscious will of God or humans. It is life, striving to overcome, to rule, to break out. All human struggles and striving are manifestations of the will to power.

To Nietzsche, the will to power is evident in humankind's search for knowledge, especially in science, philosophy, and religion. “Knowledge,” he says, “is an instrument of power.” The will to know arises from the will to power—from the desire to master and control a particular domain of reality. Reality is in flux, a kaleidoscope of sense data and concepts, and on this chaos we try to impose order, theory, and pattern so we can turn reality to our advantage. We do not seek truth for truth's sake. There is only the will to power that impels us to try to make sense of the muddle.



Figure 9.6 Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche (1844–1900).

Almost all deniers of meaning in life really seem to be rejecting only the idea that life has a specific kind of meaning: one determined by agents, purposes or principles somehow external to this world. This does not justify the conclusion that life has no meaning at all. Their pronouncement that "life is meaningless" thus just appears to be a kind of hyperbole.⁵

9.3 OPTIMISM: LIFE CAN HAVE MEANING

6 Do you think many people who say that life is meaningless are assuming that *meaning* refers to external meaning?

7 If we reject the religious view of meaning in life, are we forced to conclude that life is meaningless?

Optimists say human existence can be meaningful but are divided on how this meaning is possible. As noted earlier, some believe life's meaning has an external source, and some think it arises internally.

Meaning from Above

Most of those who take the externalist approach view the matter from a religious standpoint. Typically, the central doctrine is that a human life has meaning only because it is part of God's plan, a grand cosmic order that encompasses every entity in the universe. As participants in this plan, people have a preeminent role to play and a purpose preordained by God. To have a meaningful existence is to align your life with God's plan, either by performing certain duties or by being a particular kind of person. To live contrary to God's plan is to live a meaningless life. And, of course, if there is no God, there is no point to living.

Tolstoy not only gave us a glimpse of his fall into pessimism, he also wrote about his gradual acceptance of a deeply religious understanding of life's meaning:

Leo Tolstoy, *My Confession*

Long ago has been told the Eastern story about the traveller who in the steppe is overtaken by an infuriated beast. Trying to save himself from the animal, the traveller jumps into a waterless well, but at its bottom he sees a dragon who opens his jaws in order to swallow him. And the unfortunate man does not dare climb out, lest he perish from the infuriated beast, and does not dare jump down to the bottom of the well, lest he be devoured by the dragon, and so clutches the twig of a wild bush growing in a cleft of the well and holds on to it. His hands grow weak and he feels that soon he shall have to surrender to the peril which awaits him at either side; but he still holds on and sees two mice, one white, the other black, in even measure making a circle around the main trunk of the bush to which he is clinging, and nibbling at it on all sides. Now, at any moment, the bush will break and tear off, and he will fall into the dragon's jaws. The traveller sees that and knows that he will inevitably perish; but while he is still clinging, he sees some drops of honey hanging on the leaves of the bush, and so reaches out for them with his tongue and licks the leaves. Just so I hold on to the branch of life, knowing that the dragon of death is waiting inevitably for me, ready to tear me to pieces, and I cannot understand why I have fallen on such suffering. And I try to lick that honey which used to give me pleasure; but now it no longer gives me joy, and the white and

Faith consists in being vitally concerned with that ultimate reality to which I give the symbolical name of God. Whoever reflects earnestly on the meaning of life is on the verge of an act of faith.

—Paul Tillich

the black mouse day and night nibble at the branch to which I am holding on. I clearly see the dragon, and the honey is no longer sweet to me. I see only the inevitable dragon and the mice, and am unable to turn my glance away from them. That is not a fable, but a veritable, indisputable, comprehensible truth.

The former deception of the pleasures of life, which stifled the terror of the dragon, no longer deceives me. No matter how much one should say to me, "You cannot understand the meaning of life, do not think, live!" I am unable to do so, because I have been doing it too long before. Now I cannot help seeing day and night, which run and lead me up to death. I see that alone, because that alone is the truth. Everything else is a lie.

The two drops of honey that have longest turned my eyes away from the cruel truth, the love of family and of authorship, which I have called an art, are no longer sweet to me. . . .

I lived for a long time in this madness, which, not in words, but in deeds, is particularly characteristic of us, the most liberal and learned of men. But, thanks either to my strange, physical love for the real working class, which made me understand it and to see that it is not so stupid as we suppose, or to the sincerity of my conviction which was that I could know nothing and that the best that I could do was to hang myself,—I felt that if I wanted to live and understand the meaning of life, I ought naturally to look for it, not among those who had lost the meaning of life and wanted to kill themselves, but among those billions departed and living men who had been carrying their own lives and ours upon their shoulders. And I looked around at the enormous masses of deceased and living men,—not learned and wealthy, but simple men,—and I saw something quite different. I saw that all these billions of men that lived or had lived, all, with rare exceptions, did not fit into my subdivisions, and that I could not recognize them as not understanding the question, because they themselves put it and answered it with surprising clearness. Nor could I recognize them as Epicureans, because their lives were composed rather of privations and suffering than of enjoyment. Still less could I recognize them as senselessly living out their meaningless lives, because every act of theirs and death itself was explained by them. They regarded it as the greatest evil to kill themselves. It appeared, then, that all humanity was in possession of a knowledge of the meaning of life, which I did not recognize and which I condemned. It turned out that rational knowledge did not give any meaning to life, excluded life, while the meaning which by billions of people, by all humanity, was ascribed to life was based on some despised, false knowledge. . . .

Thus, outside the rational knowledge, which had to me appeared as the only one, I was inevitably led to recognize that all living humanity had a certain other irrational knowledge, faith, which made it possible to live. . . .

The rational knowledge brought me to the recognition that life was meaningless,—my life stopped, and I wanted to destroy myself. When I looked around at people, at all humanity, I saw that people lived and asserted that they knew the meaning of life. I looked back at myself. I lived so long as I knew the meaning of life. As to other people, so even to me, did faith give the meaning of life and the possibility of living. . . .

Then I began to cultivate the acquaintance of the believers from among the poor, the simple and unlettered folk, of

8 How do you think Tolstoy would respond to the claim that many people appear to have very meaningful lives? What would he say, for example, about meaning in the life of Mahatma Gandhi or Albert Einstein?

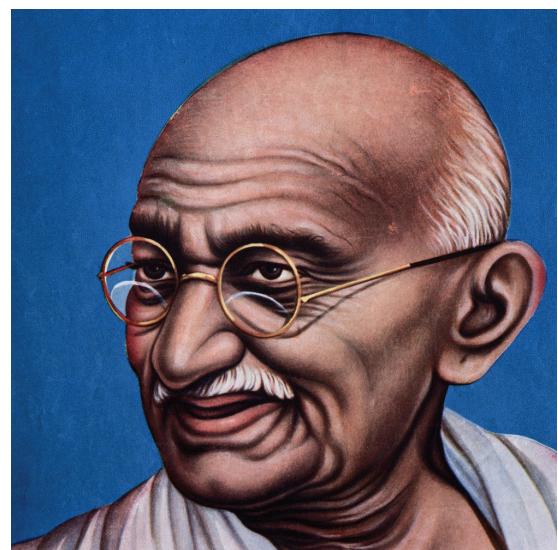


Figure 9.7 Gandhi was not a Christian. Did he nevertheless lead a meaningful life? What about Socrates? Einstein?

Leo Tolstoy,
My Confession

pilgrims, monks, dissenters, peasants. The doctrine of these people from among the masses was also the Christian doctrine that the quasi-believers of our circle professed. With the Christian truths were also mixed in very many superstitions, but there was this difference: the superstitions of our circle were quite unnecessary to them, had no connection with their lives, were only a kind of an Epicurean amusement, while the superstitions of the believers from among the laboring classes were to such an extent blended with their life that it would have been impossible to imagine it without these superstitions,—it was a necessary condition of that life. I began to examine closely the lives and beliefs of these people, and the more I examined them, the more did I become convinced that they had the real faith, that their faith was necessary for them, and that it alone gave them a meaning and possibility of life. In contradistinction to what I saw in our circle, where life without faith was possible, and where hardly one in a thousand professed to be a believer, among them there was hardly one in a thousand who was not a believer. In contradistinction to what I saw in our circle, where all life passed in idleness, amusements, and tedium of life, I saw that the whole life of these people was passed in hard work, and that they were satisfied with life. In contradistinction to the people of our circle, who struggled and murmured against fate because of their privations and their suffering, these people accepted diseases and sorrows without any perplexity or opposition, but with the calm and firm conviction that it was all for good. In contradistinction to the fact that the more intelligent we are, the less do we understand the meaning of life and the more do we see a kind of a bad joke in our suffering and death, these people live, suffer, and approach death, and suffer in peace and more often in joy. . . . I cast a broader glance about me. I examined the life of past and present vast masses of men, and I saw people who in like manner had understood the meaning of life, who had known how to live and die, not two, not three, not ten, but hundreds, thousands, millions. All of them, infinitely diversified as to habits, intellect, culture, situation, all equally and quite contrary to my ignorance knew the meaning of life and of death, worked calmly, bore privations and suffering, lived and died, seeing in that not vanity, but good.

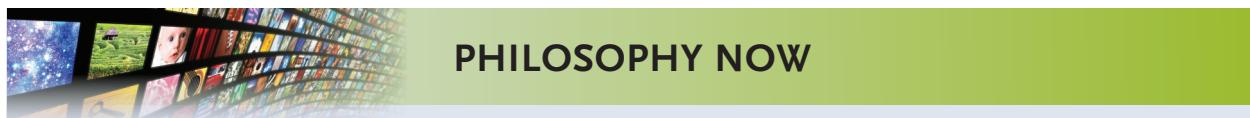
I began to love those people. The more I penetrated into their life, the life of the men now living, and the life of men departed, of whom I had read and heard, the more did I love them, and the easier it became for me to live. Thus I lived for about two years, and within me took place a transformation, which had long been working within me, and the germ of which had always been in me. What happened with me was that the life of our circle,—of the rich and the learned,—not only disgusted me, but even lost all its meaning. All our acts, reflections, sciences, arts,—all that appeared to me in a new light. I saw that all that was mere pampering of the appetites, and that no meaning could be found in it; but the life of all the working masses, of all humanity, which created life, presented itself to me in its real significance. I saw that that was life itself and that the meaning given to this life was truth, and I accepted it.⁶

So Tolstoy says he found the true meaning of life through a leap of faith, not through the rational knowledge of his circle of sophisticates. He chose the religious path trod by millions of the poor and unlearned.

Critics of such externalist views argue that the notion of God creating people to be part of his plan is an affront to human dignity, that it's difficult or impossible to know what God's plan is, that his plan may not be as benign and agreeable as believers assume, and that a plan from God imposed on our lives undermines free will. They typically deny that death renders life meaningless or that a life can be

Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.

—Viktor E. Frankl



Is Religion Necessary for a Meaningful Life?

Rick Warren, author of *The Purpose-Driven Life* and the pastor who delivered the invocation at Barack Obama's 2009 inauguration ceremony, maintains that religion is required if your life is to have meaning. "You were made by God and for God," he says, "and until you understand that, life will never make sense." Is that true?

The results of a Gallup poll raise doubts about it. The pollsters surveyed thousands of people in eighty-four countries. They concluded that "there is some support in Gallup's data for Warren's premise that religious involvement makes devotees more likely to feel their lives have a purpose. On the other hand, the results also suggest that religious involvement is not *necessary* for most people to feel that way." Here are some of the results.

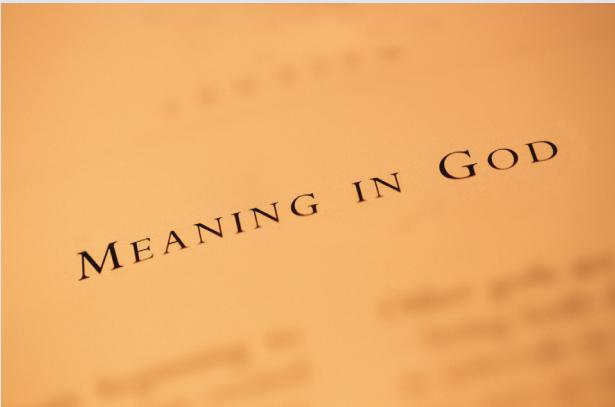


Figure 9.8 Suppose you are not religious, yet you have always felt that your life has meaning (just as many atheists believe their lives have meaning). Then someone tells you that your life cannot possibly have meaning because you are not religious. Would you think the person was denying the obvious or speaking truth? Why?

Do you feel your life has an important meaning or purpose?

Among those claiming any religious affiliation: 92% yes; 6% no.

Among those claiming to be secular, nonreligious, atheist, or agnostic: 83% yes; 14% no.

Do you feel your life has an important meaning or purpose?

Percentage answering yes: Christian: 93%; Hindu: 92%; Muslim: 91%; Buddhist: 90%; other: 89%; Jewish: 88%; secular/atheist/agnostic: 83%.

Do you feel your life has an important meaning or purpose?

Percentage answering yes: elementary education or less: 88%; secondary education up to three years of tertiary education: 91%; at least four years of tertiary education: 91%; have a job: 92%; do not have a job: 89%.

Gallup survey, 2007, data from one thousand adults per country across eighty-four populations; ±4 percentage points sampling error.

Do these results surprise you, or are they what you would expect? Do they corroborate the idea that people can have a meaningful life without religion? Do they show that meaning in life can arise internally? Explain.

meaningful only if it is immortal. Moreover, some critiques of Tolstoy's view do not depend on a denial of God's existence. Several philosophers have argued that the notion of a God assigning a purpose to humans should be objectionable to believers and nonbelievers alike. This is how Baggini expresses the point:

Julian Baggini, *What's It All About?*

It is often said that we are here to do God's will. If this were true . . . [o]ur lives would have a purpose for the being that created us but not a purpose for us. We would each be like Sartre's being-in-itself—an object to be used for the ends of others and not a being-for-itself—a conscious being making choices meaningful for itself. If we found that our sole purpose was to serve God then we might think that was a worse fate than to have no predetermined purpose at all. Is it better to be slaves with a role in the universe or to be free people left to create a role for ourselves?

This view that we are created to serve God is not only objectionable on the grounds that it robs humanity of its dignity. It also has to be seen as extremely implausible within the world-view of the religions that sometimes propound it. After all, what could seem more unlikely than that the supreme being would feel the need to create human beings, with all their complexity, and with all the suffering and toil that human life entails, solely so that it can have creatures to serve it? This is an image of God as an egotistical tyrant, determined to use its power to surround itself with acolytes and have praise heaped upon it. This is not the God which most religious believers worship, and so the idea that we are here just to serve such a God is not one that should be seriously countenanced either. . . .

I think that most reflective religious believers would agree that saying God's purpose for us is to serve it or live full lives is not adequate. They might prefer to say that the existence of God shows that there must be a purpose, since God wouldn't have

- 9** According to Baggini, how is God's creating us for his purposes supposed to denigrate human life? Do you agree?



Figure 9.9 Baggini asks, "Is it better to be slaves with a role in the universe or to be free people left to create a role for ourselves?"

created us without one, but that we do not know what that purpose is. Faith requires us to trust God and its purposes for us. As Jesus is reported in John's Gospel to have said, "Trust in God; trust also in me. In my Father's house are many rooms" (14:1–2). This is a perfectly coherent position and probably the one most sensible religious believers occupy. But doing so requires an honest acceptance that they have no more idea as to what the purpose of life is than the atheist has.

The leap of faith required to adopt such a position also needs to be clearly understood. This is faith that a God we cannot know to exist has a purpose we cannot discern for an afterlife we have no evidence is to come. Further, we would also be trusting that this purpose is one we would be pleased with. If it turned out that our purpose was to fight Satan's hordes for eternity or just to have lived as a beacon of fortitude under duress on earth before dying, we might not be too pleased that God had a purpose for us after all.

A belief that we were created by God for a purpose does not then provide us with the kind of adequate account of life's meaning we might expect. Religions are not clear about what this purpose is. The idea that it is to serve God seems deeply implausible and contrary to most conceptions of God's nature. The idea that it is to live life to the full is a platitude, only turned into something more by a belief in an afterlife. The idea that God's purpose is something we just have to trust is an admission that we have no answer to the question of why we are here and must leave everything to the unknown.⁷

Religion is the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of a meaning of our life.

—Paul Tillich



Meaning from Below

Internalists believe they can have meaningful lives without relying on the concepts of God or transcendent realms. They hold that they can confer meaning on their own lives. The proof of this, they might say, is all around us. There are many people who seem to lead meaningful lives, and we would judge this to be the case even if we thought no external being or force existed to confer meaning. Consider Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Rosa Parks, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Marie Curie, George Washington, Confucius, Thomas Aquinas—these men and women, by all accounts, were driven by a sense of purpose and led lives full of meaning.

But exactly what property or state of affairs is the conveyor of meaning? Internalists differ on that score. Here is Paul Edwards's view:

Paul Edwards, *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*

When we ask whether a *particular* person's life has or had any meaning, we are usually concerned not with cosmic issues but with the question of whether certain purposes are to be found *in his life*. Thus, most of us would say without hesitation that a person's life had meaning if we knew that he devoted himself to a cause (such as the spread of Christianity or communism or the reform of mental institutions), or we would at least be ready to say that it "acquired meaning" once he became sufficiently attached to his cause. Whether we approve of what they did or not, most of us would be ready to admit—to take some random examples—that Dorothea Dix, Pasteur, Lenin, Margaret Sanger, Anthony Comstock, and Winston Churchill led meaningful lives. We seem to mean two things in characterizing such lives as meaningful: we assert, first, that the life in question

Paul Edwards,
The Encyclopedia of Philosophy

had some dominant, over-all goal or goals which gave direction to a great many of the individual's actions and, second, that these actions and possibly others not immediately related to the overriding goal were performed with a special zest that was not present before the person became attached to his goal or that would not have been present if there had been no such goal in his life. It is not necessary, however, that a person should be devoted to a cause, in the sense just indicated, before we call his life meaningful. It is sufficient that he should have some attachments that are not too shallow.⁸

I would rather live my life as if there is a God and die to find out there isn't, than live my life as if there isn't and die to find out there is.
—Albert Camus

10 Do you agree with Edwards that the length of one's life does not by itself determine whether life is meaningful?

A common reply to any internalist view is that the prospect of death and the eventual obliteration of all human creations rob our lives of meaning. How can our lives be meaningful, they ask, when life is so short and death is certain? What's the point of living if everything we are and do will soon sink into nothingness?

Many philosophers reject this dismal outlook, arguing that the fact of death and the ephemeral nature of human endeavors are irrelevant to the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a person's existence. If life is meaningful, then it is meaningful no matter how long or short it is. Edwards is one of the philosophers who make this point:

Let us consider some everyday occurrences: A man with a toothache goes to a dentist, and the dentist helps him so that the toothache disappears. A man is falsely accused of a crime and is faced with the possibility of a severe sentence as well as with the loss of his reputation; with the help of a devoted attorney his innocence is established, and he is acquitted. It is true that a hundred years later all of the participants in these events will be dead and none of them will *then* be able to enjoy the fruits of any of the efforts involved. But this most emphatically does not imply that the dentist's efforts were not worthwhile or that the attorney's work was not worth doing. To bring in considerations of what will or will not happen in the remote future is, in [this and other] human situations, totally irrelevant. Not only is the finality of death irrelevant here; equally irrelevant are the facts, if they are facts, that life is an endless cycle of the same kind of activities and that the history of the universe is not a drama with a happy ending.⁹

Internalists can be divided into two camps: those who believe that meaning is something they create (*subjectivists*) and those who think meaning is something they discover (*objectivists*).

Among the subjectivists, we can count not only Baggini and Edwards, but also the philosophers R. M. Hare (1919–2002), Bertrand Russell (1872–1970), Richard Taylor (1919–2003), Kai Nielsen, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980), Robert Solomon (1942–2007), E. D. Klemke (1926–2000), and Lucretius (c. 100–55 BC).

For subjectivists, meaning is relative to each person and depends on his or her attitudes, desires, and goals. So subjectivists might say their lives are meaningful if they do what they deem most important or satisfy their strongest desires or act out of love or concern. A common criticism of subjectivist views is that it's intuitively obvious that sometimes objective standards apply. If satisfying our strongest desires leads to obviously immoral or trivial acts, subjectivism is implausible. Things aren't meaningful just because we say they are.

The classic example of a subjectivist is Sartre. As one of the modern founders of existentialism, he argues that humans are profoundly free to create their own lives and thus are entirely responsible for defining the meaning and moral relevance of

their existence. There are no objective standards to define what is and is not meaningful for them. “Man,” he says, “is nothing else but what he makes of himself.”

Consider these two subjectivists who lived two millennia apart but came to much the same conclusion about meaning in life. E. D. Klemke, editor of the highly regarded anthology *The Meaning of Life*, was an astute subjectivist philosopher. In a well-known essay, “Living Without Appeal: An Affirmative Philosophy of Life,” he responded to those who claim that (1) there exists a “transcendent ultimate” (a deity, for example) with which we can have a relationship through faith; (2) without such an entity and faith in it, life is meaningless; and (3) without such meaning, life is not worthwhile.

Regarding the first claim, he asks what evidence supports it. The assertions of some sacred text prove nothing, he says, since they prove only that “someone *believed* that a transcendent ultimate exists.” Likewise the testimony of large numbers of believers proves nothing. The traditional arguments for the existence of a god all fail to provide reasons for believing, and arguments from religious experience can prove no more than that “someone has had an unusual experience.” He concludes that there is zero evidence for the existence of a transcendent anything.

As to the second claim—that without faith in the transcendent, human existence is without meaning—Klemke answers by distinguishing between objective meaning and subjective meaning. An objective meaning is one that is either structurally part of the universe (apart from human evaluation) or dependent on some nonhuman external agency. If there is objective meaning, he says, there is no reason why it must be linked to a transcendent being. But even more important, “I find the notion of an objective meaning as difficult to accept as I do the notion of a transcendent being. It seems to me that there is no shred of evidence for the existence of an objective meaning in the universe. . . . From the standpoint of present evidence, evaluational components such as meaning or purpose are not to be found in the universe as objective aspects of it.”¹⁰ Klemke also rejects the related claims that subjective meaning is possible but only through the transcendent, or that even subjective meaning is impossible without faith in the transcendent. He says of the latter assertion, “I know of many humans who have found a meaningful existence without faith in the transcendent.”¹¹

In response to the third claim—that without meaning, life is not worthwhile—Klemke says that it confuses objective and subjective meaning. He says that indeed life has no objective meaning, “but from this it does not follow that life is not *worthwhile*, for it can still be subjectively meaningful. . . . I, for one, am *glad* that the universe has no meaning, for thereby is *man all the more glorious*. I willingly accept the fact that external meaning is non-existent (or if existent, certainly not apparent), for this leaves me free to *forge my own meaning*.”¹² He declares that he has found subjective meaning through knowledge, art, love, and work, for with his consciousness, he can endow events, objects, and persons with value.

Lucretius, a Roman poet and philosopher, believes that life can be meaningful even in a completely materialistic universe bereft of the supernatural. He is best known for a seven-thousand-line poem on science and philosophy called *The Nature of Things*, or *De rerum natura*, a masterpiece that has influenced many thinkers throughout the centuries as well as in modern life.

Lucretius was an atomist. Two millennia ago some philosophers argued that the world consists entirely of atoms moving in space, just as modern science has shown us. He declares that everything—humans, animals, the earth, the stars, the sun—is made of atoms. The universe is infinite and entirely material. There is no designer who created everything. The universe is eternal; it has always been here. Things have come about through the laws of nature and chance. The soul is also material, which means that it dies just as the body does. There is no afterlife; the present world is all we have.

This view may seem dreary, but Lucretius thinks the opposite. Because death is final, we need not fear it, because we will not be present to confront it. As he says, “Death is nothing to us.” There will be no pain, anguish, or torment after death.

Religion causes pain, Lucretius says, because it instills a fear of everlasting torment or some other uncertain fate after death. Religion causes anxiety because it teaches superstitions about mischief or terror caused by demons, angels, or ghosts. Religion discourages the pursuit of happiness and pleasure, when these things should be central to our lives. Religion causes ruin when it holds out the false hope of miraculously transcending our finite lives. The most famous line of Lucretius’s poem refers to a particularly evil act performed in the name of religion. He says, “So potent was religion in persuading to do wrong.”

Lucretius wasn’t an atheist exactly, for he believed there were gods, but he thought the gods had no interest in, and nothing to do with, humans. To be truly happy, he says, we must dispel illusions about our ability to live forever, find perfect satisfaction, control events, and be the center of the universe’s attention. By avoiding these delusions, we can attain a realistic measure of happiness, even joy.

Lucretius declares that we can experience a sense of awe, gratitude, and reverence when we see that the universe is beautiful and boundlessly complex. We are made of the same stuff as stars and seas and trees and clouds. We humans are all connected—to each other and to every part of the cosmos. We also experience awe when we contemplate the mysteries that science reveals, and we feel the delight of discovery when we solve those mysteries.

Lucretius believes that the meaning of life can be found in pleasure-seeking that is rational and realistic. One of his disciples said that it is not possible to live a life of pleasure “without living prudently and honorably and justly, and also without living courageously and temperately and magnanimously, and without making friends, and without being philanthropic.”

For objectivists, meaning is mind-independent. Objectively worthwhile activities or states convey objective meaning that everyone can recognize as such. If a life is meaningful, it is so because it has objective value, not because of someone’s subjective preferences or desires. An objectivist might say that helping others and creating art are generally believed to give meaning to life, and the best explanation for such beliefs is objectivism—some things are inherently worthwhile.

Notable objectivists include James Rachels (1941–2003), Susan Wolf, Terry Eagleton, John G. Messerly, Christopher Belshaw, Thaddeus Metz, Victor Frankl (1905–1997), and Moritz Schlick (1882–1936).

Susan Wolf, philosopher and author of *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*, argues that meaning in life must consist of both subjective and objective elements. As she says, "Meaningful lives are lives of active engagement in projects of worth."¹³ Active engagement is involvement in something that grips or excites a person, something that arouses passion. But this subjective response alone is not enough to add significant meaning to someone's life. Mere passion about an activity is, in itself, insufficient to contribute meaningfulness to a life. The passion must be directed at projects that are in themselves worthwhile. "What is clear to me," she says, "is that there can be no sense to the idea of meaningfulness without a distinction between more and less worthwhile ways to spend one's time, where the test of worth is at least partly independent of a subject's ungrounded preferences or enjoyment."¹⁴

This view belies the often-expressed notion that what someone does doesn't matter as long as the person enjoys it or prefers it or gets satisfaction out of it. Counterexamples abound. People do wonder sometimes if an activity they enjoy is in fact worthwhile. Some people with satisfying lives do feel that their existence is meaningless.

Wolf lists some of the activities that seem objectively worthwhile: "Moral and intellectual accomplishments and the ongoing activities that lead to them. Relationships with friends and relatives are perhaps even more important for most of us. Aesthetic enterprises (both creative and appreciative), the cultivation of personal virtues, and religious practices frequently loom large." She sums up her view in a slogan: "Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness."¹⁵

The contemporary philosopher Christopher Belshaw, another objectivist, examines some of the reasons that lead people to think life may be meaningless. Perhaps life is meaningless because it is so brief, because we and our world are so minuscule compared to the inconceivably vast cosmos, because life for us is so filled with misery and loss, and because there is no god or creator to give us a purpose or plan for living. But, Belshaw says, none of these reasons shows that life is meaningless. Why should the brevity of life or our relative size matter? These facts seem irrelevant. Yes, life is fraught with suffering, but it also contains moments of joy and satisfaction. And as for being part of God's plan, Belshaw wonders if our worries about the meaninglessness or pointlessness of our lives are really going to be put to rest because God has a scheme into which we fit. "Are we really going to be satisfied by finding that we fit into someone else's grand scheme?" Belshaw asks. "There's some sort of meaning and purpose in this, but is it the sort we want?"¹⁶

He suggests that what we really want is our own meaning that we find for ourselves. But the meaning can't be completely subjective; meaning cannot be whatever we think it is. "Whether or not your life is successful depends on how it matches up against certain external criteria," Belshaw says. "It doesn't depend simply on how you feel about it. And I think it's the same for whether your life is meaningful. Here, too, thinking doesn't make it so."¹⁷

What are some of the things that objectively matter? "Relationships," he says, "pursuing some plan or project, living a good life."¹⁸

Review Notes

9.1 OVERVIEW: PHILOSOPHY AND THE MEANING OF LIFE

- Most who have thought about it believe that questions concerning the meaning of human existence are extremely important and relevant.
- The process of examining the question of life's meaning is personal—no one can do it for you.
- The main impediment to clear thinking about life's meaning is confusion about what *meaning* refers to. The word can refer to external meaning or internal meaning.

9.2 PESSIMISM: LIFE HAS NO MEANING

- Pessimists believe that life has no meaning; optimists believe that it does. Some optimists believe that life's meaning is external; other optimists think it's internal.
- Tolstoy (at one point in his life), Schopenhauer, and Darrow are pessimists. Baggini thinks they mix up the two senses of meaning, so when they say, "Life is meaningless," they likely mean only that life has no meaning in the external sense.

9.3 OPTIMISM: LIFE CAN HAVE MEANING

- Most of those who take the externalist approach view the matter from a religious standpoint. Typically, they believe that a human life has meaning only because it is part of God's plan. Tolstoy took this view and maintained that finding meaning in life requires a leap of faith.
- Unbelievers would insist the religious view of meaning be backed by reasons and arguments. Several philosophers have argued that the notion of a God assigning a purpose to humans should be objectionable to believers and nonbelievers alike. They maintain that this idea of God creating people for a purpose is an affront to human dignity.
- Internalists believe they can have meaningful lives without relying on the concepts of God or transcendent realms. They hold that they can confer meaning on their own lives. Internalists can be subjectivists or objectivists.
- Many philosophers reject the notion that death robs people of meaning in life. They argue that the fact of death and the ephemeral nature of human endeavors are irrelevant to the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of a person's existence. If life is meaningful, then it is meaningful no matter how long or short it is.



WHAT DO YOU BELIEVE?

What Can and Cannot Give Life Meaning?

Here is a quiz to help you assess your views on life's meaning. For each statement below, indicate whether you agree or disagree with it (or have no opinion on it). This is the easy part. The more difficult task is to support your beliefs with good arguments or evidence. This exercise asks you to specify not what has *caused* your beliefs, but what *justifies* them.

1. Unless there is an eternal afterlife, human life can have no meaning.
2. Life has meaning only if there is a God who has created us for a purpose.
3. Life has meaning if you are happy.
4. Life has no meaning and no purpose.
5. Having a meaningful or purposeful life does not matter; what matters is the next life of everlasting bliss.
6. People cannot give meaning to their own lives; life's meaning is derived from God or some other transcendental reality.
7. A study of people past and present would show that some of them live or have lived meaningful lives, and this sense of meaning does not depend on their belief in God.
8. Death has no bearing on whether we can live meaningful lives.
9. The eventual obliteration of everything we have created or strived for is irrelevant to whether our lives can be meaningful.
10. The notion that God has assigned to humans a purpose or plan to live by is an affront to human dignity.
11. Without a transcendental reality and humanity's relationship to it through faith, human life is meaningless.
12. Some moral, aesthetic, or intellectual goals or endeavors are enough to confer meaning on one's life.
13. As Tolstoy says, a meaningful life requires a leap of faith.
14. People who trust that God has a plan for their lives have no understanding of what the purpose of their lives is.
15. Socrates, Mahatma Gandhi, Marie Curie, and Confucius led meaningful lives.

Figure 9.10 Determining whether your life has meaning usually requires a broad, encompassing view of things.



**WRITING TO UNDERSTAND:
ARGUING YOUR OWN VIEWS****CHAPTER 9**

1. Devise an argument for the proposition that life is (or is not) meaningful.
2. Explain Tolstoy's case for believing that life can have meaning through a leap of faith—then show how skeptics have argued against Tolstoy's view. Conclude by stating which side in this controversy you think is stronger.
3. Some maintain that we are here to do God's will. Lay out an argument showing that such a purpose would or would not make life meaningful.
4. State whether you believe that Socrates and Marie Curie led meaningful lives. Give reasons for your assertion.
5. Does the prospect of death undermine life's meaningfulness? Give reasons for your answer.

FICTION

The Good Brahmin

Voltaire

Voltaire (1694–1778), a French philosopher and writer, was one of the most important thinkers of his day. He was the author of both fiction and nonfiction, including *Candide*, *Treatise on Tolerance*, and *Philosophical Dictionary*.

On my travels I met an old Brahmin, a very wise man, of marked intellect and great learning. Furthermore, he was rich and, consequently, all the wiser, because, lacking nothing, he needed to deceive nobody. His household was very well managed by three handsome women who set themselves out to please him. When he was not amusing himself with his women, he passed the time in philosophizing. Near his house, which was beautifully decorated and had charming gardens attached, there lived a narrow-minded old Indian woman: she was a simpleton, and rather poor.

Said the Brahmin to me one day: "I wish I had never been born!" On my asking why, he answered: "I have been studying forty years, and that is forty years wasted. I teach others and myself am ignorant of everything. Such a state of affairs fills my soul with so much humiliation and disgust that my life is intolerable. I was born in Time, I live in Time, and yet I do not know what Time is. I am at a point between two eternities, as our wise men say, and I have no conception of eternity. I am composed of matter: I think, but I have never been able to learn what produces my thought. I do not know whether or not my understanding is a simple faculty inside me, such as those of walking and digesting, and whether or not I think with my head as I grip with my hands. Not only is the cause of my thought unknown to me; the cause of my actions is equally a mystery. I do not know why I exist, and yet every day people ask me questions on all these points. I have to reply, and as I have nothing really worth saying I talk a great deal, and am ashamed of myself afterward for having talked.

"It is worse still when I am asked if Brahma was born of Vishnu or if they are both eternal. God is my witness that I have not the remotest idea, and my ignorance shows itself in my replies. 'Ah, Holy One,' people say to me, 'tell us why evil pervades the earth.' I am in

as great a difficulty as those who ask me this question. Sometimes I tell them that everything is as well as can be, but those who have been ruined and broken in the wars do not believe a word of it—and no more do I. I retire to my home stricken at my own curiosity and ignorance. I read our ancient books, and they double my darkness. I talk to my companions: some answer me that we must enjoy life and make game of mankind; others think they know a lot and lose themselves in a maze of wild ideas. Everything increases my anguish. I am ready sometimes to despair when I think that after all my seeking I do not know whence I came, whither I go, what I am nor what I shall become."

The good man's condition really worried me. Nobody was more rational or more sincere than he. I perceived that his unhappiness increased in proportion as his understanding developed and his insight grew.

The same day I saw the old woman who lived near him. I asked her if she had ever been troubled by the thought that she was ignorant of the nature of her soul. She did not even understand my question. Never in all her life had she reflected for one single moment on one single point of all those which tormented the Brahmin. She believed with all her heart in the metamorphoses of Vishnu and, provided she could obtain a little Ganges water wherewith to wash herself, thought herself the happiest of women.

Struck with this mean creature's happiness, I returned to my wretched philosopher. "Are you not ashamed," said I, "to be unhappy when at your very door there lives an old automaton who thinks about nothing, and yet lives contentedly?"

"You are right," he replied. "I have told myself a hundred times that I should be happy if I were as brainless as my neighbor, and yet I do not desire such happiness."

My Brahmin's answer impressed me more than all the rest. I set to examining myself, and I saw that in truth I would not care to be happy at the price of being a simpleton.

Voltaire, "The Good Brahmin," from *The Portable Voltaire*, ed. Ben Ray Redman (New York: Viking Penguin, 1949, 1977).

I put the matter before some philosophers, and they were of my opinion. "Nevertheless," said I, "there is a tremendous contradiction in this mode of thought, for, after all, the problem is—how to be happy. What does it matter whether one has brains or not? Further those who are contented with their lot are certain of their contentment, whereas those who reason are not certain that they reason correctly. It is quite clear, therefore," I continued, "that we must choose not to have common sense, however little common sense may contribute to

our discomfort." Everyone agreed with me, but I found nobody, notwithstanding, who was willing to accept the bargain of becoming a simpleton in order to become contented. From which I conclude that if we consider the question of happiness we must consider still more the question of reason.

But on reflection it seems that to prefer reason to felicity is to be very senseless. How can this contradiction be explained? Like all the other contradictions. It is matter for much talk.

Probing Questions

1. The contemplative Brahmin is unhappy and haunted by the question of the meaning of life. The old woman is unreflective and contented. Which person would you rather be? Why?
2. Does this story suggest that happiness is essential if you want your life to be meaningful? Are happiness and meaningfulness the same thing?
3. Can a person be miserable and still live a meaningful life? If so, how? Can a person be happy and live a life without meaning?

For Further Reading

Julian Baggini, *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). An excellent primer on meaning in life; argues that meaning can have an internal source.

Kurt Baier, "The Meaning of Life," in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 82–113. A classic essay on the basic issues.

E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, eds., *The Meaning of Life: A Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). A good anthology featuring most of the must-read articles.

John E. Messerly, *The Meaning of Life* (Washington State: Durant & Russell, 2012). A survey of religious, philosophical, and scientific perspectives.

Bertrand Russell, "A Free Man's Worship," in *Why I Am Not a Christian* (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1957). A much-anthologized essay by the famous twentieth-century philosopher; discusses how life can have meaning in a godless world.