

The Meaningness of Life

Towards a sincere existentialism.

Immanuel Kant: *"Always recognize that human individuals are ends, and do not use them as means to your end."*

This season has been about meaning, and it has been about formations and transformations and how these are connected. And it has been about *meaningness*, discussed in many and roundabout ways without spelling out what it is. It is time to concretise what is meant by meaningness, as well as to summarise.

Thinking Of Things has been a way for me to investigate ideas, and to spark conversations about them with those who read. As such it has been a succesful season, with many conversations in person, email, comments below the posts, and on social media. For the purpose of a line of thought is not its conclusion. The purpose is the line of thought itself, and that it may not end. The word conclusion is a misnomer in this sense; to conclude signifies an end, while in reality it signifies a continuation, a new beginning. A conclusion reached is boring and meaningless without the followup question: so what? And thus, with your help, we continue the line of thought together.

I want to express my gratitude towards Notme. I have written this season during one of the most transformative periods of my life, so much so that the conclusions of some episodes changed into their polar opposites during the writing process. Hence the two voices, one from before called "Me" and one in the process of transformation called "Notme". Notme has been the voice of a plethora of people at different levels of closeness against which I have wielded my arrogance and preconceptions. Voices which have been, and still are, absolutely necessary for my ongoing transformation as a human being. In this sense, this season has been endowed with a meta-level.

A knowledge gained in this process is the realisation how deeply influenced I am by the historical context in which I find myself, a context by the name *modernity*.

Modernity /mə'dərnədē/

Noun

A historical period in which the following hold true:

- 1) The modern society's dominant culture changes so fast over the course of several generations, that each generation is growing up under tangibly different conditions than the previous one.
- 2) The cultural notion that change is progress.

Modernity will be the focus of Season 2, but for now I need the concept of the *project*, which is an integral part of modernity. A project encapsulates and combines the concepts of transformations and the notion that change is progress. The heart of what Notme, and now I, calls *meaningness* lies in the project. As we shall see, there are different kinds of projects, and not all contains meaningness.

This final episode of the season consists roughly of two sections: firstly it briefly summarise the previous episodes, in order to then discuss *meaningness*.

Three definitions of the word *meaning* were brought up during the first three episodes. They were:

1. Cosmic Meaning

Cosmic meaning², is the significance events have on a cosmic or metaphysical level, and it was dismissed as irrelevant. Whether there is a cosmic significance to my being in the world, or whatever happens to me, can have absolutely no bearing on my life. God or no God, cosmic plan or not, destiny fate, determinism or whatever, in the end it is up to me to live my life, make my own decisions and interact with my surroundings and fellow creatures how I see fit. I am not calling myself a theist nor an atheist, since God's existence is irrelevant. Not acknowledging God's importance is also a strategy to subvert its power over me: Power needs recognition to exist, and by not recognising cosmic meaning as important in my life I subvert it. The dismissal of cosmic meaning is an inherent part of modernity.

1 A culture is defined in Episode 9

2 Discussed in Episode 1, dismissed in Episode 3.

2. Meaning of stuff

The meaning of stuff³, on the other hand, is quite significant to how I perceive the world. We are biological and social creatures, and our perception of the world, both physical and abstract, depends on our biology and social context. This decides the way we categorise our surroundings, turning stuff into separate items. How we differentiate between rocks, pebbles, and boulders, between milk, yogurt, butter, and cream, between men, dolls, boys, women, girls, trees, bushes, statues, statutes, rules, institutions, circles, and rectangles.

These categories we learn, and we learn them during our cultural upbringing, and what we learn is not only to discern and categorise, to create taxonomies, but also how to feel about each category, how to understand each and all of them. These categories with attached emotion is what forms a *cultural prejudice*, and the set of them all is what forms a *cultural world view*. The deconstruction of cultural categories is inherent in a part of modernity often called the *postmodern*⁴, and is to some extent a part of what constitutes meaningness.

3. Meaningness

Now to meaningness⁵. And the project. Simone de Beauvoir tells a story as an example of a life-project in the essay *Pyrrhus & Cineas*. It is a story of the Greek general, and later king, Pyrrhus of Epirus (319-272 BC) and one alleged conversation he had with his friend and adviser Cineas while planning a military campaign. It goes loosely like this:

Pyrrhus: “*First we conquer Greece.*”

Cineas: “*And then what?*”

Pyrrhus: “*Then we take over Africa.*”

Cineas: “*And then what?*”

Pyrrhus: “*Then we go to Asia and conquer Asia Minor, Arabia*”

Cineas: “*And then what?*”

Pyrrhus: “*Then we go all the way to India.*”

Cineas: “*And then what?*”

Pyrrhus: “*Oh, then I rest.*”

Cineas: “*But why, then, don't you rest now?*”⁶

What Pyrrhus is about to embark upon stands as an example of a project, a personal project of world dominance--but is it also an example of meaningness?

The film maker Woody Allen recently described the reason for his own project:

Woody Allen: “*If I don't solve it, it's going to be a bad movie but I won't die. That's why I do it. I distract myself... making movies is a wonderful distraction. I'm not thinking about my death, the*

3 Discussed in Episodes 2, 4, 8, and 9. How stuff is categorised and prejudiced was the focus of Episode 2, and how our understanding is an emotion was discussed generally in Episode 4, and more specifically in Episode 8, and how we use these emotions to categorise people and ourselves was described in Episode 9.

4 Postmodern is a bit of a misnomer to me. Since every modern generation grows up in a tangibly different culture than the previous one, each generation's modernity is brand new and unique. Also, the word post-modern means very different things in different contexts (e.g. in literature or painted art, Modern and Postmodern signifies genres).

5 First introduced in Episode 3, and also discussed in Episodes 5, 6, and 7 (all indirectly).

6 This is very similar to the last dialogue in the movie *Ida* (2013), where the protagonist tries to figure out a reason for living a modern life with husband and children. When she can't find a convincing answer to the last question "and then what" she abandons her suitor and becomes a nun instead. She, and the movie, are thus both failing to address the question of meaningness.

*decaying of my body, that I will be old one day in a very distant future."*⁷
Is this a description of meaningfulness?

My answer to both these questions is *no*. What both these projects acknowledge is that life is ultimately meaningless, in the sense that it lacks cosmic meaning. Therefore, these projects only serve the purpose of distraction from an otherwise meaningless existence. This attitude fails to take into account how insignificant cosmic meaning is. As Cineas points out, the aim of this kind of project is to end it--so why even embark upon it? Why not rest now? This is part of the reason for these projects not being projects of meaningfulness, as will become clear soon.

A project of meaningfulness is not a means to an end. It can never be completed. A project whose whole purpose is to end itself and make itself redundant, such as conquering the world, eradicate evil, scientifically explain everything, own everything, create a utopia, are all the opposite of meaningfulness. Such projects I choose to call *totalitarian*. (The *utopian* projects are a sub-category to these.) Examples of totalitarian projects are neo-liberalism, a scientific theory of everything as well as some forms of Marxism. Any utopian striving for an ideal or perfection becomes totalitarian. These are the projects driven by insecurity, and they are the opposite of meaningfulness.

As will become clear, meaningfulness is found in another kind of project, the project which is its own reason for being. The projects of *sincerity*. By being sincere, one is doing what one is doing for the purpose of doing just that, and not for any other reason. There is no higher purpose, no worthy sacrifices, just that what one does. It may seem vague, but as we will see, the project of meaningfulness is specific and concrete.

The project of Meaningness

Meaningness /'mēniNGnəs/

Noun

The state emerging from sincere engagement with oneself, Eachother, and one's general context.

www.ThinkingOfThings.com

Meaningness is the project of becoming a human being and not a bit of filth, it is the project of grabbing our infinite⁸ personhood and overcome our nature and nurture⁹. It is the project of turning the

⁷ Press conference, Cannes, France, 2015

⁸ To all practical purposes. It is infinite in the same sense that the number of possible books in the world is infinite; while not strictly true, it is true to all practical purposes, since the result (a one followed by about two million zeros or so) far outnumber for example the number of atoms in the Universe (a one followed by only 80 zeros or so). The number of possibilities for personhood probably outnumber the possibilities for books.

⁹ See Episode 7.

Other into Eachother, for one cannot grab one's personhood without also helping someone else in this regard, and one cannot do it alone. And the meaningfulness of life is the reason for being. And it is a never-ending project, since consciousness¹⁰ is not a binary, when diving into the bottomless pool of personhood the transformations are neverending and without goal.

Sounds vague? It is not. The reason why the project of meaningfulness is concrete is simply this: It is derived from the fact that we are biological creatures and we are social creatures.

In the previous episodes, four stages of human development were recognised¹¹:

1. Imitating childhood, where one learns a culture's delineations and categories. Apples are different from oranges, wooden spoons from blocks of wood, mothers from fathers, etc.
2. Insecurity driven adolescence, where the social hierarchies are, often painfully¹² learnt.
3. Culture savvy adulthood, where the acquired cultural knowledge is utilised to keep the social pain away. Comfort zones have been formed, and the culture savvy adult knows how to stay within their boundaries without getting hurt, or even uncomfortable.
4. Maturity into occasional personhood and consciousness.

The culture savvy adults we end up as depend on the cultural upbringing which brought us here. One part of the project of meaningfulness is to challenge our cultural prejudices, preconceptions and biases, and they are rooted in our insecurity and fear of social pain. In our egos. Therefore, they can only be challenged socially, together.

However, to challenge is not to abandon, but to understand. Without cultural limitations we are no longer human. But to challenge our prejudices we can understand them, be aware of them, and integrate them meaningfully into our lives, without the notion that they are good or natural¹³, but merely part of who we have become. By denying this knowledge, we cannot transform into anything.

Here my modern prejudice surfaces, and I must battle with the notion that change and progress are not equal. Transformations do not make us better, it merely makes us different. Transformations does not peel off layers of insincerity and insecurity to find something pure beneath. I find it easy to fool myself into believing that there are aspects of the self dormant within, and hidden behind our culture. Of course this is not true, the aspects of ourselves are not dormant, they do not exist until they come into existence through sincere interactions with the world, and especially with Eachother. Self-discovery is a process of formation and transformation, not of unearthing and peeling. If I were to peel off all layers of culture, I would be left as nothing.

10 I am using the word conscious in a slightly unusual way. There is an important difference between being aware and being conscious. Those who discuss the nature of consciousness, tend to actually treat awareness. This confusion comes from the fact that the opposite of being aware is to be unconscious. Being aware of pain is not the same as being conscious. Consciousness implies something profoundly different, and I dare say it is a uniquely human potential. All humans, as well as many other creatures have an awareness of their surroundings and environment, and even self. Consciousness is to gleam something beyond our nature and nurture. Only persons are conscious. Most of us are not conscious most of the time. Meaningness is a path towards consciousness.

11 Of course one may order human development in many ways, the purpose of any taxonomy is to be useful, not true. No taxonomy is true. The distinction between True and False dichotomies is itself the latter.

12 Social and physical pain manifest equally in our mind.

13 The opposite of *natural* is not unnatural but either *supernatural* or *artificial*. Neither seem to make sense when applied on human traits.

Romanesque Arches

*Inside the huge romanesque church
the tourists jostled in the half darkness.
Vault gaped behind vault, no complete view.
A few candle-flames flickered.
An angel with no face embraced me
and whispered through my whole body:
"Don't be ashamed of being human, be proud!
Inside you vault opens behind vault endlessly.
You will never be complete, that's how it's meant to be."
Blind with tears
I was pushed out on the sun-seething
piazza together with Mr. and Mrs. Jones,
Herr Tanaka and Signora Sabatini,
and inside them all vault opened behind vault endlessly.*

Tomas Tranströmer



To find meaningfulness is to be aware of one's culture and the identities that comes with it. The stage of maturity into personhood is completely dependent on previous stages. Therefore, each person's meaningfulness is unique. And it is dependent on each person's life history, including the cultural identities to which we have aspired, but also events beyond that, such as traumas, atrocities, accidents, etc. So my meaningfulness will be different from yours. It is not necessary, but it helps if my interactions with Eachother is diverse. This enhances the cross-section of cultural biases within myself which get challenged. However, meaningfulness is not about abolishing norms, but rather about engaging sincerely with the ones we can, and reject those with which we cannot and which stand in the way of sincere engagements.

Berthold Brecht: *"What do you do when you love another human?" "I draw a sketch of him" said mr K, "and I take care about the likeness" "Of what? The sketch?" "No", said mr K, "the human" ¹⁴*

To connect with others is then to do so through one's *vulnerabilities*. When we are insecure we try to hide any perceived flaw or vulnerability in social interactions, and hide them to ourselves. Thereby we create a distance between ourselves and another person, turning her into *the Other*, as well as to ourselves, craving the Other's respect or admiration or fear, and judging ourselves by our ability to hide perceived flaws and instill responses in the Other. The Other becomes a projection for our embarrassment. But our vulnerabilities are connected with our insecurities, which are only flaws in a certain cultural context. So only by opening up our vulnerable selves to Eachother do we get a means to deal with them, and only then do we let ourselves really get to know Eachother, and in the process get to know ourselves, maybe for the first time. Learning to truly know another person is to truly learn to know oneself. And by so doing, both you and the other person transform, so who you knew does no longer exist. Meaningness turns the Other into Eachother.

To love your neighbour as you love yourself is not a good idea until you love yourself. When we are treating other people as Others, by hiding our flaws, this leads to insincere interaction, the extent of which only goes as far as the other person is useful to us, either by comforting our insecurity through the response they elicit, or by furthering some other of our insecurity driven cultural aspirations, but not as infinite persons with which interacting is meaningful in itself.

14 Poem: *Wenn Herr K. einen Menschen liebte* (When Mr K. loved a Human).

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: *"If we only treat people as how they are, then we only make them worse; if we treat people as if they were what they ought to be, we help them to become what they are capable of being."*¹⁵

By interacting with the world while being sincere to ourselves, we manifest what we have become. And we become what we become through sincerity. And by manifesting, what we became is tested and transformed so that we keep becoming. If, on the other hand, we try to hide who we have become to the world and in our interactions with it, it will never manifest, and neither will we transform. We fear who we are, formed by social insecurity as we are, we hide behind lies we tell ourselves, but much more damning, behind layers of vagueness, finding its rationalisation in retrospect. Vagueness in interactions detach us from Eachother, ourselves, and the world.

Question: *How can we know that the meaningful and sincere with another person is reciprocated, and that the Other is sincere in their engagement with us, so that we form an Eachother? Is it a binary, either Other or Eachother, or is it gradual and part of the project? Is it important to know?*

Meaningness and Solitude



Through sincere engagements with oneself and the world and Eachother we bring into existence aspects of ourselves. This demands times of interactions with the world and Eachother, as well as time for solitude and reflection. Through reflection we may become aware of possible aspects of ourselves and the world, which then can be tested against reality, and through the testing, they can be modified and transformed until they are discarded and replaced through a constant cross-talk between internal and external engagements. Without Eachother we could not be, and neither without reflection.

Socrates: *"The unexamined life is not worth living for a human being."*

We are biological and social creatures



Byung-Chul Han: *"An animal busy eating must at the same time pursue other tasks. It must, for example, keep away competitors for the prey. It must constantly look out so that it does not itself get eaten when it is eating. At the same time it must watch over its kids and keep an eye on its partner. In wilderness, an animal is forced to distribute its attention on several activities. Therefore, it is unable to sink into contemplation, both when it is eating and when it is copulating."* We are biological creatures and we are social creatures, and our limitations and possibilities depend on our biology and social context. Without our biological and social reality, meaningfulness cannot exist. Our insecurities are both biological in their origin and function, while their specificity is cultural, just as we eat because we are hungry, which is determined by our biology, *what* we eat is specified by our culture and place in space and time.

The fact that we are biological creatures means that we have limited time and energy at our disposal, we have limited resources for our (trans)formations. If we are in a stressful place in life, our biological reality tends to be in survival mode, our body is in fight, flight, or nurture mode, and the mental space needed for sincere engagements may not manifest, since the stress distracts us from whatever task we have at hand. For example, many studies show that poverty tends to put people in a state of perpetual stress, resulting in sleep loss, and poor decision making, especially economic decisions, which adds to the predicament causing a self-perpetuating stressful life situation. Nothing causes as much stress as the belief that we are losing social status *e.g.* within the group we perceive ourselves as belonging to, or within the dominant culture of our society. Moreover, in a consumerist society we are bombarded by advertisement telling us what to buy to gain, regain, or retain this status, causing us to be distracted from what could be meaningfulness. Also, in a secular society, distraction from the otherwise meaningless and cold universe is seen as a modern virtue, as expressed by Woody Allen above.

In order to take responsibility for our personhood and find meaningfulness, one has to first create the mental space for doing so. One needs to find a strategy for dealing with the stresses and distractions in the situation one finds oneself in. The Stoics offer one strategy for this when they say that you cannot affect how the world is, you only have control over your reaction to it.¹⁶ This can be very powerful realisation in a stressful situation, and may help some to overcome stresses. The stoic philosophy offers a plethora of strategies for taking control over one's reactions to reality and to find calm in a stressful

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See for example the how-to blog *How to be a Stoic*: <https://howtobeastoxic.wordpress.com/>

world.

Finding space for meaningfulness is a start. This is the place of being content, or even happy. While Stoicism deals with finding equanimity with one's place in a cultural context, however, meaningfulness does the opposite. Meaningness may, through sincere engagement with self, Each other and the world, take you away from that equanimity and contentness. Meaningness does not make you happy, at least not all the time.

Transformations are hard work, sincerity takes energy. And energy comes in limited supply for a biological creature. Therefore, one also needs rest, and the possibility for rest depends strongly on one's social position within a culture, for we are social creatures immersed in hierarchical cultural contexts. One needs escapism, entertainment, silliness and fun, none of which is entirely separate from meaningfulness. One needs pleasure for the senses, beautiful surroundings, and good sleep. One needs a reasonably healthy body. Because without at least some of these, to each according to ability and taste, one cannot be sincere in one's engagements.¹⁷

Meaningness is Political

Simone Weil wrote that the most corrupting thing about a political party is that its purpose becomes to grow¹⁸. Recently I harboured the idea that the purpose of any political activism or party was to render itself redundant, and therefore can a party's decline, e.g. the decline of the European Social Democrats, be seen as a success and not a failure, since the decline is a sign of having accomplished their goals to some extent. I do no longer believe that.

Instead, any constellation of people gathering should be focused on their own personal growth. To create a space in which outside hierarchies have no power over us. Where we together can express our selves sincerely, who we have become. A space within which we can transform. Not learning 15 second phrases to answer those questioning our cause, not learn how to effectively argue against those who disagree with us. Not strategise about furthering the cause. A meaningful struggle should not have the totalitarian goal to eradicate the world from evil, in whatever form it may be.¹⁹ A political cause of

17 **Concerning the nature of art vs. entertainment**, videos of cats on social media vs. long reads of world expanding content of literal quality. An understanding of the need of rest is often missed in this debate. What one engages with sincerely is quite individual. We all have different frozen seas within which can be broken with different axes (to paraphrase Franz Kafka), while we tend to be appealed by similar entertainment and escapism more dependent on the dominant culture or sub-cultures in our society in which we identify and were formed. A block buster movie is designed to have a mass appeal, while an art-movie is designed to deeply move its viewers. All people are not deeply moved by the same cultural expressions, while the mass appeal of a block buster as a form of entertainment is much more universal. So are videos of cats. This is why capitalism will never be able to create true art, since art is inherently not profitable (in general). Also, through the universal we may access the particular, by having had a common experience, the threshold for human encounters are lowered, and a sincere encounter may be formed. Escapism is like sleep, and sleep is after all the most common human activity. And like sleep, we should not spend all our time doing it.

18 *On the Abolition of All Political Parties* 1943 (a few weeks later, she was dead).

19 A political goal can be to eradicate crime. At first glance this seems as a noble goal. This is a utopian project and as such a totalitarian project. This manifests in the manner by which the goal is reached. One way to do it would be to imprison *everyone*. An even more efficient method to reach the goal would be to declare a crime-free zone and eradicate any population therein. Or one can change the law such that no-one can commit the crimes left in there. Another goal could be that everyone should get a passing grade out of school. This can be achieved by lowering the passing standards, or make sure everyone learns what will be on the test. These totalitarian methods can be contrasted by sincere ones, where the law makers and enforcers sincerely engage with a community. If through that effort the crime rate lowers it was not as a goal but as a consequence of the sincere engagement. With a sincere engagement with school children, their learning and education, the grades may come as a consequence, or they may not (depending on the school system), but either way they will learn more and be richer as human beings. This method will probably not eradicate crime, nor will it pass every school child, which is no longer a problem.

meaningness will not defeat the oppressors but help liberate them from their self-thingification.

Every culture contains prejudices and hierarchies, creating insecurities which takes us away from being human beings, and every person grows up as a cultural being, and to think this can be changed is a misunderstanding of both culture and human nature. Even if we change culture itself, it will not disappear, it is part of our biological and cultural reality just as much as our lack of wings and gills. We are instead left with ourselves, and therein lies the work. What matters is what we do with what we became, and take responsibility for what we keep becoming together. Creating a "better" culture, while not necessarily a bad thing, is still a totalitarian approach, and as such achieves little. However, we can help create spaces for Eachothers to form and transform within, together. Creating spaces of sincerity.



artwork: banksy / david boyle

It may seem as if I mean to say that political activism, or partaking in politics is totalitarian and has nothing to do with meaningness. Nothing could be further from the truth. If one is sincere with one's engagements one becomes political. The economist Albert O. Hirschman analysed different strategies for engaging with the world, which he called "Exit", "Voice", and "Loyalty"²⁰. The liberal, and indeed consumerist engagement with the world is through the exit strategy. By merely being present in a situation, being a member of a party, being a customer at a store, wearing a band's t-shirt, joining a club, or a college, or having your children at a school, this indicates your full hearted support. When you no longer can give your complete support for whatever reason, you Exit, *i.e.* leave the context and seek out a new one. This is insincere politics. However, in order to be engaged in the project of meaningness one also needs to be in a context where one can express one's aspects, and sometimes, exiting a context which prohibits sincerity is a valid approach for meaningness.

The more sincere approach is to Voice. Something is wrong in the situation and context you find yourself in, and you sincerely engage with the situation by voicing your discontent. With this engagement one then hopes to improve what is wrong and do so constructively, while the Exit strategy is a passive criticism, leaving the left-behind guessing what might have gone wrong.

Loyalty is about voicing and staying, as opposed to voicing and exiting. Through loyalty one makes sure that something is happening, through constant voicing and interaction and engagement. Through loyalty, you don't threaten to leave a situation--you threaten to stay. This forces others in the same

20 Described in the book *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*. Malcolm Gladwell writes about it in the New Yorker here: <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/06/24/the-gift-of-doubt>

context to negotiate your presence, and to some extent take you seriously.

If one engages sincerely with one's context and Eachother, one cannot help but also becoming an activist, since sincere engagements makes it impossible to ignore what one finds wrong within the context. If one could ignore such aspects, one would again not be sincere, but become a cynic. A cynic is the opposite of the sincere, and a cynic²¹ is the opposite of an activist.²²

By creating spaces of sincerity, one create opportunity for collective Voicing and Loyalty. Spaces of sincerity are by necessity non-hierarchical, else we would not be able to treat eachother as infinite persons. Hierarchies create identities. Identities and politeness have one thing in common: they only serve a purpose amongst strangers. By giving them importance to yourself, by yourself, you treat yourself as a stranger. And by creating hierarchies in a group you turn Eachother into Others. By collective voicing and loyalty we threaten our entire culture to stay.

Empathy is often misunderstood as the ability to feel what another person is feeling.²³ To me, empathy is the ability to listen to and take serious a stranger, to be sincere in the encounter, and act accordingly. (Literature may train us at listening to strangers.) Then empathy becomes solidarity, and if we are engaged sincerely with ourselves, solidarity leads to action, else it does not manifest. It is through sincerity meaningness becomes a humanism.

21 One cynical approach is political media strategy. For example, a politician may be tempted to cynically strategise and allow herself to be insincere in order to meet the perceived demands of the audience and media. This strategising is then in the hope of being able to sincerely engage with the issues at hand in the future. This strategy tends to be self-perpetuating, the future sincerity never manifests, and she becomes caught in a corrupting system of insecure strategising and insincerity. Also, the expectations that strategising is the only *modus operandi* proliferates into the entire social echo-system of politicians, reporters, pundits, audience, and voters, such that a politician gets judged not by her sincere engagement with society and politics, but by her ability to strategise. At which point the entire system has become corrupt.

Instead, a politician may be sincere. Even if she is indeed punished by the system, ridiculed and ousted, she is succesful in her sincere engagement, and if she is loyal and stays, people may come to expect sincerity from her, and possibly from others too.

22 Of course, there are many insincere ways to be and activist as well, there are many attention-seeking, insecurity grooming ego boosting activists in the world. But that is completely besides the point.

23 Many might even say that this is the definition of empathy, which then would make the whole concept completely useless. We cannot feel what others are feeling unless we have some experience to back it up, and to only be empathetic towards those with a similar experience as our's does not strike me as particularly virtuous. (There is research to back this up, described e.g. here: <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/06/06/imagining-the-lives-of-others/>)

Empathy

The capacity for feeling others' feelings. It is a fairly new word, originally used only in the theater. In Swedish, it was surprisingly not introduced before the 1980s. What did we say before—"Empathic ability" has now almost become a definition of what makes us human?

We talked about Compassion, and Sympathy and Solidarity. Words with similar meanings, but with some differences. Particularly the drift from solidarity to empathy is important. Solidarity is more abstract, more linked to a principle of our view on humanity, while empathy instead emphasises a spirit of feeling with someone. The change has its pros and cons. On the plus side that the engagement in the other's needs tend to be larger with the focus on the individual's fate. At the same time, this means a shift towards my feelings; while the more abstract position of solidarity still keeps the situation of those in need in focus, empathy is at risk of becoming a question of what I feel, or that I feel. And therefore my compassion is limited to that or those who manage to evoke my empathy. It is easy for a condition to slip in: a requirement for equality, of congeniality—a "so that I can involve myself into it." If I can not understand, I do not recognize myself and therefore I do not become involved, I need not act. A weird or unsympathetic stranger may not even suffer, who knows? A sick baby rhino beats two thousand faceless dead Chinese miners.

Isn't there something suspicious when compassion more seems to be about my feelings than about the ones in need?

Niklas Söderberg, OBS in Swedish Radio, 2012

<http://sverigesradio.se/>

On the virtue of having a hobby

One should not do anything with another purpose than doing just that. A meaningful reason for writing a book it is not so that I can make the money I desperately need, or so that I can get the attention I desperately crave, or to proliferate an idea I deem incredibly important for the world, but only in order to write that book. The writing then becomes a part of my project of meaningfulness, a vehicle through which I can challenge my own preconceptions and interact with my surroundings, to bring into existence new aspects of myself. The book then does not become a project, but it becomes assimilated into my own project of meaningfulness. And the success of the book is not measured by how many copies it sells, but by how sincere I have been in my engagement with myself and the subject matter of the book during the writing, and how collusive it has been for my formation and transformation.

"But wait a second", Me may protest, "then there is a different purpose for writing the book after all: the purpose of self-knowledge and sincerity, etc. You are not writing the book for the purpose of writing the book at all!" And sure, that is a valid protest, but this purpose is qualitatively different from the secondary purposes of fame or money. The writing offers an opportunity to sincerely engage with myself, an opportunity which would not have existed without it. And the engagement brings into being aspects of myself which would not have existed without the writing of the book. Therein lies the virtue of sincerity with whatever we happen to engage, through it we bring into existence aspects of ourselves, no longer based on insecurity and conformity. Any sincere engagement may serve the purpose of meaningfulness. In a sense, meaningfulness treats people and the world even more instrumental than totalitarian projects, since the latter do not take people seriously, while other people is at the very heart of meaningfulness.

The world's shortest existentialist novel: *The last two persons alive go for their morning walk. One slips, breaks the neck, and dies. There is no one left.*²⁴

²⁴ This is inspired by Fredric Brown's *Knock*, allegedly the world's shortest horror story: "The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door...". A dystopian version of this could be: "The last human alive sat alone

Meaningness vs. Happiness²⁵



In Episode 5, Me and Notme are discussing happiness, and Notme is vaguely dismissive of the whole concept as being something to strive for. One direct path to happiness is to conform to the roles our cultures provide us. This is the stoic approach, and it is the pragmatic approach, and as I showed in Episode 1²⁶, there are only three ways to be pragmatic, none of them actually pragmatic: you are either a true believer, a cynic, or you lack reflection. We are cynical when we conform despite understanding the uselessness and meaninglessness of whatever the pursuit is, whether it is for a career, or a family life or whatever else our culture happen to value at the moment. And thus it is insincere. To seek happiness tends then to manifest in a search for distractions from *unhappiness*, which manifests in totalitarian projects, projects which may end once we become happy.

Albert Camus: *"The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."*²⁷

To seek happiness takes one away from meaningness. On the other hand, it may very well be the case that happiness can come as a consequence of one's attempted meaningness. But not always and not immediately, since meaningness is found outside of the comfort zones we have built for ourselves,

in her room. She is checking her twitter feed."

25 The word happiness has changed its meaning so much in English that its original connotation is almost lost. Aristotle talked about "Eudaimonia" which often translates into happiness, but "human flourishing" might be a better translation. This should be contrasted by the word bliss. The shift in meaning of the word happiness has gone from "human flourishing" to today's meaning which is much closer to "bliss". The former term is close to how I define meaningness. No thinker before our time ever thought bliss was something to strive for. Yet, striving for the bliss (or happiness) is the central tennant of a consumerist society.

26

27 *The Myth of Sisyphus*, by Albert Camus. Sisyphus tried to avoid death, and as punishment, the Gods made him carry a boulder to the top of a hill, only to see it roll down again, and repeat this indefinitely. Albert Camus makes the argument that the meaningless task gives distraction from the meaninglessness of the task, and that one can imagine that Sisyphus actually is happy while carrying his rock. Happiness as distraction. Happiness is not meaningness.

outside of the habitual and culturally learned, and therefore it can often be uncomfortable and even painful. No, meaningfulness is not a direct path towards happiness, but it is a path towards personhood, towards sincere living, and a path towards real interhuman interactions away from the instrumental thingification which turns Eachother--and ourselves--into Others.

Some short examples

In terms of **ethics**, meaningfulness is the polar opposite of many ethical systems, e.g. utilitarianism. According to utilitarianism, everything you do should be as a means to an end: to increase the world's total happiness or good, and reduce the total pain. Utilitarianism does not allow for sincere engagements with anything, which makes it impossible as a value system of human growth.

Capitalism is based on insincerity at every level. Money, often in the form of profit, or a salary, is supposed to be the incentive for every action, which means that there are no actions left with their own purpose. On the other hand: Money is not itself its own purpose, but only valued by what else it can buy, so not even what is supposed to be the motivation for our actions is valued in itself, and there is no sincerity left in a capitalist world.

On work: If an employer wants to get her employees to work better and harder for whatever reason, she can give them incentives. Which incentives should she implement? The real management question is not "*which incentives?*", that is a question loaded with the fallacious assumptions that there *are* good incentives and all we need to do is to find them. *All* incentives detract from meaningfulness and detach us from our tasks. It also reflects badly on the employer who failed to give people meaningful tasks for which they do not need external incentives to do well, or to find people who care about the task in the first place. (Not to mention that the distinction between employer and employees may create hierarchies and insincerity in the first place.) Many politicians in power claim that jobs create meaning and purpose to our lives, yet they put in place systems, such as New Public Management, which undermine our engagement with our work, and thereby meaningfulness itself.

I may start a **family** for many reasons. Maybe people frown upon me for not conforming to the family norm and I yield to the social pressure. I may have found a partner who I think makes me look good in the eyes of others, or a partner whose genes I think will match mine well, so that I can reproduce in an (unconscious or aware) act of genetic narcissism, or so that I can be a valid member of society. Or maybe I am afraid of growing old alone, and hope that my family will take care of me when that happens. In these cases we do not treat people as people. We even create new people as means to insecurity driven culturally motivated ends. We do not treat our partner as a fellow human being but as the role of husband or wife, and thereby we treat ourselves as conforming to respective cultural role.

In a sense all projects, totalitarian or not, of meaningfulness or none, are about being in a context larger than oneself. That is what is so great about personhood: it is infinite (to all practical purposes). Any other person is greater than myself, and so am I. Which means that deep and sincere engagement in someone else is already to be in a context larger than myself. And there are only so many people in life with whom we can engage so deeply, since we are limited in space and time. As such, life-partners and a family, treated as human beings, can be the most meaningful thing there is. Of course, deep and sincere connections can be found aplenty outside of such limited cultural norms as the "family".

Another example: **Education** is often portrayed as a way for the lower classes to gain access to the privileges of the higher classes. By doing so people become doubly disadvantaged, since not only do

they have an under-privileged starting point, they are also denied getting an education for its own sake--they are denied being sincerely engaged with their own education and transformation.

Question: *Are there situations where instrumentalism and insincerity is warranted? Where politeness rather than deep engagements between human beings is preferable? E.g. is it OK to treat a hairdresser as a means to the end of getting my hair cut? Or am I then compromising someone's personhood, and in so doing, my own?*

The Meaningness of Death

It is in the nature of modernity to value youth over old age. Since each generation grows up under tangibly different conditions, by the time we are old, we are culturally ancient. On the other hand, if one is engaged in a project of meaningness, the longer we do it, the more we manage to grab our personhood and consciousness. Thereby, one would imagine old age being valued higher than youth, since the young are still slaves under the cultural norms of their generation, still bits of filth waiting to mature into human beings. In this sense, a human life is not like a leaf of a tree in the north, sprouting in the spring, being full and productive in providing resources for the trunk during summer and fading, crumbling, and finally falling off in autumn. No, the life of a human being sincerely engaging with self and others, taking responsibility for her personhood and transformations, is like the tree itself, growing ever stronger and wider with age and the changing seasons.²⁸

In fiction, a common trope is the person with eternal life, a blessing which turns into a curse as all they once found important withers away, and all loses its significance²⁹. What these stories tend to catch very well is how that which once seemed important to the culture savvy adult either becomes completely void of meaning with the perspective of extra-human time, or it becomes a source of nostalgia. What they in general fail to grasp is the enormous possibility that comes with such a perspective. An eternal life would not at all be a curse to a person who engages sincerely with the world and Eachother, it would present an opportunity to continue the project of meaningness indefinitely.

And therein lies the weakness of this philosophising. We all die, and I have found no way to engage with death sincerely. I have heard people say that death is what gives life its meaning, but I find this perspective impossible to reconcile with sincerity and meaningness. The death of a human being cannot be meaningful. On the other hand it cannot be experienced either, since we are no longer around when it happens to us. All we can do is remain sincere till the end. For someone's personal project for meaningness, death is but a

²⁸ This is the tragedy of agism.

²⁹ E.g. in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams, the character Wowbagger accidentally becomes immortal. He sees the importance of a project to disperse the ensuing boredom, so he sets out to insult every person in the universe in alphabetical order. In the TV series *Dollhouse*, by Josh Whedon, a select few evolve the technology to download their personality into other people's bodies. They become so hedonistic that they hardly have time to find a new body before the old one gets a heart attack. And of course, the immortal Doctor Who never stops running, and are only forced to stop when he starts caring for his companions. Other examples: *All Men Are Mortal*, by Simone de Beauvoir or *The Wort*



Truncation

*I was told that death is a part of living,
something with which people of all times deal.
That it is a ridiculous modern misgiving,
this end of life-anxiety which we feel.*

*"Old people just have to handle it's vicinity,
by afterlife, incarnation, void, or divinity."*

*And I believed what I was told, and I sneered at those who were anxious
(also at myself)*

*And then I thought that: life--it is a project! And then I thought that: each person is infinite!
Each year that we live brings us closer to ourselves, each year that we live brings us closer to
Each other.*

*An afterlife then would be a continuation
me as an eternal project just begun.
Never becoming, always in transformation*

-

Then why bother dying?

...

*Now I see death as a provocation.
Please, help me with my reconciliation!
For without afterlife or incarnation,
of our never-finished transformation,
death is nothing but truncation.*

