The Meaningness of Life  
Towards a sincere existentialism.

This season has been about meaning, and it has been about formations and transformations and the intersections of these. And it has been about *meaningness*, discussed in many and roundabout ways without spelling out what it is (this post will try to change that). This season has been written 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 also been the voice of a plethora of people at different levels of closeness against which I have wielded my arrogance and preconceptions, voices who 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 I find myself in, a context by the name *modernity*. Modernity will be the focus of season 2, but I mention it here as a testament to a layer of myself which I have considered universal and "normal", but is a product of my time and place.

[[1]](#footnote-2)

Our time is modern, and some parts of the world have been modern for a couple of hundred years, from the scientific revolution taking place in Europe during the 17th century, until the near future. But more on that next season. The reason I bring it up here is that I need the concept of the *project*. This is an integral part of modernity, a project encapsulates and combines the concepts of transformations and the notion that change is good. The heart of what Notme, and now I, calls *meaningness* lies in the project.

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

**1. Cosmic Meaning**

Cosmic meaning[[2]](#footnote-3), is the significance events have on a cosmic or meta-physical 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 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. The dismissal of cosmic meaning is an inherent part of modernity.

**2. Meaning of stuff**

The meaning of stuff[[3]](#footnote-4), on the other hand, is quite significant to how I perceive the world. We are biological creatures, and our perceptions of the world, both physical and abstract, depends on our biology. This decides the way we categorise our surroundings, turning stuff made out of a bunch of very similar molecules and cells 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, rectangles. These categories we learn, and we learn them during our cultural upbringing, and what we learn is not only to deliminate, to create taxonomies, but also how to feel about each category, how to understand each and all of them. This combination of a delimitation and a feeling is what forms a *cultural prejudice* (or bias), 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 post-modern[[4]](#footnote-5), and is also a large part of what constitutes meaningness.

**3. Meaningness**

Now to meaningness[[5]](#footnote-6). 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 his 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]](#footnote-7)

This stands as an example of a project, but is it an example of meaningness?

In a recent interview, the film maker Woody Allen describes 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 decaying of my body, that I will be old one day in a very distant future."*

Is this a description of meaningness?

My answer to both these questions is *no*. When cosmic meaning is declared absent, usually by death of God, its insignificance is often missed. This results in a life-project such as the ones in these two examples, whose main purpose it is to distract ourselves from the fact that we will all soon die and it will all have been for nothing. These projects are not projects of meaningness, because they are means to an end, and not an end in themselves. And the end is distraction from the meaninglessness of life. And maybe to be remembered for a short while.

A true project can never be 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 meaningness. Such projects I choose to call *totalitarian projects.* (The *utopian* projects are a sub-category to these.) Examples of totalitarian projects are some forms of Marxism, as well as neo-liberalism and a scientific theory of everything. Totalitarian is any striving for an ideal or perfection. These are the projects driven by insecurity, and they are the opposite of meaningness.

# The project of Meaningness

Meaningness 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 the project of meaningness is also specific and concrete.

And the meaningness of life is the reason for being. It is the project of being a human being, and not a bit of filth, it is the project of grabbing our infinite[[7]](#footnote-8) personhood and transcend our nature and nurture. It is the project of turning the 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 it is a never-ending project, since consciousness[[8]](#footnote-9) is not a binary, when diving into the bottomless pool of personhood the transformations are never-ending and without goal.

And how such a project is formed is derived from our biology. In the previous episodes, based on insecurity research, four stages of human development were described[[9]](#footnote-10):

**1.** Imitating childhood, where the delineations and categories of the culture are learnt. Apples are different from oranges, wooden spoons from blocks of wood, mothers from fathers, etc.

**2.** Insecurity driven adolescense, where the social hierarchies are (often painfully) 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.

**4.** Maturity into occasional personhood and consciousness.

The culture savvy adults we end up as depend on the cultural upbringing which brought us there. The project of meaningness is to challenge our cultural prejudice, preconceptions and biases, and they are rooted in our insecurity and fear of social pain. In our egos. And they can only be challenged socially.

This can only be achieved together. However, to challenge is not to abandon, but to understand. Without cultural limitations we are no longer human. But to challenge our prejudice we can understand them, be aware of them, and integrate them meaningfully into our lives, without the notion that they are "good" or "natural" or even "better", but merely a part of who we have become. Denying this knowledge we cannot transform into anything else.

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, and possibly more. 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 mostly with Eachother. Self-discovery is a process of formation and transformation, not of unearthing and peeling.



However, it is the cultural biases and the insecurity they create within us which makes us treat Other persons instrumentally. We interact based on what the Other can do for our social well being. We may choose a partner based on how that person makes us look, and we may choose a career based on the same, and base our interactions with the Other on how it helps the career. We may choose to treat sexual partners as an ego boost. In all these cases, we do not treat the Other as a person with infinite personhood, but instrumentally as a thing. This thingification of the Other is impossible without also thingifying ourselves. For we start to judge ourselves by how well we achieve our cultural goals be it looking good in the eyes of Others, or something completely different, even looking good in the eyes of God. [[10]](#footnote-11)

***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"[[11]](#footnote-12)*

In order to sincerely and deeply interact with the Other, to turn the Other into Eachother, one has to start with oneself. It is only by overcoming one's own insecurities, and recognising one's own biases that one can allow oneself to treat Others as Eachothers, and by so doing, one starts to treat oneself as an infinite person too, someone with the potential of infinite personhood and occasional consciousness. To love your neighbour as you love yourself is not a good idea before you love yourself.

To find meaningness 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 meaningness 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* meaningness will be different from yours. It is not necessary, but it helps if your interactions with Eachother is diverse. This enhances the cross-section of cultural biases within yourself which get challenged.

To connect with others is then to do so through one's vulnerabilities. The insecure tries to hide any perceived flaw or vulnerability in social interactions, thereby creating a distance between oneself and the Other, craving the Other's respect or admiration or fear, and judging oneself by one's ability to hide perceived flaws. But our vulnerabilities are connected with our insecurities, which again 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.

**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."[[12]](#footnote-13)*



**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 be aware of possible true 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.

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

# **We are biological creatures**

We are biological creatures, and our limitations and possibilities depend on our biology. Without our biological reality, meaningness cannot exist. Our insecurities are 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. This simple fact is all too easy to forget in our modern times. But if one remembers this, meaningness becomes easier to achieve.

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 loosing social status, and in a consumerist society we are bombarded by advertising telling us what to buy to gain, regain, or retain this status, causing us to be distracted from what could be meaningness. 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 meaningness, one have to first create the mental space for doing so. One need 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.[[13]](#footnote-14) This can be very powerful realisation in a stressful situation, and may help some to overcome one's stresses. The stoic philosophy offer a plethora of strategies for taking control over one's reactions to reality. But also our reactions are biologically determined, and some traumas cannot simply be thought away, as cannot some life situations.

Finding space for meaningness is a start. This is the place of being content, or even happy. While Stoicism deals with finding equinomity with one's place in a cultural context, however, meaningness does the opposite. Meaningness may, through sincere engagement with the Eachother and the world, take you away from that equinomity 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 the rest. One needs escapism, entertainment, silliness and fun, none of which is entirely separate from meaningness. 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.[[14]](#footnote-15)

**Byung-Chul Han:** *"An animal busy eating must at the same time pursue other tasks. It must, for example, keep away comptetitors 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 coppulating." [[15]](#footnote-16)*

# Meaningness is Political

By interacting with the world while being true to ourselves, we manifest what we have become. The truth comes through in 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 the truth, formed by social insecurity as we are, we hide our truth behind lies we tell ourselves, but much more damning, behind layers of vagueness, finding their rationalisation in retrospect.

Simone Weil wrote that the most corrupting thing about a political party is that its purpose becomes to grow. Recently I harboured the idea that the purpose of any political activisim 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 within the group. Let the constellation be a space, both physical, and mental, where we can strive to be human beings in every moment and encounter, together. Where we can be true to ourselves, 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 struggle cannot be to eradicate the world from evil, in whatever form it may be, sexism, racism, classism, agism. I think that is a misunderstanding of culture. Every culture contains prejudice and hierarchies which takes us away from being human, and every person grows up as a cultural being. Even if we change culture itself, it won't disappear, it is part of our biological reality just as much as our lack of wings and gills. We are instead left with ourselves, and therein lies the work, to deconstruct and stop being defined by culture. What matters is what we do with what we became, and take responsibility for what we become 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 others to form and transform within, together. Creating spaces of sincerity.

**Question:** *How would a totlitarian meaningness manifest itself?*

It may seem from what I have written that political activism, or partaking in politics is useless, 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", described in the book "Exit, Voice, and Loyalty". [[16]](#footnote-17) 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 you full hearted support. When you no longer can give your full hearted support for whatever reason, you Exit, i.e. leave the context and seek out a new one. This is insincere politics (and it is politics in all situations described).

The more sincere strategy 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. Loyalty may be the least modern aspect of Hirschman's analysis. With loyalty, you don't threaten to leave a situation--you threaten to stay. This forces other's in the same context to also take you sincerely to some extent.

If one engages sincerely with one's surroundings, context, and Eachother, one cannot help by also becoming an activist, since sincere engagements makes it impossible to ignore what one finds wrong with 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 cynic is the opposite of an activist.

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.

To engage politically within your society by voiting once every few years, is also to follow the exit strategy. If that is the beginning and the end of one's engagement, it is not sincere.

# Some examples

A project of meaningness does not answer questions, it finds new ones. A project of meaningness is not totalitarian. In the personal context, totalitarian thinking is the notion of perfection, and at the same time the intolerance of flaws. It is to have an idealised image of oneself, and then trying to chip off all flaws from that ideal. That is a totalitarian project, since the aim is to end the project.

One should not do anything with another purpose than doing just that. If I write 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 meaningness, 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 meaningness. And the success of the book is not measured by how many copies it sells, but by how true to myself I have been during its writing, and how collusive it has been for my formation and transformation.

"But wait a second", someone may protest, "then there is a different purpose for writing the book after all: the purpose of self-knowledge and truth, 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 prupose is qualitatively different form the secondary purposes of fame or money (which may come as a consequence of the sincerity by which I engage with the writing). The writing offers an opportunity to be true to myself which would not have existed without it, and this truth would not have been available otherwise either. Therein lies the virtue of sincerity with whatever we happen to engage, through it we bring into existence true aspects of ourselves, no longer based on insecurity and conformity. Any sincere engagement may serve the purpose of meaningness. In a sense, meaningness 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 meaningness.

**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.[[17]](#footnote-18)*

Education is often potrayed as a way for the lower classes to gain access to the privileges of the higher classes. By doing so they becomes doubly disadvantaged, since not only do they have a under-privileged starting point, they are also denied getting an education for its own sake--they are denied being sincerely engaged with their education.

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.

If an employer wants to get her employees to work better and harder for whatever reason, she can give them incentives, such as pay-bumps, bonuses, extra vacation, or whatever. Then she will ensure that her employers are no longer working in order to do a good job, and engage sincerely with it. She will ensure that the job becomes a means to an end, and make it devoid of meaningness. The real management question is not "*which incentives"* one should use to get better results, that is a so called loaded question, loaded with the fallacious assumptions that there are good incentives and all we need to do is find them. All incentives are bad, since they detract from meaningness and detach you from your task. It also reflects badly on the employer who failed to find people who care about the job, or to give people meaningful tasks for which they do not need external incentives to do well. Many politicians in power claim that jobs create meaning and purpose to our lives, yet they put in place systems which undermine our engagement with our work, and thereby meaningness itself.

In terms of ethics, meaningness 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.

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 conscious) 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 meaningness or none, are about being in a context larger than one-self. 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 a project of personhood. And there are only so many people in life with whom we can engage so deeply with, 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. Deep and sincere connections can of course also be found outside of such cultural norms. Meaningness is not necessarily about abolishing norms, but rather about engaging sincerely with the ones we can, and reject those we cannot and those which stand in the way of sincere engagements.

Another example: A political goal can be to erradicate 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 erradicate 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 fine.

In Episode 5, Me and Notme are discussing happiness[[18]](#footnote-19), and Notme me 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 1, there are only two ways to be pragmatic: you are either a cynic, or you lack reflection. It is cynical, since 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. 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, outside of the habitual and culturally learned, and therefore it can often be uncomfortable and even painful. No, meaningness 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 intrumental thingification which turns Eachother into Others.

**Albert Camus:** *"The struggle itself [...] is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."[[19]](#footnote-20)*

Empathy is often misunderstood as the ability to feel what another person is feeling. 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. 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.

**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?*

**Question:** *How can we know that the meaningful and true engagement 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?*

# 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. In this sense, a human life is not like a leaf of a tree, 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 human life is like the tree itself, growing ever stronger and wider with age and the changing seasons. This is the tragedy of agism.

In fiction, a common trope is the person with eternal life, which turns into a curse as all they once found important withers away, and all loose its significance[[20]](#footnote-21). What these stories tend to catch very well is how what 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, the possibility to engage with people with cultural backgrounds inconcievbale today, with endless cultural expressions. 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 reconciliate with sincerity and meaningness. The death of a human being cannot be meaningful. For someone's personal project for meaningness, death is but a truncation.

**Truncation**

I was told that death is a part of living, something with which people of all times deal. That it is a ridiculus 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 Eachother.

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.

My (mis)Understandings of Others

**The Buddha (~500 BC)** has detachment as a central tenant. Where Meaningness is in complete agreement with Buddhism is when it comes to being detached from outcome of any task. If one is sincere about something, it does not matter if the outcome is "good" or "bad". E.g. if a book sells well or not is insignificant if one is sincere in writing it. There is also some overlap in the sense that Buddhism aims to detach from our cultural biases and prejudice, our insecurity, (social) suffering, and ego, even if meaningness is not the really the same as detaching from these, rather to acknowledge and engage with them. Buddhism is the complete opposite everywhere else in its striving to detach from such worldly needs as Eachother, which makes other people threats to one's detachment (people are sticky), and thereby they become objects and not persons. There is also a totalitarian goal of Nirvana, where one is detached from all preconceptions and one with the world. This is denying our biological nature. And it is to detach from a greater goal, which I find contradictory at best. At the same time there is an element of true engagement with the self, the shredding of cultural identities and layers, often through meditation. So there is overlap, but the differences are fundamental.

**Socrates (~400 BC)** said that the unreflected life in not worth living for a human being. By that he started and ended existential philosophy.

**Aristotle (385-322 BC)**, Socrates' grand student, thought that if something is good because of what it produces, then what it produces is better. Therefore, the highest good must be that which is good in and of itself, and secondary virtues are those which produce this, and so on. He defines this highest good as “eudaimonia”, which is often translated as happiness, but "human flourishing" may be a better translation, and sometimes he refers to “eu zên” which means to live a good life. He also defines what constitutes a good life based on biology (he was the first biologist after all), by asking what uniqueness humans possess as a creature--that must be our purpose. He concludes that we are the only creatures who can guide ourselves by the use of reason. If we use reason well, over a full lifetime, only then can we flourish as human beings. By this, he can then agree with Solon's words a few centuries earlier: "Count no man happy [flourished?] until he be dead."

**Jesus (0-33)** allegedly said: ‘Love your neighbour as yourself.’ Completely glossed over that first you need to love yourself.

**Martin Heidegger (1889-1976)** was a big fan of Aristotle. Despite this, Heidegger only came half way towards finding meaningness. He understood to discard the importance of cosmic meaning. It was Heidegger's rather superficial dismissal of modern notions of individuality which prevented him to embrace personhood as something to strive for. His dismissal lead Heidegger to embrace culture as the only means for engaging with others and find meaning, while personhood takes its form by questioning one's culture. His concept of attention, the basis of phenomenology, is very similar to what I call sincerity. He sees our culture, with its historical context, as our destiny, and when we perceive the world through our true cultural filter, we not only bring it into being, but we do so in a *destined* manner (manifesting destiny) by our culture and its historical trajectory (modernity is not respectful to the historical context of our culture). He further saw the German culture as destined to dominate, just as Greek culture had done during Antiquity, which made his philosophy align well with the German National Socialists (Yes, he was a Nazi, after his diaries were found this is undesputed fact). If only he would have faced his discomforts with modernity's individualism...

**Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986)** a student of Heidegger (who was politically his polar opposite (Marxist)), realised the importance of a project, but (to my knowledge) failed to answer the "then what" questions satisfactory. Even if she embraced *authenticity*, which is very similar to what I call sincerity, she did not (to my knowledge) make the connection. The concept of the Other is very important for de Beauvoir and her fellow existentialists. They recognise the distance between the self and the other, and found it impossible to breach, because they did not expect the Other to be Authentic in kind towards the Authentic existentialist, which they believed formed an impenetrable gulf between people, causing much anxiety.

**Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)** was also a student of Heidegger's and a life-long partner of de Beauvoir's, tried to argue that existentialism is a humanism in a famous lecture. (Existentialism is the notion that existence comes before meaning, which could be seen as a dismissal of cosmic meaning.) He claimed that those actions are morally good which would remain good if all of of humanity performed them. This is a totalitarian failure, since one then need to do things because they are good if everyone do the same, not for the sake of doing them. It is only through sincerity that existentialism becomes a humanism. He also failed to make a coherent connection between his ethics and authenticity.

Rejected for now

In which the season is summarised and meaningness is defined  
Towards a non-totalitarian and non-metaphysical existentialism

**Carl Jung:** *"Christ expresses the same idea when he says, "I appear in the least of your brethren"; and what about it . . . if the least of your brethren should be yourself - what about it then? "*

one should not do anything with another purpose than doing just that. If I write 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 the book. Then the success of the book is not meassured by how many copies it sells, but by how true to my self I have been during its writing, and how colusive it has been for my developing, or whatever unmeasurable measure of success

A scientific project of meaningness does not claim to find a true theory of nature, merely means by which we can ask more insightful questions about nature. Totalitarian thinking in physics has brought the discipline into a crisis it cannot come out of.

In order to meet the Other, the Other has to be turned into Eachother. They have to be treated as a person, and not a means to an end.

But our insecurities stand in the way for this. We want the other to love us, and, failing that, to like us, and failing that, to respect us, or failing that to fear, or loath us. We want this because we are biologically hard wired to be insecure, to conform to social and cultural norms. To find personhood and concious autonomy is to not play the social game and treat eachother as persons, and thus work as vehicles for eachother's personhood.[[21]](#footnote-22) What Jung referrs to there is that we should not see our flaws and shortcomings as something to hide. To love someone is to do so including flaws and imperfections. And we have to learn to love ourselves in order to love eachother. Because our flaws and imperfections are culturally decided, and they are based on our fear of social pain, our insecurity. We have to be open about our insecurity with eachother in order to see them and be seen. Only then can we love, and only then can we love, ourself as a person and eachother as persons. Everyone is flawed and yet no-one is.

So I've pointed to a few thought systems which completely misses meaningness, which are aimed and focused on insincerity and thereby work against us gaining a deeper personhood and consciousness. One is utilitarianism, which says that nothing you do should be sincere, it should all be for the ill-defined greater good. In this view, one must break some eggs to make an omellette. Another example is the all more encompassing pseudo-liberal views of New Public Management, where all is measured and quantified in every work-place, which shiftes focus from doing a sincere job into fulfilling an arbitrary metric of incentives and other measures.

Modernity *noun*

1) An historical period during which a culture changes tangibly over the course of a generation for several generations, such that each generation is growing up under significantly different conditions than their parent's.

2) A cultural notion that change is progress.

**One misconception I am expressing here is that it seems as if I think 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, the do not exist until they come into existence through interactions with the world, and mostly with Eachother. And they are definitely not vid of cultural context, over a long life well travelled one may adopt many cutlrual aspects and make them part of one-self. This is why eternal life is possibly very satisfying. There is no naked, culture-less core which would be reached by living forever, the life-project is never-ending since the transformation is never-ending. It does not necessarily have a direction, and there is no goal at the end. This is important to clarify to myself, since totalitarian notions keep creeping in in my description.**

The totalitarian approaches to life falls into behavioural patterns which in many contemprorary cultures are coded as masculine, while the meaningness approach would code as feminine. Note, there is no need for someone identifying as being male to also be masculine. These codifiers in society, on what is seen as masculine and feminine, together with "masculinity" also being considerably more valued, is what constitutes a patriarchal society. Patriarchy is a set of values, together with a gendered association of those values. Patriarchy in our world is totalitarian by construction. If one wants to resist patriarchy people of all genders should be allowed to embrace whatever is considered anything (not only having a female action-hero, but also vulnerable men). Personally I work towards embracing meaningness.

However, it is the cultural biases and the insecurity they create within us which makes us treat Other persons instrumentally. We interact based on what the Other can do for our social well being. We may choose a partner based on how that person makes us look in the eyes of Others, we may choose a sexual partner in order to boost our ego, and we may choose a career based on a will not to appear odd, and base our interactions with the Other on how it helps the career. In all these cases, we do not treat the Other as a person with infinite personhood, but instrumentally as a thing. This thingification of the Other is impossible without also thingifying ourselves. For we start to judge ourselves by how well we achieve our cultural goals be it looking good in the eyes of Others, or something completely different, even the knowledge that one would look good in the eyes of others if only they knew.

Outtakes

When one is driven by insecurity, other people become an obstacle, objects of one's potential embarrasment and shame. Objects to impress, or at least make an impression towards. Another person is then not perceived as a person, but becomes the Other.

In order to sincerely and deeply interact with other people, to turn the Other into Eachother, one has to start with oneself. It is only by overcoming one's own insecurities, and recognising one's own biases that one can allow oneself to treat Others as Eachothers, and by so doing, one starts to treat oneself as an infinite person too, someone with the potential of infinite personhood and occasional consciousness. In the personal context, totalitarian thinking is the notion of perfection, and at the same time the intolerance of flaws. It is to have an idealised image of oneself, and then trying to chip off all flaws from that ideal. The aim of such a project, is to end it.

1. A culture is defined in Episode 9 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Discussed in Epsiode 1, dismissed in Episode 3. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
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). [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. First introduced in Episode 3, and also discussed in Epsiodes 5, 6, and 7 (all indirectly). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
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 convinsing anwer 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 which is the topic of this post. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. 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 possibilites for personhood probably outnumber the possibilites for books. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. I am using the word unconscious in a slightly unusual way. There is a difference between being aware and being conscious, and I think it is a difference that matters. Those who discuss the nature of consciousness, tend to actually treat awareness. This confusion comes form 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 surroudings and environment, and even self. Only persons are conscious. Most of us are not conscious most of the time. Meaningness is the path towards consciousness. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. 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. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Psychological research show that in a game, people hate one kind of player more than all else. The winner is respected, the loser is fine, people have some problems with the cheater, but no-one is as hated as the spoil-sport, the one that refuses to even play the game. The extrapolation of this result is that we are hard-wired to play the social game. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. Poem: *Wenn Herr K. einen Menchen liebte*  *(When Mr K. loved a Human). M*y translation."Was tun sie", wurde Herr K gefragt "wenn sie einen Menschen lieben?" "Ich mache einen Entwurf von ihm", sagte Herr K., "und sorge, dass er ihm ähnlich wird." "Wer? Der Entwurf?" "Nein", sagte Herr K., "der Mensch" [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship,* 1795 [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. See for example the how-to blog *How to be a Stoic:* https://howtobeastoic.wordpress.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. There is cultural debate going on (since antiquity) concering the nature of art vs. entertainment. Videos of cats on social media vs. long reads of world expanding content of literal quality. What I think is missed in this debate is an understanding that everyone needs rest. But 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 to which we identify. 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 culturual 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 inherintly not profitable (at least not in general, exceptions of course exist). 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. Sleep is after all the most common human activity, and while pleasant, it is not necessarily the most meaningful. [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Ett djur som är upptaget med att äta måste samtidigt ägna sig åt andra uppgifter. Till exempel måste det hålla konkurrenter om bytet på avstånd. Det måste ständigt se upp så att det inte självt blir uppätet när det äter. Samtidigt måste det bevaka sina ungar och hålla ett öga på sin partner. I vilt tillstånd är djuret tvunget att fördela sin uppmärksamhet på olika aktiviteter. Därför är det oförmöget att sjunka ner i kontemplation, både när det äter och kopulerar. [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
16. Described by Malcolm Gladwell in the New Yorker here: http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2013/06/24/the-gift-of-doubt?currentPage=all [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
17. This is inspired by Fredric Brown's *Knock*, allegedly the the world's shortest horror story: "The last man on Earth sat alone in a room. There was a knock on the door...". It captures the essense of creating a spooky moment in a story. A dystopian version of this could be: "The last human alive sits in her room. She is checking her twitter feed." [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
18. 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 (deserving a PhD thesis in social history by itself) has gone from "human flourishing" to today meaning "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. [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
19. *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. Hapiness as distraction. Happiness is not meaningness. [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
20. E.g. in *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, by Douglas Adams, 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 Dollhouse, 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 Worthing Saga*, by Orson Scott Card. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
21. I have discussed this with many science minded people. Personally I am not interested in a scientific explanation for meaningness, but many have, so I can share my views on this here. In evolution things happen for the purpose of survival and reproduction. Many traits that evolve for these reasons become something completely different, many traits are not used in the way they originally evolved for (one example is a bone in our ear used for hearing which originally was a part of a reptile-like ancestor's jaw). Most of what we call human consciousness is most likely a trait which came into existance in order for humans to work together socially, to mitigate a culture over the generation and with it all the knowledge it contained, much of which was useful for survival. Being socially apt was then considered sexy and therefore good for reproduction. Part of what consciousness can do is to cancel other instincts. Instead of pulling the hand out of the burning fire one can conciouslly deside to put it in there. Maybe this will gain social status, make you distinguish yourself in the group. Or it can be a ritual which if you do not complete it makes you ostracised. Either way, these sciency explanations are conseivable. To me, it is not conciousness if an action is performed merely to cater to a social instinct before a more primal one. However, to concsiously go against our instincts to do something for no other reason than doing just that, without gaining social status, without enhancing our chances for sex, or what have you, only that can be considered consciousness, and most of us go through most of our lives without ever experiencing it. Ironically, then, the underlying reason for our possibility for consciousness is likely a by-product from our instinct for cultural conformity, but it is achieved exactly by rejecting that very conformity (in a conscious manner). [↑](#footnote-ref-22)