

THE REAL QUESTION OF THE MEANING OF LIFE

What the question of the meaning of life amounts to, is common knowledge. It is addressed in all the major religions, was the subject of the earliest known work of literature (the Epic of Gilgamesh), and is regularly poked fun at within pop culture. Since the late 1990s, however, a research programme has arisen in analytic philosophy, which claims that the question is not about whether human life has a meaning, but rather how to build up positive social meaning. These philosophers denigrate interest in the traditional question, calling it a ‘cosmic’ concern which is not what people asking ‘what is the meaning of life?’ want to know about. I will show that this is wrong, and that the question can only be answered in one of two ways: either with a meaning of life – of the kind that God might provide – or with nihilism.

We routinely distinguish the meaning *in* a phenomenon, from the meaning *of* that phenomenon. Consider an early Western movie. If our interest is the meaning *in* the film, we might talk about what is motivating the various characters, their personalities, trials and tribulations etc. We might say that *in the film*, the Indians are the baddies. If our interest is in the meaning *of* the film, however, then we would instead talk about its significance in a wider setting than that of the fictional scenario it depicts. We might say that the film reveals the negative stereotypes in early 20th century America towards Native Americans, and perhaps the new-found confidence of a country creating an idealised version of its history. This, we might say, is the meaning *of the film*.

So *meaning in* concerns the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon (such as a film, novel, sport or musical composition), while *meaning of* concerns the meaning of the

phenomenon in a wider context (a society, typically). When we ask about the meaning of life, then, the form of words indicates that we are not asking about the kind of meaning we build up within the context of social life. Rather, we are asking about (how else can I put it?) *the meaning of life* – we are asking whether life itself has meaning. Since *meaning of* questions require us to look outside the contextual meaning created by a phenomenon, this question is addressed to the possibility of a wider context in which life might have meaning. This wider context would stand to life and the meaning within it, as the wider context of society stands to a film and the meaning within it. The question ‘what is the meaning of life?’ presupposes there *is* such a context, since it asks *what* meaning our lives are thus endowed with; endowed with *by God*, would be the standard presupposition. But as with all questions of this form, it leaves room for us to reject its presupposition by appropriately answering that there is no meaning of life.

I have been treating this question as an enigma in need of deciphering; when it is actually just about the most natural and ubiquitous philosophical question in human history. The question boils down to: what is the value of human life which accounts for us being here? Or less carefully: what are we here for? We know the meaning of computers in this sense; they accomplish tasks for us, and that is why we made them. So given that people exist, and care about their existence, we naturally wonder if there is any reason for it. Assuming both that there is, and that it makes our lives valuable, we ask: what is the meaning of life? Now this meaning might be moral; for the reason we exist might be to achieve something morally good. But it need not be – the value of our existence might be found in our contribution to an unfathomable cosmic plan which bears no relation to human notions of morality. The answer to the question might be thoroughly obscure, then, but the question is not.

Now we might try to answer this question by saying that the reason we exist is that a chance chemical reaction occurred on Earth about 3.5 billion years ago, beginning a chain of biological evolution that produced us. However this just pushes the question back a stage, because we must then ask why those fertile environmental conditions once existed. And to answer this we must ultimately ask why reality itself exists. The question has not changed in pursuing it backwards, because we are only asking why reality exists because we want to know why human beings exist. For humans are a part of reality, and so if there is a reason the whole thing exists, it will tell us why we exist. If there is no reason, then nihilism is true.

Compare this traditional philosophical question, to: ‘how can I get some more meaning in my life?’ To ask the latter is to ask how I can make my life more fulfilling and rewarding. Or if our aspirations are higher, it might be to ask what kind of things I need to do in order to get others, and ultimately myself, to judge that I have lived a worthwhile life. This kind of question might be answered effectively through the decision to take up a new hobby, find a new partner, or become involved in charitable work; these are the kind of things a sensible friend might suggest if you went to them with the worry that your life is meaningless. Now I ask you: what could be more obvious than that we have now moved onto a different issue?

Recent analytic philosophers have managed to persuade themselves that this is what the question of the meaning of life amounts to, however. And I think they have done this not only because they are very confused, but also because it provides them with a platform to engage in secular moralising; one which gains credence from its association with the traditional question. It allows them to dress up their intuitions about what kinds of social meaning are good, as analyses of the meaning of life. Thus they proceed to produce formulas for a meaningful life which rank people’s activities. What they fail to realise, however, is that the

notion of a socially meaningful life has a number of different senses. In one sense, for instance, we simply mean social impact. So given that Hitler had an enormous (and terrible) social impact on the world, his life was paradigmatically meaningful in this sense; ‘meaningful’ just means ‘significant’, after all. But if we instead mean *good* social impact, then Hitler obviously did not have a meaningful life. These philosophers have no justification for attending only to the *good* sense of ‘socially meaningful life’; they do it simply because they want to be atheist preachers.

Given that there are different and conflicting senses of a socially meaningful life, and that our judgements on these matters are culturally specific (as empirical psychologists investigating these matters are well aware), the recent philosophical project of providing a formula for a socially meaningful life is untenable. And it does not address the question of the meaning of life anyway.