

Finding Meaning and Purpose in Life

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Prague, Czech Republic, March 2004

If we were to find some scribbles on a piece of paper, and ask what they mean, then we would be asking what the person who made the scribbles meant them to signify. Scribbles only mean something if they were made for a reason. If we found out that the scribbles were just drawn at random then we would cease to look for meaning in them. Random scribbles don't mean anything.

The same is true of life; it only makes sense to ask "What is the meaning of life?" if we believe that life was created for a reason. If life simply evolved on Earth by accident, if we just happen to be here, then life cannot have any meaning. Life can only have meaning if it was created for a purpose. If there is no Creator, then there can be no meaning of life.

Of course, people can try to find meaning in life without believing in a Creator. We can set ourselves goals—wealth, fame, helping others—and decide to devote our lives to achieving them. If we do this, then in some sense our lives seem to become about achieving wealth, or fame, or whatever, to take on that meaning. It seems possible to impose meaning on life through our own decisions and desires.

Indeed, most people who ask "What is the meaning of life?" really mean something like "What goals should we set ourselves?"

There is a misunderstanding here, however; meaning cannot be imposed on life through our decisions and desires. The attempt to impose meaning on a life that would otherwise be devoid of meaning fails

Either life has intrinsic meaning, or it doesn't.

If life has intrinsic meaning, then the goals have already been set and there is nothing we can do to change them.

If life doesn't have intrinsic meaning, then setting ourselves goals doesn't get us any closer to fulfilling our purpose, because there is no purpose for us to fulfil. If there is no ultimate aim to life, then there are no better or worse goals that we could set ourselves; deciding to pursue wealth would add meaning to our lives just as well as deciding to pursue happiness, and neither would add meaning to life any more than a deciding to collect bus-tickets, or to pursue melancholy, or to commit as many acts of petty violence as possible. The answer to the question "What is the meaning of life?" is "There isn't one; it doesn't matter what you do." If life starts off meaningless, then it must end up meaningless.

People can try to find meaning in life without believing in a Creator in just the same way as they can try to find meaning in random scribbles or in clouds. If one looks at a cloud

hard enough for long enough and applies enough wishful thinking then one can find a hint of a familiar face or object, and try to project this meaning onto it.

That doesn't make a cloud a portrait, though; it doesn't give it true meaning. Thinking that the meaning of life is the pursuit of our self-set goals is like seeing a face in a cloud and calling it a portrait. The true meaning of life depends on the reason for our creation. If we want to find the meaning of life then we need to ask why we were put here.

Christianity gives one answer to this question. The reason that we are here, according to Christianity, is that God created us to have a relationship with him. This is why God created a universe fit for human life, and why he laid down guidelines for how to live our lives. According to Christianity, each one of us is created for communion with God; God wants to know us, to love us, and to rejoice with us.

Christianity continues to tell us that the barrier to this relationship is sin, but that in Jesus God heals that relationship, removes that barrier no matter how great it has become, and restores us. Faith in God and in Jesus is therefore right at the heart of the Christian conception of the meaning of life as the means of achieving fulfillment.