

# PHILOSOPHER'S COLUMN

## Having a Meaningful Versus a Meaningless Life

Judgments about the meaningfulness or meaninglessness of individual lives are commonplace. People often judge the quality of their own lives or the lives of others as being fully or partially meaningful or, conversely, as being fully or partially meaningless. One great difficulty is that these judgments are often plagued by such ambiguity as to make it difficult to get clear exactly what particular claim is being made. In order to minimize this difficulty, I propose to begin by stating one characterization that seems to me to capture the way many of us go about assigning meaning to the narrative of our lives. It is a characterization which holds that having a meaningful life necessarily involves the capacity to have, or to successfully achieve, important life goals.

According to Paul Edwards in "Life, Meaning and Value of" (*The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*), when we say that a person's life has meaning (in a subjective and nonmetaphysical sense), we are only committed to the claim that this person's life seems worthwhile to him or her, roughly because he or she is attached to some dominant goals and believes that these goals may be attainable. Having a meaningful life, then, roughly signifies having a minimally adequate sense of purpose and worth—largely because an individual is attached to dominant goals and believes that these goals are, or may be, attainable. Having a meaningless life seems to signify the opposite. It seems to signify the lack of hope and sense of worth—largely because the individual in question believes he or she cannot possess or can no longer achieve any important goal.

I think it is clear that, from this perspective, meaninglessness is a matter of degree and essentially subjective. It is also clear that meaninglessness is often related to the sentiment of disappointment, often the fear that one's deepest

desires may not, or cannot, be achieved. Fear appears to be the trump. I once heard a suicidal woman say that "she was just bottled-up fear walking about." Life was meaningless not because she had lost everything of value but because she was terrified by the fear of such a loss. This suggests that it is not only great actual losses (like death and separation from people or things we love) that trigger feelings of meaninglessness but anticipatory anxiety and, at worst of times, feelings of terror. The following is such a case; it is extrapolated from Gail Sheehy's brilliant description of her own midlife crisis:

Ms. S, an otherwise successful investigative reporter, has multiple brushes with death. She also experiences and seems to empathize with the complete mental breakdown of another woman. A sense of meaninglessness, a sense of an alien, horrible, unspeakable but undeniable fear begins to haunt her. She tells us that "the unfathomable fears were: I'll lose my stable pattern and all the skills that work for me. . . . I'll wake up in some alien place. . . . I will lose all my friends and connections. . . . Suddenly, I won't be me anymore. . . . I'll be transformed into some other, execrable form . . . [an] old woman.

Let us, therefore, add to our characterization and say that individuals sense or feel life is devoid of meaning when they fear great loss; when (or to the extent which) they believe that they cannot possess goals, or when, if they can and do have goals, they believe that these goals are trivial or impossible to achieve; and when these judgments are accompanied by a sense of dysphoria or despair. In other words,

people who have studied the claims of those who hold that their lives are meaningless, or who have had the experience themselves, share the following beliefs: first, that the experience typically presupposes a quality-of-life perspective, a conviction that a life of minimal quality is bound up with the individual's ability to satisfy certain kinds of desires; second, that there is a difference between a life devoid of any quality and one almost devoid of quality, and between these and one that lies just on the negative side of the scale; and, finally, that the experience of meaninglessness typically occurs when individuals fear great loss or believe that they cannot have significant goals or achieve the ends which they hold to be fundamentally important.

This characterization is untidy and problematic, but it does seem to capture a central sense of the term. Margarethe Van Andica's book *Suicide and the Meaning of Life* suggests that the term *meaningless life*, when used by the dysphoric, the chronically depressed, and the most severe cases of those who contemplate suicide, signifies a subjectively perceived failure concerning goals or the possibility of attaining goals—not merely grief and lack of direction. Andica suggests that it is not grief or pain or the lack of aim but the belief that one cannot possess goals—or that, even if one can, these goals are trivial or impossible to achieve—that leads a class of human beings to despair and to the judgment that their own lives are meaningless. This also seems to explain certain problems of passage and "meaning of life" crises.

I do not wish to address the more difficult question of whether or not this is the best way of assigning meaning to life. No doubt some will argue that it is better to believe that life is always meaningful and so will urge, like Alyosha in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers*

*Karamazov*, that we should love life more than the meaning of it. The following case illustrates what appears to be the wisdom of this alternative life perspective:

Mrs. K is a 50-year-old nurse who is recovering from breast cancer. She works a full day in the hospital, cooks and cares for her husband and six children, and goes to school at night in order to be able to improve her life-style. Her life to date seems to be a series of disasters, including the death of two children. Then, within the same week, her youngest child is hit by a car and her husband is hospitalized with a heart attack. Mrs. K is almost overwhelmed. But she never has had, nor does she now have, any sense that her own life (or life in general) is meaningless. She believes that life necessarily involves pain and suffering but that it also offers moments of happiness and joy. She lives one day at a time and tends to scold and chastise those who fail to appreciate the blessings of both hurt and unhurt experience.

In spite of this example, some readers may feel that I have spent too much time on the negative aspects of human existence and not enough on the possibilities of creating meaning and living a joyful life. They may believe that I am guilty of saying too little about people who enjoy life and have placed too much emphasis on those who are miserable or teetering on the brink of suicide. A similar point is made by Irving Singer, against Dostoevsky, in his book *Meaning in Life: The Creation of Value*. Of course, Singer also distinguishes between meaningfulness and significance; between loving all things and loving the love in everything; and between a life worth living and one not worth living. According to Singer, meaning in life is the creation of values in accordance with the needs and inclinations that belong to one's natural conditions. I have no quarrel with this characterization. Nor do I wish to quarrel with his suggestion that the energies of most ordinary human beings are best spent not in an attempt to understand feelings of

meaninglessness but in giving meaning to their lives—in discerning what goals and values they can find gratification and fulfillment in pursuing. However, there is a difference between what human beings should best do and what many of them actually do. Whatever wisdom may or may not command, the task of transmuting human nature must not be confused with the task of understanding it.

Human beings do possess the capacity to be easily and acutely affected when they perceive a root inability concerning their own life ends. Human beings, unlike most species, are frequently tormented by the savage gods of depression and despair. It is important, therefore, to recognize that these feelings are common. It is important to also understand that what leads most commonly to judgments of meaninglessness is not so much objective failure; rather, it is the sense of being irreversibly defeated—the conviction that, given one's basic goals, all is helpless and hopeless. It is the conclusion enshrined in Coleridge's *Ode on Dejection*:

Work without hope draws nectar  
in a sieve;  
and hope without an object  
cannot live.

So far, I have been describing and, in part, defending what appears to be an essentially subjective perspective. It may not be possible to enlarge it and adequately distinguish between subjectively and objectively correct judgments. But it may be illuminating if we look, for a moment, at a possible epistemological strategy. For example, it is tempting to say that, subjectively, some judgments are correct when it is claimed that an individual believes his or her life is meaningful or meaningless and when the claim actually corresponds to that respective belief. Similarly, it is tempting to add that, objectively, some are correct when, given the individual's dominant goals or his or her capacity to have goals, the judgment that his or her life is meaningful or meaningless corresponds to relevant external conditions. I do not think humanists need be concerned about the merits and liabilities of this strategy. What is important to

recognize is that *some* claims about meaninglessness have, at least on an intuitive level, greater cognitive warrant than others. That, as opposed to purely subjective judgments, there are judgments rooted in what might be called *objective failure*. The following examples may illustrate this point.

Paul D. is a seriously defective child under one month of age known to be hydencephalic, a condition where both cerebral hemispheres are absent and are replaced by cerebral spinal fluid. Because Paul possesses only a brain stem, which serves primarily to control respiratory function, and because he lacks the capacity for even minimum cognitive power, his parents judge his

life to be meaningless.

Mr. W, a 53-year-old author and journalist, suffers from recurrent abdominal pains. A preliminary medical exam is inconclusive. Exploratory surgery reveals a cancer which has spread to his liver. Mr. W insists on knowing how long he has to live and is told that he has about three months. He believes that the best way to live with death is to live as full a life as possible. He believes that his life is meaningful until the time comes when he can no longer do anything he holds of value. Mr. W continues to write and spend quality time with his wife and children. When he can no longer move, urinate, defecate, and can just barely appreciate his wife's

presence and loving kindness, he judges his life to be nearly meaningless and asks for her help in ending it.

To sum up: it is true that the disposition of our character or the way we view life often determines the measure of meaningfulness we can enjoy. But it is also true that objective circumstances may contribute and that, when an individual's well-being is nearly or completely obliterated, then a respective judgment of meaninglessness seems to have much greater objective warrant. M

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