

**What is the meaning of life? Does it matter how you answer this question?  
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Yesterday, I invited a writer friend of mine to lunch – a writer I used to admire and respect. But what I saw was a bitter and angry old man, who was very dissatisfied with his life. “I haven’t accomplished anything worthwhile. I have wasted my life!” he confessed with his typical candor.

How could he come to this negative assessment? He was a rising star in the literary circle, with several books to his credit when he was still in university. Talented and prolific, but he never achieved the big break he had hoped for. The financial reward for his lifelong devotion to creative writing has been modest, in spite of the endless long and lonely nights at his desk. Most of his books are now forgotten — out of print and out of sight.

There was clearly a profound sense of disillusion from his squint downcast eyes. In his mind, the days of pure literature were long gone and readers only consume trash. If he were to start life all over again, he might have chosen a less difficult and more profitable career.

He is not alone. I have personally known many successful individuals, who have also expressed similar sentiments in their sunset years. They have worked very hard to climb the corporate ladder, but when they finally reach the top, they only see emptiness and death on the other side of the wall. They have fulfilled all their ambitions and dreams, but happiness continues to elude them. They feel that they have thrown away their lives chasing after a pot of gold beyond the rainbow.

What should we do so that one-day when we look back we can feel good about our lives? How should we then live so that we can have a sense of fulfillment without troubling regrets? I propose that the key to success and happiness is meaning; there is growing research evidence supporting this claim. To discover your meaning and purpose in life is the surest way to find out what you are best at, how you can fulfill your potential, and what matters most in life. Therefore, it pays to wrestle with the ultimate question – What is the meaning of life (MOL)? This is the beginning of life intelligence, the first step towards the good life.

**What is the meaning of “meaning of life”?**

But what is exactly the meaning of the MOL question? We need to clarify this question before we can answer it.

First of all, this is not just an academic question for the philosophers, nor a spiritual question for the religious leaders. It is in fact a very practical question of everyday concern. Our capacity for self-reflection makes the MOL question inevitable in our daily struggles.

Life remains an unfathomable mystery. It is as unpredictable as it is irrational. Too many problems of injustice and suffering cannot be explained away

rationally. Too many paradoxes in human existence defy logic. We know that altruism is one of the highest good for us and for others, and yet we continue to exploit each other. We know that we should be kind to those who love us, yet we often inflict the greatest pain on those who love us most. We live as if we will never die, and yet deep down we know that death is only one breath away.

One of the most puzzling mysteries about human life is the MOL: Since life is full of troubles and ends in death, what is the point of living? What is the meaning and purpose of human life? Is this life worth all the trouble? The riddle of MOL stares at us, taunts us, demanding an answer.

A careful reflection will reveal that MOL actually refers to a set of interrelated questions concerning **purpose**, **values**, and **the good life**:

- Is there any meaning and purpose for human existence?
- Does God exist? If so, why does he allow evil and suffering?
- What is the point of living, when life is full of pain?
- What is the meaning of death? Is there any life beyond the grave?
- Is there any meaning when life is only transitory?
- What is the purpose for my life?
- What really matters in life? What is most important?
- What is the good life? What should I do to attain it?
- How can I find happiness and significance?
- How can I find meaning and fulfillment in my life?
- Who am I? Where am I going?
- What should I do with my life?
- What are the sources of meaning?
- Do I discover meaning from what is externally ordained?
- Do I create meaning from within myself?
- What kind of values and beliefs should direct my life?
- What is my worldview? What is my philosophy of life

This Meaning of Life Course will address all these questions. It will provide descriptive and prescriptive answers based on accumulated wisdoms from the literature and research, but more importantly, it will ask provocative questions to stimulate your thinking. Ultimately, only you can decide what works for you. There is nothing more intimate, more personal than finding out how to live your one and only life.

### **Different responses to the MOL riddle**

Although there are very different responses to the MOL riddle, most responses can be grouped into following three schools of thoughts:

1. **The agnostic school** – The MOL riddle is intractable and insolvable. Therefore, the only reasonable response is to carry on with the business of daily living and ignore the MOL.
2. **The pessimist school** -- There is no inherent meaning and purpose in human existence. Therefore, suicide would be the most honest and logical response to a life full of pain and suffering. .
3. **The idealist school** – Life has inherent meaning and purpose. Therefore, the only responsible response is to discover and create a sense of meaning and significance in one's life.

### **The need for examining one's life**

If one simply plunges into the business of living and dismisses the MOL as irrelevant, what would be the consequences?

Many are too busy pursuing success to be concerned with existential issues. But at the end, it maybe too late to find out what life is all about. Success in career is different from success in living. What good does it do to win the whole world and yet lose one's own soul?

Imagine that you have received the gift of one million dollars. Would you just squander it for fleeting pleasures or do you invest it wisely? If you are a good steward, you would want to put the money to good use, so that it will not only yield some profits, but also accomplish some good. Good stewardship requires a close examination of your spending priorities, values and personal goals.

Likewise, good stewardship of life requires a close examination of your assumptions and values. Wrong assumptions can lead to disastrous results. Wrong values can be equally costly. You need a reliable inner compass, and you need all the wisdoms of the world to guide you. Be careful how to invest your only life.

Dr. Robert Nozick (1990), one of the most celebrated contemporary philosophers, has concluded that an unexamined life cannot be lived fully. How can one live fully, if one never bothers to think about how to live well and what is important in life?

The real danger of the agnostic stance is that one may spend one's precious life on something trivial, but miss out the golden opportunities to live a worthy life.

### **Objections for the meaning of life question**

Yes, there maybe legitimate reasons for not bothering with the MOL. For example, those who struggle just to eke out an existence may not afford the

luxury of pondering on the weighty issues of meaning. They work their fingers to the bones from dawn to dusk; how do they find the time to meditate?

But who can rule out a moment of epiphany in the dead of night? What can prevent the human heart from crying out in the throes of agony: Is this life worth all the suffering? When the toil is too much to bear, who would not wonder: What is the point of this endless grind?

In fact, I would argue that it is even urgent to think about meaning, when life is full of toil and tears. There is a big difference between struggling to stay alive, and live a life that is worth the struggling. The paradox is that we actually have a much better chance of surviving and flourishing, if we know the meaning of our suffering and strive for a purpose larger than mere survival.

Another common objection to the MOL discussion is that many people may not have the education background or cognitive capacity to wrestle with philosophical issues. What is the use of discussing philosophy with a 5-year-old child?

But even a child knows how to ask: Why do I have to go to school? What for? Even a child knows how to dream about what he would like to do and what he wants to be when he grows up. And every child questions, explores, and tests the limits in order to get more fun out of their daily lives.

In its simplest form, the MOL is a very practical concern – it has to do with how to invest one's life wisely so that one can live a fulfilling and worthwhile life. Only a fool refuses to ponder life's many options and opportunities.

Just as denying God's existence does not make God disappear, so does ignoring one's need for meaning does not make the MOL question go away. The best way to ensure that one does not throw away one's life is to start thinking about how to live wisely and happily.

### **The pessimist world of darkness**

After two bloody world wars and the atrocities of the Holocaust and Nanking massacre, it is difficult to maintain the naïve optimism of modernism and humanism. Our faith in humanity has been severely undermined. The world is not getting better with science and technology. Human beings have not yet learned how to live together peacefully even with more education and interactions.

Just yesterday, the writer who had lunch with me was convinced that evil will triumph over good, ruthlessness will conquer kindness and selfishness always trumps generosity. He described life as “a pile of dog shit” -- full of ugliness, absurdity, suffering and injustice. There is no possible meaning and purpose in life. Human existence has only negative values. Life is a dark abyss waiting to swallow us up.

There has always been a stream of pessimist thinking running through both Western and Eastern cultures. This philosophy certainly resonates with many people’s experiences, especially those who have gone through terrible ordeals and continue to live in unrelenting hardships.

[Arthur Schopenhauer](#), a German philosophy, is most well known for his pessimistic view of human life. The endless reproductive cycle is pointless, because eventually, it will lead to extinction as limited resources can no longer sustain life on earth. Human existence is inherently meaningless, because of its finiteness, contingency, and continual frustration. We are tormented by biological desires, which only lead to frustration and pain. The only possible escape from suffering is through denunciation of desires, a position similar to Buddhism.

Jean-Paul Sartre developed existentialism into a formal branch of modern philosophy with the meaninglessness of life as its main tenet. He contends that human existence has no external purpose and is not part of a master plan. Existence precedes essence, because human beings must construct their own essence without external support or aid. In the face of nothingness, meaninglessness and absurdity, individuals must make decisions and act. Individuals can experience meaning only when they create their own projects to fulfill their own desires.

**Question:** *If my life is no more than an accident in nature and a speck of dust in the wind, if human beings are no different from the beasts and insects, and if the human species is doomed to extinction, why should I strive to survive? What is the point of being alive? What are the likely consequences of holding a pessimist view?*

### **Existential vacuum, depression, aggression and addiction**

Just as pessimism may lead to nihilism, meaninglessness may lead to existential vacuum. Viktor Frankl (1984) believes that existential vacuum results in the neurotic triad of depression, aggression and addiction. When life is perceived as oppressive, hopeless and meaningless, one becomes vulnerable to depression, aggression and addiction.

A young graduate student from an elite Ivy League University recently told me that he was so disgusted with the abusive and exploitive behaviors of his supervisor and other professors that he sometimes even entertained the evil thought of killing these abusive crazy professors. (He then assured me that he would not act out this fantasy, which provided a much needed relief for his anger.)

If such a gentle and caring young person could be pushed to the verge of a violent outburst, then anything is possible -- office rage, school killings, suicide-bombings, and self-destruction. The unimaginable has become a daily occurrence, when there is no meaning, no justice, and no hope.

But the dark night will end and a new dawn will begin. If one can look beyond the present darkness, one can discover a glimmer of meaning. That would be sufficient to empower one to resist the destructive forces and the death instinct that come from prolonged frustration of our hunger for meaning.

### **Egotistic hedonism**

Egotistic hedonism is also a natural reaction to a pessimist view of life. If this short physical life is all there is, then one should live to achieve maximum pleasure for oneself.

“Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless” (Ecclesiastes, 1:2). After this pessimistic declaration, King Solomon comes to the conclusion that "A man can do nothing better than to eat and drink and find satisfaction in his work" (Ecclesiastes 2:24).

The huge entertainment industry and food and beverage industry will continue to prosper as long as people are seeking pleasures and distractions to escape from a boring, meaningless existence.

The philosophy of living in the fast lane appeals to young people, because even the deadly pleasure of the moment is far more compelling than an unknown future. The pop culture of drug, sex and rock and roll keeps on pushing hedonism to the next level with more potent drugs and more destructive acts. Live on the edge and live for the highs. That is what life is all about.

***Question:*** *What is the future for a life addicted to chemical happiness?*

But the pursuit of pleasure and happiness has never been a fruitful exercise, if we leave out meaning. Viktor Frankl and other existential philosophers have long discovered that happiness only comes through the backdoor when we pursue meaning and purpose.

### **Heroism and meaninglessness**

Heroism is another way to cope with the pessimist school of thoughts. Such heroism is best symbolized by Albert Camus' [\*The Myth of Sisyphus\*](#). According to Greek mythology, the gods had condemned Sisyphus to repeatedly rolling a large rock to the top of a mountain only to see it fall back again. Sisyphus was to spend eternity in this repetitive, futile effort, which defines the utter meaninglessness of life.

Eternity actually made his existence even more miserable and meaningless. What could Sisyphus do to make his life more meaningful? By finding creative ways to push the rock up? By imagining that he was going to build a cathedral with the rock?

According to Albert Camus, Sisyphus is the absurd hero: "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy." It is the defiant human spirit, the heroic effort of meeting the challenge that gives him a sense of dignity and satisfaction.

### **A rational approach to creating meaning**

Closely related to heroism is a rational approach to creating meaning in life. If one embraces the scientific account of life, and denies the existence of a master plan, then there is no ultimate meaning and purpose in life. Therefore, in the absence of God and an externally imposed higher purpose, human beings must create meanings for themselves.

In other words, we as individuals and as a society must decide what kinds of activities are worthwhile, and what kinds of values will endow our lives with meaning. For example, we may decide that being very successful and impactful in one's profession gives life meaning. The symbolic immortality of being recorded in the chronicles of arts and science is a source of meaning. Our value systems may also identify altruism, defending one's country, caring for the children, and looking after the elder as meaningful.

However, there are severe limits to the rational approach. What happens if we are not successful in our work? How would we react when others reject the project which we have completed after many years of struggle and sacrifice? How would we feel when we are being punished for doing what

we believed to be meaningful and worthwhile? At the end, most people will be frustrated and disappointed. Even success may not fill the void in their hearts.

### **Belief in the intrinsic meaning of life**

This is the most positive and optimistic response to the mystery of life. It affirms that meaning and purpose can be discovered regardless of one's circumstances. This idealist position incorporates the heroism of taking a defiant, courageous stand in the face of unavoidable and insoluble problem. It also incorporates the rational approach by focusing on activities and values which make life worth living. But more importantly, it rests on the foundation of faith -- the belief that meaning still exists, even when one's life is a failure or when one is dying of cancer.

Dr. Frankl demonstrated the potential of meaning when he was facing unimaginable horrors and suffering in Nazi concentration camps. Many cancer patients have testified how their lives were filled with blessings and meanings even when their bodies were decaying. Only meaning can transform human tragedies.

Such an optimistic affirmation against overwhelming evidence is nothing short of a leap of faith in the dark. It requires resources way beyond one's own agency and capabilities. It may also depend on personal encounters with the transcendental sphere. Finally, it calls for faith in the existence of a Higher Power and an ultimate purpose.

There are different pathways to discover the faith-based positive meaning. The key is that you need to continue your quest, even though you can only see a dim light on the distant horizon. May the journey itself fill your heart with hope and joy as you forge ahead!

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### Reference

Nozick, R. (1990). *Examined life*. New York: Simon & Schuster.