

Meaning and

A personal journey

Nothingness

James A. Haught



Young seekers of truth go through a phase of wondering whether life has any discernible meaning. Why are we here? Why is the universe here? Is there a purpose to it all? This is the ultimate question, overarching all others.

The seekers usually plunge into philosophy, and spend years sweating over “being” and “essence” and quibbling over how the mind obtains knowledge, how we determine reality,

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and how language shapes our comprehension. In the end, most emerge (as I did) with no better answer than when they began—and a feeling that they wasted a lot of time and effort. Omar Khayyam felt the same way nine hundred years ago:

Myself when young did eagerly frequent
Doctor and saint, and heard great argument
About it and about, but evermore
Came out by the same door as in I went.¹

However, despite this futility, I think intelligent people can address the meaning-of-life question sensibly without bogging down in philosophical stewing and hair-splitting. That’s what I’d like to do now: just spell out what’s knowable, as I see it. The following is my personal, amateur view.

First, 90 percent of humanity—the religious believers—don’t need to ask the meaning of life. Their church tells them the answer. Priests and scriptures say a magical, invisible god created the universe and put people here to be tested, set rules of behavior for us to follow, and created a heaven to reward the rule-followers after they die and a hell to torture the rule-breakers after *they* die. Some supernatural explanation like this one is accepted by the vast preponderance of human beings.

But some of us can’t swallow it, because there’s no evidence. Nobody can prove that people continue living after death. Nobody can prove that people are tortured or rewarded in an afterlife—much less that any invisible spirits exist to do the torturing and rewarding.

Therefore, we uncertain people are doomed to be seekers, always searching for a meaning to life but never quite finding one. I’ve been going through it for half a century. Now, I think I can declare that there are two clear answers: (1) Life has no meaning. (2) Life has a thousand meanings.

First, the lack of meaning: as for an ultimate purpose or transcending moral order, all the great thinkers since ancient Greece have failed to find one. The best philosophical minds have dug into this for twenty-five centuries, without success. There have been endless theories, but no clear answer. Martin Heidegger concluded that we are doomed to live our whole lives and die without ever knowing why we’re here. That’s existentialism: all we can really know is that we and the material world exist.²

As we learn scientific facts we realize that both the cosmos

and our biosphere seem utterly indifferent to humanity, and care not a whit whether we live or die. Earthquakes and hurricanes and volcanoes don't give a damn whether they hit us or miss us. Tigers, tapeworms, and bacteria consider us food.

As for morality, I don't think any exists, independent of people. There are merely rules that cultures evolve for themselves in their attempt to make life workable.

Conservatives speak of "natural law," but there is none. If Ku Klux Klansmen lynch a Black man from a limb, the tree doesn't care. Neither do the squirrels and birds in the branches. Neither do the sun or moon above. Nature doesn't care. Only people care.

Or consider human rights. Thomas Jefferson said all people "are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights." But I think Jefferson was wrong. There's no evidence that any Creator endowed anyone with any God-given rights. What unalienable rights were enjoyed by African Blacks who were sold into slavery—including those on Jefferson's Monticello plantation? What God-given rights were assured the six million Jews sent to Nazi death camps? Or the one million middle-class Cambodians murdered by Pol Pot's peasant army? Or the one million Tutsis killed by Hutus? Or Ulster children killed by Catholic and Protestant bombs? Or Hiroshima residents in 1945? Or around one million women burned as witches by the Inquisition?

What was the meaning of life to the millions dying of AIDS, the millions who died in the 1918 flu epidemic or in the Black Plague, or the nine hundred who gave cyanide to their children at Jonestown, or the ninety who burned with their children in the David Koresh compound? What meaning existed for thousands of Hondurans drowned in hurricane floods a couple of years ago? Or those sixteen Scottish kindergarteners who were massacred by a psycho with pistols? Or the two thousand American women killed by their husbands or lovers every year? Or the twenty thousand victims the Aztecs sacrificed annually to the invisible flying serpent? Or the twenty thousand whom the Thugs strangled on behalf of the goddess Kali?

Meaningless, senseless, pointless—all these horrors have a grotesque absurdity about them. Words like purpose, rights, and morals simply don't apply. Evils like these make it obvious by simple logic that there is no all-loving, all-merciful, all-compassionate, father god. Common sense proves that the beneficent modern god is a fantasy who doesn't actually exist.

In his book *Consilience*, the great Harvard sociobiologist E.O. Wilson pointed out that there are two fundamental ways of looking at reality: *empiricism*, believing only what evidence tells you; and *transcendentalism*, believing that a divine or cosmic moral order exists independent of humanity. If any proof ever upholds the latter, he said, "the discovery would be quite simply the most consequential in human history."

So much for the recognition that life is meaningless. Now for the realization that it has many meanings.


Obviously, the reality of physics, chemistry, biology, atoms, cells, matter, radiation—nature, in other words—imposes a physical order upon us. We can't escape the laws of nature that govern animals on an orbiting planet. Death is stronger than we are; we can't prevent it. Therefore, whatever meanings exist must apply to the temporary period while we live.

Clearly, there's a physical and psychological purpose to life. Our bodies need food, and clothing, and shelter, and health, and affectionate comfort, and security from violence and theft, and so forth. We also need gregarious social reaction with people around us. And we need democratic freedoms so we can speak honestly without fear of punishment, and justice so we won't be treated cruelly. These are the humanist purposes of life: to provide better nutrition, medicine, housing, transportation, education, safety, human rights, and all the other needs of people.

To attain this humanist "good life," the species has a strong need to raise intelligent, healthy, affectionate, responsible children. Sometimes, I think the single biggest purpose in life is raising good kids.

I think we all endorse this biological/psychological meaning of life. We believe in preventing war, curing disease, ending hunger, improving literacy, reducing crime, averting famines, and taking all the other steps that make life pleasant—until death takes us. However, aside from this "housekeeping" type of purpose, is there any greater meaning that transcends our human needs? I don't think so. At least, I've never been able to find any proof of it. We simply must try to make life as good as possible, and avoid horrors, and care about people, and have fun, even though we know that oblivion is coming.

Make hay while the sun shines, because darkness is on its way. *Carpe diem*: seize the day for now; live fully while you can. Omar Khayyam saw the folly of aggrandizing oneself, because ill fortune or sickness and death soon wipe one out. Praying for heaven after death struck him as even greater folly: "Fools, your reward is neither here nor there." So Omar's solution was to take comfort in verses, wine, and his lover "beside me singing in the wilderness—and wilderness is paradise enough." About 1,400 years before him, the great Greek skeptic Epicurus felt the same way.

So there you have it: We who are not orthodox religious believers can't find any underlying reason for existence. And we know that death looms ahead. So we must make the interval as enjoyable as possible while we're here. This view of life's purpose was summed up a few years ago by the title of a Unitarian seminar: "Dancing Over the Dark Abyss." And  Zorba the Greek taught us, What is life, if not to dance?

Notes

1. Omar Khayyam, *The Rubaiyat*.
2. Actually, I can know only one thing with absolute certainty: that my mind exists and is receiving impressions. Descartes stated this truth as "*Cogito, ergo sum*": I think, therefore I am. Hypothetically the images, sounds, feelings, etc., in my consciousness could be illusions, like artificial inputs to a brain in a laboratory tank, and the entire objective world fictitious. Though we can't be totally sure of the validity of the sense impressions reaching our minds, we all nonetheless presume that external people, places and things actually exist. Their existence seems verified by our thousands, even millions, of encounters with them in our activities. We base our whole lives, and our search for knowledge, on this presumption that they are real.