Chapter 2: The Meaning of Life

Teaching Objectives

- Explain why we have to understand what is meant by the term "meaning" to answer the question, "What is the meaning of life?",
- Characterize the various ways people give meaning to life.
- Deliberate about whether life could have meaning, even if it remains difficult to know what "Life has meaning" signifies.
- Get a sense of the many metaphors thinkers use to explain the meaning of life.
- Identify ways in which you create meaning for your own life.

Chapter Overview

Perhaps the most difficult question philosophy asks is: What is the meaning of life? Almost all of the great philosophers have considered the question, and many of them have offered an answer—even though the question of the meaning of life may not require or allow for a specific answer. In this chapter we will first inquire at what it could possibly even signify for life to "have meaning." Then, we will explore a variety of the responses many have given as potential answers to the question of the meaning of life. The four main categories of responses are that children give life meaning, that God or a relationship with God gives life meaning, that life has meaning if an afterlife is possible, and that--because of despair-- life has no meaning. Scholars have used various metaphors to characterize what a meaningful life would look like. Since the question of life's meaning at times does not call for, or allow, a specific answer some philosophers think that metaphors can help use create meaning for our own lives, even if those same philosophers question whether we could ever know if life has true purpose. The most common metaphors used in philosophy—and so, the ones this chapter will explore—are life as a game, life as a story, life as tragedy, life as comedy, life as a mission, life as art, life as an adventure, life as disease, life as desire, life as nirvana, life as altruism, life as honor, life as learning, life as suffering, life as an investment, and life as relationships.

Key Terms

Absurd: the view that life ultimately is unreasonable, irrational, and without meaning; includes acts whose motives contradict the end sought by the action.

Altruism: acting for the benefit of others, even if there is no benefit whatsoever to oneself.

Bildungsroman: the 19th-century German philosophy that an individual's personal development occurs through various journeys, disappointments, and discoveries.

Contemplation: undisturbed thinking and learning, which includes the active life of thought and philosophy; according to Aristotle and others, the happiest life.

Detachment: the originally Stoic view that the passions and emotions are irrational, and so ought to be separate from rational contemplations and action.

Eternal Recurrence: Friedrich Nietzsche's thought experiment that imagines what our responses would be to discovering that we will experience every minute aspect of our lives in exact duplication, eternally.

Nihilism: an extremely pessimistic and skeptical view which asserts that nothing can be truly known, and so nothing can have any value.

Nirvana: a Sanskrit word meaning "extinguish", which is used in Buddhism to refer to the state of liberation from selfish cravings.

"Nirvana Principle": Freud's view, also called "the constancy principle", that the effort to maintain psychological equilibrium through overcoming desire.

Stoicism: an ancient movement in philosophy that taught self-control, a suspension of desire, freedom from the passions, and a willingness to endure whatever fate has in store.

Key Figures

Augustine: a Christian saint and philosopher who persisted in acting the question of life's meaning.

Albert Camus: French philosopher, novelist, and existentialist who theorized that life is absurdand only worth living if we rebel against its absurdity.

Ecclesiastes: book of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles which laments the meaninglessness of human activity, desire, and morality.

Erasmus: a leading Dutch humanist of the 16th century who argued that theology and philosophy both are prone to error over their own seriousness; instead, religious sects ought to unify based on only a few core theological points.

Sigmund Freud: the father of modern psychoanalysis and a leading proponent of the view that life is a disease; said "the goal of all life is death"

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe: German man of letters, poet and author of *Faust*, who believed that life was a mission to develop cultural self-identity.

Martin Luther: leader of the Christian Reformation, who (though devout) struggled with understanding the meaning of life.

Faust: legendary character immortalized by Goethe and, later, by Christopher Marlow, who lived in a cycle of desire-fulfillment, which ultimately led to frustration.

Friedrich Nietzsche: German 19th century philosopher who argued for an aesthetic value of life, independent of religious meaning.

Friedrich von Schelling: German philosopher who contended that life ought to be lived beautifully, since members of humanity reflect the artisanship of the divine.

Arthur Schopenhauer: Continental pessimistic philosopher who believed that life reduced to a frustration of desire that could be overcome only through emotional detachment.

Seneca: the influential first-century Roman Stoic who believed, like the early Stoics, that a life of harmony is possible only through a life of integrity and detachment from the emotions.

Sisyphus: Greek mythological hero who was condemned to eternally roll a rock up a mountain, only to have it fall back again; used by Camus to demonstrate the meaninglessness of human life.

Tantalus: ancient Greek figure condemned a life of frustration; his philosophy illustrates the contemporary view that life is the pursuit of desire.

Opening Questions

1. Fill in the blank: "Life is _____."

Discussion: Recent music, movies and literature have given us a plethora of answers from which to choose: "Life is a verb." "Life is a shadow." "Life is a rollercoaster." "Life is like a box of chocolates—you never know what you are going to get!" "Life is my sun dance." "Life is a dream." "Life is a song." "Life is beautiful." "Life is sweet." "Life is a garden." "Life sucks." "Life is a highway." "Life is wonderfully ridiculous." Another, even, "Life is a movie." Are *any* of these correct? What makes your answer the best out of all of the others? How would your answer change if the question were instead phrased, "The meaning of life is _____"?

2. This chapter poses two thought experiments. One comes from your author, who supposes what a hovering angel who watches the flurry of human activity would think, and the other comes from Nietzsche, who imagines a demon who reveals to us that our lives repeat themselves identically into eternity.

Discussion: Which thought experiment best tests your intuitions about the meaning of life? Why? Would you rather an angel critique your life's activities or have a demon give you some unsettling news about the meaning of your life? Do you identify yourself with the activities you perform? Are you identical with what you *do*, or is your life meaningful because of your activities-—or is your identity wholly distinct from what you do? Do you think the "flurry of activity" and endless meaninglessness result from our American culture or the global emphasis on material things like technology? (If so, is that a positive aspect of our culture, or a negative one?)

3. Name three or four things that you would not like to leave undone at your death.

Discussion: The philosopher William James believed that life has meaning only if it has a cadre of "live options" in it. (Live options are those which are emotionally appealing, and create other possibilities for the agent.) If James is right, any life that is void of future possibilities is morally equivalent to that of a dead person (who, we think, no longer possesses possibilities). Life must be about pursuing possibility. Do you agree?

4. If you were visited by an angel (or a demon) in your dreams tonight, and told that for the rest of your life, you could experience, perceive, think, desire, believe, and feel only those things that you have already experienced, perceived, thought, desired, believed, and felt in your life, would you want to wake up to live another day?

Discussion: Some philosophers think that life is only a series of meaningless repetitions, that we (like cattle) blindly and unthinkingly accept. Some agree that life typically is like this, but add that human life can amount to more if we use reason and emotion to break out of the repetition and to create new meaning for ourselves. And still others believe that life in itself is valuable, regardless of what meanings we attach to it. Where does your view fit in?

5. What should we value most about life? Explain why. Do you value most what you think you ought to value most? If not, why not? If so, are you forced to change your life?

Discussion: How have you come to decide what is valuable for your life and for those you care about? In philosophy, we make a distinction between things that are *intrinsically valuable* (which have value just in themselves, whether they get you other good things or not) and things that are *instrumentally valuable* (which have value because they get you other good things). Are the things that are valuable in your life *permanently* valuable (will they always be valuable to you?), *intrinsically* valuable (you value them whether they change, and whether they get you other good things) or are they valuable *instrumentally* (because they allow you to obtain other good things in life)? Are the things that have the most value to you things that have a concrete value (such as items

that are financially valuable), or do they instead have a more abstract value (such as personal or spiritual significance)?

Closing Questions

1. Explain how you rated the various metaphors of the meaning of life that Chapter 2 presents.

Discussion: Did you find that there were *no* metaphors on the list that aptly described the meaning of life? Conversely, did you think that, in some ways, *all* of the metaphors correct? If you think that the metaphor's relevance depends on what is happening in your life at a particular moment, are there some on the list that relate to your life right now? Are there some (for example, life as disease or frustration) that you think may be accurate metaphors for life's meaning, even though you do not like them?

2. Does life mean anything other than, "Get yours while you can"?

Discussion: If you agree with your friend who thinks life is about getting as much as possible whenever is possible for yourself, chances are that you don't believe that any act can be truly altruistic. An episode of the hit comedy "Friends" demonstrated this view. In the episode, Phoebe believes that there could never be altruistic acts, because all actions really are performed because the person doing the act gets some benefit out of it. To prove her wrong, her friend Joey volunteers at a telethon for charity. Phoebe calls Joey at the telethon to donate money because it makes her feel great, and Joey (the always-in-pursuit-of-an-audition-actor) ends up on TV—which makes *him* feel great. Phoebe points out that Joey's potentially altruistic act was turned into a selfish one when Joey benefitted from the act. Do you agree with Phoebe? If you think altruism is possible, explain how giving self-sacrificially is possible.

3. Should you "leave the earth as you found it" or "make your mark on the world"?

Discussion: Is it possible that these two competing meanings for life actually can be consistent? Imagine that a necessary aspect of living a human life was that you *had to improve* something about the world before you were allowed to stop living, or to leave earth. In this thought experiment, then, the only way you *couldn't* leave the earth as you found it was if you lived on the earth forever and did not change it for the better. Now imagine that you lived such a life. How would the meaning of your life change, if at all, by being a part of that world?

4. Is life like rolling a rock up a mountain, only to have it fall back again?

Discussion: Some students think they cannot really escape certain damaging relationships, family backgrounds, past bad deeds, or even, the rigors of finishing a college degree. Others view life's obstacles as stepping stones (to throw, rather than to roll up a hill) toward a better future. Which is closest to your personal view? Do you

think that the American political or economic systems put everyday citizens in the position of Sisyphus? Is it the same for religion? What about for the legal system? For technology? Is there any aspect of our culture that bucks the analogy of Sisyphus? If so, how is it able to do so?

5. Can a life be fulfilled by desire? If we understand life as desire, are we doomed to lifelong frustration? Would the Four Noble Truths provide support for or against this?

Discussion: Think about Faust, Tantalus, Sisyphus, Christ, and the Buddha. Which of these figures best represents the meaning of life? How do these figures balance, reject, battle, or accept the relationship between desire and a good life?

Class Exercises

Group Project: Sisyphean Characters
Simone de Beauvoir said, "What makes the lot of the wife-servant ungrateful is the division of labor which dooms her completely to the general and the inessential. Dwelling-place and food are useful for life but give it no significance: the immediate goals of the housekeeper are only means, not true ends." So de Beauvoir is suggesting that the truly Sisyphean character in life is the woman, whose ends in life are only means towards something else. Have your students jot down categories of persons who could struggle like Sisyphus ean (women, blue-collar workers, etc.) and categories of groups or social settings that could turn someone's efforts into those of Sisyphus (the Academy, government, a spouse, the church).

Questions:
1. Is de Beauvoir correct? If so, what makes the woman the true Sisyphean character?
2. If not, are there any other features that should be considered in determining who is a Sisyphean character?
3. Is there any way for a Sisyphean character to escape?

Internet Assignment: Stoicism
Read the article on Stoicism at: http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/stoicism

Questions:
1. Explain several reasons that Stoicism appealed to the Roman Republic.
2. Now compare the Roman Republic with contemporary America. Might Stoicism appeal to us today? Why or why not?

Case Study: Altruism and "Good Samaritan" Laws

Alexandra Van Horn was in the front passenger seat of a car that slammed into a light pole at 45 mph on Nov. 1, 2004, according to the negligence lawsuit filed against Lisa Torti. Torti, who was travelling as a passenger in a car that was following behind Van Horn's vehicle, stopped after the crash. When Torti stopped, she noticed that Van Horn required important medical treatment, so she moved her from her disabled vehicle. Torti testified that she placed one arm under Van Horn's legs and the other behind her neck as support when she lifted Van Horn from the car. Van Horn blamed her injuries (including a lacerated liver and borked vertebrae) on Torti. Van Horn claimed that Torti grabbed her by the arm and pulled her from the car "like a rag doll." Court documents said that the question of whether Van Horn was paralyzed during the crash or when she was pulled out of the car has been disputed.

The 2nd District Court of Appeal wrote in a decision that the "Good Samaritan" law only protects people from liability if they are administering emergency medical care. The court ruled, however, that Torti should not have perceived Van Horn's danger of remaining in the wrecked car as an "emergency". Attorney Robert Hutchinson, who represented plaintiff Alexandra Van Horn, said that, though the state's Samaritan law did not require bystanders to render aid, if they choose to render aid, they must act reasonably. The end legal result was that Van Horn was permitted to sue Torti for rendering aid.

Questions:

1. Do you think that Torti performed an altruistic act?
2. Use this case and Chapter 2 to provide three potential criticisms of the view that altruistic acts are possible.
3. Using this case, imagine that you are a legislator writing an amendmentyou're your state's current Good Samaritan law. Write a persuasive argument that Good Samaritan laws should be extended to protect those who also are rendering *nonemergency* aid.

Internet Resources

1. Visualize the struggle of Sisyphus through a brief Romanian video at: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K5MdFdAe_JY

2. Discover what the great Russian philosopher and novelist Dostoevsky had to say about the meaning of life: www.online-literature.com/dostoevsky/

3. Read about the life of Albert Camus, the Nobel Prize-winning author is remembered as "The Philosopher of the Absurd," at: http://nobelprize.org/literature/laureates/1957/camus-bio.html

4. Test out your ability to thwart the passions, rule the emotions, and apply reason to your everyday decisions by living like a Stoic…at least, for a week!: http://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/stoicismtoday/category/uncategorized/stoic-week/

5. A great resource about altruism, and its applications across the disciplines, is:
www.altruists.org/about/altruism/

6. Schopenhauer insisted that life was suffering. Examine some of his enduring quotations at:
http://www.quotationspage.com/quotes/Arthur_Schopenhauer/

7. Are you a nihilist? Are you feeling down about it? Join a group!
http://www.newphilsoc.org.uk/wordpress/?page_id=1041

8. Learn more about the life and works of Simone de Beauvoir, the great feminist and existentialist at:
http://www.philosophypages.com/ph/beav.htm

9. Watch real young people address the question, "What is your personal meaning of life?"
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=61VXSZrAdQ4

10. Listen to a podcast on "Freud and the Human Predicament":
http://www.partiallyexaminedlife.com/2010/09/25/episode-26-freud-on-the-human-condition/

11. Learn about Schelling's view on the meaning of life, as well as his philosophical thought at:
http://www.iep.utm.edu/schellin/

12. Learn more about what the Four Noble Truths mean:
http://www.thebigview.com/buddhism/fourtruths.html

Suggestions for Further Reading

Albert Camus. *The Stranger,* translator Matthew Ward. Random House, 1989.

The Dalai Lama. *The Four Noble Truths*. Thorsons, 1998.

Foydor Dostoevsky. *Demons,* translators Ronald Meyer, Robert A. Maguire, and Robert Belknap. Penguin, 2008.

Herman Hesse. *Siddhartha*. Penguin Classics, 2012.

Kathleen Higgins. *Nietzsche's Zarathustra*. Lexington, 2010.

E.D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn. *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*. Oxford University Press, 2007.

Gabriel Marcel. *The Mystery of Being, volume 1*, translator G.S. Fraser, St. Augustine's Press, 2001.

Friedrich Nietzsche. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, translator Clancy Martin. Barnes and Noble Classics, 2005.

Chuck Palahniuk. *Fight Club. W.W. Norton, 2005.*

John Sellars. *Stoicism*. University of California Press, 2006.

Robert C. Solomon and Clancy Martin. *Morality and the Good Life*. McGraw Hill, 2008.

Kurt Vonnegut. *A Man without a Country*. Random House, 2007.

Jared Whitcomb. *Bildungsroman*, Kindle Single:
http://www.amazon.com/Bildungsroman-ebook/dp/B009ZKNB2A/ref=sr_1_3?ie=UTF8&qid=1359862793&sr=8-3&keywords=bildungsroman