

The Basis of Meaning

What is Yours?

By

Rev. Dr. Todd F. Eklof

September 6, 2020

There's a sketch in Monte Python's 1983 movie, *The Meaning of Life*, that begins when a couple of doctors are informed that a patient's contractions have increased. "Good. Take her into the fetus frightening room," one of them responds. Upon entering, they complain the room is a bit bear and instruct the nurse to bring in some machines, including the machine that goes "bing," and "the most expensive machine in case the administrator comes."

Nobody knows what any of the machines are for, but within seconds the delivery room looks "Jolly good."

Yet something still seems to be missing ... oh yes, the patient. Once they finally find her, obscured by all the equipment, they reassure her there's nothing to worry about. "We'll soon have you cured. Leave it all to us, you'll never know what hit you."

After they dismiss her husband, explaining, "only people involved are allowed in here," the patient asks, "What do I do?"

"Nothing dear. You're not qualified," the doctors say. "Leave it to us."

"What's that for?" She asks.

"That's the machine that goes, 'bing.'"

The administrator enters, dressed in a tuxedo, and asks what kind of procedure they're doing.

"It's a birth," they say.

"And what sort of thing is that?" He asks.

"That's when we take a new baby out of a lady's tummy."

"Wonderful what we can do nowadays," the administrator beams.

Bing!

"Ah, I see you have the machine that goes 'bing.'" He says.

After he leaves, they very quickly deliver the baby, cut its umbilical cord with a meat cleaver, flash it before the mother, then, as the doctor instructs, "isolate it" in an incubation case.

When mom asks if it's a boy or girl, the doctor responds, "I think it's a little early to start imposing roles on it, don't you?"

He then goes on to explain she may soon begin experiencing irrational bouts of depression "so it's lots of happy pills for you and you can find out all about the birth when you get home. It's available on Betamax, VHS, and Super 8."

Bing!

The Meaning of Life seems a good place to begin considering today's topic—the meaning of life—especially given the cluelessness the Monty Python troupe demonstrates about something so essential to life as birth. The doctors don't know what all the medical

equipment is for. The administrator doesn't know what birth is. The mother doesn't know what she's supposed to do. And the newborn infant begins life in isolation from everything where it is likely to become just as clueless as everyone else. *Bing!*

Having meaning in our lives is essential to our happiness, to that which the Greeks called, *eudaimonia*, which most literally translates, "good spirit," though we might better translate it to mean, "good cheer." But a more accurate translation yet is, "to flourish." To have meaning is to flourish, and a life that isn't flourishing or striving to flourish, at any age, is a life without meaning. Since Socrates, the whole point of philosophy, according to many philosophers, is to discover what it takes to have a "life worth living," a meaningful life, to flourish, *eudaimonia*. Yet how many of us, instead, are like the bumbling doctors, the clueless dependent patient, and the isolated infant, in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*? How many of us have even ever considered the meaning of our own life and its purpose? How many of us have "examined" ourselves enough to lead "the life worth living?"

The basis of meaning: What is yours? Is it something you've given much thought to during your life? Is it something that's remained the same throughout your life? Has it evolved or changed over time? Are you still trying to figure it out? Of course, the cynical existentialist among us may claim our lives have no specific meaning since there is no such thing as fate to begin with, since God is dead, hell is other people, and life is absurd. But by meaning, I'm not talking fatalistically or deterministically. I'm not implying we each necessarily come into this world with a preordained purpose, or some overarching genetic quality that drives us, though I'm not denying these possibilities either. But Existentialism can just as easily be interpreted in a way that liberates us from the notions of fate, destiny, and genetics to determine meaning for ourselves.

That's actually the whole point of Existentialism, that without meaning we experience existential angst in the recognition there is nothing determinate about our lives. If metaphysics is the branch of philosophy concerned with the nature of existence itself, Existentialism is the philosophical idea concerned about the nature of our own individual existence. It began in the 18th century, after humanity started emerging from the Dark Ages and became increasingly free from theological beliefs (during the Renaissance), which is why Nietzsche recognized that for all practical purposes, "God is dead." At the same time, industrialization transformed us into mindless cogs in a machine, in which our work often became meaningful to everyone but ourselves. As a result, there was an increasing sense of meaninglessness because everything is left to chance and our work to the purposes of others.

This milieu prompted the philosopher Edmund Husserl to discuss it in his 1935 Vienna lecture, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, in which he concluded, "Europe's greatest danger is weariness,"¹ a weariness caused by the sense of meaninglessness regarding our existence in a world that seems to have gotten here by the accidents of nature. The very word, *angst*, the root of "anxiety," was coined by the founder of Existentialism, Søren Kierkegaard

in the early 19th century. The *existential angst*, sometimes called “dread,” associated with Existentialism, is caused, according to Kierkegaard, from the initial feeling we are born into a world of confusion and meaninglessness in an absurd world, like the isolated newborn in *The Meaning of Life*. The titles of two of his most influential books, *Sickness Unto Death* and *Fear and Trembling*, at the risk of judging a book by its cover, are enough to get at his idea that we can go through life feeling sick to death in response to the problem of our own existence, and that it is a problem we must take serious enough to try resolving, as Saint Paul said of salvation, with “fear and trembling.”² In *Sickness Unto Death*, he proposes this lifelong sense of despair is largely caused by not fully becoming ourselves, who we are meant to be, whether we consider our unfulfilled meaning preordained by fatalistic forces, or a matter of choice driven by our own passions.

The first question Holocaust survivor and founder of *Logotherapy*, Victor Frankl use to ask his new patients was, “Why don’t you commit suicide?”³ This may sound a rather callous way to begin therapy but Frankl understood our sense of personal meaning to be essential to our happiness. No matter what difficulties we have endured, no matter how much we despair, no matter how anxious we feel, if we can answer this question, why do we choose to go on living, we might just discover the meaning of our lives. As Nietzsche said, “[One] who has a *why* to live can bear with almost any *how*.”⁴ If we don’t know our *why*, our reason for being, we may experience an existential crisis: that feeling of angst a life without meaning leads to.

But if you don’t know it, or once knew it but feel it is changing and you’re in need of discovering a new purpose in life, do not despair, if you can help it. For another existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre, didn’t believe any of us is born with a specific purpose. Rather, he believed the point of life is to discover our own sense of meaning. Unlike other prominent philosophers, from Plato 2,400 years ago to Martin Heidegger in the 20th century, who believed our essence is eternal and, therefore, precedes our existence, Sartre thought the opposite, that we are first born, then discover, even create, who we are to become. “Life cannot be anything until it is lived,” he said, “but each individual must make sense of it.”⁵ As Samuel Enoch Stumpf explains in his discussion of Sartre, “To argue that we are victims of fate, of mysterious forces within us, of some grand passion, of heredity, is to be guilty of bad faith (*mauvaise foi*) or self-deception, of *inauthenticity*.”⁶ So the atheists, and empiricists among us need not reject the notion that we all must discover a sense of meaning in our lives because it sounds too fatalistic or mystical. The need for meaning is part of what it means to be human, part of the human condition.

This is not to say our individual sense of meaning isn’t born inwardly of mysterious forces, grand passions, or heredity. There are plenty of thinkers who have soundly argued in favor of essence before existence, that we are born into this world accompanied by a *daimon*, a guardian spirit of sorts, that guides us toward our inner destiny, just as the tiny acorn contains everything within itself necessary to become a mighty oak. Even if it were able to think and to declare itself free, it would have no choice but to become an oak tree, and

nothing else. It could not decide to become a cypris, or a fern, or a squirrel that buries acorns. It remains destined to become an Oak. These different philosophical views are part of what makes the question of meaning a perennial problem. Yet all would agree it is a problem each of us must respond to, no matter what we believe is the source of our meaning.

My favorite response, as those who know me will have guessed, comes from social psychologist, Erich Fromm, whom philosophy also claims as one of its prominent humanistic philosophers. If, as mentioned, *eudaimonia* is best understood to mean “flourishing,” then Fromm’s humanistic ethic may be the best avenue toward finding meaning and happiness. It is based on the principle, he said, that “the unfolding and growth of every person [should be] the aim of all social and political activities.”⁷ Unfolding, growth, flourishing, all conjure up images of seeds growing into flowers and eventually blooming.

Fromm came to this idea, not because he necessarily believed each of us is born with a predetermined destiny, or because we are free to choose our own path. He resolved the problem of uncertainty that this perennial problem presents by arguing that since we are humans our ethics should be “based on the principle that what is ‘good’ is what is good for [humanity] and ‘evil’ what is detrimental to [humanity] ...⁸ *the sole criterion of ethical value being [human] welfare.*”⁹ In other words, we don’t need to know ultimate meaning or understand ethics with absolute certainty, which is not possible. Rather, as humans it is reasonable to adopt an ethic that serves humanity, including the proper care and respect for the environment and fellow creatures we depend upon.

The Stoic philosopher, Marcus Aurelius, like many philosophers, believed humans are social animals, and that to follow our own nature means we must care for the wellbeing of others. Like Fromm, he believed human nature leads to a humanistic ethic. As Donald Robertson says in his book on Marcus, “rational beings are inherently social, designed to live in communities and to help one another in a spirit of goodwill. As such, we have a duty to live wisely and harmoniously with our fellow humans in order to fulfill our natural potential and to flourish.”¹⁰ There’s that word again, “flourish,” *eudaimonia*, and within “*eudaimonia*” is the *daimon*, the guardian of our destiny.

This may not help us arrive at our own specific meaning, but it contains an important truth, that none of us can truly be content in life if our individual pursuits cause others to suffer or prevent them from realizing their own purposes. As human beings, whatever our source of meaning, it must serve humanity in some way. We cannot truly flourish if by doing so we cause others to wilt. As human beings, “we are all tied in a single garment of destiny,” as Dr. King said. So whether your meaning is derived from art, or music, or engineering, or science, or teaching, or medicine, or law, or entrepreneurship, or gardening, or writing, or politics, or something else within the myriad of meaningful possibilities, it is unlikely any of it will be meaningful unless it genuinely promotes human welfare and individual unfolding. If, on the contrary, one finds meaning in harming and controlling others, beneath it all lies a

meaningless existence. Again, as Marcus said, “ignoring our fellowship with others is a form of injustice, a vice, and an impiety because it goes against Nature.”¹¹ So fulfilling our social nature as human beings must be intertwined with our life’s meaning.

Another quality of such meaning, whatever its particulars, is, according to Fromm, that “There is no meaning to life except the meaning [you give] to [your] life by the unfolding of [your] powers.”¹² This is to say our meaning, though it must result in the flourishing of society, cannot be based upon the authority of others. This, again, is the very reason Existentialism emerged in the first place, to resolve the general sense of meaninglessness caused by the industrialization of labor and the subsequent dehumanization of ... humans. It may very well be that some find great meaning in industrial labor and enjoy such service to humanity, knowing they are helping to manufacture goods and services that benefit thousands or millions. But others may feel they are only working out of necessity, for a paycheck, but are miserable because they find no meaning in it. Their purpose, the meaning of their lives, has been defined for them by the needs and desires of others. They have become someone else’s end. The same can be true of overbearing parents, no matter how well meaning, who try to force their children to achieve meaning in aims not their own—athletics, academics, a college a degree in a high paying but unrewarding field, joining the military, and so forth. As an adult, it may take years, if ever, to break free of these impositions to discover one’s authentic meaning. Religious and other ideologies imposed upon us can be equally as oppressive inasmuch as they are not our own. That which gives us meaning must emerge from our own agency as autonomous, freethinking individuals.

I’ve already mentioned that signs of anxiety, despair, or “angst” may suggest it’s time to examine or reexamine the meaning of our lives. Fromm gives us another indicator by suggesting the opposite of meaning is boredom. “I am convinced that boredom is one of the greatest tortures,” he says. “If I were to imagine Hell, it would be the place where you were continually bored.”¹³ He wasn’t referring to an occasional need to yawn while wishing we were somewhere else doing something else, but to the chronic state of meaninglessness, to the overwhelming sense there’s something major missing from our lives, something better we should be doing with it. If meaning comes with the unfolding of our own powers, then, “Boredom,” Fromm says, “is nothing but the experience of a paralysis of our productive powers.”¹⁴ So becoming productive in a way of our own choosing is another necessity in combating the boredom of a meaningless life.

Philosopher Lou Marinoff, who agrees with Fromm that “Man is the only animal that can be bored,”¹⁵ says, “The common cause of loss of purpose is simply boredom.”¹⁶ I’ve been using “meaning” and “purpose” synonymously, as Victor Frankl and, I think, most of us do. But Marinoff makes a distinction between them I think is worth pointing out. Marinoff, who calls “personal pointlessness” a “plague of the twentieth century”¹⁷ and—since the book he says it in was written in 1999 on the cusp of the 21st, we can infer this century too—compares this difference to a restaurant menu: its purpose is to help a patron choose something to eat. Its meaning is to provide those choices. Confusing meaning with purpose, according to Marinoff, would be like eating the menu. Likewise, a map has meaning because it can guide

us toward our destination, but our purpose is not to trace our route on a drawing, but to actually get there: “the menu is not the meal, the map is not the territory.”¹⁸

I still prefer to use meaning and purpose interchangeably, as most of us do; understanding that meaning is the overarching problem of our existence, as Frankl did, which is why I think understanding Marinoff’s point becomes essential to this discussion. “The most accurate map in the world is useless if you aren’t going anywhere,”¹⁹ he says. In other words, there’s a difference in knowing “the meaning of life,” and actually pursuing it, just as there is a difference in reading a menu and choosing a dish; or reading a map and taking a trip. Some of us are searching for our meaning, and some of us know where we want to go, but aren’t doing anything to get there, both of which leave us spinning our wheels—boredom.

Boredom means being stuck, either because we don’t know which direction to take (because we are without meaning) or because we know but dare not take the journey (by pursuing our purpose). Maybe we’re afraid of change. Maybe we’re dependent on our boring jobs to make a living and can’t risk leaving to pursue our own ends. Maybe we know our purpose and long to pursue it but can’t because social and economic circumstances don’t afford us the opportunities we need to do so—maybe someone has their knee on our neck. Maybe we know our purpose, but still have no meaning, no understanding, no map or menu, telling us how to get there. Any of these can work to prevent us from leading a life worth living. Perhaps the first step is figuring out what’s holding us back, then begin tackling that issue, which, itself, can be meaningful because just doing this much becomes part of the journey. Getting a degree, or retraining, or certification, isn’t the same as fulfilling our purpose, but it may be part of our journey getting there, which makes it meaningful.

Finally, I’ll leave you with the method of finding our purpose used in the Japanese philosophy of *Ikigai*, a word that equates happiness with leading an active and productive life. To help figure out your purpose, on a piece of paper draw four interlocking circles with a common space at their core. In one quadrant, write the answer to the question: *What do you love?* In another, *What are you good at?* In another, *What does the world need?* And in the final circle, *What can you be paid for?* Some would say that if you simply answer the first three questions, the money will follow. But the Japanese are a practical people and understand making a living is an essential part of living and rightly include it in the equation. Those questions again: *What do you love? What are you good at? What does the world need? And, What can you be paid for?* Where they intersect, you will find your *ikigai*, your purpose. It’s a simple, though beneficial exercise.

A sense of meaning, which seems so fundamental to human life, is yet a perennial problem, a philosophical question few of us ask often enough, if ever. Some of us are satisfied to serve as someone else’s end, to adopt their purposes as our own. But deep down, we all need to pursue our own purpose under our own autonomous power to experience a life worth living.

Bing!

¹ Edmund, Husserl, *Philosophy and the Crisis of European Man*, Lecture, Vienna, May 19, 1935.

² Philippians 2:12

³ Garcia, Hector, & Miralles, Francesc, *Ikigai: The Japanese Secret to a Long and Happy Life*, Penguin Books, New York, NY, 2016, p. 37.

⁴ Ibid., p. 30.

⁵ Stumpf, Samuel Enoch, *Philosophy: History & Problems*, 3rd ed., McGraw Hill Book Company, New York, NY, 1971, 2983, p. 472

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt & Company, Inc., New York, NY, 1947, p. 229.

⁸ Ibid., p. 13.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Robertson, Donald. How to Think Like a Roman Emperor (p. 232). St. Martin's Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

¹¹ Fromm, Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 45.

¹³ Fromm, Erich, *The Dogma of Christ*, A Fawcett Premier Book, Greenwich, CT, 1955, 1963, p. 104.

¹⁴ Ibid., *The Sane Society*, p. 202.

¹⁵ Fromm, Erich, *Man for Himself*, Henry Holt and Company, New York, NY, 1947, p. 40.

¹⁶ Marinoff, Lou, *Plato Not Prozac*, Harper Collins, New York, NY, 1999, p. 230.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 208.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 211.

¹⁹ Ibid.