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# preface

Some of you may have picked up *What is this thing called The Meaning of Life?* out of necessity, as required reading for a college course. Others of you may have purchased it simply out of interest, to see if anyone can possibly say anything new about life's meaning. Whether out of necessity or intrigue, we feel confident in saying that no matter what your reason for holding this book in your hands, you have, at one time or another, reflected on, wrestled with, or worried about the meaning of life. Perhaps you have reflected on the question because of a particular event or situation in your life. For example, given your desire for a fulfilling life, you might have wondered about what you can do in the years ahead to satisfy this desire. Or perhaps the thought about life's meaning occurred in the past at an important crossroads when you were faced with a tough decision to switch careers. Maybe you have asked about life's meaning when losing a loved one to death or when contemplating your own demise. Or possibly you have asked the question when pondering just how short-lived and small you are compared to the immense universe. Then again, your reflection on the question of the meaning of life might not have occurred because of any particular event or situation. Rather, you have thought about it simply in virtue of being human and realizing the fact that, while you exist, you also might not exist, and so you wonder about the explanation for your existence.

The meaning of life encompasses vast territory that ranges across questions of acute human interest. In this book, you will encounter questions like the following:

- What are we asking when we ask, "What is the meaning of life?"
- Does life have a purpose?
- What is valuable? More fundamentally, what is value?
- Are we significant? Do we matter?
- Does life (or my life) make any sense?

- Why do we suffer? Is evil evidence against God's existence? How can we best make sense of evil? Is there any meaning in our suffering?
- What does it mean to die? Does death threaten meaning?
- Would immortality be good or bad news for us?

This volume will serve as a guide to students, teachers, and anyone else who wants to think carefully about the meaning of life. It is an introductory philosophical text on life's [[pxii]]greatest question and consists of seven chapters and two appendices, each focusing on important ideas connected to life's meaning. Though not exhaustive, we are confident that it covers most of the central aspects of this topic of perennial human interest. Like all other books in Routledge's *What is this thing called ...* series, this volume is designed to be engaging; user-friendly; and, for faculty who might use it, pedagogically sensitive. It includes brief vignettes at the beginning of each chapter that serve to highlight the real-world aspect of questions about meaning; callout boxes emphasizing important persons, viewpoints, and discussions; infographics; discussion questions; suggestions for further reading; a glossary; and an index.

Although we avoid technical jargon when possible, we cannot avoid it entirely. You will notice that select technical terms are **bolded** the first time they appear in the book. These words have corresponding entries in the glossary at the end of the book. Note, though, that some bolded terms are slightly different in form than their corresponding glossary entries. For example, you will see **existentialists** bolded in Chapter 1, but the corresponding glossary entry is **existentialism**. We think it is more important to bold the first instance of a form of a technical word or concept than to wait for it to occur in its glossary form. We trust that it is understood that an existential-*ist* is one who advocates the philosophical position of existential-*ism*.

You may have questions about how we have structured the book and framed the ideas contained within. For example, many readers might wonder why, given the fact that we spend so much time throughout the book discussing the views known as naturalism and theism, we do not have separate chapters devoted exclusively to each. This is a good question. Indeed, there are other strategies for organizing the content that might have allowed for stand-alone chapters like these. However, as the project began to take shape, we realized that what we call the *Meaning Triad*—purpose, significance, and intelligibility/sense-making—would form the organizational foundation for how we approach the topic of life's meaning in this book. Thus, while most of those in academic circles today who write about the meaning of life do so from either a naturalistic or a theistic viewpoint (with the majority affirming naturalism), which does suggest devoting distinct chapters exclusively to each viewpoint, it seemed to us fitting to connect these two perspectives with the sides of the Triad (purpose,

significance, and sense-making) over the course of the entire book. Therefore, you will find varied discussions about the ways in which both viewpoints connect with purpose, significance, and sense-making at the relevant points in the following chapters.

Though this is an introductory book, we hope the way we have framed many of the topics breaks important new theoretical ground and points to fruitful directions for future research on life's meaning. For this reason, we think it will be of interest not only to those who might be reading about the topic for the first time but also to academics already fully immersed in the literature on life's meaning. This book is the product of years of thinking, writing, and teaching about the meaning of life. We have enjoyed and profited from our many conversations with students and colleagues about these ideas. We have learned so much from all of you, and we are grateful. Your voices are here.

We extend a special thanks to Lauren Weldon, who designed the various infographics used throughout the book, helping us to visually illustrate important points. I (Josh) also thank Samuel Newlands and Michael Rea for their support and encouragement during my time at Notre Dame's Center for Philosophy of Religion.

To our beloved families, we say thank you for your unwavering support in our lives. Surely, this is a large part of what meaning is all about.

*Stewart Goetz*
Collegeville, PA (November 2019)

*Josh Seachris*
Notre Dame, IN (November 2019)

# 1

# the meaning of life's meaning

> This is the question that has caused man more anguish than any other since he became aware of his existence. It's the question of questions, the one that makes computers blow up.
>
> (Lina Wertmuller, Italian Filmmaker, 1992, p. 135)

## CHAPTER SECTIONS



## Meaning in the real world

Jill is a graduate student at a research university who is nearing the end of her dissertation and having second thoughts about her choice of career. Uncertainties about her vocational path coincide with her increasing preoccupation with questions about life's meaning. Though she is having difficulty articulating her precise questions and concerns, she keeps returning to ideas like purpose ("Why am I here and what should I do with my life?"), significance ("What is valuable?" "Do I matter?" "To whom?"), sense-making ("What's it all about?"), pain and

suffering ("Is there meaning in suffering?"), and death ("What happens, if anything, after we die?"). Recently, she has spent a lot of time on Google, searching for material to read on the topic of life's meaning, and has visited her local bookstore to see what philosophy books have to say. To her surprise, many sources either are skeptical of the question or say little to nothing at all about it. Does the question have an answer? Does it even make sense in the first place?

## LONG AGO: A (VERY) BRIEF HISTORY OF LIFE'S MEANING

In one way or other, all of us have wondered about life's meaning. Over two millennia ago (sometime between 450 and 180 BCE), the wise figure in the Old Testament (Hebrew Bible) book of *Ecclesiastes*, Qoheleth ("the Teacher") expressed his angst and bewilderment when contemplating the **human predicament**. He was troubled by the futility, vanity, and brevity of life "under the sun," to use his common refrain from the book. His search for something like meaning led him and has led his readers across the ages through a consideration of the complex, painful, brief, enigmatic, and, yes, oftentimes joyful nature of life on this earth.

Elsewhere, in the classical world of antiquity, the Greeks sought to understand and lead the good life—a flourishing life of virtue in relation to others and the cosmos. Their interest in issues that intersect with life's meaning appears to have been motivated out of a more positive emotional experience than that of Qoheleth, one of wonder. Both Plato (428/427 or 424/423–348/347 BCE) and Aristotle (384–322 BCE) embodied this sentiment of wonder, itself an impetus for philosophy in the classical world. Wonder gave birth to the desire to understand how to flourish within this world. This desire for a life well-lived tracks some of what we seek in pursuit of life's meaning.

### Confucius and meaning

In the ancient East, Confucius (551–479 BCE), though not specifically concerned with questions of meaning as they have developed in the modern western world, advocated a way of living that can be viewed as offering a prescription for meaningful life. In the Confucian framework, we participate in rituals through which life events acquire social significance and families through which laudable purposes emerge. For Confucius, meaningful lives do not arise in a vacuum; they are, rather, cultivated in families, culture, and tradition, all of which allow us to

develop and express basic inclinations and emotions that are central to our humanity. It is also worth noting that a Confucian "account of meaning," if there is such a thing, might provide a nice counter-balance to some of the overly intellectual, seemingly elitist theories of meaning sometimes on offer in contemporary **analytic philosophy**.

Later, and in opposition to Plato and Aristotle, the philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer (1788–1860) argued that life is vain and empty, one reason being that it consists largely of a wearying cycle of *desire—fleeting satisfaction—boredom* in which we strive to attain goals only to experience a kind of emptiness at having reached them. In this way, life is Sisyphean. Like the mythical Greek figure, Sisyphus, condemned by the gods to roll a boulder up a hill over and over again forever (each time near the hilltop, the boulder rolls back down), Schopenhauer believed we figuratively roll boulders continuously up hills. Some of those boulders are small, like the game you play on your iPhone or a workout milestone, while others are larger, like finishing college and climbing the corporate ladder. If Schopenhauer was right, life is like rolling and re-rolling boulders: Setting a goal. Attaining that goal. Boredom. Setting another goal. And on and on. From one perspective, this process can be burdensome and tiring.

Around the same time Schopenhauer lived, the Russian novelist Leo Tolstoy (1828–1910), despite fame and fortune, came to a crisis point in which he questioned whether anything he did or had was ultimately worthwhile, especially given the fact that death would eventually rob him of it. He feared that death, if conceived of as a permanent experiential blank, held a threatening kind of veto power over the **value** and worth of human life and activity.

## Optimistic and pessimistic naturalism

Naturalism is a view about what is real or exists. In particular, it is the belief that (1) the material universe is all that exists, (2) there are no God(s), souls, or similar beings, and (3) there is no afterlife. Naturalists, however, disagree with one another about many things, including whether naturalism is good or bad news for meaning. Broadly, naturalists divide into two viewpoints on this question:

**Optimistic naturalism**: Meaningful life is possible even though the material universe is all that exists, there are no God(s), souls, or similar beings, and human beings will cease to exist at death.

**Pessimistic naturalism (Nihilism)**: Meaningful life is not possible because the material universe is all that exists, there are no God(s), souls, or similar beings, and human beings will cease to exist at death.

It probably would be misleading to tell the history of human questioning of life's meaning and related ideas in such a way as to describe the modern era as one of crisis and pessimism only. Nonetheless, the modern world of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and nineteenth centuries did see the rise of the **worldview** (see Chapter 5 for a fuller discussion of worldviews) known as **naturalism**, where a worldview is our most basic framework for understanding and orienting our lives in the world. Broadly speaking (we will provide more details in subsequent chapters), naturalism is a view that in principle excludes any appeal to an afterlife and God, souls, or similar beings to explain, in terms of purposes or goals, the existence of the world and its workings. Though the historical story is complex, the development of the heliocentric astronomical theory of Copernicus (1473–1543) and Galileo (1564–1642) caused some to wonder about human significance and specialness in a vast universe in which the earth was no longer thought to be at the center. This change from geocentrism to heliocentrism is likely a piece of the explanatory puzzle as to why people in modernity became concerned about life's meaning. The biological theory of Charles Darwin (1809–1882) about the long, arduous, and suffering-riddled process of evolution prompted others to worry about whether humans are the product of caring creation and providence. This, too, is probably a piece of the explanatory puzzle of the modern human preoccupation with meaning. Though neither one of these theories in and of itself need be thought of as requiring naturalism, each is most certainly important for understanding the rise of this view, and its ascendance in the modern world was itself accompanied by growing concerns over whether life has any meaning.

Crises of meaning strike at two levels: emotional and theoretical. Emotionally, they grip us with a gravitas we cannot ignore, as the experience of deep existential angst will attest. Theoretically, a crisis of meaning often surfaces through fissures in one's worldview. You can imagine all sorts of *intra*-worldview crises: you stress over which college to attend, which vocation to pursue, whether to get married, to have children, and so on. No doubt, these can be intense, soul-searching junctures in life. However, in none of these cases do you call into question your worldview itself, the fundamental explanatory framework through which you make sense of the world and your place within it.

But what if you were to call into question your worldview? What if, for example, you were to find yourself doubting your long-held belief that God exists? Here, we can

imagine a deeper kind of existential crisis. Worldviews are meaning-grounding explanatory frameworks through which we make sense of our lives and the world. In and through them we secure a place for purpose and significance. To doubt your worldview, then, would call into question *meaning*, insofar as meaning is closely connected with these ideas.

Religious worldviews are often thought to be more hospitable to meaning, and when they are threatened, the specter of meaninglessness looms. Thus, the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900), writing during the rise of modernism and especially in his *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, spends considerable time addressing the question of meaning after the loss of belief in God (the so-called "death" of God). Significant themes in Schopenhauer's, Tolstoy's, and Nietzsche's writings found their way into the twentieth century in the thought of atheist **existentialists** like Albert Camus (1913–1960) and Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980). Both Camus and Sartre were acutely interested in whether and how life could be meaningful in a Godless universe. Camus advocated a kind of ironic defiance in the face of an absurd universe where our deepest desires remain unfulfilled in the face of cosmic silence. The universe does not, indeed cannot care about us. While understanding the implications for the lack of meaning that comes with God's nonexistence, Sartre also thought the situation was in one way better for meaning if God does not exist, because in God's absence we have the kind of autonomy necessary to lead lives with self-determined purpose and meaning. As persons whose *existence precedes our essence*, to use his famous phrase, it is solely up to us to choose what we will be and do. Despite Sartre's and Camus's **atheistic** existentialism, it is worth noting that they and other twentieth-century existentialists were influenced by nineteenth-century philosopher Søren Kierkegaard (1813–1855), himself a theist (**theism** affirms the existence of God; "theism" comes from "theos," which is the Greek word for God). The thematic threads tying traditions to the past are often intricately interwoven.

Though questioning life's meaning is often an angst-filled response to a certain kind of crisis, it need not be. Contemplating the good life, like the Greek philosophers of old, is not so angst-driven. It will not have the same emotional, existential hue as Tolstoy's "arrest of life" experience as he calls it. Still, many of the questions and concerns that are associated with life's meaning are themselves points of existential distress—wondering what to do with one's life, worrying about whether one's life matters, experiencing the pain of suffering and asking "Why?", being anxious about death, and so on. Many have thought that the "death of God" and the disappearance of the **transcendent** accentuates such distress. Debate about whether or not this is true came to characterize some of the contemporary discussion over life's meaning at the end of

the twentieth century, after a decades-long reign of skepticism about the very meaning of the question itself.

## • THE MEANING OF LIFE IS … 42

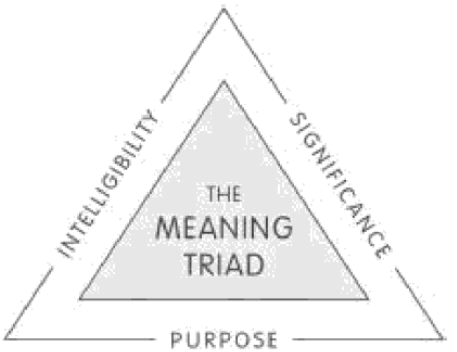
Douglas Adams, in his widely-read *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, depicts the popular, though misguided, view that the question of life's meaning really does not make any sense. The characters in this book visit the legendary planet Magrathea and learn about a race of hyper-intelligent beings who built a computer named Deep Thought. Deep Thought's purpose was to answer the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything. The computer's answer to this question was a head-scratching "42." Deep Thought explained that this answer was incomprehensible because the beings who designed the computer for the purpose of answering the question, though super-intelligent, did not really know what they were asking in the first place. When we ask about life's meaning, perhaps our request makes no sense, in which case 42 is as good of an answer as any other. And perhaps like the characters at story's end, we should not waste our time focusing on the question, but get on with the business of living.

Many analytic philosophers in the twentieth century, in the wake of the philosophical view known as **logical positivism**, shared Deep Thought's suspicion. They were especially wary of the traditional formulation of the question—*What is the meaning of life?* Meaning, the thinking went, belongs to the linguistic realm. Words, sentences, and other semantic constructions are the proper bearers of meaning, not objects, events, or states of affairs, and certainly not *life* itself. To ask what is the meaning of life might be like asking "What does the color red taste like?" or "What is smaller than the smallest of all objects?" These are nonsensical questions. Some philosophers surmise that in asking for life's meaning, we use an ill-chosen expression to voice something real, namely, an emotional response of awe or marvel at the staggering fact that something exists at all. Experiencing these feelings and asking a meaningful question, however, are two different things altogether.

Asking what something means, though, need not be a strictly semantic activity. We ask for the meanings of all kinds of things and employ "meaning" in a wide variety of contexts, only some of which are narrowly linguistic. We should pay careful attention to the meanings of "meaning" because doing so provides important clues about what we have in mind when we inquire into *life's* meaning.

## • THE MEANING TRIAD

"Meaning" pops up often in everyday discourse. We use it to communicate a number of different ideas, and the various ways that we use the term in everyday contexts shed light on what we mean in another, more momentous, context—life's meaning. In surveying "meaning's" common usage, important patterns emerge. Requests for meaning tend to cluster around three basic ideas: the triad of *purpose, significance*, and *intelligibility* or *sense-making*. We call this the *Meaning Triad* and will reference it throughout the book.




The following list of statements and questions captures the many ways in which we employ the concept of meaning on a regular basis, all of which highlight some important part of the Meaning Triad.

**P-Meaning (meaning as purpose)**

1. What did you *mean* by that face? (note: sometimes purpose and sense-making closely connect)
2. The protest is *meant* to catch the attention of those in power.
3. What is the *meaning* of that book? (*Why* was it written?)
4. I really *mean* it!
5. I didn't *mean* to do it. I promise!

**S-Meaning (meaning as significance)**

6. That was such a *meaningful* conversation.
7. This watch really *means* something to me.
8. That is a *meaningful* finding.
9. You *mean* nothing to me.
10. Thank you for your sacrifice. It *means* so much.

11. What do the president's first six months in office *mean* for the country? (note: sometimes significance and sense-making closely connect)

**I-Meaning (meaning as intelligibility or sense-making)**

12. What you said didn't *mean* a thing. It makes no sense.
13. What did you *mean* when you sent that text?
14. Do you know what I *mean*?
15. What did you *mean* by that face?
16. What is the *meaning* of that poem? (*what* is it about?)
17. What does it *mean* to be a Kansan?
18. What is the *meaning* of this? (for example, when asked upon returning home to find one's house ransacked)

Each of the above examples includes a sense of meaning with which all of us are familiar. We wonder what someone's purpose was for doing something; we might naturally ask for its meaning. We want to distinguish something done on purpose from something done by accident; we say we really meant it or did not mean to do it, whichever the case may be. We claim that valuable objects are meaningful, as are salient, significant conversations at critical life junctures. These, we contrast with trivial junk and mundane banter. We do not understand something someone says or does, so we ask for it to be clarified. We request its meaning. Each of these ways of talking about meaning is natural and instructive for understanding the ideas and issues wrapped into life's meaning. What immediately follows is a more in-depth discussion of the Meaning Triad.

**P-MEANING**

One of the things that we want to understand about our human predicament is whether we have a purpose(s) and, if so, what its nature is. In fact, many people, when asked what the question of life's meaning means, will respond that it is a question about life's purpose. One of us has students in his meaning of life class each semester interview people in their lives (parents, grandparents, teachers, coaches, clergy) using several questions related to life's meaning. One question on that interview is "What do you think the question—*What is the meaning of life?*—is asking?" A significant percentage of respondents (upwards of 80%) say that it is a question about purpose (they often say it is asking something like, "Why are we here?").

In targeting purpose as central to the question, many people assume that there is a cosmic purpose around which to order their lives. They also believe a cosmic purpose

likely would require transcendence or God, *someone* who is the source of that purpose. One might reject cosmic purpose, though, and still frame questions about life's meaning as ones largely about purpose. In this case, meaningful life is then primarily about ordering one's life around self-determined purposes. We also make a distinction between actions done on purpose and those done by accident. You might say, "I really mean it" to indicate willful action. Alternatively, you might say, "I didn't mean it, I promise" to indicate that you did not intend to drop your best friend's iPhone in the swimming pool. When it comes to life in our world, we typically want to lead lives in which our wills are engaged, where we are doing what we want to do. When our autonomy is threatened, we worry that our lives are less meaningful than they would otherwise be. Like Walter White in *Breaking Bad*, what we "[w]ant, what [we] need, is a choice. Sometimes I feel like I never actually make any of my own. My entire life, it just seems I never, you know, had a real say about any of it" (Season One, Episode 5: "Gray Matter"). Given the nature of our world, we do not want to walk through life haphazardly, nor in a way that is largely determined apart from our own consent. We want to live life on purpose, to have a say-so, to have *our own* voice matter.

Regardless of the source of purpose, purpose brings structure and value to our lives, and in so doing, brings meaning. Given our drive toward sense-making (see Chapter 5), we also might wonder how such purpose(s), especially cosmic ones if there are any, fit with other aspects of life in this world, especially pain and suffering. Let us say that the purpose of human life has something to do with being perfectly happy (see Chapter 2); how does that fit with the fact that there is so much pain and suffering in the world?

## S-MEANING

A second part of the Meaning Triad is significance and connotes ideas like value, mattering, importance, impact, salience, and being the object of care and concern, depending on context. We contrast trivial chitchat about the mundane with deep discussions focused on important matters, referring to the latter as meaningful or significant. Your grandmother's watch that you wear on your wrist is valuable and matters to you. Important to you is that particular song associated with a poignant season in life, for example, your first love. We view actions and events that have far-reaching implications as significant. We think they are also meaningful in cases where that significance has positive value. It is not immediately clear that really impactful but *negative* actions or events are meaningful, though this is worth discussing further (see Chapter 3). Finding a cure for some disease is meaningful, partly at least, because it has such a large positive impact on human health and society. We also talk about information being salient or significant: that such a large percentage of animals living

under certain conditions are dying from a particular disease may be statistically significant or statistically meaningful.

Alternatively, when something matters very little or not at all to us, we might say "That means nothing to me." It was just a meaningless conversation; it was insignificant, inconsequential. That game did not matter. It was meaningless because the playoffs were already set. The outside does not matter; what is on the inside counts. That piece of information is not meaningful. Spending your life binge-watching shows on Amazon Prime and Netflix is meaningless; you do nothing that matters, you make no positive impact, you do nothing of importance, you waste your life in triviality. In all of these above examples, our focus is squarely within the realm of meaning.

Like purpose, significance is connected to life's meaning, and often in ways that directly link personal and cosmic concerns. For many people, cosmic concerns about the meaning *of it all* are also intensely personal. Given a temporally and spatially vast cosmos, and especially one that is also uncaring and silent, many worry that their individual lives are insignificant. If the entire show is insignificant, why think that the tiny, short-lived characters upon its stage matter?

## I-MEANING

Social scientists argue that our human sense-making and meaning-making drives go hand-in-hand. These drives are analogous to core biological drives like hunger, thirst, and sex. Some scientists have even argued that "all accounts of meaning converge at *sense making*" (Markman, Proulx, and Lindberg, 2013, p. 4). We search for order, pattern, and meaning in a world that often first presents itself in chaotic, random ways. We want the puzzle pieces of life to fit together properly. These puzzle pieces bear labels like "origins," "purpose," "significance," "value," "pain and suffering," "death and ending," and "prospects of life after death." The mention of "purpose," "significance," and "value" should alert us to the idea discussed a bit later in this chapter that I-Meaning might be about making sense of, among other things, instances of the two other sides of the Meaning Triad.

Over the course of our lives, we encounter aspects of the world that spark our curiosity to understand and successfully navigate the human condition. These aspects of the world give rise to questions for which we seek an explanatory framework (perhaps even a *narrative* framework; more on this in Chapter 5) in order to make sense out of them. They are like a home to which its owner returns to find ransacked, and who, in exasperation, exclaims, "What is the meaning of this?!" Like the confused and anxious homeowner, we lack important parts of the larger context, in this case *life's* context.

We desire to fill the existentially relevant informational gaps in our understanding of the universe we inhabit. We aim to understand life's purpose and significance, if there are such things. Meaning as sense-making is asking what all this is about. We seek to fit it all together into a coherent, existentially satisfying whole. If the puzzle pieces of the human condition do not fit together as such, we might be tempted to join Shakespeare's Macbeth in lamenting that the tale of the world is one that is "told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing" (*Macbeth*, Act 5 Scene 2).

## WHICH MEANING? WHICH VALUE?

Whenever there is more than one of something, questions about if and how they are related arise. In the present context, we have more than one kind of meaning. We have P-Meaning, S-Meaning, and I-Meaning. Are they related? If so, how? To understand what is at issue here, consider an instance of S-Meaning. Let us take S-Meaning as value had by **qualitative** experiences of pleasure and P-Meaning as purposes that explain actions such as lying, stealing, and murdering. Could someone have a meaningful life in terms of S-Meaning by purposefully living immorally? Would this combination of S- and P-Meanings ultimately make any sense, which is a question about I-Meaning?

And what if there were additional sources of S-Meaning? What if psychological states like being captivated by, actively or authentically engaged in, consumed by, and satisfied or fulfilled by (assuming these are different from experiences of pleasure) exemplify or have S-Meaning? Might a subject have a meaningful life in terms of concern for and being consumed by purposefully (P-Meaning) counting blades of grass or copying out addresses from an old New York City phone book? Would this combination of S- and P-Meanings ultimately make any sense (I-Meaning)? Moreover, might psychological states like those just mentioned by themselves adequately constitute a meaningful life (call this **subjectivism** about meaning)? Or must a meaningful life also include bodily actions (and their effects) produced by those psychological states, in which case subjectivism could never account for more than part of a meaningful life (call this **hybridism** about meaning)? Or does subjectivism not account for any part of a meaningful life, but psychological states in the form of pleasure, concern for, being consumed by, etc., serve at most as evidence for or indicators of a meaningful life which consists of actions and their good results? An understanding of meaningfulness that completely excludes subjectivism as part of a meaningful life might appropriately be termed **objectivism**. If one reads contemporary discussions about what a meaningful life is, one will discover that people on all sides of the debate appeal to intuitions about which particular lives count as meaningful: couch potatoes who are fully satisfied (subjectivism); engaged agents whose relevant

## MEANING AND GOD

Albert Einstein (1879–1955) once said that "to know an answer to the question 'What is the meaning of human life?' means to be religious" (Einstein, 1935, p. 11). Others have theorized that religion itself, theistic or otherwise (Einstein evidently used "religious" in a non-theistic way), developed as an answer to humanity's concern over meaning, and especially anxieties over death.

Many people think (or just assume) that questions about life's meaning directly connect to questions about God, religion, and the transcendent more generally. It is natural to think this given the connection between God, religion, meaning, purpose, value, and significance. For a large part of human history, and for many people still today, the prospects for meaning wax or wane with the truth or falsity of religious views. This is especially true when the meaning *of* life (cosmically focused) is in view, since in the minds of many individuals a meaning of life requires a purposeful agent over and above the physical space-time universe to imbue our lives and the cosmos with overarching purpose and significance.

Asking about life's meaning, especially as embodied in the traditional formulation, is partly tied to a kind of loss, the loss of a sort of transcendent sense-making that secured deep purpose and significance for human existence, and provided a powerful salve for existentially-inflicted wounds like suffering and death. For a significant portion of human history, there was an expectation by many, nurtured in a way of looking at the cosmos, that the universe is the product of a powerful, benevolent, personal, transcendent mind. Such a view of the world is hospitable to getting a unique kind of purpose, significance, and sense-making—in a word *meaning*—as part of the deep fabric of reality. Implicit in the background is an expectation that meaning resides in and flows down from a hospitable transcendent setting. In the modern world, that expectation still lingers (after all, it is not the sort of thing that can be easily gotten rid of).

### Meaning *of* life vs. meaning *in* life

In general, the phrase "meaning *of* life" is cosmically focused, whereas "meaning *in* life" is terrestrially, humanly focused.

Meaning *of* life

- Cosmic meaning

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