

## Introduction

We humans are troubling paradoxes. We intensely want our lives to be meaningful, to count for something, to matter not only in individual and social ways but in a “cosmic” way. At the same time, we often evade thinking about meaning and let ourselves be driven by impulse instead of meaningfulness. This paradox is troubling – and puzzling – because it looks as though we undermine the very thing we most want.

This book is about both poles of this paradox. It describes ways of acquiring meaning plus obstacles to acquiring meaning, including ones we ourselves initiate. It also connects each of these poles to belief in a divine creator. Sometimes this connection will be prominent, and sometimes it will be in the background. Either way, a main aim of the book is to show how meaning is connected to that belief.

### SOME ASSUMPTIONS

“Religion” is a large category, so I am going to narrow it to theism, the belief that there is an all-benevolent, all-powerful, all-knowing creator of the universe, including humans. To be welcoming to the three major theistic religions – Christianity, Islam, and Judaism – I am going to use the phrase “the Divine One” instead of “God,” “Allah,” or “Yahweh.” In doing so, I do not assume or imply that Christians, Muslims, and Jews worship the same divine being. There are significant differences in their conceptions of the Divine One. At the same time, all three faiths are theistic in the preceding sense. As such, they all regard the Divine One as a person who loves humans and who desires for humans to live meaningfully. I will henceforth refer to the Divine One as a person. I am going

to assume that such a person exists because all my allotted space must be devoted to dealing with meaning and its connection to belief in a divine person. Nontheists who write on meaning typically do the same – they assume that there is no divine person, or no good evidence for one, because they want to discuss meaning given that assumption. One cannot justify every assumption one makes – else every book would be extremely long.

Moreover, theists and nontheists can learn from each other. Although there are significant differences between theists and nontheists with respect to meaning, there are areas of common concern, such as the extent to which emotions play a role in meaning, what activities are intrinsically good, or whether Arthur Schopenhauer’s critique of goal-aiming activities is right. The reader will notice that I refer positively to a number of nontheists throughout the book. This is because these writers have good insights about the meaning of life.

My own tradition is Christianity. Everything I say, however, and every quotation from a Christian author, can, I hope, be accepted by those whose traditions are Islamic or Jewish.

Along with theism, I am going to assume that, for some at least, there is a life beyond death in which there is a closer relationship to the Divine One and that is free from the ills of predeath life.

In addition, I am going to assume that morality is objective. To say that morality is objective is to say that there are objectively true moral statements, such as “love is better than hate,” “it is wrong to discriminate unfairly against minorities,” and “the virtues of compassion and generosity are better than indifference in appropriate situations.” I am also going to assume that these three statements can be known to be true, along with a number of other such statements. There are, to be sure, moral statements that are controversial, thus casting doubt on whether humans can know those statements. And some of the contexts in which one attempts to live out the statements are complex, casting doubt on how to apply the statements. Still, it seems equally true that some moral statements are noncontroversially known and that there are numerous contexts in which it is evident how to live out those statements. These are the moral statements that I am assuming to be able to be known and able to be applied in some contexts. Even if the quantity of such statements is not high, there are enough to make objective judgments about meaning.

Last, I am going to assume that objective morality is required to have meaning. If objective morality were not required to have meaning, it would not make sense to say that what one person has done is

more meaningful than what another person has done, or to say that a given person was once deluded about their life's meaning but now is not. These last assertions seem clearly true, and they are commonly believed. Moreover, if objective morality were not required for meaning, there could be no duty to care about meaning, and there could be no intrinsic goods that make life meaningful. I will be assuming that there is such a duty and that there are intrinsic goods that make life meaningful.

I am not going to assume, however, that beliefs in a divine person and life after death are necessary for belief in the meaningfulness of one's life. This further claim must be argued for. But I am not going to argue for it, as one of the major theses of the book is that belief in these two assumptions, plus their truth, *enhances* the meaningfulness of one's life. This thesis means that one's life can be meaningful without believing these two assumptions and without there being a divine person or an afterlife, but that one would have a more meaningful life if one did believe in a divine person and in life after death and if these did exist. This last assertion is what I will call the "enhancement thesis."

I am also not going to assume that happiness is the sole intrinsic good, that is, that hedonism is true. I will refer often to intrinsic goods, plural, implying thereby that happiness is not the sole intrinsic good. Those who believe that hedonism is true can easily rework what I say in those contexts into a hedonistic framework.

Readers who do not believe in a divine person, life after death, or objective morality can read this book as describing what would be the case *if* there were a divine person, life after death, and objective morality. They can also attend to the numerous thoughts that do not depend on these for their truth.

#### AN EXISTENTIAL APPROACH

Socrates is known both for his passion and his clarity of thought. He was passionate about searching for truth, engaging people in conversations and exhorting them to care for their souls, as he put it in *The Apology* in his defense before the Athenian jury that later sentenced him to death: "I go around doing nothing but persuading people both young and old among you not to care for your body or your wealth in preference to or as strongly as for the best possible state of your soul" (Plato 2000: 32–3 [30a4–b1]). Socrates also paid careful attention to the logic of arguments, stating them with a high level of explicitness and precision, as he is

depicted doing in Plato's early dialogues. He made distinctions and was scrupulous about accuracy.

Socrates is not normally thought of as an existentialist. Yet these two features – passion and clarity – can be regarded as qualities of a good existentialist writer, especially one who deals with the meaning of life.

Being passionate does not mean that one tries to engender emotions in the reader by using emotionally charged language. It does mean that one's direct and candid language is about emotions that matter. Clarity of thought does not mean that one is simplistic or that one is not profound. It does mean that one's writing is accessible both to professionals and to those who are relatively unacquainted with the subject matter. *Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach* aims for passion and clarity in these ways.

With respect to content, the existential approach of this book means that instead of engaging primarily in conceptual analysis of the concept of meaning and kindred concepts, it deals with boredom, death, and suicide, along with evasions and obstacles, plus how one can live so as to die well. It means, too, that the book contains large swaths of descriptions in addition to argumentation – descriptions of lived realities connected with pursuing meaning, both those that nourish the pursuit and those that obstruct it.

The conviction behind an existential approach to meaning is that the human search for meaning typically springs out of these lived realities. Boredom prompts one to ask, "Why should I keep living if nothing interests me?" The reality of death induces one to ask, "Is there any point to my life if all that I am, my feelings, hopes, and body, will one day vanish?" Of boredom and death we can say, to use Albert Camus's words, "These are facts the heart can feel" (Camus 1983: 3). An existential approach focuses on such facts. But it does not end there, for, as Camus continues, such facts "call for careful study before they become clear to the intellect" (3). And, one might add, becoming clear to the intellect is important because pinpointing precisely the inner states that prevent one from acquiring meaning is often necessary to acquire meaning. Both feeling and precision are important in discussions of meaning.

In adopting an existential approach to meaning, I am following Susan J. Brison's practice in her *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self* (Brison 2003). Brison recounts her traumatic experience of being raped and left for dead while on a morning walk when visiting southern France. She links this experience and the

frightful experiences of others with the philosophical issue of what constitutes personal identity. Violent trauma, she says, breaks up identity in ways that are not easily accounted for by current philosophical conceptions of personal identity. Philosophers who discuss personal identity, therefore, need to deal with a wider array of experiences than they currently do. The existential approach in this book is similar to Brison's approach in hers – conceptions of the meaning of life need to be able to deal with boredom, death, and suicidal impulses, along with other impassioned experiences.

A prominent part of much existentialist writing is a problem-solution, or diagnosis-remedy, motif. Some philosophical classics also contain this motif, including Plato's *Republic* and Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. It is not that the first half of such writing describes the problem and the second half the solution, but that both problem and solution, diagnosis and remedy, are woven throughout. This book is the same. Even though these terms do not appear in the book, readers can organize the ideas in every chapter into diagnosis and remedy categories.

#### MEANING AND THE GOOD LIFE

When most people think of a meaningful life, they think of one that is worthwhile. That is, they regard their lives as meaningful when they do worthwhile things. Accordingly, finding meaning for them involves finding something worthwhile in which to engage. Susan Wolf expresses this thought in her claim that “meaningfulness in life arises from engagement in worthwhile activity” (Wolf 1997: 213). What people need, she says, when they need meaning is something that is worthwhile, and when people say that an activity is meaningful they are basing their assertion on an activity's being worthwhile (213–14). Julian Baggini also connects being worthwhile with meaning. The question about the meaning of life, he says, is “about why life is of value to us, why we think it to be important and worth living” (Baggini 2004: 166). This connection, he says, is what makes the question of meaning “perfectly coherent” (166).

I am going to adopt this connection of meaning and being worthwhile, with the proviso that it is at least logically possible that there be cases of meaningful lives that are not worthwhile and cases of worthwhile lives that are not meaningful. Thaddeus Metz maintains that there are such cases (Metz 2012: 443–4). These, however, will not play a role in this book, for, as Metz states, typically what is meaningful coincides with what is worthwhile. This book concerns itself with what is typical in this

regard. The pursuit of meaning is commonly believed to be based on the pursuit of a good life. I shall adopt this common belief as well.

People commonly believe, also, that a good life includes both worthwhile activities and good inner states, including emotions, desires, and feelings. It would hardly be a good life in which one acted well but on balance had “negative” or harmful emotions or wrong desires. What counts as being meaningful, then, includes both worthwhile activities and good inner states. This is stated by Wolf in a later, expanded statement of what constitutes meaning: “Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness” (Wolf 2010: 9). In different words, meaning arises when worthwhile activities and good inner states are conjoined. Both are necessary for a good life and therefore for a meaningful life. This conjunction will play a prominent role in the book.

#### CHAPTER SUMMARIES

Chapter 1, “Why Should We Care about Meaning?,” gives two answers to the question in the title of the chapter: we humans desire to acquire meaning, so there is an expectation that we will care about it, and a divine creator desires that humans satisfy the desires for intrinsic goods and right pleasures that the divine creator has placed in humans. The chapter suggests that caring about meaning can be regarded as a virtue alongside commonly accepted virtues, and describes the characteristics it would have as a virtue.

Chapter 2, “Boredom,” distinguishes everyday boredom from existential boredom and describes the terror that is often felt when existential boredom threatens. It also describes evasive tactics that are used to avoid that terror. Without these evasive tactics, one could experience dread, agony, despair, frustration, rebellion, or suicidal feelings. One can, however, deal with boredom in a different way by regarding it as a “call from eternity.” In doing so, boredom would become an occasion for acquiring meaning for one’s life.

Chapter 3, “Denial of Death,” uses Ernest Becker’s *The Denial of Death* to describe immortality projects and vital lies that are often used to avoid the terror of death. It also explicates Becker’s thought that the prospect of death can prompt a radical change: a “dying” and a “rebirth,” which, again, would serve as an occasion for acquiring meaning.

Chapter 4, “Acquiring Meaning,” describes four ways philosophers have thought that one could acquire meaning – by achieving goals, being creative, having certain virtues and emotions, and giving and receiving

love. Achieving goals is defended against Arthur Schopenhauer's critique of goal-aimed activity, and the concept of non-goal-aimed activities is introduced. The thesis of the chapter, that all four ways of acquiring meaning are legitimate and desirable, is relatively uncontroversial, though rarely stated.

Chapter 5, "Suicide," asks whether any of the four ways of acquiring meaning described in Chapter 4 can prevent people from killing themselves. The varied answers to this question are based on several intensive autobiographical accounts of people who attempted suicide.

Chapter 6, "The Divine One," and Chapter 7, "Life after Death," unpack a main thesis of the book, that believing in the Divine One and believing in life beyond death enhance the meaning of life. In both cases, there are additional virtues and emotions one can have, the urge to transcend oneself can be satisfied, and existential boredom can be cured. With belief in life after death, the existential harm of death with extinction can be avoided, and hope can be added to one's other virtues and emotions. Both chapters end with an "existential move": those who do not believe in the Divine One or in life beyond death should be distressed by the thought that there is no divine creator or life after death.

Chapter 8, "Obstacles," describes four significant obstacles to acquiring meaning: unconscious motives, the lure of the crowd, dividedness, and constricted circumstances that produce suffering. The conclusion of the chapter is that sometimes these obstacles are overcome and sometimes they are not.

In Chapter 9, "How Should We Live so as to Die Well?," I use Ivan Ilyich's life, as told by Leo Tolstoy in his story, *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, to answer the question of the chapter. One answer is to be aware and open. Another is to develop character traits opposite to those of Ivan Ilyich, which were inordinate delight in the power to crush his inferiors, disproportionate pleasure in trivialities, and excessive self-regard. The chapter ends with a conversation between an imagined, transformed Ivan as he lay dying and a friend of his.

Overall, the aim of *Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach* is to make explicit the troubling paradox between wanting a meaningful life yet evading it in various ways. Its aim is also to connect the idea of meaning to theistic belief. The point of these aims is partly to understand human nature, partly to put forward a theory of meaning, and partly to provide thoughts that readers can use to think about the meaningfulness of their own lives.