

## *The Meaning of Life*

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A few weeks ago, I was wandering around the airport in Atlanta, killing time while waiting for a flight. I walked into one of the shops and started looking over the selection of books. Not that I need any new books, mind you. I just couldn't help myself. I was pleased and rather surprised when I saw that the store stocked several books in the Oxford series "A Very Short Introduction." I had read a few of them before, and found them helpful and generally informative. They have titles like *Kant: A Very Short Introduction* and *Dinosaurs: A Very Short Introduction*—you get the idea.

One title in particular caught my attention. It read, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction*. I picked it up, and learned that the author, Terry Eagleton, was a professor of English at the University of Manchester and a Fellow of the British Academy. Oh dear! An English professor?! Had he expounded on the expository nature of the life cycle, or the onomatopoeia of ontology? I had to learn more, and bought the book. The dedication was not too promising. Professor Eagleton had written, "To Oliver, who found the whole idea deeply embarrassing." Well now, I thought. At least the man has a sense of humor. I looked at the back of the book to see how many pages it had taken him to explain the meaning of life. A hundred and one.

I began to get excited. All I had to do was read a hundred and one pages of this little book, and I would have all of the answers. I started to read, and true to his profession, the professor was replete with philosophical and literary allusions—to famous philosophers and playwrights. There is a section on Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, where he quotes the famous soliloquy, "Out, out, brief candle! /Life's but a walking shadow, a poor

player, /That struts and frets his hour upon the stage, /And then is heard no more; it is a tale /Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing.” Now as a descendent of Duncan, the king who was killed by Macbeth, I certainly can relate to a discussion of Macbeth’s mindset. However, the good professor is no help. He says that the passage is more puzzling than it looks. I quote, “Macbeth is really complaining about two aspects of life –its transience and its vacuousness – and one can see the connection between the two. Achievements are hollowed out by the fact that they fade away so quickly. Yet the ephemerality of things is not necessarily tragic: it can be seen simply as part of the way they are, with no inevitably doleful implications. If fine dinners fade away, so do tyrants and toothache. Could a human life which had no limit, stretching all the way to infinity, have a significant shape to it? Isn’t death in this sense one of the pre-conditions for life having meaning at all? Or could such a life still be meaningful in senses of the term other than ‘having a significant shape’? Anyway, if life really is so transitory, why should the very thought of this impel you to make it even more so (‘Out, out, brief candle!’)?” Professor Eagleton, rather than answering my questions, has posed four of his own in a row. But he’s not done with Macbeth. He continues.” Like a dramatic performance, so the lines suggest, human existence does not persist very long. But the image threatens to undermine the thought behind it, since it is in the nature of a play not to last too long. We do not want to sit in the theatre for ever. Why then should the brevity of life not be equally acceptable?”

All this was too much for me. I wanted some short, simple answers to what another English major, Garrison Keillor, calls “life’s persistent questions.” Now he has got me thinking that I need to figure this out for myself, and if an English professor could

do it in a hundred and one pages, a minister should be able to summarize the whole thing in one good sermon. After all, isn't that what you pay me for? So with the tune of "What's It All About, Alfie?" going through my head, I sat down to summarize the meaning of life, kind of as a public service to our members, so that you can all go home this afternoon and rest assured that everything is resolved. This sermon will be better than *The DaVinci Code*.

How to start? How to end? I don't know. I set the sermon aside and played a game of Spider Solitaire. OK, I played four games, but I won the last one. I needed to focus. The. Meaning. Of. Life. Professor Eagleton has a long section on the semantics of the word 'meaning.' I studied linguistics. I could go there, but do you really want me to?

Aware that I was in the process of writing this sermon, a friend offered his opinion, that life is what you make of it. This seems on the surface to be a good working hypothesis. But then I got to thinking about a young woman I met in the summer of 1979, when I was working for the Chicago Services for Work and Rehabilitation. My job was to visit disabled adults in their homes to see what services they might need in order to be able to remain in their homes. Most of those I encountered were suffering from progressive diseases, such as multiple sclerosis or rheumatoid arthritis. One day I arrived at a house on the southwest side of the city. The door was opened by a small, elderly Italian woman, the mother of the client. The house was spotless and neat. She explained that her daughter was severely mentally challenged, that she had been the last of her seven children, and that many people had advised her to institutionalize her daughter so that she could move on with her life. However, as a devout Catholic, the mother said that she believed that the child was a gift from God and that it was her duty as a mother to

take care of her, no matter what. Then she led her daughter out into the living room. The young woman would not open her eyes, and gave me no sign that she was aware of anything that was going on. Her head was very small, and I presumed that her brain had not developed properly. Nevertheless, her mother continued to try to stimulate her interest by bringing her soft dolls which she mostly ignored. I felt great sadness for this young woman and her mother, while at the same time a sense of admiration for the old woman whose life was consumed in her daughter's care. Perhaps we could fairly say that she had found a great deal of meaning in the care of her daughter. Yet what about the daughter? If life is what you make it, then how was this young woman who seemingly had very little awareness of herself or her surroundings and no ability to act independently to make something of her life? Even terminally ill people can often make choices concerning what to do or make with what remains of their lives, yet in this case, my client had little or no choice in anything to do with her life. If life is what you make it, then did her life have no meaning? This is truly depressing stuff.

Then I had another brilliant idea. Wikipedia! I googled "the meaning of life," and sure enough, there was a Wikipedia article just waiting for me with all the answers, or so I hoped. Indeed, Wikipedia had trumped Professor Eagleton, and had whittled the meaning down to 27 pages, including 190 footnotes. Predictably, the article had several sections with viewpoints from different philosophical and religious traditions, as well as scientific perspectives and the nature of biological life. Then I saw the section on popular culture, and thought, now I'm getting somewhere. Perhaps I should move away from the academics and see what everyday people thought was the meaning of life. After all, there are a lot more non-English professors, non-philosophers, and non-theologians. The wiki-

author said that most people frame the question as, “What is the purpose of life?” Some of these were summarized as “to realize one’s potential and ideals; “to achieve biological perfection,” which included striving to live forever and also “evolving.” This was in keeping with the popular Darwinian bumper sticker that is often seen in answer to the Christian fish sticker. The list continued, “To seek wisdom and knowledge;” “to do good, to do the right thing”; and “to love, to feel, to enjoy the act of living.” With this last one, I thought again of the disabled young woman. Did she enjoy the act of living? There seemed to be no way to tell for sure. And if she did not, then again, did her life have no meaning? I didn’t want to go there. The wiki-list became even more problematic. The next entry was, “to have power, to be better,” and included the explanation, “to rule the world, to know and master the world, to know and master nature, and a reference to Gen. 1:28 and the words, “to fill the Earth and subdue it.” The last three listings in the Wikipedia summary of popular explanations were, “Life has no meaning,” “One should not seek to know and understand the meaning of life (because you will never live),” and “Life is bad,” with a reference to the vale of tears.

I thought again of the young disabled woman. Most people would say that her life was very bad. She had no freedom or ability to choose her path in life. It was that it was. Yet, she was most likely able to feel the sunshine on her face and to taste the meals that her mother prepared. There must be meaning in that. There must also be meaning in the total love and devotion of her mother. I couldn’t accept a different conclusion.

Why couldn’t I accept that the young woman’s life had little, if no meaning? Perhaps because that conclusion is just too awful to contemplate. Perhaps it is because it would take away some of the meaning from my own existence, to think that a human

being's life was meaningless. That would be saying that it was not worth living, and while I don't think I would not want to live her life, who am I to take away the meaning of it?

This was coming very close to simply saying that the very act of living gives meaning to our lives. Our Declaration of Independence states that we have the unalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. Our noble professor discusses that pursuit of happiness, and the fact that it, too, can be problematic. What if you spend all of your life in pursuit of happiness, and are never happy? What does it mean to be happy?

Both the "very short introduction" and Wikipedia refer to Monty Python's film on the meaning of life, and perhaps that is as good a place as any to search. One of the characters in the film is handed an envelope supposedly containing the meaning of life, which he opens and reads: "Well, it's nothing very special. Uh, try to be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try to live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations."

Except for the "avoid eating fat" part—I refuse to give up ice cream—it adds meaning to my life—these seem like wise, life-enhancing approaches.

Let us go back to our professor, though, for I think that some of his commentary is worth thinking about. He writes, "Meaning, to be sure, is something people do; but they do it in dialogue with a determinate world whose laws they did not invent, and if their meanings are to be valid, they must respect this world's grain and texture. To recognize this is to cultivate a certain humility..."

So I hate to tell you, but I have failed to find the secret to the meaning of life. There's no getting away from all those questions that our professor has posed for us. Is it for the best and a meaning-enhancing fact that our lives will end some day? Or should we strive to follow some of the popular culture representatives and try to figure out how to live forever? It beats me. What does seem important to me, though, is that we live intentionally as best we can with the cards we have been dealt. A heightened awareness of our daily lives, while sometimes depressing, can also serve to help us focus on what is really important. That should add some meaning to our lives. That may be the best we can do. Monty Python was sometimes a wise philosopher.

What do you think?