

## Is there meaning or purpose in life?

Inherent to our human nature is to find meaning or purpose to our existence; to feel as if what we do and think is for a reason, even if unknown to us at the time. Whether this purpose is individual and internal, or reciprocal and external, the pursuit for meaning can often seem somewhat Sisyphean or uncertain. Does that mean there is no meaning to be found, because it does not exist? How can we be certain of either argument? What is the nature of *meaning*? Must it be found? Does it need to be created? Or is it given to us? Does it change throughout a lifetime, or is there one singular meaning to it? Is it self-conceived or is there a higher being of some form at play here? All these various and confusing questions circle back to one another, and are linked, one dependent on the other, and another, reflecting the interconnectivity of our existence. The somewhat paradoxical nature of our existence is representative of our complexity and entanglement, in a world that is in a constant state of change and rotation. The works of Sartre, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, and Camus provide various viewpoints and interpretations of what it means to live and be alive.

Firstly, what do we mean by 'meaning' and 'purpose'? Are they the same thing or not? Purpose implies action; it is something we actively do and seek out in life. Meaning, instead, implies a more figurative and conceptual idea; not something tangible, but rather a feeling or emotion in us. In this sense, the two are co-dependent and rely on the other for existence. Our purpose gives us meaning in life; what we actively choose to do in life, directly impacts the emotions and feelings we will feel and experience. In much the same way, it can be difficult to distinguish between a purpose and a simple 'goal', yet the words imply that they are different. The subjectivity of this language mirrors that of existence and purpose, yet that does not mean some definition or clarity will not be found.

In life, we are surrounded by an interconnected web, or nexus, of people, with an intricate tissue of textualities. Whether people be familial or humanity in general, we are constantly interacting with others and the world around us, interpreting, perceiving, and adapting. If we view life from a solipsistic point of view, or from the view that we are not isolated beings, but rather a collective group of beings coexisting, our understanding of the nature of the meaning of life alters. Is meaning solitary and individual to each being? Or does all of humanity own a singular purpose we must all work towards? Is it internal or external? From this, there are various important considerations: if we conclude that humanity has a universal meaning, then it is fair to question where it has come from, and who or what has decided and given it, and importantly why and how this would be acted out. More simply, perhaps, is that if each being has their own meaning and purpose, then their actions and experiences in life must reflect their journey to carry it out, reflecting Heidegger's belief that to understand the world, means to experience it (as seen in his *Being and Time*). And how do we become aware of this existence? As you

can see, there are many seemingly contradictory and paradoxical questions, reflecting the complexity that is our existence.

If we are to consider meaning as external and singular for all of humanity, this has connotations of religious belief – although of course, religion can give individual meaning. In a basic sense, religion instructs that we must be *good* and do *good*; treat the world with respect, treat others with respect, and treat ourselves with respect. Is this not a *purpose*, and as such is purpose God-given? Collectively, society must work towards creating a fairer and just world for generations to come, through action and understanding of those around us, suggesting a sense of ‘shared’ empathy and consciousness, and an inherent link between us, through our task of *goodness*. We may not even consciously know that this is a purpose, but through following religion, this becomes an inherent part of our life, bringing into the question where purpose comes from? But what if people are not religion? It is possible to say that due to our constant interactions with others, that these moral and values transfer to others even if they are not religious. Indeed, the vast majority of people have a moral compass that gives them understanding of this *goodness*, without actually being aware of it. It is interesting to consider as well, if our God-given purpose follows us into the afterlife, as according to religion, the existence of heaven and hell dictate our actions and inform how we should act on earth. Indeed, if one wants to go to heaven, they must do *good* on earth, so, from a religious point of view, could our purpose be to enter heaven?

On the other hand, if we consider meaning as internal how does it come about? Is it there, *in* us straight from the moment of birth, whether we are aware of it or not. And as such everything we do in life contributes to this, whether we know or not? Or is it consciously made by us, by experiencing life, and by choosing our response to situations we face in life. Even if this is the case, our sense of meaning has still interacted with the world and people around us and is not a totally isolated concept. As such, does our meaning or purpose stay the same throughout our life, or does it adapt depending on who we become as we experience life? The idea that we have one such purpose or a singular meaning throughout our entire life seems somewhat restrictive. If our purpose is meant to be genuine and authentic to ourselves, some changes and adaptations must be expected as we change as individuals. One singular purpose may not serve someone for their entire life, and if meaning is meant to add value to life, if one’s meaning does not match who they are, then the opposite will be achieved, leading to an unfulfilled life and lack of true meaning. But then does this not reduce the value of meaning in general? If we have many purposes, is each less important than just having one main purpose in life? Not necessarily, especially if each purpose is fulfilling at each different stage in one’s life. Or, is it possible that we only find out the purpose of our existence as we reach the end of our life, in some paradoxical twist of events? Could this link back to the idea that we have a purpose straight from the moment of birth, and we only become aware of it at the end?

It is important to consider one of the main paradoxes of our existence: that our lives are both our own and also others. We are not isolated beings, always interacting, and interfering, with those around us and the world itself. Sartre states that man is condemned to freedom. This, however, is a great burden and responsibility, as it means we must make choices that are true to ourselves, with these choices impacting all of mankind as well. Freedom is paramount, but with freedom comes responsibility, as such existentialism is not just a humanism and not just individual – it is a doctrine of interconnectivity with *all* being a part of it. Similarly, religion plays a part, whether you are aware of it or religious or not, due to the transfer of morals as we interact. It is both internal and external; a fluid state between the two where they both influence the other. This sense of interdependence is seen through Kant's ideas of the noumena and phenomena: noumena determine both the existence and the determinations of phenomena – that they exist, and how they exist. Given this dependence of noumena and phenomena, we can infer the existence of noumena from the existence of phenomena. For there to be constructions, there must be something out of which they are constructed. In a similar sense, the internal is dependent on the external and both are proof that the other exists, as one would not exist without the other, hence this state of fluidity. Our internal 'meaning' is partly constructed by these external factors from people around us and what we consume from the world, and not in isolation. Indeed, one person's purpose can directly interact, or interfere, with another's. For example, if my purpose in life was to become a singer, but my mother did not allow me, and her purpose, for the sake of the argument was to stop me, then her purpose has directly influence mine. Of course, reality is different, and interactions between people are not this clear-cut. Regardless, we do not act in isolation, and as such, our purpose and meaning cannot entirely be our own in the sense that it is not solely created by ourselves, and does not only impact and effect ourselves. Indeed, in fashioning myself, I fashion man. There is a mutual and reciprocal notion of freedom, as are freedom is constructed by us and all others.

This is reinforced by a human universality of *condition* (importantly, not nature). The human condition concerns our positive and negative qualities whereas human nature involves our emotional responses to those traits. As such, everyone has there own unique nature, but our condition is one and shared. As part of this condition, there is the sense of a universality and interconnectivity of purposes; I cannot be anything unless others recognise me as such. Others have this ability to recognise because they too have the same condition. Commitment to myself is a co-commitment to others. This gives the sense that meaning and purpose transcend time or epochs, or the 'physicality' of our existence. One person's purpose can be understood by another, regardless of who they are or what 'time' they exist in, as human universality is perpetually made. This suggested a cyclicity of existence and purpose, that because we can understand and connect to each other on the deepest level of our literal existence, purpose can a

repeated ad reacted but in the vessel of different beings. Maybe, this links to if our purpose is God-given: that God continually gives each of us a purpose we can understand because it once belonged to another, and our task is to fulfil what they had started. Heidegger references the 'worldliness of the world' throughout his *Being and Time*, whereby objects are part of an interconnected nexus of equipment we know how to use. It is via this interconnected nexus that we glimpse at the rest of the world. In the same way, it is through others, that we can glimpse and understand ourselves and our place in existence. Maybe it is easier to understand this from a scientific point of view; quantum entanglement, for example, is when two particles link together in a certain way no matter how far apart they are in space. Could this argument be linked to our interconnectivity and inherent interaction with others? No matter how far apart we are, in time or physical distance, the actions of one impacts another, linking us together. According to Sartre, even if we each have our own meaning, as he describes through existentialism is a humanism, to choose oneself is to choose the rest of humanity.

Another important consideration is how we distinguish between a simple goal and ambitions and our *purpose*. Is one more important than the other? Are they even different things? A goal can be something small finishing a piece of work, to something larger like becoming the best basketball player in the world. It is something you work towards through various actions in your life; it is something that requires a certain amount of time, it most likely requires help in some form from others. Is this not quite similar to the parameters of what our purpose is? To find meaning and purpose we must take action, experience life, interact with others. How can we know what our purpose is apart from our goals? If our goals and ambitions in life give us a sense of deprecation and belonging, then surely it can be said they in some way are a purpose. This links back to the discussion about whether we have one purpose that stays the same throughout of life, or multiple that change as we do. When thinking about what your purpose is, it is most likely that you will think about the things you want to achieve and are working towards. But the sense that *meaning* or *purpose* give suggest that they are something more, not as 'surface-level' as a goal. One way to rectify this could be to think of your purpose as your 'why' – the reason you do what you do, what drives you and gives you the motivation to continue on. Goals, on the other hand, are your 'what' – they are the specific outcomes you want to achieve. Ideally, your goals should be aligned with your purpose. Purpose is a compass, and goals are the actions we take to move in the right direction. Often, the why can also feel like the what, and so it is hard to differentiate between a deeper, more spiritual calling, and a more literal calling to achieve the tangible things you want in life. The connection between the two is once again reflective of the connection between each person due to our universal condition, and interactions with one another. Is our purpose more of a vocation, an intrinsic part of who we are as beings, with each individual goal reflecting part of that, but not *it* directly?

However, it is difficult to really *know* what our purpose is, and for those who believe life has no purpose or meaning (more on this later), having goals or ambitions can give an important sense of direction, which in itself is having a purpose(s), just not in the grander, more significant sense of the word. We learn from Sartre that there is no reality except in action; in this sense, if we define purpose and meaning in more intangible ways, then they are not our reality unless we realise them through action, not just in thought. Man is nothing else but what he purposes and he only exists insofar as he realises himself and so is the sum of his actions. So, if one is unsure of their purpose maybe it is easier to consider the things that they *do*, relating back to the idea that we are self-interpreting and self-creating creatures. If we are 'given' our purpose straight from the moment of birth, from wherever or whoever, it may seem a bit distant to who we are or who we will become in the future. Instead, if we consciously make decisions and choose our purpose in whatever form, we are more likely to live up to and take action as needed to make it a reality and make it meaningful. This brings into question the notion of free will. If we have the free will to decide what actions we want to take in life, then we also have the free will to determine our purpose as a result. This is especially true if we consider that our purpose is self-created and dependent on who we are and what to be. But what about from a religious point of view? Despite religious influence, we are told that humans still have free will. Does this free will extend to purpose? If we want our purpose in life to be something like being a good person and making a difference in life, because this is what religion tells us is *good*, have we used our free will to come to this decision or have we been influenced deeply by religion that free will becomes less 'free' and more something of influence and duty. This once again stresses the importance of interconnectivity within life, whether that be connection to religion, connection to others, connection to us, or even connection to the world itself. Even interconnectivity between ourselves and our purpose, and the inherent fluidity between the two. Are we shaped by our purpose, or do we shape our purpose? In reality it is probably both, in a mutual state of tension, both dependent on one another.

Due to the complexities of this matter, maybe it is simpler easier to determine our purpose as what makes us happy, what makes us keep living despite this frustrating sense of uncertainty and absurdity. The uncertain promise of purpose and meaning, where it comes from, if it stays, if it is true can be rectified by simply accepting that we may not know for truth if we have a purpose or if life has meaning, but actively deciding to live, and live well, despite this lack of meaning. To avoid, or even cure, an existential crisis, if we choose to accept this uncertainty, and rebel against it, we can still live and have a fulfilled life that is not restricted by the need to find purpose. This is known as absurdism -the tension due to humanity's need for meaning, but the universe's refusal to provide any. As such, there is no other option but to keep living. Albert Camus states "the only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an

act of rebellion". Maybe living without meaning or purpose, or the need for it, is what true freedom is – we will not be tied to others, tied to ourselves, or tied to some supernatural being or force. Indeed, Kierkegaard states that the absurd is the paradox of God being eternal and infinite but also being incarnated as the finite, human Jesus. The nature of God makes no sense and so we cannot believe in God through reason. Much in the same way, maybe we cannot find meaning or purpose through reason, or at all, and instead must separate our desire to understand why we are alive, from actually being alive.

According to Camus, the pursuit of meaning only leads to more suffering as there is no meaning to be found in the first place, and so we must abandon our inherent quest for meaning. Maybe we do not need meaning to find happiness or be content; indeed, the opposite can be achieved if we become so anguished and desperate to find meaning. This is explored in Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where a man, Sisyphus, is condemned to ceaselessly push a rock up a mountain and watch it roll back to the Valley below in a continual cycle, mirroring the continual cycle of existence and universality of human condition. Sisyphus' eternal labour underscores the importance of embracing the present moment and finding joy in the process, regardless of the outcome. Despite the repetitive and seemingly futile nature of his task, Sisyphus persisted in his efforts, finding purpose and meaning in the act of pushing the boulder up the hill. This possibly implies that *purpose* in the way some may understand it as a deep, spiritual calling that is paramount to the life we live is not what we actually pursue. If Sisyphus can find happiness and be content even when his task is futile and repetitively fails, maybe purpose does not have to be this life-changing, emotional force and compass within us, but rather *us* ourselves. Our purpose is to just *be*, to live, to breathe, lacking any specificity that can limit our sense of true freedom or security. Maybe true freedom comes from the acceptance that meaning and purpose is insufficient to result in a good life if it causes too much despair and existential pain. As such, maybe true meaning and purpose comes from not actually having them – from just accepting life as it comes, and making choices for ourselves as we please.

To conclude, the doctrine of existentialism shows us the importance of action and responsibility when it comes to fashioning our own purpose and as such, that of others due to our inherent connection. We are a nexus of existences and purposes all interacting and functioning at once, past, present, and future, as a result of our shared human condition, linking us together. We therefore have the ability to understand and influence those around us, showing that purpose is both an internal and external concept. The paradoxical nature of existence is possibly too complex and overwhelming to lead to fulfilment, that it can be easier and better for us to break free from our need to have or find meaning, and instead focus our energy on simply existing and interacting with those around us. To rebel against our need for meaning, and meaning and purpose themselves, can lead to more fulfilment than actually having such 'things' could,

especially if the uncertainty of their nature causes more distress and anguish than good. Meaning and purpose both exist and do not, it is up to us, internally and externally, to take action regardless, and simply be and exist as we are, and maybe at some stage in our life we will know.

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