

# The question of the meaning of life

In its primary sense, inquiry into the meaning of life is concerned with the *objective* purpose, value, and significance of an *individual* human *life*.

- Purely subjective purposes, values, etc. trivialize the question.
  - Obviously many individuals value their lives and believe them to be worthwhile. No one disputes that.
  - The question only becomes controversial and interesting when we ask whether the *apparent* purpose, value, etc. of a person's life corresponds to an objective *reality*.
- The individual focus ensures the question's *relevance* to each of us.
  - Maybe there is no such thing as “the” meaning of life which is the same for all people (C, 18)
  - It can't be utterly unique, however, because we share a common human nature. (C, 20)

# Life as an activity

It is natural to construe “life” as an *activity*, something a person does (C, 20-21).

Activities can vary in their value, meaning, or significance.

- To say that one is engaged in “meaningful” activity is to approve or commend it (C, 20).
- But to commend an activity (or a life) is not merely to say “Wow, I like it!” but to relate specific features of that activity to objective features of the world (C, 20-21).
  - courage = standing firm in the face of danger
  - generosity = liberality in giving to others
- What specific features of a life make it commendable?

# Five features of a meaningful life

In general, an activity is meaningful to the degree that

1. It is done with a sense of seriousness, not flippancy (C, 21).
2. It is achievement oriented, not aimless (C, 21).
3. The agent sees it as meaningful (C, 22).
4. It is done with a sense of deliberate self-awareness (C, 22).

Could all this be true of a dedicated, fulfilled torturer? (C, 23ff.)

- But “meaningful” is a *positive* term. Hence, it would be semantically odd, at the least, to describe the ardent torturer’s life as meaningful.
- Very likely, such a person is not fully autonomous or self-aware, but acting (in part) out of anger, perhaps for past abuse..
- Moreover, *human* lives require us to satisfy various biological, emotional, social, and rational imperatives (C, 26-27).
  - Hence, it is very doubtful that such a person could really be fulfilled. Such a life comes “at a cost of sealing off one’s rational awareness and emotional sensibility” (C, 27)

# Five features of a meaningful life

Thus, an action can be richly and humanly meaningful only if

5. It is compatible with genuine openness to emotional and rational engagement with others (C, 29).

