Commonplace

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1 Orientation

Meaning is not a property of objects. Certain objects are meaningful to certain people, but not to others. Subjects can not generate meaning. None of us can generate meaning at will. None of us can experience meaning at will. Meaning, emerges during the right interaction between the subject and the object.

Since meaning is not a property *of* objects, there is no meaning *of* life. Since meaning emerges out of your interactions with life, there is meaning *in* your interactions with life, there is meaning *in* life.

The question "What is the meaning of life?" would have required a propositional answer, such as "The meaning of life is X." But we have seen that this is not the right question, since there is no meaning of life. Because meaning is found during interactions, the right question is "How can I interact with life such that I can experience meaning?" This question does not expect a proposition as an answer, but an interaction. Thus, we get,

The first change in orientation: from rigid ideas and abstract ideals to the lived experience.

There is no distant objective meaning of life X that you have to strive towards, but rather, each and every one of your interactions with life can either be a meaningful one or not.

> There is no way to Nirvana, Nirvana is the way.
> — Thich Nhat Hanh, "The Heart of the Buddha's Teaching"

> There is no Nirvana outside of your practice.
> — Shunryu Suzuki, "Zen Mind, Beginner's Mind"

> Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.
> — Luke 17:21, KJV

As such, with regards to meaning,

> Virtue is the only good, and vice the only evil; everything else is indifferent.
> — Seneca, "Letters to Lucilius", Letter LXXVI

Thus, paradoxically, pursuing the distant and abstract ideal of "having (what I rigidly imagine to be instead of what actually is) a meaningful life" prevents you from actually living a meaningful life. As practitioners, we don't want to live a meaningful life, we just engage in meaningful actions. From this we get,

The second change in orientation: from having (a meaningful life, a virtuous character, objects, achievements, status, desired circumstances) to engaging in the right interactions.

It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.
— Matthew 19:24, NRSVUE

It is not the man who has too little, but the man who craves more, who is poor.
— Seneca, "Letters to Lucilius", Letter II

From attachment springs grief, from attachment springs fear. For one who is wholly free from attachment there is no grief, whence then fear?
— Dhammapada, verse 214

Now, because meaning emerges during interaction, living a meaningful life also involves

The third change in orientation: from self-centeredness to caring for others.

At the core of a meaningful life is the shift from "How can the world be relevant to me? How can I derive what I want from it? How can I make it fit my ideas?" to "How can I be relevant to the world? How can I be relevant to myself, to others, and to something that transcends me (e.g., a child, a form of art)?" This is a synthesis of John Vervaeke's research on meaning in life and it aligns with findings from the 80-year Harvard Study of Adult Development. As the study authors conclude:

Among Harvard Study participants, the happiest and the most satisfied adults were those who managed to turn the question "What can I do for myself?" into "What can I do for the world beyond me?"
— Robert Waldinger and Mark Schulz, "The Good Life"

All the suffering in the world comes from the desire for oneself to be happy. All the happiness in the world comes from the desire for others to be happy.
— (Dalai Lama's paraphrase of) Shantideva, "Bodhicaryāvatāra" (A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life), 8:129

No one can lead a happy life if he thinks only of himself and turns everything to his own purposes. You should live for the other person if you wish to live for yourself.
— Seneca, "Letters to Lucilius", Letter XLVIII

Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve and to give his life a ransom for many.
— Matthew 20:26–28, NRSVUE

2 Metaphysics

Now, because a meaningful life is based on relationships,

> The good life is a complicated life. For everybody. The good life is joyful . . . and challenging. Full of love, but also pain. And it never strictly happens; instead, the good life unfolds, through time. It is a process. It includes turmoil, calm, lightness, burdens, struggles, achievement, setback, leaps forward, and terrible falls.
> —Robert Waldinger and Mark Schulz, "The Good Life"

And the natural question to ask as a follow-up is "Why didn't God create an existence without suffering?" And the answer to that, following John Vervaeke following Plotinus and Spinoza, is that God, as the ultimate cause of everything, *is* existence; God could not have created a different existence because God *is* existence.

Consider how the chain of causation works using this example of me holding a glass of water in the air (beautifully summarized by Alex O'Connor based on Thomas Aquinas argument based on Aristotle):

The First Link: The glass of water has the potential to be up in the air but it actually is in the air only because my hand actually holds it there right now. My hand has the potential to hold the glass in the air but having the potential is not enough; my hand has to *actually* hold the glass in the air.

The Second Link: My hand has the potential to hold the glass in the air, but in order to actually do so it needs my arm to actually support it right now in this position.

The Third Link: My arm has the potential to hold my hand in that position, but in order to do so it needs my shoulder to actually hold it so that it can actually hold the hand so that the glass can actually be in the air.

The General Rule: Each link borrows its actualizing power from the link above it. If at any second you were to take away any link from this chain, everything further down the chain would lose its causal power. If you take away the shoulder, the glass will fall on the ground; it will no longer be up in the air, and neither will the arm or the hand. Everything that has a potential requires a prior link to actualize that potential.

The Final Link: Therefore, the chain must ultimately rest on something that has no potential, so that it does not require a prior cause. Thus, the ultimate cause of everything, the Nature of all things, the causeless cause, God, is pure actuality with no potential, namely: existence itself.

> And God said unto Moses, I AM THAT I AM: and he said, Thus shalt thou say unto the children of Israel, I AM hath sent me unto you.
> — Exodus 3:14, KJV

Spinoza pushed this argument all the way to the end. If pure actuality exists necessarily through itself, and is unlimited (anything limiting it would be a prior cause, which we have ruled out), then there can be only one such reality. If there were two they would mutually limit each other and neither would be truly unconditioned. And if there is only one unconditioned reality, then everything else cannot be a separate substance; it must be a way that the one substance expresses itself. Thus, the finite beings around us (bodies, minds, rivers, mountains) are not separate participants in being but modes through which the single substance unfolds.

> Antonio can refer to two things: Antonio as a whole and Antonio himself. Similarly, Nature can refer to two things: Nature as a whole and Nature itself. To Spinoza, Nature naturing (natura naturans; what I have associated with the self) and Nature natured (natura naturata; what I have

associated with the whole) are the same reality seen from two sides: the active self-expressing power, and the expressed beings that result. **Nature as a whole is existence as a whole (everything that exists) and Nature itself is existence itself. The Nature of all things, God, could not have created a different existence because God is existence. And God could not have created a different world with different rules and different people because God is the world with all its rules and all its people.**

You can also see this from a biological perspective. Every month I ingest and eliminate an amount of food and water equal to my entire body weight. Thich Nhat Hanh beautifully pointed out that when you look mindfully, you can see the clouds in a piece of paper. Similarly, when you look mindfully, you can see the clouds in your own body. The rain fell and became the water you drink, which flows through your blood and cells. When you breathe and sweat, that water evaporates back into the air to become clouds again. I am not a fixed biological entity separated from Nature; rather, Nature continuously creates me through this cycle of exchange.

> I am continuation, like the rain is the continuation of the clouds.
> — Thich Nhat Hanh, "No Death, No Fear"

In a sense, there is a single mass of atoms that gets continuously cycled through plants, animals, bacteria, mountains, rivers and everything else through the laws of Nature. There is a single Nature that continuously twists itself into countless different beings.

> Then the righteous will answer him, "Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you something to drink? When did we see you a stranger and invite you in, or needing clothes and clothe you? When did we see you sick or in prison and go to visit you?"
> The King will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me."
> — Matthew 25:37–40, NIV

Nature as a whole is a living, moving organism, that has reason (the laws of physics; everything in Nature happens for a reason, everything in Nature happens as a consequence of the rules/laws of Nature), a body (the atoms), and a direction (constant change and motion).

Everything you see is the creation of God. We are like waves in the sea. The wave is made in the likeness of the sea, the sea partakes in the wave, but the wave is not the sea; nevertheless, if you pour poison in the wave, it arrives in the sea.

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Note that this is not pantheism (everything is God), this is panentheism (God is in everything). I think John Vervaeke is right when saying that pantheism is not the correct label for Spinoza. In pantheism everything is equal, everything simply is God. Here the wave is bounded and the sea is boundless, they cannot be equal. The sea is more than the waves both quantitatively and qualitatively. Quantitatively,

the sea is never used up by the waves it raises; there is always more sea than waves. Qualitatively, the wave depends on the sea for its very being, while the sea does not depend on any wave. The wave is not the sea itself, the source, the wave is only a process through which the sea itself manifests; it is the process not the source of the process. The wave is different from the see not only in degree but also in kind.

In this regard, I always remember fondly Shohaku Okumura's summary from "Living by vow": "five fingers, one hand"; multiple individuals, a single Nature, or, more grossly, one organism, multiple appendages.

Say to yourself the first thing in the morning: today I shall meet people who are meddling, ungrateful, aggressive, treacherous, malicious, unsocial. All this has afflicted them through their ignorance of true good and evil. But I have seen that the nature of good is what is right, and the nature of evil what is wrong; and I have reflected that the nature of the offender himself is akin to my own—not a kinship of blood or seed, but a sharing of the same mind, the same fragment of divinity. Therefore I cannot be harmed by any of them, as none will infect me with their wrong. Nor can I be angry with my kinsman or hate him. We were born for cooperation, like feet, like hands, like eyelids, like the rows of upper and lower teeth. So to work in opposition to one another is against nature: and anger or rejection is opposition.
— Marcus Aurelius, "Meditations", Book II

Marcus Aurelius beautifully brings us back to our conclusion from the meaning section. If we are different parts of the same body, then we were born for cooperation, thus, cooperation is inherently meaningful.

Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.
— Matthew 5:9

When you truly see that others are not separate from you, harming them is harming yourself, and helping them is helping yourself. In Christianity, the ideal, God descended into flesh, Jesus, took upon him the suffering of others, sacrificing himself so that others may be liberated.

I came that they may have life and have it abundantly. I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. [...] No one takes it from me, but I lay it down of my own accord.
— John 10:10-18, NRSVUE

This, to me, is beyond marvelous. The one substance, expressing itself fully in this particular mode, embracing the suffering of its other modes as its own. Gorgeous. Beyond glorious. Perfect. A life dedicated towards helping others, without expecting anything in return: the ideal.

In Mahayana Buddhism, the Bodhisattva refuses to exit the cycle of suffering alone and vows to return again and again until all beings are liberated.

For as long as space endures, and for as long as living beings remain, until then may I too abide to dispel the misery of the world.
— Shantideva, "Bodhicaryāvatāra" (A Guide to the Bodhisattva's Way of Life), 10:15

In a sense, this does happen. On the physical side, the atoms from which Buddhist monks are

composed get cycled until they eventually end up in other Buddhist monks. On the mental side, the ideas that the Buddhist monks had got transmitted from generation to generation. So eventually, the same atoms and mental states that defined the Buddhist monks from one generation eventually end up in the new generation which continues the work. Beyond marvelous. Beyond glorious. This is Nature committing itself to its own liberation through its modes. Gorgeous. Absolutely Perfect. Ideal. As manifestations of Nature, there is nothing better for us to do than to take care of Nature as it inevitably exists the way it does.

This metaphysics is enough for me to justify the fact that a meaningful life is a life dedicated towards contributing to the world at large while understanding that the world could not have been any different, that things necessarily are as they are. Helping others without expecting anything in return is not an act of charity or sacrifice, it is the natural expression of seeing clearly. But it is important to see clearly until the end,

> Beings are numberless; I vow to free them.
> — The first Bodhisattva vow

> Dharma gates are boundless; I vow to enter them.
> — The third Bodhisattva vow

You cannot "save" the world. You barely know what is good for yourself and you are barely able to implement it for yourself, let alone for a world that is large and interconnected in ways in which a single human mind cannot comprehend. I very much appreciate the way Bodhisattva vows are formulated. These are not something you can achieve, beings are numberless and there are boundless amounts of things you have to know and understand about the world in order to act properly, rather, they are directions you can orient yourself towards, and each step in that direction is a meaningful one.

> Most High, all-powerful, all-good Lord,
> All praise is Yours, all glory, all honour and all blessings.
>
> To you alone, Most High, do they belong, and no mortal lips are worthy to pronounce Your Name.
>
> Praised be You my Lord with all Your creatures,
> especially Sir Brother Sun,
> Who is the day through whom You give us light.
> And he is beautiful and radiant with great splendour,
> Of You Most High, he bears the likeness.
>
> Praised be You, my Lord, through Sister Moon and the stars,
> In the heavens you have made them bright, precious and fair.
>
> Praised be You, my Lord, through Brothers Wind and Air,
> And fair and stormy, all weather's moods, by which You cherish all that You have made.
>
> Praised be You my Lord through Sister Water,
> So useful, humble, precious and pure.
>
> Praised be You my Lord through Brother Fire,
> through whom You light the night and he is beautiful and playful and robust and strong.
>
> Praised be You my Lord through our Sister,
> Mother Earth who sustains and governs us,
> producing varied fruits with coloured flowers and herbs.

Praise be You my Lord through those who grant pardon for love of You and bear sickness and trial.

Blessed are those who endure in peace, By You Most High, they will be crowned.

Praised be You, my Lord through Sister Death,
from whom no-one living can escape. Woe to those who die in mortal sin! Blessed are they She finds doing Your Will.

No second death can do them harm. Praise and bless my Lord and give Him thanks,
And serve Him with great humility.

— Francis of Asisi

3 Character

The aim is thus to remain in genuine relationship with what transcends you—other people, future generations, other life forms, the specific communities you are embedded in, forms of arts and crafts, knowledge, value systems, practices and ecologies of practices, traditions—while being caring enough to act on their behalf, humble enough to keep investigating whether your current understanding of what benefits them is mistaken, and resilient enough to accept what the process costs. Socrates exemplifies this in Crito, he first rigorously examines whether fleeing would be consistent with what he genuinely owes to Athens and to justice, and then actively commits to his death penalty in Phaedo:

[...] the man who is to give you the poison has been telling me for some time, that I should warn you to talk as little as possible. People get heated when they talk, he says, and one should not be heated when taking the poison, as those who do must sometimes drink it two or three times.
Socrates replied: "Take no notice of him; only let him be prepared to administer it twice or, if necessary, three times."
I was rather sure you would say that, Crito said, but he has been bothering me for some time.
Let him be, he said. I want to make my argument before you, my judges, as to why I think that a man who has truly spent his life in philosophy is probably right to be a good cheer in the face of death and to be very hopeful that after death he will attain the greatest blessings yonder.
— Plato, "Phaedo", 63d, translated by G.M.A Grube

There are a few things I like about this scene:

1. Socrates is open to his experience: he does not want to avoid taking the poison, he tells the guard to be prepared to administer the poison two or three times if necessary.

2. He is present: he lets the guard be and continues to engage in dialogue with his friends.

3. He engages in what matters: he engages in the practice of philosophical inquiry, which transcends him. Socrates' guess from Phaedo is that after death, his "soul" will be free to philosophize for all eternity. Metaphorically, this turned out to be true. Socrates became the cornerstone of Western thought and countless people tried to embody his character over the millennia. In a sense, his character still lives in us, his "soul" (the original Greek word for soul being psyche) is very much alive and thriving, still helping people, still philosophizing, as he speculated in Phaedo.

4. He does not blindly engage in whatever he desires, but rather, he argues for and

analyzes his actions repeatedly, and from multiple points of view, both in Crito and Phaedo.

5. The argumentation happens in a community: Socrates presents his argument to the people around him, who become his judges. This is a crucial point: you see the world *through* your viewpoint, in order to correct it you need another person to look *at* your viewpoint rather than *through* it.

6. He manifests intellectual humility: even though he is prepared to follow the best argument, and forfeit his life as a result of his argument, Socrates recognizes that the best argument is just the best guess and explicitly mentions that he *thinks* (as opposed to *knows*) he is *probably* (as opposed to *absolutely*) right.

By manifesting these six characteristics, among others, Socrates was able to experience meaning in his situation. I have tried to compile the shortest curriculum able to cover these skills and way of life.

1. The Death of Ivan Ilych — Leo Tolstoy
2. How God Changes Your Brain — Andrew Newberg and Mark Robert Waldman
3. Trauma-Focused ACT — Russ Harris
4. Superforecasting — Philip Tetlock
5. The Good Life — Robert Waldinger and Mark Schulz
6. Dialectic and Dialogue: Plato's Practice of Philosophical Inquiry — Francisco J. Gonzales
7. Plato — Complete Works

The first book start us from an usual materialistic life. The second one provides the connection and meaning that was lacking in the first. The first time you read this book, I recommend starting directly from Chapter 8: "Exercising your brain"; this will get you practical in no time. The third book puts the first three points I've made about Socrates into practice: it teaches us how to be present, open and engaged in what matters, through practical advice while providing a great set of exercises meant to help us develop the necessary skills. It also does this from the perspective of a therapist, directly showcasing how we can relate to others in a compassionate manner, while always checking whether what we are doing is helpful to the other person and continuously adapting; the very definition of a meaningful interaction. The fourth book properly develops this last concept, diving deeply into what it looks like to continuously update our understanding. Once we've established a great emotional, procedural and mental foundation with the first three books, the forth one opens the social dimension. Finally, the last two books are about bringing everything together into a coherent whole by internalizing Socrates' character. Francisco Gonzales' book teaches us how to read Plato: to be transformed, not informed, to look at the character behind the drama and to internalize it. It also starts as a great continuation of Superforecasting: with the Laches dialogue in which Socrates refuses to be content with just the subjective experience, and engages in abstraction, while also refusing to hold tight to a single rigid objective definition. At the end of the curriculum, through his way of writing, Plato provides us the opportunity to accompany Socrates on his daily affairs and learn from his character.

PHAEDRUS: [...] and now, as the heat has has abated, let us depart.
SOCRATES: Should we not offer up a prayer first to the local deities?
PHAEDRUS: By all means.
SOCRATES: Beloved Pan, and all ye other gods who haunt this place, give me beauty in the inward soul; and may the outward

and the inward man be at one. May I reckon the wise to be wealthy, and may I have such a quantity of gold as a temperate man and he only can bear and carry.
Anything more? That prayer, I think, is enough for me.
PHAEDRUS: Ask the same for me, as friends should have all things in common.
— Plato, "Phaedrus", 279b, translated by Benjamin Jowett

4 Practice