

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.

So, 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

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

Nor will they say, "Look, here it is!" or "There it is!" For, in fact, the kingdom of God is within you.
— Luke, 17:21

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.

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

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”

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

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

It is not the man who has little, but the man who needs 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

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

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

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

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

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:

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 Aristotle 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:

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.

Antonio can refer to two things: Antonio as a whole and Antonio himself. The whole and the self are different. Similarly, Nature can refer to two things: Nature as a whole and Nature itself. **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.**

Therefore, God has two limitations: (i) God cannot choose to not exist, and (ii) God could not have created a different existence. God could not have created a different existence because God is existence, and because God is existence itself God cannot choose to not exist.

These two limitations also bind us. We cannot choose to not exist or to be something else. We are atoms organized by the laws of physics. And we will continue to be atoms organized by the laws of physics. We continuously cycle through plants, animals, bacteria, mountains, rivers and the whole of Nature.

I am continuation, like the rain is the continuation of the clouds.
— Thich Nhat Hanh

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. As such, 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

Then he will say to those on his left ... "I was hungry and you gave me nothing to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me nothing to drink, I was a stranger and you did not invite me in, I needed clothes and you did not clothe me, I was sick and in prison and you did not look after me."

They also will answer, "Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or needing clothes or sick or in prison, and did not help you?"

He will reply, "Truly I tell you, whatever you did not do for one of the least of these, you did not do for me."

— Matthew, 25:41–45

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).

Since neither Nature itself (pure actuality) nor Nature as a whole can choose to not exist, its only option is to take care of itself while it inevitably exists while understanding that it could not have been anything other than what it currently actually is. So we, as manifestations of Nature, have no option but to try to take care of Nature as a whole to the best of our abilities, while understanding that Nature could not have been any different than it currently actually is.

This 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 it could not have been any different. God could not have created a different world with different rules because God is the world with all its rules. As a consequence of the fact that everything evolves geometrically out of the rules of nature, the people you encounter could not have been any different than they currently actually are.

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

Adapting Robert Sapolsky's points from "Determined", if people could have chosen to have the capability, the upbringing and the knowledge required to understand virtue and to live a virtuous life everybody would have chosen to, but they could not. However, even with all our imperfections, we can still experience meaning by engaging in acts of caring; by orienting towards, by developing, and by identifying with our capacity for caring.

Well, what does Zeus say? "Epictetus, if it were possible, I would have made your little body both free and unrestricted. As it is, though, make no mistake: this body does not belong to you, it is only cunningly constructed clay. And since I could not make the body yours, I have given you a portion of myself instead, the power of positive and negative impulse, of desire and aversion—the power, in other words, of making good use of impressions. If you take care of it and identify with it, you will never be blocked or frustrated; you won't have to complain, and never will need to blame or flatter anyone. Is that enough to satisfy you?"

"It's more than enough. Thank you."
— Epictetus, "Discourses", Book I

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 worldview.

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

The first two books lay out the worldview of a meaningful life: the first one showcases how a life focused on status, achievements and wealth is a meaningless one while the second one showcases how a life focused on caring for others is a meaningful one. The third book puts this worldview 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.

We further build upon TFACT, which touches on continually updating your understanding of what is helpful for the other person, through Superforecasting which dives deeply into actually doing that. 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 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