

Chapter Title: Meaning

Chapter Author(s): Drew Chastain

Book Title: The Things That Really Matter

Book Subtitle: Philosophical conversations on the cornerstones of life

Book Author(s): Alexander Badman-King, Drew Chastain, Lewis Coyne, Jane Heal, Troy Jollimore, Holly Lawford-Smith, Christine Overall, Elaine Scarry, Helen Steward, Alison Stone, Brian Treanor and Panayiota Vassilopoulou

Book Editor(s): Michael Hauskeller

Published by: UCL Press. (2022)

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctv27qzshp.5>

---

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact [support@jstor.org](mailto:support@jstor.org).

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



This book is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC 4.0). To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>.



JSTOR

*UCL Press* is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The Things That Really Matter*

# 1

## Meaning

with Drew Chastain

*Michael Hauskeller*: Living a meaningful life matters to us, at least to the extent that most people, if given the choice, would prefer a life that has some kind of meaning to one that does not. Yet it is surprisingly difficult to say what exactly makes or would make our life meaningful.<sup>1</sup> In Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*,<sup>2</sup> it takes the supercomputer Deep Brain millions of years to come up with an answer to the 'ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything'. Famously, that answer, eagerly awaited by everyone, is 42. Naturally, this is rather disappointing because it doesn't seem to explain much, if anything, and at any rate doesn't seem to be the *kind* of answer that people are looking for when they ask that question. But what exactly *are* we looking for? What kind of answer would we consider satisfactory? What kind of answer would we even be willing to accept as an answer to our question? A mere number is clearly not going to do the trick, but what would? The trouble is that we don't really know what answer would satisfy us, which is hardly surprising since it is not quite clear what exactly the 'ultimate question' actually is.

Let us assume that the 'ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything' is a question about *meaning*. We want to know what all this is *about*, or in other words what the 'meaning of life' is, and by 'life' we usually mean everything that exists (the universe and all that is in it), but in particular our own existence. When we wonder about the meaning of life we wonder *why*, to what *purpose*, we are here, or what the *point* of our being here is. For some reason it seems important to us that there is such a point, that our life 'means' something. What is puzzling about this, however, is that it is far from clear how life should be able to mean anything at all. There certainly are things in this world that can

mean something. Words and sentences mean something. A map and a road sign mean something. Even a person's look, posture or action can be meaningful.<sup>3</sup> What all these have in common is that they carry a message for those who can read it. They tell us something about something else, something that is not immediately present but to which what is present points.

A word or a sentence has meaning because it is intended to be understood as more than just squiggles or sounds. It has meaning because it has the power to bring to mind what is absent, if only in those who understand the language. Those who don't are left with the squiggles and the sounds. A look or a smile can also convey a message, and it 'means' something if and only if it is meant to do that. Meaning is never accidental. A footprint in the sand can tell me something (for instance that someone recently came this way), but it does not 'mean' anything unless it has been left there deliberately for me or someone else to find and draw conclusions from. For something to have meaning, there must be someone who means something by it. If nothing is *meant* by a thing then that thing has no meaning, at least not in the sense that a word or a sentence has a meaning.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, unless human life and the world as we find it also carry a secret message that we are meant to understand, which does not seem likely, they don't mean anything either.

For the natural world out there to have a meaning, it would have to be like a text, as the ancient metaphor of the 'book of nature' suggests, and that text would have to be written by some supreme godlike being. But if it does contain a secret message, then we have so far failed to decipher it. And if there is no God who has used the world as his writing pad, so that there is no hidden message to be discovered by us, then it seems that the world, or life, must be considered utterly meaningless. In that case the question 'what does it all mean?' or 'what is the meaning of life?' would not only be unanswerable, it would in fact be a question that it makes no sense to ask in the first place, simply because life, like everything else in the world that is not the product of human intelligence, is not the kind of thing that can have meaning. We could just as well ask what the colour of life is. Is it green or red or blue? Of course it is none of these, nor any other colour. Questions about the colour of life cannot be answered, not because we don't know the answer, but because the question does not make any sense, and the same seems to be the case when we ask questions about the meaning of life.<sup>5</sup>

\*

*Drew Chastain:* More broadly, I think the question of the meaning of life is the question of life's intelligibility. Can we make sense of it? Language and signs and symbols are paradigm examples of things that can have meaning, but life needn't fit that linguistic model in order to have some kind of intelligibility. Music can also have intelligibility without being a symbol – that is, music apart from any lyrics.<sup>6</sup> We can make sense of music, but it's not clear that music refers to anything, and a series of notes can make sense even if there is not someone who intended that series of notes. The intelligibility of life consists largely (I wouldn't say entirely) in having a purpose or point, a kind of *practical* intelligibility, this being a question of what we are supposed to be doing in life.<sup>7</sup> But I'm afraid that even if we are able to grasp the *question* of life's meaning in this way, we are still not set up for fully satisfying *answers*, even if there is a God.

To see this, let's say there is an author of all reality, including me, and imagine that, because I've been worrying over the question of the meaning of life, God decides to visit me one day to inform me of the purpose of my existence. God tells me that everyone is important and everyone has a unique purpose and that mine is X (he also asks me not to reveal it to anyone, so I will keep it a secret). Before God leaves, I beg for an answer to an additional question because my worry was not only about the meaning of my own life but about all life and reality, and, being very gracious, God informs me that the purpose of it all is Y (and again, he asks me to keep it secret).

Though of course this would be a very exciting day for me and I would feel very special to have been entrusted with the knowledge of the point of all reality by the source of reality itself, I'm afraid that it's very possible that my concern about the meaning of life could still find its way back into my soul. I can still ask, why X; that is, why is X the purpose of my existence? And, while it may be that the answer to the question of the purpose of *the purpose* of my own existence points us to Y, or the purpose of all existence, I can still ask, why Y? And why is there a God who sets purposes for existence? If there is a God, and especially if God visited me personally to help settle my doubts, it may seem very ungrateful of me to demand more answers, but then it really isn't my fault – that's how humans were created: to ask questions. Human reflection inevitably leads us outside of the frame of practical assumptions that guide us in everyday life, and outside of this frame, for better or for worse, we encounter problems that we are then unable to resolve.<sup>8</sup>

I remember experiencing my first serious intellectual grapplings with the question of meaning when I was in high school learning about Darwin's theory of natural selection, which tells us not only that we evolved from

'lower' life forms, but also that we don't need to appeal to a divine plan to explain that.<sup>9</sup> And it wasn't just grappling. I was coping. I realised that I had to *accept* that there is no God and that life unfolds randomly or arbitrarily, so that there's just a blind push forward without any pull toward some cosy destiny that could make sense of it all. Reconsidering this problem of meaning that I was experiencing then, I now want to ask the causal 'why' instead of the 'why' of purpose. In particular, why is natural selection a meaning problem – or, more precisely, why is lack of meaning in this sense experienced as a *problem* at all? Why was my teenage self coping, and why am I still coping, with the possible arbitrariness of life? To be coping is to feel vulnerable or threatened or traumatised by one's situation, like when one loses a job or a loved one dies. It makes sense that one would have to cope with material changes to one's life that directly affect one's physical and emotional security, but how does a mere reconceptualisation of our cosmic circumstance stir up a whirlwind of disorientation and distress, when no loved one has died and no job has been lost?

Some experience more distress over arbitrariness than others, but I think the problem that we feel in relation to arbitrariness is that there is no basis for saying what we are *supposed* to be doing. Some can certainly find this freeing.<sup>10</sup> In the absence of pre-established rules and purpose, we can create the rules and create our own purposes. But, though I'm able to accept that there is no creator God guiding us to desirable destinations, I also cannot find complete comfort in self-creation. However empowering a picture of self-creation may be, there is still something empty in viewing myself as the one who must create something out of nothing. If the question of meaning is not just a question but a *problem* with which I must cope, I think it is the emptiness (or other uncomfortable moodiness) I feel when I've lost the backdrop to my life that helps me to understand what I'm supposed to be doing.

That's why so many 'answers' to the question of the meaning of life don't satisfy. Certainly not the answer '42'. That gives me no guidance at all. The meaning I'm looking for is a practical one that grounds me and points me in some direction or other. But the deeper problem is that, for the reflective mind, the problem of meaning never really goes away once it has been identified. Human reflection is always capable of unearthing the roots of any orientation that we can feel anchored in, leaving us once again exposed to the absurd abyss of arbitrariness. So, what begins as an innocent intellectual question of the meaning of life becomes the practical question of how to live life with the intellectual question forever unresolved.

\*

*Michael Hauskeller*: I think you are right that our concern about the meaning of life is at its core a concern about the world's intelligibility.<sup>11</sup> We want to understand what all this – our life, our very existence, the existence of everything – is all about, and find it difficult to accept that it may ultimately be about nothing at all; that things simply are what they are for no good reason at all. We are unwilling, or perhaps constitutionally unable, to accept the arbitrariness of things and thus we keep trying to make sense of what is going on in the world. But there are various ways in which we can make sense of things, and most of them do not really seem to get us anywhere, or at least not where we want to be.

We can certainly answer the question 'Why are we here?', or equally 'Why am I here?', by citing scientific evidence about the evolution of life and the origin and development of individual organisms. Yet while an understanding of the natural causes that have ultimately led to our existence may help us to make sense of it in the same way that a previously unexplained phenomenon (for instance an aurora) can be made intelligible by identifying the natural causes that have given rise to it (such as disturbances in the magnetosphere caused by solar wind), any kind of purely causal explanation must still remain unsatisfactory because it does not solve the problem. Even if the explanation were such that we can now see clearly how one thing has led to the next, so that there wasn't any room for chance anywhere along the way and everything had to turn out exactly as it did, the explanation would still be unsatisfactory because even though every single step in the history of the universe may have been necessary, none of it explains why there is something rather than nothing and why the laws of the universe are the way they happen to be.<sup>12</sup> No matter how comprehensively everything that happens is determined by what happened before, the entire necessary sequence of events is still unexplained and appears arbitrary.

Causes are, of course, not the same as reasons, and sometimes we need a reason to properly make sense of what is happening. If you badmouthed me behind my back and I demanded an explanation from you, asking 'Why did you do that?' (or 'What is the meaning of this?'), you would not really answer my question if you told me that what led you to do this was a combination of your genes, your upbringing, past experiences, and the affordances and constraints of the moment. 'Yes, I understand that,' I might say in response, 'and I am sure that is all very interesting, but what I wanted to know and what you haven't told me yet is *what reason* you could possibly have for doing something like that to me.' However, the reason I would be looking for in this particular situation is *not* a purpose. If you said that you did it in order to hurt me,

then I would have learned something about the purpose of your action, but I would still not understand *why* you did it. For that, I would have to know what you think I have done to deserve being treated like this. Perhaps I seriously offended you in some way. If I did, then that would explain both why you badmouthed me and why you wanted to hurt me – that is, both your action and its purpose. ‘Now I understand,’ I might then say. Things are making sense now.

Yet the reason given here is not an intention (or a future event that the action is meant to bring about) but something that happened in the past and is something that has (at least partly) *caused* the action that I demanded an explanation for. But it is a special kind of cause: one that stands in an intelligible, transparent relation to its effect. The connection is no longer just a given, a bare fact of nature that could conceivably have been very different than it is. That you are trying to hurt me because I hurt you makes sense, in a very human kind of way that is different from the way it makes sense that my shin hurts when you kick it. This is why the revelation of a divine purpose for the universe as a whole or for me personally would not solve the problem of meaning any more than a scientific explanation of our existence can.<sup>13</sup>

For my life to have meaning it is not sufficient for there to be a purpose to it, which can seem just as arbitrary as a sequence of natural causes. If God revealed his plans to me, this might explain certain features of the world that I previously failed to understand (for instance why there is so much evil in the world), but it would only satisfy the desire I express when I wonder about the meaning of life if it were no longer possible for me to ask ‘why this plan rather than a different one?’. In other words, it would have to be immediately clear to me that this plan is indeed the only plan that makes sense.

That is why I am intrigued by the example you have used to cast doubt over my claim that only things that are *intended* to mean something can mean something. Your example was music. You point out, rightly, that a musical composition does not (unlike a sentence) necessarily refer to anything (just like life or the universe), and also that a series of notes can make sense without there being any intention behind them (just like life and the universe). I think you are on to something here. So how exactly does music make sense despite not being about something? I am not sure that intention, or at least an orientation towards a prefigured goal, is completely irrelevant here. It seems to me that a combination of musical notes makes sense only as long as we regard them as the product of a composition and that it would no longer make sense if this particular combination of notes were perceived as a product of pure chance. In this

respect it would be similar to a poem that seems to make perfect sense, but would cease to do so if it were discovered that it was in fact produced by a toddler who randomly pressed the keys of a desktop without having any clue about what they were doing. The poem would then have no meaning at all, just as a cloud that happens to look like a dog has no meaning, precisely because the fact that it has for a while assumed the shape of a dog is entirely coincidental.<sup>14</sup> And yet, we may want to say that the meaning of the music resides in the architecture of the sound alone – that it neither needs to tell us anything about something that is not itself (like a sentence or a traffic sign), nor does there need to be a particular intention or purpose behind it. All that is necessary for it to make sense is that its elements are *evidently* in tune with each other: that it exhibits a certain rightness and fittingness, perhaps even goodness, that the ear can detect and that presents itself to us unquestionably. We can experience this without being pointed in any particular direction or being told how to live our lives. Purposelessly purposeful, as Kant thought all beautiful things are.<sup>15</sup> Perhaps when life is meaningful, it is meaningful in the same way.

\*

*Drew Chastain:* There is the question of how things make sense, and then there is the question of how things can make sense in such a way that the deepest problem of meaning is solved. You've made it clear that, even when we know purposes and brute causes, we can still have a need for meaning that seeks the reasons people have for doing things. We humans exist in an interpersonal world and the interpretation of reasons is indispensable for social navigation. But does this mean that the deepest problem of meaning consists in the frustration of the belief that events have that kind of reason? It is certainly a problem for meaning if the world isn't governed by reasons – a problem which can even infect our view of human action. There is the possibility that the conscious reasons we impute to our own actions are not the real causes of them.<sup>16</sup> The reasons we give may only be interpretations for our actions that we provide after the true causes found in the neurophysiological processes of the body play themselves out; a possibility which has a way of eroding our faith that life has meaning.

Having reasons as a kind of psychological state is an important part of our experience of agency and of the interpersonal social world in which we make sense of action and identity. Another way in which reasons might matter for meaning is that we can agree and disagree



with other people's reasons. We make sense of things not only with our explanations of things (causes, purposes, reasons), but also by any way in which we can be grounded and oriented. If I agree with someone else, then I am *with* that person, and if I disagree with someone else, then I am in that way *against* that person. Agreeing and disagreeing with others can ground me, helping me to locate where I am socially, and identify who I am. It's cosier to be with other people because then I have a sense of connection to others – I can feel safe and accepted with a sense of belonging – but even opposition can provide me with a sharp sense of identity and orientation in life, helping me to make sense of what to do in life: that is, giving my life meaning.

If explanations matter for meaning, I think it is because of the way that explanations help to keep us oriented, but we don't always need the extra orientation of explanation to have meaning. Imagine an everyday example of seeing someone walking down the street. You can make sense of this even if you do not know the cause, purpose or reason for the person walking down the street. It can simply be someone walking down the street. You can make sense of it, yes, but then, is such a grasp of events enough for us to have meaning in life? Perhaps it could be if we didn't demand more, in which case the question becomes why do we demand more? And is there good reason to demand more? When my reflections on meaning turn in this direction (and there are so many directions such reflections can turn!), I find myself appreciating the Buddhist perspective. At the core of Buddhism is the idea that we are the cause of our own suffering and dissatisfaction because we view ourselves as separate from the surrounding reality (ego) and need control (agency), clinging to certain ways we want things to be and disrupting the flow of life and our own contentment in the process.<sup>17</sup> If we could be content with things as they are, whatever that may be, then the question of the meaning of things wouldn't arise, at least not seriously. Like the Zen Buddhist, we could simply laugh at the need for meaning. What if, metaphorically speaking, there is nothing more to life than seeing shapes in the clouds?

I have to confess, though, that personally I am often in a state of dissatisfaction. I often don't feel quite in tune with what I'm doing. To account for my dissatisfaction, I can point to cosmic arbitrariness, or I can point to all the things that go wrong in life or aren't quite to taste, lowering the estimation of the value of life bit by bit. Many things that were once deeply engaging to me lose their lustre through repetition and disappointment. In many ways a state of dissatisfaction with life seems appropriate, as it did to the pessimist Schopenhauer.<sup>18</sup> Today we face climate change which may severely limit human opportunity in the near

future, along with the explosion of the human population, making each human life seem a bit less significant than before, and of course human activity is the reason for climate change, so it's easy to get disgusted with our own kind.

I have trouble determining whether the erosion of orientation and motivation in my own life has more to do with the lack of ultimate explanation or the specific circumstances of my life in these present times, and it could also be that my own personality just happens to lean in a more pessimistic direction (which would help to explain why I think about meaning so much!). But I tend to think that lack of ultimate explanation is a deep meaning problem – that is, the kind of meaning problem that disrupts orientation and motivation, or the practical intelligibility of life – only if there are more circumstantial problems already exercising one's mind. Given problematic circumstances, the reflective mind naturally seeks ultimate explanations, and in seeking hard yet finding none, the underlying circumstantial problems for meaning get exacerbated. I think that for many, faith in ultimate explanations (or not thinking too hard about them) is a way to keep the pessimism in check, but, as I see it, the real meaning challenge we face is optimism without explanation.

\*

*Michael Hauskeller*: But what if we finally realised that an ultimate explanation is simply impossible or at least inconceivable? Should we then not be able to give up the search and be content, just as we might be if it turned out that a key we had desperately been looking for could never be found because it had never been lost in the first place? Reasons are indeed important to us. We want them to play a causal role in our life. The realisation that all our deliberations may be nothing but a sham – because before we make the conscious decision to act in a certain way, or at least before we become *aware* of it, our brain has already initiated that action – can spark a crisis of meaning because if this is true then it may appear pointless to think about what to do in and with one's life. If my actions are caused by physical events in my body and those events are caused by other such events, so that everything I do can be fully explained solely by the chain of those events, then reasons are no longer needed.

Yet if reasons are no longer needed to explain what I do, then *I* am no longer needed because what I am, or at least seem to be more than anything else, is this conscious self that thinks and plans, hopes and despairs, wills and decides, which now, in a physicalist and deterministic universe, appears to be condemned to irrelevance. We tend to associate

meaning with agency. Agency is the power to make a difference.<sup>19</sup> If we cannot make a difference, life appears pointless, and if it is pointless, it is meaningless. In order to be able to make a difference we need at the very least to be able to make our own choices.<sup>20</sup> We resent being merely passive spectators, following what is happening in the world (including our own actions) as though we are watching a play, or a film, or reading a novel, where whatever happens in it, good or bad, we are completely powerless to influence it in any way.

However, even if reasons did play a causal role in how events unfold, be it only with regard to our own actions or also beyond, this would not necessarily address the problem of our perceived lack of agency. Even if we have good reasons for acting as we do, we may not be free to act in any other way because it is only because of what and who we are that we have those reasons in the first place. Even if we believe that at least the human world is still governed by reasons (or reason), we may still feel powerless and without real agency when we consider the completeness of the causal chain that links our actions back to the conditions that precede them. This would also explain why, in our desire to live a meaningful life, we feel threatened by the vastness of the universe, in terms of both space and time. Given how unimaginably large and long-lasting the universe is, there is little if any chance that anything we do will make any sort of difference in the long run.<sup>21</sup> In a few million years, or perhaps even much earlier, the world will probably be exactly the same as it would have been if we had never existed.

If agency is the power to make a difference and ultimately nothing we do is likely to make one, then we lack agency even if we are entirely free to make our own choices based on the reasons we choose to embrace and adopt. And if we lack agency and without agency we cannot live a meaningful life, then our life is meaningless, with or without reasons. This is also connected to our desire for an intelligible world. It is difficult to understand why we should have the impression that we are (to some extent) in charge of our lives if we are not. Why would we be able to think about how to live our lives? Why can we contemplate things like the nature of the world we live in and the meaning of life if it makes no difference whatsoever? This, we feel, makes no sense.

But of course it is not entirely true that what we do in this life makes no difference. It may make no difference *in the long run*, but it may still make plenty of difference in the short and medium term. And why should a shorter-lived difference not matter? Why should we value only differences that are ever-lasting? And even if it were true that we have no real choice in what we do or don't do, it would still be we who would be doing

it. A lot of things may happen that would never have happened without us. So in that sense we *do* make a difference.<sup>22</sup>

I am wondering, though, whether in order for our lives to be meaningful we *have* to make (or at least be able to make) a difference at all. What if we really had no power to influence the course of events – if our role really were merely that of a spectator who cannot do anything but watch as time (as well as life and world) goes by? We don't usually think or feel that a film or a novel is meaningless just because we cannot influence the events in it, nor do we think or feel that our watching the film or reading the book is meaningless. On the contrary, what often happens is that we forget, for a time, our own existence, immersing ourselves instead fully in those fictional worlds, losing ourselves almost entirely in the events we see unfolding before our outer or inner eye.

Something similar happens when we immerse ourselves in a piece of music. That is not meaningless, even though there is no exchange of reasons here. Yet there is still some kind of grounding, as you call it: the creation of a connection, a belonging, a being-with. Can we not experience the universe and our role in it in a similar way? Perhaps not necessarily by agreeing with everything that happens in it (which seems to be the Buddhist way and is also what Nietzsche<sup>23</sup> advised we do to find meaning in life), but occasionally also by disagreeing (as Camus<sup>24</sup> encouraged us to do). In any case, what is needed is a constructive dialogue of sorts (not dissimilar to the one you and I are having right now, with each other as well as with the reader), but not so much a dialogue that aims at finding ways of making a lasting impact on the world (forming it in our image), rather one that co-develops a mutual responsiveness for the way in which the other inhabits and constitutes the world. Optimism without good reason is not the real problem at all. Rather, such optimism is in fact the solution to our concerns about meaning. As I see it, the Buddhist perspective is not so much that nothing means anything and therefore we shouldn't care, but rather that life is meaningful, or perhaps we should better say *significant*, precisely because it is not meaningful – that is, it contains no message to be deciphered and no purpose or underlying rationale to be understood. Perhaps it all really is just shapes in the clouds. I find this rather appealing.

\*

*Drew Chastain:* What is 'connection'? I would like to focus in on that term.<sup>25</sup> I think a sense of connection is deeply important to meaning in life – it is the very depth of life's meaning. It is more basically important

than goals and reasons and projects and desires, or any kind of active agency. When we sense a lack of meaning, the absence of goal orientation is most conspicuous – our first thought is, what is the point? what is the purpose? – but lying less detectably beneath this surface problem is a deeper problem of a lack of connection: our ungroundedness, alienation, emptiness, fakeness or boredom. What meaning is there in a goal if there is not a sense of connection with self, or with the world or with others in one's pursuit of that goal? And, even while active agency is a common and generally reliable way of getting connected, we can certainly experience connection without goals and purposes. As I sit and listen to the frogs on the pond, taking the dampness of the recent rain into my lungs, I get some distance from the day's frantic errands and, even as today's goal orientation slips away, somewhat more palpably a sense of meaning returns. But what is it? What more can we say about this sense of connectedness?

We are definitely working with metaphor here, because physical connectedness does not guarantee the sense of connection we want to illuminate. While telephonic and digital forms of communication can keep us closer to others than we otherwise would be, one can also be alone in a crowded room. Likewise, connection is not guaranteed by spiritual contact, understood in a supernatural way. If there is such a thing as demonic possession, this involves spiritual contact but the very opposite of a sense of connection. So I think we must look for a psychological phenomenon that undoubtedly depends upon physical or spiritual contact in various ways, but is not entirely conceptually reducible to contact. Also, despite the external relation emphasised by the metaphor of connection, I think that an internal relation is just as important. The externally oriented metaphor is appropriate because a sense of connection involves the experience of a return to the world or a return to others, but at the same time there must also be a return to self.

But what does *this* – a return to, or connection with, self – mean? There's a lot to explore here, but I don't think that connection to self is achieved merely by enacting an *idea* of who or what you are. It is more like enabling the flow of what your embodied subjectivity actually needs to express or experience in a given situation, whether this fits your idea of yourself or not. Sometimes this will be experienced as active agency, sometimes as passivity, sometimes experienced through emotion, sometimes through contemplation, sometimes experienced by being with others, sometimes by being alone, sometimes just by being here now.

Whatever connection is exactly, and even if I am right that it is the deeper thing we miss when we experience meaninglessness, my darker,

pessimistic side still worries that the value of a sense of connection can wane over time – not just my own personal taste for it but connection's real desirability. I think that the underlying problem is that I have to continue the story of me.<sup>26</sup> Connection matters because *I* feel disconnected. But how many times can I value reconnection? This vessel for meaning gets chipped and scuffed. It wants to be filled a thousand times, perhaps more, but then it wants to be dashed into a hundred pieces in the fireplace. I cannot really aspire to be like a cloud, continually changing shape – at least not so radically as those vapours in the sky. As it is, when I look in the mirror, I find that same persisting human being: the one who I must be my whole life, with his ever-lengthening history, who can make less and less sense of the arrows of goals and the anchors of connection.

Put another way, agency loses its oomph. You say that agency is the power to make a difference. I think that's one aspect. But I think there is a value in agency – that intentional action mode – not just for what it can do, but also for the way it changes our experience of life when it overtakes us. I find myself desiring agency not just to make a difference but also to experience more emphatically that I am someone. As we grow up, which psychologically can take decades, there is an experience of agency in transformation and growth and finding one's potential, which isn't just the agency of performing a task, but the agency of becoming oneself and feeling one's power. This could be called an uphill experience of agency, or we could say it is like a tree reaching its full height as it gains more and more perspective on the world into which it could not help but break forth. But over time the reflective mind gets the overall story – this is me, breaking forth into the world – and that basic storyline gradually loses its tension.

Even if one commits one's life to helping others, or raising children, so that one lives a life that is not all about 'me', I think this problem of the slow disenchantment with the story of me gets delayed, but it's still there. With the slackening of suspense, my capacity for the uphill experience of agency also loses its energising potential. The downhill then looks more appealing: the wrap-up, the fade-out, a desire for nothingness, when meaninglessness feels better than meaning, or more true. A general point I keep coming back to in our dialogue is this: I don't think that the possibility of justified pessimism goes away with any analysis of meaning or any metaphysical or circumstantial description of the world. I think each of us has a voice inside, enabled by our reflective capacity, which asks, 'why more?'. One becomes a pessimist to the extent that one allows oneself to hear this voice and then comes to appreciate how difficult a truly satisfying response is.

\*

*Michael Hauskeller*: Perhaps there is no truly satisfying response to the question of meaning. The moment it occurs to us to ask the question ‘why more’, thus demanding that we be given a *reason* to go on living, we are lost. When the oomph has gone, something other than reason is needed to restore it. Life is only ever truly meaningful when it is *unquestioningly* meaningful – when things matter not because we have convinced ourselves with compelling arguments that they do, but because we never feel the need for an argument in the first place. Meaninglessness only becomes a problem for the sceptic. In that respect it is like the problem we have when we doubt the existence of an external world, the reliability and trustworthiness of our senses or our reasoning, or the objectivity of moral values. Once we have articulated the doubt, there is no way back; at least not through theorising.<sup>27</sup> It is impossible to prove, beyond any doubt, that there really is an external world, that whenever we are certain about something we cannot possibly be wrong, or that the actions we consider morally wrong really *are* wrong.

Fortunately, it is rather rare for us to seriously entertain any of those doubts. Even philosophers, who make a living from raising and debating such doubts, are normally quite happy to live their lives as if our ordinary assumptions about how the world works are all perfectly justified and undeniably true. And when they do, they find themselves, like David Hume when he took a break from his sceptical writings to dine, chat and play backgammon with his friends, quickly cured of their ‘philosophical melancholy and delirium’.<sup>28</sup> (This is the saving grace of our profession: we rarely mean what we say.) Those, however, who *do* mean it are the lost ones: they face a gulf that has opened between them and the world and that they have no way of bridging. They are stranded on the other side of everything, deprived of the connection that keeps most of us grounded in the world. This connection is indeed neither physical nor spiritual. I would call it, for lack of a better word, existential. Instead of entertaining a merely theoretical doubt, they let their doubts transform their experience of the world. Instead of merely saying ‘This appears real to me, but is it really?’, ‘This appears true to me, but is it really?’, and ‘This appears (morally) wrong to me, but is it really?’, they internalise their doubts to such an extent and in such a way that things do no longer even *appear* real, true, or right and wrong to them.

The same happens when we start doubting that our lives have meaning. It can be a merely theoretical exercise, which is designed to (still rather playfully) test the strength of the connection, but it can also be more serious. If it is the former, we say ‘This matters to me, but does it really?’, but if the latter, then this changes to ‘This does not matter to

me, and nor does anything else'. And right at the top of the things that no longer matter to me is what is real and what is not, what is true and what is not, and what is good and what is not. This is why when the world loses its meaning for us, it appears chimerical, indifferent, a fake. It is the very *realness* of things that is at stake here, and that includes our own realness for ourselves. We are no longer connected and that is precisely why we no longer even find it desirable to be connected.

When everything appears meaningless, then meaningfulness, too, appears meaningless. When nothing matters, the mattering of things does not matter either. In that situation, reason is helpless. What is needed is a leap of faith, although that sounds too deliberate. It might be more accurate to say that what is needed is something that pulls us back to the other side – a lucky break, the good fortune of coming across something that breaks through and rebuilds our connection to the world. Things must reimpose their significance on us, reclaim their intelligibility, speak to us again in a language that we can understand, like they speak to non-human animals when they live a life that suits their needs and interests, perfectly in tune with their environment, never doubting that what they do matters and that their life is worth living.<sup>29</sup>

\*

*Drew Chastain:* Lately in the philosophy of life's meaning, the trend is to ignore the general question of pessimism altogether, although this was a problem placed front and centre by earlier writers such as Leo Tolstoy and Albert Camus. The question of why we should live despite meaninglessness or absurdity is present even in the more recent reflections of Richard Taylor and Thomas Nagel.<sup>30</sup> But, for twenty-first-century philosophers of life's meaning like Susan Wolf, this core problem of meaning vanishes.<sup>31</sup> The task is no longer to grapple with reasons why we feel defeated by life. Instead, we are invited to line up lives side by side to determine whether these lives are more or less meaningful as judged by someone taking an external standpoint on them.<sup>32</sup>

For instance, what do we conclude if we reflect on the lives of Mahatma Gandhi or Oprah Winfrey, versus, say, a destitute person whose unlucky background and personal decisions led her to engage almost exclusively in trivial acts her whole life, only to die an early death from drug addiction? On the contemporary approach to meaning in life, the lives of the former have more meaning mainly because they are oriented toward activities having more value, while the latter's unfortunate life is less meaningful, if not meaningless, because she failed to pursue



sufficiently worthwhile engagements. This approach to meaning in life certainly captures one way in which we make judgements about whether life (or a life) is meaningful, but my sense is that it doesn't capture the deeper question, and for that reason it comes off as a rather superficial analysis of meaning.

I think that the deeper question is experienced from the first-person perspective, or the internal standpoint.<sup>33</sup> It is the existential question of why I should live, rather than the more thin, comparatively evaluative question of whether so-and-so's life can be said to possess enough value for it to be deemed meaningful by an external observer. These questions are certainly related – when I wonder why I should live, I wonder about my life's value, thus taking an external standpoint on my own life. But if the internal question is absent, it is not clear what's at stake when we are making the external judgement. This is one problem with the contemporary approach. Another problem is that, from the internal standpoint which gives depth to the question of life's meaning, the answer to the question of whether I should live may well be highly subjective and there really may be no good answer at all. Ultimately, I am not personally greatly invested in relativism or nihilism, but a good, honest response to the question of why I should live has never been able to free itself of these haunting possibilities. As long as this is the case, no external standpoint has earned the right to project its presumptive judgements onto others.

On the other hand, as you say, the pessimistically posed question of why I should live seems to have its source in the sceptical stance, and the problem of meaning seems to easily dissolve as soon as one's practical engagements with life distract us from unanswerable scepticism. Perhaps we should drop the 'deep' question and just pursue our best guesses at what's worthwhile even if we can't answer the sceptic by providing a philosophical foundation for objective value. I feel the force of that point, but at the same time this opportunity for open dialogue has helped me to see that I don't think the sceptical or pessimistic stance is without substantive motivation. Existential concerns are real. In my view, problems such as death and the possibility of ultimate purposelessness or the absence of personal free will are more real than the problem of knowledge, though the contemporary approach to meaning in life treats such existential concerns as unimportant. But we shouldn't sideline these concerns. Instead, we should try to better understand what makes these problems for meaning, or else we lose touch with why meaning matters in the first place.

That said, I should make clear that I am not really a pessimist *per se*, even if I take pessimism seriously and experience the drag of scepticism about meaning in my own life. I've come to think of myself as a

Janus-faced ‘ambivalentist’, who is both pessimistic and optimistic about life itself, not just my own life, struggling with the basic question of whether the difficulties of life are worth it. On the optimistic side of things, I have found that I personally feel most life-affirming when I’m feeling creative, constructive and connected. I like how you say that our shifts from scepticism to affirmation are not really a leap of faith but a matter of luck, because I think it is largely the case that authentic optimism finds us, while forced optimism can suffer from fakeness. But at the same time, as we gain more insight into our sources of optimism, we can include a bit of strategy and wisdom in our search for meaning, rather than leaving it all to fate.

## Notes

1. For a concise overview of the contemporary analytical debate on both the meaning of life and meaning in life and the difficulties of agreeing on what exactly the term ‘meaning’ means when applied to people’s lives, see Metz, ‘The meaning of life’.
2. Adams, *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*.
3. See Nielsen, ‘Linguistic philosophy and “the meaning of life”’.
4. This is known as the ‘endowment thesis’. See Morris, *Making Sense of It All*, 56: ‘Something has meaning if and only if it is endowed with meaning or significance by a purposive agent or group of such agents.’ We do, however, sometimes use the word ‘meaning’ in a broader sense that does not depend on there being an agent who intends that that meaning be there and be understood. For instance, we can say that the footprint in the sand ‘means’ that somebody must have left it there, even if leaving it was not intentional. This is what H. P. Grice called the *natural* sense of meaning, contrasting it with its more common and more fundamental *non-natural* sense in which words and sentences can have meaning which can always be traced back to an agent’s intentions. See Grice, ‘Meaning’.
5. Of course, when a question appears unanswerable because it doesn’t seem to make any sense in the context in which it is asked, we may simply have to improve our understanding of the question. See Thomson, ‘Untangling the questions’, 42.
6. Koopman and Davies (‘Musical meaning in a broader perspective’, 261) challenge the linguistic model of musical meaning, arguing that music has meaning through its dynamic structure rather than by referring, representing or expressing as words do.
7. For more on my own view about meaning as practical intelligibility see Chastain, ‘Can life be meaningful without free will?’.
8. These reflections owe something to Thomas Nagel (‘The absurd’, 141), who says that if ‘we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point, we can step back also from the progress of human history, or of science, or the success of a society, or the kingdom, power, and glory of God, and put all these things into question in the same way’.
9. Of course, these were some of my initial reactions in my youth – I don’t mean to indict evolutionary theory as emptying the world of meaning. For some counterbalancing perspective see Levine, *Darwin Loves You*.
10. See Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 53: ‘It was previously a question of finding out whether or not life had to have a meaning to be lived. It now becomes clear, on the contrary, that it will be lived all the better if it has no meaning.’
11. That the meaning of life consists in nothing but ‘the information a person needs to make sense of it’ and hence its intelligibility for a particular person has recently been argued by Thomas, ‘Meaningfulness as sensefulness’. According to Thomas, the more relevant information I have about the world, the more I can make sense of it, and the more I can make sense of it, the more meaningful my life is. The problem with this interpretation of meaning is that it frames an experienced absence of meaning as an epistemological rather than an existential crisis.

12. Kurt Baier ('The meaning of life', 82) has argued that even though 'no type of human explanation can help us unravel the ultimate, unanswerable mystery' of why there is something rather than nothing, this should not bother us because once we understand how things hang together – that is, how they fit into the system of rules that govern the universe – no further explanation is required. Once we know how things work, we know everything there is to know about the world, and since this still leaves room for human purposes, and meaning in life consists in having such purposes, a commitment to a scientific, naturalistic worldview does not prevent anyone from living a meaningful life.
13. For the opposite view that only a divine purpose for the world and our existence in it can make human life meaningful, see for instance Craig, 'The absurdity of life without God' or Hill, 'The meaning of life'.
14. Or, as Hilary Putnam (*Reason, Truth, and History*, 1–21) put it, it doesn't 'represent' anything: if a line drawn in the sand which appears to be a picture of Winston Churchill turns out to have been made accidentally by an ant's random crawling around in it, is not really a picture, or representation, of Churchill at all because the ant was never aware of Churchill's existence in the first place and, accordingly, had no intention of depicting him.
15. Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgement*, Third moment of the analytic of the beautiful, §17: 'Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*.'
16. As has been argued, in a string of publications, by Benjamin Libet. See for instance his 'Do we have free will?'. For a critique of Libet's conclusions see for instance Seifert, 'In defense of free will'.
17. See Gowans, 'The Buddha's message'.
18. See Schopenhauer, 'Additional remarks on the doctrine of the suffering of the world'.
19. For a detailed discussion of 'agency' see the next chapter in this book.
20. See Midgley, *Evolution as a Religion*, 14: '[P]eople often find plenty of meaning in their lives if they are working for their own purposes in harmony with those around them.'
21. This thought plunged Leo Tolstoy into a deep existential despair. 'Today or tomorrow,' he wrote in his *Confession*, 'sickness and death will come . . . to those dear to me, and to myself, and nothing will remain other than the stench and the worms. Sooner or later my deeds, whatever they may have been, will be forgotten and will no longer exist. What is all the fuss about then? How can a person carry on living and fail to perceive this? That is what is so astonishing! It is only possible to go on while you are intoxicated with life; once sober it is impossible not to see that it is all a mere trick, and a stupid trick.' (21) Tolstoy's sentiment is echoed by many contemporary writers, including those who support a supernatural account of meaning in life which makes it dependent on the existence of God. See for instance Craig, 'The absurdity of life without God'. Joshua Seachris ('Death, futility, and the proleptic power of narrative endings') calls the underlying intuition that in order for things to be worthwhile and meaningful they have to *last* (forever) the 'staying-power intuition'.
22. I have developed this argument further in Hauskeller, 'Out of the blue into the black'.
23. Nietzsche, *Ecce Homo*, *passim*. For a more detailed account of Nietzsche's philosophy of life see 'The joy of living dangerously' in Hauskeller, *The Meaning of Life and Death*, 113–32.
24. 'Rebellion is the common ground on which every man bases his first values. I rebel – therefore we exist' (Camus, *The Rebel*, 28).
25. I develop an analysis of the concept of connection, suggesting how an experience of connection supports meaning in life, in Chastain, 'Deep personal meaning'.
26. To aid in thinking through this phenomenon of telling oneself stories about oneself, see Velleman's exploration of the notion of a narrating self (in response to Daniel Dennett) ('The self as narrator'). While Velleman is pondering the ontology and function of self-narration, I am expressing the concern that this sense-making ability that self-aware beings have can still fall short of supporting motivation to keep going in life, no matter how much value is attributed to oneself in one's self-narrative, and even if one's self-narrative is hitched to a fairly robust narrative of the meaning of life itself. Compare Seachris, 'The meaning of life as narrative'.
27. Descartes tried this in his *Meditations* and failed spectacularly.
28. Hume, *A Treatise of Human Nature*, book I, section 7.2.
29. On the meaningfulness of the life of non-human animals see Hauskeller, 'Living like a dog'.
30. The relevant works by Tolstoy (*A Confession*), Camus (*The Myth of Sisyphus*) and Nagel ('The absurd') have been cited in previous footnotes. Richard Taylor makes the pessimistic point that life is objectively meaningless because it is a cyclical, repetitive activity that ultimately comes

to nothing, but he adds that life can be made subjectively meaningful if it is in you to do what you are doing ('The meaning of life', 128–31).

31. Wolf ('The meanings of lives', 71) advises that pessimists upset by their cosmic insignificance simply 'Get Over It'.
32. See Wolf, *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*.
33. My inspiration here comes from Thomas Nagel (*Mortal Questions*, chapter XI), who includes the internal standpoint in the overall analysis of the problem of meaning in life.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Douglas. *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. London: Pan Books, 1979.
- Baier, Kurt. 'The meaning of life'. In *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke and Steven Cahn, 76–102. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Camus, Albert. *The Rebel*, translated by Anthony Bower. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1962.
- Camus, Albert. *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien. New York: Vintage International Books, 1991.
- Chastain, Drew. 'Can life be meaningful without free will?', *Philosophia* 47 (2019): 1069–86.
- Chastain, Drew. 'Deep personal meaning: a subjective approach to meaning in life', *Journal of Philosophy of Life* 11/1 (2021): 1–23.
- Craig, William Lane. 'The absurdity of life without God'. In William Lane Craig, *Reasonable Faith: Christian truth and apologies*, 57–75. Wheaton, IL: Good News Publishers/Crossway Books, 1994.
- Descartes, René. *Meditations on First Philosophy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008.
- Gowans, Christopher W. 'The Buddha's message'. In *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, 27–34. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Grice, H. P. 'Meaning', *The Philosophical Review* 663 (1957): 377–88.
- Hauskeller, Michael. 'Living like a dog: can the lives of non-human animals be meaningful?', *Between the Species* 23/1 (2019), Article 1. <https://digitalcommons.calpoly.edu/bts/vol23/iss1/1> (accessed 1 December 2021).
- Hauskeller, Michael. *The Meaning of Life and Death: Ten classic thinkers on the ultimate question*. London: Bloomsbury, 2019.
- Hauskeller, Michael. 'Out of the blue into the black: reflections on death and meaning'. In *Exploring the Philosophy of Death and Dying: Classic and contemporary perspectives*, edited by Michael Cholbi and Travis Timmerman, 262–8. New York and London: Routledge, 2021.
- Hill, Daniel. 'The meaning of life', *Philosophy Now* 35 (2002): 12–14.
- Hume, David. *A Treatise of Human Nature*. Harmondsworth: Penguin Classics, 1985.
- Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of the Power of Judgement*. Revised edition. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- Koopman, Constantijn, and Stephen Davies. 'Musical meaning in a broader perspective', *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 59/3 (2001): 261–73.
- Levine, George. *Darwin Loves You: Natural selection and the re-enchantment of the world*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006.
- Libet, Benjamin W. 'Do we have free will?', *Journal of Consciousness Studies* 6/8–9 (1999): 47–57.
- Metz, Thaddeus. 'The meaning of life', revised 2021. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/life-meaning/> (accessed 1 December 2021).
- Midgley, Mary. *Evolution as a Religion*. London and New York: Methuen, 1985.
- Morris, Thomas. *Making Sense of It All: Pascal and the meaning of life*, 56. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1992.
- Nagel, Thomas. *Mortal Questions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979.
- Nagel, Thomas. 'The absurd'. In *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, 137–46. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Nielsen, Kai. 'Linguistic philosophy and "the meaning of life"', *CrossCurrents* 14/3 (1964): 313–34.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *Ecce Homo*. Revised edition. London: Penguin, 1992.
- Putnam, Hilary. *Reason, Truth, and History*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Schopenhauer, Arthur. 'Additional remarks on the doctrine of the suffering of the world'. *Parerga and Paralipomena*, volume 2, translated by E. F. J. Payne, 291–305. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1974.

- Seachris, Joshua. 'The meaning of life as narrative', *The Journal of the Society of Humanist Philosophers* 20 (2009): 5–23.
- Seachris, Joshua. 'Death, futility, and the proleptic power of narrative endings', *Religious Studies* 47/2 (2011): 141–63.
- Seifert, Josef. 'In defense of free will', *Review of Metaphysics* 65/2 (2011): 377–407.
- Taylor, Richard. 'The meaning of life'. In *The Meaning of Life*, edited by E. D. Klemke and Steven M. Cahn, 128–36. New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.
- Thomas, Joshua Lewis. 'Meaningfulness as sensefulness', *Philosophia* 45 (2019): 1555–77.
- Thomson, Garrett. 'Untangling the questions'. In *Exploring the Meaning of Life*, edited by Joshua W. Seachris, 40–47. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.
- Tolstoy, Leo. *A Confession*, translated by Jane Kentish. London: Penguin, 2008.
- Velleman, J. David. 'The self as narrator'. In *Autonomy and the Challenges to Liberalism: New essays*, edited by John Christman and Joel Anderson, 56–76. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Wolf, Susan. *Meaning in Life and Why It Matters*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010.
- Wolf, Susan. 'The meanings of lives'. In *Introduction to Philosophy: Classical and contemporary readings*, 4th edition, edited by John Perry, Michael Bratman and John Martin Fischer, 62–74. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007.