CrossMark

LIFE'S PURPOSE

Gregory Bassham

Does life have meaning? Less grandly, does your *life have meaning? Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of the classic* Man's Search for Meaning *(1959), thought that the quest for meaning is the strongest drive humans possess. Without a clear sense of meaning, he said, we drift, lose vitality, and frequently fall into apathy, neurosis, and despair. Yet for many people today, sources of meaning are hard to find.*

Does life have meaning? Less grandly, does *your* life have meaning? Viktor Frankl, Holocaust survivor and author of the classic *Man's Search for Meaning* (1959), thought that the quest for meaning is the strongest drive humans possess. Without a clear sense of meaning, he said, we drift, lose vitality, and frequently fall into apathy, neurosis, and despair. Yet for many people today, sources of meaning are hard to find.

Some threats to meaning are 'cosmic'. These include the brevity of life, the inevitability of death, the apparent insignificance of human strivings in an unimaginably vast and ancient cosmos, and the modern 'scientific' picture of nature as a blind, uncaring, and purposeless materialistic process. These are the sorts of big-picture threats that led existentialists like Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre to declare that human existence is 'absurd' or a 'futile passion'.

Other threats are 'individual', such as major personal heartbreaks and disappointments. Those stricken with the tribulations of Job or the disillusionments of the author of

doi:10.1017/S1477175614000165 © The Royal Institute of Philosophy, 2015

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

the book of *Ecclesiastes* may well come to conclude that 'all is vanity and a striving after wind' (Eccles, 2:14)

But might such existential hand-wringing be an over-reaction? Could the supposedly 'deep' question of life's meaning have an answer that is simple (even humdrum) and easily achievable? That's the view offered in a popular book by the British philosopher, Julian Baggini. In *What's It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford, 2005), Baggini suggests that we can discover the essential meaning of life in an unlikely source: the 1983 comedic film *Monty Python's The Meaning of Life*. Viewers might recall that at the end of that gag-filled movie there is an unexpected semi-serious conclusion:

> *Well, that's the end of the film. Now, here's the meaning of life.* (An envelope is handed to her. She opens it in a businesslike way.) *Thank you, Brigitte.* (She reads. . .) *Well, it's nothing very special. Try and be nice to people, avoid eating fat, read a good book every now and then, get some walking in, and try to live together in peace and harmony with people of all creeds and nations.* (Quoted in Baggini, 205)

To a Yank like me, this might seem nothing more than a mildly chuckle-worthy example of classic British understatement. Baggini, while no doubt appreciating the humor, sees it as a serious – and essentially correct – answer to an age-old existential conundrum. In his view, you don't need a philosopher, a guru, or a holy book to tell you what the meaning of life is. The answer is simple and potentially available to all. The hard thing isn't to *know* what the meaning of life is, but to put that recipe into practice (Baggini 186).

Baggini thinks there are two common mistakes people make in thinking about the meaning of life. One is to seek meaning in some 'grand theory' of life (my term, not his), such as Christianity, Buddhism, or Hinduism. Grand theories are big, all-encompassing metanarratives that offer

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

explanations of life's meaning and purpose, both for the cosmos as a whole and for individuals within that larger story. The problem with such theories, Baggini says, is that 'when it comes to life's overall purpose, such answers are hard to find' (26). What he means is that even if a particular grand theory is true, we have no reliable way of knowing that. Rational people, he implies, should be agnostic about whether there is any 'overall purpose' to the cosmos or human existence.

The second mistake people make is to adopt what he calls a 'teleological' or 'goal-orientated' approach to life. These are people who identify 'life's purpose' (which Baggini consistently equates with the 'meaning of life') with the achievement of future goals. This is a mistake, he suggests, for several reasons.

Suppose you identify your 'life's purpose' with the achievement of some future goal(s). This can be either a single goal, or many. If it is a single goal (for example, winning an Olympic gold medal), you can either achieve that goal or fail to achieve it. If you fail to achieve it, then you have failed to achieve your self-identified life's purpose, and your life, by your own definition, lacks meaning. If, on the other hand, you do manage to achieve your single big goal, what do you do afterwards? What is left to give your life meaning and direction? As Baggini notes, people who have achieved all their ambitions often 'are left with a kind of emptiness as they realize that, now all they have been working for has been accomplished, they have nothing left to give purpose to their life' (Baggini, 29).

So it is imprudent to put all your meaning-eggs in one basket. Instead, it makes sense to pursue a *variety* of worthwhile and valuable goals. Again, however, Baggini sees problems. The set of goals you choose to pursue can either be finite or infinite. If it is infinite, then by hypothesis your purpose can never be achieved (no infinite set of goals can be achieved in a finite lifespan). You would be like a donkey, Baggini says, chasing a carrot that is forever beyond its reach. So let's suppose, more sensibly, that you

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

see your life's purpose as the achievement of a *limited* set of worthwhile goals (first I'll accomplish A, then shoot for B, then go for C).

Again, there are problems, Baggini argues. First, you might die and never achieve more than a few of your goals. Second, if those goals are momentary achievements (e.g., winning an Olympic gold medal), those moments will melt through your fingers and recede ever farther into the past. To pursue achievements that are mere moments is to grasp at will-o-wisps and live what Kierkegaard calls 'the aesthetic life'. Such a life, as Kierkegaard argues, is inherently unsatisfactory because we are beings that exist across time, not in mere instants, and nothing of enduring value is found in the evanescent present.

The wise thing to do then, Baggini suggests, is to seek an appropriate balance between the enjoyment of momentary experiences ('events') and long-term, desirable 'states of affairs'. Baggini cites the example of a woman who works long and hard so that she can buy a large house in the south of France, where she can live an idyllic life of luxury with her loving husband and children (32). (British authors, I've noticed, *always* fantasize about living in the south of France. American authors fantasize about living in Britain.) This woman, as the saying goes, 'has it all'. Surely she has 'arrived' and her 'life's purpose' has been achieved?

No doubt, Baggini agrees, but here's the rub: People who imagine that their life will have meaning if, and only if, they achieve an idyllic future state of affairs are playing a dangerous game. First, again, they may die and never reach their goal. Second, idyllic lifestyles aren't easy to achieve. Often, they require tremendous effort and sacrifice – not to mention luck. Third, fantasized futures rarely turn out to be as good as we imagined. Too often, Baggini says, people fall into the trap of what he calls 'till then' thinking. They mistakenly imagine that life – though pretty dreary and grim now – will be all sunshine and

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rainbows *just as soon as*. . .[fill in the blank]. As the poet Philip Larkin writes,

> *Always too eager for the future, we*
> *Pick up bad habits of expectancy.*
> *Something is always approaching, every day*
> Till then *we say*. . .('Next, Please', quoted in Baggini, 35)

Those who fall prey to till-then thinking too often sacrifice 'the good' (or the 'good-enough') for the sake of 'the perfect'. That is, they sacrifice present satisfactions for a gauzy, idealized future that, in reality, probably wouldn't turn out to be a great deal better than the life they have now (Baggini, 33–34).

For all these reasons, Baggini argues, we should *not* think of 'life's purpose' as the achievement of future goals. Rather, we should recognize that purpose and meaning can be achieved *in the present* simply by *living our lives* (Baggini, 27). Just as a bridge abutment or a restaurant can fulfill their respective purposes in the present merely by doing what they were designed to do, humans can achieve meaningful and purposeful lives just by enjoying the simple things (walks, books, health, and satisfying personal relationships) that the Monty Python film recommends. This doesn't mean we shouldn't pursue ambitious future goals and enduring, high-quality 'states of affairs'. (Even to a philosopher, a large house in the south of France is nothing to be sneezed at.) But we shouldn't feel that our lives have been 'meaningless', or somehow not worth living, if we fail to achieve some or all of our lofty goals. The 'purpose' of life is simply to live a life that is 'worthwhile in itself' (Baggini, 186), that is, a life that is good and satisfactory. Though, as Kierkegaard said, we are fundamentally future-facing beings that must 'live life forwards', we must not forget that we *live* only in the present.

As a professor, I regularly assign Baggini's essay to my Philosophy 101 students as a reflection paper. With very few exceptions, they love it. They agree completely with Baggini that we must avoid living excessively 'goal-orientated' lives.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

They resonate greatly to his idea of seeking a healthy balance between enjoying life in the present and working hard for rewarding goals in the future.

One thing that most of my students overlook is that not everyone is capable of living a 'meaningful' life in Baggini's rather demanding sense. Some die in infancy and have no chance of pursuing Baggini's balanced life of enjoyed moments and desirable future 'states of affairs'. Others are profoundly mentally impaired, or malnourished, or abused, or in terrible chronic pain. Some are very old and debilitated, with little to enjoy in the present and no goals to work for in the future. Many such people cannot do even the 'not very special' things ('read a book', 'get some walking in') that the Monty Python film sagely counsels. They do not, and cannot, live good and satisfactory lives. Are their lives therefore meaningless? Baggini's view seems to imply that they are.

Which brings us back to 'grand theories' (Christianity, Buddhism, and the like). Most such theories teach that *all* human lives have meaning and value. Christianity, for example, affirms the equal inherent value and transcendent worth of all persons, regardless of race, class, age, health, intelligence, or achievements. It also allows for the possibility of *eternal* value and meaning by affirming the existence of an afterlife and recognizing that the things we do in this life may have consequences for all eternity. On the Christian worldview, we are not like stones thrown into a pond that make a few ripples and then leave the pond just as it was before. Rather, the lives we touch, the good deeds we perform, and the good qualities of character we develop will endure and have permanent significance.

It thus turns out that Baggini's curt dismissal of grand theories is more consequential than it may first have appeared. Some will see this as a critical mistake. But even those who share Baggini's agnosticism about grand theories can question his equation of a meaningful life with one that is good and satisfying (Baggini, 186–88). Certainly all good and satisfying lives are meaningful ones,

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press

but is the converse also true? Couldn't a beloved child's life be meaningful, even if its short life was filled with sickness and pain? Couldn't a person whose life is pain-filled and unhappy nonetheless live a 'meaningful' life of goodness and fortitude? Baggini assumes that 'meaning' equates with 'purpose', which in turn equates with a living a life that is good and satisfying. The loved child's life may have lacked 'purpose' in this restricted sense. But it still possessed *value* and *significance*, which, I suggest, are also dimensions of meaningfulness. In the end, Monty Python may have got it right: perhaps meaning isn't anything 'very special'. Maybe it is all around us.

Gregory Bassham is Professor of Philosophy, King's College (Pa.). gregorybassham@kings.edu

https://doi.org/10.1017/S1477175614000165 Published online by Cambridge University Press