

SOME REFLECTIONS ON MEANING OF

LIFE JYOTSNA SAHA

“Life has meaning, to find its meaning is my meat and drink.” -Robert Browning

The question of the meaning of life is most fundamental to human being as it touches the core of human existence. The most familiar form of the question about the meaning of life is “what is the meaning of life?” through this simple question; however, several different senses may be intended. There are many sense of the word ‘meaning’. If we ask what a word means, we want to know what it represents, what it stands for. But life does not represent anything. It does not seem that people are asking about what life gives evidence for when they ask about the meaning of life. In asking about the meaning of life one may ask about the essence, purpose, value, significance and host of other things for life. It means different things to different people and thus resulted in a wide range of competing answers from different ends – science, philosophy, religion, literature and popular culture. Although in the early nineteenth century writers in the West began to write precisely in the form “What is the meaning of life?” questions about life, world, existence and its purpose can be traced from the beginning of human thought.

Ancient Greek philosophers such as Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus and many others had views about what sort of life is best and hence most meaningful. In Platonism, the meaning of life is to attain the highest form of knowledge, which is the *Idea* or *Form* of the Good. Aristotle believed that the pursuit of happiness is the highest Good. Epicurus saw the meaning of life in the search for the highest pleasure or happiness. His formula for attaining human happiness is: increase pleasure and decrease pain.

Medieval philosophy centered on the theistic concept of the Will of God as the determinant factor for the meaning of life. Modern philosophy attempts to develop prejudice free philosophy. In Philosophy of Kant the determinant factor for certainty regarding purpose and meaning of life were shifted from God to the conscience. This development concerning the meaning of life gradually leads to an existentialist view. Its central themes are the significance of the individual, the importance of passion, the irrational aspects of life and the importance of human freedom. According to existentialism each man creates the meaning of their life – life is not determined by supernatural God.

Kierkegaard is regarded as the father of modern existentialism. His insistence on the priority of individual existence, subjective reflection, choice, and

responsibility make him the earliest contribution to the philosophy of existentialism. According to Kierkegaard, life is a series of choices – and that these choices bring meaning to our life. Each individual is solely responsible for making their life meaningful and living it authentically. Every action we take is a choice, decided by us and no one else. He developed his thought on the meaning of life mostly in his pseudonymous works *either/or* (1843) and *Concluding Unscientific Postscript* (1846). In his first major published work *either/or* we find the statements like “How empty and meaningless life is”, “My life is utterly meaningless.” According to Kierkegaard, one can give one’s life meaning, or that one can acquire the meaning in life by developing oneself to something. Being Christian Kierkegaard viewed meaning as ultimately grounded in religious faith, but paradoxically he said, it is possible to enjoy life and to give life meaning outside Christianity, as there are so many poets, artists and thinkers who do not belong to Christianity. (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*). To resolve the dilemma of human beings, that is, looking for meaning in a meaningless world Kierkegaard referred to a “leap of faith” – religious belief in a transcendent realm or being. For Kierkegaard faith is identified with passion and inwardness. For him ‘faith is the highest passion in the sphere of human subjectivity’ (*Concluding Unscientific Postscript*, 118). Inwardness, subjectivity, despair, dreads, passions, individuality, commitment to God, surrender or resignation are all characteristics of faith. The man in his religiosity is an individual whose primordial mode of being is faith.

Albert Camus, another leading influential writer who felt that life is absurd, meaningless, and senseless. ‘What is the meaning of life?’ is the most urgent of questions, says Albert Camus, because “I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that gave them a reason for living.” [Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*] In absurdist philosophy, the absurdity of life arises out of the fundamental disharmony between needs and aspirations of human beings and the apparent meaninglessness of the universe.

According to Camus, our situation is like that of the old mythical Greek, Sisyphus. A perfect image of meaninglessness, of the kind we are seeking, is found in the myth of Sisyphus. Old Sisyphus betrayed divine secrets to mortals, for these gods

had condemned Sisyphus to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. Gods had thought that there is no more dreadful punishment than pointless labour. Pointless labour is Sisyphus' lot and ours too. As beings looking for meaning in a meaningless world, humans have three ways of resolving the dilemma. Camus describes the solutions in *The Myth of Sisyphus* i) The pointlessness and absurdity or escaped existence of life raise the question of suicide: a solution in which a person simply ends one's own life. Should one kill himself/herself? Camus' answer is we should not. Suicide is an escapist's solution. ii) Belief in a transcendent realm or being: a solution in which one believes in the existence of a reality which is beyond the absurd and thus has meaning. Camus regarded this solution as "philosophical suicide". iii) Acceptance of the absurd: Camus endorsed this solution. According to him, we should accept the absurd and continues to live - we should acknowledge that life is awful but "all is well." "The rock is still rolling... I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain! ...He too concludes that all is well. This universe henceforth without a master seems to him neither sterile nor futile... the struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy."(*Myth of Sisyphus*)

Arthur Schopenhauer, the great pessimist, asked expressly "what is the meaning of life?" struggling with personal misery and a sense of loneliness and isolation, he tried to find some understanding of himself and the world around him that appeared to him as senseless. "He was absolutely alone, with not a single friend; and between one and none there lies infinity." (Nietzsche: *Schopenhauer as Educator*, P.122)

Schopenhauer's philosophy is shadowed by Kant. There is a difference between the thing in itself and the world of appearances. The thing in itself is the will to live or more simply, the will. It is the fundamental reality that underlies all things. But contra Kant, Schopenhauer says we can know the thing in itself. In knowing the thing in itself, according to Schopenhauer, we know the will. The world we live in is merely the phenomena of the will. The phenomenal world is an awful place. It is full of misery, pain and suffering. Almost everyone lives a life that is meaningless and insignificant. Schopenhauer answered: "What is the meaning of life?" by stating that one's life reflects one's will and the will as being aimless, irrational and painful drive. Salvation, deliverance or at least escape from suffering being found in aesthetic contemplation, sympathy for others and asceticism.

In *Book-1* and *2* of *The World as Will and Representation* Schopenhauer contrasts the aesthetic, moral, and ascetic states of consciousness with the ordinary or empirical consciousness. Ordinary, everyday consciousness is consciousness of the world of objects. Empirical consciousness is a mode of “interested” engagement in the world. Aesthetic consciousness consists in the cessation of desire-driven suffering. One’s engagement with an object in aesthetic experience is disinterested and painless. According to Schopenhauer, the fundamental principle of morality is: “Hurt no one, rather help everyone as much as you can.” (*On the Basis of Morality*, 69) It indicates that compassion or virtue is the fundamental concept of ethics. It is the step on “the road to salvation.” But like those philosophic-religious traditions Schopenhauer did not identify virtue or compassion with salvation.

Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche revolves around the central concept of nihilism. The term “nihilism” itself comes from the Latin *nihil*, which means “nothing”. Nietzsche’s early philosophical thought was profoundly influenced by Arthur Schopenhauer, through his masterwork *The World as Will and Representation* and the composer Richard Wagner. This period of Nietzsche’s thought emphasizes feeling over reason. His primary concern is the meaning and value of life. The problem with the dominance of reason is that it demands that life be rational and good. It denies the reality of the irrational and of suffering and thus devalues life as it is. Nietzsche thus proposes a higher form of pessimism which accepts the suffering in life. For Nietzsche, nihilism is a tragic state of despair but it is only a transitory state – it can be overcome. The overcoming of nihilism, according to Nietzsche, requires the finding of a way to a new “affirmation of life.” He provides three broad ways for overcoming of nihilism i) the *Übermensch* (over man) - it teaches self-creation, the creation of values, ii) eternal recurrence - it functions as a supreme test of one’s ability to affirm life and the world as they fundamentally are rather than as one might wish them to be, iii) the will to power - it is the will of life. The will to power is the desire for greater strength - not for mere existence and preservation. One thing Nietzsche wanted to do was to give an affirmative philosophy of life instead of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic, life - denying philosophy. In *The Will to Power*, Nietzsche speaks of “the creative strength to create meaning.” The meaning of life is to be created, not discovered. The mistake lies in thinking that our meaning and

values are present in “things- in-themselves.” It is created by us. All meaning is will to power.

Twentieth- century thinkers like Heidegger and Sartre are two representatives of a more extreme form of existentialism where the existential approach takes place within the framework of atheism. Throughout his long academic career, Heidegger was concerned with the meaning of being and he employed the term *Dasein* for referring the being of the particular kind of entity that is the human being. For Heidegger, the essence of human being consists in “openness”, i.e. being the “open place” (the *Da*) where the significance of things occur. Man alone has *Dasein*, and he cannot escape it. *Dasein* has no essence beyond what it can make itself be. For early Heidegger, that is, the Heidegger of *Being and Time* a meaningful life could not possible unless you were living authentically, directing your life on your own terms, rather than following others; the path we follow is always of our own choosing. In *Being and Time* Heidegger suggests that the meaning of our being must tie up with time. For Heidegger, the defining the defining structure of human openness is “temporality” or “time”. “Temporality” or “time” is a uniquely human condition that is not to be confused with chronological notions of time. It connotes becoming. We are temporal beings - born into a world that existed before us. Time is not an abstract entity, something in which we are borne passively, but an opportunity to do something. To live a life of authenticity, one must have a plan, something that unifies one’s life into an organic whole. Beyond realising our own potential there is no purpose to life. But there is a limit to our life, a point at which everything comes to an end and that limit is our death - “being towards death.” But we simply forget the limit and as a result live an inauthentic life. One’s whole life is nothing more than the execution of possibilities authentically or inauthentically to constitute his/ her existence. Heidegger’s fundamental analysis of *Dasein* from *Being and Time* points to temporality as the primordial meaning of *Dasein’s being*. As being temporal *Dasein* is thus historical too.

According to Sartre, we are nothing other than the sum of our actions. Human beings have no particular purpose. Man is nothing other than his own project. Sartre thinks people are dimly aware of their fundamental project. It is only through our projected actions that we begin to determine what our purpose in life is. We draw our own portrait of life. In his famous public lecture “Existentialism Is a Humanism”

Sartre set out the basic ideas of his existential philosophy and its relationship to the question of the meaning of life. It may be regarded as an endogenous theory of the meaning of human life. According to the endogenous theories of the human life meaning and purpose of life are posited or projected by the agent. Man according to Sartre has no essence or nature prior to his existence as there is no God to have a conception of it. So man has no purpose, any purpose an individual human being has he has given to himself. The first principle of existentialism is that existence precedes essence. We have to make ourselves, and so we alone are responsible for the essence we create. He also suggests that persons create themselves through their choices rather than possessing a predetermined essence. Authenticity is a central notion of the ethics of Sartre. According to him to be authentic involves acknowledging and embracing one's freedom and its implications. Thus our answers to the meaning of life have to come from the things we decide to do in life.

In our everyday life, we are mostly surrounded with discontent and suffering. Psychological problems are viewed as the result of inhibited ability to make authentic, meaningful, and self-directed choices about how to live. Existential approach can act as a therapy for solving the psychological problems too. This approach is based on client's responsibility and freedom. Existential approach believes that people have the capacity for self-awareness and choice. The existentialist tries to help the client finding meaning in discontent and suffering choosing to think and act authentically. According to the existentialist, creativity, love, authenticity may enable people to live meaningful lives in the face of discontent and suffering.

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