

ON THE QUESTION OF MEANING OF LIFE

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Grappling with the question of the meaning of life is indeed intriguing. *Prima facie* it seems to appear that the question is a simple one and answers to this question can be attempted from different perspectives - e. g. theistic angle, naturalistic standpoint and so on. However, in contemporary times many thinkers have engaged themselves with the issue which was hitherto unknown or unthought-of. These thinkers could realize that without understanding the question itself and the intricacies of it, any attempt to answer this question will be an exercise in futility. Hence, we find a number of contemporary philosophers who took interest in exploring the inside story of the question.

It is perhaps a natural propensity of a human being having the reflective capacity to raise certain questions and also attempt to find answers to those. Out of these questions, one question that usually occurs in human minds is: what is the meaning of life. To put it more precisely the question can be reframed as what is the meaning of human life. Perhaps non-human animals cannot frame such a question. Out of the words that occur in our reformulated questions four most important terminologies are—‘the’, ‘meaning’, ‘human’ and ‘life’. All these expressions are very familiar to us. However, when dealing with these from the philosophical perspective we find that most of these are more knotty than we usually think about these terminologies. Let us take a glance at their meaning.

The use of the article ‘the’ gives us the impression that there can be only one answer to the question. It confers some sort of uniqueness to the issue. However, a close study of available literature makes us feel that the question can have many answers and hence attaching uniqueness will invite more troubles than a solution. The fourth word in our list is ‘life’. Life can be differentiated from non-life or inanimate things. In the present context when we talk about life our focal point is human lives and not other lives, i. e. non-human lives. But the notion of human (the third word in our list) has perplexed thinkers since ancient times. Aristotle has defined human beings as those having the capacity of rationality. But his definition has been questioned by later thinkers. Any definition given about humans seems to fall short of comprehensiveness in the sense that it excludes some beings whom we consider

human though they do not fall within the bracket of any given definition. This brings to our mind the view of Rabindranath Tagore who spelt out a better picture by holding that there is a surplus in man. This surplus cannot be stipulated by any particular word/s.

Now let us come to the word 'meaning'. Students and scholars of philosophy encounter this word at umpteen times and in various senses out of which semantical sense dominates. Though there is no gainsaying the fact that semantical sense or linguistic context dominates the scene other senses are not less important. For example, when officials of the income tax department unearth a large dubious transaction, they may ask the question 'what is the *meaning* of this transaction?' By way of asking this question, they try to excavate the purpose of this act. We may find many more such contexts when the word 'meaning' is used.

We find attempts by thinkers to extricate the different senses of the word 'meaning'. It is popularly called meanings of 'meaning'. In the present paper, our attempt will be to unravel the questions latent in the question of the meaning of life. It is very much required as without doing this, to my mind, any attempt to answer the question of life's meaning will be either shallow or a pointless effort. To be more precise, our endeavour will be a second-order activity and not first order as we shall refrain from justifying any particular sort of life that somebody may consider meaningful. Rather we shall be questioning the question itself and try to grow aware of different facets of the issues involved in the question.

It is interesting to note that such an approach towards understanding the question began only in contemporary times with the advent of the analytical method of philosophizing. Before this right from the time of ancient Greece till the modern period, philosophers struggled to give some sort of straightforward answers to the question presupposing that this ultimate question of life is an uncomplicated one. For example, Epicurus considered pursuit of happiness made life meaningful. But does everybody want happiness in the traditional sense of the term? A. J. Ayer holds that the pursuance of happiness view holds good only when happiness 'is used merely as a description of any end that is in fact pursued'¹ by different individuals. Other

¹ Ayer, A. J.: "The Claims of Philosophy" Chapter 16 in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, Edited by Klemke, E. D. and Cahn, Steven M., Oxford University Press, 2008, p. 201.

philosophers find out other alternatives which made life meaningful. Not only philosophers even thinkers from other fields, e. g. scientists also took a keen interest in the issue. One such interesting attempt was made by $E=mc^2$ equation inventor, i. e., Albert Einstein, in his celebrated book *The World as I See it*. He was confident that life has a meaning and hence he said “the man who regards his own life and that of his fellow-creatures as meaningless is not merely unfortunate but almost disqualified for life.”²

It is fascinating to note that Indian philosophy since its inception were consistent on this project as it steadfastly responded to this question with the pursuit of some *summum bonum* through this *summum bonum* varied from time to time. For example, in *Dharmaśāstras*' time, it was the pursuit of *dharma* that imparted meaning to life, in *Arthaśāstras*' period it was chasing *artha*, in *Kāmsāstra*'s tenure it was strivings for the fulfilment of desires and later on it was *mokṣa* or liberation that stole the limelight. However, in contemporary times our philosophers who knew Indian philosophy and also mastered Western philosophy experimented infusing analytical methods into Indian wisdom. Hence, they gave answers which were a blend of a new sort. Still classical Indian philosophy did not engage itself with analysis of the question. Rather it conceptually excavated a response to the question which was coherent with their systems.

Let us go back to the meaning of the word ‘meaning’. Lexicographers tell us that the term ‘meaning’ is a late Middle English and is derivative of the term ‘mean’. They list a number of senses signified by the term which I tried to read and reread a number of times in order to get some clue from them. Though the term 'meaning' has a number of imports given in the dictionary two of them drew maximum attention. One is what is meant by a sentence, a word, a group of expressions, an action, etc. The second one is in the sense of signifying or making purpose explicit. Philosophers also attempted to untwine different senses of the word 'meaning'. One such attempt we find in the writing of Robert Nozick, the celebrated American philosopher. He talks of five senses of the word such as 'meaning as external causal relationship', 'meaning as external referential or semantic relation', 'meaning as intention or

² Einstein, A. (Translated by Alan Harris): *The World as I See it* (Source: <http://www.colonialtours.com/ebook>, p. 5)

purpose' 'meaning as a lesson' and 'meaning as personal significance, importance, value, mattering'.³ He is of the opinion that these five senses can facilitate in explaining the next two senses which are relatively unclear. These two senses are

- 'meaning as objective meaningfulness: importance, significance, meaning' and
- 'meaning as intrinsic meaningfulness: objective meaning ... in itself, apart from any connections to anything else.'⁴

This effort of extricating different senses of the word meaning is indeed important as it will help us to understand what is actually sought in asking the question under discussion. Realizing this many more thinkers spent time exploring its different intents. One such thinker is Garrett Thomson who arranges the different threads of the question of the meaning of life under three heads: 'Does life have a purpose or point', 'does life have some value', and 'does my life signify something'.⁵ He opines that an answer to the question of the meaning of life needs to address all these angles. From these efforts of the philosophers, it becomes evident that before making an attempt to answer the question of the meaning of life, understanding the question itself becomes imperative. It is held by many philosophers that philosophy's task is not to give solutions rather formulate questions so that the question becomes very precise. Such precision facilitates better attempts at answering the issue at hand.

As we have seen previously that the occurrence of the definite article 'the' in the question 'What is the meaning of life?' has made the issue more intriguing. Such use of 'the' imparts uniqueness and it helped the discourse to become a battleground. Whoever articulated a response to this question assumed that his is the only plausible answer ignoring the fact that those other answers have also worth. In Jain philosophy's parlance, we can say that they advocated some sort of *akentavāda* forgetting importance of the theory of *anekantavāda* or that others' views are also worthy and present some other facets of the reality. As Garrett Thomson aptly says: "... the greatest challenge to the idea that life has a meaning is that it has many rather

³ Nozick, Robert: "Philosophy and the Meaning of Life" Chapter 1.4 in *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, Edited by Joshua W. Seachris et al, Wiley Blackwell, p. 64.

⁴ Loc cit.

⁵ Thomson Garrett: "Untangling the Questions" Chapter 1.2 in *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, Edited by Joshua W. Seachris et al, Wiley Blackwell, p. 47.

than one.’⁶ Some consider pursuit for happiness gives meaning to life some hold obeying God's will brings meaning in life and many more. On account of this host of answers, readers may become puzzled and it might create some cynicism in mind. But this is not an apt attitude for philosophers. Some responses might be partially true/applicable, some might be false also. John Stuart Mill tells in his *On Liberty* that even false views should not be suppressed as it helps us to reconstruct our answers newly while countering those supposedly false views. Failing to do this will turn our views to a dead dogma. Moreover, individuals, as well as ages, are never infallible. Hence, views about the meaning of life given in the medieval period are considered obsolete or dogmatic nowadays. Therefore, philosophers need to shun cynicism or holding the view that only his/their own answers are defensible and other thinkers views are not justifiable. Rather what is required now, as we have been given to understand that it is not a single simple question, we need to improve upon the question by extricating different issues/questions involved in the apparently simple question. Thomson putting the question neatly tells that *improving* a question is a distinct process from *answering* a question. Rather it is directed towards revamping our understanding of the issues in a highly loaded question. “Better responses require better questions”⁷, writes Thomson. Hence, he suggests us to ‘unpack’ the question and not to kick off the investigation ‘with some set of ideological objectives already in mind.’ The disadvantage of inquiry with fixed objectives is that it is not helpful for a circumspect investigation.

It is also interesting to note that the question gained importance in the recent past on account of factors triggered by certain drastic shifts in attitude. Scepticism that came into fashion began challenging our ordinarily accepted worldviews. This sceptical attitude and dominance of reason have resulted in questioning the definitive nature of answers given either from religious or scientific standpoints. In addition to that, as Iddo Landou, points out the tradition of giving approbation to the ideals of pleasure-seeking has fallen from its grace, as an increasing number of people began feeling that this is not important enough to impart meaning in one’s life.

⁶ Ibid., p. 41.

⁷ Ibid., p. 42.

It is also notable that when we enquire into the meaning of life we assume that there will be an answer which, at least to some extent, will have universal appeal or acceptability. But close scrutiny of some of the answers reveals that in most cases the answer is culture-specific. It becomes evident when we scrutinize the answers that we find in Indian philosophy. Moreover, such responses are not atemporal. Hence, we find variations in answers of different ages.

A search of the genesis of the question makes us feel that it appears to our mind in certain situations or contexts. For example, spending some time under a rigid routine schedule the person may become bored and think that such stereotype lifestyle is very monotonous and is not worth pursuing. In other words, it is not making a purpose in life. In moments of despair also people may ponder about the purpose of life. Even looking at stars or thinking about the birth of the cosmos a meditative mind can get absorbed in thinking about life's origin, meaning and many other strange issues. As John Kekes says: "The problem originates in a disruption of everyday life. Because we are unsuccessful, bored, poor, tired, unlucky, sick, grief-stricken, victims of injustice ... we start reflecting on the point of the routine activities we endlessly perform. Once we embark on this reflection, it is hard to stop."⁸

If looked from a different angle we find that within the fold of the question there are 'why' questions, 'how' questions, 'what question' and maybe some more. Let us illustrate this point in a bit detail. When existentialist philosophers address the question: 'Why should I live when I could commit suicide?' the *why* issue gets utmost importance. A. J. Ayer also thinks that it is the 'why' question that constitutes the core of enquiry. He writes: "...what is required by those who seek the meaning of life is precisely an answer to their question "Why?" that is something other than an answer to any question "How?"⁹ A person almost at mid-point of his/her life could realize that what he has done up till now is not a significant one and he needs to systematise his/her life in a way which he/she thinks is better or more important. This reordering of life question is actually *how* question - how can I reorganize my life or

⁸ Kekes, John: "The Meaning of Life" Chapter- 22 in *The Meaning of Life: A Reader*, Edit. Klemke, E. D. and Cahn, Steven M., Oxford University Press, p. 255.

⁹ *Ibid*, p. 200.

improve upon my life for the rest of the portion of life is at the center of enquiry. When it is a metaphysical or personal issue, it is *what* enquiry that predominates the scene. Let us recall the celebrated case of Aruna Shanbug whose friend's plea for euthanasia went to the Supreme Court India. The argument given in favour of her plea was that life is not mere living but living with vitality. As Aruna's life lacks this, it lacks quality and hence is not worth living, i. e. it is not a meaningful life. Thus she should be allowed to have assisted death. This metaphysics of quality of life was a perplexing question to many thinkers. One such thinker was Robert M. Pirsig who took a keen interest in exploring the metaphysics of quality of life. However, answers from this standpoint provide us with some common image of human life which someone can consider as a mark of a meaningful life, some may reject also.

Some thinkers also show that the issue can be tackled from different levels.

Thomson talks about three such levels

- of the universe itself
- of life in general' and
- of a specific individual's life

The first level of enquiry is a blend of metaphysical and normative explorations. It wants to furnish the answer what imparts our being here a sense. If we have a rudimentary knowledge of it we can get a significant understanding of how should we live our lives? Thomson writes: "...it provides a connection between what we are and how we should live."¹⁰ Most of the religious systems follow this method when they discern in a specific way the nature of the cosmos and of life and on the basis of their understanding; they offer a set of instructions to organize our life in a way which it considers meaningful. The understanding of the nature of the universe and of life has significance at a general level. However, at a specific level, i. e., when the question is posed from an individual's point of view it may be caused by a different situation and it might be the case that the individual might consider his life until now meaningless and if he/she can find an answer to this question he can bring modification in life so as to transform it in a way which can bring meaning in the questioner's life. It might contain an instance for others to follow.

¹⁰ Ibid., p. 45.

There are thinkers who raise the question about the question's meaningfulness, i. e. whether the very question "What is the meaning of Life?" has any meaning or it is a question that makes no sense at all. Such questions arise, it seems, as it calls for answering so many endless questions and ultimately we find ourselves nowhere. Answering such questions is indeed problematic but this is not a sufficient reason for evading the problem. It is the nature of the human mind that it involves itself in dealing with such conundrums. Life is sometimes compared with a complex play where we participate after the drama has begun and also we shall leave the play before it ends. It is these unseen parts that make the issue intriguing and we want to unravel or reconstruct it. John Wisdom says that in asking the question of the meaning of life we "express a wish to grasp the character, the significance of the whole play. They are a confession that we have not yet done this and they are a request for help in doing it. Is the play a tragedy, a comedy or a tale told by an idiot? The pattern of it is so complex, so bewildering, our grasp of it still so inadequate, that we don't know what to say, still less whether to call it good or bad. But this question is not senseless."¹¹ Wisdom is of the opinion that it is indeed difficult to articulate the answer of meaning of life in few words. However, it does not mean that the question is senseless. Intellectuals cutting across disciplines have couched their views which may give us some inkling to make further headway.

Another relevant point is that even if we can think out the missing part of the play, it becomes only a narrative. We can understand the purpose or intention of the creator. If life is such like we merely participate in this process. Can mere understanding of this partnership is enough for life to have meaning is a moot question. If it is the case, I am just working as an instrument to fulfil the desire of something else and that too is mechanically. I cannot change anything in this complex setup even if I think that changing in a particular way will bring meaning to my life. As mechanical life brings little hope, we eagerly expect a teleological answer to the question.

While dealing with the question of the meaning of life we need to bear it in mind that the quest for a meaning of life is not an empirical or factual quest. It is rather seeking guidance as to how the analyst should live. It is usually believed that

¹¹ Ibid, p. 222.

life has a purpose. But this purpose is not the same for all. As all purposes are not of equal value, the researcher seeks input in his/her window of opportunity. Hence the enquiry ultimately boils down to the question of how I ought to live my life. The term 'ought to' clearly shows us that the issue at hand falls under the province of moral enquiry. Again, it is not merely a theoretical moral domain but a knowledge that is to be applied in action. As it also involves choosing the moral principles that impart meaning in one's life, it may be different from another person's depending upon the set of values he/she prefers. Thus we choose to *give* meaning to our life. To the question does life have a meaning A. J. Ayer says that in a sense it does have. "It has for each of us whatever meaning we severally choose to give it. The purpose of man's existence is constituted by the ends to which he, consciously or unconsciously, devotes himself. Some men have a single overriding purpose to which all their activities are subordinated. ... but the fact is that there is no end that is common to all men ... there is no single thing of which it can truly be said that this is the meaning of life. All that can be said is that life has at various times a different meaning for different people, according as they pursue their several ends."¹²

A few thinkers recast the question of the meaning *of* life as meaning *in* life. One such thinker is Susan Wolf. By changing this preposition they intend to show that meaning is not something mechanically attached to life. It is to be produced consciously. For Wolf, it is 'active engagement' and 'projects of worth' that bring meaning in life. By active engagement, she means engagement with those activities or people 'about which and whom we are passionate'. She enumerates certain activities that she considers 'projects of worth' or we may call worthwhile activities. But suppose some activities she considers not as 'projects of worth' and a person pursue that/those activity/ies. Does it mean that his/her life is meaningless? To put it in a different way: Can there be meaningless lives? Steven M. Cahn disagrees with Wolf and holds that by stipulating certain activities as worth pursuing and hence meaning-giving in life and some are not wolf is belittling some persons who follow those projects which, according to Wolf, are not 'projects of worth'. Writes Cahn: "Why not allow others to pursue their own ways of life without disparaging their choices and declaring their lives meaningless? ... If a person can find delights that

¹² Ibid. p. 201.

bring no harm, such a discovery should not be denigrated but appreciated.”¹³ From this, it appears that there cannot be a meaningless life.

We can well think that we are the creation of the evolutionary process. And in this higher stage of evolution there arose a capacity to raise the question about the meaning of life. But does the capacity of raising a question imply that it has an answer? Sri Aurobindo tells us that it is not merely physical evolution that is taking place in this universe but also psychical evolution is going on. So in this higher stage of evolution when the capacity of mind increases, are we not capable to attempt some sort of answers that our hankering mind craves for is a moot point.

Theistic philosophers in the discussion about life's meaning try to explore a divine plan. If we spend life in conformity with this plan life becomes meaningful and life lived in contravention of this plan fails to acquire meaning. A naturalist or agnostics do not agree with this line of arguing. They try to explore the metaphysical background of the question. Hence, they mull, turn and twist the question in various ways to go into the deep layer of the issue. They show the complexities of the question, raises the question about the use of the vocabularies such as 'meaning', 'meaningful', 'meaningless' when applied to life. From their discussion, we can realize that the apparently simple question is indeed conceptually obscure and full of intricacies. It is not a single question but a synthesis of many questions out of which some are cogent and we may think some answers can be ventured upon and some may not be answerable at least at the current stage of our development.

Previously we showed that meaning can also indicate purpose in the present context. But the question of the meaning of life when translated as the purpose is somewhat misleading. Every person cannot have the same purpose in life. Purpose of person A may vary from the purpose of person B. Hence, we can say that life can become purposeful in many ways. Different people may pursue different projects that they consider worthwhile. Hence, analytic philosophers instead of talking of *a* purpose talk about *purposes*. Again purpose can be used in a pejorative sense. An instrument can serve some purpose. The debatable point then is should a human being be treated as an instrument. Does such an analogy detract dignity from a human being? The theistic explanations face such insuperable contentions. Non-theists find

¹³ Ibid, p. 237.

explanations of theists as autonomy-dismissing and dignity-impairing. Another incident that complicates the issue is the event called death. Those who consider life meaningless as with death everything ends, attribute meaningfulness to immortality or rebirth. This view is also challengeable. As we find temporal limitation does not necessarily lessen value. Immortality or perpetuity is neither necessary nor sufficient proviso for according value to something, e. g. in case of getting the desired job.

A further issue that needs to be brought within the ambit of discussion is could a person's life have or may fail to have meaning without his becoming aware of it. That is: Is awareness of the agent is the *sine qua non* for life's meaning. If A is unreflectively happy and B is unthoughtfully unhappy can we say meaningfully that they have neither found nor failed to realize the meaning of life? Is 'meaning' when applied to life-situation is something awaiting to be tracked down or it is something to be given by the inquisitive mind is a debating point. As Hepburn says, "A person looks in vain for meaning and is needlessly frustrated when he cannot find it - if he conceives it as somehow existing prior to his decisions about what policies to pursue."¹⁴ From the above, it becomes clear that the question about the meaning of life when addressed need to take into account a number of issues in order to be comprehensive and not one-sided.

¹⁴ Hepburn, R. W.: "Questions about the Meaning of Life" Chapter 1.3 in *Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide*, Edited by Joshua W. Seachris et al, Wiley Blackwell, p 49.