

ABSTRACT

The present work entitled “Meaning of Human Life: Some Reflections” is divided into six chapters. The meaning of life is a question that has troubled the human mind since its emergence and the genesis of its reflective capacity. Not only that it is the only kind of being in the world that asks such questions. Other beings do not ask such questions or at least we are not aware of that. This question has been called by many the final or ultimate question of life. In order to study this question, I have taken recourse to literature survey, field study and eliciting opinions of experts.

In the first chapter titled “Introductory Remarks” I have introduced the problem. The problem under discussion is an age-old one. In India, considered as the most ancient extant civilization in the world, this question was given prime importance and attempts were made to address it directly. Mostly, attempts revolved around showing what is the final goal of life. The concept of *puruṣārtha* was used for furnishing an answer to our question. It has been said that any work that is conducive to the attainment of our desired *puruṣārtha* is worthy one and it imparts meaning to our lives.

In the west, the extant literature tells us that it was Socrates, the great Greek philosopher, who first provides us with an answer by saying that an unexamined life is not worth living. Not only that his method, known as the Socratic method, an art of questioning everything, tried to find the rationale for our every work. It was actually an effort to find the meaning of all our moves in life. Successive philosophers after him tried to formulate and reformulate the question and attempted answers in their own way.

In the contemporary period, analytic philosophers whose main tool of philosophizing was hair-splitting analysis of every concept helped

immensely to analyse the question. They were under the impression that a better formulation of the question will facilitate a better response. They show us that every word of the question— ‘the’ ’meaning’, ‘of’, ‘human’, ‘life’— needs to be clarified first. Once we get a precise idea of all these words it will go a long way in understanding the question. We can say that their task was like a grammarian. Their task was second-order. But they did a yeomen task by reminding us that without proper clarification any attempt to furnish an answer is bound to be a half-hearted one. I have attempted an analysis of these words in the first chapter.

A survey of the literature gave me the impression that answers to our enquiry can be given from a number of perspectives. When we come to know about these perspectives, we get confused as we fail to determine which one is the right answer. Determination of the right answer to such an enquiry is not possible, to my mind. However, traversing these different lines of thinking is indeed rewarding. Hence, I handpicked three different lines of thought whose lines of thinking influenced later philosophers/scholars. One of them was a pessimist, Arthur Schopenhauer, the next one was Richard Taylor, a critical thinker and finally, I discussed the view of Viktor E. Frankl, a psychiatrist and a survivor of the Nazi concentration camp. I did this to illustrate that scholars with a particular background are committed to a specific line of thought.

I also attempted to elicit the opinion of people who are not associated with the discipline of philosophy. I talked with research scholars from other departments, and elicited opinions of people who are in distress (for example, people residing in old age homes) and also some professors engaged in teaching at different universities. This attempt also provided me with some clues to think over the issue.

Chapter II is written under the rubric of “Meaning of Life: Viewpoints of Some Major Classical Western Philosophers”. In this

chapter, I chose some Greek philosophers who made a ground-breaking contribution to the issue. They are: Socrates, Plato, Aristotle, Epicurus, Diogenes, a cynic, and Sextus Empiricus, a sceptic. I have deliberately chosen these philosophers. Socrates first articulated the question and brought the issue to the forefront of discussion in the western world. Plato made an original contribution by enunciating his view in a more precise way. Aristotle was the first philosopher, and it has been held by many scholars, who addressed the question most systemically unknown before his time. He, for example, showed us that the question has two aspects—theoretical and practical. Hence, any answer which does not address these two sides is bound to be an inadequate one.

In the previous chapter I have shown that the term ‘meaning,’ as it has many meanings, in the present case it has been used in the sense of goal or purpose. Greek philosophers tell us that it is *eudaimonia* or happiness that is the goal of life. But the moot question is what is happiness. Raising this question, they dug deeper into the problem. What is usually thought as happiness may not be real happiness. Epicurus showed us very clearly what happiness is. It is a particular state of body and soul, e. g. absence of pain in the body and of trouble in the soul. By showing that all pleasures are not pleasurable, and all pains are not painful he subtly introduced qualitative hedonism. Aristotle very meticulously defined the notion of life. By doing this he not only clarified the question rather he pioneered the advent of biological sciences. He very beautifully showed that life is a continuum. Diogenes, another Greek thinker, spent a life which attracted the attention of his many contemporaries. His lifestyle and views instantiated a different line of thinking. Sextus Empiricus did a great task by espousing a sceptical line of thinking. Scepticism has a great role in philosophy as it impels us to be critical and not to hold a dogmatic view on any issue. Any dogmatic view of life’s meaning has the capacity

to lead us astray. Hence, a critical outlook is a sine qua non. All these issues were part of my second chapter.

The last century witnessed the triumph of reason. Logic, rational arguments, realism, etc. were buzzwords of philosophers of that century. It is during this time that analytic philosophy took its birth and logical analysis came into vogue. Philosophers used it very craftily to resolve philosophical problems. The meaning was a dominant theme of this school of thinking. We are habituated to thinking that when analytic philosophers talk about meaning their focal points are the semantical and the syntactical sides of the issue. This is true. However, no intellectual can ignore the question with which we are dealing. Hence, analytic philosophers either directly or indirectly attempted to answer the question. I have shown this in chapter III. To limit our discussion, I have chosen three prominent philosophers of the last century who left indelible marks in different fields of thinking and activities. They are Bertrand Russell, Ludwig Wittgenstein and A. J. Ayer. Bertrand Russell was a renowned British philosopher and activist. Though he adopted a naturalist line of thinking, he proffered some opinions on this issue which are indeed enlightening. As his writings are vast we selected certain books and essays and delineated his views on the basis of views given in those pieces of writing.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, an Austrian-born British philosopher, initially treated the question under discussion, as nonsense about which we are not in a position to say anything. In spite of saying this, he held the issue/question has merit and made ingenious attempts to answer the question. Peter Hacker beautifully showed that though no answer can be furnished, according to Wittgenstein, to the question of the meaning of life and hence makes no sense still such type of non-sense is different from misleading non-sense. He, therefore, labelled it 'illuminating non-sense.'

A. J Ayer, known as the spokesperson of the logical positivist, initially held that answer to such a question does not fall within the domain of philosophy. He held so as he clearly stated the task of philosophy in his celebrated book *Language, Truth and Logic*. His hard stance on ethics and religion etc. was the result of his affiliation with rigorous empiricism and logical analysis. By making a distinction between the *how* question and the *why* question he illuminated our thinking on the issue. Still, he held some sort of opinion which is really interesting. For example, we find him saying that though life has no independent meaning still someone can give it meaning through his activities. He claims himself to be a humanist. Perhaps this terminology gives us enough hints about how he tried to give meaning to his life. A later revision of his view given at the fag end of his life is intriguing and we have discussed it in chapter III.

Chapter IV deals with some existential philosophers' viewpoints. When the English-speaking world was putting emphasis on reason, some other parts of Europe put a premium on passion and emotion and relegated reason to the back-burner. Crises faced by the world during two devastating wars and their sequel accentuated the issue and popularized existential philosophy. Absurdity, anxiety, fear, nothingness, being, thrownness, fallenness, facticity, choice, etc. were their main jargon. Out of many existential philosophers I have chosen Soren Kierkegaard, Fredrich Nietzsche, Martin Heidegger, and Jean-Paul Sartre. These philosophers repeatedly showed the existential crisis faced by humanity and their main slogan was 'existence precedes essence.' The Kierkegaardian concern centres around how to live a life. For him, truth is subjective. As he emphasized on the subjectivity of truth, he was concerned about "what is truth 'for me'". He found the answer in living a religious life. For this, he was willing to live and die.

Existential philosophers can be grouped under two umbrellas—theists and atheists. We have seen Kierkegaard's stance. He was a theist. On the other hand Friedrich Nietzsche, Jean-Paul Sartre were atheists. They also espoused existentialist ideas though of a different sort. Hence, their answer varied about life's meaning. Martin Heidegger, a doyen of this school of thought, gave a highly original philosophy. The meaning of life questions dominated his entire philosophical journey. For him, philosophical enquiry focuses on understanding language and life. Such engagement provides us with the experience of Being. His *Being and Time* is a tome where human beings' choices and actions have been given paramount importance. One being's choice is dissimilar to other beings. Therefore, their meaning of life will also vary. Dissimilarity does not prove wrongness. To the question of what makes life meaningful, he gives several answers. Some such answers are: care gives the meaning of life, time brings the meaning of life and authenticity imparts the meaning of life. These words, although frequently used in ordinary discourse, Heidegger used these in a technical sense. Most existentialist philosophers hold that Authenticity makes our life meaningful.

In chapter V I have discussed how Indian philosophy attempts to answer the question about the meaning of life. I have discussed the concept of *puruṣārtha*. Ancient and classical Indian philosophy discussed the meaning of life in terms of *puruṣārtha*. There are many *puruṣārthas* out of which four got prominence. If our activities propel us towards our supreme goal then those activities are considered as worthy or *śreyo*. Indian philosophy does not repose faith in pleasurable life. They rather focus on the attainment of a life where suffering is completely absent. Whether such life is *ānanda svarupa* or not is a debatable issue. However, it is usually held that it is a blissful life. Contemporary Indian philosophers tried to justify this line of thinking, of course, in their own way. This is not to say that they held this view dogmatically. Rather they supported it with

independent reasoning. Here we find a reasoned combination of tradition and ratiocination. Out of many contemporary Indian philosophers I have chosen Rabindranath Tagore's and Krishna Chandra Bhattacharyya's views.

Chapter VI, which is my concluding chapter, begins with Walt Whitman's 'Song of Myself' where he beautifully depicts human beings' differences from other animals. It is only human beings who can raise certain questions. Enquiry into the meaning of life is such an issue. It has intrigued the human mind to such an extent that they took recourse to many routes to have a satisfactory answer to this question. Will Durant in order to get an answer to this question wrote a long letter to 100 persons who have many accomplishments to their credit. A study of their answers made me feel that it is worth traversing but at the same time made the thing more intricate. Some held life has no meaning, some argued on the theistic line, and some answered in an unconventional way.

All these answers made me pensive. The appearance of a pandemic and on account of which a serious danger loomed large over the globe, I got the impression that I have been thrown into a world which is dreadful and any search for meaning is a meaningless task. However, Viktor Frankl's view and our successful fight against the pandemic restore my conviction that life has a meaning if we can give it one. We need to create meaning for our own life. Meaning, therefore, seems to be a subjective one.

While I was mulling over this idea during my pre-submission seminar, I was reminded by a professor of mine that I need to rethink the issue. He made me think that human life's goal is objective though roads leading to that may be subjective. I concluded my thesis with this view.
