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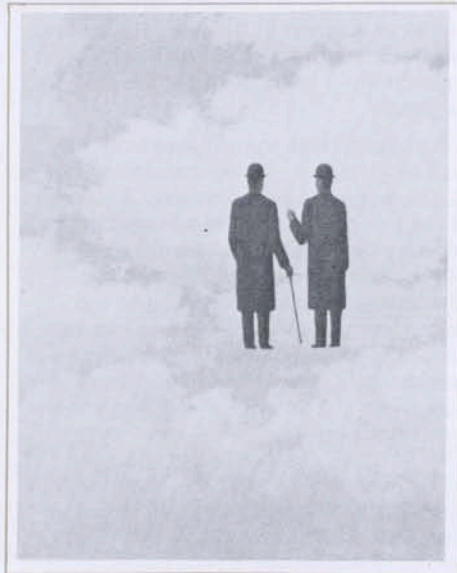
Thinking About Life's Meaning

By
David Cheney & Steven Sanders

The lively controversy among people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs over the meaning of life suggests that philosophers are not alone in their enthusiasm for the issue. Nor are they content to leave the response to such questions entirely in the hands of poets, theologians, and psychologists. The fact is that the controversy itself is much in need of conceptual clarification, coherent articulation of issues and beliefs, and critical appraisal of conflicting viewpoints - all philosophical tasks. Our aim here is to offer a brief discussion of philosophical contributions to this topic. We shall survey the three most prominent views of the meaning of life -- pessimism, theism, and humanism -- and indicate some of the strengths and weaknesses of each. In doing this, we have summarized many of the arguments and analyses which philosophers have developed elsewhere in great detail. We encourage interested readers to pursue these points in their original sources.

It is illuminating to begin by looking at some situations in which questions of life's meaning arise and asking why philosophers, and indeed most of us, raise such questions in the first place. Among life's burdens, few are more difficult to bear or shake off than the suspicion that one's existence is meaningless. Such apprehension finds a variety of expressions: that nothing matters; that life is absurd; that there is no point to it all; that life is not worth living; and so on. These concerns seldom arise as detached and abstract reflections on the nature of things. More often they are prompted by great stress in one's life. Confronting the monotonous routine of daily life, feeling a sense of futility in one's pursuits, bearing the loss of loved ones, realizing the inevitability of one's own death, finding one's achievements or goals trivial, and experiencing the loss of religious faith are among the events and situations which generate doubts about life's meaning. Dispelling these doubts, once they grip a life, is seldom a simple matter and never guaranteed.

Sometimes, of course, the expression of such doubts is but one way of voicing deep emotional turmoil and as such may be symptomatic of an underlying psychological disorder. When this is the case, a medical-psychological approach is required to diagnose the illness and prescribe appropriate treatment.



"Infinite Gratitude"
By René Magritte

However, when a person's concern is to establish what would *count* as life's having, or failing to have, meaning, his reflections have turned philosophical. It is the aim of philosophical inquiry to determine the very intelligibility of such questions and to evaluate responses.

As our list of doubt-generating situations above suggests it is often a starkly pessimistic picture of reality that yields the conviction that life is meaningless. This picture -- so vividly drawn by the 19th century philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer in *The World as Will and Representation* -- suggests that all our strivings lead either to failure, and thus frustration, or to only minimal success, which inevitably gives way to boredom. Whatever our accomplishments, they have no lasting significance. The brief pleasures of life are but momentary interruptions in the incessant flow of pain and suffering. In the course of our lives we sense a clash between our aspirations and the darkness and disorder we face. From this, a pessimistic attitude emerges. It is intensified by memory and anticipation, whereby the past continues to haunt us and the bleak prospects of the future create anxiety. It becomes entrenched as our hopes give way and the tragic sense of life prevails. Death is viewed as the final blow which nullifies any meaning we might have thought life to have.

Theistic thinkers, drawing upon the traditions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, agree that if the pessimistic picture is accurate, then life is meaningless. Indeed, if any person accepts the pessimistic picture, he or she must regard his or her own life as pointless. Of course, theists readily acknowledge many of the more poignant aspects of that picture: our existence is a continuous struggle, pain and suffering are unavoidable, and death terminates our earthly lives. However, theists claim that this portrayal is far from complete. What pessimism has left out is the fact that the universe is a *creation* and that the creator brought forth his creatures according to a cosmic scheme. His plan unifies the creation, subjects it to moral law, and has all life aiming at an ultimate destiny which gives purpose to our strivings and struggles. The suffering incurred along the way is essential to the undertaking and builds character, making the individual more worthy of divine love and better suited to an eternal life of bliss.

Although the details of this scheme vary among theistic thinkers and creeds -- compare, for example, Martin Buber's *I and Thou*, Abraham Heschel's *Man is Not Alone*, and Reinhold Niebuhr's *The Nature and Destiny of Man* -- each presents a rendition in which human existence is assured of meaning by virtue of the opportunity to participate in a relationship with the deity which culminates in the realization of some good and lasting purpose.

Much of our thinking about life's meaning shares the assumptions and traces out the implications of the theistic outlook. The reason for its influence is not difficult to find. Theism responds to our most profound questions about life: "Why are we here?", "What has ultimate value?", "How should we live?", and so on. Theism has traditionally been taken to provide, in a non-arbitrary way, convincing and deeply satisfying answers which, as Tolstoy observed, allow people of faith to accept privation and sorrow "without perplexity or opposition, but with the calm and firm conviction that it was all for good."

The pessimist generally concedes that if the theistic assumptions were true, then the wretchedness and senselessness of human existence could be seen as conditions of, or prerequisites for, meaningfulness. However, the theistic

view is rejected as God's existence is denied: for without the guarantor, the guarantee -- which alone could salvage the human situation -- is empty.

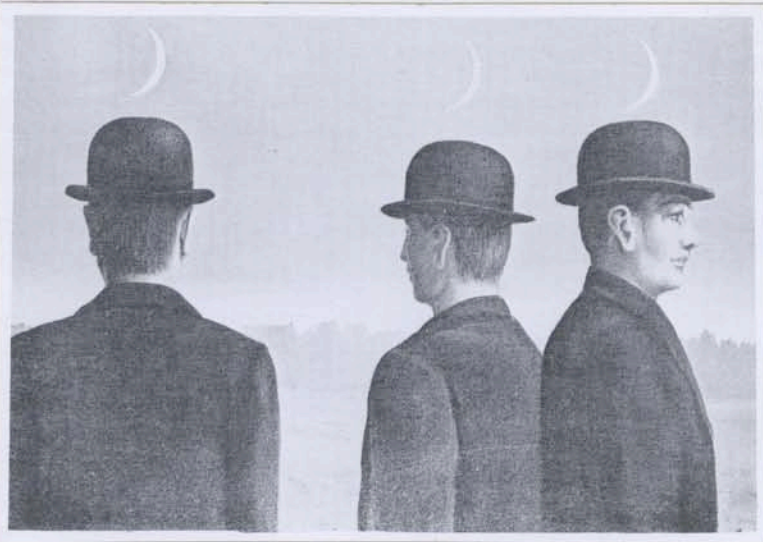
There is, however, a third point of view, commonly called humanism, which rejects both the despair of pessimism and the lofty promise of theism. The view is found in contemporary writers such as Kurt Baier (*The Meaning of Life*), Hazel Barnes (*An Existential Ethics*), and Kai Nielsen (*Ethics Without God*). Much of the humanistic challenge focuses on three points. First, doubt is cast on the claim, so central to theism, that our earthly lives would be made meaningful if they were part of a cosmic plan which led to fulfillment of the divine purpose (which might include individual immortality). Humanists question whether there could even be a purpose sufficiently grand to justify the enormous amount of evil and suffering experienced by humanity in fulfillment of that purpose. More importantly, the purpose would not be man's, but God's: humanity would be but an instrument in the achievement of another being's goal, reduced to servitude in the design of another. Such a condition would indeed impose purpose upon humanity, but not a purpose that affords meaning in any sense that matters. Rather, such an imposed purpose would be degrading, morally offensive to autonomous persons.

Second, humanists reject both pessimists' and theists' low estimation of our earthly life, considered apart from and in contrast with the image of an eternal, blissful life. The worth of anything real can be expected to pale when contrasted with an imagined model of perfection; but is this method of marking the contrast legitimate? On the contrary, humanists have argued, the standards for evaluating the real world must be derived from that world and its possibilities, not from the aspects of a fictitious model.

Third, humanists deny that only a divine scheme could rescue human existence from meaninglessness. Human beings are capable of choosing purposes for themselves which they regard as worth achieving. As they strive toward achieving these goals they bring meaning into their lives in so far as meaningfulness is a matter of pursuing and realizing worthwhile purposes. Death does not negate the meaningfulness of life as it cannot undo what one has already accomplished; rather, it only limits the extent of future achievements.

As typically conceived, the question of life's meaning is a matter of the *pattern* of

a life: how a life is organized, what direction it takes, how it interconnects with other persons and things, what is achieved within it, and so on. A life that is aimless, chaotic, arbitrary, unconnected would seem to be paradigmatically meaningless. However, not every pattern guarantees meaningfulness, and some patterns appear to be more meaningful than others. Inspecting the pattern of a life involves identifying the pursuits of a person, whether that person is interested in these pursuits and regards them as worthwhile, and ascertaining the extent to which that person's life is interrelated with the patterns of others -- whether, for example, these connections involve loving relationships. When a person has an overall conception of the pattern of his or her life, and sees how various activities and ends cohere with one another and with other people's lives, there is greater likelihood that enthusiasm for life will be sustained as particular interests wane or setbacks are encountered. Likewise, there



"The Masterpiece or the Mysteries of the Horizon"
By René Magritte

is a greater capacity to accept the inevitable and to focus on the possible, and with this comes a diminished risk of losing hope.

Theists and pessimists commonly question whether any pattern can really be meaningful if it is not set within the larger context that only an infinite being can provide. Apart from such a context, there are limits to what can be achieved in a human life, limits due to the frailties of human love, the inability to overcome death, and the eventual dissolution of our worldly achievements. While humanists acknowledge that such limitations circumscribe the extent to which a person can give meaning to life, they deny that these limitations void all prospect of meaningfulness. More important, they insist that the divine context requires that persons adapt themselves to a fixed pattern imposed on their lives which are not then open and free but prescribed and confined. Rejecting such an

alternative, humanists offer the option of creating our own patterns, regarding a life on the model of art, each person being both artist and the material which is shaped through the course of life.

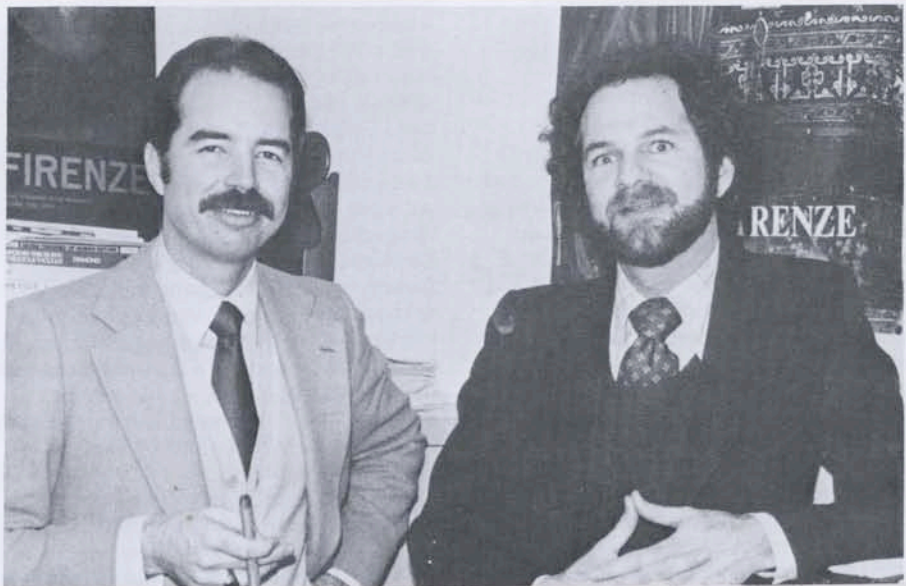
While theists usually affirm our ability, individual and collective, to create these patterns, they question the capacity of any such pattern to carry the weight of our demand for meaningfulness. First, they claim that we cannot attribute so much importance to and be compelled by ideals and structures entirely of our own making. Second, they observe that each life-pattern, considered by itself, may appear meaningful; but when viewed in its historical context, it becomes unintelligible, a fragmentary drama without significance. Finally, theists point out that these patterns provide nothing which will allow the individual to escape or overcome the burden of his or her sense of sin and guilt. However, when these patterns are subsumed under and guided by a divine plan, they are given a source of absolute value; and they are interconnected within an historical scheme leading to an ultimate destiny, which carries the prospect of God's forgiveness of human transgressions. For the theist, only this divine assurance can overcome the threat of meaninglessness which is everpresent in our lives.

In turn, humanists challenge theists to characterize the all-encompassing divine pattern and to explain what the ultimate destiny is and how it interconnects the patterns of individual lives. However theists begin their response, invariably they find the key to meaning in the ultimate mystery of the origin and destiny of creation -- a

mystery to be embraced by faith. Skeptics question the credibility of such claims and find the mystery to annul, rather than provide a key to meaningfulness. Following Freud, such claims are often regarded as "illusions, fulfillment of the oldest, strongest and most urgent wishes of mankind". Instead, humanists urge that we take things as they are and assume responsibility for doing what we can to give order and direction to our lives, without the childish dreams that have supported us so far.

Whatever the pattern of our lives, and whether we conceive of it as the fixed or the created sort, it is nonetheless possible that an element of absurdity will be inescapable, a point made by Thomas Nagel in his important essay, "The Absurd". We are the sort of beings who get caught up in the business of our lives, whatever it may be. We are quite serious about who we are, what we do, and what

we possess. We are easily preoccupied with our appearance, who our friends are, the causes we embrace, the work that we do, and so forth. Yet we have the capacity to step aside from our lives and look upon them, somewhat detached and objectively, as if we were spectators. And from that vantage point we question the very seriousness with which we take our lives. We ask, but cannot satisfactorily answer, why we should live this way and not some other way. This questioning raises the possibility that the pattern of our lives is arbitrary and, given this, the seriousness which we invest in them is absurd. Such a view can be taken of any life, regardless of its particular pattern. "If we can step back from the purposes of individual life and doubt their point," Nagel observes, "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." How should this fact about human nature be regarded -- as tragic? as a cause of despair? or with a sense of irony? One thing seems certain: this distinctively human capacity to question our own lives makes us interesting and odd unto ourselves; but it cannot rob us of our joys and sorrows, our loves and hatreds, our cares, our concerns -- the stuff of which life is made.



David Cheney, Professor of Philosophy, holds a B.A. from Arizona State University and a Ph.D. from the University of Miami, Florida. He has published in The Dialogist and Phenomenology Information Bulletin, edited Broad's Critical Essays in Moral Philosophy, and co-edited The Meaning of Life: Questions, Answers and Analysis. He is currently writing a treatise on theistic theories of life's meaning.

Steven Sanders, Associate Professor of Philosophy, received his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. In addition to co-editing The Meaning of Life: Questions, Answers and Analysis, (Prentice Hall, 1980), he has published essays in ethics and political philosophy in The Personalist, the Southern Journal of Philosophy, The Journal of Social Philosophy, and Educational Philosophy and Theory. He is currently at work on a novel.

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