

UNDERSTANDING THE MEANING OF LIFE

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Abstract

When we use the word 'meaning', it is to say what is (i) intended, (ii) expressed, or (iii) indicated. This is the reason why people can derive multiple meanings from the same instance. Similarly, there are differences of opinions in the logical perception of the meaning of life among the people belonging to different fields of expertise and their search has resulted in many scientific, philosophical, psychological, metaphysical, theological, and religious answers to this question. We have discussed these perceptions briefly in this paper to see if there is any common ground in all these perceptions.

Keywords – Science, Philosophy, Religion, Theology, Metaphysics

Different perspectives on the meaning of life

(i) Scientific perspective

Scientists contemplate the experimental facts about the cosmos and try to find logical answers concerning the 'how' of life. They consider that science can provide logical insights as to what 'life' means. The branch of science that deals with life, is biology. They claim that life is a biological self-sustaining process that distinguishes living from the dead. Various forms of life exist on earth such as, bacteria, archaea, protists, fungi, plants, animals, and human beings. These organisms are composed of cells which has a life cycle. These organisms can grow by adapting to their environment and can reproduce and evolve. Death is the end of all biological processes of a living thing.

Neuroscience is a field of science in which the biology behind thoughts and perceptions are studied. One of the facets of thoughts is pain and suffering. To avoid pain and suffering, neuroscientists try to measure the level of happiness and ease in life required of an

individual and suggest actions accordingly so that an individual finds life meaningful.

Neurotheology is a field of science which helps in finding neuronics connects and mechanism that gives satisfaction to the people from religious activities. Some researchers claim that human brain has certain mechanism that reacts to the religious beliefs and rituals. However, there is no authentic scientific meta-analysis to prove these claims. There are other scientific theories by which a person can evaluate the positive and negative aspects of their existence so that they can value their actions accordingly. In this analysis, more weight is given to positivity in life avoiding over optimism.

(ii) Philosophical perspective

Some philosophers suggest that all organisms on earth are closely related. This is known as Gaia theory. This hypothesis was formulated by Chemist James Lovelock, (born 1919) and co-developed by microbiologist Lynn Margulis (1838-2011) during 1970s. As per this theory, organisms co-evolve with their environment and the fundamental pattern, both in form and in matter of all life on earth is essentially identical. The historical continuity of all forms of life shows that the origin of life was from a single source.

Life is something that grows and has a life cycle, at the end of which, it dies or ceases to exist in its original form. For instance, animal life is relatively simpler than the life of human beings as the environment provides them with resources that are sufficient for their living. Human life is more complex as it provides them an opportunity to be aware of the world and the universe. For them, it is a process of achievement, failure, discovery, dullness, grief, distress, appreciation, etc.

Plato (427 – 347 BCE) suggested that the meaning of life is to attain knowledge. Aristotle (384 - 322 BCE) suggested the meaning of life is to practice morality, and Zeno of Citium (334 – 262 BCE) suggested attainment of mental strength, and self-discipline. Some modern philosophers claim life is full of absurdity, but they also suggest that every individual should try to find meaningful life for him or herself.

(iii) Psychological perspective

Psychology is a multidimensional discipline which includes sports, health, clinical, social behaviour, and human development. For psychologists, satisfaction in life is the key to finding the meaning of life. Psychologists pursue a scientific method of studying human feelings, thoughts, and behaviour with a focus on strengths, rather than weaknesses, to suggest measures to build a meaningful life. In it, factors like, social family ties, positive behaviour among friends and colleagues, membership of social organizations, physical exercise, meditation, increased income, etc. are studied.

(iv) Metaphysical perspective

According to Bonaventure (1221-1274), metaphysics is a branch of natural philosophy, concerned with the truth of things. As against physics, it goes further than motion and quantity to find out things in existence. It examines the true nature of 'being' or 'reality', whether visible or invisible to find answers to questions raised by philosophers, like, what the meaning of life is, and why human beings are here, what is the purpose and what is their reality, who is God and what happens when a person dies.

Natural philosophy is the study of nature and our physical universe. It is believed that natural philosophy is the originator of the study of physical sciences, particularly, physics. Natural philosophy includes areas like astrology, cosmology, laws of physical universe, physical life in the cosmos, space, time, motion, scale, etc.

Contemporary natural philosophy is divided into two schools, (i) extreme, and (ii) moderate. The extreme view is that there is no spiritual realm,

and that meaningful life is possible within the physical world. God and soul are anti-matter, therefore do not contribute to a meaningful life in the world. The moderate view is that while a meaningful life is possible within the physical universe, however it will become more meaningful if a spiritual realm is also existent. God and soul would contribute to enhancing the meaning of life, although they would not be major contributors.

Supernatural philosophy deals with the phenomena or objects and entities that are not subjected to the laws of nature. It includes those objects that are not governed by the laws of nature, like angels and spirits. Some of the spirits are called as gods in certain religions. It also includes the supernatural powers claimed to be associated with spirits and demons, like magic, levitation, telekinesis, precognition, extrasensory perception, etc.

(v) Theological perspective

Theology is the study of the nature of God, human soul, and religious beliefs. It covers God's character, his actions in relation to the Universe and his relationship with humanity. Theologians analyse various types of arguments like experiential, philosophical, ethnographical, historical, etc., to explain religious dogmas. The difference between religion and theology is that a religion is a system of belief, consisting of a specific code of ethics and philosophy, and theology is logical analysis of the religious beliefs.

For theologians, life does not originate from the mind, nor is it a mental or physical quality. Life is a gift of God, and the stream of life is related to spiritual consciousness. The perception of life plays a significant part in theology both in describing God and the life of human beings which is the gift of God to them. Therefore, an individual's life is significant only when he fulfils the purpose assigned by God. Similarly, human soul is also a gift of God and an integral part of their lives. If human beings were only physical beings, subjected to the laws of nature, then no one would have acted for moral reasons.

(vi) Religious perspective

Religions can broadly be divided into two major categories, (i) those who accept the existence of God and (ii) those who reject. Among the religions who accept the existence of God, there are two major divisions, (i) Polytheistic, (ii) Monotheistic.

Most of the religions provide answers to the questions posed by philosophy in relation to the meaning of life. However, among polytheistic religions the gods and goddesses keep on changing from generation to generation. The gods worshipped by earlier people are abandoned by the new generations and new gods are replaced in their places. This process is continuous in all polytheistic religions. This process makes these religions logically not acceptable to certain people. Among monotheistic religions, Islam is the only religion whose faith is based on pure monotheism. And Islam provides unique and logical answers to the questions posed by philosophy in relation to the meanings of life.

As per Islamic Monotheism, there is only one God who is the creator of this Universe. Muslims do not join any divine beings or partners with God. God is free from the concepts of body, form, shape. God is independent, everything else in this Cosmos is dependent upon Him. God does not have children, and no one has given birth to him. He is there from the beginning and will remain so forever. His creations are appearing in the Universe in different shapes / forms / characteristics.

Quran says - 'Allah, there is no God but He, the living, eternal, self-subsisting, ever sustaining. Neither does slumber come near Him nor sleep. To Him belongs all that is in the heavens and the earth. And who can intercede with Him except by His command? Known to Him is all that is present before men and what is hidden (from them), and not even a little of His knowledge can they grasp except what He wills.' (2:255).

Muslims believe in all Prophets sent by God, including Abraham (Ibrahim عليه السلام), Moses, (Musa عليه السلام), Jesus (Isa عليه السلام), as human

beings. Muslims believe that Islamic teachings and its philosophy remained the same, i.e., believe in one God, from Prophet Adam (عليه السلام) to the last Prophet Mohammad (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم).

As per Islamic teachings, Allah created human beings, that is the reason they are here on this planet. The purpose of their creation is to worship their creator. After their deaths, all people will be gathered on the day of Judgement in front of their Lord to answer for their deeds.

Quran says, 'I have not created the jinns and human beings except to worship Me. (And) I do not want from them any provision, nor do I want them to feed Me. Indeed, the provider of sustenance (for all beings) is Allah, the One with absolute Power and Might. (51: 56-58).

What does the worship of Allah constitute? Anything an individual does, should be as per the commandments of Allah detailed in the Quran and His Prophet's (صلى الله عليه و آله وسلم) Sunnah, in religious beliefs, social activities, and contribution to the welfare of society and care for his fellow human beings. In Islam, this constitutes the meaning and purpose of life.

Conclusion

When we study all the above perceptions, it is evident that there are two aspects to a meaningful life, (i) religious, and (ii) philosophical.

The religious point of view states that a person needs to spend his life as per the commandments of his creator. When we study these commandments, we realize that the creator wants us to spend our lives following high standard of human morals so that all human beings can live happily and peacefully.

When we study the philosophical and scientific perspectives, they also seem to be pursuing happiness, self-contentment, and moral values to add meaning to life. Life does not have to be unique to be meaningful. As we progress in our lives, our values change, and we spend our lives in their pursuit, always adding meaning to our lives.

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About the author



Ash Shaikh Mir Asedullah Quadri is well known all over the world for his explanation of Islamic Tawheed, Sahih Iman, Sahih Islam and Sahih Ihsan. He is a scholar, historian, and poet. He is the author of Tafseer-e-Asedi, Irshad Al Asedi, Fusus Al-Iman and over 1000 books on various Islamic subjects. He has written many research articles on religion, history, and other subjects. He is also the Editor in Chief of CIFIA Global Journal.