

MEANING IN ALL ITS COLORS AND VARIATIONS

Legitimate Foolishness

If I had to give a simple definition of ‘meaning’, it would be: the relationship between the mind and the world. The reason for this is that meaning is subjective, in the eye of the beholder. You may not find meaningful what I find meaningful.

It’s with our perception of things that we place them in a certain context and relate to them in a certain way. The thing to realise is that because of the subjective nature of meaning, you’re in the driver’s seat. You are responsible for your own meanings. This is, in my estimation, your greatest responsibility in life: what stories are you going to be telling yourself about yourself and the rest of the world? What narratives will you feed?

Sometimes, it can be beneficial to believe in something that is not real or cannot be proven. This is especially the case when these beliefs are not harmful to you or anyone else, but serves a purpose instead.

Borrowing this term from Ernest Becker, author of *The Denial of Death*, this is what I call ‘legitimate foolishness’; to hold a belief that cannot be proven but is beneficial to your overall outlook on life.

The belief that you are your loved one were destined to meet in one way or another may not be entirely accurate but can add a level of love and romance to the relationship that wouldn’t be there if the relationship was considered a random chance event.

Beliefs like these can lead to joy, compassion and contentment.

In other cases, however, these beliefs can form the relationships an individual has with the world in a way that causes meaninglessness, anxiety, or obsessive rumination. An example of this is when a person is worrying about a hypothetical future event that is very unlikely to happen.



If this is the case, it can be helpful for someone to change the relationship between his or her mind and the world, i.e. to change the ‘meaning’ he or she attributes to something.

This does not mean that the contents of the mind should just be based on facts. It can also mean that the individual adopts more helpful beliefs to the extent that they will not be harmful to himself or others, now, or at a later point in time.

Meaningful living means there is a constructive relationship between the mind and the world.

What harmless beliefs can you think of that might make life more meaningful to you?

Bag of Stones

Meaning is a bag of stones, waiting for us to put it down. To release the load of expectations and hopes of better times ahead—to release the pressure that there “must be something more.”

The bag of stones metaphor refers to subordinating the present moment to a hypothetical future one. We have to set that bag down if we want to continue. After all, the best way to collect gems is with an empty backpack.



Meaningful living means knowing that life can only be lived in the present moment.

Think of a future scenario you're hoping for or working towards.

What about that future scenario brings you a fantasized joy?

And what is the promise that this future scenario holds that can not be fulfilled in the present moment?

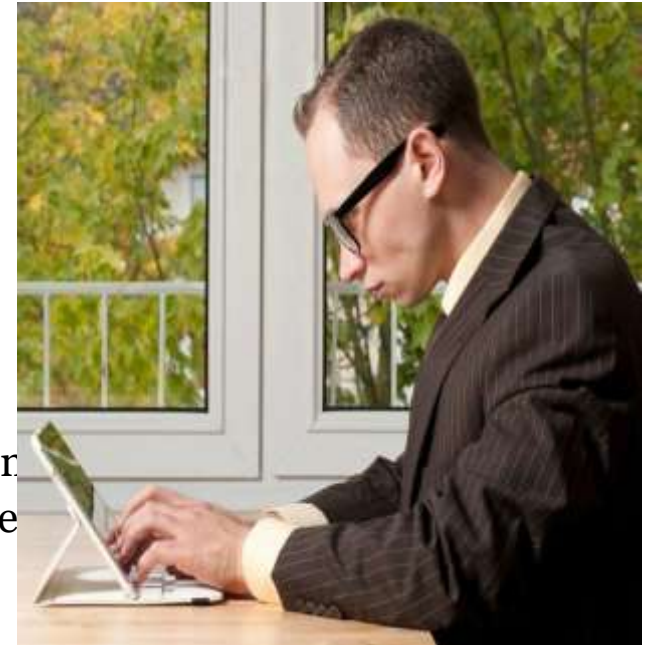
The Worrier

When do we worry about meaning? This is a very important question, because the answer to it gives us a lot of valuable information.

In my own experience, I don't worry about meaning too much when I'm engaged in activities with other people. I worry about it when I'm not engaged in anything, and alone.

Maybe you're like me. Or maybe you're not, and you worry about meaning when you are at a party with lots of people and you still feel lonely.

Becoming aware of when things seem meaningless to you is the low-hanging fruit of adding more meaning to your life. As soon as you're aware of those moments filled with worry, you can either spend less time in those sorts of situations, or learn a different way.



What does attitude of curiosity bring to your experience of meaninglessness?

Can you even welcome these moments as opportunities, knowing you have something to learn from them?

Meaningful living means being aware of why things seem meaningless at certain points in time. When do you worry about meaning? Why do you think it's at these particular moments?

From my experience, people also start worrying about meaning when things get easy—after having been really hard.

When people are struggling or helping those who are, they are usually busy fixing something that they know needs fixing. Their path is clear.

But the need for meaning doesn't stop when you solve a pressing problem. It's often when you've "fixed your problems" and reach some sort of homeostasis, that you become extra concerned with meaning. Rather than exploring this space, people often find something else to devote their worries to.

Why?

Because the question after "all is solved" then becomes: What have I solved my problems for?

The ability to adopt a constructive attitude towards negative events in life is crucial for this type of meaning-making.



Meaningful living means being able to adopt a constructive attitude towards suffering, rather than being crushed by it.

Think about your own problems and the things you have suffered through.

Were you able to experience meaning or find something valuable in spite of the hardship?

For instance, was there a time when you lost someone important to you, and it changed the way you relate to yourself or others?

High Stakes

I don't just believe that valued living matters: I believe that the stakes are high. What's at stake is not just the heavenly shot at a satisfactory life, but the hellish reality of suffering. What form of suffering is worse than coming to the end of your life and looking back with regrets, having to conclude that the one shot you had at life was, after all is said and done... "mislived"?

Maybe the meaningful life is a life that, in later reflection, has little regrets. We can imagine a continuum with the mislived life on the one end and the meaningful life on the other.

Mislived life -----Meaningful life



Every time we speak to elderly people, we may try to grapple with how they perceive their lives. Are they fulfilled? Are they ready for death? Had their life been, in Seneca's words, "long enough because they knew what to do with it?" Or will they die with "their music still in them?"

Is there a part of us that might die with our potential— unused, unexplored, and forever gone?

There is a saying:

"If you have the feeling that you've done what you want to do in life, the idea of death comes much more easy to you."

My hypothesis is that people who are not doing what they really want to do with their lives, and who are not living up to their full potential, are more likely to suffer from anxiety about death, or one of the other cloaked forms in which anxiety manifests.

Meaningful living means finding out what it takes to grow old

In such a way that you don't look back on your life with regrets.

Imagine you have come to the end of your life. Picture yourself sitting in a hospital bed. Have you done what you wanted to do in life, or told the people who matter in your life why they matter? What specific things are you doing that you may regret later? And how do you move towards this less regretful version of your imagined older self?



The Sufferer

There is the quote from Theodore Roosevelt”

“Nothing in the world is worth having or worth doing unless it means effort, pain, difficulty... I have never in my life envied a human being who led an easy life. I have envied a great many people who led difficult lives and led them well.”

Most people regard pain and difficulty as something to eliminate as quickly as possible with the least amount of effort necessary.

I do not want to trivialize the suffering that people on our planet experience. There are single mothers whose children die of a drug overdoses, there are severely depressed people in my own town, and there are survivors of abuse around the world. There may be little meaning in these cases, besides admiring the resilience of these humans who persisted despite pain.

But what people come to mind if you had to name the most “meaningful lives” ever lived?

Martin Luther King Jr., Mother Teresa, Mahatma Gandhi, Nelson Mandela...

All these people suffered—a lot. One of the most omnipresent symbols in Western culture is Jesus hanging on the cross, the ultimate symbol of suffering.

I feel the need to emphasize that meaning is more related to suffering than it is to happiness. This is not to balance our contemporary obsession with happiness, but rather because I believe that nothing worthwhile comes easy.



Taken from Nietzsche's Nachlass and the unpublished notes he left behind: "There does not exist one beautiful surface without a frightening depth."

Meaningful living does not mean finding an easy life devoid of suffering. It means living well despite the inevitable reality of suffering.

How do you regard the effort, pain, and difficulty in your life? Is it something you've worked to eliminate, to balance, or to incorporate into your awareness of suffering?

The Timekeepers



I believe meaning in life has everything to do with how you spend your time. This is an everyday consideration. Let's say you sleep for 8 hours a day: that means there are 16 hours left for you to spend. How do you spend these hours?

This is the real question of meaning. Not "what the meaning of life?" but rather "how do I spend my limited time well?" To answer this question, we have to consider what it means to "spend time well." This is a subjective quest.

For a mellow soul, spending time well might mean pouring over recipes, taking hours to select the perfect plum, and falling asleep at a reasonable hour after tea. For a more active soul, all of these activities might be deemed a waste of time.

This is what the search for meaning is about: people trying to discover what they can do with their brief time on this planet.

Paying attention to your feelings is a great way of discovering what you naturally gravitate towards. What interests reappear in your life and feel good to devote precious time towards?

“If you want to find meaning in life, you must pay attention to your feelings and become aware of them so you can understand what matters to you. Focus on the most intense feelings, no matter if they are positive or negative, as they are all there for a reason. If you learn to listen to these feelings, you can discover what matters most to you.”

Maybe it's best to not cognitively go out and search for what you may find meaningful, but to pay attention to your feelings instead.

You may go out to a party because you know human connection is an important source of meaning; but if you don't feel connected at the party, the activity is quite useless.

Think of the moments when you felt a strong sense of connection. When was the last time?

Maybe during an intense dinner conversation with your best friends or partner. Maybe when you visited your close family. Maybe you were completely absorbed in the present moment while you were playing sports. Maybe you realize it's been a while since you last felt this.

Whatever it is, those feelings of connection are sources of meaning-making.

Why not seek out those experiences more often?

Interestingly, we are often only looking for a cognitive insight to the extent that it makes us feel a certain way.

Meaningful living means spending your tiny amount of time on this planet right and using your feelings to guide you in the right direction.

When do you feel like you're spending your time well? When did you last experience flow? When do you feel most alive? Are there any ways in which you can integrate these experiences into your daily life?



Looking at Life through a Telescope

One of the common misconceptions about meaning is that because there is no overarching cosmic meaning for us as a species, our existence itself is meaningless.

The reasoning typically goes like this:

“If what I do does not matter in the grand scheme of things and it will all be forgotten in 100 years from now, then what does it matter what I do or do not do right now?”

Alright, congratulations! You’ve managed to come up with a timeframe across which anything can be regarded as meaningless and morals do not exist.

This perspective is like looking at life through a telescope—gone wrong. In space and time, you can always zoom-out to the point that nothing seems to matter. However, this doesn’t mean that it is of no matter to us in the here-and-now. It matters undeniably, like a parent’s existence matters to a child in a very absolute and definitive matter.

Here’s the thing: a person, event, or concept always “means” something to someone at a specific point in time. The question of the meaning of something is understood by the questions “to whom?” or “and when?”

We can imagine a future where the existence of our species might mean nothing to an alien creature. But how does this serve us now? This line of reasoning does not eliminate the responsibility for you to make your life meaningful. It’s a nihilistic and pathological way out, and an easy one at that.



Why would someone feel the need to play this spacetime card, to look at life through a telescope? What motive is behind this attempt to make life seem meaningless?

It reduces the cognitive dissonance for people who know they should claim more responsibility for their life than they currently do. In this way, it creates an excuse to not even consider making meaning, let alone live by a moral compass.

Meaningful living means avoiding a timeless cosmic perspective in which human life seems futile.

Have you ever felt like your life did not matter at all in the grand scheme of things? What happens when you zoom in from the timeless cosmic scale to your situation here and now? If there is comfort in this telescopic view, how do we balance that grand-scheme comfort with inspired living?

Looking at Life Through a Microscope

The opposite of looking at life through a telescope, is observing life through a microscope. This is what happens when we zoom-in to the point that we can't look beyond our current life circumstances anymore.

When times are tough and people are stressed, almost everything can seem pressing and cause more anxiety. People who don't have any hope for the future often can't see the future because they are too zoomed in, consumed by their present circumstances.

That's when thought-action repertoires, the options we can think of and act out, can decrease to the point where people see no other way out than the ultimate way out. Life becomes too overwhelming, too complex. The danger of zooming-in too much, of looking at life through a microscope and becoming too caught up in a seemingly hopeless present, is that one loses sight of a possibly brighter future.



Rather than a telescopic or a microscopic perspective, a more balanced way of looking at life is realizing that even if things do not matter ultimately, or seem pointless in the moment, there's plenty of meaning to experience in life as a whole.

“This too shall pass.” -Persian adage

Meaningful living means being able to look beyond your current life circumstances when times are tough.

When you're facing difficulties, is it your tendency to zoom-in too much, or zoom out too much? What is the consequence of taking that perspective? Think of a time when this perspective dominated your thinking or actions; is there any way to balance these two tendencies?

The Depth of Meaning

The phrase “depth of meaning” refers to the intensity of your relationship with a source of meaning.

For example, if making music is very important to you and you have made music for a long time, then music as a source of meaning, might well have tremendous depth to you.

Conversely, if you have done yoga twice in your life, then yoga as a source of meaning does not have the same depth to you as it may have to a master yoga practitioner.

Depth increases through repeated engagement, commitment, and dedication to a source of meaning. The more this source challenges you to become a better, stronger, and more actualized version of yourself, the higher the likelihood of increased depth.



Real depth does not come easy. Real depth challenges you. It requires repeated effort, and either metaphorical or literal blood, sweat, and tears.

“To do it right, it is the most complicated thing I know how to make. And it’s that challenge that drives me. I don’t need a sword. But I HAVE to make them.”

In what things in life are you cultivating depth? If you can’t think of any, where do you crave more depth? Amidst industrialized busy culture, how do we grant ourselves the tools to “go deep?”

Focus on the Process

“You know sometimes, it’s best not to have what you need, because then you stop looking for what you need and making what you need. It’s what we didn’t have that created Hip Hop the minimum, not the maximum making a dollar out of fifteen cents.”

KRS One - Running in the Dark A wonderful piece of wisdom from the American rapper KRS-One. What he is essentially saying here is that the attainment of something may be the end of the joy or meaning it brought to your life.

Meaning evolves from the process of building what we think we are looking for.



In interviews you often hear famous artists and musicians reminiscing about the time when they were still playing music in garages, desperately trying to make it. It’s only after becoming famous, and reaching the state they’d been striving for, that they’re able to fully appreciate the process that got them there.

Success changes the process we were absorbed in on the way to, well, success.

So we sit there, kings of nothing on our thin thrones, realizing that the process was vastly more important, more fulfilling, than our so-called “success.”

We ache for the process of the past and would trade our success in a heartbeat only to get it back.

Does this piece resonate with you? Is there a process that you miss now that you have achieved a certain level of success?

Meaningful living means enjoying the process towards attaining what you want, realizing our sense of fulfilment lies not in the attainment of anything, but in the process that leads us there.

Does this piece resonate with you? Is there a process that you miss now that you have achieved a certain level of success?



Why the Verbs We Use Matter

The verbs we associate most with meaning like ‘searching’ and ‘finding’, set us up for failure. Why would it make sense to ‘search and find’ meaning in your life?

That’s about the same as walking down the street when you’re single, looking for a loving, lifelong relationship.

You don’t search for that, you build it. Better yet, the loving relationship ensues from all the time and effort, all the love and forgiveness, all the pain and joy experienced between two people, over a prolonged period of time. Searching sounds so casual. Like you’re searching for the right pair of shoes.

When we use a term like “finding” meaning, we neglect that there are no quick and easy ways of attaining something meaningful.

Verbs like searching and finding also imply that meaning is to be found “outside of” ourselves like some external and rare species we hope to glimpse. What if instead, meaning was right under our noses, even built by our own hands?

So what verb can we use referring to meaning that will set us up for success?

I propose we use the verb: ‘to realize.’

This verb has a double meaning, namely to become aware of and to make happen.

This double meaning solves the problems of the searching and finding meaning paradigm; it acknowledges that the potential for meaning may already be there, thus making us an active agent in the meaning equation by reminding us to make it happen.

If meaning exists in the relationship between our minds and the world, then our role is just as important—if not more important—as the role of the world in its attainment. We can influence the contents of our own mind, but have only a limited amount of influence over the world.

Therefore, I propose that we start understanding meaning as something to be realized, in both senses of the word.

Meaningful living means framing a worthwhile connection between yourself and something outside of yourself, instead of merely searching and hoping to find it.

What meaningful connections have you built in your life? How much time and effort have you invested in these connections? What other verbs work with this idea of crafting our own meaning?



Meaning Is More Important Than Happiness

Meaning is more important than happiness, because happiness is what we're willing to sacrifice for something truly meaningful.

If you want to discover what you find meaningful in your life, try to think of all the things that you would sacrifice pleasure, hedonism, and momentary enjoyment for.

Maybe it's your kids, maybe it's your country, maybe it's your love of reading, maybe it's your devotion to a cause, your meaningful work, and maybe it's the people you care for.

If you have nothing in your life that you would sacrifice your personal happiness for, then your life may lack meaning. This does not have to be your truth, but it may be a pause for reflection.

One reason for this is that we are not wired to sustain happiness. We have evolved with one goal: to evolve further. Why? Because the only constant in life is change, and to adapt to change is to survive.

At least "meaning" is the more realistic thing to strive for.

Additionally, most healthy humans find their primary meaning via relationships with other people. It is the sacrifice of personal happiness for other people, the greater good, or some purpose outside of yourself, that is likely to imbue your life with meaning.

You can look at happiness as a reward serving the evolution of our species. You are motivated to do good for your tribe and rewarded by a sense of meaning. A sense that you did good, a feeling of fulfillment.

Meaningful living means having things in your life that you are willing to sacrifice your personal happiness for.

What things in life are you willing to sacrifice your personal happiness for? What are moments that were not happy, yet they were rich with meaning?

