

The Meaning of Life

Before a philosopher even attempts to ask or answer a question, he must first define the terms he is using. Even if these terms can be satisfactorily defined, the question itself must be questioned. It is possible that in defining his terms the philosopher will realize that the question is ill-founded, nonsensical, or unanswerable. The question, “what is the meaning of life?” cannot be answered without defining the key terms “meaning,” and “life.” What I hope to convey in this essay is that a careful definition of these terms will lead to the conclusion that the question, and indeed life itself, is absurd.¹

Part I: The Human Condition and Life in General

In order to define the term “life” we need to be more specific about what kind of life we are referring to. Nozick offers the whole of his arguments in terms of an individual, human life. This ignores the context in which an individual’s life is contained. My contention is that an individual life is a manifestation of Life in general, denoted by the capital “L.” Life in general includes the life of an individual, the species, the life of the planet, the life of the galaxy, the life of the universe, etc. My understanding of this Life as a whole can be summed up by an analogy to a fractal. A fractal is a geometric pattern that is repeated at ever smaller scales to produce irregular shapes and surfaces which cannot be represented by classical geometry.² The result is a figure that is infinitely diverse and infinitely repetitious at the same time. In terms of life, any individual life has the same basic characteristics of Life in general. The most dominant feature of a life is the coming-into-being from previous life and a death which results in the perpetuation of further life. For example, a star forms from a huge collection of dust. It comes-into-being as a result of gravity, forms a star, and after various internal transformations, goes-out-of-existence and forms the dust which will

¹ Of course this term, “absurd,” will also have to be defined in the course of the essay. What I hope to elicit is that the meaning of life, if such a thing exists, can only be found through an understanding of absurdity.

² Definition from the American Heritage Dictionary, third edition.

eventually create another star. With this understanding of the basic characteristic of Life in place, an understanding of the human condition in terms of Life in general can be elicited.³

Anyone who is alive has an inborn, in Kantian terms a priori, understanding of what it *feels* like to be alive. I stress the idea of feeling because it is clearly not knowing. To know what it means to be alive would require a complete understanding of life from start to finish, which is neither inborn nor achievable. However, we can attempt to define life by attempting to understand the human condition.

Any attempt to elucidate in an objective way the precise characteristics of the human condition must at some point define sensation, consciousness, and emotion. Furthermore, the account must also illustrate how these fundamental traits are connected. An objective account of the human condition is only possible--and, more importantly, can only be based on, a subjective experience of existence. The concept of subjective experience can only be defined in terms of how the subject interacts with everything that is not the subject; an experience, therefore, is the subject's reaction to the rest of the world. But *how*, through what means, does a subject respond to the world? Most theories that attempt to explain one or more aspects of experience make a fundamental oversight-- efforts to define the characteristics of a subject presuppose a *self* that experiences in such and such a way. The mistake is assuming that a self experiences something when in fact it is *experience* that constitutes the self. At first glance this notion that experience forms the self seems faulty: how can there be an experience without something (the subject) to experience it? The only defense I can offer is that you cannot have one without the other. However, it can be shown that the fundamental characteristics of sensation, consciousness, and emotion are the forms of experience that both constitute and define the self. Furthermore, it is only in terms of sensation, consciousness, and emotion that a subjective or objective account of the human condition can be related.

Before undertaking the project of defining these three concepts and determining the causal connections between them, I must further elaborate on certain assumptions I am making. I have and will continue to use the terms human condition, subject, and self almost interchangeably. My justification is as follows: (1) the most fundamental and defining aspect of the human condition is the condition of subjectivity; (2) subjectivity is the inability of a subject to experience existence from any perspective other than its own self; (3) the self is defined as precisely that subject which is

³ Like Nozick, I will use an individual human life to further specify the characteristics of Life in general.

limited to its own experience. Clearly I have not truly defined anything here unless I can provide an account of what experience is. However, the inherent circularity of this definition of the human condition results from the inability to separate the notion of experience from the thing that experiences it-- namely, the subject. Any attempt at such a separation is bound to fail unless an effort is made to discover how experience and subject are related through sensation, consciousness, and emotion.

For now, it will suffice to say that experience and the subject are inextricably bound; one does not cause the other any more than one can exist without the other. If we accept this notion, we can continue in our effort to establish an account of the human condition. If we cannot separate the subject and his experience, perhaps we can provide an account of how the two simultaneously came about. Through this description of their shared actualization we will be able to further develop an understanding of the nature of their inseparability and mutual causal interaction.

The only method I can determine for understanding the mutual actualization of self and experience is to examine the beginning of a subject's very existence-- the act of birth. It may be convenient to think of the birth itself as the beginning of experience, but this is an oversimplification. Just as the development of the human body is a slow process of cells dividing and not an instant transformation from nothing to something, neither is experience something that occurs instantaneously as in the moment of birth. If we assume that a strong connection exists between the physical and mental aspects of existence we can conclude that the development of the physical portion is accompanied by the development of mental processes. The key difference is that, in the moments just before and just after birth, the physical characteristics of a being are essentially the same while the mental does undergo a drastic change. This drastic change can be accounted for by the first full use of the senses.

While the physical structure of the human just before birth has a complete set of sensory organs, until the moment of birth these senses are, for the most part, deprived of any stimulation. Inside the womb, the absence of light makes sight impossible, the suspension in fluid severely limits any experience of taste or smell, and the only remaining senses, the tactile and auditory, are at best only vaguely similar to a fully conscious adult's experience of these. Since we know the nervous system is responsible for sensation and that consciousness has its physical seat in the brain, the development of this system as a whole demonstrates that sensation and consciousness are linked inseparably. In addition to this evidence of a physical co-dependence, sensation and

consciousness are related causally as such: sensation comes first, awareness of that sensation is the definition of consciousness. So in the state of limited sensation that precedes birth there is also a sort of pseudo-consciousness-- a vague awareness of a vague sensation. To make this claim is to posit a continuum of consciousness, which does not seem problematic since even a fully developed subject can experience varying degrees of consciousness such as sleep. The idea of a continuum of consciousness only further demonstrates the dependence of consciousness upon sensation.

Together, sensation and consciousness are the first tools a subject has for experiencing the world. At the risk of repeating myself, I must restate that it is this very act of experiencing that is simultaneously what defines and characterizes the nature of the subjective self. The phenomenon of a subject experiencing something is only possible through the *means* of experience, *i.e.* sensation and the awareness of the sensation (consciousness). Together, sensation and consciousness allow the subject to establish the first relationship between himself and the rest of the world. This first lesson in experience is what I previously stated to be the most indicative of the human condition-- the recognition of self versus all other. Subject-object distinction has often been reported to be the first lesson of experience; both the Freudian and the cognitive theories of human development recognize the importance of this first distinction. It is distinction that allows for the possibility of all further knowledge. Any learning process can be described as discovering, through the senses and consciousness, whether something is this or that.

The next distinction experience teaches a young subject are an understanding of space and time. Once the subject understands that space and time exist independently of his own experience of them the stage is set for the final tool of experience to develop: emotion. To illustrate the character of an emotion I will employ the same strategy I used for understanding sensations and consciousness, that is, to attempt to trace the origin of emotion.

In order to discover what is truly behind the formation of emotions we must return to the notions of sensation and cognition. These two faculties of experience led to an understanding of the concepts of self and other, time, and space. The formation of the emotion of fear can be attributed to these concepts with the addition of the experience of pain. Only when a subject first truly understands the state of being in pain objectively (*i.e.* "I am in pain") and furthermore can understand through space and time how future pain is a possibility does he first experience fear. The sensation of pain alone does not constitute fear. The understanding of a potential for *future* pain is when the first emotion of fear is felt. Interestingly enough, I find that, after fear, love is the

second emotion a subject learns. Love for the primary care-giver (usually the mother) is the result of understanding the finite nature of subjectivity and the initial dependence of the self on an other. From an evolutionary standpoint this makes perfect sense: fear is a natural instinct inclined towards self-preservation and love for others is what makes the survival of the species possible.

With this understanding of the human condition of life in place, its connection with Life in general can now be explored. Each individual comes-into-being as a result of preceding life. Throughout this existence, the individual acts as both a destroyer of other life and a creator of life as well. In eating, the human takes a life form, digests it, and uses its nutrients to perpetuate his own life. Even if the subject fails to reproduce sexually, his death provides nutrients for a wide variety of bacteria, worms, plants, and other life forms. In addition to these perpetuations, a human also provides nutrients for tiny life-forms in his own body, such as E. coli bacteria. These connections between the individual human life and other life-forms demonstrate the following features of Life in general. Life is never created spontaneously, it always emerges from previous life. Also, all life within Life is connected causally. Finally, while an individual life comes-into-being and subsequently goes-out-of-being, Life in general is perpetuated infinitely.⁴

Part II: The Meaning of Meaning

In chapter six of *Philosophical Explanations*, Robert Nozick outlines eight⁵ distinct “modes of meaning(fulness).” Although each of these modes of meaning can be applied to Life, all but one cannot avoid the potential for infinite regress. To confound the problem, the one case that avoids the infinite regress relies on self-justification, which is easily subjected to skeptical doubt. However, if one truly hopes to find any meaning at all for Life, this option that Life is meaningful in and of itself is the only possible solution.

The first mode of meaning is “meaning as external causal relationship,” i.e. “this means war” or “smoke means fire,” (Nozick, 574). In this case, meaning is thought of in terms of cause and effect. In terms of Life, this merely indicates that life results from life, and that life creates more

⁴ A complete argument for the infinitude of Life in general would have to demonstrate a connection between Life and Being in general. Furthermore, an answer to the question “why is there something rather than nothing” which shows the infinitude of Being would also have to be elicited if this argument is to be fully supported. Clearly, I cannot give these arguments the full attention they deserve within the limits of this essay, so I will simply maintain that Being is Life and that Being exists infinitely while nothing does not.

⁵ I will not address mode VIII, for it is merely a spurious conglomeration of the previous seven.

life. I contend that this mode does not elicit any overall meaning for Life, it merely demonstrates one of the characteristics of Life, that of Life perpetuating itself.

Meaning can also be thought of in terms of semantic relationships, such as ‘brother’ means ‘male sibling.’ This mode of meaning relies on synonymy and analyticity, which I believe Quine has successfully demonstrated results in a vicious circle.⁶ To establish the analyticity based on the meaning of words we must know what it is for words to “mean the same.” This is the idea of synonymy: two words that share the same definition have the same meaning. The problem here is that we now must discover what a definition is. Definitions themselves are synonymous with the words they define, so why give priority of meaningfulness to one or the other? Terms, their synonyms, and their definitions exist in a circular relationship, and there seems to be no way out of this trap. In terms of Life, meaning as a semantic relationship would boil down to variations of this empty phrase: “Life means Life.”

The third mode of meaning is “meaning as intention or purpose;” ““this play is meant to catch the conscience of the king”” (Nozick, 574). The attempt to apply this mode of meaning to Life also fails to elicit an intuitively complete answer to the question. Nozick works with this mode of meaning in terms of a “life plan.” In these terms, a life is meaningful as a result of the subject’s plans or intentions for life and the attainment of these goals. However, the goals of a life plan seem arbitrary and particular to the life in question. The idea of a life plan fails to reveal an objective meaning of Life which our main question demands. For similar reasons, the mode of meaning as a lesson also falls short of the answer we want. Even if a life fulfills its goals and provides a lesson for other lives, we can still ask “what it all amounts to. We can ask whether the lesson itself has any significance or meaning” (Nozick, 578). This ability to view a type of meaning from a relatively more objective position leads to an infinite regress. For each time we think we have found the meaning, we can step back and ask, “what makes that thing meaningful?” The same problem exists for Nozick’s fifth mode of meaning, “meaning as personal significance” (Nozick, 574). In this mode, the meaning is again completely subjective, and fails to provide an objective meaning of Life.

Nozick creates a distinction between his first five modes of meaning and the last three. I believe that his reason for doing so is as follows. Although the first five modes can be applied to a life, they always fall short of creating an objective meaning for Life in general. The last three are

⁶ W.V. Quine, *Two Dogmas of Empiricism*

different in that they attempt to define meaning in a more general way. Mode six describes this exactly, “meaning as objective meaningfulness: importance, significance, meaning” (Nozick, 575). That Nozick uses ‘meaning’ to define ‘meaning’ here is revealing-- an objective meaning of life will rely on synonymy and is subject to infinite regress. Mode seven offers a solution, the idea that meaning can have intrinsic meaningfulness: “objective meaning (VI) in itself, apart from any connections to anything else” (Nozick, 575). The possibility that Life can be meaningful in and of itself creates both a solution and a further problem. It solves the infinite regress problem contained in the previous six modes, but only at the cost of becoming circular. To say that Life is meaningful in and of itself seems to be more of a dodging of the problem than a solving of it. Whereas the previous six modes always define meaning in terms of something else, the mode where meaning is self-reflexive fails to provide an answer for what the meaningfulness consists of. We are left with a choice; either Life is meaningful in and of itself, or, since this does not really tell us anything, we can conclude that Life is meaningless.⁷

Part III: Absurdity and the Meaning of Life

Thomas Nagel, in his essay “The Absurd,”⁸ attempts to define absurdity in the following way:

In ordinary life a situation is absurd when it includes a conspicuous discrepancy between pretension or aspiration and reality....Many people’s lives are absurd, temporarily or permanently, for conventional reasons having to do with their particular ambitions, circumstances, and personal relations. If there is a philosophical sense of absurdity, however, it must arise from the perception of something universal -- some respect in which pretension and reality inevitably clash for all. This condition is supplied, I shall argue, by the collision between the seriousness with which we take our lives and the perpetual possibility of regarding everything about which we are serious as arbitrary, or open to doubt (Nagel, 13).

In terms of our current discussion, absurdity results from our attempt to ascribe a meaning for Life that is neither infinitely regressing nor circularly self-justifying. We expect that an objective

⁷ However, it is possible that this meaninglessness is meaningful if one considers meaninglessness a manifestation of absurdity, and furthermore, that meaningfulness can be found in absurdity. This option will be explored in part III.

⁸ Thomas Nagel, *Mortal Questions*, Cambridge University Press, 1979.

meaning exists, but our attempts to find that meaning show that it is either arbitrary or open to skeptical doubt. Here lies the absurdity of both our question and Life itself. The best mode of meaning we were able to produce was the self-justifying type. If we reject the idea because of its circularity, then we can only conclude that Life is meaningless, or absurd. The absurdity of meaninglessness is as follows. The pretension is that there is such a thing as an objective meaning, the reality is that meaning always relies on a context, or, is self-subsuming. The conflict between our search for meaning and the impossibility of such a meaning existing produces absurdity. Meaninglessness is absurdity.

However, I will argue that absurdity is meaningful.⁹ It is meaningful if we use the combined modes of meaning that rely on synonymy and self-justification. To say that “Life is absurd” gives meaning to life in the synonymous fashion. Life and absurdity are synonyms in this case. This is equivalent to saying, “Life is Life.” If the meaning of Life is absurd, then no further meaning can be discovered. What this amounts to is a brute-fact: Life (the absurd) is. There is the answer: Life just *is*. And what it *is* is absurd. This is a very difficult concept to convey, support, or argue for, hence the repetitions and absurd character of the preceding statements. Perhaps this understanding of the meaning of Life qua absurdity can only be found subjectively. To understand the meaning of Life, a subject must come to this discovery of absurdity, accept it, and then embrace it. To demonstrate the unteachability of this conclusion, and to reiterate the whole of my argument, I offer a reinterpretation of Nozick’s humorous tale of the man searching for meaning and the Indian sage who provides it.

The story tells of a man who traverses the mountains of the Himalayas in search of a wise sage. Upon finding the sage, the man asks “what is the meaning of life?” The sage replies with this statement: “Life is a fountain.” Angry, the man responds, “What do you mean life is a fountain? I have just traveled thousands of miles to hear your words, and all you have to tell me is that? That’s ridiculous.” I will stop the story here, leaving out the humorous punchline. My belief is that both men are right; Life is a fountain, and yes, it is ridiculous [absurd]. Life is fountain in the following respects. First of all, a fountain has no meaning per se, it just is. Second, a fountain perpetuates itself, as no water is introduced or taken away. It merely recirculates and takes on new forms that are manifestations of the form of water in general. Like a fractal, the fountain spouts

⁹ This is a glaring contradiction of the preceding statement. However, this type of contradiction is precisely the kind which defines absurdity. If Life is absurd, these contradictions are merely manifestations of the overall absurdity.

water that splashes down, each splash creates another splash, and so on down to infinitude. All coming-into-being and going-out-of-being is contained in the same fountain, just as all lives are contained in Life in general. What makes the fountain ridiculous is simply the “thereness” of it; there is no apparent meaning, it just is. So Life *is* a fountain, absurd, beautiful, and meaningful in and of itself.