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MAKING THE MOST OF LIFE: A CRITICAL ANALYSIS OF THE WESTERN METAPHYSICAL CONCEPTION OF THE GOOD LIFE

BY

Ikedinachi A. P. Wogu (Ph.D Candidate)

Abstract

Does life have meaning? If so, what is it? Almost everybody has tried their hands at a jigsaw puzzle at one time or another. Typically, the finished picture is represented as the cover of the box. These are helpful in solving the puzzle for without a clue to what you are working towards, the individual pieces are a chaotic and a meaningless jungle of colours and shapes. Without the big picture the individual pieces would almost represent anything. Is the same thing true with our lives? Is life made of fragments of experiences, and events—some of which are often joyous, some tragic, or are they mundane details of our daily routine. Do these pieces of our life contribute to our overall meaning? Do they somehow fit into the bigger picture? What is the meaning of life? Socrates in response to the Sophists of his time strove to divorce life and its true meaning from a conception entangled with skepticism and disorder which saw the fulfillment of life manifested in the acquisition of wealth and fame by whatever means possible. This paper hopes to x-ray the Western metaphysical conception of life while analyzing the existentialist position of the subject, with a view to further elucidate the past attempts at the questions put forward in the first part of this abstract, which, in other words, can be put thus “What is the good life?, What does it take to make the most of it?.”

Introduction

A first insight into the term Philosophy draws one to the ancient conception that the Greek’s associated with philosophy, and that is, “the love of wisdom”. By this definition the earliest usage of the term philosophy associates it with all spheres of knowledge (branches of knowledge). By this, every field of endeavor you could think of, that had to do with one form of language or the other, is regarded as philosophy. The turn of the 19th century however seemed to have changed all that, for various fields and branches of learning have all gained independence living what most people will call, “more variety of speculative subjects that do not fit into the mold of scientific inquiry”. This seeming change in the object of enquiry tends to only draw us further away with issues, questions and inquiries that demand our serious attention and reflection, especially on fundamental issues and inquiries which those other disciplines, now independent, may never in their life time ask.

One of such fundamental issues of great importance is the question of “the meaning of life” You will quite agree with me that this inquiry is a theme and subject that ties together most of the branches of philosophy. This theme for the Germans is known as the “what is life’s purpose and meaning”. Whether there is meaning to any person’s life might depend upon whether the universe has its purpose. It has become obvious that the more we seem to make some great scientific achievements, these discoveries tend to diminish the significance of the individual person. Often you wonder why when you look down on earth from the air-plane, we look to appear infinitesimal. It is natural to wonder why often the question about our being is always taken very seriously; in addition to that, man is always full of anxiety about the future and thus, the search for the meaning of life has become the foremost quest for mankind. In the light of the above quest, these leading questions have been known to be the most probing of all the questions that border on the meaning or the essence of life. (One) Leo Tolstoy, the famous Russian novelist found himself in midlife blessed with fame, wealth and a good family, yet he confessed “what I was standing on and given way, I no longer have a foundation to stand on... I have nothing to live by” (Lawhead, 631). He tells us that his deepest despair came from his inability to answer these questions: “What is the meaning of life? What will come of my life”? On the other hand, Sigmund Freud stated, “The moment a man questions the meaning and the value of life, he is sick (Lawhead, 631). Whose attitude would you agree with the most? Do you think with Tolstoy that all your accomplishments are empty if you do not or cannot answer the question of the meaning of your life? Or do you agree with Freud that this question is a distracting, unhealthy concern that ought to be ignored.

When you think about everything you have done this week (big or small) that helps give your life a meaning, could be a conversation with a friend, listening to some music you enjoy, writing a poem, tutoring a child or even a game of tennis. If your life can be made of an abundance of such small meaningful moments, is it necessary that there be one big purpose to your life? Is the search for the meaning of life a mistaken goal? Or do you think that these passing meaningful moments have to fit into some overall theme or goal for your life to be satisfying? Do we share enough of a common human nature that it is likely that the meaning of life will be more or less the same for everyone? To
this end, the German writer Gotthold Lessing (1729-1781) said, "If God set forth before me the Eternal, Unchangeable truth in his right hand and eternal quest for truth in his left hand and said choose. I will point to the left hand and say "Father give me this" for the eternal and unchangeable truth belongs to you alone".

If faced with this choice, will you choose as Lessing did or would you want to be given the truth without any effort on your part? Generalizing from this, do you think the meaning of life is found in some final trophy you obtain at the end of your searching for it, or is it an ongoing journey of your life itself and simply the joy of living it that makes it worthwhile? These core questions shall form the core premises from where we shall draw inferences for the task that is set before us in this paper. Because the Greeks were known to have been the first who took fundamental steps in this direction, i.e. the quest for an understanding of "the meaning of life" we shall focus on the Greek's perceptions of the concept of I and its meaning. We shall in addition, among other various thinkers and philosophers that we shall explore in Greek philosophy, draw comparison from other contemporary philosophers and thinkers such as Sartre and Kierkegaard, whose existentialism shall be very instrumental to the thorough analysis that we intend to do in these paper. At the end, we shall attempt to place a hand on what the good life is, its purpose and how to make the most of it. It is hoped that this paper will proffer advancement on this fundamental question of the meaning of life and how to make the most of life.

What is Life?

Does life have meaning? If so, what is it? Almost everybody has tried their hands at a jigsaw puzzle at one time or another. Typically, the finished picture is represented as the cover of the box. These are helpful in solving the puzzle for without a clue to what you are working towards the individual pieces are a chaotic and a meaningless jungle of colours and shapes. Consider also a piece that is blue. One would be forward to ask, is this "blue", the blue of the sky, or of the oceans? Is it a path of a cluster of blueberries? Without the big picture the individual pieces would almost represent anything. Is the same thing true with our lives? Our lives are made of fragments of experiences, and events – some of them are joyous, some tragic but some are the mundane details of our daily routine. But do these pieces of our life contribute to our overall meaning? Do they somehow fit into the bigger picture? What is the meaning of life?

Noting the assumptions entailed in the jigsaw metaphor, it suggests that there is a final picture into which we fit the pieces of our lives, as some times we assume that this picture will be the same for each person. In contrast to the jigsaw metaphor, some philosophers would prefer the metaphor of the mosaic. This mosaic is created out of many differently coloured pieces of lives, but they can be arranged in a number of ways where each is believed to take the individual pieces of our lives composing a picture that is meaningful and satisfying to us. However, the meaning of life may not be what is meaningful to you. As we will see, the search for the big picture metaphor would constitute a major division in the way different philosophers struggle with the question of meaning.

In many activities, an understanding of the purpose of these activities is important in understanding what we are doing. For example, the purpose of a football match is to get the highest goals in the back of the goal net of the opponent. In contrast the game of golf is to get the lowest score possible. If you were playing an unfamiliar game in which you moved pieces about a game board but had not a clue as to what the purpose was, you would be in the dark as to whether you are playing well or badly. This is why most philosophers and ordinary people alike believe that worrying about the meaning of life is so important.

Socrates, for instance, pointed out that we all engaged in a particular pursuit, some people are artists, some are business people, and others are physicians or shoe makers. Each particular craft has its own goal and purpose but Socrates says that being a human being itself is an activity in which we are engaged. As in any other activity we engage in, we can either be excellent or do poorly in the job of being a human being. With respect to our lives as an activity, Socrates believed we needed to have a clear conception of what human existence is all about. However, some philosophers will say this is asking for too much. Perhaps what we need to know is the answer to the question "what is life all about". Once again, we are faced with the question of whether the meaning of life would be found in some universal answer or in a number of individual answers. More will be said about Socrates' conception of life as this work progresses.

My study in philosophy since my undergraduate say's shows that from every topic discussed in all philosophy textbooks, I have discovered that these topics shed more light on the question of the meaning of life. Each chapter or topic of a philosophy text provides us with attempts at filling out one portion of the picture whether it is in terms of the nature of knowledge, the nature or reality, religious
issues, ethics, or political thoughts. All these in one way or the other, attempt an explanation to the question and the meaning of life.

Socrates, to some extent, compares life to that of a particular kind of individual, the philosopher. Life, for him, is associated with the individual whose soul has been liberated by wisdom (Stumpf, 11). This is because such a person has learnt to know and therefore can participate in ultimate truth, beauty and goodness. Since these concepts are eternal and unchangeable by the changes of the physical aspect that illustrates them, our ability to know these eternal truths indicate something eternal within us. Since the soul within us is eternal and immaterial, Socrates argued, and since it alone is the real person, then no harm that affects the body can affect it. So if life does not manifest itself in this form, then it has not attained its meaning and as such, its purpose will be illusive and incomprehensible. Life for Socrates then, must always be subjected to constant examination and The moment it stops to exhibit the characteristics mentioned above, in Socrates opinion, it is not worth living. This is expressed in his famous maxim “An unexamined life is not worth living”.

The Greek Conceptions of Life

For Heraclitus, to say that everything was in flux meant that the world is “an ever living fire” whose constant movement is assured by “Measures of it kindling and measures going out”. These “measures”, for Heraclitus, means, “a kind of balance between what kindles and what goes out of the fire”. He also described this balance in terms of financial exchange, saying that all things are an exchange for fire, and fire for all things (Stumpf and Fieser, 16-18). With this explanation Heraclitus maintained that nothing is really ever lost in the nature of things. Similarly, for Heraclitus, all things continue to exist although they exchange their form from time to time.

This flux, Heraclitus believes, is even evident in the life of human beings. It is the process of changing from one form, situation, circumstance of the individual, to another is a demonstration of the characteristics that an individual’s life must manifest if it “HE” must fulfill a purpose or have meaning. The most known way in which this flux occurs is in suffering and pain, against peace and pleasure, love and hate, living and death, the process of death or dying. These features, for Heraclites, are what any meaningful life must partake in if it must occupy a meaningful space in existence can participate in.

For Pythagoras, life’s purpose is geared towards the final mystical triumph of the soul, which is manifested in the individuals’ ability to liberate himself from “the endless will of birth”, which in turn manifests itself in the migration of the soul to animals and other life forms which in the final analysis, leads to a constant progress of “death and rebirth”. Now when this liberation is achieved through basically the study of mathematics and science, which according to the Pythagoreans, is the purest exercise that ensures purification and immortality, then and only then is the soul or life said to have attained its meaningfulness (Russel, 43).

The Sophist Protagoras, the most influential of his contemporaries, was known mostly for the great value he placed on the life of the individual, which is expressed in his famous maxim “man is the measure of all things, of the things that are, that they are and of things that are not, that they are not” (Stumpf and Fieser, 33). By this he means that the life of a person is the ultimate standard of all judgments that he makes. To say that man is the measure of all things, is therefore extrapolated in the idea that our knowledge is measured by what we perceive, but since there is nothing within us that makes us perceive things differently, it becomes difficult to test the truth or falsity of what an individual perceives because of the non-existence of a standard of testing or measurement. The life then that is authentic is the life that takes certain advanced steps towards the qualit for knowledge, the life that, at the end of the day, will be able to distinguish appearance from reality, a feat that has been declared impossible and unattainable for mankind.

A further probe into the Socratic conception of life reveals the fact that the foundation on which knowledge can be built is none other than that within a person and not on the facts of the world outside as most of the ancient Greek thinkers had proposed in the past, when they sought for the ultimate stuff from which every other thing is derived. The soul of the individual in this case is that part of the individual that is responsible for the individual. However difficult it may have been for Socrates to describe exactly what the soul is, he was sure that the activity of soul is to know and influence or even direct and govern a person’s daily conduct.

Although the soul is not a thing, he could say that our greatest concern should be the proper caring for our soul as to make the soul as good as possible. One who has taken care of his soul is said to understand the difference between fact and fancy, building thought patterns of what the human life is really like. Having attained such knowledge, those who have the proper care of their soul in mind will conduct their behaviour in accordance with the knowledge of true moral values. By this, we infer correctly that Socrates was mostly concerned about the good life and not with mere contemplation. Therefore, the good life is manifested in the ability of the individual to nurture the soul
and to allow it guide him in its day to day decision making process. But before we launch fully into what the good life means, let us consider some basic questions that have been raised since the time the quest for the meaning of life started. A fair attempt to answer these questions will prepare us for the next part of our study on "the good life".

Questions about the Meaning of Life

While there are many varieties of answers to the question, "what is the meaning of life" it may be helpful to set out a general classification of the answers. The range of answers can be organized under four main headings:

1. There are those who find the question to be too obscured or ill-formed to lead to a satisfactory answer.
2. There are those who seek the answer in some sort of religious or metaphysical ancient of human life and its relationship to the grand scheme of things.
3. There are those who claim that human life is meaningless.
4. There are those who claim that people can find personal meaning in their individual lives even though there is not some grand, pre-given meaning to human life in general. We will briefly discuss each of their positions in turn.

Pessimistic Approach

Firstly, there is a group of people who feel and claim that the whole issue discussed in this paper (the question of the meaning of life) is a meaningless one. For example, we can ask "what time it is in Chicago"? However, it makes no sense to ask "what time it is on the sun" because we tell time on earth with respect to our relationship with the sun. Similarly, we can ask the meaning of the Igbo word "mama" or we can ask the meaning of a painting or a novel. But some philosophers think we well fall into a linguistic muddle when we ask the same question about human existence.

Ronald Hepburn observes that many philosophers today contend that "Questions about the meaning of life are, very often, conceptually obscure and confused, these are amalgams of logically diverse questions, some coherent and answerable, some neither". For example, in response to the question about the meaning of human existence, American philosopher Sidney Hook writes, "it would be easy to show... that it is these questions themselves and the answers to them that are meaningless." When the 20th Century philosopher Bertrand Russell was challenged to explain what meaning life can have to an agnostic, he replied, "I feel inclined to answer by another question. "What is the meaning of (the meaning of life)?" Nevertheless, most philosophers insist that though the question of the meaning of life is complicated, it is too important to easily dismiss it this way. In fact, the philosophers just quoted will say that the question is meaningless. That is, if we are looking for some single, ultimate purpose to human existence, while acknowledging that the question may be meaningful in some more qualified sense.

The Theistic Approach

The second major approach to the question of the meaning of life is taken by philosophers who seek the answer in some sort of religious or metaphysical account. Those philosophers think that there is one grand picture into which the individual pieces of our lives can be fitted (Remember the jigsaw metaphor I mentioned at the beginning of this work). They look for an all-encompassing perspective that transcends the human situation and in terms of which human life can be given meaning. In other words, they seek for the MEANING of the life typically this is the approach of most religious thinkers who believe that humans were brought into the world to serve some divine purpose. However, the search for some ultimate meaning is not confined exclusively to religious philosophers. There are some philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle who sought for the ultimate purpose of human life in the rational nature of the cosmos or in the structure of the human nature without referring to any divine purpose. According to Theists, the world is a purposeful creation of a loving, intelligent God. Likewise they say, "we've been created to fulfill divine purpose which is to live in relationship with our creator and to follow the path laid out for us. As the Russian novelist puts it, "the meaning of life consists in the love and service of God."

A popular quote often attributed to the 17th century mathematician and philosopher B. Pascal, "There is a God shaped vacuum in every man's heart; that only God can fill" (Moore, 2003). Similarly, the Hindu teacher Kierkegaard wrote, "Until you have found God in your own soul, the world will seem meaningless to you." This contrasts the cynicism of American writer, Elbert Hubbard who said, "Life is just one damned thing after another. The religious view claims that life has meaning because there is an objective order of value rooted in the nature of God (The Bible). For this reason, the
American philosopher William James said, "the smallest details of this world derive sufficient significance from their relation to an unseen divine order".

Finally, for the theists, death is not the final chapter of life, for we are made for eternity. Our life is not like a beautiful soap bubble that lasts for a while and then is gone. As the American author Nathaniel Hawthorne said, "our creator would never have made such lovely days and have given us the dip heart to enjoy them, unless we are made to be immortal."

The third approach is that of the pessimist. To put it simply, the pessimist's claim that there is no meaning to life. This position is sometimes referred to as "Nihilism", which literally means "Nothing is Ultimate". In other words, nihilism is the claim that there are no ultimate values worth pursuing. Ironically, the pessimist argue with the religious-metaphysical view that if life is to be meaningful, there must be some ultimate transcendent, enduring values and that the meaning of life is found in some ultimate purpose that human beings are given. However, the pessimist believes that there are no such ultimate values and purpose and so concludes that, in the final analysis, life can have no meaning. This pessimist view is expressed in Shakespeare's Macbeth, where life is described by our character as "a tale told by an idiot-full of sound and fury signifying nothing."

The 9th century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer gives this grim analysis of the human condition:

What a difference there is between our beginning and our end! We begin in the madness of carnal desire and the transport of voluptuousness. We end in the dissolution of all our parts and the murky stench of corpses and the road from the one to the other too goes in regard to our well being and enjoyment of life, steadily down hill: happily dreaming childhood, exultant youth, toy-filled years of manhood, infirmed and often wretched old age, the torment of the last illness and finally the throes of which death - does it not look as if existence were an error, the consequences of gradually grows more and more manifest? We shall do best to think of life as... a process of disillusionment: since this is clearly enough, what everything that happens to us is calculated to produce (Sanders and Cheney, 1970).

Secular-Humanism Approach

The fourth approach could be secular-Humanism. Advocates of this view think that there is no ultimate meaning to either the universe or human life. Secular-humanism sees the pieces of our lives fitting together to make many interesting and satisfying combinations but without supposing that there is one, pre-given picture that we were all intended to complete. These Philosophers contended that life could be worth living in terms of the little that we find or create during our own journey in life. While the religious metaphysical approach says our lives will be meaningful only if we discover the purpose of life, the secular humanist says we can leave meaningful lives if we individually find purpose in our respective lives.

In contrast to the jigsaw metaphor, where there is only one final picture into which we fit the pieces of our lives, the secular humanist will use the mosaic metaphor. The fact is that our lives are made up of many moments and experience of birth, friendship, love, suffering, a career and finally death, these are common characteristics to all. Other experiences are unique to each individual. From these pieces, each of us is trying to compose a meaningful pattern; each of us is engaged in the project of making our lives into a work of arts for which there is no pre-given pattern that we are merely duplicating. While there may be some general similarities between different lives, still each of us is composing our own unique picture, playing off of this sort of metaphor.

How then do I Identify a Good Life?

Playing on the sort of metaphor mentioned above, contemporary existentialist Hezel Barnus says, "If the maker finds value in his creation, if the process of making is satisfying, if the end result compares sufficiently and favorably with the intention, then the pattern has value and the intention and the individual life has been worthwhile (Hazel, 107)." Barnes goes on to point out that our individual patterns can merge with those of others in a satisfying way. Furthermore, even though each person is engaged in making his or her own life into a pattern, we can obtain additional satisfaction when others have declared our pattern to be good.

Finally, Barnes says that we can rest content that our lives have been meaningful if how we lived it "has helped make it easier for others to live patterns intrinsically satisfying to them". To both religious person and the pessimist, the ravages of time and death destroy any value we have created except we have an eternal destiny. But to this objection, Ronald Hedburn replies:
Consider the famous claim that life is meaningless if death ends all, that the necessary condition of life being meaningful is immortality or resurrection. Against this, it is argued that there is no entailment between temporal finiteness and disvalue, futility. We can and do love flowers that fade; and the knowledge that they will fade away may even enhance their preciousness. To be everlasting... is no necessary or sufficient condition of value or worthwhileness, nor therefore of meaningfulness (Hepburn, 125-140).

The Socratic Teachings on the Good Life

To further capture the Greek conception of life, we will closely consider the teachings of Socrates who philosophized about such topics as the nature of knowledge, the nature of reality, religion and political philosophy. It is important that we also mention at this point that Socrates was also interested in these topics primarily because of the light they shed on the question how should we live if we are to be successful and fulfilled human beings. In other words, what is life and how am I to live and live aright, was one issue Socrates sought to address. His teachings on these subjects can be captured in three different theses:

1. The unexamined life is not worth living
2. The most important task in life is caring for the soul (the real person)
3. A good person can not be harmed by others

We will analyze these teachings with the view to showing how it influences the question of life and how to make the best of it.

The Unexamined Life is not Worth Living

As was evident in his remarks during his trial, Socrates was deeply worried that his contemporaries were like dozing cattle’s who at the end of their life will sleepily look around, not knowing who they were, where they were at that point in time, or what their life had been all about all this while. In contrast, Socrates has as his motto, the inscription written at the temple at Delphi: “know thy self”. In his own opinion, the examined life and examined belief lead to life that is responsible and fully awake. To use a metaphysical cliché, everyone in Socrates society was so busy “keeping the ball rolling”, they had never asked what the ball was, nor why they had to keep the ball rolling, or where at the ball was going to. For Socrates, what is important is not so much what we do, for our activities can change. What is important is who we are and who we are trying to become. The core of this Socratic doctrine is that making oneself as good as possible is the true goal in life, and the key to finding genuine meaning to a successful life.

The most Important Task in Life is the Caring of the Soul

Making the most of life as it affects the good life demands that the individual in question be engaged in a particular activity. For Socrates, in response to what gives meaning to life, the most important task an individual should embark on in life as the caring of the soul. According to Socrates, the soul is not some ghostly shadow accompanying us, as Homer and the Greek poets assumed. Instead the soul is the real person. It is our core personality or character and is the source of all our thought, value and decision. The state of a person’s soul makes him either foolish or wise. Like the body the soul (inner person) can be healthy or diseased. In this light ignorance for Socrates is the most deadly disease of the soul. Of course, this ignorance is not the sort that can be cured by memorizing an encyclopedia, instead the unhealthy soul is one that is ignorant of the true priorities in life. Although Socrates believed in life after death, this belief was not his motive for being concerned for the moral health of the soul. As Gregory Vlastos says:

The soul is worth caring for if it were to last twenty-four hours more, as if it were out of eternity. If you have just one more day to live and can expect nothing but a blank after that, Socrates feels that you still have every reason you need for improving your soul, you have yourself to live with that one day, so why live with a worst self, if you could live with a better one instead (5-6).

This subject of the good life was further promoted by the existence of some very influential group of people called the sophists who being skeptics believed that "Moral Goodness" and truth are just sound that we make with our mouth. They really do refer to anything. They therefore thought
that one person's opinion was as good as another persons' opinion. As such they thought that we can not know what is true or right. The only goal therefore in life is to achieve success by whatever means possible. Socrates was also bothered about the sophist idea of success which they taught people. For The sophist idea of success was to acquire wealth power and fame by whatever means available. For the sophist, when you succeed in acquiring all these, you have a good life. But, this, to Socrates was far from being correct.

Socrates believed that his contemporaries had not really taken out time to examine what it means to be successful in life. What they were really doing in Socrates point of view is that they were merely trying to be successful businessmen, politicians, lawyers, physicians and athletes or artists. But in reality, they never really considered that realizing their potentials as a person was the most important occupation they had in life. If one from the onset sets out to fully commit himself with this occupation, he will at the end of his life be able to say that he has made the most of the best of his life and will, as such have no cause to regret anything.

The Existentialist Conception of the Good Life

Before we end this paper on the meaning of life and existence, it is important that we further examine briefly the existentialists' conception of the good life, what the existentialists call Authentic Existence. Philosophers since inception have occupied themselves with the quest of discovering that single stuff, which all things can be traced to, that is, what everything consist of. The ancient Greek opinion varied on what this stuff could be. For Thales it was water, for Anaximenes, it was air, for Heraclitus it was fire, Pythagoras proclaimed that it was numbers. During the medieval era, the church fathers' and the thinkers of that time saw the application of faith as the only thing that will bring to an end the quest that man sought for in the knowledge of God and about human reality and existence. But during the modern era, the positivists and the thinkers of the analytical school condemned anything that could not be subjected to an empirical and scientific analysis. This was so because science to them was the only means through which reality and all other related issues pertaining to life and existence can be achieved.

But in the contemporary time, existentialists thought differently from all what the other philosophers had believed should be the centre of focus and discourse among scholars. According to the existentialists, the most important subject is the question of existence. If the meaning of life must be understood, the ultimate question of what "the truth is" must be addressed. In other words, if the philosophy and meaning of life must be understood, the question of "Knowing the truth" versus "being in the truth" as it affects life and existence must be fully grasped, as it is the only factor that fosters authentic existence (The Good Life).

Of the early contemporary existentialists that came up during the 19th Century till date, we see the works of Soren Kierkegaard as very insightful especially as regards the subject in focus. Kierkegaard spent most of the latter part of his life devoted to writing literary philosophy and theological works. Though they represented a variety of styles and specific topics, his work was devoted to calling individuals to live authentic, passionate and honest lives, while repudiating the temptation to find out meaning and identity in situations or abstractions.

Truth and Subjectivity

The question is often asked, "Is truth objective or is it persona? Is it possible to have true ideas that make no difference to your life? Which is more difficult to acquire, correct knowledge or correct decisions? To these questions that men have had to ask every now and then, Kierkegaard has this to say:

What I really lack is to be clear in my mind, what I am to do, not what I am to know, except in so far as a certain understanding must precede every action. The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wishes me to do; the thing is to find the truth which is true for me, to find the idea which I can live and die for (Breitl, 4-5).

In this single response (written in a journal when he was in a University) we find Kierkegaard's life mission declaration. Here we noticed these words contain two of the major themes in his philosophy:

1) Acting decisively and finding self understanding, rather than acquiring theoretical knowledge. These, to him are the crucial tasks each of us must face in life.
2) All the objective truth in the world will be useless if I do not subjectively appropriate it, if I do not make it something that is "true to me".

Throughout history, most philosophers have thought that the main task we face is how to rise above our subjectivity to obtain objective truth. For Kierkegaard, however, objectivity is the stance to take. Objectivity is uncomfortable because I can hide behind the mask of logic and empirical evidence and need not have to reveal myself. In doing so, I am refusing to bear the burden of recognizing my beliefs as my own choice of a personal stance for which I and I alone am responsible. By this Kierkegaard discovers that it is not subjectivity but authentic subjectivity that requires the greatest effort.

The second reason why so many traditional philosophers have been suspicious of subjectivity is because they assume that it is necessarily bad. But there are both a bad and a good sort of subjectivity. The bad kind of subjectivity occurs when some one’s personal interest and prejudice interfere with his or her ability to judge a situation correctly. Subjectivity in this pejorative sense is associated with the term arbitrary, idiosyncratic, and biased, as when a referee unfairly favours one team over another because he has placed a bet on the game.

However, subjectivity can also mean "necessarily related to the subject" in the sense (the type of subjectivity that concerns the existentialist). To say that an outlook or a decision is "subjective" means that it is inescapably related to the agent's needs, interests or values. In this sense, your choice concerning a career, relationship, ethical commitment and religion are subjective choices.

It is obvious that Kierkegaard has a way of catching the attention of his readers by the way he states his opinions. In contrast to philosophers' emphasis on objectivity, he boldly states "truth is subjectivity". What does he mean by this statement? He certainly does not mean that truth is whatever you want it to be. Instead, he is stressing that to know the truth in the fullest sense, it must be personally appropriated. It must make a difference in your life and you as a person must be intimately involved in it. Similarly, Kierkegaard stressed that there is a difference between knowing the truth as "something out there living external to me" and living the truth as something that affects every aspect of my life. For example, every person with intelligence embraces a very elevated moral theory but could be a sycophant in actual practice. Such a person will adjuntively know the truth but will not be subjectively living the truth. In contrast, a person could live a moral exemplary life but be incapable of articulating those moral principles in a proportional form.

Knowing the Truth Versus being in the Truth

While Kierkegaard's examples were primarily concerned with a person's relationship to God, later existentialists broadened his view of truth to include all stance towards life. Kierkegaard's dichotomy between knowing the truth and being in the truth is a good example of a general principle that can be appropriated both within the without a religious context. He said that there are two kinds of people, those who suffer and those who become professors of suffering. His comment explains the difference between knowledge that can only be gained by participating in life and knowledge that is approached in a detached academic sort of way. For Kierkegaard, "the professors" is not just an occupation, it is an attitude towards life. Its point was reflected in the words of a little-known author, Fredrick Hebbels who once said: "The Hell-fire of life consumes, only the select among men, the rest stand in front of a warming their hand" (Hebbels, 11).

The Kierkegaardian theme can be illustrated with several analogies. For example, here is how to ride a bike: Adjust the curvature of your bicycle's path in proportion to the ratio of your unbalance over the square of your speed (Polanyi, 1962). Obviously, knowing that physics formula will not enable you to ride a bicycle (Even though by participating in that reality and having the objective experience of feeling the point of balance and not through an intellectual understanding of physics formula).

The distinction between objectively knowing the truth and subjectivity being in the truth related to another distinction, Kierkegaard makes between the result and the process. In some cases, the result can be separated — for example, you can look u the distance from the earth to the moon in a book. You can get the result without having to go through the process of calculating it yourself. On the other hand, you can become physically fit in a second-hand way. The only way to get the result is to go through the process yourself. For Kierkegaard, the kind of truth that really matters (self knowledge, the way one should live, or religious understanding) is most similar to physical fitness than to mathematical information. What you know is bound up with how you know it. The journey to self-understanding is a tortuous one that only you can take.

One last point will help make Kierkegaard's point clear. During the undergraduate philosophy seminar I was in, a philosopher who was famous for his defense to the argument to logical symbols
that were spread all over the white board, at the end of this chatter of mathematical symbols were the conclusions: "God the greatest possible being necessarily exist." (Lawhead, 2013). One of my friends exclaimed to me "Damn! The argument is sound. I can't find any logical errors in it!" Then a look of horror came over his face because he was a doctoral student in philosophy who was committed to living his life on the basis of reason, and he has just been presented with an argument of God's existence that he thought was sound. Yet he realized that when he left the room, his life would be no different. Kierkegaard would have understood what this young man was feeling, because he believed that objective truth was sterile, dry, cold and useless if it did not make any subjective impact on a person's life.

Kierkegaard may be criticized for making too severe a dichotomy between the subjective and the objective. Perhaps he failed to realize that objective considerations and passionate inquiry can work together. After all, the word philosophy is "the love of wisdom". However, Kierkegaard was arguing to bring some balance to philosophical tradition that he believed had swung too far away from the subjective side of life and had over-emphasized theoretical detachment. It is interesting to know that the word theory comes from a Greek word whose root is related to the word theater. When we are in a theater we are spectators viewing that action on as stage from a distance. Similarly Kierkegaard complained, many people go through life as detached spectators theorizing about it but never really becoming engaged in it. For Kierkegaard, providing theoretical arguments to someone desperate to find meaning is like lecturing on the chemical properties of water to someone dying of thirst.

Conclusion

On a general note, for Kierkegaard, the meaning of life is found only in an encounter with God, he believed that when we stand psychologically naked before God, freed from our social masks and self deception, we will find ourselves in that encounter. Perhaps you'll agree with Kierkegaard about this and then again maybe you don't. Either way, he has some important considerations for any one facing the ultimate decision about the meaning of his or her life. Kierkegaard insights can be summarized in five interrelated pieces of advice as you consider your stance towards the meaning of life. Let me add that, his insights are not just unique to his religious brand of existentialism, for an existentialist such as Jean Paul Sartre makes the same points. His insights are as follows:

The Existentialist Five Basic Insights to Life

1. Find your own answers and not those of others

In one of these journals Soren Kierkegaard said, "There are many people who reach their conclusion about life like school boys; they cheat their masters by copying their answer from a booklet without having to work out the sum out themselves". In philosophy as in mathematics (arithmetic) using someone else answer may work in the short run, but it doesn’t help you get through life in the long run. You can model your life after great minds in philosophy but in the end, you have to work out the sum for yourself.

The point is that philosophy is both personal and subjective in the same way that death is personal and objective. Death is personal because it matters to me, yet at the same time death is an objective task about the human condition. Hence in philosophy, the personal and the subjective are intertwined. Underlying every objective claim is a personal judgment. I can follow the standard of divine commands, impersonal reason or the finding of science, yet in each case, I am making a personal judgment that I believe is trustworthy and that I am well secured in following it.

The converse is also true. Underlying every personal judgment is an objective claim. Personal judgments in philosophy are made covering what is true, fine or good or what I should do. However, as Sartre points out, I am thereby making an objective claim that this is the best way to look at things and it will be so for anyone in my situation in the final analysis. Philosophy could be understood as the attempt to subjectivity appropriating what I have found to be objectively true.

2. Take a stand but not that of a spectator

One of the worst classes I have ever taught was a course on business ethics to undergraduate accounting major students. Besides the problems caused by my failures as a teacher the students did not understand how discussing all these ethical issues would be practically useful in their management careers. But when I taught in a workshop to professional accountants in industry, their response was astonishing. These practicing accountants were "down on the field" experiencing the ethical pressures to compromise their professional integrity so that this ethical figure will be favorable to their employer. Consequently, they were enthusiastic about what I had to say and eagerly shared their own "etrix horror stories”. To illustrate the points I was making, in contrast, the
college students could not appreciate the relevance of the classes because they were still viewing the profession as a spectator or from detached standpoints.

3. Understand the inescapable place of choice, commitments and responsibility.

   For every option there are three responses: "Yes", "No" and "I will decide latter". For some questions we can choose the third response, for instance, if you ask me whether there is life out there is space, I would respond "I don’t know". Or I’ll say "I will wait and decide when we get more information". This alternative is acceptable because nothing in my life hinges on that question. But with respect to the question we face concerning the meaning of life, we do not have this luxury. We are like someone at sea trying to decide which way to steer his ship, if we put off the decision, then we will steer aimlessly until death overtakes us. With our philosophy of life, as with Marine navigation, we have to make the best decision we can, using all the information we have. In this case, not making a decision is really making a decision, but making it passively and irresponsibly. Kierkegaard ridicules the strategy of making a decision until one achieves absolute and objective certainty, however for some questions, we can’t wait forever. This is because putting off a decision may be putting off a decision indefinitely, by doing this, one may be making a decision by default. Example of such issues might be “shall I wait to be rescued or should I try to find my way back to a safe spot” or “shall I marry this person” or “shall I embrace this philosophy?” In this case the evidence can be a matter of approximation. But the decision must be a flat "Yes" or "No". However, the really worthwhile goals in life require a greater amount of risk and a greater amount of commitment.

4. Be rational and objective in all your considerations irrespective of other’s philosophy.

   One of the major decisions in Kierkegaard’s life was whether or not to marry the love of his life Regina Olsen. Even though Kierkegaard had an advanced degree in philosophy, he knew all the logic in the world could not make the decision in a passionate and personal way. It was not a decision of what to do or what kind of life he would live but even profoundly. It was a decision as to what person he could be? Philosophy and rational considerations make this issue and the option clearer for us and can also inform our decision, but in the end, we’ll have to decide which arguments are most compelling, which philosophy is the most coherent, and what choice we will make. Socrates, Aristotle, Descartes, Hume, Kant, Skinner, Mill and all other philosophers have drawn maps for you, which were made on their intellectual journeys. However, you have to make your own journey and decide from all these considerations, which is the best direction to go.

5. Live out your choice authentically.

   Kierkegaard once describe the sort of person who has made the socially acceptable choice in life and who (from external appearance) is an ideal person.

   Outwardly he is completely a real man; he is a university man, husband and father, an uncommonly competent civil funcionary. Even a respected father, very gentle to his wife and carefulness itself with respect to his children. And a Christian? Will,....yes, he is that too....after a sort (Löwe, 1977). 

   The problem is that this person (as Kierkegaard described) lacks self. He is nothing but collection of social roles: husband, father, civil servant. The preceding lines could fit any number of people. The question is "where is the unique authentic self behind all this description?" In another passage he describes another kind or person. By seeing a multitude of men about him, by getting engaged in all sorts of worldly affairs, by becoming wise about how things go in this world, such a man forgets himself.....does not dare to believe in himself, finds it too venturesome a thing to be himself, far easier and safer to be like others, to become an imitation, a number, a cipher in the crowd. 

   In some tasks in life, you can be cautious and experimental. Trying things out in small doses. If you are not sure whether you will like a spicy sauce, you try a little bit of it on you meat before plopping a whole bunch on it. But with philosophy it is different. "Try a little bit of this and a little bit of that" approach doesn’t work very well for our stand towards life.

   Finally, in stressing the importance of commitments and making decision, I haven’t meant to imply that you should never change your mind. Many of the great philosophers made radical shifts in their point of view throughout their careers. However, these shifts were not impulsive or capricious. They changed their minds only because they passionately embrace a philosophy and were continually putting it to the test, both within their lives and in the area of ideals. While a commitment to our own
philosophical stance is important, it should always be trumped by our commitments to the truth. Then and only then can life be said to be geared towards an authentic living.

I have made a vivid attempt to expose "the meaning of life", the path towards "a good life and authentic living". You are the one who really will decide what kind of life you live, the decision is all yours. I hope you will choose wisely.

Works Cited


