



THE MEANING OF LIFE AND THE GREAT PHILOSOPHERS

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Preface

What is the meaning of life? A great many people ask that question at some point during their lives. By visiting the website ExcellenceReporter.com, you can discover what over 800 thoughtful individuals, from all walks of contemporary life, think the meaning of life is. But although many different kinds of people are interested, and may bring valuable insights to the matter, if there is one particular walk of life from which you would expect to hear some especially strong answers, it is philosophy. It is a philosophical question, after all, so if there is any point to having philosophical traditions in our world, it is surely to shed light on questions like this.

There are some people, however, who are suspicious both of the question, and of philosophy's ability to address it. There are hard-core scientific rationalists who think the best answers always have to be scientific, and there are hard-line religious thinkers who want faith to override this kind of philosophical questioning. But they must realize that in expressing such views, they are entering into core philosophical territory. To persuade us that the question is not legitimate, they would have to engage in philosophical reasoning more compelling than all the reasoning which has been invested in the question throughout the history of philosophy; reasoning which makes it seem very

much as if the question is a perfectly reasonable one to ask – a question to which many sensible answers can be provided, even if they are sometimes rather speculative. With it being the most iconic of all philosophical questions, and with so many of the acknowledged greats having said ingenious things about it, it would be surprising indeed if it were not a genuine question, indicative of genuine issues. And with so many people still asking the question, and philosophy the obvious place to turn for answers, those answers must surely be a great source of potential for developing interest in philosophy.

There is still a job to be done, however, in isolating the answers the great philosophers gave, given that very few of them told us anything remotely in the ballpark of: ‘I think the meaning of life is so and so.’ The actual phrase ‘the meaning of life’ – the origin of which is the topic of our Postscript, ‘The Blue Flower’ – only acquired widespread currency during the nineteenth century. Long before it caught on, however, the issues ‘meaning of life’ now readily indicates to us were most certainly being discussed. What is problematic in

trying to encapsulate the highlights of this discussion is that even after the standard label was culturally embedded, the issues it indicates were typically discussed amid so many other concerns, and under such a wide range of different terminologies, that it can sometimes be far from obvious what a particular philosopher's views in the area amount to. Even Heidegger, who arguably did more than anyone else to place the topic firmly on the map of twentieth-century philosophy, chose to address 'the meaning of Being' rather than 'the meaning of life'; and he certainly made no clear and succinct statements about what he thought the meaning of Being was.

The task of compiling and consolidating the history of philosophy's wealth of opinion on the meaning of life was delayed in the twentieth century by the rise of hard-core scientific rationalism within Anglophone philosophy. Since the topic seemed paradigmatically unscientific to the logical positivists, as well to those who fell under their widespread influence, it began to be shunned. But as seems to be known to everyone else apart from hard-core scientific rationalists, science cannot answer every question that interests us. There are questions we can ask about our existence – such as about the meaning of life – which science is simply ill-equipped to address. The same could be said about innumerable other questions that may concern us throughout our lives, such as those about our personal relationships or careers; about how the next waves of technological innovation will affect us; about the status of science within human understanding; or about the fact that there is a reality at all.

Anyone can ask philosophical questions, of course, and some may be able to bring scientific knowledge usefully to bear on them; but they are still philosophical questions whoever is asking or trying to address them – ‘philosophical’ is just the label that has been given to questions such as that of the meaning of life. Hard-core scientific rationalism might lead you to think the questions must be spurious if they cannot be addressed by science; or that if any legitimate issues are indicated by such questions, then they must be ones which science can indeed address. But since hard-core scientific rationalism itself rests on contentious philosophy, we need not allow it to deflect us from taking an interest in the meaning of life. Concerns about the legitimacy of the question need only be addressed if the philosophy behind the concerns is good enough. So unless it obviously is good enough – which is not how it seems to us – these concerns need not be a priority. The fact that there is scepticism about climate science does not mean that those interested in what the science has to say must first address the scepticism. For we might be prepared to assume that the science is good; and likewise, in the case of the meaning of life, we might be prepared to assume that the philosophy is good.

As the twentieth century wore on, and the heyday of positivism became an increasingly distant memory, a growing trickle of Anglophone philosophers became prepared to work on the assumption that there are, at the very least, good philosophical questions in the area. In time, the meaning of life started to look prime for a comeback; which only actually occurred during the last