

International Conference

In Search of the Meaning of Life

Gdańsk, 16–17 June 2023

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Patronat medialny:



In Search of the Meaning of Life

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Abstracts

The University of Gdańsk
The Institute of Philosophy

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Ronald Alvarez Vera

Complutense University of Madrid, Spain

ronalkeastro@gmail.com

Meaning Through Creation

All the material world that exist around us has been imagine and created by someone. It is in our nature to create. Henri Bergson called it *Elon vital* as a creative energy that resides within us, the energy of life that expands in all directions and kind of manifestations. We are constantly creating our life through ideas, emotions, movement and action. Autopoiesis is a term used to define a system that produces and maintains itself by creating its own parts. Human creativity is the autopoiesis of our existence. The meaning of human life is to express life itself by creating, not exclusively life through procreation, but manifesting the creative aspect that allows humans to make real their own dreams. However, human innate desire create needs to be balance and respectful with nature itself. Creating opens the infinity possibilities for our evolution. Therefore, art, literature, music, dance or any kind of creation that express the uniqueness of each individual thoughts and emotions, reflecting the connection with our inner power, will help the entire humankind to comprehend itself. Even artificial intelligence may illuminate this path if it really help us in our way to keep learning and evolving, not making us mentally lazy or emotional disconnected with reality.

Kierkegaard considered that life can only be understood when we look into our past. Then, let's begin to create a better, more colorful and harmonic present that our future self will contemplate when looking at its own past.

Nafsika Athanasouli

Independent Researcher, Greece

nafsika@komselis.gr

On Parental Love

The love parents feel for children is one of the central experiences of being human and living a good life. Despite being a unique kind of love, it has received little philosophical attention. In this paper I want to take some first steps in remedying this philosophical neglect.

I will present an account of parental love within two contexts. The first is the idea that parental love is a relational concept and we need to consider the wider context of the relationship to understand the love. The second is that parents support their child's flourishing but this can only be understood in light of helping children become agents who make their own virtuous choices.

I will then discuss the distinctive nature of parental love for children. Unlike other kinds of love which tend to strengthen with time and increase the degree of intimacy and reciprocity, parent/child love is an on-going process of change and adjustment, which is more likely to include elements of letting go and distancing.

Finally, I will bring the idea of choice as central to flourishing together with the distinctive nature of parental love to account for the unique role of parents in cultivating their child's flourishing.

Kathy Behrendt

Wilfrid Laurier University, Canada

k.a.behrendt@gmail.com

“Local and Global Meaning, and the Myth of Resolution”

One way of approaching questions of meaning in life focuses on the nature and content of our pursuits, asking whether some kinds are more meaningful than others. Any answers we arrive at may, at least in theory, serve as guidelines for rational decision-making about what to do in and with our life.

Another approach focuses on temporal structure, asking whether meaning in life is local (having to do with the way things are at the time of their occurrence) or global (a matter of the relations between events in life). In much of the literature, this question is also treated as a potentially practical exercise—one that can yield results that may guide us in fashioning a (more) meaningful existence for ourselves.

I propose that the “content” and the “structure” approaches to meaning in life, while not incompatible, are importantly different in terms of their practical application. While the content question clearly deals with competing theories, the structure question does not. Competition, at the structural level, is internal to the subject herself: one endeavour can be seen for both its meaningfulness at a time and for its meaningfulness within the life as a whole (or some subsection thereof). Although we may actively choose, or be psychologically impelled, to favour one way of seeing over another, both remain cognitively available to us. And so, the conflict cannot be entirely resolved even in theory, and remains an ingrained feature of our lives. What’s more, I argue, we neglect

a primary fact of meaningfulness in human life when we claim or imply that there is a single best answer to the question of whether the meaningfulness of our pursuits is local or global. Part of the challenge, interest, and significance of human life springs from our capacity to hold both perspectives in mind.

John Cottingham

University of Reading, UK

jgcottingham@mac.com

Human Nature, the Cosmos, and the Meaning of Life

A variety of activities and projects may give people a sense of meaning in their lives, but there always remains a deeper question about the meaning of human life itself – a question that concerns our place within the wider scheme of things. This paper will argue that human beings cannot ultimately avoid confronting the baffling question of the nature of the cosmos in which we find ourselves, and how we are related to it. A religious perspective does not (as some of its defenders claim) ‘solve’ this question by offering metaphysical answers to the mystery of existence, but can be seen instead as offering us a system of praxis for living ‘in accordance with nature’ (as the Stoics put it), and thereby aligning ourselves with an ultimate source of meaning and value.

Hernan Guerrero Troncoso

Pontifical University John Paul II in Krakow, Poland

herrguerrero@gmail.com

Between Divine Foreknowledge and Eternal Return. Is It Meaningful to Talk about the Meaning of Life?

At two opposite extremes of the metaphysical spectrum, the Scholastic doctrine of divine foreknowledge and Nietzsche's proposal of an Eternal Return of the Same might seem to arrive at the same conclusion: There is no pre-established meaning of life. Either it lies elsewhere, namely in God, or it is assumed – and, in a sense, established, – by someone capable of resisting “the heaviest of all heavy weights”. In fact, given that both positions deal with freedom, it would be safe to say that a meaning of life would be incompatible with freedom, since it would involve some kind of determinism.

The proposed conference intends to deal with this apparent incompatibility between freedom and a meaning of life. First, it will outline a significant Scholastic view on divine foreknowledge, one that emphasizes the importance of the will in that kind of knowledge, namely the position of John Duns Scotus, in order to get some perspective on how God's foreknowledge of future contingent events is related to freedom. Secondly, it will present Nietzsche's proposal of an eternal return under the light of this particular tradition, so that it becomes clear how this proposal complements the traditional view, only to project it once the metaphysical foundations that supported it collapsed (i.e., once it is assumed that God is dead.) Finally, it will address the main problem, whether a meaning of life is compatible with freedom and with the infinite possibilities that lie ahead in a world, whose destiny has not been not pre-established since eternity

Katarzyna Gurczyńska-Sady

Pedagogical University of Krakow, Poland

katarzyna.gurczynska-sady@up.krakow.pl

Is the Meaning of Life a Result of a Conclusion or an Insight?

In my speech, I would like to present two possible ways of approaching the issue of answering the question of the meaning of life.

One is represented in the existentialist-hermeneutical approach and assumes the possibility of searching for the sense in connection with the current condition of man, the situation in which he finds himself and which he tries to understand. Meaning of life appears here as the purpose, which lights the current existence of man. This approach appears not only in the broadly understood philosophical tradition, but also in the colloquial discourse.

The second approach assumes the need for transformation, which uncovers the meaning of life, reveals itself when what was covering it disappears, dissolves. I want to show this approach based on the thoughts of David Bohm - a philosopher and physicist, the author of the book "Dialogue" (recently translated by me - Warsaw: PWN 2023). This thinker indicates the possibility of reaching this sense through a kind of contemplation of the way we think. He is the author of the concept in which thinking is understood as what creates a system consisting mainly of what has been thought and what does not disappear but affects our current perception. Getting to know this system allows us to change our perception, which is tantamount to a transformation that turns a human being into a moral subject capable of living meaningful

life. Presenting this concept, I will refer to the thoughts of Socrates and Rhineland mystics.

My conclusions will be formed as a result of the comparison of these two approaches.

Jeffrey Hanson

Harvard University, USA

jhanson@fas.harvard.edu

Virtues in Promotion of Meaning in Life

One previous criticism of Susan Wolf’s integrated theory of meaning in life is that the subjective component (often described as “fulfillment” or “engagement”) is vague and ill-defined (Metz, 2013). In response to this criticism, I offer an account of the subjective component of meaning in life as consisting in “endorsement.” To endorse one’s values is to identify with them and to be willing to be evaluated as a success or failure to attain and promote those values. My argument about endorsement suggests that authenticity is in fact a virtue, indeed the primary virtue or proto-virtue that promotes meaningfulness. I describe authenticity and suggest how it can unlock other related virtues of faith, hope, and love that also promote meaningfulness. Drawing on the 19th-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, I show how his accounts of faith, hope, and love can be interpreted not merely as the classical theological virtues but as virtues in promotion of meaningfulness. For Kierkegaard, these three virtues have two features in common. The first is what I call “non-self-exculpatory self-acceptance” (Hanson, 2022). Faith, hope, and love allow us to live with ourselves and our choices (hence they are a matter of “self-acceptance”). The person of faith and hope and love is at peace with themselves, but because they are committed to genuinely valuable ideals that they endorse as their own, they admit and accept their failings to express these values consistently (hence they are “non-self-exculpatory”). The second feature these virtues

have in common is that they do not target any specific outcome but rather reorient us to the availability of meaningfulness. The person of faith, for example, does not have faith that anything in particular will come about; they rather have faith in what is yet to come. The person of hope does not hope for any particular expectation that could be disappointed; they rather refuse to be disappointed. The person of love does not love any one person; they love everyone. In this sense the virtues that promote meaningfulness are responsive to evidence but do not rise or fall on the basis of an evidential calculus.

Sophia Höff

Protestant Theological University, Netherlands

k.s.hoff@pthu.nl

The Meaning of Life as a Constant Project

The question of the meaning of life arises against the background of the absurdity of existence. In other words, the search for the meaning of life implies that meaning is not given together with existence. This in-between-ness (between givenness and transcendence) was identified as the proprium of the human being in Jean-Paul Sartre's phenomenological-ontological analysis of existence in *Being and Nothingness*: In fact, the human being is endowed with certain biological- genetic dispositions and placed in a certain socio-ecological context. But these factors are contingent. At the same time, the human being is not limited to this facticity, but can freely project himself. The question of the meaning of existence asks about what is necessary and general, or in Sartre's words, about the value of existence. Although a value cannot be an empirical datum because it is a pure ideal of reason, it is nevertheless perceived intuitively, simultaneously with what exists inner-worldly. In action, the human being chooses to realise a certain value.

In this sense, I would like to argue that a theory about the meaning of life must start from the subject who transcends facticity in action towards a value. Further, I would argue for the meaning of life being intuitively given insofar as it is perceived as a totality of the ideal of reason and empirical realities.

Ultimately, however, Sartre shows that human beings permanently fail to realise what they have recognised as the meaning

of their existence. In accordance with their own mode of being, which is provisional and incomplete, the meaning of life for human beings can only have a project character.

With reference to Sartre, I think that a theory about the meaning of life should not only include an epistemological but also an ontological level.

Jonathan Jacobs

John Jay College of Criminal Justice, USA

jajacobs4884@gmail.com

Fulfilment Without Consolation

The question of the meaning of life is distinct from questions about the meaning of particular ends, commitments, and experiences and from questions about whether one lived and acted meaningfully. It is also distinct from questions about morality, moral value, and happiness though there are relations between all these. I suggest that there is a distinct matter of the meaning of life—a category of value—and that it can be explicated through exploring the notion of being at home in the world. This has some likeness to the sorts of perfective conceptions we find in Aristotle and in the Abrahamic monotheisms, but it is distinct from those, and has to do with a kind of fulfilment that is not anchored in perfectionism. Moreover, it is not undone by a life ending badly or a person suffering misfortune. Thus, there can be encounter with the relevant kind of value even in a life without consolation. Being at home in the world centrally concerns finding and encountering worth and significance that elicit a general disposition of appreciation directed at the world as a locus of non-instrumental worth.

In monotheistic traditions gratitude (and obedience) is a fundamental orientation—to God. In conceptions involving an intellectual telos wonder is a fundamental orientation to reality, and the perfective realization of human nature is naturally pleasing and desirable for its own sake. The discussion makes a case for appreciation of a form of normative significance of the world as integral to the meaning of life. Being at home in the world rec-

ognizes realist normativity in which there is a role for the agent though it is not a voluntarist or expressive role. It is not a defect of mind or character to fail to recognize meaning, but it is not simply one fulfilment among others.

Joshua Lewis Thomas

The Open University, UK

joshlewisjthomas@hotmail.co.uk

Defending the Intelligibility View

What makes a life meaningful? In the past few decades dozens of theories have been defended. While there has been a great deal of variety amongst these competing conceptions, the following claim is often assumed or argued: a meaningful life is, in some form or other, a valuable life. Accepting this view, ‘The meaning of (a) life’, would presumably be whatever is most valuable about (a) life, or perhaps the valuable goal which (the) life is/ought to be directed to. More recently, this orthodox type of theory has been challenged by some philosophers (e.g., Thomas 2019; Repp 2018; Seachris 2019) who see meaningfulness as primarily constituted not by value, but by intelligibility. In other words, generalising the position taken by these theorists, a person’s life is meaningful to the extent it makes sense. ‘The meaning of (a) life’ could then be seen as the explanation, answer, or information necessary to comprehend (the) life in some relevant way.

There has been some pushback to this sort of ‘intelligibility view’; to show that it fails to capture what we mean (or everything we mean) when we talk of meaningful lives (Metz 2019), and to show that we are better off siding with the established ‘value view’ of meaning in life (Landau 2021). This presentation attempts to defend the intelligibility view from some of the objections and counter-examples given against it, arguing that putative examples offered of lives with high intelligibility but low meaning (or vice versa) fail. It also attempts to provide equivalent counter-examples to the

value view: lives with high value but low meaning (or vice versa). Finally, it will briefly consider the advantages and disadvantages of disambiguating meaning in life by distinguishing and retaining both conceptions of meaningfulness: intelligibility-meaning and value-meaning.

Tim Mawson

University of Oxford, UK

tjmawson@rocketmail.com

The Least Unsatisfactory Answer to the Question 'What is The Meaning of Life?'

Many answers have been offered to the question, 'What is the meaning of life?' In this lecture, I shall seek to diagnose why we are and should be dissatisfied with all of them; what the least unsatisfactory answer would look like; and why even this would be dissatisfactory. In doing so, my aim is to facilitate one in becoming, as I shall put it, 'satisfied with one's ongoing dissatisfaction' about the meaning of life.

Daniel Milewski

Independent Researcher

danielxmilewski@gmail.com

Authenticity and the meaning of life.

One of the ways to answer the question about the meaning of a checkers (drafts) piece is to say that it is determined by the rules of the game of checkers. A piece fulfills its meaning when someone plays it, not when, for example, it lies at the bottom of the pool. Putting it somehow artificially, “the meaning of life” of a checkers piece is to be played, just as “the meaning of life” of a hammer is to be used to drive nails. Granting that one is open to such investigations, one may try to think of the meaning of human life using the structure of the meaning of a checkers piece. Among many striking things, that come up in such a comparison, it may be mentioned that a man is not given a set of rules of self-use in “a game of life”, whereas the checkers board usually comes with rules of use of the checkers pieces. Following this line of thought, human life can be understood in terms of a game with unknown rules, which may even be different for each living person. Another stark contrast can be drawn. A man, unlike a checkers piece, has the capacity to make decisions - to choose a game against which she will be able to determine her meaning.

To investigate the capacity of human beings for such a choice, I employ the concept of authenticity as mapped out by David Egan, a representative of a modest but recognizable tradition of combining the thoughts of Martin Heidegger and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Egan develops a reading of both philosophers, presenting their similar concerns for the question of authenticity. Heidegger in *Being and*

Time (1927) and Wittgenstein in *Philosophical Investigations* (1953) orient themselves toward the philosophical analysis of down-to-earth, normal human life, the former investigates the phenomena of everydayness, and the latter inspects ordinary language usage. Both philosophers regard this sphere of ordinariness or everydayness as a proper arena of thought and life. In Egan's understanding, authenticity is closely tied to this sphere as it is "the mode in which we inhabit the everyday without denying or rejecting it". Further, authenticity relates to living one's life without ready-made solutions to the questions regarding the meaning of one's existence; it requires taking one's life as something that Lee Braver (another important Heideggerian-Wittgensteinian scholar) calls "original finitude"—an orientation towards life that absolves itself not only from the so-called God's eye view but also from any notion of something other than everydayness. Seen in such context, the Heideggerian-Wittgensteinian concept of authenticity, as presented by Egan, ties with the image of a person being capable of a choice regarding the rules that will determine the meaning in that person's life (the rules of her life's game). This choice can be authentic or inauthentic.

Geraldine Ng

Philosophy Lab CIC, UK

geraldine@philosophylab.co

The *Iliad*, Invulnerability, and the Tedium of Being Transhuman

In this paper, I respond to the transhumanist view that transcending our mortal natural being would be prudential and desirable. Should we push towards bioengineered ‘perfection’? To be invulnerable as the gods, ageless and blissful – what could possibly be wrong with that? ^[1]The transhumanist proposition is radically new but raises the most enduring questions – about what kind of social world we want, what it is to be human, and what is a meaningful life.

To be invulnerable, I will argue, would make our lives go worse. In an important sense, vulnerability gives meaning to life. That does not mean that we should not try to improve the lives of human beings. Insofar as vulnerability matters, I will not try to decide to what extent it matters, since that is a much larger and more complex question.

I put together the aspiration of transhumanism to be invulnerable with the *Iliad*, one of the oldest stories about gods and mortals, and about war and death. By exploring temporality, narrative, and the contrast between divine and mortal wounds in the *Iliad*, I will make plain how the Ancients understood what makes life meaningful.

Mirela Olivia

University of St. Thomas, USA

olivam@stthom.edu

The Meaning of Life – A Genealogy

Is the “meaning of life” a new expression for old questions, such as “Why does the universe exist?”, “Why are we born?”, “Why do we have to die?”, “What can we do to have a good life?” Or does it add something unprecedented, e.g., by connecting them? As I will show, the historical background of this expression supports the last scenario. My paper highlights the continuity between the Latin *sensus* and the modern expression “meaning of life,” which emerged in the 18th/19th century in German philosophy as *Sinn des Lebens*. Second, it shows that *Sinn des Lebens* resulted from the encounter between Biblical hermeneutics and the post-Kantian legacy. Therefore, if I am correct, the quest for meaning unifies various fields of human life, especially the knowledge of reality, the science of life and the universe, and the pursuit of the good life.

Paweł Pijas

University of Gdańsk, Poland

pawel.pijas@ug.edu.pl

Making Sense, Needs and Vindictory Genealogy

In his last book, *Truth and Truthfulness. An Essay in Genealogy*, Bernard Williams, who was struggling with a terminal illness, analyzed the category of sense. According to the British philosopher, the basic carrier of sense is the so-called “mini-narrative,” which is a minimalist story we can tell about a certain set of facts so that the sequence of events and their outcome become comprehensible to us. Mini-narratives have two basic variants: the first type evokes certain regularities of nature that indicate a causal connection between facts, while the second uses the concepts of intentions, decisions, actions and their effects. Mini-narratives can be decomposed into simple facts or synthesized into more complex structures such as scientific theories or historical narratives.

Williams argues that while the factual part of a narrative is not relative, its sense is. A narrative is thus an interpretation. We will describe the same group of facts, for example, from one perspective as a heroic struggle for liberation and independence, while from another, as a riot generating disorder and unnecessary casualties. Which narrative speaks to us is determined by our perspective and the needs that are expressed through it. So, sense is not an absolute category, but turns out to be relative to our empirical characteristics.

In my presentation, I would like to introduce the above concept of sense and juxtapose it with another part from the referenced book. Indeed, the primary purpose of *Truth and Truthfulness* is

to defend the value of social practices aimed at the value of truth and to justify the sense of these practices by using a specific variation of the genealogical method, which Williams calls vindicatory genealogy. Referring to empirical knowledge of human nature and tracing the real or presumed history of a certain social practice, such as the recognition of truthfulness as an epistemic or social virtue, we can, in the footsteps of Nietzsche, point to its reprehensible causes and motives and thus undermine its sense, or we can, the British philosopher notes, discern its praiseworthy causes and motives and thus justify it. Therefore, the vindicatory genealogy is a tool for reconstructing sense, which can be used to justify particularly desirable types of narratives, such as narratives about hope, which are so important in the context of the question of the meaning of life.

Lukáš Siegel

Bratislava International School of Liberal Arts

siegel@bisla.sk

Contemporary Society and Meaning of Life: The Case for Frankl's Logotherapy.

The 21st century is bombarding us with entirely new and unexplored dilemmas. People are becoming depressed, and anxiety is rising among young people as many feel lost and frustrated about their lives. Social media, influencers, the online world, and oversaturation with information are one of the major causes behind this increase. The logotherapy of Viktor Frankl provides a unique approach that focuses on subjective perception and experiences. The main therapeutic focus of logotherapy is to search for one's meaning in life. The search for meaning relies on the personal perspective and reflection of different scenarios and experiences we have in life. The 21st century offers many quick escapes from reality and pain but no long-term solutions. Logotherapy provides a more stable approach that focuses on all aspects of life, encourages responsibility, and does not ignore or dismiss the importance of suffering in our life. Frankl's theory helps us to formulate our meaning of life and allows us to guide us through the complexities of life. In this contribution, I argue that Frankl's logotherapy provides a helpful tool for new generations to cope with stress, anxiety, and depression and guides us in our search for meaning in life.

Artur Szutta

University of Gdańsk, Poland

artur.szutta@ug.edu.pl

The Meaning of Life and AI

In my presentation, I make two assumptions:

1. An essential part of a meaningful life (at least of a philosopher or scientist) is the development in two areas: understanding and creativity. These two give us humans reasons for pride and the feeling of our uniqueness in the world.
2. Although it may not be the case, and even seems highly improbable, for the sake of argument, let us assume that, one day, AI will be able to excel humans in the above-mentioned two areas by writing articles or books, whether in philosophy or other disciplines on a much higher level than humans, much faster and on a much larger scale, or by creating works of art, architecture, technologies that far exceed those of humans, etc.

Based on these assumptions, I will try to analyze the possible consequences of the existence of AI, as described in Premise 2, with the aim being to answer the question of whether the emergence of AI (understood in the way I propose) will not negatively affect our sense of the meaningfulness of our human life (or at least of our lives as philosophers or scientists).

Błażej Szymichowski

University of Gdańsk, Poland

blazej.szymichowski@phdstud.ug.edu.pl

Existential Uncertainty and The Meaning of Life

According to Joshua Seachris, the question of the meaning of life should be understood as a request for an interpretative structure that provides intelligibility to “life”. The term “life” refers to existentially important elements or facts of our life and questions that follow them. The existentially important elements include the most fundamental questions of metaphysics, epistemology, axiology and ethics. According to Seachris, the most common questions that come up when discussing the meaning of life are:

1. Why does the universe exist? Why do I exist?
2. Is there a purpose of life? Around what purpose(s) should I order my life?
3. In virtue of what are our lives significant? Do they even matter at all?
4. Are we and our lives worthwhile and valuable
5. Why do we suffer
6. How is it all, ultimately, going to end—my life and the whole show?

A structure capable of interpreting questions of this scope must be a metanarrative or a worldview. It is often thought that a metanarrative ought to be understood as an “intellectual construction which solves all the problems of our existence uniformly on the basis of one overriding hypothesis, which leaves no question unanswered and in which everything that interests us finds its fixed place”. If this definition is correct, a complete theory of the

meaning of life dissolves any uncertainty that a person might have in regard to existentially important questions that comprise our life. Such an outcome would starkly contrast with what is often believed to be a mark of “what it is to be a human being, which is of irremovable sense of existential uncertainty.

I would like to show that if uncertainty is indeed an irremovable element of human nature then either (1) lack of fit between human nature and metanarratives necessarily renders human life meaningless or (2) the above mentioned definition of a metanarrative must be reviewed. I will argue for the second option and claim that a satisfactory theory of the meaning of life should be able to accommodate the inherent sense of existential uncertainty.

James Tartaglia

Keele University, UK

j.tartaglia@keele.ac.uk

A Nihilist's Progress

I interpret nihilism as a position on the question of the meaning of life, namely the view that there is no cosmic scheme of interpretation which is binding on human life as such, and I explain why I think this position is probably true. I defend my conception of nihilism as an evaluatively neutral position, as opposed to both the standard view that it is evaluatively negative, as well as recent popular views to the effect that nihilism is evaluatively positive ('sunny nihilism'). I then turn to the question of meaning IN life (as opposed to the meaning OF life), which is supposed to be an aspect of the good life distinct from ethical value. I argue that this concept is irreparably vague, but that on any reasonable interpretation of it, a nihilist position on meaning in life would make no sense.

Sylvia Wilczewska

Polish Academy of Sciences, Poland

wilczewska.sylvia@gmail.com

Existential Uncertainty and the Paradox of Accidental Meaning

If the answer to the question “What makes our life meaningful?” is independent of our beliefs and desires, a paradox ensues: if what makes life meaningful is something we do not believe it to be, then the more we strive to make our life meaningful, the more absurd it becomes – whether or not what makes life meaningful is present in our life. If what makes life meaningful is absent from our life, then it is meaningless, but if it is present independently, or even in spite of, our actions and attitudes, the presence of what makes life meaningful is only accidental, unconnected to, or even contradicting our efforts to imbue our life with meaning. Such accidental meaning seems to lead to absurdity. The paradox seems to provide evidence in support of subjectivism on the meaning of life – as Thaddeus Metz puts it, “the theory that a person’s life is the more meaningful, the more it obtains the objects of propositional attitudes such as desires or goals.”; according to subjectivists, the meaning of life is necessarily agent-relative. But even on subjectivism, the paradox remains: the situation in which the efforts to make life meaningful subtract from life’s meaning, though less likely than on objectivism, is very much possible. This might signal a conceptual problem: perhaps life’s meaninglessness is not the same thing as its absurdity. Alternatively, it may suggest that existential uncertainty – an attitude contrary to full-blown belief about what gives life meaning – is conducive to life’s being

meaningful. The aim of my presentation is to analyse the paradox in relation to existential uncertainty so as to shed some light on the question of whether the latter can make life more meaningful, acknowledging that the positive answer to it leads to a paradox of its own.

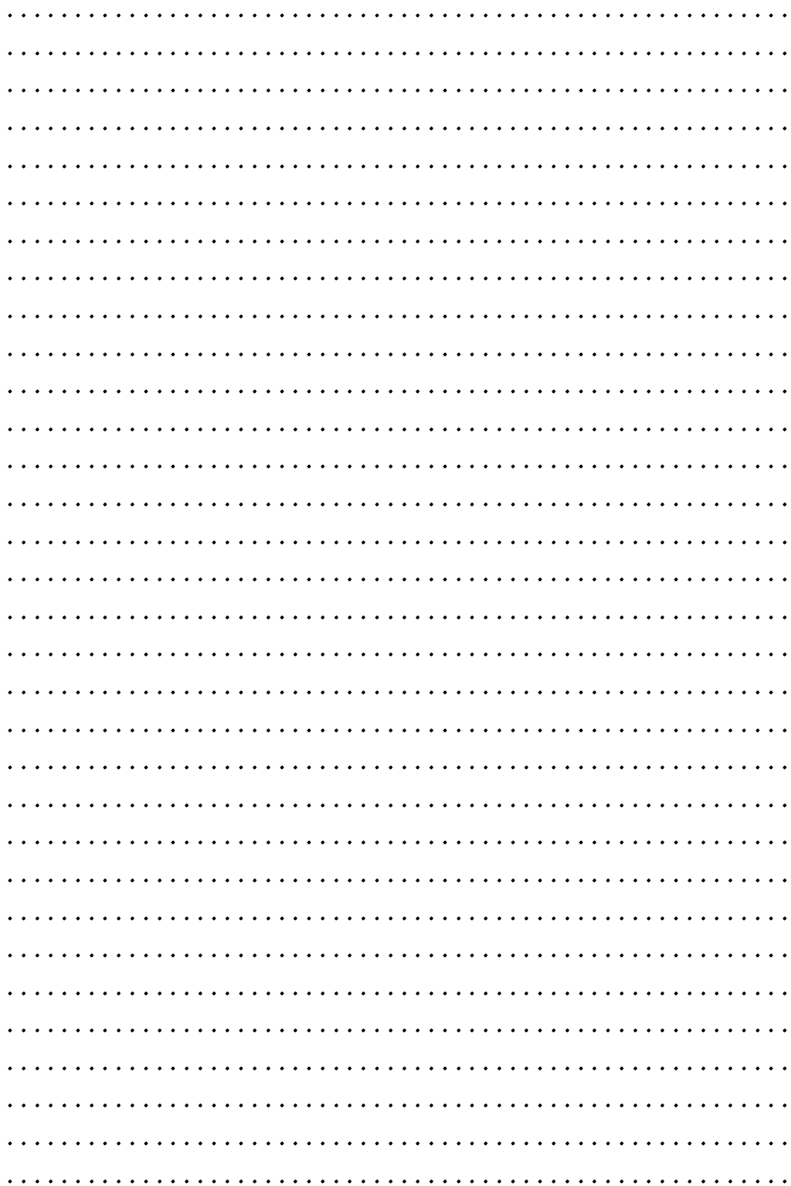
Wojciech Żelaniec

University of Gdansk, Poland

wojciech.zelaniec@ug.edu.pl

The Meaning of Life as a Will-o'-the-Wisp

I try to make alert to the fact that while it may make sense to inquire what the meaning (in various meanings of this word) of a particular act, type of behaviour, an event, an episode in one's life institution is, it probably is meaningless to ask about the meaning of entire life, like it is meaningless and pernicious for any serious study be it philosophic, scientific or what have you, to try to apply the category of causality (innerworldly) to the world in its entirety. Lives just are not in the market as things that can be meaning or, for that matter, meaningless. A search for them, if not consisting solely in arbitrary self-suggestion, is little more than a pursuit of a will-o'-the wisp. Unless of course it is considered meaningful to see your life or mine from a wider perspective, e.g. on of a god, a History, or another superhuman design (intelligent or not so intelligent).



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