

The Meaning of Life

What is the meaning of life?

The short answer: There isn't any. Life has no more inherent meaning than a traffic jam or a bad cold. It's just something you have to deal with. There's no guiding force, no cosmic plan, and no reward or punishment in the end. Life is just what you see in front of you, no more, no less.

However, the question becomes more interesting if you change it slightly.

"What is the purpose of my life?"

The purpose of your life is to deal gracefully with all the demands that existence has placed on you. If you choose to play the game of life, meaning is found by doing it well. You can choose to rebel against the world—railing at its unfairness and refusing to participate—or you can deal with it honorably as you find it.

For practical purposes, your consciousness has been inserted into an alien body and dropped on a strange and unforgiving planet. You can try to escape if you want—by committing suicide. If you choose to stay, however, then you are automatically forced to participate in the native culture and accept the local laws of physics.

You don't need a god to tell you what to do. Once you arrive here,

your mission will arise naturally from the circumstances you encounter.

All the evidence indicates that the world existed before you came and will probably exist after you leave. It follows its own rules that are entirely independent of what you want and that must be actively discovered. Sure, the world you see may be an illusion, but it's a damn good one—the best illusion you've got. By choosing to live, you are accepting the reality of this world and are committing yourself to dealing with it.

Just by arriving in a human body, you face a set of challenges. For example, you have to feed and protect your body or you are going to suffer something called "pain." Pain may be hard to understand intellectually, but you know it when you feel it. It is painful to be hungry, to cut yourself or to lose the people you have bonded with, so it is natural to avoid these things.

Even if most of life is still a mystery, you can put together a pretty good plan for yourself simply by avoiding pain. You start by protecting your body from immediate injury, but eventually you begin thinking further and further ahead, so you're anticipating pain that might happen many years in the future if you don't do something now.

Over time, you can come up with

some very sophisticated theories about pain on your planet. It turns out, there are many different kinds of pain—physical pain, emotional pain, the pain of screwing up when you know you could have done better. You have to become an explorer and a scientist to figure out how these mechanisms work.

Although the world itself is inherently meaningless, it begins to gain meaning as you interact with it. For example, you didn't choose the family you were born into, but after a while it becomes your own. You care about what happens to them, and their pain becomes yours.

Once you accept that other people exist and have feelings like you, it is natural to care about their well-being as much as your own. Why not? If you are trapped in a prison cell with a number of other prisoners, it seems comfortable and and in your own self-interest to bond with them and work for your entire community.

This isn't a good planet or a bad planet; it's just the one you happen to be stuck on. Your job is to understand how it works and to make the best of the assets you have. In the absence of other instructions, it is noble to prevent your own pain and that of your fellow travellers. You'll probably be happy when you are moving toward these goals and unhappy if you are wasting time.

Your most valuable asset in life is your time left on earth, which is dwindling fast. At some point you are going to "die" and will no longer be interacting directly with this planet. This means that if you care at all about the game, you have to play it efficiently and quickly, without squandering your resources.

In the end, you're going to move on to parts unknown. On Earth, you may be forgotten and all of your efforts could eventually unravel. Still, while you are here, you might as well do your best.

Do you have anything better to do?