

Introduction

To wonder too openly, or intensely, about the meaning of life sounds like a peculiar, ill-fated and unintentionally comedic pastime. It isn't anything an ordinary mortal should be attempting, or would get very far by doing. A select few might be equipped to take on the task and discover the answer in their own lives, but such ambition isn't for most of us. Meaningful lives are for extraordinary people: saints, artists, scholars, scientists, doctors, activists, explorers, leaders... If we ever did discover the meaning, it would, we suspect, be incomprehensible; perhaps written in Latin or in computer code. It wouldn't be anything that could orient or illuminate our activities. Without always acknowledging it, we are operating with a remarkably ungenerous perspective on the meaning of life.

Yet, in truth, the subject is for everyone. It is for all of us to wonder about, and define, a meaningful existence. There need be nothing forbidding about the issue. A meaningful

life can be simple in structure, personal, usable, attractive and familiar. This is a guidebook to it.

A meaningful life is close to, but at points importantly different from, a happy life. Here are some of its ingredients:

- A meaningful life draws upon, and exercises, a range of our higher capacities; for example, those bound up with tenderness, care, connection, self-understanding, sympathy, intelligence and creativity.
- A meaningful life aims not so much at day-to-day contentment as fulfilment. We may be leading a meaningful life and yet often be in a bad mood – just as we may be having frequent superficial fun while living, for the most part, meaninglessly.
- A meaningful life is bound up with the long term. Projects, relationships, interests and commitments will build up cumulatively.

Meaningful activities leave something behind, even when the emotions that once propelled us into them have passed.

- Meaningful activities aren't necessarily those we do most often. They are those we value most highly and will, from the perspective of our deaths, miss most deeply.
- The question of what makes life meaningful has to be answered personally, even if our conclusions are marked by no particular idiosyncrasy. Others cannot be relied upon to determine what will be meaningful to us. What we call 'crises of meaning' are generally moments when someone else's – perhaps very well-intentioned – interpretation of what might be meaningful to us runs up against a growing realisation of our divergent tastes and interests.
- We have to work out, by a process of experience and introspection, what counts as meaningful in our eyes. Pleasure may manifest

itself immediately, but our taste in meaning may be more elusive. We can be relatively far into our lives before we securely identify what imbues them with meaning.

This book considers a range of options to discover where meaning might lie for us. It is anchored around a discussion of eight centrally meaningful activities: love, family, work, friendship, culture, politics, nature and philosophy. Most are well known; the point here is not to identify entirely new sources of meaning so much as to try to evoke and explain some familiar choices. The options should provide orientation, enabling us to find our own preferences or, when we dissent, to design alternatives.

Along the way, we hope to underscore that our lives are more meaningful – and certainly more capable of meaning – than we might initially suppose. Increasing the amount of meaning in our lives doesn't have to involve any radical outward moves. Our lives almost certainly already have some hugely meaningful aspects to them, but we may not be correctly valuing, understanding or appreciating these. It is time to turn the pursuit of a meaningful life from a

comically complex impossibility to something we can all comprehend, aim for and succeed at.