

The Construct Of The Meaning Of Life Across Various Timeline

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Abstract

The question of the meaning of life is a million-dollar question that attracts different answers when it encounters time. Time played a major role in impacting the answer to this philosophical question. This paper streamlines the answer that prevailed during different ages produced by different philosophers. The changes in the stance are highlighted until it reaches the borderless postmodern world.

Keywords: Life, meaning, absurd, postmodern.

Introduction

The world, now, looks more bizarre and is becoming the most dangerous place to live in with the increasing violence and voices of suppression. Every page of a newspaper is filled with the news of killing and suicide, stealing and corruption, and the question concerning the worthiness of life is being raised from every corner. It is the best time to ask for the meaning of life since the world looks more absurd than it has been in the past, the era of the World Wars. A sense of distress and confusion prevail over the younger generation who are seeking answers for the eventual absurdities of life. It is high time to revisit the

status of life to make a reality check on the answers for the worthiness and the meaning of life. Eventually, Literatures across the world have been confined to the parameters of the wide horizon punctuated with dilemma and distress.

Throughout human history, man has been in constant quest for the meaning of life and has obtained many answers in connection with historical, cultural and ideological backdrops. A direct straightforward answer would be difficult to convince the mind as this question will lead to a series of questions constructing a huge enquiry form which includes the questions of the significance of life, value of life, purpose of existence, happiness in life, choices in life, laws of good life and so on. The answer for the question on the purpose and meaning of life needs to satisfy all the other questions that are in connection with it.

Answering this question and finding a common ground is an incessant task as the number of answers would equal the population of the earth. This impossible criterion of finding the meaning of life is explicated by Richard Taylor who claims:

The question whether life has any meaning is difficult to interpret, and the more you concentrate your critical faculty on it the more it seems to elude you, or to evaporate as any intelligible question. You want to turn it aside, as a source of embarrassment, as something that, if it cannot be abolished, should at least be decently covered. (19)

Every human being who lives on earth has the capacity to give an answer to the question of life but the validity of which is still an issue. The commoners answer this question by virtue of their experiences and by the credibility that they relish in the society. But these insights of life largely differ from the intellectual, and eventually varies in the hands of the novelists. A philosopher has his philosophy and the precept of his scholarship. Here ascend the contradictory notions which further precipitate the issue. And consequently, the texts gain significance for its unique perception of life.

Early philosophers have contemplated on the question of the worthiness of human life and have unearthed the purpose of human existence. The early researches have focused on the tradition of well-being and

the different ways to experience life to its fullest. To Aristotle, the ultimate goal of life is Eudaimonia. Aristotle is concerned with 'good' for the quality of life as he believes that "every skill and every enquiry, and every similar action and rational choice, is thought to aim at something good" as every aim is directed to one goal, which is "good" (1). He champions this idea in his *Nicomachean Ethics*. Eudaimonia, is from the Greek word eu and daimon. Eu means 'well or good', and daimon means 'fortune or lot in life', thus the term Eudaimonia signifies "living a life well" (Kraut 3). Eudaimonia is translated as 'happiness', 'well-being', 'flourishing'. To Aristotle, a "happy person lives well and acts well, for happiness is pretty much a kind of living well and acting well" (13). The ultimate goal of life, according to Aristotle, is pursuing happiness and this is found in being self-sufficient with life as "happiness is something complete and self-sufficient, in that it is the end of what is done" (11).

Aristotle shows the path from where this perfect happiness can be extracted. He takes the objective view of happiness as he decrees that happiness stems out only from "virtue, attitude, and intellectuality", because it lies in the activity of living (11). Happiness is attained by the "virtues of character such as generosity and temperance" and it centers primarily on the intellectuals "such as wisdom, judgement, practical wisdom" (Aristotle 22). "It is the virtue of

intellect that brings happiness", according to Aristotle, as one always tends to "praise a wise man for his state" (22). This state which is worthy of praise is called virtues. It is the intellect that makes a man of virtue to live well and be a happy man. Edward Deci addresses Eudaimonia as "a tradition of well-being that is not so much an outcome or end state as it is a process of fulfilling or realizing one's daimon or true nature—that is, of fulfilling one's virtuous potentials and living as one was inherently intended to live" (2).

There exists another tradition of well-being, which is Hedonia, where happiness takes the subjective form. It is

a way of life where one experiences “a high level of positive affect, a low level of negative affect, and a high degree of satisfaction with one’s life” (Deci 1). In Hedonic tradition, happiness is extracted from experiences where the importance is given to pleasure. The source or object that brings pleasure is not of a concern as the moral value codes are taken out of context. Hedonism promotes pleasure and avoids pain. Hedonia is from the Greek word *hedone* meaning ‘pleasure’ and ‘delight’. One of the early philosophers who has endorsed hedonistic view is Democritus, who declares:

The best thing for a man will be to live his life with as much joy as possible and as little grief for joy and sorrow are the distinguishing marks of things beneficial and harmful. What makes life really worthwhile is not one’s possessions of any externals, but one’s state of mind and that only fools live without enjoying life. (qtd. in Moen 2)

Aristippus of Cyrene, the first pupil of Socrates and the founder of the Cyrenaic School of Thought, endorsed the hedonistic viewpoint of seeking pleasure as the primary goal of life. Aristippus philosophy is mentioned in the early 3rd century manuscript of Diogenes Laertius’ *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Aristippus says:

Particular pleasure is desirable for its own sake, whereas happiness is desirable not for its own sake, but for the sake of particular pleasures. That pleasure is the end is proved by the fact that from our youth up we are instinctively attracted to

it, and, when we obtain it, seek nothing more, and shun nothing so much as its opposite, pain. Pleasure is good even if it proceeds from the most unseemly

conduct ... For even if the action be irregular, still, at any rate, the resultant pleasure is desirable for its own sake and is good. (88)

The Hedonistic view does not give prime importance to virtue and conduct but to pleasure. Any momentary pleasure, even if it stems from immoral behaviour, is taken into account since pleasure is the ultimate goal of life. The moral ideologue is ousted and lawlessness is urged as pleasure takes the main stage.

The early tradition of well-being, which constitutes the meaning of life, lingers on the two philosophies namely, Eudaimonia and Hedonia. Eudaimonia focusses on the development of man by the practice of virtue while Hedonia focusses on emotions such as pleasure and joy. Aristotle disagrees with the hedonistic view saying that it is not the pleasure that one must seek because:

pleasures are choice worthy, but not if they come from [disgraceful] sources, just as wealth is desirable, but not if you have to betray someone to get it, and health is desirable, but not if it requires you to eat anything and everything. (186)

To the question of the meaning of life, early philosophers, though pursuing Eudaimonia

or Hedonia tradition, converge on a notion that happiness is the paramount attainment of life. These two traditions differ only on their pathways but share the same destiny, the happiness. Thomas Aquinas (1225 -1274), an Italian Catholic priest, in his magnum opus *Summa Theologica*, too, agrees to the ultimatum that “happiness is the attainment of the last end” (1335), but he stands on a different ground to that of Aristotle and Aristippus. He believes that this “attainment of the end does not consist in the very act of will” (Aquinas 1335). He declares that it is impossible for one to attain happiness by the mere activity of will. If the activity of will is rejected in bringing happiness, then the perception of Eudaimonia and Hedonia tradition get automatically rejected.

Aquinas says that happiness cannot be attained by intellect, for he argues that “happiness consists in an operation of the speculative rather than of the practical intellect” (1337). This is because, Aquinas claims:

The practical intellect is ordained to good which is outside of it: but the speculative intellect has good within it, viz. the contemplation of truth. And if this good be perfect, the whole man is perfected and made good thereby: such a good the practical intellect has not; but it directs man thereto. (1338)

Hence Aquinas contends that intellect cannot bring

happiness because in intellectual

activity there always “remains in it the natural desire to seek the cause” (1343). This tendency to seek cannot be happiness because for perfect happiness one must reach the answer for the cause. Happiness is the final attainment and therefore there cannot be any possibility of further development from it. Since “intellect cannot cease to wonder and inquire”, it is not the right tool to attain perfect happiness (Aquinas 1343).

Thomas Aquinas also rejects the opinion that pleasure brings happiness as he declares, “it is impossible for any created good to constitute man's happiness. For happiness is the perfect good, which lulls the appetite altogether; else it would not be the last end, if something yet remained to be desired” (Aquinas 1327). Anything that comes by desire cannot be happiness because happiness is reputed to be a balm that calms the appetite and not heightens it. Therefore,

he rejects the happiness that pleasure brings. Aquinas believes that man cannot be “perfectly happy, so long as something remains for him to desire and seek” (1343). He strongly adheres to the fact that happiness must be the final attainment, therefore happiness must lead to contentment. He declares, “man is naturally the principle of his action, by his intellect and will. But final happiness, surpasses the intellect and will of man” as no man can attain “the final happiness by his natural powers” (1369).

Rejecting Eudaimonia and Hedonia's tradition of well-being, Aquinas says that the “final and perfect happiness can consist in nothing else than the vision of the Divine Essence” (1343). The perfect happiness stems only from God, as man “attains perfection through union with God” (Aquinas 1343). The perfect union with God will result in the perfect happiness. Happiness depends on the strength of the intimacy with the Divine, as this alone determines the perfect happiness and not the others. The happiness that one attains by intellect and by will is “imperfect happiness” but “perfect happiness consists in the vision of the Divine Essence”, which Aquinas calls as the “Beatific Vision” (1369).

Thomas Aquinas argues that happiness can only be birthed by the 'Beatific Vision' as in it lies the final attainment and the purpose of life. The Beatific Vision is the final attainment because:

The vision of the Divine Essence . . . fills the soul with all good things, since it unites it to the source of all goodness; hence it is written (Ps. 16:15): "I shall be satisfied when Thy glory shall appear"; and (Wis. 7:11): "All good things came together with her," i.e. with the contemplation of wisdom. It is thus evident that the happy man cannot forsake Happiness of his own accord. (Aquinas 1368)

Thomas Aquinas also believes that this happiness cannot be lost nor withdrawn "because the mind that is united to God is raised above all other things" (1368). There lies a perfect life in God which gives meaning to man's existence. Life in God is the one and the only way available for the permanent happiness, and it cannot be extracted by any worldly affairs. It is not the material things or pleasure or emotion that give meaning to life, but the life that is in God, who is the Creator and the Sustainer, and the One who showers peace upon all mankind. This forms the essential Divine Quintessence.

To encapsulate, the early philosophers and writers shed light on happiness as the ultimatum of life. According to Aristotle, happiness "is believed to be complete without qualification, since we always choose it for itself and never for the sake of anything else", as "honor, pleasure, intellect and every virtue" is chosen "for the sake of happiness" (11). To Aquinas, happiness "is consummate perfection, and therefore whoever has happiness has it altogether unchangeably" (1368). The meaning of life lingers on happiness as it brings charm to life. The central question of existence is answered if a person dwells in happiness. Happiness is believed to be the central goal of life: Eudaimonia achieves it through intellect and virtue, and Hedonia achieves it through pleasure. Aquinas rejects both and centers it on God who is the source of all happiness.

This philosophical stance of the meaning of life, the happiness, centering on God is set aside by many

philosophers on the ground that it rejects the central activity of intellect and the activity of will, and concentrates more on the side of faith and the unseen realm. John Tyrrellon in his "Commentary on the Articles of Faith" comments that "there is no verifiable evidence that there is a Supreme Being. Faith is not knowledge. We can only state with assurance that we do not know" (web). The denial of reason has resulted in the deviation from the spiritual. As a result, the Truth Divine has been replaced by power structures. Man has used his prowess to search and find new answers to the meaning of life other than that of happiness and of God and has found many meanings and self-satisfactory conclusions that seem perfect to the eyes of its beholder.

It is to be noted that the answers to the 'meaning of life' do not stand on a solid ground when it encounters time. When the culture and the societal status have been modified by time, the meaning of life too has been transformed. Literatures across the world have been forced into fluctuation between the worldly and the spirituality, yet new meanings to life are created by exploring new and creative notions of life through experimented realities. New perceptions of life have emerged and dictated the main stream. Specifically, the Twentieth Century Literature has dominated the timeline as more and more exuberating and mind-blowing proclamations have come to negotiate the philosophical issues of life. For instance, Terry Eagleton in his *The Meaning of Life* questions the question of the meaning of life, who feels that the "philosophers have an infuriating habit of analyzing questions rather than answering them" and he goes on to question whether, "'what is the meaning of life?' is a genuine question, or does it just look like one? Is there anything that could count as an answer to it, or is it really a kind of pseudo-question" (1). Eagleton is of a view that the question of meaning of life is in itself meaningless and therefore taking an answer to this question is ridiculous as "there is no such thing as life" (78). These new insights to the question of life demand manipulations of human disciplines.

The Twentieth Century Literature has seen the reawakened interest in language. Various translations from the original, the consistent presence of the mass media and

the instant communication have advanced new experiential trends. The dispersion of knowledge to all parts of the world is one of the major criterion of this era. Adolph H. Wegener in "Absurd in Modern Literature" believes that this era has seen the artificial demarcations of subject matter and methodology. As Wegener observes:

The contemporary writers, no longer sustained by the literary tradition nor the language of their own countries, inject a universal texture to the perennial problems that have distinguished the human race in its evolutionary progress and which have found divergent expression in the literature of all ages, from the passions portrayed by Aeschylus and Shakespeare, to the socially conditioned instincts delineated by Euripides, Moliere, and Ibsen, to the quest for wisdom and harmony expressed by the Stoics, Dante, and Goethe. (150)

The culmination of texts and the diverse cultural interpretations of the Twentieth Century have largely exhibited the evolution of the human experience. Wegener points out that the present state of the human spirit "transcends the sacrosanct boundaries of time, geography, and race to establish man as the common denominator between the past and the present" (150). The advancement of science and technology have energized a new understanding of life.

Throughout Ages life is seen to be meaningful that has meaning of some measure. The birth of the Twentieth Century has given rise to a transnational perception of life, and as a result there has risen a powerful perception that life is meaningless. The writings on the meaninglessness of life have taken the lead in this century, as witnessed in the following observation over life: ". . . all existing things are born for no reason, continue through weakness and die by accident . . . Man is a useless passion. It is meaningless that we are born; it is meaningless that we die" (qtd. in Oaklander 428). The birth of existentialism and nihilism have largely impacted the perception of life.

The precept of meaninglessness of life has gained momentum after the World Wars, as this period witnessed the rising problems of unemployment and distress, anxiety and failures which resulted in social revolutions and in the breakdown of religious practices. Surrealism surfaced. The awareness of the meaninglessness of life led the people to quickly question everything that were thrown at them. As a result, the meaninglessness of life becomes well known in all spheres of the society. This vacuum in life encompasses humanity and its despairing voice is, even, felt in music and paintings. Literature is no exemption to it. According to Adolph

H. Wegener, the distress of life which created a literary revolution started with:

Biichner, Ibsen, Strindberg, Chekhov, Goll, Giraudoux, Pirandello, Wedekind, Wilder, Fry, and Eliot finds its counterpart in the Theater of the Absurd. Beckett, Ionesco, Genet, Hildesheimer, Grass, Pinter, Albee, and Gelber, to mention a few, question the whole state and destiny of man, proclaiming the irrationality and apparent meaninglessness of existence, defying the absurdity of life by its very affirmation. With headquarters in Paris and exponents in Germany, England, Italy, Spain, Switzerland, and the United States, the absurd might be regarded as a cosmopolitan movement, nourished by international sources. (151)

Wegener has pulled together the names of the artists who have echoed the despairing voices of the society. Their works reflect the societal structure of the era of the World Wars and people's abrupt response. It is to be noted that the impact of the World Wars is devastating and so terribly horrendous that it has seeped into the future. The word 'absurd' has found itself in a meaningful negotiation of the materials of life and eventually, the word has become the concept and found itself in a theoretical framework named, Absurdism.

The contemporary era is obviously a borderless postmodern world, where the power of consumption, the power to travel and the power to choose lifestyles do matter much. The predominant texts of the Contemporary Literature exhibit these traits of post modernism. The contemporary postmodern fictions take a great delight in creating parodies and pastiches.

Absurdism is considered as one of the precursors of the postmodern. The postmodern texts cannot dismiss absurd altogether from its fold. Charles Harris in his work *Contemporary American Novelists of the Absurd* feels that though the expression of Absurd is confined to the twentieth century, this notion of Absurd in “the contemporary texts have found corroboration” (17). He argues that the people of the postmodern era are “a lonely crowd of organization men, growing up absurd” (17). “The fragmented world of technology”, Harris notes, “reduces man to the operational and functional” and this has made him to pronounce that this postmodern epoch, too, is a “disintegrating world without a unifying principle, without meaning, without purpose: an absurd universe” (17). It is an undeniable fact that the texts of postmodern era, the Contemporary Literature, have the prevalence and the flavour of Absurdism in its papers.

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