

Chapter 1

The Meaning of Life

OK, so we are starting off with a bit of a cliché (in philosophical terms) but it consumed Socrates, the Stoics, the Existentialists and many in between and since. You won't read an introductory book on philosophy where it isn't mentioned, so why rock the boat by not talking about it here?

"What is the meaning of life?" is the philosophical question most philosophised over by philosophers in the history of philosophy. And while it is well over 2,000 years since the question was first asked, we are no nearer an agreed definitive answer than we were all that time ago when the likes of Socrates and Diogenes indulged in the debate. But that hasn't prevented the greatest of minds during the intervening period from giving us a wealth of different opinions to wade through and ponder over. Given that one could easily dedicate an entire library with the printed literature on the subject, we can only hope to scratch a tiny part of the surface in dealing with it in this chapter, but in doing so, what better place to start than with Arthur Schopenhauer (German philosopher 1788-1860) who wrote;

"In my 17th year, I was gripped by the misery of life ... The truth was that this world could not have been the work of an all loving Being, but rather that of a Devil, who had brought creatures into existence in order to delight in their sufferings."

It has to be said that Schopenhauer wasn't noted for being the jolliest of fellows, but was he alone in having such a 'downer' on life? Well, it has to be said that, not only was he not alone, he was actually in pretty good company...

The negative vibe continued with Martin Heidegger's (German Philosopher 1889-1976) description of 'birth' about which he said,

"We are thrown into the world", but it would seem not just thrown into any old world; "thrown into a particular and narrow social milieu surrounded by rigid attitudes, archaic prejudices and practical necessities not of our own making. ... the world in which we are, if you will, condemned to be and there is no escape until death removes us from the world."

To prove it wasn't a 'German' thing, Emile Cioran (Romanian/French Philosopher 1911-1995) wrote a whole book entitled, *"The trouble with being born"* and of life in general wrote such gems as, *"Every life is utterly peculiar and wholly unimportant"* and *"Only an idiot could think there is any point to this."*

But it was Soren Kierkegaard (Danish Philosopher 1813-1855) who gets my prize for being the most pessimistic of pessimistic philosophers. Not so much for his many comments such as *"Our constant angst means that unhappiness is more or less written into the script of life"* or that *"life is empty and meaningless"*, but for his suggestion that mourners at a funeral should jump into the grave alongside the deceased and draw lots, with the loser having to climb out and bury the others!

I couldn't possibly disagree with some of the greatest philosophical minds of the 19th and 20th Centuries, so to summarise their thoughts, as I see them, I have come up with what I like to call the 'Conveyor Belt of an Inconsequential Life' analogy. Yes, I know it's snappy.

Slight digression alert! In Shakespeare's 'Henry IV Part I', Act 3, Scene 1, Owen Glendower once said of his birth,

"At my nativity, the front of the heaven was full of fiery shapes, of burning cressets; and at my birth the frame and huge foundations of the earth shaked like a coward."*

*Cresset. Those flaming torches you see attached to castle and dungeon walls in old films.

While I have no idea what the meteorological and seismic activity might have been when you were born (or when I was born for that matter) I can be pretty sure that when you were born you were picked up by a mid-wife who smacked you on the bum, sat you upon the 'conveyor belt of life' and then pressed the Start Button.

And from that moment onwards, you have been on a journey. (Oh, how I hate 'journey' analogies – but this one does seem rather apt, so stick with it). You have been travelling at a speed (not of your own choosing) in a direction (not entirely of your own choosing) living and abiding by social norms and national laws (not of your own choosing). You will probably practise a religion and cultural traditions (not of your own choosing) and you will spend up to 16 years in education (in schools probably not of your choosing and with classmates and teachers not of your choosing). After leaving education, things don't improve, you will have to work for an average of 8 hours a day, 5 days a week, 46 weeks of the year for at least 45 years, and statistically speaking you will spend those 45 years working in a job that you won't actually enjoy (more about this later). Along the way, you will meet with both misfortune and fortune, but you will not be able to speed up your conveyor belt to fast forward through the former or to slow it down letting you linger longer in the latter. The conveyor belt of life will take you forward at the same unfaltering speed, like that of a ticking metronome until you arrive at your ultimate destination. A destination you will arrive at, at a time and in a manner, again not of your choosing.

As Seneca once said, "*The order in which we each receive our summons is not determined by our precedence in the register.*"

And at that point it is 'game over' with no option to play again. Words left unsaid, deeds left undone, places not visited and acts not forgiven

will all remain as such... to the end of infinity and beyond. (Buzz Lightyear was not a philosopher)

If that is too long winded an analogy, then Albert Camus (French philosopher 1930 1960) had a rather more succinct one which appeared in his, 'The Myth of Sisyphus'.

"Rising, streetcar, four hours in the office or the factory, meal, streetcar, four hours of work, meal, sleep, and Monday Tuesday Wednesday Thursday Friday and Saturday according to the same rhythm."

Q: Ok, I now get the 'conveyor belt', but why the 'Inconsequential'?

A: Well, let's start off by saying that for the individual, life is not inconsequential, far from it, but in the grand scheme of things...

The earth has already celebrated its 4,543,000,000th birthday, the sun its 4,603,000,000th and the universe its 13,800,000,000th, whereas we as individuals will be doing well if we get to see 80 in good health.

Add to the mix that the earth is only one of trillions of planets in the universe, a universe that is so large it would take light travelling at the speed of ... er .. light (299,792,458 metres per second) approximately 93,000,000,000 years to traverse from one side to the other, and one then begins to wonder whether it really mattered or not if in a game of football in a town in the north of England on a freezing Saturday evening on the 7th of December in 2019, a team of 11 men wearing red laundry beat a team of 11 men wearing blue laundry. I guess at the time, it mattered to the 22 players, the 54,403 fans at the game and the many thousands further afield, but to the other 6 billion people they share this planet with, and in the grand scheme of things..?

As it happens, in that game Manchester City were beaten at home by Manchester Utd, 2 goals to 1. Match Report taken from the Man Utd Website, “Goals in the first half an hour from Marcus Rashford and Anthony Martial gave United much-needed breathing space on a nail-biting evening. City had the majority of the possession afterwards but it was stoic rearguard work from the Reds that kept the Blues at bay before a late Nicolas Otamendi header created a tense climax. But United held firm and made it back-to-back wins following the Old Trafford success against Spurs in midweek.”. I love the fact that the report contained the word ‘Stoic’. But I digress...

As I mentioned earlier, modern man has been walking upon this earth for approximately 200,000 years. Given a generation is regarded to be 30 years that works out as approximately 6,666 (wow, I didn’t see that one coming) generations. And unless our time spent on this planet has been remarkable in some form or another, anything we might have said or done in our lives will have been forgotten within 2 generations. I know nothing of what my great grandparents may have said or did and I suspect my great grandchildren, if I have any, will know nothing of what I have said or done. In the grand scheme of things my life will have been of minimal consequence other than that of passing my genes on to those who are either fortunate or unfortunate enough to inherit them.

Marcus Aurelius summed it up quite succinctly, “In but a short while you shall be ashes, or a few dry bones, and possibly just a name, or not even a name.”

And there you have it!

We have already seen that there was and still is no shortage of philosophers who had a bit of a downer on life but have they always thought this way?

The simple answer is "No".

Karl Jung (in his Myth & the Age of the Hero) said,

"Among the so called neurotics of our day there are a good many who in other ages would not have been neurotic - that is, divided against themselves. If they had lived in a period in which man was still linked by myth with the world of the ancestors they would have been spared this division with themselves."

So what was he getting at?

Well, to help answer that, let's ask ourselves a very simple question.

Q: What does man have in common with a 'paper knife'? (That is a knife used for opening envelopes not a knife made of paper. A slightly outdated concept I know, but stick with it).

A: You would be absolutely correct to answer, 'Absolutely Nothing', but it was Jean-Paul Sartre (French philosopher 1905 1980) that first pointed this out.

However, his reasons for saying 'Absolutely Nothing' (or 'Absolument Rien', given that he was French) were probably quite different from yours or mine.

Jean-Paul Sartre belonged to the existential school of philosophy popular in the first half of the last century and their prime concern was that of what it meant 'to be'.

His reason for saying man had nothing in common with a paper knife is simply that a paper knife has a purpose. It came into being to do a

particular task or job. Whoever had the notion for making the first paper knife knew what was required from it and designed and made it to fulfil that specific requirement.

Sartre would have said that the essence (purpose) of the paper knife preceded its existence (manufacture). In other words circumstances came about (ie, man wrote letters which were posted in envelopes, which then needed to be opened so that their contents could be read) which brought about the need, or more exactly, the desire for such a thing to come into existence. It has come about (or been invented) for a reason, its creator had a particular purpose for it in mind before he created it. Similarly, there was a need (or a desire) for man to get from 'A' to 'B' as quickly, comfortably and safely as possible and so bicycles, cars, trains, and planes were created to fulfil those needs and desires. In each case their need or purpose preceded their invention or existence.

But according to Sartre, with man, the reverse is true; his 'existence' (birth) precedes his 'essence' (purpose). Man is born without purpose , so what then?

Schopenhauer suggested that man's purpose was that of a 'Will to Life'. He said that the 'romantic life' dominates life because,

"What is decided by it is nothing less than the composition of the next generation...the existence and special constitution of the human race in times to come."

Put simply, Schopenhauer suggested we are 'programmed' to fall in love, find a mate, have babies and continue the species. That's it. Consequently, it could be argued that man's purpose on this planet is no more than that of an ant, a bee or a chimpanzee; a bat, a cat or a dirty rat; a dog, a frog or a farmyard hog.

Well, it's true we do share 98% of our DNA with chimps and 67% with mice and 60% with fruit flies, but we are distanced from other life forms on so many levels; we can sing, we can dance, we can make music, we can ride bicycles, drive cars, fly planes. We are more intelligent, more creative and we can condition our surroundings to suit ourselves. I could go on.

So what is the point of being able to do and achieve all this stuff if our purpose on this planet is no different to that of algae blooming on a garden pond?

Well, for thousands of years, most of the people who have lived on this planet (particularly the Christians, Muslims and Jews) would argue that Satre would have been wrong in his assertion as they believed man was created by God, and just as Satre's paper-knife was created for a purpose, God would also have created man for a purpose.

Q: So, what is man's purpose?

A: To serve/worship God (whether he be a Christian, Muslim or Jewish one) and then live by the teachings of that God's messenger here on earth, be it Jesus, Muhammad or Moses.

Q: But what about before Judaism and Christianity?

A: The ancient Greeks believed, "Prometheus (one of the many Greek Gods the ancient Greeks had at their disposal to worship) shaped man out of mud, and Athena breathed life into the clay figure."

Q: and the Romans?

A: Janus.

Q: Hindus?

A: Brahma

And by fulfilling his purpose by living his life according to the religious/cultural norms of his society and his position within it, man had absolved himself from personal responsibilities for his life as it was, in his view, preordained..

"It is God's will", "What will be, will be", "It was meant to be", "It's in the lap of the Gods". Etc etc.

Rules were given for society to abide by, fortune, good or bad would be given to man by his chosen deity as he/she saw fit and he was powerless to do anything about it. And no matter how intolerable his life might have been on this earth it was made tolerable in the knowledge that his finite earthly life was merely a precursor or a stepping stone to an eternal life in paradise or that of being reincarnated in this world in the body of a more fortunate being.

In the middle ages Kings and Queens ruled by 'Divine Right', they had been 'chosen' by God to rule over their subjects and at that time a 'non believer' was akin to being evil. Galileo was regarded as a heretic in 1615 for contradicting the bible by saying the earth revolved round the sun. Even as late as 1848, when Mrs Cecil Alexander penned the words for our favourite childhood hymn, *"All Things Bright and Beautiful"*, it was still the case that many in society thought your position in life was decided by God.

*"The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high and lowly,
And ordered their estate."*

So, what was the point that Karl Jung was making earlier about man being ok in the past when he was still “*linked by myth with the world of the ancestors?*”

Jung (and he is not alone) was of the opinion that has long as man believed in a spiritual world, or ancient myths, or practised a religion (any religion would do) then he had a purpose and therefore, a reason for being. He was comforted by being ‘looked after’ by an all-seeing God and any questions concerning the chaos of the universe and the world in which he lived could all be answered by the existence of God.

Q: So, what changed all that and why should it matter?

A: The short answer is Science

The longer answer includes Friedrich Nietzsche (German philosopher 1844-1900) who pointed out the inevitable implications of the advances in science. Something which he did in a very blunt manner in his book, “*The Gay Science*” written in 1882. It is worth mentioning here that when Nietzsche refers to God, he is referring to a Christian God.

“God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him.”

But what did he mean by that?

He was pointing out to us that due to man’s progress in better understanding the world round him, it had become apparent that the universe was governed by physical laws and not by a divine being. That the universe hadn’t been made in 7 days, that the earth did revolve round the sun and that humans had evolved from apes over millions of years, that plagues were not the result of God punishing man for his bad deeds. I could go on, but I’ll let Bertrand Russell have a few words on the subject first.

Slight digression alert: Bertrand Russell was no fan of Nietzsche, in fact he was known for disliking both the man and his philosophy, but one can only assume that Russell did agree with Nietzsche in this instance when he wrote 'The Art of Philosophizing' in 1968:

"It is science that has made the old creeds and the old superstitions impossible for intelligent men to accept. It is science that has destroyed the belief in witchcraft, magic and sorcery"...

"It is science that is showing the falsehood of the old dualisms of soul and body, mind and matter, which have their origin in religion."

To summarise, Nietzsche was saying that man had created a view of the world that didn't include God and as such, man had killed God, or to be more specific, the notion of God. But with this realisation comes many far reaching implications concerning morals, society and our purpose in life.

Nietzsche concluded that Europe (but he could have applied it to the world) no longer needed God as the source for defining morality, value and order in the universe as those needs were being realised through science and philosophy.

TBC

I mentioned Tom Morris earlier (He was one of the two who's definition of philosophy I liked). He once asked an assembled group of students what they wanted from life and the two most common responses were ..

- The Good Life
- A Good Life

The first 'Good Life' is preceded by the definite article 'The' and the second 'Good Life, preceded by the in definitive article 'A'. So what is the difference?

Well, it seems that those who wanted 'The' wanted 'success' they wanted fame, power, money, big houses fast cars and shiny baubles, while those opting for 'A' wanted to lead a moral, ethical, benevolent life; fulfilment and happiness being their ultimate goals.

If you find yourself in the first group, philosophy won't be instrumental in you achieving those goals. That said, there is nothing wrong with it, if that's what you really want out of life, you have given your life a 'purpose'. Go for it and good luck, just make sure that as you climb to the top you don't do it by breaking any laws or treading on people to get there.

However, if fame and shiny baubles aren't towards the top of your wish list, then the Stoics (and Socrates who came before them) have left us a huge amount to help you on your way. More about them later.

*** Going on a shiny bauble hunt can be great fun, but it does come with a health warning. Will acquiring them really make you happy? Is one shiny bauble enough, or once you have one, will you want another, then another, then another. And are you acquiring them to make you happy or to show the world how 'successful' you are? How big does a house have to be to make you happy? How many sports cars locked away in a garage does it take to put a smile on your face? Is that garage full of cars to please you or to impress anyone who happens to pay you a visit? Do you want a Rolex watch hanging round your wrist because it tells the time more accurately than other watches (it doesn't) or do you just want to show the world how wealthy you are? If you had to live on a remote island, would your shiny baubles give you solace or would not having an audience to play to change your outlook on life? How many roads must a man walk down before you can call him a man? Bob Dylan, don't you just love him?*

Bertrand Russell said that a good life was one which was 'inspired by love and guided by kindness'.