

What is the Meaning of Human Life?

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Some people argue that this question is too vague or that it doesn't have an answer. Nihilists affirm that a life of suffering followed by death has no meaning at all. In the absence of God and the afterlife we may have no purpose other than survival and reproduction. Scientists tell us that humans are the outcome of blind evolutionary processes. We are evolved animals that exhibit rational and non-rational behaviors, the evidence of our inheritance is found not only in our DNA but also in our minds and in our behaviors.

The human race has achieved substantial control over nature and we are now poised to harness the energy of the sun, postponing death and creating new life forms, rendering us something other than human. Nevertheless, we may not achieve these goals unless we curb our violent nature and halt environmental destruction. Scientists still don't have good answers to some of life's most important questions including the origin of the universe, the fine-tuning argument and the nature of reality. They don't understand the body-mind problem, how the brain generates the experiences that we have. Our bodies have many parts that eventually will fail, and for the moment, we are all certain that we will die.

Evolutionary psychology claims that our minds are adapted to a world that no longer exists; we cannot get rid of Paleolithic emotions and behaviors. Our adaptations to this ancient world created conflictive dispositions, which are now the root of our dysfunctional nature.

We exhibit cooperative and altruistic behaviors toward kin and those who would reciprocate our good deeds, and empathic behaviors toward those in need. At the same time, we display aggressive and competitive behaviors designed to achieve high status, hoarding resources and territory and competing with others for mates and reproduction. There are conflicts between groups due to tribalism, rivalry between siblings and quarrels between men and women because of their different degrees of parental investment.

Neuroscience questions the existence of souls because there are no physical laws that explain how souls could interact with matter and other souls. Without souls we cannot have free will and moral responsibility since only souls can have free will, and moral responsibility requires free will. Not having a soul diminishes our hope for an afterlife, and the theory of evolution challenges the Judeo-Christian view that we are made in the image of God and do not have ape-like ancestors. The theory of evolution has shown that new species developed when the changes in the genome due to random genetic variation were "selected" on the basis of their ability to help organisms to survive and leave offspring.

The stark picture of the scientific view explains why most people embrace the theological worldview and seek meaning and purpose in life by worshiping a transcendental deity. This view explains the creation of the universe and all life



Young Man with a Skull, by Frans Hals
National Gallery, London.

[Wikimedia Commons]

are alienated from the contentment found in non-material things like community life, spirituality and communion with nature.

Subjectivists claim that meaning is relative to the subject. For them something is meaningful if they believe it to be. In contrast, objectivists maintain that there are some invariant aspects because

forms and the wide variety of species that exist. Believers do not worry about the body-mind problem; our mind and our experiences are manifestations of the soul. They don't have to wonder how to act; they believe in free will and are expected to follow God-given moral rules. They don't despair about the suffering and injustices in this world; God will protect them and listen to their prayers. They don't have to worry about death taking meaning away from them; souls are immortal and God will reward them with eternal happiness.

Those who don't believe in the theological view and are not nihilists have to search for meaning and purpose elsewhere. Many individuals mistakenly identify the meaning of life with attaining happiness or having pleasant feelings. The former relates to satisfaction of worthwhile goals and the latter to having pleasurable experiences. In our society, though, achieving material prosperity and temporary pleasures or engaging in wanton consumerism never seems to bring lasting satisfaction. We

meaning is mind-independent. Unfortunately, many people base the meaning of their life on subjective delusions and fantasies that may not reflect the truth about reality. For example, some people find meaning in a life dedicated to a delusional political idea. As long as their delusion is in sync with those found in the prevailing society, though, they will continue to feel that they have a meaningful life. Nevertheless, in our society meaning appears to be modulated by our subjective expectations, not only by objective conditions. For instance, if we compare ourselves to beautiful people we may not feel too happy with the way we look.

The search for meaning is also challenged by our irrational dispositions. Living life to the fullest may not be that meaningful if we realize that we are only following our primitive instincts. Plato claimed that our minds are like a charioteer that has to balance two horses representing our rational and non-rational responses. Freud proposed the structural theory of the mind consisting of the ego, super ego and

the id. His theory is compatible with McLean's triune brain theory that describes the hindbrain or reptilian brain, the midbrain and the cerebral cortex. More recently, Kahneman distinguished our fast thinking, which is emotional and intuitive, from our slow thinking, which is rational and deliberate.

Life's meaning and purpose depends on our age and stage of life. We are born with different ways of feeling, thinking and behaving that determine our response to specific life events. Our mental world is governed by a variety of biochemical mechanisms that include hormones, neurotransmitters and neuronal networks. As a result, we inherit temperamental traits that cannot be changed and that govern, at least in part, our response to the environment. Individuals with the "right" combination of traits may find their lives meaningful, even in the presence of adversity, poverty and poor health. Conversely, the presence of "bad" temperamental traits do not necessarily result in a negative outcome in the absence of environmental stress. Both nature and nurture may be necessary for the full development of our responses.

During childhood, mental health is very brittle and many people suffer from emotional damage during this period. The resultant self-disorder may interfere with the person's ability to have rewarding relationships later in life. Most adults claim that love, work and play are the things that make life meaningful. Love includes romantic love, love of family and compassion for those in need. Many studies have shown that there is a positive relationship between a good marriage and subjective well-being. Work satisfaction leads many people to learn, self-actualize and help mentor those under their supervision. Income may bring happiness but only up to a point, beyond that point it seems to have little significance. Play includes activities such as music, games, travel and sports.

During retirement we have to adjust to the loss of job, income, connections and self-worth. We eventually have to deal with the limitations of aging. This is usually the time when dreaded diseases like hypertension, diabetes and cancer

are first diagnosed. Some people look back at life with satisfaction, whereas others look at it with regret. The fear of death causes great existential anxiety and this is one of the reasons why many people become more religious at this time.

I argue in this essay that the purpose of life is just to get the most out of the precious gifts that we have received and that we often take for granted. Our bodies are a miracle made of trillions of cells that work in a coordinated fashion. Each cell, in turn, is a microcosm composed of numerous structures which regulate energy balance, make large proteins and degrade waste products. We are able to reproduce and transmit our germinal plasma thus becoming a link in the great chain of life. Our brain is the most complex thing in the universe. It permits us to sense the world around us, to act on our behalf and to make rational choices. The cerebral cortex is the anatomical site of our cognitive system. It allows us to plan, reason and make inferences. Language permits us to communicate with each other.

Our lives, even if temporary, are the wondrous expression of the power of the universe. We are also active participants in the process of cosmic evolution. We can trace the light elements in our body to the big-bang. Heavier elements originated in supernova outbursts. Life arose from spontaneous generation out of inanimate matter and evolved according to Darwin's theory. Thus we humans are connected to and evolved with everything else in the cosmos. Moreover, it is conceivable that we are the only or the most advanced life form in the universe and that our progeny could acquire God-like capabilities and change the course of cosmic history. •

Guido Perez obtained his medical degree at the University of Miami School of Medicine in 1965. He specialized in Nephrology and pursued a career in teaching and research at the University of Miami. He is the author of many books and scientific articles in peer-reviewed publications. Currently he is Emeritus Professor at the University of Miami with special interest in the study of philosophy.