

The Meaning of Life: A Philosophical and Religious Reflection



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Among the many topics that have dominated human minds for centuries is the question of 'what the meaning of life is'. This issue concerning the purpose of our lives has been an obsession that has disturbed the sleep of many thinkers and philosophers throughout history.

From ancient Greek philosophers to modern times, the question of how humans came to exist on this planet and what our purpose is has been a topic of great interest. To answer such questions is not an easy task. I would say that it is a rather complex matter to deal with.

For Socrates (c. 470–399 BCE), the purpose of life is to pursue virtue (*aretē*) and wisdom. As the father of philosophy, Socrates believed that knowledge and wisdom lead human beings to virtue. In turn, virtue leads them to happiness. On one occasion, he famously said, 'The unexamined life is not worth living.' He also shared

the well-known maxim, 'Know thyself,' with his students. Too often, as human beings, we neglect to take the trouble to know ourselves.

Conversely, Plato (c. 428/427–348/347 BCE), the most prominent disciple of Socrates, had a different view on the purpose of life. To him, life should be spent pursuing justice and the Good, which Plato regarded as the highest principle governing truth and all virtues. In addition, he emphasised the importance of cultivating wisdom, moderation, justice, and courage.

In his concept of the Ideal World (or the World of Forms), Plato believed that the human soul has come from a different realm and is trapped in this body of flesh, veins, and blood. He further reiterated that the soul had prior knowledge of everything it would experience in this earthly life. As such, human learning in this mundane life is nothing more than the soul remembering what it had already learned in the Ideal World.

As the founder of Realism, Aristotle (384–322 BCE) thought that the purpose of human life is to attain *eudaimonia*. This Greek word goes beyond happiness, describing a life that fully realizes human potential and puts it into practice. Moreover, human flourishing happens when one lives a life of virtue guided by reason.

To Epicurus (341–270 BCE), who spent an enormous amount of time exploring and philosophizing about the subject of happiness, a good life is one lived in a state of happiness and pleasure, free from pain and suffering.

According to the Stoic philosophers, such as Zeno of Citium (c. 334–262 BCE) and Marcus Aurelius (121–180 CE), a good life is one lived according to reason and nature. The Stoics believed that human beings cannot control other people's opinions, wealth, fame, death, or the events that occur in their lives. At the same time, however, they have control over their own thoughts, actions, judgments, and choices. Simply put, to live a meaningful and happy life, one only has to take care of one's thoughts and emotions and not be bothered by what others think of them.

Apart from the Greek philosophers, the quest to discover the meaning of life has also caused great pain and anxiety for many modern European philosophers. Some even experienced suicidal thoughts when they were unable to discover the true meaning of life. A classic example is Ludwig Wittgenstein (1889–1951), who was a

genius at solving many philosophical problems, yet could not find the true meaning of his own life. On many occasions, he contemplated taking his own life, but fortunately, he never acted upon those thoughts.

In contrast, the handsome Albert Camus (1913–1960) approached the same problem in a more composed manner. To Camus, since life is meaningless or absurd and he could not find a convincing answer to the purpose of human existence, one should simply enjoy the moments that life has to offer. Then, when it is time to leave this world, one should simply depart. Based on his philosophy, Camus lived a life full of activity and excitement until he was killed in a car accident.

Some Religious Perspectives on Life

Hinduism is one of the world's oldest religions and teaches that a good life is one pursued by following the four basic goals known as the *Purusharthas*. A practising Hindu must observe *Dharma* (righteousness and duty), pursue *Artha* (material wealth), enjoy *Kama* (pleasure and desire), and seek *Moksha* (the liberation of the soul from worldly attachment and its reunion with the Ultimate Reality).

Buddhism, which emerged from the religious and philosophical tradition of ancient India, retains many of the ideas taught by Hinduism. It modifies some of the ideas with which it disagrees and presents a fresh perspective based on the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (c. 563–483 BCE). According to this founder of Buddhism, the birth of an individual is associated with the concept of *Dukkha*, which refers to the pain, suffering, and sorrow experienced in life. Since Buddhism teaches that life is a cycle of rebirth (*Samsara*), one's existence in this world aims to end that cycle and attain *Nirvana*. From the Buddhist perspective, one can attain liberation through self-purification by detaching oneself from worldly pleasures, engaging in meditation, and performing meritorious deeds.

In comparison to Hinduism and Buddhism, Christianity teaches that every child born into this world inherits the 'Original Sin' committed by Adam and Eve (Romans 5:12). A child or an individual is traditionally understood to be absolved from this sin through Baptism, which is associated with spiritual rebirth and renewal through the Holy Spirit (John 3:5). Furthermore, the Bible teaches that human beings are created in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27).

Life from an Islamic Perspective

According to Islam, no one comes into this world by one's personal choice. On the contrary, human presence on this planet is a choice made by Allah. In Islam, human life on this planet begins on a positive note. According to Prophet Muhammad (SAW), every child born into this world is born in a state of purity and innocence. In the religious teachings of Islam, there is no concept of 'Original Sin'. As such, the child is not burdened with the sin committed by Adam and Hawwa while they dwelt in the Garden of Eden.

Since there is no concept of 'Original Sin' in Islam, a child is not burdened with the transgression committed by Adam and Hawwa while they dwelt in the Garden of Eden. In fact, the Qur'an narrates that Adam and Hawwa sought Allah's forgiveness, saying, "Our Lord! We have wronged ourselves. If You do not forgive us and have mercy on us, we will certainly be among the losers" (Qur'an, 7:23). Allah accepted their repentance (Qur'an, 2:37).

Moreover, the Qur'an states that the iniquities (sins) of one person will not be borne by another. Every sinner must bear his or her own sins. Therefore, each individual is personally accountable before Allah for his or her own deeds (Qur'an 19:95). In Islam, salvation comes through one's own righteous deeds.

In Islam, man is created as the *Khalifah* (vicegerent) of Allah on earth (Qur'an 2:30). As a Muslim, he is expected to maintain a good relationship with his God, himself, nature, and his fellow human beings. Fulfilling these responsibilities is an essential part of living according to the divine purpose for which humanity was created.

Turning to the question of why human beings are created, the Qur'an explains that the human race is created to worship and obey Allah (Qur'an 51:56), and that life itself is a test to determine who performs the best deeds (Qur'an 67:2).

At this juncture of the essay, it is important to mention that the Qur'an teaches Muslims that life in this world is both a test and a temporary phase of existence (Qur'an 67:2; 57:20). The righteous servants of Allah will attain ultimate felicity only when they are blessed to enter the Garden of Paradise in the Hereafter (Qur'an 9:72; 89:27–30).

In this worldly life, every individual will be tested. During times of happiness, we should be grateful to Allah, while in times of misfortune, we should remain patient

and engage in self-reflection (*muhāsabah*) to identify our shortcomings and understand where we may have gone wrong. Muslims are taught that, regardless of what happens in our lives, there is always wisdom behind every event.

Besides explaining our personal lives, the Qur'an emphasizes that a Muslim must uphold fairness and justice (Qur'an 4:135; 5:8). A Muslim has to treat fellow human beings, as well as the flora and fauna, with kindness and compassion (Qur'an 16:90; 6:38). Islam preaches that there is no room for racism and prejudice against other people. The Qur'an reminds humanity that all people were created from a single pair of male and female, and that diversity among nations and tribes is a sign of Allah's wisdom (Qur'an 49:13).

In Islam, people of different colours and backgrounds are brothers and sisters in faith, while non-Muslims are their brothers and sisters in humanity. No single race is above another, as the Qur'an states that the most honoured among people are those who are most conscious of Allah (*taqwā*) (Qur'an 49:13). Therefore, the concept of "the chosen ones of God" based on race or ethnicity is not present in the Qur'an.

My final say on this topic is that the Muslim philosophy of life is one that is both beautiful and meaningful. All that a Muslim has to do is follow the guidance revealed by God Almighty in the Qur'an, try to walk in the footsteps of Prophet Muhammad (SAW), and keep away from evil things, evil people, and evil ideologies. A Muslim is expected to lead a decent life and work towards the establishment of the Kingdom of God on earth. Since life and death, happiness and misfortune, health and sickness, and the other experiences that come our way are tests from God, Muslims should neither be carried away by worldly pleasures and distractions nor fall into despair or entertain rebellious thoughts against Him.

(The views expressed are those of Dr. Mohd Abbas Abdul Razak from the Department of Fundamental and Interdisciplinary Studies, AHASKIRKHS, IIUM, and do not necessarily reflect the views of IslamiCity)