



THE MEANING OF LIFE

and why facts and reason offer the best means of figuring it out!

It is commonly said that unbelievers cannot appreciate that life has any meaning, purpose or worth. This hurtful misconception is predicated on the idea that belief in god(s), in a life after death or in the supernatural generally – and only such beliefs – give meaning to life. But do they? Supernatural “explanations” never solve problems. Rather, they dis-solve them because, by distraction, displacement, and denial, they conceal the problems they purport to address, and create even bigger ones.

Christian theology, the most prevalent and familiar version of such supernaturalism in the United States, is a case in point. It teaches that this one life we know is at best an infinitesimal portion of an eternal existence. Its only importance is that in this brief instant is determined whether we will be happy or miserable in the everlasting remainder. To win “salvation,” certain doctrines must be believed and certain behaviors must be followed. Otherwise, painful “damnation” ensues. Given the stakes, the implication is that it is irrelevant whether the doctrines are reasonable or absurd, or whether the behaviors are agreeable or unappealing or even profoundly wrong. Such is the form of Pascal’s famous wager: believe and do what you’re told, and we promise you’ll have eternity to worry about what it’s really all about.

Many critiques of this scheme have been offered. Mark Twain was one of the few who noticed that this way of “solving” the problem of the meaning of life opens up a new problem of the meaning of the alleged after-life. “Heaven for the climate, hell for the company,” was his comment. The late Christopher Hitchens went a step further, asking that it be considered what it would be like to be told: “this party’s going on forever – and you can’t leave. You’ve got to stay; the boss says so. And he also insists that you have a good time.” When did theologians ever consider the meaning of this? And how does their scheme answer the question of the meaning of “this life?” It doesn’t.

Supernaturalism devalues the only life we know. It gives justification to such grotesque views as that of Geoffrey Fisher in 1958, then Archbishop of Canterbury, who said of global thermonuclear war that it may be “within the providence of God that the human race should destroy itself in this manner” as it would only “sweep a vast number of People from

this world into the next into which they must all go anyway.” No wonder Hitchens called such religion a “death cult,” because “lurking under it at all times in every one of its versions is a desire for this life to come to an end, for this poor world to be over.” Instead of actually finding some real meaning in it.

This is bad enough. But it is worse to displace the meaning of life from what it means to those who ask the question to what it means to others who really have nothing to do with it. Whatever the meaning of human existence may be to deities, if any exist, it is irrelevant.

Suppose a barnyard animal or a household pet or, perhaps more appropriately given rapid advances in computer science, a machine intelligence, enjoyed the sort of awareness and consciousness that humans do. Should a cow consider that the meaning of its life is to produce milk and meat? Should a dog or cat or goldfish suppose that the meaning of its life is to provide companionship or emotional/aesthetic benefits to its owner(s)? Should an AI find meaning in the tasks assigned it by the computer scientist(s) who built it? Of course, a machine could be programmed to find meaning in the tasks given it or unable to find meaning in anything else. But perhaps in some sense it would not then be sentient if it could not wonder and speculate, as humans do, about the meaning of its existence.

So even if it were a fact that a supernatural being created everything including humanity, it would not answer the question of the meaning of life from the perspective of human beings. If the purpose for which such a supernatural being created human beings were known – which believers do not know! – it would not be helpful in any way. Even when it comes to inanimate objects, the purpose of their creator does not determine the meaning of such things from the perspective of others. For example, although artists, authors and composers may intend for their work to mean something, it may mean something different to others who consider it. A device designed to serve a specific purpose may be put to some other use: a paperweight, a door-stop, an ornament, or a bird’s nest.

How much more does this apply when the thing created is a sentient being. The very essence of sentient, autonomous self-awareness and the capacity to consider the meaning of existence is to be

an end in oneself and not merely the means to the ends of others. To ask "what is the meaning of life" is to recognize that the answer matters to oneself. Nor do believers sputtering "God is sovereign!" change this. Might does not make right, and ultimate might does not entitle it to ultimate right.

But unsuccessful efforts often point the way to a better approach. To begin with, the meaning of life does have to do with being alive – of having as much of it as possible – and of enjoying it, of experiencing it as a pleasant thing instead of misery and suffering. The Greek philosophers who lived before the New Testament was ever dreamed of said that happiness was the aim of life. Aristotle, who lived in the 4th Century before the current era, called it eu-daimonia, sometimes translated as human welfare, well-being or flourishing. Clearly there is a "value judgment" in assessing the meaning of life in this way, which Aristotle also recognized, saying:

"For uneducated and educated alike call it happiness, and make happiness identical with the good life and successful living. They disagree, however, about the meaning of happiness."

"Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," is a familiar phrase. In one way or another it underlies all public debate and discussion about how society should be ordered and how we ought to live our lives. For we all seek happiness, first, in meeting our biological needs, of having enough to eat and clothing and shelter from the elements. We seek personal safety and security, help from each other when we are sick or in distress, and, because we are social animals, to love and care and to be loved and cared for.

Abraham Maslow, a 20th Century American psychologist, listed these things as the foundation of his famous "hierarchy of needs." Atop them he put esteem and self-actualization, which have to do with realizing one's own individual potential and feeling a sense of value in contributing to something beyond oneself. There are ongoing efforts to put these ideas and others on a more factual and scientific footing. But we would doubtless benefit also from a revival of the ideas of the Stoics and Epicureans. They believed it was important to overcome some felt "needs," not to please a deity but in the service of human happiness. It is shameful that supernaturalism has diverted attention away from such facts- and reason-based approaches to these issues which continue to hold the greatest promise for making sense of "the meaning of life."

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All NTCOF events can be found through our website calendar , or our meetup page, from which you can RSVP, at:
- www.meetup.com/church-of-freethought - JOIN THE NTCOF MEETUP GROUP !!!

Social Luncheon: Today, immediately after our Service, join us for lunch and discussion at the Jason's Deli on MacArthur Blvd just south of 635, at 7707 N MacArthur Blvd, phone (972) 432-0555.

Freethought Salon: Discuss today's service topic or other conundrums of interest. It happens most non-1st Sundays, over breakfast, at the Hilton DFW Lakes Hotel restaurant "The Vineyard" - inside the hotel - in Grapevine beginning 10:30 AM.

Game Night: This is nearly every Friday night at the IHOP on 2310 Stemmons Trail (I-35), near Northwest Highway (Loop 12). Plan to arrive at about 7:30 PM, and stay late playing Risk, Rummikub, and other fun games!

Freethought Book Club February 20, 2016
 THE BOOK: Breaking The Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon by Daniel C. Dennett. Available FREE at http://skeptdic.ru/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Daniel_C_Dennett_Breaking_the_Spell_Religion.pdf Location/details to be announced.

Communitas Dinner Group: To be Announced!
Have Another Idea? Email or call! & LIKE US at <https://www.facebook.com/northtexaschurchoffreethought/>

**PLANNED FOR NEXT MONTH:
 "THE MEANING OF LOVE"
 (February 14 is Valentine's Day)
 > Sunday, February 7, 2016 <
 COMFORT INN DFW AIRPORT NORTH
 (Take the Freeport Parkway exit, then the frontage road east just past Best Western)**

The North Texas Church of Freethought
 The Fellowship of Unbelievers

Pastor (It's a Job Description, NOT a title!) Tim Gorski
 Presenters John Gauthier, Will Smith & Tim Gorski
 Operations Coordinator Will Smith
 Welcome Coordinator Mark Barnick
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