



'It's always right now': framing the struggle for meaning in contemporary culture

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Late contemporary culture has seen a previously dominant existentialism give way to naturalistic determinism, and yielded a nihilism that is not conducive to human flourishing, as individuals or society. I will seek to frame a discussion whereby the fact of meaning may be posited and discussed in contemporary culture, concluding that Christianity offers a context for exploring meaning in a way that is preferable to other views because it provides a coherent approach to understanding the nature of the human being, and the problems that give rise to a crisis of meaning. The article will also offer several suggestions for further study whereby the work of meaning may be pursued.

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The meaning of life seems to be a 'subject fit for either the crazed or the comic,' as Terry Eagleton points out.¹ Indeed, where the answer '42' does not suffice, the deeper search is one in which we may easily become disoriented and lost.² In a world where all that matters is the present moment, meaning is as fleeting as the seconds that pass. Because of this difficulty, many have surrendered the idea that life has meaning at all. In contemporary culture, Qoheleth catches our words and feelings up with those of the philosopher in the book of Ecclesiastes, 'Meaningless, meaningless. Everything is meaningless.' Full of ennui, we cry that there is nothing new under the sun, to see or do. In the face of a world of need, we amuse ourselves into oblivion, or drown in despair.

I

What are we here for? What is life all about? Why am I here? What should I do with my life? Who will love me? What will happen when I die? These are all basic questions of human existence, the answers to which will form a basic world-view through which we approach the rest of life, and which will interpret our experiences as we seek to make sense of our lives. The search for meaning is as old as human existence. In understanding who we are, we will go some way towards understanding why we are here.

In a Christian theistic view, the human being is comprised of two aspects, held together. The human being embodies the tension between naturalism and transcendence, between necessity and freedom. As a Christian theist who occasioned into philosophy, not least for his Gifford lectures during the Second World War, Reinhold Niebuhr emphasised two facts about humanity:

- 1 A human being 'is a child of nature, subject to its vicissitudes, compelled by its necessities, driven by its impulses, and confined within the brevity of the years which nature permits its varied organic form, allowing them some, but not too much latitude.'³
- 2 (Niebuhr calls this a less obvious fact, that) a human 'is a spirit who stands outside of nature, life, himself, his reason and the world'. This is more than the rational human being, or even the tool making human being. This is the quality of spirit that enables human beings to stand outside of themselves and make themselves their own object.⁴

These two facts of humanity emphasise that a human being is not solely or primarily a body; nor solely or primarily a spirit. To be a human being is to be a natural, biological body intrinsically held together with a supernatural, transcendent spirit.

To put this simply and starkly, there are two affirmations about what it is to be human. One, we will die. Two, we know we will die. Human beings are material, and human beings are spiritual. In the face of the first reality, the second leads us to search for meaning for an existence we know to be fleeting. Moreover, we experience these two key aspects of anthropology at once as individuals and as persons-in-relation. This relationality encompasses social and familial bonds, as well as a relationality with the created order, and a relationship with God.

Niebuhr's dialectical approach withstands the test of time and cultural shift. He shows how a Christian anthropology offers a better account of human essence and experience than other philosophies offer. His portrayal corrects the errors of contemporary understandings of what it means to be human, and enables us to recover a sense of meaning for humanity in the midst.

Philosophies of human beings, and of meaning, often falter at the point of giving due regard to *both* of these aspects of humanity. Usually, they manage to emphasise one over the other, or one at the expense of the other, providing a truncated view of what it means to be human, and therefore offering a less than satisfactory account of meaning. So, for example, empiricism neglects the spirit, restricting meaning to the material world. Materialism is a reductionistic philosophy that may posit human beings as little other than the sum of their biology, in deterministic frame. Idealism, on the other hand, neglects the body, yielding a Platonic dualism that does not satisfy the intrinsic oneness of a human being, and undermines the significance of bodily existence.

Naturalism can err in one of two directions: it can reduce human beings to their biological sum and deny their transcendence, or it can lead people to deny their contingency and imagine themselves invincible, as Robert Gall indicates. In light of natural scientific and social scientific advancement, 'What need have we of gods and superstition if we can be as gods ourselves, or create our own gods, and thereby become content amidst the brilliant logical dazzle of science and technology?'⁵

Naturalism's neglect of one or the other aspects of humanity fails to do justice to the whole of human existence; such that A. N. Wilson could haltingly, hesitantly, move from atheism to theism, as he observed:

Watching a whole cluster of friends, and my own mother, die over quite a short space of time convinced me that purely materialist 'explanations' for our mysterious human existence simply won't do – on an intellectual level. No, the existence of language is one of the many phenomena – of which love and music are the two strongest – which suggest that human beings are very much more than collections of meat. They convince me that we are spiritual beings, and that the religion of the incarnation, asserting that God made humanity in His image, and continually restores humanity in His image, is simply true. As a working blueprint for life, as a template against which to measure experience, it fits.⁶

Some atheists work hard to try to forge meaning out of the ashes of naturalism's nihilism. Some of the most popular ones like Julian Baggini and Alain de Botton follow Aristotle in talking about happiness as meaning.⁷ Others take the path of deconstruction, like Eagleton, who says we may believe

that life is an accidental evolutionary phenomenon that has no more intrinsic meaning than a fluctuation in the breeze or a rumble in the gut ... If our lives have meaning it is something with which we manage to invest them, not something with which they come ready equipped.⁸

Out of this perspectivism, Jenkins posits that for Eagleton 'the meaning of life ... is like a jazz band, individuals engaged on a collective endeavour in pursuit of happiness through the mutuality of love.'⁹

How we are to travel from determinism to a mutuality of love through perspectivism is not abundantly clear. Why is happiness worth pursuit? Why is mutual love humanity's highest goal? Why pursue anything other than individual desires? We have a sense of the goodness of anything only because there is an objective standard that enables us to perceive good or justice as preferable to evil or injustice. The plunge into the absurdity of faith requires no more courage or intellect than the plunge into the absurdity of atheism; nor does it require less.

In a theologically existential view, the angst that arises from embodying the tension between necessity and freedom is framed in a way that lends meaning to the experience of human existence. A theistic view reminds the human being of the Creator-creature relationship and distinction; this gives value to

the biological person, beyond the determinism of evolution. At the same time, it affirms the spiritual person, reminding human beings of the network of relationships in which we find ourselves and in which we are formed. At the moment that it affirms our value biologically and spiritually, Christian theism reminds us of our potential and our limitations. We can accomplish much as transcendent beings who can reflect upon and manage our biology. But we are reminded that there is one who is greater still, who measures our accomplishments, and clips our pretentious wings, while providing the wind to fly. Being related to the planet, to one another and to God offers a network of meaning that embraces the whole of what it means to be human.

II

The struggle for meaning is not new, but it has taken a new turn in contemporary culture. The question 'What are we here for?' is perhaps as old as humanity itself, captured in the creation myth where human beings refuse to accept their contingency, their relationality, and seek to be all in all. But as Viktor Frankl noted, in the twentieth century, the question, 'What are we here for?' has become a question of 'What am I here for?' and this solipsistic turn is significant in moving the question away from common existence and towards the individual. Frankl's post-Holocaust existential belief, that 'everything can be taken from ... [a human] but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one's own way,' is challenged in a naturalistically determined context.¹⁰ The problem of meaning reaches crisis proportions in a consumer culture.

For a while, consumer culture offered respite from existential angst as it allowed the individual to embrace the myth that 'I am in control'. In creating endless unfulfilled desire, consumer culture allowed existential humans to find meaning in the task of creating and re-creating themselves through purchases, possessions and image. However, as Jean Baudrillard points out, a consumer process subverts meaning, as socially meaningful exchanges are replaced with price tags and the swipe or tap of a bank card.¹¹ In this generation, we have reached a point where human image has become free-floating, seemingly transcendent, separated from the biological self. The image of God is set up as independent of its Creator, and alienation from work, family, communities and God becomes an overwhelming experience of meaninglessness.

The existentialism of Western culture becomes challenged and displaced. A generation brought up on a mantra of *carpe diem*, and recognising there is so little we can actually seize and make a difference, grasps something of the hollow echo of nihilism. It is exacerbated by the naturalistic determinism that has worked out its implications for meaning in culture as a whole.

Determinism emerges from the dominance of science as a world-view for self-understanding. I am not being-as-becoming through experience and decision. Rather, I am that which is already made, a product of my genetic code, with enhancements or deficiencies built in by an uncontrollable environment. Determinism becomes the place where we search for who we are, whether through researching our ancestry or our genetic history. Relationships in a consumer society are also treated as functional, predetermined through uncontrollable series of events, and expendable when no longer satisfactory. Reflection on the accuracy and desirability of this state of affairs is rendered impossible, along with the potential to uncover meaning in the midst.

Religion as source of philosophical reflection on meaning is sidelined. John Canfield suggests that science has thus taken the place of religion in philosophy. Surely greater discoveries of human nature are exciting and edifying and worthy of philosophical pursuit. But scientific discoveries do not exhaust or even address the matter of why things are the way they are, nor what they are becoming, or should become when humans act upon them. We are part of the natural realm, and yet possess the ability to transcend the natural realm and influence culture's path towards alternative futures with varying desirability. This affirmation alone suggests that philosophy must engage with more than how things are in the world. The 'why' and 'how' questions are never far from the human mind, and are raised constantly in our experience.

Some suggest that scientific determinism precludes a 'need' for meaning, particularly religious meaning. Yet the lack of need does not explain the persistence of questions about meaning. Robert Gall writes:

there may be no 'need', at least as science defines it, yet the religious questions – of meaning, purpose, of the right and true – still haunt us. One reason may be that the joys of science and the joys of human life do not always converge as nicely as ... [some] ... would have us believe.

Indeed, Niebuhr's dialectical understanding of the human being holds together the limits of humanity (because of sin) with humanity's potential (because of grace). Science cannot provide us with an understanding of sin or grace, and determinism undermines the potential and reality of moral responsibility. We are left powerless in the face of the moral dilemmas that scientific discoveries pose: 'The exhilaration of discovering how to unlock the vast powers of the atom or the intricacies of the genetic code does not coincide with the agony of the problems such discoveries have created.'¹²

In deterministic frame, then, human beings are rendered morally inculpable. We find a reversal at play in contemporary culture: rather than being exhorted to seize the day, we are reminded that the day seizes us. In the final scene of Academy Award-winning *Boyhood*, the main character of the film agrees with his girlfriend that rather than seizing moments, every moment takes hold of us. 'Yeah, I know it's constant, the moments,' he responds. 'It's like it's always right now, you know?' Similarly, the common phrase 'YOLO' – You Only Live Once – is used less as a motivation for risk and achievement and more as an excuse for irresponsible and nihilistic behaviour.¹³

A deterministic portrayal of how we encounter life is insufficient to support meaning. Naturalism's determinism leaves a generation bereft of meaning, as life is perceived as already made, not in-the-making, and we have no freedom over our own futures. Existence no longer precedes essence; rather, essence precedes and precludes existence. And if we do not know who we are, or why we are here, there is no meaning in life. In this closed box of cause and effect, there are no actions I can take to impact the future, to make a difference, to show that I was here. Responsibility is corrupted – I am who I am because of predetermined genetics, or environmental factors that formed my life. We should not be surprised at the epidemic of self-harm and suicide among young people in many places across the Western world.

We experience alienation as we have denied either the contingency or the transcendence of humanity. On the one hand, we think more highly of ourselves than we ought when we think we are the measure of all things. On the other hand, we underestimate our potential when we think that we are simply the sum of biological impulses. We lack meaning because we have traded our relational *imago dei* for a rugged self-dependence that relies on what or who we can buy or sell rather than on authentic social existence.

III

In a fermenting consumer culture, meaning may yet be derived from reconciliation between the image and the thing it represents. Reconciliation between humanity and God results in a restored image of God in humanity. When we live as rugged individualists, disconnected from community and self we become disconnected from the Reality that anchors the image of God in humanity. We behave as *the* authority in a consumer society, until we realise we are merely cogs in the economic wheel. Consumerism is a human experience that at once denies both our contingency and our transcendence; both our body and our spirit. Seeking meaning within a theistic context does not allow us to float free from our relational connections and obligations, for we are saved into community, not from it.

This is why a theism that is given to Hegelianism – even a fragmented, postmodern sort – is insufficient, as it runs rampant over the vagaries of human personality. A Christian, and therefore personal, theism that meets the deep longing to know and be known, and defines the essential relationality of the human person, helps us rightly to explore the meaning of life. We are not entirely alienated, for we long for love. We are not solely determined material, for we love and are loved. And with theism embodied in the self-sacrifice of the Cross of Christ comes a beckoning that extends endlessly beyond the self to other, something that Emmanuel Levinas understood.¹⁴ We are invited to love not only those who love us, but to love those considered unlovable. Here is a stable basis for human flourishing, demonstrating care for the vulnerable and the weak, while also making the most of the gifts of the strong.

Living out the image of God in humanity means overcoming the alienation that has overwhelmed our culture through determinism and consumerism. That which some philosophers would deem impossible, Christ makes possible. In the holy love of Christ, we encounter a subversive act; an act that shows us the cost of our alienation, and achieves what we could not – reconciliation. Death shows what our lives are worth. They are worth everything – enough to be sought and saved to the uttermost.¹⁵ In the seemingly endless cycle of life and death, life has the last word. The image of God in humanity that was masquerading as independent is shown the way home. God is satisfied, removing him from the consumer dynamic that demands dissatisfaction and endless desire. The image is reconciled with the Real, and life is whispered in echoes across a nihilistic culture.¹⁶

A reconciled *imago dei* brings the potential for multi-layered transformation in individual and community life. Where determinism delivers fate, Christ shows human destiny. The moment that is now, even though fleeting, has eternal meaning. We are beckoned to follow Christ in subversive self-sacrificing love in a pursuit of discipleship that includes justice and mercy. In this moment we may love and discover love. In this moment lies endless potential. Where there was once despair, we find we are harbingers of hope and messengers of meaning.

Certainly Christian belief does not obliterate existential angst from the life of the believer. Nor does our faith lift us into some 'Olympian vantage point from which to view all things in an absolutely unconditioned way'.¹⁷ Rather, it conditions our thoughts and actions in particular directions, where we appropriate meaning within a theistic frame, understood and experienced specifically in identification with the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Where there is separation and alienation, a Christian theistic approach offers the possibility of reconciliation that holds together the dialectical aspects of human nature and existence.

And so we have in personal theism, in Christian life and faith, a means of holding together the vagaries of what it means to be human. Understanding what it means to be human is the key to framing our struggle for meaning. No aspects of human experience or essence are jettisoned; alienation paves the way for reconciliation; the innate desire to love and be loved has a source and a direction, interjected into history from beyond history. Although we should never be so arrogant to proclaim that we hold the meaning of life, we can yet be confident in our confession that the Meaning of Life holds us. In every moment, each one unique, we are in a place we have never been before and never will be again. Perhaps there is something new under the sun after all.

Notes

1. Eagleton 2007, p. xviii.
2. '42' is the answer to life, the universe and everything in Douglas Adams' well-known *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.
3. Niebuhr 1964, p. 3.
4. Niebuhr 1964, pp. 3–4.
5. Gall 1987, p. 1.
6. A. N. Wilson, 'Why I Believe Again,' *New Statesman*, 6 April 2009. Accessed online: <http://www.newstatesman.com/religion/2009/04/conversion-experience-atheism>.

7. See, for example, Julian Baggini's discussion on the creation of meaning in Baggini 2005; and de Botton's preference for finding meaning in the everyday, explored in his books, TED talks and his 'School of Life' at theschooloflife.com.
8. Eagleton 2007, p. 32.
9. Simon Jenkins, 'The Meaning of Life' book review, *Guardian*, 10 March 2007. Accessed online: <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2007/mar/10/society1>. Cf. Eagleton 2007, p. 100f.
10. Frankl 1992, p. 75.
11. Baudrillard deals with these themes in a number of works. See, for example, Baudrillard 1998; also Baudrillard 1994.
12. Gall 1987, p. 1.
13. Cf. George the Poet's 'YOLO', widely accessible on the internet.
14. See Levinas 1969.
15. P. T. Forsyth develops the theme of God's holy love across several works, highlighting what the Cross achieves and not only what it demonstrates. See, for example, Forsyth 1910. Here, Forsyth highlights the victory and the satisfaction of Christ's work, and its regenerative power.
16. I have developed this theme more fully in 'Atonement in Contemporary Culture: Christ, Symbolic Exchange and Death' in Tidball, Hilborn and Thacker (eds) 2008, pp. 329–344.
17. Sell 2002, p. 191. Sell is here following the argument of Karl Jaspers.

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