The Original Meaning of Life

Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia

What is the meaning of life? In the twentieth century most analytic philosophers either ignored the question or dismissed it as meaningless. This may be largely attributable to the influence of logical positivism. Continental philosophers were always somewhat more tolerant of the question, even though they rarely put it in these familiar terms; Heidegger came close, however, with his question of the meaning of ‘Being’. The positivist idea that the question is meaningless seems to have filtered into the public consciousness with the idea that what is most bewildering about the question is not how it should be answered, but rather what it is asking. Douglas Adams, in the *Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, picked up on this nicely with his plot about the planet Earth being a supercomputer designed to work out what the question means – the answer, 42, having been much easier to determine.

In the twenty first century there have been a growing number of analytic philosophers who are prepared to take the question seriously. In doing so, they are, unusually, falling into step with the many ‘non-philosophers’ who take the question seriously. However, the distinction drawn here between philosophers and non-philosophers may not run very deep. For it is in the shadow of our own mortality that the question presses on us most acutely. Death and the question of the meaning of life make philosophers of us all.

It is all the more surprising, then, that the phrase ‘the meaning of life’ has not always been with us. It has a specific historical origin. Its immediate predecessor was ‘lebenssinn’ (life’s meaning) which occurs in a letter of 9 July 1796 from Goethe to Schiller. Goethe had just published Book VII of *Wilhelm Meister’s Apprenticeship* and was defending himself from Schiller who had been urging him to make his philosophy more explicit. Goethe refers to ‘The Indenture’ which Wilhelm Meister receives in Book VII from the mysterious Society of the Tower – a contract to bind his conduct as he performs a task for the Society. In the letter to Schiller, Goethe says that if he had not been forced, for artistic reasons, to cut short the The Indenture, then he would have gone on to make pronouncements on life’s meaning. As it is, according to Goethe, it talks mainly about art (the first sentence echoes Hippocrates’ first aphorism, in which the ‘Art’ in question is that of the physician) – although modern readers might disagree:

> Art is long, life short, judgment difficult, opportunity transient. To act is easy, to think is hard; to act according to our thought is troublesome. Every beginning is cheerful; the threshold is the place of expectation. The boy stands astonished, his impressions guide him; he learns sportfully, seriousness comes on him by surprise. Imitation is born with us; what should be imitated is not easy to discover. The excellent is rarely found, more rarely valued. The height charms us, the steps to it do not: with the summit in our eye, we love to walk along the plain. It is but a part of art that can be taught; the artist needs it all. Who knows it half, speaks much, and is always wrong; who knows it wholly, inclines to act, and speaks seldom or late. The former have no secrets and no force: the instruction they can give is like baked bread, savoury and satisfying for a single day; but flour cannot be sown and seed-corn ought not to be ground. Words are good, but they are not the best. The best is not to be explained by words. The spirit in which we act is the highest matter. Action can be understood and again represented by the spirit alone. No one knows what he is doing, while he acts aright; but of what is wrong we are always conscious. Whoever works with symbols only, is a pedant, a hypocrite, or a bungler. There are many such, and they like to be together. Their babbling detains the scholar: their obstinate mediocrity vexes even the best. The instruction which the true artist gives us, opens the mind; for where words fail him, deeds speak. The true scholar

> learns from the known to unfold the unknown, and approaches more and more to being a master.

Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship was closely and avidly read by Friedrich Schlegel (poet, literary critic and philosopher; 1772-1829), who thought the three greatest phenomena of his age were the French Revolution, the philosophy of Fichte, and *Wilhelm Meister*. Another admirer of *Wilhelm Meister*, at least initially, was Schlegel's close friend, the philosopher and novelist Novalis (1772-1801). It was Novalis who was, to the best of our knowledge, the first to use the phrase 'der sinn des lebens'. In a manuscript composed between late 1797 and mid 1798 he wrote that: "Only an artist can divine the meaning of life."

Then, in 1799, Friedrich Schlegel became the first to bring 'sinn des lebens' into print. He did so towards the end of his philosophical novel *Lucinde*:

> Now the soul understands the lament of the nightingale and the smile of the newly born babe, understands the deep significance of the mysterious hieroglyphs on flowers and stars, understands the holy meaning of life as well as the beautiful language of nature. All things speak to the soul and everywhere the soul sees the loving spirit through the delicate veil.

Whether Schlegel was influenced by his friend Novalis or whether he was directly influenced by his own conversations with Goethe and Schiller is now difficult to say. This was a tight-knit group, centred on the university of Jena. However, although – within this group – Schlegel's friends Fichte and Schleiermacher praised the novel in the highest terms, *Lucinde* was not an immediate success. Many thought it pornographic; and indeed, closer to our own time, Isaiah Berlin dismissed it as "a pornographic novel of the fourth order."

It is therefore no surprise that 'der sinn des lebens' did not immediately catch on. It was only after a second edition was published in 1835 that the phrase began to occur more frequently. In 1843, it is there in Danish as 'Livets betydning' in Kierkegaard's *Either / Or* (which contains a section that parodies Schlegel's *Lucinde*), thus beginning its long association with existentialist philosophy; and once Schopenhauer's cosmic pessimism became a hot topic of debate it began to spread more widely in German philosophy (although Schopenhauer himself did not use it). Meanwhile in 1833-34 Thomas Carlyle published, in serialised form, *Sartor Resartus*; and it was in this highly influential work that 'the meaning of life' entered the English language. Carlyle took the phrase from *Lucinde*. He was a great admirer of the early German romantics, and of Fichte, Schlegel and Novalis in particular.

With regard to the general philosophical background, we must pay heed to Fichte's place in the story. Although he did not use the phrase himself, both Novalis and Schlegel had been his pupils and Fichte was preoccupied with the relationship between life and meaning in his most accessible work, *The Vocation of Man* (1799). Fichte wished to go beyond Kant's philosophy by arguing that things-in-themselves can be known, and in a sense, created by our own will (as a manifestation of the infinite will). It is this idea that Novalis picks up on in his idea that "only an artist can divine the meaning of life." The meaning of life can be divined, in Novalis' view, because it is artistically created: we ourselves write the book of life. "Life must not be a novel that is given to us, but one that is made by us." (Whereas in the thirteenth century Bonaventure had urged us to read the book of life, Novalis, in the final years of the eighteenth century, proclaimed his intention to write it.)

Many have seen this view as implying solipsism and nihilism. And in fact, without faith, the views of the early romantics do seem to amount to nihilism; for if we must fabricate our own meaning, this suggests there is none to discover – unless, as the romantics thought, our

creation is to be guided by faith. (Interestingly, the word 'nihilism' was first used in its modern sense, the sense of there being no meaning of life, in 1799 in an open letter written to Fichte by Friedrich Jacobi. Thus, in 1799 both the 'meaning of life' and 'nihilism', in its modern sense, made their debuts in print.)

Both Novalis and Schlegel associated faith with romantic love. For Novalis, romantic love is "the key to the world and to life." In romantic love we hope to merge dream with reality. In his unfinished novel *Heinrich de Ofterdingen* (1802) the attainment of this ambition is symbolised by a blue flower. Given the central importance of romantic love in his philosophy, the blue flower might also be taken to symbolise yearning for the meaning of life. This novel was originally inspired by Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, but in 1800 Novalis began to express reservations about Goethe's novel. In his view the eponymous hero was overly concerned with the prosaic business of earning a living as opposed to the pursuit of artistic inspiration. As to the blue flower, some have argued that its colour was inspired by Goethe's colour theories, but we suspect the principal inspiration may have come from Friedrich Schlegel's interest in Buddhism. In Buddhist iconography the partially open blue lotus symbolises expanding wisdom.

The idea that we must make our own meaning in life seems now to be more widespread than ever; and, philosophically, this contemporary idea seems to be not that different from that of Novalis and Schlegel. There are, in sum, two surprising elements to the story: the relatively recent origins of the phrase 'the meaning of life' and the similarity of prevailing contemporary ideas to those of the final years of the eighteenth century, when the now familiar phrase was coined. There is, *of course*, still widespread support for the idea that romantic love is "the key to the world and to life" – the idea has been unavoidable in popular culture ever since the 1960s (love is 'all you need', after all). The original meaning of 'the meaning of life' seems to have survived and prospered.

That is not to say we should unthinkingly accept our inheritance. Not at all: we should be aware of its origin, but we should also be aware that the meaning of life has a prehistory. Questions about the ultimate context, purpose and value of life were all discussed for thousands of years *avant la lettre*.

Nonetheless, if we look at the etymology of 'the meaning of life' – that subject that makes philosophers of us all – and if we look at the origins of the idea that we create our own meaning, then we must conclude that it was in Jena in the final years of the eighteenth century, in the circle of Goethe, Schiller, Schlegel and Novalis, that the modern era began.

Stephen Leach and James Tartaglia are the editors of The Meaning of Life and the Great Philosophers *(Routledge, 2018).*