

OS GUINNESS



THE
GREAT
QUEST



*Invitation to an Examined Life
and a Sure Path to Meaning*



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INVITATION TO AN EXAMINED LIFE



DO YOU HAVE A MIND THAT is always seeking to make sense of things? Does your heart have a deep longing for a sense of order and belonging? Have you ever experienced a sense of wonder that thrills to the beauty of the world and the mystery of existence? Or are you uninterested in questions like these? For those who are willing to pursue an examined life, there is a sure path to exploring such desires. Come and let's consider the questions themselves and the great quest for faith and meaning that they spur. The prize offered by such a quest is nothing less than a life that is worthy of life.

“Forget the opinion polls. Think for yourself.” That old maxim needs reviving today in an other-obsessed age. Many people have little interest in such issues as the meaning of life. They are interested only when the questions are popular with others too. They have hardly given a thought to what life is all about, and they have zero curiosity as to why they exist at all. Press them

with questions, and all that matters is that they are alive and well, and enjoying life from day to day—and under the bountiful conditions of the modern world, that is surely not so bad. The best course, we are told, is to do the next thing that we need to do and to make the most of life while we can. After all, we are said to be entering the most irreligious era in human history, when seriousness about faith and meaning is irrelevant to more people than ever. We have enough to live with. Why should we concern ourselves with impossibly big questions about what we should live *for*?

We are often pointed to the religious “nones,” the “none of the aboves” as the exemplars of this fashionable indifference. They are the rising tide of those with receding faith, Matthew Arnold’s “Dover Beach” for our times. To be sure, what the nones say they no longer believe, and what they say is important for anyone to believe, often amounts to very little and seems to matter even less. The result is an easy-going nihilism, often masked under a wise-guy bravado. Many of the nones sound as if they are as knowledgeable as Plato even when they spout nonsense. (“I am an atheist who believes in God,” one pronounced solemnly. Another tweeted an equal non sequitur to his million followers with pseudoprofundity: “If there were ultimate meaning in the universe, your life would be pointless.”)

Compared with most people in most previous times, many in today’s generation are not only disinterested but unschooled in knowing how to search for the meaning of life. The situation is as confusing and chaotic as it is over sure paths to lasting relationships. Many of today’s elites dismiss the very idea of the meaning of life as meaningless itself. As a result, the paths for the search

are cordoned off, overgrown, and increasingly uncharted and unexplored. For any who are still determined to break with the crowd and set off by themselves, the quest is often haphazard and ad hoc—a matter of everyone for themselves.

But is our generation really so incurious that we no longer wonder about the meaning of life? What does it say of us and our view of our own existence that we are content to assume there is no more to life than muddling along as best as we can? Why are we here? What can we know? What is a good life? What should be our relationship to the cosmos in which we live? Are we to be content with clichés and consensus thinking? If the mounting incidence of suicide opens our eyes to the fact that far too many people do not want to go on existing, then the collapsing birth rate across the modern world raises a similar question at a different level: What will it take for humanity to desire to go on existing fruitfully?

For many generations, it would have been considered a time-tested statement to say that faith in God is an essential part of human experience. Carl Gustav Jung used to say that the ultimate question in human life is whether or not we are related to the infinite. But in today's cultural conversation that statement no longer sounds self-evident. Is it in fact outdated, is it arrogant, or is it just plain absurd? "The simple fact is," a famous American radio host announced bluntly, "religion must die for mankind to live." Many people today say they don't want God, others say they don't need God, and some now say that with biogenetics and ultraintelligence they can replace God. And who is to say they are wrong, they add, if they appear to get by so easily without God?

How would you set out the basic options for thinking through the meaning of life? Would it improve things for you, or make them worse, to say that our ultimate trust in life should not be in God or in any religion but only in human reason, in science, in technology, in management, in nature, and in history? Do you agree with Bertrand Russell's famous dictum that "what science cannot discover, man cannot know"? Are you content to live in what Plato called a "cave" in which the sun is not allowed to penetrate, and Peter Berger described as "the world without windows"? Are you confident that, between us, we human beings will somehow figure out the mysteries and challenges of life and the universe, and be able to live well together on our little blue ball of a home?

The truth is that the urgent need of our times is a fresh seriousness about human existence and a renewed openness to ultimate questions. Answers to ultimate questions are not only vital to each of us as individuals but to whole societies and civilizations. Indeed, there are no great societies or civilizations without confident answers to ultimate questions, and such answers need to become vital again in our schools, our universities, and our public discussion as well as in our families. "Man" cannot live on cynicism alone. Knowing what life is about is essential for finding happiness in life. The gap between the reality of a human being and the ideal of being human is now alarmingly wide, and we are closer to C. S. Lewis's warning of a master generation that, through its genetic and psychological engineering, is capable of deciding the course of all future generations—and all without their consent.

Yet many people have grown complacent through the deceptions and delusions of our advanced modern world. We have too

much to live with and too little to live for. We have fallen for the illusion of our own mastery and control, and even of our own human omnipotence. Many people live as if, in Heinrich Heine's famous dismissal of Karl Marx, they were "godless self-gods" who think they have it all together. But after a global pandemic, can we really believe we are in control of ourselves and our world, and in control of history and the future? What if that is a naivety, if not a hubris, we can no longer afford?

The essential first step for us all is to explore what we believe is the meaning of life and, in light of it, to learn to live well together, even with others who have very different views of what life is about.

HOW DO WE SEE LIFE?

We can surely all begin the quest with the simple truth that the first and greatest gift we have in life is life itself. But how do we each see life and our own lives? Life is brief, life is fragile, and life is overshadowed by death at the end. You are going to die, I am going to die, and death makes a mockery of much of the way we are both thinking and acting today. (Author Philip Roth at his eightieth birthday, quoting Franz Kafka: "The meaning of life is that it stops.") So, the very fact of a short life, lived toward a certain death, raises the question of the meaning of human existence. What does life mean? Do we only live once and there is no rehearsal for our single entry on the stage, or do we go around and around with the "eternal recurrence" of endless appearances and reappearances (or reincarnations)? How are we to understand life in order to make the most of it and live it well together?

We humans, it would appear, are the only life form that raises the question *why*. We are the only ones who can range backward in time through memory and history, as well as forward in time through imagination and vision. It would seem we are the only species that is aware of life as widely as we are or inquires about the meaning of things. So, not surprisingly, life raises foundational questions for us. The meaning of anything can only be understood within the wider meaning of everything. What are we alive for? How do we make the most of the lives we have been given? To whom or to what are we answerable for these lives of ours? What does it mean to lead a life well lived and a life worthy of life?

Obviously, none of us willed ourselves into being. We didn't choose our parents, and we didn't choose when or where we were born, so it would be absurd to think we owe life to ourselves. And it's surely preposterous and more than a little prideful to think that life is only about us, if only because there are so many billions of others alive at the same time as we are. Plus, the fact is that the time is coming when we won't be here, and before too long life will go on as if we never had been here.

To whom, then, or to what do we owe life, and what is it all about? Do we owe life to our parents, to society, to nature, to evolution, to the universe, to God or gods—if there are any? What does it mean for us to exist or to be? How are we supposed to respond to or even repay the gift of life? And how are we to make the most of the amazing gift of time, so at least we know we have made the best use of our days?

This book is for those who care about such questions. Let me start with three stories of different responses to such issues. Salvador Dalí,

the Spanish painter, was a flamboyant showman in real life as well as in his art. He loved to be the impresario of his own public image, and he produced paintings and orchestrated a lifestyle that flouted convention and delighted in catching public expectations on the wrong foot. This drive to defiance had its deepest roots in Dalí's own story. His relationship to his father had been turbulent. Once, after a tempestuous scene between father and son, the young Dalí stormed out of his father's home. Going back to his own house, he masturbated, put his semen in an envelope, addressed the envelope to his father, and—as if paying a gas or electricity bill—wrote on the envelope: “Paid in full.”

Very different was the high-flying world of a New York businessman who was so busy that he had no time to be at the hospital when his wife gave birth to their son. His first chance to see the baby was when mother and baby came home. Finally, he took time off from work, went home and crossed the room to the crib, and looked down at his newborn son. A look of startled amazement came over his face. A friend asked him what had struck him, and he answered, “I can't understand how they can make such a crib for only \$29.50.”

Few people could be more different from the artist and the businessman than the great Jewish philosopher Abraham Joshua Heschel. Born in Warsaw, Poland, and educated in Hitler's Berlin in the 1930s, he described himself as “a brand plucked from the burning.” He arrived in the United States just weeks before the invasion of Poland, not realizing he would lose his mother, sisters, and many other family members in Auschwitz-Birkenau. In New York, where he lived the rest of his life, he became not only a great Jewish leader, but a philosopher and scholar, a civil rights activist

alongside Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a poet, and a widely respected public intellectual. Felled by a near-fatal heart attack toward the end of his life, he told a friend: “When I regained consciousness, my first feelings were not of despair or anger. I felt only gratitude to God for my life, for every moment I had lived. . . . That is what I meant when I wrote, ‘I did not ask for success; I asked for wonder. And You gave it to me.’”

We might well ask which was worse: Dalí’s gross ingratitude toward his parents who gave him life, or the crass reductionism of the businessman who overlooked the miracle of life for the dividends of the market economy? Equally, we might ask how Heschel, in spite of Auschwitz and the liquidation of his family and so many of his people in Eastern Europe, and in spite of the racism and the evils he protested against so fiercely in America, still came to see wonder as the source of wisdom and gratitude and the only proper response to the gift of life by which he believed he had been graced.

How would our responses measure up against these three? Have you thought through how you see life? Stories like those could be expanded endlessly, but the real point is how each of us sees our lives, and how we are trying to make the most of life, and live life well and wisely.

INCURIOS AND UNQUESTIONING

The truth is that many people never raise the question, Why are we here? They show little interest in the meaning of their existence. They just take life and time for granted. After all, they are breathing, eating, working, sleeping, talking, and laughing today just as they were yesterday. For most people, most of the time,

tomorrow looks like more of the same. It's easy to live like that because most people just accept themselves and their existence, and never ask questions about the customs and ways of life around them. All too often, we stop asking questions as we become adults, and we lose the curiosity we had as children. So we never stop to wonder at how astonishing life is—and not just our little lives, but the existence of the universe itself, the sun, the moon, the stars, and the galaxies, as well as the marvel of simple things around us such as dewdrops, dandelions, and dogs.

Yet existence itself is amazing. If you do stop to think, questions flash out in a thousand directions. Why is there something rather than nothing? What brought existence into existence? Why is each of us here? What are we here for? If we didn't come from ourselves, why do we think we have a complete right to ourselves, but to whom then are we responsible? How are we supposed to relate to the world around us and to other people, and decide what is true or false, right or wrong, fair or unfair? How do we make the most of what is really a very fleeting time on the earth? Is this little life all that is, or is there anything after it?

Before long, you find yourself raising questions that echo those that humans like us have asked for centuries. Mere existence, simply being alive, is one thing, but life and a whole universe with meaning, purpose, and appreciation is another. How did everything get to be the way it is? What does it mean to live a good life? How are we to find a solid foundation for our purpose in life, for our loves, our friendships, our work, and our membership in the communities in which we live? Is it important to live what the great Greek philosopher Socrates called an examined life—a thoughtfully responsible life? It's odd that once you start thinking

about it, life prompts more questions than it offers answers, yet somehow, we don't often bother with the questions. It's as if we have all the answers we need.

WE NEED MEANING AS WE NEED OXYGEN

Do questions like that really matter, or are they only for philosophers? Oddly, there are many real philosophers today who pooh-pooh the very idea of the meaning of life. The search for meaning, one book says, is a task fit only for mystics, comedians, and madmen. Legend has it that a London cabbie once asked the eminent mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell what he thought was the meaning of life. ("What's it all about, Bertie?") The greatest philosopher of his day was flummoxed. *Only precise questions deserve precise answers*, philosophers answer primly. The question itself would need to be questioned rigorously before it could be answered properly. "The universe is just there, and that's all," Russell used to say, incuriously for a philosopher.

Comedians like to joke about the question too. For Monty Python, life is absurd, so questions about the meaning of life are stupid, and answers are absurd as well. One of the funniest evenings of my life was when my wife and I had dinner with Douglas Adams, author of *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*. In this book, the computer Deep Thought was asked to work out the meaning of life, and it took seven and a half million years to finally come up with the answer: 42. The world then had to build an even larger computer to find out what the question was. The search for the meaning of life, some people say, is perhaps the only meaning there is to life.

Such disdain may be common in intellectual circles today, but it is surely one of the silliest attitudes in our sophisticated age that all too often is too clever by half, and it keeps tripping itself up in its silliness. Taking life for granted is one of the worst errors in our modern world, at a time when we can least afford it. The simple fact is that *Homo sapiens* lives by more than animal instincts and the satisfaction of physical needs. Animals' needs can be satisfied easily. Even our own animal needs, such as food and sleep, can be satisfied relatively easily. But humans have deeper needs, including the need to love and be loved, a need that can only be satisfied through meaning. "Am I needed?" is part and parcel of "Who am I?," "What are we all here for?," and "What's life all about?"

If the search for meaning is said to be madness, we might ask which is madder—to believe in meaning in the way we assume it every day, to search for its source and maybe find it, or to dismiss the very search as madness and settle for living with no meaning at all? The truth is that we humans are meaning mongers. Meaning is as native to us as the air we breathe and the earth where we walk. Every word we utter, every act we perform, every plan we make (and every sentence you are reading) shouts out "meaning, meaning, meaning!" Without meaning, both our moment-by-moment daily lives, and our lives taken as a whole, would be worse than trivial. They would be worthless and futile.

Can today's intellectuals really think that, although our daily lives are crammed with irrepressible meaning, it doesn't matter whether there is any meaning to human life itself or to the universe? How can they say that? What other than conceit leads them to conclude that what they themselves do not see cannot be

there, and that no one else can find it either? If there is no meaning in who we *are*, why is there meaning in what we *say* or *do*? Is all human life simply an endless climbing of ladders that are against the wrong walls? How many people would have to ask with Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich, "What if my whole life has been wrong?" Or how would they answer author Philip Roth's *cri de coeur*, his mantra when his own life was unraveling, "My life is a problem I cannot solve."

A WHY TO LIVE FOR

The truth is that we humans cannot live without meaning any more than we can live without breathing, eating, and drinking. The will to live and the will to meaning are one, and both are essential to our humanness. We all need to make sense of life. We all need to find security in the world. That's what gives each of us a storyline in our lives. *Sense, security, storyline*—without these, meaninglessness becomes a serious problem and suicide a serious possibility.

"He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how," Nietzsche wrote in *Twilight of the Idols*. But there has to be a why. Intuitively, meaninglessness is unacceptable, even insufferable, to humans. In the dark, black night of Auschwitz, where there was no why in answer to the horror of evil, psychiatrist Viktor Frankl found that some shred of meaning, however meager, was an absolute necessity for survival. Without it, his fellow inmates had no motivation to live when life was hell and death seemed the only escape. Without at least that shred of meaning, they became "blanket cases." They took to their bunks, gave up, and died. Later, that central insight became the heart of Frankl's famous books *Man's Search for Meaning* and *Man's Search for Ultimate Meaning*.

Albert Camus wrote similarly in the celebrated opening words of his *Myth of Sisyphus*: “There is but one truly serious philosophical problem, and that is suicide. Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.” Camus didn’t mean that we should all consider taking our lives. He was saying that it is only the deepest “why” and the toughest “why not” that keep us from refusing to give up on life when life becomes unbearable. The will to live and the reason why, or the meaning to live by, must never be separated.

Don’t be put off by the disdain of the ivory tower or the scoffing of comedians. The meaning of life is too important to be left to philosophers or laughed out of court. How do we understand the realness of reality? Why do we prize human dignity or think that humans have equal worth when nothing about us looks equal? Where do we anchor our sense of identity and purpose, and develop our understanding of right and wrong, and love? How do we pursue happiness? What is a successful human being? Why should we care for our neighbor and the “other”? What does the shortness of life, and the inevitability of death at the end of it, mean for the way we live? These questions matter, and none of them can be answered without an underlying sense of the overall meaning of life. We need meaning like we need a name and a sense of our own identity.

The point is not that each of us has to go off on our own and think through these questions all by ourselves, completely from scratch. That would be tedious and impossible. It’s also unnecessary, because so many thinkers have raised and pursued the questions before us, so we can enter the ongoing conversation and come to our own conclusions. We do need to think

it through for ourselves, though not by ourselves, and so make up our own minds.

The modern world is history's greatest alibi for careless living, but Socrates's challenge still stands: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Let's explore together what that might mean for the great quest for faith and meaning.

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