

What Does It All Mean?

There's more meaning in life than we can possibly make sense of. But not to worry. We need only make sense of the life we shape for ourselves.

Mark Kingwell

Human reason has this peculiar fate that in one species of its knowledge it is burdened by questions which, as prescribed by the very nature of reason itself, it is not able to ignore, but which, as transcending all its powers, it is also not able to answer.

— Immanuel Kant, Preface to *Critique of Pure Reason*

I take as my title a question that outlines the modest theme I will pursue: the nature of meaning itself. Like many philosophers, I am fond of titles that are questions— or, at least, of titles that end with question marks, which is not always the same thing. A colleague of mine was once advised that everything in his book called *The End of Metaphysics* could be rendered true, or anyway less false, if he added a question mark to the end of it. The end of metaphysics? Could be, could be. Indeed, why not? But we have to be careful with those face-saving question marks, because they can look like a failure of nerve—the functional equivalent of a scholarly book's subtitle, which, broken over the crisis of faith symbolized by the two-story full stop of a colon, tempers the enthusiasm of a bold, snappy title with some dull, informative, backpedaling phrase. You know the kind of thing I mean. Title: *A Civil Tongue*. Subtitle: *Justice, Dialogue, and the Politics of Pluralism*. (That one is mine.)

The question at hand, you'll notice, has not been weakened with a soapy subtitle. It is, to all appearances, a genuine request for information, a question it is possible to hear actual people actually asking. True, those people are very likely to be, variously, children, the mad, the anguished, the ironic, and the damned. Moreover, the question is an uneasy question, shot through with anxiety. But one of the duties of a philosopher is to ask questions that, for good reasons and bad, are pushed to the margins of everyday life by the pressures of time and routine sanity. I say that as if I had a firm grasp on what it means to be a philosopher, and as if I were confident that I have a good answer to the question I'm asking. But like so many members of my odd profession, I am ever only half-convinced—if that—that I know what I'm up to.

The professional philosopher is a walking paradox because he is doing most acutely whatever it is he does precisely when he is most plagued with doubt, covered in confusion, mired in ramifying banks of questions. The philosophical task is not so much self-defeating as baffling, a sort of Moebius strip of the mind. Indeed, philosophy is an impossible profession because the idea of a profession of philosophy is a contradiction in terms. As the philosopher Jonathan Lear notes, "We want to pass on fundamental truths, and in our attempts to do so truth becomes rigid and dies." Philosophy, as a project of critical openness, is fundamentally opposed to the defensive, closed structure of a profession.

In the popular imagination, philosophers are the masters of meaning. They know what they're doing, and can tell others how to do it too. But in my experience, that's really not true, though there are often good reasons for pretending it is. Professional philosophers are not, as a group, wiser or deeper than other people. The tools we possess are, like all tools, limited in their application by good will and insight. Logic,

for example, is effective and worthwhile only if wielded with compassion and a sense of proportion. And much of what makes philosophy interesting is not tool-like at all, which is one reason the profession can't possibly have the structure of other professions, such as medicine or actuarial science.

So there's reason to be anxious about the question we've chosen to ask if the people we habitually consider its guardians may not really be up to it. Meaning cannot be professed. We may go out on a limb now and then and say what this or that means, though even that probably constitutes a certain kind of hubris and folly. Yet, even impossible pursuits have their pleasures. So let us pursue the question of what it all means by considering, as a first step, what it means to ask a question, any question at all.

Questions have many rhetorical uses, and requesting information is only one of them. Even apparently straightforward questions are, in many contexts, bearers of hidden agendas, as lawyers' and politicians' questions often are. The same is true of questions that might be called philosophical, especially when they are asked in a certain kind of way. There are also questions that fall into the category of what might be called "drive-by objections" —questions that are meant not to elicit information or establish agreement but to demand an answer so that the answer may be found wanting. If, realizing this, one resists the demand for an answer, one is labeled evasive. If one provides a paradoxical answer ("The good life is the life spent seeking the good life," "Virtue is its own reward," "The essence of being is the being of essence," etc.), one is labeled obfuscatory as well as evasive. In all cases, the questioner and his audience go away feeling better because none of their deep-seated convictions have been challenged. In fact, they have been reinforced. Philosophy: every bit as useless as we always suspected!

There is a profound difference between the questioner who cares about an answer and the one who cares only to dismiss the answer. The drive-by objector lacks the quality the ancient Greek philosophers associated with the beginning of wisdom. I mean wonder-bare astonishment before the world. The close-minded are not moved by the fact of the world; they do not find it amazing. They have lost their capacity for bafflement, and hence lost their ability to imagine the world as other than it is. They are reluctant to slow down in their relentless ingestion of the passing scene for fear, ironically, that something will pass them by. Meanwhile, of course, everything is passing them by. That is what everything does —if you let it.

Perhaps I'm being a little unfair.

Perhaps such people do not know what to make of the vestigial wonder they do feel, and the feelings of unease that come with it. There is no wisdom without that unease, and no chance to do anything but leave the world of meaning exactly as we find it. The world without wonder is not a world entirely without meaning. On the contrary, everything means exactly what we already thought it did. But this is meaning that never goes beyond the glib certainty of a newspaper column, the depressing sameness of a situation comedy. By contrast, it takes a certain kind of courage—or just a certain

kind of perversity—not to “understand” everything, but instead to welcome unease and put it at the center of one’s life.

One feature of this unease is the realization that, as Kant reminds us, we are equipped to ask questions we may not be equipped to answer. That is to say, we can give answers of a kind, but they may not do the sorts of things we have come to expect of answers. They may lead to more questions, or throw us back upon ourselves, or reveal that we are bound up by linguistic and conceptual confusions—or all of the foregoing. And that is not a condition to which most people readily submit.



El Sueño de Sor Juana (1979), by Carlos Castaneda

At this point, you may well be wondering why I'm taking up your time in this manner and tying the issue in knots. But before you pass a death sentence on philosophy (or this philosopher), let's return to the initial question: "What does it all mean?" Well, first of all, what does it mean to ask such a question? I said earlier that it was a real question, in the sense that we might actually find people asking it. But I was being a little disingenuous. In fact, it is a decidedly odd question—one we rarely hear articulated in anything like an ordinary context. One might ask it in a dramatically exasperated manner—say, after viewing yet another round of senseless action-movie trailers or breathless fashion pointers. More seriously, one might ask it in a dejected way, after viewing yet another round of anonymous human suffering on the nightly news. But curiously enough, when asked with true seriousness, the question is most often asked silently, as are others like it ("Am I happy?" "Is that all there is?") We speak them to ourselves, not to someone else.

We have to be on our guard for these silent questions, asked outside the usual contexts of meaning. We are alone with them, wrestling with them in our nakedness, the way the ancient Greeks practiced the sport. No wonder we feel so uneasy when they arise. No wonder we seek an array of distractions to keep them at bay most of the time. No wonder that for some people they are simply too big to admit of meaningful answers.

That latter group includes some philosophers. Ordinary-language philosophers, who ruled the roost of meaning during most of the past century, would tell us that the oddness of the questions reveals the basic problem with them. Meaning, these philosophers say, is an engagement of mind with world via the necessarily shared medium of language. A question that has no ordinary context of usage is not a real question, for, as the eccentric Cambridge philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein put it, meaning is use. If you want to know what something means, look at the way it actually arises in language.

A key reason why meaning is use is that language is necessarily shared. Words mean nothing—they are literally nonsense—if they are not stable enough to be understood by at least one other person. That is the sense in which language is normative: we can't just decide that a sound will mean anything at all. In his book *Philosophical Investigations* (1953), Wittgenstein asks: "Can I say 'bububu' and mean 'If it doesn't rain, I shall go for a walk'?" Well, no, because "bububu" doesn't mean anything. You might conceivably intend for it to mean "If it doesn't rain, I shall go for a walk," but it doesn't mean that unless and until at least one other person, and normally a whole lot of people—all the competent users of the natural language you normally speak, in this case English—can parse that intention.

The point cannot be emphasized too much: Meaning resides in the shared practices of what Wittgenstein called a language-game. And a game is not a game if everyone is playing by different rules. The rules needn't be explicit, or specify every possible move within the game. But they must enable us to make sense of any move at all. Otherwise, there is no such thing as meaning. Meaning has to be shared to be real.



Ludwig Wittgenstein in 1929, when he was awarded a scholarship to Trinity College, Cambridge.

The bluff good sense of this view is appealing. Ordinary-language philosophy is, in its way, a response to the impossible nature of philosophical inquiry. It purchases conceptual success at the cost of drastically lowered expectations. We can say what things mean, one at a time and with close attention to the details of context, but we cannot say what it *all* means, because the question does not really arise meaningfully. It arises only in odd contexts — call them philosophical in a pejorative sense —where it lurks and glowers like a mythical beast, impossible to slay. I call this view appealing, and of course it is.

It allows us to get on with the business of shaping and exchanging meaning in the shared medium of language, and does so, moreover, by wanting to cure us of the lingering ills we suffer in the form of unanswerable (metaphysical) questions. But the view is also mistaken in thinking that these questions can so easily be laid to rest, or that we would give them up even if we could. Wittgenstein, to his credit, did not believe any such thing. There is a point to asking what it all means— even if we have not yet seen the point.

Don't worry; this essay will keep its promise. Promises, after all, are themselves acts of meaning, forged in the medium of a shared language. They are what J. L. Austin, one of the early masters of ordinary-language philosophy, called performative utterances— that is, not just words but actions. To say “I promise” is to do something as well as to say something, and promises don't mean anything unless they're kept most of the time. Still, let's not be too hasty in our pursuit of the answer to the big question.

At the opposite extreme from ordinary-language minimalism about meaning is a form of maximalism that is, in its own way, just as appealing. I mean the desire, with us since at least biblical times, to find not an ordinary language of meaning but a perfect or universal one. That is the dream of the postBabel world, the world of multiple and messy meanings, and it comes down to us in various forms, from the medieval Scholastic attempt to translate all teachings into the terms of the one true faith, to the 20th-century project of deriving all meaning from first principles of logic and mathematics.

Cyberfeminist Donna Haraway echoes this desire for a perfect language (and signals its danger): “Communications sciences and modern biologies are constructed by a common move, the translation of the world into a problem of coding, a search for a common language in which all resistance to instrumental control disappears and all heterogeneity can be submitted to disassembly, reassembly, investment, and exchange.”

Haraway is right to see the far-reaching ambitions of universal coding in those terms. If everything were translatabe into, say, digital code—including the idiosyncratic clusters of genetic information we call persons—then everything would be made disposable, not in the sense of being destined to be thrown away, but in the sense of being available for any kind of redeployment. Binary code is not fussy. From the point of view of the code, there is no difference between a text document, a film, a sequence of events, or an entity. The more our lives and experiences are fused into the play of this code,

becoming chunks or nodes of code in an ever-fluid sea of information transfer, the more likely it is that the transition from a partially coded to a completely coded world will begin to make sense to us.

Notice that Haraway uses the word *translation* to describe this transition. Before there is universal translatability, there is a metalevel translation of all systems of meaning into a single, all-encompassing one. It is this metalevel translation that we have to keep an eye on. Universal languages are reductive, obviously. But what is reductive about reductionism is not that it reduces the number of entities or substances in the world, but that it reduces the number of meaningful ways we have to talk about the world. And that makes the world a poorer place.

Meaning lodges in the community-based structure of our engagements with the world. It resides neither entirely in language nor entirely in the world, but in the complex, codependent relationship that exists between the two and in the complex web of speech-acts to which we commit ourselves every day. Seekers after a perfect or universal language see this codependent relationship as dysfunctional (which, of course, it often is), but then meet that condition with a strategy of maximalist translation—all dialects rendered into one supertongue. They think this move will solve everything, but it solves everything the way any totalitarian regime does—by ruthlessly eliminating diversity and possibility.

Binary code is not the only maximalist solution we are being peddled these days. Sociobiology, the bastard child of evolutionary theory, sometimes appears in the guise of a final explanation, as does physics in its less nuanced forms—a blithe explanation of everything, based on the unified field theory. Meme theory, which explains human culture entirely in terms of inherited replicator units, and other forms of reductive cultural determinism are currently fashionable examples of the same way of thinking. We are here, these theories say, as part of a grand design to transmit genetic information, or increase complexity, or build more intricate machines. Religious fundamentalism is another kind of maximalist final explanation: we are here to be judged by God. All these explanations of final purpose are suffused by the close-mindedness that comes when one believes (a) that there is a master key to meaning, and (b) that one has it. Most dangerous of all, of course, is the person who also believes (c) that nobody else can have it.

Most of the time these forms of maximalism function on a time scale, or a level of abstraction, that renders them pointless. They have no pull with us, down here on the ground. Even so, they often exert a malign influence and encourage a certain kind of passivity, a listlessness that is easily mistaken for “philosophical” wisdom. The biggest problem with all of them is that, in explaining what it all means, they somehow still fail to explain why meaning moves us in the first place. Thus, their weirdly self-contradictory quality: in its effort to explain everything—to dispel all mysteries in one fell swoop of meaning—maximalism misses the deepest mystery, which is that things mean anything at all.

Consciousness, as materialist biologists know, is functionally redundant. That's the bad news, for you conscious beings out there. There is simply no reason that our genetic transfers, even our cultural constructions, should be accompanied by subjective experiences such as love, triumph, dejection, or happiness. But they are—and that's the compelling mystery at the heart of meaning. There is no need for meaning, yet here it is. Indeed, we might begin to suspect that the answer to our big question is not genetic persistence, or cultural complexity, or biological diversity, but what all those forces seem to serve: meaning itself.

The world of meaning is, in that sense, not unlike a work of art. We can speak of how it came to be, what its made of, even how it functions. We can talk about its place in our lives and about the things we try to express when we say that it matters to us. What we cannot do is reduce it to propositional content. And that suggests a different kind of answer altogether to the question we've been pursuing. At the risk of descending into what a drive-by objector would view as evasive paradox, the answer is this: the meaning of meaning is meaning itself.

What am I getting at by saying something so strange? Let me begin to explain in terms of a familiar example. The combination of empty success and hidden failure in maximalism is not unlike the peculiar conjunction of stimulation and boredom that is endemic to the modern age, when most people have finally had enough free time to escape from the drudgery of work—only to face the drudgery of leisure. The condition is too common to need a detailed description here. Who among us has not felt the creeping ennui of overstimulation, the dull paralysis of having too much time and too many options? Entertainment, like so many things, contains its own negation: an excess of it, paradoxically, is boring.

But we should not try to dispel the boredom with further rounds of frantic distraction, for our boredom has something to tell us. In precisely such a condition we may be most inclined to ask, desperately but usefully, “What does it all mean?” This feeling of too-muchness is not, in fact, a recent phenomenon, or one restricted to the modern era of democratized leisure. It is more basic than that, linked intimately to our relations of meaning with the world. It is a function of mind itself, of our vast, plastic capacity to find things significant. We have evolved as creatures with brains both decentralized and task-generic. That is, while certain actions can clearly be associated with certain parts of the brain, the human brain itself has a generalist architecture. It is not built to do one thing, or even a few, but to do a vast number of different, often complex things, which is why so many things strike us as interesting—from puns to madrigals, from cave paintings to the internal combustion engine, from folksongs to the Doppler effect, from baseball to chess.

A generalist brain is both a blessing and a curse. For creatures like us, there is always too much meaning to make sense of—not simply because we have evolved tools of reminder, like books and techniques and institutions, but because each of us is every day creating more meaning than we can ourselves comprehend. Wishes and fantasies,

dreams and visions—here and elsewhere, surplus meanings escape the bounds of the daily routine of trying to make sense.

Which means that to ask the question “What does it all mean?” is to set oneself up for constant disappointment. For there is no adequate general answer, no maximalist translation, equal to its scope. We may fool ourselves with the translations, or use them to overpower others, but at heart they are all corrosive of meaning. That is not to grant the field to the minimalists, however, because the question is still a real question, even if a rather odd one. And its real import is this: it sounds a cry of frustration, not with too little meaning but with too much. That is what makes us uneasy, because so little of the meaning in the world seems to mean anything in particular. It does not matter, and that lack of mattering troubles us. And so, paradoxically, a surfeit of meaning (in the world, in ourselves) seems to be matched by a dearth of meaning, or of the right kind of meaning (in the world, in ourselves).

Our anxiety about meaning is really an anxiety about ourselves, therefore, or, more precisely, about ourselves as we engage with the world. When we ask, “What does it all mean?” we are raising another question: “How should I shape my life?” Socrates knew this, and labored under no professional delusions that, in the end, metaphysics and epistemology, which concern the nature of reality and knowledge, respectively, could be separated from ethics. All inquiry, whatever its subject, has as its final object the matter of how to go about living. Philosophers have lost sight of this idea so often over the centuries that it sounds a trifle bizarre today, when most people, perhaps, would be incredulous if you were to suggest that all questions ultimately point to the one question: How ought I to live?

Before expanding on this crucial point, let me enter certain caveats. First, we’re still addressing a question, not an answer. That is very important. Plato’s mistake was to think that Socrates’ questions as to how we should live could be worked up into a system, a web of ultimate meaning, a super-answer. Ingenious and beautiful though his answer was, Plato could not finally escape the looming reductionism of his project. In the final analysis, Platonism is not in the Socratic spirit.

Second, I’m by no means entirely confident that I myself am pursuing the question well (though I hope I am). This point is worth emphasizing, because the drive-by objectors among you will perhaps be inclined to dig for dirt. But anything you might find to discredit me, however amusing, is beside the point. If Plato’s mistake was trying to systematize a deep insight, ours too often is failing to distinguish an insight from the person who reports it.

Third, though my emphasis is on the individual, because I want to throw the question back onto each one of us, I do not mean to defend meaning as individual or idiosyncratic. It is not the case that “each of us has his own meaning.” The ordinary-language philosophers are right that meaning, to be meaningful, has to be shared by a group of language users.

The whole point, and the problem, of meaning is that it reveals the complex isomorphic relationship between us (as readers, or perhaps slaves, of meaning) and the

rest of the sociocultural world (as the site, or reflection, of meaning). We are always both creating and being created by the world around us—which includes, crucially, other creatures in the same fix. It is the condition of being so stranded, of being both trapped inside our heads and able (sometimes) to fashion meanings that other meaning creators can parse, that makes the whole question of meaning so unsettling. If we arrive at different answers to the question of what this or that means—and we will—that does not mean meaning is whatever each one of us thinks it is. It means merely (merely!) that we have ahead of us an even harder task than we thought.

There remains, then, one issue for us to consider: What practical import, if any, does the question “What does it all mean?” have for our lives? It is one thing to say that asking how we ought to live is central to human life, and quite another to explain how this cashes out in day-to-day terms. I want to track the application of insight that arises from confrontation with our unanswerable question. If the cry of frustration elicited by the question remained at the level of frustration, if it did not change anything at all, we would be in desperate straits indeed. The question is not a request for information. All right. And it cannot actually be answered in full without doing violence to itself. Fine. But if it had no purchase at all on the world of our actions and experiences, it would not be worth our attention. Immersed in meaning, awash in content, how best can we cope?

There are at least five principal responses. First, we have to recognize the enduring temptation of what were above called maximalist solutions, the attempts to find a universal code, to command and control our engagements of meaning with the world. The temptation does not go away, and its dangers are manifold. In its worst and most obvious form, it issues in knowingness, a sense that we know exactly what’s going on. Knowingness is murderous of wonder and of insight, and ultimately it does a violent disservice to that which it sought to serve, the vast array of meaning itself. It sucks the meaning out of meaning.

That might lead to a second kind of temptation, which is really minimalism taken to an extreme (if logical) conclusion. I mean the tendency to avoid engagements of meaning with the world—often by diminishing ones world by stages to a tiny ordered corner where meaning is rigid, a corner safe from the myriad complications and ramifications that lie just outside the sacred space.

In the right circumstances, of course, that orientation can be productive, as, for example, when the protected space is a specialist discourse—say, quantum physics or baseball. But anyone who begins to think that quantum theory or baseball exhausts the meaning in the world is on the fast track to madness. Eventually, avoidance collapses into a form of command and control; its responses and anxieties are the same. And minimalism becomes a form of mad maximalism. Its triumph is not to expand a particular language to encompass the world, but to shrink the world to fit a particular language.

The third response is to attempt to accept and ingest the endless variety of meaning-engagements. It’s popular in our day, partly because we have so many shiny new toys



The Death of Socrates (1787), by Jacques-Louis David

that make it possible, and partly because we are training successive generations in a greater facility for it. But as a response to the vastness of meaning, this option, too, is self-defeating. There is no velocity that can take us beyond the limits of mortal life, and the speed merchants of the current mediascape are no better than any of us at knowing the meaning of meaning. Arguably, they are much worse off, for their hasty engagements soon begin to lack texture and depth. Expanding intake does not satisfy the need for meaning, because there is always more volume to accept and ingest, and a great deal of that volume is trash. The mind becomes an Augean stable, with too much manure to move about. Beware the simple growth of volume in meaning; it makes what is precious harder to find. Great art and great philosophy are rare, and always have been.

A fourth response to the array of meanings is defeatist or nihilist (or maybe simply bored). It follows hard on the heels of the speed merchants' restlessness. This response says of every meaning, large or small, rich or paltry, "Whatever." The indifference is a natural, or at least widespread, response to the great array of meanings on offer in our cultural experience. It's a perfect illustration of the isomorphism that exists between self and world. If the world is a 500-channel universe of offerings to which one is equally indifferent—a crowded catalogue of been-there, done-that Web sites—what more appropriate response than to become a person who has no interest in anything at all? The limit-case of the Socratic interlocutor's art is to engage people who have no interest at all in having meaning matter to them. One can only hope that they will grow out of this attitude and begin to realize that meaning ought to matter, at least sometimes. Until then, it will be difficult to persuade them, for, from their point of view, that effort of persuasion is just another boring message being directed at them from some point on the mediascape, another doomed bid for their already-gone attention.

Which brings me to a fifth response, and the only truly good one. It's what we might call critical immersion in the world of our meaning-engagements. This option may seem obvious after everything that's been said so far, but obvious things are often true, and the obvious, after all, is a philosopher's stock-in-trade. More to the point, its being obvious doesn't make it any less difficult. Indeed, if we understand the question of meaning as really being about shaping a life so that it's a worthwhile life, one can hardly imagine a task more daunting. It must encompass the ridiculous and the sublime, the banal and the stunning, because every moment of waking life is a form of engagement with the world of meaning—another line or two in the story we tell about ourselves.

At that story's center is the enduring ineffability of human consciousness, the peculiar capacity in humans (and maybe in other entities; we ought to be open-minded on the issue) for existence to be like something: to have a mood and particularity and texture that's experienced directly only by the subject and that's irreducible to anything else. What it's like for me to be me, or for you to be you, is a condition that repels reduction or translation. It cannot be rendered into anything other than itself.

This quality of individual consciousness makes everything else possible, for, without it, there is nothing we could call meaningful, and therefore no things or thoughts we could call questions, and therefore no subclass of questions we could call philosophical. Questions such as these: Have I taken pleasure in beauty? Have I fashioned humor or wit? Have I forged genuine friendships? Have I established a beachhead of civility and justice in my political interactions? Have I taken up roles and professions with integrity and joy? Have I left the world a better, more interesting place than I found it? Have I done one simple thing—changed a tire, written a letter, cooked dinner, performed a heart bypass—as well as it could be done?

In such moments, we are asked to make many choices and judgments. We can make them well or badly. But whatever we do, our actions will add up to a mortal span, to the story that is my life or yours. Our most basic choice, the one that grounds all the others, is this: Do we attend closely to the business of our choices, or do we flee from them, in arrogance, or fear, or boredom — or some combination of all three? That's the only ultimate purpose or meaning that we can make sense of. But it's enough. An old saw suggests that any decent thesis can be stated while standing on one leg. That works only if you and I are already talking about the same thing (not in agreement, necessarily), as I hope by now we are. So let me return, one last time, to the question at the head of this essay, and do so on one metaphorical leg.

What does it all mean? That life is full of meaning, too much meaning to make sense of in any simple fashion. That wonder in the face of meaning's richness is appropriate and necessary—is, in truth, indispensable. That only open-mindedness, and the humility that comes with it, will allow us, finally, to sort good meanings from bad, the worthwhile from the mere distraction. That in the fullness of our allotted time and after our fashion, we may perhaps put together enough meanings-that-matter to judge of ourselves that we have told a good story, lived a life that was worth living.

That it all begins with a question mark.

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The Ted K Archive

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