

Purpose of Life

Important note: *Everything I say below is only my opinion, which is based on my own experiences, or based on what I have read, heard and observed. There are no absolute truths or ultimate answers.*

The questions we ask:

As intelligent beings, humans are endowed with curiosity. And that is good. Questions like "what", "how", and "why" have besieged the human race since ancient times, and will continue to keep us busy in future. We have shown that we are good at answering some of the "what" and "how" questions. For example, we know what the speed of light is, and what the mass of the Sun is. We also know how light travels through space and how food is digested in our bodies. But, we typically fall flat to the "why" question. "Why is the world the way it is?" "Why does the light consist of quanta?" We haven't the slightest clue.

"What is the purpose of life?" is actually a why question: "Why do we exist?"

People who face this question are fortunate, because that means their minds are able to take flight from the mundane activities on the ground and try to take a bird's-eye view of life.

Why do we exist?

My honest answer is "I haven't the slightest clue!" And I don't think anybody really knows. But still, it is fun to make a few conjectures based on our observations and limited experience.

If you consider the known universe - as described by philosophers and physicists alike - it appears to me that there is absolutely no purpose to the universe. Even if we imagine for a moment that there *is* a supreme power that created the Universe, it doesn't at all appear to me that that supreme power is the least bit interested in running its day-to-day operation. The Universe appears to have conjured up its own basic rules - which we call the laws of Nature - as it bounced along and it runs using these rules along with a lot of randomness.

Life - plants and animals - are a random outcome of the random Universe. Life also has no purpose!

If you look at any life-form, you would clearly detect two basic sustaining instincts: survival and reproduction. Every living thing is busy trying to survive – i.e. eating away and killing competition - and reproducing. If you watch nature shows on TV, you will notice that life for most animals and plants is pretty brutal. They have to spend most of their time looking for food, protecting themselves from predators or enemies, looking for a mate to reproduce, and then spend even more time looking for food and safety – this time for the eggs or the babies. In this natural world, there is no protection from natural calamities; there is constant dependence on the environment.

Human beings are no exception. Each one of us is driven by these basic instincts. We run after money and power because those are the means for survival, and we chase women (or men) because they are the means for reproduction! Indeed, it would be most “natural” for us to abide by these two purposes of life.

The purpose is what we imagine:

To me, this fundamental understanding (and acceptance) of reality is important before we ourselves manufacture a purpose for our existence. This reality (that there is no purpose to anything) need not be depressing; it in fact can be very liberating - it frees you to make up your own purpose for your life! We are not slaves to any specific purpose, we can make up our own.

As Soren Kierkegaard wrote in his “The Sickness unto Death”, man can realize himself only by accepting the whole of his condition. This acceptance of limitations, of opposing powers, even of God’s eminence (or the eminence of natural forces for the atheist), is not a resignation. It is a willingness to “live no matter what”, to be what one is in the world as it is.

For me, the purpose of human existence ought to be creativity and/or usefulness. That is, we should strive to be creative: an artist creates beautiful pieces of art, a scientist invents new ways of doing things, or a philosopher discovers (or ascribes) new meanings of natural phenomena. We should alternatively or in addition, aspire to be useful: a teacher inspires young minds, a (good) politician helps reduce social unrest, a farmer produces food for his fellow beings.

According to the eminent Indian writer PL Deshpande, “If you look at a rose flower under microscope, what do you see? A collection of pollen sacs, stigmata, anthers, and so on, all nicely held together by soft, delicate petals. What meaning is there to the flower’s existence? A lover might give it to his beloved, a devotee might offer it to his God, a politician might put it on his coat pocket. And that’s how it becomes meaningful! It’s the same with life. It is up to each one of us to give it a meaning.”

So, my suggestion to all of you is not to waste time trying to uncover the grand design, i.e. the creator’s expectations from us - he (probably) has none! Instead, strive to evolve from your animal existence to a creative and/or useful existence as soon as possible. Direct your earning, learning, and yearning towards these types of goals. Stay involved in life, but without getting mixed up – like a drop of oil in an ocean. You will find that your life is suddenly a lot more enjoyable and happy. And isn’t that the ultimate purpose for everyone?

Again in the words of PL Deshpande, “Focus on beauty and on creating happiness. Don’t care what others expect from you or what they think of your work. Don’t get depressed by how miserably others live their life. Make every day count, because who knows when it will be the very last!”

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