



Meaning in Life:

Humanism and Existentialism

Presentation by Akiva Quinn

26 March 2024

Presentation summary



Humanism is a worldview that embraces the acceptance that—as human beings—we do not have a fixed, essential, given or divinely ordained purpose and must therefore determine life aims for ourselves. Life purpose, goals, projects and meaning in life must all be chosen by individuals and communities. Existentialism is a humanist philosophy highlighting the radical freedom, at the core of human existence, which requires that we choose for ourselves how to live, what life projects are worth undertaking, and the activities, outlook and values that will help us shape a meaningful life. Humanism and existentialism have crucial and profound, indeed foundational, insights to offer in the quest for meaning in life. Please join us to explore these insights and questions about meaning in life together.

Please note: The views expressed by the speaker are their own and may not necessarily reflect the official position of Humanists Australia.

Humanism and Meaning in Life

“Humanism is a rational, non-religious approach to life. Humanists strive to lead **fulfilling**, **meaningful** and **ethical** lives using reason and empathy to guide them.” – **Humanists International**

“Humanism is a way of life that provides **meaning** and **fulfilment** without religion.” – **Humanists Australia** (<https://www.humanistsaustralia.org>)

Meaning in Life: Humanism and Existentialism

- Humanism, Meaning and Purpose in Life
- Meaning in Life is related to Ethical Action
- Existentialism and the Absurdity of Life
- Meaning in Life as Personal Responsibility

Followed by questions and discussion

Humanism, Meaning and Purpose

“Humanism meets the widespread demand for a source of **meaning** and **purpose** to stand as an alternative to dogmatic religion, authoritarian nationalism, tribal sectarianism, and selfish nihilism.”

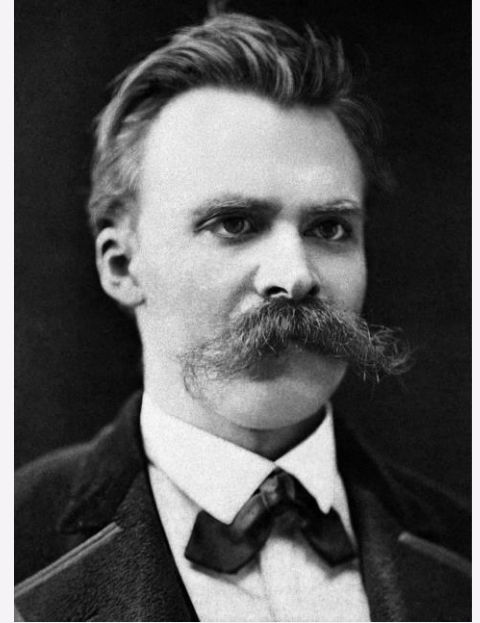
– **The Amsterdam Declaration 2022**

“We are dedicated to helping people live **ethical** and **meaningful** lives through humanism.” – **Humanists Australia**: Helping people lead **compassionate, ethical** and **fulfilling** lives without religion

Humanism, Existence and Meaning in Life

“We have to answer for our existence to ourselves and will therefore be our own true pilots, and not admit that our existence is random or pointless”
(**Friedrich Nietzsche**, 1874)

Our values are the central concern in life. Who and what do you love? What do you think is important? What do you give priority to and take seriously?
(John Armstrong, ***Life Lessons from Nietzsche***)



Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900)

Humanism, Freedom and Responsibility

“We are left alone and without excuse... **man is condemned to be free**: condemned because he did not create himself, yet nonetheless free, because once cast into the world, he is **responsible** for everything he does.” (p.29)

Humans are realized via transcendence and subjectivity.

“This is humanism because we remind man that there is no legislator other than himself and that he must, in his abandoned state make his own choices ...”

(Jean-Paul Sartre, ***Existentialism is a Humanism***, p.53)



Humanism, Naturalism and Meaning in Life

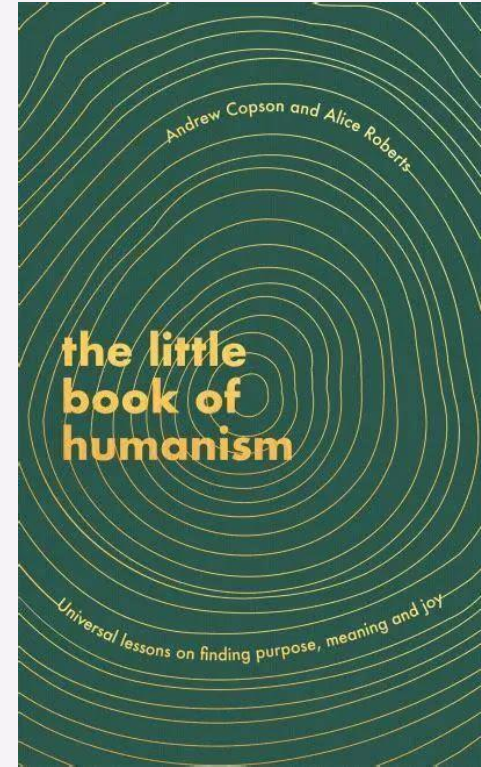
- **Objective and subjective naturalism** reject the supernaturalist claim that God is necessary to secure a meaningful life.
- “But there is another option for meaning ... which is to look only within life itself. This is the immanent option. It is content with the everyday. There is sufficient meaning for human beings in the human world. There is no such thing as **the** meaning of life, but there can be many meanings within a life.”

(Simon Blackburn in ***Exploring the Meaning of Life***, p.13)

Humanism and Meaning in Life

“The meaning of life is to live it, as wholly as we can, as abundantly as we can, here and now, sharing the experience with others, caring for others as we care for ourselves, and accepting our responsibility for leaving the world better than we found it.”

(James Hemming, former Humanists UK president in ***The Little Book of Humanism***)

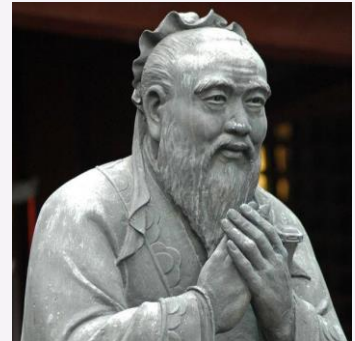


Humanism: Projects and People

“Meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness; that is ... meaning comes from active engagement in projects of worth”

(Susan Wolf, ***Meaning in Life and Why It Matters***)

Ubuntu: “a person is a person through other people”
(Desmond Tutu); **Ren** or **humanity** is expressed via a network of reciprocity between people (Kongzi, or Confucius, quoted in ***Humanly Possible***, p.14)



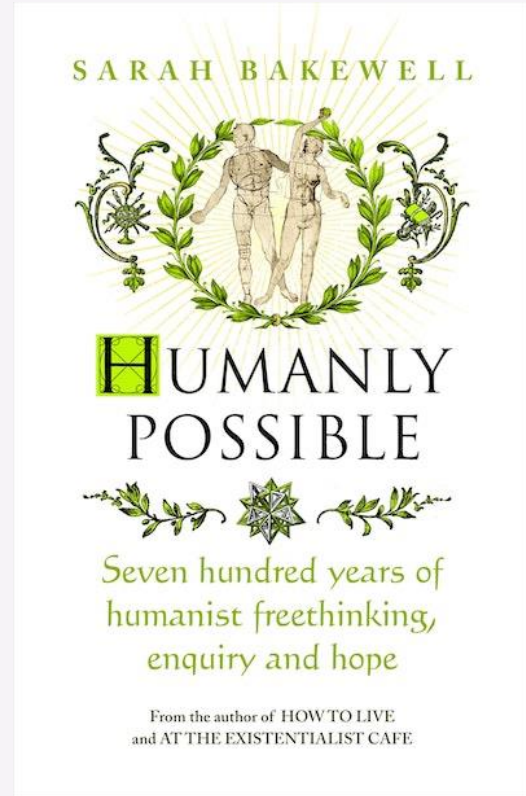
Humanism and Connection

"Happiness is the only good.
The time to be happy is now.
The place to be happy is here.
The way to be happy is to make others so."

(Robert Ingersoll in ***Humanly Possible***)

"... the meaning of our lives is to be found in our
connections and bonds with each other."

(Sarah Bakewell, ***Humanly Possible***, p.12)



Existence and Necessity

Everything that exists, including humans, does so without necessity or reason.

There is no design or rationale, either human or divine, for Existence.

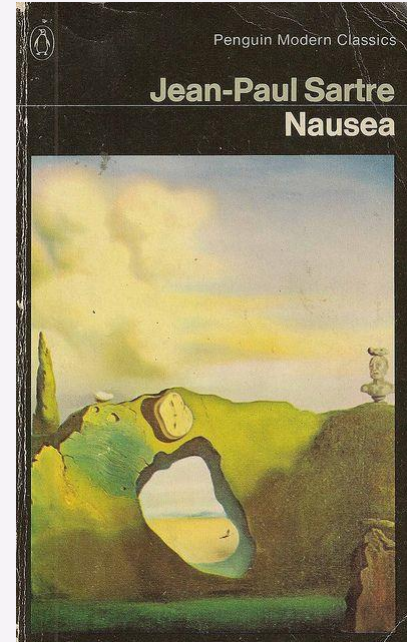
All entities or Existence is “**contingent**” including every Human Being.



Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980)

Existential Uncertainty

"I understood the Nausea, I possessed it. To tell the truth, I did not formulate my discoveries to myself. But I think that now it would be easy for me to put them in words. The essential thing is contingency. I mean that **one cannot define existence as necessity.** **To exist is simply to be there.**" (Jean-Paul Sartre, *Nausea*, p.188)



Existentialism and Meaning in Life

- Atheistic existentialists, along with religious existentialists, have in common “their belief that **existence precedes essence**; or if you prefer, that **subjectivity must be our point of departure.**”
- While the essence of a paper knife or book, given they serve a specific purpose, do precede their existence, humans have no fixed meaning or purpose in life: we are “thrown into existence, **man is nothing other than what he makes of himself.**”

(**Jean-Paul Sartre, *Existentialism is a Humanism*, p.20–22**)

Existence and Absurdity

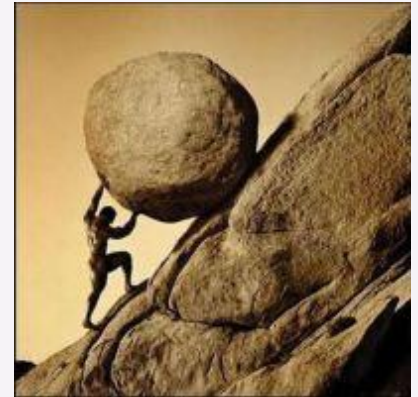
- “Judging whether life is or is not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy.”
- “The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need” – nostalgia for reason and longing for happiness and “the unreasonable silence of the world.”
(Albert Camus, ***The Myth of Sisyphus***)

Existence and Meaning

“There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night... **If there is a personal fate, there is no higher destiny**... At that subtle moment when man glances backwards over his life, Sisyphus returning to his rock [he knows himself to be the master of his days] ...”

“**The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart.** One must imagine Sisyphus happy.”

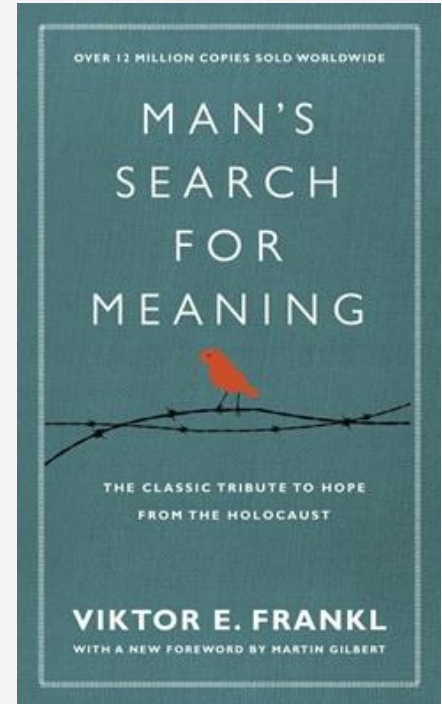
(Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*)



Meaning and Purpose

“Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather he must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, **each man is questioned by life**; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible. Thus, logotherapy sees in responsibility the very essence of human existence.”

(Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*)



Concluding remarks

- **Humanism** and **Existentialism** hold that **meaning in life is not determined or given but is perforce a personal responsibility.**
- “To declare that **existence** is absurd is to deny that it can ever be given a meaning, so to say it **is ambiguous** is to assert that **its meaning is never fixed**, that **it must be constantly won.**”
– Simone de Beauvoir
- “**Life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forward.**” – Søren Kierkegaard

Further reading

Armstrong, John (2013) **Life Lessons from Nietzsche**

Bakewell, Sarah (2017) **At the Existentialist Café**; (2023) **Humanly Possible**

Camus, Albert (1942) **The Outsider**; (1942) **The Myth of Sisyphus**; (1947) **The Plague**

Cerbone, David (2015) **All That Matters: Existentialism**

Copson, Andrew & Roberts, Alice (2020) **The Little Book of Humanism**

de Beauvoir, Simone (1947) **The Ethics of Ambiguity**; (1949) **The Second Sex**

Frankl, Viktor (1946) **Man's Search for Meaning**; (1948/2011) **Man's Ultimate Search for Meaning**

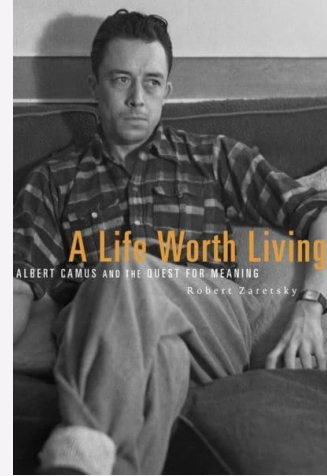
Grayling, A.C. (2023) **Philosophy and Life: Exploring the Great Questions of How to Live**

Sartre, Jean-Paul (1938) **Nausea**; (1943) **Being and Nothingness**; (1946) **Existentialism Is a Humanism**

Seachris, Joshua W. (Ed) (2013) **Exploring the Meaning of Life: An Anthology and Guide**

Wolf, Susan (2010) **Meaning in Life and Why It Matters**

Webber, Jonathan (2018) **Rethinking Existentialism**



Speaker: Akiva Quinn



Akiva Quinn's first, true love—in the realm of ideas—is philosophy, especially the sort of practical wisdom explored in applied ethics, moral, political and social theory or praxis. He studied philosophy and sociology at Monash University and completed an MA there in 2010. Akiva enjoys philosophy and literature, with a focus on meaning and morality, and has co-presented several workshops on life purpose and meaning in life. His other training is in the discipline of computer science, and he works in software development where logic and reason also play key roles and meaning can be crafted as well.

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Humanists Australia is a national organisation which launched in December 2020 in response to the growing number of Australians who don't identify as religious, and the emerging need to represent this group's interests and priorities on a broader scale.

We are dedicated to helping people live ethical and meaningful lives through humanism. Through our ceremonies, educational resources and awareness-raising, we help non-religious people discover humanism and humanist values, so that they can live an ethical life full of meaning and fulfilment.

Through our campaigns work, we advocate for positive social change. We advocate for rational, evidence-based policies that reduce societal inequalities, advance secularism, advance human rights and improve quality of life.



Website: humanistsaustralia.org

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