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## John Paul II’s Gamble with ‘the Meaning of Life’

“As often happens, the idea and the word together make their appearance as the marks of a kind of internal collapse, and what the word really seeks to indicate is the place where the collapse has taken place.”

— Gabriel Marcel\*

More than any previous pope, John Paul II thought that Christian faith could be characterized as an answer to the question of “the meaning of life.” The phrase appears throughout his pontificate, starting at the beginning, in *Catechesi Tradendae*, *Familiaris Consortio*, *Salvifici Doloris*, and *Redemptoris Missio*.<sup>1</sup> The question of the meaning of life is especially prominent in all of his major documents from the 1990’s. *Centesimus Annus* frames Catholic social teaching in terms of “the irrepressible search for personal identity and for the meaning of life” and describes Marxism as an inadequate attempt to respond to “the loss of the authentic meaning of life.”<sup>2</sup> *Veritatis Splendor* introduces moral reflection as mankind’s journey to discover the meaning of life, and interprets Matthew’s story of the rich young man asking “What good

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\* “The Crisis of Values,” in *Man Against Mass Society*, trans. G. S. Fraser (Chicago: Regnery, 1952), 127.

<sup>1</sup> John Paul II: Apostolic Exhortation *Catechesi Tradendae* (Rome 1979), Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (Rome 1981), Apostolic Letter *Salvifici Doloris* (Rome 1984), Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (Rome 1990). All cited Vatican documents available online—see the section *References* for details.

<sup>2</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Centesimus Annus* (Rome 1991), §§ 24, 41.

must I do to have eternal life?” as a question about the meaning of life.<sup>3</sup> *Evangelium Vitae* laments those factors that have diminished the question of the meaning of life, seeks to renew that question, and presents Christ as offering the fullness of the answer to the question of the meaning of life.<sup>4</sup> *Fides et Ratio* makes the question of the meaning of life the central question of philosophy, and treats all ancient questions about life’s destiny and purpose as expressions of a quest for meaning, even assimilating Plato and Aristotle, and the Delphic exhortation “know thyself,” to this quest; indeed, it even claims that modern conceptions of reason are marked by a loss of the question of the meaning of life.<sup>5</sup> Not surprisingly, then, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* published under John Paul II’s reign also frames Catholic teaching as a response to the question of “the meaning of life.”<sup>6</sup>

To understand how radical this is, consider that before John Paul II, no social encyclical mentioned “the meaning of life,” nor did any previous encyclical of moral theology. The prolific and philosophical pope Leo XIII—the champion of philosophical revival (*Aeterni Patris*, 1879) and founder of modern Catholic social teaching (*Rerum Novarum*, 1891)—never wrote about “the meaning of life.” No previous Catechism had ever mentioned “the meaning of life.”

So as John Paul II—as well as many others—would have it, the meaning of life is the central question of religion and the moral life, taken up from the great stream of all human history, a question raised by Greek poets and philosophers, Roman statesmen, Church fathers, medieval scholastics, and by every authentic human culture Western

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<sup>3</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Veritatis Splendor* (Rome 1993), §§ 1–2, 7.

<sup>4</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Evangelium Vitae* (Rome 1995), §§ 26, 49, 81.

<sup>5</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Fides et Ratio* (Rome 1998), §§ 3, 6, 26, 30, 33, 56, 76, 81; § 27; §§ 1–3; and §§ 47, 81, 88.

<sup>6</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Citta del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), §§ 26, 68, 282.

and otherwise—a question deeply rooted in the human heart, the question which Christ came to answer. But, as a matter of empirical, philological history, this is highly contentious. Strictly speaking, historical evidence for a timeless question about “the meaning of life” is not to be found. As we will see, the question of the meaning of life is a recent invention; neither Socrates nor Plato, neither Matthew nor Paul, neither Augustine nor Aquinas ever asked about the meaning of life.

What was John Paul II up to, in proclaiming the importance of the question of the meaning of life? By insisting on the universality of the question, was John Paul II aware he was making an unsupportable empirical claim about intellectual history? By integrating this question into Catholic theology, was he aware that he was being strikingly original?

This paper will argue that John Paul II's embrace of the novel question of the meaning of life was intentional and calculated, an act of valiantly creative and sophisticated theological development. John Paul II, judging his rhetorical situation, took some poetic license in adopting for the Church the question of “the meaning of life.” Understanding why and how he did it, and what was at stake in so doing, gives us insight into his approach to reason, human nature, and ethics.

### **The Historical Origin of “The Meaning of Life”**

The question of the meaning of life has a particular, and very short, recent history. It is a 19<sup>th</sup> century invention. It was first asked in fits and starts around 1850, and only really took hold at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It didn't enter official Catholic discourse until Vatican II, and then only reservedly. Far from a timeless expression of human wonder, it is a distinctively late-modern question.

This might seem to be a narrowly pedantic point about a linguistic technicality. Even if the particular *phrase* “the meaning of life” is a

recent coinage, couldn't it still capture a common natural wonder about the significance of the human condition? Might it be reasonable to think that there is something rather universal about the quest for this, whatever particular label we might put on it in one age or another? Perhaps. On the other hand, even if the phrase "the meaning of life" is a novel phenomenon only linguistically, the emergence of the phrase is still a general Western development, occurring during the same specific period in all major European languages. We should be curious why it emerged, and what else might have accompanied its emergence. What prompted Western thinkers suddenly to start speaking in terms of "the meaning of life," when they had never done so before? And given that it is a new phrase, we must face the possibility that the new phrase does in fact signify a new concept, or whole framework of concepts; and we should ask what concept, or conceptual framework, might have preceded this phrase, which the use of this phrase might have contested or even replaced. If people didn't use to ask about "the meaning of life," what question did they once ask instead, and what does it say if today we might no longer be asking that question? We cannot assume that "the meaning of life" is a universal question, without first tracing the history of its emergence, and comparing it to whatever preceded it.

It seems the credit for the first philosophical use of the German phrase, *der Sinn des Lebens*, belongs to Arthur Schopenhauer, in the second volume of his *The World as Will and Representation* (1844).<sup>7</sup> Digital library searches reveal scattered, apparently uninfluential, earlier uses: for instance, in an 1825 play by Ernst von Houwald,<sup>8</sup> in an

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<sup>7</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, *Die Welt als Wille und Vorstellung*, vol. 2 (Leipzig: Brodhaus, 1844), 629.

<sup>8</sup> *Die Fiende* (Liepzig, 1825), 213 (about halfway through the final scene of the play, Act 3, Scene 9).

1823 literary review by Friedrich Wähler,<sup>9</sup> and in an 1811 work of political history by Heinrich Luden.<sup>10</sup> But a measure of the novelty of the German phrase is that Nietzsche is sometimes credited with first use, decades after Schopenhauer.<sup>11</sup> Nietzsche probably deserves credit for popularizing the phrase in German; his first use seems to be in his 1874 “Untimely Meditations,” commenting on Schopenhauer;<sup>12</sup> it appears later in *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883).

In French, an early use was in 1865, when Émile Zola wrote that one morning “le sens de la vie” escaped his semi-autobiographical character Claude.<sup>13</sup> The phrase was not common in French before then. “Le sens de la vie” was also the title of an 1889 moralistic novel by Édouard Rod,<sup>14</sup> a usage which may be attributable to Russian influence: Leo Tolstoy was among the first—if not the first—to use the relevant Russian phrase (“смысл жизни”), in his “Confession,” first published in 1882. Rod probably read “Confession;” he and Tolstoy corresponded, and shared a critique of Schopenhauer’s pessimistic reflections on the meaninglessness of life.

The French and Russian connection points in the same direction as the first use of “the meaning of life” in English. Thomas Carlyle has a fictional German philosopher offer a pompous reflection on Freedom

<sup>9</sup> “Göthe und Pustkuchen oder über die beiden Wanderjahre Wilhelm Meisters und ihre Verfasser Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der deutschen Poesie und Poetik herausgegeben vom Professor Schütz,” *Hermes* 3 (1823): 373.

<sup>10</sup> *Ueber Sinn und Inhalt des Handbuchs der Staatsweisheit* (Jena 1811), 2, 129, 200, 216, 398.

<sup>11</sup> This view is promulgated by Jean Grondin, “Le sens de la vie: Une question assez récente, mais pleine de saveur,” *Théologiques* 9, no. 2 (2001): 7–15, and again in the first chapter of Grondin’s *Du sens de la vie: Essai philosophique* (Québec: Bellarmine, 2003). In both cases Grondin cites Volker Gerhardt, *Friedrich Nietzsche* (Munich: Beck, 1992), 21.

<sup>12</sup> *Unzeitgemässe Betrachtungen*, vol. 3: “Schopenhauer als Erzieher” (Schloss-Chemnitz: Schmeitzner, 1874), 45.

<sup>13</sup> *La confession de Claude* (Paris: Charpentier, 1865), 243.

<sup>14</sup> Édouard Rod, *Le sens de la vie* (Paris 1889).

as “the meaning of life,” in what was clearly intended as a parody of philosophy, a comic send-up of German idealism. (Carlyle may have had in mind the first volume of Schopenhauer’s work, published in 1818.) In *Sartor Resartus*,<sup>15</sup> Carlyle imagines a fictional philosopher, Diogenes Teufelsdröckh (whose last name means “Devil’s-filth”), author of a philosophical treatise about clothing; a fictional narrator tries to make sense of Teufelsdröckh’s work, which includes the following reflection:

“Temptations in the Wilderness!” exclaims Teufelsdröckh: “Have we not all to be tried with such? Not so easily can the old Adam, lodged in us by birth, be dispossessed. Our Life is compassed round with Necessity; yet is the meaning of Life itself no other than Freedom, than Voluntary Force: thus have we a warfare; in the beginning, especially, a hard-fought Battle. For the God-given mandate, *Work though in Welldoing*, lies mysteriously written, in Promethean, Prophetic Characters, in our hearts; and leaves us no rest, night or day, till it be deciphered and obeyed; till it burn forth, in our conduct, a visible, acted Gospel of Freedom.”<sup>16</sup>

Freedom, necessity, interior restlessness and struggle, the self’s attempt to transcend the world—Carlyle was writing a send-up of German idealism. There are genuine, redeemable insights here about the challenge of human freedom, insights that we will later come to associate with existentialism. But Carlyle has the narrator criticize this particular passage as an “ambitious figure,” and the philosopher’s work generally as pompous and vague, “Nothing but innuendoes, figurative crotchets: a typical Shadow, fitfully wavering, prophetic-satiric; no clear logical Picture.” It is clear that the first English use of “the meaning of life” was in fact a

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<sup>15</sup> Originally serialized 1832–1834, published in book form in 1836 (US) and 1838 (UK).

<sup>16</sup> Thomas Carlyle, *Sartor Resartus*, in *Three Books*, Book II, Chapter IX, “The Everlasting Yea.” This chapter originally published in *Fraser’s Magazine for Town and Country* IX, no. LII (April, 1834): 447–452.

joke, and one about a particular modern trend in continental philosophy.<sup>17</sup>

In English, French, and Russian, then, the question of “the meaning of life” emerges around the same time, and seems to have been prompted by the German usage first formulated in order to articulate or respond to an essentially negative answer. The question helps make intelligible, whether to face or to escape, the threat of meaninglessness: the articulation of the question reflects a felt need to overcome a pessimistic or negative view about human life—the kind of answer implied by materialism, positivism, and the scientific critique of religion. Kierkegaard was also reflecting on the meaning of life (in Danish, *meningen med livet*) in the mid-1800s—but even his positive answer was in response to the looming possibility of the negative alternative—that life was *Meningslost*, “meaningless.”

In any case, from these scattered philosophical references, “the question of the meaning of life,” finds its home in a certain kind of late-modern discourse, romantic, existential, psychological, aesthetic—a world populated as much by poets, novelists and artists as by philosophers and theologians. It has little use even into the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, but even then it is used by the likes of Freud and Dilthey, Spengler and Hesse, Thomas Mann and William James, Camus and Sartre, Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury set.<sup>18</sup> And always, even those who propose a positive answer by advancing something satisfying as “the meaning of life,” seem to feel the pressure of a looming, barely escapable negative answer, that perhaps life is meaningless or absurd.

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<sup>17</sup> Although Carlyle's is apparently the first English use of “the meaning of life,” there is an earlier use of the phrase, “life's meaning,” in *Tracts of the American Unitarian Association* (1827), 41 and 46.

<sup>18</sup> Even so, it is interesting where explicit formulation of “the meaning of life” is not found. I have yet to discover it in Proust, or Whitman, or Ibsen, for instance.

As a kind of shorthand we can thus say that “the question of the meaning of life” is an *existentialist* question, and as such about as historically contingent as existentialism itself, a philosophical movement rooted in particular cultural circumstances. True, existentialism claimed to get at universal questions of human life, but it is a feature of existentialism that it articulates those questions in terms of “the *meaning* of life” (and related questions like the meaning of suffering, the meaning of death, the meaning of freedom, or finding meaning *in* life—all questions of *meaning*) instead of some other sorts of questions.<sup>19</sup>

Even after it started to take hold, the new question of “the meaning of life,” did not grow into a proper new field or sub-discipline in philosophy. To the extent that it survived outside of existentialism, it was subsumed under ethics, where it was taken to be commensurate with previous questions of ultimate moral concern. And while it found expression in novels and plays, by the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century “the meaning of life” also came to be adopted outside of philosophy and literature by the social sciences, as a neutral, objective way to characterize individuals and cultures finding value or direction. Treating questions that might have traditionally been thought of as having religious or moral stakes as instead questions of “the meaning of life” allowed the social sciences to attend to the powerfully value-laden dimensions of human experience without taking sides—indeed pretending that it is possible and preferable to avoid taking sides—in answering those questions.

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<sup>19</sup> The existential emphasis of the question is reflected in Yuval Lurie, *Tracking the Meaning of Life: A Philosophical Journey* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2006). Lurie traces the question to Tolstoy, and a reaction to Schopenhauer; and even in claiming that the question has some ancient roots, admits that there was a prior “riddle of life” question that Tolstoy creatively reformulated as “the meaning of life.” Grondin, also attentive to the existential character—and even tragic hopelessness—of the question of the meaning of life, compares it to a more ancient question about a “*saveur de la vie*” (Grondin, “Le sens de la vie,” 14).



Of course, in popular discourse the phrase “the meaning of life” is sometimes taken to be corny or pretentious, rather than earnestly philosophical. But whatever its current or future uses, the origin of “the meaning of life” question is clear: along with other 19<sup>th</sup> century inventions like the telephone, the electric lightbulb, and the internal combustion engine, it may be hard to imagine life without it, but it is a late civilizational invention. Despite being treated as a timeless, eternal, fundamentally human question, “the” question of “the meaning of life” is a contingent social construct. Far from being, as John Cottingham called it, “the question that won’t go away,”<sup>20</sup> it is the long-absent question that doesn’t ever seem to have been missed, and waited a long time before it finally showed up. Culturally and politically, its context is one of late-modern uncertainty and secularism. The connotation of the question is subjective, and the implicit pressure to answer it is the weight of pessimism and doubt: it is hard to escape the impression that the question of the meaning of life only emerges in response to late modern political, intellectual, and social conditions that otherwise suggest that life is “meaningless.”

### Before “The Meaning of Life”

What then did people wonder about before they wondered about the meaning of life? For most of Western history, up into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the question most consistently asked about life concerns not its *meaning* but its *goal*, *good*, or *end*. The question was most commonly formulated in terms of “the end of man” or “man’s chief good” (where “man” is obviously the gender-neutral term for the human species). The Greeks called it the *telos*, Latins the *summum bonum* or *ultimus finis*. We may call it the question of human *purpose*—where by “purpose”

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<sup>20</sup> John Cottingham, *On the Meaning of Life* (London: Routledge, 2003), 1.

we don't mean an individual agent's intention or conscious *sense* of purpose, nor a particular path or vocation to fulfill, but the intrinsic, essential *why* of the species. What are human beings for? What is the ultimate point of our creaturely existence?

This is the question that dominates the central and largest of the three parts of Thomas Aquinas's *Summa Theologiae*—Question 1 of the First Part of the Second Part is “On Man's Last End,” and the following several hundred questions examine all that is entailed in answering that question. The question of man's purpose or end is addressed in Augustine's *City of God* and *Confessions*. It is the question that motivates Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. No character in a Socratic dialogue ever asked about the meaning of life, but many of Plato's dialogues consider the human good or end explicitly (e.g., *Republic* and *Philebus*), and those that don't can easily be read as relating their subjects—virtues, laws, speech, knowledge, pleasure, friendship, love and death—to that question.

The tone could be said to be set by Greek drama. It would be a stretch to interpret Sophocles' *Antigone* as an exploration of the meaning of life. It is clearly and forcefully about the end or purpose of life, in relation to family, state, and the gods. Even the great Western stories about a particular character finding his personal path—*Illiad* and *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid*, the *Divine Comedy*—only make sense as reflections on how an individual's destiny can be conceived in relation to the pursuit of the human good. It would seem to trivialize these epic stories to force them into the paradigm of exploring “the meaning of life.”<sup>21</sup>

Into the 19<sup>th</sup> century, even as the new question of the *meaning* of life was beginning to be formulated, the question of an intrinsic human *purpose* remained dominant in secular and religious contexts. When

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<sup>21</sup> Nonetheless Terry Eagleton tries to assimilate the genre of Greek tragedy under the question of the meaning of life in his ahistorical survey, *The Meaning of Life: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).

Thoreau set out “to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life,” he did so explicitly questioning the catechism’s answer to “the chief end of man,” but still in pursuit of his own, alternative answer.<sup>22</sup> We do not find Marx speaking of “the meaning of life,” though he did formulate his materialistic anthropology in terms of “the purpose of life.”<sup>23</sup> Herbert Spencer, even while articulating a utilitarian ethics grounded in positivism, still speaks of human nature and human purpose; the question of life having “meaning” does not arise for him.

In philosophy, and in Catholic theological instruction, the primary question has always been, quite explicitly, about the purpose of life. Although John Paul II praised John Henry Newman’s reflections on “the meaning of life,”<sup>24</sup> Newman and other prominent Catholic thinkers of the 19<sup>th</sup> century never asked about “the meaning of life,” but frequently spoke of “the end of man” or “the chief good of man.” And of course the 1885 Baltimore Catechism’s very first lesson—the starting point from which it proceeded to instruct in the essentials of the faith—was entitled, “The End of Man,” a phrase further glossed by the catechism as “the purpose for which he was created.” Through the 20<sup>th</sup> century and beyond, it remained not only possible but common to receive a traditional philosophical and theological education without ever addressing the question of “the meaning of life.”<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Henry David Thoreau, *Walden; or, Life in the Woods* (Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1854), both from the section, “Where I Lived, and What I Lived For.”

<sup>23</sup> Karl Marx, 1844 manuscripts, Third Manuscript, “Private Property and Communism.” Available online—see the section *References* for details.

<sup>24</sup> John Paul II, “Letter to the Archbishop of Birmingham on the First Centenary of the Death of John Henry Newman” (Vatican 1990), § 2.

<sup>25</sup> Étienne Gilson, who was otherwise willing to take liberties in translating central ideas of medieval thought, never seems to have spoken of “le sens de la vie.”

### Meaning *versus* Purpose, and Changing Conceptions of Rationality

To suppose that the question of “the meaning of life” is a timeless, universal question, is to insist that it captures what is formulated in terms of the question about man’s ultimate end or good or purpose. This would be very hard to sustain. The question of the purpose of life, if taken seriously, is intrinsically teleological and essentialist. It presumes that there is such a thing as true human *fulfillment*, rooted in human *nature*, which reflects a definite *purpose* or *intention* of its maker. In Aristotelian terms, the question implicates three of the four causes: in asking about the *end* (*final* cause) of man, it presumes that there is an essential human nature (*formal* cause), which has been communicated to man from an agent (*efficient* cause).

Put another way, to ask after the purpose or end of human life is at once to create a field for practical *moral* questions—*How should we live? For what end should I act?*—and to frame that field in the context of fundamentally metaphysical questions—*what is the true origin, nature, and destiny of human beings?* This is exactly what we see reflected in the design of the whole of Aquinas’s *Summa Theologiae*—which places the moral reflection of the *Secunda Pars* (previously mentioned) in relation to God, as creator of human nature (explored in the *Prima Pars*), and Who alone can lead us to the fulfillment of our end (explored in the *Tertia Pars*).

By contrast, the question of the *meaning* of life seems formulated precisely to avoid both the moral field and metaphysical frame. Meaning is subjective, placing an emphasis on the interior life, feelings, emotions, awareness, consciousness. What makes me feel purposive doesn’t necessarily speak to the question of an intrinsic, essential purpose. “Meaning” does indeed suggest directionality—something is meaningful or significant if it makes reference to something else. But this is not

the directionality of action toward an end, rather it is the directionality of symbol to what is symbolized. To ask about the meaning of life is almost to ask an aesthetic question: what will my life evoke, what will it represent?

As a consequence, notice what questions further arise after we open up the question of “the meaning of life”: is it the same for everyone, or a matter of individual perspective? Do we *make* meaning, or *discover* it? Do we entertain the possibility that there is no meaning? If my life feels meaningful to me, is it really meaningful? These are existentialist questions—questions of real personal seriousness, to be sure, but raised from a position disconnected from a moral or metaphysical framework. By contrast, notice what further questions arise from the question of the purpose or end of life: where does it come from? How can I achieve it? Is this or that action compatible with it? These are questions of theology and ethics—questions of moral seriousness strongly rooted in a metaphysical framework. The question of life’s meaning places an emphasis on subjective fulfillment; the question of life’s purpose can include that, but relates the notion of personal fulfillment to a question that draws one outside of oneself: what is my life *for*, how can I bring my life into its intended order? It is the difference between asking *what might happen to make me feel* fulfilled given my circumstances, and asking *what should fulfill me* in light of the true structure of reality.<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Compare Gabriel Marcel’s observations about the rise of interest in the notion of “value”: “[A]s soon as we start using the term ‘value’ in strictly philosophical discourse, there is every reason to fear that the way is being paved toward . . . sinister confusions. I am thus led to make the no doubt paradoxical assertion that the introduction of the idea of value into philosophy, an idea almost foreign to the great metaphysicians of the past, is, as it were, a symptom of the kind of fundamental devaluation of reality itself. As often happens, the idea and the word together make their appearance as the marks of a kind of internal collapse, and what the word really seeks to indicate is the place where the collapse has taken place.” Marcel finds the same phenomenon at work in the emergence of the word “personalism,” which, he says, “would only have been possible in an

So consider the kind of answers one could give to the old, more permanent question about the goal or end of life: virtue, happiness, union with God, life everlasting. “Why did God make you? God made me to know Him, to love Him, and to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in heaven.” No wonder the authors of the Baltimore Catechism, like Thomas Aquinas, could use the question of human purpose to structure an instruction in Christian wisdom. Do answers like this even make sense as answers to the question of the *meaning* of life? One would have to say, in Kierkegaardian fashion, only if one chose to make the leap of faith, to believe those answers, to make them meaningful *for you*.<sup>27</sup>

Alasdair MacIntyre has defended a teleological approach to ethics by connecting it to the possibility of making life intelligible as a narrative.<sup>28</sup> This might sound like it is a version of making life “meaningful,” although MacIntyre strongly denies an easy equation between an Aristotelian purpose and existential meaning. Simply finding meaning cannot *be* the telos of life. True, if one is not aware of a purpose in one’s life, one will feel that one’s life is meaningless, but that doesn’t mean that “living a meaningful life” makes sense as the goal of life. MacIntyre is even willing to allow that Kierkegaard, for instance, did have a teleological view of life, but Kierkegaard departed from Aristotle in his understanding of *the mode of perceiving* one’s actions as

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increasingly dehumanized world, in which the reality of what one means by ‘the person’ is every day trampled underfoot.” Gabriel Marcel, *Man Against Mass Humanity* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 1952), 127.

<sup>27</sup> For a typical example of how the question of meaning of life leads in this subjectivist direction, see Julian Baggini, *What’s It All About? Philosophy and the Meaning of Life* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981), especially Chapter 15, “The Virtues, the Unity of a Human Life and the Concept of a Tradition.”

oriented toward a *telos*.<sup>29</sup> MacIntyrean narrative is a kind of *rationality*, but Kierkegaard (as Tolstoy) was eager to place “meaning” *outside of* rationality. For Kierkegaard, man’s fundamental motives are more a matter of non-rational psychological mechanisms—hence Kierkegaard’s “ethical” reasoning is closer to “aesthetic” feeling than to more familiar forms of rational intelligibility.

So it is not a surprise that, even when taken seriously as the ultimate question of human life, the question of the meaning of life is regarded as highly personal. Unlike the question of the end of man, which is a general question about the essential good of human nature as such, the question of the meaning of life is individualistic and particular. The strength, and the weakness, of the question is that it seems to put the weight of responsibility on the one asking it to supply an answer from his or her own private, and probably inarticulate, resources.

As a consequence, those who take the question of the meaning of life most seriously seem to turn the question around, and make it less a question of abstract moral theorizing than a question of personal commitment. As earnestly characterized by Viktor Frankl, the question of the meaning of life seems to transform from a common question about human life, to a personal question about finding one’s unique vocation. Frankl described the challenge of life in the concentration camp:

We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life . . . Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual. These tasks, and therefore the meaning of life, differ from man to man, and from moment to

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<sup>29</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, “Once More on Kierkegaard,” in *Kierkegaard after MacIntyre: Essays on Freedom, Narrative, and Virtue*, ed. John J. Davenport and Anthony Rudd (Chicago: Open Court, 2001), 344–345.

moment. Thus it is impossible to define the meaning of life in a general way.<sup>30</sup>

So even for Frankl, concerned as he is with helping to find meaning in the face of what could so easily seem meaningless, the question of the meaning of life admits of no general answer, and is not even the right question to ask.

Is the question of the meaning of life even a meaningful question? That challenge was posed by positivist philosophers (e.g., Moritz Schlick and A. J. Ayer), who in their eagerness to identify truly scientific questions, capable of verification by empirical observation, dismissed whole classes of inquiry as meaningless. The positivists were right, in a way—the question of the meaning of life is a meaningless question—but in recognizing that they were not so much announcing a new discovery, as springing a trap they had set themselves. The trap was the dismissal of all moral evaluation as merely the expression of personal feeling.

This positivist trap was built with the materials inherited from their predecessors in modern philosophy. The key figure in this story, as in so much else of modern philosophy, is David Hume. Hume embraced, and made others face, the inevitable consequence of the rationalist's view of instrumental reason, that the mind cannot know the purposes or natures of things—or even whether there are purposes and natures of things. It follows that moral conviction cannot be grounded in knowledge of what things are. Given the continued power and success of science, it was only a matter of time before someone made the positivist move: to re-characterize science, formerly thought of as pursuing the natures of things, as the formulation of empirically verifiable laws, with the concomitant relegation of all evaluative judgment (moral,

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<sup>30</sup> Viktor Frankl, *From Death-Camp to Existentialism: A Psychiatrist's Path to a New Therapy* (Beacon Press, 1959), 107. Subsequent editions retitled: *Man's Search for Meaning: An Introduction to Logotherapy*.



aesthetic, and theological) to the expressions of feelings, technically irrational and meaningless.

Through much of modernity, even through early positivism, the question of the purpose of life was so powerful as to reassert itself even as conceptions of reason grew ever more antithetical to it. Pascal responded to the early modern conception of scientific rationality, showing its limits in light of the “reasons of the heart,” and even co-opting instrumental reason (in his “wager”) to reassert the question of how one is to live. Kant resisted Humean skepticism, trying valiantly to relocate ethics, metaphysics and even religion itself within the scope of rational inquiry. And as we have seen, in response to the positivist conception of reason, Kierkegaard embraced the irrationality of religious faith as the very sign of its superior sort of truth. But in doing so—in accepting the positivist conception of rationality—Kierkegaard so subjectivized the question of human destiny as to frame it in new terms, no longer as an intelligibly grasped *purpose* or *goal* or *chief good* of life, but as a personally felt, and extra-rational, *meaning* of life.<sup>31</sup>

### John Paul II's Personalist Gamble

Situated in the context of this modern narrowing of reason, the emergence of the question of the meaning of life is not merely a trivial semantic shift, superficially covering the persistence of a common, un-

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<sup>31</sup> We have seen that the question of the meaning of life had continental origins; it remains alive especially in phenomenological strands of German philosophy that attempt to articulate an alternative to this Humean/positivist conception of rationality. The question has often been discussed in relation to Hans-Georg Gadamer, for instance (*e.g.*, by Jean Grondin, *Du sens de la vie*; Jay L. Garfield, “Philosophy, Religion, and the Hermeneutic Imperative,” in *Gadamer's Century: Essays in Honor of Hans-Georg Gadamer*, ed. Jeff Malpas, Ulrich Arnschwald, and Jens Kertscher [Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2002], 97–110; and Mirela Oliva, “Hermeneutics and the Meaning of Life,” *Epoché: A Journal for the History of Philosophy* 22, no. 2 [2018]: 523–539). Even so, it seems that Gadamer himself was not preoccupied with the question as such.

derlying question within a stable, coherent conceptual framework. The shift in the formulation of the question embodies a shift in the actual question being asked, which reflects a dramatic change in the general conceptual framework assumed by those questions—a dramatic change in the assumptions made about the world, about the human condition, about rationality, and about the kinds of questions that can intelligibly be asked. The question of the meaning of life simply is not, and should not be confused with, the question of the end of man or the purpose of life. The two questions entertain different sorts of answers, give rise to different associated questions, and make different assumptions about the nature of man and reality.

As I have framed it so far, it seems that there would be three choices available when faced the historical displacement of the question of purpose by the question of meaning. Option 1: One could ignore the differences between the two questions, and continue acting as if the new and old questions are really different versions of the same question. This has so far been the most common strategy, but the arguments presented here render that untenable. Option 2: One could celebrate the shift, adopt the new question, and bid good riddance to the old question. Presumably there are some who would embrace that option; I will leave it up to those so inclined to take up that strategy. Option 3: One could find the new question problematic, and recommend not asking it, and seeking to recover the old question. That has been the implicit position of my argument so far.

But there is another choice. Option 4: one could believe that the old question is more important and fundamental, but recognize that the new question—the question of meaning—seems to have taken some hold, and one could seek to use that question, not so much to answer it, as to direct people back to the old question. In practice, I think this might look a lot like Option 1—it might involve treating the question of the meaning of life as just the latest formulation of an age-old question.

But I think it is different from Option 1, and that it was part of the creative genius of John Paul II to attempt to chart this path.

When John Paul II embraced the question of life's meaning, did he ignore the differences between that question and the older question of life's purpose?<sup>32</sup> Was he aware of the differences between the questions, and embracing the new question as a legitimate alternative, a theological development, that ought to replace the old question? It seems that John Paul II's formation in both the Thomistic and phenomenological traditions makes the question of "the meaning of life" an interesting test case. What we find is that John Paul II understood that the old question of purpose is more important and fundamental, but recognized that the new question of meaning had achieved significant cultural purpose; he therefore seems to have attempted to use the new question of meaning in order to reawaken the old question of purpose. In that way, his appeal to "the meaning of life" was probably intended (much like his appeal to "freedom" in *Veritatis Splendor*) not to replace, but to redirect attention back to, more classical notions which the tradition would have described in other terms.

By integrating "the meaning of life" into Catholic theological discourse, John Paul II seems to be accepting but perhaps co-opting the language of the age, attempting a creative re-imagining of the historically contingent question of the meaning of life as a path back to the truly timeless question of life's purpose. As his extensive use of "the meaning of life" in *Fides et Ratio* confirms, John Paul II undoubtedly interprets that question in light of reason's "sapiential dimension" and "metaphysical range," hoping to rejuvenate the classical conceptual

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<sup>32</sup> In Polish, *sens życia* is as novel as any other European language's phrase for "the meaning of life" (emerging in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), and in Latin the phrase for "the meaning of life," *sensus vitae*, is also a neologism which comes to be used in ecclesial documents only in the 20<sup>th</sup> century; it seems to have had no classical uses, and the very few appearances of the phrase in early modern books signify something different (e.g., life's sense powers).

framework. It is not possible that he intended to accept the implications of the new question's native intellectual context—subjectivism, metaphysical skepticism, and the narrowing of reason—given how confidently he strives to redirect the meaning question to more traditional questions of human nature and purpose. This is entirely consistent with other ways in which John Paul II, in recognizing the anxieties of secularism, did not condemn, but found new opportunity to evangelize.

So while John Paul II seems to take the question of the meaning of life at face value, upon closer inspection we can find him telling us that such an existential question is so pressing and so frustrating precisely because human nature is not such as to be satisfied by asking it, but must find in it a more fundamental question, one capable of leading us back to God. This suggestion deserves to be tested in greater detail in the various magisterial texts cited at the beginning of this article,<sup>33</sup> but for present purposes we may take a single representative passage from *Centesimus Annus*, § 55, to illustrate.

In this passage, which draws rhetorical strength from association with a saint and another Pope, John Paul II links the meaning question to traditional metaphysical questions about man's origin, nature, and destiny:

The Church receives “the meaning of man” from Divine Revelation. “In order to know man, authentic man, man in his fullness, one must know God,” said Pope Paul VI, and he went on to quote Saint Catherine of Siena, who, in prayer, expressed the same idea: “In your nature, O eternal Godhead, I shall know my own nature.”

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<sup>33</sup> By extension, this hypothesis also deserves to be explored with respect to earlier writings of Karol Wojtyła, as well as texts by those who influenced the formation of his “Thomistic personalism.” As we would expect, the phrase “sens de la vie” does not seem to appear in any of the writings of the Thomist Fr. Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange, a teacher of Wojtyła at the Angelicum in Rome, but “der Sinn des Lebens” does appear in works by the phenomenologist Max Scheler, about whom Wojtyła wrote his doctoral thesis at Jagellonian University.

A footnote gives further license to the question of “meaning,” citing Paul VI's 1965 address at the close of the Second Vatican Council:

The Catholic religion is man's life because it determines life's nature and destiny [*supremum finem*]; it gives life its real meaning [*pleniorumque ei sensum attribuit*], it establishes the supreme law of life and infuses it with that mysterious activity which we may say divinizes it.

The reference to the Second Vatican Council grounds John Paul II's use of the meaning of life question, and it seems that this is where the question entered the official discourse of Catholic teaching—not as a new framework for moral evaluation, but as a new rhetorical entry to the longstanding framework. It appears, clearly but modestly, in *Gaudium et Spes* (1965, to which John Paul II, as Karol Wojtyła, contributed) and before that in *Lumen Gentium* (1964, composed without any intervention from Wojtyła). It makes a single appearance in the decree *Ad Gentes* (1965), but not in *Dignitatis Humanae* (1965).

The declaration *Nostra Aetate* formulates the question, but notice how firmly it embeds it within the classical metaphysical and moral questions:

What is man? What is the meaning, the aim of our life? What is moral good, what is sin? Whence suffering and what purpose does it serve? Which is the road to true happiness? What are death, judgment and retribution after death? What, finally, is that ultimate inexpressible mystery which encompasses our existence: whence do we come, and where are we going?<sup>34</sup>

In short, the “meaning of life” question is introduced to official Catholic discourse at Vatican II, but could hardly be seen as central to that council; in the few cases it does appear, the documents insist (even more firmly than John Paul II's encyclicals) on connecting the question of the *meaning* of life to the question of the *purpose* of life, and they

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<sup>34</sup> Paul VI, Declaration on the Relation of the Church to Non-Christian Religions *Nostra Aetate* (Rome 1965), § 1.

affirm the importance of understanding *man* as made in the image of God, and *Christ* as revealing the fullness of truth about human nature and destiny—in other words, in terms of the classical question of the ultimate purpose, good or end of human life.

The development of Catholic rhetoric about ultimate human questions could implausibly suggest that perhaps the newer question of “the meaning of life” is not so different from the older question of human purpose. John Paul II’s enthusiastic adoption of the question seems to be a counterexample to what would otherwise be evident: the question of the meaning of life is a radical departure from the truly fundamental question of human purpose. But John Paul II is the exception that proves the rule. He confirms that the proper question to ask about life is a moral question, linked to a metaphysical question: the question of the chief good or ultimate end of human life. The question of “the meaning of life” cannot be left to its own, native implications of subjectivity and individualism, but can only be adopted as a relevant question if it is brought back within the orbit of a more substantive moral and metaphysical perspective.

### **Conclusion: A Future for “The Meaning of Life”?**

What then is to be gained by adopting the rhetoric of the “meaning” of life? Would it be any great loss if the question does fade on its own, and will there be any great gain if it is kept alive within the Catholic intellectual tradition? More to the point, why should the Catholic intellectual tradition want to keep that question alive, given that it previously played no important role in that tradition, nor in most of human history, and that when it did arrive it competed with and effectively displaced the classical question of human nature and destiny so central to Western reflection, and in particular to Christian faith?

The irony is that if the question of the meaning of life does survive, it may be thanks to a bold rhetorical gambit by John Paul II. Although you wouldn't know it from reading his encyclicals, the history of human reflection never before knew, and still does not need, that question, and Catholic teaching would be virtually free of it without John Paul II's peculiar embrace. Still, attention to this peculiar embrace only confirms that the question of the meaning of life is indeed, on its own terms, a dead-end question, in need of radical translation back into a very different, and truly timeless, question for it to play any effective and fruitful role in human life. Jesus Christ does not make sense as an answer to "the question" about "the meaning of life;" Christ reveals to us not a "meaning" but the fullness of truth about our nature and purpose as made in God's image, fallen, and offered salvation by the Triune God who is our origin and our end.<sup>35</sup>



### **John Paul II's Gamble with 'the Meaning of Life'**

#### SUMMARY

One of John Paul II's remarkable innovations was his embrace of the question of "the meaning of life." The question of "the meaning of life" was never asked before the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and it was slow to be integrated into Catholic discourse. When the question of life's meaning emerged, it effectively replaced a prior question, about the purpose or *telos* of life, with a very different set of theoretical assumptions. From the traditional perspective, the question of life's meaning is highly suspicious, and even Pope John Paul II's unparalleled embrace of the question confirms that he framed his personalism in terms of the older question of life's purpose or *telos*.

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<sup>35</sup> Previous versions of the argument in this paper were presented for the Thomistic Institute at the University of Maryland (October 12, 2017), and as a five-part series of guest posts on "The Virtue Blog" (December 2017), and I received helpful feedback from both. I am grateful for conversation and correspondence about the central arguments with Mirela Oliva and Tim Mawson, and especially to Dr. Oliva for her interest in engaging, and encouragement in sharing, my ideas.

## KEYWORDS

John Paul II, meaning of life, existentialism, personalism.

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