

## **John Wisdom on the Meanings of the Questions of Life**

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What do we mean when we ask about the meaning of life? Does the question even make sense? Grammar may suggest that it does, but grammar is a very unreliable guide. Perhaps the question “What is the meaning of life?” is not at all like the question “What is the speed of light?” or the question “How tall is the Eiffel Tower?”, both of which make sense and can be answered. Perhaps it is more like the question “Which colour does the number seven have?” or the question “What are the exact measurements of this thought?”, both of which cannot be answered, and the reason they cannot be answered is that we cannot really make sense of the question. We cannot understand what is being asked, not because we are not clever enough to understand it, but because the question is in itself incomprehensible: colours have no number and thoughts no spatial dimensions.

It is tempting to dismiss questions regarding the meaning of life as similarly nonsensical. Words have meaning, sentences have meaning, texts have meaning, but life is not a word, a sentence, or a text. Unless we want to regard the world as a kind of three-dimensional message from its creator – the “book of nature” - that we can decipher and “read” like any other message, it is just not the *kind* of thing that can have meaning. In that case we would simply be committing a category mistake when we ask about the “meaning of life”.

However, in an essay on “The Meanings of the Questions of Life”,<sup>1</sup> the British philosopher John Wisdom argued that even though there are good reasons for thinking that the question is senseless, it is in fact not, provided the question is understood in the right way. What is interesting about the essay is that Wisdom actually makes a very good case for thinking that the question is senseless before turning about and arguing, less convincingly, that the question does make sense after all.

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<sup>1</sup> First published in his book *Paradox and Discovery*, New York: Philosophical Library 1965. I am citing from the reprint of Wisdom’s essay in *The Meaning of Life*, ed. E.D. Klemke, New York/ Oxford: Oxford University Press 2000, 257-260.

So how does it *not* make sense? Normally, when we ask with respect to a given situation “What is the meaning of this?”, we do not want to know *what* is going on, but *why* it is going on, e.g. what has led to the quarrel that we are witnessing, what the road sign we encounter points to, or what causes the symptoms we suffer from and what, given those causes, I should expect to happen to me as a result. In other words, when we ask “What is the meaning of this?”, we are asking for something that went on before or will come after, and in any case for something that lies *outside* that about which we ask the question. Now, if that is what is required to answer the question ‘what is the meaning of x’, then it is clear that we cannot meaningfully ask that question about the world in its *entirety*, precisely because there is nothing outside everything. Just as we can meaningfully ask what supports this material object (say, the topmost card in a house of cards), and what supports the object that it is supported by, and so on, but *not* what supports *everything*, we can meaningfully ask about the meaning of this event and the meaning of that event, but not about the meaning of *all* events taken together.

(One may want to object here that asking about the meaning of *life* is not the same as asking about the meaning of *everything*, since the world of living things is much smaller than the universe, so that life may conceivably have a meaning in the larger context of the history of the universe. Wisdom does not consider this possibility and very quickly, and without providing a justification, equates the “meaning of life” with the “meaning of everything”. However, it may well be the case that when we ask about the meaning of life we do in fact mean to ask about the meaning of everything. In this context, “life” should then be understood as a synecdoche, i.e. a part that stands not for itself, but for the whole it is a part of.)

According to Wisdom, however, there is also a sense of meaning that is compatible with asking the question “What does it mean?” about a *whole* rather than merely a part (whose meaning always consists in its relation to the other parts as well as to the whole). For instance, we can meaningfully ask about the meaning of a play that we have watched. This would *not* be absurd because “our words express a wish to grasp the character, the significance of the whole play”. (259) An answer to the question might for instance tell us whether the play is “a tragedy, a comedy or a tale told by an idiot”. Similarly, when we ask about the meaning of life, “we are trying to find the order in the drama of Time” (259). In either case, whether we ask the question about “dramas of art or of real life”, the question clearly makes sense, even though the drama in question may be too complex for our

understanding, which is why we should not expect to be able to ever come up with a simple, straightforward answer, telling us that the meaning is *this*. We may still be able to offer a helpful description, though, as long as we remember that we can never give a complete and final account of “all that there is in the matter” (260). “Indeed surely the historians, the scientists, the prophets, the dramatists and the poets have said much which will help any man who asks himself: Is the drama of time meaningless as a tale told by an idiot? Or is it not meaningless? And if it is not meaningless is it a comedy or a tragedy, a triumph or a disaster, or is it a mixture in which sweet and bitter are for ever mixed?” (260)

So what is wrong with this argument? I am inclined to agree with Wisdom that there is no straightforward answer to the question of the meaning of life so that we will never be able to say ‘*this* is the meaning of life’ no matter what we think ‘this’ is (Douglas Adams’s “42” being just as good as any other possible answer). So yes, it can’t be that simple, and yes, we can certainly learn a lot about life from poets, historians, and others, without ever getting the one and only correct and final answer from any of them. However, I am suspicious of the analogy between a play and life that Wisdom draws upon here. Of course it makes sense to ask about the meaning of a play. There is, after all, somebody who has actually written the play, and they must have had certain intentions and were trying to articulate certain ideas when they wrote it. A play has meaning because there is intent in it, and where there is intent, there is always some kind of message, however vague and hard to articulate in words, that we can try to decipher and to some degree understand. But life may not be like that at all. If there is no divine playwright, then life is not a play, and if it is not a play, then it is not a comedy or a tragedy either. It may be sad or enjoyable, bitter or sweet, but that sweetness or bitterness is not the meaning of it. It is just one of its relational properties. A play is unlikely to be a “tale told by an idiot”, but it might be just that if the author is indeed an idiot, while life is never a tale because it is not told by anyone, idiot or otherwise. Life may be said to have a certain “character”, but does it also have “significance”? Character and significance do not seem to be the same. Yet even if it does indeed have significance because it is rather like a play, then its meaning *does* ultimately derive from something *outside* of it, namely the intentions and ideas of the divine playwright, who is not a character in the play, in which case the meaning of life would *not* be the meaning of everything, and the question “What is the meaning of everything” still would not make any sense because *everything* can no more be a play (and hence a comedy or a tragedy) than it can be supported by something.