

Meaning of Life

Course Introduction

Welcome to One Life! You're probably wondering what the course is about and if the course material is going to continue in this patronising way of writing? The answer is yes to both! Some would say "yes" is a bit of a poor answer to the question "what is this course about?" so lets go into a little more detail.

Most of are wondering what life is all about. What is the point of life, how should we lead our lives and so on. The traditional place to look if you are looking for answers to these questions is religion but for some of us this isn't a satisfactory answer. That is where One Life comes in – we'll be looking for answers without resorting to God.

That isn't to say the course will appeal only to atheists. We'll be looking for secular answers regardless of belief. Indeed the course was specifically designed to include everyone – religion is not on the menu.

Introduction

In this course we are going to be tackling the big questions head on – so let's start with probably the biggest question of all – what is the meaning of life?

What do you think the meaning of life is?

The question

On a more basic level we can probably question the question we are asking (after all, everything is open to questioning!). We should ask is there a meaning of life? Does it vary from individual to individual? What are we really asking anyway?

What do we even mean by the meaning of life? How else could re-phrase the question? Luckily Wikipedia provides us with just such a list.

- Why are we here?
- What are we here for?
- What is the origin of life?

- What is the nature of life?
- What is the nature of reality?
- What is the purpose of life?
- What is the significance of life?
- What is the value of life?
- What is the reason to live?

Have a read through this list. How many of those do you agree as being the same question? Any of them? Perhaps they are all different questions? How closely related are they? Are they all questions worth asking? Are they all questions we can ask?

Which questions do you think most closely express the question we are asking?

Is there a meaning?

Now that we have established what the question is, we should probably work out if there is even a question at all. Is there a meaning of life? How do we know what it is? Is it universal or is it specific?

This could be seen as two different questions. If the meaning of life is objective then the question comes down to “there is a meaning of life out there, how do we find out what it is?” whereas if the meaning of life is subjective the question is concerned if how we decide what it should be and whether that is a meaning of life at all.

By its very nature the meaning of life would seem to be objective. However in order for this to be the case you need to accept some kind of universal purpose or intelligence, a concept usually dismissed by secularists.

Do you think the meaning of life is objective or subjective? Why?

Let's look at each case in turn. Firstly, let's say its objective. This means there must be some kind of universal constant known as the meaning of life. But this brings up several questions. Who defines it? If its objective, surely it isn't defined by man and so given man is the only intelligent beings we know of, how can an objective meaning be defined?

The only other way for there to be an objective meaning is for it to be implicit (i.e. it's obvious what the meaning of life actually is). For example you could say the meaning of life is to reproduce which would be most likely be the Darwinian perspective.

Do you think an objective meaning of life can exist? How do we work out what it is?

Now let's consider that the meaning of life could be subjective. That we can define it. This could work both in the context of a subjective meaning for humans or indeed a subjective meaning for each individual.

Of course if we are just defining our own meaning of life then does it really have any significance? Is there any point in having it if we "just made it up"? Does this mean it can change over time? If we can define our own meaning, what should we choose?

If you could define your own meaning of life, what would you choose?

Conclusion

The meaning of life is a complex thing and indeed may not exist at all. Given the greatest philosophers of all time have been arguing over this for thousands of years its probably false hope to think we can get to the bottom of it in this one session. But having no doubt had some good debate I will leave you with one final question.

How do you think the "meaning of life" affects your life and the way you lead it?