

Comment

Life Is Pointless—Good Point...and How Do You Feel about That?

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Abstract: This essay is in response to R. Weinberg, whose title well-summarizes the article: “Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have It, We Can’t Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad.” This response accepts the idea that life is pointless but argues against the non sequitur that we should be very, very sad. There is a question as to whether “should” means that being sad is the appropriate thing to do, or whether it is a prediction about what will happen if people understand the pointlessness of life. Either way, from the perspective of cognitive psychology, clearly the implied causal path from thought to feeling does not always hold; considerable evidence suggests that, often, causation goes the other way around, that feelings influence thoughts. A person’s feeling sad or depressed might increase the likelihood that the person will conclude that life is pointless, or that the person will worry about it. Nobody has proven that the pointlessness of existence is incompatible with satisfaction in one’s life, or that not feeling sad means one is overlooking the pointlessness of life, or that feeling sad is more appropriate or better in some way. In sum, I wish people happiness and urge them to try to construct a meaning in their life.

Keywords: meaning of life; happiness; sadness; psychology; reasoning; emotion; reasoning and emotion

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Who do you think you’re foolin’? . . . My mama loves me.”

– Paul Simon, Loves Me Like a Rock

Weinberg¹ tells us, on what seem to me to be very well-reasoned grounds, that life is pointless. Weinberg also says in the article title that “We Should Be Very, Very Sad,” and

¹ Weinberg, R. “Ultimate Meaning: We Don’t Have It, We Can’t Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad.” *Journal of Controversial Ideas* 2021, 1(1), 4; doi: [10.35995/jci01010004](https://doi.org/10.35995/jci01010004) (<https://journalofcontroversialideas.org/article/1/1/132>).

goes on to say, "Some people worry that life is pointless. That's because it is. I don't say that flippantly or glibly. I mean it and I will show it." Although I accept Weinberg's argument that life is pointless, I do not accept that the case has been made that we should be sad or that worrying about life being pointless comes primarily from life being pointless. This flow of causation from logic to feeling may make sense to many philosophers and, indeed, to most people. It does not follow for me, however, as a cognitive psychologist, because there is a lot of research suggesting that it is often the other way around. Instead of our feelings being a clear consequence of our reasoning, our reasoning is often influenced, and even distorted, by our feelings. Psychologists have shown this by manipulating participants' moods (for example, through videos) and observing the effects on their thinking processes.² Related concepts are motivated reasoning³ and implicit attitudes.⁴ Implicit attitudes are measured not by asking individuals about their attitudes but by observing how these attitudes affect responding, such as the speed of categorizing a man versus woman by pressing the same key used to classify an individual as good at math. Sometimes participants show awareness of these implicit attitudes, even when they don't match explicitly stated attitudes. Feeling sad or depressed for any reason might tend to bring one's attention to the pointlessness of life when that basic predicament otherwise might have escaped one's notice or might have remained less salient.

My disagreement with Weinberg comes from a psychological perspective. Weinberg's basic argument was expressed in a miniature nutshell at the beginning of the article's abstract (p. 1): "Life is pointless. That's not okay." This argument follows if feelings and attitudes stem from thoughts. To the extent that, instead, thoughts are influenced by feelings, one with the right feelings might well prefer to say, "Life is okay. As a result, it is okay for life to be pointless." Metaphorically, Weinberg is a passenger in a long (and pointless) plane ride in which passengers are trying to entertain themselves and, via the essay, has opened the hatch in flight, letting in frigid air that will make passengers uncomfortable (very, very sad). Metaphorically, my view is that we can know about the frigid air and, while acknowledging it, enjoy a bubble of pleasant air inside the plane. So while it is logical for the pointlessness of life to be not okay, it doesn't have to be not okay.

I, for one, agree that life is ultimately pointless, but I am typically not very sad about it. (Sure, if I had a choice, I would choose for life to be ultimately meaningful and with a clear point.) Sometimes, I welcome the freedom that comes with having to construct a meaning even though that constructed meaning is ultimately futile and will no doubt be forgotten by all at some future date. Some may even find relief in the pointlessness of life, as a means to forget about their past mistakes because, in several hundred years, nobody will care about these mistakes.

Speaking about motivated reasoning, it is useful to ask why one would write such an article about the pointlessness of life. If you have just settled on a line of argument that will make others sad if they follow it, then why do you want them to follow it? One possibility is that, as the saying goes, "misery loves company." Another possibility, though,

² A review of research on the effects of feeling on thinking is Blanchette, I., and Richards, A. "The influence of affect on higher level cognition: A review of research on interpretation, judgement, decision making and reasoning." *Cognition and Emotion* 2010, 24(4): 561–95; doi: 10.1080/02699930903132496.

³ A review of motivated reasoning is Kunda, Z. "The Case for Motivated Reasoning." *Psychological Bulletin* 1990, 108(3), 480–98; doi: 10.1037/0033-2909.108.3.480. More recent works show applications of motivated reasoning to specific areas, such as politics and morality.

⁴ Hahn, A., Judd, C.M., Hirsh, H.K., and Blair, I.V. "Awareness of implicit attitudes." *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 2014, 143(3), 1369–92; doi: 10.1037/a0035028.

is that one can try to find meaning in life by exploring arguments and telling the truth, and by becoming known for the arguments. Of course, it is probably the case that one would realize that, in a sufficient number of years, nobody will remember the essay. It also could be the case that there are many other individuals in the universe who have made, or will make, the same point and have been, or will be, forgotten. Nevertheless, metaphorically again, one may want to find something to do on a long plane ride even if it is pointless, and to try to create or find a point to the extent that it is possible. Starkly telling the truth in a signed essay can become a somewhat satisfying substitute for a point to life, even if there is no true or ultimate point to it.

There is perhaps another possible meaning of the statement that we should be very sad. This could be viewed as an expression of puzzlement. Why are so many people not very sad? Do they not understand that life has no point? Or is this a tacit admission of puzzlement as to why, for some, pointlessness does not always produce the expected sadness?

The issue of pointlessness that Weinberg raised has been addressed in the Bible, at the opening of Ecclesiastes, where it is stated that “all is vanity.” Ecclesiastes begins: “1. The words of the Teacher, the son of David, king in Jerusalem. 2. Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. 3. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun? 4. A generation goes, and a generation comes, but the earth remains forever.”⁵ Today it seems clear that, most likely, not even the earth remains forever. The relevance of the passage is clear whether one accepts the biblical solution to the problem or not, that is, whether one believes that a transient enjoyment of fleeting things is followed by a heavenly reckoning, or not.

Having considered these possibilities, why do I bother to write this signed response despite the pointlessness? Like Weinberg, I am open to the truth no matter what it is. Also, though, I am in search of meaning despite knowing that doing so may be futile, a false hope of immortality. There is, moreover, another reason for writing. Part of the meaning I want to create comes from helping others cope with this long plane ride that is called life. It is partly for this reason that I provide this glimpse of my own manner of often cheerfully coping with any fundamental pointlessness. I hope that this spirit is contagious.

⁵ New Revised Standard Version of the Bible in English, at <https://www.biblestudytools.com/nrs/ecclesiastes/1.html>.