

The Senses of Life

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Both philosophy and religion deal with the sense or meaning of life because they seek an answer to the same human problems or questions: what is the world?, why are we in it?, how should we act?, what awaits us with death? A new eternal life (without tribulations) or peaceful equally eternal oblivion? In other words, both provide an explanation of the origins of things and their ultimate ends.

But philosophy is concerned with other phenomena, only human and not divine, and investigates them in a different way than that of religion. In general, it wants to offer a reason for the general phenomena of the world, which are also everyday things, but in a not particular way, but universal. For example, how is it done and what are the limits of knowledge? What can we consider as truth? How should men behave in society, that is, what is the use of ethics, morals or law? What are the phenomena of language and art?

Since its birth among the Greeks, philosophical thought has not intended to solve the problems of life, but to clarify, and explain the events of nature and of societies and by this means, which is that of the "love of wisdom", to console the natural anguish of men, especially their physical or spiritual sufferings and the dread before the certainty of death. Thus, if philosophy intends to explain the world rationally, too, and for this very reason it can be a lenitive, consolation for life.

The question about the meaning or significance of life can initially only be asked by an entity that is aware of itself and what surrounds

it spatially (*cum + scientia*). In other words, an entity that thinks and knows that it thinks, that reflects on the phenomena - what appears before it, what its perception captures, falling under the action of thought. This entity, man, is entirely original in the midst of the universe because it inquires about its own nature and destiny. More than just a physical and biological being, he is capable of the most diverse behaviors possible, including the disinterested, such as compassion or beauty. Or, as Lecomte de Noüy (*La Dignité Humaine*) expresses himself, partly repeating Kant and his analysis of aesthetics, he is "the only being who experiences the need to perform useless acts".¹ And no matter how materialistic we may be, there is no denying that we only believe or are convinced of an absolutely material existence because this is one of the many *visions of the spirit*, that is, of feelings and abstract thoughts.

For this reason, there are three immediate answers to the question: life has a certain meaning; life has multiple senses; life has no meaning at all.

If a person firmly believes that he is a creature created by God, not by accident, but with a view to a purpose and a future, a second and definitive life, then that which we experience here on earth, materially, is a vestibule, a preparation or a trial for eternal and divine life, whether saved or condemned. The purpose or perspective has already been previously given and it remains for him to conduct his life according to the canonical and sacred scriptures of the adopted religion, in accordance with the prescribed cults and rituals.

From a religious point of view one can still have from life the conception that it is a grace granted by the gods, or simply by nature,

¹ *L'homme est le seul être qui éprouve le besoin d'accomplir des actes inutiles.*

to the contemplation of their works, but without this contemplation or experience leading us to another life. In a way the Greeks understood it, clearly separating the eternal world from the divine beings and the ephemeral world from human beings. The fact that man attributes himself a dignity does not necessarily imply a destiny beyond that in which he lives. In short, it would not be a redeeming religion.

Otherwise, if the person is unbelieving, atheistic or agnostic, then he will have to find or build a sense for himself. In other words, it is assumed that the universe has no purpose and no meaning. Why should it? Isn't the fact or the realization of its existence enough? The universe is just there, continuously transforming itself. And so are we. It would be an absurd prepotency of reason itself to want to find meaning in the phenomenon of life. The conscience itself would bring with it, infused, this "original sin".

This person is faced with a situation that can be said to be more complicated, because it implies the freedom to act, but also the responsibility for all his actions. In other words, he or she sees himself or herself in the circumstance of establishing values or principles (although many do not bother with this) and objectives to be achieved. This also means that man has no predetermined essence or nature. His initial principles and final objectives can be absolutely personalistic, individualistic, or collective, ethical, community.

Every human being acts in search of pleasure and at the same time seeks to avoid pain, suffering. This double and interdependent condition is common to the whole human race at all times and constitutes the initial step in the search for meaning in life. Moreover, a more immediate purpose is to survive, to stay alive only for as long as possible (strength or determination called, for example, *conatus* by Spinoza, or *Will*, according to Schopenhauer). This leads many

people to accept or live with degrading, absurd, irrational and violent conduct. In any case, life itself, understood as a miracle, a kind of grace (divine or natural), or even an extremely rare event (let us think of the prevailing inorganic of the universe), would be enough in itself and would already contain all the senses.

Or its meaning would be placed in a social utopia, exclusively human, that is, one that would be achieved in a society in which life would be the expression of the most perfect happiness (whatever that means and needs), in which the evils of poverty and injustice would disappear, in which fraternity and common well-being would prevail. This idea puts its accent in a collective sense, and not in a personalistic or individualistic meaning, assuming that the species is what matters, not the individual singularly conceived.

But I am still of the opinion that there are several humanly possible senses, that is, dependent only on ourselves in our short journey. Senses that are dependent on culture, history, living conditions. For this reason, in Nietzsche's opinion, the Greeks invented not only tragedy, but many of the arts that served them as compensation for the tragic vision of life. And the same could be said of the sciences, of techniques, of philosophy itself, or of political and economic activities. They are like creatures or children that rock us in our abandonment or dereliction.

The meaning of life for a Cro-Magnon man (a great cave painter), or for a person of antiquity, was not the same as that desired by medieval man or for a 20th century industrialist or a communist militant, as well as for a teenager of our times, who experiences and hallucinates with a society of consumption, of passing fads and grandiose and sensual spectacles. Even if we think of the social conditions of antiquity, or of our colonial history, the meaning of life

for a slave was not the same as that desired by a courtier, a prince, a free man of the petty bourgeoisie, a Greek philosopher, a Phoenician navigator or a warrior, be it Tupi, Celtic or Gallic.

Since life can have many senses, depending on the formation received, the family, the culture, the time, the opportunities that have arisen, the daily professional activities, I would say that among the most commonly desired senses are: generally, happiness; more specifically, love (in its different senses, such as *eros*, *philia*, *agape* or *pietas*), knowledge, wealth, power, charity or philanthropy, celebrity.

Two others, which we can also find, more rarely: recollection, that is, a life far from one's own world, or the experience of a great historical achievement. For example, having fought in a war, having participated in an Olympiad, having accomplished a "great deed" hitherto unheard of and worthy of the admiration of his contemporaries, as a scientific discovery or invention.

Finally, I would like to draw attention to two other aspects. The first of these is that the preservation of life itself and its possibilities for all beings, by virtue of being an extremely rare or even unique fact in the universe, should be the first sense that we aspire to. The second is that there is a very important difference between giving meaning to life (which is something individual) and having a life worthy of meaning (which takes us beyond ourselves, to a transcendent life).

A life worthy of meaning is one in which you yourself impose direction and purpose, and not only realize your qualities or attributes but develop them at the highest level, thereby offering a kind of gift to all mankind, that is, making life itself, for any man at any time, more attractive or pleasant to be lived.

This life that is meaningful to you (subjective) and to others (objective) seems to me to contain the best of the senses possible. To summarise with the advice of Pythagoras - pursue and practise what is noble (worthy of respect) and good; what is useful for the common life (for all zōou, the living beings); what is pleasing, decently, without lending itself to reproach and slander.