

Todd May

A SIGNIFICANT LIFE: HUMAN MEANING IN A SILENT UNIVERSE

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We can make a distinction between meaning *in* life and the meaning *of* life.

Inattention to this mars the philosophical study of meaning, but the distinction is simple. The meaning of life would be the reason we are here, a reason which could make all our lives intrinsically meaningful. Regardless of whether there is such a reason, however, we sometimes make judgements about the social meaning of each other's lives; clarifying these judgements is the "meaning in life" question which some philosophers and psychologists address. The psychologists tend to do it more fruitfully, because they show sensitivity to cultural differences and some have an eye to clinical applications. The philosophers, by contrast, try to find a universal formula.

Todd May's book is supposed to be about the meaning of life. May sums up his concerns when he asks if there is "some reason for my being here except to live out my allotted time, to burn my days alongside others who are, in turn, burning theirs". But if there is no reason, the reason cannot be to "burn" our days; this way of putting it simply expresses May's dread of nihilism, the idea that there is no meaning of life. It even led him to contemplate suicide, he tells us, in this frequently

autobiographical book. It all began when he came across the Ethiopian proverb, “One is born, one dies, the land increases”. May read this as unremittingly bleak, but it seems more positive to me: “the land increases”, so we are not wasting our time, but rather contributing to future generations. May eventually reconciled himself to nihilism and got along fine for many years, until he came across the work of Susan Wolf, who reinvigorated the “meaning in life” paradigm in academic philosophy in the late 1990s. May’s book is inspired by Wolf’s view that our lives are meaningful when we are subjectively attracted to objectively valuable projects.

I think Wolf’s idea is incoherent. For if it is a necessary condition on leading a meaningful life that your projects subjectively engage you, as May accepts, then no matter how superlative your life is, if you are just “going through the motions” it is meaningless. You could know this infallibly; that you found saving the world boring, for instance, but did it anyway. However, judgements about whether life is meaningful are also supposed to be fallible, because there are objective conditions to be met; there are no subjective guarantees when ascertaining whether such conditions obtain. But judgements about meaningfulness cannot be both fallible and infallible.

May takes leave of Wolf after citing, to my mind, the nugget of sense in her work on this issue: the claim that philosophers are not well-placed to judge which projects are meaningful. This is not good enough for May, who thinks philosophers must develop criteria. Unlike some, however, he contents himself with looking for some criteria, not a single one. May thinks we need them for guidance, but worries about elitism, given that many of us will inevitably fall short of the criteria. I think he should have worried more, because condemning the majority of human lives as more or less socially meaningless, as these Wolf-inspired formulae always do,

strikes me as too great a price to pay for offering reassurance to a handful of dissatisfied atheists. May assures us that a person's meaningless life may nevertheless possess other positive values. But this excuse is patently hollow given May's own dread of meaninglessness; and he does not recognise the distinction between the meaninglessness of life as a whole and meaninglessness in life.

May thinks he can "steer between the Scylla of meaninglessness" and the "Charybdis of elitism". Personally I would follow Odysseus in steering for Scylla, and start thinking hard about whether aversion to nihilism is simply a residue of religious sentiment. Instead of doing this, May gets sucked into the business of ranking people's lives. The criteria he alights upon are *narrative values*: living a steadfast, intense, or subtle life, for instance, makes your life meaningful. Subtlety is an odd one; its selection seems to be a product of May's own relationship with his uncle, thereby corroborating Wolf's positive insight.

At least May is less high-minded than most in this game. His criterion of intensity allows for musicians who take drugs, sleep around and trash hotel rooms to live meaningful lives. If we use "meaningful" as a term of approbation here, however, I think May's position would only make sense because we admire the music (or behaviour). May denies this, giving the example of an intense but talentless artist; but such a life seems paradigmatically meaningless to me. I value my intuitions on this no more than May's, however, because I think their formation is bound to be idiosyncratic. And socially "meaningful" is not always a term of approbation anyway; depending on the context, we might say that Hitler's life was very meaningful (because of its impact), or that playing bingo is what gave meaning to a person's life (because they loved it). One of the weakest points in the book is when May denies that narrative value makes evil lives meaningful. But narrative was supposed to be

objectively valuable; and meaningfulness was supposed to be distinct from morality. The reason for this hiccup, I think, is that May wants narrative values to do what the doctrine of the meaning *of* life was supposed to, namely vindicate us. By pandering to this craving, this book will not help atheists get over the feeling that there is something missing from their lives.