

What's It All About, Really?

A Light Stroll Through Life's Big Questions

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1 Opening: The Cosmic Setup

- Begin with humor: “Some people search for the meaning of life in ancient scrolls, sacred texts, or philosophy books. Others try Google. And a brave few.. ask me.”
- Pose the big questions: “Why are we here? What should we do with our lives? Should I have had the pancakes?”

Some people search for the meaning of life in ancient scrolls, sacred texts, or philosophy books. Others try Google. And a brave few... ask me. Which is probably a sign of how far civilization has come – or how far it has fallen.

But really – this question has been floating around for thousands of years. “Why are we here?” Not in the “why are we at this meeting” sense, but in the big sense. The cosmic, capital-M “Meaning” sense.

Is there a purpose to all this? Are we meant to do something specific with our lives? Or did the universe just burp us into existence and say, “Good luck!”?

These are huge questions. And they are tricky, because every time you think you are getting close to an answer – someone offers you pancakes. Which brings me to another important question: “Should I have had the pancakes?”

Life is full of these moments – little choices that somehow feel enormous. Breakfast decisions become metaphors for existential uncertainty. This talk is not going to solve the meaning of life for all humanity... but it just might give us a better way to think about it. With some laughs, some stories, and maybe a few surprising insights.

2 A Brief History of Meaning

- Zoom out: from bacteria to Beethoven.
- Joke: “Life started 4 billion years ago. We only started asking about its meaning about 4,000 years ago. Before that, we were too busy avoiding saber-toothed tigers.”
- Philosophical highlights:
 - Ancient: “Serve the gods.”
 - Enlightenment: “Use reason.”
 - Modern: “Swipe right.”

Let us zoom out for a moment. Way out. Imagine Earth 4 billion years ago: bubbling seas, volcanic fumes, single-celled organisms clinging to rocks like stubborn little pioneers. These early life forms had no need for meaning. Their job was clear – divide, survive, do it again tomorrow.

Fast forward a few billion years: fish walk on land, dinosaurs rule the Earth, mammals emerge, humans show up – and suddenly, somebody invents language. Now we can talk about things. And complain about them.

But here’s the fun part: life has existed for billions of years... and we only started asking about its meaning, oh, about 4,000 years ago. Before that, we were too busy avoiding saber-toothed tigers. And let us be honest, when you are running from something with eight-inch teeth, “the meaning of life” is not exactly top of mind.

Still, once we had a moment to catch our breath and sit by a fire, the questions came. “Why are we here?” “What happens when we die?” “Who ate my goat?”

Over time, some big themes emerged. The ancient answer was fairly straightforward: “Serve the gods.” Stay on their good side, follow the rituals, maybe build a ziggurat or two.

Then came the Enlightenment. Candles got brighter, wigs got taller, and the message became: “Use reason.” Think for yourself. Discover natural laws. Find purpose through intellect and science.

And then... we arrive in modern times. Our ancestors sought meaning in temples and libraries. We seek it by swiping right. Progress?

But to be fair, every age asks the same question in its own accent, using its own tools. The core impulse – the hunger for meaning – has never gone away. It just wears different hats.

3 The Three Great Camps

- **Camp #1: Life has an objective meaning** – religious or philosophical traditions.
 - Quote: “Man is the bridge between the beast and the Übermensch. Also, floss daily.”
- **Camp #2: Life has no inherent meaning** – existentialist view.
 - “You make your own meaning. Good luck with that.”
- **Camp #3: Life is too weird to explain, so enjoy the ride.**
 - Reference: Douglas Adams – “42.”

When people talk about the meaning of life, they usually fall into one of three camps. You might think of these as philosophical vacation spots. You do not have to book a permanent stay – many people bounce between them, depending on the weather.

Camp #1: Life has an objective meaning. This is the oldest camp. Think: pyramids, scriptures, monks in robes. Whether it is religion, metaphysics, or grand philosophy, the idea here is that meaning is out there, like a hidden treasure you are supposed to find. Your job is to align yourself with it.

The rules might come from a divine source, a cosmic order, or a very long book with no pictures. It tells you: “Here is your role. Do it well.”

One version of this, courtesy of Nietzsche – with a slight interpretive twist – says: “Man is the bridge between the beast and the Übermensch. Also, floss daily.” (Because even the Übermensch gets cavities.)

This camp gives comfort: you are part of something larger. But it can also feel like the answers are already written and you are just filling in the Scantron sheet of life.

Camp #2: Life has no inherent meaning. Welcome to the Existentialist Retreat. Bring your own angst.

This camp says, “Look, the universe is not handing out instruction manuals. There is no built-in purpose. You are born, you blink a few thousand times, and then – poof.”

But! That does not mean you are off the hook. Quite the opposite: you have to make your own meaning. You have to choose, create, build it out of your actions.

In other words: “You make your own meaning. Good luck with that.” No pressure.

This can be empowering or terrifying – sometimes both before breakfast. It is a bit like being handed a blank canvas and told, “Paint something beautiful.” And also, “Time is running out.”

Camp #3: Life is too weird to explain, so enjoy the ride. Then there is the third camp – my personal favorite on certain Tuesdays. This one says: “You know what? Life is weird. Let us stop pretending we are going to wrap it in a neat little bow.”

The universe is strange. People are unpredictable. Dreams are bizarre. And sometimes, the most honest answer is simply... “42.”

That is from Douglas Adams’ *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*, in case you have not read it. In the story, a supercomputer is asked to find the meaning of life, and after millions of years of computation, it solemnly replies: “42.”

Which is both absurd and strangely satisfying.

This camp is not about giving up on meaning – it is about loosening your grip on needing it to be perfectly defined. Laugh a little. Love a little. Maybe dance badly but enthusiastically. Sometimes, that is meaning enough.

4 Choices, Choices...

- Emphasize decision-making in daily life.
- Examples: “Coffee or tea? Career or calling? Save or spend? Netflix or sleep?”
- Introduce the concept of:
 - **Micro-choices** – what you do today.
 - **Meta-choices** – what kind of person you are becoming.

Micro-Choices vs Meta-Choices I want to introduce a simple way to think about this: micro-choices and meta-choices.

Micro-choices are the things you do today. They are tiny, often habitual: what you eat, how you talk to a stranger, whether you put your phone down while someone is speaking.

They do not always feel important – but they are the stitches that hold your life together. Enough of them, and you start to form patterns.

Then we have meta-choices. These are not just about what you do – they are about who you are becoming. These are the long arc decisions: Do I want to be generous or guarded? Curious or cynical? Someone who builds, or someone who waits to see what happens?

Meta-choices happen slowly, almost in the background. But they shape your identity in powerful ways.

Think of it like this: your micro-choices are individual brush strokes. Your meta-choices are the painting that emerges over time.

And that painting? It might just be where your meaning starts to show.

5 Rational Choices (Without Going Full Spock)

- Setup: “Philosophers and economists sometimes imagine we’re all walking spreadsheets.”
- Introduce **KIPs (Key Individual Priorities)** as personal values or goals.
 - “Think of KIPs as the real KPIs of your soul.”
- Factor in constraints: time, money, ethics, entropy.
- Warning: “Just because you can fit your life into a spreadsheet does not mean you should.”
- Critique: Neoclassical economics – “infinite consumption and zero leisure at age 99.”
- Insight: “Being rational does not mean being cold – it means thinking clearly about your values and trade-offs.”

Philosophers, economists, and the occasional over-caffeinated engineer have long tried to answer life’s big questions using models, equations, and decision trees.

Some of them imagine we’re all walking spreadsheets – little rational agents maximizing some mysterious function called “utility.”

In this worldview, life becomes a matter of cost-benefit analysis.

“Should I marry this person? Let me check my pivot table.”

“Should I become a teacher or a hedge fund manager? Let me graph my lifetime expected satisfaction.”

It is tidy. It is structured. It is also... kind of hilarious.

And yet, there’s something useful in this way of thinking – if you do not take it too seriously.

Enter the KIPs: Key Individual Priorities

Instead of “utility” or “economic surplus,” I like to talk about KIPs – Key Individual Priorities.

Think of KIPs as the real KPIs of your soul.

What matters to you? Freedom? Stability? Novelty? Love? Meaningful work?

There is no universal formula – but you can get clearer about your own.

Knowing your KIPs helps you choose when paths diverge. When one job pays more, but another aligns with your values. Or when staying in your comfort zone feels safe – but your KIPs whisper, “grow.”

Do Not Forget the Constraints

But here is the thing: you do not get to optimize your life on a blank canvas.

You live under constraints – just like every real-world system.

You have limits:

- Time. (Always too little.)
- Money. (Often too little.)
- Ethics. (Hopefully present.)
- Entropy. (Everything falls apart if left unattended – including your laundry.)

Every decision is a balancing act between what you want, what you value, and what is possible.

Beware the Spreadsheet Trap

Now here comes the salt.

Just because you can fit your life into a spreadsheet does not mean you should.

Some economists tried this – neoclassical economics, in particular – and decided that the ideal human life involves infinite consumption and zero leisure at age 99.

(Because that is when you are supposed to go out with one final luxury shopping spree before spontaneously combusting.)

The problem is not the math – it is the assumption that life is just math.

Real Rationality Is Human

So let me offer this instead:

Being rational does not mean being cold.

It means being clear.

It means knowing your values, seeing your trade-offs, and making choices that reflect who you really are – not just what the algorithm thinks you should be.

Or, put another way:

Use the spreadsheet if it helps.

But keep your heart in charge of the formulas.

6 Some Suggested Meaning Recipes

- **Connection:** Love, friendship, laughter.
- **Creation:** Art, work, planting tomatoes.
- **Curiosity:** Asking questions even if no one knows the answers.
- **Contribution:** Making the world slightly less messy than you found it.
- **Analogy:** “Meaning is like soup – it’s better if you stir in a few things yourself.”

By now, you may be thinking, “Okay, I get it – there’s no one-size-fits-all answer. But how do I start cooking up my own version of meaning?”

Good news: you do not have to invent it from scratch. People have been experimenting with meaning for thousands of years. What follows are a few tried-and-true recipes – not rigid instructions, just ingredients you can mix and match.

1. Connection

Start with connection – to people, to place, to something bigger than yourself.

Love, friendship, the kind of laughter that makes your face hurt... these moments remind us we are not alone in the cosmos. Even sharing silence with someone who truly gets you can feel like a profound answer to a question you did not know you were asking.

And yes, even introverts need connection – just with better lighting and fewer group texts.

2. Creation

Next up: creation. Making something – anything – can be a source of deep purpose.

It could be painting, writing, teaching, cooking, fixing bikes, or planting tomatoes. (And if you do all those at once, congratulations – you are either a polymath or someone with a lot of unfinished projects.)

When you create, you participate in something generative. You leave a fingerprint on the world that says, “I was here, and I added this.”

3. Curiosity

Then there's curiosity – a seriously underrated path to meaning.

Ask questions. Even the weird ones. Especially the weird ones. Why do we dream in color? What happens inside a black hole? How does a seed become a sunflower? Why are flamingos pink?

The act of wondering, in itself, can be nourishing. You do not have to know the answers. Sometimes, the question is the meaning.

4. Contribution

Finally: contribution.

Make the world slightly less messy than you found it.

Help someone. Teach something. Clean up a little, metaphorically or literally.

It does not have to be grand. You do not need to solve climate change before dinner. Just improve your corner of the map, however you can.

As the saying goes: “Do your little bit of good where you are. It's those little bits of good put together that overwhelm the world.”

Meaning as Soup

So here's the analogy I like best:

Meaning is like soup.

It is warm, complex, always better with a few good ingredients – and better still when shared.

And here's the key: it is not delivered pre-packaged. You have to stir in a few things yourself.

Experiment. Taste. Adjust the seasoning.

And maybe, if the day allows, sprinkle in a little joy.

7 Ending: A Gentle Landing

- Closing reassurance: “You do not have to solve the meaning of life today. Or tomorrow. Just do something today that makes tomorrow worth waking up for.”
- Laugh line: “If all else fails, try pancakes. Pancakes may not be the meaning of life... but they're a strong contender.”

So where does all this leave us?

We have zoomed out to the origins of life, wandered through philosophy, poked fun at spreadsheets, and stirred up a few meaning recipes. And now – mercifully for you – we are coming in for a gentle landing.

But here is the most important thing I want to leave you with:

You do not have to solve the meaning of life today.

Or tomorrow.

Or ever, really.

What you can do – what we all can do – is this:

Just do one thing today that makes tomorrow worth waking up for.

That might mean reaching out to someone. Finishing something. Starting something. Laughing. Planting. Wondering. Or simply noticing a beautiful moment that might have otherwise passed you by.

And if all else fails?

Try pancakes.

Pancakes may not be the meaning of life...

...but they are a strong contender.

Thank you.