

« Meaning Making »

By Deepak Bansal

What is the meaning of meaning? As Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi put it, “*It’s a circular question.*”

This inherent circularity is what makes the question so challenging to contemplate. Humans possess self-reflective consciousness, enabling us to understand past events and project future possibilities. We strive to make sense of our experiences, constructing narratives from them. Through this consciousness, we can create meaning from existing data points, stories, and our intuition.

The question then arises: “*Can we objectively agree on a meaning?*” Philosophers have debated this for thousands of years, offering a wide range of answers. Some argue that the world is composed of atoms and molecules in a random universe, while others believe the universe has a telos (purpose or objective) towards which we all strive. Proving either position is difficult, hence the enduring debate.

However, empirical research suggests that having a sense of meaning in life is linked to higher well-being and flourishing. Even though whether the universe has a meaning remains debated (and you are all welcome to have your opinions), cultivating an individual sense of meaning can channel our energies towards particular goals. As Sartre famously conceived, each individual is a “*project.*”

In this essay, we will explore the inherent will to meaning in humans along with techniques for cultivating meaning. We will examine how personal meaning can be constructed through various practices, such as setting goals, engaging in creative endeavors, and fostering connections with others. By understanding and applying these techniques, individuals can enhance their sense of purpose and overall well-being.

1. Will to Meaning

Why do we ask about the meaning of life? Viktor Frankl, in his book “*Man’s Search for Meaning*,” argued that humans possess an inherent “*will to meaning.*” While Freud focused on the “*will to pleasure*” and Nietzsche and Adler on the “*will to power,*” Frankl researched the human need to find and pursue meaning.

As a Holocaust survivor who lost his family in gas chambers, Frankl believed his own survival during three years in concentration camps was driven by his determination to understand and share his experiences. He entered the camps with a manuscript on the “*will to meaning,*” which was destroyed, but he rewrote “*Man’s Search for Meaning*” within ninety days of his liberation.

Frankl posited that every individual has a drive to find meaning in their actions. When this drive is unmet, it can lead to frustration or existential neurosis, manifesting as depression, distress, and addiction. He developed a therapeutic approach called Logotherapy (from “*logos,*” meaning), asserting that people can find meaning in their work, love, or suffering, which can alleviate these neuroses.

Let’s explore Frankl’s ideas on finding meaning through work, love, and suffering:

Work: Often referred to as creative values, the act of creation provides meaning. When something new is created, a difficult task is accomplished, or an effort reflects individuality, work becomes meaningful. The industrial world's assembly line concept deprived millions of their creativity, a phenomenon Karl Marx termed "*alienation*." Maintaining a sense of creativity and achievement is a constant source of meaning.

Love: Love involves experiencing belonging, being held, and being seen. Family, friends, partners, and other loved ones provide a sense of community and bonding, which is crucial for humans not only to survive but also to find meaning in life. This is why celebrations, ritually, and community have been important for human survival for ages. Even in this digital world, we can find ourselves through connections with others and experiencing moments of love and togetherness.

Suffering: Suffering is a fundamental aspect of being human. It is not the suffering itself that matters but our attitude toward it. If we hold onto meaning during moments of suffering, we can endure them more easily. Frankl noted that this perspective helped many of his fellow inmates survive the camps. In his suffering, he found meaning in the hope of rewriting his manuscript. Such moments of crisis can be opportunities to discover our true selves and the meaning of our lives.

Creating meaning is an individual choice. Sometimes, we don't need to change what we are doing; we need to find meaning in our actions, satisfying our "*will to meaning*." Frankl illustrated this with the story of a mother struggling to care for her paralyzed son. When she realized caregiving gave her life meaning, her perspective shifted entirely. Frankl emphasized, "*Everything can be taken from a human but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any given set of circumstances.*"

In essence, the will to meaning helps us find reasons to live.

2. Cultivating Meaning

The quest for meaning is as ancient as human civilization itself. In one of the oldest known poems, the Epic of Gilgamesh, the search revolved around immortality. Whether the focus is truth, beauty, goodness, light, or God, humans need an anchor point to guide their lives. These anchor points have been subjectively defined and implemented by humans, shaping the arc of history.

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi noted that there is a consensus among psychologists that people develop their sense of self and their aspirations through a sequence of steps, oscillating between individual and collective focuses. People can find their own meaning at each step.

- 1) **Preserving Self (Individual):** At this stage, the meaning of life is centered on survival, comfort, and pleasure. This is crucial for stability and enjoying the basic necessities of life. A significant portion of the population struggles to meet these basic needs. Once survival demands are met, individuals can open themselves to the next step.
- 2) **Developing Community (Collective):** Here, individuals expand their concerns to include the well-being of their family, company, community, or nation. They start

thinking beyond themselves and find meaning in these broader connections. Family ties, religion, patriotism, sustainability, and the acceptance of diverse viewpoints and freedoms provide sources of meaning, fostering a sense of belonging.

- 3) **Reflective Individualism (Individual):** In this stage, individuals delve deeper into their values, autonomy, and consciousness. The desire for growth, self-knowledge, and self-actualization takes priority. They experiment with different skills, ideas, and disciplines. This stage might seem like a crisis but is actually a period of potential and personal achievement.
- 4) **Universal Values (Collective):** Having attained personal clarity of values and consciousness, individuals externalize their values and integrate their interests with the collective whole. Figures like Buddha, Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Gandhi, and Nelson Mandela exemplify individuals whose goals merged with a larger cause, idea, or transcendent entity. Their lives become acts of service.

Individuals can find satisfaction and meaning at each stage, and each stage is sufficient to provide the meaning of life. However, individuals can always grow and move to new paths. There are various models with different numbers of steps. As Mihaly pointed out, the number of steps doesn't matter as much as the process of shifting between individual and collective focuses, where a person seeks inner truth and then shares their gifts with society. This process of differentiation (individuality) and integration (with the external world) is what truly matters.

Cultivating meaning involves shifting one's consciousness between the inner and outer worlds. In most cases, the ultimate meaning of life culminates in service—dedicating oneself to something greater than oneself.

3. Benefits of Meaning-Making

We are living in an age of chronic alienation. The devastation of two world wars shattered our belief systems and thrust us into post-modernity, a period where we questioned almost everything. Now, we find ourselves alienated from any definitive answers, resulting in widespread addiction, anxiety, depression, and, in extreme cases, suicide.

Nietzsche famously said, "*He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.*" By setting self-chosen goals, we can satisfy our will to meaning, providing a guiding star for the key decisions in our lives. Meaning-making is a well-researched topic, shown to offer multiple benefits:

- **Happiness:** Martin Seligman defines meaning as the sense of being part of and serving something greater than oneself. Research in positive psychology indicates that meaning-making is crucial for living a happy and flourishing life.
- **Longevity:** The Japanese concept of *ikigai*, or "*the art of living*," is believed to explain the extraordinary longevity of people, especially on the island of Okinawa. *Ikigai* is found at the intersection of:
 - What you love
 - What you are good at
 - What you can be paid for
 - What the world needs

- **Flow States:** Meaning-making facilitates flow states by connecting us to the essence of what we are doing, enhancing engagement and satisfaction.
- **Resilience:** Traumatic events often necessitate meaning-making. Having a purpose can provide the inner strength to endure difficult times. Moreover, such times offer opportunities for reflection, allowing us to find or redefine the meaning of life.
- **Achievement:** As Seneca said, "*No wind is favorable when one doesn't know where one is sailing.*" Meaning-making provides a goalpost, enabling us to live purposefully, enjoy life as we live it, and focus our energy on areas that matter to us.

In "*The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*," the answer to the ultimate question of life, the universe, and everything is humorously given as "42." While we may never find or agree on a universal meaning of life, we can cultivate our own meaning at each stage of our lives, finding something to strive for or someone to live for.

As Viktor Frankl said, "*The meaning of life is to give life a meaning.*"

Reference:

- a) Man's Search for Meaning; Viktor Frankl
- b) Flow; Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi
- c) Flourish; Martin Seligman
- d) Ikigai; Hector Garcia and Francesca Miralles
- e) Making Meaning in Life; Michael Steger