




Chapter 12

Life and Meaning

Yusuf Momoniat 

Faculty of Humanities
University of Johannesburg 
Johannesburg South Africa

Introduction

The question of life's meaning has haunted humanity since we have been able to think. This question still plagues us because of the universe's unwillingness to answer our calls. There are questions that people ask themselves all the time, after receiving no convincing answers. These include questions about what their life means, whether it has a meaning at all, and the question that can be asked recursively about life to no end: *Why?* In this essay, I focus on the following common thread of all such questions: What meaning, if any, is there to life?

In this essay, I argue that although our individual lives have meaning, they cannot be understood entirely while we are alive. This is because we cannot ever know the 'whole' of our lives but can know only parts of them. I also argue that we assume that our lives have a certain kind of meaning. This assumption that our lives have meaning is not affected by the existence or non-existence of an ultimate meaning – the difference between these two kinds of meaning will be elaborated on shortly.

Many approaches to answering the question of life's meaning come from analytic philosophy – the philosophical tradition that takes analysis to be central to philosophical progress (Blackburn, 2016: 18). In contrast to such approaches, I offer a novel discussion of life's meaning by way of hermeneutics. Hermeneutics is the study of the interpretation of texts, which lies in the field of continental philosophy – the

philosophical tradition contrasted with analytic philosophy, which considers philosophical self-reflection paramount (Solomon, 1988). An important idea in hermeneutics is ‘the hermeneutic circle’, which states that a text’s meaning can be understood only through the relationship between the parts of the text and the whole text. This application of continental philosophy (particularly the hermeneutic circle) to a field largely dominated by analytic philosophy is novel. Prominent philosophers in hermeneutics have described life’s meaning. Hans-Georg Gadamer in *Truth and Method* (1960) and Martin Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927) conceptualise human existence as self-interpretation via hermeneutics. I use hermeneutics as a basis for my argument that one’s life has meaning but deny that that meaning comes from one’s (own) interpretation of one’s life.

Meaning in life is often tied to morality – examples include religion and Thaddeus Metz’s ‘fundamentality theory’ of meaning in life (2013: 222–239). Following these examples, a complete and robust explanation of life’s meaning should include a moral system either following on from it or as the foundation upon which it is elucidated. However, the development of a useful moral framework based on this philosophy would exceed the limits of this essay but could be considered for future research.

There are two different kinds of meaning that I refer to in this essay: interpretive meaning and philosophical meaning. Interpretive meaning is the literary kind of meaning, the type of meaning we try to preserve when we paraphrase another author’s work or the meaning we refer to when we say a play has a meaning. Hermeneutics is concerned with this interpretive sense of meaning. The second kind of meaning is the kind that philosophers of meaning in life refer to. This philosophical meaning is a ‘good’ beyond money, happiness, love or other earthly desires. When philosophers of meaning in life say that one’s life is meaningful or has meaning, they are saying that there is something ‘good’ about it. This essay lies at the intersection between these two meanings, and the interpretive sense of meaning also goes beyond human desires

and understanding – although the interpretive meaning is not necessarily ‘good’. Because of these two different forms of meaning, I will indicate which kind of meaning I am referring to when it is necessary. Another critical distinction is made in philosophical meaning.

There is a difference between *the* meaning of life and meaning *in* life. *The* meaning of life refers to what meaning can be given to life overall; some philosophies single out human life as meaningful in a unique way, whereas others apply it to all life. Meaning *in* life refers to the meaning an individual life can have, which can also be applied conditionally. For reasons that will be made clear, my use of hermeneutics necessitates that I discuss meaning *in* life and not *the* meaning of life.

In the first part of my essay, I argue that one’s life can be understood as a text whose meaning can be interpreted, which allows me to use hermeneutics and specifically the hermeneutic circle. I use it to show that one cannot be alive and have access to the ‘whole’ of one’s life; therefore, one cannot understand the meaning of one’s life while living it. In the second part, I use Gadamer’s anticipation of completeness, which says that a text is assumed to have meaning when interpreting it, to show that if one attempts to find meaning in one’s life, then one assumes that their life has meaning—albeit ultimately uninterpretable by oneself.

Section 1: Life as a Text and the Hermeneutic Circle

Life can be interpreted in the same way that a text can. There are three ways in which life is similar to a text. First, there is the narrative aspect. A text, such as a book or play, has a narrative, and the narrative is the lifeblood on which everything else relies. When we reflect on our lives, we tend to put it in terms of a narrative; people speak about eras and character development in their lives in the same way we speak about acts and structure in a play.

The second way is the distillation of wisdom or advice from our previous life experiences. When giving a friend advice, one might say, “This situation happened to me, this is what I did, and this is what happened.” The use of our own lives to help others

fulfills the same purpose that fables or children's stories do. A fable is a story that has a clear moral message.

The final similarity between life and a text is simple: life always ends, just like a story always ends. When we interpret our lives, the knowledge that it will end always informs the interpretation (even if we do not know it does). These three similarities between life and text show that they can both be interpreted. Using these likenesses, I use hermeneutics to discuss "the fundamental question" as Albert Camus puts it (1942: 1).

The *hermeneutic circle* is an important concept in the interpretation of texts and reveals our interpretive meaning in life. The act of interpretation is an attempt to bring about understanding—in my case, interpretation of one's life to understand the philosophical meaning of their life. Therefore, interpretation and understanding are linked. The circle is a phenomenon that says that one's understanding of the whole text is refined by one's understanding of the parts, but one's understanding of the parts is refined by one's understanding of the whole. Understanding a text is thus circular. However, the circular problem of the hermeneutic circle does not pose a problem for me; the existence of the circle is sufficient to show that one cannot understand one's interpretive meaning in life while alive. There is a fact of life that suggests that a true understanding of one's life is impossible using the circle.

The fact of life being alive – and not dead – makes it impossible to interpret our lives correctly. If life is interpretable like a text, then the hermeneutic circle comes into play. The basis of the hermeneutic circle is that a correct interpretation can only be arrived at if the whole of a text is known as well as all the parts that make it up. While we are alive, we are living in the 'parts' of our lives and will only ever have access to those 'parts'. That is, the 'whole' of our lives is never accessible to us, which means we cannot engage in the hermeneutic circle. If we cannot engage in the hermeneutic circle to begin developing a correct interpretation of our lives, we can never understand the interpretive or philosophical meaning in our lives. Trying to interpret the interpretive meaning of one's life while alive would

be akin to trying to understand the whole meaning of a book while still in the middle of reading it. While the interpretation might be close to the true interpretive meaning, anything could happen between the current page and the ending; life is no different.

Death is vital to my discussion and will also be discussed in Section 2. The fact that all lives end means that the ‘text’ of one’s life will always finish and, further, will always be interpretable. The final act of dying in the hermeneutic context would be similar to the completion of writing a book. Although the book has been finished, the writer has not yet read through it from start to finish. In the final moment of one’s life, one finally has access to the ‘whole’ of one’s life but is fundamentally unable to begin interpreting the interpretive meaning, as they are no longer alive.¹ The finality of life means that it will be interpretable but also that we can never interpret our lives correctly without access to the ‘whole’.

If, after death, the ‘whole’ of our lives exists, we must then ask if it is possible for the people we leave behind after we die to interpret our lives and come to a correct interpretation of that interpretive and philosophical meaning in life. The answer begins with the hermeneutic circle; one needs access to the parts and ‘whole’ of one’s life to interpret it. Other people do not have access to all parts of one’s life and thus cannot ever obtain a correct interpretation of one’s life. Any attempt to interpret a deceased person’s life would simply be a projection on the part of the interpreter. An example of this is trying to interpret the meaning of another book by referencing to it in the current book one is reading—it would be a mediocre interpretation. Thus, it is only correct, though futile, for the individual to attempt to interpret their meaning in life. This means that meaning *in* life is the only philosophical meaning I can discuss using hermeneutics.

The uninterpretable nature of meaning in life means that there is no prescribed meaning for one to aspire to or fail to achieve. Therefore, my theory of meaning in life is as universal as the ability to interpret meaning. When meaning in life is

concerned, it should be as universal as possible. Prescriptive descriptions of meaning in life are limited in that there will always be people who do not or are unable to fit into the prescription and are therefore not universal. For

This essay focuses purely on secular forms of meaning. Being in an afterlife would mean that there is meaning to life (at least, what belief in an afterlife tells us), which means that this hermeneutic exercise would be irrelevant to life's meaning.

Example, the life of an Ethiopian child is vastly different from the life of an eighty-year-old child in Japan. My description of meaning in life is not prescriptive and accounts for these differences because of the individual nature of it—one can only attempt to interpret their own life.

Section 2: Anticipation of Completeness

Georgia Warnke analyses Gadamer's "anticipation of completeness" as a solution to a problem that his philosophical hermeneutics brings about (Warnke, 1987: 82). The specifics of the problem and how his anticipation of completeness attempts to solve it are not relevant to this essay. However, the concept itself is important, as it shows that we assume that life has an interpretive meaning.

The anticipation of completeness is an extension of the hermeneutic circle. Gadamer defines anticipation of completeness as "anticipation of the whole and its subsequent articulation in the parts" (Gadamer, 1960: 293). It follows from the hermeneutic circle by showing that when we are in the process of interpreting the meaning of a book, we assume that the meaning exists. While one is engaging the hermeneutic circle, interpreting the parts before getting to the whole, one assumes that the whole and parts form a meaning that can be interpreted.

This idea is intended to describe the interpretation of, for example, books that are already complete – the whole already exists even if the interpreter has not finished reading it. However, interpreting life (which has not yet been completed) and interpreting a book is no different. The assumption that a

book has a meaning is not necessarily predicated on the 'whole' of the book existing. The completeness of a text is anticipated before we know that it has been completed. Similarly, one assumes that one's life has an interpretive meaning when one begins interpreting it – even while one is alive.

Gadamer says that there is a way for this assumption of interpretive meaning to be misguided, "when we read a text, we always assume its completeness, and only when this assumption proves mistaken – i.e., the text is not intelligible – do we begin to suspect the text and try to discover how it can be remedied" (1960: 294). To know that the anticipation of interpretive meaning in our lives is not mistaken, we must look again at death. The 'whole' of one's life does not exist until one dies. We can only know if a book is unintelligible once we finish reading it and realise that the whole is not "articulate[d] in the parts" (1960: 293). Being alive means that we cannot know whether the 'whole' of our lives is intelligible or not. Therefore, the assumption that our lives have interpretive meaning is not mistaken.

Conclusion

In this essay, I have argued that although we assume that life has an interpretive meaning, meaning cannot be understood while we are alive. I did this by using the hermeneutic circle, showing that one never has access to the 'whole' of one's life and therefore can never understand the interpretive meaning of one's life.

I also argued, using Gadamer's anticipation of completeness, that the assumption of interpretive meaning in one's life is not misguided. I showed this by looking at how the 'whole' of our lives only exists after death, so while alive, we cannot know if the 'whole' of our life is not expressed in the 'parts'.

References

- Blackburn, S. (2016). *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*. 3rd ed. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acref/9780198735304.001.0001>
- Camus, A. (1942). *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Éditions Gallimard.
- Gadamer, H.G. (2004). *Truth and Method*. 2nd ed. Translated by J. Weinsheim. and Translated by D.G. Marshall. London: Continuum.
- Heidegger, M. (2001). *Being and Time*. Translated by J. Macquarrie. and Translated by E. Robinson. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Metz, T. (2013). *Meaning in Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199599318.001.0001>
- Solomon, R.C. (1988). *Continental Philosophy Since 1750. The Rise and Fall of the Self*. Oxford University Press.
- Warnke, G. (2003). *Gadamer: hermeneutics, tradition and reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.