

The Meaning of Life

CREED

Let the hearts of those who seek the LORD rejoice!

Psalm 105:3



The meaning of life refers to the most fundamental reasons for the existence of the world and ourselves.

Why?

As a child grows up, the most persistent question he or she will tend to ask is 'why?' As human beings we not only ask what things are but also why they are. The Greek philosopher Aristotle said that this desire is universal, "*All people by nature desire to know!*"

The question 'why?' can also be applied to the whole universe and to human beings. Why is the universe here? Why are we here? What is the goal of human life? Men and women throughout history have attempted to answer these questions.

What is the 'first be-cause'?

All the things we see in the universe are caused by other things. Many thinkers have concluded that this chain of causes cannot go on forever. There must be a 'first be-cause', a necessary, eternal and unchanging 'first cause' which creates and sustains everything. This first cause is what people naturally call 'God'.

In addition, the universe shows evidence of many processes that are ordered towards things of great complexity and beauty. This order and goodness encourages belief in a God who created them.

What is 'God'?

'God' is what people rationally call the first cause and purpose of things, but this raises questions about what God is and God's relationship with us.

For Aristotle, 'God' was the unmoved mover. For Plato, he was the unchanging good. For Anselm, he was '*that greater than which nothing can be conceived*'. For Newton, he was the architect of the laws of nature.

All rational models of the cosmos also require a 'first be-cause'. Einstein, for example, often referred to the first cause of the intelligibility of the universe using the language of 'God' or the 'mind of God'.



The School of Athens by Raphael Sanzio

Question the beauty of the earth, question the beauty of the sea ... question all these realities. All respond: 'See, we are beautiful'. Their beauty is a confession. These beauties are subject to change. Who made them if not the Beautiful One who is not subject to change? St Augustine, Sermon 241 (ccc. 32)

What does creation teach us about God?

From what has been created, we can learn that God is one, all powerful, all good and unchanging.

MISTAKES ABOUT GOD



Polytheism

Denies the one God in favour of many 'gods'. This is wrong since there can only be one first cause; several gods would introduce chaos and unintelligibility into creation.



Pantheism

Denies that God is distinct from the world. This is wrong because the first cause is unchangeable, unlike all the other beings of creation.



A powerless 'god'

Denies that God is all-powerful. This is wrong because the first cause must have the power to cause everything in creation.



An evil 'god'

Denies that God is good. This is wrong because what God has created is good. Evil in the world always refers to the corruption of some intrinsically good thing.

For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities – his eternal power and divine nature – have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made.

Romans 1:20 NIV

What are Human Beings?



The Creation of Adam by Michelangelo

Human beings differ from all other living beings on earth. Although we are animals, we also have the capacity to *know* and to communicate intelligently using *language*. Aristotle calls us ‘rational animals’.

The kind of knowledge we have is also unique. It is not just sensory perception and habit, but the knowledge of *what* and *why* a thing is. Without this capacity we would have no science or philosophy.

In addition, human beings have a unique ability to *choose*, which gives rise to an enormous variety of human work and action, both good and evil.

Many philosophers have realised that the kind of being who *knows* and *chooses* in this way must have some quality which cannot simply be reduced to mere matter that is subject to change and decay. They therefore infer that we have immortal souls that do not perish when our bodies die.

What do we want?

People seem to want many different things in life. However, when the deeper question is asked about what we really want, St Augustine answers that in all things we are really searching for happiness.

We all want to live happily; in the whole human race there is no one who does not assent to this.

St Augustine, *De moribus eccl.* I, 3, 4 (ccc. 1718)

We therefore look for happiness. Proper happiness is something complete, fulfilling, pleasurable, and permanent. Although in this life we experience many partial and temporary joys, none of these truly bring happiness. Furthermore, there is much pain and suffering in life, and our bodies decay and die.

Where is happiness found?

Given our mortality, together with much suffering and discontent in life, it is clear that permanent happiness is impossible for us without some help beyond ourselves. Even though our souls may be immortal, we lose everything else when we die.

Knowing that there is a good God, human beings have rightly looked to God to fulfil their hope for happiness. Furthermore, as naturally religious beings it is clear that happiness must involve *knowing* God as the first cause and reason for all things.

You have made us for yourself and our hearts are restless till they rest in you.

St Augustine, *Confessions*, I.1.1 (ccc. 30; cf. 1718)

What does God offer us?

Christianity affirms God’s goodness and desire for our happiness. In Jesus Christ, however, God offers us what is infinitely greater: a sharing in his own divine life and blessedness.

God, infinitely perfect and blessed in himself, in a plan of sheer goodness freely created man to make him share in his own blessed life.

Compendium of the Catechism of the Catholic Church, question 1

Due to this higher calling, God never allows us to be satisfied with anything less. It is only by responding to this invitation of friendship with God that we also find our natural happiness and fulfilment. St Paul speaks of this great gift and promise as follows:

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, what God has prepared for those who love him.

1 Cor 2:9 NRSV

The Greek word εὐαγγέλιον (in Latin, ‘evangelium’) means ‘good news’ or ‘gospel’. The good news of Christianity is that God has made it possible, through Jesus Christ, for us to enjoy this new life and be happy with him for ever. This course, also called ‘Evangelium’, has been written to enable people to know and grow in this new life.

These are written that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that believing you may have life in his name.

Jn 20:31

References

Catechism of the Catholic Church:

ccc. 27-49 (*Compendium* questions 1-5)

Further reading:

HAPPNER, P., *The Mystery of Reason*, Gracewing; CREAN, T., *God is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins*, Ignatius Press. DAVIES, B., *An Introduction to the Philosophy of Religion*, Oxford University Press

