Happiness and the Meaning of Life

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The famous Albert Camus once said, “I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically killed for the ideas and illusions that give them a reason for living. I therefore conclude that the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions” (4). People have long been occupied with finding an exact meaning for life, often coupling the question of life’s meaning with the definition of happiness. A firm definition of happiness or an answer to the meaning of life has never been agreed upon and never will be, as a disagreement has existed for a long time. Thus, the question now becomes, what could be really the defining feature of the meaning of life or happiness? Since God, described as an ultimate fair power, exists, I therefore argue that having faith and believing in God would result in happiness and leads to an understanding of the true meaning of life. Having faith strengthens the belief in an afterlife, and brings one closer to Him. This would bring meaning and happiness to life. Being a non-believer, on the other hand, would result in a meaningless life.

To illustrate the variety of definitions that are ascribed to either life or happiness, here are a few examples. A study in the Journal of Positive Psychology states that, “Happy people get a lot of joy from receiving benefit from others while people leading meaningful lives get a lot of joy from giving others” (Smith). In other words, being happy and enjoying a meaningful life are different concepts that have different requirements. At the same time, however, the researchers in the present study say that, “Happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desire are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided” (Smith). The philosopher, David Swenson, also believes that life is not life unless it is happy. He states, “Happiness is not happiness unless it can be justified. In order to be happiness it requires to be interpenetrated with the sense of meaning, reason, and worth” (Cahn, 19). Thus some believe that the
definition of happiness must be derived from a meaningful life and vice versa. I also believe that the true
definition of happiness and the meaning of life are inextricably linked, not only with one another but also
with a firm belief in God.

Faith in God of theism and an afterlife, necessarily establishes an understanding that justice will
eventually be served. Having faith in God builds the assertion that everything happening in this life,
whether it is good or bad, is happening for a reason even if we don’t know what the reason is. People who
believe in afterlife are confident that a day of judgment is to come, a day in which everyone will be given
what they deserve. Therefore, even if it seems as though fairness is not found now, that would only serve
to increase the reward for the oppressed and increase the punishment of the oppressor when they are
finally reckoned in the hereafter. Thus, this would make those who are believers in God happy, as they
know that regardless of any injustice they are facing in the present, true justice will soon be served and
the poor, sick, or oppressed will all be rewarded for their patience. In addition to the sense of justice that
is tied to this type of faith, the belief in an afterlife would show that every action an individual does has
permanent consequences. Thus, the deeds done in this life are motivated by a belief in an afterlife. This
would all bring meaning to one’s life, as they’d know that what they do here is important to what the
repercussions would be later.

A great support for this argument is presented in Leo Tolstoy’s famous Confession (Cahn, 7). In
that autobiographical work, Tolstoy ultimately concludes that only with faith can one find a meaning for
life. Tolstoy relates his experiences, detailing how he was very happy in his life and was in want of
nothing. However, once he started the questioning process, he felt a burden. He felt perplexed and
disturbed that, even with all the beauties that life has provided, he cannot enjoy the rest knowing that
something "evil" is around. That evil is the deception of the pleasures of life, pleasures that will come to
an end with the concept of death. The relation of the finite to the infinite is what allows faith to introduce
answers that, without it, questioning life can never lead to an end result. For Tolstoy, rational thinking has
not allowed for a definitive answer for the meaning of life. The idea of faith, an irrational way of thought,
with all its colors around the universe, is what gives the finite existence of man an infinite sense that is
not destroyed by suffering, privation, or death. Hence, happiness persists. Faith allows for the belief that
man is living for a purpose.

Moreover, having faith in God can create a special bond with Him that brings happiness to the
human soul. For an ardent believer, one goal in life is to strengthen that bond with God and thus one
would be eager to perform the religious and moral practices that would reinforce that connection. When
one believes in God, there is a drive to please Him that comes from a special love that can only be
attributed to God. Believers would earnestly pray, read holy books, or reach out to God in order to enjoy
that special bond that one only has with the Creator. It is from this relationship that happiness could be
derived. The person would act according to the moral code where he’d be honest, forgiving, humble, and
nice which would bring self-satisfaction and thus happiness on the one hand. On the other hand, he would
also want to be caring and helpful for others, which would make others happy and thus achieve again self-
satisfaction for drawing smiles on other people’s faces.

Two interesting works that support this second argument are presented by the medieval Islamic
philosopher Al-Ghazali and the contemporary philosopher Louis Pojman. It’s very hard to discuss this
argument without mentioning concepts presented by Al-Ghazali’s famous book, The Alchemy of
Happiness. Al-Ghazali argues that the alchemy of happiness is only known by turning away from the
world and turning to God. In order to understand the meaning of life and thus achieve happiness, one
should know oneself, know God, know the world as it is, and know the afterlife as it is. In a nutshell, Al-
Ghazali argues that the world is deceitful, and those who fall into the traps that the world has set for us are
wrong (70). This idea was proposed by the Islamic Prophet Muhammad who said, “The world is a curse,
and all which is in it is a curse, except the remembrance of God, and that which aids it” (Al-Ghazali, 74).
Pojman, on the other hand explains in his essay, “Religion Gives Meaning to Life,” another form of
support to show that theism is what gives meaning to life. He points out eight theses that show how life
gains meaning through a theistic perspective (Cahn, 27). First, believing in God means that there is a
satisfying explanation of the origin and sustenance of the universe. Second, one knows for sure that good
will eventually win out over evil since theism holds that the universe is suffused in goodness. Third, it
would assure that God loves and cares for humans. Fourth, as a theist, one can answer the question: why be moral? Fifth, justice will reign in the universe and everyone will get what he or she deserves. Sixth, all people, being created by God, would be of equal worth. Seventh, grace and forgiveness will eventually be the happy ending after all. Finally, one knows for sure that there is life after death; one knows that death is not the end and that they are destined for a higher existence.

Lastly, without God and faith, life is ultimately meaningless. If people do not believe in God and an afterlife, the value of their lives becomes negligible. Without faith, what is it then that they would be working for? What would be the significance of their actions in life? They would basically come and go and that is all. This life is the end for them. Happiness would not be achieved, as no matter how important or successful or satisfied they become, there will come a day when nothing will matter anymore and everything will be gone. Therefore, there would not be an ultimate definition for happiness as it would be proximate instead. The meaning of life would also be absent as everything will reach an end, and there would be no ultimate difference if a person died today or ten years from today.

William Craig’s The Absurdity of Life Without God presents a great work that supports this argument. In Craig’s argument, he explains that life without God is absurd. It would have no meaning without God or an afterlife. Craig argues that if life ends at the grave, it would make no difference whether a person was good or bad. Life without God would be a life without value or purpose. Man cannot live as if life has no meaning, value, and purpose. Therefore, it is safe to believe in God to bring the meaning, value and purpose to one’s life.

Moreover, comparing the benefits of happiness and meaningfulness of life that would be gained from believing in God to the benefits of non-belief, one would notice that the benefits of the former far outweigh those of the latter. Thus, it is safer to believe in God in order to enjoy the privileges that would be gained in the form of happiness and the enjoyment of later in the hereafter. It is only if God exists that life is meaningful. And only with the existence of God can a person enjoy life. If both choices: the presence or absence of God, are of equal probability to be true, then the rational decision is to believe in God since one has nothing to lose and infinity to gain. Thus, we should always gamble, like Pascal’s
wager suggests, on the probability that theism is true and live in a way that makes the virtues of theism control our lives as it is in our interest to live as though it were true.

Some non-believers who do not have the belief in life after death would argue that because there is no life after death, because there is only this one life, that this would give a meaning to life by itself. Knowing the fact that a person has only this life in their hands is what makes it precious and meaningful to hold on to. If, however, an infinite life after death exists, this would remove all the value and meaning that this present life would have as it would be diluted with the unlimited time frame of the hereafter. This counter argument is nicely summarized by Karl Popper, who said, “There are those who think that life is valueless because it comes to an end. They fail to see that the opposite argument might also be proposed: that if there were no end to life, life would have no value; that it is, in part, the ever-present danger of losing it which helps to bring home to us the value of life” (Klemke, 4). In other words, the worth, significance, and meaning of our lives all lie in the fact that death is coming and everything will come to an end. This brings a sense of value to every moment occurring now, a sense of value that would not be present if we believed that our lives would go on forever.

To counter those who argue in that vein, God, being an omnipotent, omnibenevolent, and omniscient creator for this world has a lot more to teach us in the afterlife that would make each new day a new learning experience. These non-believers think that with an everlasting afterlife, each day would be redundant and living would thus be more of a torture rather than joy and happiness. However, God is infinitely resourceful. Being omniscient, God has all of the unlimited knowledge that no other being will ever have. Being omnibenevolent, He will make sure that good people will get what they deserve. Finally, being omnipotent, God could bring with his power unlimited openings for knowledge that we will always benefit from as humans. In fact, a great verse from the Quran says, “And if all the trees on earth were pens and the sea were ink, with seven more seas added to it, the words of God would not be exhausted: for verily, God is almighty, wise” (Asad, 31:27). God’s knowledge after all is unlimited and He, being all knowing, will always offer us as humans all the unlimited learnings and knowledge. No proof of this is better than simply seeing the world we live in. Looking at how the world started billions of years ago,
with the unlimited knowledge of God, we keep discovering every day lots of its hidden “mysteries” and today. Billions of years later, nothing describes our lack of complete knowledge better than the words from the physicist, Stephen Hawking, who said, “Some people will be very disappointed if there is not an ultimate theory. I used to belong to that camp, but I have changed my mind. I’m now glad that our search for understanding will never come to an end, and that we will always have the challenge of new discovery.” He adds, “Without it [the challenge of new discovery], we would stagnate” (Lenox, 186). Therefore, for those who argue against the unlimited afterlife claiming that it becomes redundant, they should know that the unlimited knowledge provided by God will make nothing redundant, as every day will be a new experience.

Ultimately, faith and belief in God and the afterlife will only bring tranquility and peace to the soul and assure that people would achieve happiness after all and all the work done here is meaningful for the afterlife. With the belief in afterlife, a person would have the firm belief that justice will be served and everyone will get what he or she deserves and that would bring inner happiness. Moreover, it would make people realize that their afterlife is governed by their actions and thus every step they’ll be taking here would be meaningful, as it would determine their afterlives. On the other hand, with the belief in God a person would develop that beautiful bond between him and God and that would be based on love and pleasing for God. That would bring joy to the soul knowing that one is on good terms with his creator and knowing that he is very close to Him. Without the belief in God, after all, life would be ultimately meaningless and loses its value as everything would actually be coming to an end and thus nothing is really worth it.
Work Cited


