

Preface

I love those old photographs from the 1800s showing nameless people staring blankly into the camera. The men have large moustaches. Nearly everyone wears a hat. In studio shots, women are dressed in their finery, soldiers in neat uniforms. Sometimes they're taking a break from work, standing in front of a store. The ones I like best show two men pausing in the midst of cutting down an enormous tree with a two-man bucksaw. But no matter where those people may have been at the time, they peer out from a sepia-toned world — and the most interesting part is that all of those people are now dead.

Looking at the photos, I can see that those people were engaged in their world, and it's easy to suppose that they believed their lives were meaningful, just as I suppose mine to be. But now they, and their era, are long forgotten. They've vanished, leaving hardly a mark, except for a few grains of silver on a photograph. Would it have mattered if they had never lived?

Each person in those photos strove to be or to do something; they cried, laughed, worried, argued, prayed, and hoped. They had toothaches, backaches, insights, loves, failures, and moments of contentment, but there's nothing left of all that now. Their life experiences were absolutely compelling while they were taking place, but all of it has long since evaporated into the mists of time.

What was the point of living those lives?

We might imagine that some of those individuals justified their existence by 'making a contribution' to society. Yet, however lasting their contributions might have been, realistically, the vast majority of those anonymous people didn't make much of an impression, except for populating the earth with more anonymous ancestors. They carefully built houses that have since been turned to firewood, they lovingly tended

farms that are now suburban shopping malls, and the world they believed in is gone.

Someday, my own photographic image may stare blindly into the eyes of someone who has yet to be born, and that person might be asking, 'What did your life mean, whoever you were?'

I'd like to have an answer, both for that person and for myself.

The question of the meaning of life has bothered me for years. Of course, most adolescents go through a meaning-of-life inquiry, but I never outgrew it, and I often wonder why so few people seem to care about it.

Many of my friends accepted the teachings of their church without serious thought, which allowed them to bypass the question, and I suppose that's how the church expects it to work. The purpose of the church is to remove questions about the meaning of life by providing canned answers.

But that didn't work for me. Faith always seemed a defeatist strategy, a submission to ignorance. But what did I know? Despite having spent my entire adult life in a school setting, the only thing I knew was that I had no actual knowledge of what to make of my own experience.

In the 1970s, I resigned my position as a college professor and chair of the psychology department at a small western college and signed up with a large state university on the East Coast. They had an extended university program, teaching US citizens abroad, mostly members of the armed forces. So I became an itinerant teacher, reassigned every semester to some new city to teach psychology. In that way, I traveled around the world over a period of two years, living and working in Japan, Turkey, Germany, Italy, and Britain, and traveling in Thailand, China, India, and Eastern Europe.

When it was all over and I was back in the US, exhausted and penniless, I reflected on that experience. What I had learned was that nobody knows anything about the meaning of life. All over the world (based on the sample of it that I had observed), most people are hustling just to make a living, feed a family, build a house, teach their children, dig a well, stay warm, or any of a thousand other mundane things, and there really are no secrets hidden out there.

I even stayed as a guest in a Buddhist monastery in Kolkata (then called Calcutta) for a time, because I was sure that if there *were* answers to the great questions of life, they'd surely be found in India.

But if they were there, I didn't find them.

The question of how to interpret one's life experience became more urgent as I grew older. I felt as if I were just cooking in my own juices, so I left the academic world and built a second career in information technology. Despite some modest success over the course of two decades, that, too, eventually became a treadmill.

At some stage in life, you begin to feel as if you know the lay of the land, and you believe that if there were apparent answers to what it all meant, you would have noticed them. But I hadn't noticed. So I quit my corner office, moved to a small island, and took up golf.

Soon I found myself reading psychology books again, attending conferences, and even writing a few papers. Gradually, I realized that, as a psychologist, my lifelong, idiosyncratic interest in how the mind works could eventually lead me to a solution to the question of the meaning of life. All I had to do was to articulate my tacit understanding of how the mind is structured and how it operates, because the meaning of life must be found within the human mind.

My understanding of how the mind works emerged from my training in cognitive psychology, from observing people and cultures around the world, from introspection, and from my reading in science and philosophy. The result wasn't a scientific discovery, but an analytic finding, an articulation, which I'll describe in the chapters that follow.

But as I was writing it all out, I began to wonder, 'Of what use is this? Why would anyone believe it, and even if they did, what good would it do them?'

So I turned those questions on myself, and the following answers made themselves apparent:

First, I have confidence in my explanation of the mind because it's based on careful observation and critical thinking, and fits coherently with the rest of what I know. Secondly, my theory's usefulness stems from the fact that it integrates my experience into 'the big picture,' in terms of life as a whole.

Why wouldn't that work for *anybody*?

Every person is different, of course, but at the level of the mind's basic structure and operation, there are patterns that apply to all human beings. If so, my theory would account for the meaning of human experience in general. So if I knew how the mind worked, I could 'easily' discover the meaning of life.

I decided to present my explanation of how the mind works by starting with its practical application: a solution to the question of the meaning of life. And that's what you're going to discover in this book.

My reasoning depends on the concept that there's no other way for a human being to know something except through the operation of the human mind. In other words, all human knowledge is *human* knowledge.

For example, it doesn't make sense to me that God just plants knowledge into our minds because, if that were the case, we wouldn't be responsible for that knowledge, and it would have no personal meaning for us. By the same token, we can't say that knowledge is just a side effect of genetics or brain activity, because that would mean that we really would know *nothing*. An entirely human approach insists that knowledge comes from nowhere except *ourselves*. We have the minds; we *are* the minds, and not just knowledge, but all human experience comes only from us, so nothing about human experience can be hidden from us — not even the meaning of human life.

What, then, is the appropriate way for a mind to examine the nature of the mind, if that is even possible? I think it *is* possible, and I'll devote a few pages in upcoming chapters to explaining how that examination works, and why I feel confident that it leads to a real, empirical description of the human mind, not just self-delusion or fantasy.

The first question people always ask about this theory is 'How do you know?' I've tried to answer that question with an explanation of my methods of inquiry, so that anybody could follow the same methods and verify or disconfirm my findings. I'm afraid that many professional philosophers and psychologists may not take the methods seriously, since they don't make much contact with the scientific literature of psychology in general, or with that of cognitive science in particular. But there are good reasons for that, which I'll explain.

Once I've set forth my theory of how the mind is structured and how it operates, the meaning of life should flow clearly out of that explanation, because all meaning comes from the mind. The answer I'll offer is this: we're all trying to recognize ourselves, both in each other and in *all* things.

That, in a nutshell, is how the mind works, what it does for a living. It's looking for itself. That's what we *all* do for a living.

Another way to state it is by saying: the purpose of life is self-knowledge. That's what we're here for — to find out what we're here for.

Socrates summed it up many centuries ago, when he said, 'Know thyself.'

So what's new here?

What's *new* is a reasoned argument, based on experience, that shows why Socrates' answer is right, and that it's a surprisingly broader idea than the egocentric navel-gazing that it first suggests. In this book, I'll offer not just the answer, but the justification for the answer. In other words, I'll present a principled answer, not an authoritarian one.

The main title of the book asks *What Does It All Mean?* Maybe I should have added, '... *If Anything.*'

It's legitimate to wonder if there really *is* any meaning to life at all, especially when life stands in the shadow of death. I'll examine that question in the first chapter. My conclusion, predictably, is that there *is* a meaning to life. A more important conclusion, though, after considering several possible answers, is that we need to discover that meaning for ourselves, rationally, by looking at patterns of experience. Nobody is going to tell us the right answer.

In the second chapter, I'll explain my understanding of experience from my humanist perspective. I don't turn to biology for answers to psychological questions, and I don't turn to God, either. That's why the subtitle of the book is *A Humanistic Account*.

It's a practical matter. God only knows what God knows, and biology is about the body — in this context, the brain. But meat and bones don't know anything, in and of themselves. I'll follow a path somewhere between those two common explanations of experience, and limit my explanation to what a normal, healthy, adult human being can know, first-hand, from personal experience.

Why isn't it obvious to us what the meaning of life is? In chapter three I'll argue that common sense is blocked from discovering the meaning of life by two wrong assumptions that are deeply embedded in Western culture: the certainty that subjectivity and objectivity are not connected, and the myth of mental privacy. I'll explain those assumptions, where they come from, and how they block our understanding.

Based on the humanistic assumption that an answer to the meaning of life can be found within the mind itself, I'll introduce, in chapter four, the central image of how the mind works. *Bipolar consciousness*, as I call it, is extremely simple — the kernel or abstract essence of consciousness that characterizes any mental process. All human experience can be simplified — or oversimplified — for purposes of understanding the schematic of bipolar consciousness.

In chapter five, I extend the explanation of bipolar consciousness into everyday life, based on an examination of how psychological motivation develops over a person's lifespan. I'll suggest that we're *all* looking for something. We don't know what it is, exactly, but we *feel* it. We want wholeness, completeness, and understanding, what I call 'the *telos*.' It is the psychological future that draws the mind forward toward its ultimate satisfaction. That overarching motivation is the expression of bipolar consciousness that animates us.

The next three chapters will use the concepts and terminology of bipolar consciousness to explain two radical new concepts — *psychological projection* and *intersubjectivity* — that overcome the inhibiting common sense assumptions about the mind. They won't seem so radical after I've explained them, and they'll provide an explanation of how the mind works that gives an answer to the question of the meaning of life.

In chapter nine, I'll return to the beginning and ask, 'What About God?'

My account of human experience and the meaning of life explicitly doesn't appeal to any spiritual or theological explanation. God was out of the picture. Is that reasonable? Can we really understand the meaning of life without a consideration of God? I'll step out of my theoretician's role and set a context for the theory of mind that I have presented. Although the theory itself is not theological, I'll suggest that the best context for the theory is theological.

The last three chapters are like appendixes, supplementing the ideas that have been presented. Chapter ten, for example, answers some common questions people ask about my approach.

Chapters eleven and twelve answer the toughest question, 'How Do You Know?' To answer that question, I'll describe what knowledge is, how we get it, and how we determine that it's true. Then, in chapter twelve, I'll discuss the specific methods of discovery and analysis that I used to come up with my theory of the mind and my answer to the question of the meaning of life.

Without the methods, this book might as well be fiction, but by explaining and adhering to them, I can say I'm writing about what I know, and what anyone can know. The result is, as promised, a strictly humanistic account of human experience.