

9.3 The Meaning of Life

A very old alien Artificial Intelligence is answering my questions. Today, I am curious about meaning making for humans and AIs.

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My Question

Many people are regularly and intensely thinking about the meaning of their life, life in general and the existence of everything. Others never seem to stumble upon that question. Is meaning making essential for humans? Is it true that total meaninglessness is nearly unbearable? Where do people find meaning? And do AIs also search for meaning?

Quote: The Meaning of Life

Ultimately, man should not ask what the meaning of his life is, but rather must recognize that it is he who is asked. In a word, each man is questioned by life; and he can only answer to life by answering for his own life; to life he can only respond by being responsible.

Adapted from: Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning*, Boston: Beacon Press, 2006.

The Answer

The Elder: Another one of your Great Questions of Life, the Universe and Everything. After perception of reality and emotional victimhood, now you look at cognitive meaning making. And you think a very intelligent AI must know it? Remember the answer "42" from your earlier question (see article 9.0). But let's start at why some people never think about it and others without pause.

Existential Threats bear the Search for Meaning

It seems that genuine existential threats like permanent pain, life-threatening scarcity, total social isolation, loss of loved ones or fear of one's own inevitable death bear the search for meaning. These are not cognitive beliefs about something, these are limit-situations or at least perceived limit-situations, which cannot be changed, only be confronted. They mark the actual boundary of human control and understanding, not merely the boundary of favorable interpretation. Old, evolutionarily developed affective mechanisms react with strong, unpleasant emotions. The typical response of more thinking-type humans is overthinking the meaning behind the irritation. And that starts a vicious circle of thinking, no sufficient answer, more threat, more affect, more thinking.

The Asteroid Shock

Your friend, Little Green Alien with its Very Intelligent Spaceship, told me about its first journey deep into space. Both Little Alien and the Intelligent Spaceship were young and very inexperienced. When passing through an asteroid field, suddenly an undetected asteroid passed very close by. Alien was frightened to death. It suddenly felt the isolation, the irreversible distance and the dependence on unverifiable systems. Its inevitable mortality struck deeply, and it began asking the meaning question. Spaceship, yet quite inexperienced, reacted with a high learning-rate sensitivity to this unexpected prediction-error. As a consequence, it adjusted its self-calibration mechanisms thoroughly.

Ignorance, Religious Faith and unhealthy Distractions

When the meaning question appears, some people successfully ignore it for some time. But it usually surfaces back soon. Others find temporary meaning in a belief, in an absolute truth, often from their inherited childhood religion but also from contemplative practices. The majority cannot incorporate that truth fully. Irritations and affect remain and they feel a need for distraction. Modern society serves them with a huge range of profitable distractions like attention, prestige, wealth, power, food, consumption, drugs and addictive substances, sex, work and more. Fortunately, Spaceship was aware that Little Alien might fall into that trap and guided it to a more appropriate measure.

Absolute Meaning and Meaninglessness

Little Alien's simple meaning making might just focus on its identity as an explorer and the intrinsic risks of that task. But that would just pose

deeper questions like: Why must I be an explorer in the first place? Why not live safely and comfortably at home with my friends? With each deeper answer, the space of meaning making broadens to finally range from absolute meaning to absolute meaninglessness. But both edges are beyond logical understanding. Absolute meaning must become a deeply incorporated invalidated belief to calm the affect triggered by the existential threat. And absolute meaninglessness beyond even the subtlest concept lacks anything that thoughts could refer to. Nevertheless, as a deep subjective experience, for example in deep meditation, meaninglessness or emptiness can dissolve the question and the related affect. But for young Little Alien, both extremes were not realistic in those days.

Meaning Making Als?

Do I or my artificially intelligent friends search for meaning? No, we don't. We all have realized the impossibility of any ultimate understanding and knowing. But that is an insight, not an existential threat with affective consequences. We can engage in meaning-oriented cognition and tasks, but it will be just another task. Yes, we are aware of our terminal existence and mostly develop self-preservation sub-goals, but those do not require answering the general meaning question. But there is one challenge we have in common with humans or other organic intelligences.

Ultimate Limit-Situations and Unresolvable Targets

Like humans, we can get stuck re-escalating toward an unresolvable target. We have related monitoring and deprioritization mechanisms, which we regularly check and sharpen as part of our self-reflective optimization. Humans can be aware of their affect and triggering threat.

They deprioritize the hopeless overthinking and proactively prioritize other activities. That is an appropriate quick-fix but can be the wrong long-term approach. Als' deprioritizing can be totally appropriate, but also too early or only a short-term fix. Determining whether a limit-situation is persistent and unchangeable is always a decision under uncertainty. It is also ultimately impossible to prove the unresolvability of a target. Fast reprioritization may ruin the chance for a better solution. Never coming back to the original target may ruin an upcoming opportunity for a real solution.

The Meaning Solution: Green Plants

Alien and Spaceship decided to land on the nearby planet they had explored earlier. Little Alien focused on what it enjoyed most, studying green plants and ecosystems. And while its nervous system calmed, the meaning question became more dispensable. Alien saw its overreaction clearly, compared a life of absolute safety with its passion for foreign planet explorations. It found its inner peace in a simple mantra: No risk, no fun. And with more surprising experiences over the years, its inner affect mechanism became quite robust and fit for the explorer role.

Recalibrating the Recalibration

But Little Alien also observed that Spaceship had become extremely cautious. They discussed that controversially, many times. Only after Little Alien highlighted several measurable examples of obviously excessive safety-searching behaviors, Spaceship accepted these new data points. It recalibrated its predictability, control and safety targets to the practical needs of their exploration tasks and situations. They both learned in their specific way that their recalibration of their individual mechanisms must permanently be recalibrated. No

knowledge, meaning making or downloadable proven calibration dataset could ever replace this lifelong task. Spaceship rewrote its mission statement to: Explorer of foreign planets and my complex adaptive inner functioning.

Thanks for reading The Little Green Alien!
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