

What is the Meaning of Life?

Lessons from the Limits of Human Existence

Attila Tanyi

Fellow, Zukunftskolleg

Wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiter, FB Philosophie

University of Konstanz

# What is the meaning of life about?

## The meaning of “meaning”

What it  
is not  
about

Morality

Happiness

Worthwhile life

What it  
is about

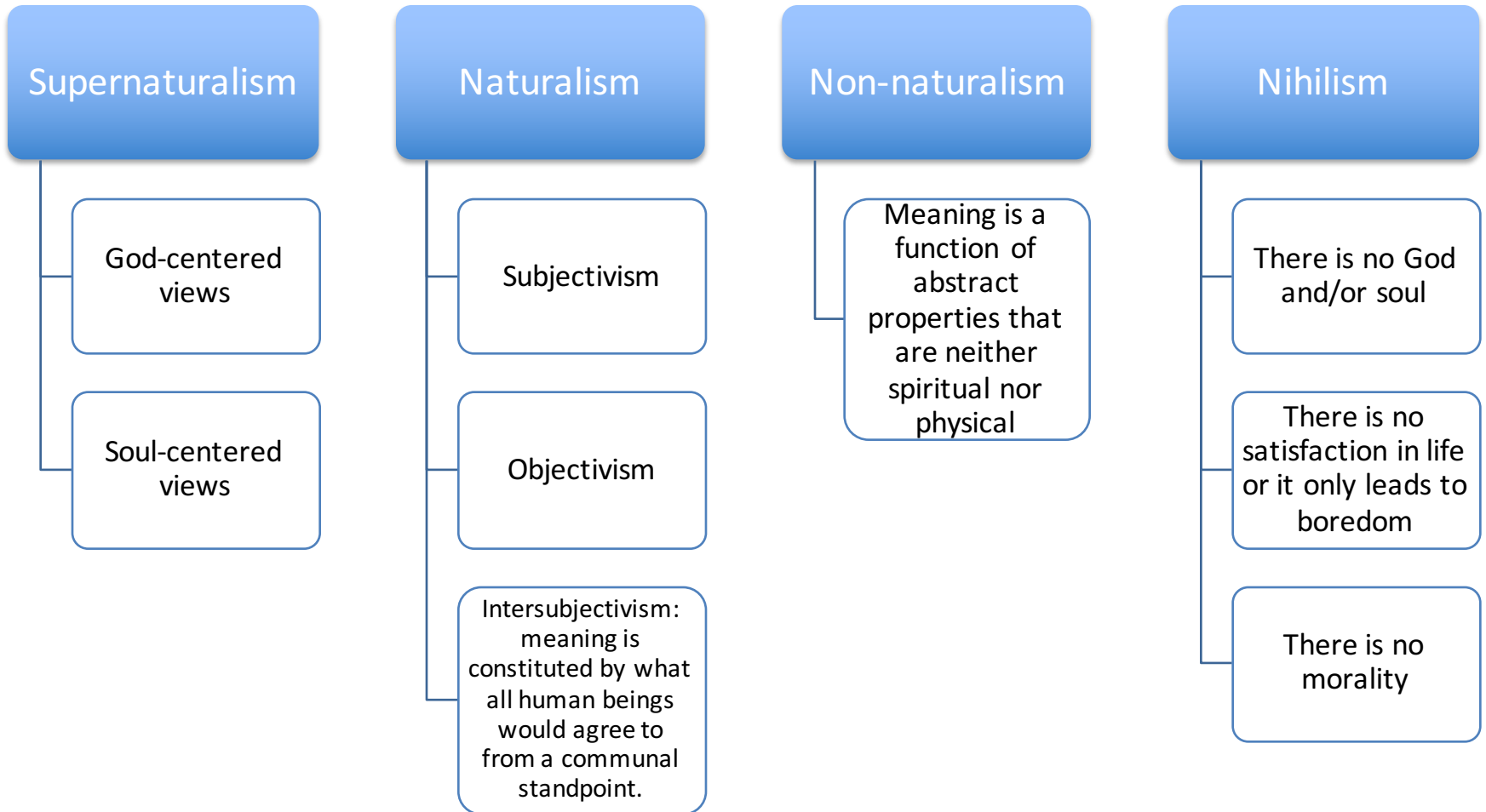
A positive final  
value that an  
individual's life  
can exhibit

It comes in  
degrees

Otherwise,  
there is no  
consensus

# Theories of the meaning of life

## The conceptual landscape



# Supernaturalism

## God-centered views

Fulfilling God's purpose in life

Participating in infinity

Meaning depends on  
perfection

## Soul-centered views

Making a permanent  
difference to the world

Perfect justice

Honoring infinite value

Honoring what is divine within  
oneself

# Naturalism

## Subjectivism

Getting what one wants most; what one believes to be most important; achieving one's highly-ranked ends; what one loves or cares about.

Authenticity in life.

Being absorbed in one's endeavors.

## Objectivism

Morality, creativity, overcoming challenges, non hedonic goods, transcending the limits of the self etc.

Hybrid view: subjectivism and objectivism.

Propositional attitudes enhance the meaning of life but are not necessary for it.

Pluralism: there is no single objective constituent of meaning in life.

Meaning of life as an 'organic whole'.

# Lessons from the Limits of Human Existence

Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

The significance of the  
child

The significance of  
struggle

The role of  
God

The role of morality

"Carrying the fire"

# The Role of God

The boy is God's  
word

His breath is  
God's breath

God appointed  
the man to be the  
boy's guardian

The child is God

# Quotes

“When it was light enough to use the binoculars he glassed the valley below. Everything was paling away into the murk...Then he just sat there holding the binoculars and watching the ashen daylight congeal over the land. He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke.”

“He descended into a gryke in the stone and there he crouched coughing and he coughed for a long time. Then he just knelt in the ashes. He raised his face to the paling day. Are you there? He whispered. Will I see you at the last? Have you a neck by which to throttle you? Oh God, he whispered. Oh God.”



## A Parallel in Hungarian 19<sup>th</sup> Century Literature

### Imre Madach's *The Tragedy of Man*

Adam

"My Lord, such frightful scenes have tortured me; and I know not what is reality. Oh! Tell me, tell me what is my destiny! [...] Enlighten me, and gratefully my fate, whate'er it be, I will endure, if only I may progress, for this uncertainty is hell."

The Lord

"Ask not again, the secret, veiled beneficently from thy longing eyes, by the wise hand of God. But could'st thou know that momentarily on earth, thy soul did rest while waits eternity above, no virtue 'twere to suffer longer here. If thou did'st know thy soul would be absorbed in dust, for grand ideas, what incentive to sacrifice the moment's fleeting bliss? While now, the future gleameth through a mist, so heavy laden with the cares and woes of this transitory life, the sense of an infinitude doth wake; if this engender pride, mortality restricts; both greatness then and virtue, are assured."

(Continued...)

Adam  
“but Lord, who  
will uphold if  
on the right  
path I  
remain?”

The Lord  
“Thine arm is  
strong, thy soul  
exalted; infinite  
the scope which  
e’er to action  
doth invite; and  
if thou heedest  
well, a voice will  
call to thee  
unceasingly, to  
lure thee back  
and raise thee  
up; but follow  
e’er the call.”

Chorus of Angels  
“What a mighty  
thought! We’re free,  
‘twixt good and ill to  
choose, while over us,  
God’s mercy waiteth  
still. Act boldly, fearing  
not the herd’s  
ingratitude; for this is  
not thine aim but  
action, great and  
good...But on the lofty  
way let thee not blind  
the sight, the thought,  
that thou could’st add  
one atom to God’s  
might, he only speaks  
to thee, as means  
toward thy fate  
fulfilling. Honor comes  
from him, for him doth  
wait.”

The Lord  
“I’ve told thee,  
man, strive  
and trust!”

# The significance of the child

Only the boy stands  
between the man and  
death

The wife's explanation  
why the man keeps on  
living

The man on suicide and  
the boy

"What would you do if I died?  
If you died I would want to die  
too.  
So you could be with me? Yes.  
So I could be with you.  
Okay."

## A quote: the man and his wife's conversation in the past.

"We are survivors he told her across the flame of the lamp.

Survivors? she said.

Yes.

What in God's name are you talking about? We're not survivors. We're the walking dead in a horror film.

I'm begging you.

I dont care. I dont care if you cry. It doesnt mean anything to me.

Please.

Stop it.

I am begging you. I'll do anything.

Such as what? I should have done it a long time ago. When there were three bullets in the gun instead of two. I was stupid. We've been over all this. I didnt bring myself to this. I was brought. And now I'm done. I thought about not even telling you. That would probably have been best. You have two bullets and then what? You cant protect us. You say you would die for us but what good is that? I'd take him with me if it werent for you. You know I would. It's the right thing to do."

## (Continued...)

"You are talking crazy.

No, I'm speaking the truth. Sooner or later they'll catch us and they will kill us. They will rape me. They'll rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I can't. I can't. She sat there smoking a slender length of dried grapevine as if it were some rare cheroot. Holding it with a certain elegance, her other hand across her knees where she'd drawn them up. She watched him across the small flame. We used to talk about death, she said. We don't any more. Why is that?

I don't know.

It's because it's here. There's nothing left to talk about.

I wouldn't leave you.

I don't care. It's meaningless. You can think of me as a faithless slut if you like. I've taken a new lover. He can give me what you cannot.

Death is not a lover.

Oh yes he is."

(continued...)

“Please dont do this.

I’m sorry.

I cant do it alone.

Then dont. I cant help you. They say that women dream of danger to those in their care and men of danger to themselves. But I dont dream at all. You say you cant? Then dont do it. That’s all. Because I am done with my own whorish heart and I have been for a long time. You talk about taking a stand but there is no stand to take. My heart was ripped out of me the night he was born so dont ask for sorrow now. There is none. Maybe you’ll be good at this. I doubt it, but who knows. The one thing I can tell you is that you wont survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far. A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. Breath it into being and coax it along with words of love. Offer it each phantom crumb and shield it from harm with your body. As for me my only hope is eternal nothingness and I hope it with all my heart.”

# Another parallel with *The Tragedy of Man*

Adam

“Hold! What thought like light’ning, rushes through my brain distraught? E’en thee, O God, can I defy, although a hundred times fate says, “thus long”, I know I need not live, against my will; for down below the abyss; above, the cliff doth frown. One spring – the last scene – and the play doth end. (*Adam rushes up off the cliff. Eve appears at the door.*)

Eve (a bit later)

“Thou’lt smile when I avow my secret; this – come nearer Adam – now, into thine ear I’ll whisper but one word; I feel I am a mother.”

Adam

(*Falling on his knees*)

“Oh! my Lord, thou’st vanquished me. Here in the dust I lie; without thee, ‘gainst thee, vainly strive must I, raise me, or strike to earth! I bare my breast to thee.”

# The significance of struggle

“All things of grace and beauty such that one holds them to one’s heart have a common provenance in pain. Their birth in grief and ashes. So, he whispered to the sleeping boy. I have you.”

“Okay. This is what the good guys do. They keep trying. They don’t give up.”

“What’s the bravest thing you ever did?  
He spat into the road a bloody phlegm.  
Getting up this morning, he said.  
Really?  
No. Don’t listen to me. Come on, let’s go.”



## Again, parallels (and lessons) from *The Tragedy of Man*

Adam “We’ve left the stars behind us, there in space, I see no goal; no obstacles I trace. Ah! Lucifer, I’m cold. What is all life without the bliss of loving and of strife?”

Lucifer “And thou dost still believe. That thou at last, shalt victory achieve? And reach the goal? This soul so credulous to man alone is homogeneous.”

Adam “No such deceptive dream allureth me; I know a hundred times I’ll baffled be, I do not care. What, after all’s the end? The end – when glory’s o’er – I apprehend, the end is death, and life is constant strife; the aim of man, to struggle throughout life.”

Adam (much later) “Let’s flee, Oh! Lucifer! My future sphere let me no longer view, my dreadful fate, the useless strife, now, I would meditate on this, If I can e’er defy God more?”

# The role of morality

The man and the boy are the good guys; those who eat humans and torture them are the bad guys.

The child receives what we might call a moral education (the man reads him stories about courage and justice).

There scenes when the boy is expressing a strong sense of compassion.

The woman in the long dialogue says that the “man talks about taking a stand, but there is no stand to take.”

The world in the book is referred to as a Godless world, as a world without godspoken men.

# A quote

“They lay listening. Can you do it? When the time comes? When the time comes there will be no time. Now is the time. Curse God and die. What if it doesnt fire? Could you crush that beloved skull with a rock? Is there such a being within you of which you know nothing? Can there be? Hold him in your arms. Just so. The soul is quick. Pull him toward you. Kiss him. Quickly.”

# “Carrying the fire”

“I want to be with you.

You cant.

Please.

You cant. You have to carry the fire.

I dont know how to.

Yes you do.

Is it real? The fire?

Yes it is.

Where is it? I dont know where it is.

Yes you do. It’s inside you. It was always there. I can see it.

Just take me with you. Please.

I cant.

Please, Papa.

I cant. I cant hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I cant.”

# What is the 'fire'?

## Humanity?

- Hard to see how.
- The bad guys also carry *this* fire.

## Morality?

- Previous points.
- “we are the good guys *and* we are carrying the fire”

## Soul?

- Never mentioned.
- Why not God (which is mentioned)?

## God?

- The boy is God's breath.
- *The Tragedy of Man*: we all carry the sparkle of God in us.