




BOOK REVIEW

Clifford Williams, *Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach*

(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020). Pp. vi + 189. £22.99 (Pbk). ISBN: 978-1-108-43298-6

John Cottingham 

Department of Philosophy, University of Reading, Reading, UK
Email: jgcottingham@mac.com

(Received 1 August 2024; accepted 2 August 2024)

The ‘existential’ approach flagged up in the book’s subtitle signals that the author proposes to address the problem of life’s meaning not so much via abstract analysis or conceptual mapping, but focusing instead on the ‘lived realities’ of the human condition as we confront the inevitable structural challenges of life such as boredom, emotional trauma, and the fear of death. From the outset, then, the reader is invited to participate in an emotionally engaged style of philosophizing, which focuses on the ‘facts the heart can feel’, in Camus’s phrase (4) – though as the author points out, this does not deny a key role for the intellect in pinpointing and diagnosing the obstacles and threats to meaning, and thereby facilitating the search for remedies.

A paradigm case of the threat to meaning comes from boredom – not mere banal everyday boredom, but ‘existential boredom’ – that terrifying and pervasive sense that Tolstoy described when he found, at the age of fifty, that although he continued to breathe and eat and sleep, he felt that there was ‘no life’ in him because he had no desires whose satisfaction he would have found reasonable (31). Such bleak indifference can lead to agony, despair, frustration, rebellion, or even suicidal feelings. Yet there is an alternative, one whose importance is eloquently highlighted throughout Williams’s argument: such distressing feelings can, paradoxically, be interpreted in a positive light, as ‘calls from eternity’. Drawing heavily on Kierkegaard, the thought here is that rather than seeking to evade or bemoan such feelings, we might construe them as a divine call to be transformed (39). Instead of futile attempts to escape boredom, the alternative is that we become emotionally open to the possibility of a radical change of outlook, so that activities that might previously have seemed insignificant are now seen to be replete with meaning and value (41).

A substantial chapter of the book is devoted to describing the kinds of activity that are indeed vehicles for meaning, picking out in particular the achievement of worthwhile goals, creativity, the cultivating of virtues and enriching emotions (such as reverence and gratitude), and the giving and receiving of love. Much of the material here overlaps with what one finds in secular philosophical discussions of the ingredients of a meaningful life, and this is consistent with Williams’s admirably open-minded insistence that the topic of the meaning of life is one where ‘theists and nontheists can learn from each other’ (2). Yet

this in turn prompts the reader to ask what is the precise role, with respect to life's meaning, of the theistic framework to which Williams explicitly declares his allegiance from the outset.

The answer Williams offers – and it is the most distinctive feature of the book – is that belief in a personal God is not *necessary* in order to have a meaningful life, but that such a belief *enhances* the meaningfulness of one's life. Many may find this 'enhancement thesis' controversial. For given the intrinsic value of all the life-enriching activities and virtues that Williams highlights, do we not already, as it were, have an adequate inventory of the ingredients for a meaningful life? How does adding God into the picture actually supply any further elements of meaning? Williams replies by focusing on additional sources of value and meaning that will be available to the believer in God, but not to the unbeliever, for example valuing life more, in so far as it is understood to be the gift of a loving creator (108). Yet the unbeliever might surely reply that if our existence is merely the by-product of a random chain of contingencies in an impersonal universe, this only makes our fleeting and precarious lives all the more precious and meaningful.

A further kind of enhancement of meaning that obtains in the theistic picture, according to Williams, is that believing in life after death enhances the meaningfulness of one's pre-death life, for example by removing the existential dread of death with extinction, and by offering the hope of additional 'intrinsic goods that will be experienced after death' (112). As presented, it is hard to fault Williams's reasoning here, but I must confess to feeling a certain unease about the strategy of invoking the afterlife as an enhancer of meaning. The uneasiness stems in part from a sense that the strategy seems to risk distorting the central moral message of the Judaeo-Christian scriptures, whose overriding concern is with the fullness of a meaningful life here and now, for example in following the path of righteousness, love, and compassion. If it is these moral qualities that confer meaning and value on a human life, it seems that this should be independent of any consideration of future beatitude. In short, the promise of future rewards seems best construed not as enhancing or 'topping up' the meaning of a human life, but rather as that which honours and recognizes the meaning that is *already there*, in the moral quality of the kind of life that was lived here on earth.

That Williams might perhaps not be entirely unsympathetic to this way of looking at things is suggested by an interesting closing chapter, entitled 'How We Should Live So as to Die Well'. Taking Tolstoy's famous story of the horrible and anguished death of Ivan Ilych, Williams considers an alternative scenario in which Ivan's death is postponed, and he thus has the opportunity for radical moral transformation, repenting his previously self-centred existence. Living on till old age, he is now able to be at peace about his impending death, comforted by the thought that he has lived well, the way human beings are 'meant to live' (172). The example does not in itself undermine Williams's 'enhancement' thesis, but nevertheless the reformed Ivan's sense of peace as he comes to the end of his life strongly suggests that the serenity of his deathbed reflections does not need bolstering by thoughts about possible future post-mortem enhancements of meaning; rather, it is the moral quality of the human life he has lived that is the fundamental determiner of its value and meaning, and of the protagonist's sense of completion, the sense that he has, at least in some significant measure, led the life he was meant to live.

Few readers will come to the end of this engaging book without acknowledging the eloquent case it makes to the effect that living a meaningful life is something we should all care about deeply. Among the book's many other virtues is the sensitivity with which the author considers the manifold threats to meaning in human life, and the 'dismay, consternation and dejection' (175) that can arise when the delight in living meaningfully slips away.

Rich in reference, psychologically nuanced, and supported with a strong array of literary and real life examples, this study offers much to think about for all those interested in the relation between religious belief and the perennial problem of life's meaning.

Cite this article: Cottingham J (2024) Religion and the Meaning of Life: An Existential Approach. *Religious Studies*, 1-3. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0034412524000465>