

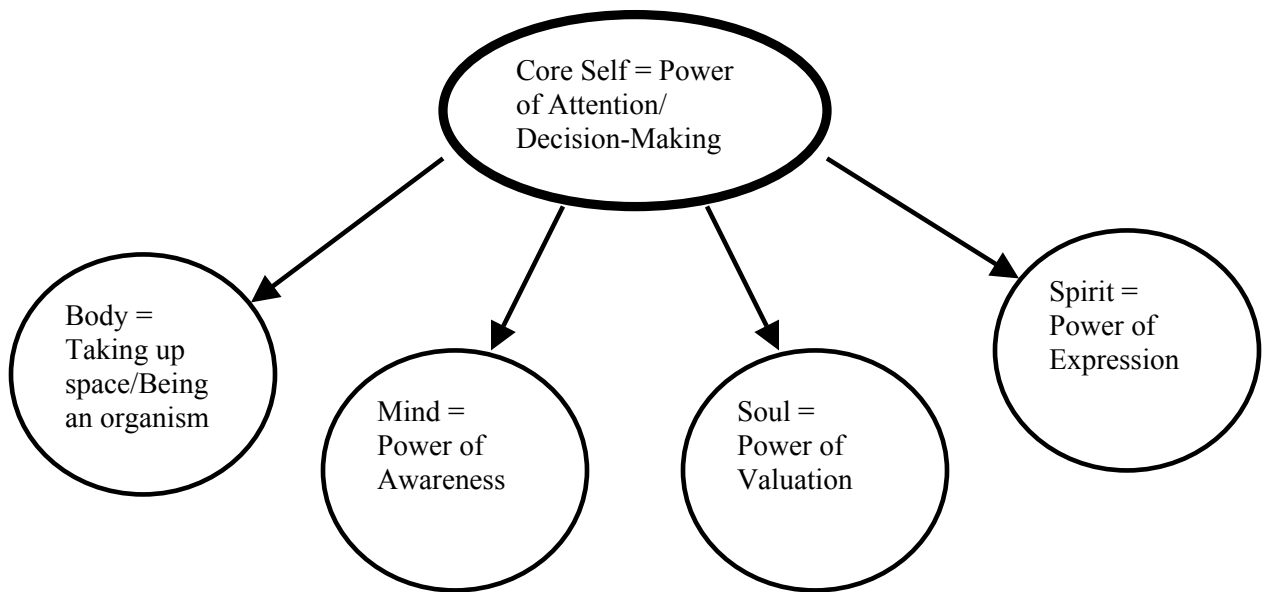
Chapter Seven

The Meaning of Life is Self-Expression

The meaning of life is a fundamental concept that has been discussed for many centuries. A large number of proposals have been made on this subject, including the pursuit of pleasure (hedonism), serving God, pursuit of self-interest, contemplation of beautiful objects, serving others, etc. While all of these different activities have their place, I believe that the picture of the person presented in Chapter Four suggests an answer to this question.

According to the picture of the person presented in Chapter Four, a person is made up of four components: body, mind, soul, and spirit. A core self, which is the power of attention and decision-making, decides on an ongoing basis which component to focus on at any given moment, and which element within these components. For example, suppose I decide to attend to my mind or set of mental representations. This does not tell me which element of my mind to attend to. Perhaps I am reminiscing about the 1968 presidential campaign, or thinking about finding something to eat. The core self makes these decisions. Figure 7-1 reproduces the diagram in Chapter Four.

Figure 7-1. A diagram of the relationships among body, mind, soul, spirit, and self



What is “the meaning of life”? This phrase is meant to pick out whatever it is that ultimately gives life its value. Someone whose life is meaningless has no purpose in life; no reason for being. Existentialism is the view that life is inherently absurd. If existentialism is true, it is difficult to see how our lives can be meaningful.

What is self-expression? The concept of self-expression came into vogue in the 1960s, when a social revolution occurred in the way people view themselves and in the way they relate to each other. This social revolution was in many ways a reaction to the repressive atmosphere of the 1950s, when there was a strong emphasis on the values of conformity and authority. In the 1960s, people began to challenge authority, and came to realize that they could make their own decisions about how to live their lives.

As part of the movement towards the rejection of authority, many people turned inward for guidance. Self-expression became identified in some cases with wearing colorful costumes, or even with saying forbidden words. The advent of the twist, Chubby Checker, Elvis Presley, and then the Beatles heralded a new movement in music called rock ‘n roll. An entire political movement was born to challenge the existing political structures. Those of us who came of age during that time really believed that we could change the world, and many of us have never given up on that ideal.

According to the diagram in Figure 7-1, at the center of every person is a core self that is the power of attention and decision-making. As persons grow and mature, they develop rules and principles that enable them to make decisions about what to do in different situations. In some cases, these rules and principles are explicit, while in other cases they remain at the subconscious level. In some cases, these rules can be inconsistent, and this leads to internal conflicts. For example, there may be a conflict between how someone would like to express their feelings for another person, and social norms of acceptable behavior. Learning how to handle these types of conflicts is part of personal growth, although this can be painful at times.

The decision-making rules and principles that people develop as they grow and mature were discussed in Chapter One. What I said there is that these rules and principles form a “theory of life” for each person, and that the justifying principles of these rules and principles represent a person’s philosophy of life. This philosophy of life might be explicit or implicit. Someone might discover, for example, that without realizing it they always decide to pursue the most pleasurable option when given a choice. Such a person is discovering that he or she is operating on the principle of hedonism.

As part of the development of our theory of life, we have to make choices about our feelings, desires, and emotions. When selecting a subject to study or major in in school, we have to decide whether to pursue what is interesting to us, or instead to study what our parents or some other authority figures tells us to study. When choosing who to go out with, we have to decide whether to go out with someone we like, or to do what peer pressure dictates. When selecting a career, we again may have a choice to make between our own interests and our need to make a living. This is often a balancing act that has no easy solution. This is not an ideal world, and many people are forced to work in jobs they don’t like so they can earn a living.

In On Liberty, John Stuart Mill talks about the ideal of individuality, and the importance of making one’s own decisions about fundamental issues in life. He says, “A person whose desires and impulses are his own—are the expression of his own nature, as it has been developed and modified by his own culture—is said to have a character.” (Mill, On Liberty, page 189). The concept of self-expression that I am developing here is quite close to the concept of individuality that Mill describes in Chapter Three of On Liberty. In this chapter, Mill is contrasting someone who makes up his or her own mind about how to lead their life with someone who simply conforms to what society dictates.

How do we choose our desires, as Mill would have us believe? Aren’t desires simply there, without being chosen? In today’s world of advertising, in which ads are prevalent in every medium, it is sometimes difficult to know when a desire is our own and when it is simply the result of constant advertising. Of course, some desires are natural, like the

desire for sex and the desire for food. But desires for specific products like Pepsi or a new Toyota Solara are conditioned by ads we see for these products. Obviously, these ads are intended to influence our desires, and often they have the intended effect.

We are not born with a blank slate, and people are born with different interests and tendencies. As part of our development, we may choose to reject certain desires and impulses as not being representative of who we really are. Or, we may acknowledge certain desires, but choose not to act on them due to the consequences. Making these choices is part of developing a theory of life. If this theory of life is based on a coherent philosophy of life, the chances of internal conflict are reduced.

A Definition of Self-Expression

An act of self-expression is a conscious act that is an external representation of a thought, feeling, or emotion that is an element of a person. This is truly an exercise in self-discovery, since it is often not at all obvious what our desires really are. Someone who really wants to discover what they want to do in terms of a career, for example, may need to try a number of different things before discovering what makes them happy. We often have a very difficult time figuring out our feelings for other people. These mental and emotional phenomena are often difficult to comprehend, but it is clear that there are often powerful forces within us. John Stuart Mill refers to this as the “raw material of human nature.”

What are the elements of a person? The idea of a theory of life developed in Chapter One can be expanded to include each of the four elements of a person: body, mind, soul, and spirit. When we make judgments about good and bad, right and wrong, we are making use of principles of judgment that we have come to accept, even if we cannot articulate them. These principles are part of a person’s theory of life that is connected with their soul. Likewise, when we express our feelings and emotions, we are also making use of principles of expression that we accept. For example, one principle of expression often taught in society is “Men should not be too open in expressing their affection for each other.” In terms of our mind, we use principles to determine what we will think about,

read, look at, or study. Many of these principles are unconscious, but they are there just the same. The principles that govern our body determines how much we exercise, how we take care of our body, how much sleep we get, etc.

It is our theory of life with respect to our body, mind, soul, and spirit that determines what the elements of our person are. In my own case, I discovered early on in college that I have a love for philosophy, and I have spent most of my life since then pursuing philosophy. Likewise, I have found myself attracted to certain types of women, and have pursued these types, sometimes without a great deal of success. I also prefer dressing casually, and have made a great deal of effort to arrange my life in such a way that I can wear casual clothes to work. All these are examples of conscious decisions I have made, using principles that are part of my theory of life. As a result, my desires to do philosophy, pursue certain types of females, and dress casually have become elements of my person. When I engage in these activities, I am expressing myself.

Consider the example of someone who follows the rule “I wear what others wear.” Even if they freely choose this rule, they are not expressing themselves because their act of conformity is not a representation of an element of their person. Instead, they have chosen to let someone else determine what they wear. Someone who pursues a career to please their parents or spouse, or solely for the purpose of making money, is not expressing themselves in their career choice. Their career choice does not represent an expression of an element of their person, but rather the choice of another person. Likewise, someone who relies on their peer group to determine their taste in music or fashion is not engaging in self-expression, but rather in conformity.

The concept of “being yourself” is very close to the concept of self-expression. The idea of “being yourself” could also be described as acting in a way that represents an element of the person. It might seem as if we could not help but be ourselves; after all, we can’t be somebody else! However, the idea of being yourself involves the idea of expressing feelings, desires, and emotions that are truly your own. This is to be contrasted with the idea of trying to behave in some expected way, or doing what you think someone else

expects or wants to do. It is in reality very hard to be yourself in today's society, because there are so many situations in which we are expected to act a certain way or to do certain things.

One of my favorite television shows is called "Squawk Box," which airs on weekday mornings on the business cable channel CNBC. In a recent episode of Squawk Box, Joe Kernen, who is a stock analyst, said to another commentator, Liz Claman, "Our ratings would go through the roof if you would just be yourself more often." While it is most difficult for television commentators to be themselves on the air, since much of what they say is scripted, the show "Squawk Box" is so popular partly because it is nonscripted, and the commentators are not afraid to be themselves. Tim Russert also credits the "Be Yourself" philosophy as the key to his ability to feel at ease while moderating "Meet the Press."

I believe that the reason the concept of self-expression as the meaning of life, or the "Be Yourself" philosophy, has not yet to my knowledge been discussed within philosophical circles is that it is an outgrowth of the social and political changes that occurred in the 1960s. It often takes decades, or even centuries, for philosophers to articulate the principles that underlie important social changes. Those of us who grew up in the 1960s are now in the same positions of authority that we were reacting to 35 years ago. As a result, this would naturally be the time to articulate philosophical insights that came to be realized during that dramatic and exciting time.

Self-Expression and the Meaning of Life

What is the relation between self-expression and the meaning of life? Why should self-expression make life meaningful, as opposed to any of the number of other theories that have been proposed about this subject?

It is interesting to compare the idea of the meaning of life with the idea of the meaning of a sentence. For a sentence to be meaningful, its components must be arranged according to rules of language that dictate word order and sentence structure. The sentence "It is

raining in Denmark” is meaningful, while “It raining Denmark in is” is not, even though if someone said the latter sentence, you would get the idea that it has to do with rain in Denmark.

I believe that the meaning of life is somewhat like the meaning of a sentence in the following way. For our life to be meaningful, the important events have to be related to each other in some coherent way. In other words, the important events in our lives correspond to the words in a sentence. Of course, there is no set of rules that dictates how we must live our lives, corresponding to the rules governing sentence structure. In the case of our lives, our conscious plans take the place of the sentence structure rules. If we live our lives according to a plan that we create, a plan that dictates some of the most important events in our lives and how they relate to each other, then we are well on the way to having a meaningful life.

What does a life plan look like? No one can completely plan their life too far ahead, because life inevitably takes unexpected twists and turns, and we have to allow for the unexpected. But a life plan can certainly address fundamental questions like the choice of a career, a spouse, where to live, and friends and associates. Some people never consciously articulate such a plan, while others have a plan in their unconscious mind that they are not fully aware. Still others primarily rely on the course of events to direct their lives. Such person may still have meaningful lives, but they are not fully in control of their own lives.

A life plan may stem from fundamental desires and emotions. For example, someone may be determined to pursue a musical career because they have decided that they are in love with music. Such a person will most likely create a life plan that enables them to be involved with music in some way. They may have to make a difficult decision between pursuing a musical career and family life. This is where the theory of life connected to our soul comes in. The point is that a life plan is not just an abstract concept; instead, it should be based on taking fundamental desires and emotions into account.

This is where self-expression comes into the picture. I would claim that for someone to have a meaningful life, they must not only have a life plan, but they must also allow for the development and expression of elements of themselves. Anyone who does not do this is in for a life of unhappiness and frustration. Our thoughts, feelings, and emotions are internal forces that by their very nature require to be expressed. If we do not express our thoughts, feelings, and emotions, the energy from these spiritual forces is diverted into other areas of our life. Most people are all too familiar with the experience of having to repress desires because expressing it is socially unacceptable. It is important find another outlet for these desires because otherwise the energy it represents may have unpredictable effects on our personality. Having to repress sexual desires for lack of a socially acceptable outlet is one of the most common examples.

Someone who expresses themselves but has no life plan may still have a meaningful life, since the principle of self-expression itself can be an ordering principle. A life can have different degrees of meaningfulness, however, so I would suggest that formulating a life plan is an important step towards having a meaningful life. And formulating a life plan that includes self-expression is an important step towards having the most meaningful life possible!