

## Jazz of Tradition and History

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### Abstract

What is the meaning of life? We've all been confused about this question. In this sagacious and thought-provoking work *The Meaning of Life*, Terry Eagleton penetrates the surface layers and reaches deep into the inner problems of the meaning of life. He encounters Pre-modernism, Modernism and Postmodernism at the question of the meaning of life, lists all sorts of questions and gives corresponding refutation. In the position of Marxism, he provides enlightenment of this inevitable problem for everyone from the perspective of philosophy. Finally, he presents an ideal that the meaning of life lies in the spirit of a jazz group, which implements the return and extension of the tradition.

**Key words:** pre-modernism, modernism, post-modernism, tradition, history

### 1. Introduction

The question of the meaning of life is so prominent and it provokes a wide range of responses and bewildering diversity of solutions at different times. The freedom of choice from these solutions, the significance of the process of pursuing and the diversity of the answer makes it crucial and necessary to clarify the real meaning of life. As a philosophical reflection in the postmodern context, *The Meaning of Life* by Terry Eagleton has caused huge responses.

### 2. The Meaning of Life and Pre-Modernism

#### ➤ The Meaning of Life and God

For people in pre-modern age, the meaning of life is God, the solid foundation to human existence. The question "What's the meaning of life?" is "a matter of a practice, not of an intellectual proposition. It asked about a relationship, not about an opinion" (Eagleton, 2007: 15).

By Wittgenstein's work, *Philosophical Investigations* which shows us how grammar deceives us, and the anticipation of one of the greatest of all nineteenth-century philosophers, Friedrich Nietzsche, Terry Eagleton shows us that our grammar may be the reason why we had failed to eliminate God.

The reason of regarding God as the meaning of life was not only because their religious beliefs had less problems, but because their social practices had less problems. At that time, the meaning of life means following what your ancestors did, and living up to the expectations of traditional and social conventions.

According to Terry Eagleton, we are now living in a world lacking religious beliefs and full of problematic social practices. One of the reasons why the twentieth century contemplated more about the meaning of existence is that the symbolic dimension of human life, three traditionally vital areas: religion, culture, and sexuality, which were exactly the areas to which people traditionally turned when they inquired about the sense and value of existence, became less central to public life and increasingly relegated to the private sphere instead.

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➤ **An Act of Meaning**

For people in pre-modern age, the meaning of life refers to an act of meaning—to whatever significance it is that God intends to convey by it. They believe that “life is the utterance of God, a sign or discourse in which he is trying to communicate something significant to us” (Eagleton, 2007: 43).

But how do people who have no faith in God lead their lives? Are their lives destined to be meaningless?

Not necessarily, Terry Eagleton, as a Marxist, told us. Marxists usually are atheists, but they still believe that life displays a significant pattern as its meaning. Those who hold that God is the ultimate meaning of life need not be obsessed about the non-existence of inherent meaning in life at all. Therefore, it is possible to believe that life is meaningful without regarding that this meaning has been ascribed by certain supreme power, like God.

Terry Eagleton also presented an idea “purposiveness without purpose” displayed in *The Critique of Judgment* by Immanuel Kant, that life may seem to be accidental, but it can still exhibit a design, much more like a random process which nevertheless falls into a significant pattern. This point of view is similar to that of Hegel. “It may seem pretty meaningless while we are living it, but for Hegel it all makes perfect sense when so to speak, the *Zeitgeist* looks back over its shoulder and casts an admiring eye upon what it has created” (Eagleton, 2007: 46).

➤ **The Meaning of Life Ascribed by God**

There is a debate between “inherentists” and “constructivists” on the meaning of life. At the point of whether the meaning of life is ascribed or inherent in the eyes of pre-modern people, Terry Eagleton had a dialectical discussion himself.

When he came to the inherent meaning of life, he mentioned an example, a work of art. And then he compared the lives of those who believe in God, or some other intelligent force behind the universe to an artifact, because life is believed to be built in meanings and purposes because of God.

However, he argued that an artifact is structured for the purpose to achieve certain effects by someone’s design. So is life; although it is independently of what people want it to mean, it is not a meaning independent of the one who designed it this way, like God. Therefore, for pre-modern people, the meaning of life is ascribed by God, never something inherent.

This is exactly the contradiction. The world cannot be allowed to have inherent or essential meanings that would inevitably constrain the freedom of God’s supreme power. “So the only way to preserve God’s freedom and omnipotence seemed to be to drain the world of inherent sense” (Eagleton, 2007: 72), that is anti-essentialism, related closely to irrationalism. God was permitted to torture people just as it suited his purposes, which is extremely ridiculous.

### **3. The Meaning of Life and Modernism**

➤ **The Possibility of no Meaning**

Modernists are preoccupied with the possibility of meaninglessness. They believe that human existence is contingent—that it has no ground, goal, direction, or necessity.

The thought of the modern period is that meaning is no longer a spiritual essence buried beneath the surface of things but it still needs to be dug out, since the world does not spontaneously disclose it. One name for this excavatory enterprise is science, which on a certain view of it seeks to reveal the invisible laws and mechanisms by which things operate (2007: 17).

Terry Eagleton criticized that it is only because people falsely imagined that the world could be inherently meaningful, and are so devastated to find that it is not. Just like the old saying goes, where there is desperation, there is hope.

One reason is that modernism is so close to pre-modern period when there was still full of meaning based on the strong faith, that they felt stunned and dispirited by the meaning of life draining away. Therefore, Terry Eagleton commented tartly and ironically “in this tension between the persisting need for meaning and the gnawing sense of its elusiveness, modernism can be genuinely tragic” (Eagleton, 2007: 58).

➤ **The Passing Product of the Will of Schopenhauer**

In Schopenhauer’s view, false consciousness is absolutely integral to our existence, so the whole of reality is just the passing product of what he terms the Will.

The Will, a voracious, implacable force, has its own intentionality. It generates everything in the world just in order to keep itself working, which is exactly how the so-called meaning of life arose. We may believe there is value and meaning in our lives; but “the truth is that we exist simply as the helpless instruments of the Will’s blind, futile self-reproduction” (Eagleton, 2007: 48).

However, Terry Eagleton pointed out that perhaps the meaning of life is not a goal to be pursued, but something that is articulated in the act of living itself, or perhaps in a certain way of living. What really matters is the process of life.

This notion, called the redemptive lie or salutary fiction, has even infiltrated Marxism. However, Terry Eagleton pointed out that ideology is vitally necessary instead of uselessness. We need ideology to persuade ourselves that individuals actually have a degree of unity or autonomy. We cannot leave ideology, because it is beneficial.

They don’t believe that our concepts, values, and ideals have any foundation in this meaningless world. Even so, there are pressing moral and political reasons why we should behave as if they were firmly grounded. What we believe is less important than the fact that we have faith.

What is ridiculous in Schopenhauer’s eyes about human being, “each of them convinced of his own supreme value, pursuing some edifying end which will instantly turn to ashes in his mouth” (Eagleton, 2007: 54), is exactly what we have to hold on. Although to some extent Schopenhauer is right about the truth that human history has indeed been more a tale of scarcity, misery, and exploitation than it has been a fable of civility and enlightenment, he came to a wrong conclusion. What we need to do is holding on and fighting against instead of giving up and erasing the meaning of life.

Terry Eagleton ironically describes the pessimistic philosophy of Schopenhauer about the meaning of life. But he indeed admits the value of his opinion because Schopenhauer makes those who firmly believe in the meaning of life have to confront the cheerless challenge of him. It is exactly the role of pessimists that positivists and even neutralists have to make their vision more than anodyne consolation, not only in this aspect of the meaning of life.

➤ **Modernism and Postmodernism of Meaning in the Eyes of Samuel Beckett**

Samuel Beckett is a philosopher between Modernism and Postmodernism cases. In his works, the extreme elusiveness of meaning makes Beckett a classically modernist.

Nothing in Beckett’s works is definitive. Godot’s absence seems to plunge life into radical indeterminacy; on the one hand, this means there is no assurance that he will come, while on the other hand, this signifies no assurance that he will not come. Anything cannot be absolute in a world without absolutes.

Yet Terry Eagleton pointed out that the paradox of Beckett’s work is that even though there is a meaning-shaped hole in its core, it still keeps its hopes and expectations for truth and meaning, which is exactly the paradox of modernism in the problem of meaning.

We have to admit that in Beckett’s world, the withdrawal of ultimate meaning creates the space. It is true that survival and flourishing requires guarantees; but too many guarantees can be obstacles to our flourishing as well.

However, the other side of Beckett's work is postmodern positivism, for which things just being-in-itself, without reason for being, without any connection with another being. We can still argue that to claim gloomily that existence is lack of meaning is to remain the illusion that it might have meaning.

Surely, if meaning is simply something we get up to, it cannot act as a sure infrastructure to reality. Things must be inherently meaningful, not just meaningful because we make them so (2007: 65).

#### **4. The Meaning of Life and Postmodernism**

##### **➤ Non-Existence of Meaning of Life**

Postmodernists don't believe in the meaning of life; they do not have faith. For them, there is no point in contemplating the meaning that never existed because postmodernism is far from the time when there was truth, meaning and reality. Terry Eagleton described their standpoint directly and sharply as follows.

In the pragmatist, streetwise climate of advanced postmodern capitalism, with its skepticism of big pictures and grand narratives, its hard-nosed disenchantment with the metaphysical, 'life' is one among a whole series of discredited totalities (2007: 16).

"Postmodernists prefer contemplating differences, specific culture and local color, instead of the meaning of life" (Chai Yan, 2011: 3). They prefer thinking small rather than big.

They believe that as long as we have depths, essences, and foundations, such as Nature, Man, Reason, History, Power, Desire, and so on, it means we are still in the awesome presence of the Almighty giving God a series of majestic new names, instead of killing and burying him. It seems that postmodernism is against any absolute foundations, such as God, Reason or History. But according to Terry Eagleton, what is sarcastic is that we can still find such a presence of absolute bottom line in postmodernism, which is called Culture.

Postmodernism wanted us to believe that grand narratives, such as Marxism, are something in the past. However, Eagleton tried to prove that actually, what is coming to an end is exactly the theory of Postmodernism, instead of Marxism (2011: 2).

"Standing in the position of realistic criticism of Marxism, Terry Eagleton pointed out that although with resistant and critical radical mask, Postmodernism is lacking in the possibility to practice its theory in real life" (Chai Yan, 2011: 2). He also pointed out that actually, grand narratives, such as Marxism, have corresponded to something real that the meaning of life actually exists.

##### **➤ The Meaning of Life is Ascribed by Human Being**

As for postmodernists, they never imagine that the world could be somehow inherently meaningful. Reality is just the way that human beings construct it to be.

Postmodernists are also anti-essentialism. Once determinate natures have disappeared and human being is the sole source of meaning in the world, there is no obstacle to human's arbitrariness. However, when clearing the world of essences, the self may be cleared along with them and the will of human being will suffer fatal blow, turning into extreme arbitrariness, which, as a sober warning, makes human being itself absurd.

"Eagleton holds that the opinion that life is ascribed by human being is just an illusion" (Xu Fangfu, 2009: 3). Meaning, to be sure, is something people make; but they make it in a determinate world with inherent laws. As a result, they must respect this world's grain and texture to validate the inherent meaning of life.

Therefore, Terry Eagleton tells us that human beings can be self-determining, only on the basis of a deeper dependency upon the world, and each other. And the meaning that everyone may ascribe to his or

her own life is constrained by the inherent meaning and this dependency, since we are deep in the midst of meaning.

## **5. Happiness and Jazz**

### **➤ The Meaning of Life and the Common Goal**

Nietzsche thinks that life cannot be judged either valuable or valueless in itself, since we are part of life. But this point of view is regarded as surely questionable by Terry Eagleton. You do not need to stand outside human existence in order to make meaningful comments about it. It is not a matter of seeing it all, just a matter of seeing enough to analyze the typical characteristics of it and reasonably judge these unfamiliar parts according to the familiar parts of fact.

Human beings share an immense amount in common. But those postmodern thinkers who are enraptured by difference may argue that universal aspects of human life are very diversified by different cultures.

However, Terry Eagleton refutes that these universal aspects constitute the most significant parts of every single individual. The differences between human beings are vital, but they are not a solid foundation on which to build ethics or a politics. At least, what we now have in common is the will to survive in the face of the various threats to our existence and pursue the meaning of life.

Therefore, as more a common or reciprocal project than an individual affair, the meaning of life seems to lie in the common goal of human beings.

### **➤ The Meaning of Life and Happiness**

After all the theories, by using the solutions of Marxism, Eagleton tried to find a balance between eternal value and ever-shifting fact on the philosophical basis of the truth and objectivity and attach importance to the essential issues of human being (2011: 2).

Since the meaning of life lies in the common goal of human being, what everyone strives for is undoubtedly happiness, but it seems both vital and vacuous. And Terry Eagleton presented three points of happiness for Aristotle.

The first point is happiness for Aristotle is part of a practical way of life rather than some private inner contentment, and it is attained by virtue, bound up with the practice of virtue that is above all a social practice rather than an attitude of mind.

The second point is that happiness is a process of creative self-realization of one's typically human faculties. But Terry Eagleton found something amiss with this theory of happiness that a happy woman or a happy failure cannot fit into it. And he contemplated there is a more appropriate understanding of happiness that can make up the defects above by Karl Marx; he prefers that happiness is a question of "self-fulfillment" rather than self-realization, which I totally agree. "Achievements make sense within the qualitative context of a whole life, not as isolated peaks of attainment" (Eagleton, 2007: 86).

The third point is that happiness can be influenced by false consciousness. Based on the theory that Aristotle sees ethics and politics as intimately bound together, in his view of happiness, as a state of mind, happiness is dependent on particular social and political conditions in which people are free to exercise their creative powers. This point of view conform to his theory that he emphasized people cannot leave political life in every aspect of his life since he was born; just as one of his famous sayings goes, man is by nature a political animal. Based on the background and times of Aristotle, his theory can be biased in certain aspects, for instance, a good life is one well supplied with slaves and subjected woman, but it is still strikingly enlightening.

Another answer is love. Love is a practice or way of life, not a state of mind. Love is the way we can reconcile our search for individual fulfillment with the fact that we are social animals. For love means the fulfillment of each becomes the ground for the fulfillment of the other.

In the end, love and happiness come down to different descriptions of the same way of life. Happiness is seen in Aristotelian terms as the free flourishing of our faculties, and love is the kind of reciprocity which allows this best to happen.

“In the literary critics of Marxism, Eagleton is famous for his political criticism as he always regards moral principles as problems of politics” (Chai Yan, 2011: 4). He coalesces pursuit of happiness in the sense of ethics and politics of life in the place of ultimate humanistic care.

### ➤ **The Meaning of Life and Jazz**

Following the ultimate humanistic care for the liberation of mankind of Marxism, Eagleton indicated the meaning of life in his eyes.

The meaning of life is not a solution to a problem, but a matter of living in a certain way. It is not metaphysical, but ethical. It is not something separate from life, but what makes it worth living- which is to say, a certain quality, depth, abundance, and intensity of life. In this sense, the meaning of life is life itself, seen in a certain way (2007: 94).

Going through a range of possibilities for the meaning of life, we can see most of these goods as compatible with each other. And Terry Eagleton gives a down-to-earth image of a good life that has fulfilled the meaning of life, a jazz group.

In a jazz group, everyone expresses their personality freely, in the meantime, keeps a sense of receptive sensibility to stimulate and act in cooperation with each other. It shows us a “completely pointless” life, just like the pointless jazz performance.

Although their respective expression does not have specific topic, but every single one of them releases a manifesto of love and death, of life, and gets cooperation from his or her companions. “It has self-realization but based on fitting into the whole group; it has self-fulfillment but without causing disharmony” (Xu Fangfu, 2009: 4).

Within sight but beyond reach, this is an ideal condition in our daily life. However, it is exactly this ideal that continuously inspires us to realize individual meaning of life in the identity of a group or a society, which is a harmonious situation, both in the sense that it is what makes life meaningful and in the sense when we act in this way, we realize our natures at their finest.

Contemplating happiness and love again, the spirit of a jazz group is exactly what they are; free flourishing of our faculties and fulfilling others on the ground on the fulfillment of each, which implements the return and extension of the tradition. “The spirit of a jazz group is a beautiful ideal of the meaning of life(Xu Fangfu, 2009: 4).”

Finally, Terry Eagleton showed dialectical materialism as a Marxist, which I agree and appreciate; he did not mean to provide the ultimate answer of the meaning of life for us, but he managed to remind us of this inevitable problem for everyone.

## **6. Conclusion**

By drawing a map of ideology of Pre-modernism, Modernism and Postmodernism about the meaning of life, Terry Eagleton analyzed and criticized various opinions towards this problem. Moreover, he, as a firm Marxist, believes that theories are in fact attention and reflection of reality. He gives a better understanding of Marxism.

This advantageous discussion not only reminds people of contemplating the meaning of life, but also provides improving ways and his ideal of the meaning of life. However, just as his last sentence in this book, “in a world where we live in overwhelming danger, our failure to find common meanings is as alarming as it is invigorating”(Eagleton, 2007: 101).

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