



*"You must understand the whole of life, not one little part of it. That is why you must read, that is why you must look at the skies, that is why you must sing and dance, and write poems, and suffer; and understand, for all that is life." Jidda Krishnamurti (1895-1986) Indian theosophist.*

### **ABOUT THIS UNIT**

*Some answers to questions about meaning and purpose; religious and atheistic existentialism.*

## **Introduction**

The quote from Krishnamurti seems to me to embody the wonder and joy of life. If you have ever wondered what life is about, if you have ever asked "*What am I doing here?*" you may have been looking for a coherent picture of everything, or a vision of the whole of life, or as some say 'a God's eye view'. This may be why you are studying philosophy.

### **Activity 8.1 Are you ready to begin this unit**

*To prepare for this unit you were asked to read some excerpts from Ecclesiastes and then to note your feelings and thoughts in your journal. If you have done this, you are ready to begin this unit. If you have not done so, please do it now.*

*Don't forget to add to your glossary as you work through this unit.*

## **The big questions**

As human beings we appear to have an innate desire to understand ourselves and our place in the universe. I am also convinced that human beings have a deep need for meaning in order to attain psychological wholeness. As Colin Wilson (English novelist; existentialist philosopher; once described as the Philosopher of Optimism) has said: "*Man is by nature a purposive creature, who develops neuroses when purpose is denied him.*"

We want to know that there is some larger meaning or significance to the events that happen in our world, that they are not just a result of blind causal processes. The world is unpredictable and full of unsatisfactory events. For example loved ones die, there is pain and suffering in the world, senseless violence and cruelty in war which may lead us to ask "*Why is this happening to me?*" "*What is the reason for all this?*" "*Who is responsible?*" These questions remind us of the problem of evil and suffering which we explored in **Unit 6**.

On a day to day level we also need to solve problems and to take action. This is how experiences arise, with feelings, sights, sounds, pains and pleasures, joys and sorrows. We then take these experiences and attempt to weave them in to some sort of meaningful pattern, somewhat like trying to find the whole picture on a jigsaw puzzle box. Our picture on the box of the jigsaw puzzle is like a template which becomes the meaning we give to our world. We impose order with the template upon that mass of unrelated experiences. In this way we try to make sense of things. But for many of us the picture never seems complete. That is why we continue to question.

I think that behind such questions as *"What is the meaning or purpose of life?"* *"What is the meaning or purpose of my life?"* *"Why does it matter what I do or whether I do anything at all?"* indeed *"Does it make any difference whether I'm alive or not?"* lies the personal quest for meaning and purpose.

So in this final unit of Introduction to Western Philosophy I will present some answers to these 'big' questions for you to think about, before concluding the course with two activities which will take you full circle back to **Unit 1**. Then I will include a list of websites and a list of books which may also be helpful. Finally there will be a short course evaluation. I would appreciate it very much if you could spend a little time responding to the questions. Your feedback will enable the course to be improved and updated.

## **Some answers to questions about meaning and purpose**

For many people **God provides the answers**. Our lives are significant because God cares about us and has a purpose for us. Our purpose is to love one another, to have faith and to win the favour of God. It feels good to know that nothing happens without a purpose.

Some say life has **no meaning at all**. If you have lost your belief in God or if you have never been a believer then you may have a sense that life is meaningless. The age we live in now is for many of us an age of anxiety and aloneness in a strange and uncertain world. Many of the old traditions are now diminishing. For many people there is an inner emptiness - what **Victor Frankl** called an **existential vacuum**, a sense that our lives are totally meaningless.

*You may care to look at Frankl's book - **Man's Search for Meaning** - about how he found meaning as a long-term prisoner in a concentration camp.*

How can we make the many necessary choices that are demanded of us without clear traditions to guide us? What is there to live for? How do we find an ultimate order in the universe without God?

**Existential philosophers** have attempted to deal with this crisis of meaninglessness.

**Existentialism** is a philosophy which focuses on the individual and the problems of human existence. Existentialists doubt that it is possible to know anything about the world for certain. This can be very unsettling for human beings. One solution is to believe in something. We are free to choose what to believe in and this can give meaning to life. Our choice may or may not involve a belief in God. It is very difficult to know whether we have chosen the right belief system but we need to have faith in whatever we choose and live according to that choice as best we can.

**Kierkegaard** was a **religious existentialist**. You will remember from Unit 6 that Kierkegaard

suggests we take **the leap of faith** and that we choose to put our faith in God as it is only through faith in God that we can find meaning in life. *"Truth is subjectivity,"* said Kierkegaard. You must look to your own experiences to formulate your own philosophy.

**Atheistic existentialists** such as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Albert Camus (1913-1960), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980) and Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) offered other solutions.

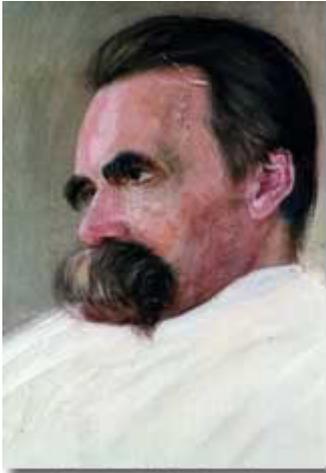


Fig 8.1 Nietzsche



Fig 8.2 de Beauvoir



Fig 8.3 Sartre

Nietzsche said that *"the belief in the Christian God has become unworthy of belief"* because it is a belief which impoverishes human lives. He said *"the old God is dead"*. Divine wisdom is no longer a support for humanity and we have lost an absolute basis for values.

According to **Camus**, without God there is no large plan into which everything fits. Life is absurd. Camus's position comes from what he sees as the contradiction between the human need for meaning and the silence of the world. He compared human life to that of the Greek mythological figure Sisyphus who was condemned by the gods to spend eternity rolling a rock up a mountain. The rock always rolls down again and Sisyphus pushes it back up again. This is a fruitless and pointless task just like the daily routine of our life here on earth.

Sartre believed in the freedom of the individual to make decisions about values and ways of living - to take the 'existential' leap into the unknown. Freedom was also a dominant theme for **de Beauvoir**, a leading figure in **feminism**.

**Existentialists** say we can rise above the death of God, chaos and absurdity, meaninglessness and purposelessness by creating our own values and meaning. By focussing our concerns on something larger than ourselves life becomes significant. If we accept our place as a part of the natural world and acknowledge that this is all there is then we can go on to flourish and lead fulfilling lives even without God.

### Activity 8.2 Thinking about the meaning of life

*How would you answer the questions "What is the meaning of my life?" and "Why am I here?" Write your answers in your journal.*

*In Unit 1 you were asked to think about where you find answers to fundamental meaning of life questions and to write your answers in your journal. Now look back at the way you*

*answered these questions in **Unit 1**. What do you notice about the answers to the two sets of questions? How do the **Unit 1** answers compare with what you have just written?*

***Write your answers in your journal.***

*Please also join in the '**meaning of life**' discussion on the **Course Discussion Forum**.*

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## Clarifying your own philosophy

Philosophy is a vast subject. If you refer back to the outline of **the main areas of philosophy** in **Unit 1** you will see that we have explored some of these areas though we have had to omit others. Time and space constraints have also meant that the material in this course has been mostly descriptive. Keep in mind though that we must be able to argue rationally for our beliefs. Proper philosophising involves rational and critical thinking.

Many people have told us what 'the' picture is in the jigsaw puzzle - or is it 'their' picture? Some speak with great authority. But as we have seen throughout this course many different pictures or competing realities have been described.

**For you as a philosopher the ultimate goal in your search is for an understanding of life and how to live it.** Wisdom comes with finding your own 'God's eye view' - your vision of the whole of life. You may never succeed completely. There will probably always be unanswered questions for you. However be patient and enjoy the search. The philosophical journey can be immensely rewarding.

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### Activity 8.3 Clarifying your own philosophy

*The theme of **Unit 1** was 'What is philosophy and what is wisdom?' and 'Why should we study philosophy?' Now, at the end of the course, how would you explain what philosophy is to someone who knows nothing about it? What reasons would you give them for studying (or perhaps not studying) philosophy?*

*Do you agree or disagree with Socrates when he said, "**The unexamined life is not worth living**". Why? What do you think 'the examined life' is? What do you think wisdom is?*

***Write your answers to all of these questions in your journal and try to reach some conclusions.***

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## Relevant web sites

Here are some websites which may be helpful in your search and also for any further browsing you may wish to do. Please note that sometimes web site addresses are changed.

- **The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy**
- **Guide to Philosophy on the Internet**
- **Philosophy Pages**
- **The Online Literature Library**

Philosophers' Cafes are becoming popular in some countries. There are some in Australia too. For more information check out [Philosophers' Cafe](#).

Two magazines may interest you. The website for **Philosophy Now** and for **The Philosophers' Magazine**.

These magazines are also available from some newsagents.

If you find that any one of the following addresses isn't working please send a message to [enquiries@u3aonline.org.au](mailto:enquiries@u3aonline.org.au) and a correction will be made.

## Further reading

Here is a list of general introductory philosophy books which I have found helpful in preparing this course. Original philosophical texts can be interesting too.

- Christian, James L *Philosophy: - An Introduction to the Art of Wondering*, Harcourt Brace College Publishers, Sixth Edition, USA, 1994
- Frost, SE - *Basic Teachings of the Great Philosophers*, Anchor Books, Revised Edition, USA, 1989
- McInerney, Peter K - *Introduction to Philosophy*, Harper Collins College Outline, USA, 1992
- Olen, Jeffrey - *Persons and Their World: An Introduction to Philosophy*, McGraw-Hill, USA, 1983
- Oliver, Paul - *101 Key Ideas - Philosophy*, Teach Yourself Books, Hodder Headline, UK, 2000
- Raeper, W and Smith, Linda - *A Beginner's Guide to Ideas*, Lion Publishing, UK, 1991
- Soccio, Douglas J - *Archetypes of Wisdom*, Wadsworth Publishing Company, USA, 1992
- Tarnas, Richard - *The Passion of the Western Mind*, Ballantine Books, New York, 1993
- Thompson, Mel - *Philosophy*, Teach Yourself Books, Hodder Headline, UK, 1995

For reference, dictionaries of philosophy and of ideas are available in libraries and bookstores. Books of quotations are fascinating to read too. The dictionary which I have found useful is Mautner, Thomas ed - *Penguin Dictionary of Philosophy*, UK, 1997.

Please continue to wonder and ponder about the philosophical questions and issues that have been raised in this course. Exploration of the various philosophical links and sites can give you much pleasure.

Thank you for participating in the course, I hope you enjoyed it. If you have, and would like to continue discussing the philosophical aspects of contemporary day to day issues, why not visit the Philosophy Forum, one of the growing number of U3A Online general discussion forums now available to members.

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As a member of **U3A Online**, you have automatic access to the Members Area. There you will find interesting information including course details, administration documents, Internet links and news. Most importantly, you can take part in the many discussion forums where members share areas of interest. We encourage you to participate and take the opportunity to meet new online friends. Click on **U3A Online Members' Area**

### Course Evaluation

*Now that you have finished the last week of the course we would like you to fill in an Feedback Form Form. Please click on the link on the starting page to access the form. The information you provide will remain confidential and will assist us in maintaining the quality and user friendliness of our courses.*

