

The Meanings of Life

October 04, 2013

Aeon Magazine:

Parents often say: ‘I just want my children to be happy.’ It is unusual to hear: ‘I just want my children’s lives to be meaningful,’ yet that’s what most of us seem to want for ourselves. We fear meaninglessness. We fret about the ‘nihilism’ of this or that aspect of our culture. When we lose a sense of meaning, we get depressed. What is this thing we call meaning, and why might we need it so badly?

Let’s start with the last question. To be sure, happiness and meaningfulness frequently overlap. Perhaps some degree of meaning is a prerequisite for happiness, a necessary but insufficient condition. If that were the case, people might pursue meaning for purely instrumental reasons, as a step on the road towards happiness. But then, is there any reason to want meaning for its own sake? And if there isn’t, why would people ever choose lives that are more meaningful than happy, as they sometimes do?

The difference between meaningfulness and happiness was the focus of an investigation I worked on with my fellow social psychologists Kathleen Vohs, Jennifer Aaker and Emily Garbinsky, published in the *Journal of Positive Psychology* this August. We carried out a survey of nearly 400 US citizens, ranging in age from 18 to 78. The survey posed questions about the extent to which people thought their lives were happy and the extent to which they thought they were meaningful. We did not supply a definition of happiness or meaning, so our subjects responded using their own understanding of those words. By asking a large number of other questions, we were able to see which factors went with happiness and which went with meaningfulness.

As you might expect, the two states turned out to overlap substantially. Almost half of the variation in meaningfulness was explained by happiness, and vice versa. Nevertheless, using statistical controls we were able to tease two apart, isolating the ‘pure’ effects of each one that were not based on the other. We narrowed our search to look for factors that had opposite effects on happiness and meaning, or at least, factors that had a positive correlation with one and not even a hint of a positive correlation with the other (negative or zero correlations were fine). Using this method, we found five sets of major differences between happiness and meaningfulness, five areas where different versions of the good life parted company.

Read the whole story: [Aeon Magazine](#)