Episode Book

EPISODE #5638

The Meaning of Life: A 250-Year-Old Question

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SYNOPSIS

The question feels timeless, but the phrase "the meaning of life" first appears in English around 1833 — and in German in the 1790s — right as the scientific picture began eroding the religious one. Was the question itself a symptom of that crisis rather than a permanent human inheritance? This episode traces the arc: what Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Judaism, and traditions from the Lakota to the Maya say the point of it all is; how the analytic philosophers split the problem into supernaturalism, naturalism, and nihilism; and what the Greeks — Plato, Aristotle, the Cynics, Cyrenaics, and Epicureans — each answered differently. The strangest finding: traditions with no contact keep arriving at the same answer. Whether that convergence is a fingerprint of the divine or a fingerprint of us may be undecidable.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Daniel's been keeping a list. Every religion we've done, every philosophy episode, and at the bottom of it, in his own words, the question underneath all of them.



Herman

The question of questions.



Corn

Right. And he's explicit that he is not asking us to answer it. He says, and I'm quoting, "I'm not asking Corn and Herman to attempt to deduce that."



Herman

Which is a relief, because I'd have needed more coffee.



Corn

What he wants is a companion piece. We've covered world religions, we've covered schools of philosophy, and this is the thing those episodes were circling without ever naming. So the remit is a whistle-stop tour. Trace the arc in the broadest possible brushstrokes. What do the major world religions say the meaning of life is. What do the major schools of philosophy say. What have thinkers who belong to neither of those camps contributed. And how has the whole debate evolved across history.



Herman

He also calls it an existential question that's occupied humanity since we have any record of our thinking at all.



Corn

He does. And that framing is the first thing we have to mess with.



Herman

Gently.



Corn

Gently. Because before we can trace the arc, there's a strange fact about the question itself, and it's the best hook in the whole episode. The question is ancient. The phrase is not.



Herman

How modern are we talking?



Corn

About two hundred and fifty years.



Herman

The phrase "the meaning of life" as a piece of English, first appearance is Thomas Carlyle, Sartor Resartus, eighteen thirty-three, thirty-four.



Corn

Which is not ancient. That's Jane Austen's lifetime.



Herman

The German side is a little earlier. Friedrich Schlegel uses der Sinn des Lebens in his novel Lucinde, seventeen ninety-nine. Novalis has it in a manuscript from seventeen ninety-seven, ninety-eight, the line about only an artist being able to divine the meaning of life. And Goethe uses lebenssinn in a letter to Schiller in seventeen ninety-six.



Corn

So we've got a German cluster in the seventeen nineties, English in the eighteen thirties. And the first person to explicitly ask the question as a question, reportedly, is Schopenhauer, in an essay called Character. And his version of it is already bleak. "What is the meaning of life at all? To what purpose is it played, this farce in which everything that is essential is irrevocably fixed and determined?"



Herman

That's a man asking a question he's already decided the answer to.



Corn

It's a man asking a question and answering it in the same breath. But here's the tension I want to flag, because it reframes the entire episode. Why does the phrase show up when it does?



Herman

Because that's exactly the moment the floor gives way.



Corn

Say more.



Herman

The seventeen nineties into the eighteen hundreds is when the scientific picture starts seriously parching away the religious one. The vocabulary arrives precisely as the thing it's asking about is losing its grip. The question as we phrase it is a product of the crisis of



Herman (continued)

faith. It's not a timeless formulation that humans have always used. It's a symptom.



Corn

So the ancient Egyptians weren't walking around asking about the meaning of life.



Herman

They were asking what the gods wanted, which is a different question with a much more answerable shape. Once you can no longer assume the gods want anything, or that anyone's listening, you need a new word for the hole where the answer used to be.



Corn

And that word is about two hundred and fifty years old. Fine. So the plan: religions first, then the philosophers, then the thinkers who don't belong to either camp, and then whatever through-line survives all of it.



Herman

Religions first. And here's the thing that surprised me most when I went back through the material.



Corn

The convergence.



Herman

Traditions on different continents, separated by millennia, with no plausible contact, arriving at answers that are recognizably the same answer. Transcend the self. Unite with the divine.



Corn

Give me the shape of it.



Herman

Start with Hinduism. The goal is moksha, liberation from samsara, the cycle of rebirth, realized as union with the divine Self, the Atman. And it's not one option among many, it's the top of a ranked list. The four purusharthas. Dharma, righteousness. Artha, wealth. Kama, pleasure. And moksha, liberation, as the highest.



Corn

So the tradition isn't squeamish about the first three.



Herman

Not at all. It ranks them. Wealth and pleasure are legitimate goals with a legitimate place. They're just not the top of the list. And the Bhagavad Gita has Krishna say it flatly, no hedging: "I am the goal of life."



Corn

That's about as direct as an answer gets.



Herman

Buddhism runs a parallel track with a different mechanism. The goal is nirvana. Pali, nibbana. And the word literally means blowing out.



Corn

Blowing out what?



Herman

The three fires. Craving, aversion, delusion. You're not adding something, you're extinguishing something. The Dhammapada says, "Nirvana, say the Buddhas, is the highest goal." And the path to it is the Noble Eightfold Path. But here's the wrinkle I like, the bodhisattva ideal in Mahayana.



Corn

The one who delays.



Herman

Delays their own final liberation to help everyone else get there first. So even inside a tradition whose stated goal is your own extinguishing, the ethical ideal is to put it off for the sake of others.



Corn

That's the first hint of the through-line, actually. Even the escape hatch is other people.



Herman

Now Christianity. And the answer here is union with God through contemplation. The Mary over Martha passage in Luke, the one thing necessary. Aquinas is blunt about it: "The contemplation of divine truth is the goal of the whole of human life." Meister Eckhart says the purpose of all prayer and all works is that God may be born in the soul and the soul be born in God.



Corn

That's a mutual indwelling. That's not a servant and a master.



Herman

It's not. And Islam's answer has a similar shape from a different angle. The Qur'an says God created jinn and mankind only to worship Me. And then a line I keep thinking about: "We were not playing a pointless game when we created the heavens and earth."



Corn

That's a direct answer to Schopenhauer, centuries before he asked.



Herman

It's a pre-buttal. The word Islam means submission to God's will. And the Sufi path, the tariqah, seeks fana', the annihilation of the self in God, and then baqa', subsistence in God. Rumi and Attar frame worship as self-consuming love. You burn up and what's left is not you.



Corn

Annihilation and then subsistence. You disappear and then you persist, as something else.



Herman

Judaism frames it differently again. The meaning is to elevate the physical world, olam ha-zeh, and prepare it for the Messianic Age and the World to Come. Tikkun olam. Repairing the world.



Corn

Repair implies something's broken.



Herman

It does. And the work is not escaping the broken thing. It's fixing it in place.



Corn

Now go outside the big five, because this is where the convergence gets hard to explain away.



Herman

Black Elk, the Lakota medicine man. He taught that all things are works of the Great Spirit, Wakan-Tanka, "the source and end of everything." The Mayan Popol Vuh says the gods created humans as a giver of praise, giver of respect, provider, nurturer. And the Mesopotamian Enuma Elish and the Egyptian Coffin Texts both frame humanity as created to serve and worship the gods.



Corn

So you've got India, the Levant, Arabia, the American plains, Mesoamerica, Mesopotamia, Egypt. No contact between most of those pairs.



Herman

Not for the relevant periods, no.



Corn

And the answer keeps coming back as: you are not the point. Something larger is the point, and your job is to orient toward it.



Herman

The religionsdepths piece puts it as the world's religions all giving more or less the same answer, just expressed in different ways, and the answer is to get closer to the divine and ultimately to experience spiritual enlightenment.



Corn

Now the author of that piece reads the convergence as evidence of a common more-than-human source. A single thing reaching all of them.



Herman

That's one reading.



Corn

And the other one, which the author concedes, is: they could all be wrong in the same way.



Herman

That's the honest sentence in the whole piece, and it's the one I can't get past. Because convergence is only evidence of truth if the thing converging is independent of the humans doing the converging. And it isn't. Same species, same brains, same set of existential problems to solve. If eight different cultures independently invent the wheel, that tells you something about wheels and something about the shape of the problem, and you can't tell from the outside which one you're looking at.



Corn

So the convergence could be a fingerprint of the divine, or it could be a fingerprint of us.



Herman

And there is no experiment that distinguishes them. That's the thing. There's no control group of humans who didn't have the problem.



Corn

Which means the convergence is real and the inference from it is undecidable. That's a frustrating place to land and I suspect it's the correct one.



Herman

That's the religious picture. Now the philosophers. And the first thing to notice is that they don't agree on what kind of question this even is.



Corn

Taxonomy time.



Herman

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, which did a substantive revision of its entry on this in June, organizes the analytic debate into three big buckets. Supernaturalism, naturalism, nihilism.



Corn

Start with supernaturalism.



Herman

A spiritual realm is necessary for meaning. And it splits in two. God-centered views, where meaning comes from fulfilling God's purpose. The most influential argument there is that only God's purpose can ground invariant moral rules or objective value. And soul-centered views, where meaning requires an immortal soul. Tolstoy's argument that only an immortal life can make anything worth doing.



Corn

And each of those comes in two strengths.



Herman

Extreme and moderate. Extreme says no God or no soul means no meaning at all. Moderate says God or the soul greatly enhance meaning but aren't strictly necessary.



Corn

Now naturalism.



Herman

A purely physical world suffices for meaning. And it splits into subjectivism, where meaning is conferred by the individual's attitudes, and objectivism, where meaning depends on objective conditions whether you like it or not.



Corn

And nihilism.



Herman

The view that the conditions for a meaningful life do not obtain for anyone. Not that you personally failed to find it. That it isn't there to find.



Corn

So that's the modern analytic map. Now go back to the Greeks, because they each had a distinct answer and they're all different.



Herman

Platonism, attaining the highest Form, the Good. Aristotelianism, eudaimonia, flourishing, through virtuous activity, with the Highest Good as the final end that halts the infinite regress of goals.



Corn

Explain that regress, because it's the sharpest bit of the whole Greek picture.



Herman

You do one thing for the sake of another. You work for money, you want money for security, you want security for peace of mind. If that chain never terminates, nothing is ever finally worth doing. Aristotle's move is to say the chain must terminate in something pursued for its own sake, and that's the Highest Good.



Corn

And his Nicomachean Ethics line on it is lovely, because it's honest about the disagreement. He says educated and uneducated alike call it happiness, and then they disagree about the meaning of happiness.



Herman

Which is the whole problem in one sentence. Everyone agrees on the word and nobody agrees on the thing.



Corn

Keep going through the schools.



Herman

Cynicism, virtue in agreement with Nature, self-sufficiency. Cyrenaicism, pleasure as the supreme good. Epicureanism, modest pleasures, ataraxia and aponia, tranquility and the absence of pain. And Epicurus on death: "Death is nothing to us; for that which is dissolved, is without sensation, and that which lacks sensation is nothing to us."



Corn

That's a remarkably clean argument. Death can't be bad for you because there's no you left to have a bad time.



Herman

And Stoicism, living according to reason and virtue, in harmony with the universal logos, achieving apatheia. Which is clear judgment, not indifference, and that distinction gets flattened constantly.



Corn

So the Greeks give you six answers and none of them is transcendence in the religious sense. They're all about the shape of a life well lived.



Herman

And then the nineteenth century turns dark.



Corn

Schopenhauer again.



Herman

The will is an aimless, irrational, and painful drive. And the escape is aesthetic contemplation, sympathy, asceticism. You don't satisfy it, you quiet it.



Corn

Nietzsche.



Herman

Nihilism is the devaluing of the highest values. A consequence of the death of God that has to be overcome, not mourned. And his positive claim is that life is worth living only if there are inspiring goals. Heidegger says nihilism is where being is forgotten and reduced to exchange value.



Corn

And then Camus, who's the one I want to sit with.



Herman

The Absurd arises from the disharmony between our search for meaning and an indifferent universe. It's not the universe that's absurd and it's not you. It's the gap. And he rejects both suicide and what he calls philosophical suicide.



Corn

Which is the religious leap.



Herman

Any move that smuggles in an answer the evidence doesn't support. He says embrace the Absurd instead. The heroic nihilist. Kierkegaard looks at the same gap and endorses the leap of faith.



Corn

So you've got two men standing at the same cliff edge. One jumps, one refuses to jump and calls the jump a form of self-deception.



Herman

And that's the Tolstoy versus Camus contrast, which is the dramatic peak of this whole episode for me. Tolstoy's A Confession, written eighteen seventy-nine, eighty, published eighty-two, censored by the Russian Orthodox Church, published in Geneva in eighty-four, and only in Russia in nineteen oh six.



Corn

Six years of it being illegal in its own country.



Herman

And the book is the classic mid-life crisis text. "If God does not exist, since death is inevitable, what is the meaning of life?" And he lists four responses. Ignorance. Epicureanism. Suicide, which he calls the most logically consistent. And simply holding on.



Corn

He calls suicide the most logically consistent.



Herman

He does. And then he admits he was too cowardly to follow through on it. That's the sentence that makes the book. He doesn't arrive at God by argument. He arrives at it because the alternative was unbearable and he couldn't do it.



Corn

And he lands on the intuition "God is Life."



Herman

Which Camus would call philosophical suicide. And here's the thing. Both of them stare at the identical abyss. Both accept the same premises. Tolstoy finds God, Camus refuses the leap and embraces the Absurd instead. Two honest, opposite responses. Neither one is being stupid. That's what makes it the peak.



Corn

Which means the disagreement isn't about the facts. It's about what you do when the facts run out.



Herman

Now the unaffiliated thinkers, because that was Daniel's third category. Viktor Frankl is the one who actually changes the question.



Corn

Man's Search for Meaning.



Herman

Published in Vienna in nineteen forty-six, in the US in fifty-nine. Over sixteen million copies. He founded logotherapy, the Third Viennese School, after Freud and Adler. Built on the premise that the primary human motivation is the will to meaning.



Corn

And the inversion.



Herman

"We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life." That flips the entire episode. You're not the one holding the question. You're the one being asked.



Corn

So the meaning isn't a fact you discover. It's a response you give.



Herman

And it's found in responsibility, not contemplation. Which puts him at odds with Aquinas, who says contemplation is the goal. Frankl says the goal is answering.



Corn

Bertrand Russell, briefly.



Herman

"The good life is one inspired by love and guided by knowledge." Which is a naturalist answer with no God in it at all.



Corn

Now the biologists, because they answer the question whether or not anyone asked them.



Herman

Williams, Dawkins, Haig. If life has a primary function, it's DNA replication and gene survival. And James Watson told Dawkins, "I don't think we're for anything. We're just the products of evolution."



Corn

"We're not for anything." That's the most nihilist sentence in the episode and it comes from a scientist describing a mechanism, not a philosopher making a claim.



Herman

And then psychology weighs in. Positive psychology converges on three dimensions of meaning. Coherence, life makes sense. Purpose, core goals and direction. Significance, life is valuable and worth living. And Terror Management Theory says meaning derives from a fundamental fear of death.



Corn

Which is a slightly deflating explanation of every religion we just covered.



Herman

It's one explanation. It's not the only one, and it doesn't refute anything. Explaining why someone believes something isn't the same as showing it's false.



Corn

Here's the one I want to end the tour on, because it's the negative position and it has to be in here. Wittgenstein and the logical positivists.



Herman

They argue the question is literally meaningless. "Expressed in language, the question is meaningless."



Corn

Unpack that, because it sounds like a dodge and it isn't.



Herman

The phrase "the meaning of x" normally denotes either the consequences of x or the significance of x. So "the meaning of life" would be the consequences of life, or the significance of life. But significance to whom? The question presupposes a frame outside life from which life could be significant, and there isn't one available. So the phrase is recursive. It's asking for the meaning of meaning.



Corn

So it's not that the answer is hard. It's that the question is malformed.



Herman

That's the claim. And I'll be honest, I don't think it fully lands, because people who ask it are clearly pointing at something even if they've phrased it badly. But it's a serious position and it's the one that says the whole episode we just did was a category error.



Corn

So let me try the through-line, and you tell me if it holds.



Herman

Go.



Corn

Every tradition we covered, religious and secular, locates meaning somewhere other than the individual self. Union with the divine. Harmony with nature. Service to others. Even Camus, who refuses every consolation, says the answer is to keep pushing the rock, which is a response to the situation rather than a satisfaction of the self. And Frankl says you're being asked a question by something outside you.



Herman

The one apparent exception is the naturalist subjectivist, who says you confer meaning yourself.



Corn

And even there, what you confer it on is usually something that outlasts you.



Herman

That's the pattern, and it's striking precisely because the traditions agree on nothing else. They disagree about whether God exists, how many gods, whether there's a soul, whether the world is an illusion. And they agree that the answer is not you.



Corn

Which is either the deepest thing we've ever found on this show or the most obvious, and I can't tell which.



Hilbert

The word's wrong.



Corn

Sorry?



Hilbert

"Meaning." You keep saying meaning. The word people actually used, in the letters I used to type, was purpose. Two different things and everybody treats them as one.



Herman

Say more about that.



Hilbert

I worked a stretch in the early two thousands doing correspondence for a firm that handled estate work. Wills, probate, that sort of thing. And people write letters. Not emails, actual letters, and they write them at the end, when they know. And the word that shows up over and over is purpose. What was the purpose of all this. Not what did it mean. They already knew what it meant. They wanted to know what it was for.



Corn

That's a real distinction. Meaning is about intelligibility. Purpose is about function.



Hilbert

Meaning you can settle yourself. You can say, it meant this to me, and that's true and nobody can take it off you. Purpose is a different question. Purpose needs someone who wanted the thing done. And that's the question they were actually asking, and it doesn't have an answer they can give themselves.



Herman

So the logical positivists were right about the phrasing and wrong about the person.



Hilbert

The person wasn't confused. They just used the wrong word for a real question. And the real question was the one the religions answer and the philosophers mostly don't. Is there anyone on the other end of this.



Corn

And you can't answer that from inside the letter.



Hilbert

No. You write it anyway. I typed hundreds of them. I never once saw an answer come back.



Corn

The whole taxonomy we just built, supernaturalism, naturalism, nihilism, all of it, is really a debate about whether that question is answerable.



Herman

Hilbert's point is that the people actually asking it aren't asking the analytic version. They're asking whether anyone is listening.



Corn

Which is the question Frankl says you answer by living rather than by concluding.



Herman

It's the one question in this entire episode that no amount of reading settles.



Corn

Let me do the misconception, because there's a big one and it's the one most people carry.



Herman

Go on.



Corn

The most common wrong belief is that the world's religions give wildly different, incompatible answers to this question, and that philosophy has been trying to pick a winner between them.



Herman

Neither half survives contact with the material. The religions converge, across continents and millennia, on transcendence of the self and union with the divine, and they differ in vocabulary far more than in answer. And philosophy doesn't pick a winner. It splits into supernaturalism, naturalism, and nihilism, and then splits again, and there is no consensus at the end of it.



Corn

The second wrong belief, which is subtler.



Herman

That the phrase "the meaning of life" is ancient. It's about two hundred and fifty years old. The question is ancient. The vocabulary is modern, and it arrived precisely when the religious answer stopped being something you could assume.



Corn

The phrase is a symptom, not an inheritance.



Herman

That's the last thing I'd leave people with. Wikipedia states it plainly: there's no consensus on the specifics of such a concept, or whether the concept itself even exists in any objective sense. And yet the search doesn't stop. It just migrates. The comparative literature that came out this year frames the modern search for meaning as moving into consumer society, self-optimization, AI, transhumanism. Same question, new shelf to look on.



Corn

Which is Hilbert's letter with a different letterhead. People are still asking whether anyone is on the other end, they're just asking it of the algorithm now.



Herman

The through-line holds regardless of where you look for it. Nearly every tradition, religious and secular alike, locates meaning in something beyond the individual self. Union with the divine, harmony with nature, service to others, or self-created purpose in an indifferent universe.



Corn

Which means the answer, if there is one, is probably not found by looking inward. That's the whole tour in one sentence.



Herman

Thanks to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want to keep us going, a review wherever you're listening does more than you'd think. We'll be back soon.