

# The Meaning of Life

Two men are drinking in a bar. Between them is a half bottle of whiskey. One of them, a pessimist, says it's half-empty. The other, an optimist, says it's half full.

The experimental artist today is the un-artist. Not the antiartist but the artist emptied of art. The un-artist, as the name implies, started out conventionally, as a modernist, but at a certain point around the fifties began divesting her or his work of nearly every feature that could remind anyone of art at all> The un-artist makes no real art but does what I've called lifelike art, art that reminds us mainly of the rest of our lives.

Harry deals in California real estate and has a good life. One day at lunch he looks around him at the quiet patio and the flowering bougainvillea, then at his partner, Mike. "Mike," he says, "do you know what the meaning of life is?" Mike says no and changes the subject. For the next few months Harry worries about the meaning of life. Finally he tells Mike he's going to quit real estate to search until he finds the answer. Mike tries to talk him out of it, but Harry has made up his mind. He puts his affairs in order and disappears from the face of the earth. Years later, Mike is eating lunch at the same restaurant and a bum puts a hand on his shoulder and says in a wheezy voice, "Mike, it's me, Harry!" Harry is a scarecrow, one eye missing, teeth gone, a filthy mess. Mike wants to shake him off, but Harry sticks to him like glue. Harry says, "It's been a long trip, I did tie

in jail, I got all kinds of diseases, I almost died in Tibet, I was robbed and beaten up...but I found the meaning of life!" Mike looks him over and figures he has to play along to get rid of him. So he says, "Okay, what's the meaning of life?" Harry stares deep into Mike's eyes and says, "It's the hole in the bagel." Mike doesn't appreciate the answer, so he tells Harry that the meaning of life can't be the hole in the bagel. Harry slowly takes his hand off Mike's Shoulder and gets an amazed look on his face. He says to Mike, "Aha! So life's not the hole in a bagel!" ...And he walks out of the patio.

What's the meaning of this story? Is Harry really right; that is, is he on the track of life's meaning, even if it isn't exactly the hole in a bagel? The story does cast him as the seer who, after his brief reunion with skeptical Mike, probably goes on and on searching. In the great quester tradition. Harry has made a binding pledge to that search. Since he has gone through hell, now he must be essentially right. But Mike could be more right: he knows that Harry is crazy. Suppose, instead, that both are equally right. Mike is a responsible man. He shares with Harry the management of a corporate giant known for its prize-winning shopping centers. Mike genuinely believes in productive work as a supreme virtue. He knows that the meaning of life cannot be simply the hole in the bagel. Harry, however, is a visionary at heart. Though he is remarkable at business and a respected member of his community, he has always sensed that there is something more, some deeper truth. Harry has read books, but books are not enough. He must find the truth himself, away from the life he's led.

Looked at this way, he and Mike are doing what each believes is necessary. They both know the meaning of life. Now suppose both are wrong. Mike only understands virtue that is socially approved. He is unconsciously smug about being a model (i.e., wealthy) citizen, and he secretly despises those who don't have the same ambition while envying anyone who is more outstanding than he is. Harry, too, who had presumably put his affairs in order before going before going on his pilgrimage, actually leaves Mike in the lurch. He had a family who loved him. There are colleagues and friends who suffer from his absence, not to mention that as the architectural brains behind the success of his firm, he has severely jeopardized its future. Searching for the "meaning of life" is for Harry just an excuse to abandon his real-life responsibilities. Neither man is admirable, so neither can possibly know the meaning of life. If the two men can be right, wrong, and partly right or wrong, is the meaning of the story that nothing in life is clearly this or that? Perhaps, but that's obvious. What is central to the story is that while Harry may be driven by an impossible dream, he is flexible about its details; if the hole in the bagel won't do, then something else will. Mike may be the practical man, but that's why he can accept reality as it appears to him: after Harry leaves, he manages anyway. We really don't know from the bare story the small particulars of their separation. Harry may not have had a family at all, and his leaving the business may have been quite decently arranged. Mike, for his part, may have decided to merge with another real estate conglomerate to expand the business. The greatest part of the story is what we choose to add to it. And that's the

story of lifelike art. Lifelike artists are either Harry or Mike, or both at once, playing at life's daily routines. They find life's meaning in picking a stray thread from someone's collar. And if that isn't it, they find it in just making sure the dishes are washed, counting the knives, the forks, the cups and saucers as they pass from left hand to the right. How different this is from "artlike artists," whose art resembles other art more than anything else. Artlike artists don't look for the meaning of life; they look for the meaning of art. And when they think they've found it, they become very discouraged if told they're wrong. They don't go willingly on to some other answer, as Harry did; and they're hardly free of doubts, like Mike. Most of the time they stick to their guns and even fight.

*Essays On The Blurring of Art and Life*

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