

The "meaning crisis" trend. How do you answer it as an Epicurean philosopher?

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Professor Rivka Weinberg argues that human life, as a totality, is metaphysically incapable of possessing Ultimate Meaning. Meaning, in the relevant sense, is a "point"—a justifying, valued end external to the activity or enterprise it renders purposeful. While particular actions and projects within a life may have such points (what she terms "Everyday Meaning"), the life as a whole cannot, because there exists nothing external to one's life to serve as its end. Any value we might pursue—like justice, love, truth, or legacy—takes place *within* the span of our life. But because our life *includes* those pursuits, those values can't be *outside* of our life and therefore can't serve as the kind of external justification (or "point") that Ultimate Meaning requires. Thus, life's structure precludes the possibility of Ultimate Meaning.

Weinberg distinguishes this from value skepticism: it is not that life lacks value, but that the overarching effort of living lacks a final justifying reason. Appeals to God, the afterlife, cosmic purpose, or narrative unity merely defer or obscure the problem, since these too are subsumed within life or else render justification circular. Even lofty, unattainable goals fail as solutions; their inaccessibility may prevent confrontation with pointlessness, but not resolve it. Despite the meaningfulness of our individual pursuits, we remain metaphysically blocked from answering the question of why we lead lives at all. Weinberg concludes that this structural pointlessness is a genuine and tragic feature of the human condition—and that sadness is a fitting and rational response to this fact, one that aligns both with our agential nature and our values as purposeful beings.

An Epicurean would contest both the metaphysical framing and the affective conclusion. Epicurus denies the need for life to have a telos beyond itself; the good life consists in the experience of pleasure and the elimination of distress, not in securing a transcendent justification. The desire for Ultimate Meaning is, on Epicurean terms, an empty and unnatural craving, akin to the longing for immortality or divine purpose. Once we understand that death is the end of all sensation and not an evil, and that pleasure is self-justifying, the supposed tragedy of life's pointlessness dissolves. Rather than lament the absence of a final end, the Epicurean would recommend cultivating immanent goods—friendship, thought, moderation—as fully sufficient for a life worth choosing.

Weinberg is a philosophy professor working in the analytic tradition and is a Kantian contractualist. Her article, *Ultimate Meaning: We Don't Have It, We Can't Get It, and We Should Be Very, Very Sad*, was published in the *Journal of Controversial Ideas*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2021), article 4, and is freely available online as an open access publication: <https://doi.org/10.35995/jci01010004>.