

Chapter Two: The Meaning of Life

TRUE/FALSE

1. The question “What is the meaning of life?” is hard to answer because the word “meaning” is itself ambiguous.

A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: p. 44

2. The question about the meaning of life most typically arises during happy times, when we have the luxury of time to reflect.

A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: p. 44

3. Sometimes, the meaning of something (a sign, a word) is what it refers to. If the meaning of one’s life refers to something, then what would give one’s life meaning would be contextual, as in linguistic reference.

A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: p. 44

4. People who think that children are the basis for a meaningful life tend to project abstractly into the future, to a utopia, a place of total peace and happiness.

A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: p. 46

5. Religious believers like Saint Augustine and Martin Luther asked questions about the meaning of life less persistently than atheists.

A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: pp. 46-47

6. Believing that the meaning of one’s life is found in an afterlife implies that one views this life as the basis of one’s significance.

A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: p. 47

7. Nihilism is the belief that life has no meaning.

A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: p. 50

16. Someone who devotes his life to mountain-climbing, taking risks and even risking his life, is likely to see his life as an adventure.
A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: pp. 55
17. Someone who views life as a disease presupposes some conception of health.
A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: pp. 56-57
18. The word “nirvana” is a Sanskrit word for “suffering.”
A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: p. 58
19. Altruism is the acting for the benefit of oneself, even to the exclusion of others’ benefit.
A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: p. 58
20. For the Greek heroes, honor was less important than other values, like compassion.
A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: pp. 59
21. German philosophers in the nineteenth century who embraced the idea that life is a *Bildungsroman* would be inclined to think that the meaning of life is learning.
A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: pp. 52, 59-60
22. The vision of Sisyphus pushing his rock up the mountain only to have it fall back again is a good image for the conviction that life is suffering.
A. True
B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: p. 60
23. Material acquisitions are a dependable test of success in life.
A. True
B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: p. 61
24. Much of our language of “relationships” conjures up a picture of two lonely souls trying to “get through” to one another.

- A. True
- B. False

ANS: T PTS: 1 REF: p. 62

25. Aristotle argues that one need not have friendships to live a good life.

- A. True
- B. False

ANS: F PTS: 1 REF: p. 61

MULTIPLE CHOICE

1. The author of Ecclesiastes writes that

- a. "Live your life as a work of art."
- b. "All is vanity and vexation of spirit."
- c. "At any street corner, the feeling of absurdity can strike any man in the face."
- d. "We are put on this earth to help others, but what the others are here for I cannot say."

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 44

2. If the word "meaning" in the question "What is the meaning of life?" refers to something beyond ourselves, then

- a. we are probably nihilists.
- b. our lives, like words, make sense only in a context.
- c. our lives, like words, will have set predetermined meanings, found in the dictionary.
- d. our lives will probably be defined by a single goal.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 45

3. Children, God, and afterlife

- a. are all forms of meaning equated with "life as an investment."
- b. are all forms of meaning created within ourselves, like stories.
- c. are all meaningful because they create happiness.
- d. are all forms of meaning located outside of ourselves, to which our lives refer.

ANS: D PTS: 1 REF: pp. 46

4. Believing that life's meaning lies in children has the odd consequence

- a. that you never know how many children you might have.
- b. that from this perspective, the meaning of one's children's lives are found not in *their* lives but in *their* children's lives.
- c. that one should oppose contraception.
- d. that the meaning of one's life depends on your opinion about abortion.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 46

5. If you think that believing in God by itself answers the question of the meaning of life then

- a. God must exist.
- c. you've only pushed the question back one step further, and need to answer other questions like "Why did God create us?"

- b. you are probably a nihilist. d. all of your questions about the meaning of life are answered.

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: pp. 46-47

6. To say that “life is absurd” is to say
a. that you have to work to create meaning. c. that it has no meaning.
b. that the meaning of life is found in the context of our lives. d. that the meaning of life is like the meaning of a game.

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: pp. 47-48

7. According to Camus, “one must imagine Sisyphus happy” because
a. he will soon be executed in the morning, thus ending his suffering. c. a life of pure reason is impossible.
b. the struggle itself to live is enough to make his life meaningful. d. Sisyphus believes he is doing God’s will.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 49

8. Your vision of the meaning of life
a. sets up expectations for how to live, determining in many ways the kind of life you will lead. c. is something you are born with which gradually unfolds.
b. is directly related to your temperament—pessimists always have pessimistic visions of meaning, while optimists have optimistic visions. d. should be formulated precisely, in a mathematical formula.

ANS: A PTS: 1 REF: pp. 50-51

9. To say that “life is a game” is to
a. say that life has a plot and characters in a story that unfolds in certain way. c. put it into a certain perspective, in order to take very seriously.
b. put it into a certain perspective, in order not to take it too seriously. d. say that life is absurd.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 51

10. The writer John Barth suggested that
a. only writers can make sense of their lives as stories. c. “life imitates art.”
b. life is a *Bildungsroman*. d. each of us is the hero of his or her own story.

ANS: D PTS: 1 REF: p. 52

11. Camus expresses the view that life is a tragedy when one of his characters declares
a. “Life is suffering.” c. “All men are brothers and the same end awaits them all—death.”
b. “Life imitates art.” d. “The character Polonius did not consider himself a minor character in *Hamlet*.”

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: p. 52

12. "Life as tragedy" and "Life as comedy" both share the assumption that
- a. art imitates life.
 - b. neither art nor life can determine the shape of who we are.
 - c. that life is some kind of story.
 - d. life is an adventure.

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: pp. 52-54

13. If life is art, then
- a. a personal God probably does not exist.
 - b. life cannot be serious or consequential, since art is not serious or consequential.
 - c. it must have a tragic plot.
 - d. it can be evaluated as a work of art, as moving, inspiring, well designed, etc.

ANS: D PTS: 1 REF: p. 55

14. Someone who devotes her life to rock climbing, probably has a vision of life centered on
- a. desire.
 - b. adventure.
 - c. the absurd.
 - d. nirvana.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: pp. 55-56

15. Which of the following would be an all-important question for someone who sees life as a disease?
- a. "Can desire be extinguished?"
 - b. "Who on this earth can one help?"
 - c. "What would a healthy life look like?"
 - d. "What kind of story is being developed?"

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: pp. 56-57

16. Tantalus, a Greek mythological hero,
- a. was forced to push a rock up a mountain for eternity.
 - b. was condemned by the gods to be tied just out of reach of a bunch of grapes.
 - c. was condemned to live the same life over and over.
 - d. was a great biblical prophet who said "Life is vanity and vexation."

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 57

17. One of the main tenets of Buddhism says that
- a. life is happiness.
 - b. live free or die.
 - c. virtue is knowledge.
 - d. desire can be eliminated.

ANS: D PTS: 1 REF: p. 58

18. The ancient Greeks, in Homer's *Iliad*, who found the meaning of life in honor,
- a. sought to live up to the expectations of the community, by proving themselves in battle and not disgracing themselves.
 - b. sought to pursue wisdom, as the greatest of goods.
 - c. sought to live a life of duty.
 - d. sought to free themselves from all desires.

ANS: A PTS: 1 REF: pp. 59

19. Bill wants to live his life to the fullest, so he's constantly trying new things, even if he does them only once. Bill probably interprets life's meaning as
- a. relationships.
 - b. learning.
 - c. desire.
 - d. investment.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: pp. 59-60

20. Calvin Coolidge apparently embraced the view that life is an investment when he said
- a. "Time is money."
 - b. "A penny saved is a penny earned."
 - c. "Buy low, sell high."
 - d. "The business of America is business."

ANS: D PTS: 1 REF: p. 61

21. The concept of "relationship" commonly implies that
- a. people are already deeply connected.
 - b. life is suffering.
 - c. there needs to be a union of two separate people.
 - d. life should be lived altruistically.

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: pp. 61-62

22. When Nietzsche writes that Socrates and other Western philosophers have turned "reason into a tyrant," he
- a. shares the author of *Ecclesiastes*' belief that "all is vanity."
 - b. agrees with the idea that the meaning of life should be based on the pursuit of wisdom.
 - c. thinks a life single-mindedly devoted to reason is a fanatical life.
 - d. agrees with Buddhists who look to nirvana as the extinction of all desires that lead to suffering.

ANS: C PTS: 1 REF: p. 56

23. The person who described his mission in life as the creation of poetry to give the German people a sense of identity was
- a. Hegel.
 - b. Goethe.
 - c. Camus.
 - d. Nietzsche.

ANS: B PTS: 1 REF: p. 54

24. The thinker who argued that the clarity of self-knowledge may be an illusion because most of our ideas are the product of the unconscious was
- a. Sigmund Freud.
 - b. Goethe.
 - c. Camus.
 - d. Socrates.

ANS: A PTS: 1 REF: p. 57

25. According to Camus, the only serious philosophical question is
- a. What is the meaning of life?
 - b. How can we extinguish desire in order to be free of suffering?
 - c. Does God exist?
 - d. Should one commit suicide?

ANS: D PTS: 1 REF: p. 61

SHORT ANSWER

1. What is the similarity between the question of the meaning of life and the question of the meaning of a word?

ANS:

Both involve reference to something that makes sense only in a broader context.

PTS: 1 REF: p. 44-45

2. Solomon says that some answers to the question of the meaning of life “only postpone the answer” by raising new questions. Suppose a friend were to tell you, “The meaning of my life is God.” Give one example of a new question that this answer raises, that you could ask your friend.

ANS:

Why has God created us? What does he expect from us? Why did he create us?

PTS: 1

REF: p. 47

3. According to Nietzsche in “The Thought of ‘Eternal Recurrence,’” what question would gain possession of you after you were visited by the demon?

ANS:

Do you desire this life this once more and innumerable times more?

PTS: 1

REF: pp. 48-49

4. Define nihilism.

ANS:

Nihilism is the view that life has no meaning.

PTS: 1

REF: pp. 50

5. What sort of story would you be likely to tell if you viewed your life as a *Bildungsroman*?

ANS:

A story of your personal development as you go through the various quests, disappointments and discoveries of life.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 52

6. When Friedrich Nietzsche wrote “Live your life as a work of art,” what did he mean?

ANS:

He meant that you should focus on the process or activity of your life, and not just the outcome; that you should approach this process or activity artfully, giving attention to its beauty or style. You can then evaluate your life as a work of art, i.e., as moving, inspiring, well-designed.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 55

7. What common thread do the images of “Life as Desire” and “Life as Nirvana” share?

ANS:

Both are about desire: “Life as Desire” is about finding meaning through wanting one thing after another; “Life as nirvana” is about extinguishing desire and reaching a state of tranquility.

PTS: 1

REF: pp. 57-58

8. Define *altruism*.

ANS:

Altruism is acting for the benefit of others, even if there is no benefit whatsoever to oneself.

PTS: 1

REF: 58

9. Sisyphus is a good illustration of what image of the meaning of life?

ANS:

Life as suffering.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 49, 57

10. According to Camus, what is the only serious philosophical question?

ANS:

Whether one should commit suicide or not.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 61

ESSAY

1. Solomon says that some answers to the question, “What is the meaning of life?,” really assume that our lives have meaning only because they refer to someone or something outside ourselves. Write an essay explaining this way of answering the question, and then develop three detailed concepts of meaning that illustrate it. What are the shortcomings of this way of answering the question?

ANS:

This question explores Solomon’s point that such answers postpone the question.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 46

2. Solomon says that the “question of the meaning of life is not just an act of discovery but also an important act of creation.” What does he mean by this? Pick *three* of the images of meaning he discusses in the chapter (e.g., Life as story, life as a game), and explain each image, focusing on at least two ways that each vision of meaning requires creativity. Then step back and look for points of comparison between the acts of creativity required in each of the three visions of meaning. Which image is the most compelling to you, and why?

ANS:

Students will explore the notion of creating meaning.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 50-51

3. Write a dialogue in which two characters discuss their competing images of the meaning of life. One of the characters can represent your preferences, and the other can represent a viewpoint on meaning that you do not prefer. Your dialogue should bring out and explain each image in some detail; it should discuss the relative strengths and weaknesses of each. Finally, it should provide a reasoned argument or explanation why, given their strengths and weaknesses, the images are compelling to the characters. Be creative in writing your dialogue, and have fun, but stay focused on the issues.

ANS:

A critical dialogue writing assignment covering the entire chapter.

PTS: 1

REF: chapter 2

4. How do you answer the question “What is the meaning of life?” Your essay can draw on any of the options in the text, but can also develop a different image. In either case, be sure to explain the vision of meaning, and explain why this image is compelling to you. Solomon says that the way one answers the question of the meaning of life indicates one’s “general view of life.” What does your answer reveal about your general view of life?

ANS:

See chapter in its entirety.

PTS: 1

REF: chapter 2

5. Assume that your life is a story. Who are the major characters, and how does the plot unfold? How does the hero of the story (you!) personally develop and grow as the plot unfolds? Is your story a tragedy, a comedy, or something else? What are the major conflicts that the characters have to confront? What do you anticipate the next chapter in the story will be? How does viewing your life as a story alter your sense of your life’s meaning?

ANS:

This question asks students to develop the narrative concept of meaning in chapter two.

PTS: 1

REF: p. 51-52

6. Albert Camus says that the only serious philosophical question is “Should one commit suicide?” What do you think Camus means by this? Is suicide necessarily tied to finding life meaningless -- or can there be other motives for suicide? Is Camus right? Do you think Sisyphus considers this question? If so, why does he choose to answer “No”? What does your answering the question “No” imply about your sense of the meaning of life?

ANS:

Exploring the rationale for suicide and its connection to the absurd.

PTS: 1

REF: pp. 49, 61

7. Social scientists tell us that people tend to be happiest when they have meaningful relationships in which they are actively engaged. This confirms the “Life as Relationships” viewpoint. Aristotle writes that “friendship seems to be one of the features of the good life.” Explain what Aristotle means by this, and then describe your own experience of friendships. Be specific: focus on one or two examples. What makes them important to your life? How have friendships contributed to your sense of meaning?

ANS:

This essay allows students to explore the concept and experience of friendship.

PTS: 1

REF: pp. 62