

The “Meaning of Life” and Goethe

Aristotle’s Four Questions

1. What is it “made of”?
2. How is it “structured”?
3. How does it “work”? (How do I use it)?
4. What is it for? (What does it aim to do)?

The Material Questions

1. What kind of thing are we? What is a “human”?
2. What is the structure of life? Does life have “meaning”?
3. How should we act, what should we do? Can we “change” ourselves or are we predestined to be as we are?
4. What are we trying to achieve? What makes us happy? Is there something greater than ourselves?

[Johann Wolfgang von] Goethe’s Answers

1. We are “thinking animals” who seek answers through concern about the meaning of ideas, relationships, and the impact of “sensations.
2. The structure of life is represented by the natural cycle of growth and decay best represented by flowering plants.
3. A meaningful life is dependent on the ability we have to learn from experience. We have little control over the material aspects of life for wealth, position and prestige are chimera that evaporate in a moment of time. Pursuing material positions makes life “reasonable and comfortable – we need to adapt ourselves to ‘get on’ in the world as it happens to be” (p. 329).
4. The purpose of life is to “be happy”. For the Roman a happy life was one centered on virtuous living...right behavior in accordance to social conditions. For Goethe a happy life is one in which we seek to fully develop the capacities we have “which must be [both] physical and mental”. Through self control one can lead a “courageous life” which requires us to be at “odds with both conformism and eccentricity”. You can overcome this tendency to view yourself through the eye of the other person by focusing on yourself as an “independent object”. (pp. 329-330).

A central intellectual focus of Goethe was to describe a world of the “real”. A world in which the unattainable Romantic perception of perfect love, human grandeur and nobility and its counterpoint of the acquisition of material wealth for its own sake become transmuted into a central question of living...How can our spiritual and material needs be allies rather than enemies? (p. 331). How do we become “whole” out of a fractured, segmented existence?

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